Queer and Refugee Positionalities in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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Abstract

This article examines the representations of positionality in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Published in 2019, Vuong centers his narrative around the narrator, Little Dog—a queer Vietnamese American refugee struggling not only to understand his mother's and his family's traumas from war, displacement, and abuse, but also contending with his own path as a queer person of color and as a writer hindered by the inadequacy of language to reflect his thoughts and emotions. While *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* undoubtedly challenges readers to examine individual responses to trauma, displacement, and loss, the text's conclusion ultimately emphasizes that the characters' struggles do not define them—instead their abilities to find comfort and understanding in each other afford them paths toward long-term healing. Accordingly, by employing lenses offered by trauma studies, queer theory, and refugee studies, I argue that Little Dog's narrative illuminates both the obstacles presented by his myriad positionalities, as well as the ways that we might read his and his family's refugee narrative through a more redemptive and transformative perspective.

Keywords

Ocean Vuong; Positionality; Queer; Refugee; Subjectivity; Trauma.

DOI: 10.25364/27.5:2025.1.5

At the beginning of Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the narrator, Little Dog, reflects on the Vietnam War's impact on his mother; he observes, "I was an American boy parroting what I saw on TV. I didn't know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves—but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son" (4). The vulnerability expressed in this reflection is representative of Little Dog's narration throughout the text. In this instance, he confesses to his mother his lack of awareness and understanding: he "didn't know that the war was still inside [her]"—that the war, even decades after the cessation of combat, remained with her and continued to affect her (and by extension, himself) in myriad, diverse ways. Indeed, an idea that reverberates throughout Vuong's novel is that "once [war] enters you it never leaves." Yet, just as important, the text simultaneously presents a journey of understanding, compassion, and healing at both individual and collective levels. It is in this regard that Little Dog continually seeks answers about his and his family's past—"where have you been? Where have we been ma?" (Vuong 137).

Furthermore, his narrative also seeks answers to questions about his identity and subjectivity. At one of his most vulnerable points, he confesses to his mother:

> I don't know what I'm saying. I guess what I mean is that sometimes I don't know what or who we are. Days I feel like a human being, while other days I feel more like a sound. I touch the world not as myself but as an echo of who I was. Can you hear me yet? Can you read me? [. . .] Even when I know something to be true as bone I fear the knowledge will dissolve, will not, despite my writing it, stay real. I'm breaking us apart again so that I might carry us somewhere else—where, exactly, I'm not sure. Just as I don't know what to call you—White, Asian, orphan, American, mother? (Vuong 62)

Little Dog's vulnerability in this statement illuminates ideas crucial to this essay focused on queer and refugee positionality in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Little Dog poses questions about his identity and broader subjectivity. He seeks knowledge, understanding, healing, connection, communication. He seeks answers in the face of significant doubt—and yet suggests a comfort even within the ambiguity, without the answers. He desires communion in its broadest sense, whether with his mother and grandmother, with his first love, or even with the reader. All of these questions ultimately center around questions of positionality: meaning, the various ways that Little Dog's identity—queer, refugee, Vietnamese, Asian American—affects his subjectivity, his place in the world, and especially his relations to the people in his life.

Early in the text, he posits that "whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something new from what is gone" (28). This creation of "something new"—from the trauma of war, from the displacement from a homeland, from the loss of loved ones, and especially from positionalities that serve to marginalize—is what inspires this article and is most significant to our understanding of positionality in the text.

Vuong published *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, his first novel, in 2019. The narrative focuses on the relationships and experiences of a family of Vietnamese refugees in Hartford, Connecticut; it is set almost exclusively in the urban inner city, though there are periodic reflections back to the war in Vietnam decades earlier, given the war's impact on the main characters. Most notably, Vuong employs an epistolary form to organize the story: the narrator, Little Dog, crafts a letter to his mother, "Ma," which consists of reflections on their life together and his personal struggles coming to terms with their traumatic past and his queer identity. Moreover, the letter offers insight into the traumas that both Ma and Little Dog's grandmother experienced during the war and their journey to the United States—traumas that continue to affect both them and Little Dog into the present day. Through the course of the narrative, Little Dog develops a better understanding of his mother, their relationship together, his identity and subjectivity, and his place in the world. The resolution of the text eventually presents a means of healing for Little Dog. It is thus a text that forces its audience to reflect on the lives of refugees—of trauma, displacement, instability, love, and healing.

Critical to this examination of Vuong's novel is an understanding of the concept of positionality. To start, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) offers two pertinent definitions. First, the OED defines positionality within the field of sociology as "the occupation or adoption of a particular position in relation to others, usually with reference to issues of culture, ethnicity, or gender" ("positionality"). The OED also includes a second, more general definition: "the fact or quality of having a position (in various senses) in relation to other things" ("positionality"). While these two definitions are relatively broad, the emphasis on the "relation" between individuals, particularly with regard to "culture, ethnicity, or gender," is critical to the study of Vuong's work. Indeed, Vuong's text emphasizes the evolving positionality of both Little Dog and his family members. Little Dog inhabits multiple, shifting positions of subjectivity based on his ethnicity, his sexuality, and even his labor class. Mitsunori Misawa, in his work on the positionality of LGBTQ individuals in education, establishes framing that complements and amplifies the OED's more generalized definitions. Misawa writes that "all parts of our identities are shaped by socially constructed positions and memberships to which we belong. Such automatic categorization is embedded in our society as a system" (26). He continues,

"marginalization and discrimination are particularly inescapable issues for minorities in contemporary society," since positionality affects "everyone's daily life" (Misawa 26). Consequently, the significance of positionality on an individual is not just one's relation to another; rather it illuminates the ways that our socially-constructed identities reinforce structural inequalities and dynamics of power, subjugation, and marginalization. This framing speaks to a central aspect of Vuong's novel: Little Dog's unstable subjectivity, given his evolving positionality and marginalization. The narrative of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is thus, at one level, an examination of Little Dog's evolving subjectivity, given the instable positionalities that he inhabits as a queer refugee in America. Little Dog's personal journey forces the audience to reflect on the obstacles that his intersectionality presents, as he comes to terms with both his past and his present.

