The Non-Human As A Representation Of Queer Asian American Adaptation And Resistance In Ocean Vuong's Novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019)

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Abstract

This thesis will explore the non-human as a representation of queer Asian American marginalization within Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). I will argue that the non-human represents the protagonist's adaptation and resilience to his grief as a queer second-generation Vietnamese immigrant. I will detail how the protagonist relies on the non-human to conceptualize his identity and family beyond their trauma. I will demonstrate how Vuong's portrayal of the non-human reconstructs the queer Asian American subject's sense of identity, home, and community beyond structures of colonialism and heteropatriarchy.

Keywords: Queerness, Immigration, Trauma, Non-Human, Intersectionality

Introduction

Within this thesis, I will investigate the nature of queer Asian American marginalization within Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). In this epistolary novel, the narrator and protagonist Little Dog recounts growing up as a queer second generation Vietnamese immigrant in 1980s America. I will explore Little Dog's grief as he grapples with the alienation, exclusion, and violence that he experiences due to his identity. The majority of my research will discuss how Vuong portrays Little Dog's comprehension of and response to his grief through representations of the non-human. I will argue that Little Dog's identification with non-human metaphors and symbols reflects his adaptation and resilience to loss. He uses the non-human to challenge the forces of colonialism and heteropatriarchy which created his losses. Additionally, the non-human represents Little Dog's desire to exist beyond these oppressive structures. In my analysis of the non-human, I will ultimately demonstrate that while Little Dog's losses fundamentally shape him, he is equally defined by his response.

Throughout his narration, Little Dog recalls enduring the trauma of his immigrant household while navigating through the white heteronormativity of America during his youth. The novel's narrative is non-linear; Little Dog addresses his mother Rose in a series of letters as he recounts memories from different points of time throughout his childhood and early adulthood. Within these vignettes, Vuong often uses the non-human to depict Little Dog's grief as considers whether his identity and future are inextricably intertwined with his loss. Throughout the novel, Little Dog contemplates whether he is fated to perpetuate cycles of queer and immigrant trauma. Early on in his narration, Little Dog relies on the symbol of the monster to reflect on the colonial origins of his mother's abuse and grieve the intergenerational trauma that he inherited from the Vietnam War. Later on in the novel, Little Dog discusses his

relationship with Trevor, a boy with whom he shares an emotional and sexual relationship during his teenage years. By identifying with the metaphor of monarch butterfly migration, Little Dog recognizes how both his familial and romantic relationships are shaped by colonialism and heteropatriarchy. Vuong's novel concludes with a subtly hopeful open end as Little Dog persists in his search for meaning within his life and identity beyond his loss. Thus, the non-human not only allows Little Dog to acknowledge that these systems of oppression shape him through loss, the non-human also helps him conceptualize his identity beyond loss.

As I argue that the non-human reflects Little Dog's response to grief as he confronts the marginalizing forces within his life, I will draw upon Mel Chen's work *Animacies* (Chen, 2012). Chen argues that by moving beyond the human and animal binary, the non-human challenges the current Western systems of power that define humanness (Chen, 2012, p. 5). Chen subsequently reconstructs notions of identity and community beyond these exclusionary definitions of human (Chen, 2012, p. 3). Through Chen's theory, I will illustrate how Vuong's portrayal of the non-human not only investigates the dehumanization of queer Asian Americans but redefines humanness to include their identity. While Chen provides a theoretical framework for the non-human within this thesis, my research was further supported by Myra Hird and Juliana Chang's scholarship (Colebrook, 2008). Their analysis of the non-human as a representation of queer and Asian American marginalization allowed me to concretely apply Chen's analysis to Little Dog's daily struggles. Ultimately, these three scholars all contributed to my claim that the non-human aids Little Dog in transforming his grief into self-advocacy and a desire for change.

While my thesis focuses on the non-human as Little Dog's adaptation and resistance to grief, my analysis was greatly supported by scholarship on melancholy. Throughout the novel, Little Dog's sense of loss is vast and ambiguous. The nature of Little Dog's listless drew me to

the word melancholy, a sadness without a distinct place. Sigmund Freud defines melancholy as an unresolved loss of "a loved object" (Freud, 1999, p. 248) that is internalized by the grieving individual. Throughout the novel, I primarily perceive Little Dog's "lost object" as his sense of home as a queer Vietnamese American. Little Dog does not name his loss but implies that it originates from multiple sources including the Vietnam War, his family's subsequent immigration, and his experiences with homophobia. According to David Eng and David Kazanjian "melancholia's continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects" (Eng & Kazanjian, 2008, p. 4). Therefore, my analysis of melancholy is an opportunity to explore displacement, trauma, and cycles of violence as a manifestation of the marginalized subject's grief over their "loved object" (Freud, 1999, p. 248)

I will define Little Dog's displacement as his struggle to feel security or permanence within his relationships and environment. At home, Little Dog faces his mother's physical abuse and his family's Vietnam War trauma. Additionally, at school he endures alienation and discrimination from his classmates due to his queerness. As he grows older, his relationship with Trevor contains internalized homophobia, uncertainty, and despair. Through these multiple layers of Little Dog's grief, I will argue that Little Dog's struggle to find a sense of safety or belonging is a product of both queer and Asian American displacement. David Eng's scholarship in *Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies* (Eng, 1997) greatly aided me in recognizing displacement as a point of intersection within Little Dog's Asian American and queer identities. Eng also argues that displacement allows the queer Asian diasporic subject to challenge present notions of home rooted in heteropatriarchy and colonialism

(Eng, 1997, pp. 32-33). Therefore, Eng's scholarship urged me to not only explore Little Dog's melancholy but his response to it.

By emphasizing Little Dog's response, I will oppose Freud's definition of melancholy as a static pathological illness that the subject must overcome (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 3). I will align with David Eng and Shinhee Han's critique that Freud does not consider the ongoing losses of racialized subjects due to historical and ongoing forces of oppression (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 25). Eng and Han argue that "immigration, assimilation, racialization" continue to displace Asian Americans, as melancholy inherently shapes their subjectivity (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 3). They draw their theoretical framework from queer of color theorist José Esteban Muñoz who argues "melancholia is not a pathology but an integral part of daily existence and survival" (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 61). With the support of these scholars, I will present melancholy as Little Dog's adaptation or his way of life that he developed to survive his marginalization. Additionally, Muñoz argues that marginalized subjects can transform their melancholy into a desire for alternative forms of community and home that validate their identity (Muñoz, 2009, pp. 19-20). Within the novel, I will illustrate how Little Dog transforms his melancholy to imagine a future for himself and perceive himself as more than just a subject of oppression.

Furthermore, Eng and Han believe that for Asian Americans, melancholy is what Raymond Williams calls a "structure of feeling" (Williams, 2014, p. 27), which acknowledges how social contexts pervade everyday life of the subject (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 25). They argue that for the marginalized subject, melancholy exists as their response to contexts of historical and current systems of oppression (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 25). Within the novel, Vuong's depictions of the non-human represent Little Dog's "structure of feeling." The non-human illustrates Little Dog's response to the melancholy within social contexts of his life. While Eng and Han focus on

Asian American melancholy, their reference to William's generalized theory of social contexts, makes their research applicable to a variety of identities. Thus, their argument allows me to explore Little Dog's melancholy as a response queer marginalization as well. Finally, Eng and Han subscribe to William's belief that this structure of feeling not only develops the identity of a singular subject, but that of the group; melancholy constructs a community of those with similar positionalities. Therefore, Little Dog's response to melancholy is Vuong's attempt to redefine queer Asian Americans beyond their loss. Through Little Dog's resistance to his marginalization, Vuong challenges real life social contexts of queer Asian Americans and desires change within our current systems of oppression.

