

Care, Precarity, and Chosen Kinship: Reimagining Family in Ocean Vuong's The Emperor of Gladness 2025

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines how Ocean Vuong's novel *The Emperor of Gladness* (2025) reconstructs the concept of family through the interwoven experiences of care, precarity, and chosen kinship. The study goes beyond the conventional biological epistemologies and sees elective affinities as an important survival mechanism for the outsider of the mainstream dealing with an insecure world. The analysis is centred on the concept of care as an intentional ethical practice, not just an emotion. The paper maps the ways in which characters experience a constant state of social and economic insecurity, and develop their own sphere of belonging. Such fragile and yet resilient relationships that are created through vulnerability, make care a public, political act. In addition, the research explores the novel's depiction of the relationship of chosen kinship as a refuge and space of mutual responsibility. Whereas the family configurations that are usually linked to trauma are inherited, the self-made family communities are a potent imagining of intimacy and support. Moreover, Vuong's style of writing, a gentle, disjointed prose, mirrors the frailty which he celebrates. In conclusion, this paper argues that, rather than being an inherited relation with blood, kinship becomes a practice that is constantly enacted and carefully tended to in the performance of *The Emperor of Gladness*. It ends by arguing that the novel suggests radical care and intentional community as the most relevant and promising answers to a precarious life and thus as a possible redefinition of belonging.

Keywords: Care, Precarity, Chosen Kinship, Ocean Vuong, Relational Ethics, Fragile Intimacies

INTRODUCTION

In a recent century of literary imagination, a radical transformation in depiction of intimate relations and of the ties of community. Storylines based on family, rooted in genealogies, marriage and the identification of families by institutions are being increasingly replaced by storylines that focus on self-determined and fluid networks of belonging. Ocean Vuong's fiction has always been on the cutting edge of this change. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), his first novel, he charts a mother and son's tender and turbulent relationship in the context of inter-generational trauma. Now, with *The Emperor of Gladness* (2025), Vuong extends this inquiry further, and sheds light on a story that tears up the foundation of kinship and assembles it anew with a conscious engagement of care. It is a novel that comes at a time when loneliness, a critique of the nuclear family and a quest for new models of relation to community abounds in the culture. It resonates directly with those who are disenchanted with the rigidures of societal construction and seeks to create intimacy through a love which is not natural, but deliberate, moral, and ethical.

In the present study, *The Emperor of Gladness* is located in the three related critical discourses. The first is that of precarity, which has grown out of its economic origins to be a condition of being vulnerable that today permeates the life of the modern world. Judith Butler is a scholar who has theorized precarity as a "bodily exposure" to each other, and which can be a cause of destruction or unexpected solidarity. The characters in Vuong's stories live completely among this precariously unstable land, an instability that takes the form of the precarious nature of employment, uncertainty of emotion, and the lingering effects of exile. The second discourse is related to the ethics of care. Theories of care by feminists like Joan Tronto and Carol Gilligan have maintained that caring is a practice and a disposition that is fundamental to human flourishing rather than a second thought that comes after justice. This research is informed by their perspectives and seeks to suggest that Vuong's concept of care is a conscious and educated practice that is in continual self-production. The third framework is selected kinship, a perspective that builds on the queer theory and anthropology of the family, and describes a family as a dynamic network that is formed by continually formed acts of support and affection, rather than by legal or genetic bonds.

It is Vuong's literary interventions that make him stand out for insisting on the intertwinement of these three strands. Precarity is not simply a background to the action, but the state which makes radical care necessary and possible chosen kinship. Precarity is not just a backdrop to the action, but it is what makes radical care necessary and possible, chosen

kinship possible. The story doesn't feel like a pretty little thing. Rather, it shows characters who are vulnerable, who are weak, and who are made a point of recognition: language, a language shared with strangers, a language where strangers can become kin.