In addition to a framework of positionality, our understanding particularly of queer and refugee subjectivity likewise is critical to an examination of Vuong's novel. While we never encounter the term "queer" within the text, it is an essential concept for our understanding. Michael Warner emphasizes that

> the insistence on 'queer'—a term initially generated in the context of terror—has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence. Its brilliance as a naming strategy lies in combining resistance on that broad social terrain with more specific resistance on the terrains of phobia and queer-bashing, on one hand, or of pleasure, on the other. 'Queer' therefore also suggests the difficulty in defining the population whose interests are at stake in queer politics. (xxvi)

Indeed, Vuong's text focuses on each of these elements—both the "pleasure" that Little Dog experiences, as well as the violence, "terrains of phobia," and the resistance to such. Jack Halberstam's work within queer theory amplifies the significance of the term. He argues, in his work on queer time and space, that "'queer' refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (Halberstam 6). In addition to Warner's formulation of combining resistance and pleasure, Halberstam's framing emphasizes queer non-normativity; the term "queer" crucially offers malleability in multiple forms. Furthermore, Warner augments this conceptualization by adding that queer "means being able, more or less articulately, to challenge the common understanding of what gender difference means, or what the state is for, or what 'health' entails, or what would define fairness, or what a good relation to the planet's environment would be" (xiii).

Consequently, the non-normative nature of queer-ness offers a transgressive characteristic as well—to "challenge" assumptions of normativity in myriad aspects of our lives. Finally, Jose Esteban Muñoz builds upon this framework with his study of the ways that queer individuals "disidentify." He writes that,

> identification, then, as Sedgwick explains, is never a simple project. Identifying with an object, person, lifestyle, history, political ideology, religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying, as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world. (Muñoz 8)

He expands upon this later in his monograph, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), by asserting, "disidentification, like the subjective experience Michele Wallace describes, is about expanding and problematizing identity and identification, not abandoning any socially prescribed identity component" (Muñoz 29). This construct helps to explain Little Dog's path as well; we will see how, in the narrative, he oscillates between identification and disidentification, as part of his struggle to come to terms with his queer subjectivity and positionality. The text, in its broadest sense, represents a queer narrative, given the emphasis on positionalities, war, trauma, and suffering.

In addition to Little Dog's queerness, his and his family's status as (former) refugees likewise is a critical component for understanding his journey and the text as a whole. The narrative centers on the refugee experience—of displacement, trauma, instability, survival, suffering, and liminality. Yen Le Espiritu's monograph, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (2014), presents essential framing for this study. In an effort to redefine our understanding of refugee studies, she writes, "the field begins with the premise that the refugee, who inhabits a condition of statelessness, radically calls into question the established principles of the nation-state and the idealized goal of inclusion and recognition within it" (10). Indeed, the narrative of Little Dog, Ma, and Lan certainly "calls into question [. . .] the idealized goal of inclusion and recognition." Khatharya Um, in her remarkable work on Cambodian diaspora, reinforces this perspective when she asserts that "mass displacement, statelessness, and refugees are features of modernity, conditions that reveal both the vulnerability of the modern age and the resiliency of history's battered subjects" (20). As we will see, a central element of Little Dog's letter is the desire for recognition, whether from his mother, his first love, or from the greater community, just as his family's journey speaks to both the "conditions" and "vulnerability of the modern age." Yet, Timothy August's work in *The Refugee Aesthetic: Reimagining Southeast Asian*

America (2021), also challenges us to emphasize the humanity of refugees; he criticizes the representation predominant in our culture: "instead of refugees being recognized as structural attributes of global capital accumulation, images of the refugee and the refugee face present viewers with a type of abject experience that is seen as exceptional and best avoided altogether" (2). August suggests that refugees are represented as "exceptional," as alien, when their experiences actually are representative of the norm in modern society—of structural inequality within "global capital accumulation." In this regard, Espiritu also writes that "the messiness, contingency, and precarious nature of refugee life means that refugees, like all people, are beset by contradiction: neither damaged victims nor model minorities, they—their stories, actions, and inactions—simultaneously trouble and affirm regimes of power" (2). On the one hand, Little Dog's narrative speaks to the contradictions of his positionality: of a refugee, of the "messiness, contingency, and precarious nature of refugee life" that Espiritu asserts. Moreover, his personal journey both troubles and affirms the "regimes of power" that he encounters. Despite the myriad obstacles, Little Dog consistently seeks inclusion—not necessarily at the collective level but certainly at the individual level, in his relationships with family, friends, and his first love. Thus, his narrative emphasizes the humanity of him and his family—or, in Um's terms, the "resiliency of history's battered subjects." Consequently, as much as the characters in the narrative endure significant challenges due to their respective positionalities—and particularly their status as refugees—they ultimately encounter forms of healing and discover stability in their hybrid positionalities.

In order to consider their positionalities, we first must understand the traumas that the characters within the narrative experience and endure. As Viet Thanh Nguyen notes in his work on war and memory, the stories of the impact of war are not exclusive to just the soldiers on the battlefield; he challenges us to reflect on the expansive impacts of combat on diverse populations: "what if we understood that war stories disturb even more when they are not about soldiers, when they show us how normal war is, how war touches and transforms everything and everybody, including most of all, civilians?" (145). This certainly is the case within Vuong's novel; no one in Little Dog's family—Ma, Lan, Little Dog—engaged in combat in Vietnam, but the war's effects reverberate and permeate through each of their lives.

Most notably, Little Dog initiates his narrative with a litany of examples of abuse from his mother. He notes that he "must have been four" the first time his mother hit him (Vuong 5). Throughout the first part of the letter, he continues to reference various episodes of abuse from Ma, whether physical or psychological: "the time you threw the box of Legos at my head," "the time with the gallon of milk. The jug bursting on my shoulder bone," "the time with

the kitchen knife" (Vuong 6, 9). The tone is nonchalant, but the repetition of violence is profound. Little Dog emphasizes both the trauma his mother inflicts on him and his inability to comprehend why she does so, as well as the ways that her wartime traumas affect their relationship and affect her understanding of motherhood.

