

## Democratic Aesthetics:

### Scenes of Political Violence and Anxiety in Nari Ward and Ocean Vuong

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**Abstract:** By attending to art and writing that interrogates U.S. citizenship and state violence, this essay foregrounds the structural antagonism between democracy as an instituted form of rule, which depends on inegalitarian hierarchies, and democracy's egalitarian drive. It argues that the realization of democracy as a form of governance (consensus democracy) occurs by substituting the rule of a part for the whole, which violently forces democracy's constitutive figures to conform to and negotiate its organizing logics. Nari Ward's *We the People* allegorizes this inherent tension in democracy as one between synecdoche and metonymy. The article then theorizes a new form of democratic politics through an engagement with Jacques Rancière before turning to Ocean Vuong's "Notebook Fragments" and "Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds" as articulations of a democratic aesthetics constituted by figures—including metonymy, irony, and catachresis—that interrupt the substitutions of synecdoche. Vuong's poetry foregrounds the violence enacted by state fantasies and insists on the democratic equality disavowed by consensus democracy. Together, Ward and Vuong locate the political force of aesthetics not in reassuring visions of inclusion but in operations that disturb and resist any form of hierarchy.

**Keywords:** Democracy, aesthetics, citizenship, migration, politics

*First Scene.* In "To My Father / To My Future Son," Ocean Vuong's speaker asserts, "Yes, you have a country. / Someday, they will find it / while searching for lost ships..." (2016: 57). Mirroring the title and its filial relation, these lines both assert a relation to one's country characterized by possessive presence and acknowledge the absence that cuts that relation until some possible future return. As many of its readers have remarked, Vuong's award-winning poetry collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), thematizes the challenges and antagonisms of citizenship, which become intensified for the immigrant or refugee. The radical indeterminacy signified by Vuong's ellipsis in these lines could be read as a gesture to the experience of the Vietnamese immigrant or refugee who, upon becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen, participates in the

racial “fiction” designated by “the concept of an Asian American” that intensifies their severance from their place of origin (Song 2013: 47). It is a fiction in part because it participates in “the concept of the abstract citizen—each formally equivalent, one to the other,” a concept that “is defined by the negation of the material conditions of work and the inequalities of the property system” (Lowe 1996: 2). Lisa Lowe claims that in the U.S., “not only class but also the historically sedimented particularities of race, national origin, locality, and embodiment remain largely invisible within the political sphere,” which requires an “integration” of diverse individuals into a homogenized “national project” (1996: 2). Citizenship depends on an aesthetic that ensures a coherent narrative of absorption, into which Vuong’s poem introduces a fissure.

*Second Scene.* On May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017, over one hundred people from around the world participated in a special naturalization ceremony at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (Slane 2017). Presiding Chief Magistrate Judge Jennifer Boal proclaimed, “[N]ow you are all citizens of the United States of America. We are all Americans. Together we stand as one people, defined not by blood or race or tribe or wealth, but by the fact of citizenship” (Slane 2017). After the ceremony, the newly minted citizens were invited to view Nari Ward’s special exhibition several floors above. Ward emigrated to the U.S. from Jamaica, and the centerpiece of his exhibit, *We the People*, engages overtly with the founding principles of his adopted home. The work is “created using around 1,000 hand-dyed shoelaces tied together to spell out the first three words of the preamble to the Constitution. The shoelaces are not shiny and new, but stretched and worn, many varying in length and some missing aglets” (Slane 2017). Ward repurposes materials that “already have a history” and makes new use of the “dysfunctional or discarded” (Ward 2014: 871). Linking an official ceremony to a piece of contemporary art, this event perfectly foregrounds the anxious imbrication of what Jacques Rancière refers to as the aesthetics of politics and politics of aesthetics (2009: 19-44). Yet we might ask: What exactly is the nature of this imbrication? Politics is clearly aesthetic in the elaborate ceremony with its

stylish, bourgeois museum backdrop. But how is the aesthetic political? What does the form of Ward's piece perform?

This essay will ultimately make the case that the poetry of Ocean Vuong offers one of the most powerful and compelling dramatizations of a truly radical democratic aesthetic in literature—one that faces up to the negativity disavowed by consensus democracy's visions of unity. In my first section, however, I propose a way of reading Ward's *We the People* that provides a vocabulary for understanding how aesthetic works—either visual or textual—can interrogate political procedures and norms. Rather than intervene in discussions of contemporary installation art or contemporary poetry, these engagements with Ward and Vuong read their respective works for the insights they provide into the politics of aesthetics. Because artistic works differ and distance themselves from social groups and structures, they potentially institute a time and space that reframe “material and symbolic space” to reorder our sense of the social relations that might otherwise seem fixed (Rancière 2009: 23-24). For Ward and Vuong, this reordering centers on revealing how racialized migration challenges the fantasmatic equality offered by consensus forms of democracy. Ward, as one of the most important installation artists of the past three decades, and Vuong, as a rising figure in the literary scene, together offer a robust body of work that interrogates such problems of U.S. democracy. My primary interest therefore lies in theorizing a democratic politics that challenges the false promises of consensus democracy, and in these readings, I stress the value of putting in dialogue several strands of thought about politics and political subjects to offer a new account of the democratic politics of artistic productions.

This account locates the political force of aesthetics not in reassuring visions of egalitarian democracy but in operations that disturb and resist any form of hierarchy that fixes the figures of art or the people in society. My approach to democracy therefore stresses the centrality of aesthetics for politics.<sup>1</sup> Rancière, I argue, offers a powerful model for understanding democratic politics in the U.S.

that corrects the oft-discussed limitations in the liberal tradition (Hartman 1997; Lowe 2015). Rancière's notion of the "police" advances a generalized way of understanding society's policing of consensus orders and regulations, and it helps foreground the coercive nature of seemingly innocuous or even liberal policies and actions. This generalized notion of the police emphasizes that policing is not merely—or not even—about police force or state repression but about the productive and regulative organization of space and time. That is, the police order determines what or who can appear and how such appearing occurs. Following Rancière, I claim that politics has to do with the appearance of those figures discounted by the dominant order and with challenges to the rules governing appearing (Rancière 1999: 29). Specifically, I argue that a formalist language offers importantly different ways to "figure" democracy that must be distinguished. I link metonymy, in its particular use by Ward and Vuong, to Rancière's concept of democratic politics as that which interrupts police orders of domination, but I then draw on a discourse of "anxiety" to supplement Rancière's theory by accounting for the psycho-affective elements of individuals excluded from his structural thinking of the political subject. Anxiety names both that which disturbs the consistency of psychosocial fantasies, such as citizenship, and a dominant affect of democracy's social antagonisms. Shifting from Ward, who foregrounds political community, to Vuong, who foregrounds individual identity, helps me extend Rancière in this way. Through these readings, I argue that figurative movements potentially disturb and reorder oppressive regimes of inegalitarian consensus that disavow the force of equality that grounds them. Collectively, Ward, Vuong, and Rancière help us understand democratic politics as constituted by irresolvable antagonisms, which are too often elided in normative conceptions of democracy.

