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Lyric Indifference and the Genre of the Person

Abstract

This paper reads Jackqueline Frost's *Young Americans* and Ocean Vuong's *Time is a Mother* as cases of indifference to and within lyric norms. This indifference is understood as a moment of relief from the identitarian specificity of apostrophic conventions. In Frost's poetics, indifference is figured as a refusal of the assumption of personhood as the basis of politics. The limits and ironies of this poetics are traced in Vuong's lyric sequences, where every body's specificity, and every poem's singularity, offer a way out from what Virginia Jackson has described as "the genre of the person", with which the overdetermination of lyric reading has reified difference.

1. *Beyond Lyric*

"What were we before we were we?"
(Ocean Vuong 2019, 191)

In 2008, Rei Terada suggested that the intensity of lyric as a "zone of electrification is dissipating along with belief in the autonomy of the lyric object and in the specialness of the lyric mode" (196). Her contribution to the *PMLA* insert on *New Lyric Studies* called for a consideration of how lyric "might help us think about something besides lyric" (Ibid.). In the fifteen years since, this anticipated dissipation of lyric intensity has not materialised. The assumption that lyric works as a mode of intensification, that its specialness can be put down to its formal capacity to concentrate some other quality which it captures but does not determine – time or affect, memory or attention – has remained central to many assessments of lyric. What Terada calls "the lyricism of lyric" (Ibid.: 197), the experience of a poetic speak-

ing out that exceeds the lyric object itself, accounts for the flourishing of the lyric essay, lyric as applied to filmmaking or photography, and to the act of criticism itself. If lyric this century were to have a colloquial currency (in the way that tragic or epic sometimes do), it would perhaps be closest to the OED's most recent entry on lyrical, added in 1997: "excitedly effusive; highly enthusiastic, fervent".

Instead of a weakening of definition, contemporary scholarship on the lyric in its past and current forms has tended to harden around the trope of apostrophe. Unpicking the question of 'who is speaking to who' has become, on the one hand, the ground for historicist work on the ways in which address and the drama of personhood it stages were 'lyricised' across the nineteenth century and, on the other, the basis for a defence of lyric as a transhistorically coherent genre. In a sense, this debate has metonymized 'apostrophe' for 'lyric', just as for a previous generation of critics 'lyric' had habitually come to stand for 'poetry'. Such a shift might suggest that lyric's "zone of electrification" is indeed weaking, or at least retreating. Yet the situation is complicated by the fact that whilst lyric, at least since the post-structuralist poetics of Paul de Man, has been theorised as contingent on apostrophe, apostrophe is in no way contained by lyric. It was for this reason that de Man could point – via the deconstruction of lyric tropes – to "the possibility of a future hermeneutics" which would dispel the power of lyric in favour of "historical modes of language power" ([1984] 2014, 303). With his emphasis on tropological transformations that effect "the taking of something for something else that can be assumed to be given" (Ibid.: 292), de Man, like Terada, hoped to pass 'through' lyric to a more spacious critique, in which a deconstruction of the rhetorical regime active within lyric might be put to broader use. Even in the most ordinary of settings, apostrophe allows us to turn away from the interaction at hand and towards fantasy, which is why Jonathan Culler invites us to consider "a man standing on a corner in the rain cursing buses" who apostrophically "makes a spectacle of himself" (2002, 141). And yet the trope has also been used, as Denis Flannery notes in his entry on apostrophe for the *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia*, "to explore complicated legal and ethical terrains where the boundary between the living and the dead, the present and the absent, the animate and the inanimate can be difficult to draw or ascertain" (2020, 2). It is on the exploration of this boundary that interventions on 'lyric reading' have staked their social consequence. If lyric reading can mean generating critique that is rooted in the all too human dynamics of recognising or misrecognising

the other, of voicing difference, of relational subjectivity, then the ethical reach of lyric reading is hypothetically limitless. Likewise, if reading lyric poetry is a means of denaturalising received ideas of self, community, and responsibility, tracing the poeticised interaction of these concepts through histories that are circumscribed by colonialism, patriarchy, economic immiseration and ecological catastrophe, then the political stakes could hardly be higher. Another way of saying this would be to assert that since apostrophe differentiates presence from absence, and life from death, lyric – by association – becomes the crucible for examining difference and its effects in literary studies. If lyric is "iterable" in an ever-recurring present (Culler 2015), if it is, following Derrida, "a mark addressed to you" ([1988] 1991, 227), then it gets to the heart of what is meant when we say literature 'speaks to us': apostrophe being the figure which both marks that 'speaking to' and demarcates that 'us'.

