

Literary Form and Violence:

A Queer Viet(namese) American Poetics of Fragmentation

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The abstract:

For this thesis, I study the novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong. The novel is large in its affective and intellectual scope. *On Earth* weaves multiple competing and interlocking spheres of violence, trauma, familial kinship, animality, language, masculinity, queer racialized intimacy, racially queer melancholia, and loss, etc., experienced by a queer Vietnamese American male narrator, his hapa mother, his grandmother, and his white American boyfriend—all together in a multitudinous inquiry of identity, of how to live and imagine an architecture for the future.

Focusing on the macrostructure of the novel and the microstructure of Vuong's sentences, I argue towards a dialectical relationship *between* the polyvalence of destructive violence that continues to permeate and organize the (queer) Vietnamese American body emerging from the American War in Vietnam *and* the literary form (which is also a body form) produced by a queer Vietnamese American writer in order to archive, disrupt, negotiate, and transform that violence. I contend that polyvalence of destructive violence is a central fragmenting force that induces and shapes the Vuong's poetics, which evolves with and beyond the very violence that tries to trap it in the first place.

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brian's note to this thesis' readers: Do read all the footnotes with utmost urgency.

“sadly, the history of poetry is also the history of war. how lucky I am to stand beside you in these ruins we’ve made of words, these words we’ve rescued from the ruins.”

—Ocean Vuong on the day Russia invades Ukraine

“The highest point of knowledge is always a poetics”

—Édouard Glissant

I. Introduction

I am a foreign student in America: a queer Vietnamese man. As America and the English language become my land of rebirth, I find myself drawn to fragments, towards the employment of linguistic fragments as literary aesthetics. Reading fragments, I am enthralled in a state of “conflicted embodiment;” I am confronted in both body and mind (Varley-Winter *Reading Fragments* 1). The etymology of the word ‘fragment’ (as I will trace in section III) points to a wounded ontology born from violence. A fragment, as Camelia Elias suggests, further points towards a state of plurality, for one cannot break a whole into a singular fragment; yet a whole can itself be conceptualized as a fragment when detached from its context and its relationality (*The Fragment* 1). Thus, a fragment vacillates between plurality and unfathomability, resisting a clean definition. Often, I feel like a fragment. When I am frivolous, I say that my lived experience constitutes psychological fracturing, that it is organized by my displacement between Vietnamese and American cultures, histories, geopolitics, and within Western neoliberalist life—more specifically, organized by my affective tie to my Vietnamese ancestors’ history from the American War in Vietnam. As Ocean Vuong claims: “the history of poetry is also the history of war;” likewise, the history of Asian American literature, of the Asian American literary fragment contains also the history of violence against Asian Americans. The fragment already foregrounds the question of history and violence’s aftermath. Although my sense of displacement and affect to my people’s history predispose me to artistic fragments, I know the fragment to mean more

than mere broken identity and woundedness. The fragment, when recuperated as literary aesthetics, can be heterogeneously employed to think through the matrix of identity, history, and violence—and to generate possibility of being from the assemblage of debris. Thus, for this thesis, I study Ocean Vuong’s debut novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, for its capacious exploration of violence, situated in the Vietnamese American body emerging from the war, and for the fragmentary poetics¹ the novel employs to negotiate the queer Vietnamese American narrator’s relationship with violence. I believe literary form is dialectically entangled with violence, as the novel’s fragmentary aesthetics is employed to incorporate and recalibrate destructive violence towards a more positive and constructive structure of being.

On Earth is an epistolary novel narrated by a “queer yellow faggot” (the narrator’s words), a queer Vietnamese American man who is writing a letter to his illiterate mother, but also a letter to anyone who finds it (199). He has no name; he is referred to as “Little Dog.”² The novel revolves around Little Dog, his hapa mother Hong, his white lover Trevor, and his grandmother Lan. Over the course of the book, the narrator, who is also a writer, recounts his family’s life as refugees in America; he negotiates his queer racialized intimacy with his white boyfriend Trevor; he reckons with grief, in the face of his grandma’s death from cancer and Trevor’s overdose; he questions what it means to be a Vietnamese American writer working at the intersection of literary aesthetics and history (of violence). *On Earth* employs different linguistic modes of inquiry and often transgresses genres; it moves from epistolary,

¹ I begin with *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics and Poetry*’s definition of ‘poetics’ as “a label for any formal or informal survey of the structures, devices, and norms that enable a discourse, genre, or cultural system to produce particular effect” (“Poetics, Western” 1059). In this thesis, I will use the word ‘form’ interchangeably with ‘poetics’ to signal the novel’s literary structure, both its macro-architecture and the microstructure of the sentences.

² a nickname his grandmother gives him as part of a rural tradition in Vietnam, so that the evil spirits (who only hunt for pretty and strong children) will hear his diminutive name and leave him alone.

autofiction³, memoir, criticism, essay, documentation of historical events, legal verdicts, poetry, prose-poetry, to personal philosophy; all within the space of what is called “a novel.” Vuong’s formal architecture, as Guignery and Drag would have it, can be termed a “poetics of fragmentation” (“The Poetics of Fragmentation”). Such poetics manifests in multiple forms of narrative and syntactic fragmentation, collage-like linguistic structure, and even the polyphony of genres. The novel has no plot. *On Earth*'s form, in Tony Hoagland words, can be described as: "fragment is the unit, juxtaposition is the method, collage is the result" ("Fragment, Juxtaposition, And Completeness"). Generally, the novel entails braiding of narratives, cohesive juxtapositions of linguistic fragments, episodes, and events in order to weave its own fragmentary temporality, its “archival poetics” against the Western erasure of (queer) Vietnamese American bodies (Macmillan “The Archival Poetics”).

Thus, the novel is large in its affective and intellectual scope. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* weaves multiple competing and interlocking spheres of violence, trauma, familial kinship, animality, language, masculinity, queer racialized intimacy, racially queer melancholia, and loss, etc.—all together in a multitudinous inquiry of identity, of how to live and imagine an architecture for the future. Such architecture, I will argue, emerges from the novel’s central and dialectical relationship between its literary form and violence.

My analysis of *On Earth* engages a matrix of methodologies: theory on violence, on literary form and syntax, queer and feminist theory, critical race theory, and biopolitics. Because the novel demands such epistemological plurality. *On Earth*'s fragmentary form is an apt form to explore and act through the intersecting nexus of war, diaspora, race, and queerness. In “Left of Queer,” discussing the current state and vision of queer studies in 2020, David Eng and Jasbir

³ Generally, works of fiction that are animated by the authors’ autobiography.

Puar call for the "cross-pollinations of disparate bodies and fields of scholarship [to] advance the future of queer theory in necessary and important directions" (8). Likewise, in the anthology *Q&A: Voices of Queer Asian North America*, published in 2021, aims to "dismantle" a monolithic Asian America, which is in fact constituted by "multistranded postnational temporal and spatial convergences and entanglements" (Manalansan IV, Hom, & Fajardo 3). *Q&A* "break[s] down epistemologies of queer as emanating only from specific conditions that cannot be easily universalized" (4). Heeding these scholars' crucial vision of "cross-pollinated" methodologies and interdisciplines between queer studies and Asian American studies and beyond, I take up different methodologies to investigate the novel. However, first and foremost, at a more specific angle of literary form and historical subjectivity, I seek to engage with Dorothy Wang's theory that:

[W]riting by Asian Americans formally manifests the effects of social and historical forces on the poets' subjectivity and language, not only in what is consciously and explicitly stated but also in what is unstated or said obliquely and—crucially—in how something is said (for example, syntax, tone, word choice). (Wang 45)

In this thesis, focusing on the macrostructure of the novel and the microstructure of Vuong's sentences, I argue towards a dialectical relationship *between* the polyvalence of destructive violence that continues to permeate and organize the (queer) Vietnamese American body emerging from the American War in Vietnam *and* the literary form (which is also a body form) produced by a queer Vietnamese American writer in order to archive, disrupt, negotiate, and transform that violence. I contend that polyvalence of destructive violence is a central fragmenting force that induces and shapes the Vuong's poetics, which evolves with and beyond the very violence that tries to trap it in the first place.

In the next section, I will explore violence as intersecting structures, as multiform and materializing aftermath upon the (queer) Vietnamese American body (mostly through the narrator's mother Hong), and violence's mundaneness and tenacity upon the body. In section III, I will situate and deepen my definition and analysis of the novel's fragmentary form. Vuong employs the literary fragment in multiple ways and this thesis does not offer an exhaustive study of them. I will read the queer Vietnamese American literary fragment as a means to expose the narrator's wounded ontology, as a guide to his ancestral history, as ethical archival poetics within the failure of the West's archive. He further uses fragments as queer metonymy to expose and transform Trevor's hegemonic white masculinity. The novel's poetics of fragmentation opens a possibility for queerness; I believe Vuong fashions a kind of queer syntax which is also body syntax that articulates a reparative epistemological vision for language and the violenced body. Then, in section IV, I will bring it all to a coda.

II. A Genealogy and Architecture of Violence: Intersectionality, Aftermath, and the Mundane

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the noun "violence" in its most popular semantics as "[t]he deliberate exercise of physical force against a person, property, etc.;" "esp. when destructive or damaging[.]" or "undesirable" (OED "violence"). Indeed, "violence" tends to animate in our mind a force undesirably and destructively physical. The epicenter of violence for the Vietnamese American body, as experienced by the characters in *On Earth*, does come from and is embodied in the gory casualty of the American War in Vietnam. However, the contextual violence upon the racialized and queer Vietnamese body, documented and treated in the novel, manifests in multiple forms. Following G. W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx, and Frantz

Fanon, the scholars Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim argues that “[v]iolence is a fundamental force in the framework of the ordinary world” (5). Furthermore,

[S]ubjectivity is both marked [by difference] and masked [by hierarchy] that violence seems to escape its own analysis: [violence] lives in the shapes that it appears to subvert. Violence is not opposed to structure as something that exists external to structure; it is another form of structure, of processes, of practices...[Violence’s structure] operates at multiple levels—historical, rhetorical, and practical. (Lawrence and Karim 7-8)

Indeed, the force of destructive violence is not to be essentialized; it is historically contingent, and it only appears inevitable precisely because it has been historically, rhetorically, and practically passed down. As Lawrence and Aisha caution: "*One must elect at the outset whether to view violence as product or to view it as process*" (“Theorizing Violence” 11, italics theirs). In *On Earth*, destructive violence, as negotiated by all Vietnamese and American characters, is not “constitutive of human nature...at its uttermost” as William James claims, but it is always a process, one that is relentlessly intersectional and fragile (Lawrence and Karim “Theorizing Violence” 4). As I will trace below, following the civilian trauma of war, violence structurally permeates Vietnamese Americans in language, the (gendered, racialized, and sexualized) body, human's established hierarchy over animals, white masculine formations, linear nationalist temporality, racist legality, and etc. I will contextually anatomize violence via their manifestations, processes, ontological leakages, and materializing effects.

1. Intersecting Structures of Violence

An incident in middle school where Little Dog is bullied by a nine-year-old white boy reveals the architecture/structure of white American heterosexist violence, one that is intentionally destructive and self-serving, that seeks to perpetuate itself. Little Dog's visible

racial difference has induced his ostracization at his prominently white middle school in Hartford, Connecticut (*On Earth* 23). The "rare features" of his Vietnamese face sparks a white American boy's impulse for violence; this boy Kyle unprovokedly shoves Little Dog's head into the window glass on the school bus. Kyle commands him to "[s]peak English" (24). When Little Dog remains fearful and silent, Kyle and his peers physically abuse him further while Kyle makes another demand: "Say my name then'...'Like your mom did last night'" (25). These ostensibly racist and sexist phrases often circulate as epithets towards racial minority and female bodies; and they can be liberally dismissed as offensive and then are effectively foreclosed of opportunity for examination. But Kyle's linguistic construction mobilizes an intersection of violence that supports his supremacy as white, native-English speaker, heterosexual, American; it needs to be examined.

We must keep in mind that Kyle is still a boy—9 years old. FFrom whence has Kyle "mastered the dialect of damaged American fathers" (*On Earth* On Earth 24)? Is his language mimetic instead of an actual ideological belief of his intersectional dominance? Or does the two coalesce and is mutually constitutive of each other as the former promote itself towards the latter?

The violence Kyle enacts upon Little Dog manifests in both physical and linguistic forms, which are mutually constitutive. His language constitutes and is reinforced by ideologies of his identitarian superiority. Kyle's first command reveals his sense (or defense) of linguistic hegemony of English, native and fully possessed, making Little Dog aware of his inferior Vietnamese features and Vietnamese language. Then, by asking Little Dog to "say [his] name," Kyle, having an artificially unproblematized, unmarked and "impossibly American" name, further reinforces his hegemonic identity (*On Earth* 102). Regarding namesake, Zadie Smith

criticizes identity politics' tendency to essentializes people's identity⁴ and claims that "[t]he only thing that identifies people in their entirety is their name[;]" but what then if the narrator's name is never revealed but just as 'Little Dog', a protective endearment yet diminutive animalization of a person, and what then when Hong is dispossessed of her own name as a consequence of war (as I'll point out later) ("Identity is a pain in the arse": Zadie Smith on political correctness)?

Kyle could have stopped at "Say my name then" as already a derogatory command for Little Dog, but he proceeds to add: "Like your mom did last night," which implies that Kyle has sex with Little Dog's mother the previous night. Of course, this is not true; Kyle fabricates his access to Hong's body in order to establish his heterosexual virility as a man and asserts his entitlement towards all female bodies (while he is still a 9-year-old boy). In another word, he uses his imaginary conquest of Hong's body as proxy to humiliate and overcome Little Dog by means of belittling his maternal authority figure. Therefore, to make Little Dog say Kyle's name is to also reaffirm Kyle's white (hetero)sexual entitlement and sense of power.

