“Queer Soulmates”: The Nonnormative Properties of American Queer Autofiction

Khuram Hussain

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University of East Anglia
School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a critical-creative exploration of 'queer' both as an identity and a narrative form within the genre of contemporary queer self-writing. Part One features a critical essay employing phenomenology and queer theory to analyze the representation of non-normative sexualities in current literary works. It examines Garth Greenwell's *What Belongs to You*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* through the autofictional frame. The synthesis of current autofiction and queer phenomenology forms an expansive framework for examining identity's subtleties, narrative construction, and self-portrayal, emphasizing autofiction's capacity for articulating queer personhood while dissecting the formal elements of the chosen texts. The critique weaves together queer theory and literary criticism to unpack each text's political dimensions, showing how each champions queer identities and their atypical relationship with space, time, and desire.

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Please note that in the preparation of this manuscript, US spelling and punctuation conventions have been used throughout.

PART ONE | "Queer Soulmates": The Nonnormative Properties of American Queer Autofiction

Garth Greenwell's *What Belongs to You*, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous,* and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*.

INTRODUCTION| The Nonnormative in Queer Self-writing: A Phenomenological Study of American Queer Autofiction

Introduction to the Phenomenological Exploration

Autofiction has found its soulmate in queer writing. The autofictional form, which plays with and tests certain storytelling conventions, has emerged as a perfect canvas for queer writers to explore self-representation through their experimental narratives. The form's potential for disruption with styles, discourses, and genres appears particularly suited to expressing sexual identities that diverge from predominant sexual norms. The depictions of selfhood in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Garth Greenwell's *What Belongs to You*, and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* act as discourses on queer embodiment, articulated through contemporary interpretations of 'queer,' which David Halperin describes as "positionality vis-à-vis the normative."[1] Yet, the fusion of fact and fiction in autofiction recalls the challenge Saint Augustine faced in *Confessions*: the question of how autobiographical writing should engage with and acknowledge the epistemological uncertainty in recounting real events.[2]

In an era marked by what David Shields calls "reality hunger," this issue takes on new urgency. Shields, in his diagnosis of "the banality of nonfiction,"[3] propounds a memoir approach where "the facts of the situation don't much matter, so long as the underlying truth resonates."[4] This philosophy mirrors my own writing style, which seeks truth and draws from personal experiences to create narratives of personal and contemporary relevance. My approach has evolved aesthetically and critically through engagement with the self-representational works of other queer writers, including those examined in this study. Consistent with Shields' viewpoint, writing my novel *The Boy and the Bot* from the perspective

[1] David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 62.
[2] Augustine, Confessions, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991).
[3] David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (Hamish Hamilton, 2010), p. 40p.
[4] Ibid., p. 41.

of an intradiegetic gay protagonist exposed the limitations of plot-driven storytelling for portraying the complex 'I'. This insight led to deliberate structural disruptions across spatial and temporal dimensions of the text. It also fostered artistic liberty to blend factual events with fictional narratives, producing what Serge Doubrovsky refers to as *symbolic truths*—meanings recognized symbolically rather than as "the revelation of empirical fact"[5]—within the autofictional space. As such, the linguistic shape of lived experience moves beyond empirical disclosures in *The Boy and the Bot*, endowing the narrative with layers of personal and symbolic import.

Background and Rationale

This thesis unfolds in two interconnected parts: The first is an analytical essay that brings together contemporary autofiction with queer phenomenology, providing a multifaceted lens for the investigation of identity, narrative, and expression for queer subjects. It dissects the interplay of theme and form across selected literary works to illuminate how autofiction deepens our perception of queer existence. The second part is a creative endeavor, an original autofiction narrative that intertwines the earlier analyzed themes into the life story of a first-generation gay American Muslim, mapping the protagonist's journey through space and time against the backdrop of a re-envisioned American dream seen through a queer lens.

Autofiction's emergence challenges and expands traditional literary categories, though its recognition as a distinct movement is complicated by a lack of broad-based authorial consensus. Despite the proliferation of this approach amid growing concerns about authenticity,[6] autofiction remains exclusive to a select group of writers, predominantly in

[5] Hywel Rowland Dix, *Autofiction in English* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 13.
[6] Michelle Goldberg, 'Adelle Waldman's Journey From Brooklyn Literati to a Big Box Store,' *The New York Times*, 4 March 2024 < https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/04/opinion/adelle-waldman-help-wanted.html> [accessed 9 March 2024]
Lauren Elkin, 'Bad Genre: Annie Ernaux, Autofiction, and Finding a Voice,' *The Paris Review*, 26 October 2018 <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/10/26/bad-genre-annie-ernaux-autofiction-and-finding-a-voice> [accessed 15 December 2022].

Anglo-Saxon and European contexts, whose self-representational stories are seen by the academy as helping to create a new kind of literature.[7] Critics and publishers frequently reduce such works to outdated categories like "autobiographical," "immigrant novel," or "gay novel," thereby restricting them to conventional genres. Nigerian-American autofiction author Tope Folarin observes that writers of color often feel compelled to create characters that meet the academy's expectations.[8] Folarin also highlights the absence of a collective manifesto, which precludes autofiction from attaining the status of a literary movement. Writers such as Chris Kraus eschew the term autofiction altogether, given modernism's historical connection with the 'auto'—a case in point would be James Joyce's *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*—and so "why do we need a special term for it?"[9] The corpus of queer writing, with post-war autobiographical works by Gore Vidal, James Baldwin, and Christopher Isherwood, embodies this modernist inquiry, probing the boundary between private revelation and public performance of desire. [10]

It is precisely this dialectic of public and private lives, of revelation and secrecy that underpins the definition of autofiction as a separate literary category. Unlike modernism, which similarly explores subjective experience, autofiction stands apart in its foundation upon the author's actual life events. Therefore, autofiction's subjectivity emerges not merely as a narrative technique but as a core element that intimately links the narrative to the author's personal life. Accordingly, designating these texts as autofiction—notwithstanding Nelson's text's relation to the term—serves a polemical purpose, which I will address more fully in the chapter devoted to this. It represents an embodiment, or instantiation, of stylistic and generic

[7] The term autofiction is primarily used to describe works by Rachel Cusk, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Chris Kraus, Olivia Laing, V.S. Naipaul, J.M. Coetzee, and Ben Lerner, among a few others.
[8] Tope Folarin, 'Can a Black Novelist Write Autofiction?' *Critical Mass*, October 27, 2020. <https://newrepublic.com/article/159951/can-black-novelist-write-autofiction> [accessed 13 December 2022].
[9] Rebecca Van Laer, "Just Admit It, You Wrote a Memoir," Electric Lit, May 25, 2018. <https://electricliterature.com/just-admit-it-you-wrote-a-memoir> [accessed 13 December 2022].
[10] The time period is marked by the publication of Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* (1964), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948).

innovation, where the author's personal experiences are not just fodder but the very crux of the subject matter.

In his critique of conventional literary theory, Timothy Bewes introduces the term "instantiation"[11] to address the limitations of analyzing novels solely as objects of theoretical inquiry. He argues that this approach falls short when engaging with postfictionality, which autofiction exemplifies. Within autofiction, instantiation is not simply a method of recounting a tale but a conscious literary maneuver that binds the author's lived experiences to the narrative framework, thereby urging readers to reconsider the dichotomy of fiction and nonfiction. Here, the author's subjectivity becomes a pivotal narrative component, essential to both the creation and interpretation of the literary work.

The narratives I analyze in this study explore the intersection between desire, politics, and identity, which form the cornerstone of my reading. Firstly, on a macro level, through thematic and formal observations about 'queer,' and secondly on a micro level, by examining how space engenders questions of orientation. By showing how these writers navigate and challenge the constructs of heteronormativity *and* homonormativity, I seek not only to contribute to the field of queer theory but to elucidate the interplay between identity, power, and narrative within the broader socio-literary landscape. Lisa Duggan, the originator of the term homonormativity, links this concept to a neoliberal sexual politics that upholds and perpetuates established heteronormative structures, while "a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption."[12] Duggan's theory aligns with Jasbir Puar's homonationalism, which critiques a homonormativity that intersects with American nationalism, "generated both by national rhetorics of patriotic inclusion and by gay, lesbian,

[11] Timothy Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), p.5.
[12] Lisa Duggan, 'The new homonormativity: the sexual politics of neoliberalism,' in *Materializing Democracy*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Duke University Press, 2002), p. 179.

and queer subjects themselves."[13] This study situates itself at a critical juncture in queer literary discourse, highlighting how narratives of desire within queer self-writing demonstrate identity formation—a discourse informed by the societal forces of normativity and the resistance that defines queer experience.

Research Problem and Objectives

This thesis is an investigation into fictive activations of the self. In autofiction, as on TikTok, creatives produce stylized versions of themselves against meticulously constructed backdrops. This synthetic becoming is interpreted by Doubrovsky, who suggests that sincerity, the regulating principle of autobiography, falls short in conveying the existential objectives of self-representation. In his dialogue with French literary scholar Roger Célestin, he posits that the meaning of life escapes us in certain ways and is "reinvented" [14] in writing, which he calls autofiction. French autofiction authors such as Philippe Forest, Catherine Cusset, and Nina Bouraoui have tailored this concept to their writing practices. Cusset, in her 2012 presentation 'The Limits of Autofiction,' explains that autofiction's quest for truth, anchored in the blend of fact and fiction, derives its vigor from emotion, which she deems an "organizing force" [15] for the narrative, making it not truer, but "richer."[16]

This study, informed by queer theory, seeks to explore nonnormative experiences—those diverging from societal norms and expectations about identity, with a focus on sexuality and gender. It poses three critical questions: (1) In what ways do individual perceptions of space and time influence the depiction of embodiment? (2) What narrative techniques do

[13] Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, Durham 2007), p. 39.
[14] Although the term autofiction has its grounds within the French academy—Doubrovsky is credited for "inventing" it to describe his novel *Fils* (1977)—studies on the autobiographical practice reflect early twentieth century synthesis between modernism and life-writing. A notable precursor of the was the term "autobiografiction" which was recently redeployed by Max Saunders and attributed to Stephen Reynolds's 1906 essay 'Autobiografiction.'
[15] Cusset, 'The Limits of Autofiction.'
[16] Serge Doubrovsky, *Autobiographiques: de Corneille à Sartre* (Perspectives Critiques: Presses universitaires de France, 1988), p. 78.

selected works employ to depict the embodied self as it moves through space and time? (3) How does the author's direct engagement with their life, as both muse and motif, elucidate expressions of queerness? Building on Steven Seidman's assertion of queer theory's ability to articulate "forms of personal and social difference,"[17] this research seeks to connect the theoretical and experiential dimensions of queer identities. It examines their manifestation and realization within literary narratives. By advocating autofiction as a vehicle for examining queer selfhood, this study argues that autofiction does more than just create a space for identity articulation and acknowledgment. It also acts as a conduit for individuals to perform their otherness. The analysis centers on the subject as a carrier of queer epistemologies and examines how the formal characteristics of autofiction accentuate the self within the text.

Research Methodology

In my analytical framework, I use phenomenology and close reading as primary lenses. I draw on Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, which establishes the connection between Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodiment and sexual orientation. For Merleau-Ponty, the body shapes individual world interpretations, and therefore is central to experience. Thus, he positions consciousness as anchored in the "*body-subject*"[18] rather than as a detached, cerebral experience. Ahmed maps the reciprocal bond between the body and space by emphasizing orientation's temporal dimension. She proposes that individual self-conceptions develop over time via interactions with spaces: "After all, to acquire a direction takes time [...] it is by following some lines more than others that we might acquire our sense of who it is that we

[17] Seidman, *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, p. 135.
[18] For example, in autobiographical writing, the purely objective autobiographical writer fails to acknowledge that a body-subject like himself is his own subject matter. Objectivity, as the phenomenologist would argue, rests on unexamined presuppositions which need to be acknowledged.

are."[19] Crucially, the notion of orientation involves navigating cultural and historical environments beyond physical positioning. Within this paradigm, Butler's notion of performativity in *Gender Trouble* further illuminates identity formation processes. According to Butler, repetitive gender performances solidify and shape the psyche through societal norms, forming a basis for agency that "cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility."[20]

The phenomenological approach is pivotal to this thesis. While interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) has seen widespread use across various research fields, its application in literary studies has often been confined to examining reader-text dynamics. Notable mid-20th-century scholars such as Roman Ingarden and Gaston Bachelard have contributed to this focus, though its popularity has fluctuated due to the rise of New Criticism, Marxist criticism, and Cultural Studies. This research intends to bridge this gap by applying phenomenology to autofiction, not just to analyze the text's impact on the reader but to interrogate the representation of the 'I.' In this respect the aim is to reveal the nuanced, subjective contours of the self that take form in the embellishment of lived experience. Indeed, Diana Fuss emphasizes queer theory's obligation to "exert sustained pressure from/on the margins to reshape and to reorient the field of sexual difference to include sexual differences."[21] Fuss, drawing on Lacan, argues for a relational foundation of identity that acknowledges its interplay with difference. As such, phenomenology, with its focus on the subject as the source of knowledge, provides an invaluable frame for examining "the margins" and articulating novel forms of queerness as this study aims to do.

At the heart of this discussion on knowledge is the role of language, which in the phenomenological tradition is theorised in particular ways which are helpful for my purposes.

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[19] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 31.
[20] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (S.I: Taylor and Francis, 2011), p. xxiv.
[21] Diana Fuss, *Inside/out: lesbian theories, gay theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 6.

Martin Heidegger, alongside Edmund Husserl, considers language as the medium through which the world's meaning is revealed to Dasein, or being-in-the-world. Hans-Georg Gadamer further develops this idea to suggest that all understanding is inherently phenomenological and can only be achieved through language. He argues that reality manifests through language, saying, "language is only real because the world is represented within it."[22] For Gadamer, tradition informs understanding, embedding it with prejudices that shape our knowledge framework. Paul Ricoeur furthers this dialogue by emphasizing language's narrative capacity in defining existence. By differentiating between spoken word and text, Ricoeur illustrates how narrative positions subjects within both discourse and experience. These principles resonate with the essence of autofiction, where language serves as a crucible for self-construction. Catherine Cusset writes, "the only fiction in autofiction is the work on language." [23] Writer and critic Lauren Elkin also notes that "autofiction produces the self within language, rather than within an approved genre; it brings form out of voice." [24]

This raises some key questions: In what ways do language and form cultivate the self and express queerness? How do queer authors employ these tools to encapsulate their unique experiences? My aim with this thesis is to show how this happens in these specific cases toward the conception of the 'I' through formal experimentation. 'Autofiction' is the name for one—self-conscious and singular—genre through which this not only happens but is shown to happen. The genre's innovative and disruptive nature—its blending of styles, its spatial play, its reworking of narratological norms—showcases how the 'I' can emerge and evolve in a queer context, through a serial portrayal of the narrating self.

[22] Langdridge, *Phenomenological Psychology: Theory Research and Method*, p. 51.
[23] Cusset, 'The Limits of Autofiction.'
[24] Lauren Elkin, 'Bad Genre: Annie Ernaux, Autofiction, and Finding a Voice,' *The Paris Review*, 26 October 2018 <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/10/26/bad-genre-annie-ernaux-autofiction-and-finding-a-voice> [accessed 15 December 2022].

In the following chapters, I examine the narrativized 'I' to highlight the thematic and structural embodiments of queerness. My analysis identifies manifestations of queerness through diverse approaches: (1) depicting non-normative bodies interacting with spaces and objects, (2) exploring the confluence of desire and intersectionality with orientation, (3) illustrating non-linear temporalities that break from traditional narratives, (4) evaluating narrative styles and linguistic innovations, and (5) casting the 'I' as an agent of transformation and resistance against dominant power dynamics. The texts' inclusion of anecdotes, confessions, and reflections provides insights into how queer identities navigate space, time, and narrative. By adopting a phenomenological perspective on autofiction, and echoing Ahmed, I consider the "body as an object that is *sensitive* to all the rest," [25] while recognizing the intertextual and enigmatic elements that shape postmodernism.

The theme of desire and relationships is central to the texts in question. To dissect these elements, I will draw on Leo Bersani's *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essa*ys, which scrutinizes the intersection of social dynamics and exclusion with desire, an analysis particularly relevant to the works of Vuong and Greenwell. José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* further informs this examination by envisioning a utopian performativity. As Muñoz argues, "Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."[26] Stated differently, a queer futurity hinges on the promise of transformation. This crucial perspective, reflected in these narratives', assumes a critical role in discussions of belonging and, in Nelson's case, the process of becoming.

[25] Ahmed., p. 67.
[26] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), p. xxiv.

The inquiry will navigate the dynamics of narrative forms and language. Form-wise, I will assess divergence from certain storytelling norms as reflected by tone, mood, technique, temporal shifts, and genre blending. Critical texts for this aspect include Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, which assists in evaluating the polysemous qualities of the narratives, and Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, which offers insights into dimensions of plot and character. Further, the study will incorporate Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to explore the unconscious influences on identity formation within the narratives. Lacan's notion of the "mirror stage" as a formative moment of the ego suggests that the characters' sense of self is influenced by their perceptions and misperceptions in their formative years. The analysis will delve into how characters reconcile their internal world (the Imaginary) with external societal structures (the Symbolic), and how these experiences are influenced by the underlying unconscious (the Real), the most elusive Lacanian order. The Real represents what eludes language and symbolization, fundamentally disrupting the stability of both the Imaginary and the Symbolic. It's the inexpressible foundation that shapes the characters' interactions and reactions within their worlds. This addition promises a more comprehensive psychoanalytic dissection of character formation and narrative structure, deepening the understanding of the forces that drive identity construction within the text.

Intersectionality, defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, denotes the convergence of various forms of marginalization and their interconnected nature.[27] Evolving from its legal origins, intersectionality now encompasses a broader spectrum of marginalized subjectivities, as shown in the texts. For these writers, intersectionality informs rhetorical choices; race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and desire not only drive storylines but also relate to national narratives of exclusion, as per Puar's notion of homonationalism.[28] Intersectionality theory is thus an

[27] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-167.
[28] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 5.

indispensable framework in exploring how multifaceted identities inform these texts' narratives.

Organization of the Thesis

The thesis opens with Garth Greenwell's *What Belongs to You*, where it investigates the complex role of desire and its relationship to exclusion, and how these forces shape identity. The narrative of the protagonist's charged relationship with Mitko, marked by exploitation yet emotionally binding, and his experiences of upbringing and alienation, serve as a backdrop to this inquiry. By drawing from Bersani and Lauren Berlant, the analysis dissects the interplay of shame, desire, and history. The narrative ultimately delivers a multifaceted depiction of intimacy and its profound effects on self-conception and the sense of space.

The second chapter focuses on Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, which is structured as a letter to the protagonist's illiterate mother, Rose. The novel serves as an urgent exploration of love, loss, and the quest for acceptance in a world shaped by both anguish and beauty. Vuong's narrative, rich with echoes of trauma, is analyzed through Cathy Caruth's work in trauma studies. Caruth points to trauma's "enigmatic core" that haunts its survivor not merely through the recall of injury but through its very unassimilated nature: "the delay or incompletion in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event." [29] Her theory contextualizes how trauma, through its belatedness, disrupts the narrative self and contributes to the text's fragmentation, a characteristic of Vuong's autofiction.

In the final chapter, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* provides a self-narrative that blends personal experience with theoretical discourse. Presented in fragmented form, *The Argonauts* engages in a dialectical exploration of gender and sexuality within the context of

[29] Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 5.

Nelson's relationship with the artist Harry Dodge, while chronicling her experiences of pregnancy and motherhood. Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* enriches this analysis by illuminating how societal factors inscribe meaning onto bodies. Grosz views these factors as social inscriptions that give rise to a psychical interiority; inscriptions, or "texts," construct bodies as networks of meaning and social significance, "producing them as meaningful and functional 'subjects' within social ensembles."[30] As such, bodies can be viewed as living narratives that challenge cultural and normative constructs, a central theme in Nelson's work.

Nelson's text, which advocates eschews binaries within the narrative of her personal life, showcases the inherent subjectivity at the heart of autofiction. Indeed, her narrative's distinct temporal fluidity and deliberate event curation emphasize this aspect. Brontez Purnell, a queer writer, has a programme on *The New Yorker* radio hour, "Memoir Is Fiction—I Don't Care What Anyone Says." In this, Purnell elaborates that "You [or] I could both write down our lives as true as we know it. But the second our mom reads it, or one of our siblings reads it, or anybody else peripherally in the book, they can easily say, 'What are you talking about? That never happened like that.'"[31] Here, Purnell acknowledges that memory is a disputed realm, subject to different interpretations that can challenge a singular narrative of truth. Hywel Dix notes this subjectivity as a defining feature of autofiction, a quality that Nelson's self-portrayal intrinsically embodies. While Nelson's work is notable for its autot*heoretica*l style, it shares common ground with Vuong's and Greenwell's texts in form and substance. It contributes significantly to the body of research by providing a foundation for the theoretical underpinnings of queer concepts and portraying a spectrum of queer archetypes beyond solely homosexual narratives.

[30] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 117.
[31] 'For Brontez Purnell, "Memoir Is Fiction—I Don't Care What Anyone Says,"' *The New Yorker Radio Hour*, 16 February 2024 <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/articles/for-brontez-purnell-memoir-is-fictioni-dont-care-what-anyone-says> [accessed 20 February 2024].

This thesis concludes by recapitulating the findings from the three texts. Desire emerges as a particularly potent and queer force within these narratives, vital to understanding the phenomenology of queer identity. The narratives further illustrate performativity as a dynamic expression of queerness, while emphasizing desire's transformative potential. This study also integrates the diverse narrative strategies these texts deploy to represent queer experiences. From this foundation, the thesis proposes directions for future research to enrich the field of queer literary studies.

What emerges, by and large, is the inherent challenge of articulating the self. In grappling with and acknowledging these complexities, autofiction confronts language's limits, formal departures, and memory's fallibility. Queer theory's adherence to social constructivism often overlooks these issues. Lanei Rodemeyer posits a strong link between phenomenology and queer theory despite the latter's rejection of phenomenology on methodological grounds.[32] She builds her argument on the poststructuralist insights of Gayle Salamon and David Ross Fryer, calling for a reassessment of gender and sexual identity through the lens of embodiment's discursive essence. Drawing on Lisa Käll and Sara Ahmed's discussions, Rodemeyer charts a course for phenomenology as the experiential basis for developing a political stance or identity construct. Although Ahmed's work integrates phenomenology and queer theory, thereby reinforcing Rodemeyer's perspective, it also modifies the focus from spatial to sexual orientation, a shift Ahmed acknowledges: "Although I follow the concept of orientations in this book, it is important to note that I start with phenomenology. And yet, even at this starting point I seem to lose my way."[33]

This thesis attempts to redress this gap by employing a phenomenological approach to track orientations within the selected texts. Certainly, subject positioning and bodies are

[32] Michel Foucault and Judith Butler's critique is centred on phenomenology's focus on essences or ontologies.
[33] Ahmed, p.21.

discursively constituted in queer theory, and both my critical project and creative practice delineate how orientation arises in relation to space. Here I follow Rubin's argument that Foucault's critical method "tends to undermine the authority of individual speaking subjects and thereby plays into patterns of domination that work against the possibility of marginalized subjects using their knowledge of their own subject positions to speak counterdiscursively."[34] As we transition into the first chapter, we will delve deeper into how orientations are shaped and articulated within the selected texts, setting the stage for a thorough phenomenological inquiry.

[34] Henry S. Rubin, 'Phenomenology as Method in Trans Studies,' *GLQ* 4, no. 2: 264.

CHAPTER ONE | Queer Journeys: Desire, Shame, and Utopia in Garth Greenwell's *What Belongs to You*

In Garth Greenwell's *What Belongs to You*, the titular query, resonating through 208 pages, becomes an intellectual lodestar, culminating in a somber, if not desolate, revelation: nothing. The novel follows an unnamed American teacher living in Bulgaria as he navigates desire, intimacy, and personal history. He forms a complicated relationship with Mitko, a young hustler whom he meets while cruising in a public bathroom. Despite their initial interaction being transactional, the protagonist becomes enamored with Mitko, grappling with his own compulsions, and the cultural and linguistic barriers that separate them. By interrogating space, time and embodiment, this chapter develops the variegated properties of queerness that play into desire's narrative tapestry. Greenwell's stance on autofiction aligns with a long-standing literary tradition that uses the nuances of personal experience as a foundation for fictional narratives.[35] This approach underlines the validity and richness of autofiction as a literary form, particularly for articulating the interiority of existence and probing the question of belonging, which I will track through the narrator's embodiment.

