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# ANGLO-AMERICAN STUDIES

VARIA SECTION



*“Are you going to wear a dress now?”:*

Nonhegemonic Masculinities in Ocean Vuong’s

*On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyses the work of Ocean Vuong, specifically his engagement with queerness and its impact on individuals. In *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong constructs a world marked by both beauty and pain, centered on the transformative relationship between Little Dog and Trevor. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of sociologist Raewyn Connell, as well as the ongoing debate within the interdisciplinary field of Masculinities, I demonstrate how Vuong articulates multiple forms of masculinity and how, ultimately, Little Dog and Trevor—characters who embody nonhegemonic masculinities—endure the violence imposed by those surrounding them. This research deepens the critical understanding of this contemporary novel and situates it within a broader scholarly context; through a close reading of the masculinities embedded in the narrative, we can discern how queer and feminist studies are inevitably intertwined with masculinity and the societal pressures that

**RESUMO:** Este artigo analisa a obra de Ocean Vuong, em particular o seu envolvimento com *queerness* e os seus efeitos sobre os indivíduos. Em *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong constrói um mundo marcado simultaneamente pela beleza e pela dor, centrado na relação transformadora entre Little Dog e Trevor. A partir das contribuições teóricas da socióloga Raewyn Connell, bem como do debate em curso no campo interdisciplinar das Masculinidades, demonstro como Vuong articula múltiplas formas de masculinidade e como, em última instância, Little Dog e Trevor — figuras que incorporam masculinidades não hegemónicas — sobrevivem à violência imposta por aqueles que os rodeiam. Este estudo aprofunda a compreensão crítica deste romance contemporâneo e situa-o num contexto académico mais amplo; através de uma leitura atenta das masculinidades integradas na narrativa, podemos discernir de que forma os estudos *queer* e feministas estão



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compel men to perform constructed alter egos. In a novel defined by grief, cultural displacement, and numerous structural and interpersonal obstacles, the persona into which Little Dog is coerced reflects the broader social forces shaping his existence. In a world populated by men who imagine themselves as natural-born leaders aligned with hegemonic ideals—ordained to rule, dominate, marry, and reproduce—the narrative foregrounds those who exist on the margins of hegemonic masculinity and asserts the necessity of recognising their experiences.

**KEYWORDS:** Ocean Vuong, Masculinities, Queer Studies, Asian American literature.

inevitavelmente entrelaçados com a masculinidade e com as pressões sociais que impulsionam os homens a agir consoante os *alter egos* construídos. Num romance marcado pelo luto, pelo desfasamento cultural e por numerosos obstáculos estruturais e interpessoais, a persona em que Little Dog é coagido a refletir sobre as forças sociais mais vastas que moldam a sua existência. Num mundo povoado por homens que se imaginam líderes natos alinhados com ideais hegemónicos — destinados a governar, dominar, casar e reproduzir-se — a narrativa dá visibilidade àqueles que existem nas margens da masculinidade hegemónica e afirma a necessidade de reconhecer as suas experiências.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Ocean Vuong, Masculinidades, Estudos *Queer*, Literatura Asiático-Americana.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1988, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak concluded that the subalterns could not speak. In her in-depth postcolonial analysis, she challenges the Eurocentric intellectuals who speak for the marginalised, dismissing the power structures that differentiate them. Although Spivak focuses entirely on power and gender structures, the lack of representation, and the erasure of non-Western perspectives outside the hegemonic power, her argument seems also to fit Ocean Vuong's narrative. Vuong explores the intergenerational trauma of war, cultural dislocation, and the complexities of immigrating to the settler's nation as a queer man. In other words, Vuong is able to tell a story through a type of narrative that is not part of the dominant discourse; he acknowledges his marginalisation yet establishes his presence and voice regardless. The novel opens with "I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (Vuong 2019, 3) emphasizing that Little Dog, the main character, is writing not necessarily to communicate with his mother, especially because she does not understand English, but to voice his struggles and experiences as a non-conforming subaltern person. Although Spivak maintains that the subaltern cannot be heard within hegemonic Western frameworks, Vuong's narrative suggests a possibility for marginalised voices—such as Little Dog's—to articulate themselves and challenge heteronormative, hypermasculine Western narratives. And as Vuong says in an interview, "If I write for whiteness, even to prove it wrong, then I've lost myself already" (*in* Vaid-Menon 2022), which stresses the idea that as a marginalised person, he feels tempted to prove himself to the white literary world; however, in doing so, he would lose his purpose to navigate the experience of immigrant populations—especially his experience as a Vietnamese American non-conforming gay man.

