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MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S., Volume 50, Number 3, Fall  
2025, pp. 187-204 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



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# “The Lack of Coherence is a Powerful Disobedience”: A Conversation with Ocean Vuong

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During his visit to the Toledo Museum of Art in October 2024, Ocean Vuong reflected on his creative process, stating, “I think the lack of coherence is a powerful disobedience, especially for an Asian American subject, who has been legible in this country mostly through labor.”<sup>1</sup> Vuong was responding to my question on the role of coherence in art and how making oneself legible to the world is a fundamental concern for many artists, especially minority artists. Throughout his career, Vuong has reflected on the representational limits and possibilities of language and art, the racialized and gendered gatekeeping in the publishing world, and how the demand for racial and ethnic “legibility” can also be a type of disempowerment. As our conversation continued, Vuong made clear that “a certain lack of coherence and legibility can be really, really beautiful.” This rejection of biased notions of coherence and legibility—and the artistic choices it enables—is particularly significant for Vuong’s work as he moves between many genres and forms: poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and now photography, which we discuss in our conversation. His genre-crossing oeuvre addresses themes of historical and cultural memory, Asian American labor, queer identity, biological and chosen families, refugee and immigrant experiences, the aesthetics of intimacy, rural and postindustrial communities, and the ongoing effects of US empire.

Born in 1988 in Saigon, Vietnam, Vuong spent time in a refugee camp in the Philippines before arriving in the United States with his family as refugees. They settled in Hartford, Connecticut, where he was raised by his mother and grandmother. Growing up, his mother and relatives worked in nail salons and factories. He started his college education at Manchester Community College before transferring to Pace University to study international marketing. During his first term there, he transferred to Brooklyn College, where

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlaf041>

he earned a BA in nineteenth-century American literature. While an undergraduate, **Vuong** published his first poetry chapbook, *Burnings* (2011), followed by a second chapbook, *No*, in 2013. He went on to complete his MFA in Poetry at New York University.

During his MFA, **Vuong** published his debut full-length poetry collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016). This book won the T. S. Eliot Prize, the Whiting Award, and the Thom Gunn Award, establishing **Vuong** as a major voice in contemporary poetry. This collection centers a Vietnamese immigrant experience in the United States and explores themes of self-identity, trauma, the speaker's relationship with their father, and the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Following his MFA, **Vuong** served as the 2019-20 Artist-in-Residence at NYU's Asian/Pacific/American Institute, working with the Center for Refugee Poetics and the Lillian Vernon Creative Writers House. He then taught at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, before joining NYU as a professor of creative writing in 2022.

In 2019, **Vuong** published his first novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. It quickly became a *New York Times* best-seller and has sold over a million copies in forty languages. It won the American Book Award, the Mark Twain Award, and the New England Book Award. Set against the backdrop of wartime Vietnam and postindustrial Hartford, the novel follows the coming-of-age journey of Little Dog, a queer Vietnamese American man. Written as a letter to his illiterate mother, Rose, it intertwines Little Dog's story with those of his mother and grandmother, weaving familial history with staggering reflections on American life, language, war, migration, and sexuality.

**Vuong's** next poetry collection, *Time Is a Mother* (2022), was written in the wake of his mother's death. It was a finalist for the Griffin Poetry Prize. These poems explore grief, loss, and contemporary life with the conviction that words can only convey so much. In "Dear Rose" in this collection, **Vuong** writes:

a word  
is only what it  
signifies that's how I know  
the arrowhead in my  
back means I'm finally  
pretty a word like bullet  
hovers in an amber  
afternoon on its way to  
meaning. (96)

With its concise and unexpected line arrangement, the poem allows words to breathe alongside blank spaces on the page, delinked from the need to resolve a narrative or end comfortably. **Vuong** has said of the collection, "This is my proudest book. . . . I don't know if it's good or 'successful,' but I feel like I didn't

compromise anything. And I got to do what I've always wanted to do, which is to embrace all linguistic registers that are contemporaneous to me" (qtd. in Hsu). This book illustrates Vuong's championing of both artistic integrity and linguistic diversity, affirming his indelible place in American arts and letters.

A MacArthur "Genius" Grant recipient and a National Book Award nominee for *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, **Vuong** has also received fellowships from the Poetry Foundation, the Lannan Foundation, and the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, and the Ruth Lilly Fellowship and a Pushcart Prize. His writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, and more. His latest novel, *The Emperor of Gladness* (2025), follows a year in the life of Hai, a young man living in East Gladness, Connecticut, who becomes the unexpected caretaker for Grazina, an eighty-two-year-old widow with dementia. They form an unlikely and transformative relationship built on empathy and second chances.

