

Decolonising the Soma: Traumatic Memory and the Politics of Transnational Vietnamese Identity in Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016)

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates traumatic memory and identity politics in Ocean Vuong's Night Sky with Exit Wounds (2016). The primary objective is to examine how textual voids and evocative imagery facilitate the "working through" of transgenerational trauma. The study explores the navigation of individual remembrance within collective memory frameworks to reconstruct queer refugee identities. The methodology employs an interdisciplinary framework integrating Hirsch's "postmemory," Halbwachs' "collective memory," and Caruth's "unclaimed experience". It also utilises Clark's research on somatic historiography regarding sexual violence. The paper hypothesises that Vuong's specific poetic structures and somatic imagery provide a creative framework for translating fragmented psychic trauma into recognisable personal narratives. For the refugee subject, the body functions as a "tomb" for dead voices. Identity is viewed as a process "born and reborn" from the disentanglement of loss and survival. Ultimately, the research suggests that reclaiming the "soma" subverts official narratives to honour marginalised subterranean memories.

Keywords: Traumatic Memory; Identity; Postmemory; Somatic Historiography; Collective Memory

INTRODUCTION

The legacy of the Vietnam War and the mass migration of the Vietnamese diaspora have produced a profound body of post-war literature dedicated to navigating transgenerational displacement and state-sanctioned erasure. Within contemporary American letters, Ocean Vuong has emerged as a vanguard figure whose avant-garde experimentation reshapes how refugee trauma is memorialised. Scholars note that his work challenges the limits of the English language to accommodate the fragmented realities of the displaced subject (August, 2024; Hart, 2024). His debut collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), arrives as contemporary scholarship actively investigates how the children of refugees inherit the unarticulated somatic wounds of their parents. Ultimately, Vuong's poetry serves not merely as aesthetic expression, but as an alternative historical archive that successfully resists imperial amnesia (Graham, 2022).

When these historical wounds of war and migration are mapped onto a queer refugee subjectivity, traditional frameworks of memory and identity become highly contested. Trauma inherently represses overwhelming psychic events, establishing a structural barrier that makes it difficult for oppressed subjects to articulate their lived experiences using conventional linguistic scripts. However, literary language possesses the unique capacity to disrupt these rigid structures, transforming subterranean suffering into a shared human experience. In *Night Sky with Exit*

Wounds, Vuong facilitates a vital process of “working through” this historical weight via deliberate textual voids, fragmented layouts, and evocative somatic imagery. The soma—the physical body—becomes an archival repository where identity, memory, and desire collide as a site of both intense wounding and creative resistance.

Within this landscape, memory acts as a spectral force, capturing what critical scholarship conceptualises as “haunting legacies” and “violent histories” of transgenerational trauma as they manifest in the postmemory generation (Schwab, 2010). To investigate these dynamics, this manuscript adopts an interdisciplinary framework synthesising Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy of forgetting, Marianne Hirsch’s paradigm of postmemory, and Maurice Halbwachs’ theories on collective memory. Following this theoretical grounding, the paper applies this multi-tiered framework to three sequential thematic pillars within Vuong’s text: first, the transgenerational geography of postmemory; second, the somatic historiography of wartime sexual violence; and finally, the negotiation of queer refugee identities within restrictive cultural narratives. Through this structured approach, the analysis demonstrates how Vuong’s verse ultimately subverts official histories to honour marginalised, subterranean memories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary Asian American literary scholarship heavily centres on Vuong’s oeuvre as a transformative site for re-evaluating the intersections of diaspora, imperial violence, and non-normative desire. Critical engagements highlight that Vuong’s writing moves far beyond a passive historical re-enactment of the Vietnam War; instead, he fundamentally restructures narrative space to accommodate the fragmented subjectivities of the refugee figure, pushing the English language to its expressive limits (Hart, 2024). This resistance to linear historical accounts challenges the “fallacy of certainty” within dominant Western archives, which frequently flatten refugee journeys into oversimplified, state-sanctioned rescue narratives (Graham, 2022). Rather than accepting these sanitised records, Vuong’s verse establishes an alternative historical archive where aesthetic choices and the construction of “refugee beauty” function as deliberate tools of survival, allowing racial subjects to preserve political agency and navigate systemic erasure within the host country (August, 2024). A significant dimension of this critical conversation involves mapping intergenerational trauma directly onto queer subjectivities. Vuong utilises classical subversions – such as queering the Telemachus myth – to reposition the queer refugee at the centre of the American national consciousness (K. Nguyen, 2021), a thematic intertwining echoed by Abizanda-Cardona (2024), who illustrates how queering the trauma narrative exposes the ongoing effects of historical violence on civilian descendants. Crucially, this analytical impulse to map how displaced subjects navigate identity crises in the wake of geopolitical collapse mirrors broader trends in transnational literary scholarship, which increasingly examines how characters confront war trauma and diasporic displacement to reconstruct a fractured sense of personal wholeness (Saleh, 2025).

