

SUBJECTING SENTENCES: SYNTAX AND POWER IN OCEAN VUONG'S *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*

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Content warning: discussions of rape and sexual assault

“Let me begin again.

Dear Ma,

I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are... I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with because. But I wasn't trying to make a sentence—I was trying to break free. Because freedom, I am told, is nothing but the distance between the hunter and its prey.”—Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Ocean Vuong's semi-autobiographical novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* opens as a rewritten letter from the young Vietnamese American protagonist, Little Dog, to his illiterate mother, Rose—an endeavor to reach her through the words on the page or, as Vuong himself refers to the novel's form, an “attempt to see if language can really be a bridge as it often aspired to be” (“Inside the Book”: *Ocean Vuong* 0:23-0:28). Rose's Vietnamese education had ended at age seven when her school collapsed in an American napalm raid; years later, as a refugee of the Vietnam war, she would take Little Dog and his grandmother to live in Hartford, Connecticut, where he would learn American English alongside his mother's Vietnamese. Little Dog reflects upon learning English syntax during his early education, calling attention to how he was taught to adhere to the prescriptive grammar of the hierarchical sentence according to Barthes: “it implies subjections, subordinations, internal relations”—a “hunter” and a “prey” (Barthes 15; Vuong 2). In this moment of resistance, rather than operate within the sentence's implied hierarchical structure as taught by a faceless academic authority, Little Dog attempts to “break free” from it—he further accomplishes this by beginning the following sentence with “because,” intentionally breaking the aforementioned rule of syntax. Throughout the novel, Vuong underscores the notion that language's connective tissues are founded upon the dominant class's syntax and their desire to subject the subaltern (Spivak 22-23).

If syntax is a set of rules, principles, and processes that govern the structure of sentences within a language—and is reinforced by state authority through educational, legislative, and political apparatuses—then syntax may be considered an ideology: an imagined set of narratives which connects individuals to their real conditions of existence and simultaneously subjects individuals to a higher authority (Althusser 52-57). By deviating from syntax within *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong resists the hierarchical structures produced by language and, in doing so, opposes the power dynamic created by binary, non-intersectional understandings of sexuality, gender, and race. Additionally, by examining the role

of the hierarchical sentence structure, Vuong depicts how syntactic discourse can entrap subjects as well as free them—how it is the site of both interpellation (assigned identity) *and* individual agency, both subjectivity *and* subversion. Vuong’s novel thus undermines structuralist notions of language as predicated upon binary oppositions. The application and discussion of feminist and linguistic theoretical frameworks provide a lens through which we can analyze the syntax within Vuong’s novel as resisting the binary relationship between Subject (the structure of power) and object (the subject it interpellates) and, further, binary understandings of gender, sexuality, and race from the perspective of forces of power. In doing so, Vuong proposes a new language of ambiguity and negation, in which an intentional lack of specificity can provide more opportunities to resist binary oppositions.

I. The Subjecting Syntax of American Masculinity

Saussure utilizes the example of gender within his “Course in General Linguistics” to illustrate that “in language there are only differences without positive terms” (Saussure 121):

... two sound-images, e.g. *father* and *mother*, or two ideas, e.g. the idea “father” and the idea “mother”; two signs, each having a signified and signifier, are not different but only distinct. Between them there is only opposition. The entire mechanism of language... is based on oppositions of this kind and on the phonic and conceptual differences that they imply. (Saussure 122)

A “signifier”—a word or image, such as *chair*—represents a “signified” idea or definition, such as *a piece of furniture on which you sit* (though often, as with all signifieds, this definition is up for debate; one may imagine the stickiness of what it would mean to sit on a desk or a kitchen counter instead and if that may be considered a *chair*). Saussure claims that the terms “mother” and “father” are “distinct”—they lack any overlap in the physical forms and mental concepts of each term. Saussure therefore positions these words and the ideas they represent within a binary. As a result, there is no room for non-binary positions between these two signs and their signifiers; to be the feminine “mother” is to be the exact opposite of the masculine “father.”

Within Vuong’s coming-of-age novel, *Little Dog* constructs and reconstructs his identity in relation and in opposition to this Saussurean binary syntax. One of the earliest memories he recalls in the novel—an encounter with a bully on the bus ride to school—reveals the dominant syntax of American masculinity and its effects on his body:

... I realized the spark came from inside my head. That someone had shoved my face into the glass.