This is why attempts to re-envision a social role for literary studies this century frequently orbit around the apparently distant matter of close reading, theory of lyric, and apostrophe. When "the possibility of lyric speech and of lyric reading" crops up in Joseph North's *Literary Criticism*, it appears in a footnote that digresses on his reading of D.A. Miller's work. The passage is worth quoting in full because it illustrates the aptness of an expanded lyric mode to a criticism that looks back in order to move forward:

> 'Voice'; 'I, you'; 'eavesdropping': it strikes me that what is really at stake here, as at so many crucial points throughout the book, is the possibility of lyric speech and of lyric reading. This is interesting for many reasons, but for our purposes I simply want to recall that both 'close reading' and the critical paradigm itself have historically been quite closely associated with the genre (or mode, if you prefer) of lyric – certainly more closely than with any other genre. Having recalled this, it is intriguing to see lyric returning here as one of the central stakes of a reading that does not acknowledge it – a reading that, as I am trying to show, seems in many ways to be an attempt to win a way back, through 'close reading,' to something like criticism in the older sense. (2017, 241)

Much of North's efforts to salvage close reading in the service of a "genuinely radical, rather than liberal, project of subject formation" is driven by a conviction that the discursive possibilities presented by lyric for such a project are too good to lose (211). What North describes in his closing pages as "the critical project of forming new subjectivities and collectivities by way of the systematic cultivation of capacities for value" (204) maps closely enough on to various

claims made within poetry studies for an ethical potential inherent to the lyric, as though this criticism in the newer sense would have need of lyric's "authenticity, sincerity, immediacy, voice", those "taboo poetic terms" that Marjorie Perloff claimed "may be coming back to haunt us" (2015, 391). Those terms, which were perhaps never so far out of sight, have served to shore up lyric's specialness as a site for supercharging the ethical predicaments of identity and difference, even as the generic grounding for lyric has fallen away.

This article is not about lyric's presumed ethical burden, although it is important to establish that the presupposition of such a burden exists and that it largely hinges upon the figuration of apostrophe as a measure of difference. Neither is it especially concerned with 'lyricisation', the process by which that single figure of address flattened out a much more diverse generic landscape, although it takes up one significant phase of that process, as described by Virginia Jackson (2023), towards its conclusion. If, as Terada suggested, "the critique of lyric is necessary as long as we need to be convinced that its construction has been a problem", then I would like to imagine, along with Terada, that "we may be past that moment" (2008, 199). I do so because when faced with the two collections discussed here – *Young Americans* by Jackqueline Frost and *Time is a Mother* by Ocean Vuong, both published in 2022 – critical debates about lyric as a phenomenon that compacts a series of ethical quandaries on the formation of a subjectivity through the difference that is marked out by apostrophe are undercut by a contemporary poetic practice which is spectacularly indifferent to apostrophic conventions and which mounts a challenge from within lyric to the ethically charged difference that sustains it.

This is not to say that Frost and Vuong occupy yet another front of 'anti-lyric' writing in the literature of the United States, not least because Vuong has been celebrated as a lyric poet, while Frost's relationship with a lyric mode is of a more ambivalent kind. Part of what I am arguing for here is more attention to the pragmatic mixedness of contemporary poetic form, a practice whose very hybridity has shed itself of old categories of 'experimental' or 'lyric', 'formal' or 'confessional'. Pairing 'lyric' with 'indifference' is a means of testing how far such generic disregard might be said to remix older norms or whether, in fact, it might represent a step back from them, a deactivation of the 'zone of electrification' that surrounds lyric. I read *Young Americans* and *Time is a Mother* as examples of such a step back. Both texts take the task of poetically reshaping the differences of I/you, interior/exterior, body/mind,

presence/absence as a queer one, and they take American pastoral as their environment, implicitly enlarging the scope of queer experiences beyond the urban backdrop that commonly accompanies them in literature. Frost's poems are often only fleetingly concerned with harnessing lyric tropes – present tense, constrained reminiscence, direct address, apostrophe, parataxical brevity – in order to contrive the presence of what could be called a 'speaker'. By contrast, of the twenty-eight poems in Vuong's collection, eleven open with an I/you address, four of those are titled and framed as epistles, and the collection's governing theme of loss and its disillusions depends throughout on the experience of such lyricised address as a marker of absence, distance, and the frustrations these entail. This also means that for Vuong the poem remains largely, though not exclusively, a site for exposing intimacy, for turning the matter of private disaster into a display of public vulnerability. This seemingly familiar lyric procedure is transformed by Vuong's de-personalisation of the lyric 'speaker' and an indifference to its referential consistency as such, so that a confessional mode can wax freely into political critique. For Frost's poetics the momentum often flows in the other direction: she begins from political urgencies, often given as epideictic pronouncements detached from any speaker and cut out of a completable syntax, and from there interpolates several subjects which never amount to a person.

What both collections confront is an exasperation with the limits of address and a certain desperation at the thought of what might replace them. Exasperation because, for better or worse, they understand the modern lyric as having been tied up with the question of who is speaking to who for over a century. Given the naked urgency (and absurdity) of apostrophe's calling up what isn't there – a quality that, as noted, connects its poetic use with the most rudimentary mechanisms of language – it is no surprise that answering the question phrased by Virginia Jackson as "Do poems speak to you?" (2022, 652) emerges as a motif across the poems of both Frost and Vuong. The question becomes desperate because these poets also understand that, as Frantz Fanon wrote, "it is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his [a person's] own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of life is condensed" ([1952] 1986, 217). What seems special about lyric is its ability to figure – and control – this condensation of meaning as apostrophe. But this also means that the question of "human worth and reality" comes to desperately depend on nothing more than language speaking

to what isn't there. Frost and Vuong feel this as a problem: if we want 'human worth' to be real and 'reality' to be worth something, then we might wish for more than mere recognition from an other.

