

LITERARY AND LITERAL BODIES: VIETNAMESE AMERICAN FORM, AFFECT, AND
POLITICS IN OCEAN VUONG'S ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS

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By

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ABSTRACT

Since the institutionalization of Asian American Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, the definition of “Asian American” has been under constant revision in response to changes in immigration policies and, consequently, to shifts in class, ethnic, sexuality, and gender demographics. Asian America’s original reliance on identity politics for sociopolitical progress consequently produced reading practices that prioritized referential correlations and idealized positions of resistance in relation to hegemonic U.S. politics. Pushing against the reactionary limitations of this bias, the field’s growing interests in aesthetics emphasize the discursive constructedness of the Asian American category and argue that Asian American literature should be (re)approached as works of art rather than as political statements.

Vietnamese American literature has mostly eluded the debate between politics and aesthetics, primarily concerned with processing and resolving the geopolitical consequences of the Vietnam War. Given the violences inflicted upon the Vietnamese body during war, embodiment is inherently embedded in Vietnamese American literary representations. For Vietnamese American literature, the human body and its affective experiences emphasize the necessarily dialectic relationship between embodiment and deconstruction. Beginning with the scholarships of Dorothy Wang, Rachel Lee, and Marguerite Nguyen, I argue that an *affective* literary form emerges from Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. Vuong engages

with the Vietnamese body, particularly that of the Vietnamese American refugee working class woman, and the literary body of Vietnamese American and canonical American forms to register the unspeakable subjectivities of contemporary Vietnamese America.

I interrogate the formal choices of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, particularly the protocols of the epistle and the memoir, and the ways in which Vuong inherits and transforms these narrative structures using mechanisms of poetry and tonal shifts of the Vietnamese language to (1) challenge the linearity and atomistic qualities of time in approaching history and (2) expand the spatial or geographical framework for Vietnamese America. I argue that the novel's expansion of the historical context for Vietnamese America produces a narrative form that coheres affectively rather than sequentially to de-exceptionalize Vietnamese America with a relational positionality that considers other communities of marginalized identity and their correlated histories.

To Mom and Dad—
Without you, your sacrifices, and your unconditional
love, my life would not be possible.

To Professor Christine So—
Your constant passion, conviction, and mentorship
in and out of the classroom keep me afloat.

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INTRODUCTION

Written by the contemporary poet and now novelist Ocean Vuong, the instant *New York Times* bestseller *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* forces an urgent reckoning with the lived realities of our contemporary world, where lives are marked by the unrestrained greed of global capitalism and long histories of imperial violence. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Little Dog composes a letter to his illiterate mother Hong, whose English name directly translates to “Rose,” and traces histories of the world, of family, and of love—from the birth of Tiger Woods and grandmother Lan’s love story with an American soldier to the Oxycontin overdose and death of Little Dog’s own lover. The novel is an intimate portrait of a family of Vietnamese refugees, torn from their homeland by the violence of American military intervention, what the United States identify in the nation’s collective memory and official history as the Vietnam War. Such framing matches with normative expectations of a book written by a Vietnamese American author—but the novel, while including the Vietnam War as a frame of departure, eludes such simplification. *On Earth We Briefly Gorgeous*’ careful first words signify simultaneous inception and repetition, novelty and history. The narrator starts the narrative by articulating an awareness of his purpose and intention: “Let me begin again.”¹ Using the words “begin again,” Vuong begs for a reorientation—a new way of approaching and a new form for perceiving the world.

Vuong elevates the mechanisms of and epistemology behind narrative construction. With its self-referential moves and explicit engagement with giants of Western high literary and cultural criticism, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* centers the positionality of the writer—both Vuong and his narrator Little Dog—on the meta and diegetic levels of the text. Divided into three sections, the novel begins with Little Dog and his family, told in temporally nonlinear vignettes that document their early years in America, where they settled in Hartford,

¹ Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), 3.

Connecticut, and go as far back as Lan's encounters with American soldiers in Vietnam. Little Dog comes out to his mother in the second section, and the narrative moves beyond familial history, extending to Rose's working conditions in a nail salon, Little Dog's job on a tobacco field, the stories of his Chicano and Latin American coworkers, his love story with Trevor, and how the young men met, made love, and spent their days. Little Dog copes with two deaths in the final section—Trevor dies from a drug overdose, and Lan dies from cancer.

Vignettes of childhood memory, accounts of historical events and people, journalistic episodes of national and international politics, oral storytelling from elders, and poetic fragments together stitch the pages of the moving novel—yet the text insists on its epistolary meta-organizational form with its use of the second person pronoun “you” and its reiterations of “Dear Ma,” simultaneously reinforcing and dismantling its own structural foundation. Between the end of section two and the beginning of section three, the prose begins to fragment into incomplete sentences and frequent line breaks, and, for a moment, the novel visually and mechanically mimics the structures of poetry. Despite the vague outlines of a plot, however, the form and construction of Vuong's novel emphasize affective provocation rather than sequential cohesion. Spanning the multigenerational love, labor, and violence experienced by Little Dog and his two female caretakers, Rose and Lan, the narrative escapes a linear plot and a definite form to instead reorient a focus on people and the emotive circulation within and between communities of people. According to a *New York Times* article on Vuong, the novel “started as an experiment, one which Vuong never set out to finish.”²

Little Dog and Vuong himself share many similarities. Born in 1988 on a rice farm near Saigon, Vuong departed his motherland and spent over one year in a refugee camp in the

² Kevin Nguyen, “Eavesdropping on Ocean Vuong's New Book,” *The New York Times*, last modified May 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/25/books/ocean-vuong-earth-briefly-gorgeous.html>.

Philippines before arriving in the United States at the age of two.³ The family settled in Hartford, Connecticut, where he lived with his mother and grandmother and where the former worked as a manicurist. As a queer Vietnamese American refugee born eight years *after* the formal conclusion of the Vietnam War, the author occupies a unique positionality at the intersection of America, Vietnamese America, and Asian America. At the 2019 Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center's Asian American Literature Festival, Vuong confessed he takes the expectation that an author must be synonymous with his protagonist in order to manipulate and collapse the literary consumer's obsession with ethnic authenticity.⁴ It is not a coincidence, therefore, that Vuong's biographical context and *Little Dog's* fictional identity share overlapping commonalities. The novel's genre-defying form and the biographical context of its author invite a controversial conversation too familiar with Asian American literary and cultural studies—that of politics and aesthetics.

The Politics of Asian American Aesthetics

Since the establishment and institutionalization of Asian American Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, the definition of Asian American (and, by extension, Asian American literature) has been under constant revision in response to changes in immigration policies and, consequently, to shifts in class, ethnic, sexuality, and gender demographics. Initially motivated by the African American community's activism against racism and white supremacy during the Civil Rights Movement, Asians in America overlooked their internal identitarian diversities in exchange for collective social and political progress. With this historical context, the institutionalization of Asian American Studies relied upon Asian America's cohesion around identity politics and

³ Michiko Kakutani, "Review: 'Night Sky With Exit Wounds,' Verses From Ocean Vuong," *The New York Times*, last modified May 9, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/10/books/review-night-sky-with-exit-wounds-verses-from-ocean-vuong.html>.

⁴ Ocean Vuong, "Fiction Reading: Ocean Vuong," Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center's Asian American Literature Festival, Washington, D.C., August 4, 2019.

common lived experiences from minoritized racialization. This emphasis on resistance and on reclaiming sociopolitical spaces in America formed the ideological groundings for Elaine Kim's inaugural field-defining work *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. In her interrogation of the relationships between literary representation and their correlated social histories, Kim focuses on "literary figures" created by "Asian Americans of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino ancestry," established groups with long histories of settlement in the United States.⁵ The emphasis on material referents—or the direct relationship between literary representation and living Asian Americans—positions Asian American literature as authenticating narratives that not only counter mainstream racist stereotypes through accurate portrayals of lived realities but also (re)claims an Asian American space within America's national social and political consciousness. In other words, Asian American literary bodies were understood to have direct correlations with literal embodied lives. The implications of such intimate correlations suggest that, in order to write an Asian American text, an author had to possess a body that was not only Asian American but also resistant to hegemonic U.S. national narratives.

The immigration acts of 1965 and 1967 alongside U.S. military Cold War interventions in Asia caused an influx of migrations that drastically altered Asian America's internal demographics.⁶ In "Theorizing Asian American Fiction," Stephen Hong Sohn, Paul Lai, and Donald C. Goellnicht explain the enormity of these changes: "So significant have these demographic shifts been that by the end of the twentieth century, the majority of Asian Americans and Asian Canadians were born outside of the US and Canada, and did not speak

⁵ Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), xiii.

⁶ Stephen Hong Sohn, Paul Lai, and Donald C. Goellnicht, "Theorizing Asian American Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 56, no. 1 (2010): 3, accessed March 13, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26287167>.

English as their first language, a situation very different from that in 1968 when Asian American Studies was forming as a field.”⁷ The inherent internal diversity within Asian America could no longer be ignored, and the cohesion of the Asian American identity category began to destabilize since, for example, Southeast Asian refugees who arrived in the United States as a consequence of Cold War violences and English-speaking “Chinese and Japanese Americans whose families had been in North America for several generations” do not share common experiences or languages.⁸ For Asian American Studies, the difficulty of referentially representing the irreducibility of what Lisa Lowe describes as the “heterogeneity, hybridity, or multiplicity” of Asian America propelled the field to (re)theorize and diversify its own ideologies and methodologies.⁹

Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* argues that Asian American Studies and critical practices have limited Asian American cultural productions to positions of either resistance or assimilation in relation to hegemonic U.S. politics and racism. The implications not only posit Asian America as reactive, derivative, and oppositional but also underscore a complicity with capitalism. Nguyen argues that, “with the maturation of global capitalism,” one could “turn even resistance into a commodity.”¹⁰ He traces the evolving relationship between literary representations of the Asian American body with shifts in the Asian American body politic, arguing that “particular kinds of bodies in the literature” emerge from “different historical moments” and do not fall into simple categories of resistance and accommodation.¹¹ While Nguyen grounds his theory in embodiment, Kandice Chuh’s

⁷ Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht, “Theorizing Asian American Fiction,” 3-4.

⁸ Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht, “Theorizing Asian American Fiction,” 3.

⁹ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 67.

¹⁰ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

¹¹ V. Nguyen, *Race and Resistance*, 7.

Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique moves away from the body and approaches deconstruction to suggest that Asian American as a category is discursive rather than descriptive, a term used as “a *metaphor* for resistance and racism.”¹² Radically changing the field, Chuh theorizes Asian American Studies as a “subjectless discourse.”¹³ She argues that an Asian American subject who is neither embodied nor connected to living referents can resist the essentialism and consequent exclusions that result from identity politics. The move away from embodiment and towards deconstruction—a focus on the constructedness of the Asian American category itself—stimulated an interest in literary aesthetics, an approach to Asian American literature as art rather than as political statements.

For Asian American literary criticism, the traditional focus on identity politics translated to reading practices that privilege representation and content rather than form and style. The inherent instability and constructedness of the term Asian American problematize the ethics of referential representation, which beg for a push against the sole privileging of content. Responding to the works of previous Asian American literary scholars who relied upon identity politics for social and political advancement, Christopher Lee’s *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* critically interrogates identity as an aesthetic form to reclaim Asian American literature as art. In other words, for Lee, identity in literature operates as a mediating mechanism rather than as a material fact. Lee defines “the aesthetic” as “a mode of cognition that exceeds the parameters of rational knowledge and/or political agency,” which suggests aesthetics’ complete removal from the binaries of political resistance or assimilation.¹⁴ The constantly evolving and dialectic relationships between literary representation

¹² Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 27.

¹³ Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 9-10.

¹⁴ Christopher Lee, *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 13.

and correlating social, historical, and political materialities are exposed through an examination of literary identity as a constructed form, a method that avoids factual politics in order to groundbreakingly gesture to and center the imagination.