While existing scholarship has robustly analysed Vuong’s innovative linguistic disruptions (Hart, 2024) and his mythologization of queer exile (K. Nguyen, 2021), a critical gap remains in examining the exact material and bodily canvas where these forces intersect. Most contemporary studies treat the thematic pillars of refugee displacement, wartime violence, and queer desire as separate or parallel inquiries. This study addresses this gap by synthesising Marianne Hirsch’s postmemory and Maurice Halbwachs’ collective memory frameworks with Janine Natalya Clark’s paradigm of somatic historiography. By doing so, this paper investigates how the *soma* acts as an

explicit, material archive that carries the unarticulated trauma of wartime sexual violence and transgenerational displacement. This approach expands current critical understandings of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* by demonstrating how poetic space systematically reclaims the traumatised body from both institutional amnesia and traditional heteronormative cultural scripts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To adequately navigate the psychological and bodily landscapes of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, this study relies on a consolidated, twofold theoretical framework bridging Cathy Caruth's foundational model of trauma with Judith Butler's paradigm of queer performativity. Rather than utilising a disconnected array of approaches, this manuscript isolates Caruth's (1996) concept of "unclaimed experience" to analyse how overwhelming historical crises evade immediate consciousness. Caruth posits that trauma is characterised by the structure of its belated transmission, which constantly repeats its impact across generations. This framework highlights that the truth of trauma is rarely found in direct historical statements; instead, it "cries out from the wound" as a witnessing voice when standard language fails (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). Grounding the analysis in Caruth's understanding of the recursive, belated nature of suffering allows this paper to systematically examine how poetic language translates unassimilated psychic shocks into a recognisable personal architecture.

While Caruth provides the mechanism for tracing inherited wounds, Butler's framework for queer identity formation provides the tools necessary for analysing how non-normative subjectivities are negotiated within restrictive spaces. Butler (1990, 1993) argues that identity is not a fixed biological certainty, but an unstable process constructed through the ritualised repetition of socially enforced scripts. For the queer and displaced subject, identity construction often emerges directly from a breakdown or outright failure of these conventional cultural scripts. When standard social support structures are missing or hostile, the individual must engage in self-creation outside traditional frameworks to assert ontological security. Intersecting Caruth's "voice of the wound" with Butler's performative negotiation establishes a consistent matrix to evaluate how the physical body functions as a primary canvas where inherited historical trauma and marginalised queer desires collide, resist normative scripts, and demand recognition.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design rooted in literary hermeneutics and textual analysis, filtering Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) down to a deliberate corpus of nine core poems divided into two focused analytical tracks. To examine the intersecting dynamics of transgenerational trauma and queer identity, the methodology applies a three-tiered interpretive approach that systematically translates abstract frameworks into concrete, text-level readings. The first track isolates "Telemachus," "Aubade with Burning City," "A Little Closer to the Edge," "Headfirst," and "Notebook Fragments" to assess Caruth's (1996) "unclaimed experience" by decoding formal textual voids—such as fragmented layouts and erratic lineation—and tracking historical crises archived within corporeal spaces via "somatic historiography." The second track groups "Immigrant Haibun," "Because It's Summer," "Seventh Circle of Earth," and "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong" to evaluate Butler's (1990, 1993) model of performativity, analysing the repetition of non-normative desires and behavioural gestures as ongoing negotiations to carve out

ontological security from failing cultural scripts. Confining the data to these precise coordinates successfully eliminates redundancy, prevents thematic refractions, and ensures a highly concentrated, theory-driven reading.

POSTMEMORY AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF TRAUMA

Hirsch (2008) defines postmemory as the second generation's relationship to "powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 103). These transmitted experiences penetrate so deeply they "constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 103). In *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), Vuong utilises poetry to navigate the "conflicting layers of his intergenerational trauma" (K. Nguyen, 2021, p. 430). By reworking the *Odyssey*, he constructs "post-memories" of war, challenging historical erasure to position the "queer refugee at the centre, rather than the periphery, of an American narrative" (K. Nguyen, 2021, p. 430). Through "poetical reimagination," Vuong mythologises the queer body by recounting stories he did not witness. Vuong's collection functions as a discursive intervention, inviting interrogation through Hirsch's (2012) postmemory and its "structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience" (p. 6).

First, the dialectic of concealment and revelation inhabits the volatile topography of the "generation after," who bear the "personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5). This burden is inscribed somatically: "Do you know who I am,/ Ba? But the answer never comes. The answer/ is the bullet hole in his back, brimming/ with seawater" (Vuong, 2016, p. 7). This imagery exemplifies Hirsch's (2012) assertion that "trauma, in its literal meaning, is a wound inflicted on the flesh" (p. 80). When read through Caruth's framework of the unclaimed experience, the bullet hole ceases to be a static historical artefact; it becomes the literal "voice of the wound" breaking through generational barriers, illustrating how the unassimilated catastrophe of the parent is transmitted to the child as an embodied reality.

