

Memory as a Second Chance:

*An Intersectional Reading of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous**

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Ocean Vuong aged two with his mother and aunt at a Philippine refugee camp. (The Guardian)

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*I
kneel to write
our names on the sidewalk
& wait for the letters to
signal a future
an arrow pointing to a way
out I stare & stare
until it grows too dark*

*to read the ant & his brother long
home by now night
flooding the concrete black
my arms dim as incomplete
sentences reader I've
plagiarised my life
to give you the best
of me & these words these
insects anchovies
bullets salvaged & exiled
by art Ma my art these
corpses I lay
side by side on
the page to tell you
our present tense
was not too late (Vuong, *Time is a Mother* 77-78)*

*"The truth is memory has not forgotten us." (Vuong, *On Earth* 189)*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to argue for the importance of remembrance, of intersectional analysis, and the central role of fiction in the writing of history. These arguments will be made with special regard to queer, diasporic, Asian American writing, focusing on *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) by Ocean Vuong. This thesis argues that Vuong's novel should be read as a significant relic, that will aid in reimagining American, as well as global, history as more than a master narrative, and arguably, transcending what language can articulate. This thesis will explore how the novel serves as a disruptive and recollective discursive force, as well as how the collapse of language and structure can become a tool for conveying meanings that are otherwise impossible to articulate. We need to examine how the novel navigates borders of identities created and upheld using language, and how it becomes a vehicle of retrospectively navigating landscapes of identity, trauma, and memory.

This thesis will argue for how Asian-American writing appears to challenge and disrupt conventions of historical and novelistic representation to unearth neglected histories and, ultimately, resist erasure. An intersectional analysis, this thesis argues, is useful in terms of uncovering more than how dominant groups perform domination through a particular medium. An intersectional analysis can also uncover the ways in which subaltern groups "build, maintain, grow, or use their power in relation to such systems of domination as masculinity, femininity, whiteness, maleness, Western might, discrimination, prejudice, and/or stereotypes" (Esposito 47), among other systems.

Through this mode of analysis, which unpacks hegemony as it is produced through dialectical processes, we may begin to build an increased awareness of the pedagogies of text and develop ideas that gesture towards greater social justice. Intersectional analysis, then, does not primarily concern itself with disadvantage, but rather how hegemony is challenged and disrupted. This thesis brings together scholarship that encourage a cross-disciplinary approach to queer, diasporic literature, collecting scholarship that informs an intersectional reading of such literature. This scholarship draws from refugee studies, war studies, intersectional theory, critical race theory, and gender studies in an approach to Asian American writing that seeks to unify disciplines concerning the intersectional bodies of the text.

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1. INTRODUCTION

I happened to stumble upon *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* during the opening of the Deichman library in Bjørvika, Oslo, and picked it up simply because of its intriguing title. I read the novel in two sittings and was deeply moved by Ocean Vuong's writing, the stories he has preserved, and the ways that the novel breaks away from the conventions of the novel structure. As a queer, nonbinary reader, I was moved by the way the novel diversifies masculinity and challenges gendered narratives, also as they relate to race and sexuality. More importantly, reading the novel, I came to realize that throughout my six years of university studies, during which I have read extensively on queer studies and critical race theory, not once had I been introduced to, or encouraged to, study Asian American writing. As the novel expanded my perspective I could feel the emergence of a gap, a disparity of knowledge. I decided to read up on Vietnamese American literature and discovered that scholars engaging with this literature are working against historical nescience surrounding the Vietnamese experience, which is remarkably affected by its omission in Western scholarship. I committed to studying Vietnamese American writing, as it makes a case for what should be remembered. The goal of this thesis is to argue for the importance of remembrance, and how that is conveyed in Ocean Vuong's writing, which, I argue, resists the erasure of neglected stories. Moreover, upon discovering that the Vietnamese experience in post-Vietnam America is meagerly covered, I wished to bring together scholarships across disciplinary barriers to suggest a mode of reading that will extend our knowledge of these experiences, and uplift neglected voices.

This thesis brings together scholarships that encourage a cross-disciplinary approach to queer, diasporic literature. Above all, this thesis brings together scholarships that inform an intersectional reading of such literature. These are scholarships that combine elements from refugee studies, war studies, intersectional theory, critical race theory, and gender studies which I use to inform my approach to Asian American writing. These perspectives will be employed to discuss how *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, as a global narrative, challenges western cis-, white, male historical master narratives, and disrupts orientalist attitudes. These perspectives will inform a close reading of the novel, in which I will also model and argue for an intersectional reading of its themes. Through a close reading of the novel, this thesis will serve as a representation of intersectional reading. If critics fail to recognize the intersectional aspects of the novel, they risk alienating narratives that manifest themselves as retellings of American and global history and as empowering to those who occupy intersectional

identities; they risk alienating American, queer, BIPOC narratives from a long line of American authorship. This mode of reading does not only entail investigations of the overlapping dynamics of identities but, more importantly, investigations regarding how concepts of sameness and difference can serve as analytic tools for discussing contextual dynamics of power.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. These chapters respectively explore a particular thematic aspect of the novel that I have found relevant to a discussion regarding hegemony. Chapter 1 is dedicated to discussing the nature of memory and how it relates to hegemony, historical erasure, popular memory, and how the novel itself is an act of creative remembrance. Chapter 1 will establish how remembering and forgetting are acts of agency, and how this has implications regarding our responsibilities as readers and writers. This chapter will also examine the similarities between fiction writing and the writing of history. Chapter 2 is dedicated to discussing language and its relations to hegemony, the production of identities, and margins. This chapter will also examine how the Vietnamese American characters of the novel develop methods of communication that exceed the limitations established by Anglocentrism. Chapter 3 is dedicated to discussing hegemonic masculinity, how gender relates to racialization, as well as how the novel disrupts this hegemony. Each chapter seeks to unpack how the novel disrupts hegemony that otherwise undermines the intersectional bodies of the text.

In its reception, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* has been described as an act of translation and queer diasporic artmaking, and as a novel with a strong umbilical link to Vietnam, although the narrative is mainly set in the United States. However, this thesis argues that the novel should be read as a global narrative, as opposed to preceding analyses in which state borders appear to be taken as geographical givens, rather than boundaries in which culture is constructed. Analyses that overlook and remain uncritical toward the divisions of narrative in relation to national territory and language in reading diasporic literature risk disregarding the intersectional nature of identity. Moreover, they risk disregarding the pan-national thematic aspects of immigrant and refugee experiences, also as they are conveyed through text. The 1.5 immigrant and refugee generation disrupt notions of national identities as isolable and dissociable. *On Earth* simultaneously explores Americanness and Vietnamese-ness, as well as how these identities are pinned up against one another, yet unified through histories of warfare and violence. Vuong claims that the American identities of refugees are formed before they set foot on American soil: "it starts as the first bombs fall. American citizenship begins with foreign policy" (Ocean Vuong: *On*

Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous”). In this close reading, a reader will find that the novel does little to negotiate or adopt specific identities, but rather explores the lived experiences as well as the power dynamics that relate to diasporic conditions and intersecting identities (such as refugeeeness, queerness, Vietnamese-ness, and Americanness). This exploration is done through the eyes of a 1.5 generation immigrant, growing up to be *of* America, rather than just *in* America. The novel serves as an architecture of language that accommodates the histories of Asian bodies as complex, intersectional bodies. The novel should be read as a significant relic that will aid in reimagining American- and global history as more than the master narrative and, arguably, as more than language can articulate. This thesis will explore how the novel serves as a disruptive and recollective discursive force and how deconstructions of language and structure can become tools for conveying meanings that are otherwise impossible to articulate. We need to examine how the novel navigates itself through, and outside, borders of identities created and upheld using language and how it becomes a vehicle for retrospectively navigating landscapes of identities, trauma, and memory. This thesis will argue for how Asian American writing appears to challenge and disrupt conventions of historical and novelistic representation to unearth neglected histories and, ultimately, resist erasure.

Since this thesis argues that the writings of history and fiction are deeply connected, and that diasporic novels may serve as a disruptive force regarding a western master narrative, the need for a framework for analyzing such texts arises. As a framework, this thesis emphasizes that *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* requires an intersectional reading. Intersectionality as a theoretical framework for approaching text emphasizes that we must understand how social categories interplay inseparably and, more importantly, how texts possess pedagogical capabilities. Therefore, one must understand how narrativity participates in dominating subaltern groups. It is necessary to define what intersectional reading entails. It is equally necessary to respond to critiques addressing intersectionality and delimit which definition of intersectionality this thesis embraces.

Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall describe intersectionality as a framework for discussing the dynamics of sameness and difference and an analytic tool for discussing contextual dynamics of power (Cho et al.). Erica B. Edwards and Jennifer Esposito argue in their book, *Intersectional Analysis as a Method to Analyze Popular Culture: Clarity in the Matrix*, that intersectionality, when applied to the reading of popular culture texts, should ask the following:

How social inequality is performed, produced, or maintained through popular culture; How popular culture negotiates interlocking systems of power at structural, disciplinary, cultural, or interpersonal levels; How popular culture expands or constrains thinking in ways that reveal or contest its interconnections with forms of domination (such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, ableism, nationalism); How socio-historical context is implicated in popular culture representations; How popular culture representations create sites of erasure, oversimplification, or complexity; How popular culture responds to the status quo; and How popular culture is or can be a medium for social justice. (17)

I want to argue that these questions can also be asked when inquiring about any text, as all texts convey ideas that stem from a person's mind, affected by certain ideologies and norms relating to the hegemony of society. These questions posed in an intersectional reading prerrequisite an understanding of literature – and other cultural texts – as educational arbiters of cultural development. Furthermore, a perspective on intersectionality emphasized by this thesis is that which emphasizes its theoretical framework as a tool for analyzing domination rooted in multiple forms of oppression. This entails that this thesis will not venture to analyze social categories in themselves, but rather how these categories are a product of a cultural production that dominates groups subjected to subalternation. What is to be gained from an intersectional reading of texts is that we learn to dissect and criticize the voices that maintain such domination and, also, to uplift and recognize voices that disrupt domination, such as Ocean Vuong's. Since texts like *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* disrupts the conventions of novelistic and historical representation – representation that shapes the basis of our cultural knowledge altogether – we must develop a language for describing ghost stories, stories that speak of inexpressible loss yet resist erasure by accommodating neglected bodies in all their interlocked complexities. This interlocked nature emerges in Vuong's novel through the hybridity of its Vietnamese American characters.

This thesis will also discuss ways in which the characters of the novel display Vietnamese American hybridity, which is considered a process of developing cultural alternatives fit for survival and healing. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is an exploration of the hardships, and triumphs, relating to the hybridity of Vietnamese Americans. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud refers to Lisa Lowe's use of the concept of "hybridity" as an analytical framework for approaching Vietnamese American identities. Lowe's description of hybridity is helpful for an intersectional analysis of text, as it refers to an "uneven process" where immigrants encounter violence carried out by the U.S. state, as well as their Asian states of origin, and how, as a response, these immigrants survive these acts of violence by "living, inventing and reproducing different cultural alternatives" (49). It is particularly interesting how Vietnamese American hybridity is explained as an act of survival through the invention of cultural alternatives. This theory is something that resonates with intersectional theory, and

the themes of Ocean Vuong's writing. This relates to an intersectional reading, as in exploring the cultural alternatives the novel gestures towards, one will uncover how the novel resists domination, as well as how the novel responds to interlocking systems of power. Furthermore, the state of being subject to the violence of both the country of origin and country of arrival is an integral part of what makes up the refugee experience, as an experience where the refugee is forced to regard how national powers operate across borders through interlocking systems. Little Dog, who is the main character and narrator of the novel, observes how this manifests itself in the bodies of the Vietnamese Americans around him, especially his mother:

A new immigrant, within two years, will come to know that the salon is, in the end, a place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones—with or without citizenship—aching, toxic, and underpaid. I hate and love your battered hands for what they can never be. (80-81)

A reader will notice how the narrator comprises the immigrant experience and the state of being “awake in American bones”, which can be interpreted as embodying the concept of Americanness. Taking this into account, the narrator believes that Americans, with or without citizenship, are united by exhaustion from the class realities and working life of America, and are disappointed by the false promises of the American dream. Here, the narrator effectively destabilizes the binary logics of Vietnamese/American by upsetting American exceptionalism that would otherwise configure the U.S. as “better off”. The economic undermining of minorities is one of the many violent acts carried out by the nation; once again, violence contributes to generating the symbolism of Americanness, as well as Vietnamese American hybridity, considering that hybridity itself is formed as a counterculture to violence: “Your hands are hideous—and I hate everything that made them that way. I hate how they are the wreck and reckoning of a dream” (79). One will notice how wage discrimination, aches from hard work, and toxic work environments are described as part of what makes up the American body. By doing this, Little Dog confirms the validity of Asian bodies as American bodies and interlocks these bodies inside a country crumbling under the pressures of the capitalist American Dream. The nail salon, a confined space created by racial discrimination in the labor market, becomes a space in which hybridity is highly visible. American nail salons constitute a large industry that is 80% owned by Vietnamese immigrants (Hoang 113). The nail salons, as conveyed by the novel, are “sites of racialized encounters” (Hoang 113), where hybridity becomes particularly visible.

Many Vietnamese American experiences are products of the violence between competing empires and of resettlement marked initially by downward mobility and racial tensions. I use

the term “hybridity” here to refer more specifically to those experiences and identities shaped by colonialism, war, immigration, and racism. (Pelaud 49)

It is important to note when discussing hybridity that the term itself might suggest a cultural dualism: that hybridity denotes an equal footing in two cultures. The same can be said regarding terms such as ‘panethnic’ and ‘transnational.’ However, such interpretations have a compromising effect on the subjectivity of narrators and our perceptions of national identities. I argue that the novel should be described as a global narrative, as this excludes terms that would have the narrative situated within the defined borders of a binary, consisting of isolable identifiers. Pelaud notes that the concept of hybridity incorporates all Asian American identities, which serves as an alternative to prior practice in Asian American studies where certain Asian peoples, such as the Vietnamese, have arguably not been sufficiently covered in terms of study. Up until the early 1990s, the privileging of the East Asian experience had remained unchallenged. Filipino American and South Asian scholars argued that the field did not sufficiently cover “the experience of people marked by histories of colonialism and U.S. imperialism” (Pelaud 47). Therefore, hybridity as a framework is very useful for analyzing power relations on macro- and micro levels. The word hybridity itself suggests a kind of dualism, which Pelaud clarifies not to be the case for this framework as one should not argue that a person has an equal footing in two cultures. That is never the case.

