

“To be invisible in order to be safe”

A queer Vietnamese American experience of self-protection in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019)

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ABSTRACT	RESUMO
<p>This research aims to analyze the intersection of sexuality and race in the identity construction of Little Dog, the protagonist of Ocean Vuong's novel, <i>On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous</i> (2019). Specifically, it seeks to identify how he negotiates his homosexual Vietnamese American identity through language and describes his self-protective strategies in response to the ingrained social discrimination in American society. Queer Vietnamese Americans struggle to construct their identity in the United States, as they belong to two marginalized groups: LGBTQIAP+ and immigrants. Thus, a textual analysis (Belsey, 2013) was conducted, considering culture and history in language through an in-depth exploration of textual elements. This article used the concept of reading queerly (Stockton, 2023) to explain LGBTQIAP+ narratives, combined with hybridity (Pelaud, 2011) to interpret narratives within the Vietnamese American community. Results showed that the protagonist was socially oriented to adopt self-protective measures against discrimination. Experiencing inferiority during his formative years led him to seek social invisibility and caution when approaching queer topics. Little Dog represents real-life homosexual Vietnamese Americans who learn to defend themselves due to the lack of safe spaces allowing them to fully embrace their sexuality and cultural identity.</p>	<p>Esta pesquisa objetiva analisar a interseção de sexualidade e raça na construção da identidade de Cachorrinho, o protagonista do romance de Ocean Vuong, <i>Sobre a Terra Somos Belos por um Instante</i> (2019). Especificamente, busca-se identificar como ele negocia a sua identidade vietnamita-americana homossexual através da linguagem e descrever suas estratégias de autoproteção em resposta à discriminação social enraizada na sociedade americana. Vietnamita-americanos <i>queer</i> lutam para construir suas identidades nos Estados Unidos por pertencerem a dois grupos marginalizados: LGBTQIAP+ e imigrantes. Portanto, uma análise textual (Belsey, 2013) foi conduzida, considerando cultura e história na linguagem mediante uma exploração aprofundada de elementos textuais. Este artigo utilizou conceitos de leitura <i>queer</i> (Stockton, 2023) para explicar narrativas LGBTQIAP+, combinado com hibridismo (Pelaud, 2011) para interpretar narrativas da comunidade vietnamita-americana. Os resultados mostraram que o protagonista foi socialmente orientado a adotar medidas de autoproteção contra a discriminação. Experienciar inferioridade durante seus anos de formação o levou a buscar a invisibilidade social e a ter cautela ao abordar tópicos relacionados à comunidade LGBTQIAP+. Cachorrinho representa vietnamita-americanos da realidade que aprendem a se defender devido à falta de espaços seguros que lhes permitam abraçar plenamente sua sexualidade e identidade cultural.</p>

KEY-WORDS	PALAVRAS-CHAVE
Identity; Queer Vietnamese American; Reading Queerly; Hybridity; <i>On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous</i> .	Identidade; Vietnamita-Americano <i>Queer</i> ; Leitura <i>Queer</i> ; Hibridismo; <i>Sobre a Terra Somos Belos por um Instante</i> .

INTRODUCTION

The exploration of the construction of racialized queer identities — which refer to non-white lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, pansexual, and more (LGBTQIAP+) — in the United States requires examining how racism and homophobia intersect and reinforce each other in the country. While racism is a system of oppression primarily based on race, homophobia is the discrimination against LGBTQIAP+ people. These vectors, as Butler (1993, p. xxvi) states, are understood as interconnected and interdependent structures of power that affect and shape individuals' lives and identities. By reinforcing each other, they contribute to the construction of racialized queer identity in the U.S. by shaping experiences of marginalization, resistance, and the search for recognition within this population.