Along with Lee's prioritization of Asian American identity as form and its consequent post-identity move, Elda E. Tsou's *Unquiet Tropes: Form, Race, and Asian American Literature* argues "for reconceptualizing Asian American literature as a set of rhetorical tropes taking shape around highly specific historical problematics."¹⁵ Tsou focuses on tropes in Asian American canonical literature "that call attention to themselves *as* tropes" through their own attempts to self-dismantle.¹⁶ Through their exposure of the fictionality of narrative construction, these tropes underscore a formal simultaneity of both deviation from and inclination towards referentiality. Tsou writes, "In placing figurative activity at the center of Asian American literature, we can begin to grasp how cautiously, and sometimes suspiciously, these texts view their connection to Asian America."¹⁷ Tsou underscores once again the instability of the term Asian American, which, as I've previously traced, bears referential complications in relationship to the constantly changing constituencies of the Asian American community. Suggesting a more "general formalism," Tsou further deconstructs the Asian American in Asian American literature in order to formulate a formal literary inclusivity that, in the end, might dismiss the Asian American categorization entirely in exchange for universalism.¹⁸

The contemporary turn to deconstruction and aesthetics has taken a leap away from, or arguably even dismissed, Asian American Studies' original reliance on identity politics for institutional recognition and survival. The stakes of this discursive turn are high.

¹⁵ Elda E. Tsou, *Unquiet Tropes: Form, Race, and Asian American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 5.

¹⁶ Tsou, *Unquiet Tropes*, 5.

¹⁷ Tsou, *Unquiet Tropes*, 12.

¹⁸ Tsou, *Unquiet Tropes*, 17.

Deconstruction's rejection of identity politics also dangerously declines Asian America's original goal of collective social and political progress—a move that negates the efforts of individuals who fought very real battles against long histories of physical and psychic subjugation under racism. A fragile boundary separates deconstruction from erasure, and the literary body cannot over-write the literal sweat, tears, blood, and scars that have been felt, seen, heard, and experienced by the physical body.

The polarizing debate between politics and aesthetics—or, phrased differently, between embodiment and deconstruction—reaches a compromise with Dorothy Wang's revolutionary *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry*, which rejects the deconstruction of Asian America and theorizes against the abstraction of the social, historical, and political. Arguing for the unique positionality of Asian American poets due to their “relation to the writing—and wished-for mastery—of English” that “takes on a heightened sense of self consciousness because of their constitutive exclusion from the category of native speaker,” Wang contends that the Asian American poet must navigate their “alien/alienated relationship to the English language” with “the most exalted and elite English literary genre.”¹⁹ The perceived and perpetual foreignness of Asian Americans in the United States coupled with poetry's reputation as high-brow American culture make Asian American poetic productions unique. Occupying a contradictory position of simultaneous racial exclusion and literary elitism, therefore, Asian American poetry offers a critical site for the convergence of form and content—aesthetics and politics. Wang argues:

Anyone who has written even a few lines of poetry knows how crucial a decision it is that someone chooses to write a poem—and not, say, a journalistic essay or political manifesto—and how essential are the myriad formal decisions made at every turn in a poem: where to break the line, what rhythmic or metrical pattern (or none) will govern,

¹⁹ Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 27.

what will constitute the unit of the stanza, how the poem will look on the page, and so on. It is not only a matter of conscious authorial choice but no less of the submerged or unconscious structures of language that make themselves felt in the particular language of individual poems.²⁰

While other literary critics frame Asian American identity as literary tropes or forms, Wang's critical centering of Asian American poetry highlights the necessity of identity politics and rejects the mutual exclusivity of aesthetics and politics in reading Asian American literature. Literary form itself emerges from both conscious and unconscious choices and, therefore, is also an articulation of content. In other words, form and content are synonymous rather than oppositional.

A more recent turn away from total deconstruction recenters the human body in Asian Americanist critique. In *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies*, Rachel C. Lee interrogates Asian American cultural productions' captivity with the body and its fragments, pointing to a tension between Asian America's discursive constructedness and its constant preoccupations with the biological body. Building on Viet Thanh Nguyen's examination of bodily representations in literature, Lee argues for a focus on "figuring representations as both socially determined and in excess of that determination"—and one among such "excess," or what escapes social codifications, is affect.²¹ Lee defines affect as experiences that elude "conventional semantic understanding" and "is a function of something ineffable, the suspension of meaning, which we might also see as the potential of plural,

²⁰ Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, 30.

²¹ Rachel Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 24. Lee writes: "Rather than 'subversion' or 'gender trouble,' 'resistance' was the word Nguyen chose, but it has morphed into 'supplement,' 'haunting,' and 'affect.' Thus, while 'resistance' was the noble, heroic name given to a kind of purified antagonism that representations by Asian Americans might index, 'melancholia,' 'irritation,' 'animateness,' 'zaniness,' 'anxiety,' and 'envy' (the first deftly explored by Anne Cheng and David Eng, the latter five drawn from Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings and Our Aesthetic Categories*) all conceptually broaden the terrain of still antagonistic but limited agency with which we might think through the conditions of possibility for Asian American cultural productions."

indeterminate meanings.”²² Similarly highlighting subjectivities that evade linguistic description, Pieter Vermeulen describes affect as “the placeholder for *unreadability*.”²³ Simply put, affects are experiences not cognitively or socially registered as labeled emotions. In other words, by gesturing to subjectivities and experiences that language cannot fully replicate or even adequately describe, affect enables a multiplicity of possibilities for seeing, feeling, hearing, and knowing what we normally do not register, allowing the “ineffable,” the “unreadab[le],” and the “unexpected” to slip through.²⁴ The identification and examination of affect, therefore, can elucidate the subjective conditions of experiences and lives that are excluded from socially codified norms.

The body and affect recenter embodiment in the literary body by providing a site for the intersection of (1) material referentialism through the biological body itself and (2) the “ineffable,” “unreadab[le],” and “unexpected” instability of the Asian American identitarian construct. In other words, aesthetics and politics collide upon examination of the body and its affects in literature. Pairing both Dorothy Wang’s claim that literary form is an articulation of content and Rachel Lee’s argument that the human body and its affective experiences provide a site for simultaneous readability and unreadability, I highlight an inextricable relationship between the literary body and the literal body in Asian American literature.

The Aesthetics of Vietnamese American Politics

Embodiment is especially crucial and inherently embedded in Vietnamese American literary representations given the violences inflicted upon the Vietnamese body—its burnt and blown-up fragments—during the Vietnam War. Because the existence of Vietnamese America is

²² R. Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America*, 27.

²³ Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9.

²⁴ R. Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America*, 27.

a direct product of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese American literature has been intertwined with and overshadowed by the war. Published works by Vietnamese American authors are almost always refugee narratives that not only articulate but also process the violences of and losses from war. Ended relatively recently in 1975, the Vietnam War occupies an enormous place in the United States' national memory due to the destruction of lives and the wrecking of America's national dignity in the eyes of the international community. As a consequence, Vietnamese American literary and cultural productions are constrained by (1) the need to process the traumas of war and forced migrations inflicted upon Vietnamese Americans and also (2) the pressure to provide emotive resolution for the larger white American public for the failures of their humanitarian violation in Southeast Asia. Vietnamese American literature, therefore, has always been prescribed with the recuperative expectation of trauma and healing. More recently published works by Vietnamese American writers, even if not engaging directly with the refugee experiences of forced migration, interrogate themes of history or identity that address inherited memories of Vietnam and the war.

Given the urgency to process the violence and recency of Vietnamese America's historical context and genesis, Vietnamese American literature and criticism have mostly eluded the politics versus aesthetics debate in Asian American Studies. In other words, the enormity of the geopolitical consequences of the Vietnam War for the United States' national pride and global positioning has restricted Vietnamese American literature with the heavy burden of international politics. In *America's Vietnam: The Long Duree of U.S. Literature and Empire*, Marguerite Nguyen inaugurates Vietnamese American literature into the conversation on form and aesthetics with her interrogation of genre. Genre, she argues, "arises out of particular material circumstances yet... undergoes constant renewal," and genre's construction and

consumption play a role in shaping “perceptions of war, race, and empire.”²⁵ In other words, genre offers a critical site for the convergence of formal literary protocols (i.e. expectations of the novel as a form with characters, plot, climax, etc.) and the ways in which those formalisms are reinforced, challenged, or transformed alongside social, political, and historical circumstances.

Emphasizing the importance of Southeast Asian geopolitics in shaping Vietnamese American forms and cultural productions, Nguyen’s critical intervention applies the *long duree*, which she borrows from Fernand Braudel’s “model of critical inquiry that integrates the long term, the short term, and the conjectural,” to historicize the interdependency of politics and aesthetics in Vietnamese American literature.²⁶ No scholar has ever before contextualized Vietnamese America within a pre-colonial history that escapes frameworks rooted in Western nationalism. Nguyen focuses on Southeast Asia as a region rather than on just Vietnam as an independent nation. She traces relations between America and Vietnam that date back to maritime exchanges in 1819, arguing against conventional understanding that the United States and Vietnam first came into contact in the late twentieth century through American military intervention during the Vietnam War. Nguyen writes, “Field-defining works by Lan Duong, Yen Le Espiritu, Jodi Kim, Mimi Thi Nguyen, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, and Cathy Schlund-Vials reread Asian American literature as a corpus born of war and not solely of imagination,” arguing that, although “these very scholars remind us that the very category ‘Southeast Asia’ is a geopolitical destination that stems from post-World War II political

²⁵ Marguerite Nguyen, *America’s Vietnam: The Long Duree of U.S. Literature and Empire* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), 7.

²⁶ M. Nguyen, *America’s Vietnam*, 4. Nguyen explains the framework for her approach to Vietnamese American literature: “Braudel advocated a *long duree* model of critical inquiry that integrates the long term, the short term, and the conjectural: ‘The time of today is composed simultaneously of the time of yesterday, of the day before yesterday, and of bygone days.’... If Braudel’s *long duree* paradigm invests in long temporal arcs to determine historical causality and totality, I am equally interested in how a text envisions and maps what constitutes history and how these strategies overlap with or diverge from a work’s historical reference points.”

agendas and rubrics of knowledge,” “[t]here is nothing self-evident about periodizing Vietnamese-American encounters in Vietnam War or Cold War terms; memory and history are geopolitical fabrications.”²⁷ Whereas previous scholars relied upon the Vietnam War as a framework for understanding Vietnamese American identity and literary formation, Nguyen elongates the temporal context of Vietnamese America to both include and predate the Vietnam War. She introduces the crucial role of Southeast Asian geopolitical history to not only emphasize “the dynamic relationship between form and history” but also to de-exceptionalize the Vietnam War as a historical anomaly.²⁸

Little work has been done on Vietnamese American literary aesthetics, and, with her framework of the *long duree*, Marguerite Nguyen takes a literature that has been exclusively defined in relation to the United States’ late twentieth century political agenda and transforms it into a contemporary palimpsest of history, emotion, and beauty. With the scholarships of Dorothy Wang, Rachel Lee, and Marguerite Nguyen as my argument’s beginning point of orientation, I argue that from Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, a text as rich in history and politics as it is in language and beauty, emerges an *affective* literary form—a particularly Asian American one and, even more particularly, a Vietnamese American one. Vuong engages with (1) the Vietnamese body, particularly that of the Vietnamese American refugee working class woman, and (2) the literary body of Vietnamese American and canonical American forms to register, to borrow from Rachel Lee and Vermeulan, the “ineffable,” the “unreadab[le],” and the “unexpected” of contemporary Vietnamese America. Commenting on the intended audience of his book with the knowledge that most of his readers are white, Vuong said, “In order to read

²⁷ M. Nguyen, *America’s Vietnam*, 3, 4.

²⁸ M. Nguyen, *America’s Vietnam*, 6.

the book, people have to eavesdrop as a secondary audience upon a conversation between two Vietnamese people.”²⁹

I will first interrogate the formal choices of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, particularly the protocols of memoir and the epistolary form, and the ways in which Vuong inherits and transforms these narrative structures using mechanisms of poetry and the tonal shifts of the Vietnamese language. As a result, Vuong (1) challenges the linearity and atomistic qualities of time in approaching history and (2) expands the spatial or geographical framework for contemporary Vietnamese America. I argue that the novel's expansion of the historical context for Vietnamese America simultaneously produces a narrative form that not only inherits and expands Vietnamese American literary traditions but also consequently places Vietnamese America within a relational positionality that takes into consideration other communities of marginalized identity—Chicano and Latin Americans, Native Americans, the working class, women, the LGBTQ community—and their correlated histories. Next, I will interrogate the novel's formal choices in depicting and engaging with the body—particularly the body of the Vietnamese American refugee working class woman—and consequent productions of affect. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous's* enigmatic narration produces an affective suturing of a material reality that (1) registers the accumulated histories of violence that incorporates and escapes the Vietnam War and (2) includes and ventures beyond Vietnamese America. As a consequence, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* both honors the immensity of the Vietnam War yet also de-exceptionalizes it within a wider historical context of imperialism and racial violence that have been inflicted upon communities outside of not only Vietnamese but also Asian America. Literary and literal bodies are inextricably and intimately intertwined, simultaneously embodied and imagined.