Satisfied when Little Dog acquiesces to his command, Kyle replies with "That's a good little bitch" (25). His use of double adjectives of "good little" is excessive; both to impute Little Dog with desired submissiveness and to diminish him along with their adjectival modification of the word "bitch," a pejorative feminization and animalization of a person. Little Dog's Asian American masculinity "must always be read as an overdetermined symptom whose material existence draws its discursive sustenance from multiple structures and strategies relating to racialization, gendering, and (homo)sexualizing" (Eng *Racial Castration* 19). I would add to

⁴ During the interview, Smith said: "If someone says to me: 'A black girl would never say that,' I'm saying: 'How can you possibly know?' The problem with that argument is it assumes the possibility of total knowledge of humans. The only thing that identifies people in their entirety is their name: I'm a Zadie Smith" ("Identity is a pain in the arse").

these "multiple structures and strategies" also the concept of animacy theorized by Mel Chen where language users use animacy hierarchy,⁵ "to manipulate, affirm, and shift the ontologies that matter the world" (42). Kyle shifts Little Dog's human ontology by animalizing him; to Kyle's psyche, the status of animal is inherently inferior to that of human and by displacing the narrator into a "bitch" is to effectively dehumanize him. Following a long intersectional tradition that is racist, sexist, and animacy hierarchist, Kyle, a white boy, "racial[ly] castrat[es]" and dehumanizes Little Dog, an Asian boy through derogatory feminization and animalization (Eng *Racial Castration*).

However, Kyle's white heterosexual position is not stable; it is full of leakages. If Kyle's imaginary sexual prowess is tied to the iteration of his name, Little Dog is also a receiver of that prowess when he iterates Kyle's name. Kyle's act of violence becomes (homo)sexually intimate with Little Dog. Even the very physical violence being enacted in this scene is also intimate, for Kyle "shoved his fleshy nose against [Little Dog's] blazed cheek," face-on-face (24). Kyle's violence that is meant to defend his white heterosexuality mutates into a physical and psychological form of homoerotic intimacy. In another word, his violence becomes reliant on intimacy, on (homo)eroticism to be enacted.

Furthermore, amid the bully session, when Kyle hears a song he knows come on the radio, he immediately disassociates with his own violence and turns to gossip with his friends as if the bullying didn't happen at all. The bullying, to Kyle, is mundane, insignificant; or, a cognitive dissonance is required in order to dissociate himself from the violence he has

⁵ See Mel Chen's discussion of the animacy hierarchy where humans are placed at the top of a metaphysical hierarchy above non-human animals and non-animals like plants and stones. White racism has historically employed this hierarchy to dehumanize other races by animalizing them; and thus justifies colonialism, slavery, and imperialism. See also David Eng's *Racial Castration* where he traces how the concept of white healthy heterosexual sexuality is historically established by demonizing racial and gendered differences.

committed, from its abject consequence embodied by his victim? Again, Kyle's unprovoked violence materializes in his wake of Little Dog's non-white racial difference; why would he bully Little Dog if he wasn't threatened by him? In his linguistic belittling escapade, Kyle's imperative clauses serve to dominate and never to grant Little Dog the status of the subject. Kyle's act of violence is relentless, not only is it physical, it couples and coproduces with the force of linguistic hegemony, gendered and (homo)sexual dominance, and animalization, for it to subtend Kyle's white masculinity while successfully diminishing and subjugating Little Dog.

As Mel Chen has it: "if racism is the hierarchalization of power and privilege across lines of race, then its reliance on the construction of a fragile humanity is one of its most profound dependencies" (*Animacies* 40). These multiple structures and strategies, this matrix of imputed inferiority are necessary because of Kyle's "fragile humanity," because he needs Little Dog's absolute dehumanization around which he can *build* his superior image and power.⁶ Through this matrix of violence, Kyle and Little dog become "multiply interpellated subjects," within a "mutual psychological entanglement" between the actor and the receiver of violence (Eng *Racial Castration* 5, Chen 49). This encounter with Kyle is an intricate lesson for Little Dog in the complex and intersectional landscape of American violence.

To take such intersecting structures of violence further, I now add the violence of temporality, a linear nationalist one. Specifically, Little Dog (or the narrator) archives the US

⁶ To side track: I want to bring in Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* where Arendt claims that "Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent... Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it" (56); and that "violence, having destroyed all power, does not abdicate but, on the contrary, remains in full control" (55). Her giant claim is relevant in this scene between Kyle and Little Dog. If what Arendt said is true, the ideological violence, linguistically rendered, that Kyle heaped upon Little Dog would destroy Little Dog's power as a human subject while such violence does not create a sense of power for Kyle but only highlights how fragile his white humanity is. Violence has stood in for Kyle; Kyle does not have power but has violence as his ultimate tool to construct selfhood, which he might think synonymous with his sense of power. But to Arendt, violence is not political, even antipolitical; But isn't Kyle's violence very political?

decision to mass bomb North Vietnam during the American War in Vietnam: "General Curtis LeMay, chief of staff of the US Air Force, said he planned on bombing the Vietnamese 'back into the Stone Ages.' To destroy a people, then, is to set them back in time" (*On Earth* 60). LeMay follows the temporality of a fired bullet, one that Annamarie Jagose describes as "always linear, teleological, reproductive [destructive in this case], future oriented" towards an end, one that violently rejects all other alternative temporalities that might be "cyclical, interrupted, multilayered, reversible, stalled" ("Theorizing Queer Temporalities" 186). The question of violence then is also the question of temporality. LeMay's *linear, nationalist, and colonialist* temporality associates the distant past with backwardness and primitiveness where lies abjection and powerlessness; he himself becomes an important, civilized American high-ranked military figure, who has the power to commit genocide, to bomb the unified Vietnamese temporality back into that past, "'back into the Stone Ages'."⁷

Taking the intersecting structures even further, the narrator documents a legal events in American history that permit and pave the way for destructive violence against the Asian American body and the Vietnamese body.⁸ During his research, the narrator finds an 1884 news article which reports a trial of a white railroad worker's murder of "an unnamed Chinese man"

⁷ The fragmentary form, denunciation of plot, and proximity of disparate times in *On Earth* directly subvert this white heterosexist and racist temporality while still acknowledge its violent presence.

⁸ See Brockell and Chang for a brief overview of historical flashpoints of American anti-Asian American violence, which has a long and ugly history; from multiple massacres such as Chinese massacre of 1871, Rock Springs massacre of 1885, to utter ostracization and scapegoating of the San Francisco plague outbreak, to legal discrimination like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, to incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, to multiple murders of Asian American motivated by hatred of their corporeally racial difference, etc. See also Jean Pfaelzer's *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* which documents hundreds of forgotten riots, purges and lynchings in the 1880s that murdered, injured, and displaced thousands of Asian Americans. Not to mention also the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes in America since the beginning of covid pandemic; with ex-President Donald Trump racializes covid as a "Chinese flu," to the massacre of Asian American women in Atlanta in March 2021, to multiple senseless murders of Asian Americans, especially the elderly and women, in New York City and elsewhere recently.

(62). The case is dismissed; the judge, Roy Bean, "cited that Texas law, while prohibiting the murder of human beings, defined a human only as White, African American, or Mexican" (63). "The nameless yellow body" is considered not human or non-human, and thus legally permissible to be violated. The utter legal repudiation of humanity of the Asian American body, which further proliferates the ideology of its permissible violence, is sustained across generations and times.⁹ Violence upon the Asian American body is moreover justified by the American legal system.

I have traced so far violence's manifestations and intersectionality of linguistic hegemony, gendered and (homo)sexual dominance, white masculine formations, animality,¹⁰ temporality, and legality upon the Asian American body, upon the Vietnamese American body. These are the intersecting structures and processes of violence that ultimately justify and coproduce violence in its physical form. Thus, analysis of violence across fields and disciplines have to be able to accommodate and discern contextual polyvalence of violence in the daily fabric of our lives in order to negotiate and transform it. In addition to violence as an ongoing structure, I would now like to look at violence as reverberating aftermath. The following subsection explores violence's affective and materializing consequences upon the Vietnamese American body.

2. Violence as Embodied Aftermath

⁹ This is why the label Asian American as a political coalition is necessary to make visible the erased bodies. Though the label can give rise to commodification (See Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Race and Resistance*), problematic for its supposedly monolithic representation. But as Dorothy point out: if we're going to debate what it means to be Asian American, we need the label, this collective identity in the first place; and as Timothy Yu points out, such label can "function as a powerful point of identification," especially for the younger generation (Yu "Has Asian American Studies Failed?")

¹⁰ Though I have only traced Kyle's animalization of Little Dog as a point of human superiority against animals, violence against animals are treated thoroughly throughout the novel and one could argue as an inextricable part of the novel. But for the limited space and concentration of this thesis I will not dwell in depth into the violence on animals.

When we talk of "true war stories[,]" we often think of the epicenter of the war itself, valorizing masculine combat in our collective memory, in the films we make, in the stories we tell, especially in the memory of the American war in Vietnam.¹¹ In this valorization, war is bound to masculine formation; war makes a man. Rarely do we center on the civilians' lives caught up amid it, on the aftermath of trauma of these bodies and what their following generations carry.¹² *On Earth* foregrounds its central site of attention upon the aftermath of the war, upon the civilian embodied trauma and its repercussions across generations.

It is true what Viet Thanh Nguyen says: "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 4). This aphorism manifests from the first page of *On Earth*. The narrator's mother, Hong, stares "horror-struck" at a taxidermized buck at an American rest stop (*On Earth* 3). As she stares, Hong's reflection, her body, is "warped" into the glass eyes of the animal, or rather, a "corpse"—an animal who "embodie[s] a death that won't finish, a death that keeps dying" (3). Vuong uses tautology in this phrase for emphasis but also a spectral and ghostly echo of violence and its enduring traumatic aftermath, flaunted in a public space via the buck.¹³ Most importantly, Hong identifies with this forever dying corpse, even if she is disgusted by it, even if she cannot stop staring at it; especially so. As a Vietnamese refugee from the American war in Vietnam, Hong sees her PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) mind and body trapped in this unbounded landscape of violence embodied in

¹¹ See Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Nothing Ever Dies*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The buck is also a display of masculine triumph over the animal; the dead body is preserved as a decorous trophy to feed the masculine ego.

another hunted body of an animal. The word “death” means that she has died and will keep dying; Hong may now live as a ghost.¹⁴

Nguyen asks: "If war makes you a man, does rape you make a woman?" as rape has been historically tenacious reality upon civilian bodies—women's—in any mass human conflicts (*Nothing Ever Dies* 227). Hong's body is violated by the violence of war. Indeed, Hong's body forces her to relive again and again the traumatic war memory; her mind fastened to a time indelibly marked by violence (12). Little Dog realizes that the “war is still inside [his mother],” that “once it enters [her] it never leaves” like a bodily violation (*On Earth* 4). Hong is dispossessed of her own name, as Little Dog asks: “When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?” (12). Her name evokes “what she left behind;” the history of violence materializes and imbues her name with loss. Browsing a shop in an American mall, Hong desires a “fireproof dress,” still haunted by the fire of war, so that her body would be violence-proof. Her temporality is in disarray. Her memory and its relationship to time often recurses back to events of violence; she is “stuck forever” in the past (3). For instance, in the last mini-chapter of chapter I, Hong wakes up in the middle of the night and her mind travels back to an event of violence that happened five years prior. The narrator observes “the wom[a]n who raised him [lose her mind]” as she starts to live and act with urgency in that time with disregard to her present moment (68).

The violence of war further leads to the narrator and his mother’s linguistic dispossession.¹⁵ Hong’s education stops at age 5 as her “schoolhouse collapse[s] after an

¹⁴ The word ‘Ma’ in Vietnamese means ghost and ‘Má’ means mother. Yet, in the novel, due to anglicization, the accents are removed. So, when Little Dog addresses his mother as Ma (as in the second line: “Dear Ma”), he also calls out to the ghost that she is.

¹⁵ See Neumann's discussion of *On Earth's* treatment of linguistic violence and disparity.

American napalm raid" (*On Earth* 31). Detailing his mother's abrupt end of education, Little Dog shifts to a first-person plural perspective to denote their intergenerational trauma embedded in language: "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" (31–32). War supersedes language, supersedes the tongue, overrides it. Hong's stunted Vietnamese is then transferred to Little Dog over the course of her motherhood. Language is no longer dematerialized but a concrete, violence¹⁶ reality. Language is embodied in its analogy to the corporeal form of an "orphan," to an architecture that has been "ashed," to "a time capsule" (time, semantically on its own may be immaterial but when paired with "capsule," time becomes concrete and contained), and to a tangible "mark" of ruin. Hong's "tongue [both corporeal and linguistic, which is not mutually exclusive, is] made obsolete by gunfire" (*On Earth* 38). Put another way, violence has propelled language into a material state of "obsolete" aftermath. In this way, Hong's loss paradoxically remains with her, materialized whenever she speaks.

As the linguist Mel Chen, working at the critical intersection of race, sexuality, gender, disability, animal studies, and materialism, argues:

Language is as much alive as it is dead, and it is certainly material. ...But in spite of, or because of, the so-called linguistic turn ... and the influence of poststructuralist thought, language in theory has in many ways steadily become bleached of its quality to be anything but referential, or structural, or performative. Some attempts at theorizing language ... fail to recognize, or include, the vast materialities that set up the conditions

¹⁶ I use "violence" as a verb here to denote violence as an ongoing process upon the body and language.

[the constitutive force of exclusion, erasure, violent foreclosure, abjection, and its disruptive return] under which language might even begin to be spoken. (*Animacies* 53)

The condition of Hong's linguistic dispossession of Vietnamese is "certainly material." The ongoing and "vast materialities that set up the conditions" under which her Vietnamese is stuntedly spoken have to be recognized in its "constitutive force of exclusion, erasure, violent foreclosure, abjection, and its disruptive return" produced through the multi-forms of violence Hong experiences. The implication of her linguistic dispossession is acute, for her Vietnamese is hereditary, bequeathed to the narrator. Hong cannot help but subsume her son Little Dog into her violence of Vietnamese language, her temporality, into the epicenter of war violence and trauma to which she keeps recursing.