This social question of identity construction is commonly found in American literary contexts, in which some characters experience the search for recognition and empowerment in a society that disregards the aspects that constitute their identities. These scenarios illustrate the struggles of many real people and are regularly represented by characters from marginalized social minorities, such as LGBTQIAP+ individuals of color. In this way, Contemporary American literature brings visibility to socially silenced narratives, providing insights about life through the worldviews and experiences of these individuals.

One such work is *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), the debut novel by the award-winning Vietnamese American poet, essayist, and novelist Ocean Vuong (1988-). The narrative of Vuong's novel is centered on Little Dog, the youngest member of a family of immigrants in the United States of America. He is a poor cisgender Vietnamese American who struggles to recognize his identity in this context of social helplessness for being a homosexual immigrant of color. These aspects shape the construction of his identity reflecting the limited support of the country towards him — due to what he represents.

Through the characters of the book, the voices of immigrants and other minorities struggling to find their value in American society are highlighted. Possibly, the aspect that most catches the readers' attention is that the author surprises by creating a protagonist who is not just trying to understand his identity as a Vietnamese American, but also as a homosexual within a vivid, challenging, and emotional portrait of American society.

The plot is a letter that Little Dog writes in his late twenties to his illiterate mother, Rose, without the intention of her accessing this content. Despite Rose's traumas from the Vietnam War, immigration, discrimination, and cultural adaptation in the U.S. affecting her parenting of Little Dog, they have built a loving and understanding relationship. The



fact that she does not know how to read is presented in the first lines of Vuong's novel (2019, p. 3): "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 to go back to the time". From this scenario, he sees this writing as a space free of judgment to rescue his memories to tell her his journey of personal growth, especially as a person who has faced harsh experiences in the discriminatory American society and has been affected by his mother's traumas. The letter is organized into three parts that reveal intimate feelings from childhood to adulthood. When dealing with many years of the protagonist's life — especially the bond with his mother, grandmother, and first lover — it is to be imagined that he addresses numerous important themes in the development of his identity. One of its essential topics concerns what and who was around him as he recognized himself as a homosexual Vietnamese American.

It is important to mention that some elements were based on the author's experiences. Like the protagonist, he is part of the LGBTQIAP+ community, his mother was illiterate, and his family migrated from Vietnam to the U.S.A. However, the story is a work of fiction set in Hartford, Connecticut.

The justification for this research is based on the idea that the protagonist of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* represents a noteworthy illustration to analyze the intersection of sexuality and race in forming contemporary queer Vietnamese American identities. His journey of self-discovery as a queer immigrant of color in the U.S. — a country marked by xenophobia, racism, and homophobia — offers significant information about the experiences lived by this marginalized community. Moreover, this study is possibly even more important for the Vietnamese American population, as the number of studies on the pieces of literature that portray these people's lives is not as extensive as they are for other Asian groups (Pelaud, 2011, p. 1/2) and much less regarding queer lives. Thus, by recognizing that Little Dog's story reflects the reality of many real people, this research acknowledges the need to investigate this character's story to contribute to the visibility of this underrepresented community and enrich the discourse on racialized LGBTQIAP+ experiences in contemporary American literature.

Hence, this article arrives at the research problem that it is even more difficult for Vietnamese Americans who are queer to construct their identity in the U.S.A. as they are formed by the intersection of two marginalized groups in this country: the LGBTQIAP+ population and Vietnamese immigrants. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw (Ted, 2016), it means that this community experiences the impact of multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously, which can have profound effects on their social, emotional, and psychological well-being. Consequently, queer racialized individuals often develop legitimate and necessary self-protection mechanisms to confront a system that perpetuates discrimination and violence. As stated by Collins *et al.* (2021, p. 690) "individuals and



groups who are oppressed within systems of power create and pass on knowledge that fosters their survival, resilience, and resistance". In doing so, they deal with prejudice and ensure their own safety. This reality prevents them from constructing an identity that is not traumatized by racism, homophobia, and, especially, their intersection.