Donald Ranard writes, for instance, that Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation—those who belong neither to the first generation of adult immigrants nor to the second generation of U.S.-born children—are “a bridge between two cultures,” living “in two worlds with two sets of languages, rules, and customs.” This common understanding, when taken literally, runs the risk of reinforcing Orientalist conceptions of first and third worlds. It can overshadow the reality that subjectivity is for the most part more rooted in one location than the other and, more important, that there are major power differentials between the United States and Viet Nam [...] (Pelaud 50)

Reading *On Earth*, Ranard’s arguments seem to resonate with Little Dog’s experiences. It is important to note that, although hybridity is an exciting framework that aids our understanding of Vietnamese American narratives, the framework itself should not become a means of generalization. After all, *On Earth* goes well beyond mainstream refugee discourse. The novel, as previously argued, does not attempt to negotiate identities, but rather seeks new forms of belonging, through creative remembrance. It is in light of this, that hybridity becomes relevant to the intersectional analysis, as Lisa Lowe appears to suggest that Vietnamese Americans have developed adaptability in facing violent acts and oppressions carried out both by the U.S. state and Vietnam. Moreover, it is by looking at these border-crossing instances of violence that we may locate certain Vietnamese American texts as

global texts. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that Vuong's novel is an example of such cultural alternatives developed to survive and accommodate Asian bodies that are subjected to domination on multiple levels. The fact that *On Earth* destabilizes binary logic by destabilizing the English language itself shows us that a writer can offer cultural alternatives using the architecture of narrative to empower and recognize intersectional bodies. This thesis will also argue for how power appears to operate through memory, which is again deeply affected by narrative, fiction, textual records, and our readings of them.

Ocean Vuong is a Vietnamese American professor, poet, essayist, and novelist. Vuong has received several prizes for his prose and poetry, including the 2014 Ruth Lilly/Sargent Rosenberg fellowship from the Poetry Foundation and the 2017 T.S. Eliot Prize. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* received a MacArthur Grant award the same year it was published and spent six weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. Vuong was born in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam in 1988. His family was forced to flee to the Philippines, as police suspected that Ocean's mother was of mixed heritage. Rose was the daughter of a Vietnamese mother and an American Navy soldier, who met during the Vietnam War. The family eventually achieved asylum in the United States and settled in Hartford, Connecticut, the town in which *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is set. When the family arrived in the U.S., Ocean was only two years old.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous is a semi-autobiographical, epistolary novel, "a letter from a son to a mother who cannot read" (Vuong, *On Earth* blurb) The narrator, Little Dog, retells and unearths a family history through gathering and creatively verbalizing postmemories. The novel depicts the effects of war on a family struggling to build a new life in Hartford in a time of great turmoil. The Vietnam War, the Opioid Crisis, and 9/11 are among the catastrophes that constitute the historical backdrop of the novel.

Growing up with his mother and grandmother, having migrated to the U.S. as an infant, Little Dog experiences multiple tensions in terms of identity and belonging. His mother, Rose, barely speaks English, and Little Dog must learn at an early age to help her with translation. Rose suffers from post-traumatic stress due to American napalm raids in Vietnam and an abusive relationship with Little Dog's absent father. His grandmother, Lan, also has trauma-induced schizophrenia. Rose and Lan's traumas continually resurface and are experienced by Little Dog in moments of violence and tenderness. The oscillating nature of their relationships become a great topic of interest for the narrator, as he writes to allow an indirect reconciliation and intimacy between son and mother. More importantly, the narrator writes to sustain the memory of his mother.

Reading the novel, the reader gains insight into the hardships of immigrant families, war refugees, and victims of abuse. As Little Dog develops a romantic relationship with Trevor, a white boy that he meets while working at a tobacco farm, conflicts surrounding gender, racism, hegemonic masculinity, sexuality, substance abuse, and violence are introduced. These are experiences that the narrator draws from in writing a story that appears to not only cross state borders but unify national identities within an intersectional body of work.

The plot is very much centered around the American/Vietnamese main characters. It zooms in on lives within the diaspora, maintaining a closeness to the main characters. The novel does this, rather than dedicating itself disproportionately to the details of white patriarchy, commenting indirectly on how inequality is performed without dedicating its narrative to hegemony. The reader learns indirectly about such power structures through the lived experiences of the main characters, and the novel does not choose to privilege systems of domination in terms of drawing from its conflicts. In fact, the narrator does not use conflict to progress the novel's narrative. Instead, the novel latches onto its characters, allowing for a heartfelt, detailed depiction of their lives. Thus, the novel becomes a unique narratological space, accommodating that the characters can be explored on their own terms without being overshadowed by governance systems.

However, the effects of such governance are incommensurate with a story that would lead to any reconciliation between the novel's characters and the society they live in. The novel does not seek this at all; what it does instead of seeking the climax of reconciliation is to lay out a space in which the Asian bodies of the text can be recognized, and where their stories can be told. Vuong has argued himself that how tradition and how cultures carry stories indicate what they value. He believes that western narratology is phallic and capitalistic in nature, as the reader is emotionally manipulated and freed post-climax. Instead of employing the conflict of dualities to progress his story, he builds tension through proximity to the characters and the frictions of words offered by poetry (Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin).

Conflicts based on duality often entail narratives of destruction in which opposites seek out and destroy one another. *On Earth* is not a battle of dualities, but rather sits outside dualities and disrupts them overall. Vuong refers to the Kishotenketsu structure in which conflict is not centered when he argues: "When you don't have a plot driven by conflict, what you get is people." (Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin). This statement is very much in keeping with marginalized voices preceding his own, such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha,

whose texts were built up of frictions, streams of consciousness, and postmemories, maintaining a closeness to the narrator; and Toni Morrison, who has been a front figure in developing narratological spaces that empower marginalized voices. An intersectional approach to text should inquire into how cultures carry and privilege stories. By unpacking the structuring of marginalized stories, it becomes clear that they challenge the very structure of dominant texts that are structured around dualities and the violence that produces them. (Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin) The few white characters in *On Earth* are essential to note as they are put under an alternative gaze than a white gaze. They are positioned in and constrained by a working-class reality, as well as drug abuse, and contribute to indirectly depicting the complexities of American (gender, ethnic, sexual) identities as deeply conceived by violent dominations. One will notice here that roles have been reversed regarding master narratives in which BIPOC characters often are used as tools for the character developments of the text's white characters.

Above all, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a work of creating a language that can serve as a vehicle to carry the [hi]stories of intersectional bodies; the novel represents an act of figuratively interpreting events, retelling them to oneself to find beauty, intimacy, and connectedness. The novel navigates borders of identities created through language as a hegemonic device and becomes an architecture of retrospectively navigating landscapes of identities, trauma, and memory. It maintains proximity to the Asian American bodies of the text and their experiences, which are not driven by dualities, but rather sit outside such dualities. In this regard, *On Earth* becomes a spatial transgression that cuts through the lines of racial and socioeconomic spaces and concepts that might otherwise remain separated. The novel is divided into three unnamed chapters, separated only by blank space, each attempting to reset and begin again in telling the story. As the novel's narrative breaks with chronology, my analysis will do the same.

1. REMEMBRANCE

This section of my analysis is dedicated to discussing the nature of memory as conveyed by the novel, how this relates to hegemony, historical erasure, popular memory, and how the novel itself is an act of creative remembrance. This chapter will also examine the similarities between fiction writing and the writing of history. Furthermore, this chapter will establish how remembering and forgetting are acts of agency, and how texts can become either sites of remembrance, or forgetting; how they can become sites of erasure. This is significant to an intersectional reading, as looking at how texts remember and forget, also helps us identify how social inequality is either produced or challenged by a text.

Let me begin again. Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are. I am writing to go back to the time, at the rest stop in Virginia, when you stared, horror-struck, at the taxidermy buck hung over the soda machine by the restrooms, its antlers shadowing your face. In the car, you kept shaking your head. “I don’t understand why they would do that. Can’t they see it’s a corpse? A corpse should go away, not get stuck forever like that. (3)

The narrator explores the distance between writer and recipient. Little Dog writes to his mother to ‘reach’ her. However, the act of writing itself also creates distance between them, thus creating a paradox. A letter suggests distance, as letters are usually sent to reach someone far away. Moreover, the fact that Rose cannot read and that the letters are unintelligible to her unless read *to* her reinforces notions of distance. Arguably, Little Dog is writing that, to reach his mother, he must take the narrative someplace else; into a past that cannot be recovered, only remembered. This is something which is recurring throughout the novel: “I’m breaking us apart again so that I might carry us somewhere else” (62).

Throughout the novel, the narrator conflates his writing with manipulating people, spaces, time, and knowledge. Quite immediately, the novel develops a theme regarding space and time, as it relates to the powerful effects narratives have on our perceptions of the world, the spaces we occupy, and our histories. A reader will notice the increasing distance writing creates between son and mother, and ask: “What can one do to cross that distance?” I would like to argue that this is done through the indirect intimacy offered by remembrance and memory representations.

The verb ‘remember’ itself suggests a beginning anew; the prefix ‘re’ - indicates ‘again’ – something beginning anew – and ‘member’ refers to a piece of a structure or a body. To remember, then, is to piece together the past as a structure created through narration; to remember is to be in dialogue with oneself, looking back on oneself.

Epistemological questions arise, as the concept of remembering suggests a restructuring, a relocation of fragments: Does memory create something entirely new, something distinguished from the past events in themselves? Little Dog appears to express that remembering creates distance, which one can argue relates to the potential for memory to be distinguishable from the past itself. Nevertheless, Little Dog still writes to go back to a specific memory of his mother, Rose, staring at a taxidermy buck, “horror-struck”. This memory is significant, as it evokes themes of the ghostly, estrangement, art, and memory. Rose, coming from a culture where death is associated with disappearance; the lives claimed by the war, people who would not be buried, remain as ghostly bodies disintegrated by war, and undermined by a western historical master narrative. Having to disappear oneself, displaced because of war, the Vietnamese culture in which representations of the dead should not be set close to the living; all of this accumulates into an understanding of death as associated with departure and disintegration.

One could argue further that the taxidermy buck itself functions as a representation of the ghostly, as well as the haunting effects of trauma induced by violence. This interpretation sets the taxidermy buck and Rose in a close relationship, as Rose must struggle with trauma; the death that did not occur yet haunts the body. The taxidermy buck arguably symbolizes how death and violence are preserved in American culture through art, which supports the theme of estrangement, America, through the expression of art, being unsympathetic towards victims of war. Ironically, the fact that Little Dog is writing about his mother preserves her after she passes away. However, it is not death itself that is preserved; it is instead survival and perseverance sustained by remembrance. The symbol of the taxidermy buck effectively motivates a recognition of western art as greatly involved in colonial violence and its preservation in popular memory. Rose, therefore, sees herself reflected in the eyes of the animal; violence being preserved in her trauma. One will do well to notice here how directly art is associated with memory, as art has the power to preserve it.

Memory is fragmented in nature, as is Little Dog’s narration, which appears to piece together his story, aligning it with the stories of his ancestors. “Let me begin again” suggests that there are stories that come before his narration. It suggests heritage; it also suggests regret, uncertainty, or a desire to revise, to improve. This act of reaching, and gathering a [hi]story, requires great creativity, which is apparent in the narrator’s use of allegory to fill in distorted and displaced historical gaps created by war and forced migration. This scene also evokes associations with trauma and how traumatic events manifest within the traumatized individual, as the traumatic effect is involuntarily revisited, beginning again and again.

Through this mode of writing, Little Dog appears to achieve an indirect intimacy with his mother, no matter if she gets to read it or not. Writing as a gathering of memories aligns his mother's life story, her traumatic past, with his own story. In aligning these histories, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* crosses borders, synchronously remembering their life histories in Vietnam and the U.S. The fragmented nature of this writing coincides with the nature of memory, yet it is by falling apart that the narratives appear to begin organizing a process of reparation. This is done by turning the inaccessible truths of the past into art, both in the forms of poetry and prose: "I wanted to start with truth and end with art." (Late Night with Seth Meyers). It is through this mode of writing, that the novel becomes a narratological space that reveals and resists erasure and destabilizes hegemonies that render Vietnamese bodies ghostly.

In the process of writing, the narrator experiences epistemological anxieties, as remembering cannot reproduce reality, yet is vital in terms of its preservation. Here, it also becomes clear that language has great power in terms of offering a 'space' of continuation. Therefore, it is useful to think of literature as a form of architecture, something which can be built for different representational purposes. It appears that the writer notices that the architecture of the American language does not accommodate his mother's memories or her interlocked nature. A reader notices, throughout their reading that American English appears instead to be preserving the same violent acts that organize the hegemonies disrupted by the novel. By breaking apart this linguistic structure, the writer starts to rebuild. Hence, the notions of the English language as the road towards integration in the English-speaking nation is also disrupted, as it cannot afford the words to describe intersectional bodies or help those whose tongues are marred by war. I will discuss language as it relates to hegemony further in the next chapter of this thesis.

Everything I wrote began with maybe and perhaps and ended with I think or I believe. But my doubt is everywhere, Ma. Even when I know something to be true as bone I fear the knowledge will dissolve, will not, despite my writing it, stay real. I'm breaking us apart again so that I might carry us somewhere else—where, exactly, I'm not sure. Just as I don't know what to call you—White, Asian, orphan, American, mother? (62)

Echoing Qiu Miaoji, who is quoted in the epigraph, Little Dog expresses a desire for writing to give his mother a 'plot of land', a place of belonging, ground to stand firmly on. Little Dog believes that writing possesses the power to accommodate and empower identities, and this is very much the aim of his writing, which then greatly coincides with Little Dog's desire to "fill in our blanks, silences, stutters [...]" (31), where he expresses a desire to carry him and his family and heal them using language as a vehicle. However, he also experiences intense

epistemological anxiety; he fears that even as he is writing to reconcile his relationship with his mother, and their memories, even the truth might dissolve. This anxiety is linked with Rose's intersecting identities: "White, Asian, orphan, American, mother?". Little Dog is uncertain related to the categorical, divisive nature of the language used to describe identities that are, in reality, intersecting and nuanced, experienced accumulatively. Therefore, language as a hegemonic dividing force is further explored in the novel. The anxieties expressed by Little Dog also coincide with a perception of ethnicity as a "dialectical process" that emerges through interaction and is negotiated using language (Nagel 42).