Beyond the consequences of war, other forms of corporeal violence are heaped upon Hong. The Vietnamese immigrant women in the novel continually experience gendered domestic violence and capitalist exploitation of their bodies. Hong's sister Mai is used to have "her head [slam] against the wall" by her white American boyfriend Carl (70). Likewise, Hong's Vietnamese husband would beat her until her "face [is] broken" (115-116). Then, Hong's working condition as an immigrant in nail salons in America is without salary, health care, or a contract. Her body "becomes its own contract, a testimony of presence" as the narrator exposes:

We will do this for decades—until our lungs can no longer breathe without swelling, our livers hardening with chemicals—our joints brittle and inflamed from arthritis—stringing together a kind of life. A new immigrant, within two years, will come to know that the salon is, in the end, a place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones—with or without citizenship—aching, toxic, and underpaid. (80-81)

In this passage, the narrator employs the politicized first-person plural to string together a body of Vietnamese immigrant workers. The narrator emerges from the tradition of Asian American literature, which is often only “legible through a political frame” (Park 111). It is “shot through with discontent,” often assuming a “confessional” mode and a first-person plural that evince the collective's discontent (“discontent” is rather a euphemism here) in order to unite the subjugated collective (Park 101). Little Dog even anatomizes the working Vietnamese body further, in order to point to the local pain within the lungs, the livers, the joints. He personally focuses on Hong's hands, which he describes as “hideous,” like “two partially scaled fish,” like “the wreck and reckoning of a dream” (79). These bodies cohere under the “the nightmarish conditions that produce [their] masses,” the nightmare of bodily deterioration to make an economically subjugated American life that is “aching, toxic, and underpaid” (Park 104). In these three adjectival words, lie three forms, three modes of modifications, and three temporalities. “[A]ching” contains the present participle verb form; it modifies the painful corporeal affect of the working body. “[T]oxic” in its naturalizing form of the adjective points to the horrendous metaphysical nature of the capitalist system and working condition. Like “aching,” “underpaid” also contains a verb form but in past participle; it modifies the economic worth of the body. The adjectival trio scrutinizes and emphasizes the temporally fragmentary and painful corporeal reality of the Vietnamese worker within exploitative racialized American capitalism.

“Everything good is somewhere else, baby. I'm telling you. Everything,” Hong says to her son, lamenting the subalternity of her life (55).

Violence has percolated into Hong's metaphysics to the point that she passes it down corporeally to Little Dog through her abuses; it is not the only thing she passes down of course, but violence often ramifies out of her acts. In the first mini-chapter, the narrator presents a series

of temporally scattered events where Hong physically abuses him. She hits him often as a child, the first time when he is four and the last time when he is thirteen (5-11). Once, she throws a box of Legs at his head until the "hard-wood dotted with blood" (6). Another time, her jug of milk "burst[s] on [his] shoulder bone" (9). Another day, a "slap [from Hong]... flung [his] gaze to one side" (26). In the narrator's research, he finds that "parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children" (13).¹⁷ When Little Dog finally asks her to quit her beating at the age of thirteen, she quits it. Hong's violence upon her son becomes intimate and only personally tolerated. Eventually, Little Dog's internalizes his mother's violence as "mundane to [him]...what he knew, ultimately, of love" (119). "Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war," the narrator posits of his mother's violence, as if her abuses are in fact protective acts for his future survival. Hong's violent tendency towards her son is not intrinsic but induced by the matrix of violence and trauma heaped upon her; thus, their inevitable leakages from her body and mind. Violence has become so intimate that the Vietnamese American body incorporates it as "mundane," as "love."

The war, domestic, capitalist violence propels a Vietnamese American body into enduring traumatic aftermath. Hong's temporality is cyclically oriented towards past violence; she experiences acute, materialized linguistic dispossession; her body continually suffers from PTSD and corporeal exploitation. Her violence becomes inheritance to her son; it has become so mundane that Little Dog incorporates it as constitutive of his life, as love.

3. Violence of the Mundane; Violence as an Organ

¹⁷ But interestingly, Hong is antagonistic to the violence upon her son that is external from her touch; she disapproves of the violence enacted by Little Dog's bully at school and of the street violence, upon which Hong tries to deflect and comfort Little Dog (*On Earth* 26, 230-1).

On the tangent of the mundane, violence is pervasive within the psychologically linguistic landscape of English. In the third chapter where the narrator discusses what it means to be a writer, he exposes the way violence is normalized in language, in the standard of expression:

You killed that poem, we say. You're a killer. You came into that novel guns blazing. I am hammering this paragraph, I am banging them out, we say. I owned that workshop. I shut it down. I crushed them. We smashed the competition. I'm wrestling with the muse. The state, where people live, is a battleground state. The audience a target audience. "Good for you, man," a man once said to me [the writer-narrator] at a party, "you're making a killing with poetry. You're knockin' 'em dead." (179)

In these expressions, creative accomplishment stands on an equal footing with destruction. Poetry, "a language of creativity," is reduced to a capitalist and colonialist mentality of conquest (*On Earth* 179). In the passage, Little Dog delineates how the anglophone collective "we" (not excluding himself) praise the second-person "you" and then themselves in the first-person "I" with the plethora of possessive, combative, and destructive verbs: "kill," "guns blazing," "hammer," "bang out," "own," "shut it down," "crush," "smash," "wrestle," "target," "knock dead."¹⁸ In our lives, we see our small to large processes as conquests, something to be triumphed over.¹⁹ Creativity and creation are defined by destruction—a paradox, which the writer-narrator resists in his rhetorical question: "But why can't the language for creativity be the

¹⁸ Once, personally, a professor told my English class what he heard a male student say after having successfully completed a test: "I raped that test," the student said. This student perceives the test as a physical body (likely human) that he has triumphantly and proudly violated; once again the erotic aspect of destructive violence is present for the perpetrator.

¹⁹ Vuong has also pointed out the destruction imbued and normalized within the English language and the co-constitutive relationship of violence and creation/nourishment in his poems and interviews (Vuong "Notebook Fragments"; "Ocean Vuong Wrote his Novel in the Closet").

language of regeneration?" But the fact that this is a question and not a statement reveals his uncertainty too.

Violence has woven itself so seamlessly, unproblematically, and mundanely within the English language; the language that we speak, think in, the language that regulate and is effectively the architecture of our lives and our acts. "The state, where people live, is a battleground state[.]" declares the narrator, "The audience a target audience." To affectively reach someone through our creation is to effectively destroy them as a "target." What appears to pillar the architecture of our lives is violence or the logic of the "battleground" that permeates the language as well as the body.

Facing the tenacity of violence, Karim and Lawrence ask a question, one that gestures towards living with and bending the energy of violence towards a positive and constructive use: "If violence reappears again and again as a human reflex, might it not perhaps have a positive function that can only be realized by accepting its intrinsicity and responding to its energy rather than trying to remove it" (12)?

The narrator had started to explore and positively transform that tenacity of violence. During his teenage years, Little Dog believes in the intrinsic presence of violence within his body:

...[He] would wake [late at night] believing a bullet is lodged inside him. He'd feel it floating on the right side of his chest, just between the ribs. *The bullet was always here*, the boy thinks, older even than himself—and his bones, tendons, and veins had merely wrapped around the metal shard, sealing it inside him. *It wasn't me*, the boy thinks, *who was inside my mother's womb, but this bullet, this seed I bloomed around....* he feels it poking out from his chest, slightly tenting his sweater. He feels for the protrusion but, as

usual, finds nothing. *It's receded*, he thinks. *It wants to stay inside me. It is nothing without me.* Because a bullet without a body is a song without ears (76-7, all italics the narrator's).

As a conductor of violence, a bullet relies on the body to serve its ultimate destructive function. In the novel, however, Hong is never physically shot; only the menacing possibility of the bullet always impossibly near. The history of violence materializes itself nonetheless inside the body, the Vietnamese body; as a violatory consequence of Hong's trauma, it materializes in the form of a bullet. The bullet's materialization can be affectively felt but cannot be touched as Little Dog "feels for the protrusion but...finds nothing." Thus, the bullet's trajectory is reconfigured, as it doesn't come out of a gun's barrel, but becomes hereditary from mother to son. A bullet is born and then a son. The bullet has become inert; it has become "The History of Memory" in fact (*On Earth* 7); it has become a fact that the body archives as an organ floating inside.

The narrator would retract this "belie[f]" of the intrinsically embodied violence later in the novel (but not the juxtaposition, the coexistence of violence and creation).²⁰ However, throughout the novel, he contradictorily acknowledges that Hong and himself are "a direct product of the war in Vietnam" (46, 53); even in Vuong's poem "Notebook Fragments," the speaker who share *On Earth's* narrator's history and identity also acknowledges: "An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists./Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me" (*Night Sky with Exit Wounds* 70).²¹ The Vietnamese American body, that is the

²⁰ He says on page 231: "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."

²¹ Throughout this thesis, I will also use textual evidence from Vuong's other works to supplement my argument, since Vuong's oeuvre presents at its core a queer Vietnamese American speaker with similar identity and history with *On Earth's* narrator. Vuong's obsession drives him back again and again to the same non-exhaustive spheres of love, family, violence, the sacred, the erotic, maleness, and masculinity. Thus, moments of textuality in Vuong's oeuvre often converse and converge.

narrator and his family, is indeed born out of historical nexus of violence. The omnipresence of violence, immaterial or material, has rendered itself inevitable, mundane, and constitutive of the (queer) Vietnamese American reality.

But their self-worth is not dependent on violence. Looking at the bullet the narrator conjures reveals that it is the other way around. Interestingly, the bullet is personified into having desire.²² The bullet, the artifact of violence, “wants to stay inside [the narrator];” the bullet is “nothing without [the Vietnamese body].” It “wants” the narrator’s body. The bullet is alive and has sentience, just as violence is not an anomalous product but a sentient process. The narrator even makes a direct comparison between bullet and song: “Because a bullet without a body is a song without ears”; a direct equation (“is”) without a metaphoric mediator (‘like.’) He joins the seemingly opposite ontologies of destruction and artistic creation. The passage proposes an indelible mark of embodied violence and its metaphorical recalibration.²³ The bullet becomes “the abject [that...] beseeches” but does *not* “pulverize the subject” (Kristeva 5). On the contrary, the queer Vietnamese American Little Dog mobilizes and transforms the process-like destructive violence to negotiate his subjectivity and literary creation.

The novel’s linguistic fragments, in their portrayal of violence, do not build up towards a climax nor are they used to shock or elicit adrenaline. *On Earth*’s writer-narrator proposes an alternative. He assumes the linguistic and corporeal agency to reconstruct the narrative of violence—not as a violence to be suffered but a violence continually and concomitantly to be survived, reconciled, and transformed towards a more positive structure of being. Resisting a

²² Or rather, it is animated, given sentience, for desire is not exclusive to humans alone.

²³ Writing on the narrator Little Dog and Trevor’s masculinities and queerness, Christina Slopek claims that the narrator of *On Earth* mobilizes the abject to straddle the boundaries of masculinities and queerness; though she never explicitly specifies the elements of abjection in the novel, I think the large factor is *violence* in its multiform (“Queer Masculinities”).

simple narrative of violence between the perpetrator and the victim,²⁴ Vuong lets violence leak to all corners of the novel “without it becoming vital” to his words, to make violence “independent from any character’s self-worth, rendering it inert, terrible, and felt” (Vuong “The 10 Books”). The novel, with its fragmentary form, does not give violence a platform to destroy; it fashions a literary form, a poetics that dialectically reckons with violence—through the literary fragment.

III. The Queer Vietnamese American Fragment

“Beauty is not decorous, it is medicinal”

—Ocean Vuong

Again, “*The highest point of knowledge is always a poetics*”

—Édouard Glissant

‘Poetics is beauty is knowledge is medicinal’

—brian Long Ta

1. Survey of Literary Fragments

Before discussing the fragmentary form of the novel and how it specifically reconfigures violence, I will first trace the genealogy of Western literary fragments,²⁵ within which the novel is situated. So, what is a fragment again? The Oxford English Dictionary defines “fragment” as “[a] part broken off or otherwise detached from a whole; a broken piece” (OED “Fragment”).

The passive verb “broken” suggests an endured violence. In Latin, the words *fragmen* and *fragmentum* derive from *frango*, meaning “to break, to shatter, to crash” (Drag and Guignery xii;

²⁴ In his discussion of art-making and power by marginalized, minoritarian artists, Viet Thanh Nguyen cautions: “To see oneself only as a victim simplifies power and excuses the victim from the obligations of ethical behavior in politics, warfare, love, art” (*Nothing Ever Dies* 196). Little Dog and Hong are victims of war violence; but Little Dog refuses to assume the “masked power” of a victim, who channels anger to propel his art or victimizes himself to compel guilt on the part of the American majority (196).

²⁵ I will discuss both poetry and fiction, since genre-bending novel moves back and forth between and is the hybrid of the two.

Slessarev “Fragment”). The term's etymology further emphasizes “the wound” (xii). Thus, fragmentation traditionally symbolizes “loss, lack and vulnerability,” associations that are both affective and physical (xii). However, fragment, as a poetic technique and literary genre in Western literature, is more complicated.

From 19th century on, Western poets started to place their faith in fragments. A poetic genre emerges and is literally, nominally, formally composed of linguistic fragments. Poems' forms learned to (or are forced to) accommodate conceptual incompleteness, embraced by the Romantic period, the Modernist literary movement, and other later writers (Slessarev “Fragment”). Alongside poetic fragments Western fragmentary fiction writing also emerges, rejecting Western classical literary tradition of plot, which follows a chronological trajectory of "ground situation, complication, rising action, crisis, climax, falling action, resolution" (Stone and Nyren 72-74).²⁶ The rejection of this classical tradition manifested notably from Modernism, where Western artists pioneered a "new art [which] was chaotic and fragmented in its form, and allusive and indirect in what it meant" (Laura Winkiel *Modernism: The Basics* 2). The Polish literary scholar Wojciech Drąg, writing on Western fragmentary fiction writing, generally defines the practice in its “ren[unciation of] a linear plot narrative and a set of conventional reader expectations, favouring non-linearity,... metatextuality and the frequent use of citations, repetitions and lists” as exemplified in Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (“Jenny Offill’s *Dept. of Speculation*” 59). In “the apparently chaotic wealth of heterogeneous scraps,” the fragmentary aesthetics is born (Drąg 59).

²⁶ Characters are secondary, even if they appear crucial; they are, after all, subsumed under plot, under the writer's grand design (most immediately to my mind is the novella *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemmingway). The climax (rather phallic following the "rising" action) likely involves some form of physical violence.