²⁹ K. Nguyen, “Eavesdropping on Ocean Vuong’s New Book.”

**(RE)FORMING THE EPISTLE AND THE MEMOIR:
VIETNAMESE AMERICAN HISTORY AND LITERARY LIVES**

The Vietnamese American Letter

“Let me begin again.”³⁰ The novel is an epistolary composition—a letter from a son to his mother—yet the initial signpost stands on its own line and appears to exist outside of the epistle’s contained frame. After declaring his purpose to “begin again,” Little Dog then directly addresses his mother and officially commences the letter—infusing a second beginning—by acknowledging the futility of what he is doing: “Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are.”³¹ Because Rose is illiterate and lacks English fluency, Little Dog’s words will neither reach their intended audience nor arrive at their intended destination. The novel, therefore, begins with a recognition of its own failure as an epistle.

On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous takes and ruptures inherited literary forms—specifically the epistle and the memoir—critical to both Vietnamese American and Asian American formational history. In doing so, Vuong formulates a new understanding of history that encompasses the specificity of context while also envisioning an embodied form capable of containing the on-going accumulation of past, present, and future structural violence. The epistolary form played a formative role in internally concatenating the Vietnamese American refugee community immediately after the forced separations that resulted from the Vietnam War. In *America’s Vietnam*, Marguerite Nguyen examines Võ Phiến’s Vietnamese-language letters, which she describes as “some of the earliest conceptions of Vietnamese American subjectivity

³⁰ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 3.

³¹ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 3.

and literature.”³² Interrogating the epistolary form’s contribution to Vietnamese American refugee identity and community construction, she writes:

While empires and international organizations tend to frame refugees in finite terms of crisis and emergency, Vietnamese-language letters provide a chronotopically open portrayal of refugeeness. In form, letters offer an open spatial and temporal structure—they connote circulation and invite responses in future time—and when combined with Vietnamese language, they create a venue through which a Vietnamese-literate public can express and consider refugeeness and conditions of refugee production as ongoing.³³

The epistle differs from other forms of writing in its simultaneous navigation of multiple spaces and multiple times. More specifically, the form inherently possesses a self-awareness of its scope and scale at the moment of its genesis. In regards to time, the person writing a letter in the present moment expects the recipient to receive and to respond in a future separate from the moment of the letter’s creation; in regards to space, the sender also constructs the letter from a place of knowing that its destination is elsewhere. Most uniquely, the epistolary form addresses an explicitly specified and narrowly defined audience—usually one person. When we send a letter, therefore, we implicitly acknowledge the passage of time, the changing of place, and the presence of at least one other human being. Nguyen argues that letters create a time and space outside of the U.S. nation-state’s own aesthetic production of the figure of the refugee, what Yen Le Espiritu describes in *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* as the United States’ “material and ideological conversion of U.S. military bases into places of *refuge*” that “discursively transformed the United States from violent aggressor in Vietnam to benevolent rescuer of its people.”³⁴ Espiritu argues that the United States constructed the figure of the Vietnamese refugee (and correlated conceptions of boat people) in order to reshape its own national and international image—damage control for a military strategy gone horribly wrong.

³² M. Nguyen, *America’s Vietnam*, 21.

³³ M. Nguyen, *America’s Vietnam*, 139.

³⁴ Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 49.

Vietnamese American letters, therefore, intervene to reconstruct Vietnamese America outside and against the backdrop of such narrative erasures by providing a Vietnamese language-based space for communication amidst a reality of ruptured lives, homes, and identities. The epistolary form and network allow for the expression of Vietnamese refugee subjectivity, map the geographical extent of the emerging Vietnamese diaspora, and chart the temporal variation of Vietnamese migration context and resettlement (i.e. departure, arrival, and time spent at refugee camps vary).

Despite the epistle's constructive contribution to community and identity formation, however, Nguyen highlights the inherent politics and power dynamics embedded in and illuminated by the Vietnamese American epistle: "attention to Vietnamese American letters clarifies the national and international political conditions under which one can write and whether, when, and how writings reach their audiences."³⁵ In other words, while letters can cross time and space to connect people, there is no guarantee that the letter will arrive or that the recipient will respond. Upon the chaos of forced migration, many refugees sought missing loved ones in what Nguyen describes as "the epistolary structure of the classified ad," an example of the adaptability of the form's conventions in identifying the sender and receiver (i.e. the writer and the intended reader).³⁶ Nguyen explains that, specifically for the letters and epistolary adoptions of Vietnamese refugees, the intended recipient might be deceased, lost among those who died in the dangerous passages of militarized and war-forced migrations. Vietnamese refugees' epistles, therefore, "also function[] epitaphically," "demarcate[ing] the dead as well as the living."³⁷

³⁵ M. Nguyen, *America's Vietnam*, 143.

³⁶ M. Nguyen, *America's Vietnam*, 141.

³⁷ M. Nguyen, *America's Vietnam*, 142.

While *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* honors the epistle, framing its contents with a tradition that marks the beginning of Vietnamese American literary and identity formation in the United States, the novel disrupts epistolary conventions to undermine the form's hegemonic biases from the very first page. In addition to the form's elucidation of political dynamics, Nguyen highlights the "class-based hierarchies" of writing and genres in her interrogation of the classified ad as a manifestation of the epistolary form.³⁸ Simply stated, the conventional epistle is an established, respected, and respectable literary form, while the classified or missing persons ad is not. The latter's adaptation of epistolary strategies not only makes room for those traditionally excluded from the privilege of writing letters (i.e. the privilege of affording stamps to send; the privilege of access to a postal service; the privilege of knowing a recipient exists and lives) but also renders visible that very privilege. Acknowledging Võ Phiến's elevated positionality as "part of the Vietnamese diaspora's educated class," Marguerite Nguyen summons Viet Thanh Nguyen's claim in *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* that the power dynamic inherent in U.S. literary production produces ethnic and Vietnamese American literature that share "some common generic features," such as the explicit translation of language and culture or the affirmation of American benevolence and exceptionalism, as a consequence of being written exclusively by the "most educated class."³⁹ Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, "Class markers are evident in what Vietnamese American literature does not often address (the peasantry), as well as in an array of stylistic features that mark an authorial anxiety about being the educated elite of a racial minority."⁴⁰ Vuong addresses the politics of literary production by constantly questioning his very act of writing a letter at the same time that he

³⁸ M. Nguyen, *America's Vietnam*, 143.

³⁹ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 203-208.

⁴⁰ V. Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 208.

writes it, and the text simultaneously straddles high and working class literary aesthetics. Marguerite Nguyen then suggests, however, that such literary politics “is more than an example of power dynamics in the literary world.”⁴¹ What those missing persons ads also illuminate is the documentation of loss made possible by the epistolary form and both its fulfilled and unfulfilled intentions. The affective registering of loss, therefore, grounds the literary body in literal embodiments—loss of home, loss of country, loss of family, and loss of lives.

Articulating the very act of “writing” in the first page of the novel, *Little Dog* measures distance with language as each additional word increases the space between him and his mother: “Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are.”⁴² Complementing the narrator’s acknowledgment of writing as artifice, location and directional specificities (“down,” “further,” “where you are”) outline an awareness of spatiality. The relationship between the production of language and space enables Vuong to imagine physical and literary placemaking specifically for someone who exists outside the reach of “word[s].”⁴³ That *Little Dog* explicitly addresses someone who cannot read makes Vuong’s book unique in its articulated inclusion of those overlooked by Vietnamese American (and Asian American) literature. Simply and obviously put, no other Vietnamese or Asian American book intends to write to—or even “reach”—someone who cannot understand English, a marker and consequence of not only class but also geopolitical positionality. Signifying a hyper-awareness of its own formal designs, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*’ very first words gestures to a space outside the epistolary formula—“Let me begin again” begins before “Dear Ma”—to generate a form that simultaneously excludes yet also acknowledges its own act of exclusion. *Little Dog*’s letter steps outside of itself to register his mother’s marginalized positionality as an illiterate

⁴¹ M. Nguyen, *America’s Vietnam*, 143.

⁴² Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 3.

⁴³ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 3.

Vietnamese refugee working class woman. Rose's sociopolitical position is not only represented but also embodied in the physical form of the novel's delicate construction—the simultaneous inheritance of and movement away from the conventions and literal frame of the epistolary form.

Underscoring the mechanisms of the epistolary form once again, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* resurrects and reformulates its inception three-quarters into the novel. Little Dog writes:

Dear Ma—

Let me begin again.

I am writing because it's late.

Because it's 9:52 p.m. on a Tuesday and you must be walking home after the closing shift.

I'm not with you 'cause I'm at war. Which is one way of saying it's already February and the president wants to deport my friends. It's hard to explain.

For the first time in a long time, I am trying to believe in heaven, in a place we can be together after all this blows ~~over~~ up.⁴⁴

This time, "Let me begin again" is within the epistolary frame, enclosed by and following "Dear Ma—." Rather than his initial "writing to reach you [his mother]," Little Dog is now "writing because it's late."⁴⁵ The novel's first beginning ties language with the creation of space ("each word I put down is one word further from where you are") and the possibility of movement ("I am writing to reach you"). The text here, however, emphasizes temporality with its generous use of time markers ("begin," "late," "9:52 p.m.," "Tuesday," "after," "closing," "February," "first time," "long time," "after"). This temporal inundation conceptualizes a futurity from the exact position of the present moment, eventually directing us to an imagined place: "heaven... a place we can be together."

⁴⁴ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 173.

⁴⁵ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 3, 173.

At this moment of its second inception, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*' double beginning constructs a dialectic between the literary and the historical to expand the boundaries of Vietnamese America's conventional historical context. While distance is measured by language in the first beginning, this second one measures distance with violence: "I'm not with you 'cause I'm at war. Which is one way of saying... the president wants to deport my friends."⁴⁶ Although Little Dog, Rose, and Lan are products of the Vietnam War, the "war" resurrected in this quote does not refer to the late twentieth century conflict directly experienced by Vietnamese Americans, something conventionally expected of novels written by Vietnamese Americans about Vietnamese Americans. This "war" attacks undocumented immigrants of a different century and a different geographical location, presumably the exclusion and violent removal of Chicano and Latin Americans from U.S. political recognition and physical territory. With his injections and interrogations of beginnings, Vuong not only unites different histories but also different communities—and, in doing so, the text combats the structural violence that enforces physical and nonphysical distance between marginalized peoples. The Vietnamese refugees of the late twentieth century and the undocumented immigrants of the contemporary moment share the same plight, placed at the mercy of the U.S. nation-state, forced to mobilize and to be immobilized by the dictates of statehood and citizenship. Here, the novel takes a turn away from Vietnamese American literary conventions and expectations by stepping beyond the bounds of the Vietnam War. As a result, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* re-contextualizes the historical confines of Vietnamese America to include a larger network of relations.

Presenting a more fragmented mutation of the book's opening, this second beginning visually resembles the shape of a poem. Vuong crafts his prose with poetic sensibilities to reformulate the former using the latter's emphasis on visualization (i.e. what the words literally

⁴⁶ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 173.

look like on paper). While markers of time and place regulate the positionality of the novel's characters, Vuong's aesthetic choices disrupt the regulation with constant insertions of line breaks. With every sentence and its demarcations of time, Vuong fights back with a line break—literally creating space on the page for the imagination of a place where communities of marginalized identity (Vietnamese refugees restricted to the past by historical narratives of the Vietnam War *and* undocumented Chicano and Latin American immigrants exploited by today's immigration laws) can unite in their common struggles and not-so-common differences. Transforming an epistle into poetry, Vuong tears his prose into fragments to challenge the conventions of letter-writing and to expand its role in the Vietnamese American context. Here, the post-Vietnam War literary form narrates a contemporary war on the legalities of personhood to de-exceptionalize the Vietnamese American refugee experience, putting Vietnamese America within a larger historical and geopolitical network of other marginalized communities that have been structurally oppressed across time and space. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* “begin[s] again” by reciting social, political, and historical content not conventionally discussed in Vietnamese American literature. By including what is “hard to explain,” Vuong constructs a literary form that affects empathy between disconnected communities by reinforcing visual and textual—and, consequently, embodied—presence.