This reconstruction is achieved through a specific, marginalised lens. Vuong does not simply recount the historical facts that permeate his life narrative; instead, he conjugates his refugee recollections with his family's intimate war memories and the broader memorial corpus of the Vietnamese people. This approach resonates with V. T. Nguyen's (2013) assertion that "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (V. T. Nguyen, 2013, p. 144). By incorporating these layers, Vuong challenges normative understandings of the war, shedding light on the "effects of the war upon female civilians and their descendants" (Abizanda-Cardona, 2024, p. 217). This adds critical nuance to the known facts of his nation's fall, offering a personalised, subjective reconstruction that transforms "received, transferred knowledge" into a mythology of the "generation of post-memory" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 103).

Second, Vuong's poetic structures substantiate this geography of trauma by illustrating how the spectre of war indelibly marks his lineage. These constructions bridge the "break in transmission resulting from traumatic historical events" by striving to "reconnect and re-embody an intergenerational memorial fabric" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 32). Vuong's work demonstrates that while these experiences are "mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5), they are nonetheless "transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5). This resonates with the textual assertion that "Maybe the body is the only question an answer can't extinguish" (Vuong, 2016, p. 16).

INDIVIDUAL VS COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

Memory is a complex social and individual phenomenon where mnemonic inheritance profoundly shapes identity formation. Because individual mental organisation is inherently rooted in social structures, Halbwachs (1980) argues that collective memory reconstructs past events from shared data and conceptions passed back and forth within a group (p. 31). Expanding on this framework, Green (2004) notes that individual memory occurs primarily through dialogue with others within these social networks (p. 38). These dynamics produce internalised value judgments that act as a “mirror of the past” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 166). This social reflection remains fundamental for achieving ontological stability, providing the historical continuity required for a subject to validate their own existence.

Ontological stability inherently relies on the subject's capacity to align personal thoughts with a collective framework, as separation from these structures prompts internal dissolution. As Halbwachs (1980) posits, an individual must rely on the memory of others as the very source of what they wish to repeat (p. 51), meaning personal remembrances persist only at the intersection of collective influences (p. 44). Ruptures in these protective mnemonic networks cause an interior turmoil that no later reconciliation can repair (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 78). This structural break closely mirrors the experience of traumatic history, which Caruth (1996) characterises as a belated experience that “attests to its endless impact on a life” (p. 7). Because overwhelming crises evade immediate psychic assimilation, the resulting truth of trauma simultaneously inflicts intense personal suffering and demands the recognition of unacknowledged realities (Caruth, 2004, p. vii).

Halbwachs (1980, 1992) scrutinises collective memory's ontology, delineating “points of contact” (1980, p. 31) between individual remembrance and social frameworks. He posits that the solitary nature of memory is illusory; “in reality, we are never alone,” for individuals “always carry with [them] and in [them] a number of distinct persons” (p. 23). Personal memories are inextricably bound to the social, as remembrances “are recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events” (p. 23). This interplay ensures “memories adapt to the mass of present perceptions” while current experiences fit into the “framework of our old memories” (p. 22). Halbwachs extends this scaffolding to the material world—referencing the “stones of the city” (p. 131), the “architect” (p. 23), and “musicians” (p. 158)—suggesting that “bonds attaching [a group] to physical locale [gain] greater clarity in the very moment of their destruction” (p. 130).

The theoretical tenets of collective memory permeate the poetics of Vietnamese American author Vuong. In the poem “Aubade with Burning City” (2016, p. 10), Vuong chronicles the fall of Saigon on April 29, 1975. This event marked the total collapse of the American defence as North Vietnamese forces breached the city limits. The poem anchors this historical dissolution in a specific auditory trigger: Irving Berlin's “White Christmas.” This song was broadcast over Armed Forces Radio as the coded signal for Operation Frequent Wind. It precipitated the frantic evacuation of American personnel and Vietnamese nationals while the city burned. Vuong interweaves the narrative of the city's immolation with the lyrics of the traditional carol. He creates a jarring amalgamation of the festive and the catastrophic. This juxtaposition echoes Halbwachs's notion of a fractured spatial framework.

Consequently, the intervention of collective memory becomes imperative. It is a necessity that emerges from the limitations of official historical narratives. This crucial element in composing the poem aligns with the theoretical landscape mapped by Halbwachs, who suggests that collective memory is not merely superimposed upon common memory but rather complements it. This reinforces social constructs through “affective impressions” within the group

(Halbwachs, 1980, p. 98). These affective impressions are notably absent in many passages of history, particularly when contrasted with the private, embodied memories of individuals. However, the analysed corpus, specifically Vuong's work, demonstrates a unique interaction where both forms of memory coalesce to reconstruct a historical fact: the decline of a city under the pressure of war.

Vuong (2016) writes: "Milkflower petals in the street/ like pieces of a girl's dress. / May your days be merry and bright... [...] a nun, on fire, / runs silently toward her god – / Open, he says. / She opens" (pp. 10–12). These verses disentangle the "mnemonic traces" of a fragmented past. They present a montage of dissonant imagery where the machinery of war is juxtaposed with a delicate phantom. As Agnew (2005) observes, such "Memories establish a connection between our individual past and our collective past (our origins, heritage, and history)." (p. 3). This sentiment is echoed in the poem's superimposition of scenes connected by recollection. The figure of the girl serves as a somatic metaphor for the besieged city itself. Vuong conflates the cartography of streets with the vulnerability of the body.