Vuong's creative work now extends to photography, with his first museum exhibit, *Still Life: a day in a nail salon in 2009*, debuting at the Toledo Museum of Art. To mark the occasion, I was in conversation with **Vuong** at the museum on 12 October 2024. In front of an audience of more than three hundred people, **Vuong** gave a presentation of his photos, explaining his journey into photography. Afterward, **Vuong** and I discussed writing, photography, the portrayal of racialized bodies as "still life" objects, the power of Asian ordinariness, and rest as an act of labor and defiance. Our conversation ended with questions from the audience, which are included here as well.<sup>2</sup>

**Joey S. Kim:** When I first encountered your writing, I was really struck by its visceral nature and the way in which the images populated your scenes and your stories. It seems, then, a natural shift, but also really significant, this turn to photography. As an interdisciplinary artist, I wanted to know how writing and photography as genres fuse or inform each other, and what is the relationship between them for you?

**Ocean Vuong:** I think both photography and poetry function through occlusion. The world is blocked off. It's about what we don't say on the page. It's about that negative space. Keats called this negative capability. And I would argue that photography has that, too. It has a function that film doesn't have because even with a film of still images, there's a reel. And so, time becomes quite oppressive so that you're being pulled by it. And the film keeps completing itself. The person walks across the room. If this is a film, the flag flutters, the face changes, and so what happens is that the viewer becomes quite passive. They're waiting for something to happen. But photography, because it arrests time, is a provocation, similar to the poem.

The poem is a provocation, particularly in the Eastern tradition with Matsuo Basho, Li Bai, and Du Fu. Those poets saw poetry as more something that should beckon the viewer forward and less about telling you how to feel, so I think both photography and poetry are so similar because they signal mythology without narration. And so, they're built on tension alone, and I see the photograph, the camera, kind of like a hole puncher. You're punching out parts of time and, at the end, you have a collection of pieces of the past that have been displaced. I read somewhere about one of my favorite photographers, Garry Winogrand, that if you compile all of the shutter stops in his entire archive, it only goes to eleven and a half seconds. How lucky we are to have such a technology that allows for that compression, that mythology. But what I love about photography is that it's an invitation always to the viewer, whereas film and music have a score, and it doesn't mean they're less than this art, but they don't have that same provocation. You look at a photograph and say, "I have time. And whatever I think is true. There's no wrong way to look at something." I think the camera is the technology of yes and affirmation. It can only say yes. And for a writer, as you know, writing is an art full of maybes.

Susan Sontag was right. She said there's no luck in writing. I don't know about you, Professor Kim, but I have never written a good sentence by accident. It comes with a lot of maybes and doubts, but in photography, your gut says, "I want this. I want to say yes to this. I want to say yes to the world," and then the camera says "yes" unanimously, and in the dark room it comes out, and then you say, "Oh, there's the magic I didn't see that," just like in the photo of myself in the refugee camp.<sup>3</sup> Sure, if you zoom in on the t-shirt, it says, "I love Daddy," which was of course bought by my father. And yet it's the women who have created and orchestrated the preservation of that image. And so the subversiveness in this is so beautiful, in that information is gathered all at once—the words on the shirt, the father, and the invisible work of the women.

**JSK:** I love that distinction: yes versus maybe and this idea of yes—we talked about this before. It also raises for me, as a Korean American scholar and poet, the question of coherence. Often, I write across different registers, genres, disciplines, and fields. In many ways, I struggle to write myself into existence, maybe due to a lack of visible precedents or a fear of erasure and legibility. It makes me wonder: what is coherence in art, what is the coherence of the object, of the photo, of the poem? Coherence and legibility shape, and, I think, obstruct many of us. I wanted to hear more about what you think of in terms of the completion of a work, or what coherence even means in relation to art.

**OV:** Oh, that's beautiful. Well, it's interesting because I didn't know coherence was so valued until I entered the professional world. You have to render yourself transparent in order to be valuable—to get a job or to appeal to a publisher. When I was growing up, I was surrounded by storytelling full of mystery. Opacity was enriching; every time my grandmother told a story, it changed, right?

I do agree with Harold Bloom, the late critic who gets a lot of flack, rightfully so. In his book *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994), he posits a series of rubrics for great literature. A lot of it is conservative and sort of rear-guard thinking, but one element I do agree with is when he says the most important part of art that endures is its strangeness.

