On Being Topped

Vulnerability and Pleasure in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Leopold Lippert

Abstract

This article explores the sexual and racial politics of anal vulnerability in Ocean Vuong's 2019 novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. The article shows how the book negotiates the relationship between vulnerability as an embodied relation—configured as forms of bodily receptiveness, permeability, and dependency that necessarily constitute the formal basis of any intersubjective encounter—and vulnerability as a social relation, configured as frameworks of legitimation that differentiate populations in terms of how they encounter, and are affected by, risk, attachment, desire, violence, and physical and mental health. By reading a series of teenage sexual encounters between the Asian American narrator-protagonist Little Dog and Trevor, his white first lover, the article shows that the novel uses anal sensation and metaphoricity to negotiate the vulnerabilities that come with sexual shame and stigma, racial trauma, internalized homophobia, as well as with racialized sexual stereotypes, all the while suggesting ways in which these vulnerabilities may be turned into sources of pleasure, care, reparation, and healing.

Suggested Citation: Lippert, Leopold. "On Being Topped: Vulnerability and Pleasure in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 4, no. 1 (2022): 41–56, DOI: 10.47060/jaaas.v4i1.150.

Keywords: vulnerability; queer; sexuality; anal sexuality; pleasure

Peer Review: This article was reviewed by the issue's guest editors and an external reviewer.

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Vulnerability and Pleasure in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Leopold Lippert

In one of the many uncanny childhood reminiscences gathered in Ocean Vuong's queer coming-of-age novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), the narrator-protagonist Little Dog offers a brief anecdote containing an awkward origin story: speaking for his Vietnamese mother who does not speak English, he assures a startled blond salesclerk at a Sears department store that, despite a skin tone that is much lighter than his own, his mother is indeed his mother. "'No, madam,' I said to the woman in my ESL English, 'That's my mom. I came out her asshole and I love her very much. I am seven. Next year I will be eight."[1] The anecdote's apparent oddness is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, and perhaps most obviously, it teaches the young refugee schoolboy how the intricacies of race permeate even the most mundane encounters in the US, as Little Dog's mother almost "passes" for white, only to be racialized anew by her own "garbled" English and easily embarrassed by her seven-year-old who takes over with an English competency only insignificantly higher at the time.[2] Second, the anecdote is also indicative of the novel's larger concern with displacement and language dispossession, misunderstandings, mistranslations, and the yearning for, as Birgit Neumann puts it, "a language that can compensate for the unavailability of the mother tongue and enable forms of belongingness that embrace plurality, openness, and ambiguity."[3] And third, and perhaps most relevant for the concerns of this article, Little Dog's little speech places the asshole where it shouldn't be, biologically and culturally speaking—as the progenitor of new life, rather than as a vehicle and symbol of excess and waste.

This potentially transgressive confusion around the asshole being the birth canal makes "the clerk turn… and clack… away on her heels," and is subsequently explained (away) by the narrator, in retrospect, as a seemingly random example of a cross-cultural misconception concerning sexual shame: Little Dog's mother believed, "like many Vietnamese mothers, that to speak of female genitalia, especially between

mothers and sons, is considered taboo—so when talking about birth, you always mentioned that I had come out of your anus."[4] The incident and its reconfiguration of the mother's anatomy, however, becomes more meaningful when read in the context of the novel's larger concern with the ass, or more precisely, with anal vulnerability and its metaphoric dimensions. As this article will show, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* articulates a significant portion of its racial, sexual, and class politics through the anus, and it does so by connecting the bodily vulnerability of the (sexualized) anus—protected soft tissue, highly receptive nerve endings susceptible to pleasure and pain, or in Little Dog's mother's description of giving birth, "This huge noggin nearly tore up my asshole!"—with the various social and cultural vulnerabilities of the queer refugee protagonist.[5] Through the anus, Vuong's novel articulates a politics of vulnerability that negotiates the relationship between vulnerability as an embodied relation—configured as forms of bodily receptiveness, permeability, and dependency that necessarily constitute the formal basis of any intersubjective encounter—and vulnerability as a social relation, configured as frameworks of legitimation that differentiate populations in terms of how they encounter and are affected by risk, attachment, desire, violence, and physical and mental health.[6] Such a politics of anal vulnerability serves to reconfigure heteronormative, racist, and nationalist conceptualizations of sexuality and belonging, offering an alternative ethics of reciprocity and care to both the Vietnamese refugee protagonist Little Dog and his white working-class lover Trevor.