In this sense, to answer how the intersection of sexuality and race has shaped Little Dog's identity construction in the United States, it is crucial to analyze both the theories that surround the topic and excerpts from the letter where this intersection is highlighted.

The main objective of this work is to analyze the link between sexuality and race in the identity construction of the protagonist of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. It also seeks to identify how Little Dog negotiates his identity as a homosexual Vietnamese American through language. Finally, it describes his self-protective strategies in response to social discrimination rooted in the United States.

This research was conducted through textual analysis, focusing on Ocean Vuong's 2019 novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. According to Belsey (2013), this method enables the gathering of concepts for understanding culture and history through an in-depth exploration of textual elements. It means that mimesis is taken into consideration to analyze how the text represents the reality of the community in question. Thus, this research examined the textual elements that Vuong employed regarding Little Dog's choice of lexical elements to illustrate how he navigates the intersection of his queer and immigrant of color identity while protecting himself from prevalent systemic prejudices in the United States. In accordance with literary concepts based on reading queerly (Stockton, 2023) to interpret Little Dog's homosexuality and hybridity (Pelaud, 2011) to interpret his Vietnamese American experience, the data for this analysis consisted of some excerpts from the novel that explore the link between sexuality and race in the protagonist's identity. Each of these passages was carefully analyzed, considering the meanings present in the characteristics of prose fiction — such as the use of language, description of events, dialogues, and characters' thoughts, as established by Pugh and Johnson (2014) — to examine how they relate to the construction of Little Dog's identity.

1 READING QUEERLY: QUEER IDENTITY IN LITERATURE

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Little Dog's coming-of-age is especially marked by sexuality questions as he is a homosexual man who lives in a homophobic country. Thus, it is fundamental to understand how the pieces of literature that do not focus on heterosexual people are formed to analyze Vuong's protagonist experiences. These works — called queer narratives — focus on LGBTQIAP+ characters in all forms of art to provide



an important platform for exploring sex/gender norms and the struggles faced by non-heterosexual individuals in a heteronormative society (Stockton, 2023, p. 68). It is through queer narratives that authors can create representative works, register the history, and motivate social changes to improve LGBTQIAP+ lives. This artistic exploration of queer identity construction typically depicts their journey facing social and cultural pressures due to systemic homophobia. It also shows the means they find to protect themselves from social discrimination through self-discovery and contact with other queer individuals, as happens with Little Dog.

Considering this panorama, the concept of reading queerly can assist the comprehension of nuances from the queer novels. It can be explained by a reflection on this Little Dog's passage:

There is so much I want to tell you, Ma. I was once foolish enough to believe knowledge would clarify, but some things are so gauzed behind layers of syntax and semantics, behind days and hours, names forgotten, salvaged and shed, that simply knowing the wound exists does nothing to reveal it (Vuong, 2019, p. 62).

The limitations of conventional knowledge when it comes to understanding the intricacies or subtleties of a subject is an idea that can be grasped by this quotation. Using written language in the letter he writes, Little Dog conveys the idea that some aspects cannot be easily communicated through traditional knowledge frameworks. This is because they involve deep emotional or personal experiences, historical and cultural contexts, or complex social dynamics. Thus, by recognizing these intricate aspects, it is important to emphasize the relevance of alternative approaches. In parallel with this interpretation of Little Dog's words, reading queerly is an idea that may help overcome complex and limiting barriers of language when it concerns LGBTQIAP+ content. As stated by Stockton (2023, p. xiv), this concept

sometimes means reading against the proverbial grain — piecing together elements of the text in such a way that it communicates something not readily apparent or something opposed to the text's otherwise 'obvious' message. At other times, queer reading means just the opposite: stating the obvious when nobody else will.

So, it invites readers to perform a critical analysis of texts, including subtext and power dynamics, to go beyond surface interpretations and explore the depths of the queer universe that can be obscured by syntax and semantics. In other words, hidden meanings are unveiled and heteronormative assumptions in LGBTQIAP+ experiences and perspectives in literature are challenged. Based on this concept, this research can perform a textual analysis of the construction of Little Dog's sexual identity.



