Lifting The Curtain: An Analysis of Queer Poetry Throughout the Years

Among all literary mediums, poetry is known for unwavering vulnerability. Poetry, written in ornate and often complex language, is an offering to both the writer and the reader, one that is confessional, raw, and contemplative. However, just because a poem and its message can exist in this way, it does not mean that these contributions of intimacy are written overtly and exposed in plain sight. Rather, many poets hide the naked truth of their poems behind a curtain of concealment. There are many reasons as to why distinct poets choose to veil the meaning behind their poems. For example, poets may do this accidentally and as a product of dense language, or they may do so to create mystery. However, there are instances where poets *have* to write obscurely as a safety measure against themselves, such as depictions of queer love or desire. For instance, renowned modernist poet Hart Crane, known for dense and obscure metaphorical imagery, attempted to veil the queerness in his writing because there was no other secure option. This necessity to conceal one's true desires is a byproduct of the current social attitude at the time they were writing. It is for this reason that, throughout recent decades, poets have been able to be more open and direct about their queerness without facing repercussions. Writers Ocean Vuong and Natalie Diaz are sublime examples of contemporary poets who are not afraid to express their true, queer selves through their poetry. The transformation from veiled to conspicuous language surrounding queerness in poetry that can be seen in the writing of Hart Crane, Ocean Vuong, and Natalie Diaz displays the lifting of the curtain of concealment that has once obscured queer poetry.

The life of Hart Crane, which spanned from 1899 to 1932, was filled with much familial strife and personal dilemma, which appeared in his poetry in often obscure and blanketed ways. Traveling back and forth between Ohio and New York for most of his life, Crane had a difficult

relationship with his family that wholly infected his personal life (“Hart Crane”). To cope with these hardships, Crane sought refuge in queer sex and alcohol; however, he mostly ended up heartbroken and beaten down, as his sexual desires were mostly unrequited (“Hart Crane”). Though a handful of his poetry offered a hopeful view of life, Crane was constantly depressed, finding his life and career ungratifying (“Hart Crane”). Living in New York City did not seem to help his mentality either, as the physical and mental chaos of the city suffocated his mind and spirit (“Hart Crane”). Due to this, he left New York City; however, upon returning, he fell in love with sailor Emil Opffer (“Hart Crane”). Their relationship was sexually charged and magnitudinous, paving the way for Crane’s poetic series *Voyages* (“Hart Crane”). Nevertheless, from this point forward and into the creation of *White Buildings*, Crane’s work was criticized for its dense nature and style, which was difficult for many readers to parse through and make sense of (“Hart Crane”). Because of this, many readers and critics claimed that his poetry was only phonetically substantial and not logically or emotionally credible (“Hart Crane”). However, this critique fails to acknowledge that behind any layer there is meaning and that perhaps a poem's message is well-hidden for a reason. Regardless, Crane’s relationship with Opffer ended around this time, which caused Crane’s emotional state to bear a constant shift, one that he characteristically soothed with sex and alcohol (“Hart Crane”). Consequently, the end of his life was marked by a decline in self-worth that sparked from the negative reception of his writing, which ultimately led to a consuming depression, causing him to kill himself by jumping off a boat on April 27, 1932, in Mexico (“Hart Crane”).

When analyzing the details of Crane’s life from an indirect perspective, it may seem that his queer sexual encounters acted as another drug to him— a way to cope with his internal and external hardships and confusions. This analysis both discredits the validity of queer desire and

disregards its possibility of acting as a positive force in one's life. To that end, Hart Crane's queer love and sexuality did not act as a means of a numbing escape, however, they were the very source of identity and true expression for Crane; moments of electric passion, devoid of confusion. Although Crane found identity and profound sentiment in his romantic endeavors, these endeavors could not be expressed directly in his poetry due to the public opinion surrounding queer love and relationships that existed at the time of his writing. Therefore, Crane is an example of a poet who utilizes tactics, such as opaque imagery and dense metaphor, to disguise the authentic essence of his poems. This essence, at large, is his identity as a queer man combatting bouts of self-degradation and sorrow.