Vuong's debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), explores the complex story of Little Dog, a second-generation immigrant whose existence challenges the hegemonic image of a self-made man in the United States. Through his character, Vuong articulates the marginalisation experienced by minorities in contemporary society and simultaneously deconstructs prevailing conceptions of masculinity, queerness, and internalised homophobia. This article aims to demonstrate the complexity of men's studies and how it intertwines with queer theory to deconstruct societal ideals of masculinity. It

also explores how *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* challenges these concepts by including and exalting representations of non-hegemonic masculinities.

The concept of “hegemonic masculinity” was first introduced by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell in her book *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (1987), and it has been applied and complexified ever since. Even though masculinity has been an important aspect of both queer studies and women’s studies, Connell’s theory was able to formulate a cohesive, comprehensible narrative that did not focus on perpetuating the myth that every man benefits from patriarchy and instead “celebrates a multiplicity of masculine identities over socially embedded stereotypes” (Hobbs 2013, 384). She seeks to demonstrate that even though there is a dominant type of masculinity, it does not mean that there is no space for other, equally important, expressions of masculinity to rise within the male world. As stated in *Hegemonic Masculinities: Rethinking the Concept* (2005) by Connell and Messerschmidt:

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, 832)

Hegemonic masculinity manifests in various ways, either through competitive sports, violence, heterosexual desire, or inherent homophobia. Connell stresses the link between hegemony and violence, daringly saying that “at both symbolic and practical levels the defense of gun ownership is a defense of hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2005, 212). However, hegemonic masculinity is not a stable concept, due to its extensive nature, “[it] is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (Connell 2005, 76). The concept of hegemony originates from Gramsci’s analysis of class dynamics, wherein a dominant group assumes a leading position in society at a particular time and place. For that reason, at any given time, the leading ideal of masculinity can change. For instance, the model of hegemonic masculinity valorised before and during the Second World War differs markedly from contemporary forms, as wartime ideals were defined by violence, weapon use, and a valorisation of

irrationality. The fall of Germany in 1945 inevitably meant the defeat of the muscular German soldier ready to go to war and kill the enemy with his mastery. In *The Men and the Boys* (2000), Connell explores the connection between strength, bodies and masculinity by stating:

Exemplary masculinities in Western societies are typically defined by a specific body-reflexive practice: sport, violence, heterosexual performance, bodybuilding. The commercial promotion of the exemplars is a striking feature of how hegemony is maintained in gender relations. Yet closer examination shows bodies repeatedly breaking the bounds or failing the uses proposed for them. (Connell 2000, 86)

Later in her other pivotal work entitled *Studying Men and Masculinity* (2001), Connell adds:

For instance, some cultures make heroes of soldiers, and regard violence as the ultimate test of masculinity; others look at soldiering with disdain and regard violence as contemptible. Some cultures regard homosexual as incompatible with true masculinity; others think no-one can be a real man without having had homosexual relationships. (Connell 2001, 49)

This quote reinforces not only that hegemonic masculinity fluctuates in the ways previously discussed, but also that while homosexuality is punishable and regarded as deviant from hegemonic masculinity in certain societies, in others it is valued as an experience that contributes to the perceived fullness of a man's masculinity. Consequently, in Western societies, homosexual men are automatically marginalised for failing to conform to heteronormativity and are thus frequently associated with femininity: "gayness is easily assimilated to femininity", positioning them both at the bottom of the hierarchical order (Connell 2005, 78). Connell demonstrates the consequences of homophobic mass media, which still reinforces stereotypical ideals about gay men, writing "for instance, heroism is so tightly bound into the construct of hegemonic masculinity that it is virtually impossible, in contemporary mass culture, to represent gay men as heroic" (Connell 2005, 234).<sup>1</sup> Donaldson, in his study, goes even further, saying that "conformity to the demands of hegemonic masculinity, pushes heterosexual men to homophobia and rewards them for it. In other words, male heterosexual identity is sustained and affirmed by hatred for, and fear of, gay men" (Donaldson 1993, 648). Both arguments sustain the idea that hegemonic

masculinity survives from a complex hierarchy that defines what certain types of masculinity should look like and the consequences to those who do not defend and perpetuate hypermasculine beliefs.