This study suggests that Vuong presents the family as an active verb, a dynamic process, a relationality that embraces and is embraced in a world without assurances. This thematic investment is reflected in the formal elements of the novel, notably the lyrical, broken prose, and the focus on the minute, actual gestures. The writing itself makes what it describes, the careful attention, more real: asks the reader to dwell in moments of gentle significance. This paper seeks to make a contribution to the scholarship on contemporary fiction that has emerged to re-think relationality in a way that goes beyond heteronormative and biogenetic frameworks, the emphasis being on *The Emperor of Gladness*. With the novel entering the critical conversation, new dimensions can be explored for its relations with precarity at a national level, but one that is not bleak but rather carefully, hopefully, architecturally, connected. This research will reveal the textures of Vuong's worlds through a close reading of the text, and will shed light on ways in which the characters in the novel create fragile, yet resilient worlds together, showing that the most meaningful families are often those we make on our own terms, one act of care and kindness at a time.

Care, Precarity, and the Making of Chosen Kinship

The Emperor of Gladness begins in a world already in disarray. The characters do not face precarity as a crisis but as a quiet condition, which permeates all decisions and desires. The novel unfolds three interwoven movements with a continuous construction of a new definition of family. First, it creates a 'shared ground of vulnerability,' a point of commonality. First, it creates a 'shared ground of vulnerability,' a point of commonality. Secondly, it speaks of purposeful acts of care as the only viable answer to such fragility. Third, it shows how the acts of looking after each other have a natural enough result: chosen kinship. Third, it uncovers kinship as the radical product of these continuous practices of looking after. Combined, these movements make for a sweet blueprint of collective survival and a story of lonely people. The subject of precarity is not only physical poverty. Financial insecurity definitely plagues the characters, appearing in their worried estimates and provisional homes. However, Vuong probes into the emotional and existential fragilities as well.

The characters have histories of displacement, betrayals, and the slow draining of hope. This multi-layering is apparent throughout the protagonist's inner voice, fluctuating between his basic physical requirements and the more profound issues of what it means to belong. The prose in this book is more unstable and more breathy, preferring short sentences with an uncertain, almost breathy quality. The paragraph could start with a specific factual description of a rented room, and then become an introspection on impermanence, echoing a manner of how precarity permeates the outer world and the inner world. Importantly, this condition is not narrated as a lack of the individual. Instead, it points outwards to structural forces, implying that the characters live within a larger social system that creates and sustains their vulnerability. This representation corresponds with the notion of precarity as something that is experienced differently by different people, but which nevertheless connects us all equally to one another. The novel refuses to present a story of "broken people" and instead makes a point of demonstrating that the characters are not broken in and of themselves, but are responding to the heightened effects of a fractured world. This sense of common fragility is the ground for all that comes next.

Care is a conscious and expert practice that arises from this state of uncertainty. There are numerous moments in the novel in which one character cares for another by means of physical, small gestures. A person is preparing food quietly in a focused manner. A friend sleeps with someone else and provides only a comforting presence. A person's hand is placed briefly on a shoulder. These moments might be interpreted as nuggets of information, seemingly inconsequential. The story gives them their due weight, however, pushing the ordinary to the ethically significant. Vuong is drawn to the nature of such gestures, their sense of touch, the sound of water cascading down a glass for someone else, the exact way to wrap a blanket around a sleep mask. This focus makes care less abstract and less sentiment and more concrete and requires patience and attention. One can appreciate these exchanges as the very stuff of moral life, as Joan Tronto's feminist care ethicists have developed. Care in this context is not a subsidiary process of justice and autonomy, but is itself a basic process through which human beings sustain one another. The novel also deconstructs any easy dichotomy between carer and caree.