Little Dog appears to be writing to make sense of this, too; wanting to break these segmented tropes of identity apart to carry himself and his mother somewhere else. Here, there is a sense of inexpressibility, as language very much relies on binary tropes of identity. A reader notices that Little Dog does not know what to call his mother. This tells them that the English language cannot recognize a body constituted by more than binary logics of identity. This is interesting, as it suggests that in "wearing" the English language, one is in a continual encounter with the white gaze as it adheres to the language itself. If a language does not accommodate all bodies, and rather separates them into tropes and stereotypes, how can we rely on language as a carrier of knowledge, of memory? In understanding the world in fictional terms, and in breaking apart language and its narratological structures, one might begin to unearth hidden pieces of knowledge. Even the writing of history is, arguably, fiction:

Stories are not lived; there is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a true story, this is virtually a contradiction of terms. All stories are fictions. Which means, of course, that they can only be true in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which a figure of speech can be true. Is this true enough? (White 9)

Hayden White, an American historian, and theorist, argues that stories are not concrete, not singular, and that there is no *true* story. He argues that the writing of history itself is based on many figurative interpretations of events. This can seem unnerving; however, White believes that the legitimacy of writing can be measured to some extent. Instead of expressing epistemological anxieties relating to this argument, White insists that this perspective on the writing of history offers creative freedom, which is important for someone to be able to represent their community.

This revelation of contingency is not a capitulation to nihilism but rather an affirmation of freedom, a freedom born of the necessity of tropes. That is to say, once the fundamentally rhetorical nature of the historical writing is made manifest, it can have the effect of liberating the historian, not necessarily to satisfy a will to power (though this cannot be excluded) but to realize his or her creative role in the self-understanding of his or her community. (Doran xxi)

White makes an argument regarding the principles of historical writing, which raises questions regarding the relationships between ‘real’ and ‘fiction’, and between interpretation and representation. Fiction contributes greatly to the writing of history, as art is, like all media, situated in and affected by contemporary culture and history. Writings of fiction and writings of history also primarily rely upon, and are founded on, similar rhetorical tropes. White’s metahistory brings our attention to the constructedness of history, and how that ties in with literature. It should also be added, considering *On Earth* as a queer novel, that queer fiction has played a significant role in developing a queer historical identity. As queer narratives have throughout history not been accepted into the dominating historical narratives, fiction has played a significant role, as writers of fiction can narrate the historical contexts enveloping their subjective histories. “A writer’s handling of reality is affected by [...] whether [...] he perceives and therefore looks at a phenomenon and its interconnection or in its dislocation; in its rest or in- its motion; in its mutability or immutability [...]” (Wa Thiong’o 78). Ngugi wa Thiong’o points out how reality as a concept relies on the same perceptions that fiction relies upon, that being our reading[s] of the narrative. Therefore, the writer’s attention and their perspectives are central to the writing of history. This is important in discussing diasporic, queer literature, as these narratives shift readers’ attention to neglected histories, thus preserving them.

Kathy Kessler argues in her essay “Rewriting History in Fiction: Elements of Postmodernism in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Later Novels,” that “Because Ngugi merges elements of fiction and historical fact, he is able to create a sense of immediacy and of scope in his treatment of a nation in crisis and in his attempt to emerge as a nurturing force in a profoundly unstable world.” (78). Kessler describes a critical function of postmodern writing: challenging the traditions that inform the world, hence our understanding of our histories and identities. *On Earth* appears to possess similar functions regarding its unreliable novelist and how it merges fictional and poetic elements with its clear historical positionality. Despite expressing uncertainty related to writing as a distancing reconstruction of reality, the novel, as it unearths neglected histories, possesses the power to resist erasure.

Jörn Rüsen, in his discussion regarding the place of Hayden White in the history of metahistory, questions what *meaningful* means (Rüsen 97). This question arises when looking at the traditions of historical writing, where “methodological rationality of historical research has focused on the method of source critique” (Rüsen 97). He then goes on to argue that, according to White, historiography is not characterized as sequencing of perceived facts alone. He argues that the quality of historiography relies on the method of interpretation,

which consists of four steps: the first step is to formulate the leading question for investigating and collecting information; the second step is to critique the “remnants” of the past, dissecting sources; the third step is to interpret, creating an “explanatory order”; and the final step, which White emphasizes, is representation, the narratological presentation of the past. This is relevant to our reading of literature because White establishes that the methods of writing history and writing fiction are similar, overlapping methods (97-98). This, I argue, is important, prerequired knowledge in terms of an intersectional analysis that interrogates how socio-historical contexts are implicated in cultural artifacts, as well as how text can empower and privilege histories in popular memory. A distinguishing characteristic between these writings may be that historical writing intends to achieve objectivity, whereas fiction commits itself to the emotional work of [re]telling stories. Nevertheless, both history and fiction should include the human experience. This can be applied to Vuong’s writing, as it works to recollect memories and process remnants of the past to make sense of them.

Similar to how Vuong’s writing is described, the writing of history is an act of gathering and representing a fragmented past that cannot be recovered, only remembered: “If we are lucky, the end of the sentence is where we might begin. If we are lucky, something has passed on, another alphabet written in the blood, sinew and neuron; ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast” (9). *Little Dog* couples the visceral and the historical, histories of ancestors motivating flight, and migration. Once again, the narrator uses animals as an allegory of the human experience. Here migratory birds are used to symbolize the departure of migrants and refugees. What is interesting about this symbolism is that departure is characterized as a hereditary experience. However, in the past this has been an experience of significant loss, not being meant for one to outlast. Taking this into account, one could argue that *Little Dog* experiences pressure regarding this ancestry to turn the narrative of the defeated refugee around, transcending stereotypical refugee narratives. The reader’s notion that experience is described as hereditary connects to concepts of cultural trauma, collective memory, and postmemory. Moreover, the “alphabet written in the blood” exemplifies *Little Dog*’s hyperconscious relationship to narrativity as structured by language, and its importance regarding his family’s preservation.

Unlike historiography, *Little Dog* relies on sources that are harder to distinguish: cultural trauma and postmemory. Daniel Ariew questions: “can trauma be represented at all? If it can be represented, are there limits of the representation?” (5). Cathy Caruth defines *trauma* as “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a

reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). Caruth draws from Freud in arguing that representations of trauma cannot be direct representations due to the latency of trauma. The traumatic event[s] is not the reference point of any narrative dealing with it. It is instead the forgotten memory that becomes an indirect reference. Therefore, in becoming traumatized, a person is distanced from the memory of the event itself, forced to process the psychological wounds it has inflicted. This, in turn, leads to the inexpressible nature of trauma. However, through fiction, one might be able to find ways to identify, verbalize, and process trauma. Here, in terms of our intersectional reading of the novel, it is important to note that intersectional analysis has been significant for the development of trauma theory and vice versa. As texts articulate themselves regarding traumatic histories, they work to locate violent experiences and hegemonic inequalities that induced the trauma. More importantly, the verbalizing process gives us information about how the narrator turns forgetting into remembering, reinserting themselves within a history, a reference point.

Little Dog writes about how one day when Lan was watching television they saw “a herd of buffalo run, single file, off a cliff, a whole steaming row of them thundering off the mountain in Technicolor” (179). Lan wonders why the buffaloes would run off the cliff and die like that. Little Dog, not knowing the answer, suggests that they are just following their family. Therefore, one can suggest that the buffaloes function as an allegory for the hereditary aspects of trauma and how children follow their parents on destructive paths. The image of the cliff seems inevitable, as the herd, the family, races towards it. Death and destruction are passed on through the family. Rose flees from Vietnam to protect her son, yet the abuse and warfare she has survived have made her abusive. Violence is then passed on, as she hits Little Dog to teach him lessons. When the family hears gunshots in the neighborhood, they are terrified, reliving the war and passing that traumatic experience on to Little Dog. As the trauma, the story of a wound, forces one to reexperience the psychological wounding, they must also fear for a traumatic future, distorting notions of time as the past and the future are not isolable in terms of trauma. This might explain why Little Dog’s writing breaks with chronology, which could be to address a wound that also surpasses chronology.

Although death haunts the main characters of the novel across generations, the allegory of the migratory birds seems to suggest that there are alternatives that give life to one’s successors, as they pass on their knowledge and urge them to “fly south,” to take the narrative of destruction and turn it into something they were not meant to outlast. Looking at Lan’s storytelling, although it is shifting, distorted by her trauma-induced schizophrenia, she “gestures towards collective healing” by opening the wounds of her traumatic memory and

passing them on to her grandson who can, with that knowledge, support her, and his family's healing (Pham). Rose gestures towards the same collective healing when she takes in her queer son and opens up to him about the traumas of abortion. This, one can recognize in Little Dog's writing, as a recollective work that serves to resist the erasure of his family's stories, and altogether functions as a healing project. Moreover, this healing project becomes a part of overcoming, through recollection, the hereditary harms caused by acts of violence that are structured by forces of domination.

When it comes to Vuong, much of this work can be identified as a friction between words, memory-fragments, and the creative remembering of his family's lives. *On Earth*, therefore, does not only become a work of conveying the traumatic experience to a reader but also to reach into a past one has not lived oneself, that one still carries the traumatic weight of, transferred across generations:

While the major historical events remain true, the fictional story connects the second generation to the events of the first generation's lifetime. Heckner claims, "It not only establishes a lineage between the second and the survivor generation but also reconfigures traditional modes of reception by reintroducing the visceral. (qtd. in Ariew 63)

According to Daniel Ariew, fiction appears to function as a connecting bridge between the first generation, the generation suffering from first-hand trauma, and their children, who must live with the generational trauma of the family. Fiction creates a sense of lineage for the writer; hence fiction aids the writer in conveying their individual histories. This thesis tightly ties the writing of history with fiction, further arguing that this connection demands a reader's attention. This attention should motivate a critical approach in terms of how literature serves as representation and therefore shapes our perceptions of others and the world. This is especially true regarding the narratives that sit outside the hetero-white-cis-male master narrative which challenge traditions of writing:

Paradoxically, while traditions form and inform "the textual world through which people develop a sense of self and collective identity and relate to one another," the critical postmodernist argument follows that traditions are not or should not be viewed as unified totalizing text but as most valuable in the ways they "demonstrate the importance of constituting history as a dialogue among a variety of voices as they struggle within asymmetrical relations of power [...] [They] serve to place people self-consciously in their histories by making them aware of the memories constituted in difference, struggle and hope. (Ariew 63)

Kathy Kessler describes how postmodern writing, in breaking with traditions of writing informing the self and the world, presents itself as a form of "counter-memory" (79), a memory that reveals complex and undermined identities in terms of prior popular representation. This argument, which couples the writing of history with the writing of fiction, echoes remarkably with Little Dog's writing, which can be understood as a kind of

reverse narration. In this reverse narration, there is, as argued, a nurturing force; in representing the hybridity of Vietnamese Americans, Little Dog manages to offer a “vision of continuity in a dislocated world” (82): “Maybe we’ll be the opposite of buffaloes ... We’ll grow wings and spill over the cliff as a generation of monarchs, heading home” (192). *On Earth*, offers a narrative of hope, as it becomes an accommodating, preserving text that gestures towards cultures that allow for healing. Additionally, Kessler connects writing to how power is structured and how, in terms of remembrance, texts implicate to us what should be remembered. While the tragic lives of animals have been used to describe human lives, Little Dog breaks away from these narratives. He discovers through his creative remembrance that memory itself becomes a tool for his family’s healing, bringing them together, so that they may transcend an end like the one suggested by the buffalo allegory.

If the writing of history is understood as a reverse narration, as figurative interpretations of events, then there is no clear border between it, and fiction writing (apart from the writer’s motive to depict what is evaluated as objective truth). “And so with history: to confer meaning retrospectively, to see one event in the light of another as narrativistically connected (if not constructed), is precisely what history does” (Doran xxxi). Little Dog is no historian, yet the letter he writes serves as a documentation of his family history seen through the lenses of poetry and fiction. Identity is built up of narrative. As Oliver Sacks has written: “It might be said that each of us constructs and lives ‘a narrative,’ and that this narrative is us, our identities” (110). This is reflected in *On Earth* which is, arguably, a complex construction of identities; it is a lived text. As identity is built up of narrative, it becomes clear that cultural texts demand intersectional analysis, as this reveals to us what the cultural memory contains.

Though literally chronological, history is figurally anachronistic: for a later event alters the meaning of an earlier event whose fulfillment [...] “is to be understood as the product or effect of a kind of reverse causation.” Hence figural interpretation becomes in this example the will to see a later event as if it were intrinsically related to an earlier event, in the absence of any efficient-casual connection: to choose a past is to choose a corresponding present. The idea of history as a linear series of fixed points of reference is thus replaced by the idea of a dynamic system of retrospective correspondences or “repetitions” [...] (Doran xxxi)

Much like how White describes the writing of history as retrospective correspondence, or “repetition,” as previously stated, Little Dog’s letter is repeating itself, beginning again and again. “To tell that story, then, is to rewrite it—or revive it.” (6), James Ricks writes, arguing that the epistolary style of Vuong’s novel does not follow a set of chronology. The novel’s rememberings occur in both the U.S. and Vietnam and skip between the protagonist’s childhood and adolescence. The narrative transcends spatial and temporal isolations to effectively “superimpose these fragmented stories onto one unified plane of remembrance”

(6). Here, Ricks describes an essential function of the novel. Through remembrance, the narrator can break chronology and connect fragmented stories, regardless of where they are situated geographically. In doing so, the narrator can simultaneously make connections regardless of where these histories occur; the narrator's stories intersect, whether they are situated in the U.S. or Vietnam. Thus, the novel's narrative is a global one. Ricks also describes how the novel successfully emulates the accumulative nature of experience and how that brings the narrator to a unified plane of remembrance. This function is central in terms of the novel's role as a global narrative. This is significant, as the narrative of *On Earth* can stand outside the hegemonies of national borders, which in turn allows the novel to accommodate bodies that are more complex than what the margins of nationality can afford.