Critics, as Drag and Vanessa Guignery point out, have traced theoretical interest in fragments back to 16th-18th century French moralists who favored “the form of the pensée, the sentence, the maxim, the aphorism” and the late 18th century Romanticism (xiii). Contrary to the modern conception of fragments as chaos, the French moralists strived towards completeness through their “aphorism” and the Romantics towards “an impossible totality which remains an ideal” (xiii). Then comes the modernist fragment, which responds to the Romantic fragment. The beginning of twentieth century was steeped in crisis deriving from World War I, technological, social, political, scientific, and economic modernization; stark changes induced great ontological uncertainties. The modernist fragment was born out of “modernity’s triple crisis of completeness, totality and genre,” “of the subject,” “of meaning” with the ultimate desire for “reconstruction” and a “new center” (Drag and Guignery xiv-vi). Modernism is followed by postmodernism which “obeys the modernist logic of innovation and obsolescence,” the logic of “superceding oneself” by relentless inventions of aesthetics, of form after form (McHale “Changing Tenses” 4). While Romantic and Modernist fragmentary form still aimed for alternative unity, the postmodernist fragment only wishes to “destroy the idea of connectivity,” to denounce synthesis of any kind, whether social, epistemic, or poetic, privileging “montage, collage, the found or cut-up literary object, for *paratactical* over hypotactical forms” (Drag and Guignery xvii, Hassan 445, italics mine).

So far, this is only the *generic* Western genealogy of the literary, fragmentary form, going from the French moralist, to Romanticism, to Modernism, to Postmodernism. Although Drag and Guignery gesture towards historical crises that produce literary fragments, their introduction to Western literary fragmentations only offers an unmarked category of the practice, focusing too heavily on establishing universal, formal categories of the literary fragments

without inquiring into the author's motive and subject formation. Writing on the fragmentary poetics of twentieth and twenty-first century American poets, Tony Hoagland cautions: "Very similar-looking poetic surfaces can be the manifestations of very different underlying aesthetics" ("Fragment, Juxtaposition, And Completeness"). Hoagland also outlines literary criticism's common attempt to read poetic fragments as responses to the chaotic nature of modernity. However, it is crucial to remember that each writer's motive of the fragment (even in the same literary movement) can differ. The literary fragments can be employed in numerous ways: to mirror, to document, to negotiate, to disrupt, and even produce the world, etc. How literary forms become fragmentary are contextual, contingent on the writer's historical, social, and political space of specific negativity. Each has their own relationship to history, their own architecture and vision of literary fragments. In another word, the literary fragment is also autobiographical.

To take it further, I will briefly outline the motives of certain movements of literary fragments, both in Western poetry and fiction. The Romantic poetic fragment intentionally represents a "ruined aesthetic," "nature's triumph over civilization," as it appeals to the "English picturesque imagination" (Slessarev "Fragment"). The modernist imagistes such as Ezra Pound and H.D. derive their formal inspiration from the short form of Japanese haiku (Pound's 1913 "In a Station of the Metro") and the literal, physical poetic fragments from the ancient Greek poet Sappho (Pound's "Papyrus"; H.D. *Sea Garden*). Sappho's poetry only survives in fragments, and what has been lost becomes where Pound and H.D. found and projected themselves (Prins "Sappho's Broken Tongue"). Pound's vision of the poetic fragment is aimed towards the scientific precision of meaning embodied by an image, an object ("A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste"); or aimed towards the "personal conquest of time" as Joseph Frank would suggest in

his theory on the "spatialization of form" in modern literature (237). While Pound's motive is to imbue a fragment, an image, with totality and precision, H.D. seeks to dilute imagism, to produce permeability between seemingly opposite ontologies in her juxtaposition of images, exemplified in her poem "Oread." Then there is T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" published in 1922 with its relentless parataxical juxtapositions of allusions, voices, genders, geographies, temporalities, languages to create a schizophrenic, minimally cohesive (even dissociative) collage. As Ocean Vuong reminds us in his instagram post the day Russia invades Ukraine: "sadly, the history of poetry is also the history of war." Eliot's poem is literally a "waste land" of language, bodies, and history in the aftermath of war. Eliot had started to "experiment with internal fracturing," induced by his historical and geopolitical situatedness in the historical background of World War I, in the disorienting European and American 20th century sense of modernity (Slessarev "Fragment").

As for the form of Ocean Vuong's debut novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, as you would expect, there is no plot.²⁷ On the narratological macrostructure, the novel is divided into three large 70-page chapters, and within each there are 5-6 mini-chapters. The novel does not move in a progressive or linear temporality of narrative but rather fragmentary mixture of temporalities. The novel is structured by juxtaposing linguistic fragments together. The fragments in *On Earth* can be a scene, an episode, an event, a vignette of thought, that take up half a small page or the whole page. Then there is blank space following to indicate a break in both time and space toward another fragment.²⁸ The principle undergirding the novel structure's

²⁷ To reiterate, *On Earth's* form, in Tony Hoagland words, can be described as: "fragment is the unit, juxtaposition is the method, collage is the result" ("Fragment, Juxtaposition, And Completeness").

²⁸ Here is a little excerpt. You don't have to read the whole thing; just two or three fragments and you get the idea; or just look at it. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/a-letter-to-my-mother-that-she-will-never-read>

is *parataxis*,²⁹ the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate temporal and spatial units, though linguistically rendered.

Vuong's fragmentary form opposes Pound's scientific triumph of form and Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" (Kermode 128). The juxtapositions of the novel's linguistic fragments are not aleatory; each mini-chapter's fragments are carefully orchestrated as they aspire towards a fragmentary cohesion. The fragmentary form's momentum "derives not from narrative but the subtle, progressive build up of thematic resonances" (Shields "Collage"). Themes and characters recur and deepen with change, nuances, and complexity without easy progress. And most importantly, two thirds the way through the novel, it breaks down further into smaller fragments to encapsulate Little Dog and his lover Trevor's queer relationship and masculinities (I will discuss this in subsection 4). In another word, prose *disintegrates* into poetry. This disintegration happens again one mini-chapter following the first disintegration, when the narrator speaks to his mother about what it means to be a queer Vietnamese American writer.

On Earth, as a fragmentary novel, follows a long tradition (primarily Western) of literary fragmentation. Vuong has cited modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary writers who employs various formal fragmentations as influences for *On Earth* ("The 10 Books"). These are Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (1982), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003), Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* (2014), among others. However, I would like to situate Vuong within the Asian American literary fragment, for a mangle and politically relevant

²⁹ The OED defines parataxis as "The placing of propositions or clauses one after another, without indicating by connecting words the relation (of coordination or subordination) between them, as in *Tell me, how are you?*."

scope. As I mentioned in the introduction, the Asian American literary fragment is inextricable from the historical and ongoing violence upon the Asian American body. Furthermore, the American War in Vietnam as "continuous history" continues to organize popular perception and production of Vietnamese American literature³⁰ (Kim and Nguyen "The Literature" 71). Vuong, in writing *On Earth*, is not an ethnographer of the Vietnamese refugees in America. In fact, his fragmentary form and its intersectional exploration of race, war, diaspora, and queer identity disrupts any clean essentialization or limitation of identity, of a marginally racialized literature within the Western literary realm.

On Earth's fragment follows and even fashions a formal hybridity from Cha's *Dictée* and lê's *The Gangster*. Cha's fragmentary multimedia novel is animated by the colonialist and imperialist history of violence in Korea and America, history and violence that are situated within the bodies of Korean (American) women from Cha's familial lineage or from history itself. Cha's literary fragment is heterogenous, ranging from poetry to prose to visual forms, manifesting in different languages of Korean, French, and English, at times even refusing to translate itself. In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe argues that *Dictée's* "formal disruptions interrogate the multiple, sometimes contradictory configurations of the ideological apparatuses of state church, neo-imperialism, patriarchy, and other structures of power," specifically by way of the formal "discontinuity, fragmentation, and episodic unfluency" (Kim "Apparatus" 143-44, Lowe 152). Then, lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* presents a the fracturing experience of a Vietnamese American woman war-refugee in America, literally and formally, as lê reveals in an interview ("Migrant Father Fragment"). *The Gangster* does not dwell into the

³⁰ see Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Nothing Ever Dies* and "The Literature of the Korean War and Vietnam War," and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's *This is All I Choose to Tell*

epicenter violence of the American war in Vietnam; it focuses exclusively on the aftermath of displacement for certain Vietnamese refugees, fragments of their lives literally floating around the novel. Like these two Asian American literary fragments, Vuong's *On Earth* exemplifies a critically fragmentary aesthetics while grounding itself within Asian American history and attempting to positively transform violence. *On Earth*'s fragmentary form is political. In an interview for the literary magazine *Electric Literature*, Vuong said of his form:

it felt important to me, as an Asian American writer, to not compromise, to refuse the decree of plot and veer, meander, detour, circumvent, queer and complicate, actions of which, in western criticism, are often seen as failures in narrative—but I feel, have always felt, are the very means of which I have built my life. To be lost, then, is never to be wrong—but simply more.

Fragmentary form, I believe, can be the right tool for a writer who does not aspire for conquest of time, space, and body, but wishes to theorize through time and history as violence and wishes to produce potential repair—such is the case with Vuong's fragmentary poetics embodied by *On Earth*.

As Édouard Glissant has it: "*The highest point of knowledge is always a poetics*" (*Poetics of Relation* 140). Thus, the question of literary form, of *On Earth*'s fragmentary form, is not only the question of mere aesthetics, but also the question of epistemology—and I would say also, of archival, of agency, of political and medicinal reconfiguration of violence, and endless possibility for queerness. In the following subsections, I will explore the condition of literary production of the novel as well as the multiple ways the literary fragment is employed to negotiate and reparatively, constructively transform destructive violence and meaning. *On Earth*'s fragments manifest as the wound, the guide, as punctuation, archival poetics, queer

metonymy, and queer syntax. This plethora of meanings emerges from the queer Vietnamese American writer-narrator's linguistic and corporeal agency to write the body (even write with the body) towards an unbounded queer architecture of Being.

2. "Cut it Open": Linguistic Negativity

Negotiating joy in the aftermath of war as a queer Vietnamese American writer, the narrator says to his mother: "I know. It's not fair that the word *laughter* is trapped inside *slaughter*./We'll have to cut it open, you and I, like a newborn lifted, red and trembling, from the just-shot doe" (187, italics the narrator's). "[L]aughter" and "slaughter" are almost-homographs; they look alike but have different sounds and completely different meanings. The speaker "know[s]" the linguistic and physical entrapment of joy and literary creation inside the tenacious history of violence; a history of violence cannot be ignored and must be reckoned with.³¹ This linguistic and corporeal entrapment is what Vuong as a writer and a queer Vietnamese American body has to grapple with and from which Vuong's poetics is born.

Vuong uses a metaphor of giving emergency birth to a shot doe as a detour to come back to the question of language. Like language, the "just-shot" animal is in a critical, time-sensitive condition; the successfully-hunted animal is pregnant with life but is threatened to lose that life. The solution is physical, visceral: "cut it open." The collective "We," the violence-drenched Vietnamese American body, the narrator and his mother, have to enact this cutting together. To craft joy out of violence is to save the fawn from the violence-drenched doe. To craft a language out of destruction is to cut that destruction open in order to give birth to "laughter," to joy. To form a cathartic

³¹ Vuong once claims in an interview that this following quote about the narrator's boyfriend Trevor in *On Earth* is essentially the thesis of the novel (if a novel can have a thesis): "I [Little Dog] did not know then what I know now: to be an American boy [Trevor], and then an American boy with a gun, is to move from one end of a cage to another" ("On Earth with Ocean Vuong", *On Earth* 116). Trevor's body and masculinity is trapped inside the cage of violence as well.

aesthetics from violence requires (physical) birth or rebirth. In this way, language is terribly physical, material. It must be physically cut open and reborn.³²

To be clear, the language and the structure of the novel are *not in a causal* relation with the narrator's queer Vietnamese American subjectivity—put another way, violence does not *simply cause* the fragmentation of the novel. The two, as Boris Ejxembbaum writes, are in the “relations of correspondence, interaction, dependency, or conditionality” (I would also add ‘co-production’) (Wang 35). The Vietnamese and English languages for the writer-narrator have to negotiate with a tenaciously historical and intersectionally ongoing structure of violence. The narrator is linguistically dispossessed as an intergenerational consequence of the American war in Vietnam. The narrator laments: “What if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out?... The Vietnamese I own is the one you [Hong] gave me, the one whose diction and syntax reach only the second-grade level” (31). In her essay “How Words Fail,” the poet and essayist Cathy Park Hong debates the common perception that “a poem represents a person who is a unified whole, and that the syntax of the poem is a window to the person's, or writer's, mind.” Hong evokes poets like Gertrude Stein, Paul Celan, John Taggart, and others whose poetry points to the limit and materiality of language, where the poem's speaker is more like “fabrication of the self,” fashioned from the sense of cultural and

³² Vuong keeps coming to the concept of linguistic and corporeal rebirth to signal his underlying motive and principle of his aesthetics. His language is written in an alphabet of “sinew, blood, and neuron” of his ancestors (10). To create again following the blood of his Vietnamese ancestors. Moreover, Vuong again employs the simile of birth and rebirth to signify coming-of-age change in his teenager romance with Trevor: “You [Trevor and the narrator] who crawled from the wreck of summer like sons leaving their mothers' bodies” (*On Earth* 159). Vuong keeps recurring back to his mother's body as well, the source of beginning. Vuong takes us back to the moment inside the womb where he describes the placenta as the “first,” the “true mother tongue” where the mother and the child speaks through “blood utterances” (137). Vuong ends his poem “Not Even This,” which is about being a queer Vietnamese American writer and the melancholia and violence associated with that being, with the following lines: “I caved and decided it will be joy from now on. Then everything opened. The lights blazed around me into a white weather/and I was lifted, wet and bloody, out of my mother, screaming/and enough.”

political displacement. Likewise, Vuong and the writer-narrator³³ of *On Earth* employs “deliberate inarticulation,” a language that is “borne out of negation,” out of the “void” that is the tongue (“How Words Fail;” *On Earth* 31). This linguistic negativity, or the “void” as the narrator calls it, opens the space for the formation of the novel’s poetics.