At last, the notion of masculinity is highly debatable in men's studies, even though contemporary society focuses on systemic issues such as the patriarchy, which revolves around the oppression of women by men. Hegemonic masculinity consists of oppression by a few men towards others, less central men. Essentially, any analysis of patriarchy is incomplete without reference to men's studies, which examine how groups of men, through hegemonic structures, exert control over women, as well as over men who do not conform to hegemonic norms. These concepts are not static, however, but continually evolve and adapt to contemporary realities, with Connell revisiting and refining her initial arguments on both hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities over time.

Since hegemonic masculinity is embedded in challenging and affirming that there are multiple ways of being masculine and numerous ways of embodying masculinity, queer theory should not be overlooked, as it has been deconstructing numerous notions, such as masculine *versus* feminine. Judith Butler has become a key theorist regarding the topic of gender performativity, arguing that gender is constituted through repeated acts and the way someone compulsorily performs themselves repeatedly. Their view of gender disrupts the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity as fixed elements, claiming instead that it is fluid and socially fabricated. Through this understanding, Butler states that there is no natural way of being masculine, nor a singular way of being, expanding the discussion to various types of identities. To exemplify, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler defends:

That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very inferiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the "integrity" of the subject. (Butler 1990, 136)

In other words, as mentioned earlier, gender does not have an independent existence outside of societal construction, nor does it exist naturally within a person. It is a fabricated identity, even if it is believed to be of "interior essence"; it is a conjunction of made-up regulations that are attributed to someone based on the way they present themselves in

society, whether they are perceived as masculine or feminine. Of course, such notions are limiting for this analysis, since both masculine and feminine include subdivisions with multiple identities.

## II. UNDERSTANDING *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*

Ocean Vuong's novel disassembles and explores the notions that have been revealed thus far. Through the characters of Little Dog, Paul, and Trevor, Vuong explores the existence of various types of masculinities in society and their varying degrees of influence, to some extent, by war. Little Dog and Trevor occupy the most important space in Vuong's book, as both attack directly at hegemonic masculinity through their attitudes, while also being victims of it at the same time.

*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* explores sexuality, gender, and cultural heritage from the perspective of a Vietnamese American boy. Moreover, any analysis of masculinity within Vuong's novel requires reflection on the social construction of Asian masculinity in the United States, for example, and its influence on how Asian men come to perceive themselves. From Connell's perspective, we know that masculinity changes from location to location and from situation to situation, so hegemonic masculinity in Vietnam is not the same as in the West, and masculine ideals during the Vietnam War are not the same as today. Fatma Eren writes, "the history of Asian American men in the US is marked by systematic racism, primarily based on their effeminized manhood. Being recruited to work in feminized occupations as cooks, laundrymen or domestic service before WWII (...) they were excluded from white male privilege" (Eren 2021, 36). Asian men had to leave their countries and start anew somewhere foreign, somewhere where their university education would not guarantee them a prosperous and stable future. They saw their roles as providers and household maintainers attacked by the United States' systemic racism, reflecting on their sense of manhood, and as Eren argues "in America, where the idea of hegemonic masculinity is intricately grounded in material success, it is seen that Asian men direct their nervousness and tension, arising from failure, toward their family members, particularly their spouses" (Eren 2021, 37). This tension can be seen through Rose, who suffers from domestic violence.

The problematic effect of the Vietnam War on Asian masculinity is reflected in Little Dog, but primarily in his Mother Rose's oppressive actions. As a result of her traumatic past and her struggles trying to raise her son in a foreign country, facing the hardships of immigration, Rose projects her insecurities in Little Dog by forcing him to comply with hegemonic masculinity. She is, however, conscious that American hegemonic masculinity differs from the Vietnamese. When Rose says, "This is American milk so you're gonna grow a lot. See? (...) You already look like Superman!" (Vuong 2019, 27), she not only illustrates what is to her American masculinity—a strong, muscular man—but also emphasizes that Little Dog must consume American products to become the idealized man that will be respected among others, "hoping the whiteness vanishing into [him] would make more of a yellow boy" (*ibidem*).

When Little Dog confesses, he suffers violence from American boys, she says, "What kind of boy would let them do that?", which promotes more violence as a response to violence, as if, yet again, man's nature should be inherently violent (*idem*, 26). Additionally, to Rose, a man would not cry, because hegemony finds vulnerability an attack on manhood. After her son communicates that he suffers from bullying, Rose says, "Stop crying. You're always crying!", which reveals that she would rather perpetuate hypermasculine values rather than accept her son's hurt, scared it would make him weaker (*ibidem*). This moment contrasts with the scene in which Little Dog finds his grandfather crying, "The man's name is Paul. He is my grandfather – and he's crying" (*idem*, 46).

