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## Shaping the Lyric: Literal and Metaphorical Blank Space in the Poetry of Emily Berry and Ocean Vuong

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This article examines two poetry collections that evoke the theme of parental loss: *Stranger, Baby* by Emily Berry, and *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* by Ocean Vuong, both published in 2017. It will focus on the poets' use of blank space, both literally and metaphorically, to emphasise their underlying themes of loss, absence, distance and detachment. However, an analysis of their poems will reveal that their subject is not that of loss but the impossibility of articulating such loss through language. The concept of blank space shapes these poems both physically and figuratively, as Vuong and Berry write into the void that exists between experience and its articulation, foregrounding the void itself through the process of writing. While Berry's poetry centres on the language of personal grief, Vuong's collection negotiates other types of loss: a sense of lost heritage, and the silence that results from the erasure of multiple voices.

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Emily Berry and Ocean Vuong have each written poetry collections on the theme of parental loss. Berry's *Stranger, Baby* (2017a) examines her grief for her mother, who died when she was a child, while Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2017a) examines the absence of a father. My reading of these texts will focus on the literal and metaphorical use of blank space, as both poets evoke the experience of loss, while simultaneously interrogating their own attempt to do so. I argue that Berry and Vuong combine techniques from different poetic traditions, creating a 'hybridity of lyric and language modes' (Sastri 2014: 191) similar to that identified in the work of other contemporary poets, such as Jorie Graham and Susan Howe (Spahr and Rankine 2002). Reena Sastri places Louise Glück in this 'hybrid' category (2014). She argues that Glück's work, along with that of many other contemporary poets, combines a 'speech-based, expressive' lyricism focused on 'personal authentic experience', with a more 'constructivist' approach that questions language and the 'illusion of coherent selfhood', so that her poems 'simultaneously create the vivid illusion of voice and reveal its artifice' (Sastri 2014: 189–191). In a similar way, I will argue that Berry and Vuong simultaneously evoke a sense of loss, while acknowledging that it is impossible to put such loss into words. By combining some of the characteristics of first-person, expressive lyric poetry with a more reflexive focus on the constructed nature of language and the self, associated with a more experimental lineage of writers such as Howe, Glück, Denise Riley, and Kristin Prevallet, Berry and Vuong re-shape the lyric, literally and figuratively, around the concept of blank space.

Fiona Sampson argues that Berry's early poems fit an expressive, confessional, 'affect-led' lyric tradition (Sampson 2012: 214–225). Though contested by many poets, confessional poetry is generally understood to focus on 'transgressive autobiographical subjects' such as family trauma, or sexual experience (Rosenbaum 2012: 296). However, both Vuong and Berry have contested purely autobiographical readings of their work. Berry rejects the term 'autobiographical', preferring Sharon Olds' description of her poetry as 'apparently personal' (Berry 2017b), while reviewers have highlighted the way in which she foregrounds, not her personal experience of loss, but the 'difficulty' of transforming such loss into words (Winik 2017). In a similar way, Vuong states: 'I see the act of the imagination in service of larger questions. And so, as a poet, I often invent these spaces based on truths' (Vuong 2019). He explains, for example, that the description of his father, in the poem 'On earth we're briefly gorgeous' (2017a: 41) was a helpful way for him to question 'masculinity and the vulnerabilities inherent in performing masculinity' rather than a straightforward account of an event (Vuong 2019). I will therefore analyse *Stranger, Baby* and *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* as collections that focus on the futility and illusion of language. I will demonstrate how Berry and

Vuong use blank space literally and metaphorically to evoke a sense of loss, while also self-reflexively emphasising the constructed nature of their poems, highlighting the gap between experience and the transformation of that experience into language.