2. *The Justifiable Remainder*

If such a wish sounds revolutionary, then Jackqueline Frost's *Young Americans* reads as though it were penned from the other side of the failed revolution. Picking their way through scenes of a devastated southern pastoral (extracts were earlier published under the title "American Gothic"), the poems turn inside-out what Maria Damon styles as "the common lyric/urban problem of reconciling interiority with sociability" (2008, 101-102), so that the problem becomes how to reconcile an expansive exteriority – namely, suffering caused by mass scale political violence and its degradation of communal life – with a sociability that is in retreat. Frost's representation of this problem centres on a cluster of recurring motifs of namelessness, dispossession, and the fungibility of persons, contained within formal arrangements that draw attention to the vacant centre of the 'lyric-I'. My intention here is firstly to pinpoint Frost's conception of violence as poetic transformation and then to draw out each of these motifs in turn in order to suggest that their cumulative effect is the proposition of an indifference to identity as the proper locus of resistance to political coercion. This indifference is displayed in the juxtaposition of a debased 'I' alongside ecstatic visions of a collective 'we', a contrast that is neither antagonist nor pacifying, but which promises to accept difference as a mere coproduct, and not a condition, of communality.

Young Americans is a road trip lit by oil well fires. The book's eponymous sequence of block-poems, some as short as three lines, for the most part justified and becoming more ragged and pockmarked as the book develops, is split across six parts, each partitioned by a two-page spread of sharp vertical bars. The violence of the poems' imagery, what Frost at one point terms "an always unexpected / Conniption of Violence" (2022, 69), includes flashes of surveillance helicopters, beaten faces, car crashes, police charges, oil spills, burning fields of cane, electrified border fences, makeshift bombs, and a black market of blood, although such a list doesn't capture the much more diffused sense of a violence that is as constraining as the block form of the poem's themselves, as

arbitrary as their justified line breaks, and as pervasive as the urban rot which it thrives within. That is to say, considered generically, that the lyric economy of the poems is no longer, as Cécile Alduy has written of the early French Petrarchan tradition, a template of "productivity" that demonstrates the poet's alchemical ability "to produce endless meanings from a limited set of tropes and situations" (2010, 726). Frost's template is one of wastage. The material scarcity of the "sapped utopias" (Frost 2022, 12) that the poems inhabit is matched by the continued insufficiency of lyric address to produce a surplus of affect that might be usefully converted into an identifiable subject. The "languages of / process", as Frost writes part way through, have here exhausted themselves: "we are the justifiable / remainder" (Ibid.: 49). In place of a language of 'process', with its suggestion of usefulness, teleology and transformation, the poems revolve around a 'we' that is always already the bare residue of the violence that it bears witness to.

To put it in less abstract terms, Frost asks us to imagine a community that comes together to grieve its own undoing. While there is a perceptible shift in tone away from the elegiac pain of the opening section to the hard-eyed political premonitions of the closing sections, there is nothing linear to Frost's laying out the terror of state violence in the American Deep South. Frost teaches political and aesthetic theory at the University of London in Paris, with a focus on the struggles for Caribbean liberation and their transatlantic intellectual history. One of the drivers of her poetics is the idea that violence catastrophises temporal orders and that, as such, violence is itself poetic insofar as it demands new languages adequate to the task of bearing out new temporalities. As she writes in an essay on Césaire's *Et les chiens se taisaient*:

> To conceive of violence as poetic invites us to reimagine social transformation not as the direct and total change associated with a linear model of historical movement, but as indirect, fragmentary, unpredictable, and unspectacular. (2017, 76)

This violence is also mythic, in the sense that it "establishes a law far more than it punishes the infringement of a law that already exists" (Benjamin [1921] 1996, 248), which is why many of the poems occur in a past tensed state of aftermath and why proper names surface sporadically as though they were mythological figures. Poetic and mythic, a labour of making and unmaking form, this violence does not simply target but retroactively constitutes the self as its

preferred unit of control. In response, the poetics of *Young Americans* works through not so much the fragmentation of a lyricised subjectivity fissured between addresser and addressee but rather the fugitive impulse to get free altogether from a self that in announcing its presence accepts its extinction.