“Speak English,” said the boy with a yellow bowl cut, his jowls flushed and rippling... “Don’t you ever say nothin’? Don’t you speak English?” He grabbed my shoulder and spun me to face him.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you.” He was only nine but had already mastered the dialect of damaged American fathers...

“Say my name then.” He blinked, his eyelashes, long and blond, nearly nothing, quivered. “Like your mom did last night.”

... I willed myself into a severe obedience and said his name.

I let their laughter enter me.

“Again... that’s a good little bitch.” (Vuong 24-25)

Members of the APA’s Div. 51 (Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity) attribute this moment of aggression to how American society “socializes boys and men to conform to a definition of masculinity that emphasizes toughness, stoicism, acquisitiveness and self-reliance,” remarking that such socialization “leads to aggressive, emotionally stunted males who harm not just themselves but their children, partners and entire communities” (Clay “Redefining Masculinity”). We witness the *physical* effects of American masculinity on Little Dog’s body—his “face shoved into the glass” of the bus’s window, his “shoulder grabbed” by the young boy with the yellow bowl cut, “spun to face” his bully. But further, Vuong recognizes a nonphysical syntax which operates in tandem with the boy’s physical violence: this “dialect of damaged American fathers” that the nine-year-old boy has mastered. “Speak English,” he commands, interpellating Little Dog as a subject with the implied grammatical [You] and emphasizing the English syntax as that of power. “Don’t you ever say nothin’?” he rhetorically asks, mocking Little Dog’s silence, questioning his participation within the syntax. “Look at me when I’m talking to you,” he commands again, underscoring the role of the English syntax-wielding Subject as the position of power. “Say my name... like your mom did last night,” the boy orders, utilizing the simile of the feminine subject to deny Little Dog’s ownership of masculinity, and, in turn, any power through English syntax. “That’s a good little bitch,” he taunts upon Little Dog’s “obedience,” solidifying this Subject/subject power dynamic through a subject/object grammatical structure in which Little Dog is positioned as the submissive, feminine “bitch” opposite the powerful, masculine bully.

It is through this gendered, Saussurean binary opposition that the young boy claims power. If we envision the masculine entity as “tough,” “stoic,” “acquisitive,” “self-reliant,” and “aggressive,” as conceptualized by APA’s Div. 51, then the feminine position within this Saussurean framework can only be the opposite: “fragile,” “hysteric,” “restrained,” “dependent,” “passive.” In commanding Little Dog to say his name like his “mom did last night,” the boy, embracing the Saussurean structure of binary opposition within syntax, confines Little Dog to the position directly opposite his as a bully—the position of fragility, of submission. Saussure claims that in being a part of a language’s syntax, a word “is endowed not only with a signification but also and especially with a value,” and that “signs function not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position.” The boy, then, through this syntax of American masculinity, constructs

a relative, hierarchical relationship of “value” between him and Little Dog: his name said aloud by Little Dog and his relative masculinity grants him power, while the substitution of the derogatory term “bitch” in place of Little Dog’s name positions him as subject within this hierarchical construction (Saussure 9-12).

Years later, Little Dog recognizes this same syntax when asked if destruction is necessary for art—this “dialect of damaged American Fathers” now becomes a structure that frames creativity and success in aggressively masculine terms which imply subject/object relationships. Such is the new syntax of American masculinity:

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

This reflection follows a conversation Little Dog has with a veteran of the Vietnam war—a white man he recognizes could possibly be his biological grandfather, whom he had never known. Though Little Dog ultimately answers “no, sir, destruction is not necessary for art,” addressing the man with a masculine title of respect, he acknowledges that he had not offered that reply because he was certain of his own statement on art and destruction, but rather because he hoped to believe it himself. Reflected in this language of destruction as art are the socialized masculine signifieds of the desire to dominate and acquire (Clay “Redefining Masculinity”). “The Sentence,” according to Barthes, “is hierarchical: it implies subjections, subordinations, internal reactions”; such a hierarchy is constructed within this syntax of American masculinity through chosen signifiers which operate in tandem with the construction of the sentence itself (Barthes 51). Here, the masculine signified is the Subject of the hierarchical sentence, interpellating everything else as its concrete object through syntax and (re)producing the oppositional language structure in place: the gun-wielding “You” kills the poem; the “I” hammers the paragraph, crushes it, shuts it down—it “wrestles” with the muse; the “We” smashes the competition; the “state” is a battleground state, its residents casualties; the “man” knocks ‘em dead (Althusser 55). In this way, the masculine Subject positions itself as the subject of the sentence in binary opposition to the object of the sentence, utilizing words with aggressive valences to make obvious its control over the subject which it hails. It is only through the lens of control, of domination, that success is recognized, resulting in a lexicon of success predicated upon subjection—an ideology which echoes (and finds its origin within) moments such as Little Dog’s *physically repressive* interaction with the blonde-haired bully on the school bus (Althusser 51). To create a poem, workshop, paragraph, or novel is to “kill” it, to destroy it.