The Vietnamese American Memoir

While letters contributed to forming and documenting Vietnamese American refugee community and subjectivity, the memoir was instrumental in introducing Vietnamese American voices to the larger U.S. literary market and audience. While the epistle addressed Vietnamese America internally, the memoir reached larger white America. In *This is All I Choose to Tell*:

History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud charts the thematic patterns and development of Vietnamese American literature and writes:

The United States lifted its economic embargo in 1994, and Viet Nam once again made the front pages of newspapers around the country. America's return to Viet Nam through the market economy facilitated the entry of Vietnamese American cultural production in the U.S. national narrative. The year 1994 marks the emergence of what would become a relatively popular genre, the Vietnamese American memoir... [a form in which] authors take on the role of spokespersons for their community.⁴⁷

In other words, cultural production relies upon market forces that derive expectations from social and political contexts. For Vietnamese American literary production in particular, improved political and economic relations between Vietnam and the United States prior to the turn of the century engendered a market for Vietnamese American literature.⁴⁸ The popularity of the Vietnamese American memoir along with socially attached expectations of authenticity underscore the prescribed value and place of Vietnamese American literature—that Vietnamese American texts and authors not only act as representatives for the Vietnamese American experience but also bear the burden of resolving American anxiety regarding their humanitarian violations and racial violences during the Vietnam War. Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* presents a quintessential example of the Vietnamese American memoir tradition, described by Viet Thanh Nguyen as a text in which the author “speaks directly at the beginning and end to Americans, especially veterans, absolving them of any guilt they may feel about the war.”⁴⁹ Within the larger American cultural context, Vietnamese American authors and characters—life and literature—are arguably always presumed to be synonymous—always works of nonfiction rather than art. For writers of color, Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, “the author’s

⁴⁷ Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, *This is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 27.

⁴⁸ Robert Dayley, *Southeast Asia in the New International Era* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2017), 107. In December of 1986, the Vietnamese party-state pursued economic development through the introduction and implementation of *doi moi*, an economic policy that embraced a more decentralized market-oriented economy and, consequently, promoted a more progressive political climate that aligned with U.S. ideologies and interests.

⁴⁹ V. Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 203.

identity and body is [sic] relevant because art exists in a social world where readers and writers bring their prejudices to the act of reading,” consequently suggesting the inextricability of embodiment and literature.⁵⁰ The popularity of the Vietnamese American memoir owes to both the Vietnamese American writer’s burden of relieving America’s Vietnam War guilt and the public’s expectation of non-fictional ethnic authenticity (i.e. the memoir’s author and character are the same). Simply put, Vietnamese American memoirs were popular because, perceived as true stories written by Vietnamese American representatives who speak for all other Vietnamese Americans, they made white Americans feel forgiven and good about their own human rights transgressions.

Marguerite Nguyen interrogates the form of the memoir, which she defines as “a genre whose attention to a particular autobiographical context potentially counteracts dominant histories.”⁵¹ Memoir differentiates from an autobiography in scope, focusing on specific episodes rather than tracking the entirety of a life, and its “self-referential engagement with the question of authorship” allows the form to “*transmit* personal knowledge with a sense of immediacy and feeling.”⁵² In other words, the memoir’s expected performance of intimacy breaks the barrier between the reader and writer. The consequence of transferring authorial subjectivity to readers—a move that universalizes the stories and experiences of the memoir’s writer—is the dehistoricization of the memoir’s content. For a Vietnamese American text, this translates to the dehistoricization of the Vietnam War in exchange for empathetic relatability.

While *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is a work of fiction, Little Dog and Ocean Vuong himself share many similarities, blurring the line between fiction and biography. I focus on the form of the memoir and on its manipulation in the novel to interrogate a Vietnamese

⁵⁰ V. Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 211.

⁵¹ M. Nguyen, *America’s Vietnam*, 93-94.

⁵² M. Nguyen, *America’s Vietnam*, 93.

American literary tradition and to respect Vuong's own constant emphasis that his book is a work of fiction. In an article published in *The Atlantic* by Kat Chow, Vuong is quoted saying, "I wanted to invoke or invite an autobiographical reading, but refuse it ultimately... The book would be founded on truth, but realized by the imagination."⁵³ Vuong strategically incorporates details from his own life, which, given his fame and popularity, will be recognized by readers, in order to directly confront that still on-going problem—readerly expectations that a writer of color must always represent his own life or his own ethnic community. Both Vuong and Little Dog were raised by their mother and grandmother, both have mothers named Rose who work in nail salons, both are writers, both grew up in Connecticut, and both are queer Vietnamese Americans. These intentional overlaps make *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* a rich site for the interrogation of the Vietnamese American memoir and its evolving role—or expected role—in contemporary Vietnamese American literature. A memoir written by a person of color solicits readerly expectations of objective authenticity, while the form's conventional mechanisms enable a subjective and reflexive creativity that underscores the writing process (i.e. it is usually clear that a memoir documents past events because the narrating voice often adds retrospective reflections from the writer in the moment of writing).

Marguerite Nguyen's interrogation of memoirs identifies the closing of distances between the writer and reader in order to transfer subjective experiences; however, Vuong's manipulation of memoir disrupts the seamless transference of emotive intimacies. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* manipulates the competing expectations (nonfictional authenticity) and conventions (writerly retrospection) to produce affective alternatives that underscore the impossibility of subjective replication. As a result, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* breaks not only from

⁵³ Kat Chow, "Going Home with Ocean Vuong," *The Atlantic*, last modified June 4, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/06/going-home-ocean-vuong-on-earth-were-briefly-gorgeous/590938/>

Vietnamese American literary traditions but also with expectations of memoirs more generally. For Vietnamese American texts, authors traditionally translate language and cultural differences for a presumably white American audience in order to both promote empathetic understanding and prescribe an emotive resolution to the Vietnam War. Vuong distances himself from these earlier convictions of Vietnamese American memoirists in his negation of complete empathy between the reader and the writer, consequently instigating a reversal of memoir's tendency to facilitate dehistoricization by de-universalizing the affective and emotive contents of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

To interrogate Vuong's inheritance and disruption of the memoir, I will trace a "particular autobiographical context" from Vuong's own life to its textual appearance in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. How and what changes in the translation of a biographical detail into a fictional narrative? What does Vuong's move from the former to the latter reveal about affective experiences and their narrative transference? In his correspondence with Chinese American poet Arthur Sze published in *The Asian American Literary Review*'s 2014 Fall/Winter issue, Vuong writes of his teenage years working on a tobacco farm as a response to Sze's own experiences of working and writing:

For many summers I worked on a tobacco farm in rural Connecticut alongside migrant workers from Mexico and South America... I was the only non-Spanish-speaking worker there, so I communicated mostly through smiles. Which was what surprised me most. These men, who worked and lived on the field... were always smiling, even through the heat and ache. With a few seasons of work, most of these workers would have enough money to purchase sizable amounts of land back home, on which they could build houses for their families. The perspective was dizzying for me at the time.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Ocean Vuong and Arthur Sze, "A Lettre Correspondence: Ocean Vuong and Arthur Sze," *The Asian American Literary Review*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2014): 104.

After recalling the details of his labor, Vuong connects the fields to his poetry: “These images and scenes never made it into my poems. In fact, I hardly mention them these days.”⁵⁵ They did, however, make a substantial appearance in his novel—where the tobacco fields emerge as a place of labor and of love, where Little Dog works and where he meets his lover Trevor. While Vuong’s articulation to Sze reminisces the “smiles,” his novel adapts the same context of work but takes a melancholic turn as “smiles” transform to “sorry” in Little Dog’s narration. While Vuong remembers his coworkers as men who constantly smiled, Little Dog describes his workers as men who constantly apologized—“Lo siento,” they’d repeat day after day. An affective transformation occurs between Vuong’s writing to Sze and his construction of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*—or, in other words, between Vuong’s letter to Sze and Little Dog’s letter to his mother. The same biographical episode alchemizes into two variations: Vuong’s autobiographical memory of “smiles” and hard work led to the “purchase of sizable amounts of land” in his letter to a fellow Asian American writer, but Little Dog’s recollection of “sorry” grounded the novel in the realities of immigrant labor. Vuong’s autobiographical letter solicits feelings of hope, while Little Dog’s narration produces a more complicated affective result and provokes the opposite of hopeful.

Vuong contextualizes the tobacco fields in his novel within a Vietnamese American frame since, referencing my argument on the epistolary form’s significance to Vietnamese American identity and community formation in the previous section, the novel is literally constructed as a letter. Vuong invokes expectations of the Vietnamese American memoir by beginning the chapter with the nail salon, a familiar location for a Vietnamese American novel

⁵⁵ Vuong and Sze, “A Lettre Correspondence: Ocean Vuong and Arthur Sze,” 104.

given the Vietnamese American dominance in the nail salon industry.⁵⁶ Vuong's own mother also worked in a nail salon. Little Dog describes Rose's labor as a manicurist and paints an intimate portrait of quintessential Vietnamese American working class labor. It is also through the nail salon that *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* contextualizes this contemporary Vietnamese American context within the historical frame of the Vietnam War—another expectation acknowledged and checked off. Nearly half a century ago, the United States went out of its way to violently contain communism within the boundaries of Indochina, destroying the people and landscape of an entire country. Now, U.S. capitalism can contain Vietnamese America without direct government or military intervention. The same imperialism that exacerbated the Vietnam War continues to inflict violence upon Vietnamese American bodies through nail salon labor. The workers and their children have “lungs” that “can no longer breathe without swelling,” “livers hardening with chemicals,” “joints brittle and inflamed from arthritis.”⁵⁷ With Vuong's documentation of the damaged body in fragments, the nail salon exposes the eerie similarity between Vietnam under American imperialism and Vietnamese America under modern capitalism. Vuong takes the tradition and expectation that a Vietnamese American memoir must address the Vietnam War, yet, without even mentioning the war, he shows that acetone has replaced napalm as a more lucrative poison.

Contemporary Vietnamese America is a product of not only geopolitics but also capitalism. The novel's depiction of contemporary Vietnamese American labor hones in on the U.S. nation-state's rhetorical production of refugees and transfers its replication in the novel's

⁵⁶ Kimberly Kay Hoang, "Nailing Race and Labor Relations: Vietnamese Nail Salons in Majority-Minority Neighborhoods," *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2015): 113-139, doi:10.1353/jaas.2015.0017. The nail salon—a \$7.5-billion industry predominantly owned by Vietnamese immigrants and “the fastest growing Asian immigrant-dominated business”—occupies a critical place within Vietnamese America as a contradictory site of economic opportunity and labor exploitation, resistance against and complicity with racial discrimination, political empowerment and systemic violence.

⁵⁷ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 80.

textual construction of Vietnamese American nail salon workers. Little Dog observes, “The most common English word spoken in the nail salon was *sorry*,” and describes how Rose and her coworkers constantly apologize even “when they had done nothing wrong” in the hopes of receiving a tip.⁵⁸ He explains, “In the nail salon, *sorry* is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency. It no longer merely apologizes, but insists, reminds: *I’m here, right here, beneath you*. It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable.”⁵⁹ The text’s interrogation of the word “sorry” within the space of the nail salon underscores the rhetorical mechanism and power dynamics that transform an apology into an “insist[ance]” and a “remind[er]” of Vietnamese American visibility and presence, gesturing to the same geopolitical constructions of refugeeness immediately following the Vietnam War. The rhetorical twists in the salon workers’ deployments of “sorry” to physically and socially “lower[]” themselves echo Mimi Thi Nguyen’s argument that Vietnamese refugees are positioned by the U.S. nation-state as owing debt to America for extending the “gift of freedom” in the face of political turmoil at home.⁶⁰ The text’s use of the words “right, superior, and charitable” precisely describes the U.S. nation-state’s self-prescribed national identity and vision when strategically choosing to save the same people they tried to kill. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* shows that, in the contemporary moment, rather than emphasizing refugee gratitude for geopolitical survival, capitalism reinforces the same oppressive constructions in the Vietnamese American working class apology—saying “sorry” is a tool for economic survival. “Being sorry pays,” Little Dog reflects, “... Because the mouth must eat.”⁶¹ Upon this emphasis

⁵⁸ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 91.