The novel's narrative transcends national borders, manifesting itself as a global narrative. This is significant, as discourse surrounding migrant and refugee texts often separate between a "here" and "there," a "before" and "after", as if the departure from one place to the other would displace the continuity of a person's lived experience and their identity. Moreover, such discourse decouples migrant and refugee literature from the literature of the host country, marking it as "other". This is deeply problematic, as such discourse appears to decouple the migrant's writing from the host country's tradition of authorship, which in turn expels the migrant from being part of the nation's text culture; the fact that a migrant text navigates a state of in-betweenness should not entail that they are received as not-belonging and deviant. These texts challenge the hegemonic status of binary concepts and nationalism. As a particularly western concept, 'the refugees' appear to betray their purpose of reinforcing western-patriotism, as they challenge the very idea of national borders having transfer value to human identity. The human experiences conveyed by such texts show the reader that human experience cannot be limited to nationality. Instead, these texts explore identity in its particularity and accumulated multiplicity. In encountering texts that navigate the intersectionality of "refugeeness," one requires a framework for analysis.

White points out that the writing of history is also very much informed by the present, because, to write history is to determine a causality leading to the present as it is perceived. The purpose of historical writing is to inform the decisions we make in the present, because making sense of the past is also to make sense of the present. Ross Poole, in his account regarding collective memory, writes that the role of memory "is not simply to provide us a cognitive access to the past; it is also to provide a route by which responsibility for past events is transmitted to the present." (152). This is a compelling argument, as Poole connects past and present through memory as a source of responsibility. This has great implications in

terms of our reading of memory representations, as they may inform us about how we should act towards a better future. Memory, according to Poole, is not just cognitive, it is also normative. By reading about Little Dog's experience of writing a reader also gains insight in terms of how memory informs him as a character, as he works to create an accommodating narratological space.

In reverse narrating his family history, Little Dog works to preserve memory, and choose what to make of the past. In this, there is a sense of risk, responsibility, and creative freedom. "Even after all these years, the contrast between our skin surprises me—the way a blank page does when my hand, gripping a pen, begins to move through its spatial field, trying to act upon its life without marring it. But by writing, I mar it. I change, embellish, and preserve you all at once." (85) Here, a reader will notice how the narrator evokes a deep connection between the narratological, the spatial, and the physical body. Moving a pen across a page is described as moving across a spatial field, suggesting that to write is to move through and occupy space. The proximity between the imageries of 'skin' and the paper of the page suggests that to write is to write onto the skin, like a tattoo. Little Dog, in many ways, is writing the body into being, occupying a narratological space. He describes this as a process of marring the body, and the narratological space itself. In other words, resisting erasure is described as a somatic experience, as the body contains the narrative, but is also carried by the narrative, as it maintains as true one's presence in the world. Thus, I argue that despite its marring, altering effects, the writing's preservative capacities remain triumphant.

As two focus points of this thesis are to discuss the importance of remembrance, and fiction as a [re]writing of history, it is relevant to discuss the relationship between the narrator and the novelist. Roland Barthes once argued that the author is dead; I would like to argue that the author has survived by writing, although they are shrouded and protected by the ambiguities of a fictional novelist. In reading and listening to the discourse surrounding *On Earth*, one will notice an unclear distinction between where Ocean Vuong ends, and Little Dog begins. It can be argued that Little Dog serves as an author surrogate; they share much of the same biography, born in Ho Chi Minh City and brought to the U.S. as infants. The very title of the novel is taken from one of Vuong's autobiographical poems, from his collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. It can be argued that Little Dog is a mediation between life writing and creative re-articulation.

Although this is not necessarily relevant in terms of analyzing the novel, what is worthy of analysis is the fact that Vuong is disrupting the idea of an unreliable narrator, replacing it with an unreliable author. Vuong wonders what would happen if the reader

encountered a novelist who is “not okay” and if the dream, the novel, collapses. In the middle section, the novel's very structure collapses, and the prose becomes poetry (Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin). Vuong reverts to a style of writing he is more familiar with to convey otherwise inexpressible emotions. Moreover, what this does, effectively, is disrupt the notion that a novel is a contract. Taking this into account, by breaking the contract of the novel's fiction, the narrator can reclaim their agency, offering an alternative mode of carrying their stories. One might argue that the dialogue between novelist and narrator is the strongest here, as breaking with the novel's structure arguably is breaking with its fiction. The novel seemingly has two overlapping voices. Vuong emulates Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* as he explores, through poetry, how frictions between words can stimulate memories and associations and perhaps even tell stories that language otherwise would fail to articulate. Through poetry, Vuong arguably locates some of the fragmented pieces lost from memory. The collapse of the epistolary style of the novel reinforces the reader's notion that the novel betrays chronology and spatial isolation to gather pieces of intergenerational, transnational experience.

Although the novel begins as a letter, a contemporary message, the narrative presented in the novel reaches back to times before Little Dog was born. Little Dog describes storytelling as leaving “only the bones, which remain untold” (43). Through his writing, he appears to be reaching for what one may call a skeleton of postmemory. Little Dog makes this description of storytelling in tandem with writing a tale about a group of men eating the brain of a Macaque ape, to prevent impotence: “The men will eat until the animal is empty, the monkey slowing as they spoon, its limbs heavy and listless. When nothing's left, when all of its memories dissolve into the men's bloodstreams, the monkey dies. Another bottle will be opened.” (43). The narrator repeatedly compares the capabilities of macaques to that of humans, suggesting that this story is an allegory for the erasure of historical memory as a result of violence. The narrator uses the allegories of the “ruined lives of animals” (241) to tell a human story. At the end of the novel, Rose compares herself to a monkey, creating a parallel: “Why didn't they get me? Well, 'cause I was fast, baby. Some monkeys are so fast, they're more like ghosts, you know?” (241). This parallel is significant because it evokes themes of refugeeness, erasure, and invisibility as a way of survival. Like the monkey's memories being devoured by men, the memory of the Vietnamese has been undermined, downplayed, and, in some cases, outright erased. Also, something worthy of note, is that the image of a group of men consuming the memories of the ape, suggests that erasure is a process relating to patriarchal hegemony. “Like other communities in exile, Vietnamese in

the United States feel keenly the urgency to forge unified histories, identities, and memories” (Espiritu 3). Considering the monkey allegory, the fact that Rose escapes strongly suggests that surviving also means being remembered. Therefore, the novel couples biography with survival, and indirectly comments on memory as a site of oppression.

The novel challenges how identities are formed under the pressures of white mainstream culture, which has undermined and silenced the histories of people of color. “It should not surprise anyone that Vietnamese Americans would want to remember amidst all that forgetting. One does not become recognizably human until one acts in one’s history. And for that, one needs to have history” (Thu-Huong 159) writes Nguyễn-Vo Thu-Huong, arguing that Vietnamese Americans are subject to forgetting and are, therefore, dehumanized. It is interesting how Huong ties humanity so directly to history as if to say that to be human is to possess a history. One can argue that Little Dog shares this perspective, as he believes that writing can preserve a person. This can also be argued considering that *On Earth* conveys anxieties surrounding oblivion and the erasure of memory.

The Vietnam War is not forgotten in its entirety. However, nations remember differently. It is the most documented war in U.S. history. However, what has been forgotten in the western public memory is the Vietnamese, who have been pushed to the margins of a western-written history. Yên lê Espiritu argues that the western discourse surrounding the Vietnam War conceals the “costs borne by the Vietnamese,” and that the war’s high visibility nevertheless does not account for the continuing suffering of dislocation and trauma: “the highly visible can actually be a type of invisibility [...]” (18). Espiritu emphasizes that there needs to be discourse surrounding “the endings that are not over” (18). The post-Vietnam era is, arguably, an unfitting name for an era marked by continual endings manifested in traumatic wounds. She argues that Americans have been obsessed with the Vietnam War “as an American tragedy,” (18). As a result, the Vietnamese’s role in the war, as collaborators, victims, enemies, and as participants in the war, has been overshadowed. This becomes clear when looking at American-made popular media surrounding the Vietnam War. Take the highly acclaimed 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* as an example, in which the Vietnamese serve as a mere backdrop, on the run. This film echoes imagery taken from photographs, where we see U.S. troops posed as victorious, heroic, and powerful, whereas images of the Vietnamese are women and children on the run. Vietnamese bodies are thus styled as decorations to embellish and sustain American exceptionalism and glorified warfare. *Apocalypse Now* is only one part of the canon that feeds into American apologia upheld through various media (e.g., *The Deer Hunter*, *Full-Metal Jacket*, and *Platoon*).



Under sniper fire, a Vietnamese woman carries a child to safety, as U.S. marines storm the village of My Son, near Da Nang, searching for Vietcong insurgents, April 25, 1965. (Credit: Eddie Adams)

Regarding how American media is directing the sympathy of the viewer at the U.S. Army and U.S. citizens, images presented to us in art carry significant power in terms of our perception of the world, as it can distract the public from the suffering and killing of 3.3 million people. Some images seem to reaffirm and reinforce the Western-constructed agenda of using the concept of ‘refugee’ as an opportunity to recast oneself as the savior, the Vietnamese being posed as fleeing from Communists. However, those same refugees were made refugees, because of American imperialist warfare. Rather than criticizing the imperialist misadventures of the U.S., this canon, which deeply affects collective memory, serves to undermine the Vietnamese experience and existence as a people and as central agents in the historical developments of the war. The roles that the Vietnamese played were many. However, in reading the American discourse surrounding the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese are stripped of their agency, becoming ghostly figures in the collective western narratives. In popular media, U.S. soldiers are at the forefront, and military culture, a weaponized masculine culture, is romanticized, overshadowing the slaughter of civilians: “Who will be lost in the story we tell ourselves? Who will be lost in ourselves? A story, after all, is a kind of swallowing. To open a mouth, in speech, is to leave only the bones, which remain untold. It is a beautiful country because you are still breathing” (43).

Remembrance is, thematically, placed at the center of Little Dog’s writing. What is interesting about this passage is how Little Dog describes the writing, which has been discussed as a vehicle of remembrance, as a swallowing. To articulate and tell a story is described as devouring meat, leaving only the bones. To write and to remember, then, is also to forget. Telling a story creates distance, as one departs from the events in themselves and

reinterprets them, digesting the information provided by memory. The writer moves away from descriptions of remembrance as a devouring, therefore, also a disintegration as a theme, as the narrator returns to the mother. Her presence makes the U.S. beautiful to him. Beauty is found in the living and our re-membered stories. In this extract, we notice that Little Dog comments on the dangers of forgetting, as we, ourselves, can be lost in the stories we and the collective body of readers/writers choose to tell, and therefore privilege.

“Forgetting is of course an inescapable element in remembering. Schudson puts it succinctly when he states that “[m]emory is distortion since memory is invariably and inevitably selective. A way of seeing is a way of not seeing, a way of remembering is a way of forgetting, too”, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger write in a chapter of *Social Forces* (1107). By recollecting the past and by writing, we choose not only something to privilege but also something to forget. As commemorative activities seem to build their basis on historiography and other records/artifacts, people who have not been written into such records are subtracted from such gregariousness. “Thus, memory, like narrative, is “constructed around its own blind spots and silences.” (Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger 1107). Given that the Vietnam war is so thoroughly documented, one could argue that these silences do not occur in terms of what texts are accessible to the public. However, I want to argue that silences are not only found in terms of recorded history, but also in terms of our reading of it. As we reproduce these records in art, essential details such as Vietnamese suffering seem to have been repeatedly omitted. In our textual co-production of western collective memory, we also encounter silences due to reading that privileges a master narrative of a specifically *American* tragedy. With this in mind, we must take responsibility for our history of reading historical records. In short, a reader is also responsible for their readings of texts, which feed into writing and remembrance. Therefore, an intersectional reading, which makes silences visible, is necessary, so that we may criticize texts and work towards greater representational and social justice.

Reading about the Mỹ Lai massacre in which U.S. forces massacred 400 unarmed civilians, gang-raped and mutilated women's bodies, and brutally murdered children as young as 12, we are told a different history than that of an American tragedy. Vietnamese suffering has been completely decoupled from war studies and pushed into the margins of a past grieved only by the surviving Vietnamese and their children, who must live with the remaining trauma and postmemories. This, too, has been decoupled from war studies, being classified as part of refugee studies. This decoupling ultimately leads to the forgetting of the U.S. as the nation structuring the mass departure of Vietnamese and the loss of at least 3.3

million lives (Espiritu 17). “The nonrecognition of Vietnamese losses raises the question “what makes for a grievable life?” and even “what is real?” (Espiritu 17).