### **"We the People" and the Metonymy of Democratic Politics**

To begin to develop the vocabulary and distinctions that will inform my reading of the democratic politics of Vuong's poetry and this reading's extension of Rancière, I turn now to Ward's art installation. Ward began working with the rubber tips of shoes in 2009, and because he tends to use all parts of his materials, he then used the laces to make shoelace drawings (Haynes 2019: 121). First created in 2011 during his residency at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, *We the People* transposes the first three words of the Constitution onto a blank wall—often, but not always, white—using thousands of shoelaces that dangle from holes in the wall (Haynes 2019: 121). The piece typically takes up the entirety of a museum room's wall, hailing the viewer with both its large scale and its stark contrast between blank background and defined letters in the foreground. Lauren Haynes notes that Ward “was interested in exploring words that he felt most Americans did not consider on a regular basis,” and the opening of the Constitution provides an ideally loaded, yet often ignored or forgotten, phrase (2019: 121). Given its use of such an iconic phrase, *We the People* may seem immediately sensible, perhaps especially in Ward's subsequent installations of the piece during the Trump era. Okwui Enwezor insists, however, that though Ward's “work in many ways might seem immediately representational,” “it's purely abstract” (2019: 79). In what follows, I argue that some of its abstraction stems from how it allegorizes the constitutive exclusions of citizenship and the false promises of democratic inclusion.

From a distance the letters of *We the People* seem to bleed, suggesting ink running down a page or three-dimensionality, in which the viewer can perceive a shadow. One might notice the strands of shoelace hanging asymmetrically, but the words seem fully-formed; they seem to cohere in an elegant reproduction of script. As one approaches the art object, however, the fragments come into more explicit view. One sees that the shoelaces do not come together neatly but make visible their construction. Superficially, this seems similar to the fantasy of citizenship, in which diverse populations come together as one people constituted and enriched by a unity of differences. Gary

Carrion-Murayari suggests that the work “asks viewers to consider how personal and national identity define us and whether a shared sense of belonging is still possible—and whom it empowers or excludes” (2019: 171). Ward has characterized *We the People* as “participatory,” for in some of its exhibitions visitors have been able to exchange their shoelaces for shoelaces in the piece (Stapley-Brown 2017). Rather than focus on synecdoche, that is, on a fantasmatic projection of the whole from parts, I contend that this exchange focuses on a metonymic logic of substituting parts for other parts.

Roman Jakobson’s seminal account of figurative discourse helps us think about the stakes of this distinction. Jakobson opposes metaphor (combination or similarity) and metonymy (contiguity), which leads him to present synecdoche as a type of metonymy (1971: 255-6). Yet I argue that Ward pushes us to differentiate between metonymy (contiguity) and synecdoche, which puts the contiguous relation into the service of a higher order, or metaphoric conversion.<sup>2</sup> Ward’s art installation shows that metonymic substitutions of part for part potentially short-circuit—or at least complicate—the part for whole and whole for part substitutions of synecdoche. While scholars have been rightly wary of metonymic substitution due to its potential to erase or reify differences (Goyal 2018), the account of metonymy I read in Ward in fact resists such problems. Far from “making the figural real, largely by reifying metaphoric equivalents into metonymic manipulations” (Best 2004: 61), Ward’s metonymy resists the reification desired by the legal citizenship process. Although the specter of the synecdochic whole remains in *We the People*—visitors who participate in the exchange of shoelaces also participate in the realization of the whole—Ward’s metonymic focus on the substitutability of parts for parts de-privileges the stability and totalizing rule of the whole by turning away from the logic of synecdoche to the logic of metonymy. This emphasizes the singularity of the parts and the figurative movements required to make these parts cohere in a metaphoric or synecdochic whole.

This reconfiguration of the sensible and our relation to it foregrounds the political logic of Ward's aesthetics. Reflecting on her own experience with the work as both an American art curator and a viewer, Haynes remarks, "I am struck by the moments when the words are not quite legible; yet as I move around and shift my perspective, the text becomes clearer" (2019: 122). Haynes suggests, "With this oscillation between clarity and obscurity, Ward prompts viewers to consider our relationships with the government and each other—and how the ways they shape our lives are not always fully apparent" (2019: 122). The play between proximity and distance, between attraction and repulsion, as well as between clarity and obscurity, allegorizes the relation between what Rancière names politics (the democratic drive of equality) and the police (democracy as instituted form of inegalitarian rule). In *Disagreement*, Rancière explains, "Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it *the police*" (1999: 28). Rancière's distinction helps us avoid confusing liberal institutions, which often depend on and perpetuate hierarchy (Hartman 1997; Lowe 2015), with democratic politics, which insists on a radical—and radically disruptive—anti-hierarchical equality. Democracy when instituted as consensus depends on a "distance" and a certain attraction; that is, if a subject of democracy (especially a normative subject) does not look too closely, the distribution of the sensible may in fact appear to fulfill the democratic promise of equality. From an alternative viewpoint, however, the inequalities may become increasingly apparent. The substitutability and fragmentation of *We the People* return us to the contiguities of social relations, to the inaugural "separation in space, and often in time" before it is "bridged" or joined by synecdoche into a political community (Jakobson 1971: 244). In other words, the metonymic substitution reveals the potentially "disruptive ends" of Ward's artistic representation (Bishop 2012: 283). Ward thus figures the equality that constitutes democratic

articulations by foregrounding the inequalities of the social order to disrupt its fantasies of coherence, and as I will argue in the following section, this figural appearance generates the anxiety of democratic politics.<sup>3</sup>

In this figural movement, Ward makes tangible Rancière's warning that we need to resist the seductions of consensus democracy, such as the promise of equality that inheres in the citizenship process. Yet subjects excluded from the democratic promise—subjects designated as immigrants, queer, black, women, or trans, to name a few of the many categories that figure those excluded in different ways from the social order—might experience instead a sense of repulsion at the outset, since the democratic promise works through the unpredictable permeability of boundaries. These subject positions are neither equivalent nor do they signify the same kind of exclusion. The racism evident in the “model minority” myth for Asian Americans, for example, differs categorically from the violence of anti-blackness. Yet these different categories of exclusion do reveal that citizenship will always operate as a component of consensus democracy, that is, the police. Rancière's definition of the police as an order “that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying” helps us understand how citizenship, because it depends on and reifies the constitutive exclusions of a nation-state, never operates in the name of equality (1999: 29); instead, citizenship always “polices” bodies. Who counts as included and to what extent constantly shifts, such that inclusion, if granted, can never be taken as secure.