⁵⁹ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 91-92.

⁶⁰ Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 17.

⁶¹ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 92.

on survival, the narrator then shifts the narrative focus from his mother's labor to his own work on the fields.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous repackages the author's biography and collaborates with the novel's epistolary form to solicit and then negate the feeling of empathy on both the meta and diegetic levels. Little Dog first addresses the experience of his letter's intended audience—his mother Rose and her use of “sorry,” one of the few English words she knows. The word “sorry” carries immense value due both to Rose's scarce vocabulary and to its ability to monetize empathy from customers through facilitating the charitable act of tipping. Just as Rose relies upon empathy from her customers to make a living, Little Dog then relies upon the uniting power of empathy on the narrative level to transition to a context outside of his mother's experience. He deploys the same high-value word to take his “Ma” outside of her own Vietnamese American context. Little Dog writes:

And yet it's not only so in the nail salon, Ma. In those tobacco fields, too, we said it. “Lo siento,” Manny would utter as he walked across Mr. Buford's field of vision. “Lo siento,” Rigo whispered as he reached to place a machete back on the wall where Buford sat ticking off numbers on a clipboard. “Lo siento,” I said to the boss after missing a day when Lan had another schizophrenic attack and had shoved all her clothes into the oven, saying she had to get rid of the “evidence.” “Lo siento,” we said when, one day, night arrived only to find the field half harvested, the tractor, its blown-out engine, sitting in the stilled dark. “Lo siento, señor,” each of us said as we walked past the truck with Buford inside blasting Hank Williams and staring at his withered crop, a palm-sized photo of Ronald Reagan taped to the dash. How the day after, we began work not with “Good morning” but with “Lo siento.” The phrase with its sound of a bootstep sinking, then lifted, from mud. The slick muck of it wetting our tongues as we apologized ourselves back to making our living. Again and again, I write to you regretting my tongue.⁶²

Beginning nearly each sentence with “Lo siento,” Little Dog lists five anecdotes that draw upon the lived experiences of both himself and his peers working on the tobacco fields under the watch of the white Mr. Buford. Lan's PTSD, Republican President Ronald Reagan, country singer Hank Williams, and the overwhelming presence of machinery (“machete,” “tractor,”

⁶² Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 92.

“engine,” “truck”) reconstruct the memory of a war—a distinctly American one—and the saturation of violent language (“ticking,” “attack,” “shoved,” “blown-out,” “blasting”) replicates the violence of a past war on a contemporary site of labor. The field itself also alludes to past histories of U.S. racial violence—the exploitation of farm workers that led to the joint Filipino and Mexican effort in the 1960s farmers workers rights movement and, most foundational to the construction of America, African American slavery and the looting of land from Native Americans. Through the word “sorry,” Vuong connects the interior space of the nail salon to the exterior space of the tobacco fields to show that American imperialism and its present-day guise—all-American capitalism—continue to persecute communities of racially marginalized identity as they battle for economic survival.

As the narrative shifts from “sorry” to its Spanish equivalent “Lo Siento,” Little Dog moves from “Ma” and the nail salon community to “we,” “Manny,” “Rigo,” “I,” “we,” and “each of us” on the tobacco fields. With the words “each of us” and the repeated use of “we,” Little Dog aligns himself not with his mother and the Vietnamese American nail salon workers but with his Chicano and Latin American coworkers. With Little Dog’s narrative realignment—a distancing between the Vietnamese American writer and the Vietnamese American community—*On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* presents a constellation of relations that steps beyond the Vietnamese American community. As a result, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* expands the “we” of traditional Vietnamese American literature to incorporate a larger network of people whose histories correlate to different times and geographies but are nonetheless linked to the same structures of power.

The text’s self-referential loop back to the process of its own creation invites an interrogation of its construction. Little Dog ends the paragraph by readdressing his mother and

rearticulating the writing process: “Again and again, I write to you regretting my tongue.”⁶³ The text injects another articulation of “sorry” and “lo siento” as the Vietnamese American writer apologizes for his writing, another form of labor. Here, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*’ use of the word “regretting” produces an affective moment that accumulates the contents of the previous narration, and the literary body absorbs the emotive experiences of the physical bodies. The emphasis “again and again” further embodies Vuong’s strategy of affective accumulation, and the terms “sorry,” “lo siento,” and “regretting” are expressions of the same affect that unite these different communities of labor. While past Vietnamese American texts actively translated for the expected white English-speaking reader, one of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s discussed “common generic features,” *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*’ exclusion of the Vietnamese translation of “sorry” is a counterintuitive choice for a Vietnamese American text and breaks that traditional convention. Little Dog’s realignment of the pronoun “we” with Chicano and Latin American laborers and Vuong’s omission of the Vietnamese word for “sorry,” though very subtle details, revolutionize Vietnamese American literature by de-exceptionalizing the Vietnamese American experience. By honoring space within the book for non-Vietnamese American communities, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*’ aesthetic choices recognize Vietnamese America’s place with relation to other communities of color in a world constructed to exclude and separate all racialized peoples. In other words, Vuong reconceptualizes history by showing that the Vietnam War of the past and the capitalism of today are symptoms of the same structural foundations.

Vietnamese American Empathy

Reading *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* as Vuong’s manipulation of the memoir form, I highlight a more complicated circulation of empathy that emerges as a consequence of

⁶³ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 92.

epistolary mediation. While Little Dog takes his mother's reliance on empathy from clients in order to make a living to catalyze her own empathy for his Chicano and Latin American coworkers, empathy operates differently for the readers of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. In other words, the novel ensures that its literate English-educated readers cannot empathize with the tobacco field laborers in the same way that Rose would—and the novel's aesthetic choices guarantee this affective divergence. I bring back Marguerite Nguyen's suggestion that memoirs "erod[e] the separation between authorial truth and readerly experience" to argue that Vuong mediates his own biographical detail using the epistolary form announced by the first lines of the novel to consequently underscore (and arguably undermine) this erosion.⁶⁴ In other words, Vuong elucidates the mechanisms of memoir to highlight rather than erase the separation of the author from his audience. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, therefore, engages both with the expectation that an Asian American memoir must authentically represent Asian America and with the conceit that a text written by an author of color must have any relation to a memoir.

Vuong's letter to Sze, made available to the public by *The Asian American Literary Review*, allows the author's biographical experiences to juxtapose with his own narrative mediation in his work of fiction. What arises is a mismatch of affect produced by the two narratives—one from the author's actual life and one constructed by the author within his work of fiction—because the reader of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is witnessing the circulation of empathy within the epistolary frame of the novel rather than experiencing that empathy firsthand. Vuong dismisses memoir's promise of intimacy to elucidate the role of mediation in establishing the relationship between the writer and the reader and to suggest the impossibility of replicating subjective, emotive experiences. For the reader of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*,

⁶⁴ M. Nguyen, *America's Vietnam*, 94.

the emotive experience of consuming the affective accumulation of words intended for an illiterate audience is more complicated.

Both forms and their conventional expectations stimulate empathy between the writer and the reader—for the epistle, it's Little Dog and the letter's intended recipient Rose; for the memoir, it's Little Dog (or Vuong himself) and the reader of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. With its unconventional manipulation of both the epistle and the memoir, however, the novel redirects the expected circulation of empathy between the English "I'm sorry" in the nail salon and its Spanish equivalent "lo siento" on the tobacco field. Empathy for the epistle is stunted by Rose's illiteracy, while empathy for the novel's reader is made complicated by Vuong's simultaneous solicitation and rejection of the memoir. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* depicts both the deployment and curtailment of empathy to demonstrate a discrepancy between affective experiences and their literary transference or replication. As a result, the reader of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* simultaneously desires to empathize with the novel's characters but is prohibited by the novel's construction from achieving that satisfaction. Although the reader expects to empathize, Vuong makes clear the impossibility of directly experiencing the labor conditions of the nail salon and the tobacco field. Instead, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* manipulates the reader's expectation—the reader's *need*—to empathize in order to communicate the incommunicability of Vietnamese, Chicano, and Latin American working class subjective experiences.

Exiting the pages of the book for a moment, I interrogate the novel's affective constructions by returning back to Vuong's correspondence with Sze quoted above, where he remembers communicating through "smiles" as the only "non-Spanish-speaking worker" and articulates a memory that the men "were always smiling" despite "the heat and ache" of their

labors.⁶⁵ For his coworkers from “Mexico and South America,” Vuong explains, “Their whole lives and the lives of those they loved, in another country, can be changed by merely three or four crops of tobacco.”⁶⁶ Upon returning to the field as an adult and finding instead the products of gentrification, Vuong questions the whereabouts of his former coworkers:

I think of Jose, whether he ever made enough to send his 10 year-old daughter to college. Or Hector who was saving for a wedding, where he would marry his teenage sweetheart. I think of them standing by the dust-swept road as I rode my bike home on those amber, musty summer streets. As I look back I can see Manny waving to me, all four fingers silhouetted against the fading light, and hearing the various shouts of “Adios! Hasta mañana, Chinito!” as I plunged my bike into the cricket-dark—towards home.⁶⁷

Without contextualization, this quoted passage from Vuong’s letter could be mistaken as a passage from his work of fiction. In fact, these same details reappear, though slightly nuanced and elaborated upon, in the following quotation from the novel when Little Dog, like Vuong himself, wonders about the state of his former coworkers:

How George was one grand away, about two months of work, from buying his mother a house outside Guadalajara. How Brandon was going to send his sixteen-year-old daughter, Lucinda, to University in Mexico City to be a dentist, like she always wanted. How after one more season Manny would be back by the seaside village in El Salvador, running his fingers over the scar on his mother’s collarbone where a tumor would’ve just been removed using the pay he received removing tobacco from the Connecticut soil... And I heard them behind me, their voices distinct as channels on a radio, “Hasta mañana, Chinito!” “Adios, muchacho!”... Without looking, I could tell Manny was waving, like he did each day, his three-and-a-half-fingered hand black against the last light.⁶⁸

Between Vuong’s own personal retelling of his life experience and the translation of that biographical episode into fiction, an extension of geographical specificity and an elaboration of personal histories appear in the latter. The geographic designations “outside Guadalajara,” “University in Mexico City,” and “seaside village in El Salvador” root the novel’s characters to particular histories associated with their correlating geographical context. Vuong gives care to

⁶⁵ Vuong and Sze, “A Lettre Correspondence: Ocean Vuong and Arthur Sze,” 104.

⁶⁶ Vuong and Sze, “A Lettre Correspondence: Ocean Vuong and Arthur Sze,” 104.

⁶⁷ Vuong and Sze, “A Lettre Correspondence: Ocean Vuong and Arthur Sze,” 105.

⁶⁸ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 93.

the contextualization of Chicano and Latin American lives and presents their relationships with loved ones (George and “his mother,” Brandon and his “sixteen-year-old daughter, Lucinda,” Manny and “his mother”) in addition to also elaborating upon the lives of those relatives (George’s mother will get a house, Luncinda wants to be a dentist, Manny’s mother has cancer). Such meticulous care to include the personal stories and to gesture to the geopolitical histories of the tobacco field workers operates against memoir’s tendency to universalize subjective experiences. The personal aspirations of the laborers in Connecticut situated against the context of their relatives abroad produce a literary “semblance,” a term I borrow from Christopher Lee, that captures the intersection of the personal and the geopolitical. The fictional passage’s immediate emotive provocation juxtaposed against the distance and variety of its geographical contexts allow the reader to intimately witness but not directly experience the lives of these workers.

The legacies of the Vietnamese American letter and memoir endure in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*—a revolutionary moment in not only Vietnamese American but also Asian American contemporary literature given the novel’s many accolades and Vuong’s MacArthur Genius Grant. Vuong’s adoption and adaption of these two critical Vietnamese American forms, however, take Vietnamese America to the contemporary moment by expanding the community’s formational context to include other histories and geographies external to Vietnamese Americans and the Vietnam War’s Cold War circumstance. Little Dog’s constant questioning and rationalization of his writing process underscore the narration’s own vulnerabilities as it navigates the boundaries of Vietnamese American literary traditions, which owes its genesis to the Vietnam War, and demonstrates a desire to adjust those limitations. As a result, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* engenders a self-questioning literary form that simultaneously escapes

yet also remains tethered to tradition, producing an affective literary aesthetic that registers a contemporary Vietnamese America that cannot and does not exist in exceptional isolation.