In what follows, I will read the ways in which *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* attaches social and cultural meaning to certain bodily vulnerabilities organized around anal experience. This focus on the anus and its politics of vulnerability contributes to already existing scholarship on Vuong's novel (as well as on his previous, similarly-themed poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* [2016]) a specific perspective on the racialization of sexuality in the context of the Vietnamese American refugee experience.[7] In particular, I will focus on a series of teenage sexual encounters between Little Dog and Trevor, his white first lover, who was, in the first-person narrator's perception, "raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity."[8] These encounters use anal sensation and metaphoricity to negotiate the vulnerabilities that come with sexual shame and stigma, racial trauma, internalized homophobia, as well as racialized sexual stereotypes, all the while suggesting ways in which these vulnerabilities may be turned into sources of pleasure, care, reparation, and healing. Hence, the notion of vulnerability takes up a dialectic meaning here: a potentially destructive condition that may at the same time engender constructive practices of care. By describing the complex sensual experiences connected to the ass in the interracial sexual encounters between Little Dog and Trevor, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* engages with that dialectic: the novel rewrites common heteronormative

and white-privileged understandings of anality and instead foregrounds a transgressive conceptualization of the anus and its associated vulnerabilities. In the process, Vuong's transgressive politics of anal vulnerability not only reconfigures dominant understandings of sexuality and kinship structures but also rewrites prominent cultural narratives of generational trauma and the Western "industries of memory" that have accrued around the US war in Vietnam and the figure of the Vietnamese refugee.[9]

Vulnerability and the Asian Ass

How can we conceptualize the bodily vulnerability of the anus negotiated in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and of the sexualized and racialized anus in particular? Judith Butler positions the physical receptiveness and interdependency of the human body at the center of the social, economic, and political vulnerability of individuals and communities. To better grasp this connection, Butler suggests "letting go of the body as a 'unit' in order to understand one's boundaries as relational and social predicaments: including sources of joy, susceptibility to violence, sensitivity to heat and cold, tentacular yearnings for food, sociality, and sexuality."[10] For Butler, it is the fundamental openness and relationality of the body that makes it vulnerable to all kinds of social and political forces, and such vulnerability can become potentially damaging if it is exploited by others, if it is confronted with hostility or violence. Vulnerability is thus accompanied by a considerable amount of risk that needs to be mitigated, and to achieve such mitigation, Butler proposes an ethics of non-violence inspired by Emmanuel Levinas. In Butler's reading of Levinas, the other's "face" serves as a literal and metaphorical marker of vulnerability's paradox, as it "at once tempts me with murder and prohibits me from acting upon it."[11] If we encounter the other's face, then, we recognize its fundamental vulnerability, its invitation to respond violently, but we manage to turn that invitation down. By looking at the face and acknowledging its very openness, Butler suggests, we can resist the temptation to confront the other with antisocial violence, and instead acknowledge vulnerability as a common characteristic not only of our embodied selves but also of our social and political lives.

Importantly, however, in Vuong's novel, the paradox of vulnerability is not negotiated via the face but is more closely connected to the anus. And while the face appears to be theorized as a quasi-universal marker of humanity, the anus (and its vulnerability) in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is always already informed by dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality. Hence, to understand the bodily vulnerabilities and their possible violent temptations in the sexual encounters between Little Dog and Trevor, we need to elaborate on the *particular* vulnerabilities of gay interracial anal erotics and look at the ways in which they reflect on the cultural and social vulnerabilities of the displaced Asian American queer protagonist. Jonathan Kemp's study

of *The Penetrated Male* (2013) is quite helpful in this regard: Kemp details the mostly negative correlations between heteronormative masculinity and (anal) openness or penetrability, arguing that "our traditional understanding of the penetrated male body" is characterized by "taboos not only against anality and anal intercourse, but, by extension, against so-called passivity and powerlessness."[12] For Kemp, the vulnerability of the anus has a specific gender politics, as it has traditionally served to distinguish a "non-penetrable" form of hard masculinity associated with power and dominance from "vulnerable" forms of masculinity that are softer and more receptive, but which are also typically read as emasculated and powerless. This binary gender politics of the anus is further complicated by its politics of sexuality, as especially in the context of gay male sexuality and the lingering shadow of the AIDS crisis, anal vulnerability has been associated with illness, death, and (symbolic) murder and, thus, with the very antisocial violence that Butler's ethics tries to eschew.[13] While the cultural association of gay male anality with antisocial negativity is prominent both as a homophobic trope and as a strategy for queer resistance,[14] there has also emerged a different, almost antithetical strain of theorizing anal vulnerability, associated with Guy Hocquenghem or Christian Maurel. For these theorists, the fact that "the anus is excluded from the social field" of a phallic "jealousy-competition system" makes it possible to (re)claim the anus as a site of desire and pleasure that defies sexual categorization and identitarian logics, as well as the active-passive distinction that undergirds the politics of masculinity outlined above.[15] (Or as Maurel summarizes, "Active, passive, old bullshit. . . . But to be sodomized is only passive for those who, having never been sodomized, have never felt what effervescent anal *activity* is."[16])