Halbwachs (1980) emphasises that while memory appears intimate and individual—as suggested by Vuong's poems—it is fundamentally a social phenomenon. Because individual memory relies on "social frameworks" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 35), it remains subject to constant "fluctuations" (p. 56) as groups evolve. In war scenarios, "points of contact" emerge between these memories. The Vietnam War's official discourses align with Halbwachs's (1980) definition of "history"—a schematic record in "ultimate opposition" to the living continuity of collective memory (p. 78). While consolidated narratives often remain static, a complete panorama requires unofficial narratives. These represent the authentic collective memory, or "depository of traditions" (p. 83), reinforcing social constructs through an "affective community" (p. 30) rather than abstract chronology, filling the gaps of official history with lived experience.

Halbwachs (1980, 1992) identifies two foundational elements of mnemonic construction. These include personally lived events and vicariously experienced occurrences. The latter refers to events projected by a collective entity. An individual may lack direct participation in these specific episodes. However, the surrounding community perpetually relives these narratives. Consequently, these external histories become integrated into an individual's particular memory.

This phenomenon is manifest in the biography of Vuong. He encountered the history of the 1975 fall of Saigon through family matriarchs. One specific narrative involved the surreal broadcast of Irving Berlin's "White Christmas." This detail introduced a subversive narrative into collective war memories. It challenged official historiography. Vuong internalised these inherited stories into his particular memory. His consciousness reflects the experiences of a refugee boy in the Philippines. He lived amidst the conflict between South and North Vietnamese factions. He also experienced the pervasive presence of the American military. Espiritu (2014) observes that this history is often framed through "militarised refuge(es)," where the "war's end is narrated as a rescue mission" (p. 1).

These themes converge in the poem "A Little Closer to the Edge" (Vuong, 2016, p. 13). The text depicts figures who step "hand in hand, / into the bomb crater" (p. 13). The imagery is profoundly distorted. Vuong describes a "headless" snake that "fails to fulfil the biological functions typical of its existence" (p. 13). Instead, the creature "observes and mutates" (p. 13). This metaphor serves to "vilify the woman" in the context of conflict (p. 13). Pillai et al. (2023) argue that Vuong is "continually drawn back across the sea of memory to draw on key episodes that have been the catalyst for the creation" of the Vietnamese diaspora (p. 258).

THE SPACE OF THE SOMA AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

This corporeal focus aligns with Espiritu's (2014) contention that "the hidden forces of modern body politics may become most visible within the space of intimate domestic interaction" (p. 180). Vuong effectively uses the body as an entry point into historical trauma. Furthermore, the italicised lyrics from "White Christmas" dissolve into the poem's overarching metaphor. This creates a "ghost story" that is "attentive to 'the ghostly' and 'the afterlives' of Vietnamese refugees" (Espiritu, 2014, p. 20). These borrowed lines cradle the city's immolation in a paradoxical tone of hope. This hope contends with the desolate warscape. The poem culminates in the chillingly ironic invocation: "May your days be merry and bright" (Vuong, 2016, p. 11).

Ultimately, while society may attempt to avert its gaze from the scars of misery, the reality remains that bodies display the marks of indebtedness. As Hirsch (2008) argues, this transmission of trauma is "not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (p. 107), yet it remains a deeply "embodied experience" (p. 110). These engraved marks cannot be erased; therefore, a space is required where these voices can be heard on equal terms. In this vein, the process of "negotiation" between collective and individual memory becomes evident. It parallels what V. T. Nguyen (2013) defines as "ethical memory"—a form of remembrance that "recalls both one's own as well as others" (V. T. Nguyen, 2013, p. 144). This ensures that the complexities of the past are not silenced by the dominant historical record.

Vuong forces "thorny subjects" to surface from the "ocean of oblivion." He specifically focuses on the violence perpetrated against women during wartime. The poem presents "false lovers" moving toward a symbolic battlefield. Conflict occurs primarily within the female somatic space. Vuong implores: "O father, O foreshadow, press / into her—as the field shreds itself / with cricket cries" (Vuong, 2016, p. 13). This act operates as a mechanism of submission. It transcends the mere destruction of physical homes. The violence induces ruptures that preclude any return to a pre-traumatic state. As Clark (2017) emphasises, "the long-term consequences of conflict-related rape and sexual violence are often overlooked" (p. 2). Thus, the poem retrieves the "war-woman" from the margins of history. This narrative opposes the dominant "memory of the perpetrator as a collective trauma" (Giesen, 2004, p. 114). Vuong instead illuminates a memory inherited from subterranean discourses. Somatic historiography offers an essential framework for analysing textually repressed atrocities. As scholars like Kimberly Theidon (2023) and Janine Natalya Clark (2017) demonstrate across global conflict zones, institutional archives historically marginalise wartime sexual violence, relegating these atrocities to an unarticulated, subterranean fixture of cultural memory. Poetry, therefore, serves as a crucial intervention to counter this erasure and provide a voice to the historical wound.