AFFECTIVE AESTHETICS: ROLAND BARTHES AND THE VIETNAMESE AMERICAN WRITER

In addition to its engagement with Vietnamese American literary traditions, Ocean Vuong and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* directly converse with Western literary criticism. Roland Barthes appears throughout the novel as a motif that underscores Vuong's own efforts in theorizing the ethics and politics of literature. I trace Barthes' presence throughout the text to elucidate a particular relationship between literary aesthetics, the author, and the reader. In his *New York Times* article "Eavesdropping on Ocean Vuong's New Book," Kevin Nguyen writes, "As a writer, Vuong believes speaking Vietnamese gives him an advantage. It's a tonal language, which requires the listener to pay attention. He gives an example: *má, mả, ma*. In Vietnamese, they mean wildly different things: mother, grave, ghost. For him, hearing these distinctions translates to writing with that level of precision."⁶⁹ I apply Vuong's own theorization of his writing to my tracking of Barthes throughout the novel—each appearance adheres to certain patterns, yet each engagement also solicits a "wildly different" reorganization of language, affect, and the body, a mimicry of the Vietnamese language's tonal mechanisms. In each instance that Little Dog summons Barthes, he also engages directly with his mother and with the theme of loss. Echoing Dorothy Wang's emphasis on the Asian American poet's position of simultaneous racial exclusion and literary elitism, Vuong confronts English at its highest calibers. What materializes is a uniquely Vietnamese American affective form that bears a simultaneous ownership of and uneasy relationship to the English language, a form that concurrently compels and distances the reader's registering of, borrowing once more from Vermeulan's definition of affect, the "unreadability" of Vietnamese America.

⁶⁹ K. Nguyen, "Eavesdropping on Ocean Vuong's New Book."

A name familiar to philosophy, literary, and cultural studies, Roland Barthes is a twentieth century French theorist and critic whose work defined the fields of structuralism and post-structuralism. His essay “The Death of the Author” argues for a separation of the text from its author, suggesting that, while characters within the frame of a narrative have a “unilateral[]” understanding of “words that have double meanings,” it is the reader “who understands each word in its duplicity, and understands further, one might say, the very deafness of the characters.”⁷⁰ Demanding that “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author,” Barthes writes:⁷¹

In this way is revealed the whole being of writing: a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of; the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination; but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted.⁷²

Emphasizing “destination” rather than “origin,” the French critic places interpretive power fully in the hands of the reader and strips texts of all authorial intentions. But what if the reader—defined by Barthes as “a man without history, without biography, without psychology”—is an illiterate woman whose whole physical and psychic being is defined by the forces of international geopolitics and history? I focus on Barthes and introduce “The Death of the Author” in particular to emphasize that *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* actively engages with its readers, forcing us to not only bear witness but also acknowledge our complicity with the words on its pages.

⁷⁰ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 148.

⁷¹ Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 148.

⁷² Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 148.

A few pages into the book, Little Dog summons Barthes for the first time: “I reread Roland Barthes’s *Mourning Diary* yesterday, the book he wrote each day for a year after his mother’s death. *I have known the body of my mother, he writes, sick and then dying.* And that’s where I stopped. Where I decided to write to you. You who are still alive.”⁷³ The novel underscores a discrepancy between socially codified emotions and affective registers. With Barthes’s mourning of his mother’s death, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* summons the emotion of grief that often follows the loss of a loved one. Barthes’ management of grief, which resulted in the production of *Mourning Diary*, compelled Little Dog to write to his mother. If we take grief, a feeling mediated by the consumption of *Mourning Diary*, as the emotion circulating between Barthes and Little Dog, the narrator of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is mourning his living mother as he writes to her—but the text suggests an affective alternative when it excludes the narration (or the naming) of what exactly caused Little Dog to “stop[]” and “decide[] to write.” Vuong’s formal choices expose the inadequacy of grief in registering Little Dog’s lived and subjective reality—specifically, the emotion of grief is inadequate in representing the relationship between the narrator and his mother. How do you mourn someone who is still alive, provoked by a “reread” of someone else’s diary? Whereas Barthes “wrote... after his mother’s death,” Little Dog shifts from past to present tense after reading Barthes’ writing: “And that’s where I stopped. Where I decided to write to you. You who *are* still alive” (emphasis mine).⁷⁴

By reading the word “you,” which Little Dog repeats twice, the reader occupies the position of Little Dog’s illiterate refugee Vietnamese American working class mother. Vuong’s narrative structure aligns the contemporary, presumably educated, English-speaking reader with

⁷³ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 7.

⁷⁴ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 7.

a figure who cannot read and whose positionality exists as a direct result of U.S. military violence, global capitalism, and Asian, European, and American imperialisms. Emphasizing “where” he “stopped” (as opposed to “when” he “stopped”) alongside the subtle shift from past to present tense, Vuong crafts a dialectic between the temporal and the spatial that acts as a formal mediator to replace the deficiency of grief in explaining Little Dog’s affective positioning. The novel’s narrative construction puts the reader of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* and Little Dog’s intended audience—his mother Rose—in the same positionality, consequently producing a compulsion to form connections yet also simultaneously maintaining the reality of disconnection. In other words, while the narration’s use of the word “you” and Little Dog’s appeal to Barthes suggest literature’s healing potential through forging connections, the text reminds us that Little Dog and Roland Barthes do not occupy the same time and space as writers, and the literate reader does not occupy the same positionality as the illiterate mother as audiences of the written texts. These five sentences illustrate the material consequences of aesthetic choices in capturing a spatiotemporal palimpsest that produces affective experiences, rendering visible what codified emotions cannot fully represent.

Barthes resurfaces a second time when Little Dog, Rose, and Lan go shopping for ingredients to make bún bò Huế, which requires oxtail as the main ingredient. The women are unable to speak English and, therefore, cannot communicate with the butcher. Rose asks in Vietnamese, “Đuôi bò. Anh có Đuôi bò không?” which translates to “Oxtail. Mister, do you have oxtail?”⁷⁵ When her native tongue fails to produce the desired produce, Rose resorts to bodily movements that mimick the motions of a cow: “Foundering, 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.

⁷⁵ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 30.

You moved, carefully twisting and gyrating so he could recognize each piece of this performance: horns, tail, ox.”⁷⁶ The body enters when words fail, and Rose must dehumanize herself to mime what she eats in exchange for not knowing English, her body “perform[ing]” the appearance and behavior of an animal. The butcher and a witnessing customer laughed at Rose, and, “drowning, it seemed, in air” from the stunted communication, she “tried French, pieces of which remained from your [her] childhood. ‘Derriere de vache!’ you [she] shouted,” which translates to “Butt of a cow!”⁷⁷ The text’s histrionic word choices (“floundering,” “wiggled,” “mooing,” “twisting,” and “gyrating”) in describing Rose’s body and its metaphorical use of “drowning” place the body of the Vietnamese American working class woman at the mercy of the English language. The scene underscores the embodied effects of language—or what the lack of English can physically do to a human body in America. What surfaces from the intersection of Vietnamese, French, and English is a palimpsest of historical violence accumulating in one moment on Rose’s body, resulting in her theatrics (“this performance”) and suffocation (“drowning... in air”)—performance and survival. Then, unable to comprehend Rose, the butcher summoned a man who “spoke to you [her] in Spanish.”⁷⁸

Despite knowing English, Little Dog “didn’t know that oxtail was called *oxtail*” and, therefore, is also unable to communicate on behalf of his mother and grandmother. The word “oxtail” appears six times within the five-page text of this scene—yet, juxtaposed against the narrative’s textual repetition, “oxtail” never actually gets spoken or vocalized on the diegetic level of the text. Despite Little Dog’s English delivery, this scene unfolds entirely in Vietnamese from the perspective of Little Dog, Rose, and Lan. With the change in font formatting of “oxtail” to the italicized “*oxtail*,” the text underscores the act of translation and highlights the writer’s

⁷⁶ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 30.

⁷⁷ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 30.

⁷⁸ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 30.

role as a mediator between experience and narration. But just as Vuong challenges the expectation that a memoir must be an authentic representation of the author's ethnic community, which I interrogated in the previous section, the text here highlights the impossibility of perfect and complete translation. Vietnamese, French, Spanish, and English anchor communication at this moment in the narrative and concatenate around the unspeakability of the English word for "oxtail." The text's refusal to translate its Vietnamese or French dialogues further extends this dissociation to the English-literate reader of the novel—just as Little Dog, Rose, and Lan are unable to verbalize "oxtail," the reader of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is also unable to comprehend the non-English texts without mastering Vietnamese and French literacy. Both the aesthetic form and the content of this scene mimic one another through (1) a consistent choice to not translate language differences and (2) imperfect experiential translation in the narration through writerly mediation. The grocery trip's failure to ultimately produce any oxtail, however, not only underscores linguistic but also affective disjunction.

Laughter circulates this scene, from the butcher who "laughed" with "his hand over his mouth at first, then louder, booming" to the "middle-aged woman" who "shuffled past" while "suppressing a smile."⁷⁹ Eventually, after Rose's failed attempt to communicate in French, "Lan dropped my [Little Dog's] hand and joined you [Rose]—mother and daughter twirling and mooing in circles, Lan giggling the whole time."⁸⁰ While the same physical reaction joins the characters of Little Dog's narrative with a common emotive expression, the scene in its entirety affects the opposite of laughter from the novel's reader upon registering the irony of the grandmother's "giggling." The uncontrollable laughter and its uncomfortable movement between the characters, which provoked Lan's own "twirling and mooing," illustrate a mother's inability

⁷⁹ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 30.

⁸⁰ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 30, 31.

to gauge her own daughter's social suffocation and dehumanization. Unknowingly, Lan contributes to her daughter's (and her own) public humiliation. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* shows that in America, where the English language regulates bodies and actions, two family members who speak a common language other than English can lose the ability to affectively connect with one another outside of the home, where the performance required for survival disrupts common emotive understanding.

Culminating in the written articulation of silence, a contradicting act itself made possible only through writing, the narrative highlights the difficulty of linguistic and affective translation for Vietnamese American working class families who must navigate life in an English-speaking world. The laughter swells into silence when the family makes their exit from the grocery store: "None of us spoke as we checked out, our words suddenly wrong everywhere, even in our mouths."⁸¹ That "words" were "wrong... even in our mouths," the only part of the body that will allow their delivery—their vocalized entrance into the world to be heard and received—underscores a fragmented relationship between language and the body. The text, however, breaks apart this relationship in order to redefine it, and the silence of the scene cancels the presence of verbal "words" in order to direct attention to other modes of communication. Because spoken words were inadequate in communicating the transactional and emotive needs of its characters, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* gestures to another form of language—that of the body. Rose "moved[] carefully" so that the butcher could "recognize each piece" of her "performance," and Little Dog explains how every movement and choreography of his mother's "finger," "back," "hand," and "head" correlated with a particular word: "horns, tail, ox." Even though her bodily mimicry of a cow dehumanizes and humiliates her, Rose executes agency through her ability to adapt despite not possessing English fluency. Using her body, Rose herself creates and deploys a

⁸¹ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 31.

language. As a result, she posits a different mode of communication that does not rely on verbal language systems and their associations with structures of power.

Little Dog then summons Barthes to expand his interrogation of the body as language: “*No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure, wrote Barthes. For the writer, however, it is the mother tongue.*”⁸² Barthes articulates a normative relationship between “the writer” and “the mother tongue,” asserting an underlying assumption of universality that elevates the writer with a guaranteed relationship to “pleasure” and constructing a complementary relationship between language and the body. Little Dog, however, questions such universality and elevation. He asks, “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?”⁸³ Engaging directly with (il)literacy, Little Dog wrestles with the geopolitics and uneven power relations that shroud his specific positionality as a Vietnamese American writer, one who must navigate the politics of both his access to the bourgeois world of Barthes and his “own[ership]” of an underdeveloped “mother tongue.” While Barthes uses “mother tongue” as a figure of speech to describe a writer’s native language, Little Dog removes “mother tongue” from its metaphorical deployment through a series of three questions and reorients our attention to the words’ material, physical, and literal referents: “mother” and “tongue.”