Character roles are seamlessly dovetailed. The one who is given comfort in one chapter is comforted in the next. This mutuality is a reminder of the universal nature of vulnerability, though it is distributed unequally. Also, the care that is imparted creates a soft pleasure in the story. In the midst of the suffering, these transactions offer moments of warmth, and quiet laughter; care is not only about surviving, it's about making it just a little possible to flourish. These regular attentions and supports slowly become the naturalized result of this study's chosen kinship. The most important relationships in the novel are not based on family connections or legal agreements. Rather, they are knitted together by the work of caring in which they are involved over time. When a neighbor provides you with food, he becomes somewhat like a relative. An unexpected travel companion along the way becomes an essential support. Vuong depicts this process as a slow, almost unnoticeable process of knitting together. They remind themselves of each other and realise that at some point in the process they were made responsible for one another and nobody told them. The image

builds on and extends a long tradition in the queer and feminist discourses that reimagines kinship without the heteronormative framework. The importance of marginalised communities constructing their own networks of belonging, in spite of their lack of access to the traditional sphere of family recognition, has been documented by scholars such as Kath Weston and Michel Foucault.

The Emperor of Gladness adds to this line of descent as it establishes selected kinship in the context of an immediate precarity. The relationships established in this novel are not necessarily idealistic flights from hardship. They are always fragile, as they are born fragile. Misunderstandings arise. Needs clash. The relationships falter in the face of challenges. But it is this fragility that makes them meaningful. The characters select not to leave, not to go back, not to risk it again—a risk they have, because the connections are not promised by an outside entity. Vuong's "chosen kinship" is no longer a noun, but a verb, and a very active one at that, not a state of being. This understanding is reinforced by the formal decisions made in the novel. The episodic form and lack of tidy closure reflect the open-endedness of family construction.

The novel's language itself carries out the ethics it depicts: when the threads that precede it are looked at together, they become especially apparent. Vuong's prose is soft and broken, sensuous. In a sentence will often stop: at the colour of light on a wall, at the texture of a worn fabric, and in that pause the reader is invited to use a mode of perception that echoes the attention that the characters give each other. This stylistic approach represents care on the level of form. The voice of the story doesn't hurry towards resolution or explanation. It remains with the moments, it lights them up and it values them. This habit of attention is a form of kinship extended to the reader, a way of living differently with the world, a more receptive way of being in it. The way prose is broken up in these texts similarly represents the tenuous state of what it portrays. Sentences break off. Paragraphs leave gaps. The story travels from side to side as frequently as forward. But in the cracks, the reader has room to breathe and feels the burden of what has been given. Form and content merge, and reading is an act of receiving care and giving care.

Finally, The Emperor of Gladness suggests that family, without its traditional assurances, uncovers its truer nature and its greater calling. It's not some structure that's passed down and granted, but some fragile achievement that is co-created day after day. This novel leaves no sentimental closure. But the precariousness will never disappear. The selected bonds are never completely secure. Rather, there is hope in the doing, in the showing up, in the things that are mended, in the things that are forgiven. Vuong's vision is more than a mirror of our times – it's a possibility for a culture defined by loneliness and institutional decay. Even though living with the precariousness of conditions is not always possible, one can create a small shelter of belonging—little homes, by choice and by care—through deliberate and mutual action. These shelters, which are so delicate, turn into everything. They literally turn into a home for them.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The above analysis of The Emperor of Gladness offers several important conclusions to enhance the existing knowledge regarding current writing on family, care and vulnerability. This section collates and reflects on those findings and considers the implications for literary studies and care ethics and kinship theory more broadly. The initial discovery refers to the novel's rethinking of care as a time-based practice and not just a place or a relationship. Although the spatiality of caring and supported caring practices has been well explored in other scholarship on care, Vuong's narrative brings to light the temporality of caring. Characters look after each other by keeping memories which would overwhelm any one consciousness.

They care by means of rituals of bereavement, which extend care beyond the grave. They also care by hoping together; by building fragile images of shared futures which make suffering in the here and now bearable. It brings to the fore the temporal dimension in relation to other theories on care that have been brought to the fore by Joan Tronto and others, and thus expands the theoretical landscape that takes a holistic view of care and considers the interconnectedness of past, present and future in any care setting. The discovery calls for future studies of other modern novels that represent care in a different way than in this book; not only as a relationship with others, but as a relationship with time.