Not only does the syntax of American masculinity symbolically subject and destroy, but it also continues to have real, tangible effects on the body it hails and subjects. As Little Dog recalls an article he read following consideration of his feelings of uncertainty surrounding his and his mother's identities, he cautions against the dangers of subscribing to language and definitions as binary:

Sometimes we are given only two choices. While doing research, I read an article from an 1884 El Paso *Daily Times*, which reported that a white railroad worker was on trial for the murder of an unnamed Chinese man. The case was ultimately dismissed. The judge, Roy Bean, cited that Texas law, while prohibiting the murder of human beings, defined a human only as White, African American, or Mexican. The nameless yellow body was not considered human because it did not fit in a slot on a piece of paper. Sometimes you are erased before you are given the choice of stating who you are... To be or not to be. That is the question. A question, yes, but not a choice. (Vuong 63)

Vuong presents the “nameless yellow body” of the murdered “unnamed Chinese man” in contrast with the named judge, Roy Bean. In this scenario, Roy Bean, in the position of authority, ultimately rules in favor of a white railroad worker. Roy Bean concludes that it is only the “murder of human beings” which is prohibited in Texas—since “human” as a signifier is defined within Texan law as only signifying “White, African American, or Mexican,” the murderer is spared a sentence on the technicality that Asian people are not considered human in Texas. When Cixous argues that “law organizes what is thinkable by oppositions (dual, irreconcilable; or sublatale, dialectical),” then, in this case, only people who are “White, African American, or Mexican” can be *thinkable* as the signified of human, as Texan law proposes an *irreconcilable* definition of human (Cixous 147). In this way, the Chinese victim experiences a double-erasure: the judge, deciding that the Chinese victim was not considered “human” as defined by law, or state-enforced syntax, erases the Chinese man's body from the category of “human” before he is “given the choice of stating who [he is].” Simultaneously, the judge's name, as well as the white murderer's, will be immortalized while the victim's name will be lost to time—a name considered inconsequential by the repressive authority of both the judge and the ideological authority of the newspaper itself. In this moment in time, within the syntax of American law, the Asian body is not even interpellated as a subject, excluding it not only from state-sanctioned civil liberties but also fundamental human rights, thus reproducing the devaluation and exploitation of the Asian body (Althusser 55).

In this moment of a failed binary, Vuong presents one to consider in parallel: “sometimes we are given only two choices... to be or not to be” (Vuong 63). As Little Dog unravels the meaning of his identity as a queer Vietnamese American who rejects the syntax of traditional American masculinity, he understands how deeply intertwined identity is with existence. In the example of the murdered Chinese man, his existence, from the perspective of Texan law—and, by extension, Texan ideology, as law functions as both a repressive and an

ideological state apparatus—is predicated upon his identity as Asian American (Althusser 50). As Little Dog remarks, this binary set of choices is “not a choice” at all. Our existence, our living, is dictated by syntax as it appears within law, which serves to (re)produce the subjectivity of residents to the politico-legal locus of the American state (Vuong 55).