In the midst of the abuse, Little Dog struggles to comprehend his mother's treatment; with time, however, he develops a level of understanding and corresponding acknowledgement of his mother's traumas. At one point he notes that "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 you. You who are still alive" (Vuong 7; italics in original). This statement is a crucial step—the first of several—in Little Dog's evolution in understanding. While he struggles to communicate with his mother, he ultimately turns to writing as a means of communicating his love and understanding. In addition to her PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), Ma's inability to communicate in English traumatizes her as well; it is just one of several obstacles that negatively affect her relationship with her son and her ability to establish a stable life in America. Little Dog describes an instance when he attempts to teach Ma to read in English; he notes, though, that "that act reversed our hierarchies, and with it our identities, which, in this country were already tenuous and tethered" (Vuong 5). Ma is a remarkable, resilient woman who sacrificed body, mind, and home to try to find a better life for her own son and mother in America—but Little Dog's youth and naivete generate tremendous friction between them. In the end, though, Little Dog reverts to writing and describes this process evocatively: "I am writing you from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son. If we are lucky, the end of the sentence is where we might begin. If we are lucky, something is passed on, another alphabet written in blood, sinew, and neuron; ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast" (Vuong 10). Little Dog's statement encapsulates so much of what his narrative entails—an epistolary novel of love, trauma, survival, and yes, writing. Still, his statement also reflects the effects of his Ma's war traumas on him—"something is passed on," both with regard to his mother's love and the violence she likewise inflicts on him as she suffers through her own pain. He ultimately remarks that "at thirteen [. . .] I finally said stop," though neither the abuse nor Ma's suffering in fact does (Vuong 11).

In addition to Ma's PTSD, Little Dog's grandmother, Lan, presents a second exemplar for the physical and psychological traumas of war; Little Dog's relationship with Lan also emphasizes the idea of inter-familial

trauma in a mode distinct from his relationship with Ma. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory introduces a valuable lens in this regard; she writes in *Family Frames* (1997) that "postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated" (22). Lan's experiences are different from her daughter's, and Little Dog's description of her is particularly illuminating: "they say that trauma affects not only the brain, but the body too, its musculature, joints, and posture. Lan's back was perpetually bent—so much so that I could barely see her head as she stood at the sink. Only the knot of tied-back hair was visible, bobbing as she scrubbed" (Vuong 19). Lan suffered multiple traumas during the war, and Little Dog's description implies that the effects are so enduring and exhausting that her body comes to represent them—her back "perpetually bent" with "only the knot" of hair visible at the sink. Yet, as much as her body came to represent her trauma in a physical sense, Little Dog still struggles to comprehend what genuinely ails her. He describes the contrasts that he would observe in his grandmother: "it was stillness, I realize now, not of her body, which kept ticking as she slept, but of her mind [. . .] I'm watching a stranger, I thought, one whose lips creased into an expression of contentment alien to the Lan I knew awake, the one whose sentences rambled and rattled out of her, her schizophrenia only worse now since the war" (Vuong 16). The narration exposes us to the challenges Little Dog faced in comprehending his grandmother—on the one hand, awake, her "sentences rambled and rattled" as her post-war schizophrenia worsened; on the other hand, a "stillness" of mind when at rest. Thus, Little Dog confesses shortly thereafter that "I came to know, in those afternoons, that madness can sometimes lead to discovery, that the mind, fractured and short-wired, is not entirely wrong" (Vuong 23). His epistolary narrative accordingly provides us with a sense of discovery, as he progressively builds a more empathetic comprehension of what his Ma and Lan suffered through in Vietnam and continue to endure in the United States.

Lan's traumas in Vietnam were myriad; none more so than her decision to sell her body to provide for herself and her daughter. She admits at one point, "I never asked to be a whore," but she needed to be, after estrangement from her family (Vuong 47). Little Dog presents her story carefully: "Leaving Mai in the care of her sister back in the village, Lan rented a windowless room from a fisherman by the river, where she took the soldiers. How the fisherman, living below her, would spy on her through a slot on the wall. How the soldiers' boots were so heavy, when they kicked them off as they climbed into bed, the thumps sounded like bodies dropping, making her flinch under their searching hands" (Vuong 47). The implications are clear,

though; the circumstances created by the war forced Lan to prostitute her body, to save herself and her daughter from destitution. The effects are enduring and generational—they immediately affected Ma as a child, and in turn reverberate into her own treatment of Little Dog. This familial trauma is a crucial element of the narrative and informs our understanding of their subjectivity and positionality. Early in the text, Ma says out of nowhere, "'I'm not a monster. I'm a mother'" (Vuong 13). This forces reflection in the narrator; he posits, "to be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once. I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it after all" (Vuong 13). Little Dog comes to realize that an explanation for his family's suffering is not simple; as the narrative eventually demonstrates, it takes time, empathy, and listening to develop understanding. Still, the traumatic effects on Ma, Lan, and Little Dog are myriad and enduring; they remain visceral elements within their respective relationships, both internal to the family and external, too. As Judith Herman notes,

> Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exults her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity. (214)

Consequently, while Little Dog establishes the familial traumas and conflicts early in the narrative, they remain a critical element of the text writ large.