While sexual violence targeted multiple demographics, its gendered dimension is central; however, the impact exceeds physical harm, functioning as an ontological assault to obliterate memory. Clark (2017) emphasises that "[i]t is the silencing of these stories that suppresses agency" (p. 221), advocating for pluralistic narratives to resist erasure. In "Headfirst," Vuong reclaims maternal agency, contrasting instruments of subjugation with a mother's endurance. Describing the speaker as "fleshed from the toothless mouth / of a war-woman" (2016, p. 20), Vuong suggests an identity forged from wreckage, where the "second beating heart" (p. 20) represents the weight of inherited history. His metaphor of the body as a "blade that sharpens / by cutting" (p. 21) implies resilience generated through recursive suffering. Such retrieval is essential because "the long-term consequences of conflict-related rape and sexual violence" are often overlooked (Clark, 2017, p. 52); thus, Vuong's verse provides a vital site for honouring suppressed maternal narratives.

Vuong liberates the profound sentiments of maternal figures to delineate a subterranean form of memory. This alternative history erodes the official narratives perpetrated by the state. Vuong crystallises a specific pronouncement for the child, asserting that the present remains accessible despite historical trauma. He writes, “My son, / even tomorrow / you will have today” (Vuong, 2016, p. 20). This sentiment reflects a repressed effect that surges within the poet’s contemporary language. The past persists in recessed spaces, perpetually haunting the present from the shadows of the irreclaimable. In “Notebook Fragments,” Vuong (2016) records a grandmother’s recollection of wartime brutality: “Grandma said in the war they would grab a baby... and pull” (p. 68). This graphic imagery underscores the physical and ontological ruptures caused by conflict. Ultimately, the regression of the past is not inherently liberating. Instead, it serves as a recursive movement that continuously defines the present.

SOMATIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

Traditional historiography typically prioritises the victors’ version of strategic triumph. This approach focuses on those who secured the tactical advantages of a won battle. However, emphasising the intersection of collective and individual recollection transcends these rigid structures. Commenting upon Michael Pollak’s concept of “subterranean memories”, Crocco (2021) argues that: “it is in the intersection of conflict, multiplicity, and movement that the disputes between *the official memories* and the *subterranean memories* are being constituted as a response to conjectural reconfigurations that allow for their emergence” (p. 77). Therefore, “subterranean memories” are granted agency that frequently diverges from official state narratives. Such divergence precipitates a silent crisis within the formal historical record. Dominick LaCapra (2016) characterises this struggle as an attempt to “conjoin critically tested memory and comparably tested document-and-text-based knowledge in furthering collective projects seeking truth” (p. 400). Memory work thus functions as a vital corrective to sterile, state-sanctioned sources. It addresses the “unclaimed experience” of those marginalised by traditional historical accounts.

Vuong utilises his verse to navigate these fractured mnemonic landscapes. In “Aubade with Burning City,” he reconstructs the 1975 fall of Saigon by fusing national history with subjective affect, creating a pluralistic narrative of the event that concluded his nation’s conflict. This somatic historiography—further developed in the poems “A Little Closer to the Edge” and “Headfirst”—illustrates how war remains vividly etched upon the flesh many years later. Clark (2017) observes that the “long-term effects” of such atrocities “are neglected and overlooked” (p. 5). She notes that many survivors “still struggle in their daily lives with the physical, emotional and social consequences of the crimes committed against them” (p.11). These physical forms carry the ineradicable marks of the past into the contemporary moment. They manifest what Clark (2023) identifies as “broken and ruptured connectivities” that “had not only harmed these individuals, including emotionally and economically, but also their land, what they grew on that land and their animals” (p. 58). History is re-articulated through the contours of the wounded, “foreign” body. According to Clark (2017), “It is the silencing of these stories that suppresses agency” (p. 221). Ultimately, Vuong’s work provides a vital discursive site for honouring these “storied connectivities” that “encapsulate important longitudinal dimensions of resilience” (Clark, 2023, p. 277). These connectivities ensure that the traumatic past is not relegated to oblivion.

MEMORY, IDENTITY AND QUEERNESS

Halbwachs (1992) posits that memory inheritance constitutes a foundational element of identity. Mental states stem primarily from social events: “a whole part of his memory – the part which retains events and remembers persons – keeps contact with the collective memory and is under its control” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 43). Through most memory-bearing contexts, “a sense of our identity is perpetuated” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 47). Vuong’s poetry adopts this framework. He utilises a linguistic architecture to navigate the present while reconstructing the past. Vuong occupies a specific intersection as a gay, Vietnamese-American refugee. His work centres on the “unspeakability of trauma” (Bond & Craps, 2020, p. 6). The Vietnam War functions as a pervasive mnemonic shadow. This trauma aligns with Caruth’s (1996) “unclaimed experience” (p. 10). Vuong provides a “voice” to the historical “wound” (Caruth, 1996, p. 1). Thus, identity emerges through a negotiation between individual and collective struggles. Systematic “memory work” becomes essential to “counteract post-traumatic effects” (LaCapra, 2016, p. 376).