3. Fragment as the Wound, the Guide, and the Punctuation

What constitutes *On Earth*'s formal fragmentation is also the visibly physical blank space bordering the fragments. This space can be theorized as silence, inarticulacy, the fissure of language, but it can also be understood as a kind of “wound.” Deriving from the history of violence that have marked and separated Little Dog and his mother Hong, Little Dog says, after having come out as gay to his mother: “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?” (137). Little Dog sees himself and his mother as each end of an open wound, where upon healing, the two would “reencounter” into the same body of skin. Seen in this light, the text is constituted by the “skin” that is the words and by the “wound” that is the blank space. The fragmentary form becomes the wounded body of the narrator and his mother.³⁴

But the narrator only believes in this metaphor when he is “careless;” healing does not come so organically, so easily. The blank space or the wound is visibly fixed on the page. Later in the novel (later in physical pagination), when the narrator laments to his mother the melancholia of being a queer racialized subject in America, he renews the metaphor of the wound: “I was a gaping wound in the middle of America and you [his mother] were inside me asking, *Where are we? Where are we, baby?*” (229; italics the narrator's). This time the narrator

³³ The narrator is not Vuong but a fabrication of Vuong’s self

³⁴ or, also the readers themselves? since they are tasked also with bridging the textual fragments

is himself the entirety of the wound; his wounded ontology has expanded to a “gaping,” a wide cavernous scale, expanded into the national landscape of America, the country itself.³⁵ America is wounded and the queer Vietnamese American body is the wound. And Hong is inside that wound, inside Little Dog, inside and lost; which symbolizes a "reversed...hierarchy," a mother inside a son (*On Earth* 5). *On Earth's* formal fragmentation points to the racialized, sexualized wound that is personally, affectively, intergenerationally experienced while entangled with the national body/identity of America.

Indeed, Vuong’s fragmentary form and poetics is, first and foremost, a form of the wounded aftermath of violence. In *On Earth's* chapter III, in the second disintegration of narrative into prose-poetry, the writer-narrator opens up to his mother about being a writer, about his act of writing: “I’m not telling you a story so much as a shipwreck—the pieces floating, finally legible” (190). The narrator analogizes “story” to “shipwreck.” He analogize the fact of this novel to a “shipwreck.” This "shipwreck" metaphor is apt in its evocation of the dangerous and traumatic exodus across the sea of Vietnamese refugees, or the "boat people," from the American war in Vietnam; which was the case for the narrator’s family.³⁶ The narrator-writer's literary creation materializes in the aftermath of destruction; the act of writing becomes the architectural act of collating "pieces" together.

Nonetheless, in the vast indeterminate body of ocean where the traumatic fragments “float,” they become “finally legible.” Fragments, in this case, embody *not merely* dislocation,

³⁵ At times, a whole blank page would separate two mini-chapters; this happens when we’re about to enter a mini-chapter that is especially affectively heavy (66, 128, 152). However, in the last chapter of the novel, all the mini-chapters are separated by a whole blank page (172, 194, 218, 234). It is fitting as the last chapter contains many deaths of closed ones from the narrator’s lover to his grandmother, dying respectively from drug overdose to mortal illness.

³⁶ See James M. Freeman and Nancy Foner’s *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans 1975 – 1995*. See Pelaud’s “History” in her monograph on Vietnamese American Literature *This is All I Choose to Tell*. See Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Refugees*.

disorientation, commonly theorized in (post)modernist creativity, but rather a site that brings focus and legibility; the Vietnamese American fragments become a situating guide amid the infinite and entropic oceanic body of history.³⁷ Likewise, the speaker of Vuong's poem³⁸ "Not Even This" also asks: "What if it wasn't the crash that made me, but the debris?" suggesting that his subjectivity coalesces together from the aftermath of violence, from the "debris" of history. Writing on the poetic fragment, Jennifer Chang suggests: "To read a fragment is to read the contours of incompleteness" (352). Chang further points out: "If it is a fragment, there will be more;" "more" meaning not a larger whole but rather simply what has been lost and indeterminately inaccessible, without possibility of full restoration, resisting the West's obsession of constructing a lost origin as ultimate truth (Chang 352-3). Thus, the material, linguistic, and affective fragments left from history, from historical bodies, present a vast negative space of aftermath and even a guide for Vuong to engage in a creative dialectics between parts and an inaccessible whole, between historical violence and modern formal fabulation; a space from which Vuong's poetics emerge. The queer Vietnamese American writer fabulate new possibilities of aesthetics and epistemology, while still being grounded in the fragments of history.

Then, as I read and reread *On Earth*, I was drawn more and more to the blank space that visually constitute the novel's linguistic fragments, to its other possibilities. The blank space represents an absence of transition from one fragment to the next, but it is also a *present* nothingness that cannot be ignored. In fact, this metaphysical, mental, visual blank space (or

³⁷ Such historical guidance of fragments also cohere with Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck," whose speaker dives into the ocean to look for a historical shipwreck, wishing to establish affective tie to the historically marginalized bodies, queer bodies specifically. *On Earth's* fragments, in this case, nod to both the Vietnamese diaspora and queerness.

³⁸ who, again, shares the identity and history with the narrator.

rather, a negative space) throughout *On Earth* can be theorized as *punctuation* itself, punctuating the linguistic fragments. Put another way, the queer Vietnamese American blank/negative space is imbued with punctuating power/potential. In the monograph *Punctuations: How the Arts Think the Political*, Michael Shapiro approaches punctuation not as linguistic marks but as conceptual and metaphorical entities, as "deferral[s]" of meaning, that artists employ to disrupt harmful epistemological normativity and produce political, creative possibilities. Heeding this theory, *On Earth*'s negative space constitutes "the compositional rhythms that deliver moments of dissociation as punctuation... the intervening spaces..." that "challenge practices of intelligibility...[and] political sensibility" (Shapiro 3). The blank space becomes "the void [(or the undecipherable historical noise) that] defers the attempts to consummate...[,]" defers closure of knowledge³⁹ in the face of historical wound of war, race, and the narrator's queerness (Shapiro 8).

Speaking on the blank, negative space employed also by *Dictée*'s fragmentary form, Chang says: "I [Chang] feel the blank space as my silence meeting hers [Cha], a space that mirrors the distances between myself and others—speaking subjects, interlocutors, future experiences, the selves I might yet become. Such space feels like time..." (352). The Asian American negative space embodies a metaphysical distance of potentiality related to language, futurity and temporality, and "the selves [an Asian American subject] might yet become" (notice "selves" in plural form, suggesting the plurality of a racialized subject). In an interview, heeding the marginalization a racialized artist in America faces, Vuong addressed the body of Asian

³⁹ In an open letter to the Buddhist community following the death of Thich Nhat Hanh, Vuong reveals that: "The root of the word 'narrative' is 'gnarus,' Latin for knowledge. As such, all stories are first and foremost the translation of knowledge" ("A 'love letter'"). Knowledge is embedded in literary forms, in the linguistic art which is also a corporeal art.

American artists at large: “Be prepared to be unfathomable to the rest of the world,” Vuong said. “We need you, and we are ready for you” (Cochran “MacArthur Genius”). To be an Asian American artist (who does not cater to the structural epistemology tied to whiteness that expect you (a racialized subject) to be an anthropological tour guide to “your race”) is to be “unfathomable”; Vuong urges you to be unfathomable. Heeding Chang’s theory and Vuong’s call for the constructively negative space of Asian America, such unfathomable space is the negation of identitarian essentialization. If a limited Asian American essence cannot be pinned down, it forecloses the colonialist impulse of masterability/control (assuming that one cannot dominate what one does not know) and opens up agency fashioned by the imagination and the body. Indeed, *On Earth* as a genre-bending novel along with its diverse scope of thematic exploration cannot be pinned down or essentialized; the novel weaves multiple competing spheres of being, negotiated by the queer Vietnamese American subject without hope of closure. Thus, while the fabulative fragments produced by the writer-narrator speak, the blank space around them points towards what cannot be spoken or historically lost, but it also points towards the productive possibility of the Asian American selves and creativity. Such unfathomability, embraced by the queer Vietnamese American fragment, politically punctuates the form of the novel.

Thus far, I have read *On Earth's* literary fragments to embody the wounded aftermath and an architectural guide for the soul of a queer Vietnamese American male subject. They also open punctuating spaces for unfathomability as well as political possibilities to conceptualize one’s intersection of identity markers such as queerness, race, history, and violence. In the next subsection, I’ll explore the use of the fragment as an ethical archival poetics.

3. Fragment as an Ethical Archival Poetics

Again, *On Earth*, as a linguistic body, is structured by parataxis, the act of juxtaposing seemingly unconnected units of meaning (in the novel's case, linguistic units). The fragments in the novel manifest as a sentence, a paragraph, a page; what makes these units, and subsequently, the text fragmentary is the absence of immediate temporal and spatial relationality from one unit to the next; a sentence or a paragraph becomes a linguistic and conceptual fragment because its connection has been detached by way of parataxis. But this does not mean *On Earth* is chaos of unfathomable fragments; Vuong orchestrates the fragments strategically to produce different literary aesthetic and political functions. Vuong often braids/collates different temporal and spatial events together. Take for example the third mini-chapter of chapter I where two scenes, two different events of violence are braided to build an archival poetics, documenting the violence against Vietnamese bodies that are Little Dog's mother and grandmother (*On Earth* 35-44).

Situated in 1968 Vietnam, steeped in the war, the mini-chapter first presents the narrator's grandmother Lan who is holding her newborn daughter Hong in front of an American armed checkpoint across which she needs to cross to reach her house. Braided into this scene is another scene of local Vietnamese men who split a macaque's skull for the nourishment of their virility. The two scenes seem unconnected—bounded together only under the umbrella of violence and the same temporal and spatial plane of 1968 rural Vietnam. But they are braided in the sense that sometimes fragments and components of one scene are juxtaposed (between the blank space) with those of the other scene's; sometimes they are embedded within the same paragraph.

Yet, the two disparate scenes, which constitute the entire mini-chapter, become both spatially and temporally intimate. They are also intimate because the events are derivative and recreated from familial memory, from the real-life or mythic stories Hong and Lan tell Little Dog—stories being all they could bring to America as refugees. Even though the two events are

fully fleshed in this mini-chapter, the fact that these stories are orally, fragmentarily passed down isn't revealed until later (later in the physical pagination (not time) of the novel). Until the last few pages of the novel, we are transported back into a moment in childhood where Little Dog asks his mother to tell a story he enjoys; she begins the story: "...Once upon a time, in the old country, there were men who would eat the brains of monkeys" (*On Earth* 240). In a fragment on page 191, during one of Lan's schizophrenic episodes, Lan inundates her grandson Little Dog: "you want to hear a story? I tell you a story...Okay...long ago. One woman hold her daughter, like this...on a dirt road. This girl, name Rose, yes, like flower. Yes, this girl, her name Rose, that's my baby...Okay, I hold her, my daughter. Little Dog...you know her name? It's Rose, like flower. Yes, this little girl I hold in dirt road. Nice girl, my baby, red hair. Her name is.... (191)" Lan goes on like this all night to her grandson, in this cyclical, schizophrenic mode, a cyclical mode of trauma that is exemplified in the temporality of the Vietnamese war-women in the novel.

The narrator is aware of the ontologically unstable nature of language and stories, of the act of authoritatively speaking about other people, especially the ones who are close to him. In the mini-chapter, these stories are not revealed to us in Lan and Hong's own words but their grandson/son that is the narrator. The words then become charged with spectrality, for Little Dog realizes that it is him who has the privilege and the language to fictionally archive their memories, their stories, their histories; such archival decision comes with an enormous question of ethics. In her article "Venus in Two Acts," Saidiya Hartman wrestles with the Western archive of enslaved African Americans; for the archive is "a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body" as these historical bodies are delivered to the present and are defined by the fatal violence that murdered them in the first place (2). The archive becomes "inseparable from the

play of power that murdered [the enslaved African American bodies]" (Hartman 10-11).

Violence "determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power" (10). Although slavery occupies an entirely different historical trajectory, incomparable to anything, Hartman's struggle with the archive can illuminate on *On Earth's* Vietnamese American writer-narrator's struggle with the American collective memory of the American war in Vietnam. Violence "determines, regulates[,] and organizes" the Vietnamese and American stories emerging from the war and the bodies circulated around that war. Hartman asks: "How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know?" (3) and "How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence...[without] subject[ing] the dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence?" (4-5). Being aware of such ethical conundrum, what Little Dog does as a writer, a narrator of *On Earth* is he braids his retelling of the two stories together while being relentlessly metafictional. He enacts a fragmentary, collage-like archival poetics while acknowledging its limits of representation and forgoing his authority on his subjects of narrative, of archival.

The narrator's own metafictional voice and temporality manifest throughout the mini-chapter to indicate its extrinsic multilayers. The scenes are told in third-person perspective, yet the first-person narrator emerges often to address the second person "you" that is his mother.⁴⁰ However, at times this singular "you" morphs into the plural "you" to address the readers directly. As the narrator narrates the scenes, he asks: "If I say the woman [Lan]...would you see her?...Can you hear the sound of the chopper?" (36-37). He keeps checking in with his mother or the readers for synesthesia, if his language can archive the visual and auditory aspects

⁴⁰ Again, *On Earth* is a letter from a narrator to his mother.

experienced by the body in the scene. Then a page later, he asks of Lan's scene: "It is a human story. Anyone can tell it. Can you tell it?" (38); he is asking both his mother and the reader in this case using the pronoun "you." The narrator engages the reader in this act of archival, asking them if they "can..tell it," tell the story of his grandmother and mother during the war; which are a central part of both American and Vietnamese violent histories.⁴¹ Vuong's use of the fragmentary plethora of perspectives (the narrator/writer, the reader, the characters; first, second, and third person) explicitly and formally entangles all the possible subjects involved in the collective metaphysics of writing, of remembering, of archival.

At the same time, this metafictional archival mode denies a fixed and absolute representation of the violence of the Vietnamese American body.⁴² The materiality within the story blatantly bears markers of linguistic construct: "It has started to rain; the dirt around the woman's [Lan] bare feet is flecked with red-brown quotation marks—her body a thing spoken with" (36). Not only Lan's body, the patch of Vietnamese land she stands on is also in "quotation marks," a signifier of speech to indicate the act of speaking; the body and the land are imaginatively and linguistically rendered. The narrator-writer is archiving Lan and Hong's history, their story through his own form of linguistic collage, his own poetic medium of the novel. He is engaging in the mode of "speak[ing] nearby" rather than "speak[ing] about" as the filmmaker and literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha would have it ("There is No Such Thing as Documentary"). The narrator's is "committed to not speaking on [Hong and Lan's] behalf, in their place or on top of them" thus leaving a gap of meaning for the subjects being spoken of to fill themselves. Trinh

⁴¹ This question is perhaps appropriate for the fragmentary form also. Traditionally, the literary fragmentary writing is a democratic genre, relying heavily on the readers to piece, to reconstruct the fragments together, in the absence of transitions, unity, and chronology.

