UK Academic Publishing

UK Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (UKJHSS)

Vol. 1 | No. 1 | 2026 |pp. 40-55

Website: https://www.ukapub.com/journals/ukjhss

Received: 3 November 2026 Revised: 15 November 2026 Accepted: 19 November 2026 Published: 22 November 2026

Original Research Article

The Unmirrored Self: Narcissistic Injury, Failed Recognition, and the Fragmentation of Lyric Subjectivity in Contemporary Poetry

Farhana Khan[1], Hassan Jalal Abdullah Weshah[2]*, Husni Mansoor Nasser Saleh[3]

[1] Professor and Head, Department of English, Maulana Azad College of Arts, Science & Commerce, Aurangabad, India

Farhanajaved184@gmail.com

[2] Assistant Professor, Department of English, Hajjah University,Yemen, Hassanjalalweshah2024@gmail.com

[3] Associate Professor, Department of English, Radfan University College, University of Lahej, Yemen,

husni.mansoor@lahejuniversity.net

* Corresponding author: Hassanjalalweshah2024@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper reads Ocean Vuong, Claudia Rankine, and Joshua Jennifer Espinoza through Heinz Kohut's account of narcissistic injury and Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. Kohut explains the inner damage when a child is not mirrored. Honneth explains how society withholds love, rights, and solidarity from some people and not others. Together they help us describe the unmirrored self, a lyric subject formed in failed recognition rather than in self-presence. Its signature on the page is fragmentation. Vuong's poems reach for a mirror that was never given. Rankine's face one that distorts. Espinoza's look to a mirror that cannot exist, so they turn to the moon and to ghosts. Each poet fragments the speaking "I" in a different way, and each pairs a different strategy with a different relation to time. The paper argues that the lyric works here as a failed mirror. Its address goes out and no answer returns. Yet the failure is crafted, and it offers company instead of cure. The poems cannot heal the wound, but they give it a voice. That voice can be shared, and sharing it is a quiet form of recognition.

Keywords: narcissistic injury, misrecognition, Kohut, Honneth, lyric subjectivity, fragmentation, Ocean Vuong, Claudia Rankine, Joshua Jennifer Espinoza, contemporary poetry

I. Introduction:

Psychoanalysis often begins its story of the self with a face. A baby looks up and finds a parent looking back, and in that look (delighted, tired, distracted, cold) the baby learns something about whether it is welcome in the world. Heinz Kohut (1971) called this the mirroring function of the selfobject: the experience through which a child's exuberant wish to be seen is met, steadied, and slowly turned into a durable sense of being someone. When the mirror fails, the loss is larger than a missing reflection. The child comes to doubt that there is a self there to be reflected. This is what Kohut (1977) meant by narcissistic injury, and he meant something far more severe than disappointment: the fragmentation that follows when the environment declines to recognize what it sees.

The poems I read in this paper are crowded with such refusals. Parents who cannot look, a nation that will not look, a culture that decided in advance what it would see. What interests me most is that they do not stop at describing the refusal. They carry it into their form. The

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speaking "I" of these poems is not a whole person observing misrecognition from some earlier position of wholeness; it was assembled in the failure to be seen, and its grammar shows the gap where the mirror should have been. I call this figure the unmirrored self: a lyric subject that arises from failed recognition rather than from self-presence, and whose formal signature is fragmentation.

Three poets anchor the argument: Ocean Vuong, Claudia Rankine, and Joshua Jennifer Espinoza. Each writes from an experience of unmirroring, and each locates its source differently. In Vuong (2016) the failure is familial and national at once: a queer Vietnamese American speaker whose family cannot see his queerness and whose adopted country sees his body only as the residue of a war. In "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," he talks to himself as a child nobody held properly: "Your father is only your father / until one of you forgets." In "Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds," the body itself becomes the site of the failure. Rankine (2004; 2014) writes a failure that is racial and social. The "you" of *Citizen* is asked to absorb a white colleague's discomfort, is told "you are not the guy," is trailed by security in a parking garage; *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* spreads the same condition into a diffuse melancholy, a person watching catastrophe on television with no place in the public conversation for her own grief. Espinoza (2016; 2018) writes the gendered, embodied version: a trans woman whose culture offers no image of her that does not pass through violence first. "The Moon Is Trans" finds a mirror in the sky, a distant and alien one, and "Things Haunt" gives us a self that persists without being recognized.

These poets are seldom read together. Vuong tends to arrive through queer and refugee studies (Abizanda-Cardona, 2024; Gibbons, 2025; Nicosia, 2021), Rankine through Black studies and the poetics of racial trauma (Ceraso, 2018; Javadizadeh, 2019; Mendenhall, 2022), Espinoza through the still-forming field of trans poetics. Yet the shared preoccupation is hard to miss. Axel Honneth's (1995) recognition theory gives me the social half of the vocabulary: self-realization depends on love, rights, and solidarity, which support self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Misrecognition, as Honneth and his interlocutors develop it (Bona, 2018; Martineau, Meer, & Thompson, 2012; Schick, 2022), names the condition these poems dissect: being seen, but seen wrongly.

My contribution is to put Kohut and Honneth in the same room. Kohut explains what happens inside a child when the mirror fails; Honneth explains what happens when the mirror is held by a society instead of a parent. Narcissistic injury has been underused in literary criticism, and misrecognition has rarely traveled from social theory into the close formal analysis of lyric. I argue that these poems register failed recognition at the psychic and the social level at once, and that their formal habits (fragmentation, breakdown, address that goes astray) are what the unmirrored self looks like on the page.