I. Embodied Spaces and Diverse Orientations

A. Individual Experiences of Queer Embodiment

In the early chapters of *What Belongs to You*, a critical scene set in the National Palace of Culture (NDK) bathrooms reveals the tension between the space's ostensible function and the sexual interactions that occur within. The narrator's observation that "the bathrooms at NDK are well enough hidden and have such a reputation that they're hardly used for anything else"[36]

[35] Garth Greenwell, "Interview on 'Cleanness' and 'What Belongs to You,'" *Observer*, January 25, 2020 <https://observer.com/2020/01/garth-greenwell-cleanness-interview> [accessed 6 April 2024].
[36] Garth Greenwell, *What Belongs to You* (London: Picador, 2017), p 4.

sanctions these spaces as cruising sites. Yet the "intense privacies"[37] of these locations confronts a contradiction embodied by the narrator's object of affection—Mitko, whose demeanor, described as "cordial and brash, entirely public,"[38] disrupts the covert nature of cruising spaces. This incongruity foreshadows the link between spatial formations and sexuality. Spaces, regardless of their reputations, are molded by the unique individuals present and the unfolding interactions.

To elaborate, the narrator's turn "into"[39] the room at NDK signifies that even spaces known for sexual liaisons can host the unexpected. Or to echo Sarah Ahmed's insight, "when bodies take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit, something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens."[40] The narrator's turn "into" the cruising space reinforces the potentiality of the spatial configuration of the bathroom. Space, then, as a site of recurrent sexual encounters with Mitko—coupled with a desire for a more secluded setting free from a scrutinizing audience—evokes the narrator's desire: "I wanted him to myself, free of the audience we so frequently had at NDK."[41] The hovering and eavesdropping of others outside the stall reveal the spatial dynamics that sexualize bodies. Such interactions reflect the interplay between bodies and space and shape the behavior of NDK's visitors, including the narrator, who confesses to sometimes having pressed his ear against the walls as one of the "Unchosen."[42]

Intriguingly, this interconnectedness situates spatial orientation as an active agent in shaping sexual behaviors. The bathrooms at NDK become more than mere physical spaces; they become active agents that dictate a hierarchy of desire. In introducing the concept of the "Unchosen," Greenwell hints at individuals marginalized due to societal, cultural, or physical

[37] Ibid., p. 4.
[38] Ibid., p. 4.
[39] Ibid., p. 4.
[40] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 62.
[41] Greenwell., p. 11.
[42] Ibid., p. 11.

attributes, as they navigate sexual desirability and power dynamics. Bersani's essay, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' offers a lens to scrutinize these ontologies; "Anyone who has ever spent one night in a gay bathhouse knows that it is (or was) one of the most ruthlessly ranked, hierarchized, and competitive environments imaginable,"[43] he writes, offering a counterpoint to the utopic paradigm of bathhouses as liberating queer spaces. The narrative, thus, affirms these intersections of marginalized desires through the moniker of the "Unchosen," a complement to Bersani's "undesirables."[44]

What becomes apparent here is that the narrator's decision to bring Mitko into his home, despite the risk of robbery, stands as a rejection of the communal dynamics ingrained at NDK. This distancing from the collective experiences shared in Sofia's cruising spaces, when scrutinized through Muñoz's future-oriented lens of utopia, situates the narrator's actions as a pursuit of a meaningful connection with Mitko. Utopia, as articulated by Muñoz, materializes in "an economy of desire and desiring,"[45] one perpetually directed toward "that thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise."[46] Following this framework, the narrator's disregard for cautionary advice signifies a rebellion driven by the prospect of the "not yet here." This defiant act subverts the conventional operations of cruising spaces by a reconfiguration of relationship dynamics within these environments.

In a text marked by the potentialities of space, Bulgaria emerges as a distinct character. The depiction of Sofia, set against the decay of Soviet-era architecture, serves as a metaphor for post-capitalist stagnation—a trenchant parallel to the narrator's mental state. His journey to Varna, with the highway flanked by derelict buildings "abandoned no doubt for their larger counterparts in the city,"[47] emblemizes a capitalist dystopia. In this way, the novel employs the

[43] Leo Bersani. *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 12.
[44] Ibid., p. 12.
[45] José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York University Press, 2019), p. 26.
[46] Ibid., p. 26.
[47] Ibid., p. 41.

physical environment to echo themes of loneliness and alienation, with the city's landscape paralleling the narrator's psychological roadmap.

The centrality of objects as orientation devices is a key aspect of phenomenology, which warrants further examination in Greenwell's text. The explicit portrayal of this theme appears in the photographs displayed on the adult social networking site, which capture Mitko in various contexts and states of undress while working as a hustler. These photographs reveal facets of Mitko's private existence, such as his relationship with his first love, Julian, enriching his character's complexity. The narrator discerns the performative element in the staged photograph of a kiss between two men, yet he experiences a tangible longing arises for "access to some greater intimacy"[48] with Mitko. This longing persists as the evening progresses into online dialogues, with Mitko interacting with other men. Amid these interactions, the narrator finds solace in a slim volume of Cavafy's poetry on an increasingly sordid night. The book emerges as an orientation tool—symbolic within the narrator's search for meaning or emotional catharsis.

The text explicates the book's significance through its physical presence. The narrator contemplates the unread Cavafy on his lap, using "mawkishness" [49] to denote desire as potentially sentimental or insincere. Previously, the book held a transcendent role, marked by its nurturing quality—"the sense that stray meetings in dark rooms or the shadowy commerce of my own evening could burn with genuine luminosity, rubbing up against the realm of the ideal, ready at an instant to become metaphysics."[50] However, in the present, as the narrator transitions from fatigue to agitation, this idealism wanes. The unread book then serves as a means to reclaim the lost idealism. It reinforces the dynamic connection between the object and the narrator's shifting emotional states.

[48] Ibid., p. 21.
[49] Ibid., p. 28.
[50] Ibid., p. 28.

Furthermore, objects serve as conduits for the narrator's engagement with his past, as exemplified by reflections on his black dress shoes. These shoes evoke memories of his father's expectations and the meticulous task of polishing a similar pair "until they shone,"[51] thereby becoming a symbol of the narrator's identity as perceived by his father. The significance of the shoes extends beyond their practical function; they come to symbolize pride, worth, and selfhood, thus shaping the narrator's identity.

It is therefore important, to recognize the role of objects in shaping the narrator's embodiment. This concept is crystallized in the novel's second section during a scene with his childhood friend, K. The narrator's act of leaning back on a swing, hands on chains, gazing at a suburban sky described as "dull metal or unvarnished wood," [52] exemplifies phenomenology's concern with the body's agency in meaning-making. The sky's portrayal, seemingly void of "the patterns I had been taught were there," [53] invites a sensory interaction and conveys a departure from traditional perception. The mention of the narrator looking up introduces a vertical dimension, steering the experience toward an alternative orientation. This is reinforced when the narrator leans back too far, loses balance, and falls onto the dirt, resulting in what Ahmed terms *disorientation*, "a way of describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are."[54] Objects then, as linguistic constructs, acquire significance through narration. Embodiment, linked with the construction of meaning around objects, gains narrative significance by presenting alternative ways of being and perceiving.

The motif of gifts in Mitko's story underscores objects as symbols of connection and reciprocity. The narrator's possessions—laptop, cell phone, iPod—act as social status indicators influencing character interactions, especially in intimate settings. A sexual encounter in a Varna hotel room illustrates this: the iPod, coupled with Mitko's split attention between

[51] Ibid., p. 75.
[52] Ibid., p. 79.
[53] Ibid., p. 79.
[54] Ahmed., p. 20.

the narrator and television, channels desire and focus. Mitko's choice to watch a historical film—a selection that, for the narrator, "killed my desire"[55] —not only signifies Mitko's fleeting interest in the narrator but emphasizes the performative aspect of desire. The narrator's observation that the film "was as brutal as the film I had watched on the bus the day before" [56] suggests a shared choreographed desire informed by cultural artifacts. His reflection on desire's "little theater of heat" [57] reveals a cognizance of intimacy's performative layer, especially when objects mediate—even in transactional contexts.

In this context, embodiment is manifested through engagements with objects and cultural artifacts. Space, in other words, profoundly influences embodiment. Indeed, as the novel progresses, it becomes apparent how Bulgaria, as the novel's setting, shapes the narrator's marginalized status. One stark example occurs during the narrator's visit to a public clinic for syphilis testing. The healthcare provider's brazen announcement of his screening publicly compromises the narrator's privacy and positions the clinic as a potential source of shame. This incident provokes a visceral response, manifested in the narrator's tense presence among fellow patients. Further, the requirement to sign an agreement not to donate blood, until cleared, prompts him to reconsider his residency eligibility. This clinical encounter, illustrating societal boundaries that Ahmed terms "lines," [58] disrupts the narrator's identity, leading him to question his belonging and to view the illness as emblematic of "rootlessness." [59] The illness thus assumes a significance that extends beyond the physical, where "lines" become metaphors for displacement and stigma.

B. Desire as a Shaping Force in Embodied Spaces

[55] Greenwell., p. 49.
[56] Ibid., p. 49.
[57] Ibid., p. 44.
[58] Ahmed., p. 18.
[59] Greenwell., p. 145.

Before meeting Mitko in the NDK restrooms, the narrator characterizes this space with a pervasive sense of warning. The narrator claims, "But warning, in places like the bathrooms at the National Palace of Culture, where we met, is like some element coterminous with the air, ubiquitous and inescapable, so that it becomes part of those who inhabit it, and thus part and parcel of the desire that draws us there."[60] In this context, instead of acting as a deterrent, the warning melds with the environment's desire—an inseparable part of the ambiance. The term "part and parcel of desire" illustrates a symbiotic union between caution and desire. This observation suggests that the space's warning transcends its function as a mere signal; it becomes embodied by those within. The absorption of spatial configurations demonstrates how these settings shape subjective experiences.

The scrutiny of "warning" within the NDK's bathrooms merits attention, viewed through Muñoz's framework of queer potentiality. Muñoz contends that queer spaces accumulate histories and memories, and idealistic practices of thought that "resist the perils of heteronormative pragmatism and Anglo-normative pessimism."[61] Thus, the "warning" in this context symbolizes the societal constraints that govern and stigmatize queer desire. This amalgamation of warning with the spatial and the desired reflects the resilience and innovation within queer communities. It effectuates a transformation of seemingly inhospitable spaces into sites of potentiality and defiance.

As the narrative unfolds, spatial dynamics intensify desire. The customary setting of the NDK evolves into a realm of potentiality, marked by a nuanced relationality free of overt erotic overtures. Certainly, Mitko's forbidding quality—denoted by a sense of "bodily sureness or ease"[62] and an absence of squeamishness about existence—enhances his appeal through his presence in space. Here, the narrator's idealization of Mitko as "unattainable" [63] resonates with

[60] Ibid., p. 44.
[61] Muñoz., p. 96.
[62] Greenwell., p. 6.
[63] Ibid., p. 6.

Muñoz's concept of a queer utopian horizon. As Muñoz puts it, this horizon represents a space beyond the immediate that signals "a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world."[64] The unattainability of Mitko, therefore, takes on a symbolic significance, indicative of queer potentiality that presents a possibility for change.

This case illustrates desire's essence and evolution. The narrator, initially resisting Mitko's advances, succumbs to the potent combination of regret and Mitko's charisma. The pivotal moment occurs as Mitko enters a stall and begins to undress, prompting the narrator to acknowledge his readiness to meet Mitko's terms. This interaction, shaped by a shifting sense of self-value over time ("I was being shifted by the passage of time from one category of erotic object to another"[65]), reveals how temporal dynamics wield influence over intimacy to redefine classifications within desire's landscape. Here, desire manifests as queer—not solely in terms of physical attraction but as a deviation from norms of sexual development.

The NDK interaction between the narrator and Mitko illuminates desire's performative dimension. The narrator's reluctance to engage in transactional sex elicits from Mitko a playful withdrawal, signified by a smiling retraction of his hand. This moment, and the narrator's subsequent chant of "*Chakai chakai chakai*, wait wait wait," [66] spotlight the scripted nature of desire's expression—a routine choreographed by societal cues. The narrator's acknowledgment, "there's something theatrical in all our embraces,"[67] lends credence to this interpretation of performance within intimacy. The text further complicates this performative nature by revealing a layered pretense: the narrator feigns belief in Mitko's superficial passion while recognizing its potential artificiality, possibly amplified by intoxication.

[64] Muñoz., p. 25.
[65] Greenwell., p. 7
[66] Ibid., p. 7.
[67] Ibid., p. 9.

Inevitably, the encounter deteriorates into dissatisfaction, marked by Mitko's "poor performance of an orgasm."[68] However, as feelings of anger and betrayal diminish, the emptiness following Mitko's abrupt exit paradoxically intensifies the narrator's pleasure. This inversion of expectation echoes Foucault's remarks in an interview with *Salmagundi* magazine, wherein he asserts: "[…] for a homosexual, the best moment of love is likely to be when the lover leaves in the taxi."[69] Foucault's theory provides context for the narrator's reflective posture in the aftermath of Mitko's departure. Alone, the narrator engages with and fulfills desire not through the act itself, but through memory, savoring "the freedom of fantasy, to make of him [Mitko] what I would."[70]

By and large, the performance of desire features consistently, even within the confines of the narrator's apartment. To illustrate, in a distinctive and unexpected act, Mitko playfully licks the tip of the narrator's nose, a gesture devoid of overt seduction in its departure from the expected kiss. As their interaction unfolds, it reinforces the boundary between genuine sentiment and pretense through the observation of a French singer's video performance. The narrator notes the singer's artificiality, mirrored by the superficiality of her expressed emotions. The performance, hence, becomes a conduit for evoking and mediating the authenticity of feelings between both men.

Against this backdrop, viewing desire through a Marxist lens reveals a discernible shift from raw, personal feelings to a manifestation of dominance by the narrator. The narrator's assertion, "I set him down, and he stretched out...this compliance being, finally, what I had purchased,"[71] showcases a transformation of compliance into a commodity, legitimized by the narrator's role as the buyer. Simultaneously, Mitko's attraction to the narrator's possessions,

[68] Ibid., p. 9 – 10.
[69] Michel Foucault, Lawrence D. Kritzman, and Alan Sheridan. *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings,* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 297.
[70] Greenwell., p. 10.
[71] Ibid., p. 23.

juxtaposed with the narrator's assertion of control, exemplifies Marx's concept of alienation—the estrangement from one's authentic expressions. Desire, hence, becomes a traded commodity within the capitalist system. Both men navigate their desires within the confines of this system, which appears to not only alter the nature of emotional interactions but also their subjective experiences.

The objectification present in their relationship is multi-faceted. Mitko sees the narrator as an embodiment of Western privilege, which is evident in his longing for the narrator's foreign goods and the narrator's passive complicity in this power dynamic. This implied value is discernible in the narrator's passive acknowledgment during his public introduction—a confirming nod that indicates a shared awareness of their hierarchical positions. Conversely, the narrator views Mitko as a commodified presence, acknowledging this objectification as a form of "claiming." [72] This interplay of power and intimacy draws attention to the connection between the two. Or as Butler reminds us, it "opens a channel of exchange that not only serves the functional purpose of facilitating trade but performs the *symbolic* or *ritualistic* purpose of consolidating the internal bonds."[73]

Despite the transactional dimensions of their relationship, the book ossifies an emotional connection between the narrator and Mitko. Mitko's appellation for the narrator, "*istinski priyatel*" [74] (a true friend), gestures toward a relational depth that surpasses mere transactions. For the narrator, physical intimacy with Mitko evokes a profound embodied reaction, articulated in visceral, almost primal terms. The description of Mitko enveloping the narrator with his limbs not only vividly portrays physical proximity but also serves to reorient the narrator's emotional compass. This sensorial immersion—breathing in the alcohol-laced air mingled with Mitko's unique scent—amplifies the narrator's primal response, described

[72] Greenwell., p. 185.
[73] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (S.I: Taylor and Francis, 2011), p. 49-50.
[74] Ibid., p. 132.

metaphorically as the illumination of brain chambers. The narrative renders this encounter with aquatic imagery, likening Mitko's embrace to being encircled by a marine creature. The duality of being held "like his [Mitko's] beloved or his child; or held, I suppose it must be said, like his captive or his prey,"[75] illustrates the complexity of their connection, where affection and exploitation are intertwined.

Above, we encounter one of the numerous instances of self-negation—executed via linguistic roleplay—utilized by Greenwell's narrator to diagnose and redress his wounds. This phenomenon resonates with Bersani's inquiry into the darker facets of eroticism, where desire is so intense it verges on self-destruction. The narrator's admission—"Maybe that's why, when I finally did have sex, it wasn't so much pleasure I sought as the exhilaration of setting aside restraint, of pretending not to be afraid, a thrill of release so intense it was almost suicidal,"[76]—illustrates desire's potential for self-annihilation. This concept can be analyzed using Berlant's theory of cruel optimism, wherein the individual clings to a desire or an ideal fraught with self-harm. The "almost suicidal" thrill pursued by the narrator reflects a quest for a pleasure that is inherently self-compromising. Thus, the liaison with Mitko transcends mere calculation, or as Berlant would say, it bounds the narrator to "a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming."[77]

This opaque (and arguably cruel) connection between the two men reaches a critical point with their joint contraction of syphilis. The narrator's reflection—"Maybe I imagined we had gotten past this somehow, that the sickness we shared established a kind of solidarity between us, a shared ground"[78]—evinces a profound unity born of shared affliction. This connection is sustained by the cruelty of their relationality, which persists despite the damaging aspects of their bond. Berlant articulates this phenomenon as a return to an "optimistic

[75] Ibid., p. 30.
[76] Ibid., p. 123.
[77] Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press 2011), p. 2.
[78] Greenwell., p. 151.

attachment"[79]—a yearning for transformation through proximity to the object of desire, despite known risks. Thus, the shared experience of risk compels the narrator to interact with Mitko in a more unguarded and sociable manner. The narrator's contemplation, "How would I forgive myself if I had infected him, if I had dragged him into the world from which (as I thought of it) he had lifted me out?"[80] confronts the inseparable link between the potential for harm and profound connection. Here, we encounter Bersani's concept of "impersonal intimacy,"[81]—and Adam Phillips's understanding of relationality from *Intimacies*—suggesting that the expansive narcissism of impersonal intimacy engenders "a process of becoming,"[82] fostering evolving affinities of being. The collective encounter with syphilis serves as a compelling instance of this paradox: responsibility and shared orientations manifest within the broader terrain of queer relationality.

II. **Societal, Cultural, and Temporal Contexts**

A. Queer Temporality: A Phenomenological Examination

Greenwell's narrative restages the past to depict a temporal dimension that departs from a normative linear progression. This pivotal shift occurs as the text refocuses on the narrator's familial lineage. The narrator's sister, while inebriated, reveals her sexual experiences with older men, prompting the narrator to recognize unsettling parallels in their lives. His own conduct, marked by reckless and indiscriminate sexual encounters, echoes the infidelities of their father, shaping his understanding of both his and his sister's behaviors. Desires emerge not as isolated instances but as an enduring lineage, likened by the narrator to an "inherited disease,"[83] a potent legacy that disrupts conventional timelines in line with Muñoz's concept

[79] Berlant., p. 2.
[80] Greenwell., p. 111.
[81] Bersani., p. 162.
[82] Bersani., p. 162.
[83] Ibid., p. 67.

of queer temporality. As such, desires act as a bridge through time, anchoring the narrator to what Muñoz deems "a temporality that is not in the present but, more nearly, in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity."[84]

Indeed, desire is a function not merely of isolated occurrences but is linked to the narrator's historical narrative. This notion becomes palpable in the narrator's childhood connection with K., a friend with whom he shares a love for books. After a night spent together, K. awakens in distress, vomiting and sweating, a visceral manifestation that suggests the crossing of boundaries between the two men. When K. forcefully pushes away the narrator during another bout of vomiting (each convulsion accompanied by a moan or sob) what is implied is a realignment of their intimacy, and the blurred lines that both connect and separate these characters. Desire, thus situated in an interstitial stage, functions as "a spatiality that is aligned with a temporality that is on the threshold between identifications, lifeworlds, and potentialities,"[85] as Muñoz states. By portraying this liminal space, the narrative amplifies a conception of time that surpasses the immediate and captures an intrinsically queer essence that anticipates future possibilities.

The narrative trajectory heralds a change in the temporal dimensions by investing past joy with a heavier emotional burden. The drive to drop K. home becomes a pivotal moment; the protagonist's physical responses implicate him in their transgression. The description of the cool air flooding in establishes a sensory connection that extends the body into its spatial setting. The father's "watchfulness,"[86] as a temporal force, influences the atmosphere and emotions of the present, while a sense of "foulness"[87] infuses the narrator's being. This formative experience, described viscerally, ingrains a feeling of shame within the protagonist. Drawing on Muñoz's theory, we understand "the present must be known in relation to the

[84] Muñoz., p. 99.
[85] Ibid., p. 105.
[86] Greenwell., p. 83.
[87] Ibid., p. 83.

alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds."[88] Hence, the "foulness" exists not only outside but also lingers in the narrator's self-perception, forming a phenomenological anchor. Shame then becomes a palpable expression of this lasting temporal effect, profoundly influencing the narrative's emotional and relational dynamics.

It is important to recognize that desire and exclusion are not standalone experiences but are interwoven throughout the narrator's personal history. This becomes apparent through the introduction of a heterosexual romantic relationship involving K, wherein the narrator consents to stand at the door while K and his girlfriend share a private moment. In the narrator's quest to reestablish a bond, his role evolves from a "guard"[89] to an "audience," [90] indicating a substantial shift—a transformative moment in the temporal continuum—where desire and exclusion meet. Viewing this intersection through Muñoz's lens, which views desire as nonlinear and multifaceted, we see its ability to transcend linear time.

The narrator's relationship with K. becomes a critical lens for self-reflection and historical understanding. Greenwell illustrates this importance: "Whatever the weather, I went out and wandered, and now I wandered with K.; I introduced him to my solitude, and he deepened it without disturbance."[91] In this context, wandering, typically a solitary activity, transforms into a communal experience that enhances the narrator's solitude instead of interrupting it. Halberstam's notion of queer time—which signifies an unstructured, non-linear progression—further grounds the narrator's wanderings. As Halberstam puts it, queer time operates against "the logics of succession, progress, development, and tradition proper to hetero-familial development."[92] In the text, these logics are eschewed, influenced by desire's

[88] Muñoz., p. 27.
[89] Greenwell., p. 89.
[90] Ibid., p. 89.
[91] Ibid., p. 77.
[92] Judith Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 75.

intersection with shame, thereby marking a temporal shift that persists into the narrative's present.

B. Intersectionality in Queer Experiences

Greenwell's narrator's mental peregrinations represent multiple intersecting factors defining him as a gay, foreign, and vulnerable individual. His Southern US origins juxtaposed with his role as an English-teaching poet at a Sofia college furnish him with an ostensibly privileged status in contrast to Mitko. Yet, the narrative establishes his precarity by probing his personal history. A lecture disrupted by the news of his father's illness is emblematic of his turmoil: the event triggers a transition from academic eloquence to an awkward stance, where he is at once an educator, orator, and the forsaken son. This momentary loss of composure, described as "rehearsing"[93] thoughts devolving into "a repertoire of dull gestures, a custom,"[94] indicates the performative nature of identity. It reflects both a personal crisis and a broader commentary on the roles played within academic institutions, foreshadowing a narrative of personal and professional stagnation.

Over the novel's course, the shadow of the past becomes apparent. The protagonist's desire for Mitko becomes a nexus where feelings of shame and self-judgment intersect, rooted in childhood experiences—his estrangement from his father. In the novel's second section, the narrator reflects on the physical connection with his father, initially marked by innocence and curiosity during shared activities like "the race to the toilet after a long drive, pissing in the tight space pressed together."[95] A pivotal incident disrupts these dynamics entirely, as the father, upon noticing the son's arousal, abruptly ends their ongoing connections. This event marks "the end of care"[96] from the father—pushing the narrator away with a face "twisted in

[93] Ibid., p. 61.
[94] Ibid., p. 61.
[95] Ibid., p. 71.
[96] Ibid., p. 72.

disgust."[97] In the fictive present, while observing a father and child by the river in Blagoevgrad, the narrator reflects, "so it is, I thought then, as the man and his child released each other and moved away from the water, so it is that at the very moment we come into full consciousness of ourselves what we experience is leave-taking and a loss we seek the rest of our lives to restore."[98] The meeting of "leave-taking" and the quest to reclaim what has been lost reflects the lingering impacts of the father's reaction on the narrator's psyche. Simultaneously, this narrative trajectory converges with the narrator's recurring sense of "dislocation,"[99] briefly assuaged during the "few hours I slept embraced by Mitko."[100] The body emerges as a canvas where the emotional and temporal dimensions of loss manifest, thus shaping the narrator's inner world.