It is important to keep the potential of such an egalitarian and polymorphous understanding of anal sexuality in mind, for it serves as an implicit point of reference for the politics of vulnerability espoused by *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. However, this politics needs to be purposely articulated against a racialized logic of sexual roles that in fact fixes the very "old bullshit" Maurel attempts to undo in his vision of (gay) sexual pleasure.[17] The sexual encounters between Little Dog and Trevor are always already racialized by a cultural assumption that typecasts Asian (American) gay men as "bottoms"—as receptive and therefore seemingly passive partners in anal sex. This practice of racialization not only operates within a larger context of racist fetishization, which Leslie Bow calls "racist love,"[18] but also elides the specific Vietnamese American refugee identity of Little Dog into a more general passivized Asianness. As several Asian American studies scholars have pointed out, the typecasting of Asian "bottoms" (and conversely, white "tops") is related to (neo)colonial "narratives of penile privilege" that associate Asian men with softness, effeminacy, passivity, and a more general social and cultural powerlessness related to the (neo) colonial racialization of Asians and Asian Americans alike.[19] According to this logic,

a racialized fantasy of dominance and submission is grafted onto a polarized conceptualization of sexual roles and practices, thereby valorizing certain masculinities ("hard," "dominant," "white") and sexual positions ("top," "penetrating," "active") while disparaging others. In the process, the bodily permeability and openness that lies at the center of an ethics of non-violence is solidified here—vulnerability ceases to be a common element of human encounters and instead becomes culturally and racially specific—and its burden of risk, the violent threat that penetration symbolizes, is placed onto the Asian ass exclusively.

Analyzing this hegemonic conjunction of race, sexuality, and power, Nguyen Tan Hoang identifies a problematic double bind for Asian American men, such as Vuong's narrator-protagonist, and their understanding of selfhood: if bottomhood is seen as racialized emasculation in white-privileged cultural contexts, then Asian American men often (have to) resort to questionable "strateg[ies] of remasculinization" that are achieved "at the cost of marginalizing femininity and feminine embodiment."[20] Instead of short-circuiting bottomhood, emasculation, and powerlessness, Nguyen suggests a different cultural strategy: Insisting that the power im/balances between "top" and "bottom" roles are much more complex than a binary active/passive distinction, he suggests "adopting a view from the bottom." Such a perspective, albeit articulated out of a specific theory of gay male sexuality, is surprisingly close to Butler's broader ethics of non-violence, as it "reveals an inescapable exposure, vulnerability, and receptiveness in our reaching out to other people."[21] For Nguyen, a resignification of bottomhood is ethically necessary, one that highlights not only the fundamentally reciprocal nature of sexual encounters but also acknowledges the common vulnerabilities that lie at the heart of any encounter, sexual or otherwise. Such a resignification would also reconfigure the racialized underpinnings of anal sexuality specifically and bodily vulnerability more broadly, as it grates against a heterosexist and white-privileged identitarian logic that inflexibly fuses race with gender and sexual identity (and that identifies Asianness with effeminacy and bottomhood exclusively). Hence, Nguyen suggests leaving "the refuge of heteronormativity" and asks "what other routes are possible for thinking about gay Asian American bottomhood that would accord pleasure and agency (and, at times, a thrilling surrender of power and agency)?"[22] In the following, I will examine how *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* explores these *other routes*, using the anus as a marker for an ethics of vulnerability, social relationality, and pleasure, while at the same time eschewing the racist and heteronormative preconceptions that place the burdens of vulnerability on some identity positions more so than others.

Cracking Up, Cracking Open

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the anal politics of vulnerability come to the forefront when the first-person narrator Little Dog, aged fourteen, meets Trevor, the grandson of his employer, at a tobacco farm, and they start a fraught but intense love relationship, the only love relationship featured in the narrator's recapitulations to his mother. At this point in the novel, the relationship between Little Dog and his biological family, in particular his mother and grandmother with whom he lives in Hartford, Connecticut, has been well established, and the initial encounter with Trevor is embedded into a larger extension of kinship formations beyond blood relations. In developing the narrative this way, the novel follows an established pattern of queer Asian North American fiction, which, as Stephen Hong Sohn argues, typically features "*survival plots* that significantly involve queer Asian North American characters as storytellers" and "a set of individuals (and entities) who are not necessarily biologically related to him or her and who together create an *inscrutable belonging*."[23] In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, this larger set of individuals is represented by the Spanish-speaking, undocumented migrant laborers at a tobacco farm outside Hartford, where Little Dog starts to work during the summer to earn his own money. Away from "family," Little Dog finds new forms of belonging and sociality through the men he works with, an experience that proves restorative:

> But the work somehow sutured a fracture inside me. A work of unbreakable links and collaboration, each plant cut, picked, lifted, and carried from one container to another in such timely harmony that no stalk of tobacco, once taken from the soil, ever touches ground again. A work of myriad communications, I learned to speak to the men not with my tongue, which was useless there, but with smiles, hand gestures, even silences, hesitations.[24]

Through hard physical labor, Little Dog is connected to the other workers—and that connection is based on a concrete bodily vulnerability, as the bodies of the male farmhands need to be open in order to communicate and collaborate—they need to be aligned to be productive. Given the language barrier, communication is not linguistic but based on a shared sense of bodily interdependency, on "smiles" or "hand gestures" or "hesitations." This emphasis on immediate sociality across racial and linguistic differences is noteworthy also because Vuong's narrative here dismisses a prominent racist script, namely that of "Asian American asociality, a mode of racial performativity that navigates the processes by which Asian Americans have been racially figured as a problem for and of sociality, as assimilated yet socially isolated, unrelatable subjects."[25] Instead of dwelling on racialized asociality, Vuong emphasizes the context of economic exploitation in which these men work. Embedded in such a context, the bodily interdependencies described above are also reflective of the social, economic, and legal vulnerabilities of the mostly undocumented laborers: they

need to be productive so that their legal status is not undermined; they need to put to work their bodily vulnerabilities so that their social and economic vulnerabilities are not betrayed.

For Little Dog, the situation is somewhat less threatening. To be sure, picking tobacco is a summer job that provides respite from a family constellation shaped by generational war trauma, but unlike his coworkers, he is in no immediate danger of being deported. Rather, the work experience offers a way for him to assert adolescent self-sustainability in the face of the quotidian racial and socioeconomic dispossession the novel chronicles. It is through this adolescent self-assertion that Little Dog initially bonds with Trevor, who comes to work at his grandfather's tobacco farm because he wants to escape his abusive father, whom he "fucking hate[s]."[26] Although Trevor enjoys certain privileges associated with whiteness that Little Dog does not, the narrator still acknowledges the shared insecurities of growing up and hating one's parents—and learns a surprising lesson about intersectional vulnerability: "Up until then," Little Dog recounts, "I didn't think a white boy could hate anything about his life."[27] While racially and socioeconomically different, Little Dog and Trevor are narratively paired, as teenagers in a shared coming-of-age experience.

Over the following months, the two protagonists develop a physical relationship that might be characterized as "inscrutable belonging," as it is never explicated on the basis of identity categories, as "gay" or perhaps "interracial," but as a deepening sequence of intimate sensations and longings, of a "sound almost like pleasure" or a "tongue tracing my ear"—yet also of shame and silence. Their initial genital sexual encounters take place as what they call "fake fucking," a practice of mock penetration, or as the narrator describes it, "a penis in a fist in place of the inner self, for a moment it *was* real."[28] The repeated description of these "fake" encounters as an integral part of Trevor and Little Dog's relationship sheds initial light on the novel's politics of anal vulnerability. On the one hand, the anus seems to be considered so vulnerable by both protagonists that its actual penetration seems to be out of the question, a form of bodily violence that they shy away from. While they do desire to fuck, as a form of shared intimacy and pleasure, and even mimick penetrative movements, the anus itself is never involved in these practices—its presence is performatively invoked, but paradoxically, its bodily materiality remains imaginary. On the other hand, despite the make-believe penetration, the racial politics of anal vulnerability are already firmly in place, as Little Dog's sexual role is, without any explicit discussion, framed as submissive, or "bottom." He is the one being topped, even if penetration is only fake.

That this anal vulnerability corresponds with the cultural vulnerability of the Asian queer is clear to Little Dog, whose narratorial voice immediately links bottomhood

with cultural and social marginalization—what at first was "fucking" becomes "to be fucked up" in the process, with the promise of at least some form of agency being associated with being bottom: "'Keep going,' I begged. 'Fuck me up, fuck me up.' By then, violence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love. Fuck. Me. Up. It felt good to name what was already happening to me all my life. I was being fucked up, at last, by choice."[29]