The paper moves from framework to readings: first Kohut, Honneth, and the case for their synthesis; then Vuong, Rankine, and Espinoza in turn; then a comparison and a closing reflection on lyric theory, with four figures along the way. I want to ask what these poems do that criticism has not yet described: what it means to write a poem that expects not to be properly seen, and to read it as a scene of recognition that never quite completes.

The stakes are literary and political. If recognition is a precondition of self-realization, as Honneth (1995) holds, then a culture that systematically withholds it from queer children, Black citizens, and trans women is producing fragmented selves, not just unpleasant feelings. The poems bear witness to that and keep writing in the faint hope of finding a mirror. Whether the

poem can be that mirror is the question I keep returning to. The poems hint at an ambivalent answer: that the lyric, a genre built on address to a "you" who might be listening, may be the last mirror available, even when it shows only fragments. Perhaps most of all then.

II. Theoretical Framework: Narcissistic Injury and the Politics of Recognition

A. Kohut's Self-Psychology: The Mirroring Function and Narcissistic Injury

Kohut reached his theory of the self through a problem classical analysis could not solve. His patients were educated, articulate, often accomplished, and they did not bring the repressed conflicts Freud had taught analysts to expect. They brought something vaguer: a feeling of not being quite real, of lives that lacked coherence, of being unable to hold on to themselves. Kohut (1971) read these complaints as signs of a fragmented self, and he traced the fragmentation to failures of "selfobject" responsiveness, the earliest relational experiences through which an emerging self is affirmed and made durable.

Mirroring is the key. The child arrives with what Kohut (1971) called grandiose-exhibitionistic strivings: an exuberant sense of its own importance and a wish to be seen and admired. The parent's face is the first mirror. When it answers with real delight, the child's grandiosity is not merely indulged; it is metabolized. Through what Kohut called "transmuting internalization," the child gradually takes the mirroring function inward and learns to stay cohesive without constant outside affirmation. Grandiosity matures into ambition, self-esteem, the capacity for joy. When the parent is depressed, absent, overwhelmed, or simply unable to see this child as the child needs to be seen, the result is narcissistic injury (Kohut, 1977): a disruption of cohesion that runs from mild deflation to profound fragmentation.

Injury is not ordinary frustration, which can even help a child grow when it arrives inside adequate recognition. What injures is the missing response itself, the discovery that the need to be seen is not merely unmet but unwelcome. Kohut (1984) put the consequence plainly: the self comes apart, with bodily symptoms, a sense of unreality, a frantic need for substitutes, and in the worst cases an inability to feel like the same person across time.

It is worth stressing that narcissistic injury is not a pathology of too much self-love. It is a pathology of too little recognition: the injured person was never loved into a stable self. Late in his career Kohut (1985) pushed the idea beyond the clinic, suggesting that art, religion, and politics express the need for selfobject experience. A work of art can serve as a selfobject, offering the mirroring a social world withholds and giving a fragmented self, however briefly, a coherent reflection.

That is why the framework suits this study. If a poem can act as a selfobject, then the poems I read are more than representations of injury; they are attempts at repair. They stage the failed mirror and also try to be one for the reader. Their fragmentation is a symptom, certainly, but potentially also the medium of transformation. Kohut (1971) said the aim of analysis was to transform narcissism into mature self-regard and creativity, not to remove it. The poems are similar: they do not overcome fragmentation, but they make something from it, and in the making something like a self appears.

B. Honneth's Recognition Theory: Love, Rights, and Solidarity

If Kohut gives the intrapsychic grammar of the unmirrored self, Honneth (1995) supplies the social one. *The Struggle for Recognition* starts from a modest-sounding premise: people are not self-sufficient monads, and their sense of self depends on others. Drawing on Hegel and

Mead, Honneth argues that living a life one can call one's own requires three forms of recognition, each tied to a distinct self-relation.

Love comes first, and he means not romance but the primary affective recognition that begins between parent and child. It grounds self-confidence, the basic trust in one's body, desires, and worth as a living being. Rights come next: recognition as a bearer of entitlements whose claims can be heard. That grounds self-respect, the sense of belonging fully to the moral community. Solidarity is third, the recognition that one's particular qualities matter to a community, and it grounds self-esteem, the sense that one's way of being in the world is valued rather than merely tolerated.

For literature the useful part is Honneth's account of what happens when recognition is withheld. Misrecognition is not just a shortfall of positive regard; it is active distortion, a way of seeing someone that stops them from being seen as they are. The misrecognized are not invisible. They are hypervisible in the wrong way, through a stereotype, a category, a projection. The injury is psychological, and also moral: the conditions for self-realization are taken away.

Others have sharpened the picture. Bona (2018) follows misrecognition through everyday intercultural life, Martineau, Meer, and Thompson (2012) show it working through mundane habits of seeing and not seeing, and Schick (2022) adds that recognition carries vulnerability: to be recognized is also to be exposed to being recognized wrongly.

For my three poets the forms of misrecognition overlap. Vuong's speakers are misread as queer children by families that cannot see them and as refugees by a nation that remembers only casualties. Rankine's are read through racial stereotype, their grief refused as grief. Espinoza's are trans women in a culture whose only image of transness is violence. Each configuration bends Honneth's three forms differently (Figure 2, further on, sketches how I read them).

C. Synthesizing Psychoanalytic and Social-Theoretical Approaches

Why do we need both Kohut and Honneth? Why not pick one?

