

NEGOTIATING IDENTITY UNDER THE CULTURAL SUPEREGO IN *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*

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Abstract

Diasporic individuals often face complex identity formation that involves psychological tension driven by conflicting cultural moralities. In Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, this tension is illustrated through the protagonist, Little Dog, whose identity is shaped by familial obligations, cultural expectations, and social marginalization. This study aims to explore how the cultural superego influences Little Dog's identity formation and how he navigates cultural pressures within a Vietnamese-American diaspora context. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this research draws on Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly Freud's concept of the cultural superego. The data consists of selected narrative passages, dialogues, and character reflections that expose themes of moral regulation, guilt, repression, and cultural pressure. The analysis employs thematic textual analysis to interpret how internalized cultural authority influences identity negotiation. The findings suggest that the cultural superego functions through various mechanisms, including familial duty, guilt, social discrimination, norms of masculinity, and the cultural gaps between Vietnamese and American values. These mechanisms act as internal moral regulators, shaping desires, emotional expressions, and self-perception. As a result, identity is recognized as a continuous negotiation rather than a stable construct. This study contributes to psychoanalytic literary studies by demonstrating how Freud's concept of the cultural superego can be applied to diasporic literature. It explains identity formation as a psychologically regulated process influenced by collective moral authority rather than solely by individual autonomy.

Keywords: Identity; Diaspora; Cultural Superego; Psychoanalysis; Negotiation

INTRODUCTION

Identity evolves over time, shaped by personal experiences and different cultures. Personal experiences such as moving to a new country, receiving an education, or encountering different cultural values significantly shape how individuals view themselves and those around them (Cundoko & Thohiriyah, 2025; Baumert et al., 2024) understanding the acculturation of immigrant youth is essential for fostering social cohesion. How the cultural identity formation of ethnic minority adolescents relates to their academic, social, and psychological adjustment is an important and as yet unresolved research question. This study examined to what extent identifying with the heritage and/or host culture is an individual resource or risk factor for the adjustment of immigrant youth in Germany. A random sample of 15–17-year-olds ($N = 1992$; $M_{age_w1} = 15.3$ years, $SD = 0.64$; 44.5% girls; 44.7% students with immigrant background). When people interact with diverse cultures, they reconsider their beliefs and evolve their identities by blending different facets of themselves. The process emphasizes that identity formation stems from self-definition and the negotiation of minority and majority cultural norms (Maslowski, 2022; Modood et al., 2025). In this intercultural process, individuals continually adjust their behaviors, beliefs, and values to strike a balance between cultural belonging and personal autonomy (Croccetti et al., 2024). Such adjustments inevitably create spaces of negotiation, where individuals must navigate different cultural expectations and social norms. Negotiation can empower individuals while also making them feel excluded, as they seek to belong and preserve their cultural identities (Mude & Mwanri, 2020). In multicultural settings, identity is not a fixed entity (Tegar & Thohiriyah, 2025) which portrays Lucia,

a Chinese – American who struggles with schizophrenia. Through this novel, Mira T. Lee vividly portray the immense struggle of living with schizophrenia and the challenges of leading an everyday life. Schizophrenia is a complex mental disorder that requires the family's role in providing support and treatment. By using Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious mind, this study aims to emphasize the crucial role of family dynamics in shaping the condition of individuals with schizophrenia. The article employs a qualitative approach to conduct an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of the id, Ego, and Superego in order to reveal the relapse of the schizophrenia condition experienced by Lucia. The findings show that dysfunctional family dynamics can trigger an identity crisis, which in turn exacerbates schizophrenia symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, abnormal behavior, disorganized thinking, and emotional disturbances. The study provides a novel perspective on familial impact through literary character analysis (Tegar & Thohiriyah, 2025; Djufri, 2025) cultural identity no longer exists as a static inheritance, but as a social construct that is constantly negotiated. This research aims to understand how individuals respond to identity tensions in plural social spaces, as well as how identity representations are exercised, maintained, or negotiated through symbolic strategies and everyday practices. Using an interpretive qualitative approach and a mini-ethnographic design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observations of 15 informants from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the city of Makassar. The results of the study show that individuals face various forms of cultural tension, both in the form of stereotypes, assimilation demands, and multiple identity dilemmas. However, they also respond actively through symbolic represen-

tation, subtle resistance, and the creation of a more reflective hybrid identity. This process shows that identity is not just a cultural label, but the result of symbolic interactions, power relations, and complex social dynamics. This research contributes to a new understanding of the importance of seeing identity as a contextual, performative, and political process. The results have implications for the development of more inclusive and equitable social policies in responding to cultural diversity (Djufri, 2025). Instead, it changes as people interact and negotiate their differences. Identity emerges as a dynamic process shaped by continuous negotiation between individual experiences, cultural belonging, and the social power structures that define inclusion and difference.

Experiences of moving or being displaced can significantly impact how individuals perceive their culture and feel a sense of belonging, often prompting them to reevaluate what home and identity mean to them. In this context, cultural elements such as language, traditions, and collective memory serve as vital means of maintaining emotional and symbolic ties to their homeland (Adhikary, 2024; Trzeszczyńska et al., 2024; Charalambous et al., 2025). These elements, as expressions of cultural heritage, help maintain a sense of continuity amid the fragmentation caused by displacement, allowing individuals to preserve connections that bridge past and present. At the same time, cultural heritage acts not only as a marker of one's roots but also as a dynamic source of transformation, guiding individuals as they navigate and adapt to new cultural environments (Naheed & Shoosharian, 2022; and culture is key to what makes cities creative, and sustainable. The Post-2015 Development Agenda has prioritized culture and how it may help people and communities create