The ambivalent syntactic representation of American legislature and its effects on the subjected body, as Little Dog highlights in this moment, isn’t limited to 19th century Texan law. The manipulation of syntax (in particular, grammatical structures and defined signifier/signified relationships) within legislature continues to occur in the variations between state definitions of rape, adulthood, marital union (though legalized nationwide in 2015, the unconstitutional laws banning same-sex marriages have yet to be repealed in some states), gender identity and expression, and citizenship. Among sexual crimes policies, New York State utilizes specificity by delineating differences between “rape,” “sexual abuse,” “predatory sexual assault,” and criminal sexual act[s],” among others; Minnesota’s less specific categories are of “criminal sexual conduct,” “statutory rape,” and “sodomy”; Nevada additionally includes “incest” as a punishable offense and excludes a “specific statutory rape statute.” New York State punishes all sexual crimes with imprisonment, while Minnesota and Nevada offer fines in tandem with or in place of prison sentences (RAINN “Sex Crimes: Definitions and Penalties” for the states of New York, Minnesota, and Nevada). Such iterations of policy surrounding sexual crimes offer a mere glimpse into a state authority’s utilization of syntax to protect or neglect its residents (subjects)—in some cases, specificity offers more protection for the victims of crimes, as in the case of sexual assault, but can also create opportunities for subtle exclusion, as in Little Dog’s example of the unnamed Chinese man.

For a state authority to protect a body it must first *interpellate* it as a subject; the intentional exclusion of marginalized bodies—be they of marginalized race, gender, socioeconomic class, or sexual orientation—from law allows for the justification of mistreatment against such bodies. Since the identity of the Chinese man did not “fit in a slot on a piece of paper,” he could not exist according to the structure of power governing Texas; instead, it is “Texan law” which “define[s] a human,” thus positioning “Texan law” as the Subject of the hierarchical sentence (Vuong 63). Meanwhile, the White, African American, or Mexican human being becomes the object of this sentence, interpellated as the subject of Texan authority, while the Asian body exists in a complex position outside of this Subject/object relationship—free in that it is not hailed as a subject and subsequently subjected, allowing its resistance to the concrete meaning assigned to Texan (American) subjects, yet confined to becoming the site for “a discursive battle for the meaning of their identity” (Foucault 69). As Little Dog later remarks, this subaltern body is “like a word”: it “hold[s] no weight in this world yet still [carries] [its] own life” (241). By rejecting the notion of the subaltern body as a signifier of “human” and only recognizing and reproducing the subjectivity of “White, African American, or Mexican” signifiers through legislature, the syntax of American masculinity (that

which positions the repressive masculine Subject as the subject of Texas law's sentences) speaks over and erases subaltern bodies—it destroys them.

II. The Need for Another Language

As Little Dog earlier recognized the dangerous perspective of aggressive, possessive American masculinity on creativity, he goes on to wonder “why can't the language of creativity be the language of regeneration?” (Vuong 179). Little Dog rejects this binarily structured syntax of American masculinity—the notion that masculine creation *can only be* destruction, else it is not masculine—and recognizes the need for another language in its place. In resistance to Saussure's prescribed grammar, Barthes argues, “On the stage of the text, no footlights: there is not a subject and an object... the text supersedes grammatical attitudes” (Barthes 16). Opposing the finite, ideological “Sentence,” he suggests that the text is “that uninhibited person who shows his behind to the *Political Father*” (Barthes 53). Through Cixous's analysis of who might benefit most from these ideological grammatical attitudes, we can understand this “*Political Father*” to be the governing authority which benefits from syntax's “organization by hierarchy”: in claiming its role as the masculine parent—an aggressive disciplinarian—the Political Father “makes all conceptual organization subject to *man*” or, more broadly, prioritizes the ruling Subject (government, monarch, religious leader) as the apex of the organized hierarchy (Cixous 147).

Rather than embrace the ideologies of power based in binary opposition which are perpetuated by the hierarchical sentence—the white, masculine, cisgender, heterosexual Subject of the sentence versus those it hails as subject—Barthes proposes the text as a connective hyphos of tissue that establishes an islet of *common* as opposed to the Saussurean *distinct*. This new language embraces hedonism rather than represses it, rejecting structures that prioritize the desire of only the dominant Subject situated within a binary and replacing them with a democratically pleasurable text. Barthes would challenge, for example, the “mother/father” binary as outlined by Saussure, replacing it with a cauldron of boiling liquid in which common terms rise to the surface as a signifier bubble and, on occasion, pop alongside or merge with other bubbles—*mother* and *father* being only two of many, which may overlap with terms such as *parent*, *caretaker*, *community head*, *leader of a drag family*, and *saint*.