I think that's absolutely right. In all of the work that provokes us, there's a strangeness that doesn't reveal itself, that doesn't make itself too explicit, and then it becomes something that goes beyond capital and commerce. You know a bag of chips is exhaustible, but a work of art full of strenuous interventions, stutters, and fragments could be revisited again and again, and I think I align with that greatly.

Because I was raised by women who didn't read, they didn't tell me I had to make myself legible. There's a lot to be said about tiger moms in the Asian American clichés of upward mobility, but I didn't have that. The Vietnam War created what were considered “bad” refugees or “bad” immigrants—those who didn't already have professional skills, money, or land, as American policy had previously favored. My family was farmers, and I was blessed that they told me, “Son, worst case, you can work as a manager at McDonald's, get a salary, and have health care. That's good enough.”

I had total freedom to be experimental but meaningful in my experiment and not just do something new for the sake of novelty. It had to have roots and substance, and I think the lack of coherence is a powerful disobedience, especially for an Asian American subject, who has been legible in this country mostly through labor. Historically, even the Chinese railroad workers couldn't be buried in the US when they died; their bones were shipped back to China so that the physical evidence of their labor would be literally erased.

Similarly, the “Asian American art prodigy” is often only legible as a musical prodigy—a tool to play the cello or perform Bach or Beethoven. But to have one's own thoughts and create one's own art? That's far more difficult. I think a certain lack of coherence and legibility can be really, really beautiful.

**JSK:** I love how you're bringing up this more capacious idea of Asian Americans and those from marginalized communities. What your photos are doing is capturing these complexities. They're also showing, for me as an Asian American, what it means to be photographed away from this

spectacularized narrative of grief, violence, and utility, where the human becomes solely an object or a function.

I was reading Jennifer C. Nash's *How We Write Now: Living with Black Feminist Theory* (2024), and she discusses the importance of the ordinary in Black life. She emphasizes a desire to center "the quotidian and the banal, the bleakly ordinary, to Black people who still live as symbols of so much—whether pain or deviance, trauma or excess" (68). In a similar vein, I see how many of your photos, representations, and writings center parts of our lives that have not been deemed legible or worthy of aesthetic interest. Can you say more about your artistic practice in terms of ordinariness and the sense of working against the ideas of labor or production within a capitalist model of success?

**OV:** Oh, what a beautiful research question. You know, I think it extends along all routes of this country because this country is founded on labor, love, and loss. And in that function, it crosses all ethnicities—the Irish white working class, the sharecroppers, the enslaved people taken from their homes to build parts of this land, and then Asian American labor: nail salon workers, cooks, nurses, dry cleaners, etc. And all of this was made possible by policy in the nineteenth century. American policymakers did not want Asian American men doing masculine jobs, so they relegated them to service jobs, and that has really stuck.

To me, the most radical image of an Asian American is an Asian American at rest, an Asian American body doing nothing. Standing in a river, bathing oneself, holding and feeding a child—these moments I'm deeply interested in because they also represent a time when the body is tending to itself. Static-ness and rest become agency, which the American commercial ethos tells us isn't true. Publish or perish. If you're not moving, you're lazy.

I used to work at a place called Panera. When I worked there, my co-workers and I were so good at our jobs that we finished our tasks quickly, but when the manager came by, we had to pretend to be busy; we performed labor. We moved towels from here to there and brought them back so that we wouldn't get yelled at. There's a kind of shame in being still; there's a shame in rest. I think it's no wonder that our young people are burning out. My students are burning out, too.

The body at rest becomes hyper-politicized because it represents the first moment of resistance. This cycle has happened throughout this country, even during the American Renaissance, with the industrialization of the states. When Walt Whitman said I am free to "lean and loaf" (13), it was at a time all about building tycoons. For Whitman, to celebrate the bathers, the people who are bathing themselves, the men, the laborers—that was a radical tradition.<sup>4</sup>

It's interesting that you bring up the Black tradition, too, because I think of Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) and Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "The Bean Eaters" (1960). In Brooks's poem, the first thing you smell is the sizzling onions of the Chicago working-class apartments—shared apartments, the food, and how bodies are fed. This takes poetry off the Shakespearean pedestal, which Shakespeare didn't even place himself on; it was the propaganda that came after that put him in this canonical position, but Shakespeare was working with everyday people. It's also interesting that the reification and analysis happen long after the working-class lives of artists. Brooks's work is so important to me and to the Black radical tradition. I think, as an Asian American, this is really significant because, in literature, photography, and art—when we think about opposition to power, opposition to the state—it was the Black thinkers who were the precursors that opened this river for us. So when you and I write about truth to power, we're working in the river brought forth by Phillis Wheatley, a poet writing as an enslaved woman in Massachusetts at the threat of her life, and Jupiter Hammon, a poet born into slavery writing in Hartford, Connecticut. This is seventy years before Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