Traumas are foundational to each of the individuals within his family—and to several other individuals whom we encounter in the text. Little Dog's narrative emphasizes how these traumas create dysfunction within the family and confuse and complicate the internal relationships. In her groundbreaking monograph, *Inhuman Citizenship* (2012), Juliana Chang offers a helpful lens for understanding one of the crucial consequences of such trauma(s) for a family of refugees. She writes, "if ideological norms of domesticity are posited as crucial to the health and stability of the nation, then private homes and families become sites of surveillance, knowledge production, discipline, and regulation. In this way, apparently deviant domestic formations are subject to regimes of hypervisibility. And as Avery Gordon elucidates, hypervisibility can shade into invisibility" (Chang 16). Indeed, this deviance from societal norms

particularly affects Ma and Little Dog as they navigate life in the United States. On the one hand, their inability to assimilate into supposed cultural norms—whether with regard to language, labor, social class, or sexuality—results in hypervisibility at times; on the other hand, they "shade into invisibility" as well, due to their multiple positionalities as refugees, as persons of color, as minorities within their community, and as economically disadvantaged individuals struggling to survive. Chang also argues that "this is the teleological narrative or fantasy of the nation: America as the natural endpoint for all persons. While the immigrant is imagined as hoping and dreaming of the future, the child is the site where dreams are supposed to be realized, actualized. Put simply, the child is the very telos of America" (23). Presumably, this was Ma's hope for her son and mother: the actualization of life's dreams, away from the traumas of war and economic collapse in Vietnam. Yet, her enduring PTSD and their refugee subjectivity serve to stifle such hopes. Certainly, there are other significant traumas within the text—Ma's abortion, their collective displacement from Vietnam to the United States, Little Dog's father's abuse of Ma—all of which amplify, complicate, and exacerbate their suffering. Nonetheless, the physical and psychological traumas that Lan and Ma suffered during the war in Vietnam undoubtedly affect Little Dog through their enduring post-traumatic wounds. Little Dog's narrative illuminates the false "fantasy" of assimilation and the ostensible "telos" of the American Dream, particularly given his family's positionality as refugees and minorities.

This emphasis on the characters' traumas was deliberate, as one of the critical aspects of positionality that Vuong reflects in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* centers on the refugee experience. Little Dog's family's experience in America clearly is shrouded by their liminal status as Asian refugees. As Angelo Ancheta describes in his canonical work, the racial hierarchy in the United States presents a complicated position for Asian Americans:

> in terms of representation, a black-white model ignores or marginalizes the experiences of Asian Americans, Native Americans, Arab Americans, and other groups who have extensive histories of discrimination against them. A black-white model discounts the role of immigration in race relations and confines discussion on the impact race has had on anti-immigrant policies that affect the nation's growing Asian American and Latino populations. (13)

This is crucial to considering Little Dog's and his family's post-war, post-traumatic paths and positionality in the narrative—the racial model in the United States "ignores or marginalizes" minority groups that do not fall within the black-white binary. Leslie Bow amplifies the significance of this

position; she writes that "interstitial populations reflect the cultural ambiguity of what anthropologist Victor Turner has theorized as 'liminal personae,' initiates who are temporarily shorn of social status prior to undergoing ritual transformation" (11). Moreover, "the interstitial is the site of multiple forms of cultural anxiety, as well as a place where status hierarchies are publicly interpreted and subject to evaluation and discipline" (Bow 21). The refugees within Vuong's novel clearly embody the "interstitial" as Bow defines it—they are "liminal" personas who struggle with both their traumas and the forced need to assimilate, yet they are also sites of "cultural anxiety."

The text extends this liminality further by stressing Asian Americans' stereotypical status as "foreigner." Ancheta offers one formulation of this racist trope: "anti-Asian subordination is centered on citizenship, which divides racially between American and foreigner. Asian Americans are thus perceived as foreign outsiders who lack the rights of true 'Americans'" (17). Bow offers a similar but notable extension: "the figure of the foreigner or alien is one that is irreducibly tied to Asian racialization in the United States [. . .] 'the foreigner' is a point of identification that resists one of lesser status, the 'minority' who is understood to be something less than white" (137). As I will examine shortly, the individuals within *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* indeed represent each of these elements—those of the liminal persona as emblems of cultural anxiety, and those of the perpetual foreigner. Muñoz adds one final aspect to this subjectivity. In his work *Disidentifications* (1999), he argues that "the migrant status can be characterized by its need to move back and forth, to occupy at least two spaces at once [. . .] The very nature of this migrant drive eventually wears down the coherency of borders" (32). Indeed, the liminal characters within Vuong's text "occupy two spaces at once"—and sometimes even more than that. While for Muñoz this is liberatory and potentially deconstructive, we also encounter in the text instances where this liminality is debilitating and stifling. As Bow writes, ultimately "the issue is not merely one of inclusion or exclusion, integration or segregation, or racial classification as a sign of assimilation or its limits, but how the in-between exposes the complex interplay of multiple axes of social status and normativity" (232). And this is the core of Vuong's work—Little Dog's family's subjectivity as refugees on the margins of society "expose the complex interplay of multiple axes of social status and normativity"—their positionalities inevitably are grounded in this marginal identity.

Their subjectivity as refugees starts, of course, with their displacement, the traumas which I discussed earlier. Little Dog, however, returns throughout his letter to reflect upon his family's displacement, in an attempt to comprehend the reasons behind it and the significance of the upheaval in the present. Early in the narrative he offers, "sometimes, I imagine the monarchs fleeing

not winter but the napalm clouds of your childhood in Vietnam [. . .] so that, looking up, you can no longer fathom the explosion they came from, only a family of butterflies floating in clean, cool air, their wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof" (Vuong 14). Thus, Little Dog knows the traumas of his mother's suffering on one level—a visceral, violent level for him at times—but at the same time it is hard to comprehend, since he has no memory of it. He knows her history, and he understands that he is intertwined in it:

> like the time she told of how you were born, of the white American serviceman deployed on a navy destroyer in Cam Ranh Bay [. . .] How, by then, she had already left her first husband from an arranged marriage. How, as a young woman living in a wartime city for the first time with no family, it was her body, her purple dress, that kept her alive [. . .] I had forgotten myself in her story [. . .] But I wasn't asleep. (Vuong 23)

But their collective displacement remains a central trauma for the family; Little Dog later emphasizes the gravity of their situation upon leaving their home country: "in two years, Vietnam—which, thirteen years after the war and still in shambles—would grow so dire that we would flee the very ground he stood on, the soil where, a few feet away, your blood had made a dark red circle between your legs, turning the dirt there into fresh mud—and I was alive" (Vuong 21). He thus was born into destruction and violence; he even originally was named after Vietnam.