Although Crane's expression of queer love in his poetry may be concealed, unearthing them reveals facets about the poet that speak volumes about his identity. For example, Crane's poem *Possessions* in his poetry volume "White Buildings" recalls a sensuous memory between himself and a lover. This poem may be difficult to unpack at first, however that is precisely Crane's intention. Nevertheless, the proclamation of the word "Lust" at the end of the first stanza points to why this may be (Crane 25). Particularly, in *Possessions*, Crane is attempting to veil the detailed sexual escapade from direct view so that the focal point of the poem rests on the emotions it elicits rather than the specificities of the moments described. At first glance, the title and the first line of the poem ["Witness now this trust ! the rain" (Crane 25)] indicates that the passionate memory being recalled here is something that Crane deems as rightly *his*. The mentioning of the key in the third line, one that is "ready to hand…one moment in sacrifice" (Crane 25), signifies that the two lovers here are willing and ready to open up to one another either emotionally or physically, in this moment of sacrifice and surrender to one another. This theme continues in the following lines, and the idea of a hidden sexual encounter reappears with,

"Through a thousand nights the flesh / Assaults outright for bolts that linger / Hidden, — O undirected as the sky" (Crane 25). Specifically, Crane is writing that what is going on between the two lovers surges beneath the surface and under a curtain of concealment. This idea of concealment may also ring true in the following lines, "That through its black foam has no eyes / For this fixed stone of lust . . ." (25). If the sky has no eyes, it cannot see the lust. However, it is noteworthy that the lust present here is described as a "fixed stone." denoting that it is not going anywhere (Crane 25).

The second stanza of *Possessions*, then, may act as either a recognition of these sexual encounters and their memory or an account of the difficult circumstance that surrounds their love affair (Crane 25). However, in the third stanza, the speaker takes up this stone of lust again, quietly, and though in public ["In Bleecker Street, still trenchant in a void" (Crane 25)] is feeling like he is drowning in a shadow. The mention of Bleecker Street here is interesting, as Bleecker Street is known to be a hub for the queer community. Perhaps, though, this line is denoting that even when he is present in the queer community, he still does not feel embraced and accepted. Next, he writes that he is "Wounded by apprehensions out of speech" (Crane 25): is he worried that someone might find out, or that his lover might end it? Regardless, the speaker holds this stone against the sun, illuminating the stone of lust (Crane 25).

The beginning of the final stanza of *Possessions* brings mortality into question. Here, the speaker, who "Tossed on these horns, who bleeding dies" (Crane 25), lacks pity for themselves and their end-of-life rage and unfulfillment of the "partial appetites" (Crane 25) caused by the secret love affairs he had to maintain throughout his life. Therefore, because he had to conceal his love, he was never truly fulfilled. The true possession, as portrayed in the final lines [(The pure possession, the inclusive cloud / Whose heart is fire shall come, — the white wind / rase /

All but bright stones wherein our smiling plays" (Crane 25)] are the true moments of desire that the speaker holds within him. These moments of desire and lust remain steadfast despite the condition of their concealment. This concealment is reiterated in the final lines, as it states that the "The white wind / rase / All but bright stones wherein our smiling plays" (Crane 25). It is interesting that the wind here is white, perhaps denoting a biblical critique of homosexuality as "impure". Nevertheless, these final lines are significant in that they mean that in the end of our lives, all is destroyed except these stones of lust where our memories of desire and love are stored.

Regarding Crane's personal life, *Possessions* is significant for many reasons. The most pertinent, though, is that the poem displays an unwavering maintenance of queer love and desire despite being forced into the "closet". The mere fact of Crane's utilization of literary methodology to conceal his sexuality is disheartening; however, his ability to sustain this expression, no matter what, is highly commendable. Crane's life was marked by sorrow and hardship, which may have been exacerbated by this forced concealment. Although Crane had to disguise his desires behind metaphor and dense figurative language, the meaning still exists behind these layers. Moreover, Crane stands as a prominent figure of queer poetry existing behind a curtain that, when lifted, is definitive of a hidden identity.