Finding comfort in Barthes, Little Dog cites Barthes on several occasions to propose that even two languages, like Vietnamese and English, since they both contain traditional binary hierarchical linguistic structures, cannot communicate the spectra of existences between the oppositions. He wonders if he can be in a constant relationship with pleasure like Barthes claims the writer can, even though his mother tongue is “stunted”:

No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure, wrote Barthes. For the writer, however, it is the mother tongue. But what if the mother tongue is stunted? What

if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out? Can one take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely? The only Vietnamese I own is the one you gave me, the one whose diction and syntax reach only the second grade level. As a girl, you watched, from a banana grove, your schoolhouse collapse after an American napalm raid. At five, you never stepped into a classroom again. Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan... Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war. (Vuong 31)

What does it mean to speak in loss? Little Dog recognizes that the second-grade level Vietnamese “diction and syntax” passed onto him from his mother, Rose, may lack more terms than it offers. To him, his Vietnamese is “stunted,” “cut off”; the language he desires to take pleasure in is a “void” of signifiers and signifieds that he never learned, this loss being a direct result of trauma. Rose’s relationship to the syntax and diction of Vietnamese is predicated on loss—witnessing her school destroyed by a raid, she avoided the environment of formal schooling which, on the one hand, prevents her from engaging in the pleasure of the writer of the mother tongue according to Barthes, and yet offers freedom through this unintentional resistance to formal Vietnamese grammatical structure.

Later, Little Dog reflects upon a moment in which he walks alongside Rose on New Britain Ave in Hartford, passing a trail of blood that must have been from someone who’d been “stabbed or shot the night before”—his mother urges him on, tells him not to look down, to look up to see the birds in the trees instead, which “flourished like fruit” from her words (Vuong 230-231). She illustrates an imaginary, positive portrait of colorful birds on the trees to distract her son from the dark, gory scene they walk past, using language to create beauty in the face of trauma. Following this remembrance, Little Dog ruminates that he was wrong to have believed that they had been “born from war,” instead underscoring that he, his mother, and his grandmother, in the wake of the Vietnam war, had been “born from beauty.” Speaking “in war,” is not simply to allow its violence to co-opt one’s entire narrative and perspective, but to recognize the beauty in the strength of healing from it—to illustrate that the speakers of the seemingly broken, orphaned language are not “the fruit of violence,” but instead that “violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it,” thus granting them pleasure within their mother tongue outside of its syntax (Vuong 231).

Little Dog searches for a third language to act as a supplement to his two languages of English and Vietnamese, hoping to communicate pleasure, beauty, and creativity in a non-binary way similar to his mother’s illustration of the imaginary birds. He considers physical language, the language of the body, as this third language:

Two languages cancel each other out, suggests Barthes, beckoning a third. Sometimes our words are few and far between, or simply ghosted. In which case the hand, although limited by the borders of skin and cartilage, can be that third language that animates where the tongue falters. It’s true that, In

Vietnamese, we rarely say *I love you*... care and love, for us, are pronounced clearest through service... three people on the floor, connected to each other by touch, made something like the word *family*. (Vuong 33)

In his mother tongue based on loss, Little Dog's words are "few and far between" or "ghosted"—such words either, in their vagueness, create ambivalent space in between their signifieds, or are apparitional voids which imply a presence. While Saussure would claim that no signified can exist *a priori* to its signifier, in this moment, Little Dog acknowledges that, regardless of signifier, a signified is present. In this loss, there is *still something there*; it is the hand which "animates" these non-binary positions which the "tongue falters" in describing, as the ambiguity of action can actually provide a more specific meaning. Rather than say "*I love you*," the hand communicates care through acts of service: the plucking of white hairs from grandmother Lan's head; the pressing of Rose against her son to "absorb a plane's turbulence and, therefore, his fear." It is Rose's hand that slaps Little Dog upon learning of the bully on the school bus, and her hand which subsequently pulls him to her body, gestures to his "bellyfull of English," brushes his hair to one side, pours him a glass of milk (Vuong 26-27).