*We the People* asks us to consider how the “we” (re)constituted by citizenship structures and limits our sense of political and national community. What I call democratic politics in this essay—distinct from the consensus democracy of mainstream political discourse—names the inherent structural antagonism of the democratic promise and insists on a proximity to an equality that rejects the false promise of democracy and undermines its seductions; this equality therefore figures a negativity that cannot be positivized in a form of government without being betrayed. As Rancière



succinctly claims, “There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as democratic government. Government is always exercised by the minority over the majority” (2006: 52). Consensus democracy betrays democratic equality because it “designates a stable organization of the relationship between sense and sense, [...] between what is given and what is thinkable” (Rancière 2016: 94). Because consensus polices the sensible and thereby disavows the dissensual differences between what is given and what is thinkable, consensus democracy in fact negates democratic politics. Since *We the People* works to “create space for conversation and exploration,” it can potentially interrupt consensus (Haynes 2019: 122).

In contrast to dissensus, however, the dramatic scene at the ICA emphasizes the construction of consensus, that is, the process through which the individual becomes part of a collective, such as a national, social, and legal order. In this scene, naturalization interpellates subjects into what Donald Pease names a “state fantasy,” which refers “to the dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity” (2009: 1). By becoming a citizen of the U.S., the subject becomes a subject of and subject to the U.S. Pragmatically speaking, citizenship confers rights to the immigrant or refugee, yet by becoming a citizen, one becomes even further entrenched in the nation’s system of surveillance and discipline. This bind has a long history in the U.S., and as Joy James argues, “the rise of white citizenship” has constructed “democracy’s boundaries: establishing the definitional norms for democratic citizenship through racially-fashioned captivity” (2015: 34). The generic category of the citizen obscures the historical fact that “the rights and privileges of white citizens” were “undergirded by the subjection of blacks,” a structural relation that persists in our so-called emancipated society (Hartman 1997: 25). Citizenship operates as a means to construct and reinforce the boundaries of the nation-state; however, citizenship can also exclude those nominally included within its boundaries. One need only to consider the mass murder of black and trans men and women by police in the U.S. to see the ways in which the status of

citizen means little when that citizen is not a white, cis-gender male. In the U.S., “black personhood remains legible primarily as criminality” (DeLombard 2019: 495). Where Vuong’s Vietnamese-American ethnic position becomes homogenized as Asian American, Ward’s Jamaican-American ethnic identity gets reconfigured by the racial signifier of black. Structural anti-blackness marks one difference between the black American, who Zita Nunes figures as a “remainder” in U.S. democracy, and the non-black foreigner, who “historically [...] and theoretically can always be (re)incorporated in a way that the remainder cannot” (Nunes 2008: 95). In my reading of Vuong, however, I will emphasize the psychic costs of this (re)incorporation when the position of the non-black foreigner is occupied and embodied by a queer Vietnamese refugee. For now, though, I want to point out that the persistence of the materials in Ward’s piece—that is, Ward’s construction of a whole from parts that refuses to forget the gaps of and between these parts—resists the fantasmatic construction of the homogenized subject by the police order of the nation-state, as if recognizing the violence of erasure and forgetting required to become a naturalized citizen participating in a state fantasy. *We the People* sides with the “remainder” in a way that citizenship cannot.

Synecdoche therefore functions as a master trope of consensus democracy in the U.S., within which “part” of the population stands in for the “whole” of the population—the constantly shifting “we” of “We the People.” Citizenship names a paradigmatic instance of this process, for synecdoche operates in the name of what Lowe calls the “abstract citizen,” which only appears by erasing or subordinating differences in the name of sameness. Though Ward’s materialization of the opening words from the Constitution serves as a dramatic background for the naturalization ceremony, in which a new group joins the “we” named by the Constitution, Ward’s piece reflects a much more critical reading of citizenship and democratic processes. As Priscilla Wald argues, “The changing ‘we’ of the nation-state makes the very name of any ‘us’ mean ‘something not ourselves.’” The task of any official story of the nation is to enable a smooth transition, to accommodate

revisions in order simultaneously to transform and preserve ‘us’” (1995: 299). Ward’s *We the People* complicates the “smooth transition” constructed by the Constitution and the optimism of citizenship, which legally designates one as part of the national community of Americans. Naturalization in fact makes natural what is unstable and contingent in its construction. Ward’s insistence on metonymic fragmentation draws attention to the way in which the subject gets produced *as* distortion through the naturalization process. The subject is always the naturalization of a torsion that threatens to reveal the natural as a disavowed form of distortion itself.

### **The Anxiety of Democratic Equality**

In the previous section, I argued that metonymy potentially disturbs synecdoche, the master trope of consensus democracy, and in doing so, metonymy operates as a privileged figure of equality for democratic politics. This reading of Ward’s *We the People* depends on democracy’s structural antagonism between synecdoche and metonymy, that is, between a form instituted by substituting part for whole (consensus democracy) and a drive that moves metonymically along a signifying chain (democratic politics). The former depends on the construction of inequality, while the latter proliferates an anarchic equality that destabilizes inequality’s hierarchical formations. Democracy as a form of government—or a police logic of consensus—can only appear and survive by leaving behind what it is, by disavowing democratic politics of equality. What would it mean, then, to side with this disavowed equality? What would it mean to side with metonymy?

While my discussion of *We the People* began to answer these questions, Ward’s artwork still remains open to the seductions of synecdochic democracy. *We the People*’s use during the naturalization ceremony, for example, reveals that it can be too easily reframed to align with consensus projects. And because Ward’s piece only occasionally allows for audience participation, its

more radical potential to disrupt the logic of synecdoche cannot be guaranteed in its staging. Ward's *We the People* authorizes such uses in part because Ward aims to balance "despair" with an "element of hope, of light" in his work (Ward 2015: 36). Although Ward notes that the U.S. possesses "this notion that everyone gets absorbed and becomes American" (2015: 41), *We the People*, with its critical interrogation of inclusion and the disavowal it requires, disarticulates this consensual notion of absorption. Nevertheless, the optimistic elements of *We the People*, especially its allegory of inclusion, play into the seductions of the democratic promise, thereby allowing for its dissensual metonymic gestures to be subordinated. To address the possibility of resistance in greater detail, then, I will soon turn to the poetry of Ocean Vuong, which more fully draws on the force of negativity disavowed by consensus democracy's formal articulations.