In “Immigrant Haibun” (2016), Vuong hybridises prose and verse. This form creates a “self-questioning but more accurate representation of the past” (LaCapra, 2016, p. 400). The speaker’s perspective fluctuates between internal and external focalization. The poem chronicles the maritime departure from Saigon. This journey serves as a foundational act of self-definition. Clark (2023) emphasises that “a dynamic approach to resilience [...] captures the fluid and multi-storied connectivities between individuals and their social ecologies” (p. 6).

Vuong addresses “long-term consequences” that are often overlooked (Clark, 2017, p. 2). His work reappraises cultural identity amidst historical displacement. The poem begins with an epigraph by Edmond Jabès, a Jewish poet who relocated to Paris during the Second World War. The inscription reads: “The road which leads me to you is safe even when it runs into oceans” (Vuong, 2016, p. 14). This maxim functions as a hermeneutic key to the text. It underscores the inherent ambiguity of the displacement. Vietnamese subjects were transported to the United States involuntarily. The alternative was death within refugee camps. This reality is reflected in the verse: “If you must know anything, know that the hardest task is to live only once” (p. 14).

Consequently, the poem chronicles these tribulations as an inverse epic. It depicts a populace migrating in pursuit of a final amnesty. The narrative details minute sacrifices made for the sake of survival. A female lifeguard represents a woman on a foundering vessel. A violin melted to warm one’s feet in the frozen night serves as a blanket. The voyage appears interminable and fraught with attrition. Vuong writes: “We had been sailing for months. Salt in our sentences. We had been sailing—but the edge of the world was nowhere in sight” (p. 14). This imagery parallels the relentless nature of warfare. A touching irony emerges toward the conclusion of the poem. The vessel is merely a miniature within a glass bottle. It rests as a domestic ornament upon wooden furniture. Conversely, this may transcend irony through poetic sublimation. Language provides the only viable vessel for such experiences. This interpretive lens reshapes the mother’s closing words: “If we make it to shore [...] I will name our son after this water. I will learn to love a monster” (p. 15).

Vuong’s *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) investigates identity construction beyond marginal boundaries through a negotiation of distinct memories. These mnemonic strands represent individualised choices that are not mutually exclusive. Halbwachs (1980) contends that “mental attitude is possible only for a person who belongs (or has belonged) to a group” (p. 33). Consequently, social identity is fundamentally governed by the “other” and the external gaze. This gaze regulates the crystallisation of potential identities within a given social framework. Billig

(1999) suggests that such identity is maintained through “collective remembering and forgetting” (p. 170). Self-image remains subject to constant transformation and social negotiation. Eyerman (2019) notes that collective identity is “the recollections of a shared past that are passed on through ongoing processes of commemoration” (p. 25). Therefore, identity formation relies on criteria of acceptability and credibility rather than fixed essences. These negotiable constructs often encapsulate traumatic memories suppressed by prolonged silence. Karamehić-Muratović and Kromják (2021) observe that these contexts require an exploration of “remembrance and disharmony” alongside social harmony (p. 3).

Vuong (2016) utilises the second section of his collection to examine a queer identity defined by shame. This identity deliberately subverts normative masculinity through a counter-narrative of social deviance. Analysed through Butler’s lens of identity performativity, the poems map the “gay body” against a backdrop of war-like destruction, chronicling an internal struggle to construct an authentic self-image when the surrounding heteronormative social scripts offer no viable prologue for conduct. In “Because It’s Summer,” the protagonist’s encounter in an urban park illustrates a collision of fear and desire. Vuong (2016) depicts a clandestine meeting rooted in domestic deception where the setting—a decaying baseball field—underscores a sense of neglect. The protagonist arrives “to be no one,” seeking an anonymity that functions as a refuge from a fractured identity (Vuong, 2016, p. 36). As the encounter ends, the protagonist “smear[s] [his] neck with / lipstick” and “dress[es] with shaky hands,” uttering a repetitive “thank you” (Vuong, 2016, p. 36). This repetitive, ritualised performance of hidden desire highlights Butler’s assertion that identity is constantly being negotiated and rewritten within social gaps. The protagonist views the stranger not as a lover, but as a figure offering a temporary reprieve from a hostile environment, granting him a space to perform a marginalised existence. The protagonist views the stranger not as a lover, but as a figure offering forgiveness from a hostile environment, granting him “another hour to live” (Vuong, 2016, p. 36).

Queer identity construction often emerges from the failure of conventional social scripts, as these individuals frequently lack a normative “prologue” for conduct. According to Halbwachs (1980), memory and identity are intrinsically linked to social frameworks and milieu that provide stability and meaning (p. 106). When these frameworks are absent—often due to the marginalisation of queer lives—self-knowledge must develop within gaps where traditional social supports do not exist. In such instances, the individual is forced to operate outside the contexts which carry memory, leading to an identity formed through fragments that may initially appear “too mutilated and mixed up with others to allow us to recognise them” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 41). This lack of a pre-established script necessitates a form of self-creation that is not inherited but is instead reconstructed from the margins of society.