Arguably, delving into the past in these wanderings is not arbitrary. They serve to offer a prognosis of the narrator's alienation by highlighting the rupture in his childhood—the development of an "uneasy solitude" [101] that solidifies into shame. The novel, in fact, engages with and to some extent (re)produces the conventional trope of the tortured middle-aged homosexual, often portrayed in queer literature. This trope, humorously parodied in Andrew Sean Greer's *Less*, features a melancholic gay protagonist who writes novels about similar characters. Greenwell's narrator, while engaging with similar thematic territory, does not grapple with his sexual identity in straightforward terms. Rather, his conflict arises from the complexity of autonomy, the nature of his transactions with Mitko, and the recognizably human facets of their interactions beyond the commodified exchange. Greenwell himself articulates,

[97] Ibid., p. 72.
[98] Ibid., p. 34.
[99] Ibid., p. 34.
[100] Ibid., p. 34.
[101] Ibid., p. 73.

"I don't think the narrator feels particularly conflicted about his sexuality or about having sex with men. But he does feel conflicted about questions of agency and choice [...]"[102]

The character of Mitko, against this backdrop, emerges with a rich intersectional identity. His physicality and style evoke a deliberate hypermasculinity entwined with "an air of criminality."[103] The visual contrast within the photographs he shares with the narrator—of two men, one departing with talent or means, the other becoming "more or less homeless"[104] —speaks volumes about the class stratification impacting Mitko's existence. The detail of his chipped tooth transcends a mere descriptor; it symbolizes a broader historical and socioeconomic legacy, reminiscent of what Ahmed articulates about the inheritance of historical suffering, described as the lineage's "gift." [105] Thus, Mitko's character is an intricate blend of societal challenges, linguistic barriers, and physical attributes—all of which demarcate his place within the Bulgarian context.

Mitko's identity is portrayed as dynamic and puzzling, characterized by shifting personas. The narrator's observations of Mitko's changing faces reveal a striking duality, particularly evident during arguments. He describes Mitko as someone who combined such transparency (or the semblance of transparency) with such mystery, so that he seemed at once overexposed and hidden behind impervious defenses."[106] This juxtaposition between apparent openness and concealed depths suggests a deliberate construction of identity. Far from accidental, the word "semblance" suggests the potential for masking within Mitko's behavior.

In tandem with Mitko's portrayal, the narrator grapples with the constructed nature of his own "partial selves."[107] In doing so, he presents the idea of wholeness as a "sham,"[108] a

[102] Nicole Rudick, 'Bodies in Space: An Interview with Garth Greenwell,' *Paris Review*, January 19, 2016 < https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/01/19/bodies-in-space-an-interview-with-garth-greenwell> [accessed 27 Feb 2024].
[103] Greenwell., p. 4.
[104] Ibid., p. 21.
[105] Ahmed., p. 121.
[106] Ibid., p. 15.
[107] Ibid., p. 70.
[108] Ibid., p. 70.

theme reinforced by the performative nature of desire in the narrative. Nevertheless, the aspiration for authenticity persists as a central motif. This complexity reaches a critical juncture as Mitko, in the novel's denouement, resorts to derogatory language and threatens the narrator's exposure. The narrator's assertion, "I am an open person, I don't have these secrets,"[109] aims for transparency and forthrightness, outwardly disavowing hidden facets of identity. The potency of this statement, however, lies in its potential contradiction. The declaration "everyone knows what I am"[110] invites readers to contemplate the level of self-deception within the confessional narrative, thus enriching its intellectual depth.

III. **The Auto in Queer Narrative**

A. Form, Aesthetics, and Representation

Greenwell's narrativization presents both reflection and inquiry, expressed in expansive, contemplative passages. The use of spacious paragraphs mirrors the narrator's explicit inclination toward confession, reflecting the fluid motion of thought that weaves together past and present. Mieke Bal notes that deviations from chronological sequence act as more than artistic choices; they draw attention, emphasize, elicit aesthetic or psychological effects, build suspense "to show various interpretations of an event, to indicate the subtle difference between expectation and realization, and much else besides."[111] Within this paradigm, Greenwell orchestrates psychological impacts to navigate a range of emotions—from desire to vulnerability—creating the sense of confession. These choices also take on a visual form, with each paragraph standing as a vessel for emotional impact.

Illustratively, approximately sixty pages into the text, a narrative wormhole transports the reader to a different temporal and spatial dimension. A formidable forty-page paragraph

[109] Ibid., p. 70.
[110] Ibid., p. 186.
[111] Mieke Bal. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), p. 69.

unfolds—devoid of indentations or line breaks—immersing readers in recollections of the protagonist's boyhood in Kentucky. Greenwell comments on his style, "I do like spacious paragraphs in general, paragraphs that allow for digressions and juxtapositions. I don't have a very orderly mind; I find it hard to think about anything in isolation. The paragraphs are a way for me to capture how consciousness feels, or my consciousness. I don't think in topic sentences."[112]

In my analysis, Greenwell's stylistic decision serves two purposes: it sharpens the confessional tone and offers visual markers to navigate the narrator's emotional landscape. The eschewal of chronological order, a nod to modernism, positions the narrative as an introspective exploration and definition of self. Equally critical is the strategic use of pacing, emphasis, and episodic interactions between the narrator and Mitko to create tension and suspense. The narrative's tripartite form enhances the exploration of its central question and introduces a stylistic fragmentation reflective of the narrator's life experiences. Preferring spatial over temporal connections, Greenwell devises a narrative structure emblematic of a distinct, queer form.

This analysis scrutinizes the narrative mood through the lens of Barthes's concepts of semantic and cultural codes. By examining the harsh realism depicted in Sofia's urban landscape, we see how the setting—characterized by "abandoned construction hulks and huge concrete frames that rise up like excavated ruins or ships rotting at sea"[113]—grounds the narrative in a vivid sense of place. This backdrop resonates with the semantic code's motifs of alienation and the quest for intimacy. Concurrently, the narrative weaves the cultural code into its fabric, enriching it with references that encapsulate post-communist Bulgaria's essence. The characters' interactions with modern technology (e.g., laptops, cell phones, iPods) and

[112] Rose H. Howsei, 'An Interview with Garth Greenwell, author of What Belongs To You,' *Dead Darlings* Jan 6, 2017 <https://deaddarlings.com/interview-garth-greenwell-author-of-belongs> [accessed 27 Feb 2024].
[113] Greenwell., p. 73.

consumer choices (e.g., Mitko's preference for expensive gin despite financial hardships) reflect their experiences and identities. This meticulous construction of narrative mood, informed by an interplay of setting, identity, and cultural dynamics, steers the narrative toward a confessional tone.

Certainly, the narrative's pensive, free-floating voice amplifies its confessional aspect. The prevalent homodiegetic voice, conveyed through the protagonist's first-person narration, offers an unobstructed view into his psyche, thereby reinforcing the story's intimate and confessional dimension. Yet, traces of a heterodiegetic voice surface as glimpses into Greenwell's own perspectives. Phrases such as, "Love isn't just a matter of looking at someone, I think now, but also of looking with them, of facing what they face […],"[114] and "[…]and I wondered whether I wasn't really turning my back on things in making them into poems, whether instead of preserving the world I was taking refuge from it."[115] The slippage these narrative voices draws the reader into a close relationship with both narrator and author.

We turn, then, to the auto-fictive realm, where the protagonist's path converges with Greenwell's own life story. Here, akin to contemporary autofictions, the narrator's selective sharing of personal details reinforces a sense of self-effacement. His assertion, "I've never been good at concealing anything; the whole bent of my nature is toward confession,"[116] sparks inquiry into the book's confessional style—a hallmark of autofiction. The deliberate choice of a nameless narrator—mirroring recent trends in autofiction—reflects Greenwell's artistic decision; he clarifies that "the nameless first-person and a sense that there was no need to be beholden to either pure invention or autobiography is something that I absorbed from poems and that felt very natural to me."[117] In his essay, 'The Rise of the Nameless Narrator,' Sam

[114] Greenwell., p. 180.
[115] Ibid., p. 170 - 171.
[116] Ibid., p. 11.
[117] Nicole Barney, 'Hybrid Interview: Garth Greenwell,' *CRAFT* <https://www.craftliterary.com/2020/01/28/interview-garth-greenwell> [accessed 27 Feb 2024].

Sacks characterizes this as "an epidemic of namelessness,"[118] noting that such stories often revolve around a sense of statelessness. Since the narrator lacks a proper home, a proper name is also absent—a reflection evident in Greenwell's text. As noted by Damon Galgut in his review of the novel: "Without all the normal markers, the narrator becomes not a character in the usual sense, but a voice."[119]

In this frame, the narrator's subjectivity becomes central to the narrative. An embedded unreliability in the narrator's portrayal of characters, particularly Mitko, influences the narrative's trustworthiness. A striking example occurs in Varna, where the narrator admits his physical longing for Mitko—"I came to be with you, to have sex with you"[120]—only to be countered by Mitko's observation of the narrator's inconsistency: "The trouble with you is you don't know what you want, you say one thing and then another."[121] This interaction is precisely what Greenwell, the author, orchestrates to guide the reader in forming a psychological profile of the narrator. I contend that this ambiguity is strategically employed to presage the enduring influence of the narrator's complicated history in his relationships.

The text's fragmented structure is deliberately designed to mirror the complexity of its subjects and to foreground the characters' subjectivity and internal conflicts. The omission of direct speech is not merely a stylistic choice but an embodiment of Barthes's hermeneutic code. This code, which Barthes calls an "enigma,"[122] propels the reader to search for meanings that are not readily available on the surface of the narrative. This approach aligns with Mitko's character, whose very essence becomes an enigma of desire and connection that the protagonist seeks to understand. The absence of direct dialogue pushes the reader to look deeper into the

[118] Sam Sacks, 'The Rise of the Nameless Narrator' *New Yorker*, March 3, 2015 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-rise-of-the-nameless-narrator> [accessed 27 Feb 2024].
[119]Damon Galgut, 'Human Nature Shines Through.' *The Nation*, February 12, 2016 <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/human-nature-shines-through> [accessed 27 Feb 2024].
[120] Greenwell., p. 50.
[121] Ibid., p. 51.
[122] Roland Barthes and Honoré De Balzac. *S/Z* [1st American ed.] ed. Farrar Straus & Giroux (London: Blackwell Oxford, 1990), pp. 17.

subtext and implications of their interactions, demanding a more active role in piecing together the narrative.

The proairetic code, or code of actions, as outlined by Barthes, is deeply intertwined with the hermeneutic code in the text. Each action taken by the protagonist in pursuit of Mitko, each moment of contact or withdrawal, propels the story forward and adds tension. This tension is heightened by the absence of clear resolutions or explanations for their behaviors. Here, the symbolic code helps decode the relationship dynamics between the two men. The narrator and Mitko's interactions are laden with subtext about dominance and submission, both in a personal and cultural sense, and these themes are explored through their complex, often non-verbal, communications. The symbolic code thus becomes a means to understand the characters' internal struggles and the socio-cultural barriers that impact their relationship.

By utilizing these codes, Greenwell constructs a sophisticated frame that that goes beyond the narrative's fragmented facade. The reader is asked to engage with the text on a level that requires an interrogation of their own understandings of desire, power, and connection, mirroring the often intangible and elusive nature of truth itself. Through this multifaceted narrative lens, Greenwell explores the depth of human connection and the inherent struggle for belonging that, while it may never fully materialize, remains a relentless human pursuit.

B. Language, Identity, and Intersubjectivity

Shame assumes a central role in the narrator's embodiment, marking his entry into the realm of the confessional. Notably, the text draws parallels with James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, where the American protagonist faces a similar struggle with desire and shame abroad. Greenwell acknowledges Baldwin's influence, with a particular emphasis on examining the

"anatomy of shame," [123] as Morten Haugerud notes. Evocative phrases like "suffocated with longing," [124] "paralyzed with humiliation," [125] and "in this room where there was such humiliation in revelation" [126] infuse the text. They conspire "toward a certain shape of the sentence, a sentence whose music is the music of interrogation, and of doubt, and of self-questioning and self-revision,"[127] as Greenwell explains.

To be sure, Greenwell's narrative delves into complex emotional landscapes. Take, for example, the narrator's reaction to his father's acknowledgment of his sexuality. He contemplates, "As I listened to him say these things it was as though even as I laid claim to myself I found there was nothing to claim, nothing or next to nothing, as though I were dissolving and my tears were the outward sign of that dissolution."[128] Here, the notion of dissolution and an absence of self to claim point to an essential void. Applying Lacan's psychoanalytic theory clarifies this concept; the act of laying claim to oneself is an attempt to regain a sense of agency. But as the narrator discovers, the claimed self remains elusive, resonating with Lacan's Mirror Stage, "[…] an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development."[129]

Above, the narrator contemplates his emotions, noting a feeling of rage that "would not dissolve," [130] a stark contrast to the earlier theme of self-dissolution. Rage then takes on an immutable quality; it occupies the narrator and resists dissolution. Reflecting retrospectively, the narrator ponders, "What would I be without the anger I felt then […] whatever it has kept

[123] Morten Haugerud. 'The Anatomy of Shame in James Baldwin's Giovanni's Room' (Unpublished master's dissertation, University of Oslo, 2019).
[124] Greenwell., p. 29.
[125] Ibid., p. 56.
[126] Ibid., p. 147.
[127] Laura Preston. 'A Syntax Of Doubt: An Interview With Garth Greenwell, Author Of What Belongs to You' *Electric Literature*, Jan 19, 2016 <https://electricliterature.com/a-syntax-of-doubt-an-interview-with-garth-greenwell-author-of-what-belongs-to-you/> [accessed 27 Feb 2024].
[128] Greenwell., p. 99 – 100.
[129] Jacques Lacan. *Ecrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink (WW Norton, 2007), pp. 3.
[130] Greenwell., p. 100.

me from, without it, I would have lost myself altogether."[131] Anger, therefore, is not simply an emotion. Rather, it is a force that crystallizes the narrator's sense of self and becomes essential to his being. The sentiment that "it ebbs or surges but is always there" [132] reveals anger as a constant, a crucial element that subsumes the narrator's existence.

Lacan's theories, as demonstrated, offer a layered analyses of the psychological intricacies encoded in the text. For example, the narrator's interpretation of his desire is colored by linguistic cues from Whitman's poetry. During his first encounter with Mitko, the narrator sees his life as "beneath the pitch of poetry," [133]signaling a gap between the idealized Symbolic realm of literature and his own, more banal reality. Literature's Symbolic order stands as a benchmark by which he measures his life, with language delineating the shifting and elusive contours of desire.

This is not an isolated occurrence; language accentuates the subjectivity of desire, especially in the narrator's intimate interactions with Mitko. These are characterized by vivid, almost hyperbolic, descriptions: "clasping his hips with both my hands like the brim of a cup from which I drank."[134] This metaphor not only elevates a physical encounter to a level of spiritual or emotional profundity but also invites a Lacanian interpretation. The "cupping of hips" can be interpreted as a moment of self-recognition, where the act of 'drinking' becomes a reflective act that contributes to the narrator's evolving identity. In a way, the cup metaphor suggests a repository of treasured desires, and 'drinking' from it signifies the consummation of profound longings. Moreover, this act embodies a utopian impulse, distinctly queer—a momentary transcendence of societal restrictions.

Greenwell's linguistic finesse and literary references deftly shape the contours of desire's subjectivity and its queer subtleties. Consider the narrator's reflections on Whitman's

[131] Ibid., p. 100.
[132] Ibid., p. 100.
[133] Ibid., p. 32 – 33.
[134] Greenwell., p. 23.

verse: “There were lines in Whitman’s poems that had always struck me as exaggerated in their enthusiasm, their unhinged eroticism; they embarrassed me a little, though my students loved them, greeting them each year with laughter.” [135] Here, the narrator discerns desire’s exclusion by contrasting his own reticence with his students’ enjoyment. This approach carves out an intersubjective identity that oscillates between desire’s glorification through language and its tangible manifestations. Thus, Greenwell’s narrator delineates love as an act of perception, “a way of looking, of becoming alive to nuance.” [136]

IV. **Thematic Insights**

A. Queer Politics and Culture

Greenwell’s text inspires a unique form of relationality by redefining intimacy and social bonds. The opaque relationship between Mitko and the narrator illustrates the dual nature of queer desire—marked by both exclusion and fulfillment. The narrator’s embrace of complex desire aligns with queer theory’s rejection of normative relational standards, celebrating the multiplicity of relational forms. Queer theory aims to capture “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically,” [137] as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes.

It is, therefore, important, as Sedgwick advocates, to acknowledge the non-monolithic dimensions of desire in relation to Greenwell’s narrative. Here, I argue that Greenwell’s text invites a departure from traditional psychoanalytic readings of sexuality as a straightforward trajectory. Rather, it proposes the possibility for healing experiences that honor the complexities of erratic desires and joys. Following Bersani’s assessment, desire holds a

[135] Greenwell., p. 32.
[136] Howsei.
[137] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Routledge, New York 1994), 7.

capacity to disrupt and reconstruct identities through masochistic elements, where sexual longing becomes a catalyst for profound, if tumultuous, pleasure. This is evident in the narrator's interaction with Mitko. As Galgut articulates, "there is mutual exploitation, but also emotion; each of them wants something more from the other, something harder, maybe impossible, to define." [138]

Desire bypasses binary conceptions of absence and presence, and amidst the conflicts and uncertainties, moments of agency and connection arise. To further explore the roots of this queer relationality and its power to contest conventional social and sexual schemas, I revisit a key childhood anecdote the narrator shares. The reflection centers on a shared showering experience with his father, imbued with images of his father's physique, shared mirth, and tactile connection. Applying Muñoz's idea of "utopian performativity," [139] this memory becomes a blueprint for hopeful imaginings of a different time and space that critique the present through the lens of what could be—a "not-quite-here" [140] reality tinged with detail like "ornamental bulbs" [141] and a "mirror obscured with fog." [142] The act of reconstructing utopia through the play of memory and artistic expression emerges as a rupture. The latent potentiality inherent in such imaginative retellings propose an alternative lens through which to view intimacy, desire, and subjectivity.

While the political dimensions in Greenwell's text may not be immediately apparent, subtle connections come to light in the aforementioned scene. The detailed descriptions in the bathing scene—words like "large" to depict physicality and the motifs of slick tiles and steaming water—evoke the clandestine world of bathhouses, a cultural touchstone for queer encounters. These details, which Muñoz might say are haunted by the "ghosts of public sex,"[143]

[138] Galgut.
[139] Muñoz, p. 99.
[140] Ibid., p. 106.
[141] Greenwell., p. 71.
[142] Ibid., p. 71.
[143] Muñoz., p. 41.

link personal recollections to a collective narrative of queer spaces and experiences. On a deeper level, a powerful political impulse can be discerned in the acts transcribed, the spaces conceptually rendered, and the performance of writing expressing his public sex history. Utopia, and the longing for it, becomes central in contesting and reimagining hegemonic structures.

Such utopian ideals also serve as a lens through which to view political dissent. While the book does not overtly address LGBT political rights in the US, it traces the imprint of political beliefs on personal bonds. The narrator's divergence from the political ideology of his home state and his father is contrasted with his alliance with K., a kindred spirit in their shared political discontent. Their camaraderie, cementing during the political fervor of an election season, finds expression in K.'s physical destruction of political signage, an emblematic gesture of resistance. The suggestion that "perhaps it was something else we wrecked" [144] layers the narrative with an imaginative subtext of defiance, aligned with Muñoz's understanding of queer utopian practice as an "act of negation." [145] Here, utopia serves dual purposes: it is a beacon towards a hopeful future and a tool for critiquing the status quo.

B. Autofiction's Transformative Force

It should be apparent how autofiction fundamentally influences both narrative and thematic facets within Greenwell's work. The form's performative dimensions dynamically operate on the page, substantiated (and exaggerated) to unlock the narrative's transformative potential. A revealing moment happens when the narrator, riding the train with his mother, thinks about writing a poem inspired by a young boy. The narrator acknowledges the likelihood of not remembering the boy precisely but rather "the use [he] would make of him."[146] This act of

[144] Greenwell., p. 78.
[145] Muñoz., p. 125.
[146] Greenwell., p. 170.

linguistic utilization to encapsulate an experience, however imperfectly, is acknowledged by autofiction. As Dix puts it, "In the more general sense, the lived experience is itself subject to the distortions of the imagination and the act of fictionalizing affects the content of the memories."[147] In the same section, the narrator expresses, "Making poems was a way of loving things, of preserving them, of living moments twice; or more than that, it was a way of living more fully, of bestowing on experience a richer meaning."[148] In this way, by deliberately embracing a "richer" interpretation in poetry, the narrator asserts his agency in shaping memories. Self-narration attributes meaning through fictionalization—a concept consistent with autofiction's emphasis on "staging, performing, constituting and searching an author's self through narration."[149]

In this manner, the narrator's struggle to comprehend the teleology of his desires becomes a cognitive exercise marked by diversions, deviations, and a persistent disorientation. This journey is reflected on the page through an experimental process of self-discovery through writing. As Menn observes in her analysis of the works of Scottish author John Burnside, "autofiction allows the author and narrator to imagine him- or herself in any chosen way, and thus potentially makes way for arriving at a more profound sense of selfhood and identity."[150] This arrival is exemplified by the narrator's involvement with R., a figure reminiscent of Mitko. Greenwell delineates this transformative progression, asserting, "There was no temptation, I thought, there was no danger of his upsetting the new balance I had found, the monogamy that still had the novelty of a break from long habit."[151] This new equilibrium reflects the narrator's—or indeed the writer's—digressive journey toward metamorphosis. The

[147] Hywel Rowland Dix, *Autofiction in English* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 6.
[148] Ibid., p. 170 - 171.
[149] Ricarda Menn, 'Unpicked and Remade: Creative Imperatives in John Burnside's Autofictions", pp. 163–177 in Autofiction in English, ed. by Hywel Dix (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 167.
[150] Ibid., p. 167.
[151] Greenwell., p. 115.

performances of authorship, thus, create transformative experiences, marked by the embracing of new relational paradigms within the narrative.

The concept of futurity is indeed salient in this context. According to Muñoz, potentiality heralds latent opportunities for different futures beyond the present limitations. The narrator, having been molded by his father's betrayals, engages with this tension: "It was like that for me, too […] in each, I have the sense of being entirely false and entirely true, like a self in a story." [152] Arguably, his tentative steps toward monogamy represent a significant departure from the intergenerational narrative of betrayal and solitude. Hence, in this narrative, utopia is not merely an ideal state; it represents an aspirational future that deviates from the narrator's past behaviors, epitomized by his pattern of seeking transient connections in cruising spaces.

This shift illuminates a recurring theme: the narrator and Mitko each seeking alternative trajectories, driven by the urge to transcend their histories. The narrator sees his time in Bulgaria as a form of escapism, especially evident during his initial discomfort at his mother's visit. Similarly, Mitko's song lyrics in "Dim da me nyama"[153]—expressing a desire to vanish like smoke or a speeding car—reflect a wish to escape his unstable life. These aspirations represent what Muñoz describes as the not-yet-here, a utopian horizon brimming with possibility, yet tantalizingly out of reach for both characters.

In the end, the actualization of these possibilities remains elusive. Mitko's departure from the narrator's life provokes contemplation on the potential for a fulfilling future or an existence mired in the fragments of what once was. Moreover, the persistent gaze toward a distant future—with R. residing miles away in Portugal—poses the question of whether this forward momentum inhibits the narrator's ability to inhabit the present fully. The narrative thus

[152] Ibid., p. 69 - 70.
[153] Ibid., p. 176.

grapples with the tension between the quest for utopia and the impact such yearning may have on the present moment, underscoring a central theme of the novel.

These utopian hermeneutics deepen the narrative's subjective landscape—integral to the autofiction genre. Cusset observes, "the 'I' of the autofiction writer is anything but egocentric. It is not centered on the self, but erasing the self so as to make the truth of past emotion emerge."[154] Indeed, the novel's utopian undercurrents foster a synergy with subjectivity that simultaneously refracts past and present in pursuit of truth. Reflecting on Mitko, the narrator contemplates, "Like everything else in my past, he was part of the story that had led us to each other; it's a way of being in love, I think, to see the past like that."[155] It is precisely this perspective—understanding the past "like that"—that resonates with the autofictional form, with its iterative process of remembering and reinterpreting. Thus, Mitko's eventual disappearance takes on significance, creating space for forgetfulness and the initiation of a new chapter, liberated from Mitko's lingering shadow.

[154] Cusset.
[155] Greenwell., p. 117.

CHAPTER TWO | Queer Transformations: Memory, Desire, and Healing in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

As we transition from exploring Greenwell's portrayal of a white American's experiences in Bulgaria to Ocean Vuong's articulation of a queer Vietnamese refugee's life in the US, we encounter a shift in narrative focus. Vuong's works, including his poetry collection *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* and his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, engage with themes of memory, diaspora, and queerness. The novel particularly examines the psychological impact of the Vietnam War on Vuong's characters, Rose and Lan—Little Dog's mother and grandmother—interrogating the enduring effects of conflict and the cathartic potential of desire in Little Dog's odyssey. Similar to Greenwell's text, desire here also functions as a conduit to a utopian vision. Yet, for Little Dog, desire catalyzes a positive metamorphosis and self-discovery through artistic expression. Anchored in the intersectional portrayal of identity and history, this analysis illuminates how language, narrative structure, and desire inform Little Dog's experiences and contribute to a sense of healing.