Before turning to Vuong, however, I will argue in the remainder of this section that the constitutive negativity of metonymic political interruptions of police consensus has a dominant affect, namely, that of anxiety. Rancière offers, I have shown, a compelling rereading of democratic politics against the policing of consensus democracy, yet his theory has been rightly challenged for too often overlooking questions of identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. My attention to anxiety attempts to correct this limitation in Rancière while maintaining the valuable insights of his theoretical framework.

In this attention, I am drawing on a specific sense of anxiety from psychoanalytic theory, which similarly informed Priscilla Wald's *Constituting Americans*. For Wald, the nation-state requires "official stories" to constitute its people, such as the Constitution's preamble (1995: 2). Because these official stories always construct norms and collectives that exclude, many authors write with the "unsettling sense of not enjoying full authorial liberty," with the "uneasy awareness of a larger story controlling their stories" (Wald 1995: 3). Wald cites the Freudian "uncanny" as something that "helps us understand what inaugurates narratives of identity and what haunts them" (1995: 5). Freud

shows how the *unheimlich* (unfamiliar, unhomely) coincides with what seems to be its opposite, the *heimlich* (familiar, homely), as he links the uncanny to the return of the repressed (Freud 1953-74: 220, 226, 241). According to Wald, “the uncanny sends us home to the discovery that ‘home’ is not what or where we think it is and that we, by extension, are not who or what we think we are” (1995: 7). While Wald focuses on the anxiety of not belonging that is produced in a subject incapable of being absorbed into the whole, I am more interested in a notion of anxiety related to the falsity of narratives of incorporation themselves. Rather than focus on anxieties about what it means to be “American,” I focus on the potential for the subject to inaugurate the return of the repressed that haunts democratic consensus projects in the U.S.

With this meaning of democratic anxiety I thus draw on what Jared Sexton names “the anxiety of antagonism,” an anxiety that “precipitates” a “narrative crisis” (2016). We see evidence of this anxiety in the Trump administration’s virulent anti-immigration policies and rhetoric, as well as in the brutal and swift police violence against the protests in the name of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, among countless others. This state violence registers as a symptom of the anxiety of the consensual regime, for these protests insist on the façade of consensus democracy, which that regime cannot bear to acknowledge. Frank B. Wilderson III helpfully glosses such an unbearable encounter when he argues that the condition of black suffering offers a problem with “no imaginable strategy for redress—no narrative of social, political, or national redemption” (2020: 15). An anti-black world cannot be reformed, only remade. While Wilderson would describe citizenship and state power in terms of a “conflict” rather than an essential antagonism of anti-blackness (2020: 159, 181), I insist that democratic politics in Rancière’s conception names precisely such a structural antagonism because democratic dissensus for Rancière is always a polemic about who counts as a human: it appears when “the part that has no part” suddenly appears to demand a wrong that reveals and interrupts the fundamental inequality of the police. Democracy’s political

dissensus “is a confrontation of worlds” that “occurs when those who are supposed to be only able to voice their pain affirm their capacity for speaking about justice and injustice” (Rancière 2019: 233). This confrontation generates anxiety because anxiety involves “the sudden appearance of the *Heimliche* within the frame,” which then cuts the coherence of that frame (Lacan 2014: 75-76). As I will argue in the next section, the uncanny returns of violence in Vuong’s poetry generate anxiety precisely because they articulate through repetition the political act that the police order disavows, confronting consensus democracy with its own “primal scene.” Vuong emphasizes the violence required to repress the equality articulated in the political act; this violence haunts and exposes the lies proliferated by the police order’s façade. If, as Pease argues, “[i]t is the function of fantasy to conceal the inherent impossibility of social cohesion” (2009: 15), then anxiety, as that which fractures the fantasmatic frame, makes visible the impossibility of cohesion and consensus. In other words, anxiety destabilizes the scene that “fantasy sets [...] into place” (Pease 2009: 17), and for this reason, I argue for anxiety as a central affect of democratic politics.

For minoritarian subjects, the framed scene of consensus democracy, such as the ICA’s naturalization ceremony, functions as what Saidiya V. Hartman calls a “scene of subjection.” This frames “the enactment of subjugation and the constitution of the subject” in a movement of dialectical torsion (1997: 4). It works to perpetuate the hegemonic power of consensus. If “the exercise of power” is “inseparable from its display” (Hartman 1997: 7), then a focus on aesthetic scenes and encounters that interrupt the smooth operation of this display proves essential. The democratic anxiety generated by Ward’s *We the People* and by Vuong’s poetry, as will be shown in what follows, insists that the “objects” of democracy—that is, the people nominally included, yet in fact excluded, from the democratic count—uncannily present themselves as desiring subjects, rather than as objects subject to violence (Lacan 2014: 271). Figuring the subject of desire, the work of Ward and Vuong, like the work of Black Lives Matter, demands from the oppressive system a

reordering of things, and this demand for equality potentially destabilizes that order and generates anxiety within it. This appearance of the constitutive egalitarian drive of democratic politics haunts and antagonizes consensus democracy's fantasmatic promises.

### **Ocean Vuong and the Politics of Aesthetics**

With these notions of anxiety and the figurative structures of democratic politics, I now turn to Vuong's poetry as an exemplary articulation of the antagonistic relation between a consensus order and its anxiety-producing interruptions before concluding with a rereading of Rancière in light of the insights developed from Vuong's poetics. Where Ward's installation allegorizes the structural antagonism between democratic politics and consensus democracy, Vuong's poetry generates anxiety when it articulates forms of resistance or refusal against the police order's enactment of violence by performing a reciprocal, but asymmetric, counter-violence. Against consensus democracy, which depends on the totalizing drive of form and formal organization, Vuong foregrounds the violence that emerges from the materials that get redistributed in such organizations by explicitly engaging with what it means to be positioned according to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. While Vuong's poetry, like Ward's artwork, allegorizes the tension within democracy from the perspective of immigrants and refugees, I argue that Vuong works toward a democratic politics in his insistence on the gaps between subjects and their communities, refusing to be subsumed by the organizing violence of a collective, or even of a stable identity. This refusal of "state fantasy" disrupts the workings of synecdoche in favor of metonymy. The shift from Ward, whose artwork depends on the citation of narrative prose, to Vuong is motivated as well by my desire to show how the aesthetic expression of democratic politics often depends on metonymy despite different media, forms, and genres. Jakobson suggests that metaphor's "principle of similarity underlies poetry"

(1971: 258), but the engagement that follows reads Vuong's poetry against this suggestion and against Vuong's own remarkable use of metaphor. Metonymy appears entangled throughout Vuong's poetic articulations, especially in those that are metaphoric and synecdochic. Vuong's figuration of democratic politics through metonymy, as well as other tropes that interrupt metaphoric substitution, renders his poetry as an expression of democratic anxiety, since it depends on the anxious appearance of a politics of aesthetics that punctures the police order and its fantasmatic consistency.