When Little Dog reveals his sexuality, Rose responds by asking, "Are you going to wear a dress now?", followed by the assertion, "They kill people for wearing dresses" (*idem*, 130). This exchange reveals not only Rose's perception of homosexuality but also her understanding of femininity as a position of vulnerability and weakness. Her fear of Little Dog wearing a dress is rooted in her own history of abuse as a woman; by stating that "people" are killed for wearing dresses, she broadens the threat beyond Little Dog, implicitly invoking the violence historically directed at women. While this passage also reflects the pervasive association of gay men with effeminacy and diminished masculinity, Rose's reaction emerges from her lived experience as a woman, wherein femininity is both stigmatised and weaponised as a source of violence rather than protection. As C. Slopek mentions in "Queer Masculinities" (2021), "[Rose] conflates same-sex desire and the violation of gender-specific dress codes because both infringe heteronormativity" and

“infringing gender norms beyond sexual orientation is considered more transgressive and, thus, more dangerous.” (745). Lastly, Rose says, “I gave birth to a healthy, normal boy”, asserting that queerness is considered an abnormality and a sickness, because it does not correspond with the natural form of masculine desire (Vuong 2019, 131).

Little Dog’s relationship with Trevor is equally significant within the novel, as it embodies the struggles of two boys growing up in the United States and coming from different—yet similarly abusive—backgrounds. Trevor, a white boy whom Little Dog meets while working in the tobacco fields, becomes the centre of a haunting love story that at times allows Little Dog to feel beautiful. More often, however, Little Dog internalises blame, perceiving himself as having “tainted” Trevor through his homosexuality. Trevor embodies many of the attributes traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity; he was “raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity” (*idem*, 203). Yet, despite this positioning, he suffers at the hands of an abusive father, represses his non-heteronormative sexuality, and belongs to the lower socio-economic classes. When Little Dog meets him, he says, “Up until then I didn’t think a white boy could hate anything about his life” (*idem*, 97).

According to W.S. Pollack’s study (1998), there exists a “boy code” that must be adhered to for boys to gain respect within boyhood. This code typically dictates the repression of emotions and any behaviours perceived as feminine, promoting toughness and independence, and thereby reinforcing performances of hegemonic masculinity. Trevor suppresses his own identity, and the novel presents several moments in which he conforms to this boy code, even when such conformity is largely performative rather than authentic. There is a moment when Little Dog is describing Trevor, and he says, “Trevor sixteen; blue jeans streaked with deer blood” (Vuong 2019, 153) and “Trevor the hunter. Trevor the carnivore, the redneck” (*idem*, 155), Trevor is described as a savage, bloody hunter, “shotgunner, sharpshooter, not fruit, or fairy” (*ibidem*) which paints him as a violent, strong man who uses guns in his free time, as if part of his nature. By stating “not fruit or fairy”, Vuong draws the line between the two boys—Trevor may cry when he is in the barn—but he is not as fragile as Little Dog, he is not a fruit nor a fairy, two terms society uses to describe gay men. It is important to note that the narrative is presented through a singular, subjective viewpoint, a feature that becomes fundamental to understanding how Little Dog perceives other characters, particularly Trevor. Little Dog’s



interpretation of Trevor is deeply shaped by his own mindset, at times leading him to question Trevor's actions while obscuring the extent of the suffering and internal conflict that Trevor himself experiences. While Little Dog regards him as an embodiment of hegemonic masculinity—a white boy who represses his sexuality yet ostensibly exists unhindered within the structures of American masculinity—the critical understanding is that Trevor, despite his racial and cultural positioning, is profoundly constrained and harmed by hegemonic norms, which elicit his most destructive behaviours.

In the same context, he tells us that Trevor does not eat veal because it is the cows' children, and as a grown man he should eat the actual cow, "Trevor who, wild as he was, wouldn't eat veal, wouldn't eat the children of cows" (Vuong 2019, 216) and meat is the metaphorical symbol of manhood (Amin 2023, 272). It seems that Trevor's entire existence is haunted by his fear of being perceived as effeminate. He is also a rebel because he "fingered a freshman girl then tossed her underwear in the lake for fun" (Vuong 2019, 154). He is submitted to the pressure of heteronormativity, and even if he did not have to prove that to his peers, he owned that to himself. M.S. Kimmel (2006) in *Manhood in America* argues that heterosexuality was a defensive shield for boys; they used it to avoid the shame of not being masculine enough. Internalised homophobia is Trevor's worst enemy; he denies his sexuality throughout the entire novel, saying things like "Please tell me I am not a faggot. Am I? Am I?" (Vuong 2019, 155).