*Stranger, Baby* displays blank space – in a literal sense – on many of its pages, with gaps in the middle of lines (25) and several poems stretched down the left-hand margin, leaving a space on the page that is larger than the text (26). A few of the poems, such as ‘Summer’ (7), are double spaced, and Berry has suggested that double spacing in elegy could be read as a ‘listening device’ to evoke the absence of the dead (Berry n.d.). *Stranger, Baby* was written as part of a PhD supervised by Denise Riley, whose own writing, including *Time Lived without its Flow* (2012), *A Part Song* (2012) and *Say Something Back* (2016), has similarly been interpreted as having a particular focus on the language of loss (Butler 2020: 332). In her thesis, Berry compares Riley’s poetry to the work of W.S. Graham, arguing that both poets create ‘open’ space within their texts, so that elegy becomes ‘a site that makes space for lack, that allows it to persist’ (Berry 2017c: 17 and 42). She describes her own project as focusing on ‘loss itself as a concept’ and ‘how this manifests in language’ through ‘holes, gaps, negation and obscurity’, stating, ‘I wondered what it meant to contemplate loss, to be thoroughly compelled by a bright, blank space’ (Berry 2017c: 2 and 7). Berry’s thesis centres on the predicament of elegy as a poetic form, examining ‘how something present (language, a text) can deliver something absent’ (Berry 2017c: 36). She argues that Kristin Prevallet’s use of blank space in *I, Afterlife*, where she interrupts the word “dis/APPEAR” with enjambment, ‘allows the poet’s loss to inhabit the text’ (Berry 2017c: 43–44). Berry indicates her own use of this technique in ‘Winter’ (14) where ‘an extra wide stanza break’ reinforces ‘the impossible distance between speaker and subject’ (Berry 2017c: 123). Berry’s discussion of these texts reveals a focus on the futility of language in the face of death, and a desire to evoke the absence itself, in the form of blank space, and the act of reaching into it. She quotes these lines from ‘Distance’, a poem by Prevallet: “Believing that holes can be filled with language is dangerous—only space itself occupies empty spaces” (Berry 2017c: 57).

Cate L. Mahoney has identified a similar focus on space in the work of Emily Dickinson, arguing that Dickinson constructs a kind of elegy that brings ‘the physical and psychological loss into the poem itself’ (Mahoney 2015: 53). Mahoney asserts that Dickinson’s preference for the dash over other forms of punctuation ‘expands’ the space and ‘destabilizes the language around it’, effectively becoming ‘the embodiment’ of loss (Mahoney 2015: 58–59). Though Berry only briefly refers to Dickinson in her thesis, it is clear from her discussion of the work of other poets, such as Anne Carson, that Berry’s own poetry centres around a similar “presence of absence” (Barthes quoted in Berry

2017c: 17). She discusses Carson's use of a certain neologism, "overtakelessness", borrowed from Dickinson's poem '1691', interpreting its meaning as 'the lack of the capacity [of the dead] to be overtaken' (Berry 2017c: 79). Her interpretation of this word implies a sense of futility even in language that is invented specifically for the purpose of expressing loss. I will argue that Berry's subject is not only grief or family trauma; rather, *Stranger, Baby* is full of poems that reach out into the void of absence, focusing on the void itself, the blank space that exists between experience and its articulation in language.

Vuong has also discussed the poetry of Emily Dickinson, interpreting her use of dashes as a way of 'articulating beyond language' (2019). He sees these dashes as a 'visceral response' in the absence of language, 'in the context of a patriarchal structure, where all the men around her at that time were silencing her' (Vuong 2019). He has also discussed the marginalisation of Asian American poets, stating that 'the lineage is feeble' with 'a lot of holes in it, a lot of silences' (Vuong 2016). In light of this, I will investigate the concept of silence as a central manifestation of blank space in his work, and the notion of a heritage or identity that can be lost, distant, or erased. The cover of *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* depicts a photograph of Vuong as a young child with his family, taken in a refugee camp, and the shape of this photograph re-appears inside the book three times: an empty space inside a rectangular frame, dividing the collection into four sections (5; 27; 51). Irrespective of whether the editor or poet added this empty rectangle, it indicates that family, and perhaps identity or heritage, may be impossible to depict, either in a frame or a poem. Vuong's focus on blank space may therefore relate not only to the loss of a father, but to a space that encompasses other types of loss. It points to the absence of numerous voices, the loss that results from decades of repression and erasure, in terms of race, gender and sexuality. Vuong's subject, then, is not limited to the loss of a father, or childhood trauma; rather, I will argue that his poems make use of such experiences to explore this blank space of silence, this attempt to articulate the self through language, to break into the silence with language, while acknowledging that such an attempt can never negate the silence. Just as Berry uses blank space literally on the page, many of Vuong's poems are also arranged with blank space between, around or within the lines, using indentation (9) or alternate left and right alignment (25), while several poems end with a half-line, surrounded by empty space (30).