In the scene, Little Dog's everyday experiences of racial dispossession and generational war trauma become externalized in the fake anal sexual act, and sexual pleasure is linked to an obscure agency derived from the ability to at least *name* the vulnerability associated with that dispossession. Little Dog has an immediate grasp of how his social and sexual vulnerabilities are connected, and he is willing to play along, offering up his fake anal vulnerability to be exploited since that pacifying strategy has worked in an everyday life in which he has learned to always apologize first. Trevor, respectively, seems equally aware of the racialized distribution of vulnerability that cuts across their relationship, as he refuses to be (fake) topped by Little Dog, citing established tropes of emasculation and powerlessness, thereby reenacting rather than questioning the racialized top/bottom division. As the narrator recounts their sole attempt at switching sexual roles: "Then, one afternoon, out of nowhere, Trevor asked me to top him . . . But it was over before it began. Before my tip brushed his greased palm, he tensed, his back a wall. He pushed me back, sat up. 'Fuck.' He started straight ahead . . . 'I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't, man. I'm sorry, it's not for me—' He paused, wiped his nose. 'It's for you. Right?'"[30] On the verge of being topped himself, Trevor cannot break free from the entrenched gender politics of hard masculinity, in which being "bottom" is associated with being "weak" or with vulnerable femininity. In his version of internalized homophobia, men are only read as being gay once they allow themselves to be penetrated, once they offer their bodily vulnerability to shared sexual pleasure. According to this logic, Trevor's "straight" masculinity remains intact as long as he is in the "top" position. As this logic is conveniently racialized, and sexual vulnerability is cast as "Asian" as well as "gay," Trevor is "allowed" to engage in interracial homosexual sex without ever having to question the boundaries of straight white masculinity. For Trevor, then, having sex, even if it is gay sex, is about affirming established heteronormative identity markers rather than making oneself vulnerable to a situation of potential pleasure. For Little Dog, this is a disappointment hard to bear: "I had thought sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong. The rules, they were already inside us."[31]

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous, however, does not dwell on such disappointment, but instead makes the intransigent sexual and racial politics of its setup a starting point for a resignification of the various vulnerabilities of its protagonists. Most

prominently, this is achieved through Little Dog's attempt, already alluded to above, to reframe bottomhood in active, agential terms rather than as passive endurance, a reframing that would also destabilize the racialized top/bottom division that characterizes not only the relationship of Little Dog and Trevor but also the perceptions of gay Asian masculinity more broadly. This division, Nguyen points out, does not hold anyway, and sexual dynamics are typically more reciprocal or more complicated: "Although dominant perceptions of top-bottom roles understand the top as dominant and active and the bottom as submissive and passive, the power dynamics between the two positions are much more multifaceted."[32] Vuong has Little Dog articulate a similar dialectics, as he gradually discovers that there is potential agency in *any* sexual role, as long as one actively embraces it: "Because submission, I soon learned, was also a kind of power. To be inside of pleasure, Trevor needed me. I had a choice, a craft, whether he ascends or falls depends on my willingness to make room for him, for you cannot rise without having something to rise over."[33]

As Little Dog comes to realize, bottomhood may serve as a way to assert a sense of control in sexual encounters and at the same time represent an ambivalent "mode of accessing sexual and social legibility" for the Asian American queer.[34] What is more, there is pleasure to be gained from that assertion, not only for Little Dog himself but also for Trevor, whose sexual pleasure is dependent on Little Dog's conscious choice to embrace his racialized bodily vulnerability, and by extension, the cultural and social vulnerabilities associated with it. Accordingly, the "inside" that is commonly framed as part of the inside/outside binary of physical penetrability, and which fixes the Asian American bottom as the one whose "inside" is being violated, is here reconfigured as an "inside" of pleasure itself. Vulnerability, in turn, is not primarily understood as a precondition to physical penetrability or even racial dispossession, but as the active willingness to open up and share pleasure with one's sexual partner, regardless of the particular social and sexual position one holds: while the "fucking" is still fake, the alignment of vulnerability with pleasure—and its potential to be enabling and restorative rather than hurtful—is not.

The emphasis on letting oneself be vulnerable in order to share pleasure is also extended to the nonsexual dimensions of Trevor and Little Dog's relationship, and perhaps can be read as a more overarching ethics of living with one another across (racial) differences. Vuong gives a poignant and semantically rich example of such an ethics in a short scene where Little Dog and Trevor laze around in a barn at the tobacco farm after they kissed intimately, listening to radio commercials during a Patriots game. Trevor's sudden existential question, "Why was I even born, Little Dog?" remains significantly unanswered, and both protagonists instead respond to a KFC commercial, professing their hatred for the brand. It is unclear what exactly it is about the situation that they find funny, perhaps the incongruence between the