To return now to those motifs of a retreating sociability (namelessness, dispossession, fungibility), we can take them as prefiguring this exit-strategy. The theme of namelessness is introduced from the very first section. The opening page addresses the 'we' that will travel through the collection:

> The après-midi of our brotherhood is effortless. How did you put it before? This becoming's like confetti cutting. Weren't we celebratory and vicious? At times vicious and blithe? Weren't we reckless and massive? (2022, 3)

This mode of address is neither the turn away of apostrophe nor the direct exclamation of *ecphonesis*, but rather a privately coded appeal to a collectivity that has outlasted its own rupturing (the first four lines introduce this split as a temporal before/after, the last four as paradoxical predicative pairings). The directness of this appellative gesture runs counter to the figure of apostrophe in its classical usage. Whilst apostrophe in antiquity involved the diversion of address in court from the judge to an unseen figure in order to appeal to extraneous circumstances, in order to 'pretend', in Quintilian's manual, "that we expected something different or feared some greater disaster" (1920, 397), Frost's address closes in on this 'brotherhood' as its own agent and own arbiter. Rather than an appeal to the unexpected, it is a rhetorical pose that asks us to take stock, to recollect, and then to decide what difference or distance has been abridged by this pronominal largesse. Not, in other words, 'who is speaking to who' but 'who is speaking *for*, *as*, *with* me' – and on what possible grounds. In the dissident imaginary of the *Young Americans*, it is as if we can decide the political import of our actions but only on the effortful condition that collective action means no appeal to an elsewhere (with its other) can hold sway. To give just one example of how such a problem is posed overtly, Frost names herself once a few pages in as part of this 'brotherhood', but only so as to underscore the political impasse that individual expression represents:

> And even our names fastened together by vulgarity and fable, even you cannot forgive in my name – even when they called out Jackqueline, twice or four times. (2022, 6)

In earlier drafts of the sequence, published in 2013, the cage-like forms of the book version have not yet been fixed. The text is presented as standard prose, and with the exception of its opening and closing passages, each section begins with the factual stuff of biography: "I was talking to J about self-exclusion… When I moved West I was certain of nothing… My name is Jackqueline Nicole Frost; I'm twenty-six years old" (2013, 32-33). In the finished collection, Frost has performed a rigorous excision of direct stagings of the self: in their place is a de-particularising 'we' that can subsume the experiences of several named (and unnamed) persons across the collection.

A poetry that effaces the lyric-I in order to resist what Virginia Jackson, paraphrasing Fred Moten, calls "the grammar of unremitting predication" is nothing new (2023, 13). One of the arguments of Virginia Jackson's most recent work, which I return to in the following section, is that in the nineteenth-century Black poets' farsighted resistance to this coercive force laid the foundations for the mode of lyric alienation which would come to dominate American poetry (2023, 9-10). In Frost's poems, I am suggesting, what should strike us is the absence of any attempt to articulate such alienation in terms of difference. So far, I have tried to take the measure of the pulse of collectivity that animates *Young Americans*. But if Frost's callouts to 'we', 'our', 'us' were nothing more than a pronominal ranginess of Whitmanesque magnitude, then her vision of resistance would ultimately be answerable to the logic of exclusion and inclusion that it tries to outrun. This possibility is avoided because the poems are alight with instances in which the enumerations of personhood, possession, and singularity burn up on contact with the indeterminate, volatile, and altogether more mystical substance of a common 'we'. To take one complete page from the centre of the book, in the following lines the trappings of personhood are picked apart:

> or who came back from the war like Paul Hidalgo / and drove his red Chevy truck one too many times into the cane / and was chased by state troopers / and dogs / barefoot / through it / his name tattooed across his back / and because nothing else took place / besides being made for the war / or being broken by it later / or being made for someone who's made for the war or who comes back mangled by it later / it's as if / the lengths we went to / to make anything else HAPPEN / conditioned us to fear little more than death / and death too / seemed worth that / or at least was common enough / (2022, 27)

Whilst earlier in the collection the rigidity of the justified block form tends to break lines on a stressed lexical word, form here works to accentuate the transi-

tory rush of prepositional phrases and dependent clauses ("into the … across… besides … for the… as if…") which strip "Paul Hidalgo" down to a someone – a mere "who" – "made for the / war": a reduction from proper name to the common condition of mortality with which the passage ends, a transition that is mirrored in the peculiar shift from the fuzziness of "or who" to the nominal precision of "like Paul Hidalgo" in the first line.

These twelve lines trace two movements of *Young Americans* as I have aimed to describe it here: violence individuates the person so that it can dispose of them; in a counter move, the utopian interruption of this process – that desire "to make anything else HAPPEN" – is presented as a collective and nameless endeavour. It is difficult to read this page or others like it without sensing a parallel between the language of disciplining and the strict frame that the form provides, without, that is to say, noticing with Sedgwick a correspondence between a poem's "principle of severe economy (the exactitude with which the frame held the figure)" (1987, 117) and bodily restraint or, what's more, a body restrained. The collection's two most remarkable formal techniques – the justified line ending and slashes marking breaks within the line, as in the passage cited above – suggest the overdeterministic oppression of this restraint (we might say the text is 'mangled' just as war mangles a body) whilst simultaneously accentuating a poetics that wants to cut up or across identity's illusory fixity: the slash seems to *contest* the line break, and the line break becomes increasingly erratic as a result. This contested form approximates the tensions Frost thematises throughout as the fugitive resistance to a violence that cuts out persons in order to manage them. This contest is irresolvable. Precisely because Frost's poetics is unequivocally political (it might be truer to say that her politics is poetic), the visionary potential of the poems is expressed in the idea that politics would be better understood (and perhaps altogether better) as a kind of collectivised *poiesis* in which new forms of community could keep on emerging, collapsing, reconstituting themselves, without the need to first pass through the choke point of a 'speaker' that has been excised from collective expression. Indifference to lyric convention is the necessary formal expression of this vision.