As this thesis expands outward to discuss Little Dog's melancholy within the context of Asian American identity development, I will draw on the theoretical framework of Lisa Lowe. This foundational Asian American scholar argues that Asian Americans adopt hybrid and multiple identities due to forces of oppression. Lowe outlines her theory stating:

> Hybridity, in this sense, does not suggest the assimilation of Asian or immigrant practices to dominant forms but instead marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination. Finally, we might understand "multiplicity" as designating the ways in which subjects located within social relations are determined by several different axes of power, (...).
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> (Lowe, 1999, p. 67)

Lowe explains that as Asian Americans navigate and survive these dominant structures, they adopt multiple and hybrid identities. I will utilize Lowe's theory to illustrate that as Little

Dog confronts multiple layers of grief as a queer Vietnamese American immigrant, he adopts a hybrid identity. Vuong represents the non-human, which contains the hybridity of being neither human nor animal, to depict Little Dog's hybrid identity. Additionally, Lowe's consideration of different axes of power recognizes how heteropatriarchy impacts Asian Americans as well, thus recognizing sexuality as a significant aspect of Asian American identity. Finally, Lowe emphasizes that hybridity exists as a resistance to binaries which undermine the experiences of the diasporic individual (Lowe, 1999, p. 70). As hybridity validates their identity which is spread across different geographies and cultures (Lowe, 1999, p. 70). Within the novel, I will argue that the hybridity of the non-human illustrates how Little Dog persists against his loss, which is spread across multiple generations of Vietnamese Americans and intersections of his identity.

To illustrate how these various scholars guide my interpretation of the novel, I will provide an overview of each chapter within this thesis. The first chapter, "Identifying With The Monster: Little Dog's Adaptation to Trauma", will focus on the non-human symbol of the monster, which I argue represents Little Dog's adaptation to trauma as a queer Vietnamese American immigrant. This chapter defines trauma as a product of Little Dog's displacement and a manifestation of his melancholy. Little Dog inherits immigrant trauma through his mother's physical abuse, and his queer trauma through his classmates' homophobia, Little Dog continues to lack a true sense of home. As he interrogates the monstrosity within himself and his mother Rose, he contextualizes their actions through their experiences with the Vietnam War and homophobia in America. When Little Dog ultimately recognizes the monster within himself and Rose, he acknowledges how melancholy shapes their life and contextualizes their actions. However, by emphasizing the monster's hybridity, Vuong portrays Little Dog's adaptation to

displacement in; he uses his losses to propel him through life as he confronts systems of colonialism and heteronormativity.

The second chapter, “The Monarch and Little Dog’s Resistance to the Violence of Displacement" will illustrate how the non-human represents not only Little Dog’s adaptation but also his resistance. I define resistance as Little Dog’s refusal to perpetuate the cycles of violence within colonialism and heteronormativity, as well as his desire to define himself beyond them. Vuong represents Little Dog’s resistance to violence through the monarchs' increased genetic strength which develops as weaker members of the colony die during migration. The monarchs' evolution is shaped by those in the colony who died during the migration, but allows the colony to mitigate future losses. As evolution is a collective and intergeneration transformation, I will argue that Vuong depicts the monarchs not only as a representation of Little Dog’s resistance and identity development, but that of the displaced queer and Vietnamese American community. This chapter will reinforce Muñoz's argument that resistance and a future liberation for the queer racialized subject involves redefining community, belonging and sensations of home. Thus, this chapter will reinforce the overall argument that melancholy is not a pathological dead end, it becomes a tool for the grieving subject’s survival and can serve as the foundation for group identity development.

This thesis contributes to growing scholarship on queer theory within the context of critical race theory. By exploring melancholy within Vuong’s novel, I simultaneously interrogate the systems of colonialism and heteropatriarchy that cause Little Dog’s grief. I draw on Muñoz and Lowe to demonstrate and explore how race, gender, sexuality together shape the life of marginalized subjects such as Little Dog. By focusing on the intersection of queer and Asian American identity, I aim to confront what scholars have observed as an overrepresentation of

eurocentric whiteness within queer literary representation and discourse (Altman, 2001; Chen 2012; Schoonover & Galt, 2016). I will align with Dennis Altman's argument that, however differently articulated, queer identities exist beyond the Western world (Altman, 2001, pp. 86-87). Through the non-human, I will analyze how Vuong's representation of queer Asian American identity moves beyond Western definitions of humanity. My analysis of Vuong's novel aims to validate and present a nuanced experience of the diasporic queer subject. Finally, by emphasizing the non-human as a representation of Little Dog's resistance to queer Asian American marginalization, I argue that intersectionality is imperative in efforts towards liberation from systems of oppression.

Through my analysis of the novel, I intend to challenge the notion of melancholy as a stagnating state of mourning, presenting it instead as a way of life and group identity formation for queer Asian American subjects. By examining Vuong's representations of the non-human, I argue that melancholy can also propel the grieving subject to adapt to and resist systems of oppression which create their loss.

Chapter I: Identifying with The Monster: Little Dog's Adaptation to Trauma

Throughout *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), the non-human illustrates Little Dog's perception and comprehension of his trauma as a queer Vietnamese American. This chapter argues that Vuong portrays Little Dog's adaptation to his trauma through the symbol of the monster. I will focus on a passage in which Little Dog interrogates the monstrosity within himself and his mother Rose as he reflects on his experiences with physical abuse and homophobia. At the beginning of the passage, Little Dog considers whether Rose is a monster within the context of her trauma from the Vietnam War which she passes down to him through

her abuse. Rose's monstrosity then reminds Little Dog of when his classmates called him homophobic slurs after they saw him wearing Rose's dress. Thus, Little Dog considers his monstrosity both as the son of a Vietnamese immigrant and as a queer boy growing up in America. At the end of the passage, Little Dog ultimately acknowledges that Rose is both a monster and a mother; he simultaneously recognizes himself as a monster as well. His perception of monstrosity within his mother, also reflects his perception of self. As Little Dog contextualizes the monster within structures of colonialism and heteropatriarchy, Vuong illustrates that the marginalized subject can become monstrous in response to trauma. As Little Dog identifies with the monster, he recognizes how the trauma within his queer Vietnamese American experience shapes his identity. By defining the monster as an adaptation, this chapter presents Little Dog's queer and racial trauma as forces that do not inhibit his way of life but fundamentally shape it.

Little Dog's Mother as Monster and his Inheritance Of Trauma

In several passages throughout the novel, Little Dog reflects on moments from his childhood in which Rose physically abused him. This chapter will analyze a passage that occurs after Little Dog recounts the final time that Rose physically abused him which ended after he defended himself. At the beginning of this passage, Rose unprompted tells Little Dog, "I'm not a monster. I'm a mother" (Vuong, 2019, p. 3). Little Dog recalls how he initially responded to Rose at the time. He also reflects on her abuse as an older narrator who understands how her trauma impacted her motherhood. Little Dog retrospectively describes their interaction in this letter:

> "You're not a monster," I said.
>
> But I lied.