Although "obscure," there is no doubt that Hart Crane's expression of his queer love, despite his personal adversities, opened a door for queer poets coming after him. Specifically, Ocean Vuong, born just fifty-six years after Crane died in 1988, is a poet known for his vulnerability and personal strength in his poetry and fiction. Vuong's story begins years before he was born when his grandfather from Michigan joined the Navy and was deployed to Vietnam, where he met and fell in love with Vuong's grandmother (Armitstead). His grandparents had

three children when the Fall of Saigon, which ended the Vietnam War, occurred (Armitstead). The Fall of Saigon separated the three children, one of whom was Vuong's mother, until they were adults (Armitstead). It was around this time that Vuong's mother had him, and shortly after his birth, they were deported to the United States, where they eventually moved to Hartford, Connecticut (Armitstead). The preface of Vuong's life, as it has been spelled out, was defined by the Vietnam War. Vuong often discusses this in his poetry, claiming he would not be alive if the war had never happened (Armitstead). On the contrary, though, he also explains that things are much more complicated than this and that these complexities unfold within his poetry (Armitstead).

Vuong's history and his identity exist at large in his poetry. These identities, namely, are himself as a Vietnamese-American and as a queer man. In an interview with Amanpour and Co. entitled *Ocean Vuong on War, Sexuality and Asian-American Identity*, Vuong details the harsh reality that he has faced living in America, where his identities often silenced him. Vuong mentions in this interview that he was told growing up that he was better off being invisible and fading into the background so that he did not bring too much attention to himself and his identity (Amanpour and Co.) While he employed this as a kid, Vuong grew up enraged at this forced invisibility and concealment, wanting to be known while rejecting safe invisibility (Amanpour and Co.). Vuong found his writing to be a powerful source of proud self-expression, as it allowed him to grasp the multifacetedness of victimization (Amanpour and Co.). Therefore, Vuong used his writing to take control of his life while rejecting negative stereotypes present about his Vietnamese and queer identities (Amanpour and Co.). In his poetry, Vuong strove to "address these tropes of shame around queerness and sexuality" (Amanpour and Co. 17:09-17:15), to raise himself and others who have been told that it is easier to be invisible than yourself.

The powerful vulnerability of the true self is present in Vuong's poem *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, which shares a title with Vuong's autobiographical epistolary novel. Written to an unidentified *you*, this poem begins talking about hunger, specifically hunger as the reason that we, "give / the body what it knows / it cannot keep" (Vuong). In other words, to give into a "hunger," a temptation bordering on necessity, is to do things we know cannot be maintained. The Vietnam War is then mentioned, as the speaker says that the war has caused an "Amber Light" to fade (Vuong). The color amber is characteristic of internal warmth, positivity, and confidence; there is no doubt that something such as a war could deteriorate these. This very deterioration of light is what "pins my hand / to your chest" (Vuong). Is the *you* here a lover, and is this their way of banding together and being each other's warmth, or is it an act of disconnect?

Further on this possibility of disconnect, the shorter next section follows a possible suicide. Here, the speaker asks the *you* to stay as they slip right between their arms, seemingly throwing themselves into a river to be alone forever (Vuong). The next section goes on to describe an incident of domestic abuse in his family, which led to his father kneeling in the bathroom crying (Vuong). What happens in the bathroom is not stated explicitly, however, it can be assumed that it is a physical response to the events that have just transpired — a response to guilt, shame, and loathing. The next lines are rather significant, as the speaker says they "learned that a man, in climax, was the closest / thing / to surrender" (Vuong). There are two interpretations here of the use of "climax": that of sexual climax and a breaking point. To the latter, Vuong describes this tipping over as the most vulnerable position for a man. For both, however, these are instances where one is most likely to give themselves fully over to another so they do not have to bear it themselves. This "surrender" may be a nod to the societal expectation

of masculinity, that which is deemed as fragile if a man exposes themselves as weak or vulnerable.

The following sections also convey a sense of surrender. First, there are a series of commands, all of which find the reader telling the person they are addressing to say something despite their inclination to think of another (Vuong). Next, there is a surrender and handing over of oneself to another to lose control (Vuong). The speaker says they "wanted to disappear — so I opened the door to a / stranger's car. He was divorced. He was still alive. He was / sobbing into his hands" (Vuong). Both the speaker and the lover here are offering themselves over to one another, both sexually and emotionally. Additionally, there is a sense here of using sex as a distraction: the speaker wants to put themselves to the side so they are sleeping with another to distract, even if just for a moment. There is another significant aspect of this section: the casual, blatant description of a sexual encounter between two men. Not only is a queer sexual encounter detailed here, but it is one charged by a subjugation and a removal of the self. In other words, the sex here is not a sacred thing but a means of escape. This refusal becomes even more apparent in a later section, as the speaker writes, "In the shower, sweating under cold water, I scrubbed & / scrubbed" (Vuong). There is a feeling here of being "dirty", of wanting to scrub away all of the impurities of the self caused by trauma and past transgressions.