While Ward's art installation foregrounds subjects as parts of a collective, Vuong's poetry privileges the representation of a desiring self.<sup>4</sup> Vuong therefore offers a different emphasis from which to engage the democratic anxiety produced by and producing political violence. In both "Notebook Fragments" and "Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds," Vuong turns to the divisions of the enunciating subject that must be disavowed to construct Rancière's (political) subject of the statement—the "we" of "We the People" or the category of "the worker." Any "we" that emerges, no matter how divided, can only emerge by leaving behind or imposing a connection onto the subjects on whom it depends. Wilderson argues that "we" "is a form of *suture*. It papers over any contemplation of violence as a structuring matrix" (2010: 249). Vuong has stated that poetry operates as a suture, but he has also insisted that poetry is generated out of antagonistic conflict, which must be registered despite the suture (2019a). Vuong confronts, then, the fact of violence more directly than Ward, and in doing so, he offers a more explicit way to refuse consensus democracy's demands of synecdoche.

Vuong's poetry resists the identity categorizations forced upon individuals, but Vuong also recognizes that one must negotiate such categories, for categorization and the impositions of identity are inevitable. In an interview with Kaveh Akbar, Vuong offers a telling simile of identity that leads to a metaphor of community: "I see identity more as a thread being pushed through a piece of fabric



as it's being woven, and that all of our identities are fibers woven in that thread." Vuong's figure of the thread combines dynamism and stasis. The "fabric" operates as the stage on which identity appears, but since the identity-as-thread works through the fabric "as it's being woven," Vuong also suggests that identity constructs this stage. The metonymic shift from the singular identity as "thread" to identities as "fibers woven in that thread" suggests relations of both part-for-whole and parts-for-parts. Yet Vuong then acknowledges that external forces impose identity formations: "Of course, no matter what I do or say, I will always be an Asian-American, Vietnamese, Queer, etc, including all the identities that I don't even have the language for yet" (Vuong n.d.). Vuong poses a double problem with identity in these statements. The first involves an internal focus: how one might come to terms with one's own proliferating selves. The second involves the external focus of the social order determining one's sense of self. While the latter may seem the more violent of the two, Vuong suggests that a subject's internal divisions perform a comparable form of violence.

Rather than reconcile these problems with difference, or try to articulate an identity that would somehow include them all, Vuong's poetry stresses the complex entanglements of these different identity categories and their constitutive forces. Lowe insists that "the American of Asian descent remains the symbolic 'alien,' the *metonym* for Asia who by definition cannot be imagined as sharing in America" (1996: 6). In the force of the redeployment of metonymy, along with other interruptive figures, that subtends his astounding metaphoric language, Vuong foregrounds and disrupts this racist imposition of the American state fantasy. As Summer Kim Lee argues, "In the contemporary moment, minoritarian subjects bear the burden of representation, of representing and standing in for the totality of the community to which they belong" (2019: 29). Throughout his poetry, Vuong both accedes to and refuses this burden of synecdoche, in which the particular stands in for the whole. I argue that Vuong avoids consensus in favor of a democratic dissensus, of placing

on the stages of his poems irreconcilable worlds. The “fabric” of his poetry depends on the conjunction of threads and fibers that potentially disturb the fantasmatic coherence of the whole.

This opposition between the coherence of the whole and the incoherence of the parts informs Vuong’s “Notebook Fragments,” whose very title offers the “suggestion of arbitrariness” (Vuong n.d.). Constructed from a series of fragments and ranging from the humorously pragmatic—“Note to self: If a guy tells you his favorite poet is Jack Kerouac, / there’s a very good chance he’s a douchebag”—to the pseudo-existential—“Shouldn’t heaven be superheavy by now?”—the poem does offer a sense of order, or necessity, despite its suggestion of arbitrariness (Vuong 2016, 69). In one span of several lines, the statements seem to work as a sequence: “In Vietnamese, the word for grenade is ‘bom,’ from the French ‘pomme,’ / meaning ‘apple.’ // Or was it American for ‘bomb?’” (69). Here “it” only makes sense if read as referring to an antecedent, which in this case would be “bom.” Another sequence later in the poem similarly requires the reader to link the fragments into a chain to construct a narrative, that is, to construct meaning:

I met a man tonight. A high school English teacher  
from the next town. A small town. Maybe

I shouldn’t have, but he had the hands  
of someone I used to know. Someone I was used to.

The way they formed brief churches  
over the table as he searched for the right words.

I met a man, not you. In his room the Bibles shook on the shelf  
from candlelight. His scrotum a bruised fruit. I kissed it

lightly, the way one might kiss a grenade  
 before hurling it into the night's mouth. (70)

One might read some of these lines as separate. The repetition of “I met a man” followed by “not you” might signal a shift. Though the poem’s repetition of “I met a man” suggests a sequence of men, it could also signal the reappearance of the same man. In later repetitions, the “man” changes, yet each man can be metonymically substituted for the other in the erotic pairing with the speaker. The analogy to a grenade—“the way one might kiss a grenade”—also refers back to the earlier linguistic discussion of grenade in Vietnamese, French, and English. A thread seems to weave the various fragments together into some recognizable sequence or narrative.

The fragment as a part for the whole, as a synecdoche, operates as one of the governing logics of “Notebook Fragments,” since each fragment can be read as part of the larger narrative unity of the poem, a narrative that constructs some version of the speaker’s identity. Rancière describes the new form of “totality” promised by the fragment as one in which the fragment operates as a “microcosm of a world” (2011: 78). Literature emerges by cutting “what the fragment aimed to gather together. In fact, the entire history of literature can be characterized as the fate of this ‘garland of fragments’ that presented the image of another totality in opposition to the former narrative and discursive order” (Rancière 2011: 78). As I have been describing “Notebook Fragments,” the poem certainly seems to inherit this logic. The “narrative” that emerges from reading the fragments in sequence contains within it the disruptions that, if left unchecked, would sever the thread—the connective tissue—required by narration.