I. **Embodied Spaces and Diverse Orientations**

A. Individual Experiences of Space and Embodiment

This is an epistolary novel, and—as we see in Little Dog's letter to Rose—it invites us to imagine its form in spatial terms. The opening line, "I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are,"[156] brims with spatial significance. The act of 'reaching' symbolizes unconventional forms of connection that span emotional and physical divides. Thus, the narrative ascribes to writing a queer essence of proximity,

[156] Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (Jonathan Cape, 2019), p. 3.

attempting to bridge the gap between Little Dog's physical reality and Rose's emotive world. In the same passage, the vivid description of a Virginia rest stop, where Rose gazes into the black glass eyes of a taxidermy buck and sees her "whole body, warped in that lifeless mirror"[157] further accentuates spatial dimensions. The term "lifeless" denotes a static view of time and space, presenting a stark contrast to "warped," which connotes Rose's altered self-image. Little Dog's reflection on the buck symbolizing "a death that won't finish"[158] speaks to the enduring nature of past wounds. In this way, the text illustrates the interplay of space, time, and personal experiences, which shape individual narratives.

The interrelation of bodies and their surroundings endows space with a fluid and palpable character. Echoing Greenwell's text, this dynamic not only demonstrates how "bodily direction 'toward' objects shapes the surfaces of bodily and social space," [159] as Ahmed posits, but it also charges these spaces with affective dimensions. For example, the scene where Little Dog approaches Rose's bedroom to the sound of Chopin originating from within the closet, and the narrative renders the door in a reddish glow, imbues the setting with layered significance. The closet, emitting music, becomes a metaphor for spatial and emotional intricacy, tinged with queer connotations. Additionally, the use of red, often connected with fire, suggests a threshold space, redolent of potential metamorphosis, peril, or intense feeling—key elements of embodiment that resonate throughout Little Dog's journey.

This nexus between space and embodiment is most notably established through narrative retrospection, akin to Greenwell's approach. Vuong's prose, however, distinctively depicts a consciousness that not only reflects on the past but also actively reinterprets and reconstructs it. A poignant illustration is found in Little Dog's recounting of the ritual where he would remove white hairs from Lan's head, a task accompanied by her stories. He

[157] Ibid., p. 3.
[158] Ibid., p. 3.
[159] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 68.

assimilates her narratives, echoing her speech and movements as if watching a "film playing across the apartment walls."[160] Little Dog's description of these personal interactions as "animated by my imagination,"[161] reflects Ahmed's perspective on the affective aspect of spatiality. His realization that "we collaborated"[162] in these reenactments showcases the co-creative and participatory nature of memory. It reinforces the narrative's dynamic sculpting of identity through such shared experiences.

Consequently, Vuong focalizes space as a central locus where the "fractured and short-wired"[163] mind becomes a wellspring of discovery. Little Dog's absorption in Lan's stories indicates a visual connection with her memories. Butler's emphasis on the interplay between bodies and language further solidifies this link between spatiality and embodiment, notably evident in Little Dog's narration of Lan's experiences during the Vietnam War. In a significant scene, rain intermingles with red-brown quotation marks flecked around Lan's bare feet as she waits on the shoulder of a dirt road. Here, the narrative transcends mere physical description, encapsulating Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body as a site of expression, where the sensory world interacts with the corporeal self. Thus, Little Dog's accounts blur the lines between individual and collective experiences, emphasizing the body's primary function as an agent of perception and articulation.

Inexorably, Little Dog's self-perception is shaped by his interactions with space, both as a twenty-eight-year-old man and as a writer. Reflecting on his physical attributes—5ft 4in tall and weighing 112lbs—Little Dog contemplates, "I am handsome at exactly three angles and deadly from everywhere else. I am writing you from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son."[164] The phrase "I am writing you from inside a body

[160] Vuong., p. 23.
[161] Ibid., p. 22.
[162] Ibid., p. 22.
[163] Ibid., p. 23.
[164] Ibid., p. 10.

that used to be yours" binds the physical connection between mother and child, and, intriguingly, between Little Dog's narrative act and his family history. The body takes on a queer dimension, at once a vessel for maternal legacy and a conduit for his own storytelling. He later asserts, "What matters is that all of it, even if I didn't know it then, brought me here, to this page, to tell you everything you'll never know,"[165] linking the traumas and hardships endured to the embodied act of writing, where the page becomes a space for enunciating memory.

Hartford is a central focus in the novel, examined through spatial and affective dimensions. Like Greenwell's portrait of Bulgaria, Little Dog's narrative moves beyond mere physical descriptions to examine the shifting dynamics of the urban landscape. The shift of insurance companies away from Hartford, induced by the digital revolution, signifies how economic transformations recalibrate spatial reality. The migration of professionals to metropolitan hubs is reflective of a wider spatial narrative, delineating Hartford's economic trajectory. The nostalgic image of Whalers jerseys in a bus station underscores a temporal disjuncture, while places like the Bushnell Theatre and the Wadsworth Atheneum, frequented predominantly by suburbanites, hint at societal stratification. These elements collectively map Hartford's socio-economic topography.

This socio-spatial mapping resonates in the environment of the nail salon where Rose is employed. The corporeal strains of the workers—distended lungs, calcified livers, and swollen joints—epitomize the somatic burden of their labor and the vicissitudes of immigrant existence. Through Grosz's lens, the body is seen as a palimpsest, marked by the physical repercussions of their occupation, as illustrated by their "lungs [that] can no longer breathe without swelling … livers hardening with chemicals."[166] Despite the adversity marked by pain,

[165] Ibid., p. 15.
[166] Ibid., p. 80.

toxicity, and low wages, they persist in their employment at the salon, buoyed by the prospect of securing a "real job soon,"[167] irrespective of their residency status. This aspiration is intertwined with Berlant's notion of cruel optimism, where life is sustained through "practices of self-interruption, self-suspension, and self-abeyance," [168] signifying a slow and incremental reshaping of their conditions within the labor they perform. For Rose, then, the salon becomes "a place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones."[169]

To further this point, Little Dog's recounting crystallizes the layered realities of the nail salon through its embodied dimensions. Workers, whose bodies are steeped in the aromatic spices of traditional cooking while simultaneously exposed to the noxious fumes of salon chemicals, experience the salon in transformative ways. Following Grosz's argument, these physical realities become "corporeal signifiers"[170]—inscriptions that yield meaning, representation, and depth within the social hierarchy. The salon, depicted as a crucible where cultural narratives from the workers' homeland unfurl and commingle with their laborious present, enacts these significations. The space, characterized as one where "folklore, rumors, tall tales, and jokes from the old country are told"[171] produces profound effects of meaning for those who, in Ahmed's terms, "appear oblique, strange, and out of place." [172] Thus, the salon is not only a physical locale but a rich site where cultural and labor practices converge; it outlines the delineation between the public and private spheres, elucidating a particular social order that resonates with queer overtones.

Comparatively, the dynamics of cruising spaces in Greenwell's book share thematic similarities with Vuong's articulation of the atmosphere of the nail salon, particularly in

[167] Ibid., p. 80.
[168] Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press 2011), p. 27.
[169] Ibid., p. 80 – 81.
[170] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 141
[171] Vuong., p. 80.
[172] Ahmed., p. 179.

relation to the impact on personal identities. Both narratives feature spaces—be it the anonymous trysts in public restrooms or the chronic exposure to harsh salon conditions—that serve as stages for performance and social interaction. The salon, much like the ephemeral encounters in cruising spaces, becomes a liminal zone for those navigating new linguistic and cultural landscapes. The intersection of the public and private in both texts reveals how identity, norms, and space converge.

Greenwell's narrative contemplates the role of objects as mediators of intimacy, whereas Vuong's text explores the self as an ongoing performative act, intricately tied to objects. Rose's deliberate choice to wear her finest sequined black dress and gold hoop earrings for a trip to the mall is charged with irony, revealing the performative nature of identity. Yet, this act of adornment starkly contrasts with the economic realities represented by the local corner store where the "doorway was littered with used food stamp receipts" and apples appear "wrinkled and bruised."[173] These details emphasize the family's societal navigation, where the disparity between the glitz of the mall and the frugality of the corner store colors their everyday negotiations. Performativity, hence, indicates the disparity between aspirational ideals and the actualities of daily life, contributing to the construction of the characters' sense of self.

To be sure, objects in Vuong's narrative serve as pivotal catalysts in the formation and regulation of self. A telling incident unfolds when Rose asks Little Dog to assess the fireproof nature of a dress. Little Dog's affirmative response, even if factually inaccurate, becomes a performative utterance aimed at regulating his mother's war-related trauma. This scene not only underscores the constructed nature of identity but also imbues the garment with a queer essence in their relational context. Another time, Rose's query, "Do I look like a real American?"[174] while clutching a white dress, initiates a whimsical engagement with identity;

[173] Ibid., p. 7.
[174] Vuong., p. 9.

the act signals a bodily entanglement with cultural expectations and perceptions, viewed through an Ahmedian lens. Little Dog's silent affirmation—through a nod and a smile—reveals a dynamic interplay between appearance, cultural expectations, and performative affirmation.

Much like Greenwell's narrator, whose identity is constructed against the Bulgarian landscape, Little Dog's self-concept is sculpted within the urban confines of Hartford. In both narratives, space is not merely a backdrop but an active force in shaping identity. Vuong illustrates this through an incident where Little Dog, out in his mother's dress in his yard, confronts a cascade of mockery and name-calling—a moment that echoes with Greenwell's depiction of stigma and shame. The experience of traversing the neighborhood on a pink bicycle—"a boy could be knocked off that shade" [175]—signifies the influence of color on societal perception and spatial mobility. Little Dog's bus ride home, during which he absorbs the laughter of bullies—"I let their laughter enter me" [176]—highlights the porous boundaries between his internal world and external forces. The descriptive imagery used—"severe obedience"[177] and leaves resembling "dirty money"[178]—invokes an emotionally charged atmosphere. After the aggressors' departure, Little Dog's silent shoes, described as "silent flares,"[179] metaphorically represent his unvoiced distress.

This interplay of objects and spatial contexts shapes Little Dog's fragile sense of self. Following the bullying incident, a poignant moment ensues as Rose sits on the couch with a towel wrapped around her head, while Little Dog stands nearby, "holding myself." [180] Sensory details, like cigarette smoke and blue smoke swirling, color the tension. Immediate regret for sharing the incident is palpable as Rose stabs her cigarette into her teacup before Little Dog starts to cry. The command to stop crying, followed by a slap, enacts physical abuse by Rose,

[175] Ibid., p. 135.
[176] Ibid., p. 25.
[177] Ibid., p. 25.
[178] Ibid., p. 25.
[179] Ibid., p. 25.
[180] Ibid., p. 25.

recurring throughout the novel's first section. Little Dog's internal observation—"everything seemed like a window, even the air between us" [181]—conveys a sense of vulnerability and exposure. The air, often perceived as invisible and intangible, takes on the properties of a "window"—a medium that allows for both observation and closeness, yet also represents a barrier. This symbolizes the myriad of unarticulated and inexpressible experiences between Little Dog and Rose.

These traumatic experiences indelibly shape Little Dog's psyche, as he expresses, "There are times, late at night, when your son would wake believing a bullet is lodged inside him." [182] This visceral metaphor situates the body as a vessel for historical violence and personal anguish, transcending the physical realm to represent an ever-present psychological wound. Vuong's characterization, "*this bullet, this seed I bloomed around*,"[183] reframes Little Dog's genesis as emerging from violence, a poignant counter-narrative to conventional birthright. The bullet thus becomes an emblem of a distinct mode of being, marking Little Dog with a legacy of resilience and an implicit form of resistance against traditional identity paradigms.

B. Desire as a Shaping Force in Embodied Spaces

As Little Dog enters adolescence and starts work at a tobacco farm, his encounter with Trevor shatters his previous narrative of invisibility. He yearns for Trevor's gaze and the connection it promises, seeking a force to "fix me to the world I felt only halfway inside of."[184] Here, the term "fix" denotes a potentially equilibrium-inducing force; it taps into a deeper, transformative process in a way where the intense potential of desire exerts its own gravitational pull. Little Dog explains, "What I felt then, however, was not desire, but the coiled charge of its possibility,

[181] Ibid., p. 26.
[182] Ibid., p. 76 -77.
[183] Ibid., p. 77.
[184] Ibid., p. 96.

a feeling that emitted, it seemed, its own gravity, holding me in place."[185] This latent potential of desire, conceptualized as having its own gravitational force, signifies a grounding in the anticipation of desire itself. It unveils an aspect of self-validation within homosexual desire—queer as Little Dog acknowledges, "I was seen—I who had seldom been seen by anyone." [186]

Vuong's narrative contrasts with Greenwell's by broadening the scope of desire, depicting it not simply as a yearning but as a force that confirms social existence and individuality. In Vuong's portrayal, desire transcends mere attraction; it serves as a means of asserting one's place in the social fabric. Little Dog's contemplation of his secret moments with Trevor in a dilapidated mobile home—described as a "privilege, a chance" [187]—captures the nuanced intersection of personal desire and social identity. "He was white. I was yellow. In the dark, our facts lit us up and our acts pinned us down," [188] Little Dog muses, signaling that in their intimacy, societal labels become illuminated and yet restrictive. This closeness, mirroring Bersani's idea of impersonal intimacy, requires abandoning the personal ego or, in other words, "a suspension of the psychological, social, and professional interests that constitute a person's individuality."[189] Hence, the desire expressed in Vuong's work transcends individual longing to reflect larger societal constructs. The act of hiding together involves a suspension and disidentification with norms of racial identity, thus fostering a more radical form of intimacy.

In Vuong's narrative, desire is not merely a personal feeling but interwoven with the larger societal milieu, thus distinguishing it from Greenwell's exploration of desire's relational aspects. Vuong emphasizes the embodiment of emotions and cultural contexts, revealing this

[185] Ibid., p. 96.
[186] Ibid., p. 96.
[187] Ibid., p. 112.
[188] Ibid., p. 112.
[189] Leo Bersani. *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 69.

through Trevor's visceral "knuckled American rage" [190] and his father's weeping. As Grosz puts it, "Human subjects never simply *have* a body; rather, the body is always necessarily the object and subject of attitudes and judgments."[191] Trevor's personal crisis, illustrated by his unconscious state in a thunderstorm, heroin coursing through him, speaks to a life marred by external judgements. Such narratives reflect the malleability of social dynamics, supporting Ahmed's concept of "imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course."[192] Desire, as Vuong presents, thus unfolds within a framework of societal influence and individual aspirations.

The text shows how desire takes on a uniquely queer form, especially in its physical aspects. While in Trevor's bed, Little Dog reflects, "And what do you do to a boy like that but turn yourself into a doorway, a place he can go through again and again, each time entering the same room?"[193] The sentence marks a deliberate shift, where Little Dog becomes an entry point; it signifies his willing transformation into a passage for recurring encounters. His body becomes a receptacle for Trevor and, applying Ahmed, becomes reoriented by his physical presence. This is evident when Little Dog immerses himself in the encounter, likening it to plunging into "a climate, the autobiography of a season."[194] The subsequent mishap—a clash of teeth and Trevor's hurt sound—marks an odd moment by emphasizing vulnerability and embarrassment—a further act of disidentification that queers intimate interactions.

Vuong's text takes an intriguing turn when addressing the act of consummation. Little Dog's oxymoronic statement, "The first time we fucked, we didn't fuck at all," introduces the familiar theme of performative desire. This concept is elaborated as Little Dog describes their simulated intimacy under the sheets: "Under the humid sheets, he pressed his cock between my

[190] Vuong., p. 200.
[191] Grosz., p. 81.
[192] Ahmed., p. 21.
[193] Ibid., p. 111.
[194] Ibid., p. 111.

legs. I spat in my hand and reached back, grabbed tight his heated length, mimicking the real thing, as he pushed."[195] The act of mimicking emerges as a method of engaging with desire that transcends mere physicality, accentuating more borader, communal aspects. Pleasure then transcends a strictly sexual realm. A form of ascetic conduct establishes the basis for an unconventional exploration of sexual connection.

This performative nature of desire in Vuong's work aligns with Greenwell's approach but diverges in its essence. Rather than dwelling on physical satisfaction or wholeness, Little Dog's experience reflects Bersani's view on the pleasures of sociability, where "a willingness to be less—a certain kind of ascetic disposition—introduces us (perhaps reintroduces us) to the pleasure of rhythmed being."[196] In other words, the sexual acts, encompassing mimicry and engagement, unveil a mutual acceptance of incompleteness, an ascetic choice that leads them to discover a cadenced pleasure. The portrayal of intimacy in the text, textured by its performative nature, rarefies desire's social nature due to its very incompleteness.

As the narrative progresses, the expression of physical desire veers into masochism. Little Dog's actions and commands during their intimate moments illustrate a merging of desire with pain. This physical aspect, defined by "force and torque," [197] and the escalating pain that verges on a breaking point, resonates with Bersani's concept of masochism in which pleasure transcends traditional sexual limits. Little Dog's admission, "I can't make sense of what I felt,"[198] along with a desire for heightened intensity—in the directive to "do it harder"[199] —shows a deliberate pursuit of extremes. His metaphorical reflection on being lifted off the bed by the roots of his follicles speaks to the destabilizing nature of the encounter, while the portrayal of flickering "like a bulb in a storm"[200] captures the transformative aspect of the

[195] Ibid., p. 114.
[196] Bersani, p. 48.
[197] Ibid., p. 118.
[198] Ibid., p. 118.
[199] Ibid., p. 118.
[200] Ibid., p. 118.

experience. The declaration, "This is how we were going to do it from now on,"[201] not only underscores their renegotiated dynamic but also marks Little Dog's acceptance of an ecstatic form of desire, finding empowerment within submission.

Little Dog's inclination toward sexual violence can be traced back to the physical abuse inflicted by his mother. His body, a repository of lived encounters and histories, can be seen to accumulate past encounters and histories. As Ahmed puts it, "what bodies 'tend to do' are effects of histories rather than being originary."[202] Little Dog's admission—"by then, violence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love"[203] —reflects this notion of sedimented histories. Further, his declaration, "To arrive at love is to arrive through obliteration. Eviscerate me, and I'll tell you the truth," posits trauma as a perverse norm. Through the process of self-annihilation, the body becomes a site of revelation—a conduit linking desire to a history marred by abuse as a subtle aspect of queer relationality.

Hence, as in Greenwell's narrative, past histories are layered within the self, steering desire along predetermined trajectories. The aversion to affection post-intimacy—illustrated by Little Dog's withdrawal and undertaking to "rinse my mouth" [204]—is not just an emotional reflex but a resistance to the heteronormative ideal of tenderness. Through the lens of Muñoz's theory of queer futurity, Little Dog's deliberate act of mouth-rinsing becomes a metaphorical cleanse, yearning for a future possibility that is both vivid and essential. This behavior subverts the conventional narrative of intimacy, suggesting a form of catharsis that, in Muñoz's words, "promises a return, a reanimation, in a future time and place." [205] This indicates a scenario in which comfort and connection are deliberately forfeited, possibly in anticipation of inevitable disappointment.

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[201] Ibid., p. 118.
[202] Ahmed., p. 56.
[203] Ibid., p. 119.
[204] Ibid., p. 119.
[205] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* (New York University Press, 2009), p. 149.

Nevertheless, these fleeting moments of intimacy carve out a space for Little Dog to forge a resilient self. A defining moment is presented when he meditates on his own perceived imperfections while gazing into a mirror on the farm. In this act of reflection, he resolves to let the mirror "hold those flaws" [206] because, for that moment, they are not defects but rather attributes to be desired and pursued, "found among a landscape as vast as the one I had been lost in all this time." [207] Little Dog's choice to remain in front of the mirror and accept his flaws signifies the breadth of his personal evolution. The moment unfolds as a liberating experience "laden with potentiality,"[208] as Muñoz would state. This queer futurity is central to a relational modality wherein desire catalyzes a metamorphosis that I will further examine in the subsequent section of this thesis.

II. **Societal, Cultural, and Temporal Contexts**

A. Queer Temporality: A Phenomenological Examination

While Greenwell's narrative utilizes temporal mobility to guide desire's exclusion, Vuong's text employs it to convey the trauma of the Vietnam War. This is evident in Little Dog's recollection of a childhood prank involving Rose. In this memory, Rose reacts viscerally to Little Dog's playful gesture of wearing a toy army helmet and shouting "Boom!" [209] Her response includes contorted facial expressions, sobs, chest-clutching, and gasping. The words "once it enters you, it never leaves" [210] captures the persistent nature of trauma as it endures through physical embodiment. Therefore, trauma introduces a non-linear temporality that interrupts traditional narrative progression.

[206] Vuong., p. 107.
[207] Ibid., p. 107.
[208] Muñoz., p. 91.
[209] Ibid., p. 4.
[210] Ibid., p. 4.

Lan's nocturnal habit of wildly scratching at blankets further illustrates the temporal dimension of trauma. Her fear of attracting mortars through screaming indicates how belated wartime trauma informs present behaviors. Cathy Caruth's theory posits that traumatic experiences often provoke delayed response "which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event […] and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event."[211]This notion of "increased arousal" is evident in Lan's examination of toy army men, as described by Little Dog: "She crawled over, squatted before the toy army men, picked one up from the pile, pinched it between her fingers, and studied it."[212] Lan's engrossed inspection of toy soldiers, where she scrutinizes one between her fingers, conveys the immediacy with which past traumas can intrude upon the present. Additionally, Lan's physical embodiment—her "perpetually bent"[213] back—reveals the somatic imprint of her experiences, as Little Dog notes the impact on "its musculature, joints, and posture." [214] Her contorted form, compared to "a cartoon character just blasted with TNT," [215] not only conveys her personal suffering but also serves as a manifestation of collective memory, a testament to war's enduring imprint on the human body.

These echoes of conflict re-emerge in Hartford, where present-day gunshots displace the characters in time, eliciting reflexive, wartime behaviors. Turning off the lights to avoid detection, a practice reminiscent of war, blurs the line between then and now. Such behaviors can be understood through Caruth's description of trauma's "enigmatic core," [216] where full comprehension of the past remains elusive, and repetitive recollections take its place. Lan's dispassionate reactions to the gunfire point to a non-linear experience of memory. Her casual recounting of entire villages obliterated during the war can be analyzed through Muñoz's views

[211] Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 4.
[212] Vuong., p. 18.
[213] Ibid., p. 19.
[214] Ibid., p. 19.
[215] Ibid., p. 17.
[216] Caruth., p. 5.

on memory negotiation, driven by a "*utopian impulse*" [217] aimed at envisioning alternative social configurations. This idea suggests that memory is dynamic and performative, ever influencing one's engagement with the world.

The synthesis of memory and performance is also evident in Little Dog's retelling of Lan and Rose's past. An illustrative instance is found in the singing of a Vietnamese folk song, wherein Little Dog embodies the past through vocalization. The act of singing a classic lullaby, once performed by Khánh Ly, not only showcases the timelessness of music but also acts as a vessel through which history reverberates in the now. In this scene, the lullaby's thematic content—depicting a woman singing amid corpses on sloping leafy hills—introduces a temporal dissonance. Its refrain, which seeks the singer's sister among the faces of the dead, accentuates the intersection of past trauma. Little Dog's reflection on "my crazy grandma mumbling away again"[218] while recalling Lan singing the same lullaby at a friend's birthday party deepens this association. Singing the lullaby becomes a performative gesture for both Lan and Little Dog, transcending linear time. By rendering the song with their "best effort,"[219] Little Dog enacts a form of temporal drag that influences his understanding of identity and loss.

This concept of temporal fluidity in testimony, as Caruth describes, portrays trauma as an unresolved narrative. As Caruth puts it, "As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance." [220] In Little Dog's reflections, wounds symbolize these fragmented recollections. He muses, "Sometimes, when I'm careless, I believe the wound is also the place where the skin reencounters itself, asking of each end, where have you been?"[221] The perception of the wound as a site for the skin to "reencounter itself"

[217] Muñoz., p. 26.
[218] Vuong., p. 49.
[219] Ibid., p. 49.
[220] Caruth., p. 16.
[221] Vuong., p. 137.

introduces a temporal dimension encoded in a cyclical return to a potential locus for regeneration. Here, time becomes cyclical, an endless dialogue between what was and what is, defying a linear narrative and embodying a form of temporal queerness.