> What I really wanted to say was that a monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root *monstrum,* a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once.
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> I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it, after all. Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war. (Vuong, 2019, p. 13)

Throughout this section Vuong emphasizes the hybridity of the monster to illustrate how due to Rose's trauma, her motherhood is intertwined with her violence. Vuong outlines how Rose's traumatic experiences with displacement and discrimination shape her abuse through the hybridity of the monster. Little Dog describes the monster's duality by stating "To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once" (Vuong, 2019, p. 13). Through the symbol of the lighthouse Little Dog depicts Rose's trauma from displacement and also illustrates how she perpetuates her trauma within her motherhood. Due to the Vietnam War and her subsequent immigration, Rose is forced to reconceptualize home. Like the shelter of a lighthouse, the monster contains some semblance of home. However, the lighthouse also serves as a warning, and the monster is unable to embody home's sense of security or permanence. Rose's conception of home similarly lacks security or permanence. She was not able to maintain a sense of safety in Vietnam due to the dangers of war. In order to survive the war, Rose is forced to prioritize shelter over the country and community she was born into by immigrating to America. She also experiences racism and discrimination in America that further reduces her

sense of security. Despite the unfamiliarity and discomfort, Rose learns to settle and find shelter within America in order to survive. Consequently, trauma also shapes her motherhood as, due to her abuse, Rose is unable to embody a sense of home for Little Dog that contains consistent safety. By comparing Rose to a monster and a lighthouse, Little Dog perceives her as a home that lacks safety or permanence. Like the lighthouse, Rose evokes both comfort and harm within Little Dog. Thus through her abuse, she passes on a concept of home to Little Dog that is intertwined with the sensations of fear and violence that she experienced.

Through the monster's hybridity, Vuong also depicts how Rose's experiences of alienation and discrimination also shape her motherhood. As Little Dog considers whether Rose is a monster, he details the linguistic transformation of the word over time revealing that monster was "adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr" (Vuong, 2019, p. 13). By investigating the linguistic origins of the word monster, Little Dog distances the monster from its colloquial connotation as inherently cruel. As Little Dog compares Rose's identity with these fantastical creatures, Vuong demonstrates that she is not cruel by nature but demonized for her otherness and potentially becomes cruel as a consequence. Through the monster's "myriad origins" (Vuong, 2019, p. 13), Vuong reflects Rose's mixed identity and the trauma she experienced as a result. Rose is biracial; she has a white American soldier father and a Vietnamese mother. In addition to the discrimination, she faces in America as an adult, Rose's mixed identity caused her to experience verbal abuse and alienation from other Vietnamese children when she was growing up. Her multiple origins made her monstrous in the eyes of her peers. After immigrating to America, Rose continues to navigate her biracial identity when interacting with Vietnamese and white American communities. Rose cannot comfortably settle into either her Vietnamese or American identity, like the monster her origins continue to be

liminal. Thus, Rose's sense of home lacks security and permanence. Due to her position as a biracial Vietnamese immigrant living in America, she is denied a sense of belonging within her current country of residence. Therefore, through the monster, Little Dog depicts his mother's abuse as a product of her displacement and alienation. As a sympathetic son, Little Dog portrays Rose as a victim within larger structures of colonial violence. However he still acknowledges that her abusive response to this trauma makes her cruel. By positioning Rose as both a victim and a perpetuator of violence, Vuong introduces the ethical complexities of intergenerational trauma and abuse within an immigrant household. Thus, the monster depicts Rose's violent motherhood as a response to the trauma of colonialism and war.

Vuong then explicitly depicts Rose's physical abuse as a response to her war trauma, when Little Dog names Rose's violence as a product of her post traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). Little Dog explains his mother's abuse by reflecting, "I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it, after all. Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war" (Vuong, 2019, p. 13). Through this statement, the novel frames Little Dog's experience with abuse within the larger historical brutalization of racialized bodies originating from war and colonialism. Despite the end of the Vietnam War, Rose's PTSD is apparent when she acts as if she is currently still facing the dangers of war. She maintains a survival mentality while she raises Little Dog. Even when she has immigrated away from the place of violence, she believes that war is still present or will come again. She does not feel a sense of permanent security. By abusing Little Dog, Rose reenacts her memories of wartime physical pain and fear onto him. Through her violence, Rose's past seeps into her present relationship with Little Dog and shapes her role as a mother. Quan Manh Ha and Mia Tompkins identify the intergenerational trauma within Little Dog's family by

observing that “Little Dog did not live the war as Rose and Lan [his grandmother] did, but he does witness their violent outbursts, flashbacks, and nightmares. He observes how trauma distorts the boundaries of space and time”. Finally, Little Dog perceives his mother’s violence as a perverse attempt to care for and protect her child by preparing him for future dangers. Through Rose’s misguided attempts at mothering Little Dog, Vuong illustrates how trauma can shape the Asian American subject's parenting and produce intergenerational trauma. Thus Vuong contextualizes Rose’s abuse within the immigrant household by portraying both her and Little Dog as victims of larger systems of violence.

Little Dog further depicts his mother’s abuse as a product of her trauma by challenging the definition of monster. Little Dog expands on the morally complex nature of intergenerational trauma within his family by revealing, “From the Latin root monstrum, [the monster is] a divine messenger of catastrophe” (Vuong, 2019, p. 13). By interrogating the linguistic origins of the word monster, Little Dog once again distances the monster from its colloquial connotations as inherently cruel or evil. When considering the monstrosity within his mother, Little Dog characterizes the monster through the neutral role of a messenger. As a messenger, Rose delivers catastrophe through her abuse but is not the origin of it. Within the novel Rose passes the trauma of war to her son through her abuse. As the messenger, Rose is not portrayed as the origin of trauma but a perpetuator of it. Rose’s violence originates from her own experiences with historical colonialist violence, in an effort to adapt, she allows this violence to seep into her role as a mother and manifest as abuse. Through Rose’s characterization, Vuong depicts Rose as one of many Vietnamese Americans who pass on the catastrophe of war as they immigrate and become parents.

Little Dog continues to contextualize his mother's abuse and portray Rose as morally ambiguous through the monster's divinity. By describing the monster's Latin root as "divine messenger" (Vuong, 2019, p. 13) Little Dog perceives the creature as non-human in a godly sense. He suggests that the monster and his mother were originally beings of purest innocence forced to pass on catastrophe. Vuong's morally nuanced representation of the monster further outlines the ethical complexities of intergenerational trauma and portrays Rose as more than a villain. By describing the Latin origins of the word monster within the context of the Vietnam War, Little Dog also interrogates the colonial origins of trauma within his family that were passed down to him. Little Dog does not absolve Rose of her abuse but acknowledges the violent origins of her trauma. Therefore, through his complex depiction of the monster, Little Dog acknowledges her abuse as a response to her trauma while still holding her accountable to her violence.

Finally, as Little Dog deconstructs the monster in order to protect Rose, Vuong illustrates that despite her monstrosity he still perceives her as a mother. In the moment, Little Dog verbally agreed with his mother, and reassured her that she is not a monster. Retrospectively, he expresses his true perception of Rose's monstrosity in his letter to her when he confesses "I lied. What I really wanted to say was that a monster is not such a terrible thing to be" (Vuong, 2019, p. 13) Despite being a victim of her abuse, Little Dog's first response is to protect Rose from acknowledging the monstrosity of her violence. He attempts to shield her from the negative emotions that she could experience as a result of confronting her actions. Through Little Dog's care for Rose, Vuong illustrates that attachment, and a sense of family can still exist within a relationship shaped by abuse. Little Dog still expresses the loyalty of a child attached to a parent. When he recognizes his mother as a monster, he does so by questioning whether a monster is

truly terrible thus sympathizing with her. He emphasizes that Rose's abuse does not make her inherently evil or cruel, nor does it make her less of a mother. However through his retrospective narration, he acknowledges she has still committed violent actions that do make her monstrous. Vuong illustrates that Rose's motherhood is inherently intertwined with violence and shaped by that due to her trauma from colonial violence and displacement. Thus, Vuong's depiction of Rose reinforces Eng's argument that the marginalized individual's losses do not inhibit their way of life, including the development of family or relationships, but shapes them (Eng, 1997, p. 20).