3. *A Genreless Person*

Time is a Mother, Ocean Vuong's second collection, following 2019's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, was published by Penguin in 2022. Frost's work represents something of a limit case when considering contemporary poetry

in English that swerves lyric norms, whereas Vuong is usually read as inheritor and innovator of lyric's most venerable traditions (a review by writer Kit Fan cited on the back cover of the UK edition states that "[n]ot since Emily Dickinson has poetry found such an oceanic openness of the self's quiet laceration" (2022, para.2)). In order to understand what lyric indifference might look and sound like, Vuong is a helpful guide because his work is heavily invested in renovating the possibilities of apostrophe in order to describe relations (non-monogamous, queer, intergenerational) that don't readily fit into the templates inherited with lyric. More than this, however, is his poetry's openness to the indeterminacy of address: they figure a 'you' that is wilfully pluralistic in its occupation of multiple positions across the space of a single poem. In Frost, an unruly 'we' is evoked as an alternative to the compromised solipsism of lyric's 'I'; in Vuong, 'you' is likewise less a person (or an absence figured as such), and more of a method for collective reinvention. For both writers, this pronominal slipperiness is intended as a precursor to political solidarity, because the breaking up of the grammars which usually denote a singularity as different from a collectivity points towards the utopian prospect of a free exchange between multiple subject positions. I will return to this notion of indifference and its queerness in closing. First, I read one poem from Vuong's collection – "No One Knows the Way to Heaven", an earlier version of which won the Narrative prize in 2015 – as an attempt to imagine a self that is disengaged from what Virginia Jackson has called the "genre of the person".

The genre of the person is a concept difficult to summarise, dispersed as it is throughout the argumentation of Jackson's most recent work, *Before Modernism: Inventing the American Lyric*. For Jackson, as she reflects elsewhere on the work of Lauren Berlant, genres in the broadest sense are "sites of mutual collective recognition" (2015); their histories are therefore palimpsestic accumulations of how and where such recognitions take place. It follows that lyric is a particularly complex case of this generic layering since, by the beginning of the twentieth-century, it is widely associated with a 'speaker' who herself asks to be recognised (as credible, as ideal, and as human). The lyric thereby becomes inextricable from the person-as-genre: who is speaking, how we come to recognise this person, why such recognition might matter; these questions are what make the modern lyric's stagings of subjectivity operative as such.

As part of Jackson's archaeology of this idea, *Before Modernism* is concerned with "the ways in which the question of 'who is speaking in a poem'

became a question in the first place" and how "poetry's many different genres of address were reduced and resolved into a genre defined by a fictional dramatic situation" (2023, 7). Jackson reads the long history of this reduction through a number of nineteenth-century poets, including Ann Plato, Phillis Wheatley, and Frances Ellen Watkins, in order to reconstruct what she calls the 'deep design' of American poetics, which connects the violent abstraction of racialization with the universalising pretensions of a lyric-I that is supposedly unmarked by history:

> a literary, lyricized idea of poetry as the expression of a fictive speaker addressing him/her/their/itself to everyone and no one, that replaced the genre of the poem with the genre of the person … Black poets and women poetry saw early and often that lyric's abstract communal subjective tendencies came at their expense. They pushed back by demonstrating the alienation of that abstraction from historical persons, and it is this response that has shaped modern ideas of lyric. (2023, 20)

The genre of the person describes, in one sense, the final phase of this reduction of generic variety to apostrophic lyric, a somewhat starker abbreviation of what Jackson had earlier named – in her 2012 entry on lyric for the Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics – "an idea of the lyric as a genre of personal expression" (4). It also connects this process to the categorisation of persons *as generic*: the enforced legibility of a body according to ascriptions of race, gender, sexuality, ableness, as inexorably pursued from the nineteenth-century up to our own. And, finally, Jackson's concept is intended to suggest that in both processes (societal and poetical) what is lost is a less deterministic intersubjectivity that would be richer and more vital than the two-in-one intersubjective fantasies allowed for when we reduce our readings of one another to generic fictions.

What I want to suggest is that this genre of the person may not be the end of the story, may not be the final, terminal phase of lyric which Jackson takes it to be, or, at the very least, that contemporary poetry which may be loosely called lyric is in fact in search of new forms for less restrictive ideas of the self.[1]

1 Jackson herself gestures at a similar possibility of generic openness in responding to Berlant on narrative genres: "the effort of the critic is always to imagine a better or more interesting or more malleable or generous story: the goal of criticism is to make the stories that surround us, whether their fictions are literary or lived, more interesting" (2015, para.19).

Another way to put this would be to say that Jackson's scholarship finds a timely analogue in the poetic production of contemporary poets, like Frost and Vuong, who are just as alive as she is to the political contexts and consequences of reductive lyric readings. In the case of Vuong, as mentioned, this is a slightly more difficult claim to make, since it would be a mischaracterisation to claim that he does away with the apostrophic mode of modern lyric altogether. I turn now to "No One Knows the Way to Heaven", from the fourth section of *Time is a Mother*, as one example of how Vuong's lyric deploys apostrophe in order to subvert, rather than reaffirm, the delimiting of persons, their relations, and the politics of recognition that accompany them.