In this analysis, I argue that the non-linear and repetitive nature of time not only signifies the presence of trauma but also opens avenues for healing. In this respect, as I have shown, desire presents connection and possibility in Vuong's narrative, diverging from Greenwell's portrayal of exclusion and alienation. This is further illustrated by Little Dog's recollection of riding with Trevor through Hartford, where focus on the breath—the "basic measurement of life"[222]—symbolizes life's unseen continuities. These reflections, persisting despite Trevor's physical absence, indicate that the present encapsulates past potentialities. This enduring mental image disrupts conventional temporal progression, resonating with Muñoz's assertion that "the past is a field of possibility […] in the service of a new futurity."[223] Thus, the contemplation of Trevor's breath, which continues after his death, suggests that such reflections can inform and transform future possibilities.

B. Intersectionality in Queer Experiences

Intersectionality is a prominent theme in Vuong's narrative, as Little Dog, a gay Vietnamese American, contends with the overlapping layers of his identity against the backdrop of Hartford. He faces a complex web of social dynamics including racial tension and homophobia. His formative years are marked by social isolation, including public humiliation from childhood friend Gramoz, who abruptly ends their friendship and labels him a freak. Additionally, the loss of Trevor, intertwined with the turmoil of his sexual identity and the

[222] Ibid., p. 151.
[223] Muñoz., p.16.

scars of maternal abuse, underscores the vulnerability and instability that characterize his existence.

In the book, Little Dog's characterization of Paul as a "stranger turned grandfather turned family"[224] nurtures an unorthodox family dynamic. This storyline, wherein a stranger assumes the role of a grandfather, queers traditional family norms by emphasizing the fluidity of familial relationships. Further, Paul's varied attributes—tutor, vegan, marijuana grower, lover of maps, and Camus—illustrate a dynamic familial identity that not only nuances character portrayal but also questions rigid identities. The acknowledgment of the limited understanding of their family and country reflects an awareness of the ongoing process of identity formation and knowledge acquisition. Aligned with Muñoz's framework, this receptiveness to learning embodies a queer futurity within the present "that is both a utopian kernel and an anticipatory illumination."[225]

The revelation that Paul is not his biological grandfather—and the subsequent "cutting of the cord" [226]—acts as one such moment of illumination. The metaphorical cutting of the cord serves as a symbolic unveiling, comparable to the act of coming out. The messy aftermath emphasizes the emotional toll of these revelations on individual and familial identities, along with the pivotal significance of personal histories. In Go Cong, Lan is branded a "traitor and a whore for sleeping with the enemy,"[227] continuing to bear the trauma of her estrangement from her family. At one point, Lan tearfully tells Little Dog, "I never asked to be a whore."[228] Her repetition of the proverb her mother shared, "A girl who leaves her husband is the rot of a harvest,"[229] exposes the sociocultural factors that inform her sense of self; the act of rocking

[224] Vuong., p. 212.
[225] Muñoz., p. 91.
[226] Vuong., p. 55.
[227] Ibid., p. 61.
[228] Ibid., p. 47.
[229] Ibid., p. 47.

and lifting her face toward the ceiling signifies a reaching back to the past—the ongoing influence of historical events on present emotions and identity formation.

This confluence of war, race, and migration are also central to Rose's identity. Her origins from Go Cong and her mixed-race heritage mark her as an outsider, a fact harshly illuminated by the moniker "ghost-girl."[230] In America, Rose's ability to pass for white at first glance reflects a performative identification with the normative. Yet, her linguistic abilities complicate categorization. A pivotal incident at Sears, where Rose faces a question about Little Dog's adoption, depicts the intricacies of racial perception and language: "Only when you stuttered, your English garbled, gone, head lowered, did she realize her mistake. Even when you looked the part, your tongue outed you,"[231] writes Little Dog. In this context, Rose's disruptive presence instigates an inquiry into the interplay of factors shaping identity. The incident informs a different inflection where the performative nature of language guides racial perceptions.

The connection between language and identity also resonates with Little Dog. Similar to the linguistic hurdles that Greenwell's narrator encounters, Vuong's text highlights Little Dog's limited command of Vietnamese, his mother tongue. Yet, for Little Dog, the novel's context signifies his linguistic adaptability. His mother's challenges with English force him to navigate social and linguistic boundaries by striving to "fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could."[232] He likens her vocabulary to small coins saved from nail salon tips and questions whether a stunted mother tongue is not just a symbol but is, in itself, a void—an inquiry intensified by question, what happens "if the tongue is cut out." When an incident at a grocery store sketches Rose's language limitations, resulting in mockery, Little Dog steps in as the family's interpreter—he describes this action as, "I code switched."[233] The phrase "I

[230] Ibid., p. 61.
[231] Ibid., p. 52.
[232] Ibid., p. 32.
[233] Ibid., p. 31.

took off our language and wore my English"[234] speaks to the performative nature of language, where linguistic choices become intentional acts of self-presentation. This dexterity in language use is a strategic maneuver that aligns with a queer positioning—rather than perpetuating alienation, as in Greenwell's work, it acts as a fulcrum for agency and transformation in Vuong's narrative.

III. **The Auto in Queer Narratives**

A. Form, Aesthetics, and Representation

Vuong draws from autobiographical elements to craft a fictional narrative that explores the coming-of-age and migrant experiences. He transforms personal realities into a public literary work by weaving together fiction, the epistolary novel form, and prose poetry. The East Asian narrative structure of kishōtenkets[235]—which mirrors autofiction's fragmented aesthetic and plotlessness—allows Vuong to focus on a gradual build-up rather than an immediate conflict. The novel's hybrid structure melds past and present, contributing to a dynamic progression that recalls Greenwell's non-sequential ordering. For Vuong, however, this approach reflects the narration of trauma rather than the expression of a spectrum of emotions through large, block-like paragraphs. As a result, the novel's visual design—evident in the variation of sentence lengths and paragraph structures—mirrors the disjointed rhythm with which traumatic memories are often recalled.

In Vuong's narrative, the deliberate use of Barthes's proairetic and hermeneutic codes invites a nuanced examination of trauma. The narrative intertwines introspective reflection and significant events, revealing latent tensions and mysteries about memory and identity through the hermeneutic code. For instance, Little Dog's reflections on his and his family's war

[234] Ibid., p. 32.
[235] Lisa Allardice, 'Ocean Vuong: 'I was addicted to everything you could crush into a white powder,' *The Guardian* < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/apr/02/ocean-vuong-i-was-addicted-to-everything-you-could-crush-into-a-white-powder> [accessed 29 Feb 2024].

experiences, alongside his musings on love and loss, pose existential questions such as "What is a country but a life sentence?"[236] and "What if art was not measured?"[237] Despite a general absence of overt action, suspense emerges through proairetic elements like the foreshadowing of Trevor's death in moments captured by lines such as "And we cracked up. We cracked open. We fell apart like that, laughing."[238] This code effectively animates Little Dog's coming of age and his relationships with Rose and Trevor. Together, these narrative strategies propel the story forward and enhance the representation of trauma.

As a poet, Vuong employs a symbolic language to construct meaning. Memories are metaphorically represented by repeated references to archaeology ("where we made a kind of life digging in and out of one brutal winter after another"[239]), drowning, a repeated rebirth, descriptions that draw on the corporeal ("the sky was the color of bruises"[240]). Descriptive phrases like "the lampposts of soundless towns hang in fog"[241] not only evoke vivid imagery but also evoke the narrative's poignant mood. Moreover, his use of imperatives, including "Look"[242] and "Tell me where it hurts,"[243] guide readers to confront specific, emotionally charged details, thus engaging with the narrative's cultural code. Such code is rich with historical references to the Vietnam War and cultural symbols, painting Little Dog's journey to maturity and his interactions with Trevor. For instance, Vuong might use items emblematic of Americana or specific mentions of cultural phenomena to anchor the reader in Little Dog's experiences.

For summer. For your hands

[236] Vuong., p. 9.
[237] Ibid., p. 183.
[238] Ibid., p. 108.
[239] Ibid., p. 214.
[240] Ibid., p. 230.
[241] Ibid., p. 167.
[242] Ibid., p. 14.
[243] Ibid., p. 176.

were wet and Trevor's a name like an engine starting up in the night. Who snuck out to meet a boy like you. Yellow and barely there. Trevor going fifty through his daddy's wheat field. Who jams all his fries into a Whopper and chews with both feet on the gas. Your eyes closed, riding shotgun, the wheat a yellow confetti.[244]

Here, cultural codes such as the "Whopper" and "daddy's wheat field" deepen our understanding of the characters' environments, reflecting elements of American rural life and fast-food culture. These codes evoke a world familiar in both substance and spirit, capturing a backdrop of teenage rebellion and the expansive freedom of the American landscape. The phrase "yellow confetti" symbolizes a celebration or a coming-of-age ritual, emblematic of youth's exuberance and rites of passage. The narrative further contrasts energy and stasis: Trevor's name bursts forth like an "engine starting up in the night," full of potential movement, while it juxtaposes this with the inert, "wet hands" of Little Dog. The act of sneaking out represents a departure from established norms, and "riding shotgun" with eyes closed suggests surrendering control, signifying either trust or deliberate oblivion. The line breaks and fragmented imagery allows readers to consider each moment individually, thus creating a temporal distance that enhances the narrative's emotional impact. Yet, the tangible details—the sensation of wet hands, the sensory experience as one rides with eyes closed—create a sense of closeness in space, paralleling the characters' internal journeys with their physical reality.

In this context, metaphors function as devices that are both semantic, for their descriptive power, and symbolic, for their deeper representational meaning. In one of the book's penultimate sections, Vuong employs the recurring motif of the table as an inherited symbol, an engagement that magnifies the impact of history on individual and cultural

[244] Ibid., p. 153.

narratives. Indeed, the description "A city with no name […] A family hiding underneath a table" [245] ties the concept of trauma to phenomenology. The table, presented as a substitute for a house and history, signifies a loss of stability and identity. It becomes an inherited symbol burdened with displacement and the erasure of a named city or history. The table exists and doesn't exist, an intersubjective constitution that emphasizes the complexity of inherited narratives. Diverse interpretations—shrapnel, art—establish a multiplicity of meanings associated with intergenerational memories. In this way, Vuong's narrative, which embeds memories with cultural significance, diverges from Greenwell's text that uses memory lapses to introduce an element of subjectivity. The table, enriched with cultural connotations, emerges as a multidimensional symbol in Vuong's text.

In Vuong's work, metaphors are plentiful, functioning not only as standalone figures of speech but also in concert with metonymy, creating layers of meaning. For example, in a scene depicting the family's airplane journey to California, Little Dog mentions the violent relationship between Rose and his father. In relation to Rose, the phrase "crooked nose from his countless backhands"[246] metonymically signifies the lasting effects of his father's violence within the family unit, reflecting broader themes of domestic abuse. The family's airplane journey to California, marked by turbulence and clouds morphing into "boulders—hard rocks,"[247] represents their fraught passage. Here, the flight's depiction as a "supernatural perseverance of passage" [248] enriches the narrative with metaphors of endurance, connecting the particular with the universal.

Similes play a crucial role in Vuong's narrative, offering new layers of meaning. For instance, likening the placenta to "a kind of language" [249] transcends its biological role to

[245] Ibid., p. 232.
[246] Ibid., p. 28.
[247] Ibid., p. 28.
[248] Ibid., p. 29.
[249] Ibid., p. 29.

embody communication and connection. In the novel, he muses, "At four or five months, my brother's placenta was already fully developed. You two were speaking—in blood utterances." The term "blood utterances"[250] hints at an innate, corporeal dialogue that subverts conventional linguistic frameworks. This use of the placenta entails a metonymic extension of meaning, where the physical and biological attributes of the placenta are extended to convey broader, symbolic significance.

Similarly, Vuong uses the monarch butterfly as a paean to migration and resilience. He imagines the monarchs not as escaping winter but the war-torn landscapes of Vietnam, their delicate wings fluttering like resilient fragments enduring a journey of thousands of miles. This passage, "Sometimes, I imagine the monarchs fleeing […] their tiny black-and-red wings jittering like debris,"[251] intertwines the butterflies' flight with traumatic history. According to Bal's narratology, such descriptions surpass mere depiction, gaining depth through both their referential and rhetorical qualities. In other words, meaning derives not just from what is represented but also from *how* it is represented. The vivid imagery of the butterflies' wings evokes a visceral engagement with trauma, while the depiction of "clean, cool air"[252] symbolizes a longing for a fresh, unburdened existence, juxtaposed against "the explosion they came from."[253] In this way, the image of monarch butterflies flying unscathed from explosions disrupts the linear trajectory of violence. We then catch a glimpse into a queer temporality that constitutes multiple historical and cultural contexts.

The buffalo metaphor in the text anchors a core theme of freedom and personal legacy. A scene on the Discovery Channel prompts Lan's question about buffalo running off a cliff, to which Little Dog responds, "They're just following their family. That's all. They don't know

[250] Ibid., p. 137.
[251] Ibid., p. 14.
[252] Ibid., p. 14.
[253] Ibid., p. 14.

it's a cliff."[254] This improvised answer, thus, extends the buffalo as a metaphor for familial attachment. Later, when Little Dog poses the same question to Trevor, Trevor's response invokes a fatalistic element: "Mother Nature."[255] Trevor's blunt equating of family to a "fucked family" [256] embeds relational dysfunction within the metaphor, suggesting a preordained collective fate. Thus, the buffalo metaphor invokes ideas of autonomy and the inexorable pull of destiny, foreshadowing Trevor's end, symbolized by the looming precipice.

It is notable how the recurring motifs of monarch butterflies and buffaloes resonate throughout the narrative. Little Dog expands the symbolism of butterflies to encapsulate the essence of life itself, as evidenced by his assertion, "To live, then, is a matter of time, of timing."[257] Here, life's unpredictability parallels the butterflies' susceptibility to a single night of frost. Additionally, he conjures the image of a radiant bridge amidst constant cliffs utilizing the bridge as a metonym for optimism and potential paths forward. These metaphors collectively provide a structured framework for representing overarching themes. Consequently, the narrative unfolds not in a linear fashion but rather as a mosaic of motifs woven across temporal contexts.

B. Language, Identity, and Intersubjectivity

Language—and in particular the marks of written inscription—are themselves treated as suggested metaphors in Vuong's text, as for example when he describes Little Dog's scar: "I didn't know that would be the last time I'd see him [Trevor], his neck scar lit blue by the diner's neon marquee"[258]; subsequent lines reveal a desire to interact with the scar, symbolized by a comma, with the intention of transforming it into a period through a kiss: "A comma

[254] Ibid., p. 179.
[255] Ibid., p. 237.
[256] Ibid., p. 237.
[257] Ibid., p. 4.
[258] Vuong., p. 169.

superimposed by a period the mouth so naturally makes. Isn't that the saddest thing in the world, Ma?"[259] Employing Lacan's concept of the Symbolic order, the desire to erase the scar signifies a negotiation within this symbolic framework; the transformation of the comma into a period attempts to conclude their narrative with a different ending, offering a sense of closure. Indeed, the wish to see the scar once more, coupled with the intention to obscure it through a kiss, posits the potential for transformation and healing via acts of queer desire. Little Dog conveys this vision when speaking to Trevor: "Imagine I could lie down beside you and my whole body, every cell, radiates a clear, singular meaning, not so much a writer as a word pressed down beside you."[260] The desire to become a "word" implies a yearning for a mode of interaction that surpasses traditional intimacy. This subversion of language use towards a future beyond the current reality is a queering of linguistic expression.

While Greenwell's prose uses language's referential function to express feelings of alienation within desire, Vuong's method empowers Little Dog through the narrative's expressive capabilities. For example, Little Dog's declaration, "I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with *because*,"[261] demonstrates a conscious effort to defy linguistic norms. His desire to "break free"[262] and his association of freedom with "the distance between the hunter and its prey,"[263] reflects a deep quest for freedom, using language to transcend constraints. Writing thus becomes an act of disidentification, a term described by Muñoz that denotes a process where individuals work against and beyond normative societal constructs. In defying the rule against starting sentences with "because," Little Dog not only contests linguistic expectations but also claims a space for personal agency.

[259] Ibid., p. 169.
[260] Vuong., p. 171.
[261] Ibid., p. 4.
[262] Ibid., p. 4.
[263] Ibid., p. 4.

The moniker 'Little Dog' itself interrogates the queerness of language and representation. When Little Dog ponders, "What made a woman who named herself and her daughter after flowers call her grandson a dog?"[264] the narrative unveils that the name functions as a safeguard against malevolent forces by disguising the child with a label traditionally deemed unpleasant. Little Dog's statement, "I have and have had many names,"[265] does not presuppose a rigid identity. Rather, as Butler reminds us in her theorization of naming, it acts as a formative element of subjectivity and, hence, speaks to the fluidity of the self. Little Dog explains, "To love something, then, is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched—and alive."[266] Here, naming serves as a mode of linguistic resistance. Language thus becomes "a shield,"[267] a strategy for survival, revealing its capacity for queerness.

Vuong's text also parallels Greenwell's work in using language to amplify the narrator's feelings of dissolution. Little Dog's experiences with bullying and his mother's abuse shape his existential inquiries. He confesses, "I don't know what I'm saying. I guess what I mean is that sometimes I don't know what or who we are […]" [268] His description of interacting with the world not as his current self but as an "echo of who I was" [269] speaks to Lacan's notion of the self as haunted by its formative reflections. The questions, "Can you hear me yet? Can you read me?" [270] extend beyond a simple request for understanding; they encapsulate a plea for acknowledgment from the symbolic order. Through these questions, Little Dog seeks validation of his existence within an intersubjective realm.

Writing manifests as a vital instrument for fulfilling the need for understanding. Little Dog's hesitations about various elements of writing—"images, clauses, ideas, even the pen or

[264] Ibid., p. 18.
[265] Ibid., p. 18.
[266] Ibid., p. 18.
[267] Ibid., p. 18.
[268] Ibid., p. 62.
[269] Ibid., p. 62.
[270] Ibid., p. 62.

journal I used" [271]—mirror an authentic experience of doubt intrinsic to self-expression. His "fear the knowledge will dissolve"[272] relates to the embodied nature of uncertainty; the search of a label for his mother—"White, Asian, orphan, American, mother"[273]—is performative and contributes to the ongoing process of identity formation. Little Dog articulates this sentiment by writing, "I'm breaking us apart again so that I might carry us somewhere else—where, exactly, I'm not sure."[274] Drawing on Berlant, this desire for a different elsewhere entwined with uncertainty constitutes an optimism that thrives on the collapse of fixed notions. The act of breaking apart becomes a necessary yet cruel step in the pursuit of different possibilities, thereby reflecting the open-ended and ambiguous nature of identity construction.

In this way, language is acknowledged for its formative impact on identity within the text. A significant moment arises when Little Dog recalls his ESL teacher, Mrs. Callahan, and the children's book *Thunder Cake*. The characters' choice to bake a cake amidst a looming storm, a departure from expected behavior, represents a queer form of resilience. This encounter inspires Little Dog, drawing him into the "current of language," [275] with a utopian potential realized through linguistic engagement. Language, therefore, transcends its basic communicative function, offering a path to personal transcendence.

In lived experience, language equally serves as a cornerstone in the edifice of identity. Little Dog observes, "One does not 'pass' in America without English," [276] pinpointing language as a tangible aspect of identity and tracking its performative facet. This concept is vividly depicted in the aftermath of the bullying episode. He recounts drinking so much cold milk that it lost its flavor on his tongue, likening it to a "thick white braid" [277]—a cultural

[271] Ibid., p. 62.
[272] Ibid., p. 62.
[273] Ibid., p. 62.
[274] Ibid., p. 62.
[275] Ibid., p. 5.
[276] Ibid., p. 52.
[277] Ibid., p. 27.

signifier through which identity is both contested and confirmed. The ritual's repetitive nature, coupled with Rose's counter rap, signifies the act's performativity, which Little Dog accentuates by alluding to Superman. The act of drinking milk becomes an identity-affirming choreography, a performance in which both Little Dog and Rose partake, thus navigating and reinforcing racial and cultural identities.

Interestingly, language assumes a distinct role in delineating the identity of Hartford. The phrase "What's good?"[278] operates not merely as a salutation but as a method of affirming existence and crafting solidarity within a milieu marked by hardship. The cadence of gunshots, the silent acknowledgment of domestic strife at the C-Town checkout, and the tacit recognition of being "knocked down"[279] underline the corporeal realities of violence and struggle. In this context, "What's good?" evolves beyond a simple greeting into a performative declaration, one that reclaims joy and resilience in the face of adversity. It reflects the community's ability to repurpose language as a means to imagine and strive for a collective queer futurity, a shared endeavor to envisage and forge a brighter future.

The dynamic of intersubjectivity and power structures becomes particularly evident in the context of the nail salon. The frequent articulation of "*sorry*,"[280] often accompanied by submissive gestures like bowing, enacts the ritual of subordination that defines the salon's atmosphere. This recurrent utterance of "sorry" does more than communicate remorse; it shows the performance of subjugation by reflecting how workers assimilate and perpetuate their own subaltern status, thereby reinforcing established power hierarchies. "Sorry," as the most commonly spoken word in the salon, undergoes a semantic shift, laden with connotations of control and subjection. Additionally, the expression "Being sorry pays"[281] suggests a transactional element, where the continual use of "sorry" leads to a form of self-degradation in

[278] Ibid., p. 212.
[279] Ibid., p. 214.
[280] Ibid., p. 91.
[281] Ibid., p. 92.

exchange for financial compensation. The continual repetition of the word transforms it into a form of symbolic capital that maintains and upholds the existing social stratifications within the salon environment.

IV. **Thematic Insights**

A. Queer Politics and Culture

The exploration of identity politics in Greenwell's and Vuong's texts provides a compelling study in contrast. Greenwell centers on a political critique that reflects upon the narrator's personal experiences with US Republican ideologies, while Vuong, through Little Dog's eyes, offers a critical examination of racial identity politics. Little Dog's contemplation of Tiger Woods' self-identification as "Cablinasian" [282] serves as an insightful commentary on the fluidity and performative nature of identity. It exemplifies identity as an iterative performance rather than a static entity, thereby challenging monolithic racial classifications and advocating for self-definition. Moreover, Little Dog explores the issue of identity erasure through legal classifications. He references a case from 1884, where a white railroad worker was acquitted for the murder of an unnamed Chinese man. The judge justified the dismissal by citing Texas law, which defined "a human only as White, African American, or Mexican."[283] Little Dog's assertion, "Sometimes you are erased before you are given the choice of stating who you are,"[284] amplifies the dehumanizing consequences of racial categorizations. This erasure is not merely theoretical but is experienced in societal constructs that strip individuals of their humanity.

The city of Hartford becomes a crucible for the novel's sociopolitical commentary. The waiting outside Social Services, the huddling in the winter block—these are performances, as

[282] Ibid., p. 63.
[283] Ibid., p. 63.
[284] Ibid., p. 63.

Butler reminds us, that articulate their struggles and resistance against social divisions. Hartford's dilapidated architecture serves as a silent witness to systemic neglect and economic inequality. Little Dog's account of riding through the city with Trevor introduces an element of queer resistance, notably in the reference to turning death into a joke, the reduction of "fire to the size of cartoon raindrops,"[285] and the act of inhaling the resulting smoke through cigarillo tips. Trevor's emphatic declaration, "Fuck Coca-Cola! Sprite for life, motherfucker!"[286] seemingly trivial, manifests as a repudiation of capitalist structures, co-opted by Little Dog's agreement. Yet, the revelation that both Coca-Cola and Sprite belong to the same conglomerate complicates the act of resistance, calling into question the efficacy of their defiance.

In a broader sense, Little Dog's critique extends to the idea of nationhood itself. The notion that that "we're already on our feet, and therefore ready to run"[287] —poised not in allegiance but in readiness to flee—subverts the traditional role of anthems in engendering patriotism. By inverting the purpose of standing, Little Dog queers this narrative to formulate preparedness as resistance or departure rather than honor. The revision of the patriotic phrase into "one nation, under drugs, under drones" [288] bypasses the conventional understanding of national identity and allegiance by reframing these concepts within their very critique.

My argument here is that citizenship, in the context of Little Dog and his family, embodies a state of liminality—an existence poised between two realities. An instance recalls Lan passing around a bowl of rice and tea, humorously remarking, "This is our McDonald's!"[289] This playful comment disrupts the normative notion of fast food through a queer lens enshrined in everyday experiences. Performance emerges as a powerful tool in embodying this perspective, as evidenced in another scene when Lan shouts, "I'm happy!"[290]

[285] Ibid., p. 147.
[286] Ibid., p. 148.
[287] Ibid., p. 183.
[288] Ibid., p. 183.
[289] Ibid., p. 18.
[290] Ibid., p. 34.

and throws her arms up. Clinging to a mother "the size of a raft"[291] and silently drifting down the great brown river called America becomes a shared performance, a political act constructing a collective sense of happiness.