2 HYBRIDITY: QUEER VIETNAMESE AMERICAN IDENTITY

This analysis of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is influenced by Ono's (2005, p. 4) idea about the "continuous retracing of the intellectual course of" Asian American Studies through the provision of new critical readings for Asian American works. This exploration delves into Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Island cultures, histories, and experiences. It helps address issues such as sexuality, transnationalism, and diaspora in academia. Additionally, it contributes to the ongoing struggle against white supremacy and structural racism in the U.S.A. Hence, as Vuong's novel draws attention to important topics on this agenda, it stimulates critical thinking and engagement in readers; and, can be considered a valuable object of study in this field.

As stated by Kula *et al.* (2021, p. 15), "given the diversity within the Asian American community, it is important to gain more understanding of the past and present circumstances of each of these groups". In this situation, this article is referring particularly to the Vietnamese, as they are the main characters of Vuong's novel. Furthermore, the experience portrayed by Little Dog's mother and grandmother about the immigration to the U.S. as a consequence of the Vietnam War not only left them with emotional and psychological scars but also deeply influenced Little Dog's own journey — which is the focus of this research. Through his interaction with his family, their trauma becomes intertwined with his own experiences. So, considering such a historical event as fundamental for the analysis of how this group lives enhances the significance of this research for Vietnamese American Studies.

"'Remember', you said each morning before we stepped out in cold Connecticut air, don't draw attention to yourself. You're already Vietnamese'" (Vuong, 2019, p. 219). The speech of Little Dog's mother records origin and immigration as components that stand out negatively in the protagonist's identity since his childhood. From the experiences in American society that made Rose integrate this thought into her life, she passes on to her son this warning that their rights, dignity, and voice are less valued than those of whites in the U.S.A. — and if they want to live in peace there, they must live with this unfair reality.

The reinforcement of that conception corroborates the difficulty of Little Dog's development over the years because he grows up trying to prevent others from paying attention to him, which consequently affects his love relationship in the future. Despite his mother's warning about his race, he tries to incorporate the same interpretation into his sexuality. After all, he concludes that being a Vietnamese/Asian immigrant in American society is challenging, and the additional complexity of being homosexual further compounds these challenges.



According to Anzaldúa (1987, p. 20), this social rejection towards such minorities — and especially the intersection of them — leads racialized queer individuals to conform to the values of the dominant culture and suppress the parts considered unacceptable (in this case, obviously referring to sexuality). This attitude of hiding their true identity, even from those closest to them, stems from the perception that it is enough to be rejected by society due to their origin; thus, many prefer not to risk being also rejected by their own mother, culture, and race. These barriers negatively impact on the lives of both racialized individuals who have their sexuality exposed to society and those who conceal it.

The exploration of the experiences that shaped Little Dog's queer Vietnamese American identity can be described by the concept of hybridity. According to Lisa Lowe (1996 *apud* Pelaud, 2011, p. 49), hybridity “provides a strong departing analytical framework to approach Vietnamese American identities” as it describes the experiences of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities in the face of violence from both the U.S. and their countries of origin. This comprehension process of the diverse experiences of these communities is sought through the exploration of survival and resistance tactics resulting from structural oppression, considering the historical context and the challenges these people have faced.

For hybridity to be applied to the memories narrated by Little Dog, which intersect his sexual and racial identity, it is necessary to understand how the process of revisiting past experiences by Vietnamese American narrators is approached in literature. Pelaud (2011, p. 64/65) states that “memories or altered memories about Viet Nam, literally recollected in memoirs or through fiction, play an undeniably crucial role in the identity formation of the narrators”. Writing about fragmented memories is not only about creativity or choice but rather a complex and disturbing experience that challenges rigid concepts, such as individual versus collective realities, and cultural nationalism versus transnationalism. These texts are considered registers of historical traumas, as they reflect the vulnerability of Vietnamese Americans due to the lack of social support. Consequently, such conditions lead to the development of various survival strategies, which vary according to gender, sexuality, and financial resources, for example. Thus, this research considers lexical elements as the category of analysis. It aims to explore the keywords in the narrative of the protagonist of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* that indicate strategies of self-protection, possibly in response to cultural and historical influences that shaped his homosexual Vietnamese American identity. In addition to this, the research also considers the mimetic approach to examine how the story portrays the reality of the represented community.