The common theme shared by *Stranger, Baby* and *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* is that of the absent parent. Ryan compares Berry's work with the more traditional elegies of Ian Hamilton and Thomas Hardy, arguing that Berry's poems do not share the 'belief in the potential to raise the dead', fixating instead on the absence of the mother, and the 'grief

and uncertainty' that is left in the wake of her death (Ryan 2018). Ryan observes how Berry gives her mother no real voice in the collection, creating no 'physical impression' of her (2018). This lack of physical description is combined with a minimal focus on the actual traumatic event, as only one poem, 'Winter' (14), refers directly to her mother's death, emphasising the fact that Berry's subject is not her absent mother, but an interrogation of the absence itself. However, this is not a straightforward evocation of absence. Ryan also points out that *Stranger, Baby* 'regularly breaks the fourth wall, aware of the artifice of its rituals', with poems that 'announce their made-ness' (Ryan 2018). The focus here is not on the absence itself, but the poet's attempt to evoke such absence through language.

Berry foregrounds her use of language through unanswered questions that appear in several poems, emphasising a lack of response from the absent mother. For example, in 'Picnic' she asks 'Who are you. Who are you. Who are you.' (6). This technique is self-consciously analysed in 'Everything Bad is Permanent' (16) where disembodied voices speak:

Some people don't put question marks at the ends of questions any more  
In case anyone should think they'd be so idealistic as to expect an answer

*Then, looking reproachfully at her mother, she demanded  
'Where was you, Mummy? Where was you?'*

Where was you, Mummy  
As from a stable place you come unbalanced

I did it once by accident, now I do it deliberately, in plain sight  
In decorated sight

This lack of question marks indicates that no answer is expected; to receive an answer from the absent mother is impossible. And yet, the questions are still asked, existing in a kind of impossible void, a blank space where language becomes something 'deliberate' and decorative, divorced from its normal communicative function. These disembodied voices also represent the collage technique that Berry has used throughout the collection, filling her poems with quotes from writers such as Sigmund Freud, A.A. Milne and Virginia Woolf. Such polyvocality is emphasised, presented in italics with little attempt to smooth the joins between one voice and another; although the poet's voice repeats the line 'Where was you, Mummy' in this particular quote, the lack of question mark and change of tone are clear. These lost voices do not harmonise or come

to any conclusion; they simply speak out into the void, expecting no response. This sense of individual voices each speaking in turn is emphasised by Berry's use of end-stopped lines, creating blank space as we move from one line to the next, highlighting the lack of response.

Berry references Sigmund Freud throughout her collection, using quotes from his writing in her poems and the book's title, with four poems written in his voice: 'Freud's War' (30), 'Freud's Beautiful Things' (31), 'Freud's Horses' (32) and 'Freud's Loss' (33). While some reviewers, such as Sarah Crown (2017), have interpreted Berry's sea imagery as representing her absent mother, because, in Freud's 'dream-etymology the sea stood for the mother', this sea imagery does not just represent the absent parent. In her thesis, Berry states that 'the sea became a useful metaphor for the largeness (as it seemed to me) of what I was attempting to name and the seeming impossibility of reducing it' (Berry 2017c: 119). I would suggest, therefore, that Berry is using sea imagery to represent absence, in the form of empty space where the mother should have been, as well as the impossibility of articulating such absence through language. The speaker in 'Picnic' (4–6) describes the slippery process of confronting one's own grief and attempting to write about it: 'Watching the sea is like watching something in pieces continually striving to be whole'. In 'Tidal Wave Speaks' (21) she expands on the same theme:

This is what I did.  
Laid it all out like a tidal wave.  
Thought you could in fact  
*lay out* a tidal wave.