⁴² See also Macmillan's reading of Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as a parallel yet different case of archival poetics. Macmillan says: "[*Be Lonely*] professes [a] kind of self-reflective gathering—the act of promoting association between materials without the claim of complete or definite representation" (201).

perceives of this mode as "freedom to both sides," between the narrator and his mother, grandmother. However, for the subalternity of Hong and Lan's lives whose mother tongue is stunted and whose English is just another entropic void, there is no such "freedom" for their articulation or contestation. Even the fact of the narrator's writing evades Hong, for one reason of Hong's illiteracy. Nonetheless, the narrator chooses the "strong ethical stance" of "speaking nearby," by owning up to his own medium, to his privileged formal/literary act of archival ("There is No Such Thing as Documentary").

The narrator-writer reveals a motive behind his writing, his archival poetics: "I never wanted to build a 'body of work,' but to preserve these, our bodies, breathing and unaccounted for, inside the work" (175). In this fragmentary poetics, the narrator juxtaposes Hong and Lan's imaginations, memories, spirits, and bodies together; the violence "breathing and unaccounted" Vietnamese bodies.⁴³ He braids two principal temporalities of Lan's and Hong's, temporalities of a mother's and a daughter's. Lan is telling a story of herself holding her daughter Hong at a gun checkpoint; Hong is telling a story of monkeys being eaten by men while she herself embodies the monkey.⁴⁴ Joseph Frank would perceive Vuong's braiding of the two scenes, his "breaking up of temporal sequence" by way of juxtaposition, as "spatial form" (Frank 230-1). To Frank, by braiding two seemingly disparate scenes together, Vuong instigates the "simultaneity of perception," to "seize, isolate, [and] immobilize" fragments of time (231, 236). For each

⁴³ Often, the narrator also documents the larger historical events of violence that relates to his personal events or his identity even. For example, when the narrator comes out to his mother as gay in the third-to-last mini-chapter of chapter II, he includes a passage, documenting the events: a gay teenage boy in Vietnam having acid thrown in his face because of his sexuality and the Orlando gay nightclub shooting where 49 gay men were killed (137). The narrator situates and affectively ties his experience, his identity with marginalized and violence body in different geographical and historical sites of Vietnam and America.

⁴⁴ "You were born in the Year of the Monkey. So you're a monkey[.]" the narrator says to his mother Hong; to which, she concurs: "Yeah, I guess so...I'm a monkey" (240). Hong equates herself to the animal, the monkey, collapsing the two hierarchical ontologies via her linguistic act.

fragment engage with each other in “reflexive relations” (Frank 231). Yet, Frank’s motive of his spatial form is the “personal conquest of time” (237); his notion of time as linearity subtends this conquest mentality. In fact, the narrator is trying to archive other kinds of time, to weave together temporal fragments of two fractured minds in close space of the mini-chapter without offering closure to time and body. As Vuong says in his letter to the Buddhist community at large: “all stories are first and foremost the translation of knowledge...they are the transmission of energy...[as the principles of Buddhism] taught us, energy cannot die” (“A ‘Love Letter’ for Our Community”). The knowledge and energy of the two Vietnamese women are fragmentarily juxtaposed and perpetuated through time and space, through the narrator’s literary agency.

However, as I will quote Hartman further: “The task of writing the impossible...has as its prerequisites the embrace of likely failure” (14). The fragmentary form epitomize already a kind of failure—a productive failure of wholeness, of chronology, of certainty. Throughout the novel, as the narrator speaks of Hong, of Hong’s body, he recognizes the complications of his act of fragmentary archival—his failure. There is always the “physical fact of [Hong’s] body” which “resists [the narrator’s] moving it” (85). In the act of writing, the body becomes something the writer writes on, the body as the blank page becomes a kind of “spatial field” (85). By writing, the writer-narrator will “mar [his subject’s life],” he will “change, embellish, and preserve [his mother] all at once.” The attempt of ethically archiving the violenced body is also the failure of “proper” archival (quotation marks mine). Language, though inextricable from the body, cannot always fully or ethically recuperate the body.

The queer Vietnamese American’s narratological employment of fragmentary braiding, metafiction, and fragmentary perspectives destabilize the epistemology of the archive of Vietnamese American bodies. The writer-narrator “strain[s] against the limits of the archive” in

order “both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling” (Hartman 11). Yet, he will fail, but perhaps that is the point.

5. Novel Disintegrates into Poetry: Fragment as Queer Metonymy

After reading the queer Vietnamese American fragment as the wound, the guide, the punctuating negative space, and archival poetics, I would now like to approach the fragment’s queer potential in its manifestation as metonymy. First, what is metonymy? My identification and analysis of metonymy here starts from *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*’ grouping of its definitions by critics as: “A trope in which one expression is substituted for another on the basis of some material, causal, or conceptual relation.”⁴⁵ The general keyword that define metonymy is “relation,” or meaningful “contiguity” between two or more entities, as Roman Jakobson would have it (Jakobson “Two Aspects of Language” 105). Despite being a rarely studied phenomenon, metonymy is used often in our daily speech (see W. Martin’s “Metonymy”). And when studied, no scholar has agreed upon what metonymy is, for usage and perception of metonymy vary depending on context and the individual’s specific point of reference. As for *On Earth*, the novel employs metonymy as fragment (and vice versa). The metonymic fragment is specifically situated in a queer racialized context between the narrator and his white boyfriend Trevor.

The metonymic fragment manifests two thirds way through the novel, in the last mini-chapter of chapter II, where the narrative breaks down into smaller fragments. In another word, the novel disintegrates into poetry. This mini-chapter comprises mostly of a-few-sentence paragraphs; it is devoted to Trevor, the narrator’s white American lover in their teenage years.

⁴⁵ For example, you can refer to the queen of England or the English monarchy as “the Crown.” See a table of different examples of metonymic relations in Hugh Bredin’s “Metonymy.”

This mini-chapter, or rather a poem, contains a list of metonymies of Trevor's physical and psychological characteristics, such as his belongings, his preferences, and the dark, intimate events that punctuate his and Little Dog's relationship. The formal disintegration brings about a queer love poem and a critique of Trevor's white American violent masculinity grounded in materiality. The first page of the mini-chapter goes like this:

Trevor rusted pickup and no license.

Trevor sixteen; blue jeans streaked with deer blood.

Trevor too fast and not enough.

Trevor waving his John Deere cap from the driveway as you ride by on your squeaky Schwinn.

Trevor who fingered a freshman girl then tossed her underwear in the lake *for fun*.

For summer. For your hands... (*On Earth* 153)

The poem first presents a metonymic litany⁴⁶ of Trevor's belongings that stands in for Trevor himself: such as his "rusted pickup and no license," his "blue jeans streaked with deer blood," "his John Deere cap," then his "shotgun," and his "Bic lighter" (153-4). Hugh Bredin claims that "metaphor *creates* the relation between its objects, while metonymy *presupposes* that relation" (57). To him, metaphor articulates the "Structural relations ...within things" while metonymy represents the "extrinsic relations...among things" (53). Thus, "metonymy can never articulate a newly discovered insight,...[it] is irresistably and necessarily conventional" (Bredin 57). Yet, Trevor's metonymies are simultaneously structural and extrinsic. As Sarah Kersh claims, metonymy "allows for a proliferation of meanings that are coterminous, circumjacent, and juxtaposed" (264). When Trevor's metonymies are "coterminous, circumjacent, and juxtaposed,"

⁴⁶ in all different types, in different word forms, i.e. adjectival, nominal, verbal characteristics.

together they point towards the extrinsic materiality associated with (or constitutive of?) white hegemonic masculinity, that is structural and intrinsic to Trevor as a white American middle-class boy. These material markers, manifested as metonymic fragments, signify his striving towards white American hegemonic masculine identity: from the reckless driving with no license, to dominance over animals with firearm, to smoking while being a teenager, or even his gendered act of recreational power over the freshman girl. Trevor's belongings metonymically expose the structure of violence grounded in his masculine materiality.

Then, Trevor is anatomized further into his body parts, into minutiae of his body: "the pine-stuck thumb on the Bic lighter," the freckles on his nose, the scar resembling a comma on his neck, his "hard lean arms aimed in the rain" (153-4). Then, Trevor is fragmented further into the sound his body parts make: "the sounds of his boots," to his "bucktooth clicking on his inhaler as he sucked," to fragments of his speech in italics "*I like sunflowers best. They go so high*" (*On Earth* 154). Trevor, the narrator's lover, is completely fragmented and made to exist in his metonymic fragments,⁴⁷ the (im)material metonymies of his belongings, his body parts, his sound, his speech. The notion of a "whole" Trevor does not exist.

Such poetic fragmentation of Trevor is realized by the writer-narrator, Trevor's lover. Why does Little Dog do this? As if life is in fact metonymically lived and remembered; as if the ongoing production of being, of queerness, of masculinity, is molecular and metonymic; as the narrator declares:

...When you [the narrator] say *Trevor* you mean the action, the pine stuck thumb on the Bic lighter, the sound of his boots

⁴⁷ one could categorize Trevor's body parts as synecdoche (as a part-whole relation), but synecdoche can be subsumed under metonymy.

on the Chevy's sun-bleached hood. The wet live thing dragged into the truck bed behind him.

Your Trevor, your brunette but blond-dusted-arms *man* pulling you into the truck. When you say *Trevor* you mean you are the hunted, a hurt he can't refuse because *that's something, baby. That's real.* (156, italics the narrator's)

While *On Earth* is an epistolary novel from Little Dog to his mother, this mini-chapter is the first and only time that it is not addressed his mother. The singular second person "you" which has been Hong throughout the novel now morphs into the narrator.⁴⁸ The narrator disintegrates from the first-person into the second person. During this double formal disintegration into poetry and into second-person perspective, the narrator is having a fragmentary soliloquy⁴⁹ about his lover Trevor. Little Dog says to himself: "Your Trevor, your brunette but blond-dusted-arms *man*." Little Dogs claims Trevor as his, as his "*man*"; however, that claiming is sustained by metonymy, which manifests as the contrast-colors of Trevor's hair and as Trevor's body parts, his head and his arm, two important loci of human cognitive and physical maneuvering. Thus, to claim a queer lover is to only claim him in his pieces.

Furthermore, the name⁵⁰ "Trevor" so far evokes only Trevor's metonymic fragments, whether his action or his body parts or his sound or the animal ("the wet live thing") he has

⁴⁸ My Creative Writing and English professor Siobhan Phillips once pointed out to me that Little Dog might be writing two letters, one to his mother and one to Trevor (as in this mini-chapter), but I think this mini-chapter can also be a letter from the narrator to himself, as a way to hold on to his lover Trevor.

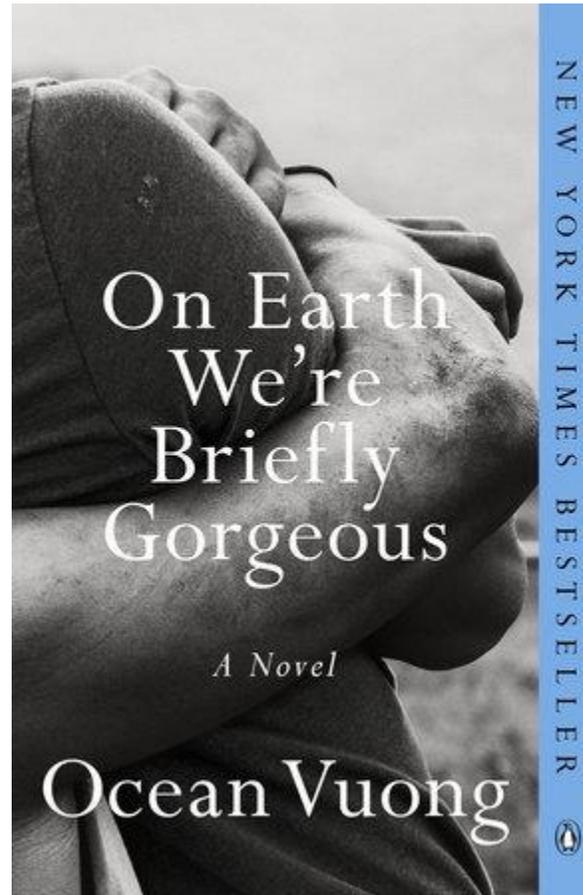
⁴⁹ The OED defines soliloquy as: "An instance of talking to or conversing with oneself, or of uttering one's thoughts aloud without addressing any person."

⁵⁰ Does a name evoke a whole subject or is a name simply a fragment, a metonymy of personhood?

killed. Interestingly, the name “Trevor” is tied to the narrator's metaphysics;⁵¹ when uttered, the name ignites immediately their relationship where the narrator is “the hunted,” the racialized, disadvantaged partner, while Trevor is “the hunter” (*On Earth* 155). The narrator is metonymically transformed into “a hurt,” a metonymic wound tied to racialized queerness and violence, a wound that establishes a queer contiguity between the narrator and Trevor, between a Vietnamese boy and a white boy. The queer racialized intimacy between the narrator and Trevor is shadowed by the predator-prey dynamic, as both bodies are trapped inside a tenacious structure of racial and sexual violence. They are metonymically connected through the “hurt,” an ontological wound that Trevor “can’t refuse” (156).

But after all, it is metonymy that holds these two racialized queer bodies together. Trevor’s metonymy and Little Dog’s metonymy fuse during the act of kissing: “His tongue in your throat [the narrator’s throat], Trevor speaks for you,” the narrator says (157). The parts/metonymies/fragments of two queer bodies interpenetrate; they become one in the literal and metaphorical act of speech. Here, two corporeal fragments deriving from two queer bodies render their very bodies possible. These are not just any fragments but the very linguistic and sensual body parts that are the tongue, the mouth, the throat—the body parts that enable verbal speech, sensual tasting of food and of sexual bodies (whether kissing, fellatio, cunnilingus, anilingus or just simple licking of skin and surfaces, etc.). Moreover, the cover of the novel already foregrounds the metonymic fragments in the form of body parts. (Forget not, that the cover is part of the text, whether the author chooses it or not, and needs to be read as well). The cover shows, from an fragmentary angle, one body embracing another

⁵¹ This reminds me of the title of the film *Call Me by Your Name* directed by Luca Guadagnino, where to utter one’s lover’s name to simultaneously evokes one’s own name.