The Monster and Little Dog's Response to Queer Trauma

While considering the monstrosity within his mother, Little Dog is then reminded of a time during his childhood when Rose picks out a dress at Goodwill. She asks him if the tag indicates that the dress is fireproof, he lies and reassures her that it is. Days later, Little Dog wears her dress in the front yards and is consequently called homophobic slurs by his classmates at school. This section of the passage illustrates how Little Dog's inherited trauma as a second-generation Vietnamese American frames his trauma as a queer boy growing up in America. Little Dog recounts the memory:

> What I do know is that back at Goodwill you handed me the white dress, your eyes glazed and wide. "Can you read this," you said, "and tell me if it's fireproof?" I searched the hem, studied the print on the tag, and, not yet able to read myself, said, "Yeah." Said it anyway. "Yeah," I lied, holding the dress up to your chin. "It's fireproof."
>
> Days later, a neighborhood boy, riding by on his bike, would see me wearing that very dress—I had put it on thinking I would look more like you—in the front yard

> while you were at work. At recess the next day, the kids would call me *freak, fairy, fag.* I would learn, much later, that those words were also iterations of *monster.* (Vuong, 2019, pp. 13-14)

As Little Dog explains to Rose that he wore her 'fireproof' dress in hopes of physically resembling her more, Vuong reinforces how trauma shapes their relationship. When Little Dog explains to Rose, "I had put it on thinking I would look more like you" (Vuong, 2019, p. 13) he expresses a natural childlike sense of admiration for her, through his attempt to copy her. Despite Rose's abuse, there are aspects of her which Little Dog's younger self wanted to learn and emulate. Furthermore, the dress represents a moment of vulnerability for Rose. She remembers how Vietnamese villages and their inhabitants were burned to the ground by American soldiers during the war. As Rose chooses her clothes based on her fear of fire, Vuong illustrates how her trauma continues to influence her decisions in America. Through Rose's choice, Little Dog learns from her that clothing, a mode of self-expression, can be intertwined with trauma and survival. As Little Dog wears his mother's clothing and embodies her, he attempts to connect more deeply with her, suggesting a desire to understand the traumatic origins of abuse and violence within their relationship. By inhabiting the dress, Little Dog tries to process the sensations of fear and danger that he inherited from her. Little Dog's desire for femininity and his self-exploration is intertwined with his desire to understand Rose. Vuong illustrates how Little Dog's inherited trauma does not negate his identity as Rose's son; however, it shapes how he relates to her as he constructs his own identity in response to the trauma that she passed down to him.

However, as Little Dog's attempt to look more like his mother, the femininity of this action, causes him to be ostracized by his classmates for his perceived queerness. He recalls that the consequence of wearing Rose's dress was, "at recess the next day, the kids would call me *freak, fairy, fag*" (Vuong, 2019, p. 14). As Little Dog embodies Rose through the dress, he is subject to discrimination and verbal abuse. Like the hybridity within Rose's identity, Little Dog's queerness positions him between the world of the American schoolyard and his Vietnamese American family, both of which he does not truly feel safe in. His trauma from both his queer and Vietnamese American identity, also causes him to resemble the hybridity of the monster. By connecting the monster to Little Dog's queerness, Vuong illustrates that this symbol encapsulates Little Dog's intersectionality by representing both his queer and Vietnamese American identities. Vuong thus depicts the trauma within the queer Vietnamese American experience as a twofold marginalization that reinforces Little Dog's identification with the non-human.

However, as Little Dog recognizes the monstrosity within himself through these homophobic slurs, similar to Rose, he also acknowledges the systems of heteropatriarchy which make him monstrous. Vuong illustrates how Little Dog's monstrosity shapes his queer identity and exists as an adaptation to homophobia. He retrospectively reflects on the slurs his classmates used stating, "I would learn, much later, that those words were also iterations of monster" (Vuong, 2019, p. 13). Similar to when he deconstructed the linguistic origins of the word monster, Little Dog distances the slurs from their homophobic history and demonized connotation by emphasizing that he did not fully understand their meaning at the time. The fact that only later in his life did Little Dog learn the monstrosity of these words, suggests that those words are made monstrous by their social context. While the words did not initially carry their

discriminatory connotation or history to Little Dog at the time, they still contained a sense of violence. Vuong illustrates the impact and harm of the words on Little Dog, as he continued to remember them much later and place them within a social context. Vuong reinforces the violence within these words as through the alliteration of the f sound, the words still contained a harshness when articulated by his classmates. Thus, Vuong reinforces that his classmates' words are also not inherently hurtful but become so through their tone and intention to discriminate. Finally, without their social context, the words "*freak, fairy, fag"* (Vuong, 2019, p. 13) contain multiple meanings that have changed over time. Like the monster, the words initially contain ambiguous meanings, their intention and context makes them cruel. Therefore, just like his mother, Little Dog's does not perceive his monstrosity as inherently evil. Instead societal perceptions and structures of heteropatriarchy characterize him as such. Thus, Little Dog identifies with the monster in order to comprehend and adapt to homophobia.

Throughout this passage, Little Dog explores the origins of the word monster, to determine whether his mother is one, as an abuser who is also traumatized by the war. Through the hybridity of the monster as both a shelter and warning, Vuong illustrates how intergenerational trauma complicates Little Dog's relationship with his mother which contains both care and abuse. Little Dog's emphasis on the monster's hybridity builds towards his eventual realization at the end of the passage in which he concludes, "You're a mother, Ma. You're also a monster. But so am I—which is why I can't turn away from you" (Vuong, 2019, p. 14) . Vuong asserts that both motherhood and monstrosity exist within Rose. Her trauma does not stop her from being a mother, however it does shape her motherhood. There are no conjunctions between Little Dog's two statements, reinforcing the hybrid existence of both her motherhood and monstrosity. Rose's tendency to abuse can be seen as a misguided attempt to

mother her son. However the consequence of her violent actions makes her a monster. The trauma within Rose's life that compels her to abuse and to act monstrous, is passed down to her son, and thus Little Dog recognizes himself as a monster as well. As Little Dog cannot turn away from Rose, Vuong illustrates their resemblance and attachment to one another as trauma bonded individuals. Therefore, Vuong illustrates how Rose's adaptation to trauma will continue to live on through Little Dog.

Through the representation of the monster, Vuong illustrates that even once the marginalized subject leaves their place of trauma, their memories of violence and fear continue to manifest within their new way of life. The hybridity of the monster conveys how trauma exists within Asian American and queer ways of life and relationships. Finally, Vuong emphasizes the hybridity of queer and Vietnamese American as Little Dog can only comprehend his and Rose's adaptation through an imaginary creature, the monster. Vuong reinforces Muñoz's argument that liberation queer and racialized identities cannot be and must be imagined (Muñoz, 2009, p. 11). Thus, the hybridity of the monster is used to validate the identity of the marginalized subject and challenge the current oppressive structures that do not recognize their multiplicity. Only through the imagined hybridity of the monster, can Little Dog conceptualize his and Rose's ability to adapt. Therefore, Vuong not only presents the monster as Little Dog's adaptation to his queer and Vietnamese American identity, the hybridity of the monster also represents Little Dog's desire to move beyond trauma.

By defining the monster as an adaptation, this chapter presents Little Dog's queer and racial trauma as forces that do not inhibit his way of life but fundamentally shape it. Little Dog emphasizes the adaptive hybridity of the monster, as both harmful and comforting to him. Simultaneously, Vuong illustrates the pain and empowerment that comes with Little Dog's

adaptation to trauma, represented in the monster. Through the monster's hybridity, Vuong complicates the impact of trauma on the queer Vietnamese American subject, reinforcing David Eng's argument that loss continues to shape the marginalized individual's life instead of causing endless "pathological mourning" (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 3). With the aid of Eng's argument, I illustrate in this chapter that monster as adaptation reflects queer Asian American identity's continuous evolution in response to the trauma of marginalization.