Vietnamese villagers killed by American soldiers during the My Lai massacre in 1968.
(Credit: Ronald S. Haeblerle)

Altogether, it becomes very clear that popular texts play a significant role, as they manifest themselves as sites of both erasure and remembrance, structuring popular memory and forgetting. In other words, when looking at writing and reading as acts of remembrance, we also encounter stutters and silences that may privilege one group of people over another. It becomes clear that power operates through memory:

As a consequence of “the masculinist hypervisibility of American representations of the Vietnam War” and the concomitant discounting of Vietnamese (especially of South Vietnamese) accounts of the war, the most that we have are fragmented “flashes” of memory, of partial and imperfect recollections. Looking for and calling attention to the lost and missing subjects of history are critical to any political project. In a different context, Toni Morrison has instructed us to be mindful that “invisible things are not necessarily not-there.” How do we write about absences? (Espiritu 20)

In many ways, writing history is to write something into existence. Therefore, the discounting, especially of the South Vietnamese people, has left writers searching for what makes up that existence, what has been crossed out of history, and, in turn, popular memory. Espiritu argues that engaging in war and refugee studies is characterized as searching, as one is reading and listening for things that are seemingly not there. She describes these stories as “fragmentary testimonies” (Espiritu 19); to write about war and diaspora, in many ways, is to write ghost stories. As narratives have been overwritten, authors appear to be working on rewriting absences into presences, which means developing a counter-narrative. For the 1.5

generation, much of their writing appears to be reaching for, and collecting, postmemories; memories that are not there, yet still are:

I remember the table, which is to say I am putting it together. Because someone opened their mouth and built a structure with words and now I am doing the same each time I see my hands and think table, think beginnings. I remember running my fingers along the edges, studying the bolts and washers I created in my mind. I remember crawling underneath, checking for chewed gum, the names of lovers, but finding only bits of dried blood, splinters. I remember this beast with four legs hammered out of a language not yet my own. (222)

To turn absences into presences, Little Dog turns to the deep connections between language and memory. In this extract, we see how a table is illustrated using words, and how language is manifesting the memory of the table, its sensations, and associations. Here, Little Dog uses the table, a place of gathering in the home, to describe a broken home, and the time when his father was still around. Language, in this extract, appears to be so connected to the physical world, as if the table is hammered, made real, using words. In Little Dog's mind, to write is to manifest, to make evident. If the ghosts are named, they will lose their ghostly veils; that is to say, if the "complex" and "multifaceted" legacies of the Vietnamese experience are written down, and turned into words, they will resist the erasure structured in a negligent collective memory. "The past is not past. What has happened before remains, and we are living with complex and multifaceted lasting legacies. We need a frame that is attendant to such complexity" (33-34), write Erica B. Edwards and Jennifer Esposito.

Edwards and Esposito are calling for an intersectional analysis of texts that would attend to the complexity of fragmented stories such as *On Earth*. The purpose of such an analysis is to interrogate the textual world in terms of how social inequality is performed, including the erasure of the history of marginalized groups: "Intersectional theory is an experiential/epistemological/ political/structural project working across and within categories of personhood and because of this, it is able to excavate and liberate the ghosts we try (in futility) to ignore" (33-34). Morrison, Espiritu, Edwards, and Esposito are all arguing that texts, especially those of popular culture, can become sites of erasure, as texts are simultaneously sites of remembrance. We must therefore show awareness that texts have the power to overwrite histories of great complexity, therefore restraining our ways of thinking about the world.

Through writing, Little Dog can establish a lineage and convey the neglected history of the Vietnamese who fled to- and settled in the United States. This is done by reaching for and gathering memories that are seemingly not there, yet significantly affect Little Dog's life, hence still exhibiting a presence calling for our attention as readers seeking to remember.

On Earth is a deep dive in postmemory, and by creatively recollecting them, resists the erasure of Vietnamese existence and experience within the historical frame of the Vietnam War and the ensuing years of settling and growing up in the U.S. Reading the novel, we learn that the novel responds to silences configured by hegemony that have rendered Vietnamese bodies, and their histories ghostly. In constructing a narratological architecture, the narrator can create a site of remembrance working against the erasures constituted by a plethora of text that manipulate and shape popular memory. Thus, we learn that texts, due to their pedagogical capacities are acts of agency in terms of the remembrances they privilege. Likewise, our readings of texts become acts of agency as, by reading, we choose something to remember, to privilege.

2. LANGUAGE

This section of my analysis is dedicated to discussing language and its relations to hegemony and the production of identities, and margins. This chapter will also examine how the Vietnamese American characters of the novel develop methods of communication that exceed the limitations established by Anglocentrism. Vuong alternates between autobiographical writing and writing fiction inspired by personal experience. An unreliable novelist, the unclear distinctions between novelist and narrator, and the novel falling apart structurally, allow for a creative remembrance. The ambiguity of this creative form allows Vuong to cast a veil over the borders between his writing and his private life. The letter being unavailable to the mother creates a contradiction: there is silence, a distance between writer and recipient, allowing for indirect intimacy and openness. This honesty would arguably not have been possible without a surrogate and the mother's low English-language proficiency. This section will discuss language further as it relates to hegemony, in light of Vuong's novel:

"I only have the nerve to tell you [this] because the chance this letter finds you is slim—the very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling it possible" (113). The letter, the novel, is addressed to Rose, Little Dog's mother. Ocean Vuong's real mother was also named Rose. This clear yet also obscured proximity between art and real life, and history, is a critical aspect of the novel, as it exemplifies how our understanding of history relies very much on the same figurative structures, constructed using language, that fiction does. Little Dog has, ultimately, chosen to understand the world on fictional terms, hence aligning the personal and emotional with history. Little Dog is not the only character who performs such narration:

Some people say history moves in a spiral, not the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed. [...] Lan through her stories, was also traveling in a spiral [...] Shifts in the narrative would occur - the past never a fixed and dormant landscape but one that is re-seen. Whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something from what is gone. (27)

Little Dog describes history as a circular revisitation that stands in contrast to a chronological experience. The circles of time move around an undefined epicenter that one repeatedly revisits. What this epicenter represents is unclear to the reader; however, one learns that Lan does not revisit memory as something which is fixed. Memory is marked as an absence, yet remembering means creating something new from that absence. Little Dog bases his

narration on his family's oral traditions, which are characterized by creative shifts. He recognizes that changes are occurring each time Lan tells a story. In turn, this interprets as being connected to the nature of remembrance; the past is not fixed and linear but instead reconstructed by our revisit, the act of seeing events anew. Seeing anew appears to produce a memory that is not simply a reconstruction of the event itself, but an inscription of emotional, creative meanings. This becomes apparent when looking at the characters' retellings, carried by language, and non-linguistic modes of communication:

Have you ever made a scene," you said, filling in a Thomas Kinkade house, "and then put yourself inside it? Have you ever watched yourself from behind, going further and deeper into that landscape, away from you?" How could I tell you that what you were describing was writing? How could I say that we, after all, are so close, the shadows of our hands, on two different pages, merging? (6)

Through writing, Little Dog attempts to achieve an indirect intimacy with his mother. Rose is illiterate, yet Little Dog notices that both his mother and grandmother follow a storytelling tradition. Rose enjoys drawing and coloring. Little Dog notices that this creates a parallel between him and his mother, as they are both telling stories, only in different ways. A reader will notice that Rose describes drawing as going into a landscape and away from oneself. Rose describes the power of escapism that art offers and its power of granting distance and perspective. More importantly, she describes the experience she has of going into an American landscape, feelings of dysphoria, and disassociation: Hence, the distance between writer and recipient is emphasized, although the narrator recognizes that there is a closeness despite this distance. It is interesting how, in this extract, Rose indirectly describes Little Dog's writing. "Making a scene" suggests the creation of fiction, whether in the form of prose or painting. However, Rose experiences that, as she paints, she is inserted and immersed into the landscape she creates. Rose recognizes the capacity art has of relocating a person's narrative, their position in the world. The frictions between the self, something which might be perceived as substantial, and the fictional scene, the abstract, create a distance from which one can look upon oneself. Art becomes a reflection, a mirror, and a projection, creating distance. In discussing storytelling, *On Earth* explores the boundaries between literal and literary, and the importance of storytelling as a form of remembrance, resisting erasure. It becomes clear throughout the novel that language plays a significant role in terms of being able to convey oneself and one's story, yet also that there are other methods. Language creates distance between Little Dog and Rose and reverses their roles in an Anglocentric society:

But that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed our hierarchies, and with it our identities, which, in this country, were already tenuous and tethered. After the stutters and false starts,

the sentences warped or locked in your throat, after the embarrassment of failure, you slammed the book shut. "I don't need to read," you said, your expression crunched, and pushed away from the table. "I can see—it's gotten me this far, hasn't it?" (5)

Language is the very vehicle of telling a story, and thus this creates a distance between Little Dog and Rose. Rose does not share Little Dog's affection for literature, because her language (both her Vietnamese and her English) is a wall between her and the world around her.

Language, in the novel, functions as a manifestation of identities that are "tenuous" and "tethered"; the intersectional identities of Little Dog and his mother are described as lacking a sound basis and as unsubstantial. This is, perhaps, most apparent in situations where language is a source of conflict. This is because, as the novel implies, language is a tool for asserting power and producing inequality through enforcing binary logics that cannot fathom intersectional bodies such as Little Dog's and Rose's. Little Dog connects language directly to the social inequalities experienced by Asian-Americans as well as war-induced trauma:

When it comes to words, you possess fewer than the coins you saved from your nail salon tips in the milk gallon under the kitchen cabinet. Often you'd gesture to a bird, a flower, or a pair of lace curtains from Walmart and say only that it's beautiful—whatever it was. "Đẹp quá!" you once exclaimed, pointing to the hummingbird whirring over the creamy orchid in the neighbor's yard. "It's beautiful!" You asked me what it was called and I answered in English—the only language I had for it. You nodded blankly. (28-29)

Little Dog equates language with labor market discrimination, which coincides with foreign-born immigrants who struggle with language and American labor market practices (Wang, Takei, and Sakamoto). Little Dog problematizes how his mother has been confined to the nail salon and barred from participating in English-speaking spheres of American society. It becomes apparent that the host country does not, in reality, host the refugee; she is exploited and left with a language marked both by departure, war and segregation. Language, therefore, becomes a springboard for illustrating the social inequalities experienced by Asian Americans, and the constraints placed on their bodies, language becoming a measure of power and belonging. Therefore, the novel transgresses the English-speaking space of the U.S., and the fronted melting pot metaphor is used to negotiate the U.S. as a nation of cultural intermarriage.

Latching on to the Asian bodies of the text, the novel can discuss how social inequality is produced in white, hetero-patriarchal society. In this regard, Vuong's writing reminds us of the writing of Toni Morrison, who argued that one should be aware of an "ever-present consciousness of Whiteness as the default. Whiteness as gatekeeper. Whiteness as the dominant narrative [...]" (Lewis-Giggetts). Morrison's explicit awareness of the white gaze is something Vuong has adopted in his writing, by developing alternative gazes. "These

bodies are inspiring to me. They're worthy of literature with a capital 'L', something these bodies rarely got a chance to be," Vuong said in an interview with Seth Meyers, stating clearly that the novel has chosen to privilege the Asian bodies of the text, the gaze also coming from an intersectional Asian-bodied perspective (Late Night with Seth Myers). *On Earth* is a text that is written from one Asian American to another. The novel sets Asian-American bodies at its center. Through writing, one chooses someone to privilege, one chooses what to uplift. Despite the realities of the market, where the white gaze is deep-seated, the novel privileges and latches on to Asian bodies, therefore destabilizing white patriarchy on both the levels of the fictional world and the literal world in which we live. Ignoring the imaginary white man reading and judging the text, it creates a unique narratological space in the American literary marketplace. Reading further, one will notice that the novel, although it describes language as a source of social inequality, does not submit itself to, or take for granted, the position of Anglocentric power:

The next day, you had already forgotten the name, the syllables slipping right from your tongue. But then, coming home from town, I spotted the hummingbird feeder in our front yard, the glass orb filled with a clear, sweet nectar, surrounded by colorful plastic blossoms with pinhead holes for their beaks. When I asked you about it, you pulled the crumpled cardboard box from the garbage, pointed to the hummingbird, its blurred wings and needled beak—a bird you could not name but could nonetheless recognize. “Đẹp quá,” you smiled. “Đẹp quá.” (29)

Rose's language has been deeply inflected by conflict and diaspora; both her English and her Vietnamese are challenging in terms of allowing her to express herself deeply. However, the narrator disrupts American Anglocentric, ethnocentric power structures by depicting how Rose can find alternative ways of communicating with her son. In this scene, she may not be able to name the hummingbird in the adoptive country's language, or her mother tongue, yet that does not matter ultimately. The syllables might slip off her tongue, yet she nurtures her environment through her actions, feeding the birds. Birds being a recurring symbol for refugees, one can suggest that Rose is participating in a healing process by aspiring to become what the birds represent: beauty and freedom. Rose remains displaced and haunted, yet in recognizing the beauty of the birds and feeding them, she is perceived as beautiful by a reader.

Therefore, the narrator conveys moments of transcendence despite his mother's communicative challenges. Furthermore, *Little Dog* emphasizes the distinction between naming and recognizing, which has excellent transfer value in discussing the novel itself, and how it accommodates marginalized bodies. The narrator emphasizes how recognition is different from- and superior to the act of naming and how actions surmount whatever

language can afford. This, too, disrupts the position of Anglocentrism in American texts, as the writer can convey beauty that does not rely on the English language to be recognized by a reader. This also makes us aware of how concepts, such as beauty are reinforced through language, and how “beauty” appears to be another word for “recognition.”