Within these gaps, sexuality transcends physical contact to become a primary site for ontological discovery. This process is deeply influenced by what Eyerman (2019) identifies as a “tear in the social fabric” (p. 136) caused by the intersection of trauma and displacement. For those whose “ontological security” (p. 14) has been shattered by external forces like war, the intimate space of sexuality provides a venue to reclaim a sense of being. Thus, queer identity has “become powerful enough to effectively challenge the sexual politics and proclivities of the dominant culture” (Eyerman, 2019, pp. 80-81). Because trauma “marks upon [...] group consciousness, making [...] memories forever and changing [...] future identities in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Eyerman, 2019, p. 3), the queer subject, as a traumatised subject, “is left in profound silence without the motivation or resources to construct a narrative” (Worsham, 2006, p. 176). In this

context, sex acts as a restorative practice, allowing the individual to establish a presence in a world that has otherwise rendered them invisible.

Despite a fractured identity mediated by the historical weights of war and displacement, the subject strives to become “recognisable” by synthesising their fragmented experiences. Eyerman (2019) notes that for displaced populations, such as the Vietnamese diaspora, identity is a movement of “the past in the present” where trauma leaves “indelible marks” (p. 23). This process of becoming recognisable requires the subject to bring “into play every resource of the collective memory” to bridge the divide between their internal reality and the external world (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 186). Ultimately, the subject finds recognition not by adhering to traditional norms, but by naming their own fractured history and asserting their identity through the very gaps left by upheaval.

In “Seventh Circle of Earth,” Vuong (2016) applies this tension to the 2011 immolation of a gay couple in Texas. The title references the circle of violence in Dante’s *Inferno*. The poem utilises a formal constraint by relegating all text to footnotes. This structural choice mirrors the social erasure and marginalisation of queer subjects. The imagery depicts the body’s dissolution into a “crackle of charred bones” (Vuong, 2016, p. 42) and rising “smoke” (p. 42). The speaker describes a violent transformation where “laughter” is reduced to “ash” and “air” (p. 42). This destruction offers a paradoxical liberation through the loss of self. By becoming “no one” (p. 42), the victims find a tragic reprieve from the scrutiny of the living. Ultimately, Vuong (2016) emphasises that despite their erasure, they remain irrevocably “American” (p. 42).

Unlike journalistic accounts, the poetic version focuses on the intimacy shared between two bodies. This love persists even in the face of impending death. The work mocks both mortality and the ironically precarious conditions of gay life in America. In Dante’s *Inferno*, the seventh circle is reserved for the violent. These figures are condemned to a valley and submerged in a river of blood. From the banks, the Minotaur of Crete stands ready to strike the transgressors with arrows. The poem strategically inverts this hierarchical structure. This reversal functions as the primary source of the work’s irony. It highlights the specific societal conditions imposed upon gay couples: “look. Look how happy we are / to be no one/ & still/ American” (Vuong, 2016, p. 42).

Erasing the past requires the erasure of the subjects residing within that time. However, these efforts remain purely figurative. The past inextricably returns to the present. It functions as a temporal invasion. Memory persists even when unsummoned. It cannot be easily displaced. Instead, it compels a pursuit of incomplete fragments. Currently, a space has opened for experiential narratives. Both ethnography and literature increasingly utilise these accounts. Such narratives provide a renewed sense of meaning to human experience. Hirsch emphasises the concept of “postmemory.” This phenomenon extends beyond direct protagonists. It involves a second-generation memory. It describes the memory that “can be transferred to those who were not actually there to live an event” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 3). This includes public or familial recollections of both auspicious and tragic events. The term suggests “literally ‘after memory,’ indicating the absence of a first-hand empirical connection to the war” (Löschnigg & Sokolowska-Paryz, 2014, p. 1). It persists ambivalently among those connected to the original record. This mediation often generates conflict. Subsequent generations attempt to reconstruct their own identities through ancestral memory.

Young (1994) defines this process as “the vicarious memory of past catastrophe” (p. 19). Postmemory emerges from the fusion of original trauma and contemporary reconstruction. This distinction is primarily conceptual. It does not necessarily represent a shift in the fundamental paradigm of memory. All experiences of the past are inherently vicarious, describing the

relationship of later generations to historical trauma. For Hirsch (2012), postmemory “offered a means to uncover and to restore experiences and life stories that might otherwise remain absent from the historical archive” (p. 15). Subjects employ imagination and recognised facts to represent prior events. Every narration of the past is a representation. It stands in place of the actual fact. Consequently, the vicarious nature of representation is not exclusive to historical study. In this respect, Hirsch (2012) notes that “Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (p. 5). Hirsch claims that literature gives form to this understanding. History has converged with memory and validated its contributions. Sontag (2004) views “[t]he understanding of war among people who have not experienced war” as more critical than mere remembering (p. 21). However, understanding requires memory. This creates an ambivalent attitude towards history that “gives contradictory signals about the value of remembering” (p. 115).