The final stanza of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is captivating and remarkable. In this stanza, amongst the heavy air of Summer, an intimate moment between two lovers is described (Vuong). This intimacy, marked by a "hand under my shirt as static / intensifies on the radio" (Vuong), is almost palpable. This intimacy refers to the surrender described earlier in the poem, as the two lovers physically and emotionally offer themselves up to one another. Interestingly, the speaker writes that the hand not underneath the other's shirt is "pointing your

daddy's revolver / to the sky…This means I won't be / afraid if we're already here" (Vuong). This moment is reminiscent of a scene described earlier in the poem: "That this amber light / whittled down by another war / is all that pins my hand / to your chest" (Vuong). In both instances, a sense of violence and danger (War, Revolver) is temporarily eased at the security of the lover and their intimacy.

This idea of temporality is in motion throughout this stanza, as there is ample imagery of time. Primarily, the opening line states, "It's not too late" (Vuong). In the context of this stanza, this line seems to mean that it is not too late for the two lovers to get together in the middle of violence and personal strife. Next, there is the acknowledgment that a "body / beside a body / must make a field / full of ticking" (Vuong), and "That your name / is only the sound of clocks / being set back another hour / & morning / finds our clothes / on your mother's front porch, shed / like week-old lilies" (Vuong). The former alludes to the fact that sexual intimacy makes time move forward — makes time run away. Nevertheless, the latter presents the notion of time moving backward, hinting that these moments of surrender, vulnerability, and intimacy work against us. In other words, this stanza encapsulates the message of the entire poem that, though these tender moments of intimacy may be transitory, they are still worth it. Overall, Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is noteworthy in that it pushes for the embracement of queer love and intimacy despite both its temporality and the personal struggle that may exist in the background. Here, Vuong is communicating to the reader queer intimacy is valid and worth fighting for, even if it only lasts a moment.

Despite their distinct literary approaches, both Hart Crane and Ocean Vuong have written about the raw reality of queerness against the backdrop of their lives marked by personal struggle. This vulnerability, regardless of their various repercussions, presents a bravery that

defines their poetry as strong-willed and resilient. Undoubtedly, after the years of Hart Crane and as queerness has become more socially "acceptable," more people—including writers—can freely and confidently express themselves. What is more, is that writers can directly illustrate their queerness in a way that both highlights the queer experience and the ways that they have been cast aside or ostracized by the communities they represent. Vuong is a great example of such representation: He has taken the invisibility and ostracism placed upon him and has turned it into something to defy, to make himself and his identities brighter. Nevertheless, Vuong is not alone in this journey, as many other queer writers of this generation are using their past struggles and oppressions as literary weapons to fight against the very people who attempted to silence them.

Similar to Vuong, poet Natalie Diaz illustrates and proudly expresses her identity as a queer woman in the context of her oppression. Born in 1978 in Fort Mojave Indian Village in Needles, California, Diaz is Mojave in the Gila River Indian Tribe ("Natalie Diaz"). Diaz's poetry is both an ode to and a product of her expansive culture as she almost solely writes to and about her queer lovers, her community, the people who oppress her, or all of the above simultaneously. Diaz's poetry is significant because she writes in her own language created out of the Mojave, Spanish, and English languages she speaks ("Natalie Diaz"). Throughout all of her poems, there is a constant, unfaltering power in which Diaz both proudly represents her cultural and queer identities while attempting to preserve her history by fighting back against her oppressors ("Natalie Diaz"). Her 2020 poetry collection *PostColonial Love Poem* is most characteristic of these traits, as all of the poems contain a willingness to protect both her identity and those in her community.