In this sense, the Queer of Color Critique is used to deepen the hybridity approach in the textual analysis of excerpts highlighting the construction of Little Dog's racialized queer identity. According to Ferguson (2004, p. 4), this area refutes the notion that race,



class, gender, and sexuality are distinct forms that seem to be isolated from each other; and defends that racial and national formations are connected. This Critique considers the impact of race on the identity of sexual minorities and confronts the idea that white LGBTQIAP+ experiences are the norm, contrary to what traditional Queer Theory seemed to suggest.

Based on this view, it is crucial to examine sexual identities according to the specificities of each race to conduct a comprehensive analysis. Hence, Queer Vietnamese/Asian American Studies stand out in the theories of Queer of Color Critique (and, consequently, in hybridity) for being specifically related to the identities of individuals like Little Dog. These studies explore the convergence of identities among LGBTQIAP+ individuals of Vietnamese or Asian descent in the U.S. and amplify their voices. When carrying this out through literature, literary studies examine how these stories can be a tool for resistance against oppression as they “create individuals instead of stereotypes, and diversity instead of homogeneity” (Janette, 2011, p. x). Accordingly, these fields explore how queer Vietnamese/Asian American characters, shaped by multiple forms of oppression, challenge dominant narratives and stereotypes about marginalized communities in their works.

3 SELF-PROTECTION IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE QUEER VIETNAMESE AMERICAN IDENTITY

In this analysis of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the selected scenes highlight the intersection of its protagonist's queer and immigrant of color identity, while he self-protects from systemic prejudice in the United States. The examination occurs by reading queerly and hybridity concepts to deepen the textual registers regarding Little Dog's choices of vocabulary to narrate such experiences of intersection in the letter. Thereby, it becomes possible to identify his self-discovery and, consequently, how his homosexual Vietnamese American identity is constructed.

It is possible to see the combination of the aspects mentioned earlier in the first interaction between Little Dog and Trevor when they meet in the tobacco fields where they worked during adolescence. First, the narrator reflects on Trevor's impact on his coming-of-age, more precisely on the way he started seeing himself and his desires for things that might not be easily achievable as they are beyond his control. Then, he describes how this encounter happened:

When the boy came to me one afternoon, the boy who would change what I knew of summer, how deep a season opens when you refuse to follow the days out of it, I said “Sorry”. The boy from whom I learned there was something even more brutal



and total than work — want. That August, in the fields, it was he who came into my vision. Near day's end, I felt another worker beside me but, caught in the rhythm of the harvest, couldn't stop to consider him. We picked for about ten minutes, his presence intensifying on the periphery until he stepped in front of me as I reached to lift a wilted stalk. I looked up at him, a head taller, his finely boned face dirt-streaked under a metal army helmet, tipped slightly backward, as if he had just walked out from one of Lan's stories and into my hour, somehow smiling. "Trevor", he said, straightening up. "I'm Trevor". [...] And because I am your son, I said, "Sorry". Because I am your son, my apology had become, by then, an extension of myself. It was my *Hello* (Vuong, 2019, p. 93/94).