Greenwell's narrative employs utopian performativity through poignant childhood recollections, while Vuong's story utilizes it to subvert the traditional immigrant narrative. The image of the family eating mayonnaise sandwiches, juxtaposed with the background of sirens, presents a stark antithesis to the romanticized American Dream, thereby contrasting the idyllic with the characters' lived experiences. Yet, the simple act of sharing food becomes a profound moment of joy and inclusivity, as reinforced by Muñoz who recognizes "quotidian gestures as laden with potentiality."[292] These moments, I argue, coalesce to produce a sense of belonging for Vuong's characters.

In Vuong's queer framing, Little Dog's portrayal of Rose deflates the archetype of the doting American mother by candidly depicting her physical abuse. Little Dog asserts, "You're a mother, Ma. You're also a monster. But so am I—which is why I can't turn away from you. Which is why I have taken god's loneliest creation and put you inside it."[293] Here, the unsettling possibility of monstrousness within motherhood suggests a multifaceted identity that encompasses both care and harm—a fluid identity construction that mirrors his own self-conception. Moreover, placing the mother within the metaphor of "god's loneliest creation" reimagines the traditional gaze. In queer phenomenology, the gaze is not neutral; it is imbued with power dynamics and societal expectations. By associating Rose with a gaze that is severe and lonely, Vuong positions the role of the mother within complex and potentially isolating framework.

[291] Ibid., p. 34.
[292] Muñoz., p. 91.
[293] Vuong., p. 14

The political dimension of linguistic norms holds centrality in Vuong's narrative. Rose commands Little Dog to "step up" [294] by harnessing his "bellyful of English," [295] a phrase that underscores language's dual role in performance and in shaping reality, in line with Butler's theories. In a way, the command to employ English transcends simple language acquisition and embodies desires for assimilation, belonging, or survival within America. Equally significant is Little Dog's decision to pursue English studies. In a discarded draft of a letter, he discloses, "How I, the first in our family to go to college, squandered it on a degree in English."[296] Opting for a degree in English, contrary to potential familial expectations and capitalistic norms, can be interpreted as an act of disidentification. The departure from conventional paths demonstrates queerness as a form of resistance against predefined notions of success.

However, Little Dog's journey is not without its trials. Little Dog conveys this struggle, stating, "They will want you to succeed, but never more than them. They will write their names on your leash and call you *necessary*, call you *urgent*."[297] The imagery of a leash with names inscribed upon it represents the constraints imposed by a predominantly patriarchal society that seeks to exert control over identity and expression. By critiquing the notion that literature must be apolitical to achieve greatness or universality, Little Dog emphasizes the inextricable link between writing and politics. He questions the very foundations of what constitutes "great writing," [298] arguing that political engagement is not an impediment to greatness but an essential component of it.

No less importantly, Little Dog's experiences suggest that portrayals of intimacy can have profound implications for social and sexual organization. Engaging with Bersani's perspective, the act of taking Trevor's gold cross into his mouth becomes a metaphorical

[294] Ibid., p. 26.
[295] Ibid., p. 26.
[296] Ibid., p. 15.
[297] Ibid., p. 185.
[298] Ibid., p. 186.

gesture of shattering by representing a radical reimagining of desire. Little Dog describes the evolving experience from intercourse—"The sparks in my head bloomed with each thrust"[299]—to a distinct form of pleasure, as "after a while, the pain melted into a strange ache, a weightless numbness that swept through me like a new, even warmer season."[300] The melting of pain underscores the ideality of the intimate encounter, evidenced by Trevor becoming an "extension"[301] of Little Dog within a future state of interconnectedness and mutual influence. The query, "Why did I feel more myself while reaching for him, my hand midair, than I did having touched him?"[302] accentuates the transformative and anticipatory nature of desire vis-à-vis the potentiality embedded in the act of "reaching." This portrayal resonates with the relational dynamics in Greenwell's writing, where intimacy is suffused with a sense of anticipation, projecting forward into a realm of possibilities. Through Little Dog's and Trevor's interactions, Vuong's narrative shapes social and sexual dynamics within the domain of queer politics.

B. Autofiction's Transformative Force

The role of autofiction as a means to traverse the contours of memory, particularly in recounting trauma, resonates deeply in Vuong's narrative. Cusset's acknowledgment of autofiction's engagement with "the imprints of memory" [303] is echoed in the text, which, in the words of Olga Michael, expresses through "repressed, fragmented, traumatic memory"[304] in trauma's telling. Reflecting on the impact of war, Little Dog notes, "Some people say history moves in a spiral, not the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory,

[299] Ibid., p. 202.
[300] Ibid., p. 202.
[301] Ibid., p. 202.
[302] Ibid., p. 106.
[303] Cusset, 'The Limits of Autofiction.'
[304] Olga Michael, 'Graphic Autofiction and the Visualization of Trauma in Lynda Barry and Phoebe Gloeckner's Graphic Memoirs', in Hywel Dix (eds), *Autofiction in English*, Palgrave Studies in Life-Writing (Cham: Palgrave, 2018), 105-24 (p. 113).

our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed."[305] This contemplation on the cyclical nature of history intriguingly suggests the fusion of fact and fiction, a distinctive hallmark of autofiction. Within this paradigm, the dynamic nature of minute details in Lan's narratives—"the time of day, the color of someone's shirt, two air raids instead of three, an AK-47 instead of a 9mm, the daughter laughing, not crying"[306]—presents history as a fluid narrative where each cycle revisits and reshapes the past. In this context, "memory is an active interpretation and recreation of the past; it is neither an excavation into it nor a retrieval of actual events as they happened,"[307] as outlined by Michael.

In Greenwell's work, the utopian lens focuses on the realm of desire, whereas in Vuong's narrative, it extends to wartime recollections. Little Dog's portrayal of Lan's Vietnam hinges on perspective: "It is a beautiful country depending on where you look."[308] He creates an alternative vision of war and gender roles, evident when he says, "Depending on where you look, you might see the woman waiting on the shoulder of the dirt road, an infant girl wrapped in a sky-blue shawl in her arms."[309] The scene conjures "a utopian political imagination,"[310] to borrow Muñoz's words, and challenges the monolithic patriarchal war narratives. Little Dog further writes, "*You were born*, the woman thinks, *because no one else was coming*. Because no one else is coming, she begins to hum."[311] As the autofictional form's performative dimensions unfurl on the page, the narrative evokes the sense that "utopia is always about the not-quite-here or the notion that something is missing,"[312] as Muñoz contends. Vuong's use of autofiction thus creates a performative space where the grandson's central role in the diegetic world contributes to the queering of both temporal and spatial dimensions. Autofiction thus

[305] Vuong., p. 35.
[306] Ibid., p. 28.
[307] Michael., p. 106.
[308] Vuong., p. 35.
[309] Vuong., p. 35.
[310] Muñoz., p. 96.
[311] Vuong., p. 35.
[312] Muñoz., p. 118.

emerges not only as a literary technique but as a way for a reconceptualization of identity and belonging, achieved through experiments in form and style.

Little Dog explicitly recognizes the transformative dynamics inherent in writing. When reflecting on Rose, he expresses, "Even after all these years, the contrast between our skin surprises me—the way a blank page does when my hand, gripping a pen, begins to move through its spatial field, trying to act upon its life without marring it. But by writing, I mar it. I change, embellish, and preserve you all at once."[313] In this articulation, Little Dog recognizes that writing offers a dual capacity: to modify *and* safeguard Rose's portrayal. This parallels Greenwell's narrator's use of poems as a means of "loving things, of preserving them, of living moments twice."[314] However, in Little Dog's narrative, the act of crafting narratives not only asserts the narrator's agency in shaping memories, as it does for Greenwell's narrator, but also implies a trajectory toward the transformation of Rose's existence. Identity, therefore, emerges not as predetermined but as enacted through repeated performances on the page. Writing serves not only as a performative act but also fulfills a therapeutic function, thereby illustrating a characteristic of autofiction.

The expression of self, hence, in both Vuong and Greenwell's texts serves as a mechanism for transformation, a utopian gesture within the realm of artistic recreation. Little Dog's assertion, "You asked me what it's like to be a writer and I'm giving you a mess, I know. But it's a mess, Ma—I'm not making this up,"[315] offers insight into the non-linear nature of identity formation through storytelling, addressing not only the concept of transformation but also *how* it unfolds. The acknowledgment of presenting a "mess" speaks to the notion of reinvention in autofiction, a concept described by Doubrovsky as "the awareness and acceptance of the fact that one's life story is partial, fragmented, revised, and influenced by the

[313] Vuong., p. 85.
[314] Garth Greenwell, *What Belongs to You.* (London: Picador, 2017), p 171.
[315] Vuong., p. 189.

author's subjectivity in a given context."[316] In this context, messiness signifies more than just the creative process; it represents an embrace of the subjective journey involved in narrating one's life story.

Crucially, sexual encounters, as depicted, emerge as moments where the boundaries between identity and society and delineated and negotiated. The quote, "For a few delirious moments in the barn, as Trevor and I fucked, the cage around me became invisible, even if I knew it was never gone,"[317] explicates the temporary dissolution of the metaphorical cage enveloping Little Dog. The expression "the cage around me became invisible"[318] suggests a momentary utopian transformation, where societal constraints momentarily lose their grip. However, the acknowledgment of the cage's enduring presence and the subsequent realization that "my elation became a trap"[319] reinforces the transience of escaping societal constraints. The recognition of internal conflicts serves as a reminder that utopian moments are fleeting and subject to the ontologies of normative structures.

In this exaltation of the imagination within the autofictive mode, a discernible shift occurs from the act of 'making' to the 'making up' of the autobiographical self. This shift is evident in the explicit rejection of the present moment, notably when Little Dog expresses a longing for an alternative future. His contemplation, "Maybe in the next life we'll meet each other for the first time—believing in everything but the harm we're capable of,"[320] creates a temporal disruption by envisioning a union with Trevor in the next life as a first encounter, emphasizing a queer futurity. The idea that one can "change without disappearing, that all you had to do was wait until the storm passes,"[321] strengthens this forward-dawning vision where resilience stems from an insistence on potentiality—reminiscent of Greenwell's narrative,

[316] Michael., p. 106.
[317] Ibid., p. 216.
[318] Ibid., p. 216.
[319] Ibid., p. 216.
[320] Ibid., p. 192.
[321] Ibid., p. 137.

wherein the protagonist's desire for monogamy is realized in the liminal space between narration and involvement. Hence, Little Dog's metaphorical invocation of buffaloes and monarchs has a distinct intent, climaxing in the hope that "Maybe we'll be the opposite of buffaloes. We'll grow wings and spill over the cliff as a generation of monarchs, heading home."[322] These interconnected themes of utopia, temporal disruption, and performative resistance converge to articulate counter-narrative of a more affirming existence, achieved through a fusion of the real with the fictional.

[322] Ibid., p. 192.

CHAPTER THREE| Queer Becomings: Desire, Transformation, and Agency in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*

In *The Argonauts,* Maggie Nelson presents an autobiographical narrative that outlines her roles as a partner, mother, and academic, as she navigates through multiple intersections of queerness. This work, employing a hybrid genre known as autotheory, blends elements of memoir with criticism. This approach marks a departure from the conventional focus of autofiction by embedding theory intrinsically within the narrative. The narrative focuses on Nelson's relationship with Harry Dodge, a genderqueer artist, and chronicles their journey through pregnancy, parenthood, and gender transition. This phenomenological exploration documents various aspects of identity, desire, and resistance within Nelson's work. Through this analysis, it provides valuable insights on how an autotheoretical approach can enrich discussions about queerness.

I. **Embodied Spaces and Diverse Orientations**

A. Individual Experiences of Space and Embodiment

While Greenwell and Vuong delineate the dynamic between space and bodies in their texts, Nelson explicitly establishes this connection by depicting queer subjectivities. During a visit to her best friends' trapeze-burlesque shows, Nelson, with her five-month-old baby, Iggy, strapped to her chest, meets a bouncer who insists the show is for audiences 18 and older. She interprets this incident through Susan Fraiman's notion of "a heroic gay male sexuality as a stand-in for queerness which remains 'unpolluted by procreative femininity.'" [323] Nelson sees the nightclub, typically a symbol of freedom and self-expression, as a contentious space. Her critique sheds light on the continuous negotiation of queerness within such environments.

[323] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Melville House, 2016), p. 84.

Coming from another perspective, the interrelation of spaces and bodies suggests that spaces are anything but neutral. Nelson, for instance, recounts her experience of watching the film *Community Action Center* during a family outing with Dodge. Dodge's critique regarding the film's "banishment of cock"[324] prompts Nelson to ponder the difficulty of accommodating the nonphallic when the phallic consistently asserts its presence. She uses the metaphor of the phallic "pushing its way back into the room" [325] to denote the pervasive re-emergence of traditional standards, which hinders the creation of new, inclusive spaces. In the same passage, Nelson expresses her agitation through the inquiry, "*In whose world is the morphological imaginary defined as that which is not real?*"[326] This rhetorical question challenges the exclusive legitimacy of normative structures in defining reality. Nelson adopts Butler's term "morphological imaginary" [327] to critique the societal constructs of gender and identity. This statement adds depth to the discourse on space, critiquing the limitations that normative frameworks place on the expression of diverse identities within certain environments.

Each of these instances serve as launching points for Nelson's scrutiny of space and its relationship with identity. Nelson, in this vein, introduces the term "odd moment"[328] to describe the recurrent interrogations regarding Dodge's identification. During these moments, the camaraderie between "two dudes screeches to a halt[329] as gendered details on Dodge's identification become apparent. Nelson observers, "The friendliness can't evaporate on a dime, however, especially if there has been a longish prior interaction, as one might have over the course of a meal, with a waiter."[330] Such disruptions highlight pivotal points where the

[324] Ibid., p. 78.
[325] Ibid., p. 78.
[326] Ibid., p. 78.
[327] Ibid., p. 78
[328] Ibid., p. 110.
[329] Ibid., p. 101-111.
[330] Ibid., p. 111.

performative aspects of gender and identity emerge. Thus, space becomes a dynamic arena where identities are in flux, constructed and enacted nature within social contexts.

Nelson's work goes beyond critiquing space within social narratives and invites readers to reassess the relationship between the changing body and its environment, as her experience with pregnancy demonstrates. Having conceived through multiple In Vitro Fertilization attempts, Nelson gains insight into her altered spatial presence during gestation. She notes the surprisingly warm interactions she receives during a book tour in her third trimester as "nothing short of shocking."[331] As she reflects further, Nelson recognizes a duality in the public perception of pregnancy: "But the pregnant body in public is also obscene. It radiates a kind of smug autoeroticism: an intimate relation is going on—one that is visible to others, but that decisively excludes them."[332] With this observation, Nelson reclaims the pregnant body as an entity of bodily sovereignty and exclusion by asserting a dialogue between public and private realms. This positions pregnancy not just as a physical condition, but as a conversation about queer corporeality. This characteristic distinctly differentiates Nelson's work from the texts of Greenwell and Vuong.

Yet, Nelson's narrative, like the other works under review, actively interrogates and reshapes space, thereby redefining its essence. Indeed, the concept of inhabitance, explored through Greenwell's cruising spaces and Vuong's nail salon, acknowledges the mutual impact of bodies and environments. This interconnection frames Nelson's intentional decision to rent in New York City: "I was so happy renting in New York City for so long because renting...allows you to let things literally fall apart all around you. Then, when it gets to be too much, you just move on."[333] Nelson uses the term "literally fall apart" to hint at considerations of both space and identity; her satisfaction derives not just from the tangible but also from the

[331] Ibid., p. 112.
[332] Ibid., p. 112.
[333] Ibid., p. 14.

emotional and affective responses elicited by her environment. The deliberate decision not to "lift a finger to better"[334] the surroundings signals a form of queer defiance—favoring impermanence and fluidity over establishing permanent foundations. This stance challenges the typical, heteronormative narratives around homeownership. It urges a reconsideration of the conventional expectations associated with the ideas of settling and investing in a permanent residence.

Similar to Vuong and Greenwell's works, Nelson's narrative emphasizes how space and objects collaborate as crucial factors in defining embodiment. Nelson observes the omnipresent yellow YES ON PROP 8 signs dotting the landscape during autumn, recognizing them as spatial markers imbued with distinct political and social meanings. This observation paves the way for Nelson's discussion of Catherine Opie's artwork, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, which portrays a scene etched into Opie's skin, showing two stick figures of women hand in hand. Opie's artistic expression, thus, actively dialogues with and reacts to the environment shaped by the signs. The sphere of the political signs—denoted by the heteronormative depiction of the stick figures—also permeates the cognitive realm in which Opie's piece is reflected upon and deciphered.

Nelson's critical engagement with these themes sets her work apart from the other two texts. It initiates a conversation on embodiment that emphasizes continual active interpretation. A clear instance of this dynamic is Harry's art-weapons, particularly a wooden stump outfitted with bolts. Upon facing a stalker, Nelson arrives home to discover the wooden stump strategically placed on her porch's welcome mat during Harry's absence, an action that alters typical spatial dynamics and redefines the significance of the threshold. Further, the atypical art-weapons embody a conscious deviation from traditional standards by queering gift-giving. Choosing non-traditional gifts reflects a wish to express closeness in unique and individualized

[334] Ibid., p. 14.

ways. Such choices not only emphasize the transformative power of objects in shaping personal emotional terrains but also add to a queer re-envisioning of intimacy and companionship in the relationship.

Indeed, a queer revaluation of objects is prominently illustrated in Nelson's portrayal of motherhood, through her examination of a Nan Goldin photograph featuring Layla Childs. Childs, a dancer, employs a hands-free pumping bra and a double electric pump for milk extraction. These devices not only mediate the embodied experience of breastfeeding but also grant a measure of autonomy in performing motherhood, thus contributing to the construction of maternal identity. The photograph also signals a disidentification from traditional norms by deviating from typical motherhood portrayals. Nelson argues that "while pumping milk may be about nourishment, it isn't really about communion," which can be seen as a form of disidentification. As Muñoz puts it, "disidentification focuses on the way in which dominant signs and symbols, often ones that are toxic to minoritarian subjects, can be reimagined through an engaged and animated mode of performance or spectatorship."[335] Thus, the reimagination of milk expression emerges as a queer act that reveals a performative detachment. It acknowledges the notion of distance and finitude in maternal experiences, a theme I will return to in this chapter.

So we see how Nelson's work stands out from the other texts by presenting the body as a corporeal surface—a site adaptable for inscription and resistance. In this light, bodily acts become potent declarations of a unique subjectivity—a queer existence. One notable example is Nelson's consideration of tattooing HARD TO GET across her knuckles, an idea from her friend to signify the potential outcomes in adopting such a pose. The body thus unfolds as a malleable canvas capable of bearing marks of defiance and assertion. As Grosz notes, "These

[335] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York University Press, 2019), p. 169.

interactions and linkages can be seen as surface effects, relations occurring on the surface of the skin and various body parts. They are not merely superficial, for they generate, they produce, all the effects of a psychical interior, an underlying depth, individuality, or consciousness, much as the Möbius strip creates both an inside and an outside."[336] In this vein, the tattoo Nelson contemplates would crystallize a particular ethos, filtered through the material and symbolic dimensions that shape embodiment, thereby turning the body into an ideological realm.

The body's malleability becomes a central theme when Nelson, four months pregnant, and Dodge, undergoing six months of testosterone therapy, travel to Fort Lauderdale for Dodge's top surgery. They undertake this pilgrimage amidst the theme of "changing bodies," [337] which marks a shifting of identities through bodily transformations. The term "inscrutable hormonal soup"[338] accentuates the enigmatic common ground uniting their experiences of pregnancy and transition. Among the raucous boardwalk crowds, Nelson perceives a "force field" [339] enveloping them—a metaphor for the protective emotional sphere they share. As Ahmed notes, "the unreachability of some things can be affective; it can even put other worlds within reach."[340] Thus, their "force field" is both a barrier and a binding agent, intensifying the connection between Nelson and Dodge. This bond deepens after the surgery as Nelson contemplates Dodge's recovery, admiring his courage to chase "a better life, a life of wind on skin" [341]—an expression of desire for unbridled existence. Dodge's repose on a "throne of hotel pillows" [342] underlines the profound role of physicality in their lived experiences. Meanwhile,

[336] Grosz., p. 116.
[337] Nelson., p. 99.
[338] Ibid., p. 99
[339] Ibid., p. 100.
[340] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 153.
[341] Ibid., p. 101.
[342] Ibid., p. 101.

"a life of wind on skin" evokes a palpable sense of freedom and authenticity, a tangible realization stemming from the convergence of the public and the private.

In this respect, while Greenwell and Vuong's narratives illustrate how bodies are shaped within historical contexts, Nelson's book uniquely probes 'queer' through corporeal transformation. Nelson reflects on her own transformation and that of Dodge, highlighting their evolution and new directions. She notes, "Our bodies grew stranger, to ourselves, to each other."[343] Nelson details the physical changes experienced by both herself and Harry—Dodge's new coarse hair growth, her sustained breast soreness—conveying a potent sense of unfamiliarity and reorientation. Dodge's transition from a "stone"[344] state to a more fluid, expressive physicality parallels Butler's challenge to sexual binaries. The act of shedding a shirt "whenever you feel like it"[345] and confidently venturing into public spaces depicts a queering of space through newfound embodiment. Nelson remarks on the physical and sexual changes that T incites: "surges of heat, an adolescent budding, your sexuality coming down from the labyrinth of your mind and disseminating like a cottonwood tree in a warm wind."[346] This illustration of sexuality as both embodied and dispersing during transformation encapsulates the interplay between the mental and the physical. As bodies transition, they encounter new modes of being, signifying an ongoing process intertwined with cultural, social, and individual narratives, as per Grosz's framework.

In Nelson's account, the interaction between physical and psychological dimensions becomes pronounced, especially in her descriptions of pregnancy. She foregrounds the insemination procedure with vivid sensory details: she climbs onto the chilled examination table, feels the catheter's sting "through the opal slit of my cervix,"[347] and notices the sensation

[343] Ibid., p. 107.
[344] Ibid., p. 107.
[345] Ibid., p. 107.
[346] Ibid., p. 107.
[347] Ibid., p. 96.

of "thawed seminal fluid pooling directly into my uterus."[348] These visceral experiences, coupled with the emotionally charged nature of insemination, queer normative reproductive practices. The tactile expression of support—Dodge holding her hand—serves as a concrete display of unity, fostering a shared queer subjectivity.

Nelson also emphasizes the embodiment of pregnancy through her depiction of the baby's movements at night. Phrases like "*Move along, little baby!*"[349] and the sensation of the baby's foot on the lungs initiate a spatial dialogue between the pregnant body and the developing fetus. The use of metaphors, such as "unfurl"[350] and "feed his unfurling,"[351] breathes life and momentum into the otherwise static perception of the pregnant body. This negotiation of space uncovers a paradox of vulnerability, where the pregnant person assumes the duty of caring for the baby but cannot fully govern the pregnancy's progression. Metaphorically depicting the womb as both "dark"[352] and a "helix"[353] captures the complex emotional and physical aspects of pregnancy by framing a spatial dynamic of surrender and control that challenges conventional views. Nelson dives into the "*capaciousness* of growing a baby,"[354] revealing how the baby literally "*makes space*"[355] within the body. Descriptions of bodily shifts, such as the cartilage nub and the slide in the rib cage, underscore the transformative process. Postpartum, the "husky feeling"[356] felt in the perineum and the contrast of her breasts filling with milk—compared to an orgasm, "but more painful, powerful as a hard rain"[357]—meld together, yet bifurcate pain from pleasure. The unexpected release of milk from

[348] Ibid., p. 96.
[349] Ibid., p. 114.
[350] Ibid., p. 114.
[351] Ibid., p. 115.
[352] Ibid., p. 115
[353] Ibid., p. 115.
[354] Ibid., p. 128.
[355] Ibid., p. 128.
[356] Ibid., p. 128.
[357] Ibid., p. 128 – 129.

one nipple while the other is engaged in nursing subverts conventional notions of bodily autonomy and containment.

In effect, Nelson's narrative venerates the body's physicality while reconceptualizing pregnancy and motherhood through an association with space and objects. Her assertion, "I had always presumed that giving birth would make me feel invincible and ample, like fisting,"[358] introduces a performative dimension by linking maternity with a sexual act. This stance transcends the conventional mind/body dichotomy and invites a recognition of childbirth as an incarnate trial. Nelson articulates the concrete details of labor, with special attention to the marked dilation she describes as "thinning," [359] a term that doubles as a metaphor for the emotional metamorphosis of the birthing person. She contests the simplistic advice of "letting the baby out" [360] and suggests that to do so requires one to be prepared to metaphorically "go to pieces." [361] Her reflection on how to "*submit to falling forever*"[362] recognizes the impossibility of maintaining an unblemished state in childbirth. This introspection defies not just the expected euphoria tied to motherhood but also questions the societal ideals of maternal fortitude and endurance.