This lineage of violence extends into Little Dog's liminal positionality as refugee, as foreigner, within the United States. He offers an overwhelming description of an instance of abuse he experienced on a school bus, in which several young boys bully him for his physical stature and introversion. He writes, "knowing the face I possess, its rare features in these parts, I pushed my head harder against the window to avoid them [. . .] I realized the spark came from inside my head. That someone had shoved my face into the glass. 'Speak English,' said the boy with a yellow bowl cut, his jowls flushed and rippling" (Vuong 24). Little Dog's suffering is palpable—his "face [shoved] into the glass" of the bus window. His reflection is curt; he observes that "[the white boy] was only nine but had already mastered the dialect of damaged American fathers" (Vuong 24). And the effect of the bullying on Little Dog's understanding of his subjectivity and positionality was clear and visceral; after his extended description of the incident, he notes that "I willed myself into a severe obedience and said [the boy's] name. I let [the children's] laughter enter me" (Vuong 25). He includes this experience early in the narrative as a means of establishing the violence, both physical and psychological, of his experience as an Asian refugee within America—and the palpable consequences of this

subjectivity. While the violence of the bullying on the bus is shocking, it is just as significant that Little Dog "let the laughter enter" (Vuong 25) into him; the bully's words and characterization remain.

Ma's reaction to her son's bullying illuminates yet another chilling aspect of refugee subjectivity—that of the charged concept of "assimilation." Her mode of care is not necessarily one of comfort and empathy; instead, she questions his acquiescence to the boys' bullying demands. She slaps him and challenges him to find his own path: "'You have to find a way, Little Dog [. . .] you have to because I don't have the English to help you. I can't say nothing to stop them. You find a way. You find a way or you don't tell me about this ever again, you hear?" (Vuong 26). And her son's response is quite telling; Little Dog confesses to the reader,

> I drank so much of that cold milk it grew tasteless on my numbed tongue. Each morning after that, we'd repeat this ritual: the milk poured with a thick white braid, I'd drink it down, gulping, making sure you could see, both of us hoping the whiteness vanishing into me would make more of a yellow boy [. . .] The milk would erase all the dark inside me with a flood of brightness. (Vuong 27)

The imagery of assimilation cannot be starker than this description: of Little Dog numbing his tongue through the drinking of so much cold milk, of both mother and son "hoping the whiteness vanishing into [him] would make more of a yellow boy," of his attempt to "erase all of the dark inside me." Anne Anlin Cheng writes in *The Melancholy of Race* (2000), "this is racial melancholia for the raced subject: the internalization of discipline and rejection—and the installation of a scripted context of perception" (17). We can't help but see the "internalization of discipline and rejection" in Little Dog's response to the bullying and his desire for assimilation. His attempt both to please his mother and to "erase all the dark inside" through the consumption of milk manifestly illuminates this internalization. To read this episode in a more positive light, we might turn to Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* (1996). In defining hybridity, she argues that the concept "does not suggest assimilation of Asian or immigrant practices to dominant forms but instead marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination" (Lowe 67). Moreover, on a larger scale, she emphasizes that "'Immigrant acts' names the agency of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans: the acts of labor, resistance, memory, and survival, as well as the politicized cultural work that emerges from dislocation and disidentification" (Lowe 9). We certainly can read Little Dog's response to the bullying as emblematic of the need to survive "within relationships of unequal power and domination," as Lowe writes. Indeed, throughout *On Earth*

We're Briefly Gorgeous, we encounter myriad instances of this inequality and subordination.

In this regard, a final significant element in Vuong's depiction of a refugee's experience and positionality relates to the relationship between language, labor, and subjectivity. Throughout the novel, we encounter reflections on the power and significance of language within our lives. At a more granular level, though, we also encounter multiple instances where Ma's and Lan's and Little Dog's challenges with language directly reflect their positionality. Ma's relationship with language is especially circumspect—she cannot communicate effectively in English, which leads to numerous conflicts both public and private especially in her relationship with her son. After a particularly embarrassing situation at a grocery store, when Ma resorts to acting out words that she does not know in English, Little Dog reflects, "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? [. . .] 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" (Vuong 31-2). Little Dog was embarrassed and ashamed for his family at the grocery store; it reinforced his awareness of the significance of language within one's life. Accordingly, he concludes, "That night I promised myself I'd never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you [. . .] From then on, I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. I code switched. I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours" (Vuong 32). Their roles reversed; son becomes caregiver and provider for mother. Moreover, he becomes her "mask" in public, to protect her. As he concludes, "one does not 'pass' in America, it seems, without English" (Vuong 52). Little Dog later connects language with labor, which is yet another aspect of refugee subjectivity. On the one hand, his first job offers him a literal and figurative way out; he notes that "the work somehow sutured a fracture inside me [. . .] A work of myriad communications, I learned to speak to the men not with my tongue, which was useless there, but with smiles, hand gestures, even silences, hesitations" (Vuong 90-1). Thus, his work at a tobacco farm allows him to develop kinship with other liminal figures in his community; he communicates not with verbal language but instead "smiles, hand gestures, even silences." On the other hand, the narrator likewise critiques his mother's positionality as a laborer in a nail salon. He observes, "The most common English word spoken in the nail salon was *sorry*. 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 right here, beneath you*. It is the lowering of oneself so the client feels right, superior, and charitable" (Vuong 91; italics in original). Accordingly, Little Dog's narrative emphasizes the complications

in such liminal subjectivity: the deference involved, the shame that a son feels for his mother's laboring. He tells his Ma, "I hate and love your battered hands for what they can never be" (Vuong 81).

Ultimately, the final crucial element that Vuong contends with in his novel is the positionality as a queer person of color. In his groundbreaking work on queer theory and politics, Michael Warner offers a critical lens for understanding the significance of queer theory towards understanding other frameworks, such as the consideration of refugee subjectivity above; he writes that

> theory has to understand that different identity environments are neither parallel—so that the tactics and values of one might be assumed to be appropriate for another—nor separable. Queer struggles and those of other identity movements, or alternatively of other new social movements, often differ in important ways—even when they are intermingled in experience. (xviii)

Furthermore, as noted earlier, the term "queer" offers malleability in multiple forms: Warner's work emphasizes resistance, while Halberstam's study on queer time and space stresses transgressive and deconstructive non-normativity. Vuong's emphasis on Little Dog's queer subjectivity in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* thus presents us with a final critical element for our consideration of positionality within the text.