Because neither can carry the poems alone. Kohut's vocabulary for what happens inside a self when mirroring fails (fragmentation, depletion, the hunt for substitute selfobjects) is extraordinarily rich, but his model is largely ahistorical and asocial. It cannot say why some children are more likely to go unmirrored than others, or why some failures are systemic rather than idiosyncratic. For that we need Honneth.

Honneth explains the social conditions under which recognition is distributed and denied; he can say why queer children, Black citizens, and trans women are refused what self-realization needs. But his framework is largely cognitive and normative. It says little about the affective texture of going without: how the absence lodges in the body and hardens into symptoms, defenses, and creative strategies.

The poems demand a framework that holds both. They are about the intrapsychic experience and about the conditions that produce it. McNay (2008) warns of the "trouble with recognition": it can be a burden as well as a gift, and the demand for recognition can itself misrecognize. The poems seem to register exactly this. They question what seeing requires and what it costs to be seen in distorting ways.

So my synthesis runs like this. Narcissistic injury is the intrapsychic mechanism by which misrecognition becomes fragmentation; misrecognition names the social conditions that distribute and sustain that injury. The unmirrored self has suffered both failures at once, of the

primary mirror and of the social one, and its poetic voice comes from negotiating between them (Figure 1). The poem is neither symptom nor solution. It is a site of struggle where the self tries to find or make the mirroring it was denied, and where the failure of that attempt shows up in form even as the attempt goes on.

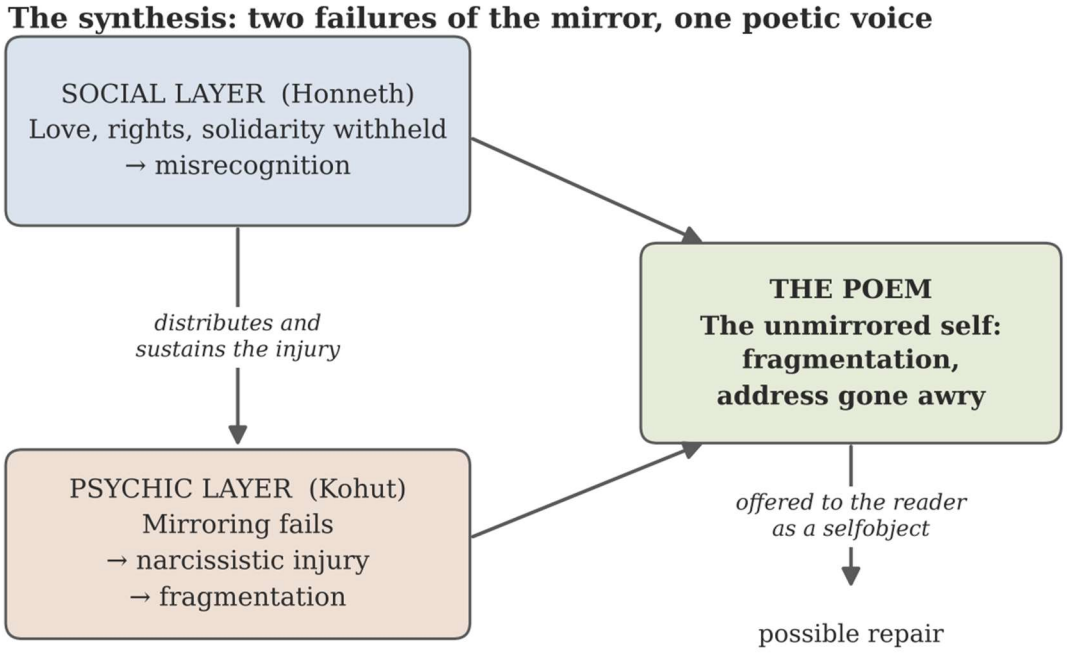


Figure 1. The synthesis: social and psychic failures of the mirror converge in the poem.

That is why the lyric matters so much here. Lyric is built on address, on calling to a "you" who might listen. It is also, by nature, a monologue: the "you" may never answer, may not exist. So it stages address without guaranteeing response; it is a mirror held up to a face that may not be there. In Vuong's self-address, Rankine's second-person apostrophe, and Espinoza's addresses to the moon, the reader, and the dead, the lyric's built-in gap between call and answer becomes the formal expression of the unmirrored condition. The poems do not overcome it. They inhabit it, and by inhabiting it they make it visible.

III. The Failure of Primary Recognition in Ocean Vuong's Night Sky with Exit Wounds

The first mirror is the mother's face. Before a child has language, before it knows where its body ends, it knows the face looking back, and that face answers questions the child cannot yet ask: Am I welcome? Am I real? Kohut (1971) treated it as the first selfobject, the child's first outside source of a cohesion it cannot yet make for itself. A warm face gets internalized; a cold, absent, or averted one teaches that the need to be seen is a burden, something to hide.

Night Sky with Exit Wounds (Vuong, 2016) comes back again and again to this scene. Its speakers were not adequately mirrored: queer children in families that could not afford to see them, refugees in a country that reads their bodies as casualties instead of persons. Gibbons (2025) describes the layered position of the queer refugee in Vuong's writing, where the demand for recognition is doubled by displacement. What I find compelling is that the book does not simply report this. It tries to repair it, to become its own mirror and to make from language a selfobject that gives the recognition the world would not.

A. "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong": Self-Address and the Unmirrored Child

The opening poem is the plainest case. It is self-address: a speaker talking to himself by name, as if to another person. "Ocean, don't be afraid," it begins, and the whole problem is compressed into that line. He is not just talking to himself; he is trying to be the mirror he never had. He speaks to a child who needs reassurance, a boy who was told, openly or not, that his fear was not acceptable, nor his desire, nor he. The poem's answer amounts to this: I see you, I see you are afraid, and it is all right.