I tell my students this, too: these writers are part of the American tradition. Just because something is not in the big *Norton Anthology of American Verse* doesn't mean it isn't part of the tradition. It's still the American tradition, and people of all creeds and colors can be inspired by that. We can see that if those people came first and made such radical decisions against power, then we can also contribute to what they started, and we are living in their shadow. To me, all Asian American writers working against power, critiquing power in their work—what is the state, and how capacious and limiting is the state?—owe a great debt to the Black tradition that started this movement, from which we are all benefiting.

**JSK:** Thank you for that reminder of our lineage. It makes me think about the larger systems by which we conceive of valuation and judgment. These systems undergird conceptions of art and what is considered beautiful. To me, you are the epitome of an artist who creates beauty—the gorgeous, right? Your work, specifically with the way in which you're moving through genres now with photography, is really a tour de force.

I was reading *Five Manifestos for a Beautiful World: The Alchemy Lecture* (2024), in which Christina Sharpe "contend[s] that the Beautiful World is not a touristic world of consumption and extraction, but one that meets Dionne Brand's understanding of beauty, beauty that is 'not uncomplicated. . . . Beauty is the ability to see everything; to confront everything'" (4). How do you define beauty and then apply it to your work?

**OV:** Oh, that's such a beautiful question. And what a lovely, lovely concept. Beauty as defiance, as a way to see—the camera in a way does that. It sees everything; it doesn't miss. But it also works with obfuscation. It blurs, the shallow depth of field renders the background, and so choices are made.

I am always interested in how beauty has trafficked in the West as evidence of wealth and power. The still life began with agrarian wealth: “Well, right here. This is how much meat I can afford. This is how much meat I can leave out and let it rot because I have more coming.” So the tables of fruit, the outside farm animals—it's all a kind of evidence, which is why these works were commissioned. It was a kind of bragging rights. And so, beauty was what was rare, powerful, and acquired. And in the case of the Hudson School of painting, it was what was used to entice settlers to the West: “Look how open the West is. It's ready for you.” You wouldn't know that there were entire nations of Indigenous folks living in these lands, looking at those beautiful, seductive paintings.

But I think I have to go back to my grandmother and my mother—the women who raised me. They taught me how to see. I became an artist, but they were, to me, the first artists because they taught me how to see. And to them, beauty was medicinal: “If it's beautiful, you deserve more of it.” Here are women who are uneducated, illiterate, and I'm always interested in where that power of recognition comes from, outside of systems of education or power. Here they are, refugees. They could have said anything, but they sat me down and showed me what is beautiful.

We would go up and look at a sunset. My mother would say, “It's so beautiful, and so sad.” Again, that word *sad*—it's capacious; it holds beauty, as well. I was taught to see by women who knew so much loss and pain. And beauty, for them, was not decorous. It had a function in mundane, ordinary life. Beauty was ordinary. The biggest refrain in my household, being raised by these women, was the phrase “*đẹp quá*,” which means “too beautiful.” They would look at hummingbirds—“too beautiful, too beautiful.” That was the refrain of my life. They would make a perfect bowl of *bún riêu* or *phở* and say, “too beautiful, too beautiful.”

And that became my education. When I started to write, I told myself, “I never have to turn away. This is my art; I chose this. It's my job to look deeper and see the beauty even inside the horror.” The starfish—you amputate it, and it starts to grow back its limbs. That's not a decorous beauty; it's not an aesthetic beauty, but conceptually, it is so beautiful. The clam, making a pearl out of a grain of sand, agitating it. So, to me, beauty is beyond the visual; it's also what's meaningful, what is conceptually true.

And it's also the attempt: I think I really respect the attempt as something legitimate, the process as the project. I shy away from presenting something

with such a strong, cohesive façade. And so, in my writing, the paragraphs break apart; the chapters purposely dissolve. Poetry is a form that breaks itself. The line break is the open joint. There's a violence that happens; you break the line in order to finish the poem. And I want to apply that structure and thinking to the rest of what I do.