Chapter II: The Monarch and Little Dog's Resistance to Cycles of Violence

Through the metaphor of monarch butterfly migration, Little Dog expresses his resistance as he rejects remaining a victim of his queer and immigrant trauma. This chapter investigates how monarch migration represents Little Dog's refusal to endure and perpetuate patterns of violence rooted in colonialism and heteropatriarchy. Little Dog describes the perils of monarch migration to reflect his family's immigrant trauma as well frame the homophobia he experiences at school. Little Dog fixates on the genetic absence of the monarchs who died throughout the migration which strengthened the genetic material of future generations to recognize how he confronted his marginalization. Through the monarchs' evolution, Vuong contextualizes Little Dog's displacement within colonialism and heteropatriarchy and emphasizes the narrator's resistance as he imagines his life beyond these systems of oppression.

This chapter will first analyze monarch migration within a passage where Little Dog stands up to his mother's abuse. Little Dog emphasizes the violence the monarchs' migration as they flee the oncoming fatal winter, to parallel his family's violence as a response to fleeing the Vietnam war. When he confronts his abuse at home and school through the monarchs' evolution,

he expresses a resistance to the violence of colonialism and heteropatriarchy. Secondly, this chapter will contrast the monarch butterfly with the metaphor of buffalo running off a cliff. Little Dog references the buffaloes throughout his narration to portray the patterns of queer and immigrant violence with his life. As Little Dog rejects the buffalo and identifies with the monarchs, he illustrates an ability to conceptualize his life and identity beyond these patterns of violence. Finally, I will focus on Little Dog's fantasy of the monarchs becoming fireproof, to depict his resistance to violence and ability to cope with trauma by visualizing his life beyond his painful reality. Vuong's emphasis on the evolution of the monarch species, not only illustrates Little Dog's resilience to trauma, but conveys how the Vietnamese American and queer subject can confront their marginalization. Thus, this chapter will also focus on the concept of evolution to further explore Eng's definition of melancholy, as more than an individual experience but a collective historical one that develops marginalized group identity (Eng, 1997, p. 65). Ultimately, Little Dog's resilience to the trauma of displacement, reflects the growth and development of queer and Vietnamese American communities in response to their marginalization.

Resisting Abuse and Monarch Evolution

Through the monarchs' migratory evolution Vuong depicts Little Dogs resistance to intergenerational trauma and queer violence. Little Dog introduces the monarch metaphor when he recounts the last time that Rose abused him, which ended because he confronted her. Little Dog recalls that he defended himself from Rose similarly to how he confronted his classmates who bullied him for his queerness. Little Dog recounts his mother's final act of abuse:

> The time, at thirteen, when I finally said stop. Your hand in the air, my cheek bone stinging from the first blow. "Stop, Ma. Quit it. Please." I looked at you

> hard, the way I had learned, by then, to look into the eyes of my bullies. You turned away and, saying nothing, put on your brown wool coat and walked to the store. “I’m getting eggs,” you said over your shoulder, as if nothing had happened. But we both knew you’d never hit me again.
>
> Monarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes. When does a war end? When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?
>
> (Vuong, 2019, pp. 11-12)

As previously stated, Little Dog perceives Rose's physical abuse is a manifestation of her trauma from the Vietnam War. Therefore, when Little Dog stands up to her, he also challenges the patterns of intergenerational war trauma that he inherited. Little Dog describes the incident stating, “Your hand in the air, my cheek bone stinging from the first blow. “Stop, Ma. Quit it. Please” (Vuong, 2019, p. 11). When faced with Rose’s violence, Little Dog does not retaliate with his own violence. He peacefully but firmly begs his mother to stop. He prioritizes ending Rose’s violence and thus the colonial violence which her actions perpetuate. Little Dog does not ignore his inherited trauma or absolve Rose of her abuse as he still feels the physical sting of her first blow. However, the lingering sensation of pain does not stop him and potentially propels him to resist her second blow. Finally, Little Dog is able to stop his mother mid action as if he were able to universally freeze time. This momentary suspension of time reinforces his attempt to end the century old patterns of violence passed down over time through generations of immigrants.

Within this passage Vuong also emphasizes Little Dog's ability to disrupt these colonial structures of power due to his queerness. Little Dog applies his method of resisting queer violence to confront his mother's abuse. When reflecting on the incident, Little Dog tells Rose, "I looked at you hard, the way I had learned, by then, to look into the eyes of my bullies" (Vuong, 2019, p. 11). Little Dog resists remaining a victim to her abuse and his classmates' homophobia through the same gaze. By being bullied for his queerness Little Dog is continuously alienated. His identities do not make him feel safe in his primary home of America. Rose's abuse further reduces his sense of safety and permanence within his home. Consequently, when Little Dog defends himself and tells her to stop; he confronts patterns of violence and challenges notions of home through his queer and Asian American experience. Vuong emphasizes Little Dog's intersectionality as his resistance to racial and queer marginalization is intertwined; his confrontation of intergenerational trauma is aided by his resistance to queer violence. As he learns from his queer experience to confront his family's violence, Vuong illustrates that his attempts to resist heteronormative and colonial violence are dependent on one another.

Vuong then introduces the metaphor of monarch migration as a representation of Little Dog's resilience in the wake of his trauma. When Little Dog emphasizes how generations of monarchs evolve to become more resistant to the perils of migration, Vuong presents their evolution as a metaphor for Little Dog's resistance to violence. Little Dog describes the monarchs' evolution by explaining "Monarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes" (Vuong, 2019, p. 12). Little Dog highlights the dangers of monarch migration to depict his own family's migration as an act of survival. The monarchs' migration due to the fatal

cold of the impending winter reflects his family's immigration due to the increasing dangers of Vietnam during the war. Vuong emphasizes how the monarchs' who during the migration are remembered by the current generation through their genetic absence. The monarchs' evolution reflects how both Little Dog and Rose carry the losses of the Vietnam War as they move forward through life. Rose lives with the memory of all the people and places that she lost during the Vietnam War. Rose passes down the memory of this violent event to Little Dog through her abuse. In turn Little Dog focuses on the genetic development within the younger monarch generation to understand how he is fundamentally shaped by her memories. Finally, Little Dog emphasizes that monarchs' evolution occurs across multiple generations and populations. Thus, Vuong portrays the monarchs to reflect not only Little Dog's family but generations of Vietnamese Americans who develop resilience to displacement. Vuong focuses on the monarchs' collective exile to represent not only Little Dog but the larger Vietnamese immigrant community affected by the war. Thus, Vuong conveys how younger generations of Vietnamese Americans are shaped by and learn from their parent's memories of the war.

Within the monarch metaphor, Little Dog emphasizes that the death of the monarchs who could not endure the migration, allow future generations of the colony to strengthen their genetic material to withstand these perils. Vuong's focus on monarch evolution illustrates that while Little Dog is fundamentally shaped by the trauma he inherits, he then learns to resist continuing the patterns of violence that began with his family's dispossession. After remaining a victim for many years, Little Dog gradually learns to confront both his bullies and his mother. He recalls the moment in which he defends himself against mother's abuse as "The time, at thirteen, when I finally said stop" (Vuong, 2019, p. 11). Little Dog's resistance developed over time in response to his pain. However, Little Dog stating that he "finally" (Vuong, 2019, p. 11) defended himself,

suggests that his resistance was inevitable and he simply had to grow into it. Similarly, Little Dog explains that the gaze he used to confront Rose was a look that he "had learned, by then" (Vuong, 2019, p. 11). From his experiences with homophobia, Little Dog learns how to defend himself without perpetuating brutality. When he chooses to stop his mother and classmates' abuse, he also ceases the pattern of queer and immigrant violence. Through his nonviolent interactions with others, Vuong illustrates how Little Dog cultivates agency and resiliency to systems of oppression.