Yet the poem knows better than to be naive. The title carries a gap in time. *Someday.* The love is not here; it is promised, postponed, thrown toward a future that may not arrive. The speaker cannot yet love himself fully because the self he would love is still fragmented, still wounded by recognition withheld. So the poem is at once an act of self-recognition and a confession of its limits. It performs the mirroring it describes and shows that performance is not enough, that primary misrecognition cannot be willed away.

Here Kohut's (1977) transmuting internalization earns its keep. A poorly mirrored child cannot simply decide to take the mirroring function in; the capacity for self-recognition is built slowly, through repeated experiences of being seen, and where those are missing the self stays brittle and dependent on affirmation it cannot fully trust. The speaker can say he will love himself, but not without the "someday."

The father line is revealing in the same way. "Your father is only your father / until one of you forgets." Several things happen at once. The line demystifies the paternal role, stripping away its authority and inevitability. It also admits that the father's recognition is unreliable: he can forget, fail to see, pull the mirror away at any moment. The speaker is bracing for that, inoculating himself against a recognition that was never secure. Nicosia (2021) reads Vuong as queering Telemachus, the son waiting for a father who may not return. It is a fine comparison, but it misses how, in these poems, the father is present in a way that is itself an absence. He is there and cannot see; his gaze is not the mirror the child needs. This is the failure of love-recognition in Honneth's (1995) sense: not a missing parent but a present one who cannot give the affective recognition a child requires. The child learns that its need for love is a burden and learns to hide it, sometimes by hiding the very self that needs loving.

B. "Self-Portrait as Exit Wounds": Violence and the Fragmented Body

If the first poem is about voice, about speaking oneself toward recognition, this one is about the body. The title is almost a thesis: a self-portrait that is not a unified image but a wound, a place where something went in and out and left a mark. The body here is not stable ground for identity. It is a record of violence, a surface where the history of misrecognition has been written.

Vuong's work is crowded with marked bodies: Vietnamese civilians in the war, queer men after the AIDS crisis, refugees carrying displacement in their flesh. Abizanda-Cardona (2024) shows how he queers the standard Vietnam trauma narrative, refusing both victim and hero and insisting that violence and desire are tangled together. The tangle shows up in form. The poem gives no coherent story of how the body was hurt, only fragments and moments that do not add up, because a body fragmented by violence cannot be shown whole without falsifying what it went through.

Here narcissistic injury stops being a mere metaphor. Kohut (1971) held that severe injury produces bodily fragmentation as well as psychological pain, a loss of the bodily cohesion on

which selfhood rests. A body denied recognition does not feel like a body; it feels like parts, sensations belonging to no one. Vuong's poem registers this with striking exactness. The body is a wound, and the wound is not only physical. It marks a recognition never given, a love never received, a self never allowed to cohere.

But the poem is not only damage. It is also reclamation. "Self-Portrait" matters: the speaker claims the right to depict himself even in pieces. He will not present as whole, legible, and acceptable to the gaze that always misread him. This is what I look like, the poem says. This is the wound, this the exit. Look or look away, but do not pretend it is not there.

Vu (2023) writes about the "leftover liquids" in Vuong's work, the fluids of mourning that seep through poems and cannot be contained by body or text. That image helps with the formal work here. The poem does not try to stop the bleeding; it lets the wound speak and lets fragmentation be the form. In doing so it offers a recognition unlike the one denied. It is not the parent's mirror, which would show the child whole. It is the poem's mirror, which shows the child wounded and says: this, too, is a self.

IV. Racial Misrecognition and the Lyric "I" in Claudia Rankine's Work

Vuong's speakers lack a mirror that was never there. Rankine's face the opposite problem, and in some ways a harder one to write about: the mirror is everywhere. It is in the checkout line, the faculty meeting, the parking garage, the startled face of a white colleague. It is always already looking, and what it shows is never quite a person. His poems dramatize the absence of recognition; hers dramatize its distortion. Honneth (1995) treats misrecognition as distinct from simply withholding recognition, and Rankine shows why. To go unseen is one injury. To be seen constantly and seen wrong is another.

There is a further complication. The lyric tradition Rankine inherits has a subject, and the subject has a color. Javadizadeh (2019) reads Rankine against Robert Lowell to show that the confessional "I" dominating twentieth-century American poetry was never as neutral as it claimed; its whiteness was structural. Glaser and Walker (2021) argue that the American lyric was built so as to leave some subjects "unfit for history," available for aesthetic use but not civic recognition. When Rankine writes in the first person, she is occupying a form that historically shut her out, and the friction is audible on every page. No wonder she so often gives up the stable "I" for a "you" that is accusatory and protective at once.

A. *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*: Depression, Disconnection, and Invisible Selves

Don't Let Me Be Lonely (Rankine, 2004) is a book about a self with no place to stand. It is made of short prose sections, image plates, and a running meditation on television, medication, and death, and its fragments do not gather into a narrative so much as build into a mood. It appeared in the shadow of September 11 and the start of the Iraq War, and it is soaked in the peculiar loneliness of watching catastrophe on a screen: grief turned public property, handed to everyone and so owned by no one.

Honneth's third form, solidarity, helps here. Solidarity-recognition is having one's particular way of being valued by a community (Honneth, 1995), and what Rankine records is its failure at the level of the nation. The speaker absorbs the official language of mourning and finds her own losses do not fit the available grammar. Kohut (1984) described the depleted self as one that cannot stay cohesive without outside support; this speaker is depleted in that way, though the causes are social. The recurring questions about antidepressants ask what happens

to someone forced to manufacture, privately and artificially, the coherence a functioning social world would have supplied.