He requires the dominant position in the relationship, so he feels more male, relegating Little Dog to the submissive part. There are several moments in which we see Trevor trying to establish dominance as a shield, for instance, "I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. (...) It's not for me, it's for you. Right?" (*idem*, 120). The secrecy of their relationship offers Trevor a conditional form of safety. By remaining closeted, he avoids confrontation with the world's rigid rules around masculinity and sexuality, allowing him to pass as heterosexual and move through public spaces without attracting violence or scrutiny. However, this safety is not freedom so much as a survival strategy: it depends on constant self-monitoring and silence. Trevor's ability to "pass" protects him physically, but it also requires the erasure of his authentic self, revealing how safety in this context is granted only through concealment rather than acceptance. Applying Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's idea that binary sexuality limits human experience and self-representation (1990), Trevor was forced to hide his sexuality, for it did not respect the binary spectrum.

Therefore, because his understanding of the world was binary, he needed Little Dog to be the passive one so he could mask his dominant persona. Subsequently, Little Dog states, “The rules, they were already inside of us”, because Trevor was constantly rejecting his true self and identity, shaming Little Dog and not opening himself entirely (Vuong 2019, 120). Little Dog, by contrast, embraces his identity from the outset when he states, “I don’t like girls” (*idem*, 130). Notably, his self-definition is articulated through negation rather than affirmation, positioning his identity in opposition to heteronormative expectations. Instead of employing a positive declaration of desire or selfhood, Little Dog defines himself through what he is not, a strategy that reflects the limited discursive space available to nonhegemonic masculinities. This negative articulation underscores how queerness, within a heteronormative framework, is often rendered intelligible only in contrast to the dominant norm, rather than as an autonomous and affirmed identity. Trevor, on the other hand, denies it until the last minute, even comparing it to a sickness, “I’ll be good in a few years, you know?” (*idem*, 188). Ironically, after stating this, he dies from an overdose, demonstrating that his self-denial has killed him; his drug addiction, which he developed due to his struggle with hegemonic masculinity, inevitably ends him. Not only does this passage show the stigma around homosexuality as a disease, but it also shows that Trevor was fighting against himself all along and relying on Little Dog to feel more masculine. As Eren claims:

They both attempt to cure their wounded manhood stemming from their low socioeconomic status and dysfunctional families. However, Trevor’s internalization of the supremacy of White heterosexuality and Little Dog’s internalization of the emasculated position of Asian American men in American society influence the course of their relationship. (Eren 2021, 39)

When they meet for their final goodbye, Little Dog reflects, “the whole point of us meeting each other was to say goodbye, or rather, just to be side by side, a farewell of presence, of proximity, the way men are supposed to do” (Vuong 2019, 168). This farewell enacts a form of nonhegemonic masculinity by privileging presence, emotional intimacy, and care over performative toughness. Little Dog and Trevor, thus, resist hegemonic norms. Vuong suggests that masculinity can encompass vulnerability and connection, affirming alternative expressions of manhood that challenge and expand societal expectations of what it means to be a man.

In the end, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* explores the nuances of growing up queer and non-white in a country as intolerant as the United States, but it also delves into a narrative that exposes masculinity as a spectrum that can be performed in various ways. Both Trevor and Little Dog are masculine in their unique ways, and the way Vuong poetically exalts their identities demonstrates that nonhegemonic masculinities exist in society and are equally relevant. Moreover, the ending of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* resonates with Judith Butler's assertion that "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (1990, 140). Trevor's self-destructive turn to addiction can be read as a form of self-punishment, employed to suppress what he perceives as his deviance—his homosexuality and his inability to embody the stability and authority expected within his community, as well as to fully perform hegemonic masculinity. As Butler suggests, Trevor ultimately "fails" to do his gender correctly: although he is a white American boy positioned within the privileges of American masculinity, his repressed sexuality and internal conflict lead to his tragic death, through which he is remembered and rewritten by Little Dog.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article has drawn briefly on the concept of hegemonic masculinity to analyse how Ocean Vuong deploys and critiques it in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, illuminating the complex and often violent dynamics of queer male existence within a heteronormative social order. Vuong also explores the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, allowing the reader to understand that Little Dog must face multiple struggles simultaneously. The fact that his family immigrated from Vietnam adds more intensity to his character. Little Dog's relationship with his mother demonstrates that, for the most part, he felt aimless while grieving an abusive past. While the story of Little Dog could easily be narrowed down to his struggle growing up homosexual in an already tormented household, and him falling in love with an all-white American boy, who fights internally to be socially accepted, Vuong gives us more. His past, which consists of intergenerational trauma created by war, revolving around grief and cultural displacement, affects Little Dog on a deeper level and creates a hostile bed for him to lie in. Through Connell's theoretical framework, Little Dog's masculinity can be understood as nonhegemonic, not because he fully rejects hegemonic ideals, but because his relationship