Vuong’s (2016) “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong” serves as a profound meditation on temporal anachronism. For Halbwachs (1980), “we retrieve the image of a past event by mentally traversing the framework of time” (p. 99). Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory posits that we do not store memories as static, objective files; rather, we reconstruct the past from the vantage point of the present. When we “mentally traverse the framework of time,” we are not neutral travellers; we carry our modern social frameworks, values, and technological understandings with us. Because the “framework” we use to organise time is rooted in our current society, the act of retrieval often involves filling in historical gaps with modern logic to make the past more “readable.” These anachronisms result from the inherent difficulty of traversing time without bringing our modern “mental luggage” along. Ultimately, Halbwachs’ view suggests that memory is a creative reconstruction, making anachronism a natural byproduct of the way we navigate our history. Memory is a “reconstruction of the past” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 46) achieved through present cognition. Adults frequently “deform their memories of childhood” (p. 47). They force these recollections into the “framework of the present” (p. 47). Vuong (2016) mirrors this by situating the “end of the road... behind us” (p. 82). The past exists only as it is reconstituted in the current moment. The subject’s identity relies on social frameworks. The “collective memory of the family” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 54) provides the foundational structure for the self. Individual consciousness acts as an “intersection of several currents of collective thought” (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 45). In Vuong’s poem, the father’s role is contingent upon active remembrance (Vuong, 2016, p. 82). The subject’s beauty is located within the “mother’s shadow” (p. 82). Memory is essentially a “collective process”.

The subject is defined by their position within these social frameworks. Writing functions as a vital conceptual tool for ontological security. Halbwachs (1992) suggests that individuals “write it down” to render their memories “more precise” (p. 48). Vuong (2016) introduces a “desk” with a “brick to make it last” (p. 83). This symbolises a “framework of memory”. Such frameworks communicate “stability and generality” to concrete recollections (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 182). They exist “both within the passage of time and outside it” (p. 182). The subject eventually “mistakes these walls for skin” (Vuong, 2016, p. 83). Writing transforms external structures into a guarantee of present existence.

To correct the analytical imbalance of viewing Vuong’s verse solely through a lens of victimisation, this synthesis places Caruth’s trauma framework in direct conversation with Butler’s theory of performativity, establishing the queer refugee body as an active site of ontological reclamation rather than a passive canvas for historical wounding. By intersecting these paradigms, the analysis demonstrates how the displaced subject utilises the literal wreckage of

transgenerational trauma as raw material for resilient identity construction. In core poems such as “Seventh Circle of Earth” and “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong,” the transmission of unassimilated psychic shock ceases to be a site of permanent erasure; instead, the “voice of the wound” is re-authored through ritualised, performative acts of queer intimacy and self-fashioning that operate within the gaps of failing cultural scripts. Ultimately, while ancestral trauma provides a fractured lexicon, the queer performative impulse rewrites the syntax—transforming historical grief into a viable space for contemporary existence and proving that refugee reconstruction is a continuous, agentic refusal to let the wound dictate the limits of queer visibility.

CONCLUSION

In investigating the intricate convergence of transgenerational trauma, mnemonic erasure, and queer identity construction within Vuong’s *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), this study has demonstrated that poetic verse functions not as a passive repository for inherited historical grief, but rather as an active, textually dynamic landscape capable of archiving historical ruptures while simultaneously generating resilient modes of self-fashioning. By synthesising the foundational trauma paradigms of Caruth alongside Butler’s theories of performativity and further grounding these models within the memory frameworks of Hirsch, Halbwachs, and Ricoeur, the analysis successfully bridges the conceptual divide between abstract structural wounding and the lived material realities of the displaced subject. Through a rigorous, text-centred hermeneutic method applied across the selected poetic corpus, the manuscript has established that the formal disruptions of the text—including its strategic layout fragmentations, deliberate textual voids, and erratic lineation—manifest precisely as the structural “voice of the wound,” giving expressive shape to unassimilated transgenerational crises that inherently evade the linear constraints of standard narrative prose.

Furthermore, by tracing how wartime sexual violence and geopolitical displacement are somatically inscribed upon the physical body, the paper underscores how the *soma* operates as an alternative, material archive that directly counters the institutional amnesia of both the homeland and the host nation. Ultimately, the intersection of these diverse theoretical networks reveals that the reconstruction of queer refugee subjectivity is achieved through ritualised, performative acts of intimacy and self-expression that purposefully operate within the cracks of failing or hostile dominant cultural scripts. Rather than demanding the total erasure of ancestral trauma to achieve contemporary survival, Vuong’s verse proves that the fragments of historical wounds can be effectively repurposed into the very linguistic and corporeal tools necessary to assert marginalised visibility, thereby subverting official heteronormative historiographies and honouring the subterranean memories of the subaltern.

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