The novel depicts moments of direct contact between its main characters and American Anglocentrism, and in doing so further destabilizes its position:

Floundering, you placed your index finger at the small of your back, turned slightly, so the man could see your backside, then wiggled your finger while making mooing sounds. With your other hand, you made a pair of horns above your head. [...] But he only laughed, his hand over his mouth at first, then louder, booming. [...] You were drowning, it seemed, in air. You tried French, pieces of which remained from your childhood. “Derrière de vache!” (30)

In her encounters with native-born Euro-Americans, Rose is not lacking in resources; she uses her body language, her French, but it is all in vain, as the Euro-Americans appear to be lacking in resources themselves. Rose’s language is a global one, but she is still othered in encountering Anglocentrism, which in this regard is proven to be lacking in terms of intercultural communication competence. Hence, the novel problematizes the mainly western notion of the English language serving as a globalizing, bridge-building tongue. In turn, this challenges the American savior narrative concerning refugees: This is done by depicting cross-cultural encounters situated in the U.S. and remembering the Vietnam War as a global historical catastrophe. The novel also explores how language seems to be a manifestation of our life experiences, and how trauma can deeply damage one’s tongue:

No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure, wrote Barthes. For the writer, however, it is the mother tongue. But what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out? Can one take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely? The Vietnamese I own is the one you gave me, the one whose diction and syntax reach only the second-grade level. (30-32)

In this extract, the narrator criticizes Roland Barthes’ portrayal of the mother tongue as an object of pleasure for a writer. For victims of war and diaspora, a mother tongue can become a “time capsule” that encapsulates the disintegrating effects of violence and exploitation—of trauma. The narrator questions what would happen if the mother tongue was so damaged that it, itself, becomes an absence. Once again, a reader will notice how the concepts of departure and absence, the ghostly, caused by violence are reflected in Rose’s character:

As a girl, you watched, from a banana grove, your schoolhouse collapse after an American napalm raid. At five, you never stepped into a classroom again. Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan. Our Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark of where your education ended, ashed. Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war. (30-32)

Little Dog connects his mother’s childhood home, destroyed by American napalm raids, directly to the state of her language. The mother tongue itself is orphaned, separated from its

mother country. *Little Dog* emphasizes how war and trauma disrupt language as the communicator of identity. Therefore, remembrance is central in analyzing the power dynamics relating to language. In remembering the Vietnam War, the novel effectively situates itself as a global narrative and emphasizes how language is shaped by violence. Therefore, the novel remembers and conveys the effects of diaspora structured by American society, which counters notions of English-speaking countries and the English language as internationally unifying. The novel establishes how language becomes a border between people[s], and how marginalized groups, therefore, are undermined through language, deeply affected by violence. Violence and its connection to language explain how erasure is structured and how language is a hegemonic tool of domination:

“Sometimes our words are few and far between, or simply ghosted. In which case the hand, although limited by the borders of skin and cartilage, can be that third language that animates where the tongue falters” (32). *Little Dog* refers again to Barthes, who suggested that two languages cancel each other out. However, this appears to be wrong in Rose’s case as one language appears to dominate the other, and that domination damages her mother tongue. Here, one will notice the word choice of “ghosted,” which connects thematically to erasure. The hand, the body, is suggested as the alternative communicator, which has great potential in terms of translation using body language and writing, and painting. Repeatedly, however, a reader will notice that especially-English-speaking Americans are unwilling to engage in translation. Altogether, this explains *Little Dog*’s decision to wear the English language “like a mask” (32), as the English language appears to be a way for him to develop ways to communicate his, and his family’s identities, despite how the language is weaponized. Language is therefore recognized as a tool of domination or translation and a tool for communicating oneself, the body, and building accommodating spaces within the nation’s body.

“That night I promised myself I’d never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you. So began my career as our family’s official interpreter. From then on, I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. I code switched. I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours.” (31-32)

Little Dog becomes responsible for his mother, as he must be her translator, which reverses the hierarchies of parent and child. However, one can see that Rose appreciates and even seeks refuge in nonlinguistic, visual storytelling. The son and the mother are writing on separate pages to heal and find a space to be accommodated by. Language as a power of both exclusion and inclusion creates a gap between mother and son, that the son must traverse through writing. Throughout the novel, one will notice that the Vietnamese language itself

has been deeply damaged by a history of colonialism, making it difficult to convey specific identities. In *Little Dog*'s case, this becomes apparent when he comes out as gay to his mother:

“I don’t like girls.” I didn’t want to use the Vietnamese word for it—*pê-dê*—from the French *pédé*, short for *pédéraste*. Before the French occupation, our Vietnamese did not have a name for queer bodies—because they were seen, like all bodies, fleshed and of one source—and I didn’t want to introduce this part of me using the epithet for criminals. (130)

This scene exemplifies moments of translation between son and mother in relation to communicating identities. The scene goes beyond closet narratives in popular media, as this moment is equally affected, interlinkingly, by histories of French colonialism, Rose’s war-stunted tongue, and international queer history. Like many other colonies, the Vietnamese have been affected by enforced heteropatriarchal western ideology. Queer bodies from a Vietnamese historical perspective were considered bodies the same as any other; by emphasizing this, *Little Dog* resists Western prejudice relating to queer rights in Asian nations, as well as the belief that western societies are at the historical forefront of honoring such rights. Christina Slopek insists that, as much as visibility through the articulation and ‘singling-out’ of marginalized identities is important, these acts are remainders of colonization: “*Little Dog* here recalls a precolonial Vietnamese utopia in which queerness did not attract attention, which debunks the myth that queerness is necessarily deviant from the norm” (743). Slopek argues further that *Little Dog*’s position as a “mediator between cultures and languages” allows him to convey his identity in ways that a monocultural context would not allow for. His mastery of the English language allows him to convey and obscure his identity, giving opportunities for both intimacy and distance between him and Rose.

Altogether, the novel “makes clear that to be queer is a contested position in both contemporary Vietnamese and US-American culture, and especially for someone positioned at multiple intersections” (Slopek 743). The closet narrative is positioned at an intersection of queer international history and the hegemonic structures that seek to erase said history. *Little Dog* coming out to his mother also positions the novel as an act of writing a queer history. Hybridity, as it relates to the simultaneous overlapping acts of violence carried out by the state of arrival and Asian states of origin, is set in relation to queer identities and their history:

A few months before our talk at Dunkin’ Donuts, a fourteen-year-old boy in rural Vietnam had acid thrown in his face after he slipped a love letter into another boy’s locker. Last summer, twenty-eight-year-old Florida native Omar Mateen walked into an Orlando nightclub, raised his automatic rifle, and opened fire. Forty-nine people were killed. It was a gay club and the boys, because that’s who they were—sons, teenagers—looked like me: a colored thing born of one mother, rummaging the dark, each other, for happiness. (137)

Violence carried out against queer bodies happens in both Vietnam and the U.S. and informs Little Dog of how the world receives his queered body. Little Dog emphasizes that these bodies, these people, remind him of himself and look like himself. The reader notices that Little Dog is pressured from multiple angles, as acts of violence against queer bodies and bodies of color are found everywhere. By introducing queer narratives, the novel intervenes with the mainstream immigrant discourse that privileges a heteronormative perspective, othering manifestations of gender and sexuality in relation to narratives of nation and belonging.

As Little Dog speaks to his mother, he seeks an alternate way for them to connect despite a history of violence. Rose opens up to Little Dog about the fact that he had an older brother. Because there was no food, Rose had to get an abortion, the hospital still smelling like gasoline from the war. Rose's story is told in tandem with Little Dog's experience of being kicked off his bike because it was pink. As these stories overlap with one another, betraying chronology, they ultimately align Little Dog and his mother as they open up to each other about the violence they each have experienced. Little Dog then goes on to describe the placenta as an organ that facilitates the exchange of nutrients and hormones: "In this way, the placenta is a kind of language—perhaps our first one, our true mother tongue" (137). Minh Chau Nguyen Pham argues that in this scene using the imagery of the placenta, Little Dog creates a "ghostly encounter" between Rose and her dead child. "Moving beyond the limits of the language of words, the narrator turns to the language of the body, painting the body as a safe gateway where beings, alive or not alive, communicate and bond" (Pham 60) she writes. This, I argue, is what allows for the sense of continuity that Little Dog goes on to establish. He creates, through writing, a space for remembrance where his mother can be in dialogue with the ghostly absences in her life: "It is no accident, Ma, that the comma resembles a fetus—that curve of continuation. We were all once inside our mothers, saying, with our entire curved and silent selves, more, more, more. I want to insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication (139).

In creating a space that allows for communication with the ghostly absences that haunt Vietnamese lives, the narrator creates a space in which one can develop language to describe these absences, hence turning absences into presences. This, in turn, creates a space of connection and healing. Therefore, in facing intersecting acts of violence, the narrator has developed alternative cultures tailored for survival, by healing trauma, and resistance against the dominant forces of erasure that violate queer bodies of color on multiple levels. This is because the narrator and his mother decide to open their traumatic wounds and begin a

process of articulation leading toward healing. Moreover, this very articulation, through Little Dog's reverse narration becomes the means of resisting erasure: "You will reach over, brush it off, and shake your head as you take in the son you decided to keep" (139).

Rose 'taking in' her son suggests that by coming out he quite literally is displaced outside of the home. One can argue that in envisioning the home as a predominantly, even compulsory heterosexual space, Little Dog is further displaced inside the diaspora. As diasporas have been historically, legally, and politically configured as standing outside of and between nations, the family has been the dominant structure around which systems of entry, belonging, and integration have been structured. Therefore, being queer within the diaspora sets the queer body in a duplex displacement, both concerning nation and families as social structures of belonging built upon heteronormativity. David L. Eng argues that coming out suspends the queer body between "in" and "out", "between origin and destination and private and public space" (205), which complicates issues surrounding the entitlements to home—being literally ejected from the home as a heterosexual space of origin further displaces the queer migrant. By taking in Little Dog, Rose develops a counter-narrative to this.

In his book *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*, Eng conjoins the fields of Asian American studies and queer studies, setting a framework for intersectional analysis of text surrounding Asian America. Eng is particularly interested in unpacking how the racialization of Asian bodies in relation to American citizenship has also been a process of ascribing concepts of gender and sexuality to the Asian American subject. Dealing with the duplex displacement of Asian American queer bodies of the diaspora, Eng suggests a solution to this displacement which "is neither to reinforce or reify the hegemonic regimes of heterosexuality and whiteness that facilitate unimpeded access to home, citizenship, and membership in a social community. [...] the goal is to contest the inevitability of these normative structures while deconstructing their mechanism of exclusion" (206). To connect this to the novel and the hybridity of Vietnamese American subjects, this deconstructing of mechanisms of exclusion is precisely what Rose does in taking in her son after he comes out to her. Considering that singling-out identities is a colonial inheritance and how both the nation-state and the home are configured as heterosexual spaces, Rose decides not to reinforce this. The act of opening her home to her queer son queers the hegemonic space of the home. By opening her traumatic wounds to him, she begins to develop a means of survival, that being the healing powers of articulation.

3. ALTERNATIVE MASCULINITIES

This section of my analysis is dedicated to discussing hegemonic masculinity, how gender relates to racialization, as well as how the novel disrupts this hegemony. As this thesis emphasizes an intersectional reading of texts, it is natural to unpack themes regarding masculinity as it relates to hegemony, language, nationalism, homophobia, and racism. Pedagogies of gender, internalized homophobia overlapping with chauvinism, the feminization of Asian male bodies, and emergent masculinity regarded as essential to Americanness are among the issues that *On Earth* explores and destabilizes.

Masculinity, as represented in the novel, becomes highly visible in Little Dog's romantic relationship with Trevor, as well as Trevor's relationship with his father. What becomes clear to a reader is that American masculinity is deeply rooted in violence, both as a construct and as the cornerstone of the patriarchal power structure. Violence permeates the novel's depictions of America and Vietnam, and it appears that histories of violence tie these nations together in developing themes surrounding masculinity. Trevor, as a character, embodies American hegemonic masculinity. In re-writing and *re-membling* Trevor, Little Dog has chosen to upset hegemonic white masculinity by representing intersectional masculinities and by empowering subordinated queer masculinities. Moreover, I argue that the novel effectively distorts discourses that, on the cultural level, blame homophobia on 'sexually repressed' ethno-racial groups. These are discourses that, ultimately, have led to a racialization of the problematics of homophobia and the construction of authentic heterosexuality. However, *On Earth* gives us the materials for a discussion about the symbolic meanings white men attach to same-sex relationships and how concepts of American masculinity intersect with the constructs of heterosexuality and whiteness.

The novel, as discussed previously, conveys anxieties surrounding how American culture appears to desire the sustenance of violence and death through art: "Once, at a writing conference, a white man asked me if destruction was necessary for art. His question was genuine. He leaned forward, his blue gaze twitching under his cap stitched gold with 'Nam Vet 4 Life, the oxygen tank connected to his nose hissing beside him" (178). This quotation revisits the same themes evoked by the allegory of the taxidermy buck, which also sets the novel in a close relationship with Vietnam War history, and within the diaspora. The Vietnam veteran's question exemplifies how violence is central to American concepts of art.

“I regarded him the way I do every white veteran from that war, thinking he could be my grandfather, and I said no. ‘No, sir, destruction is not necessary for art.’ I said that, not because I was certain, but because I thought my saying it would help me believe it” (178).

Interestingly, the narrator is unsure whether he should believe that violence is unnecessary for art. One can argue that this is because the narrator has not been able to abstain from destruction in his writing, which would characterize his writing as possessing hegemonic masculine traits. Regarding the collapse of the novel and the process of marring memory to sustain it, both suggest that, although the writer is breaking with Western modes of writing, he is also in keeping with the destructive aspects of American artmaking and authorship. This appears to contradict arguments made previously about the novel being unique in the context of American authorship. However, I would like to argue that what makes *On Earth* unique is that destruction is used in writing as a preparation for a reparative process of healing.

Suppose one is to examine the ‘Nam’ veteran’s question further. In that case, one can argue that this is used to comment on both how American art is deeply connected to acts of violence carried out by the state, such as the Vietnam War, as well as how the euro-ethnic-American-made depictions of this violent imperialist adventure are deeply connected to the construction of American masculinity. As masculinity is not a homogenous, inherently problematic concept, but instead is heterogeneous in terms of what ideals it may be built upon, it is essential to specify what masculinities are set in relation to warfare in the novel.

The novel comments on American hegemonic masculinity, which is especially visible in Little Dog and Trevor’s relationship. In order to discuss hegemonic masculinity, it will be helpful to define the term, and determine its relevance to intersectional analysis.

The term “hegemonic masculinity” refers to a particular idealized image of masculinity in relation to which images of femininity and other masculinities are marginalized and subordinated. The hegemonic ideal of masculinity in current Western culture is a man who is independent, risk-taking, aggressive, heterosexual and rational. (Barrett 79)

Barrett’s definition of hegemonic masculinity is helpful for an intersectional reading, as it emphasizes the fact that masculinities are numerous and set in hegemonic relationships with one another. Additionally, this definition supports claims that masculinity, and gender overall, is an “intersectional accomplishment – or a construction that takes forms in and through race, class, and sexuality” (Ward 416). White hegemonic masculinity, as depicted in the novel, commingles with the history of the Vietnam War and Little Dog’s family structure. Discussing masculinity as depicted in the novel, Christina Slopek argues that *On Earth* effectively diversifies this concept: “Altogether, *Briefly Gorgeous* dynamically reinscribes

gender roles with queer energies, diversifying masculinities and attesting to their fluidity in the face of transcultural exchange, the ‘abject’ [...]” (740). Slopek’s argument relates to, for example, my previous arguments about Rose queering the home as a hegemonic, gendered space.