Vuong explicitly depicts monarch migration as Little Dog's resistance to passing down trauma through violence, when Little Dog asks Rose if the last time, she abused him signifies the end of war. Little Dog retrospectively asks his mother "When does a war end? (Vuong, 2019, p. 12). Little Dog does not clearly identify the war within his question. He does not even distinguish whether this war is a real historical event or a metaphorical internal conflict, suggesting it could be both. His vague question suggests that he recognizes how the Vietnam War and its colonial violence lives on through his family's trauma. As he contemplates whether his mother's final act of abuse is the end of violence of war, he questions whether his self-defense could mark the end of intergenerational trauma within his family and the cycle of colonialist violence they are trapped in. Little Dog's directness within this question contains a sense of defiance. Through Little Dog's desire to move beyond the war trauma he inherited, Vuong depicts the narrator's agency as his ability to imagine his life beyond colonial violence. Finally, the ambiguity and magnitude of his question suggest Little Dog does not expect Rose to provide him with an answer. Little Dog's rhetorical question reinforces my argument that Vuong challenges overarching systems of violence that create marginalization and displacement within his novel.

Through Little Dog's second question to his mother, he continues to search for when the memories of war and intergenerational trauma end. Little Dog follows up his first question by asking Rose, "When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?" (Vuong, 2019, p. 12). Vuong demonstrates how Little Dog continues to be affected by the war beyond Rose's abuse. Little Dog is also shaped by his family's memories of war as he adopts their immigrant mentality and identity. To the narrator, Rose's name carries the identity of a community, as well as memories of violence and oppression. She is like a monarch who carries the memories of their dead in their genes. Through his question, Little Dog wishes that her identity, and consequently his as well, could exist separate from colonial violence. However, Rose's name also signifies her identity as a mother to Little Dog. Thus, Little Dog's desire to remember only her name, is also his desire to remember his mother for her care and not the lasting trauma she inflicted upon him. Therefore, Little Dog expresses his resilience to loss through his ability to imagine his identity and family relationships beyond trauma.

Rejecting the Buffalo and Identifying with The Monarch: Hope Beyond Violence

Little Dog continues to oppose his family's cycle of violence when he rejects associating with the self-destructive metaphor of buffalo migration. Throughout the novel, Little Dog references a recurring metaphor of herds of buffalo running off a cliff to their death. Out of habit, familial bonds and attachment each buffalo follows the other to their death. Through the buffaloes' self-destruction, Little Dog recognizes how patterns of violence within his family that can lead to his own destruction should he perpetuate them. When he identifies with the resilient portrayal of the monarch; he imagines his identity and family beyond intergenerational trauma. By emphasizing the familial bonds within the monarch colony, Vuong imagines how

marginalized families such as Little Dogs can exist beyond their violent dynamics rooted in oppression.

Vuong first introduces the metaphor of buffalo migration, when Little Dog and his grandmother Lan watch a nature channel on TV. Little Dog narrates the memory:

> One afternoon, while watching TV with Lan, we saw a herd of buffalo run, single file, off a cliff, a whole steaming row of them thundering off the mountain in Technicolor. “Why they die themselves like that?” she asked, mouth open. Like usual, I made something up on the spot: “They don’t mean to, Grandma. They’re just following their family. That’s all. They don’t know it’s a cliff.”
>
> (Vuong, 2019, p. 179)

Little Dog initially expresses sympathy and compassion towards the buffalo who remain oblivious to their danger. He tries to soften the brutality of the buffaloes' suicide for his grandmother by explaining, “They don’t mean to, Grandma. They’re just following their family” (Vuong, 2019, p. 179). He depicts the buffaloes’ death as a product of familial bonds so strong that they are unable to see the danger within them. Little Dog’s perception of the buffaloes’ death reflects his perception of his family’s violence. Due to his sympathy for his family and his consideration of their trauma, he often protects them from recognizing the harm that they caused. For example, Little Dog’s compassion for his mother and his interpretation of her abuse as a product of colonialist violence, leads him to deemphasize her responsibility in perpetuating violence. Even in his explanation of the buffaloes' suicide, Little Dog suggests that the herds’ familial bonds negate the violence of their self-destruction. Thus, he protects Lan from confronting the violence that can exist within a family. Furthermore, Little Dog frequently lies to his family in order to protect them from facing violent truths. Throughout several points in the

novel that I analyzed thus far, Little Dog lies to Rose and Lan in order to protect them from acknowledging the patterns of violence within their family dynamics and behaviors. At first, Little Dog downplays the buffaloes' violent death as he overlooks the violence within his own family. Through the buffalo metaphor Vuong illustrates how Little Dog is initially inclined to ignore his family's patterns of violence allowing them to continue instead of acknowledging their harm.

However, Little Dog's explanation of the buffaloes' suicide is insincere as Vuong illustrates that the narrator cannot truly ignore his family's violence. Little Dog prefaces his explanation of the buffaloes' death stating, "Like usual, I made something up on the spot" (Vuong, 2019, p. 179). Little Dog's doubt suggests that he does not believe familial bonds can explain away the buffaloes' suicide. Thus, he acknowledges that his bond with his family does not preclude them from being culpable of violence. Furthermore, Little Dog's doubt also suggests that the buffaloes' demise is not inherently a product of familial bonds. Thus, he expresses the belief that family structures can exist beyond patterns of violence. His actions reflect this mentality; when he confronts Rose's abuse, he compassionately holds her accountable exhibiting that family loyalty is not inherently violent.

Therefore, Little Dog suggests that the buffalo have more agency in their decision to jump and are responsible for the death of other herd members. By confronting his mother, he does not allow her trauma to excuse her abuse. As he also holds his family more accountable for perpetuating patterns of colonial violence onto him, Vuong acknowledges the responsibility of Vietnamese immigrant parents in perpetuating intergenerational trauma. Finally, Little Dog describes the buffaloes' actions as causing a chain of self-destructive violence throughout an entire herd. Thus, he understands that if he perpetuates violence, he is responsible for continuing

intergenerational trauma within his family and community. Therefore, through the metaphor of the buffalo, Vuong illustrates the agency of the Asian American immigrant as they desire family and identity beyond their violent histories.

Little Dog encapsulates his opposition to intergenerational trauma when he explicitly rejects identifying with the buffaloes plunging to their death. Instead, he imagines his identity and his family's life through the metaphor of monarchs who fly off the cliff and continue to live. Addressing his mother, Little Dog fantasizes about illustrating his belief in their freedom from violence:

> Maybe in the next life we'll meet each other for the first time—believing in everything but the harm we're capable of. Maybe we'll be the opposite of buffaloes. We'll grow wings and spill over the cliff as a generation of monarchs, heading home.
>
> (Vuong, 2019, p. 192)

Within their current life, Little Dog and his mother are buffaloes as they are treated as second class citizens in America. When Little Dog perceives himself and Rose as butterflies, he resists their present oppression by imagining their freedom within an alternative reality. As Little Dog identifies with the monarchs, he wishes "Maybe in the next life we'll meet each other for the first time—believing in everything but the harm we're capable of" (Vuong, 2019, p. 192). By fantasizing the first time that he and his mother meet, Little Dog wishes for a reality in which their trauma rooted in colonial violence would no longer exist and impact their relationship. While Little Dog suggests that they may still be capable of harm within this alternate reality they

cannot conceptualize hurting one another and their violence remains dormant. Thus, Little Dog imagines a time and space in which he and Rose are not tied down to their memories which make them inclined to perpetuate patterns of violence. As Little Dog visualizes his family's freedom beyond the current colonial violence that they endure, Vuong expresses a sense of hope.