Diaz's *PostColonial Love Poem* contains many poems addressed to a beloved that celebrate queer intimacy and sexuality. Specifically, Diaz's poem "Ode To The Beloved's Hips" finds the speakers praising their lover's physicality while highlighting queer love and desire. In the poem's first stanza, there is a likening of desire and sensuality with religious or spiritual elements. Specifically, the poem begins with the lines "Bells are they — shaped on the 8th day, silvered / percussion in the morning — *are* the morning" (Diaz 37). Assuming that the "8th day" here is the resurrection of Christ, these lines seem to signal the bringing in of a day marked by something new — a fresh start ushered in by the chime of the bells. However, the speaker then says they wish to "Hold the day away a little / longer, a little slower, a little *easy*" (Diaz 37). These lines present the notion that the speaker is trying to resist the coming of this new day or perhaps is trying to stop the quickness of time. The end of the first stanza finds a noteworthy fusion of the bodily and the religious, as the speaker states, "Communion of Pelvis, Sacrum, Femur. / My mouth— terrible angel, ever-lasting novena, / ecstatic devourer" (Diaz 37). The first line here claims that the body is something "sacred" to be consumed. Subsequently, the next lines denote that the speaker ingests this holy, bodily communion willingly and happily, perhaps out of a craving or ravenous desire for the body.

The following stanza continues on this theme of ravenous desire as the speaker recounts moments of intense intimacy with their lover. To this point, there is first the line, "O, the places I have laid them, knelt and scooped / the amber—fast honey— from their openness" (Diaz 37). Here, there is an impassioned account of intimacy between two lovers, which is definitive of vulnerability and appreciation of the lover's body. Additionally, the line "licked / smooth the sticky of her hip" (Diaz 37) recounts a sexual interaction between the two lovers. The famished desire noted earlier is also present here, as the speaker says that they are "Lambent slave to ilium

and ischium — I never tire / to shake this wild hive, split with thumb the sweet- / dripped comb– hot hexagonal hole…" (Diaz 37). Not only is the speaker desiring her lover, but she is grateful and willing to beckon to the calls of her body. The abundant "honey" imagery here is noteworthy for two reasons: Honey as the marker of sweet intimacy and sexuality, and honey as something that provides. The end of this stanza even further highlights the speaker's almost uncontrollable desire for their lover's body, as they write, "for her hips, / I am – strummed-song and succubus" (Diaz 37). This stanza further ignites the fire of intimacy between these two lovers, as the speaker would do anything for the taste of their lover's hips.

The next three stanzas further illustrate imagery of the hips as something "divine." Particularly, there are the lines, "Transubstantiation bone — hips of bread, / wine-whet thighs. *Say the word and healed I shall be:*" (Diaz 37). These images call back to the previous comparisons of the lover's body to communion while claiming that the body is a symbol of divinity that the speaker wants and needs to be restored. This strengthens the connection of desire between the two lovers into something non-negotiable. Later on, the speaker conveys that their desire is so strong that it is sinful and that they wish to be delivered from it. Specifically, the speaker states, "Imparadise me. Because, God, / I am guilty. I am sin-frenzied and full of teeth" (Diaz 38). Here, the speaker is claiming that their desire for their lover is so strong that it feels as though they are giving into a devilish temptation, something they cannot have but they must. Their desire for their lover seems so strong that it must be *evil*, something in need of resistance. However, as described previously, the speaker cannot resist their lover. As an aside, it is quite interesting that the lover's body is described as both communion and something devilishly tempting for the speaker. Perhaps this suggests that the lover's body is a requirement for the speaker but that they become sinfully carried away.