The first conversation between these characters, who experience a romantic relationship throughout the narrative, is marked by a striking linguistic feature. That is the use of the expression 'sorry' by the Vietnamese American character in response to the white American who had introduced himself. Little Dog's speech is intriguing because, in this context, it is socially expected for him to say his own name or simply greet Trevor with 'hello', as he himself mentions. However, that is not what happens. Little Dog implies through the excerpt that his use of the expression 'sorry' is a linguistic mechanism that he has incorporated into his identity as a form of self-protection from the (oppressive) white society. It is possibly not only related to his origin but also to his sexuality, as his secrecy about this aspect made him want to attract even less attention. This idea is reinforced as he refers to his mother as responsible for the response he gave to Trevor.

To understand Rose's influence in this scene, it is necessary to revisit Little Dog's memories with her. As he grew up watching his mother work in a nail salon, the protagonist noticed that the most used English word there was 'sorry'. The salon employees used this term to position themselves in an inferior role and thus allow the clients to feel "right, superior, and charitable" (Vuong, 2019, p. 91). Consequently, by pleasing them with this speech, the manicures managed to keep their jobs — which were crucial for supporting their families. Hence, Little Dog also incorporated this vocabulary and the mindset of "Asian American men as inferior subjects in both mind and body" (Pelaud, 2011, p. 78) into his everyday life because he understood that it is what American society expects from him, and, thus, he can conform to its standards. This sense of agency experienced by Little Dog often compels individuals to adopt behaviors that position them as inferior to others in power relations. It perpetuates a cycle of subservience due to social factors associated with discrimination, such as gender, race, sexuality, or social class. By doing so, the protagonist could avoid drawing attention and conflicts by behaving as inferior to white people, for instance, apologizing in advance — even without having done anything wrong.

In this sense, Little Dog's perspective in the letter enables a reading that aligns this scene with the context of the intersection between sexuality and immigration in the

construction of his identity. After all, the narrator points out that the behavior of invisibility, which he incorporated into his own identity as an attempt to work around the discrimination faced by Vietnamese individuals (especially those who are queer) in the U.S., prevented him from engaging in a dignified interaction with the white American who had caught his attention since their first encounter and had shown an interest in getting to know him.

This impact that Little Dog feels in the first interaction with Trevor intensifies in the second time, which happens on the same day. The narrator reflects on the sensation of having felt seen. He states that his feelings for having been noticed by Trevor are not limited to desire or lust. Instead, they are tied to the possibility of living energizing experiences now that he felt visible to a person who, incidentally, awakened his interest. This contact with Trevor was so unexpected and deep that Little Dog was left without a reaction, but he realized that it had impacted his self-perception.

What I felt then, however, was not desire, but the coiled charge of its possibility, a feeling that emitted, it seemed, its own gravity, holding me in place. The way he watched me back there in the field, when we worked briefly, side by side, our arms brushing against each other as the plants racked themselves in a green blur before me, his eyes lingering, then flitting away when I caught them. I was seen — I who had seldom been seen by anyone. I who was taught, by you, to be invisible in order to be safe (Vuong, 2019, p. 96).

Perhaps, one of the aspects that most catches the attention in this passage is the narrator's use of the expression 'invisible' to define his own identity when referring to the time of the episode, having once again his mother's influence in this statement. As already mentioned, she taught him from childhood to try to go unnoticed by society as a way of protecting himself, avoiding conflicts resulting from white Americans' prejudice against people of Vietnamese origin. In the case of Little Dog, he had tried to protect himself even more because he perceived that his chances of being discriminated against increased due to the risks that non-heterosexual individuals tend to experience in homophobic U.S. society.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that, according to Berlant and Warner (1998, *apud* Stockton, 2023, p. 71), queer people are seen as immoral within the heteronormative perspective, since "these [societal] norms [associated with heteronormativity] are culturally fused into people's sense of right and wrong, such that they often become visible through their perceived violation". For this reason, LGBTQIAP+ individuals do not go unnoticed in heteronormative American society, as their identities and actions challenge normativity, being interpreted as a violation of the sense of morality.