Yet Rancière highlights that the reading of fragment as synecdoche operates alongside the reading of fragments metonymically, according to a logic of contiguity (the “garland of fragments”).

Vuong's references to "grenade" can be read as related because they appear rather proximately to each other. There is, in other words, no necessary link between them. Similarly, Vuong's repetition of "I met a man" insists not on totality (part for whole) but on incompleteness. Something remains that generates the repetition. This remainder, the excess and lack, can be understood as what Paul de Man named irony. For de Man, "any theory of irony is the undoing [...] of any theory of narrative," for irony is "what makes it impossible ever to achieve a theory of narrative that would be consistent" (1996: 179). To narrativize "Notebook Fragments," one has to restrict the negativity of the gaps between the fragments. This restriction then allows one to impose a reading onto the series.

Vuong's sequences leave themselves open to falling apart, and many of the individual moments in the poem similarly emphasize and leave themselves open to the negativity and "narrative crisis" that anxiously undermines any cohesion (Sexton 2016). One of the poem's fragments, for example, details a version of the speaker's (and Vuong's) origins: "An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. / Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me" (2016: 70). Existence emerges from the violence of fucking, which takes place within the violence of American imperialism in Vietnam. Michiko Kakutani's review cites this passage and notes, "Vuong contemplates the irony of the war" in his dependence on it for his existence (2016). The irony of this moment does not get resolved; instead, as Lee Edelman argues in a different context, "such irony undermines every affirmative presentation of self and guarantees only the persistence, in its multitude of forms, of the negativity, the unresolved question, that drives us to pick at the scab of selfhood that aims to suture the wound of being" (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 109). "Notebook Fragments" opens with a similar image: "A scar's width of warmth on a worn man's neck. / That's all I wanted to be" (Vuong 2016: 68). Vuong opens "Notebook Fragments," then, with a desire to be a trace of an originary cut, not the void but its remainder. To want to be a scar is to want to be a healed wound: that which has been (perhaps incompletely)

reconciled. This desire, then, seems to be a desire for the “warmth” of wholeness, for participation in a consensus order, yet this “warmth” is also that of a scar. Vuong maintains this tension between a desire for (narrative) coherence and an insistence on negativity, and the unfolding of the fragments that follow suggests a return to the wound and its anxious presence. Vuong’s speaker in “Notebook Fragments” figuratively might be said to be picking at the wound’s scar tissue, and thereby picking at the fantasy of wholeness. Rather than offer “another totality,” fragments also fragment totality, thereby marking the uncanny reappearance of fracture. Both scar tissue and fragments insist on the void of the wound, the democratic interruption that has been partially covered over and elided by the consensus of narrative and totality.

Vuong’s poem articulates, albeit differently, the relation described by de Man in his reading of metaphor and metonymy in Proust, in which the “necessity” of the link between two terms implied by metaphor depends on the arbitrary “contiguity” of metonymy (1979: 14). Similarly, the effects of “Notebook Fragments,” such as its metaphoric presentations of grenades, depend on reading the fragments both as a series of fragments connected (as a thread) and as a fragmented series of contiguous moments. For the poem’s connections emerge from the contiguous relationship between the fragments in the series. The connective thread must be imposed over this contingent and arbitrary relation. Ben Lerner, with whom Vuong worked at Brooklyn College, suggests that it can be more difficult “to resist the will to integration than to combine various scenes into coherent and compelling fiction” (2014: 53). Vuong’s poem plays with the seductions of narrative, of meaning-making practices, even when those imposed links are fragile and tenuous. It is harder, Vuong suggests, to hold onto the negativity that generates narrativization and resist its seductions than it is to hold onto the generated narrative.

“Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds” extends this attention to the negativity that persistently fragments the self, as evident already in the analogy of the title between a self-portrait and the exit

wounds of gunshots. “Self-Portrait,” perhaps more so than “Notebook Fragments,” which repeatedly insists on the first-person speaker, offers a complex engagement with the lyric “I.” As Xiaojing Zhou argues, the lyric “I” in contemporary Asian American poetry often foregrounds *both* “a socially and culturally defined other, represented as the outsider, the foreigner,” *and* a reclamation of “otherness as irreducible alterity, as a form of resistance and intervention” (2006: 19). Vuong’s poem insists on the difficulties of its speaker’s identity by opening disjunctively: “Instead, let it be the echo to every footstep / drowned out by rain” (2016: 26). If read against the title, the “instead” seems to draw readers away from the analogy to exit wounds. In this reading, “it” refers to the self-portrait, which becomes “the echo to every footstep,” rather than exit wounds. Later, though, the speaker repeats the use of ambiguous referential language, “let me weave this deathbeam,” in a way that reiterates the opening analogy. The deathbeam as gunshot suggests that the poem has indeed followed through on the analogy of the title. This moment asks readers to reread the “it” of the first line, such that “it” may refer instead to exit wounds or to the entirety of the title, “self-portrait as exit wounds.” The “as” of the title produces an indistinction, since it may name an analogy—as if—or an ontological status—as such. In either case, the self of the self-portrait becomes characterized by a series of wounds, or violent penetrations, which anticipates the opening “scar” of “Notebook Fragments” later in the collection.

The “instead” of the opening line also gestures to the apparent turn away from the self of the ostensible self-portrait. The self-portrait begins not from a stable position, but from a turning movement, an already divided and mobile state. References to a boat, a refugee camp, a Vietnamese phrase, and an American scene (“Wonder Bread // & mayonnaise raised to cracked lips”), which could be read autobiographically (Armitstead 2017; González 2017), suggest a process of migration from Vietnam to the U.S. (26). This sequence includes a reference to the American culture industry and the racist spectacle of people watching a Hollywood film about Vietnam: “everyone cheering as

another // brown gook crumbles under John Wayne's M16, Vietnam / burning on the screen" (26).

The violence of the Vietnam War gets repeated, endlessly, on film for the entertainment of American audiences. The scene here dramatizes the violence of this repetition on viewers who see themselves not in the place of John Wayne, but in the place of the murdered Vietnamese.

Alternatively, viewers who identify as both Vietnamese and American—such as naturalized citizens of the U.S.—might see themselves in the place of both John Wayne and the murdered Vietnamese.