Here, she self-reflexively considers her own attempt to '*lay out*' her grief using language, and in 'Sign of the Anchor' (3), there is a clear description of standing on the edge of 'the dangerous shore', confronting this great void, this absence. The speaker attempts to use the tools of language: 'I shouted some words', but the words are 'lost', and she is unable to escape the reality of death, even in a poem: 'ash rained from the sky'. The poem ends with the speaker immersed in the sea: 'far out, in wet denim', immersed in this absence and her attempt to turn it into poetry. This poem is the first one in the collection, implying that the rest of the poems are written from a state of immersion in what turns out to be an impossible attempt to put loss into words.

*Night Sky with Exit Wounds* also makes use of blank space imagery to evoke the absence of a parent; this time it is Vuong's father, who left the family when he was very young. The collection is full of references to fathers, and Vuong explains: 'I'm always

asking who's my father. Like Homer, I felt I'd better make it up' (Vuong 2017b). The first poem in the collection is 'Threshold' (3-4), depicting a boy watching as his father sings in the shower:

I watched through the keyhole, not  
the man showering but the rain  
  
falling through him

The scene is set with a sense of loss, of trying to reach out towards someone who appears solid, but turns out to lack real substance, as the water falls 'through' his body. Not only is the father viewed from a distance, through a 'keyhole', but his voice, too, is revealed to be insubstantial:

His voice –  
  
it filled me to the core  
like a skeleton.

Such a voice has no flesh to it, and there is a price to be paid, even for this elusive glimpse:

I didn't know the cost  
  
of entering a song – was to lose  
your way back.  
  
So I entered. So I lost.  
I lost it all with my eyes  
  
wide open.

In this opening poem, Vuong establishes the theme of loss, indicating, in a similar sense to Berry's immersion in the sea, that an attempt to articulate such loss, to find substance within it, is doomed to failure. The speaker knows this now, and yet he still embarks on this quest, self-consciously, with 'eyes//wide open'.

Vuong's second poem, 'Telemachus' (7-8) attempts to fill the space of the absent father with another insubstantial figure; this father is based on myth. 'Telemachus' presents the same themes of illusion and absence that appeared in the first poem. It ends with the words 'I seal my father's lips//with my own & begin/the faithful work of



drowning'. Just as Berry wades into the absence of the mother at the beginning of her collection, Vuong, too, loses himself in loss, in the absence of a father. He attempts to pull his father 'out/of the water', only to discover that 'he could be anyone's father'. This reinforces the idea of a father who can be present in the language of a poem but absent in reality, where even physical touch is 'No use' because he is both dead and a literary construction. Many things in the poem appear real but are revealed to be insubstantial, from the city that is 'no longer/where we left it', to the sandy 'trail' that is erased by the waves. The speaker questions his father about his identity:

*Do you know who I am,*  
Ba? But the answer never comes. The answer

is the bullet hole in his back, brimming  
with seawater.

The answer to the question comes, not in speech, but in the physical, brutal space of a bullet hole, filled with water, not blood, representing the absence of presence, the absence of even the semblance of life. Throughout the collection, including the title, Vuong uses this imagery of bullet holes, along with other forms of blank space, literal and metaphorical, to examine several interconnected themes. These themes converge around the concept of identity and how to articulate it, including his father's absence, the trauma of being removed from his country of birth, and a complex interrogation of masculinity and homosexuality.