(“On Earth’s Cover”). My first thought is: Trevor embracing Little Dog inside a field. But the photo does not reveal any identitarian markers. In this ambiguity, the body parts, the arms, or the body's metonymy are all that we need and are given: the intimate entanglement of bodies made possible by their metonymic fragments. Thus, metonymy becomes a bridge that connects queer bodies whether by way of namesake, of a wound, or sensual/linguistic body parts. But I have to ask as well, why do queerness has to keep establishing itself through a metonymic object that is the wound of structural violence?

The queer theorist Lee Edelman, writing on the queer potential offered by metonymy, claims that: “Metaphor...binds the arbitrary slippages characteristic of metonymy into units of

‘meaning’ that register as identities or representational presences” (“Homographesis” 9). Thus, metaphor enforces sexuality’s meaningful coherence while metonymy, as “arbitrary slippages” of ontology, can be recuperated as “figure of queer desire, desire unbound and unclassified” (Freedgood “Reading Things” 13-14). However, the queer metonymy found in this mini-chapter is bound to the specific masculine materiality associated with Trevor’s white masculine violence; meanwhile the queer desire between Trevor and Little is also metonymically regulated by a structure of violence between a hunter and its prey.

At the same time, exposing the structure of white masculinity through the accumulation of Trevor’s metonymies does not proffer a unitary meaning on that structure either—only to bring it up for scrutiny. As Elaine Freedgood claims, metonymy brings “a radical instability in its effect on literary form and meaning” for its “contingency” of the reader’s specific point of reference and interpretation (“Reading Things” 13). Thus, I would like to open up other possibility for close-reading the mini-chapter on Trevor. One can argue that this mini-chapter’s metonymic fragmentation is because of Trevor’s violent hegemonic masculinity, which has fractured him, and that it has fractured the loved ones surrounding him as well, namely Little Dog. One can also argue that this is Little Dog’s poetics of remembering: a list of everything pertaining to a queer lover, a list of the lover’s metaphysics. The list can also represent the narrator’s “compensating control;” a list is produced so that he can remember Trevor, his life with Trevor, as a “compensati[on]” for the entropic nature of memory (Dillon “Why Literature Loves List”).⁵² The narrator sees memory in pieces, in fragments coalescing together. Or, Little Dog means to “preserve” and humanize Trevor by showing (or performing) his multiplicity and

⁵² As Brian Dillon traces the use of ‘list’ as a literary device: James Joyce uses list as parody in *Ulysses*, Oscar Wilde as “luxury, profusion and corruption” in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Joan Didion as “prized control” in *The White Album* as she makes the most “affecting and effective” list to pack her belongings.

plurality by way of fragments, to evoke a Trevor in process, the disparate, temporal moments of Trevor, free-floating, indeterminate; Little Dog harnesses the “pure pleasure in the descriptive act of noting in series, and a darker sense that the list will never be done with, and may well at any rate lead us astray,” meaning that Trevor remains productively incomplete (Dillon “Why Literature Loves List”). Or simply, breaking Trevor up into metonymic fragments makes Trevor *manageable*, makes Trevor’s aspiration towards hegemonic,⁵³ , toxic white masculinity manageable; its violence is rendered inert in the aftermath of fragmentation. Or, this fragmentary poetics is the product of Little Dog’s grief following Trevor’s death from overdose; a lover, after death, can only be remembered in metonymy, in fragments, in debris; the fragments help him reconstruct (or deconstruct) and guide him back to his lover. There are many meaningful forces of disintegration and fragmentation here and I am unwilling to limit myself to any particular one. Whether it’s the fracture of white masculinity, a controlling list, a strategy of mnemonics, an intentionally failing representation of a person’s plurality, or the aftermath of queer grief, the employment of metonymy as fragment (and vice versa) cannot help but coalesce or collide with one another to produce a queer collage of meaning.

6. Fragmentary Syntax—Queer Syntax

Now, I would like to interrogate the sentences' structure that make up the Trevor-metonymy-list; from this interrogation, I will arrive at something I call *queer syntax*. Vuong experiments and builds a collage of syntax in this list of Trevor’s metonymies. Whereas Brian Dillon claims that a list “does not admit of qualification or reserve, narrative switchback or

⁵³ Though, hegemonic masculinity is only an impossible ideal around which men have to negotiate themselves and inevitably fail, whether or not they want to. See Connell and Messerschmidt for analysis of Western hegemonic masculinity.

second thoughts, dependent clauses or sinuous trains of thought,” the list-making in this mini-chapter encapsulates almost all these characteristics, for it is a human list, situated in queerness (“Why Literature Love Lists”). The Trevor-list transcends the structure of a conventional list by inviting entropy and instability of personhood (or fragmentation as a guide). It is full of Trevor and Little Dog’s affect. It lists Trevor’s rich shame of his homosexual acts with Little Dog, Trevor’s euphoria within his drug addiction, Trevor’s disgust with eating veal, etc.—a list of what it means and feels to strive to square oneself into hegemonic masculinity and what it means and feels to be the lover caught up in that impossibility of striving. The Trevor-list is full of Little Dog’s ontologically destabilizing language to make sense of their relationship, their racialized queerness trapped inside the violence of American landscape. Looking at the list’s linguistic syntax will illuminate further on the Vuong’s employment of microstructural poetics of fragmentation in order to transform violence into a more positive and constructive structure of queerness. The Trevor-list comprises of six examples of these *non*-sentences:

- (1) “Trevor sixteen” “Trevor too fast and not enough” (153)
- (2) “Trevor the hunter. Trevor the carnivore, the redneck...” (155)
- (3) “Trevor waving his John Deere cap”; “Trevor loading the shotgun two red shells at a time” (153-4)
- (4) “Trevor who fingered a freshman girl...” (153)
- (5) “Trevor bucktooth clicking on his inhaler...” (154)
- (6) “Trevor *I like sunflowers best. They go so high.*” (154)

These are never complete sentences but only syntactic fragments. The name⁵⁴ “Trevor” seems to function as an anaphoric and nominal fragment that is juxtaposed next to its

⁵⁴ Again, does a name evoke a whole subject or is a name simply a fragment, a metonymy of personhood?

metonymies; there is no auxiliary verb to connect/equate the subject to its modifying words, its modifying adjectives, verbs, and nouns. For example, “Trevor sixteen; blue jeans streaked with deer blood” exists instead of ‘Trevor is sixteen; he has blue jeans streaked with deer blood.’ Trevor is juxtaposed next to his numerical age, his adjectival (“too fast”) and nominal (“the redneck”) characteristics, his own body parts (“bucktooth”), his speech (“*I like sunflower best*”). The absence of auxiliary verbs to connect these fragments signify the presence of parataxis, the juxtaposition of semantic units without immediate coordination and subordination (as opposed to the hierarchical hypotaxis, where one clause is subordinate to another). Example 5 further shows that a person’s belonging is demonstrated (or negated) in the lack of possessive modifiers (the apostrophe s) but rather by parataxis to show that a part is on par with the supposed whole. Yet, this juxtaposition appears contradictory, since the metonymy that is supposed to substitute its subject/object of association, is juxtaposed next to that very subject/object; it appears like tautology. Or rather, the name “Trevor,” because of its relentless repetition, acts to render the subject only a fragment.⁵⁵ In these non-sentences’ syntax, the name “Trevor” negates its superior status of the subject in the hierarchy of the English language’s syntax. Thus far, in addition to the macrostructural paratactical form of the novel, the queer Vietnamese American writer crafts a syntax that is fragmentary, internally structured by parataxis, a syntax that undermines the linguistic hierarchy of the subject.

Moreover, example 3 presents Trevor in continuous action by using the present participle -ing while example 4 presents Trevor in a past action, using the relative pronoun ‘who.’ The

⁵⁵ “Trevor” also acts as a reminder, an insistence of memory against forgetting as the speaker calls out to his lover. Such anaphora can even be a coping mechanism as Vuong literally once titled in his poem “Anaphora as Coping Mechanism,” a poem whose speaker copes with his lover’s death by repeating relentlessly the phrase “he dies” (Vuong *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* 40)

present principle conventionally serves as an adjectival modifier of its subject while grammatically requiring a comma to separate itself and its subject.⁵⁶ Here the comma is non-existent; non-comma parataxis is present. Trevor is made to vacillate between atemporal, continuous action (which seems like the present but not quite, with the -ing verb) and reified past action (as in “who fingered a freshman girl”). He is made to vacillate between the unbounded potential of his queer time and his reified past actions. To take it further, the parataxis and these temporally aporetic verb forms that power Vuong’s syntax constitute what Carolyn Dinshaw terms the “postdisenchanted temporal perspective,” or a ‘postdisenchanted temporal’ syntax in this case. Dinshaw coins the term/concept of “postdisenchanted temporal perspective as one that opens up to an expansive now but... is shaped by a critique of teleological linearity, that is, rejects the necessity of revealed truth at the end of time or as the meaning of all time” (“Theorizing Queer Temporalities” 185-6). Vuong’s “postdisenchanted temporal” syntax becomes a syntactic tool that renders its subject temporally non-hierarchical (or even anti-hierarchical) in the subject’s ongoing aporetic negotiation of queer time and teleological time.

My analysis of these non-sentences’ syntax is the beginning of what I term a *queer syntax*, instigated by a queer Vietnamese American writer as a methodology to intervene and think through the hierarchical violence of the language English, to transform the subject of violence, namely Trevor. I understand not every non-normative enactment of language can be recuperated as queer; however, in this case, Vuong, or the narrator, specifically amplifies syntax in this section within context of queerness between the Trevor and Little Dog.

Thus, queer syntax is fragmentary; queer syntax is sustained by parataxis. Queer syntax establishes non-hierarchical and complex relationality through parataxis. Queer syntax means to

⁵⁶ As in: “He scrubs his arm violently, trying to wash off the blood of his lover.”

positively transform the violenced body of Trevor or the body has been permeated by structural violence. Since language is a principal medium where we negotiate meaning and is presumably our first mode of agency, language bears extremely high stake. I mean syntax here not as an easy explanation of one's subjectivity, but as a tool, a methodology, that one negotiates the world with. Syntax builds poetics; poetics generates knowledge; knowledge in turn rearranges syntax. Put another way, Young produces his own syntactic structure in order to work through another structure that is violence. Queer syntax, with its structure of fragmentation, parataxis, and temporal aporia, becomes a crucial tool for the queer Vietnamese American writer-narrator to negotiate with and reconfigure the structural violence of American masculinity and of the English language.

6.1. Queer Syntax—Body Syntax: Comma

To expand my definition of queer syntax, we'll have to look at the novel's meditation on punctuation. Punctuation as linguistic mark is often used instinctively yet carelessly. Punctuation is vital as facilitator of language, as "systems and practices of intelligibility," yet deemed secondary to words and meaning (Shapiro 2). Its potential as political and linguistic agent is not often recognized. The species that pay most attention to punctuation is perhaps writers and artists (though not exclusively); they have personalized (or revolutionize) punctuation, used it as their coping mechanism, as companions or disruption to words and meaning (see Koestenbaum, Temple, and Shapiro). In this way, punctuation has also constituted writing style or psychological style rendered in writing. It becomes political as it remakes and reguides the act of meaning-making.

Which leads me to comma. In his meditation on language as a means to think through the matrix of queerness, race, history, and violence, the narrator of *On Earth* dwells into the utmost

minutiae of language: comma. It is not that the writer-narrator (or Vuong) uses punctuation in any peculiar style (or he does and I haven't noticed), but rather there are images of comma that come back again and again. He explicitly discusses the concept of comma within his description of queer characters. The comma is transformatively theorized beyond its convention as punctuation marks; the comma, as I will argue, is both corporeal and linguistic as it is an active agent in articulating a new literary form and a new queer bodily form against violence. The concept and embodiment of comma is crucial for queer syntax.

So, what is a comma, again? Comma is a common facilitator of language, something that, in modernity, we desperately need to make language legible and palatable, sonically or written-ly (Bowden "Punctuation"). The Oxford English Dictionary defines comma as “[a] punctuation-mark...used to separate the smallest members of a sentence[,a]lso used to separate figures and symbols in arithmetic, chemical formulæ, etc.” The OED emphasizes the comma's function of “separat[ion]” to facilitate linguistic and scientific intelligibility. As for writers: Gertrude Stein despises comma, declaring that they are “servile,” “hav[ing] no life of their own,” and “positively degrading;” her style is usually slap-dash, comprising of run-on sentences with utmost limitation of commas, if any (Temple "The Punctuation Marks"). Gabrielle Lutz loves commas for their “precision,” for their ability to make sentences grammatically correct and semantically intelligible ("The Punctuation Marks"). Toni Morrison insists that commas are for “pauses and breath,” refuting her editor’s correction of her commas “for grammatical things” ("The Punctuation Marks"). Morrison’s perception of commas leads us to the spirituality of comma, to the human breath; in this way, the comma is the linguistic representation and the record of the human body alive and in speech.

In *On Earth*, the writer-narrator transforms the OED's inert meaning of comma. In the novel, the concept of comma occupies and permeates both the linguistic and corporeal realm, especially the queer body.⁵⁷ The scar on Trevor's neck, the fetus, and the queer human body are described as "comma" as I'll soon analyze. Comma is written on the body, seen on the body, is the body. In this way, the comma is material; comma constitutes the human body (for commas are poetic pauses, are breaths emanating from the body, as Morrison suggests). In this way, queer syntax is also a body syntax as comma becomes the connector of language and body.

After refuting yet also embracing Sigmund Freud (oops I mean Freud)'s theory of homosexual narcissism, the narrator animates the comma into the conversation:

It is no accident, Ma, that the comma resembles a fetus—that curve of continuation. We were all once inside our mothers, saying, with our entire curved and silent selves, more, more, more. I want to insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication. And so what? So what if all I ever made of my life was more of it? (139).