Little Dog emphasizes his desire to move beyond trauma and cease patterns of violence as he continues to reject the self-destructive fate of the buffaloes. He develops his fantasy stating, "Maybe we'll be the opposite of buffaloes. We'll grow wings and spill over the cliff as a generation of monarchs, heading home" (Vuong, 2019, p. 192). While the act of going over a cliff meant death for Little Dog and his family as buffaloes, when they become butterflies, the cliff propels them to fly. As his family grows wings and transforms into monarchs in the midst of the plunge to death, they exhibit agency and resistance to their violent fate. As Little Dog likens the colony to liquid which is not harmed by gravity, he reinforces his desire for his family to become impervious to violence and pain of their reality. Vuong emphasizes his family's resourcefulness through the monarchs' ability to turn the danger of a cliff into a launchpad, an opportunity to begin their return home. Little Dog resists being a victim to displacement by imagining how, like the monarchs', his family can still create a sense of home. Finally, by addressing Rose through the pronoun "we" and emphasizing the monarch colony's unified transformation, he perceives him and his mother's identity as a collective. Thus, Little Dog imagines a reality in which immigrant family bonds continue to exist free from colonial violence and intergenerational trauma. Through Little Dog's desire for collective freedom, Vuong also speaks to the Vietnamese American community's hope and resilience despite their memories of the Vietnam War.

Finally, the buffaloes' demise also serves as a metaphor for queer patterns of violence when Little Dog discusses their death with Trevor, a boy with whom he shares a sexual and emotional relationship throughout the novel. When Little Dog identifies with the monarchs' freedom, he also imagines his existence beyond the structures of heteropatriarchy. In contrast to Little Dog's insincerity when explaining the buffaloes' demise to his grandmother, Trevor rationalizes the buffaloes' death with certainty stating "It isn't up to them where they go. It's Mother Nature. She tells them to jump, and they go on and do it. They don't get no choice about it. It's just the law of nature" (Vuong, 2019, p. 237). While Vuong portrays the buffaloes' death as intergenerational trauma when Little Dog talks to his mother, with Trevor, the buffaloes represent the violence within the queer experience. Trevor perceives the buffaloes' death as natural and unavoidable, illustrating that queer trauma can also create self-destructive patterns. Trevor's attitude towards the buffalo reflects his belief that violence and harm are inextricably connected to his queer identity. Throughout the novel, Trevor reflects this mentality through his internalized homophobia. Despite his relationship with Little Dog, Trevor never truly acknowledges his sexuality as if his denial will allow him to escape the pain of queerness. However, towards the end of his life, Trevor expresses a hopelessness in being unable to escape this pain. Trevor's explanation of the buffaloes' inevitable demise conveys his hopelessness towards the end of his life and reflects his death. Trevor dies from a careless drug overdose, and Little Dog hints that his death could have been intentional. Thus, through the buffalo metaphor, Trevor perceives freedom from the trauma of queerness only through death.

In contrast to Trevor, Little Dog doubts the inevitability of the buffaloes' death and questions the cycles of violence within his life. As Little Dog identifies with the monarch; he expresses the belief that queer and immigrant identity can exist beyond systems of violence. His

and Trevor's different perceptions of the buffalo reflects their attitudes towards their marginalization. According to Fatma Eren analysis of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), "Vuong's way of tackling his homosexual identity as a Vietnamese American appears as an effort to subvert the power assigned to white heterosexual patriarchy" (Eren, 2021, p. 40). Eren's observation supports my argument that by identifying with the monarchs, unlike Trevor, Little Dog confronts his queer marginalization and finds agency within his life. Ultimately, whether Little Dog and Trevor can conceptualize their queer identity beyond violence reflects their paths through life. Little Dog is able to leave the violence of his home and move away to New York to pursue his education whereas Trevor remains in Hartford Connecticut and dies there. Thus, Little Dog's identification with the monarch metaphor, and his sense of hope allows him to persist through life despite his trauma.

The Fireproof Monarch: Little Dog's Desire for a Life Beyond Trauma

Vuong encapsulates the monarch migration as a metaphor for resistance, when Little Dog fantasizes that the butterflies become fireproof. Little Dog imagines his identity and family beyond their current marginalization through the monarchs who similarly transcend the perils of migration due to their fire resistance. Little Dog fantasizes about the fireproof monarchs after he is ostracized by his classmates for wearing Rose's 'fireproof' dress. As previously stated, when Little Dog is seen wearing his mother's dress in his front yard, he is called homophobic slurs on the playground the day after. When reflecting on being bullied, Little Dog turns to monarch metaphor for comfort:

> Sometimes, I imagine the monarchs fleeing not winter but the napalm clouds of your childhood in Vietnam. I imagine them flying from the blazed blasts unscathed, their tiny black-and-red wings jittering like debris that kept blowing, for thousands of miles across the sky, so that, looking up, you can no longer fathom the explosion they came from, only a family of butterflies floating in clean, cool air, their wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof.
>
> (Vuong, 2019, p. 14)

As Little Dog imagines the monarchs as fireproof, he expresses a desire to liberate himself from the queer and immigrant trauma that the 'fireproof' dress represents. As Little Dog associates the monarchs with his mother's childhood during the Vietnam War, he depicts their migration as his family's displacement by colonial violence. The monarchs' migration to flee the napalm bombs represent Little Dog's family who similarly immigrate to escape the perils of the war. By portraying the monarchs as impervious to the destruction of the napalm blast and the fire that it unleashes, Little Dogs wishes that his family were able to repel the violence and trauma of war. However, Little Dog repeatedly emphasizes that the monarchs' fire resistance only exists within his imagination. In reality, the monarchs are not fireproof, and his family is still a victim of colonial violence and displacement. However, through his ability to imagine family structures and identities beyond this violence, thus expressing resilience and hope.

As Little Dog continues describing the monarchs as fireproof, he imagines how his family can transform through their migration and resist passing on their trauma. Little Dog describes the monarchs flying away from the blast stating, "their tiny black-and-red wings jittering like debris that kept blowing, for thousands of miles across the sky" (Vuong, 2019, p.

14). As they move away from the blast the monarchs still resemble burning rubble, a physical memory of the aftermath of the war. Little Dog illustrates how he and his family still carry the memories of war as they immigrate away from it. Initially the monarchs do not move with intention, they are blown across the sky. Through their passive migration, Little Dog illustrates his family's lack of control as they were forced to leave Vietnam due to colonial violence. However within his fantasy Little Dog emphasizes the distance the monarchs traveled as they move further away from the blast that initially displaced them. Through this distance Little Dog suggests that during their migration the monarchs become less passive. While the monarchs are blown across the sky by the blast, due to their fire resistance, this force which displaces them also propels forward. Therefore, through the monarchs' ability to move beyond the flames and become fire resistant, Vuong illustrates how Little Dog and his family become resistant to their trauma.

As the monarchs' move further away from the explosion, Little Dog continues to imagine his family's identity beyond systems of violence. Little Dog envisions that, "looking up, you can no longer fathom the explosion they came from" (Vuong, 2019, p. 14). At some point throughout their migration, the monarchs are no longer associated with the initial explosion that triggered their migration. Their identity exists independent of the violence that originally forced them to flee into the sky. Through the monarchs' freedom, Little Dog imagines how he and his family's identity could be free from memories of the war's violence, the original force which caused them to immigrate. Additionally, as Little Dog references his mother's childhood in his fantasy, he emphasizes that she especially will be able to look beyond her trauma by no longer associating butterflies with the napalm bombs. Therefore, Little Dog resists current structures of oppression, as he fantasizes about his family's freedom both from their traumatic memories.