**JSK:** That's really helpful in terms of thinking about beauty—not just visually but also in terms of emotional intimacy. I've struggled with how to conceptualize beauty. Isn't beauty, in many ways, an ethical commitment, both as humans and in art? So much of your writing seems to envision a different future. I'm thinking of José Esteban Muñoz's and Joshua Chambers-Letson's work on the commons and the incommensurability of the commons. How do we remain in difference from each other but still build a sociology or a world of common ground, one that doesn't buy into the homogenizing desires of whiteness? So it's really affirming for me, as a writer and scholar, to see your version and vision of beauty, which is also deeply personal and familial. It makes me think about the role of memory and time across your works, both on a personal and collective level. What role does memory play in your work, and how does it fuse with temporality? You're not thinking in a chronological or "chrono-normative" way. Instead, as you say, it's like a "time accordion" (Vuong, "Writer").

**OV:** Memory is an interesting thing because scientists tell us that we make it every time we remember. To remember is to attach as opposed to dismember. We're making new neurons in our brain every time, so memory is fallible. It's a work of creation, but it's also incredibly costly.

To remember—to think of a day in your past, a time when you were twelve, or even just last year—is to daydream, to displace the present. So the cost of memory is literally your life. It's your current moment in your life, gone. You're not present here because you're there. So, choose wisely what you remember.

I was raised by women who often chose not to remember because it was too painful. I feel as a one-and-a-half generation immigrant that, sometimes, I achieve their dreams for me by betraying their visions. They ask, "Why are you looking at pain? Why are you looking at photographs of Vietnamese people so mangled as corpses it's even hard to discern one body from another?"

I don't have an answer for them, but all I can say is that I chose this because of curiosity. And I think memory and wonder are things that we don't often talk about. I like that. To me, there's a curiosity. There's a wonder in my own work. I never know what I'm going to write. I have a kind of North star that I move toward, and most of the time I'm just digging. And once in

a while you see a white flash, and you keep digging. You realize it's a bone, you know, God knows to what, but you keep going, and you reveal things to yourself as a writer. But it also helps me think about how to stop writing, oddly enough.

One of my heroes is Annie Dillard, and when I was twenty-two, I came home one day from school at Brooklyn College, and she was on the radio. I was undressing, and I just stopped because Annie Dillard was talking. I thought, "It must be a new book, Hallelujah!" but she quickly said to the host, "I'm here to announce that I'm done." And interestingly enough, the host immediately kind of asks, in a polite way. "Do you have dementia? Is something wrong?"

It's interesting that for a woman, an artist, someone who won the Pulitzer in nonfiction, to say, "I want to rest and I'm satisfied," immediately feels like error. Something must have happened for you to stop, and Dillard, to her credit, says, "No, one day I got to my desk, and I realized I've said everything I wanted to say, just the way I said it."

We're told as writers and artists that we should build this body of work, that the satisfaction of being an artist is to look at your bibliography and say, "Look, I keep coming and coming and coming." But I was very fortunate at twenty-two to have a different model there, because I said, "Gosh! What if instead of just endlessly making, my goal as a writer is to write so carefully and with such intention that I, too, can one day, get to my desk and say, I did it, on my terms?" And now I can live with the capacity of looking, the sharpening of the gaze that the books so naturally have afforded me. I can look at the world with that mind and clarity without having to turn it into a product. Isn't that the ultimate reward—to see better?

It just flipped how I thought. The sum, the byproduct of writing a book is the book, the main destination, but the ultimate telos is how to really look at this world alongside the people living in it. I hope I'm lucky enough to get to where Dillard got to, the sooner the better, to be able to make my work finite. To say, "I've done what I wanted to do, but I'm not done. I'm not over. I'm not thrown away, or something's not wrong with me, just because I decided to stop." I ache for that, and that's my goal as an artist— to learn how to stop well.

**JSK:** Yes, it's incredible, this stopping. It's a type of non-compliance, or it even feels like an act of rebellion or some kind of strange denial of self. I have one more question, and then I'm going to turn it over to questions from the audience. You think about the gaze in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. You write . . .

**OV:** I always think about the gays, yeah. Sorry, sorry, I had to [laughter from audience].

**JSK:** [laughing] It's one of my favorite novels! You write: "In a world myriad as ours, the gaze is a singular act: to look at something is to fill your whole life with it, if only briefly" (175). I wanted to bring it back to your photography. This quote reminds me of the etymology of the word photograph. *Phos* in Greek means light. *Grphe* from Greek is writing or drawing. So, together, a photograph means "writing or drawing with light." It's a beautiful evocation of your practice. How do you interpret this idea in your current role—of writing and drawing with light? I was wondering if you could speak more to that.