What moves me most is the restraint. Rankine does not stage her speaker's pain as spectacle. She reports it flatly, in sentences that refuse the consolations of lyric beauty, and the flatness is the point: it is the tone of someone who has learned not to expect recognition and so has stopped reaching. Schick (2022) argues that recognition always entails vulnerability, and this speaker seems to have decided the exposure is not worth it. She watches. She takes her medication. She notes the date. You wait for an outburst that never quite comes, and the waiting is the experience of unmirrored selfhood the book wants to pass on.

B. *Citizen*: Everyday Racism and the Refused Mirror

If *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is about a self that cannot find itself in public grief, *Citizen* (Rankine, 2014) is about a self that is found, precisely, and found wrongly. The book is built from everyday scenes: the woman who says she did not see the speaker in line, the colleague who needs to explain something twice, the stranger whose question is not really a question. These are not the spectacular violences of the evening news. They are small, repeated acts of misrecognition that remind a person, again and again, that she is not being seen as one. Sorlin (2024) reads them as pragmatic events, speech acts whose racism lies less in what is said than in how they break ordinary expectations of courtesy and address. That seems right to me, and it explains why the pages are so hard to bear: nothing happens in them, and everything does.

Section V is where the pronoun trouble shows most. Rankine's second person does odd work. Sometimes "you" is the speaker talking herself through an insult. Sometimes it is the white reader, suddenly implicated in a scene they had been reading comfortably. Sometimes it is the person who has just said the thing, caught mid-exposure. Manora (2024) has written well about this instability, arguing that Rankine's shifts among I, you, and we recover a grammar of resistance from the Black Arts Movement while refusing its confidence in a stable collective voice. I would add that the instability is also the unmirrored self made formal. When someone is seen again and again through a distorting mirror, the pronouns start to slip. Who is speaking? Who is spoken to? Who is spoken about? The syntax enacts the vertigo of a self that cannot trust its position in a sentence.

The line "you are not the guy" has been discussed so often it risks becoming a slogan, but its function is worth pausing on. It is a moment of refusal: the speaker's account of herself is overruled by someone else's account of what she must be. In psychoanalytic terms it is a textbook scene of narcissistic injury. The self offers its version of reality, and the environment does not merely decline to affirm it but replaces it. Kohut (1971) insisted such moments are not trivial; they are where cohesion fails. The book's genius is that it does not isolate them as set pieces. It repeats them, section after section, until the reader begins to feel what the speaker feels: no outside to the misrecognition, no neutral ground from which to be seen correctly.

Ceraso (2018) calls *Citizen* an example of lyric hybridity, refusing the line between poem and essay because the experience it records cannot be held by either alone, and Mendenhall (2022) reads the fragments as signs of a self not at home in the forms available. Both converge on my point: the fragmentation of Rankine's lyric subject is the formal result of a social condition. Sabrina (2024) argues that Rankine writes against the white racial imaginary, and Saber (2025) extends this to the book's transnational Black identities. The mirror Rankine's

speakers face is not blank. It is full of somebody else's picture: a projection, a threat, a problem, anything but the person standing there.

The bridge to Espinoza is not only thematic. Both write subjects whose misrecognition is structural instead of familial, and both find that the lyric cannot answer it with a whole, self-possessed speaker. What Espinoza adds is a different relation between visibility and invisibility: someone culturally illegible yet unable to go unnoticed. The moon, in her poems, is a mirror very far away.

V. Trans Embodiment and the Impossible Mirror in Joshua Jennifer Espinoza's Poetry

The moon is not a person. It has no face, no eyes, no way to look back. Yet in Espinoza's poetry it becomes the only mirror available to a speaker who can find no reflection on earth. Vuong's speakers lack a mirror that was never given; Rankine's face one that distorts; Espinoza's lack one that is structurally impossible, a reflection the culture has neither the vocabulary nor the will to produce. When the speaker of "The Moon Is Trans" looks up, she is looking for a selfobject in the most literal sense, something that might show her she exists. That the moon is distant, cold, and indifferent to her need is not the poem's failure. It is the poem's condition.

The trans subject in Espinoza is caught in a double bind with no real parallel in the other two. The trans woman is hypervisible (her body is a site of cultural anxiety, scrutiny, and violence) and yet illegible: she is seen constantly, and what is seen is not her. The Black subject in *Citizen* is seen through racial images with a long, brutal history; Espinoza's trans subject is seen through a thinner, more recent, more openly fantastical repertoire, closer to an absence, a hole in the cultural imaginary around which the trans body must organize its legibility. All three of Honneth's (1995) forms fail here, each differently. Love-recognition falters when a family struggles to see the trans child as the child they thought they knew; rights-recognition, before a legal and medical apparatus that demands proof of transness before granting basic protections; solidarity, in a culture that can celebrate trans visibility while staying hostile to trans life. So the speaker is searching for a mirror that does not yet exist, and the poems record the search.

A. "The Moon Is Trans": Celestial Bodies and the Unavailable Reflection

The title is the thesis, and the thesis is stranger than it looks. Saying the moon is trans is not really a claim about the moon's gender. It is a claim about what moon and speaker share: both orbit the earth, both are visible only in reflected light, both run on cycles, both get read by others as symbols of something they are not. The moon has stood for chastity, madness, romantic longing, femininity. It has carried the projections of every culture that ever looked up. And it stays indifferent to all of it. It does not need the projections. It does not know they exist.