solemn Trevor and the trivial ad, but immediately, they both start laughing. "And we cracked up. We cracked open. We fell apart like that, laughing."[35] The laughter is reparative, as Trevor's existential desperation is turned into a form of vulnerability that does not hurt, but one which instead offers the promise of communion and pleasure. As narrator, Little Dog reiterates the figure of speech that describes laughter as an involuntary bodily response—*cracking up*—as the more definite *cracking open*, a mode of making oneself vulnerable to the other to experience the sheer joy of laughing together. The implicit answer to Trevor's question as to why he was even born, *to fall apart laughing*, describes a veritable ethics of vulnerability, in the sense that he and Little Dog need to give up control over the metaphorical and conceptual coherence of their bodies in order to laugh, in order to engage with one another pleasurably. Finally, Vuong's decision to describe laughing specifically as *cracking up/cracking open* engages a larger semantic field that encompasses both the anus (via the *ass crack* that can be cracked open as well) and the larger bodily and social vulnerability that will become central to Trevor's character in the course of the novel: his drug addiction, a long-term effect of an opioid prescription he received for a broken ankle at age fifteen. In the final section of this article, I will turn to this latter dimension of vulnerability in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, a dimension that shifts vulnerability's central promise from pleasure to care.

Baptized by Pure Need

The last and perhaps thickest description of anality and anal vulnerability is part of a retrospective narration following Trevor's death from a heroin overdose. By the time Little Dog learns of Trevor's death, more than five years after they first met, they have lost contact, as Little Dog has left Hartford for New York City to attend "a city college in Brooklyn." While there are gaps in the narrative concerning the five-year span, the implication is that Little Dog's upward social mobility has estranged the teenage lovers from one another, which is why Little Dog only learns about Trevor's death through a Facebook comment that Trevor's father posted in his son's account, simply stating, "I'm broken in two." As Little Dog leaves New York for Hartford on the train, he ponders that phrase, and eventually comes up with a more precise one: "*Into—yes*, that's more like it. As in, *Now I'm broken into*."[36] As he mentally rewrites the Facebook post, Little Dog uses by now familiar notions of physical penetrability and the threat of violence in order to describe the broader vulnerabilities created by a malfunctioning healthcare and social system. While Trevor did not let Little Dog *break into* him pleasurably, through teenage anal sex (fake or not), he is eventually *broken into* by a drug addiction that has clear social causes and class implications. Trevor may have been able to mobilize both his own hard white masculinity and Little Dog's racialized vulnerability to prevent himself from being broken into in the first

instance, but he cannot prevent his eventual vulnerability to opioid addiction, facilitated by his class and socioeconomic background.

As Trevor is broken into by an overdose, Little Dog's grandmother Lan is dying from cancer, likely a late effect of the chemical toxicity she was exposed to during the US war in Vietnam. The narrative alignment of the two different kinship structures that have shaped Little Dog's coming-of-age is further complicated by an extended memory of anal sex woven into these narratives of death, decay, and family. As Little Dog watches over the cancer-ridden body of his grandmother, he remembers the first time he and Trevor actually had sex, "not with his cock in my palm like we usually did, but for real." This memory takes him back to the barn on the tobacco farm, and to a seemingly innocent time with Trevor, "before . . . the ambulance, the hospital room, the heroin hot in Trevor's veins. Before he would come out of the hospital, clean for a whole three months before hitting it again."[37] But while the memory, and its particular emplacement in the narrative, might easily have worked as a reiteration of the homophobic trope that associates anal sex with death and decay (of Trevor, of Little Dog's grandmother), Vuong takes the scene into a different direction. At first, the sensation of simultaneous pain and pleasure that Little Dog experiences in the bottom position is described in visceral detail, tracing the subtle shifts that turn the discomforts of anal receptivity (not fake this time) into enjoyment. As he revisits the memory, Little Dog recounts an unexpected learning experience: "The sparks in my head bloomed with each thrust. After a while, the pain melted into a strange ache, a weightless numbness that swept through me like a new, even warmer season. The feeling brought on, not by tenderness, as from caress, but by the body having no choice but to accommodate pain by dulling it into an impossible, radiating pleasure. Getting fucked in the ass felt good, I learned, when you outlast your own hurt."[38] The sensation of pleasurable pain caused by physical penetration is reminiscent of the initial evocation of the anus in the novel, in the *fake anal* pain Little Dog's mother experienced when she gave birth to him. And like in this earlier instance, the pain creates a familial bond, this time, however, not between mother and son, but an *inscrutable belonging* between Trevor and Little Dog that becomes a form of kinship, too, "as if we were two people mining one body, and in doing so, merged, until no corner was left saying *I*."[39]