**OV:** Oh, that's beautiful. Well, I remind my students that looking is a civic duty—and seeing, too. Some of us don't have eyes to look, but there are still ways of entangling ourselves toward the vision of the world. We owe it to ourselves, our world, but as artists, you know, this is where we plant our flag of work: I need to look.

I think looking, even looking without making, is incredibly productive because there are different definitions of work, and sometimes seeing is not always knowing—which is why photos, poems, right? There are poems I read years ago. I revisit them now, having lost a mother, having my brother—who is ten years younger than me—move in with me, and being now thirty-five. I see more in the words of writers like Emily Dickinson, Toni Morrison, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac. It's interesting, you know—I always wrote off Kerouac because, well, it's always the fans of Kerouac that ruined him for me, right?

But I started to revisit Kerouac, because he's a New England writer. He's coming from Lowell [Massachusetts], and I visited his first novel, *The Town and the City* (1950), and it's so—actually, so close to what I'm trying to do. You know, there's such tenderness there. And again, it brings me to this idea that we have to keep looking at the present and the archive, because the living are outnumbered by the dead.

We have to do this huge work of salvaging meaning from the past and forging new meaning toward the future. And when I looked back at Kerouac's work, I said, "Oh, my goodness. I didn't see this." They misconstrued him because they didn't see all of this, right—this kind of deep sadness, this deep compassion for the brokenness. This was before *On the Road* (1957), where a lot of the misogyny came in, the bravado, the performance. In *The Town and the City*, he was so earnestly Catholic in trying to find goodness in the community, and there was such wonder and whimsy in that world. And, I saw myself. Lo and behold, looking at this white man writing about his life in 1940s New England, I started to see echoes of myself.

Toni Morrison says this: "I read Tolstoy, and I see myself." I get to do that, right? I don't care who they are. Maybe they never imagined a Black woman in

Ohio reading their work. But because that happened, I have access to that in my imagination. That's my agency. I get to have that experience, too.

That's the beauty of writing. The beauty of art is that, ultimately, it has no value inherently. We, the living, have to curate and orchestrate value around it with discourse. Unlike water or food—you can just point to that and say, "That's valuable." We all know that. But it's harder to look at a book or a painting and say, "Why did we put this one here as opposed to something else?" On one hand, it's very daunting. On the other hand, it's so inspiring because that's what gets people in the room. We come together, and we, the living, outnumbered by the dead, now have to make a decision about value in ways that have no inherent value. And we do that through language. This feeble, reductive, finite material—this language we're now using toward expansion and clarity—it seems almost too fantastical to be possible. And yet, historically, it has always been possible, and a great privilege to participate in.

**JSK:** As someone who came to literature this way—well, we talked about this—about how the first time I thought of becoming an English major, I was sitting in front of a *Norton Anthology*, reading, I believe, one of the Romantics, either John Keats or Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This person, long dead, with no overlap with my life whatsoever, spoke to me. I think that is, in many ways, also the community by which I am sustained—by these dead writers, dead artists. For us as the living, as professors and artists, I feel like it's our, and my, mission to also continue that legacy in a way. It is, in many ways, a kind of spiritual practice.

**OV:** Yeah, absolutely.

**JSK:** I'll turn to a few audience questions now. Someone asks: "Can you talk about the challenges that arise in helping your audience pivot with you from poetry to photography? I am an artist bringing writing into my work and find it challenging."

**OV:** I might have a more extreme view of this, and I think the greatest respect you can give a reader or a viewer is to ignore them. And I mean that earnestly, I think, because when you start to fantasize about an "ideal reader," immediately you start to build a kind of scarecrow out of preconceptions—ideas of what you think a reader wants from you, what an ideal reader is, right? So you create a kind of straw person out of this fantasy, and it has no relation to reality.

I've been fortunate enough to be in so many rooms across the world because of my work, and every room I've been in has different people, just like this room. Who am I to sit down and say, "Let me just erase all of you and pick one," right? And then, what does that mean?

It's not even just an ethical or moral position but an artistically impossible one. Because if I then say, "Well, maybe my audience wants me to really showcase these identitarian markers—gay, Asian American, what have you," but those are too large and abstract to hold me. Now I'm actually removing portions of myself to make myself more recognizably palatable to those audiences, and then I've actually amputated more of myself. In that attempt to reach an audience, I've actually left myself behind. I think the most valuable thing about art is that when we get to a space so specific, it actually becomes universal.

When Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about the smell of onions in the crammed Chicago flats—I've never been there, but there's a similitude to that lived life. I start to trust that she's out ahead. She's not looking at me.

I think, for me, there's very broadly speaking two types of writers, and you know it when you start reading their books. There's the book where you read it, and you feel like the writer is in an interview suit behind a table, selling you on this book while you're reading it, right? "Here's what you thought you wanted, here's . . ."

And I don't know about you all, but for me, I start to kind of turn away from that book, right? I'm more interested in the other phenomenon where I encounter the back of a writer's head. I come closer to her, the back of her head, and I see sweat on the back of her neck. And I realize, oh my goodness, she's digging. She's digging a hole, and I get to look over her shoulder. There's an absolute disregard for me, a kind of voracious questing in this work, and she's just digging. I'm precariously looking over, and then we're both collectively venturing.

When you can feel that a writer or an artist is just truly venturing and inviting you along the linear technology of the sentence, there's a great trust. It's a spiritual trust, and you say, "Oh, you're not trying to win me over. You're really out there trying to figure something out." That's what I want out of my literature—I want someone who's really out there asking the questions they don't have answers for—and I'm privy enough, privileged enough, to be on the ride.

**JSK:** I love that image of just watching over the writer's shoulder, and a writer who is writing with a mission that is delinked from the audience. Because on the flip side, there's also this extractive, consumptive nature to that exchange when someone is writing for a public and a certain kind of people-pleasing.

**OV:** When I was selling my book, I was meeting with publishers, and I was fortunate. Sometimes you don't get to meet with publishers. And I saw them raise concerns. And one of them said, you know, I was writing about New England and writing about explicit, fumbling coming-of-age and intimacy: boys, you know, just a white boy and an Asian boy trying to find their way without the language of queerness, without role models, without elders teaching them how to find pleasure. It's just what's inside them; it's just desire leading them out. And they're fumbling, and it's messy.

One of the publishers said, “Well, what about the Midwestern audience? They’re not—it’s too much for them, right?” This was years ago. I’d never been to the Midwest, but I knew enough to say, “I don’t know, I think they have nervous systems and brains and inner lives and sexual pleasure. God forbid they feel things.” But it was a wild education to come to New York as a rural person and realize—and see—the limitations of this coastal way of building art and power. Because Penguin Random House is powerful, right? And here I am being asked to render to a preconceived and falsely conceived limitation of a huge portion of the country. And they work like this every day. I was so lucky that I was already a scholar, a professor at that time. I’d published a book of poems. I knew enough to say, “You’re being silly, with all due respect.”

But how many young writers would have folded at that moment? How many young artists would have gone into that room and left erasing their work because of this scarecrow idea of a reader somewhere in the Midwest that “won’t understand”? But it happens at all levels. And again, that disobedience sometimes even starts in those business meetings, way before you get to the final draft of the novel.

**JSK:** Thank you for bringing your art to the Midwest. Seriously, thank you. We have time for one more question. What is your art’s relationship to healing and/or liberation?

**OV:** Well, it would be good if healing occurs, in the way that it would be good if healing occurs anywhere, including stamp collecting, coloring, interpretive dance. So I’m not against healing, but I do resist the presumption that my writing will heal. I think I can’t write from that position because it assumes that I know more than the reader. And I don’t work well as an artist when I have a seemingly superior position in relation to the reader. To me, the goal is not to heal because I don’t know what healing is, and I don’t know that I ever will.

Here’s something interesting: I don’t know if I want to heal. I’m more interested because healing has an end to it. There’s a lifespan; the experience is over. I’m an advocate for bodily health and healing, mental health, of course. But as a larger concept, to me, I think figuring things out together—and maybe I would say healing up to ninety percent—is much more fruitful than the idea of being fully healed. It leaves room for all of us who are not there.

Because it could be very lonely to say, “Well, I’m healed. Good luck to you,” you know, because I’ve heard that myself, and I thought, “I don’t know if that’s where we’re most useful to each other.” I think there’s always something to work toward, and I hope that my work is provocative. And if a reader gets

more of themselves from reading my work, that's all I can ask for. I'm never the kind of artist that would say to someone, "You got it wrong. I didn't mean that. You totally got it wrong."