This emphasizes the division that, far from reconciling, citizenship intensifies. For these divided subjects, the state fantasy of citizenship persistently fails to cohere.

Vuong's poem therefore rehearses the history of forced and voluntary migration, as well as its consequences, in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for South Vietnamese refugees. As is well known, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 led to a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants from Asia. Yet as I have argued, citizenship does not guarantee equality; in fact, citizenship perpetuates inequality through its policing structure. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, for instance, "initiated not fewer but indeed more specifications and regulations for immigrants of Asian origins"; thus, this act introduced new forms of surveillance and policing (Lowe 1996: 9-10). Grace Kyungwon Hong argues that with categories like "immigrant," "Only the most willfully naive of us could overlook the ways in which these categories are deeply racialized and gendered, yet in ways that allow for the disavowal of race, gender, and sexuality as criteria for precarity" (2015: 12). This builds on Lowe's claim that though "the nation proposes immigrant 'naturalization' as a narrative of 'political emancipation' [...], it is a narrative that denies the establishment of citizenship out of unequal relationships between dominant white citizens and subordinated racialized noncitizens and women" (1996: 27). To return to my opening example, Judge Boal's homogenizing claim, "We are all Americans now," erases the differential contradictions inherent in citizenship. It disavows, for instance, the xenophobia and racism many Asian American

citizens face. By attending to the violent history structuring South Vietnamese refugees and to the ongoing spectacle of racism in cinematic representations, Vuong refuses to engage in the state fantasy of citizenship and instead points to its structure of disavowal that serves a consensus homogeneity.

“Self-Portrait” also includes an event presented as a formula in “Notebook Fragments.” After situating the reader in “’68, Ha Long Bay,” the speaker alludes to “the grandfather fucking / the pregnant farmgirl in the back of his army jeep” (27). From “pregnant farmgirl,” the reader can infer this act to be a repetition of sexual violation, though the poem maintains ambiguity as to whether the grandfather is alone in this violence. The designation of “grandfather” names a relation between the figure and the speaker, yet prefacing “grandfather” with the abstraction of “the” distances him from the speaker. The scene resembles the speaker’s origin story in “Notebook Fragments,” which suggests that this “pregnant farmgirl” might be the speaker’s grandmother. By leaving the farmgirl unnamed and without clear relation, however, Vuong’s speaker in “Self-Portrait” emphasizes the logic of U.S. violence in Vietnam as a violence of substitution and equivalence. This substitutability depends on a general subject-as-object, for if the violated women were given proper names, the system of substitution and violence would cease to work in the same way. Here Vuong foregrounds the “unequal relationships” denied by consensus democracy (Lowe 1996: 27). Vuong therefore stresses the danger of hierarchy, for if one population (the U.S. military) maintains power over another (Vietnamese women), then the dissymmetry proliferates inequality.

It is this hierarchical relation that democratic politics seeks to interrupt. The poem performs a version of this interruption by decentering the “self” that is the ostensible subject organizing the poem. For throughout its references, which develop a kind of autobiography, the “self” of the self-portrait seems insistently to absent itself in its own self-presentations. These presentations reveal the self as anxious not because self-identity is lost but because self-identity is constituted and presented



as the uncanny reappearance of loss, that is, self-identity is nothing but the presence of a dissensual suture. The speaker employs a “we” and “our” at one moment, but it is not until “let me weave this deathbeam” that the speaker refers to the self unambiguously. The simile of the title, which constructs a similarity between the “self-portrait” and “exit wounds,” fragments and proliferates into metonymic articulations in the lines of the poem that follow. Although the subjunctive “let it be” that structures the poem represents the expression of a desiring subject, the first-person pronoun only appears in the closing lines. The connection between scenes described and the speaker, as well as connections across poems, can only be inferred, or imposed, by the reader.

“Self-Portrait” then concludes by inverting these scenes and acts of violence, as the speaker asserts his position in the first person. After stating, “let me weave this deathbeam,” the speaker reaffirms this gesture:

Yes—let me believe 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. (27-28)

The simile here, “like the footsteps of ghosts,” uncannily returns the reader to the opening line of the poem that confuses both the subject and the subject’s temporal position. Where previously he names the “echo to every footstep,” here he makes a direct analogy to the footsteps themselves. What seemed the delayed after-effect now appears as the more immediate effect, if not the cause. While the speaker turns the gunshot against his oppressors, “like a true // Charlie,” re-appropriating the derogatory label used against the Vietnamese, he also seems indistinguishable from those

oppressors. This emphasizes the relational nature of colonizing violence and decolonizing counter-violence. Because “most of the post-1965 Asian immigrants come from societies already disrupted by colonialism and distorted by the upheavals of neocolonial capitalism and war,” they “retain precisely the memories of imperialism that the U.S. nation seeks to forget” (Lowe 1996: 16-17). Vuong’s rehearsal of these memories brings to the fore U.S. imperial violence. Where traditionally the Asian immigrant serves as a site for the fantasmatic projection of U.S. national anxieties (Lowe 1996: 18), Vuong reverses that projection: he generates anxiety by revealing consensus democracy as a fantasy that masks its structure of antagonisms. The final prayer “that nothing moves” asserts not simply the absence of movement, but also the movement and force of absence that figures the remainder in any fantasmatic construction of the self or community. Vuong therefore closes his self-portrait with that which should not appear in a portrait of the self but which constitutes the possibility of that self.

## **Conclusion**

In both poems, Vuong emphasizes how the community, or the broader social orders, re-enact on the subject the division that is already constitutive of the subject. The “I” that emerges in an act of counter-violence at the close of “Self-Portrait” suggests the construction of the “I” only from the violence of history, social context, and social relations. The “I” appears in the space of a catachresis, the gap created by the violent wound or gunshot. The dialectical relationship, then, can only be understood as a negative dialectic without synthesis, as signaled by the “nothing” at the poem’s close. Against synthesis, Vuong’s poetry insists “on the unintelligible’s unintelligibility,” which Edelman links to “the internal limit to signification and the impossibility of turning Real loss to meaningful profit in the Symbolic without its persistent remainder: the inescapable Real of the

drive” (2004: 106-7). Vuong’s emphasis on irony and catachresis reiterates that no projected narrative or meaning can be guaranteed, and with this emphasis, Vuong intensifies the disruptive force of metonymy.