Focusing on the word “tongue,” Little Dog traces its transformation from being “the symbol of a void” to being “itself a void,” the narrative translating a metaphor into its embodied meaning. The text then imagines violence onto the tongue upon its metamorphosis into a body part: Little Dog asks, “... what if the tongue is cut out?” This subtle yet complete transition from

⁸² Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 31.

⁸³ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 31.

the literary to the literal—the transition from writing to physical violence—shifts the focus from figures of speech to the figure of the Vietnamese American working class woman. The narrative turns the other half of Barthes’s metaphor—“mother”—into a focus on Rose, her body, and her material existence.

The twist from metaphor to embodiment once again restructures Barthes’ affective assertions through the text’s resurrection of and engagement with loss. Little Dog asks, “Can one take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely?” and continues with an indirect answer, “The Vietnamese I own is the one you gave me, the one whose diction and syntax reach only the second-grade level.”⁸⁴ The question suggests that, for Little Dog, the writer exists in constant relationship not with pleasure but with loss, an experience that summons grief instead of pleasure, and his use of the word “own” contends that, for the Vietnamese American writer specifically, loss is inherited from the particular and collective experiences of the Vietnam War. We then learn that the American military napalmed Rose’s school when she was five years old and ended her education. Her illiteracy, therefore, is a direct consequence of the United States’ Cold War international relations and militarization. With this detail from Rose’s childhood, the text grieves a loss that can only be imagined—not only her literacy (and a fluency in her own “mother tongue”) but also everything that would come along with it—the oxtail, the bún bò huế, respect, a happy family.

The text problematizes Barthes’ use of “mother tongue” to dismiss its universalizing and dematerialized implications. In other words, Vuong underscores language’s ability to dwell only on metaphors (or, to use the framing vocabulary of this paper, on literary aesthetics) at the cost of the total depoliticization and erasure of lived realities. Rather than forcing a complete distancing from Barthes to progress his narrative, however, Vuong instead adapts a strategy I

⁸⁴ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 31.

will call aesthetic accumulation. After removing “mother tongue” from Barthes’ metaphorical deployment and deconstructing the idiom back to its material referents, Little Dog then takes language back to its figurative use and asserts his own intervention. He claims: “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.”⁸⁵ The text first dismantles Barthes’ figurative “mother tongue” into the embodied “mother” and “tongue” to elucidate the literal within the literary. With this established, Little Dog then adapts Barthes’ foundations by taking the literal “mother” in “mother tongue” to reconstruct a return to the literary, comparing his underdeveloped Vietnamese to an “orphan.” Little Dog’s deployment of metaphors differs from that of Roland Barthes in that it is an accumulation of the embodied and the figurative, a centering of the figurative in the figure and the literary in the literal. Vuong shows, therefore, that the aesthetics of literature must retain its dialectical grounding in social, historical, and political materialities.

Aesthetic accumulation also operates to reorganize structures of time and place, allowing the narrative to keep moving forward without ever moving on—a position intrinsic to contemporary Vietnamese American literature’s relationship to the Vietnam War. Little Dog compares “Vietnamese” to a “time capsule,” a metaphor that, while constructed as a literary device, articulates an explicit reference to time, a concept inextricable from history and from orientations of past, present, and future. A “time capsule” holds objects from the present moment and conserves it for the future—almost like a letter, though perhaps without a specified and designated audience. Although gesturing to the movement or passing of time, the “time capsule” metaphor acts as a marker of spatial rather than temporal positionality with the text’s use of the word “where” that transforms the timeline of Rose’s life into a place. Using the word “where” as

⁸⁵ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 31-32.

opposed to “when,” Vuong collapses time and space and consequently disrupts conventional understanding of temporal linearity. The past, present, and future do not progress independently one after the other but coexist in one place. For Vuong, his use of the word “where” marks not only a simultaneous time and place in Rose’s life but also a memorial to her loss—a literary and textual monument. Little Dog then directly addresses his mother: “Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war.” And Vietnamese American literature and history always trace back to the war—to the genesis of Vietnamese America.

Vietnamese American literature tends to end where it begins—the Vietnam War. Barthes intercepts this time to assist the narrative’s (re)navigation of the war’s physical and psychic consequences. While Vuong acknowledges the war, he shifts away from Vietnamese American literary traditions by decentering it from Little Dog’s narrative. Instead, Vuong centers embodiment to produce an affective alternative to Vietnamese American literary representation. After returning home from the grocery trip, Little Dog recalls an intimate moment with his mother and grandmother in their apartment, summoning Barthes once more: “Two languages cancel each other out, suggests Barthes, beckoning a third. 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.”⁸⁶ Here, Vuong uses the language of mathematics to articulate the deficiency of words—because, sometimes, words just don’t add up—and his use of “ghosted” further implies their intangibility and immateriality. He differentiates between two parts of the body, prescribing “the hand” with recuperative powers to communicate in place of “the tongue.” Juxtaposed against the impalpability of the word “ghosted,” his detailed emphasis on the physicality of hands (“the borders of skin and cartilage”) once again removes the focus away from verbal and auditory communication. Because “words”

⁸⁶ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 31-32.

became “suddenly wrong everywhere, even in our [their] mouths” and because spoken language—or the lack of spoken language—created relational disconnection in the grocery store, Vuong empowers a form of communication that does not rely on linguistic fluency. The language of the body, which Little Dog now explicitly labels as “that third language,” does not require the ordering and processing of words. Instead, the language of the body functions and circulates through affective registers and exchanges. With his emphasis on the physicality of the body, Vuong takes the silence that suffocated his family in the grocery store and enrobes it with recuperative powers that heal relational connections disrupted by linguistic (dis)communication.

Creating space for nonverbal communication in the text, Little Dog reflects upon Vietnamese articulations of affection: “It’s true that, in Vietnamese, we rarely say *I love you*, and when we do, it is almost always in English.”⁸⁷ The narrator underscores the English language’s emphasis on verbal deliveries in expressing affection and highlights an act of translation that imposes English rather unnaturally upon a Vietnamese American situation. Little Dog explains:

Care and love, for us, are pronounced clearest through service: plucking white hairs, pressing yourself on your son to absorb a plane’s turbulence and, therefore, his fear... And we [Lan and Little Dog] knelt on each side of you [Rose], rolling out the hardened cords in your upper arms, then down to your wrists, your fingers. For a moment almost too brief to matter, this much made sense—that three people on the floor, connected to each other by touch, made something like the word *family*.⁸⁸

Vuong’s strategic choice to use the word “pronounce” ascribes the nonverbal body parts with the same ability as verbal language to communicate, and the act of articulation is not solely exclusive to the mouth’s ability to produce sounds. The list following the colon acts as definitions of “care and love,” a series of actions done by the body for the body, from miniscule acts like “plucking white hairs” to intensive caring that requires an exertion of the body in its entirety. That a body can “absorb” the physically palpable motions of “a plane’s turbulence” in

⁸⁷ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 32.

⁸⁸ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 33.

addition to the intangible emotion of “fear” suggests the immensity of corporeal power in both withstanding physical violence as well as in regulating the circulation or containment of feelings. That the clarifying “for us” is cradled within the safety of two commas further emphasizes the uniqueness of nonverbal affective communication. Eschewing the limited norms of both spoken and written English, Vuong represents the “unspeakability” of affection and the “unreadability” of the Vietnamese American working class family.

Fragmented parts of the body saturate the passage—“white hairs,” “upper arms,” “wrists,” “fingers”—and, where the text does not explicitly label the body parts in English, Vuong paints a portrait of the body and reinforces its textual presence through choreographies of relational and physical touch. Each time a human body comes into contact with another through an act of “care and love,” the text constructs a “semblance,” a term once again borrowed from Christopher Lee, of the subjective and affective experiences of its Vietnamese American characters. Rather than defining “care and love” for the reader through precisely stated meanings, the text instead defines Vietnamese American expressions of affection through imagery and its consequent connotations. Lan and Little Dog’s massaging of Rose’s exerted body constructs an image that “made something like the word *family*.” The use of the words “something like” to define “family” avoids linguistic exactitude to instead prioritize the production of affect, which the text suggests appears only “[f]or a moment almost too brief to matter.” The fleeting nature of affect in defining Vietnamese American emotive experiences and familial relations breaks from denotative conventions of linguistic precision. The aesthetic choice to embrace relational care for the body and its fleeting duration affectively registers what the English language cannot fully replicate. While a body whose mouth is unable to speak English must perform in public (the grocery store) for survival, consequently losing the ability to

affectively relate to others, the body within the domestic Vietnamese American space communicates sans words and survives through physical touch—with this strategy and juxtaposition, the text conveys the unspeakable.

After establishing the futility of English verbal communication for Rose, the text continues to enforce this conceit in its interrogation of language—almost as if searching for an aesthetic form to fit her lived materiality. In the chapter of Barthes' next appearance, Vuong takes his argument that “the hand, although limited by the borders of skin and cartilage, can be that third language that animates where the tongue falters” and uses the body to textually depict the “unreadability” of Vietnamese American labor.⁸⁹ Watching his mother come home from a long day at the nail salon, Little Dog laments, “Because I am your son, what I know of work I know equally of loss. And what I know of both I know of your hands. Their once supple contours I've never felt, the palms already callused and blistered long before I was born, then ruined further from three decades in factories and nail salons.”⁹⁰ Once again, Little Dog resurfaces the feeling of grief in writing about his mother and her body, setting up a direct relationship between “work,” “loss,” and Rose's “hands.” While Barthes processes loss in grieving his mother's death, Little Dog mourns his living mother because of her condition as a laborer (her hands are an embodied marker of her class) and as a product of international geopolitics (the temporal references “once supple contours” and “long before I was born” link the historical moment of the Vietnam War to its contemporary embodied consequences). Saluting to an imagined past briefly memorialized by small choices in wording, Little Dog mourns the loss that is the damage on his mother's hands (“callused,” “blistered,” “ruined”) and the loss of what “once” was for her.

⁸⁹ Referring back to the theoretical framework laid out in my introduction, I will deploy Vermeulan's description of affect as representing “unreadability” throughout the rest of this section.

⁹⁰ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 79.

After Rose returns home from work on a different evening, Little Dog cares for her body aches using “a quarter” and “Vicks VapoRub,” a healing method commonly used by Vietnamese people to alleviate back pain or to relieve fevers, a process that requires “careful bruising” of the skin in order to “heal.”⁹¹ Vuong then juxtaposes this Eastern medical practice with French philosopher Roland Barthes, putting the colonized and the colonizer in conversation with one another. Little Dog muses: “I think of Barthes again. *A writer is someone who plays with the body of his mother*, he says after the death of his own mother, *in order to glorify it, to embellish it. / How I want this to be true. / And yet, even here, writing you, the physical fact of your body resists my moving it.*”⁹² Vuong juxtaposes Barthes’ literary body against the physical body of Little Dog’s mother, emphasizing a discrepancy between the former’s theorization and the latter’s lived reality. Barthes uses writing to “play[] with the body of his mother” in order to “glorify” and “embellish it,” suggesting writing’s role as decoration and adornment. On the other hand, Little Dog writes not of glorification or embellishment but of damaging (“bruising”) the skin. Instead of adding to her body, Little Dog takes away from it first in order to help and heal it. The divergence in word choice and connotations in the textual depictions of the figure of the mother underscores an affective dissonance between the Western writer and the Vietnamese American writer. The stand-alone line, “How I want this to be true,” further surfaces the divergence between the two—the Vietnamese American writer voices his aspirations and desires to be able to “glorify” and “embellish” his mother’s body instead of damaging and further reducing it. Here, the articulation of an aspiration that cannot be achieved produces and reinforces the feeling of loss that I’ve been tracing throughout the text—a melancholic

⁹¹ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 84-85.

⁹² Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 85.

expression of foregoing something one never had in the first place and a textual mimicry of Rose's loss of a complete "mother tongue."