The way language works, there's no way for me to correctly, fully say that to anybody. I build an experience. You embody it, if you choose to. And what you feel from that—whether it's healing, whether it's confirmation, confusion, befuddlement, bewilderment, joy—it's still true. It's still yours. It's in our reception to the world; it's sometimes the only thing we have. People can take everything away from us, other than how we feel with the world. And I think I do respect that immensely, and I would never stand behind my work and say, "This should heal you," but if it happens, I'm all for it.

I can't speak for other artists, but I can't sit down at the desk and say, "Man, they're really going to feel better because of this." Because to be honest, that's how the dictators start. All the fascists at one point, early on, were, "This is good for them!" and "We'll feed it to them with force and military power." So I like to just shy away from that toward a kind of more open and perhaps complicated method.

**JSK:** What about liberation?

**OV:** Thank you for following up on that. The work of liberation, especially in the arts, I have a different answer on. It's already possible. And my students often ask this. My students, rightfully so, they're saying, "What do we do? There are two wars that we know of. There are people dying, genocide, loss of life. There's a fascist rising all across the world. What's the point of a poem, professor?"

They're virtuous to ask that, in the right to ask that. And it's my job to remind them that there's room enough for all of the work—to help liberate each other and fight for each other, through legislation and activism, and to write the poem with consciousness and care. There are enough hours in the day. You don't have to do all of that in one day, but there's enough, and historically, those works coincide. I teach Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1987). Here's a poet who became a politician of Martinique, who wrote a long poem. That poem was very informative because it's about the front—national crimes against the Martinican people, against the enslaved—and he ends the poem with a scene from the revolt of a slave ship that happened in the past. What Césaire is telling us is that the act of liberation is not the city on the hill that we're moving toward; it's already happened. In multiple microcosms, we've already successfully fought for each other, with legislation, with poems, with art.

It's also a specifically Western and privileged idea to question the power of art when so many folks outside of this country, across the globe,

inherently and innately use art alongside fighting for liberation and expanding people's rights. It's not even a question. You go to activist movements in Zimbabwe, in Nigeria, in Brazil, and poems are just there. They're not questioned.

I also remind my students that there is a kind of privilege for us to sit in an institution like NYU, where I teach, and question the validity and utility of something that folks in the developing world are using at this moment to fight for their lives. And it's important to honor that—that tradition has already occurred, going from the songs that enslaved people in this country used to direct folks toward freedom in the North and how those songs moved into the oral tradition. The poems were already working alongside liberating fronts, and there is a kind of elitism for us to sit here, after that great wealth of progress, and say, "Well, can I do anything else?" I think it's important to reframe that. It's interesting that poetry is often the one genre we single out and say, "Well, are you saving the world or not? Because otherwise, we're going to throw you into the dump."

It's interesting that this "minor art," in many ways, that doesn't always make a lot of money but is very accessible to the working class and to the oral tradition in music, is the one about which those in power are often most skeptical. Every six or so years, there's somebody in *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic* who writes this kind of bombastic article saying, "Is poetry really important, or can we do away with it by now?"

It's interesting that they've ignored the function of it happening nowadays, particularly with music in young folks. People ask me, "Where is the next Rimbaud?"—Rimbaud, this revolutionary writer in nineteenth-century France.<sup>5</sup> The next Rimbaud is probably not a poet; most likely, they're a hip-hop artist or a musician, working with their time, making SoundCloud mixtapes in their bedroom, putting the language to use in a way that is shareable with those in their community.

Working for your community is, to me, the ultimate testament. If your art goes beyond that, that's just whipped cream after that. But to me, the ultimate testament is how are these photographs functioning in my community? And if anyone in my community says to me, "I don't like that photo," I would never show it. If they don't like how they're seen in that, I would never show it. To me, it's always collaborative. My brother works with me on every shot. I give him suggestions, but everything ends up how he wants to be seen, and that work is very, very important to me.

**JSK:** I really appreciate how deeply rooted your work is in community and collaboration. You have given us all a lot to think about. Thank you so much, Ocean.

## Notes

1. Ocean Vuong's visit was made possible with support from the Toledo Museum of Art and the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Toledo.
2. The interview has been slightly edited for clarity and focus.
3. **Vuong** showed this photo to the audience before our conversation, and it is also part of the cover to his book, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016).
4. This is a reference to Walt Whitman's lines on bathing and rest in *Leaves of Grass* (1855).
5. Arthur Rimbaud is a French poet known for his symbolism and countercultural themes. He had an immense impact on the Surrealist movement, and his works continue to be read and translated into many languages.

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