B. Desire as a Shaping Force in Embodied Spaces

Like the works of Greenwell and Vuong, Nelson's text depicts desire as an inherently corporeal sensation. The book's introductory passage starkly illustrates this point: "Instead the words I love you come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad."[363] The image of Nelson's face against the cement introduces a raw aspect to the experience, while

[358] Ibid., p. 108.
[359] Ibid., p. 155.
[360] Ibid., p. 155.
[361] Ibid., p. 155
[362] Ibid., p. 41.
[363] Ibid., p. 3.

the contrasting descriptors “dank” and “charming” queer the embodiment of space. Moreover, Nelson remarks, “You had *Molloy* by your bedside and a stack of cocks in a shadowy unused shower stall. Does it get any better? What’s your pleasure? you asked, then stuck around for an answer.”[364] Here, the inclusion of *Molloy* beside the bed alludes to Nelson’s self-discovery against the backdrop of Beckett’s existential motifs. Literature, thus, transcends its role as a cultural touchstone and partakes in the crafting of a queer identity in the domestic space, juxtaposed with the visual of “a stack of cocks.” The phrase “stuck around for an answer” disrupts normative scripts around desire’s teleology by not prescribing or assuming a specific answer. The openness of the question exemplifies the malleable and situational essence of desire, seen through a phenomenological perspective.

Vuong and Greenwell foreground explicit sexuality in their writing; however, Nelson distinguishes her text by fusing sexual experiences with scholarly reflection. She connects Luce Irigaray’s concept of labial morphology and her own experience of masturbation in a queue at Film Forum, again melding critical discourse with tangible experience. Her narrative ventures further during a shared encounter with Dodge at an erotic art cinema. Nelson expresses a predilection for non-traditional portrayals of sexuality, such as the artistic adornment of a girl’s buttocks with feathers and scenes depicting non-violent sexual hitting. These confessions, hence, akin to Irigaray’s “autoerotic mandorla,”[365] sculpt a self-aware narrative that strives to embody a pluralistic dialogue on queer desire.

Nelson champions an unreserved exaltation of sexual gratification. She declares, “I am not interested in a hermeneutics, or an erotics, or a metaphorics, of my anus. I am interested in ass-fucking. I am interested in the fact that the clitoris, disguised as a discrete button, sweeps over the entire area like a manta ray, impossible to tell where its eight thousand nerves begin

[364] Ibid., p. 3.
[365] Ibid., p. 77.

and end."[366] This unapologetic celebration of pleasure, liberated from ideological constraints, resonates with Bersani's views on the subversive potential of same-sex desire. Bersani posits that such desire, by eluding integration into mainstream frameworks, cultivates a revolutionary, nonconformist appreciation of relationships. Nelson's views reflect this stance, notably when recounting the viewing of the art porn film: "Those parts made that little portal swing open for me: *I think we have—and can have—a right to be free*."[367] Nelson's proclamation of freedom not only resonates with Bersani's thesis but also conveys a sense of intersubjectivity, encapsulated in the imagery of the portal. Though she claims to be solely interested in ass-fucking, Nelson implicitly calls for a grander emancipation from societal impositions in the sphere of desire.

This juncture in the thesis allows for a comparative analysis of desire as portrayed by Greenwell, Vuong, and Nelson. While Greenwell offers a psychological exploration of desire that reveals the power dynamics of intimacy, and Vuong's narrative intertwines desire with Little Dog's path toward self-definition, Nelson portrays a form of desire grounded in ideology. Her reflection about synergy with Dodge, "Why did it take me so long to find someone with whom my perversities were not only compatible but perfectly matched?"[368] echoes Butler's theory that "the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender."[369] By positing that "Really, though, it's more than a perfect match," [370] Nelson suggests an active, dynamic interaction that defies stasis. Her narrative thus presents a unique approach to relational dynamics, one that engages with desire not as a static state but as an evolving interplay. In doing so, she represents a model that is both ideologically conscious and resistant to fixity.

[366] Ibid., p. 106.
[367] Ibid., p. 79.
[368] Ibid., p. 87.
[369] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (S.I: Taylor and Francis, 2011), p. 24.
[370] Nelson., p. 87.

Moreover, Nelson's narrative embraces the multifaceted nature of desire by encapsulating motherhood. Reflecting on breastfeeding Iggy, Nelson describes it as "romantic, erotic, and consuming—but without tentacles,"[371] distinguishing between erotic and sexual pleasure. She introduces the concept of an "underspace,"[372] a dark and sweaty realm that metaphorically represents a private and emotionally charged space. The shared bottom bunk becomes a nexus for queer connectivity; the mutual engagement of mother and child carves out a realm of profound connection that upends traditional familial structures. In recognizing "Iggy's small body holds mine," [373] Nelson reflects Ahmed's notion that spatial relations are produced through actions; the child is nourished while the mother is pleasured—the two effects are not mutually exclusive. Such embodied experiences showcase the malleability and expansive possibilities inherent in family ties. By redefining the mother-child relationship through a queer lens, Nelson creates an epistemological articulation that forges new subject positions.

In this discourse on pleasures, Foucault's assertion that "classical antiquity's moral reflection concerning the pleasures was not directed toward a codification of acts, nor toward a hermeneutics of the subject, but toward a stylization of attitudes and an aesthetics of existence"[374] is pertinent. Within these "aesthetics of existence"—rocking Iggy to sleep, breast-feeding, and taking delight in his body—maternal pleasure acquires its shape. Nelson expresses her admiration for Iggy's "fantastic little body,"[375] initially hesitating to touch him freely. However, despite her hesitancy, she embraces her right to handle her baby: "My baby! My little butt! Now I delight in his little butt,"[376] Nelson writes, reveling in the physical bond with Iggy. In addition, Nelson's reference to the erotic in her relationship with her stepson forges a

[371] Nelson., p. 55.
[372] Ibid., p. 55.
[373] Ibid., p. 55.
[374] Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality* (Penguin History, 1992), p. 92.
[375] Ibid., p. 52.
[376] Ibid., p. 52.

queer aesthetic. The process of memorizing her stepson's physical features involves the necessity to "learn about"[377] his face while lying with him "in mute repose."[378] This revelation adds nuance to depictions of the bonds between women and children, challenging prevailing notions of selfless motherhood and nonsexual mothers.

In Nelson's exploration of desire, we encounter a dimension of self-actualization. Central to her depiction is the figure of the "sodomitical mother," [379] as conceptualized by Susan Fraiman—a role that Nelson personifies in her celebration of non-procreative sexual activities, thus redefining motherhood as an experience anchored in personal pleasure. Echoing the resistance of artists like Catherine Opie, who resists the marginalized status traditionally foisted upon the sexually divergent, Nelson rejects the dichotomy of an "ontological either/or"[380] and critiques the idealization of the child as an attempt to assimilate. Rather, what emerges is a form of pleasure that is "not merely balm for a wound,"[381] a striking contrast to the themes of alienation and exclusion prevalent in Greenwell and Vuong's texts. Referencing Sedgwick, Nelson's advocacy to "pluralize and specify"[382] supports the pursuit of discursive reformulations. Her work goes beyond mere critique; it forges a new discourse that validates diverse experiences of pleasure and knowledge.

II. **Societal, Cultural, and Temporal Contexts**

A. Queer Temporality: A Phenomenological Examination

The analysis demonstrates that Nelson's reinforcement of the "outside in"[383]—the body inducing psychological changes—presents a contrast to the way Vuong and Greenwell's texts

[377] Nelson., p. 14.
[378] Ibid., p. 14.
[379] Ibid., p. 87.
[380] Ibid., p. 81.
[381] Ibid., p. 120.
[382] Ibid., p. 78.
[383] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 115.

allow spatial experiences to shape the 'I.' This distinction produces a divergence from temporal norms, as Nelson does in her discussions on motherhood. The phrase "*I gave my body to my baby"*[384] indicates a conscious relinquishment of bodily autonomy. Yet, her follow-up, "I'm not sure I want it back, or in what sense I could ever have it,"[385] calls for a reevaluation of the assumed trajectory of regaining ownership post-pregnancy. Nelson's insight into the "false sense of ownership" [386] over Iggy's life and body, a result of "temporal proximity," [387] argues against the default power a mother might claim over her child's story. Such recognition stresses the shared and interconnected nature of temporal experiences. Challenging sole ownership or authorship, the continuous renegotiation of bodily boundaries postpartum disrupts the singular narrative of possession.

Focusing on temporality provides a counter narrative to conventional stories of motherhood and underlines the fluidity of identity across time. Opie's recurring artwork—*Self-Portrait/Nursing*—embodies this idea vividly. The scar, a symbol of queer maternity, subverts standard narratives of sexuality and parenting and adds an intergenerational aspect to the discussion. Moreover, in her *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, Opie contests established perceptions of queerness and motherhood. By simultaneously cradling her son and displaying the scar from her earlier piece, *Self-Portrait/Pervert,* she opposes orthodox views and uses repetition to defy fixed categories.

This argument contends that such revisitations foster a non-linear, cyclical temporality, a hallmark of queer time. The example above illustrates the centrality of repetition, echoing Nelson's idea of mobility, or the act of "writing the same book over and over again." [388] Nelson admits to undergoing the same realizations, writing the same notes, and revisiting familiar

[384] Nelson., p. 136.
[385] Ibid., p. 136.
[386] Ibid., p. 174.
[387] Ibid., p. 174.
[388] Nelson., p.140.

themes. Through Halberstam's lens, these repetitive actions may be interpreted as a subversion of the conventional narratives of linear progression. This form of defiance contests the customary ideals of advancement, growth, and evolution that are often entrenched within heteronormative family paradigms. As such, Nelson's cyclical approach to themes is not a deficit but a purposeful and resonant exploration.

Nelson views these revisitations as indicative of a transformative process that underscores the value of fluidity. She admits to valuing plurality and then states, "whatever I am, or have since become, I know now that slipperiness isn't all of it."[389] She perceives slipperiness subjectively, allowing for a form of queer temporality that resists simple categorization or static definitions. Nelson further examines how the body's sense of self evolves. She explains, "On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we were aging,"[390] suggesting that our physical selves are in a constant state of flux. Nelson's reflections on slipperiness thus denote an ongoing progression. By advocating for a dynamic construct of identity and desire, she champions a queer temporality that acknowledges the importance of fluidity toward "a becoming."[391]

B. Intersectionality in Queer Experiences

Family dynamics are a pivotal theme across the three texts, with Nelson's work homing in on her rapport with her mother and her experiences as a mother herself. Nelson's childhood, marked by her father's early passing and passive-aggressive interactions with her mother, forges a multifaceted identity. She reflects on her mother's lifelong quest for "zero fat" [392]— a preoccupation that profoundly affects Nelson's self-concept. Despite seeing her mother as

[389] Ibid., p. 140.
[390] Ibid., p. 103.
[391] Ibid., p. 66.
[392] Ibid., p. 131.

beautiful, Nelson observes that her mother's negative self-image "can generate a force field that repels any appreciation of it."[393] Nelson longs for her mother to acknowledge her own beauty, believing that this self-acceptance would be mutually beneficial: "as if that kind of self-love would somehow offer her body to me."[394] Nelson eventually recognizes that her mother has, in a sense, already given her body to her, yet they remain distinct individuals: "they do not share the same lot." [395] This entanglement of body perceptions and identities deepens the portrayal of their relationship. It presents a mother-daughter bond that strays from conventional expectations and highlights a distinctly queer familial tie.

In Nelson's narrative, the persistent anticipation of disaster becomes a lens through which she views the world—a practice she associates with her mother, who embodies what Nelson calls "prophylactic anxiety." [396] This habitual preparedness for the worst-case scenario, inherited from her mother, crystallizes as a form of legacy, entrenching itself within Nelson's psyche. She illustrates this with a memory: "The year my father died, I read a story in school about a little boy who builds ships in bottles. This boy lived by the belief that by imagining the most terrible event possible, you could protect yourself from shock when it occurred." [397] Nelson, inadvertently mirroring Freud's theory that anxiety acts as a premonition of peril, confesses to habituating herself to this state of worry.

The absorption of anxiety creates a continuous emotional link between Nelson and her mother. It's within this affective lineage that we observe a queer relationality, one that intertwines the personal with the intergenerational, as seen in the other works under discussion. In Greenwell's narrative, paternal infidelities overshadow the protagonist, while in Vuong's writing, maternal trauma transfers to Little Dog, illustrating how histories are embodied.

[393] Ibid., p. 132.
[394] Ibid., p. 132.
[395] Ibid., p. 109.
[396] Ibid., p. 149.
[397] Ibid., p. 148.

Indeed, as Ahmed reminds us, "inheritance can be rethought in terms of orientations."[398] This reconceptualization is apparent in all three narratives. Specifically, in Nelson's writing, her mother's orientations toward anxiety are not merely psychological but are etched within their shared history and lived experience.

Nelson's narrative delves into the phenomenon of anxiety, centering on her confession that she draws "the bulk of my self-worth from a feeling of hypercompetence."[399] The accolade of being a "great student,"[400] for lacking "*baggage*"[401] exposes societal expectation that personal challenges are antithetical to scholarly excellence—a presumption that academic achievement requires the forfeiture of emotional and personal entanglements. The admission "at which moment the subterfuge of my life felt complete" [402] marks Nelson's perceived success in meeting these societal standards by presenting a façade of an untroubled academic life. Indeed, Nelson's reliance on her own "near total self-reliance"[403] reveals itself as a defensive strategy, a motif she wrestles with throughout her work: "I will always aspire to contain my shit as best I can, but I am no longer interested in hiding my dependencies in an effort to appear superior to those who are more visibly undone or aching."[404] This shift highlights the mutable and developing aspects of Nelson's sense of self. It reflects a vulnerability, a sense of incompleteness, which sculpt the continuously evolving aspect of Nelson's identity.

Dodge's identity, too, encapsulates a spectrum of intersectional elements. Dodge, we are told, grapples with the weight of a name assigned at birth, accompanied by a persistent sense of displacement, never quite feeling "at home in my own skin." [405] Identifying as a self-

[398] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 125.
[399] Nelson., p. 127.
[400] Ibid., p. 127.
[401] Ibid., p. 127.
[402] Ibid., p. 127.
[403] Ibid., p. 127.
[404] Ibid., p. 127.
[405] Ibid., p. 39.

described "butch on T,"[406] Dodge rejects the tidy resolutions offered by binary gender narratives. Nelson notes that Dodge sometimes declares, "*I'm not on my way anywhere*,"[407] which disrupts the expectations of straightforward identity progression. The pursuit of Dodge's birth mother—a figure depicted as "a newly sober leather dyke, quick, articulate, and tough around the edges" [408]—adds layers to Dodge's multifaceted self. What began as an adoptee's sense of pervasive nomadism, characterized as a "spreading, inclusive, almost mystical sense of belonging,"[409] evolves into something more plural and queer. This evolution reflects a transformative journey that not only intersects with various aspects of identity—gender, sexuality, and familial lineage—but also embodies a resistance to essentialist notions of identity.

III. The Auto in Queer Narrative

A. Form, Aesthetics, and Representation

The hybrid composition of Nelson's text—a mosaic of blog-like narratives, analytical meditations, curated excerpts, and reflective inquiries into diverse themes—manifests its distinct identity. Nelson conceptualizes her methodology as 'autotheory,' a blend of autobiographical elements with critical theory. She adopts Ralph Clare's framework, which situates the narrative form as a response to the institutionalization of critical theory and its perceived waning influence. In developing this approach, Nelson employs the lexicon and tactics of critical theory to effect a transformation of both narrative structure and thematic substance. A notable methodological choice involves her eschewal of conventional footnotes in favor of marginal annotations, which serve as signposts that inform and texture Nelson's thoughts. By straying from the norms of academic writing, Nelson refrains from presenting a

[406] Ibid., p. 65.
[407] Ibid., p. 65.
[408] Ibid., p. 171.
[409] Ibid., p. 173.

dominant claim for validation, thus challenging the formalities of academic endorsement with a more fluid and inquisitive style.

Citations within *The Argonauts* illuminate and contextualize. They provide the reader with not only insights and explanations but also references for further exploration. Genette's concept of paratexts as a dialogic space—where the reader and text enter into conversation—offers a framework for understanding these marginal annotations. According to Genette, paratexts occupy "a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction."[410] They do not merely guide readers through the narrative's thematic landscape but also engage them in a deeper transaction with the text. Nelson's application of this concept allows her annotations to serve as catalysts for engagement, fostering a richer comprehension of theory within the reader's mind.

For example, Nelson transitions from musings on writing to discussing Sedgwick through a pointed statement: "*That's enough. You can stop now*: the phrase Sedgwick said she longed to hear whenever she was suffering. (Enough hurting, enough showing off, enough achieving, enough talking, enough trying, enough writing, enough living.)"[411] This interjection does more than spark curiosity about the term "enough"; it also signals shifts in genre and tones. For Genette, footnotes create nuanced local effects "that help reduce the famous and sometimes regrettable linearity of discourse."[412] Nelson's repetitive invocation of "enough" exemplifies this by easing the passage to new topics like her musings on the corporeal transformations of pregnancy. The citations thus not only signal topic changes but also invoke nuances in tone and genre. These shifts are carefully crafted to mirror the narrator's intellectual and emotional terrain.

[410] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press 1997), p. 407.
[411] Nelson., p. 128.
[412] Genette., p. 328.

Nelson distinguishes her text within this thesis by emphasizing the construction of plural meanings. She crafts multiple understandings using narrative techniques such as diegesis—detailing her experiences, reflections, and the evolving dynamics of her relationships—and metalepsis, which embeds theoretical concepts into her storytelling. This interplay elevates and complicates her portrayal. Within the frame of the hermeneutic code, Nelson intertwines personal and theoretical threads through enigmas about identity, gender, and relationships. She provokes questions regarding the fluidity of sexuality and the body, particularly in their relation to societal norms. Further, Nelson engages in a play of binaries, such as stability/instability, male/female, and mother/lover. These symbolic codes create tension and foster a nuanced understanding of queer existence. Her method offers intimate insights into the self by highlighting how external factors and information shape personal identity.

Nelson self-identifies as an "empiricist."[413] She describes her writing ambition as "*to find the conditions under which something new is produced* (creativeness),"[414] which underlines the purposeful and reflective nature of her writing. Barthes champions 'writerly' texts for their ability to transform readers from passive consumers into active creators of meaning, "a producer of the text."[415] Indeed, Nelson's narrative, with its dedication to forging new pathways, embodies this value, rich with allusions to various forms of art, cinema, and personal anecdotes. This engagement is not random; it frequently draws upon scholarly work and cultural discourse, from feminist theory to psychoanalysis, situating the narrative within a broad cultural and intellectual milieu. Therefore, her narrative's form not only invites alternative interpretations but also legitimizes and normalizes their emergence, adding a layer of authenticity to the storytelling process.

[413] Nelson., p. 128.
[414] Nelson., p. 128.
[415] Roland Barthes and Honoré De Balzac. *S/Z* [1st American ed.] ed. Farrar Straus & Giroux (London: Blackwell Oxford, 1990), pp. 2.

Nelson propels her narrative by detailing key life events, such as pregnancy and childbirth, which define the text's proairetic code. For instance, Nelson sets her childbirth experience against italicized recollections of Dodge's mother's passing, contrasting the creation of life with the end of one. She employs internal analepses, reflecting back on previous themes like the sodomitical mother, to seamlessly navigate past events within the storyline. Similarly, she uses prolepses to express anticipatory thoughts about future happenings, like Iggy's birth and her contemplations of his physicality before he is born. These deliberate temporal shifts are not merely narrative techniques; they serve to reconstruct and reclaim past experiences. In effect, they provide a discursive texture to the text that invites readers to engage with its thematic essence of time and continuity.

These shifts beckon an analysis of Nelson's work through an autofictional lens. Her narrative structure, characterized by analeptic and proleptic time jumps, mirrors the temporal machinations found in Greenwell and Vuong's works and is instrumental in shaping Nelson's identity and recollections on the page. In addition, Nelson utilizes vivid imagery to reimagine her self-narrative, evident in her portrayal of her feminist theory professor who embodies a "whip of autumnal New England in her hair and cheeks"[416] and her depiction of a scene in Fort Lauderdale as "hot and lavender with a night storm coming in."[417] Indeed, paralleling Vuong's masterful metaphors, the recurring image of the Argo—an ancient Greek vessel—echoes Barthes' concept and, in Nelson's account, represents a central metaphor for selfhood. This 'self' appears constant, yet undergoes incessant metamorphosis: "We develop, even in utero, in response to a flow of projections and reflections ricocheting off us. Eventually, we call that snowball a self (Argo)."[418] These narrative elements, encapsulated by the Argo as a semantic

[416] Nelson., p. 72.
[417] Ibid., p. 100.
[418] Ibid., p. 118.

symbol, merge to create a literary aesthetic that promotes the possibility of self-reinvention through the act of writing.

In advocating for the fictional aesthetics within Nelson's narrative, my intention is not to argue for a fictionalized portrayal. Rather, it is to illustrate how the fictional elements in Nelson's text justify its exploration under the umbrella of autofiction. Dix defines autofiction, in his study of Doubrovsky's work, as "a project of self-exploration and self-experimentation on the part of the author,"[419] a description that aptly applies to Nelson's stylistic endeavors. The intentional integration of the first and second person (addressing Dodge), for instance, forges a dynamic interactive focalization that invites the reader into the narrative as a co-participant. In Dodge's section, the absence of capitalization and the variation in sentence lengths evoke a stream-of-consciousness that draws the reader into a more intimate exchange. Time stamps, which punctuate transitions between Dodge and Nelson's segments, anchor the narrative temporally, evoking the immediacy of social media and fostering a contemporary relationship between life and narrative form. The formal properties of the text—such as concise paragraphs, absence of indentation, and block justification—reimagine the page as a visual display, orchestrating a deliberate performance that deconstructs the self and advances ideological discussions. Thus, the page becomes a stage where the components of the Argo shift, revealing a life in flux, eroding binaries, and unfolding personal metamorphosis.

B. Language, Identity, and Intersubjectivity

Much like Little Dog's relationship with language in Vuong's narrative, Nelson wields language to construct (and reconstruct) the self, albeit with a focus on engaging with the language itself. In this model of autobiographics, language becomes Nelson's tool for grappling with the incomprehensible. In an interview with Annie DeWitt, she says that she wanted *The*

[419] Hywel Rowland Dix, *Autofiction in English* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 4.

Argonauts to "intimate things that fall outside of categories, or language, even, by being exceptionally clear about what I see, think, apprehend."[420] Drawing on Wittgenstein, she emphasizes the idea that "the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed."[421] Adopting this philosophy, she reveals her private life's intimacies, such as when she extracts inedible items from her son's mouth, attempting to convey the nuances of motherhood even though she is aware that words might not fully succeed. Despite the inherent limitations of language, Nelson partakes in the relentless pursuit of articulating the ineffable. In doing so, she maps a queer identity that rarifies within the elusiveness of the inexpressible.

Nelson writing as an embodied practice, teeming with "tics of uncertainty,"[422] parallels the existential ambiguity in Vuong's depiction of Little Dog's literary exploration. Nelson, however, interprets uncertainty as an indicator of the struggle to transcend normative constraints. She employs the metaphor of *Breakout*, the classic Atari game, to elucidate this point. The relationship between writer and text is likened to a game played within the cultural field. The act of "popping the little black dot"[423] into the rainbow bank symbolizes a fine-tuning of personal experience against the backdrop of established linguistic and societal frameworks. As the rainbow bank loses its colors to the breakout, Nelson illustrates the deconstruction of dominant narratives—a visual representation of writing's power to reshape cultural paradigms.

I contend that Nelson's linguistic involvement does more than dismantle binaries; it also sculpts her identity while showing her mastery of language in critical argument and self-expression. Her precise use of language denotes an ethic of non-wasteful communication. The

[420] Ann Dewitt, 'What's Queer Form Anyway? An Interview with Maggie Nelson,' *The Paris Review*, June 14, 2018. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/06/14/an-interview-with-maggie-nelson> [Accessed March 1, 2024]
[421] Nelson., p. 57.
[422] Nelson., p. 122.
[423] Ibid., p. 76.

integration of Ann Carson's query—*"What exactly is lost to us when words are wasted?"*[424]—mirrors Nelson's literary philosophy, which relates the judicious use of words to broader existential themes. Yet, Nelson's concern that her prose might become a "gravestone marking the forsaking of wildness"[425] exhibits a sophisticated self-critique. Despite her commitment to coherence and sense-making, she acknowledges the potential limitations of her writing practice. Nevertheless, her self-expression reflects an attempt to dissect the truths of lived experience. "I collect these moments. I know they hold a key,"[426] she asserts. Through a Lacanian lens, Nelson's gathering of moments in pursuit of a key is her striving to apprehend the intangible truths concealed by everyday constructs. These moments, or keys, symbolize the pursuit of profound self-realization or insights into the world.