The bliss of interracial bonding through anal vulnerability is short-lived, however, as the *real* fucking soon excavates feces from Little Dog's ass, thereby curiously materializing Butler's ethical proposition *to let go of the body as a unit*. What's more, the sudden appearance of feces, as a result of anal sex, complicates Leo Bersani's psychoanalytic model of penetration, in which the "taking in/expelling rhythm" produces a dynamic in which the "momentary losing of what is being received is the condition for the pleasure of the reception."[40] In Little Dog's case, losing is not momentary,

and the loss is not eventually turned into the pleasure of reception, but is instead imbued with shame and the fear of retribution on Trevor's part. By staining Trevor's penis with shit, Little Dog destroys the convenient (if merely symbolic) heterosexuality Trevor has managed to maintain by racializing sexual positions and roles. Little Dog has made himself vulnerable; consequently, he fears the reactivation of Trevor's internalized homophobia and physical violence as a form of atonement, since "I had tainted him with my faggotry, the filthiness of our act exposed by my body's failure to contain itself."[41] Trevor, however, decides otherwise, and turns Little Dog's vulnerable anus into a site of care; he leads Little Dog out of the barn to the river and helps him wash himself clean in the quiet darkness of the night. The cleansing becomes a ritualized form of caregiving, a mutual acceptance of bodily vulnerability and shame. Even more so, this unpredicted scene of care is concluded with a reparative gesture that links care back to pleasure again: Trevor kneels down and begins to lick Little Dog's ass in a healing ritual that not only acknowledges—with Butler and Levinas—(anal) vulnerability as a common characteristic of our embodied and social selves but which, for Little Dog, also *feels good*: "I shook—his tongue so impossibly warm compared to the cold water, the sudden, wordless act, willed as a balm to my failure in the barn. It felt like an appalling second chance, to be wanted again, in this way . . . Although this was not the first time he did this, it was the only time the act gained new, concussive power. I was devoured, it seemed, not by a person, a Trevor, so much as by desire itself. To be reclaimed by that want, to be baptized by its pure need. That's what I was."[42]

The scene and its ethics of care rewrite the racist and heteronormative politics of anal vulnerability, instead offering reparation in the form of a stylized baptism. Importantly, however, this baptism does not eschew the sexual: rather than cleansing and thereby excising the "filthiness" (according to a prominent homophobic script) of especially anal sexuality, the scene re-introduces anality into the very act of purification.[43] Instead of being cleansed *from* pleasure, Little Dog is cleansed *through* pleasure, "devoured," in his recollection, "by desire itself." The phrase echoes Little Dog's earlier description of bottomhood, which enabled Trevor to be "inside of pleasure," only that this time the (racialized) roles are reversed, and it is Trevor who offers pleasure to Little Dog.[44] Through a sexual baptism that provides both reparation and pleasure to the racialized queer protagonist, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* thus suggests a more encompassing understanding of what the anus and anal vulnerability can achieve culturally. Rather than subscribing to a heterosexist and racist logic according to which the Asian queer is made structurally vulnerable by being typecast as subservient "bottom"; rather than introducing and enacting racial and sexual hierarchies of vulnerability, the novel articulates a politics of shared vulnerability that transforms established protocols of relationality, pleasure, and care.

Conclusion

In the foregoing article, I analyzed the racial and sexual politics of anal vulnerability in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. By exploring the interrelations between vulnerability as an embodied relation—particularly with respect to the anus—and vulnerability as a social form with racialized and sexualized dimensions, I have shown that the novel articulates an ethics of vulnerability based on a polymorphous and egalitarian understanding of anal sexuality. By reading several scenes concerned with the sexual and sensual relationship between the Asian American protagonist Little Dog and his white lover Trevor, I have highlighted the ways in which the novel deploys anality to negotiate sexual shame, racial stereotyping, and generational trauma, all the while finding ways to avoid the racist and heteronormative dynamics that would otherwise only associate bodily and social vulnerability with specific identity positions. Instead, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* rewrites common heteronormative and white-privileged understandings of anality, thus offering agency, pleasure, and care to both Little Dog and Trevor, despite and across their various vulnerabilities.

Acknowledgments

This article was developed out of a conference talk I delivered together with Philippos Ioannou. I am very grateful for the exchange and collaboration that lead to this earlier talk. Any flaws that can be found in this reworked and expanded version are my own.

Notes

1 Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), 52.

2 Vuong, *On Earth*, 52.

3 Birgit Neumann, "'Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan': The Mother Tongue and Translation in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," *Anglia* 138, no. 2 (2020): 295, DOI: 10.1515/ang-2020-0023.