In this way, the expression ‘invisible’ draws attention not only due to its meaning but mainly because it becomes clear that the narrator recognizes that he had tried to achieve that invisibility in practice for many years, making this mechanism of self-protection practically an integral part of his identity construction — although not fully achievable due to his sexuality. Hence, Little Dog survived in American society by protecting himself from the potential dangers that this discriminatory reality presented; however, he realizes that he spent many years merely existing, without truly experiencing life to the fullest.

The narrator mentions Rose in the letter to highlight her influence on how he felt when experiencing the intersection of his sexuality and race through contact with Trevor and other people from American society. In addition to those moments, there are scenes in which this intersection results from their interactions. A representation of this is when Little Dog confides to his mother about being attracted to boys. Considering his historical and cultural knowledge of the Vietnamese language, especially regarding the vocabulary related to non-heterosexuality, he reflects on which terms would be more appropriate to express this information. So, the protagonist concludes that it is best to tell it in English as a strategy of self-protection, as in Vietnamese it could lead to a higher likelihood of misunderstood meanings about what he intends to convey:

“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 (Vuong, 2019, p. 130).

Choosing the English language worked well, as Rose understood the message without any hint of ambiguous interpretation regarding the criminal sense that her son had feared before this conversation. As a result, Little Dog self-protected and, consequently, did not have to deal with his mother misinterpreting information that is particularly important for him to see her understand accurately, as it corresponds to his sexual identity.

Little Dog’s reflection on which language he should use to tell his mother about being a homosexual goes beyond the realm of sexuality and reveals much about not being a white American. The decision not to use the Vietnamese language is linked to a cultural context marked by the traumas of colonization by French Christian missionaries. This context leads LGBTQIAP+ Vietnamese individuals to prefer to avoid certain expressions due to their historical association with hostility.

According to Callier (2022, p. 536), LGBTQIAP+ racialized individuals understand the ways they are socially devalued, as they have been violently disciplined through the normalization of marginalization imposed by society, both within and outside of schools.

It might be for experiencing this devaluation that the protagonist finds the use of the expression in English — rather than *pê-dê* — more adequate. After all, he wants his mother to immediately understand the message, and he knows the Vietnamese expression traditionally carries a negative connotation that, along with making him feel offended due to its association of his sexuality with pedophilia, it could affect the listener's comprehension, resulting in a misunderstanding. This concern is present in Little Dog's and queer Vietnamese Americans' identity formation. However, it is not shared among queer white Americans, as they do not experience a historical trauma influenced by colonialism that associates the expression used to describe homosexuality with criminality or pedophilia.

Another moment in which the intersection of Little Dog's homosexual and Vietnamese identity emerges in his interaction with his mother is in this scene that captures a visual glimpse of the intolerance the protagonist experiences in American society:

Do you remember the morning, after a night of snow, when we found the letters
FAG4LIFE scrawled in red spray paint across our front door?
The icicles caught the light and everything looked nice and about to break.
'What does it mean?' you asked, coatless and shivering. 'It says 'Merry Christmas,'
Ma', I said, pointing. 'See? That's why it's red. For luck' (Vuong, 2019, 180).

It is important to mention that this memory is limited to this small passage and does not guide the reader in determining whether the event happened before or after his mother knew he was homosexual. Also, it appears in the letter in a detached manner, without being fully connected to the subject that came before or after it. Despite these aspects, it is still a striking and curious passage, especially due to the words that compose it.

When questioned by his illiterate Vietnamese mother about the expression 'FAG4LIFE' that suddenly appears on their front door, and she does not know what is written, Little Dog chooses not to mention the expression. Instead, he uses visual aspects (the red spray paint) and the time of year (Christmas) to create a response that works around the subject. In this regard, he affirms that what is written is 'Merry Christmas' due to the components within the context of the phrase aligning with the cultural knowledge they have acquired in the U.S. about Christmas — people wishing a Merry Christmas door-to-door, the color red, and the time of year. According to Anzaldúa (1987, p. 20), "culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture". Therefore, since this celebration is not a custom enrooted among citizens in Vietnam due to the predominance of Buddhism in the country, the knowledge Rose has about this matter is especially tied to the symbols she learned in the U.S. Hence, her son's response is convincing to her.