It is notable that Nelson frequently mentions Lacan in text, even quoting him in the margins: "*If a man who thinks he is a king is mad, a king who thinks he is a king is no less so*."[427] This citation brings the concepts of the 'real' and the 'imaginary' to the forefront of the discussion. One particularly telling scene involves two popsicles in a drawing by Dodge, engaging in discourse on fantasy versus reality: "You're more interested in fantasy than reality,"[428] to which the other responds, "I'm interested in the reality of my fantasy,"[429] as both popsicles melt. Through a Lacanian lens, the popsicles can be seen navigating the Imaginary (the realm of images and illusions) and the Symbolic (the realm of social structure and language). Their melting represents the Lacanian idea of the "sliding of the signified under the signifier," [430] where meaning is not fixed but constantly shifting. The dissolving popsicles

[424] Ibid., p. 60.
[425] Ibid., p. 65.
[426] Ibid., p. 79.
[427] Ibid., p. 17.
[428] Ibid., p. 79.
[429] Ibid., p. 79.
[430] Jacques Lacan. *Ecrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink (WW Norton, 2007), pp. 117.

poignantly illustrate the transient nature of our self-concepts and the subjective 'realities' we construct.

This idea of constructed selves also appears in Greenwell's work, manifesting as the narrator's fragmented identity. Nelson's text, however, signals fluid self-definition. For example, Nelson cites Barthes's *The Neutral* in discussing self-identification. She describes a memorable moment from Sedgwick's graduate seminar where she chose *otter* during a totem animal exercise, signaling a search for a distinct identity. Nelson aspires to qualities associated with otters—"small, slick, quick, amphibious, dexterous, capable"[431]—reflecting a longing for an ideal self-image. Yet her desire to "shimmy out of"[432] the otter identity suggests a reluctance to embrace fixity. Though initially unfamiliar with *The Neutral*, Nelson retrospectively identifies it as a conceptual anthem. The Neutral, as explained by Barthes, serves as a counterforce to doctrinal rigidity; in its alignment with specific positions, it offers alternative responses like evasion, dissent, or disengagement.

Interestingly, the incorporation of the otter motif in Nelson's text parallels Vuong's use of the moniker, 'Little Dog,' as an unorthodox mode of identity formation. Yet Nelson's engagement with The Neutral delineates her strategy: adopting the otter as a symbol, she rejects categorical rigidity. Her repeated critique of "'totalizing' language" [433] reveals a struggle against binaries, and the very bracketing of the word "totalizing" highlights the potential of language to confine identity within normative structures. Beyond the introduction of new words such as "boi, cisgendered, andro-fag,"[434] she advocates for an awareness of the multiplicity of uses and contexts for each word, echoing Butler's views on language as a dynamic and ever-shifting process where meaning remains elusive. The deliberations about the meanings of words between Nelson and Dodge exemplify a commitment to a "multitude of possible uses,

[431] Ibid., p. 139.
[432] Ibid., p. 140.
[433] Ibid., p. 122.
[434] Ibid., p. 9.

possible contexts."[435] They showcase a commitment to a relational and epistemological inquiry within a framework where language is subject to continual negotiation.

Nelson's text once again becomes indispensable to this thesis with its theoretical foundations. The recurring use of words and imagery throughout the text underscores a self that is both fluid and multifaceted. Indeed, Nelson's concept of self-identity interweaves with the metaphorical journey of the Argo. The ship's mythic voyage symbolizes the ongoing quest to dismantle binaries and achieve a sense of belonging in a world of constant change. It is interesting to note that Barthes' analogy, wherein the lover renews the ship without altering its name, mirrors Ahmed's emphasis on the impact of embodied experiences on subjectivity. The lover's declaration of "I love you"[436] is construed as a performative gesture, where each iteration reshapes and revitalizes its meaning. This conception of language as an active, embodied practice suggests that meaning evolves with each repetition. The act of renewing, akin to the lover's labor, parallels the fluid and ever-changing nature of identity, fostering a dynamic process of self-discovery and transformation.

IV. **Thematic Insights**

A. Queer Politics and Culture

While Greenwell's work offers an implicit critique of Republican politics, and Vuong's text examines intersections of race and politics in the US, neither directly engages with the LGBTQ+ movement's contemporary alignment with heteronormativity. In contrast, Nelson addresses the "assimilationist, unthinkingly neoliberal bent"[437] of the mainstream LGBTQ+ movement, echoing Butler's concerns about the potential pitfalls of seeking acceptance within existing societal structures. Butler, alongside other queer theorists like Jasbir Puar, has

[435] Ibid., p. 9.
[436] Ibid., p. 5.
[437] Ibid., p. 32.

critiqued the drive for integration into conventional institutions such as marriage and the military. Nelson also tackles homonormativity, acknowledging a dynamic where victimhood claims coexist without a truly radical foundation, thus intensifying the discussion on assimilationist trends within the LGBTQ+ movement. Rather than picking sides, Nelson's scrutiny exposes the paradoxes within queer communities—conservative fears of destabilization juxtaposed with frustrations within queer circles about queerness falling short of genuine radicalism. A statement by poet CAConrad in the same passage, "I'm not the kind of faggot who wants to put a rainbow sticker on a machine gun,'[438] is invoked, calling for a more radical approach to societal structures. Nelson's assertion, "if we want to do more than claw our way into repressive structures, we have our work cut out for us,"[439] stands as a call to action for a transformative, anti-assimilationist vision within the LGBTQ+ movement.

Nelson's self-reflective work, as such, enriches this discussion by providing a firsthand account of these complexities. For Nelson, categories are fluid, and heteronormativity lacks a predetermined formula, much like queerness and motherhood. She illustrates this with a description of a family photograph on a mug, featuring herself pregnant, her recently transitioned husband, and her stepson at a performance of the *Nutcracker*, thereby questioning the perceived binary between queerness and procreation. Queerness, in her view, is not antithetical to heteronormativity but is woven into the fabric of humanity and everyday intimacies. Using the analogy of an art exhibition, she contends, "Some of the subjects of *Puppies and Babies* may not identify as queer, but it doesn't matter: the installation queers them."[440] Nelson thus expands the debate to encompass not just resistance and assimilation but also to place language and conceptualization at the heart of understanding queerness epistemologically.

[438] Ibid., p. 32.
[439] Ibid., p. 32.
[440] Ibid., p. 90.

In *The Argonauts*, Nelson uniquely reimagines traditional institutions, vividly portraying personal intimacies against the backdrop of her own wedding. The Hollywood Chapel, described as a "hole in the wall"[441] with unconventional décor and featuring a drag queen, eschews the traditional grandeur of wedding venues. The scene where the couple breaks down crying during the expedited ceremony challenges the stoicism and formality typically associated with weddings. The drag queen, serving simultaneously as a greeter, bouncer, and witness, disrupts entrenched gender roles, thereby queering the marriage ritual. Linguistic choices, such as the omission of pronouns from the vows, defy the gender-specific language that often permeates marriage ceremonies. Nelson's account continues with depictions of everyday moments shared between the couple, such as hastily collecting their child, enjoying chocolate pudding, and reflecting on "our" [442] mountain. These vignettes, capturing the essence of marriage, advance a progressive portrayal that strays from heteronormative scripts.

Unlike Vuong's and Greenwell's works, which suggest transformative possibilities through a relational ideality, Nelson's narrative actualizes these possibilities through lived experience. By situating her marriage on the same evening as the enactment of Proposition 8, Nelson comments on the fleeting nature of queer spaces and rights in the socio-political landscape. The transient Hollywood Chapel—"disappeared as quickly as it had sprung up, waiting, perhaps, to emerge another day"[443]—symbolizes the uncertain tenure of such spaces, yet also hints at the potential for resurgence. The idea of reemergence in the same sentence underscores a kind of hope, a potentiality or concrete possibility for another world, as Muñoz would describe it, "that fuels a critical and potentially transformative political imagination."[444]

Thus, in Nelson's book, utopian performativity extends beyond the abstract narrative methods found in Greenwell and Vuong's texts; it embodies a becoming, forged not by

[441] Ibid., p. 30.
[442] Ibid., p. 30.
[443] Ibid., p. 31.
[444] Muñoz, p.2.

ideology but a resistance to socio-political challenges. To be sure, the episode of Dodge's son's custody case illustrates how the family's intimate, emotional realities intersect with broader socio-political dynamics, particularly the fear of bias from a potentially discriminatory judge. This external pressure becomes an omnipresent anxiety, casting a "tornado green" [445] shadow over their day-to-day life. Dodge's creation of a playful and nurturing environment for his son, with a slide, a baby pool, a Lego station, and a swing, represents acts of lived resistance. These efforts resist "the provincial and pragmatic politics of the present," [446] as articulated by Muñoz, and signify a utopian drive where practical acts of love and imagination transcend socio-political adversities.

Moreover, Nelson's reflections on pregnancy embody a political dimension, resonating with Foucault's analysis of power structures. A case in point occurs during a discussion at a "prestigious New York university" [447] on her book *The Red Parts* (2007). When queried about her engagement with "dark material" [448] during pregnancy, the question implicitly wields disciplinary power, attempting to govern women's bodies. Nelson counters this by physically asserting her presence, pressing "a knee into the podium," [449] as an act of resistance to prescribed societal roles. The pregnant woman in this scenario becomes the central spectacle, resonating with Foucault's concept of the spectacle within the panopticon and the realm of surveillance. As Foucault puts it, "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." [450] The metaphorical panopticon in this instance reveals the dynamics of control and disciplinary tactics at play, which constitute a politicized exercise of power. It illustrates the

[445] Ibid., p. 38.
[446] Muñoz, p. 31.
[447] Nelson., p. 113.
[448] Ibid., p. 113.
[449] Ibid., p. 113.
[450] Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Second Vintage books ed. Vintage Books, 1995), p. 201.

acute awareness of constant scrutiny that Nelson conveys—a relentless "drumming" [451] that looms to overwhelm everything else.

In the analysis of Nelson's politics, my contention is not that it is advocating for a teleology but rather a freedom to become. Nelson expresses frustration with the repetitive invocation of same-sex marriage, stating that few, if any, queers think of their desire's main feature as being "same-sex."[452] Rather she suggests that for many queer individuals, the key feature of desire is not the sameness of sex but a "shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy."[453] This notion aligns with Butler's view of marriage as a term that both unites *and* differentiates groups within a shared yet complex patriarchal lineage. In other words, the commitment to "someone else's pussy"[454] in relationships with women becomes a form of embodied resistance. Nelson broadens her critique to contemporary capitalism, citing Beatriz Preciado's "pharma-copornographic era,"[455] where the economy exploits the relentless consumption of bodily resources. This calls for a re-evaluation of radical queerness and a reconsideration of the normative as it relates to sexual practices.

Within this frame, motherhood adopts a political resonance congruent with Nelson's radical perspective. Engaging critically with Edelman's *No Future*, Nelson acknowledges the symbolic use of the Child to sustain normative ideologies yet diverges from advocating against procreation. Instead, she aligns herself with the broader critique of capitalist structures within queer theory. Nelson's fierce resistance to the destructive actions of the wealthy and powerful—expressed with a resolute "Fuck *them*, I say"[456]—extends beyond concerns about reproduction and heteronormativity, resonating with Little Dog's critique of corporate hegemony. Both Vuong (using Little Dog) and Nelson critique corporate institutions, following

[451] Nelson., p. 114.
[452] Nelson., p. 31.
[453] Ibid., p. 31.
[454] Nelson., p. 31.
[455] Ibid., p. 138.
[456] Ibid., p. 95.

Muñoz's call for activism through the creation of alternative, more inclusive narratives. However, for Nelson, the autotheoretical approach allows for critique that becomes a forceful call for activism.

And so, we observe Nelson, despite her explicit reluctance to champion "enabling representations,"[457] entangled in the inevitable task of representation. Indeed, the expression of her intimate thoughts and experiences on the page is an act of representation. In an interview with *The White Review*, Nelson acknowledges this: "But, as I was saying to Harry, I can't write about queerness in a vacuum; there's going to be an act of representation that takes place."[458] In fact, in the book's concluding sections, Nelson implicitly rejects conventional notions of reproduction in favor of the concept of "acts of production,"[459] utilizing whimsical language such as *"flying anuses*"[460] and "*speeding vaginas*"[461] that echoes the subversive spirit often embraced in queer perspectives. Nelson's assertion that evolution is a "*teleology without a point*"[462] resonates with critiques from queer theory against essentialist narratives. However, she grapples with uncertainty regarding the existence of nothing or nothingness while affirming a space "ablaze with our care, its ongoing song."[463] This recognition of the gesture of "care" upholds a shared sphere where binaries are undone, and the allusion to an "ongoing song" implies a politics that seeks to create new paradigms for queerness.

B. Autofiction's Transformative Force

Nelson's narrative, steeped in the fluidity of the self, centralizes her interpretation of '*Becoming*,' a concept she adopts from Deleuze and Guattari. Her exploration of "a becoming

[457] Ibid., p. 120.
[458] Jess Cotton 'Interview with Maggie Nelson,' *The White Review*, May, 2015. <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-maggie-nelson> [accessed 1 March 2024].
[459] Nelson., p. 178.
[460] Ibid., p. 178.
[461] Ibid., p. 178.
[462] Ibid., p. 178.
[463] Ibid., p. 178.

in which one never becomes,"[464] carried through the book, reflects her alignment with the principles of autofiction, which, as Cusset notes, "should only be the work of our deep self." [465] Nelson achieves this through meticulous word choice, intertextual references, and the deliberate construction of sentences and paragraphs. Through this process, her work contributes to the ongoing evolution of identity, embodying a commitment to a queer aesthetic that values plurality.

For Cusset, "the writing of autofiction is performative. Autofiction doesn't just tell, it acts at the same time." Indeed, Nelson's recognition of the "persona or a performativity"[466] in her work conveys this awareness. Functioning dually as the subject and object within her narrative, Nelson weaves her personal anecdotes with the viewpoints and experiences of Dodge and their family. Nelson's claim that in a world where "the antidote to shame is not honor, but honesty"[467] underscores her commitment to transparency and authenticity. In her rejection of "crappy fiction" [468] that imposes "false choices" [469] within a story, Nelson opts for a narrative approach that uses her own life as a medium for understanding and transcendence.

Nelson's treatment of desire harnesses this transcendence; expressions like "*You're just a hole, letting me fill you up*"[470] define a purposefully bold narrative style that defies easy categorization as "neither native nor foreign." [471] She invokes Sedgwick's idea that pleasure, when expressed and atomized, can accumulate and expand: "One happy thing that can happen, according to Sedgwick, is that pleasure becomes accretive as well as autotelic: the more it's felt and displayed, the more proliferative, the more possible, the more habitual, it becomes."[472] The accumulative aspect of pleasure suggests a virtuous cycle of enhancement and possibility.

[464] Ibid., p. 66.
[465] Cusset, 'The Limits of Autofiction.'
[466] Ibid., p. 75.
[467] Ibid., p. 40.
[468] Ibid., p. 102.
[469] Ibid., p. 102.
[470] Nelson., p. 9.
[471] Ibid., p. 122.
[472] Ibid., p. 140.

This concept entails a transformation that surpasses the individual and has the potential to reshape broader social norms and behaviors. Through its influence, the self that is narrated is in a constant state of flux and recreation, which Ricarda Menn identifies as characteristic of a modern culture "constantly striving for originality." [473]

In the current cultural landscape, as my analysis has shown, Nelson positions motherhood as a process of continuous negotiation and transformation. Her narrative presents the inherent instabilities within mothering, a fluctuation between selfhood and selflessness, delight and distress. The birth of Iggy, characterized by contrasts such as "gentle" [474] versus "screaming," [475] illustrates the birthing process's dualities. Nelson advocates for Winnicott's notion of 'good enough' care, seeking balance between the child's independence and the mother's needs—especially those related to pleasure. She critiques societal tendencies that confine the sodomitical mother to the MILF archetype. In examining her maternal journey, Nelson engages in a performative act of motherhood that aligns with the contemporary ethos of autofiction.

The Argo, symbolizing Nelson's family, encapsulates the notion that the self exists in relation to others and the world, aligning with the thesis of autofiction. The Argo's narrative variations underscore the evolving nature of love, family, and self-exploration. Nelson employs the Argo as a literary device, which she reshapes in various narrative contexts while preserving its core essence. The realization that "*What is good is always being destroyed*" [476] suggests an ongoing reassessment of values and norms, the inside and outside. The statement, "And so we go on, our bodies finding each other again and again, even as they—we—have also been *right here*, all along,"[477] portrays bodies as dynamic entities changing over time. The repetition with

[473] Ricarda Menn, 'Unpicked and Remade: Creative Imperatives in John Burnside's Autofictions", pp. 163–177 in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 164.
[474] Ibid., p. 166.
[475] Ibid., p. 166.
[476] Ibid., p. 175.
[477] Ibid., p. 108.

“again and again” calls for a non-linear and queer temporal understanding in relationships. Like the malleable self in autofiction, the Argo represents changing interpretations of relationships and identity, indicative of Nelson’s fluid perspective. These insights collectively contribute to a deeper understanding of subjective experiences and the inherent dynamism of self-portrayal.

Conclusion | Reflections & Research Implications

My critical inquiry uses phenomenology to dissect queer embodiment. It analyzes three texts to reveal the interconnectedness of bodies, spaces, and objects in the negotiation of queer subjectivities, with a particular focus on desire—a central theme in all works. *In What Belongs to You*, desire both focuses and fractures the narrator's consciousness, catalyzing a pursuit for intimacy against a backdrop of isolation. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* depicts desire as a primal force driving Little Dog towards visibility and transformation. *The Argonauts* takes on an autotheoretical stance, with Nelson weaving desire into the narrative of identity construction, traversing psychological and physical evolutions that accompany shifts in identity, sexuality, and gender roles.

Autofiction has enriched our understanding of the self within these themes. The form has aided deep insights by engaging with the author's life as both source material and subject matter. By comparing Nelson's work with other autofictional texts, I have analyzed these narratives from a theoretical perspective to broaden academic dialogue. This approach has enabled a spectrum of comparisons across themes such as temporality, form, aesthetics, and language.

In my literary work, I use the autofictional mode to explore the dystopian effects of AI on human relationships. The protagonist, Samir, interacts with technology in a way that becomes an extension of the self, mirroring themes of alienation and agency similar to those in Greenwell's and Vuong's works. Although my novel eschews Nelson's autocritical mode, it implicitly critiques assimilation and engages with issues of subjectivity, queerness, and the process of becoming through an embodiment of these themes.

Comparative Analysis: Exploring Commonalities and Contrasts

My critical analysis has identified three salient themes in the selected texts. First, desire features as a potent, boundary-crossing force to unlock new relational dimensions. Unlike traditional representations, desire's masochistic elements in Vuong and Greenwell's works forge a queer relationality that evades homonormative and heteronormative scripts. Nelson's narrative further complicates desire through the metaphor of the Argo, which captures its fluid and multifaceted nature. Here, desire extends beyond sexual autonomy to incorporate maternal joys, thus broadening the scope of queer desire. Second, each novel delves into queer politics as an illustration of how personal narratives and identities intersect with broader social contexts. These intimate odysseys become conduits for the transformative effects of queer stories on political and cultural landscapes. Lastly, intersectionality stands as a pivotal theme, with characters navigating multifaceted identities. These identities, far from being fixed essences, emerge as intersecting constructs that influence both the narrative arc and broader conceptions of communal ties.

Performativity indeed stands out as a pivotal theme. Greenwell depicts desire through a lens of performance, while Vuong encapsulates performativity in the embodiment of his family's narrative. Nelson adds layers to this concept by meta-reflecting on her writing, using it as a tool for the self's evolution. As Cusset observes, "Autofiction doesn't just tell, it acts at the same time."[478] This act of performing the self reflects the gap between the current self and an aspired future, resonating with Muñoz's idea of a 'not yet here' horizon of possibility. In Greenwell's narrative, this implies the potential of a lasting relationship, whereas Vuong's explores healing from trauma through a reimagined and rewritten wartime history. Nelson, similarly, embeds a utopian performative aspect in her portrayal of her family, which aligns with the dynamic nature of the Argo, her familial microcosm. Autofiction thus reveals itself as

[478] Cusset, 'The Limits of Autofiction.'

a conduit for change, a means to explore latent realities and craft visions that are quintessentially queer in their defiance of the status quo.

This inquiry has identified common elements in these texts considering their hybridity and non-linear nature. All three texts invoke the hermeneutic code to engage readers with mysteries that propel the narrative. *The Argonauts* grapples with enigmas of gender fluidity and societal norms, while *What Belongs to You* centers on the perplexing character of Mitko and the unnamed narrator's internal dilemmas. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* explores the mysteries of family history and self-discovery. Each author uses action sequences to drive their narratives: Nelson chronicles life events and intellectual forays; Greenwell's narrator undergoes physical and emotional episodes with Mitko; Little Dog sifts through experiences and memories. Symbolic language and imagery deepen the characters and themes, as seen in the evolving metaphor of the Argo, the vivid post-communist Bulgarian setting, and the transformative butterfly motifs.

In all three texts, Lacan's ideas illuminate how language is not simply a medium for expressing identity but a foundational element in its very constitution. In Greenwell's book, the narrator's linguistically charged relationship with Mitko illustrates Lacan's concept of desire as structured like a language—highlighting both connection and alienation. Vuong's novel presents language's therapeutic potential through Little Dog's letter-writing, embodying Lacan's therapeutic potential of language as Little Dog seeks coherence in his fragmented identity. Nelson's text invokes Lacan's Symbolic order to navigate identity articulation through language; the Argo becomes a symbol for the self—continuously reconstructed through language and experience.

Distinct differences also characterize the three texts. Each features unique narrators with disparate experiences that shape their intersectional identities. While all are American, Greenwell's protagonist experiences cultural dislocation abroad, in contrast to Vuong's and

Nelson's US-based settings. Desire serves as a narrative engine in Greenwell's text, whereas in Vuong's and Nelson's works, it intertwines with various themes. Vuong prioritizes Little Dog's familial relationships and the exploration of trauma within the immigrant narrative, while Nelson focuses on a discourse around queerness and the binaries of sexuality, alongside personal accounts of pregnancy and her partner's gender transition.

The mood and style of the three narratives diverge as distinctly as their content. Greenwell's lyrical and reflective prose delves into desire and intimacy, Vuong's letter-formatted novel merges fiction with autobiography, and Nelson's text interweaves memoir with theory in an autotheoretical style. These differences extend to their narrative delivery: Vuong reconstructs family history through metaphor, Greenwell's anonymous narrator's confession parallels the author's biography, and Nelson engages in a critical examination of form and representation, negotiating the expression of self. Hermeneutically, *The Argonauts* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* interlace personal and familial pasts to craft their mysteries, while *What Belongs to You* contemplates the enigmatic nature of desire and otherness. In terms of action, Nelson's book predominantly depicts intellectual introspection, in contrast to the more physically anchored actions in Greenwell's and Vuong's works. Nelson's text uses semantic exploration for intellectual pursuit, while Greenwell and Vuong evoke emotive responses, reflecting on their characters' internal landscapes. Finally, while *The Argonauts* contextualizes personal experiences within theoretical frameworks, *What Belongs to You* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* are deeply embedded in the cultural and historical milieu of their settings, incorporating the cultural and historical codes of their respective environments.

Future Directions for Research

The findings of this study lay the groundwork for several promising research directions:

1. *Desire and Queerness Connection:* Analyzing sexual desire in contemporary fiction reveals its critical role in self-conceptualization of queer identities Desire not only contributes to identity but also promotes a form of utopian performativity in the gay narratives analyzed. Its multifaceted nature extends beyond sexual intimacy to include broader experiences, such as the depiction of pregnancy in Nelson's work. Though queer desire is well-trodden in literary studies, the specific elements I've investigated—such as the nuances of a utopian intimacy and the depiction of maternal pleasures—are ripe for deeper exploration to fully understand their impact on queer subjectivity.
2. *Intersectionality in Self-Reflective Writing*: Investigating intersectionality in self-reflective narratives provides fertile ground for understanding identity construction. Research can further dissect the confluence of race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status with queer experiences to enrich our comprehension of identity formation. Studies might examine how authors convey and contend with intersecting identities, and the impacts of these intersections on queer visibility and representation.
3. *Queer Writing and Autofiction's Relationship*: Exploring narrative strategies in queer and autofictional writing can illuminate the evolving forms queer authors adopt. Comparative analysis should seek to identify themes, techniques, and stylistic choices that queer writers employ, assessing how they navigate and potentially transform narrative conventions and the contours of autofiction.
4. *Autofiction as a Medium for Queer Advocacy*: Examining autofiction's capacity for queer advocacy promises to shed light on the interplay between literature and activism. Such exploration could reveal how personal narratives within autofiction confront prevailing LGBTQ+ narratives, with an emphasis on understanding the portrayal of marginal identities and their association with queer activism.

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