I think that is what the speaker wants. Not the moon's recognition (the moon cannot recognize anyone) but its example. Here is a body thoroughly misrecognized that has survived anyway. Named and renamed, worshipped and feared, gendered and ungendered, and none of it has touched the thing itself. The speaker longs for something like that invulnerability, the ability to be seen wrongly over and over and stay intact. Kohut (1971) described the fragmented self as unable to hold together without mirroring; Espinoza's moon models a cohesion that needs no mirror at all. There is sadness in the model, though. The speaker cannot become the moon. She cannot leave the earth or escape the gaze or turn into a body visible only as light on

something else. The moon is a consolation, and consolations are always smaller than the loss they console.

What lifts the poem above a conceit is its use of distance. The moon is very far away; she cannot touch it, speak to it, or get an answer. So the address to the moon is an address to something that cannot respond, which is just the structure of lyric apostrophe: a silence given a name. The poem does not beat the silence; it makes it audible, and so gives the reader the company of someone else speaking into one. That is the sense in which the poem works as a selfobject (Kohut, 1985). It does not give the recognition the speaker wants. It gives recognition that she is the kind of being who wants it, and that the wanting is not shameful or pathological. It is human.

The final lines, where the speaker imagines the moon as somewhere she might go, are often read as utopian. I read the moon as a place of elsewhere rather than arrival, a vantage from which earth's constant misrecognition would shrink to something small and far. The longing is not for a better mirror but for a world where mirrors are not the precondition of being real, and the poem's beauty lies in refusing to close that question.

B. "Things Haunt": The Persistence of Unrecognized Selves

If "The Moon Is Trans" looks up for a mirror, "Things Haunt" looks back. It is about ghosts: of unlived lives, of unrecognized selves, of the girl the speaker was supposed to be and the woman she is still becoming. In Espinoza (2018), haunting is what happens to a self denied recognition that refuses to disappear. It persists as a presence that cannot be acknowledged, a disturbance in the space it occupies, a sense that something is there when nothing can be seen.

This is a different relation to invisibility than Rankine's. The Black subject in *Citizen* goes unregistered in her full humanity yet is rarely unnoticed; the noticing is the problem. The trans speaker of "Things Haunt" is invisible more literally, not culturally legible and so not available to be noticed at all. Her invisibility is a gap in the conditions under which recognition could happen. Haunting is the mode of presence open to a self that cannot be seen and cannot be eliminated, a persistence that is also a protest. The ghost is not leaving, and in its silent way it is asking to be acknowledged.

Kohut's (1977) fragmented self helps explain why haunting is the right figure. The fragmented self is not absent; it is present in pieces, in symptoms, in moods from nowhere, in a nagging sense of wrongness. The self that haunts this poem could not be integrated into the life the speaker is living: too queer, too trans, too much for family and culture to absorb. It haunts because it was never allowed to be real, and because in some sense it is still alive.

What Espinoza does with this is remarkable. She does not exorcise the ghosts or fold them into a coherent story of selfhood. She lets them speak, and the poem fills with voices that do not quite belong to the speaker and images that do not quite resolve. The fragmentation is the poem's fidelity to the self it represents. Vuong's is lyrical, incantatory, aimed at repair; Rankine's is documentary and cumulative, aimed at indictment; Espinoza's is quieter, stranger, more at ease with the unresolved. Her poems do not try to make the ghost a person. They let the ghost be a ghost.

Even so, there is something in the poem I can only call hope, a hope stripped of consolation. The ghost persists. For a self denied recognition, persistence is an achievement of its own, the minimal claim it makes on the world: I am here, even if you cannot see me. The poem honors that claim without pretending to satisfy it, and offers the company of a self that

has learned to live without the mirror it needed and found, in the living, a way of being that does not depend on being seen.

Here the three poets can be brought into one frame. Each writes about a self denied mirroring, from a different position in relation to the mirror. Vuong's speakers reach for it and find it missing. Rankine's reach and find it distorted. Espinoza's stop reaching and learn to live in the dark. The differences matter, and I do not want them collapsed into one story. But all three write selfobjects in Kohut's (1985) sense: texts that do for the reader what the social world failed to do for the poet. The poem is no cure. It is a place where the unmirrored self can be met, and in that meeting something like recognition becomes possible. Figure 2 shows how I read the weight of Honneth's three failures across the poets.