The sea appears in several of Vuong's poems, emphasising the vast space between his US home and his birth-country of Vietnam, a distance that is physical, cultural and full of violence. In 'Immigrant Haibun' (13–15), the six prose sections and the final haiku text are separated out with blank space in between, emphasising the vast distance of this journey, along with phrases such as 'We had been sailing for months'. The haibun is full of fairy tale imagery and the materiality of language, to the point where we do not know what is real and what is merely language: 'The fog lifts. And we see it. The horizon – suddenly gone... Just like the fairy tales. The one where the book closes and turns to laughter in our laps.' The ship is, at once, a fairy tale, a real ship and 'a ship in a wine bottle on the mantel in the middle of a Christmas party', but despite this confusion between what is merely language and what is real, they 'keep sailing anyway', as the materiality of language continues to compete with the narrative. There is 'A white hyphen where his lips should be', while someone, perhaps Vuong himself, perhaps his mother, feels 'like an ampersand'. This merging of language and family demonstrates the difficulty of writing about the past: some experiences are real, others imagined, and



these poems attempt to fill in the gaps, to fill in this blank space, while also focusing on the space itself, acknowledging that language can only achieve so much.

There are other figurative spaces that appear in the same haibun: ‘Stars. Or rather, the drains of heaven – waiting. Little holes. Little centuries opening just long enough for us to slip through’. These stars-as-holes signify a desire to step into one’s own narrative, to construct an identity, create a past, while also wanting to slip away from it, to slip out of it. They also echo the title of the collection: *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, where such holes create an apparently beautiful image that is actually the result of violence, as well as a reference to the speaker’s journey as an immigrant, as he exits one geographical location and enters another. Similarly, in ‘Logophobia’ (2017a: 77) the speaker is writing in Vietnamese, and decides to ‘drill the ink/into a period’. This then becomes another bullet hole in his father’s back, into which he climbs, signalling an attempt to enter his own heritage, through the act of writing.

In ‘Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds’ (25–26) Vuong takes this concept further, as the poem races from one image to the next, using enjambment and slant rhyme to increase the pace. This rush of imagery mimics the traverse of a bullet through the body, through all the varied aspects of Vuong’s heritage, from the journey across the globe on a ‘sinking boat’, through a ‘city trying to forget//the bones beneath its sidewalks’ to the ‘refugee camp sick with smoke’ and the ‘grandfather fucking/the pregnant farmgirl in the back of his army jeep’. The poem begins with a sense of autonomy, starting ‘Instead, let it be’ as if the speaker is seizing control of their identity and how it might be articulated. The repeated refrain ‘let it’, ‘let them’, adds to this semblance of control, culminating in an image of the American ‘Charlie’, about to shoot:

Yes – let me believe that I was born  
to cock back this rifle, smooth & slick, like a true

Charlie, like the footsteps of ghosts misted through rain  
as I lower myself between the sights – & pray

that nothing moves.

The final line is cut short, leaving the poem open-ended, signalling a space for the speaker to make his choice: whether or not to shoot, whether, perhaps, to identify as American or Vietnamese. Vuong foregrounds the construction of an identity through language; yet this is precarious, violent, dangerous, and never complete, ending with the moment before a decision is made. In fact, approximately half of the poems in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* finish with a half-line, or just a few words, creating a sense of

incompletion and emphasising the precarious nature of poetry, as it attempts to capture the self in language. The absence of a parent, in Vuong's collection, is thus linked to a much larger, far more complex absence: a lost heritage, caught in the crossfire of two disparate cultures. In the poem 'Daily Bread' (72–74), he addresses the writing of identity directly: 'I know/nothing of my country. I write things/down. I build a life & tear it apart'.