The queering of hegemonic spaces is recurrent in the novel. Slopek argues that, although the novel has received some scholarly attention relating to translation and queer articulations, it demands detailed analysis relating to how queerness is constructed and diversified within the frame of transcultural exchange (740). Slopek’s article can inform an intersectional analysis, as the diversification of masculinity emphasizes gender as a specifically intersectional accomplishment. Slopek zooms in on the abject of bottomhood and its gendered connotations. I would like to extend on her analysis by looking at how gender and sexuality are racialized concepts. This becomes especially clear when looking at the relationship between Trevor and Little Dog. ‘Sorry’ is Little Dog’s way of introducing himself to Trevor: “I’m Trevor.’ I would know only later that he was Buford’s grandson, working the farm to get away from his vodka-soaked old man. And because I am your son, I said, ‘Sorry.’ Because I am your son, my apology had become, by then, an extension of myself. It was my Hello” (94).

Immediately upon meeting Trevor for the first time, Little Dog highlights a power differential between them. Little Dog addresses his mother directly, implying that his subordination is something he has been taught: “In the nail salon, sorry is a tool one uses to pander [...] It no longer merely apologizes, but it insists, reminds: I’m here, right here, beneath you” (90). Little Dog thinks of the word ‘sorry’ as a tool of both hegemony and profit. In lowering themselves, the Asian American workers make their white customers feel superior and charitable, increasing the chance of getting a good tip. It “is worth every self-deprecating syllable the mouth allows. Because the mouth must eat” (92). Little Dog adopts the same behavior, as he starts working the farm, noticing that the other men there do the same. He notices how one of them, Brandon, works at the farm to send his daughter to university in Mexico; how Manny is there to pay for his mother’s surgery and a fishing boat. “Sorry, for these men, was a passport to remain” (92-93). The setting of Trevor and Little Dog’s first encounter is the racialization of labor. This being linked to their relationship also deeply relates to gender. Racialization in terms of the American legal sphere of citizenship has also, historically, ascribed gender to Asian American subjects. “Up until 1870, American citizenship was granted exclusively to white male persons” (Eng 16). Asian men would not become naturalized until the repeal acts of 1943-1952: “Whereas the “masculinity” of the

citizen was first inseparable from his “whiteness,” as the state extended citizenship to nonwhite persons, it formally designated these subjects as “male,” as well” (16-17). The overlapping projections of race and gender ascribed to Asian bodies within a legal sphere give indications for the nature of hegemonic systems located within the social sphere:

[I]t might be said that the acquisition of gendered identity in liberal capitalist societies is always a racialized acquisition and that the exploitation of immigrant labor is not only through the racialization of that labor but also its sexualizing. Acknowledging these mutual imbrications is to understand the social emergence of masculinity and femininity as dependent on these fundamental and constitutive intersections and crossings. (Eng 17)

The nail salon is a space that serves to represent racialized and gendered labor, as it affects Asian American communities. Eng argues that we cannot isolate racial formation from gender or sexuality without reproducing the hegemonic normativity that seeks to define these concepts as distinguished and isolable (19). Eng refers to Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts*, in which she argued that, especially prior to the Magnuson Act of 1943, it can be said that male Asian immigrants occupied feminized positions “in relation to the universalized national white male citizen” (18), and that this historical racialization of labor and citizenship is a material trace of a gendering projected onto Asian bodies. It might be said that Asian American bodies have been historically positioned in a particular intersection of racial- and gender discrimination, configured as queer outside the scopes of the white cis-male citizen. Eng extends on this by suggesting that Lowe’s argument insists that we must investigate the racialization of Asian American masculinity as an “opaque screen”: “This screen obscures the complex histories of social organization through which categories of sexuality and gender gain their coherence and symbolic significance” (18).

Eng believes that in unpacking the projected meanings of Asian American masculinity, we begin to unpack strategies of domination that are internalized in the Asian American male subjectivity. Therefore, in looking at how gender and race are performed and projected by characters in the novel, we interrogate interlocking systems of domination. We may also begin to unpack how the novel contests such domination. It becomes apparent reading the novel that Trevor conflates gender, race, and sexuality by assuming a dominant, white, hypermasculine role in his homosexual relationship with Little Dog, while he expects Little Dog to embrace a feminized submissive role. Little Dog is forced to navigate interlocking discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, and race, as he finds that these are concepts that are projected onto him, clinging to his body:

But it was over before it began. Before my tip brushed his greased palm, he tensed his back a wall. He pushed me back, sat up. “Fuck.” He stared straight ahead. “I can’t. I just—I mean...” He spoke into the wall. “I dunno. I don’t wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can’t, man. I’m sorry, it’s not for me—” He paused, wiped his nose. “It’s for you. Right?” I pulled the covers

to my chin. I had thought sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong. The rules, they were already inside us. (120)

Heteronormativity and masculinity as they are projected by Trevor, and attached to his homosexual relationship with Little Dog, become especially apparent in their sexual relationship. Bottomhood, as conflated with femininity, which Slopek comments on extensively, becomes a barrier between the two characters. Little Dog expected gay sex to have the effect of revelation. However, looking at Little Dog and Trevor's sexual relationship, it becomes apparent how “the rules” of masculinity and heteronormativity already are “inside us,” internalized. Additionally, Trevor expecting Little Dog to be more positive towards the submissive, which he associates with bottomhood and femininity, reflects how race and gender also are conflated. Slopek argues that gay Asian American men occupy a “structurally frail place,” located at this intersection of sexuality, gender, and race (751).

Slopek refers to Tan Hoang Nguyen, who addresses the fact that “In a gay sexual marketplace that valorizes Asian men appear to occupy the most unsexy, undesirable position of all, seen as soft, effeminate, and poorly endowed” (Nguyen qtd. in Slopek 751). Nguyen connects this to the gendering of Asian subjects, suggesting that the stigma surrounding bottomhood is an extension of feminization and chauvinism. The “binary construction of top-bottom” (751) is therefore also, arguably, a projection of a “heteronormative vision of sex as power exerted by a dominant person – a man – over a submissive one – a woman” (Slopek 751). Taking this into account, the ascribing of a submissive role to the feminized Asian male body also indicates that the heteronormative vision of dominance is also connected to the white domination of people of color. Therefore, the novel comments on how Asian male, queer bodies experience domination, as it operates through the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. “He was white, I never forgot this. He was always white. And I knew this was why there was a space for us: a farm, a field, a barn, a house, an hour, two. [...] He was white. I was yellow. In the dark, our facts lit us up and our acts pinned us down” (111).

Little Dog is constantly aware of their “facts” regarding race and, interestingly, associates white privilege with excess in terms of space as well as time. It is this privilege that affords their privacy, and the opportunity to develop their relationship. However, this is a dark space in which their differences are highlighted and feed into an abusive relationship: “As a matter of fact, ‘masculinity is a contested terrain that produces exclusions, hierarchies, and stratifications within itself’ Concordantly, if masculinity is intersectional, ‘there has to be

some kind of relation between the hegemonic men and those that are seen as nonhegemonic” (Finzsch qtd. in Slopek 748).

However, *On Earth* does destabilize this narrative of domination: “But how do I tell you about that boy without telling you about the drugs that soon blew it apart, the Oxy and coke, the way they made the world smolder at its tips?” (111). Trevor struggles with drug abuse after having been put on OxyContin for a broken ankle, and, in the end, he dies from an overdose. Trevor is abusively dominant towards Little Dog in their relationship, as he struggles to replicate heteronormativity. A reader will notice that it is ironic that it is Trevor who dies from drug abuse, which is perceived to be a hypermasculine practice: “I never did heroin because I’m chicken about needles. When I declined his offer to shoot it, Trevor, tightening the phone charger around his arm with his teeth nodded toward my feet. ‘Looks like you dropped your tampon.’ Then he winked, smiled – and faded back into the dream he made of himself” (181). One will notice that Trevor, as Little Dog remembers, seems to connect his drug abuse to his gender performance, calling Little Dog a girl for not taking heroin. Little Dog survives for not participating in the same white-cis-masculine gender practice as Trevor. This narrative, in which the white hypermasculine is killed by its symbolism, that being risk-taking self-destruction, appears to upset narratives that configure whiteness as a hegemonic positionality that offers power and survival. David. L. Eng, referring to the work of Kobena Mercer, argues that, to understand this positionality, we must initiate examinations of whiteness, as it wards off visibility, therefore also criticism.

For “all our rhetoric about ‘making ourselves visible,’” he asserts, “the real challenge is in the new cultural politics of difference is to make ‘whiteness’ visible for the first time, as a culturally constructed ethnic identity historically contingent upon the disavowal and violent denial of difference.” Mercer’s intervention is significant. Whiteness - in its refusal to be named and its refusal to be seen - represents itself as the universal and unmarked standard, a ubiquitous norm from which all else and all others are viewed as regrettable deviation. (138)

As the novel works to make Vietnamese bodies and their stories visible, one might argue that it also, through Trevor and Little Dog’s relationship, works to make the destructive nature of white hegemonic masculinity visible: “Your uncle James. [...] [...] ‘Good man, made of bone, your uncle. [...] he whooped them in that jungle. He did good for us. He burned them up. You know that, Trev? [...] [...] ‘He told you yet? How he burned four of them in a ditch with gasoline? [...]” (142-143).

American hegemonic masculinity becomes especially apparent when looking at Trevor’s father and his upbringing. His uncle James “doing good” for the U.S. by burning Vietnamese bodies in a ditch, sets hegemonic masculinity in direct relationship with the ideals that motivated the Vietnam War, that being nationalism, imperialism, domination, and

the dehumanization of nonhegemonic bodies. Joane Nagel argues that the Vietnam War was “staged in a gendered, sexualized battle theatre” (29). I would like to extend on this by adding that the Vietnam War being a conflict of gender performances and weaponized sexuality ultimately entails the conclusion that the war was a conflict staged at an intersection of these concepts, including race.

The war was a site of masculinities in conflict as various, raced, classed, and ideologically divided Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian manhoods. During the war there were also sexual encounters between American GIs and Asian women in the brothels and clubs of Saigon, Bangkok, and other military “rest and recreation destinations as well as in the combat zones of the war. (Nagel 29-30)

As Nagel suggests, the war saw encounters that were deeply sexualized, gendered, and racialized. This is not only visible in terms of how these concepts are projected onto ideological, and political tensions, but also in the gendered, racialized spaces the war created, such as brothels, clubs, and other recreational sites in which Asian women were taken advantage of. Lan had to navigate through these spaces to survive. Later in this chapter, I will discuss how Little Dog diversifies masculinities in light of these spaces, Lan’s trauma, and his grandfather, Paul. This also relates to Trevor and what his father says to him about his uncle. This scene sets the position of hypermasculinity and heteronormativity as a maintainer of hegemonic masculinity in a direct relationship with historical power differentials between the U.S. and Vietnam, between the U.S. GIs and Vietnamese civilians; those who were killed, those who suffered from the weaponization of rape in civil-military relations, hosted in sites of “rest and recreation”, and also those who survived who still suffer the trauma of these violent, gendered, racialized fronts.

Trevor’s struggle with his father is a struggle with the position of heterosexuality and masculinity; this is extended upon to discuss racism as Trevor’s father speaks fondly about the Vietnamese bodies being burnt by American troops during the war. When Trevor confronts him, he says “Go ‘head, do something, make me burn.” (143), suggesting that Trevor associates himself with the burnt, dehumanized, queered bodies that were killed, therefore also siding with Little Dog who must experience the consequences of living in this queered body in the U.S. Here, Trevor seems to indirectly affirm his positionality as queer, although he continues to struggle with doing so fully. His father believes he will be just like his uncle: “You a burner, you gonna burn them up” (144). However, one can argue that Trevor only ends up burning himself, falling victim to his own gender performance and his addiction. However, Little Dog also remembers the moments when Trevor is ‘briefly gorgeous’, moments where he transcends hegemonic masculine practices.

In discussing the abject of queer sex, Slopek refers to a scene where Little Dog and Trevor have anal sex for the first time. Although vague about it, Little Dog experiences penetration as if Trevor “was this new extension of” himself (202). This intimacy is soon interrupted: “A scent rose up [...] like soil [...] I didn’t think, didn’t yet know how to prepare myself. [...] No one has taught us to be this deep - and deeply broken.” (202-203). The two boys are forced to confront the abject of gay anal sex in light of the “taboo of pollution” (Slopek 753). Little Dog, knowing that Trevor is “raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity” (203), fears how he will react: “the filthiness of our act exposed my body’s failure to contain itself.” It becomes clear that this incident brings to light how Little Dog also reproduces “homophobic bias” and still “sees himself in the eyes of dominant societal forces” (Slopek 753). However, this time, it is Trevor who decides to break away from the rules of such dominant forces, reinforcing their intimate relationship:

I felt his stubble, first between my thighs, then higher. He had knelt in the shallows, knees sunk in river mud. I shook—his tongue so impossibly warm compared to the cold water, the sudden, wordless act, willed as a balm to my failure in the barn. It felt like an appalling second chance, to be wanted again, in this way. (205)

Trevor takes Little Dog to a river, so they can wash themselves. This imagery evokes associations with immersion baptism, as they both immerse themselves in and are cleansed by the river water. Trevor’s act of restoring intimacy in their relationship after the abject causing its disruption, appears to gesture towards alternative masculinities that accommodate queer masculine intimacies despite taboo and ideals of purity. This act allows Little Dog to overcome the “cage” of heteronormativity projected onto queer sex: “For a few delirious moments in the barn, as Trevor and I fucked, the cage around me became invisible, even if I knew it was never gone. How [...] waste, shit, excess, is what binds the living” (216). Little Dog once again uses the stories of the lives of animals to tell a human story, to convey what Trevor’s gentleness in the river had taught him:

I touch your shoulder with the gentleness Trevor showed me back in the river. Trevor who, wild as he was, wouldn’t eat veal, wouldn’t eat the children of cows. I think now about those children, taken from their mothers and placed in boxes the size of their lives[...] I am thinking of freedom again, how the calf is most free when the cage opens and it’s led to the truck for slaughter. All freedom is relative - you know too well - and sometimes it’s no freedom at all, but simply the cage widening far away from you, the bars abstracted with distance, but still there [...]. But I took it anyway, that widening. Because sometimes not seeing the bars is enough. (215)

This quotation appears to illustrate that, although Trevor’s ‘brief’ moments of transcendence did not successfully eliminate the cage, the hegemonic structures in which their relationship was situated, they created a space in which the bars became abstracted. These bars represent the boundaries upheld through several dialectics, such as culture, history, gender, and

sexuality, which in becoming abstracted, create a space that accommodates their intersectional relationship: “Power structures and the boys’ entire relationship are shaped by the boys’ discrepant cultural backgrounds and (sub)culture-specific gender performances. Their intersectional relationship disproves the stability of boundaries drawn and reinforced by hegemonic concepts of masculinity” (Slopek 748). The novel appears to illustrate unnamed productions of whiteness as the refusal of difference, and the carrying out of destruction, as hegemonic powers of heterosexuality and masculinity, are projected onto the queer Asian body, creating an unequal relationship. However, in rewriting and remembering Trevor, Little Dog conveys a history of alternative masculinities and intersectional bodies surviving without submitting themselves to such hegemony. The Asian intersectional body is triumphant and sufficient, the abusive white male being imprisoned and killed by his own symbolism, yet also remembered to have been briefly gorgeous, transcending that narrative, contributing to accommodating a relationship: “Because you remembered and memory is a second chance. Both of you lying beneath the slide: two commas with no words, at last, to keep you apart” (159). By remembering Trevor, Little Dog embraces their homosexual relationship and upsets the hegemonies of masculinity and heteronormativity, empowering intersectional queer bodies, and nonhegemonic masculinities. The novel also empowers nonhegemonic masculinities regarding Little Dog’s relationship with his grandfather.