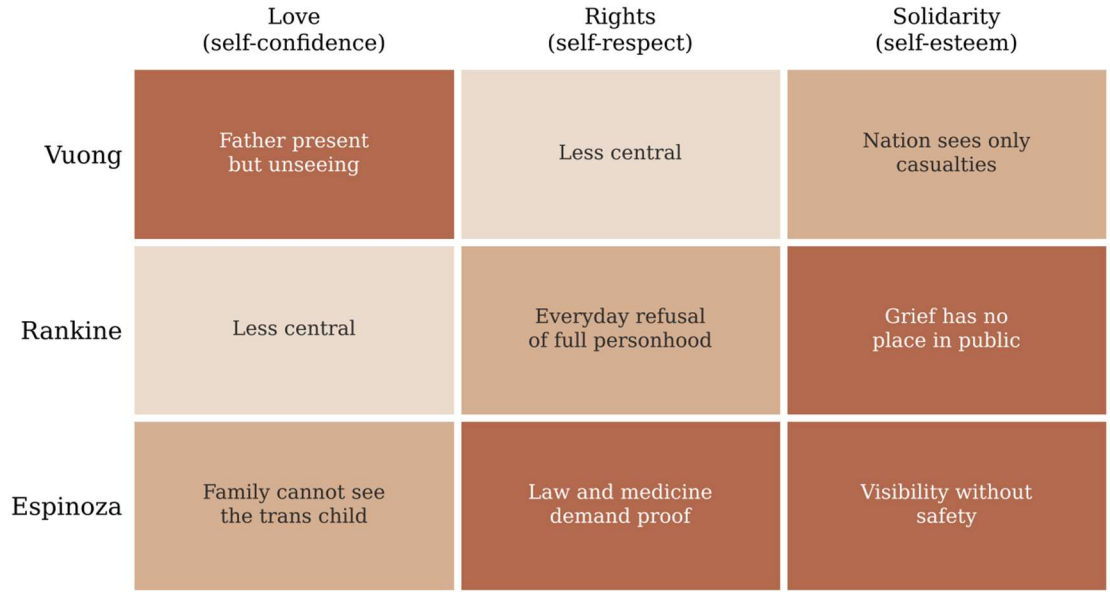


Figure 2. Where each poet's misrecognition bears most heavily on Honneth's three forms of recognition (interpretive).

VI. Comparative Analysis: Three Modes of Unmirrored Lyric Subjectivity

Reading the three side by side, the first thing that stands out is a shared formal instinct: none of them will give us a whole speaker. This is not coincidence. Each, under the pressure of their material, found that the confident, cohesive, self-present lyric "I" that has dominated the genre for centuries is not available for the subjects they write about. Using it would pretend the mirror had worked. The fragmentation is the formal trace of a condition none of them can write their way out of.

But it takes different shapes. Vuong fragments lyrically; his lines break in incantatory, almost ritual ways, as if the speaker were conjuring a self through repetition and address. Rankine fragments by accumulation. Her sections pile up unresolved, each a fresh scene of misrecognition, and the reader feels the pressure of a pattern with no outside. Espinoza fragments quietly. Her ghosts do not clamor; they persist. Her fragmentation is a condition, not a cry.

The shapes track the site of injury. For Vuong the wound is familial and national together, which is why his poems keep returning to the family even as they register the larger history shaping it (Abizanda-Cardona, 2024; Gibbons, 2025). For Rankine it is racial and social: the mirror is distorted, not missing, and the main site is the everyday world of the checkout line, the faculty meeting, the parking garage. For Espinoza it is gendered and embodied, and the mirror is structurally unavailable, so she looks to the moon, to ghosts, to other unrecognized selves.

Site shapes strategy. Vuong's poems reach for self-mirroring, trying to become the parent he needed or to make the wound a portrait; the strategy is reparative, if incomplete. Rankine's indict; the second person turns the reader into the one who must answer for the misrecognition on the page. Espinoza's persist, neither repairing nor accusing, simply refusing to disappear. And strategy shapes time. Vuong faces the future: the love in his title is deferred but coming. Rankine lives in the present; the scene is happening now, in this sentence, and the poem will not let you think it is over. Espinoza lives in the ghostly past, the unlived lives that haunt the present and cannot be resolved into a future or a present. Figure 3 gathers these contrasts.

	Vuong	**Rankine**	**Espinoza**
Site of injury	Familial and national	Racial and social; everyday world	Gendered and embodied
The mirror	Missing	Distorted	Structurally unavailable
Fragmentation	Lyrical, incantatory	Accumulative, documentary	Quiet, persistent
Address	Self-address	Shifting "you"	Moon, ghosts, the dead
Strategy	Self-mirroring (reparative)	Indictment	Persistence (haunting)
Time	Future (deferral)	Present	Ghostly past

Figure 3. Three modes of unmirrored lyric subjectivity compared.

Underneath, a common structure justifies the pairing. All three function as selfobjects in Kohut's (1985) sense. They do not heal the wound, but they make a space where it can be seen without turning into spectacle and a fragmented self can be met without being forced to cohere.

That is where the synthesis proves necessary. Kohut gives the language for what the poems do at the level of the self; Honneth gives the language for why the mirroring was withheld. The unmirrored self is produced where the two meet, wounded by the failure of the primary mirror and of the social one, writing in the space between. It does not become mirrored. But it becomes audible, and in becoming audible it makes a claim the world cannot entirely ignore.

VII. The Lyric Poem as Failed Mirror: Form, Address, and Fragmentation

Every lyric poem has a moment when the speaker turns toward someone who is not there: a lover, a god, a parent, a self that no longer exists. Criticism calls this apostrophe and has argued for decades about what it means. Is the address a fiction, a way of pretending the void can talk? Or does the act of calling itself conjure the "you" into being?

For these poets the apostrophic turn is no rhetorical question. It is the central dramatic action, and it almost always turns toward a mirror that fails. Vuong addresses himself as a child who cannot hear him. Rankine addresses a "you" that is sometimes the reader, sometimes the speaker, sometimes whoever just committed the injury. Espinoza addresses the moon, which cannot answer, and ghosts, which can only haunt. In each case the form repeats the structure of failed recognition: the speaker reaches toward a "you" and the "you" does not reach back (Figure 4).