The two published versions of the poem open with lines that sharply draw an 'I' and 'you' in two paradigmatic roles, introducing a 'speaker' who is apostrophising an as yet unborn child:

No One Knows the Way to Heaven

but we keep walking anyway.
When you get here it will be different
but we'll use the same words.
You will look & look – & see only
the world. Well, here's
the world, small
& large as a father.
I am not
yet your father. I tried
to speak this morning
but the voice only went far
as my fingers. (2022, 67)

Frost's moves to depersonalise the subject of her poems relied, as we saw, on the trope of mourning, and so recuperating, a lost collectivity. In Vuong's poem, a similar move, with a comparable utopian strain, is future oriented: this 'I' is defined by the 'not yet' of its interlocutors coming into being; it is a self that inhabits the space between the stark negation of "I am not" and the promise opened by the following line. If the poem then continued to behave as an apostrophising lyric, we might expect it to shore up the two poles of this position, with the 'speaker' gaining definition through its address to a child who will change its world ("it will be different") but nonetheless share in its

language ("we'll use the same words"). This would align the poem with the long practice of apostrophic animation, the kind that Barbara Johnson dissected, in her reading of another poem which addresses unborn life (Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Mother"), in order to reveal a continual "struggle to clarify the relation between 'I' and 'you'" that ends "only in expressing the inability of its language to do so" ([1987] 2014, 533).

In Vuong's poem, however, there is a more populous, purposefully indeterminate, and lenient play of various modes of address which distinguish it from the ever narrowing intensity of Brooks' apostrophising. The poem opens by addressing this child (the earlier version includes the appellative "sweetheart"), but it then moves on to recount an anecdote on "what a face can do / to a face":

> Like once,
> I let a man spit in my mouth
> because my eyes wouldn't water
> after Evan shot himself
> in his sister's chicken coop.
> The chickens long
> gone. I had been
> looking for a sound to change
> the light in the room.
> But all I could find
> was a man. His bright spit. I
> lifted
> my tongue as he stood
> above me.
> My jaw a ransacked
> drawer.
> I said *Please,*
> 'cause I'm a cold man
> who believes every bit
> of warmth should be saved
> & savored. (2022, 67-68)

Unable to grieve (unable even to name tears as such), the 'speaker' kneels before "a man"; his anonymity set off by the biographical exactness of naming "Evan". The man stands above him and spits into his mouth as it hangs open – like a "ransacked / drawer" – on the word "*Please*". The spitting scene vibrates

with masochistic undertones and, as though flinching from its own force, the poem then turns out its biggest surprise:

It's alright –
no one can punish us
now. Not even
the speaker. (2022, 68)

This moment is the dislodgement of the text's prior commitment to the I/you arrangement of intimacy with which the 'speaker' strives to outstrip their own provisionality. "It's alright" has the same coaxing, reassuring, 'fatherly' manner of the poem's opening lines, momentarily written over by the unsettling eroticism of the spitting scene. But that reassuring tone is now divorced from the dynamic fiction of speaker/child, so that whoever we might say is now 'speaking' has been cut free from the role of 'the speaker' in the very moment that they are heard as responding most tenderly to the inferred distress of the absent child. The earlier 2015 version of the poem is, at this juncture, even more categorical in scrambling our capacity to differentiate these persons: "sweetheart" is used a second time to refer to the man who spits, pairing him up with the yet-to-be child as addressed at the poem's opening, and the lines "Not even / the speaker" read – for the avoidance of any doubt – "Not even / the speaker in this poem" (Vuong 2015).

It is a moment that brings to the surface the limits of lyric address in its paradoxical arrangement of a speaker who is not the poem's speaker and an addressed other who is not yet there to be addressed. This amounts to a voiding of the deictic centre from which 'I' is assumed to stabilise and consolidate meaning in the poem (the fact that the subject of the decisive phrase is "no one" – as in the poem's title – is another performance of this depersonalising shift). Since the poem configures this emptying out of the 'I' through a number of distinct stages (firstly, an 'I' that is yet-to-be, then, an 'I' dissociated from the speaker, and finally, as I'll come to, a genreless person), it becomes difficult to talk about a 'subject' that could gather such folds together by psychologising them as the interplay of identification or disidentification. Instead, we are left with something akin to the "subjective effects" which Joel Fineman read through Shakespeare's sonnets: "the result is that the poet's identity is defined, by chiasmic triangulation, as the disruption or fracture of identity" (1984, 77). Just as Fineman argued that this "speech acquired on condition that it speak

against itself'" (Ibid.: 77) was a consequence of the sonnets belatedness with respect to a Renaissance tradition which they could appropriate only through terms of literary self-consciousness, irony, and repetition, so too does *Time is a Mother* register the exhaustion of lyric's apostrophic appeals to difference through its meta-poetic disorientations of readings that might otherwise be primed for the resolution of identity.