Instead of their association to war, in his fantasy Little Dog emphasizes the monarchs' identity as a family. Little Dog imagines that his mother will look up at the sky and recognize the monarchs "only as a family of butterflies floating in clean, cool air" (Vuong, 2019, p. 14). He imagines that the monarchs are primarily recognized as a family and by their current environment is safe from flames. Through his fantasy, Little Dog wishes that he and his family could exist within a safe environment in which they are predominantly seen for their familial bonds with one another. In an earlier passage, Little Dog wonders whether war truly ends when he can say his mother's name and have it mean only her name. By identifying the monarchs primarily as a family, Little Dog continues to wish that he and his mother were only defined by their present experiences and roles, instead of their trauma. When Little Dog does not allow the napalm blast to define the monarchs' entire identity, he simultaneously imagines a reality in which their war trauma does not define his family either. Therefore, Little Dog undermines the role of colonial forces by imagining a reality in which they no longer shape the identities of marginalized individuals.

Finally, Little Dog transforms his trauma into resistance as he details the monarchs' evolution to become fireproof. He envisions that "their wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof" (Vuong, 2019, p. 14). Little Dog emphasizes that after many fires the monarchs learn how to become fire resistant to express his own desire to become resistant to the violence within his life. Through the monarchs' evolution, Little Dog wishes to learn from his own grief and allow it to fuel his freedom. While the monarchs' fire resistance is not possible and only exists within his imagination, Little Dog's ability to even conceptualize a different life illustrates a defiance to his current marginalization. Furthermore, Little Dog fantasizes about the monarchs' fireproof wings after being ostracized for wearing his mother's 'fireproof' dress. The

word fireproof unites Little Dog's inherited Vietnam War trauma with his experience being bullied for his queerness. Rose's desire for a fireproof dress illustrates her trauma through her desire to still protect herself from the violence of war. Little Dog wearing his mother's dress causes him to experience new trauma for him as he is ostracized for his femininity and perceived queerness by his classmates. Therefore, when Little Dog pretends that the dress is 'fireproof' and imagines the monarchs' wings as fireproof, he imagines a reality in which he is impervious to the queer and immigrant violence within his life.

In conclusion, the monarch serves as a symbol of Little Dog's resilience to the trauma of displacement within both his queer and Vietnamese American identity. Vuong portrays the monarchs as a species that evolves to become more resilient to the perils of migration, to illustrate Little Dog's resistance to patterns of violence rooted in colonialism and homophobia. Vuong portrays the monarch symbol within the context of Little Dog peacefully confronting his mother's abuse to demonstrate how immigrant identities and families can exist beyond violence. Little Dog continues to express his hope when he rejects identifying with the metaphor of buffaloes following each other off a cliff to their death, and subsequently resists the destruction of queer and immigrant identities. Instead, Little Dog identifies with the migrating monarchs who fly over the cliff and survive to express his desire to live beyond the violence he and his family have experienced. Finally, by presenting the evolution of monarch migration as a collective experience, Vuong speaks to the resilience of Vietnamese American and queer communities. When he imagines the monarch colony's survival and evolution to resist the violence of migration, he also imagines how these communities continue to survive war, immigration, and life in America. Thus, through his fantasy of monarch fire resistance, Little

Dog redefines belonging and home to reconstruct himself, his family, and his communities beyond the trauma of the Vietnam War.

Conclusion

This thesis investigated the nature of queer Asian American marginalization within *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) by exploring how the protagonist, Little Dog responds to grief and oppression. Through its analysis of non-human representations, this thesis investigated Little Dog's adaptation and resilience to the melancholy within his queer Vietnamese American identity. Little Dog's identification with monstrosity illustrates how his inherited immigrant trauma and queer trauma shape his identity and relationships with others. To challenge Freud's pathological definition of melancholy, this thesis explored melancholy as a way of life for Little Dog and his family. Furthermore, through the hybridity of the monster Vuong asserts that Little Dog is defined not by his melancholy but his response or adaptation to it. Through the monarch migration, this thesis outlines how Little Dog is also able to redefine himself through his melancholy to resist cycles of violence that originate from colonial and heteropatriarchal displacement. By portraying the monarch as resistant to the perils and trauma of migration, Little Dog imagines a reality in which he and his family can exist beyond their trauma from historical and continuous displacement. Vuong's representation of the non-human acknowledges the current reality of the marginalized subject, in which melancholy pervades their life. However, this thesis also portrays the non-human as a form of resistance, a desire for the grieving subject to imagine a life in which they can move beyond displacement and loss.

I came to this thesis wanting to explore the melancholy that exists at the intersection of the Asian American and queer experience. My research on melancholy facilitated my discovery

of Mel Chen's theories on the non-human which became the forefront of analysis. As Vuong often uses non-human representations to reflect Little Dog's queer Vietnamese American experience, Chen's research became increasingly relevant to the primary text. However early on in my research process, I conducted significant exploration on melancholy and in my proposal I had outlined several paths to explore this concept within the text. My enthusiasm for melancholy posed a challenge throughout the editing process as I struggled to keep it relevant when within my analysis. During the editing process, I had to acknowledge that despite melancholy's crucial role in helping me construct the theoretical foundation of my thesis, it was not always relevant to every aspect of the text. Throughout writing this thesis, I understood the extent to which an argument can transform as I ultimately focused on Little Dog's response to melancholy. I learned to let go of research that felt important early on in the process and which I had grown attached to in order to allow the thesis to grow. I believe that the link between my theoretical framework and textual analysis became stronger when melancholy became less prominent within the intervention. However, within this conclusion I would like to acknowledge future opportunities for analysis of *Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) with regards to the melancholy within queer Asian American identity.

While this thesis discusses Little Dog's desire and ability to imagine his identity beyond his exile from white heteronormative American society, it does not provide a detailed analysis of how Vuong envisions queer Asian American futurity. According to foundational queer theorist Lee Edelman, society is orientated and constructed around heterosexual reproduction which is perceived as the future of the human race (Edelman, 2004, p. 2). Edelman argues that the queer subject exists in opposition to this phenomenon which he dubs "reproductive futurism" (Edelman, 2004, p. 2). Building off Edelman, Muñoz perceives this opposition as an opportunity

for the queer individual to construct identity, community, and a future beyond heteronormativity (Muñoz, 1996, p11). Finally, Jennifer Cho states that due colonialism, the queer immigrant not only lacks futurity but is a threat to the "heteronormative future of the United States" (Cho, 2022, p. 132). Therefore, there is an opportunity to combine queer and racial interrogations of futurity within Vuong's work.

Little's Dog's inability to reproduce the white American nuclear family causes him to conceptualize futurity through the non-human. His distorted perception of futurity is most prevalent in a hunting motif that Vuong presents throughout the novel to depict Little Dog's family and sexual intimacy. There is the potential to explore Little Dog's intimacy to understand how queer racialized futurity is formed out of melancholy. This potential investigation of Little Dog's intimacy as a form of resistance was inspired by Christina Slopek's work, *Queer Masculinities: Gender Roles, the Abject and Bottomhood in Ocean Vuong 's on Earth We 're Briefly Gorgeous* (2021). Slopek argues that there is power within Vuong's representation of Little Dog submitting to Trevor, "like prey offering itself up to its predator" (Slopek, 2021, p. 72). This research could explore how Little Dog's queer Asian American melancholy propels him to internalize futurity as an act of animalistic consumption instead of reproduction. Vuong' novel contains numerous non-human representations to reflect how melancholy shapes the queer Vietnamese subject. The detailed descriptions and prevalence of the non-human make it rich for interpretation within the context of queer and Asian American melancholy.

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