A second important finding to emerge is related to the precarity – kinship formation connection. The analysis shows that, in Vuong's novel, vulnerability is not just something to be transcended, but something that can be connected from. In the face of the precarity of the characters, they do not create chosen families – they create chosen families because of it. Shared fragility opens a special way to see another person, to recognise another person, one that does not go through the filter of social performance, but is more sincere. The discovery of this finding raises a number of questions about the narratives constructed around precarity as solely a problem that needs to be solved. The suffering is not romanticized in the novel, but it does assert that being vulnerable can create intimacies that those who feel secure will not experience.

This insight feeds into the current discussion in affect theory and vulnerability theory (Judith Butler) and presents a literary case study on the way that an ethos of 'withdrawal' can be replaced by an ethos of 'community'. The third finding is related to the formalization of thematic problems. All these features of Vuong's style (stylistic choices,

syntax, the circular way of the story, the focus on small sensory details) are not used as decoration, but as an integral part of the meaning. The prose does the careful attention it tells about. The lack of a linear narrative in the narrative reflects the characters' rejection of the conventional paths they might take in life. The tight coupling of form and content is indicative of a new genre of novel that perhaps could be described as ethical formalism, where the way the novel is told is itself the act of caring for the character and reader. The discovery calls into question literary criticism's tendency to focus on form as the means to theme and the function of form as a means of ethical relation.

Lastly, the study finds that the selection of kinship in Vuong's novel is not a utopia alternative to biological kinship or a mere duplication of biological kinship. Rather, it is a different way of relating in its own logic, its own tempo and its own fragilities. Such bonds require constant renewal, it takes small daily actions to keep them alive. They are not permanent, but they're something that's arguably more important: They're an experience of being mattered by others who've chosen to be there. This discovery is not only of literary significance, but is also a cultural tool to rethink intimacy in an age of loneliness and institutional disintegration.

CONCLUSION

This research paper, has analyzed how Ocean Vuong's novel *The Emperor of Gladness* redefines the notion of family in the overlapping instances of care, precarity and chosen kinship. The study aimed to get to know the novel better, in order to better comprehend how it transcended a biological-oriented approach and how it was perceived as a choice of affinity and a moral endeavour. By examining the text closely, the paper has illustrated the delicate yet strong sense of belonging, the challenging yet fulfilling sense of belonging that Vuong builds. The narrative is the central contribution of this study as it brings to the fore the idea of care as a multi-dimensional practice. The analysis showed that care is expressed not only physically near, with emotional care, but also in the longer term through the sharing of past memories, through shared pain and through tentative hope.

This discovery builds on existing care ethics studies, bringing to the fore the temporal qualities of caring for each other. Moreover, it was also found that precarity in the novel contributes as a negative background but is not only, and it also has a positive aspect. It is the very condition that enables mutual recognition to become possible, and it is the condition that makes the possibility of an unexpected solidarity possible, because being vulnerable isn't a condition of isolation, but a condition that is the basis of recognition.

The paper also brought to the fore the formal choices that reflect the themes of the novel, and how Vuong's choices reflect the themes. Combined, the prose becomes fragmented, the story is told in circles, and the care is paid to minute sensory detail is a literary practice of care. The pairing of form and meaning here places the novel in an important place within what can be described as ethical formalism: the way the story is told is an integral part of the moral vision that it presents.

In the end, *The Emperor of Gladness* takes a stance towards the idea of 'chosen kinship' as an unfinished process instead of an end state. The relationships shown in the novel need to be continually renewed and strengthened through small, deliberate actions on a daily basis. They don't say they're forever, but maybe they're more important than that: they say they have lived experience of being of interest to others who have freely chosen to stay. Vuong's story is a quiet hopeful counter vision in a modern era when many are feeling lonely, traditional support systems are diminishing, and institutions are decaying. It implies that no one will be able to get away from the circumstances that make life permeable, but that by mutual and continuous care, one can erect small huts of belonging. The novel ends with these tenuous abodes being sufficient, proposes the novel. True to the word, they're a home.

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