What prepares the way for this turning point is the strain in the preceding lines between the referential definiteness of "Evan shot himself / in his sister's chicken coop'" and the anonymity of the encounter with the "bright spit" of "a man". Joining the two vignettes is the search for a post-verbal means of communication, an alternative to the linguistic stringency which denotes but does not comprise the body ("the voice only went far / as my fingers", as Vuong writes a little earlier [2022, 67]). That alternative is figured in the spitting scene as an acutely eroticised attention to the mouth as a receptive vessel for "warmth" (and not a producer of talk). After the mention of Evan's suicide, the 2015 version has the slur "*faggot*" burning into Evan's head, overtly connecting his death with homophobia:

> The word *faggot* a shard
> of light growing into a
> hole in his skull. Someone screaming
> silent as a snow
> globe. (Vuong 2015)

These lines sharpen what is at stake in the text's pursuit of a person without genre. The force of a slur has nothing to do with its semantic value, nothing, that is to say, with its conveyance of meaning or its responsiveness to the indeterminate meaning of the body in front of it of its speaker. It can be taken, in this sense, as a form of apostrophe (especially if we keep in mind the classical apostrophic pretence 'that we expected something different or feared some greater distance'): the speaker of a slur asserts not that they recognise (or misrecognise) the presence of the other but that they refuse to take that presence as anything other than the denotation of an abstracted (and transferable) quality. This too, of course, is a kind of generic abstraction: it nullifies the particularities of a self by fixing compulsively on one perceived particularity and taking this as epithet. This is why what follows in the poem is silent screaming (in the 2015 version) and the exchange of spit (in both versions): images that both convey a dissatisfaction with language as

a sure, even, and neutral means of communicative exchange. In light of this dissatisfaction, the suggestive menace of 'the speaker' now starts to become clearer: what the poem moves away from is the ascription of any predicative value to any single quality of the human form. Within a lyric mode, this is best expressed in the poem's wilfully paradoxical *dissociation* of the 'I' from 'the speaker', since if this 'I' is no longer beholden to the role of 'speaker', it can only be read as the *always provisional result* of subjective effects that do not align with an identity.

In the remainder of the poem, this indeterminacy is overtly thematised through a return to the figure of the not-yet born child as a genreless person. The dissolution of the poem's subjective centre-point is continued through address to this yet-to-be 'you':

> There's enough
> for you, but not enough
> for *you*. You indistinguishable
> from rain. Rain: to give
> something a name
> just to watch it fall. What
> will I name you?
> Are you a boy or a girl
> or a translation of crushed water? It doesn't
> matter. (Vuong 2022, 68)

"It doesn't / matter" concisely expresses an indifference, intended here not as a lack of care but as a suspension of the appellative force that imposes the genre of the person, the same force that unites slurs and the trope of lyric address as the sounding out of differences between the speaker-as-presence and the addressee-as-absence. What the remainder of the poem moves us to imagine is that this "You indistinguishable" will be sufficient on its own terms, without generic trappings, and without its being snared within a language that extrapolates from matter to identity, from presence to absence, and from part to whole.

4. *Forms of Indifference*

In interviews, Vuong is fond of describing poetry as an art that "breaks itself towards unity" (2020). There would be much to say about how this speaks to the apostrophic intricacies of his poetry, or how the phrase recalls but tweaks

earlier formulations of lyric alienation from sociality, or how it might relate to the motif in his work of the poem-as-body (and, as such, a broken expressivity fashioned out of language's communality). In concluding, however, I want to return briefly to the question of indifference, since it is here that I believe that the queer poetics of breaking towards unity can be best interpreted as a novel project as yet unfinished, as not merely indifference to lyric norms but as a lyric indifference to personhood. Indifference, I have suggested, can be read through the poetics of Vuong and Frost as a moment of relief from the identitarian specificities which apostrophic conventions tend to reify. In Frost's fractured poetics, this appears as a capacious 'we' composed from what remains once the assumption of personhood as the substance of politics has been rejected. In Vuong's apostrophic hall of mirrors, this involves the refraction of an 'I' through relations which weaken the force that would otherwise fix a body to an identity and language to a speaker. In both texts, these effects are achieved through a relaxation of the inter-subjective intensities which lyric is assumed to paradigmatise in apostrophe. How then should these formal and rhetorical strategies be intended as lyric indifference? What does 'indifference' allow us to do with lyric that is new?

In order to hazard a response to these questions, a brief foray into the philosophical significance of indifference as it has been posed this century is necessary, although a full treatment of the term, its uses and repercussions is beyond the scope of this essay. In its most basic sense, indifference proposes the suspension of a regime of difference: a moment in which a governing interpretative logic of discrimination is rendered inoperable. Indifference here refers neither to a lack of engagement with difference nor to an erasure of difference as a meaningful component of lived experience. It urges, rather, an understanding of difference as one effect of political regimes of control and subordination, rather than as the cause which justifies such structures. As a critique of difference, it therefore disputes the notion that difference ontologically grounds the political. In turn, it places difference firmly within the realm of the historical and the discursive.