"[T]he hand," however, "although limited by the borders of skin and cartilage, can be that third language that animates where the tongue falters."⁹³ Because he cannot "glorify" or "embellish" his mother's body through writing, Little Dog turns his mother's body into writing to transform loss into creation. He writes:

Even in these sentences, I place my hands on your back and see how dark they are as they lie against the unchangeable white backdrop of your skin. Even now, I see the folds of your waist and hips as I knead out the tensions, the small bones along your spine, a row of ellipses no silence translates. 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.⁹⁴

Little Dog directly compares "the small bones along your [Rose's] spine" to a "row of ellipses no silence translates" and "the unchangeable white backdrop of your [Rose's] skin" to "a blank page." Because written language cannot completely replicate Rose's lived experiences and transfer her subjectivity to the reader, Rose's body itself must become language in order to represent the "unreadability" of her experience in all of its complexities. By turning Rose's body into the mechanics of a language she cannot understand or read and write in, however, the text also underscores the materiality of language itself. Just as his mother's literal body is damaged by the labor she does, Little Dog also damages the literary body as he writes.

The many layers of this passage articulate the text's attempt to make room within the literary space for a figure that is not literary—in other words, making space within literature for the illiterate, the affective, the embodied, and those who live beyond the reach of written and spoken words. Little Dog verbalizes to his mother what he does to her and her body right as he

⁹³ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 31-32.

⁹⁴ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 85.

does it “in these sentences,” “plac[ing],” “see[ing],” and “knead[ing]” her body while “gripping a pen” and “mov[ing]” through the “spatial field” of “a blank page.” This careful conflation of the literary and literal bodies exposes the novel’s enormous efforts to include not only the working class Vietnamese American refugee woman as the novel’s content but also the essence of her identity in the aesthetic construction of the novel’s form. The latter strategy recognizes the materiality of her positionality in its structure of composition, while the former could easily further marginalize her if it dehumanizes her into a literary device to propel the narrative forward. With this union of literary and literal bodies, Vuong transfers the affective relationship between Little Dog and his mother into the DNA of his own novel, transmitting the care that Little Dog gives to his mother’s body to both Little Dog’s construction of his letter and to Vuong’s own construction of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*.

Vuong does something no other Vietnamese or Asian American writer has done by not only including but actively addressing someone who cannot read in his very literary novel—in doing so, he acknowledges the geopolitical violences responsible for illiteracy in the first place and ensures that his Vietnamese American novel maintains cognizant of such contexts in both its political and aesthetic choices. With the novel’s constant highlighting of literacy, Vuong demonstrates a neglected distinction between literacy and communication to suggest that the two, though related, are not synonymous. Literacy is intimately linked to structures of power and favors spoken and written deliveries, privileges not fully accessible to those who are barred from a particular kind of education dispensed by uneven political and economic systems. Literacy focuses on the medium of communicative delivery rather than on the actual act of delivering. On the contrary, communication relies upon the exchanges that occur between two or more people. Encapsulating both the verbal and the nonverbal, the written and the unreadable, the mouth and

the hands, communication emphasizes that movements and circulations between and among people are what encourages common understanding—something that verbal and written language, manifestations of literacy, cannot always achieve. Literacy enforces exclusions, while communication encourages relations.

While Barthes' theorization of writing is straightforwardly presented as a positive process for mourning and commemoration, Little Dog's complicated anxieties about writing are exposed in his depiction of simultaneous "bruising" and "healing," a formal and aesthetic embodiment of the positionality of a contemporary Vietnamese American writer. Even in its very action of literarily depicting the body of the Vietnamese American working class woman's body, the text simultaneously articulates the unfeasibility of what it does by articulating the incompleteness of experiential translation—Rose's spine is like "a row of ellipses no silence translates." The text suggests that the very act of trying to capture Rose's literal body within the literary space, despite the novel's intentions to include her in the literary space, is perhaps as futile as writing to someone who cannot read in a language they cannot understand—yet he does it anyway. By communicating an articulation of incommunicability, however, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* redirects our focus beyond language and beyond the words on the page even as we read Vuong's words—and, by communicating incommunicability, the text spotlights its affective agenda by asking us to reorient our attention to the complications of what we expect to feel and how we actually feel.

The text's constant self-referential moves to highlight the mechanisms of its own construction emphasize the position of the contemporary Vietnamese American writer as someone who simultaneously resists and is complicit with oppressive structures of power that (re)produce imperial literary traditions. By fragmenting his mother's body into separate parts

upon the page (“back,” “waist,” “hips,” “small bones,” “spine,” “skin”) in order to textually represent it, *Little Dog* is complicit with the same structure of knowledge production that white American journalists and novelists used to depict Vietnamese bodies during the war—deploying fragmented Vietnamese bodies and body parts to represent what is constructed to be an exceptionally unrepresentable American tragedy. *Little Dog*’s explicit articulation of simultaneous damage and creation, however, acknowledges the self-awareness of both the author and his text in their complicity with violence and imperialism—for the English language is the language of the imperialists. To navigate both “marring” and “preservation” defines the aesthetic politics of Vietnamese American literature, particularly in relation to the Vietnam War and the need to simultaneously remember and move on from it. But because Vuong has consistently redirected us to experiences beyond the written and the verbal and to histories beyond the war, the text’s fragmenting of Rose’s body similarly invites us to consider the embodied in all of its relational complexities—the body, its parts, *and* its affects.

Barthes’ last presence in the novel is trivial, but he appears during a moment of immense importance—Lan’s death. *Little Dog*, Rose, and her sister Mai surround the “stiff frame” of their grandmother and mother.

I do the only thing I know. My knees to my chest, I start to count her purple toes. 1 2 3 4
5 1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5. I rock to the numbers as your [Rose’s] hands float over the body,
methodic as nurses doing rounds. Despite my vocabulary, my books, knowledge, I find
myself folded against the far wall, bereft. I watch two daughters care for their own with
an inertia equal to gravity. I sit, with all my theories, metaphors, and equations,
Shakespeare and Milton, Barthes, Du Fu, and Homer, masters of death who can’t, at last,
teach me how to touch my dead.⁹⁵

Despite Barthes’ literary examination of death and loss each time he surfaces in the novel, at this moment of actual death, words—and Barthes—ultimately mean nothing. Here, *Little Dog* distances himself as a writer and self-prescribes the role of the witness as he watches “two

⁹⁵ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 210.

daughters care for their own.” He strips the women of their relational ties to him, emotionally removing the writer away from the experiences of his characters. The end of the passage, however, removes the writer from his position as a literary producer and turns him back into a son and a grandson—Little Dog’s world of high brow literature “can’t, at last, teach me [him] how to touch my [his] dead.” The move from the depersonalized “two daughters” to the personalized “me” and possessive pronoun “my” articulates the role of the writer in navigating the affective differentials of experience and the translation of that experience through writing and reading. When words fail, the body enters—and Little Dog counts his grandmother’s toes, claiming at her moment of death that it’s “the only thing I [he] know[s].” In this moment of life’s end, the writer refuses words, and words crumble into “1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5.” The immensity of loss is made palpable not through the “embellish[ment]” of words but through their complete deterioration.

As the writer himself becomes a witness for a brief moment and as the organizing mechanism of the novel—language and words—begin to fall apart and turn into numbers, Vuong also makes the reader of his novel a witness of the Vietnamese American writer’s anxiety and of the sufferings of his characters. His constant juxtapositions of Barthes against Little Dog’s own writing to and about his mother (and also grandmother) ensure complicated and even contradicting affective responses from the reader—grief, anxiety, healing, etc. As a consequence, Vuong refuses the complete and satisfying transference of experiences and instead presents an accumulated semblance of affective subjectivity—because the English-educated and literate reader can never experience a total replication of the Vietnamese American working class woman’s subjectivity. While the literal and the literary intimately intertwine, the two are not identical—and Vuong’s aesthetic construction of self-referential writing ensures the complicated

distinction. From the novel's affective and aesthetic accumulation, what the reader of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* does experience, however, is both the act and awareness of witnessing a culmination of not only the social, the political, and the historical but also the grief, the sadness, the hope, and the love alongside all those other inarticulable emotions. Vuong's engagement with literal and literary bodies invites the reader to see, feel, know, and experience something they can't explain. As a result, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* materializes the inexplicable.

EPILOGUE

“I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with *because*,” writes Little Dog, “But I wasn’t trying to make a sentence—I was trying to break free.”⁹⁶ We fear breaking free because we fear the erasure of the Vietnam War—the forgetting of those who died without warrant and of the Southeast Asian voices and lives suppressed by the United States’ national narrative—and, as a consequence, Vietnamese American Studies has always maintained a conviction to memorialize the enormity of the Vietnam War and its associated violences to contextualize the specificity of Vietnamese American identity. We fear the move towards the universalization and dehistoricization of the Vietnamese American struggle because we want to avoid our own replication of the United States’ political strategy to transform a war on race into a story of humanitarian saviorship. Responding to Marguerite Nguyen’s push for de-exceptionalization, I further argue that the consequence of exceptionalizing the Vietnam War in our contemporary moment is the perpetuation of a complicity with the model minority myth—another metanarrative of racial exclusion and violence, one that defines the social and political positioning of Asian Americans as superior to other communities of racially marginalized identity. At a time when the ethics and politics of Affirmative Action within higher learning institutions have caused a rift between Asian Americans and other communities of color, particularly African Americans, Chicano Americans, and Latin Americans, I believe it is important to de-exceptionalize ourselves in order to not only be more inclusive but also to recognize the larger mechanisms of power that have always regulated and are continuing to reinforce our separations. I argue that *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* differs from past Vietnamese American literary texts in that it brings justice to the memory of the Vietnam War and to the weight of its violence without exceptionalizing its historical significance. The novel

⁹⁶ Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 4.

brings in other histories of violence from other time periods and other geographical locations that have witnessed the persecution of communities of identity—other people of color, the working class, the LGBTQ community, disabled individuals, those without the privilege of education, women. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* narratively forms a relational constellation that, while using the Vietnam War as a frame of focus for Little Dog's own personal and familial context, places Vietnamese America within a larger web of marginalizing violence. In response to Vuong's *New York Times* comment that an annual salary of \$60,000 "would be considered fancy where I'm [he's] from," Kevin Nguyen writes, "It's not clear what he means by where he's from. There's Ho Chi Minh City, where he was born and lived until he immigrated to the United States at age 2. Or Hartford, Conn., where he was raised by his mother and grandmother. Or he could simply mean people who didn't grow up with much."⁹⁷ This same intentional and inclusive ambiguity defines the pages of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, one articulated statement representing and gesturing to a variety of experiences that span multiple categories of marginalized identities.

I acknowledge the universalizing dangers of de-exceptionalizing the Vietnam War and the consequent move towards complicity with the U.S. nation-state's erasure of violence upon Vietnamese bodies—but when we exceptionalize ourselves and our own experiences, we also separate and de-exceptionalize the experiences of others. In his re-historicization of the Vietnam War, Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, "A just memory opposes this kind of identity politics by recalling the weak, the subjugated, the different, the enemy, and the forgotten. A just memory says that ethically recalling our own is not enough to work through the past, and neither is the less common phenomenon of ethically recalling others. Both ethical approaches are needed..."⁹⁸

⁹⁷ K. Nguyen, "Eavesdropping on Ocean Vuong's New Book."

⁹⁸ V. Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 17.

My hope in expanding upon Marguerite Nguyen's call in *America's Vietnam* for the expansion of Vietnamese America's historical and geopolitical context is not to erase the significance of the Vietnam War but to understand it as one horrendous tragedy among the infinite list of many. I am not arguing for a neoliberal flattening of historic violences, and I acknowledge that the increasing publishing trends for minority literature and the rise of world or international literatures tend to erase differences in the name of superficial multiculturalism. Instead, I push for the understanding of Vietnamese America's contemporary positionality—which does incorporate our histories and include that of the Vietnam War—not as exceptional but as relational, existing alongside the past sufferings of African American slavery and Native American expulsion as well as the contemporary suffering of Chicano and Latin American undocumented immigrants, of Syrian refugees, of victims of the United States' war on terror, of those living in the midst of the Rohingya crisis, of those victimized by the war on drugs, of people living around the Bay of Bengal who are forced to migrate due to rising sea waters. Spanning multiple continents and multiple histories of marginalization in its narrative of a Vietnamese American family, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* reminds us that, during our brief moment as human beings on earth, to be beautiful is also to be unexceptional—like a Rose.

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