To Little Dog and Rose, the phrase "*I love you*" reduces their relationship to hierarchy: the Subject, "*I*," is positioned above the object of the sentence and its interpellated subject, "*you*." "*I love you*"—with its verb "*love*" implying the positive term in its binary, opposite *hurt* and *bate*—communicates only the warm embraces into which Little Dog is pulled and none of the physical abuse he endures from his mother. The syntax's specificity denies the complexity inherent in human relationships, in which the presence of "*love*" does not signify an inability to hurt. In place of syntax's rigid "causes" and "meanings" (signifiers and signifieds, which act as a "gag" upon the lips of the subject hailed by syntax), Little Dog and his family communicate through the flexible, ambivalent language of physical action, their actions hosting islets of ever-shifting common meanings, their three bodies "on the floor, connected to each other by touch" forming the word "*family*" (Irigaray 76; Vuong 137). As such, the rediscovered mother tongue—"our body's language"—can communicate Barthes's islet of non-binary definitions of love: love as action, as pulling *and* pushing; a transfer of "nutrients, hormones, and waste passed between mother and fetus"; the dissolution of the "permanent," "fixed borders" of the body (Irigaray 77; Vuong 137).

III. A Radical Resistance of Binary Language

Offering his own resistance to the Saussurean hierarchical sentence and its ideological and repressive effects on the subjected body, Vuong embraces the hedonism and subversiveness of Barthes's text—as well as Irigaray's non-binary, fluid language of the body—to propose that a position between Subject and object exists: a place where "submission was also a kind of power" (Vuong 118). In the case of the unnamed Chinese man, since his "interpellation as subject within any single discourse" is never final, syntax solidifies his place within the subaltern while

simultaneously granting him freedom to exist outside of hailing and subjection—though, ultimately, the syntax outlives his freedom (Easthope & McGowan 69). Similarly, the nail salon that Little Dog’s mother works at becomes the site for this complex, non-binary syntax that blurs the boundary between Subject and object:

The most common English word spoken in the nail salon was *sorry*... I have seen workers, you included, apologize dozens of times throughout a forty-five-minute manicure, hoping to gain warm traction that would lead to the ultimate goal, a tip—only to say *sorry* anyway when none was given. In the nail salon, *sorry* is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency. It no longer merely *apologizes*, but insists, reminds: *I’m here, right here, beneath you*. It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable. In the nail salon, one’s definition of *sorry* is deranged into a new word entirely, one that’s charged and reused as both power and defacement at once. Being sorry pays, being sorry even, or especially, when one has no fault, is worth every self-deprecating syllable the mouth allows. Because the mouth must eat. (Vuong 91-92)

The manicurists working at the nail salon in Hartford instrumentalize English syntax, complicating the Subject/object relationship through a subversion of hierarchy. In expressing remorse or regret for the subject’s actions, the speaking subject grants the recipient of the apology the power of forgiveness: only the Subject can say “it’s okay, I accept your apology.” “I’m sorry”—a hierarchical sentence in which the *I* submits itself through apology to the Subject, *You*—“insists” and “reminds” the Subject that its subject is “*right here, beneath you*”; in this way, the apology is a form of submission, a way of “lowering oneself” so that the paying client (the owner of capital which is exchanged for the manicurist’s labor, the Subject within this capitalistic social relation) can feel “right, superior, and charitable” (Marx Ch. 33; Vuong 92).

And yet, this apologetic syntax is subverted into a “currency”; in exchange for “the ultimate goal, a tip,” the manicurists intentionally make themselves subjects through the syntax of apology. It is in this way that “being sorry pays”: the “mouth,” the body, belittles itself through the syllables of “*sorry*,” charging the word and reusing it as “power”—the subject, through their own “defacement,” can influence the Subject’s action of giving them a tip. The organization of this syntax of apology—in its dominant meaning, the speaker subjects themselves to the apology-receiving Subject—falls apart at the seams; though it works “to produce particular forms of subjectivity,” its very organization also “implies the possibility of other subject positions and with them the possibilities of resistance to meaning which may be dominant” (Easthope and McGowan 69-70). Through intentional, performative syntactic submission, then, the object maintains its position as the subject of the hierarchical sentence—the hailed subject can influence and control its Subject.