Blank space is also used literally and metaphorically in both collections to signal a sense of distance and detachment, inextricably bound up with the loss of mother or father. Michiko Kakutani (2016) describes Vuong's collection as using 'the magic of words to summon and preserve the past'. However, the use of blank space in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* appears to emphasise the physical distance between his current US home and his birth-country of Vietnam, as well as the temporal distance of experience, as he writes about a past he was too young to remember. There are several references to events that took place before Vuong was born, including the conception of his mother in 'Notebook Fragments' (65–69), where he writes: 'An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me'. Such a statement indicates the apparent contradiction that lies at the heart of this exploration into an identity born of violence. Not only is this heritage a distant one, separated by a yawning gulf of blank space in the form of physical, cultural and temporal distance; it is also a precarious one, caught inside its own dependence on the brutality of war.

The fall of Saigon is another event that took place before Vuong was born, in 1975, described in the poem 'Aubade with Burning City' (10–11). This poem is full of broken lines and blank space. Vuong interweaves his own imagery with lyrics from the famous 'White Christmas' song which was played on the radio at the time, as a warning to initiate evacuation. The repetition of 'white' alongside white imagery such as 'snow', contrasts against darker imagery such as 'black dog'. Along with fragmented images and overheard voices, this emphasis on black and white implies a past glimpsed through grainy news footage and photographs, witnessed years later through television screens:

The city so white it is ready for ink.

The radio says run run run.

Milkflower petals on a black dog

Like pieces of a girl's dress.

*May your days be merry and bright.*

The fall of Saigon is thus captured in the poem as a distant historical event, broken lines creating a flickering movement, reminiscent of a news broadcast transmitted across time and space. There is also an ironic contrast here, between the US and Vietnam, two aspects of this same heritage, emphasised by the insertion of cheerful song lyrics alongside images of death and destruction. A father figure appears in many of Vuong's poems, and in this one, as the 'chief of police' lies 'facedown in a pool of Coca-Cola' there is '[a] palm-sized photo of his father soaking/beside his left ear'. Such a father is doubly distant, being no more than a decaying photograph of someone else's father. As the poet attempts to lay claim to this distant past, his distorted, dream-like language emphasises the shifting precariousness of merging family memories with personal recollections and historical accounts, bound up, as always, with the loss of a father, and the impossible irony of wartime love.

Berry also uses blank space to evoke a sense of self-conscious distance and detachment, but this is not just between daughter and absent mother; there is also a sense of distance between the poet and her lyric 'I'. She uses double spacing to emphasise this distance in 'Now all my poems are about death I feel as though I'm really living' (22). Each end-stopped line appears unconnected with the preceding line, with no clear metrical pattern, and the effect is of a series of freeze-frame images from a film, stuck in the present tense, fixating, through photography and observation, on how things look:

Under the trees, on the wet ground, with the staggering crows.

I photograph myself in the cemetery.

I kneel and speak to you and I observe myself doing it.

The crows observe themselves.

The words 'pose' and 'observe' appear twice in the poem, and this focus on self-conscious looking fixes our attention on language; the poet observes the grieving version of herself writing the poem, evoking a sense of detachment or objectivity. However, this sense of detachment breaks down in the final line, with a sudden switch to past tense and a rush of verbs: 'I knelt, I spoke, I cried, I wrote this down, regretted it'. At the very moment when the poet begins to see her grief objectively, such objectivity is revealed to be no more than an illusion, as grief rushes back in full force.

This focus on language is explicit in many of Berry's poems. 'The End' (11) self-consciously analyses the process of writing about loss:

I told a story about my shame

It got cold when the air touched it

Then it got hot, throbbed, wept, attracted fragments with which it eventually  
glittered

Till I couldn't stop looking at it

This attempt to write about loss, and the specific element of shame associated with it, produces 'a story' that appears as a real, almost tangible, object, that can get hot and cold, and display its own emotions, so that it appears to be detached entirely from the poet. However, the mesmerising 'glittered' effect, along with words such as 'spectacular', in the poem's first line, implies that such a sense of detachment is no more than an elaborate illusion. In the same poem, the speaker has already established a desire for the 'distortion' of her voice, so that 'people don't know it's me', implying a desire for detachment between the self that feels grief and shame, and the self that writes about it. Such detachment is reinforced by double spacing, creating a sense of separation even between the lines of the poem.