4 Vuong, *On Earth*, 52.

5 Vuong, *On Earth*, 52.

6 For recent scholarship on the unequal distribution of vulnerability and precarity, see, for example, Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Matt Brim, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Catherine S. Ramírez, Sylvanna M. Falcón, Juan Poblete, Steven C. McKey, and Felicity Amaya Schaeffer, ed., *Precarity and Belonging: Labor, Migration, and Noncitizenship* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021); Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

7 See, for example, Summer Kim Lee, "Staying In: Mitski, Ocean Vuong, and Asian American Asociality," *Social Text* 37, no. 1 (2019), DOI: 10.1215/01642472-7286252; Kelly Nguyen,

"Queering Telemachus: Ocean Vuong, Postmemories, and the Vietnam War," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, no. 29 (2022), DOI: 10.1007/s12138-021-00605-3; Christina Slopek, "Queer Masculinities: Gender Roles, the Abject, and Bottomhood in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," *Anglia* 139, no. 4 (2021), DOI: 10.1515/ang-2021-0057; Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2016).

8 Vuong, *On Earth*, 203.

9 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 14. Nguyen suggests that the US military-industrial complex manufactures industrial memory with respect to the US war in Vietnam that goes beyond the creation of mere spectacular value. He argues that the "military-industrial complex does so not simply or only through a memory industry based on the selling of baubles, vacations, heritages, or entertainment. The memory industry produces kitsch, sentimentality, and spectacle, but industries of memory exploit memory as a strategic resource." Nguyen, *Nothing*, 14–15. Along similar lines as Viet Thanh Nguyen, Yen Le Espiritu suggests that for the industrial manufacture of memory around the US war in Vietnam, the figure of the "freed and reformed Vietnamese [refugee]" has been crucial, as it "has been key to the (re)cuperation of American identities and the shoring up of U.S. militarism in the post-Vietnam War era." Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 1–2.

10 Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 45.

11 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso Books, 2004), 135.

12 Jonathan Kemp, *The Penetrated Male* (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 1.

13 For the classic reading of anal sexual politics in the context of the AIDS crisis, see Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave," *October*, no. 43 (1987), DOI: 10.2307/3397574.

14 See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

15 Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 103, 105.

16 Christian Maurel [Guy Hocquenghem], *The Screwball Asses* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2010), 49. This text was published under Guy Hocquenghem's name but has since been attributed to Christian Maurel.

17 While not concerned with Asian masculinities, Maurel's intervention is partly also directed against a racist sexual logic, namely one that fetishizes the "Arab man" as a virile penetrator. See Maurel, *Screwball*, 9–12.

18 Leslie Bow, *Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 1.

19 David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 1. As performance scholar Eng-Beng Lim points out, this racial-sexual typecasting can also be read as "theatrical conceit or performance in(ter)vention" that may undermine the very (neo)colonial fantasies on which it is based. Eng-Beng Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias* (New York: New York

University Press, 2014), 19. See also Thomas Xavier Sarimento, "PhilippinExcess: Cunanan, Criss, Queerness, Multiraciality, Midwesternness, and the Cultural Politics of Legibility," in *Q&A: Voices from Queer Asian North America*, ed. Martin F. Manalansan IV, Alica Y. Hom, and Kale Bantigue Fajardo (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2021).

20 Nguyen Tan Hoang, *A View From the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 14.

21 Nguyen, *Bottom*, 2.

22 Nguyen, *Bottom*, 19.

23 Stephen Hong Sohn, *Inscrutable Belongings: Queer Asian North American Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 22–23.

24 Vuong, *On Earth*, 90–91.

25 Lee, "Staying In," 29.

26 Vuong, *On Earth*, 97.

27 Vuong, *On Earth*, 97.

28 Vuong, *On Earth*, 105, 106, 119, 114.

29 Vuong, *On Earth*, 119.

30 Vuong, *On Earth*, 119-20.

31 Vuong, *On Earth*, 120.

32 Nguyen, *Bottom*, 7.

33 Vuong, *On Earth*, 118.

34 Nguyen, *Bottom*, 15.

35 Vuong, *On Earth*, 108.

36 Vuong, *On Earth*, 166–67.

37 Vuong, *On Earth*, 199–200.

38 Vuong, *On Earth*, 202.

39 Vuong, *On Earth*, 202.

40 Leo Bersani, *Receptive Bodies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 87.

41 Vuong, *On Earth*, 203.

42 Vuong, *On Earth*, 205–206.

43 In her incisive reading of the novel, Christina Slopek interprets the cleansing scene in terms of a compensation of abjection: the initial "undesired abject dimension" (the feces) is compensated via another abject (the ass-licking), creating an "ambiguous corporeality" in the process. My point here is rather that there is genuine pleasure to be gained from re-introducing anal vulnerability—a pleasure that goes beyond the functional logics of mere compensation. See Slopek, "Queer Masculinities," 753.

44 Vuong, *On Earth*, 206, 118.

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