To start, Little Dog emphasizes the tremendous challenges and obstacles that he faces with regard to societal norms, in contrast to his own identity. As part of his discussion of his queer and refugee subjectivity, he describes how during recess at school "the kids would call me *freak*, *fairy*, *fag*. I would learn, much later, that those words were also iterations of *monster*" (Vuong 14; italics in original). In a text that is especially concerned with language, he stresses the ways in which even at a young age he was exposed to terms of derision, violence, and subjugation—through which he learns to equate himself with "*monster*." In a similar vein, in one particular description of his nascent sexual relationship with his co-worker, Trevor, he observes, "the rules, they were already inside us" (Vuong 120). On an immediate level, this refers explicitly to their romantic relationship—and particularly Trevor's discomfort with his feelings—but the phrase certainly is malleable and speaks to the myriad "rules" and norms and obstacles that Little Dog and his family encounter as refugees and minorities as well. Hence, the malleability of the term "queer." Little Dog's relationship with Trevor illuminates these complicated positionalities of his intersectional subjectivity: refugee, queer, Asian.

Little Dog's relationship with Trevor transforms his perspective on himself and his subjectivity. In his extended reflections on Trevor, he offers a succinct description of the impact of the relationship: "I was seen—I who had seldom been seen by anyone. I who was taught, by you, to be invisible in order to be safe" (Vuong 96). This reflects back to the conceptualizations of Asian American subjectivity offered by Juliana Chang earlier, in which Asian Americans seemingly are both hypervisible and invisible. For Little Dog, though, the love he feels and receives from Trevor elicits a different mode of visibility—a legibility via recognition and care from another human being. He "was seen." This feeling also stems from a deeper bond with Trevor—a mutual understanding of struggle that Little Dog previously had not known. He comments that "up until then I didn't think a white boy could hate anything about his life. I wanted to know him through and through, by that very hate. Because that's what you give anyone who sees you, I thought. You take their hatred head-on, and you cross it, like a bridge, to face them, to enter them" (Vuong 97). Trevor's home life was just as dysfunctional as Little Dog's, something he could not comprehend. Their similar life experiences allowed Little Dog to reframe an understanding of his own home life. Moreover, though, he felt love from Trevor, both physical and metaphysical. He states, "there were colors, Ma. Yes, there were colors I felt when I was with him. Not words—but shades, penumbras" (Vuong 106). He adds, "Why did I feel more myself while reaching for him, my hand midair, than I did having touched him?" (Vuong 106). And later he introduces a more macabre rendering of his feelings: "Sometimes being offered tenderness feels like the very proof that you've been ruined" (Vuong 119). Little Dog's relationship with Trevor transforms him. There is an ecstasy in his descriptions. He struggles to find words to properly describe his emotions. And much like his life at home, there is love and violence and vibrancy. Yet, the romance with Trevor challenges Little Dog to reckon with his sexuality and positionality in ways he has not experienced previously.

At the same time, Little Dog emphasizes Trevor's intense struggles with his homosexuality and the impact of both Trevor's homophobic father and heteronormative society writ large. In the nascent stages of their sexual relationship, Trevor tells him, "'I can't. I just—I mean [. . .] I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch'" (Vuong 120). While Trevor clearly is attracted to Little Dog, he is not fully comfortable with his sexuality; as this statement shows, societal norming has influenced Trevor to view homosexuality as weak, as feminine. Thus, he cannot reciprocate some of the sexual acts that Little Dog performs. Notably, Little Dog describes how, "surfacing from the sheets, [Trevor's] face shone through the wet mask we made of our scavenge. He was white, I never forgot this. He was always white" (Vuong 102). It is hard to find

a more direct discussion of queer and minority positionality within the text. After intercourse Little Dog looks up to see his partner, and the immediate recognition goes to Trevor's skin color—"he was white [. . .] he was always white." Even in his first romantic relationship, Little Dog cannot escape his minority positionality—there is a hyper focus on skin color. In *Racial Castration* (2001), David Eng offers an insightful examination of queer subjectivity; for Eng the intersection of the homosexual and the primitive in Freud "asks us to consider how the assumption of a normative social identity requires a heterosexualizing imperative bound to a hegemonic structure of whiteness—how the assumption of a 'pathological' social identity is circumscribed by a homosexual prohibition bound to a racialized position" (13-4). In other words, societal norming equates heterosexuality with whiteness, and this is the positionality we encounter with Trevor. Trevor continually questions his sexuality—and his understanding of sexuality; he asks Little Dog, "'Is it true though? [. . .] You think you'll be really gay, like, forever? I mean [. . .] I think me…I'll be good in a few years you know?'" (Vuong 188). In a separate instance, he even reverts to a slur, in the midst of having sex with Little Dog: "*Please tell me I am not*, he said, *I am not a faggot. Am I? Am I? Are you*?" (Vuong 155; italics in original). Trevor's discomfort is palpable; his words and reactions make clear the impact of societal norming of equating homosexuality with weakness and abnormality. He views his homosexuality as temporary, as a fling; he cannot fathom that it is his natural sexuality. Needless to say, this wounds Little Dog. He concludes, "I had thought sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong" (Vuong 120).

Jack Halberstam argues in *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005),

> if we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity and come closer to understanding Foucault's comment in "Friendship as a Way of Life" that "homosexuality threatens people as a 'way of life' rather than as a way of having sex." (1)

This is critical for understanding both Little Dog and Trevor. Trevor simply cannot "detach queerness from sexual identity"; he views his homosexuality as weakness, as wrong, as abnormal—a result of the heteronormativity that he has absorbed at both familial (via his father) and societal levels. Little Dog's relationship with Trevor, however, has the opposite effect—it is affirming. In the midst of their relationship, he reflects, "I let the mirror hold those flaws—because for once, drying, they were not wrong to me but something that was wanted, that was sought and found among a landscape as enormous

as the one I had been lost in all this time" (Vuong 107). While Little Dog's subjectivity as a queer person of color seemingly situates him in myriad forms of minority positionality, his relationship with Trevor affords him an affirming understanding of self and sexuality.