Vuong’s investment in catachresis—literally “misuse,” with a connotation of perversion (OED)—appears in his focus on the unintelligible materiality of the body and the sexual, as when he grounds his being in the violence of fucking, which can only be accounted for in the poems with inadequate linguistic placeholders and uncanny repetitions. Jacques Lacan writes that the “lack-of-sense (*ab-sens*) designates sex” and that sense depends on the exclusion of sex, “(*sens-absexe*)” (2009: 38). Sex names precisely that which is insensible, unintelligible; sex marks the limit to the sensible and intelligible. Vuong’s account of sex between the protagonist, Little Dog, and Trevor in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* succinctly points to its excesses: “I can’t make sense of what I felt. The force and torque, of pain gathered toward a breaking point, a sensation I never imagined was part of sex” (2019c: 118). Sex also registers one limit to Rancière’s conception of politics. Rancière’s dismissal of the individual subject in favor of the collective, political subject, allows him to conceptualize a political category that would otherwise be impossible, for the subjects on whom this category depends are constituted by unintelligible and irrational libidinal drives that resist the meaning required by Rancière’s axiom of equality, his “presupposition” that equality must be prior to inequality (Honneth and Rancière 2016: 139). By excluding the anxious appearance of sex, Rancière can guarantee the movement “between sense and sense” rather than the impossible leap from non-sense to sense (2016: 94).

In his attention to the self’s psycho-affective dimensions, Vuong gestures to both the processes of recognition—within the self, between the self and other—and to the gaps inherent in this process. Recognition depends upon a logic of reflexivity, yet Vuong persistently destabilizes the reflexive relations necessary for (and constitutive of) recognition. In his interview with Akbar,

however, Vuong seems to follow a Rancièrian paradigm when he details his understanding of the poem in terms of communicability, that is, in terms of sense: “The poem is for self-preservation, but it is also written in the hopes of speaking to these private fears and joys that we all share, but that we don’t get to talk about in public spheres. In that sense, it is also communication between people in order to build a space where we can recognize one another.” Though Vuong describes “self-preservation” and a recognition process, his qualifier of “a space” in which such recognition between subjects occurs stresses the primacy of the aesthetic. In other words, “to build a space” suggests that such a space does not pre-exist the recognition experience. “The assertion of a common world,” Rancière argues, “happens through a paradoxical *mise-en-scène* that brings the community and the noncommunity together” (1999: 55). Rancière’s project therefore similarly depends on the construction of such a space, and it is the aesthetic that “allows separate regimes of expression” to be conjoined and confronted (1999: 57). For Rancière, disagreement or dissensus therefore has a rationality (1999: 43-60). There can be no dialogue between rational and irrational; instead, the rationality of the police must be confronted with the rationality of political disagreement.

Yet Vuong’s poetry emphasizes that the irrationality of the subject underlies the rationality of the political subject, which suggests that Rancière’s democratic politics depends on but disavows an unintelligible negativity. In figurative terms, rational movements along the metonymic chain depend on the irrational catachrestic gap that separates each metonym. Though Vuong’s comments in the interview suggest a similar line of thinking to Rancière, his poetry suggests otherwise. The rationality of disagreement can only appear if it disregards the irrationality of the catachrestic gap constitutive of the divided self and the divided community. By insisting on “a space” or “a common world,” both Vuong and Rancière attempt to circumvent a problem of the self by emphasizing the construction of a space that will allow for dissensus. At stake in breaking from the irrationality of the

self to privilege a logic of reciprocity, then, is a break from the reproduction of the same. Vuong and Rancière attempt to break from this reproduction by constructing a space that allows for two incommensurable orders of rationality: that of the police and that of democratic politics.

Rancière fears that recognition will overstate identity, “thinking the activity of a subject mainly as an affirmation of self-identity,” and prevent in advance any political act from taking place (Honneth and Rancière 2016: 86). Vuong’s turn to recognition, however, suggests something different. While the psycho-affective dimensions of the self trouble Rancière’s theory of the political subject, they do so by adding division, not by reconciling division into an order of self-identity. Vuong’s poetry insists that the enunciating subject cannot be subsumed by the subject of the statement. Any political subject, any “we” that appears through the axiom of equality, an axiom that evacuates the libidinal movements of the self and of the social, voids the enunciating subjects who voiced it into being. The suturing “we” disavows the anxious appearance of these subjects and regulates in advance the possibilities of democratic politics to disrupt state fantasies of consensus. Vuong’s poetry thus offers us a rigorous democratic aesthetic, and this aesthetic emphasizes that without an attention to the psycho-affective dimensions of the subject, Rancière’s theory of democratic politics risks avoiding a confrontation with the very fantasies of police consensus that it aims to challenge.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> My focus on aesthetics distinguishes my conception of democracy from those that prioritize power or ethics. For an alternative, Kantian approach to the aesthetics of democracy, see de Duve.

<sup>2</sup> Jakobson's examples reveal the entanglement of metonymy and synecdoche. In literature, Jakobson argues, "the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details" (1971: 255).

<sup>3</sup> *We the People*, especially in its interactive form, offers a potentially—but not necessarily—emancipatory aesthetic. For a discussion of relational aesthetics in participatory art, see Bishop.

<sup>4</sup> This resonates with their different experiences with citizenship. Ward emigrated from Jamaica to New Jersey with his family at age 12 before moving to Harlem in the late 1980s, while Vuong at age 2 arrived at a refugee camp in the Philippines before migrating to the U.S. and settling in Hartford, CT in the early 1990s. Although viewers and readers frequently comment on Ward's and Vuong's biography, this risks participating in the demand for "ethnic" artists and writers to rehearse their traumatic experiences and conform to stereotypes for the enjoyment of the consuming public. Gary Carrion-Murayari offers an account of Ward's life, but he also warns that biographical readings often fail to engage with Ward's "sculptural language" (2019, 167). Most reviews of and interviews with Vuong dwell on his biography. Claire Armitstead's "War Baby: The Amazing Story of Ocean Vuong, former Refugee and Prize-Winning Poet" offers an obvious example. Rigoberto González notes, however, that Vuong "employs plenty of poetic license in shaping a mythology from the

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immigrant journeys. What matters is that these are the stories of Vietnamese refugees, not necessarily his family's accurate narrative" (2017, 90). This distinction informs Viet Thanh Nguyen's characterization of the persona of Vuong's poetry, rather than the poetry itself, as autobiographical (Vuong 2019b). Cathy Park Hong similarly warns against biographical conflations and notes that Vuong's earlier readers often ignored his queer identity because it conflicted with expectations of the Vietnamese immigrant (2020, 49-51).

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