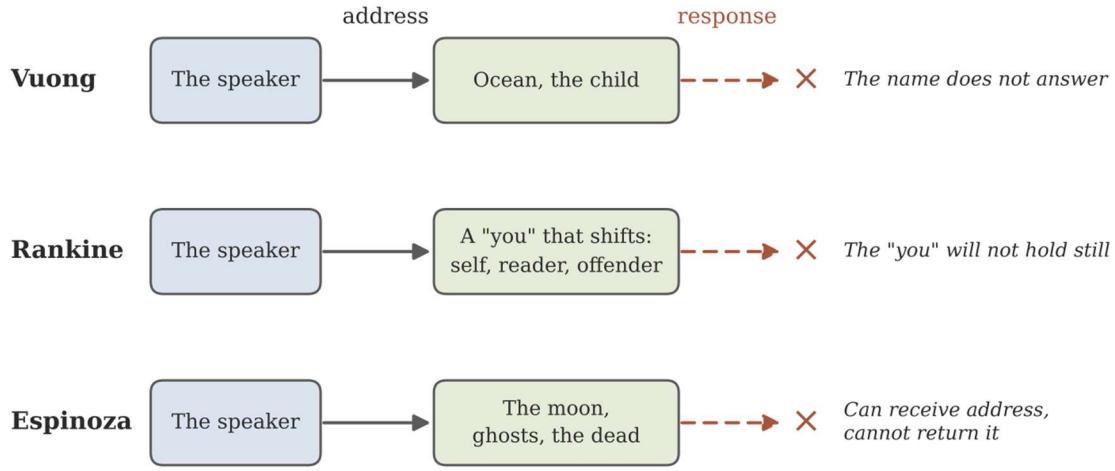


Figure 4. Address and withheld response in the three poets.

So I call the lyric, here, a failed mirror. I do not mean to diminish the poems; I mean to name what they do. A mirror that fails is still a mirror. It organizes the space in front of it, creates the expectation of a reflection, makes the person looking aware of their own face. These poems create the expectation of recognition (the reader feels from the first line that someone is speaking to someone) and then withhold it. The call hangs in the air. The poem ends and the mirror is still empty.

This is not failure as artistic shortcoming. It is failure chosen, crafted, made into form. The poems do not withhold recognition for lack of skill; they withhold it because providing it would be a lie. A missing mirror was never there. A failed mirror was made, carefully, and then broken. Vuong's self-address cannot complete itself: he calls his own name and the name does not answer. Rankine's second person cannot stabilize; the "you" slips, refusing a position from which recognition could be given. Espinoza addresses the non-human (moon, ghost, dead) that can receive address but cannot return it. Form is not a container for content here; it is the content, made audible.

The implications reach lyric theory. The dominant tradition of lyric reading treats the poem as the expression of a unified speaking subject, a tradition Javadizadeh (2019) and Glaser and Walker (2021) fault for its unexamined whiteness, and it assumes that the mirror works. These poets expose that as an assumption. The coherent lyric self is a production that depends

on conditions of recognition not universally available; for those denied recognition, fragmentation is a condition, not a choice.

I do not want to overstate this. The poems do not reject the lyric tradition; they inhabit and transform it. They still address, still expect a response. What changes is the addressee. The "you" is no longer someone who can give recognition but someone in the speaker's own position: unmirrored, fragmented, waiting. Address becomes solidarity instead of demand. I know you are looking for a mirror too, the speaker says, and I am here, looking with you.

That is why the failed mirror is also a gift. The reader does not get the recognition they might have wanted but gets company, a speaker who knows what it is to reach for a reflection and find nothing. What the poems mirror is the struggle itself, a self reaching for a coherence it does not yet have (Kohut, 1985). The lyric does not demand completion; it lets the speaker be in process. The poems do not cure the wound. They make it a voice, and a voice can be shared. The mirror is still empty. But the room is not.

VIII. Conclusion

I began with a simple claim: the mirror, in psychoanalytic thought, is never merely an object, and when it fails the child loses more than a reflection. I have tried to show that this condition is poetic as well as clinical, one that contemporary poetry registers in form and that the lyric is uniquely able to articulate.

Vuong's speakers are queer children whose families cannot see them and refugees whose bodies the nation reads as casualties. Rankine's are Black subjects seen constantly and seen wrong. Espinoza's are trans women in a culture with no image of them except violence, illegible even as they are hypervisible. These are not the same wound, and merging them would do violence to each poet's specificity. But the structural kinship is real.

The synthesis of Kohut and Honneth gives me the vocabulary. Kohut describes the inside: fragmentation, depletion, the hunt for substitute selfobjects. Honneth describes how the failure is distributed: love, rights, and solidarity withheld from some subjects and not others. Together they show a self wounded where the psychic and the social cross, and poems that are neither symptoms nor solutions but sites of struggle.

Form has been central. Fragmentation here is not decoration; it is the signature of the unmirrored self. All three poets refuse the coherent lyric "I," not for lack of skill but because producing it would be a lie. What they offer instead is the failed mirror, the lyric as address with no guaranteed answer, the genre that knows from the inside what it is to speak without the promise of being heard.

The political stakes should not be underestimated. If recognition is a precondition of self-realization (Honneth, 1995), a culture that withholds it systematically is producing fragmented selves. The poems bear witness to that and keep writing in the hope of finding a mirror. They do not promise it will be found, but they insist the search is worth making even when no one is listening.

I will end with the image I started from. The mirror in these poems is almost always empty: the face that does not look back, the moon that cannot answer, the ghost that cannot be seen. Yet they do not end in despair. They end in the persistence of the voice, speaking into an empty mirror, addressing when no one answers, reaching when there is nothing to reach for. That is not heroism or triumph. It is simply what the unmirrored self does. The mirror is still

empty. But the room is not. That sharing, fragile, incomplete, ongoing, is what the lyric offers, and it is not the recognition that was needed. But sometimes, in the dark, something is enough.

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