The "narcissistic" replication of one's beauty, the narrator argues, is necessary to one's queer self whose ontology is denied within the violence of heteronormativity. To be homosexually narcissistic in this sense is to deem one's queerness beautiful enough to be "worthy of replication," enough to be extended into futurity. The comma is evoked to embody this idea of replication, this "more[ness]." As a punctuation mark, the comma functions as such, denoting a sonic pause in the sentence and signifying something "more" that comes after itself. However, in this case, the ontology of comma is produced beyond its convention. Comma and fetus are physically similar in formal contour; they are also semantically, metaphysically alike in their embodied continuation of being, of growth. The comma's shape translates or transfers into the

⁵⁷ as commas manifest mostly in discussion of the queer bodies of the narrator and Trevor.

corporeal shape of human beginning: the fetus, or rather a queer Vietnamese American fetus. Both the comma and the fetus are "the curve of continuation." The narrator does not conflate so much as creates friction of similitude between comma and fetus, between the linguistic and the corporeal, between continuation and beginning of life. The fetus or the Child, as opposed to Lee Edelman's vision of queerness as antagonistic to reproductive futurity, embodies continual potentiality and newborn possibility of queer Being (Edelman *No Future*).

At the same time, the fetus cannot survive on its own; it needs the mother to nurture and encompass its body.⁵⁸ It is the maternal temporality and maternal body that shelters and nurtures the fetus, and subsequently, queerness. Comma exists under maternal time; queer syntax derives its meaning from the maternal, from a gynocentric locus of meaning—not the phallus, not phallogocentrism,⁵⁹ nor the phallic guarantor of meaning of the Symbolic order.⁶⁰ Indeed, the novel is foremost a letter from the narrator to his mother. The narrator's negotiation with polyvalence of violence and his queerness always coalesce and form in relation to his mother's life, since whatever belongs or is denied to his mother,⁶¹ he inherits. However, the existence of the novel is a paradox, or a very good irony, since his mother cannot read and whose language is not English. The "physical fact of your body," the narrator writes to his mother, thus become more important than words (85). The placenta that connects the fetus and the mother, as the narrator claims, "is a kind of language—perhaps our first one, our true mother tongue;" the fetus

⁵⁸ I'm indebted to my English Professor Siobhan Phillips for pointing out this crucial connection between the fetus and the maternal time.

⁵⁹ Coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, this term is encapsulated by *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory* as "a conflation of *phallogocentric* ('phallus-centered') and *logocentric* ('word-centered'; epistemologically, 'truth-centered')...Applied to, for example, society, it denotes one which controls or attempts to control by means of sexual/social influence and power. Thus, a patriarchal society [Western] would be predominantly logocentric as well as phallogocentric..." (531)

⁶⁰ See Jacques Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics" and "Freud and the Scene of Writing" in *Writing and Difference*

⁶¹ namely violence intergenerationally bequeathed in temporality and language and body as I analyzed in section II.

and the mother speak in “blood utterances” before language (137). The pure corporeality of communication is more “true” than the linguistic one. The fetus as the comma is the embodiment of queer syntax, one that is sustained and evolved from maternal and gynocentric temporality and corporeality.

Then, the comma is further likened to a scar (or vice versa). The narrator sees Trevor "with a scar like a comma on his neck, syntax of what next what next what next" (154). A scar is a wound that has healed but still embodies an indelible, reminding mark of its past violence; the scar is a mark of survival, of memory. The comma and the scar together embody a "syntax of what next what next what next," a syntax of survival, of continuation. Furthermore, the scar becomes another metonymic bridge for the two queer bodies, the narrator's and Trevor's: as the narrator seals Trevor's scar with his mouth, the scar/comma materializes further into "a violet hook holding two complete thoughts, two complete bodies without subjects" (156). The scar/comma as a “violet hook” is a rather violent (as it is intended to pierce through) connector of bodies and language. The comma's function of linguistic and corporeal *connection* is emphasized instead of “separation” (OED “comma”). Comma's function as a facilitator of syntactical and bodily parataxis is also emphasized. Nonetheless, in these description, the comma manifests in the context of violence, as seen through the scar (aftermath) and then reconfigured as a hook (violence transformed to connect two queer bodies). The corporeal comma, as an essential agent of queer syntax, acknowledges and reconfigures the survival of violence as a bodily punctuation and even transforms that violence towards the potential of bodily queer connection.

Fetus, scar, hook, and now, key. Keys are, as the narrator claims, "the commas of doors" (159). Comma becomes a physical means to unlock, to enable a person to pass through

thresholds. Comma becomes a physical solution, an enabler of bodies in space; it enables the body to cross a barrier, to entering a new or old space whether literal or metaphoric.⁶² Thus far, queer syntax is not only linguistic but also the syntax of physicality, of space, with the comma as the central spectre that subtends that syntax.

But most importantly, the trio of linguistic fragment, body, punctuation are made explicitly in into an intimate relationship, sometimes synonymous with one another. While discussing his poetics, the narrator extends his literary architecture to the body: "A person beside a person inside a life. That's called parataxis. That's called the future" (190). (The linguistic parallel of this quote would be: 'a fragment beside a fragment inside a collage. That is the parataxis; that's called the future.') Thus, the novel's paratactic form of language also transfers to non-hierarchical juxtaposition of bodies. And most spectacularly, the narrator further transforms parataxis and queer bodies in his description of himself and his boyfriend Trevor; he describes their two bodies lying underneath a playground slide as "two commas with no words, at last, to keep you [Little Dog and Trevor] apart" (159). Let's align these three:

1. "A person beside a person inside a life. That's called parataxis. That's called the future." (*On Earth* 190)
2. A fragment beside a fragment inside a collage. That is the parataxis; that's called the future. (my sentence)
3. "Both of you [Little Dog and Trevor] lying beneath the slide: two commas with no words, at last, to keep you apart." (*On Earth* 159)

⁶² In Vuong's poem "Not Even This," the queer Vietnamese American speaker also claims an equivalence between doorway and body.

The narrator claims that parataxis is the future, not only in term of his literary form but for actual bodies as well. For sentence 3, two queer bodies have fully become punctuation, become commas (or is it a reversal to the human fetus?). The fetal shape of a person enlarged in the conceptual, metaphysical punctuation to stand in for the person. What does this epic reconfiguration of comma do to body and language? What is the potentiality in the act of amplifying the smallest molecule of language to be perfectly permeable (even synonymous) with the body?

Vuong's decision to invest the smallest and ignored molecule of language with corporeality, history, and paratactical power is political and epistemologically seismic. He imbues comma with metaphoric power, explicitly transports it into the humanly corporeal and symbolic realm. Punctuation, as I have read earlier, has served a metafictional mode, a metalinguistic effort of an archival act, of "speaking nearby" or served as a kind of negative, blank space of potentiality. But now, the concept of comma is in a dialectical relationship with the queer body, with the novel's form, with violence.

The narrator claims that the resemblance between comma and fetus is "no accident," as if the punctuating molecule of language and the body are intrinsic to each other, as if we are born this way. But Jacques Derrida differentiates writing and bodily presence, claiming: "there has never been anything but writing...[and] that what inaugurates meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence" (Culler 12-13).⁶³ Yet, punctuation is not exactly language so much as it is the traditionally indispensable agent of writing in English; it subtends the act of meaning-making as it makes language legible. Thus, punctuation as linguistic marks regulate structure of meaning; the stakes of punctuation is high in meaning-making, in

⁶³ Derrida's words quoted from Culler's *Literary Theory*

representation of knowledge. But here the comma appears as a conceptual, metaphoric punctuation instead of a linguistic mark; the idea of punctuation crosses border from the linguistic to the body, into materiality and a symbolic; the punctuation as the comma is unleashed. The queer Vietnamese American's writer-narrator privileges the corporeal. To Little Dog and Vuong, written language is not exclusive from the body; on the contrary to what Derrida said, the queer Vietnamese American writer-narrator imagines *punctuation of writing, i.e. comma, as bodily presence*. Vuong employs the bodily presence of comma as an enriching agent of his poetics, his now bodily poetics, a queer Vietnamese American epistemological architecture for the future. Comma becomes a methodology of queerness and the queer body itself. It aims to bridge language and body, to rearrange the space it occupies, to reorganize violence with the queer body. The queer body as a punctuating comma is always *more* and *now*.

The *now* comes from the breath. When we take the poetic comma for the human breath, the body becomes its metonymic breath; under the playground slide, the two racialized queer bodies or two queer commas are juxtaposed, as life's stillness, as breath; they simply *be*. Moreover, the queer bodies as two life-sized, adult-bodied commas are imbued with punctuating power—to punctuate time and space, to intervene both in the linguistic and the corporeal. Trevor and Little Dog's bodily commas punctuate time and space with ontological moreness, survival, while being under maternal locus of meaning. In an interview I attended, Ocean Vuong claimed that the period is the punctuation of the empire, of colonialism because it imposes a beginning and an end, because it embodies a teleological methodology and epistemology—utterly limiting and prime for masterability (“Time is a Mother at Parkway”). If this is true, the comma negates hierarchy as it resists a beginning and an ending, its embodiment of perpetual possibility, of an epistemological moreness, whether temporal and otherwise. The queer bodily commas punctuate

and intervene, remake, and even attempt to heal the bodies and spaces structured by destructive violence. While language has its limit, comma does not (there are "no words, at last, to keep [the queer humanly commas] apart"). Seen in this way, queerness is the comma, a perpetual continuation and not an ending. As José Esteban Muñoz famously claims in *Cruising Utopia*: "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer;" queerness, to Muñoz, is "the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality," and "the future is queerness's domain" (1). The comma, as bodily presence and linguistic agency, amplifies the two queer bodies of Trevor and Little Dog towards such horizon, such futurity.

In the previous subsection, 6, I have traced a linguistic queer syntax, one that is fragmentary, paratactic, and temporally aperiodic, employed to actively transform the violence of the English language (the violence of syntactic hierarchy) and white masculine subject (Trevor). It is a syntax which is indeterminate, unbounded, full of potentiality, yet still grounded and informed by the structures of violence that it is permeated with. But in this subsection, 6.1, queer syntax is also body syntax or syntax of the body, with the comma as its fundamental agent of bodily and linguistic metamorphosis. In the context of queerness, comma manifests as a fetus, a scar, a corporeal hook, a door key, and an entire queer body. These bodily manifestations of comma (or comma recuperated as the queer body) symbolize life beginning, continuation, survival, connection, transformer of violence, and the endless presence and potential of queerness. Queer syntax as body syntax has direct and crucial implications, as bodies, empowered and reconfigured by language, move to punctuate and politically intervene in the world. Queer syntax envisions the queer body as punctuation, the queer body punctuating space. Furthermore, queer syntax is nurtured within gynocentrism, within the maternal body and time. Queer syntax reconfigures and reguides the body around the arch of violence, towards another

constructive structure of being. Queer syntax aims towards a future utopia of reparation of bodies in time, against the violence of heteronormativity, against the colonial empire, and ontological hierarchy embedded in language. This is just the beginning of what I call queer syntax, produced and inaugurated by a queer Vietnamese American writer-narrator and Ocean Vuong.

IV. Coda

In this thesis, I have explored the dialectical relationship between literary form and violence presented in Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. I have exposed violence as an ongoing process, as intersecting structures in the fabric of our language and our daily life. Violence is a central (yet overlooked) organizing force in our lives and in the lives of Vietnamese American refugees coming from the American war in Vietnam. Such structural and process-like violence serve as political tools to establish power hierarchy for the subject enacting violence; violence as embedded ideological structures eventually leads to physical violence. For the Vietnamese American war bodies, violence is also a reverberating aftermath, materialized in language, temporality, trauma, and intergenerational violence. Violence is mundane as it leaks from the Vietnamese American body or even archives itself as a bullet-like organ inside the body. As war conflicts continue to displace people around the world, different structures of violence will—unfortunately, horrendously—be enacted across bodies and will continue to mutate. Thus, analysis of violence—how it manifests, where it comes from, how it is employed—will always be crucial to think through the multifaceted structure of humanity and to think through how to engage with and positively transform historical and ongoing violence into a better architecture for the living.

For the queer Vietnamese American writer of *On Earth*, whose existence is made possible at a historical nexus of war violence, Vuong, or the narrator (the two are not

interchangeable), understands that violence is so tenacious, mundane, and integral to his history that he cannot ignore it nor resist it outright. He has to acknowledge violence, accommodate it, negotiate with it, and to render it inert through the novel's literary form of fragmentation. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* uses the literary fragment to build its poetics, with parataxis as its central principle. The fragmentary form holds great potential as a medicinal tool to think through the ongoing matrix of queerness, diaspora, violence, and Vietnamese American identity—because *On Earth* posits a literary aesthetics that continually undoes itself by way of paratactic fragmentation (as one fragment builds on the disintegration of the previous fragment until it becomes a carefully orchestrated yet unfathomable collage); it is also a form that epistemologically intervenes in the West's obsession with masterability of origin and truth. It offers us an epistemological, fragmentary mess that is continually lived by a queer Vietnamese American man.

Thus, the poetics of fragmentation produced by a queer Vietnamese American writer *instigates* useful methodologies and epistemological intervention for both literary aesthetics and criticism—for how to deal with historical and embodied violence by fashioning a literary architecture of linguistic fragments. Such architecture is not exhaustive, of course; the fragments employed in the novel hold a plethora of meanings and functions. As I have read, the queer Vietnamese American fragment of *On Earth* embodies the racial/colonial/queer wound, embodies the affective guide back to history, and the punctuating blank space as creative and identitarian potentiality for Asian Americans. It offers a fragmentary archival poetics that ethically resists closure and the violence of the West's archive. The fragment is further transformed into queer metonymy, or rather metonymic fragment, that accumulate and point towards the material structure associated with the violence of white masculinity while offering

other insights and interpretations of queer metonymy. Finally, the queer Vietnamese American fragment, at a microstructural level of the sentence, offers what I call *queer syntax*—a syntax that recalibrates the violence of the English language and the violenced body. But queer syntax is also body syntax as Vuong envisions queer bodies as commas that punctuate and intervene politically. Thus, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* has inaugurated a positive transformation of intersectional structures of violence: the novel proposes its own queer Vietnamese American fragmentary architecture of being, with a reparative and unbounded vision of queerness at its core.

Word Counts: 21,321

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