This sense of distance and detachment is emphasised by the use of multiple voices within many of Berry's poems. The collection is full of voices, including multiple selves within one poem. 'Tragedy for One Voice' (9) sets up a performance of cognitive dissonance between the two voices of one grieving soul, referred to as 'ME ONE' and 'ME TWO', while other poems such as 'Picnic' (4-6) present the voice of raw emotion alongside other voices that are able to take a more objective stance. Alongside these layered selves we hear many other voices, sometimes in the form of direct quotations. In one poem, the title 'I have already said that the baby appreciates, perhaps from the beginning, the aliveness of the mother' is a direct quote from Donald Winnicott, while the single line poem that follows is a direct quote from Berry's mother's writing (43).

Berry incorporates voices from other sources too, including figures in works of art. In the poem 'Girl on a Liner' (34) there are several voices, some of whom appear to be advising the poet how to write the poem, criticising the poet's choice of words:

I watch the water pour out of my eyes; there was a feeling  
but I wrote it down and it ceased to be a feeling,  
became art. "I am afraid of..." they explained,  
'might be better rendered as, 'There is a fear of...''

This suggested change from active to passive voice removes any sense of the personal, adding to the assertion in the previous lines that writing something down removes

the ‘feeling’, turning it into impersonal ‘art’, and emphasising the detachment of the lyric self from the grieving self. The poem becomes a linguistic analysis of the distance between loss and its vocalisation on the page, re-creating the detachment required by a writer attempting to bridge the gap.

This detachment evokes the central problem of using language to articulate loss, knowing that it can never succeed. As I have already mentioned, *Stranger, Baby* contains several poems shaped into narrow columns with blank space to the side. ‘Aura’ (48) forms two columns down the page, separated by a column of blank space, emphasising the distance between the dead and the living, ironically joined at the point just before the speaker decides that there is ‘no separation’ after all. However, the sense of distance is reinforced by the fact that the blank space re-appears in the final four lines:

no separation	it was just
aura the most	remarkable
sadness &	if only I would
keep looking	I would see you

Such an ending indicates that language – however hard it tries – cannot link mother with daughter, past with present, or the living with the dead. However, the lack of a full stop implies that this is an ongoing process that, despite such futility, the writer can never admit defeat.

The impossibility of language to articulate experience is also a key theme in Vuong’s poems, and he also uses multiple voices to express this distance between language and reality. He has spoken about a gap in communication between himself and his family, stating ‘I always wanted to speak to my family, but I can’t, because my mind thinks in a much more intricate English, whereas my family speaks in a third-grade-level Vietnamese’ (Vuong 2016), and several of his poems reflect this linguistic distance. ‘My Father Writes from Prison’ (18) is ‘an imagined letter from his father to his mother’. He explains,

that in taking up other voices he is occupied by a “sense of loss,” because “those voices never speak in this way or have ever spoken.” His father really was in prison, but it was a Communist prison, and letters, if they came at all, were censored. In writing poems like this, Vuong seeks “not necessarily to speak for anyone, but to offer a rendition—in a way a phantom—of what could have been ... Every attempt to speak is also a grieving of the voice that never arrived.” Speaking for someone who never spoke is also a way of paying homage to the absurdism and surrealism of the myriad mythologies that inspire him, tales which “ignore all rational sense” because they come out of a “nonsensical” world. “I think I stand firmly as an inventor and a mythmaker.” (Vuong 2017c)

This explanation, though difficult to discern from the interviewer's remarks, indicates that such poems are written as myths, foregrounding the concept of narrative as illusion. Writing the poem as a letter implies the presence of the letter-writing-father, while also indicating his distance from the recipient. But this distance from reality is emphasised even further through the merging of one language with another, and the forward slashes that break up the text, fragmenting it and forcing the reader to feel disconnected. There is an implicit lack of communication here, and therefore a sense of distance between writer and reader, English and Vietnamese, father and son. Vuong's imagined voice of his father in this poem therefore emphasises his father's absence, and the distance between them.