In *Indifference to Difference*, Madhavi Menon describes this as the refusal of "the line of predictability that gets drawn from the body to identity, and from desire to the self" (2015, 1). Menon's argument opens with a two-pronged re-assessment of identity politics: first, as an ontological limitation on the multiplicity and mutability of lived experience, rather than its affirmation; second,

as a politics that participates in the regimes of difference which structure the very oppression that it seeks to mitigate:

> Race and sex and gender and class are certainly policed fiercely in all societies, but why do we confuse the policing with the truth about ourselves? If anything, the categorization is the problem, not our challenging of it. In a bizarre move of sympathising with our oppressors, we take to heart regimes that restrict us, and then tell ourselves that the restriction is the truth of our being in the world. (Ibid.: 3)

To be clear, it is not that identity as perceived through the lens of difference doesn't pertain to a certain positionality within political regimes – for Menon, the problem is that this identitarian position is not up to the task of challenging such regimes. Indifference is recovered by Menon as one way out of this impasse, since it affords a space in which to think about what it is that escapes or exceeds the politics of difference.

So far, the parallels with the queer poetics of Frost and Vuong are clear enough: in their de-personalisation of subjectivity as expressed in the lyric poem, they refuse the grip of identity and explore subjectivities which are particular *and* ungraspable, embodied *and* fluid, collective *and* broken. Their poems are full of encounters that constellate the 'I' as nothing other than the provisional sum of the mutable relations that it is plotted within. This relational model of subjectivity could conceivably be articulated within the terms of difference (the 'I' being read as the accretion of its apostrophised differences from any number of 'yous') were it not for the fact that the poems simultaneously *refuse to determine the other with any predicative conviction* (in Frost, that enigmatic 'we' which comes prophesied out of a utopian past; in Vuong, the not-yet 'you' that recedes into the future). Neither is this a poetics which aims at transcending difference by cancelling out the particularities of embodied experience. Frost and Vuong are always scrupulous in particularising the lives and bodies that figure in their poems, but they do so in order to show that the meaning – and the value – of these lives is not attributable to any one accident of biography. Just as their poetics encompass lyric without being wholly legible as lyric, their poems embody difference without being reducible to it.

It is in sympathy with this last point that Menon argues for a recovery of universalism via the politics of indifference. Poetry, Vuong states, is an art that "breaks itself towards unity": poetry promises, that is, to attend to the fragment, the instant, the particular not in order to valorise the contents of any one

of these forms as a new sign of wholeness but in order to propose the form of brokenness itself as a universal. Crucially, such a proposition is not deaf to the claims of difference as they are made upon bodies. If it were so, then Vuong's poetry would not take the pains and joys of embodiment as seriously as it so clearly does. The idea that the broken particularities of every body are, much like the broken particularities of every poem, the shared substance on which communality founds itself is a much more radical proposition: it recognises difference, and then it calls for new forms that will lessen or loosen the significance of this recognition. Drawing on Marx and Badiou, Menon describes a politics of indifference in very similar terms:

> Despite conjuring up a shrug of the shoulders, or even political apathy, indifference is not about heartlessness or ignorance. Rather, it names an anti-ontological state of being that would acknowledge and embody difference without becoming that difference... Rather than being hemmed in by difference – single or multiple – that can be signified in advance, indifference is attuned to a universality of difference in which specific differences cannot be used as the basis of stable signification. (Ibid.: 14)

For Menon, as for Vuong and Frost, the theoretical horizon which indifference opens on to is queer. This is so because "queerness – at a minimum – refuses the predeterminable cohesion of identity" (Ibid.: 127). The queered self is, like the 'not yet' of Vuong's non-speaker, never able to fully align with identity, much less with one identifiable role or particularity, and this is so because the unpredictability and volatility of desire means that the self can never be satisfied with fixity or held up for more than a moment by any demand to cohere. It is the presence of this queered self, and the indifference of which it is the expression, that explains too the ambivalence with which Frost and Vuong reapproach lyric. Their lyric is no longer the privileged mode by which literature can arrogate the expression of identity, even in all of its declinations, or together with its contradictions and ill-fittingness. And it is no longer a lyric which is interested in revendicating identity as generated amid the relational strains of difference, although it departs from the notion of difference as a political limitation. When their 'speakers' speak, they do so in order to cede to language as a force that exceeds any individual. When address occurs, it occurs as an event that derails the self's travel towards any predetermined destination.

If lyric is a concept that can still help us think, it's because our power to differentiate it generically and its power to inscribe difference as the genre of the

person have – in synchrony – been lost. The task for criticism is not to restore to lyric its specialness, nor to expect that lyric will clarify the ethical predicaments in which identities are enmeshed. Lyric indifference would describe a poetics humbled by the past failure of similar attempts to make a difference. It would see lyric as a proficuous site within which to think through the self as an incomplete, and incompletable, composite of discursive effects – precisely because lyric once served to reify such effects as manageable identities. It would look for new forms that attenuate rather than accentuate the predication of the self. Lyric indifference would be one means of such criticism. Its end would be a poetics disenchanted with the self.

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