In a path similar to the trajectory of his relationship with Trevor, Little Dog's narrative reveals the evolution of his relationship with his Ma. As noted earlier, he begins his narrative with an emphasis on the physical and emotional abuse he experienced from her; however, as the narrative progresses, he emphasizes the ambiguity and complexity of their relationship. Most significantly, halfway through the text, he describes the poignant moment when he develops the courage to come out to his mother, in a Dunkin Donuts; the description offers us a compelling example of the intersection of trauma, queerness, and healing. Little Dog tells his mother, "'I don't like girls'"; he admits that he does so in order to avoid employing the Vietnamese word for homosexual, which stems from the French word for pedophile (Vuong 130). She responds by asking a variety of questions, to attempt to understand how and why—"'Tell me [. . .] when did this all start? I gave birth to a healthy, normal boy. I know that. When?'" (Vuong 131). Yet, she does not criticize him and ultimately suggests acceptance. Moreover, she proceeds to convey her own secret to him—that she had to abort his brother, in yet another trauma that she endured in the aftermath of the war. Little Dog confers to us that "we were exchanging truths, I realized, which is to say, we were cutting one another" (Vuong 133). The setting of this deeply vulnerable conversation—Dunkin' Donuts—is particularly telling. Quintessentially northeastern United States, a region in which Dunkin' seemingly is ubiquitous—some might stretch it further to say metaphorically American and labor class, as well. Regardless, the dining area of this fast-food coffee shop is public, which ostensibly offers both Little Dog and Ma safety in the presence of others; it likewise serves to de-emphasize and reduce the dramatic nature of their discussion. Their conversation is more elaborate than described here; Little Dog takes his time conveying the significance of the discussion and the vulnerabilities that both he and his mother show in opening themselves up—a vulnerability that they could not reveal when Little Dog was younger. In the same way that Little Dog's relationship with Trevor transforms his understanding of his sexuality and subjectivity, his conversation with Ma at Dunkin alters his understanding of his mother. He concludes the section by remarking, "we leave Dunkin Donuts heavier with what we know of each other" (Vuong 139).

Accordingly, as the narrative reaches conclusion—and frankly as his family's and his own challenges evoke more existential questions—Little Dog reflects more deeply on life, particularly with regard to his intersecting positionalities and understanding of his own subjectivity. The final third of the

narrative directly involves loss: Trevor overdoses on drugs (albeit long after their relationship has ended) and Little Dog's grandmother Lan succumbs to cancer. His description of Lan's death is particularly moving; he describes it thus: "two hours later, she stirs awake. We crowd around her, hear the single deep inhale pull down her lungs, as if she was about to dive underwater, and then, that's it—no exhale. She simply stills, like someone has pressed pause for a movie" (Vuong 209). These losses transform Little Dog; they force reflection on multiple aspects of life—not simply mortality and loss, but even the inadequacy of language, as the narrative proceeds to break down from direct prose into a cacophony of ideas. At one point, he comments,

> we try to preserve life—even when we know it has no chance of enduring its body. We feed it, keep it comfortable, bathe it, medicate it, caress it, even sing to it. We tend to these basic functions not because we are brave or selfless but because, like breath, it is the most fundamental act of our species: to sustain the body until time leaves it behind. (Vuong 198)

At a separate point he also reflects, "sometimes, when I'm careless, I believe the wound is also the place where the skin reencounters itself, asking of each end, where have you been? Where have we been, Ma?" (Vuong 137). Accordingly, while much of the text indeed focuses on subjectivity—whether queer, Asian American, refugee, or minority—the narrative ultimately emphasizes, more simply, the humanity of Little Dog, his Ma, and myriad others in similar positions. Indeed, the narrative is framed as a letter from Little Dog to his Ma, and we're immersed in the middle of their epistolary conversation throughout. His question, "where have we been, Ma?" echoes throughout this narrative, as he comes to terms with their history and its enduring, continuing reverberations into their current lives.

Consequently, even though the text seemingly overwhelms us with trauma and loss—from the taxidermized deer that initiates the narrative to Ma's war story at the very end—Vuong's novel likewise emphasizes to us the means of acceptance, healing, and agency in the midst of human struggle. The healing this text offers may not be whole, or full, or complete, but it is still present and achievable. On the one hand, Little Dog's losses undoubtedly affect him. In a reflection on the way(s) that Duchamp's "sculpture" of an upturned toilet challenged viewers to see something anew, simply by changing its orientation, Little Dog admits that "before Lan's illness, I found this act of malleability to be beautiful, that an object or person, once upturned, becomes more than its once-singular self. This agency for evolution, which once made me proud to be the queer yellow faggot that I was and am, now betrays me" (Vuong

199). Thus, the "malleability" he discovered via his subjectivity as a queer Asian American betrays him as he envisions the loss of Lan, whose body betrays her with the cancer destroying her from the inside. Nonetheless, Little Dog reflects on the slang from his adopted hometown of Hartford, Connecticut:

> because being knocked down was already understood, already a given, it was the skin you wore. To ask *What's good*? was to move, right away, to joy. It was pushing aside what was inevitable to reach the exceptional. Not great or well or wonderful, but simply good. Because good was more often enough, was a precious spark we sought and harvested of and for one another. (Vuong 214; italics in original)

While on the surface this is a reflection on the malleability of language, it likewise directs us towards a revised worldview for Little Dog—as "good was more often enough" (Vuong 214), even in the face of subjugation and loss.