In the next three stanzas, the speaker continues praising their lover's hips in a transcendental way. First, the lover's hips "Are a city. They are a Kingdom…Beloved, your hips are the war" (Diaz 38). Here, the hips are described as things that are both powerful and expansive in their prowess. Additionally, the comparison of hips to war at the end perhaps signifies a quarrel between the two lovers, that their passions are too strong that it is creating conflict. In the next stanza, the speaker wants to indulge in their lover. The speaker states that "your legs, love, are boulevards / leading me beggared and hungry to your candy / house" (Diaz 38). The speaker is saying here that their lover's legs lead them ravished and longing for more. This idea of irresistibility and indulgence carries on in the next lines as the speaker claims, "Even when I am late / and the tables have been cleared, / in the kitchen of your hips, let me eat cake" (Diaz 38). Once again, the speaker longs for their lover's richness, something they cannot resist and want to "eat". The idea of the lover's body as something transcending the physical hits a climax in the next stanza, as the speaker states, "O constellation of pelvic glide — every curve, a luster, a star. More infinite still, your hips / are kosmic, are universe— galactic carousel of burning / comets and Big Bangs" (Diaz 38). Likening the lover's body to these celestial bodies hints at a hierarchy of the body as something powerful and all-consuming that no other being can come close to comparing to. Additionally, the lines "O, hot planet, let me / circumambulate. O, spiral galaxy, I am coming / for your dark matter" (Diaz 38) suggest that the speaker wants to explore their lover's body further. Specifically, that in the infinite universe that is the lover's body, the speaker wants to explore and know it all.

In the final stanza of "Ode To The Beloved's Hips", the lover's body becomes a complex voyage for the speaker. The stanza begins with a journey, "Along las calles de tus muslos, I wander, / follow the parade of pulse like a drum line—" (Diaz 38). Here, the speaker is traveling

down the roads of the lover's thighs, something that beckons and calls the speaker to follow it. This journey leads the speaker to "descend into your Plaza del Toros– / hands throbbing Miuru bulls, dark Isleros" (Diaz 38). The introduction of Bullfighting here is significant in that it adds to the conflict of the complex passion between the two lovers. Additionally, the fact that the speaker's hands are bulls signifies that their yearning for their lover is causing this uproar in conflict. This idea continues further with the description of "Your arched hips— ay, mi torera" (Diaz 38). Here, the speaker is writing that their lover's hips are the bullfighter, signaling that they are meant to fight off or keep the lover's hungered hands at bay. This journey into and throughout the lover continues "Down the long corridor, your wet walls / lead me like a traje de luces— all glittered, glowed" (Diaz 38). In this line, the speaker is continuing the journey within their lover, being guided by the sparkling bullfighter suit: something that tempts and allures. The following lines continue to illustrate the rich desire between the two lovers, as the speaker claims they are "the animal born to rush your rich red / muletas— each breath, each sigh, each groan— / a hooked horn of want…" (Diaz 38-39). The use of Bullfighting as the image of irresistible desire is brilliant. In this bullfight, the speaker is the bull that cannot resist the bewitching desire of the bullfighter— the body. The speaker claims that they were created for this desire, that their purpose is to seek it out no matter what. The poem then ends at a climax, as the speaker says, "Here I must enter you, *mi pobre* / *Manolete*— press and part you like a wound— / make the crowd pounding in the grandstand / of your iliac crest rise up in you and cheer" (Diaz 39). Here, the speaker gives into the temptation of their desire for their lover, something that results in a celebration from a "crowd".

As the analysis of "Ode To the Beloved's Hips" portrays, Natalie Diaz is not only unafraid of expressing queer passion, love, and intimacy but is proud of the all-encompassing

nature of her desire. The vulnerability that Natalie Diaz presents here and throughout the rest of her poetry is in no way obscuring the idea of queer love. Rather, she is putting queer love at the forefront while giving it a name that stands proudly against the oppressors who attempt to silence and reject. This vulnerability does not weaken, but it strengthens and ignites a fire of undeniable and uncontestable power.

Nevertheless, igniting this fire and spectacle would not be possible without those forced to dim their flame. Jericho Brown once said that "Poetry is a veil in front of a heart beating at a fast pace" (Kellaway), a testament that rings true for all of the poets who had to conceal their queer passions behind a curtain. Specifically, Hart Crane hid his queer desire behind obscure logic and metaphor, disguising this passion so that the common eye could not trace it. However, the fact that he continued to express these desires displays commendable resilience and bravery. It is because of this bravery that poets like Ocean Vuong and Natalie Diaz can specifically express their queer desires in their poetry. Vuong and Diaz are exemplary examples of poets who have lifted the curtain that was concealing themselves. Once this curtain was lifted, their identities could not be ignored— they could not be extinguished. Rather, their writing allows them a steadfast platform of unwavering defiance against their oppressors: a defiance that, when perpetuated, allows future generations to express themselves wholly, freely.

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