Vuong has spoken about the use of multiple voices in his poems as a way of 'speaking to phantoms' (2016). He explains: 'I became obsessed with the impossibility of speaking to these shadows, the possibility of an impossibility, which occurs for me only in language' (Vuong 2016). It is clear from this quote that his use of multiple voices indicates a focus, not on the voices themselves, but the 'impossibility' of speaking for them or addressing them directly, which, through poetry, appears real, even though it also reveals this reality to be false. Vuong continues, in the same interview, with this reflection:

Of course, this blends into the poem "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," in which I speak to my own shadow. In this way, I saw a potent moment: these three characters that are built on mythologies and unbounded by the physical world became fluid to one another. I think that's ultimately where the queer aspect of poetry is so attractive to me, both in the execution of syntax, you know, the multitudinous aspect of syntax and line breaks, having double, triple entendre, and in that the speaker or the addressee is always in transience, always a shifting person, which I think is the closest we can get to the way I feel as a queer person living in the world. (Vuong 2016)

There are several poems in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* which explore aspects of queer identity. For example, in 'Immigrant Haibun' (13) and 'Logophobia' (77) the speaker talks of entering the bullet holes that appear through the collection. Although there are clear links here, as I have already discussed, with the violent relationship at the heart of an American-Vietnamese identity, and the relationship between language and experience, the idea of entering these holes also has sexual connotations. However, Vuong's comment also indicates that he views poetry itself as a queer form of writing, a genre that can be used to deconstruct or destabilize our static sense of self, in a way that replicates the experience of living as a queer person. Vuong's collection could therefore be read as an attempt to evoke the fluid, interconnected aspects of identity in language,

along with a simultaneous acknowledgement that language itself is slippery, 'shifting', and insubstantial, evoking an ongoing sense of spacial separation between language and experience.

Some of Vuong's poems also indicate another absence in addition to the absent father: the absence of lost lovers, friends or other men who are persecuted for their sexuality, linked with the loss, or forced erasure, of voice. In 'Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong' (78–79) there is a reference to 'Your dead friends passing/through you like wind/through a wind chime'. Such friends have lost their substance, just as the father has lost his substance. They are still, somehow, present in the sound of the chime, yet such a presence is intangible and illusive; it is the presence of absence.

Vuong uses the ventriloquising technique in other poems, but always in such a way as to foreground the absence of voice, or a sense of distance between the reality of experience and its expression through language. 'Seventh Circle of Earth' (39) describes the murder of two gay men through the voice of its victims. Vuong explains that he originally wrote the poem 'in tercets' but the use of a traditional poetic form 'felt like a diluted, forced recasting of a horrific event' and he eventually re-wrote the poem as it appears in his collection (Vuong n.d.). In the new version he leaves a 'vast and utter emptiness' on the page, emphasising the 'violent erasure' of the men (Vuong n.d.). This blank space also reinforces the impossibility of using language to speak for the voiceless. The disembodied voice is now relegated to the footnotes. The absence of these two men is made present through the blank space on the page, just as the loss of his friends appears in the fleeting echo of a wind chime.

This analysis of *Stranger, Baby* and *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* demonstrates how Ocean Vuong and Emily Berry use blank space literally and metaphorically to emphasise their underlying themes of loss, absence, distance and detachment. In doing so, they write as lyric poets, producing poems that evoke such emotion and experience on the page. However, they also use many of the techniques advocated by more experimental poets such as Riley, Howe and Prevallet, exploring the multiplicity of the self, interrogating their own poems, and emphasising the impossible gap between experience and its articulation through language. They therefore re-shape the lyric around the concept of blank space, figuratively and literally writing into the void that exists between life and its articulation through language. They foreground an experience of the void itself through the process of writing and, in the case of Vuong, point towards the erasure and repression of multiple voices.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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