A similar subversion is employed by Little Dog in his relationship with Trevor; using the nonverbal language of the body, he positions himself beneath

Trevor as his subject—Little Dog embodies the submissive BDSM trope, creating a place for Trevor as dominant:

What do you call the animal that, finding the hunter, offers itself to be eaten? A martyr? A weakling? No, a beast gaining the rare agency to stop... To be inside 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. Submission does not require elevation in order to control. I lower myself. I put him in my mouth... After a while, it is the cocksucker who moves. And he follows, when I sway this way he swerves along. And I look up at him as if looking at a kite, his entire body tied to the teetering world of my head. (Vuong 118)

Through structure of the sentence, Little Dog constructs *himself* as Subject. Directly resisting the syntax of American masculinity, it is the *hunted* which gains “agency”; the subjected “I” which has a “choice,” which lowers itself, puts the Subject in his mouth, owns the scopophilic gaze; the “cocksucker” who moves first, and Trevor must follow (Mulvey 16). Here, it is the *subjected* body which is positioned as the Subject of the sentence, the tether upon which Trevor—the representation of American masculinity through his socialized traits of aggression and desire to dominate—relies. Without Little Dog’s choice, Trevor cannot be “inside pleasure”; if it is the third language of the body which grants pleasure in communication, as Little Dog celebrates in Barthes, then the mouth (the body; the text) becomes a site *within which* pleasure is generated through a complexified connection between bodies rather than a rigidly hierarchical one.

Sexuality—itself a syntax, a “cultural production”—is often understood through the lens of “previously rehearsed and socially encoded ideological script” of American masculinity and heteronormativity (Halperin 40). Within binary understandings of sexuality, it is perceived as hierarchical and binary; notions of socialized feminine and masculine identities are prescribed onto homosexual relationships. Halperin recounts this history of sexuality in citing understandings of homosexuality in Ancient Greece: Sex is not only polarizing, however; it is also hierarchical. For the insertive partner is construed as a sexual agent, whose phallic penetration of another person’s body expresses sexual ‘activity,’ whereas the receptive partner is construed as a sexual patient, whose submission to phallic penetration expresses sexual ‘passivity.’ Sexual ‘activity,’ moreover, is thematized as domination: the relation between the ‘active’ and the ‘passive’ sexual partner is thought of as the same kind of relation as that obtaining between social superior and social inferior. ‘Active’ and ‘passive’ sexual roles are therefore necessarily isomorphic with superordinate and subordinate social status. (Halperin 30)

Even through the language of the body, a hierarchical syntax seemingly emerges. On the one hand, the “insertive partner is construed as a sexual agent,” with penetration representing an “activity,” a thematized masculine domination; meanwhile, the “receptive partner is construed as a sexual patient” who submits to phallic penetration, representative of feminine “passivity.” As such, through a

binary lens, Little Dog and Trevor's relationship would appear as rigidly hierarchical: Trevor, the agent of sexual 'activity,' occupies the position of power; Little Dog, who receives, is hailed as the subject. But Little Dog complexifies this relationship by subverting the notion that the receiver of phallic penetration exhibits passive submission—for Trevor to dominate, it is Little Dog who must accommodate him, "make room" for him, "for you cannot rise without having something to rise over" (Vuong 118). In resistance to these binary understandings of homosexuality through a gendered, hierarchical framework, Halperin urges us to "decouple, as it were, kinds of sexual predilection from of masculinity and femininity," to become aware of how these constructions are enmeshed in our "most precious unique, original, and spontaneous impulses" of nonnormative sexuality (Halperin 25, 40). In other words, Halperin, too, strives to create a language for non-binary understandings of sexuality; Little Dog develops this language through the language of the body by transforming our understanding of reception as *action*—a form of agency as opposed to passive submission.

Vuong proposes that the binary oppositions implied by syntax are not only harmful to the body but are also simply not enough to describe the hues of life—a spectrum of color not merely limited to black and white but one which includes magenta and vermillion and marigold. The syntax of American masculinity—in its structuring of the aggressive and acquisitive man (and state power) as Subject—reinforces gender roles as well as heteronormativity; to provide space for queerness, Vuong provides a third language through not only the body but also alternative syntax, similar to the subversion of the Subject/object relationship within the nail salon. In one such instance, Little Dog recognizes that Vietnamese syntax describing the queer experience—rooted in a French colonialist perspective—cannot objectively communicate queerness, as it is presented binarily opposite to the morally good heterosexual norm. Instead, Little Dog offers his own syntax in place of colonially affected Vietnamese:

"I don't like girls." I didn't want to use the Vietnamese word for it—pê-đê—from the French pédé, short for pedophile. Before the French occupation, our Vietnamese did not have a name for queer bodies—because they were seen, like all bodies, fleshed and of one source—and I didn't want to introduce this part of me using the epithet for criminals... "You don't like girls," you repeated... "Then what *do* you like?"... "Boys." (Vuong 130)

Little Dog rejects the negatively charged term "pê-đê" in favor of "I don't like girls"—a phrase which, through negation, illustrates the non-binary understanding of gender which Little Dog hopes to convey when coming out to his mother. In providing a negation as opposed to a prescription ("I don't like girls" instead of "I like boys"), Little Dog expands upon binary understandings of sexuality; in this negative space, an islet of common terms flexibly forms outside of the imposed syntax of French-influenced Vietnamese, which rigidly defines homosexuality as criminal. Rather than "pre-exist a simple scientific labeling," this

pathology of the homosexual as the pedophile, the “pervert,” is “*produced* (comes into existence) in and through discursive constructions of ‘the pervert,’” which is then imposed upon a culture which previously did not position its queer bodies within a binary (Easthope and McGowan 69).

Such a binary, which masquerades as morally founded but is instead based in xenophobia and ideals of reproduction, creates a hierarchical syntax within which the colonial power hails all its subjected bodies—heterosexual *and* queer. In pitting such bodies against one another by defining them within a binary syntax, the colonial power breeds animosity between its subjects, reducing the likelihood of a powerful, unified uprising. Irigaray remarks that “it’s not that we have our own territory, but that their nation, family, home, and discourse imprison us in enclosures where we can no longer move—or live as “we”; such a discourse of homosexuality as pedophilic restricts the formation of a collective identity (Irigaray 74). Little Dog, in refusing to utilize the traditional syntax of Vietnamese as it defines homosexuality, uses ambiguity to deconstruct the hierarchical structure of heteronormativity as being above homosexuality. He speaks to escape the “enclosures, patterns, distinctions and oppositions” of the hierarchical syntax as imposed by French colonial power by introducing his identity as equal to his mother’s (and her previous expectations for his sexuality) in hopes that it would not separate them (as is the intention of the discourse’s construction) (Irigaray 75).

If the syntax of the English language (much like the French corruption of Vietnamese) is utilized by both ideological and repressive state authorities in the United States to control American narratives and the granting of civil liberties—consider gatekeeping within academia and authorship to exclude minorities from political discourse, the incongruous shaping of American historical narratives across various national textbook companies to fit regional perspectives and political beliefs, the intentional employment of words and phrases with seemingly similar meanings and yet opposing valences (pro-life versus anti-choice, super straight versus transphobic) to justify xenophobic attitudes and policy—we can understand syntax as a binary, divisive set of rules which reinforce American ideologies of cisgender, heteronormative, white, male supremacy. Little Dog refers to this syntax as the “dialect of damaged American fathers”—through the intentional positioning of masculine power as the Subject of hierarchical sentences within this system of syntactic governance, the subaltern body is spoken over, hailed as the fragile, passive body directly opposite strong, aggressive power (Vuong 24). As such, this syntax does *not* act as a bridge; instead, this hierarchical language breeds rifts between Subject and subject, between hailed subject and subaltern. In response to the violence he witnesses and is subjected to by the Saussurean syntax of American masculinity, Little Dog rejects his role as its hailed subject and instead embraces non-binary language: a language which, he proposes, is of the body—a language which never congeals into rigid, hierarchical syntax. Through Little Dog’s creation of a new syntax, Vuong, as with the French feminist writers Cixous and Irigaray, directs attention to language and the consciousness it is deployed to communicate not as oppositional, but instead

“language as a passageway... to the unconscious, to that which has been repressed and which would, if allowed to rise, disrupt the established symbolic order, what Jacques Lacan has dubbed the Law of the Father” (Hejinian 18). Vuong’s proposed new language – the body, a mother tongue, a passageway to repressed desire, a *bridge* – is a language which favors the ambivalence of action over the specificity of the action’s signifiers. It is a revolutionary language founded upon the site at which grammar breaks apart and takes on new meaning – where “sorry” lowers oneself into a position of power relative to the Subject, where the act of submission is actually one of control.

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