towards them is marked by a quiet, unspoken aspiration. Throughout the novel, Little Dog remains aware of hegemonic masculinity as a model of safety, legitimacy, and belonging, even as it remains unattainable to him. By the end of the narrative, however, he comes to accept his own nature and recognises that inhabiting the margins of hegemonic masculinity—rather than conforming to its demands—may offer a more sustainable form of survival and self-understanding. He is not the war hero who comes home to his wife and kids and wishes to be celebrated for fighting a battle he probably does not fully grasp the reasons for. Instead, he is the gay son who comes home from school and cries in his bedroom. Trevor, by contrast, is consumed by the need to perform in accordance with the hegemonic masculinity ideal into which he was born. Like Little Dog, he contends with financial hardship and familial abuse, yet unlike Little Dog, he internalises these pressures, punishing himself for his homosexuality and for his inability to transcend the constraints imposed by intergenerational trauma. His tragic death serves as a stark reminder that nonhegemonic masculinities are frequently dismissed, marginalised, and subject to both societal and self-inflicted violence.

While Rose made the decision to move abroad to flee the violence and the bleakness she faced in Vietnam, her unreceptiveness towards Little Dog's sexuality creates a multilayered narrative of mother-son plot. In the novel, Rose represents the society Connell discussed in her studies, symbolising the judgment and societal pressure to conform to a certain type of masculinity. Through homophobia, a lot of people display and perpetuate hegemonic masculinity. Trevor, himself a victim of hegemonic structures, enacts his desire to belong within dominant masculine patterns by imposing a submissive and feminised role upon Little Dog, operating under the belief that this positioning would allow him to be “cured” in the years to come. He spent most of his time hiding his true nature through sexual domination and by performing the “boycode” to prove he was not emasculated. The two boys portray some of America's darkest realities, all of which challenge the concept of the American dream and what it means to be a non-conforming male in American society. Trevor's dream was to be released from his sickness, released from his father and his drunkenness and be a normal man with a normal life; whereas, for Little Dog, his dream would probably include Rose, despite everything, and loving someone who loved him without shame. Moreover, Vuong portrays two boys situated on the margins of society, both shaped by socio-economic precarity and queerness, and exposes their



shared longing for self-acceptance and for the perceived stability promised by hegemonic masculinity. Yet, rather than offering protection, this ideal renders them victims, a reality most starkly embodied in Trevor, whose death results from his continued struggle to attain it.

At the opening of the novel, Little Dog asks, “Can you hear me yet? Can you read me?” (Vuong 2019, 62); by its conclusion, readers are positioned to answer affirmatively. Although society continues to punish those who fail to perform hegemonic masculinity, the narrative reveals that both Little Dog and Trevor inhabit nonhegemonic forms of masculinity in relation to which hegemonic masculinity is constructed. Specifically, they embody marginalised masculinities, shaped by unequal power relations rooted in gender, class, race, and ethnicity, as well as subordinate masculinities, which are positioned as inferior to hegemonic ideals. Through these characters, Vuong demonstrates that masculinity is neither singular nor hierarchical by nature, and that such forms do not warrant punishment—even when, tragically, these men internalise that violence and turn it upon themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Connell's study is now twenty years old, and media representations have evolved over time. While heroic queer characters were once rarely seen on the big screen, by 2025, this has changed significantly.

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Inês Santos holds a Bachelor's Degree in History from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Porto and a Master's Degree in Anglo-American Studies from the same institution. In her third year of her Bachelor's program, for her final research project, she studied witchcraft in the Inquisition of Lisbon – this study is titled “Feitiçaria e Superstição na Inquisição de Lisboa de 1662 a 1699”. Throughout her bachelor's, she showed interest in interdisciplinarity, and applied for various seminars from Japanese cinema to North American literature. Her Master's thesis is titled *Adapting Sally Rooney to the screen: Are the politics of sameness still relevant in Adaptation Studies?*

## HOW TO CITE

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