At the end of the narrative, when he and his mother return to Vietnam, Little Dog encounters a remarkable scene in the middle of the night on a street in Saigon: a funeral where the mourners are dressed in drag. Little Dog has traveled with Ma to Saigon to return the ashes of his grandmother Lan to her native country following her death. In a text filled with depictions of trauma, both physical and psychological, this trip serves as a journey of memory and healing, as Little Dog attempts to come to terms with the significance of his grandmother's death. His descriptions of the drag funeral on the Saigon street are remarkably compelling and evocative. He initially notes, "I stepped closer and that's when I saw on the table, impossibly still, the distinct form of a body covered in a white sheet. By now all four members were openly weeping, while, on stage, the singer's falsetto cut through their racked sobs" (Vuong 225). From afar, he had perceived the scene as one of revelry and celebration; yet, as he engages more closely, he observes the seriousness and significance of the event—the "body covered in a white sheet," "four members [. . .] openly weeping," and a "falsetto" cutting through the weeping. The emotion is palpable, as is Little Dog's melancholic surprise. His reflection on the funeral establishes a crucial lens for our examination and understanding of the narrative as a whole; his description of the memorial is profound:

> It's through the drag performer's explosive outfits and gestures, their overdrawn faces and voices, their tabooed trespass of gender, that this relief, through extravagant spectacle, is manifest. As much as they are useful, paid, and empowered as a vital service in a society where to be queer is still a sin, the drag queens are, for as long as the dead lie in the open, an othered performance. Their presumed, reliable fraudulence is

> what makes their presence, to the mourners, necessary. Because grief, at its worst, is unreal. And it calls for a surreal response. The queens—in this way—are unicorns. (Vuong 226)

For Little Dog, the drag performance and memorialization in the middle of the night in Saigon transcend multiple boundaries: international, cultural, and gender. The "othered performance" ultimately is "necessary" to respond to the "unreal" nature of grief. It suggests that we as humans must embrace a nonnormative response—a "surreal response"—to engender healing. Or, as Little Dog puts it, "in Saigon, the sound of music and children playing this late in the night is a sign of death—or rather, a sign of a community attempting to heal" (Vuong 226). In communist Vietnam, the drag revelers, performing a public memorial for a loved one, on the streets of Saigon in the middle of the night, transgress multiple cultural norms—seemingly with tacit approval from authorities, given the immense security structure in the country. For an individual who struggles throughout the narrative to come to terms with his liminal status as a refugee, a minority, and a queer person of color, the significance of the "othered performance" is indeed profound—most notably as a process of healing in the midst of grief but also as a means of comprehending his queer subjectivity in a new light.

Little Dog concludes his narrative with an evocative image which ostensibly encapsulates so much of what we've examined: the intersections, solidarity, humanity, healing and affirmation. He writes to his mother:

> I look at you and see, through the pitch dark, Trevor's eyes—Trevor whose face has, by now, already begun to blur in my mind—how they burned under the barn lamp as we dressed, shuddering quietly from the water. I see Lan's eyes in her last hours, like needful drops of water, how they were all she could move. (Vuong 216)

The convergence of eyes here is quite remarkable—Trevor, Lan, and Ma's eyes all converge and ostensibly coalesce into one, from Little Dog's perspective. Herman, in her work on trauma and recovery, asserts that "recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (133). This certainly is crucial to understanding the way that Vuong concludes the novel. In this imagery of the converging eyes, we encounter not isolation but rather the blending of the past and present. Trevor, who is gone; Lan, who is gone; Ma, who remains, still, with Little Dog. There is death—and loss—but there is life. And memory. Herman also asserts that "survivors challenge us to reconnect fragments, to reconstruct history, to make meaning of their present symptoms in the light of past events" (3). And this is what we

encounter throughout *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*: Little Dog engaging with the "fragments," with the past as it echoes into and shadows the present, in an attempt to connect with his mother, while simultaneously navigating towards an understanding of his own subjectivity and positionality.

Bow argues that "the space of the interstitial where culture is consciously interpreted—whether minutely, forcibly, or over an extended period of time—can be a site where the terms of culture not only become visible but are subject to potential reenvisioning" (15). Little Dog and his family indeed embody the interstitial—refugees, stereotyped "perpetual foreigners," Asian Americans, queer, nonnormative. His narrative reinforces the immense challenges individuals face in their positionalities. Yet, the end of the narrative indeed suggests a re-envisioning of both subjectivity and post-traumatic healing. As Halberstam argues, "queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2). The nonnormative subjectivities of Little Dog and his family force them to imagine futures outside of the normative logic(s) that they encounter in the United States; their survival presumably requires this, given the marginalization, harm, and derision they experience solely due to their positionality. As Kandice Chuh so powerfully argued, "Asian American is in this sense a *metaphor* for resistance and racism" (27; italics in original). Little Dog's narrative certainly reflects just this—the racism *and* the resistance.

As I noted at the start of this article, Little Dog offers the following reflection early in his letter to Ma: "whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something new from what is gone" (Vuong 28). In a narrative centered on a refugee family's experiences, I continually return to this framing—of a life (or lives) oriented in a spiral, "creating something new from what is gone." Indeed, this represents so much of Little Dog's experience: his grandmother's prostitution in war and the traumas it provoked; his mother's own traumas from poverty, displacement, and abuse; Little Dog's abuse in turn; Little Dog's loss of his first love and his grandmother. And yet, again, even in the aftermath of these hauntings, he continually discovers "something new from what is gone." He discovers comfort and malleability and agency in his queer positionality. He discovers love and care from his mother. He discovers a different framing for life from his grandmother. Little Dog concludes his narrative with a succinct formulation of his family's history:

> yes, there was a war. Yes, we came from its epicenter. In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name—Lan—in that naming claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into something worth keeping. From

> that, a daughter was born, and from that daughter, a son. All this time I told myself we were born from war—but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it. (Vuong 231)

In a world currently (and seemingly, indelibly) overwhelmed with war, violence, death, displacement, and suffering, it undoubtedly is quite challenging to attempt to view the plight of thousands of war victims in any type of positive light. Still, Little Dog's conclusion challenges us, again even in the face of immense global conflict, to do so—as he asserted, he and his family "were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence."

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Biography

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