Little Dog’s grandfather-by-action, Paul, is a white Vietnam War veteran who, throughout the novel, suffers great regret. During the war, Lan was forced to become a sex worker “for American GI’s on R&R” (46) to survive. She leaves her children in the care of her sister and rents a “windowless room” by the river (47). Lan recalls how “the soldiers’ boots were so heavy, when they kicked them off as they climbed into bed the thumps sounded like bodies dropping, making her flinch under their searching hands” (47). The hegemonic masculinity represented by American soldiers who take advantage of Vietnamese women struggling to make a living in a country engulfed in napalm fire is clearly illustrated in this extract. Their boots sounding like “bodies dropping” couples the acts of violence carried out by the U.S. Army soldiers with their entering of the bedroom, synchronously conveying images of sexual abuse and warfare. Lan retells this story in vivid detail, despite how her illnesses would otherwise cause her to go in loops, repeating herself. She even recalls how “the soldiers would smell of a mixture of tar, smoke, and mint Chiclets - the scent of battle sucked so deep into their flesh it would linger even after their rigorous showers” (47). These explicit sensory memories depict images of Vietnam that are scarcely recalled in the American popular memory and describe the violence of warfare as lingering on the bodies of

the soldiers who carried them out. Lan's continuous reopening of the traumatic wound allows the novel to reach back to a history that Little Dog was not around to experience himself, but which still profoundly affects his family. This also serves as the historical frame of Lan and Paul's relationship. Paul appears to represent an alternative masculinity to that of the U.S. Army force's violent hegemonic masculinity: "But Paul, shy and sheepish, who often spoke with his hands in his lap, was not her client- which was why they hit it off" (47).

Paul and Lan develop a romantic relationship, "despite their estranged vernaculars," and "they found themselves transplants in a decadent and disoriented city besieged by bombing raids" (48). The word choice of "transplants" is particularly interesting here, as it suggests multiple meanings. Once again, the narrator uses imagery relating to the organs of the human body to describe the development of relationships. In this case, to "transplant" suggests relocating, be it a plant into new soil or an organ removed from one body and inserted into another. This suggests that Paul and Lan's relationship relocated them to a new ground outside the global binary of Vietnam-America constructed by warfare. But Paul is a soldier with duties to his country, and in 1971 he is forced to leave to take care of his mother, who had faked her tuberculosis to get him home. All the letters Lan tries to send him are intercepted by his brother. By the time he receives notice that there is a woman in a Philippine refugee camp carrying a marriage certificate with his name on it, the year is 1990, and he has been married to someone else for eight years. "He says all of this in a flood of stuttered Vietnamese – which he picked up during his tour [...] until his words are barely coherent under his heaving" (211).

Paul and Lan both participate in the vulnerable act of opening the traumatic wounds that allow the healing process of verbalization, reinforced by the novel itself. Their history contributes significantly to establishing a memory of the Vietnam War as a gendered, sexualized, and racialized conflict, which affected the two unequally. Lan's trauma-induced schizophrenia and how her perception of time is collapsed speaks significantly of the power differentials between her and Paul, who went home to live a new life. Paul, however, seems to be haunted by guilt, and his repeated efforts of reparation directed at his grandson challenge hegemonic masculine ideals of destruction and domination, gesturing towards alternative, healing modes of masculinity. Although these acts are incommensurate in the grand scope of the traumas of war and the lives lost, all irreparable damages, Paul's relationship with his grandson (like Lan's) arguably prepares Little Dog to arrange the process of collective healing using narrative. "I see you finally got a dog boy. Good for you,

Paul!’ [...] ‘No,’ Paul says, his hand raised awkwardly, as if waving away cobwebs. ‘This is my grandson.’ He lets the word hover between us all, until it feels solid [...]” (64).

One hears the echo of history in reading the neighborhood woman’s blatantly racist remark, pointing to racial tensions within the U.S. and the Vietnam War as a racialized conflict that haunts the family. Paul correcting her and saying that Little Dog is his grandson is significant to him because it connects a cord to a present family, not a ghostly absence made from war. Rose insists that Paul is not Little Dog’s grandfather: “Up until that point I thought I had, if nothing else, a tether to this country, a grandfather, one with a face, an identity [...] whom I was a part of, whose American name ran inside my blood. Now that cord was cut” (55). Rose’s words leave Little Dog feeling undeserving of an American identity: “Everything is somewhere else, baby. I’m telling you. Everything” (55). To Rose, the thought of family is overshadowed by ghostly absences. Her father, “the real one, was just another American john, faceless, nameless, less. Except for you. All that remains of him is you, is me” (54). During a sermon, Rose calls out to her unknown, absent father “Where are you, Ba? [...] Where the hell are you? Come get me!” (59). In choosing to be family, Paul and Little Dog choose to make absences presences: “‘No,’ I say after a while, ‘I don’t got any other grandpa. So I wanna keep calling you that’” (61).

Following Yen le Espiritu’s argument regarding Vietnamese American writing, Little Dog and Paul decide to develop a counter-narrative to the ghostly absences that haunt the diaspora by choosing to be grandfather and grandson. By choosing to be family, Little Dog also chooses to have an American lineage, mitigating feelings of displacement both within the nation and the family structure. Choosing one’s family is also considered a particularly queer aesthetic, as queer people are often displaced from their homes, which are ruled by heteronormative ideals. This contributes to the queering of the family aesthetic conveyed by the novel and a reader’s notion that family, as depicted in the novel, is also a narrative, which one can retell to heal wounds formed by war and displacement. Altogether, the novel establishes the formation of identities as a dialectical process negotiated through language that one may relocate through developing counter-narratives. This is something that becomes visible in Little Dog’s relationship with Trevor, who is creatively remembered as gesturing toward healing intimacies that accommodate queer intersectional bodies; it is also visible in Paul and Little Dog’s decision to transpose the narrative of a family to move on from the ghostly absences conceived by war. Reading the novel, a reader will notice that, perhaps, after all, Little Dog succeeds in carrying himself and Rose someplace else.

CONCLUSION

There are some points I would like to make in concluding this discussion, that I wish to see continue. This work of connecting and integrating studies across different disciplines is ambitious, and a lot to cover within the framework of a 30-point thesis. I am hoping, however, that someone might find this project useful in terms of conducting further inquiries regarding how texts navigate themselves with regards to interlocking systems of power. This thesis regards texts as arbiters of culture that carry pedagogical capabilities, which a reader may unpack to understand how hegemony is either maintained or disrupted. In choosing to analyze *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, I have hoped to illustrate that intersectional analysis can be used to uplift and celebrate voices that gesture towards ways of healing wounds inflicted by intersecting hegemonies, and toward greater social justice. The success of *On Earth* suggests that the novel conveys a narrative that has been deeply desired by the world. The novel's function as an architecture that accommodates South Asian intersectional bodies and their histories, and as a work that models Vietnamese American hybridities, is important. As a work that gestures towards cultures that allow remembrance, survival, and the healing of trauma on societal, interpersonal, and personal levels, the novel is worthy of thorough scholarly attention, as this work of analysis may point us towards socially remedial modes of reading. I have devoted much attention to the process of remembering as performed by the narrator, what that process might teach us about our readings of texts, as well as what this process implies about our responsibilities as readers should be.

To conclude the discussion regarding *On Earth* specifically, I think it is useful to respond directly to Edwards' and Esposito's questions, which have guided my intersectional reading of the novel.

How social inequality is performed, produced, or maintained through popular culture; How popular culture negotiates interlocking systems of power at structural, disciplinary, cultural, or interpersonal levels; How popular culture expands or constrains thinking in ways that reveal or contest its interconnections with forms of domination (such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, ableism, nationalism); How socio-historical context is implicated in popular culture representations; How popular culture representations create sites of erasure, oversimplification, or complexity; How popular culture responds to the status quo; and How popular culture is or can be a medium for social justice. (17)

Regarding how social inequality is performed *in* the novel *by* the novel's characters: We, as readers, encounter a family who is excluded from a larger national community, through warfare motivated by western imperialism. As refugees, these characters process memories in

which they have experienced forced migration, violence, and abuse, both enforced onto their bodies on a state level and an interpersonal level. Building a new life in a post-war era that is marked deeply by resurfacing trauma, endings that are not over, the characters are dislocated temporally, as well as geographically, revisiting a point of reference. The world around them, however, has begun a process of choosing what to remember and disremember, what to privilege, and what not to privilege. The process of erasure renders these bodies, within the diaspora, as ghostly. History and memory are characterized as 'spaces' through which domination is carried out. In their encounters with Euro-Americans, Anglocentrism, exceptionalism, and imperialism, all inform their exchange, and Little Dog decides to become a translator, a mediator who must work to find a place in which his mother can find peace and belonging. Rose struggles with the systemic racism behind labor discrimination in the U.S, which interplays with the traumatic wounds that cause her to abuse her son. These traumatic wounds manifest within her language, which becomes a wall between her and the world. History, and how it is carried in the body as trauma, is characterized as a hereditary phenomenon that one must identify and work against to heal. The Vietnam War, The Opioid Crisis, and 9/11, cumulatively affect the characters in a narrative that arches across continents, becoming a global narrative. Regarding the homosexual relationship between Trevor and Little Dog, the novel conveys a narrative surrounding hegemonic masculinity, and how it interplays with various forms of domination, such as racism, homophobia, and chauvinism. However, the novel does disrupt all these dominations in developing a counter-narrative.

Regarding how social inequality is disrupted: Through its creative remembrance, the novel reinscribes and reinserts its characters' bodies and stories into global history. Inserting the intersectional bodies of the novel into popular historical narratives opens for an understanding of these histories as more complex, and these people as central in their developments. The novel exposes the dangers of erasure as the bodies written out of history must work to manipulate the process of erasure, creating counter-narratives both in their writing and the cultures they develop, gesturing towards ways of healing. This process involves the manipulation of language, as performed by the novel, and developing modes of communication that exceed the limitations established by Anglocentrism. The reader becomes aware that acts of remembering and forgetting are, in fact, acts of agency, which suggests that we must develop strategies of remembrance. The novel also points to ancestors as carriers of knowledge that, if they choose to open their traumatic wounds, can lead their children on the path towards healing and belonging, as opposed to dislocation and unresolved

trauma. The novel disrupts binaries expressed in the English language, which is used as a hegemonic tool. The novel does not negotiate within the scopes of binaries, but rather sits outside them, finding alternative, unifying identifiers that bring the characters together. The novel achieves this further by, for example, diversifying masculinities, disrupting a hegemonic masculinity that is deeply rooted in white domination of people of color. Simultaneously, the novel refigures the diaspora in the light of queerness. In depicting a relationship in which these dominations and power dynamics play out, yet are challenged, becoming ‘briefly’ affectionate and accommodating, the novel gives examples of masculinities that draw power from intimacy rather than domination. Through presenting cultures that accommodate the intersectional bodies of the text, the novel contests their interconnections with forms of oppression. These interconnections are meaningful to discuss, as they, in themselves, suggest an inadequacy in terms of scholarship, and the ways in which it is divided into numerous, isolated disciplines. A lesson we can draw from queer, diasporic literature is the ways in which it presents histories to us that remain unrepresented, exceeding existing categories. In studying this literature, we may unearth neglected histories, uplift the voices that articulate them, and challenge the regimes and knowledge structures that attempt to silence them.

As this project only works to lay the foundations for a larger discussion of developing frameworks for reading text – reading that can potentially help us challenge oppressive hegemonies – I want to leave some notes for whomever, hopefully, chooses to take up the mantle: The purpose of this thesis has been to develop a cross-disciplinary approach to texts, whether it be queer, diasporic literature, or the primarily white, western, cis-male literature of the literary canons presented in western academia. One of the challenges this project involved was the risk of spreading oneself too thin, not being able to give sufficient attention to important aspects of the novel. However, in reading recent scholarship about *On Earth*, I chose to devote more attention to memory and memory representations, as they relate to hegemony. For future research, I would like to suggest that it is important that we work to further optimize methods of reading in this cross-disciplinary approach. Edwards and Esposito’s definitions of intersectionality have a privileged position in my reading, yet I would be interested to see what findings one would have if one were to use a different definition, a different basis for an intersectional reading. This is a field of research with multiple branches, and an abundance of possibilities. Lastly, I am very much aware of the fact that this mode of reading, if it is to lead us towards greater social justice, requires not just further optimization; it is required that this reading is done by a significant amount of people.

This is essential for such analysis of social inequality and counter-narratives to become sufficiently present in popular discourse. However, I believe that our responsibilities as individuals should come first, as this reading can reinforcingly equip us for several arenas in which discussions leading to social change take place: be it the milieus of interest for educational institutions, politics, activist groups, or social communities.

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