The protagonist's intention is to avoid further questioning from Rose and not have to provide explanations about, for instance, why that term was placed on their door and what such an act and words mean. If he had stated exactly what was written, he would likely have had to explain the expression 'FAG4LIFE' to his mother, which could lead to an uncomfortable conversation and potentially harm their relationship. By strategically choosing a response that changes the meaning of the message, Little Dog achieves some goals. He not only protects his mother from exposure to offensive and homophobic language, but he also avoids the possibility of openly revealing his own identity. Furthermore, he avoids disclosing the challenges he faces as a homosexual immigrant of color in American society.

Based on Berlant and Warner (1998, *apud* Stockton, 2023, p. 75), this means that the potential conversation they would have had would make Little Dog show her that in the heteronormative sphere where they live in, the homosexual body cannot camouflage or go unnoticed, unlike the heterosexual body — which is considered the implicit norm. In other words, no matter how much her son had tried to follow her advice about being invisible (due to his Vietnamese origin) as a means of protection against discrimination in the U.S., he would not be able to do so due to the discomfort his homosexual identity elicits in a homophobic society, simply by his existence. Therefore, the strategy of self-protection in choosing to associate the written words with a positive and festive aspect, like Christmas, demonstrates that the protagonist is a queer Vietnamese immigrant who has developed his identity through the social, historical, and cultural knowledge of American, Vietnamese, and LGBTQIAP+ communities to navigate the adversities that arise in his path within the discriminatory society he lives in.

4 CONCLUSION

This article has presented how the intersection of sexuality and race shapes the identity construction of the protagonist of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* within American society. For this purpose, key moments in the letter have been shown which highlighted the linguistic and behavioral choices the protagonist adopted in his identity as self-protective measures to deal with discrimination in this country due to his sexual orientation and origin.

It is implied in Little Dog's narration that he learned strategies on how to discreetly protect himself as he experienced complex scenarios during his formative years. For being a homosexual Vietnamese American, he faces racism, homophobia, and xenophobia, but not in isolation; actually, it is the combination of these repressive power structures. Consequently, the intersection of these vectors of power influences his decisions,



interpersonal relationships, and journey to discover spaces where he could authentically and honorably express himself. In other words, the prejudice he experiences for years impacts his perception of his own worth as an individual and leads him to believe for many years that being invisible is the best option for someone like him in the U.S.A. He also becomes cautious when discussing topics related to the LGBTQIAP+ community to avoid conflicts or misunderstandings. So, he learned to carefully choose his words and conceal parts of his identity — sacrificing his authenticity — in pursuit of safety.

Little Dog's story not only illustrates the challenges that LGBTQIAP+ individuals of color face but also highlights the resilience and capacity for resistance that characterize their quest for authenticity and dignity within a challenging social context. Thereby, it has been possible to observe that his journey is complex, especially due to the social powerlessness that led him to develop an early maturity to deal — mostly on his own — with a society that diminishes his identity and makes him believe he should aim to be invisible to avoid causing disruptions with his presence. However, he cannot achieve this invisibility, as LGBTQIAP+ bodies do not go unnoticed within the prevalent heterosexual normativity in American reality. This indicates that he truly needs to know how to defend himself, as society is not willing to provide a safe space for him to fully exist as an individual who embraces his sexuality and cultural identity.

In this context, the language and interactions that Little Dog shares in the letter not only reveal his personal struggles but also shed light on the experiences shared by many other individuals facing the intersection of marginalized identities. The study of his identity construction not only acknowledges the challenges but also highlights the resilience, strength, and determination that characterize the journey of the LGBTQIAP+ community of color — especially Vietnamese — in the United States.

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Title in Portuguese:

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