the future they desire. The study aims to determine the link between cultural heritage and urban sustainability and how multidisciplinary education can help organize urban issues. The article is of relevance to the emerging multicultural urban society with wide socio-economic disparities straining the global urban resilience and posing a challenge for future policy implementation. A systematic literature review was conducted using the Dimension database, and the results were analyzed using VOS viewer. The study also employed the PRISMA quantitative approach for selection criteria. This paper has identified understudied themes including community heritage, sustainable urban governance, and behavioral and multidisciplinary approaches. It is strongly felt that undertaking this study will not only add to the literature in cultural heritage study but also help further multidisciplinary and knowledge-based inquiry, which is currently evolving in the academic domain. Therefore, urban academics have a duty to resolve the issue confronting global urban sustainability and cultural disputes. Future research is required to simplify the current complex issue to make it more relevant and inclusive (Naheed & Shoosharian, 2022; Sunarti & Fadel, 2021). Diaspora illustrates that cultural heritage is not merely an unchanging artifact from the past; rather, it is an evolving process of remembrance and transformation that influences how individuals understand their identities beyond borders.

Cultural heritage constantly changes over time, and one of the most significant ways it transforms is through literature. Literature serves as a powerful medium through which individuals and communities articulate, negotiate, and preserve their cultural identities (Maneha, 2025; Allen & Gopinath, 2024; Tolulope Daniel Ojuola, 2024). Authors who draw from diasporic

or hybrid backgrounds use storytelling to reshape individual and collective experiences into narratives that bridge inherited traditions with the realities of new cultural environments. Through the expression of emotions, memories, and conflicts rooted in specific cultural contexts, literature enables readers to witness how identity evolves in relation to power, language, and heritage (Zhao, 2024). Literature functions not merely as a reflection of culture but as an active agent that shapes and redefines identity across temporal, spatial, and cultural boundaries. This process, which illustrates the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations, aligns with Sigmund Freud's theory that unconscious impulses shape identity, suppressed emotions, and the moral values we adopt from our families and culture. The tension between inner drives and external moral codes shows how personal identity is not purely individual, but is continuously shaped by the collective conscience of culture (Kashchey, 2021).

Freud's psychoanalytic model frames identity as a negotiated outcome between instinctual drives and internalized moral authority. In this study, the framework is based on the concept of the cultural superego, understood as an internalized collective conscience formed by social norms such as language hierarchies, racialized belonging, gender ideals, and class-based expectations (Weiss, 2020). These norms do not merely operate externally; they become psychological imperatives that discipline the subject from within through guilt, shame, and self-surveillance, shaping what feels permissible or forbidden in everyday self-understanding (Naz, 2021). Read alongside Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the cultural superego therefore clarifies how diasporic identity is negotiated not only through personal desire, but also through inherited moral

demands that regulate what can be expressed, desired, and ultimately claimed as the self (AlSheddi et al., 2020; Branje & Moor, 2021; Prasetya & Thohiriyah, 2024).

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* presents an intimate and poetic portrayal of identity, memory, and intergenerational trauma experienced within the Vietnamese-American community. Little Dog, a Vietnamese immigrant and the son of an illiterate mother, explores how factors like language, culture, and silence shape his sense of self. Through Little Dog's story, Vuong highlights the conflict between traditional cultural values and the demands of fitting into American society. This conflict emerges as an internal struggle between his individual desires and moral responsibilities, illustrating the role of the cultural superego, which influences identity through feelings of guilt, duty, and a sense of belonging. Little Dog's efforts to navigate his queer identity, loyalty to his family, and feelings of cultural displacement reveal how identity is continually reshaped by opposing moral systems his Vietnamese roots and the American emphasis on individualism. This research will focus on how Little Dog's process of negotiating his identity, shaped by the cultural superego, represents the challenge of balancing inherited morals with the quest for personal freedom within a diasporic context.

This study aims to (1) examine how the cultural superego shapes Little Dog's identity and (2) analyze how he negotiates Vietnamese and American cultural pressures, thereby offering a psychoanalytic account of identity negotiation in diasporic literature through the lens of the cultural superego.

This study contributes to existing scholarship on *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by demonstrating that Little Dog's identity is shaped less by a linear re-

conciliation of “Vietnamese” and “American” values than by an ongoing, morally regulated negotiation across domestic, public/institutional, gendered, and intimate domains. Rather than reading the novel primarily through trauma, hybridity, or acculturation as descriptive conditions, the analysis specifies how normative pressures are converted into psychic governance, namely, guilt, shame, fear, and self-surveillance that delimit what can be spoken, desired, or claimed as a livable self. The concept of cultural superego advances diaspora and psychoanalytic literary criticism by shifting the superego from a mainly intra-familial or individualized mechanism to a multiscale framework that accounts for institutional language hierarchies, racial/class evaluation, labor morality, masculinity codes, and heteronormative policing as internally reproduced imperatives. In doing so, the framework clarifies the novel’s distinctive representation of “belonging” not as social inclusion alone but as a moral economy that demands endurance, silence, and self-minimization as virtues. The study also extends psychoanalytic readings by showing that Vuong’s literary form, epistolary address, fragmentation, and lyrical metaphor, does not merely illustrate pressure but formally stages the superego as a voice that is simultaneously answered, negotiated, and resisted. The implications are twofold: for diaspora studies, it offers a vocabulary for analyzing how collective moral regimes become psychological constraints in immigrant narratives; for psychoanalytic literary criticism, it proposes “cultural superego” as a text-led analytic bridge that connects moral authority, institutional power, and narrative form within contemporary diasporic literature.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design with close reading to examine how cultural norms are internalized as moral regulation in Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). The novel was read in full through multiple reading cycles, and passages were purposively selected using explicit inclusion criteria aligned with the study’s focus: scenes that register internalized moral pressure through guilt, shame, fear/anxiety, repression or self-silencing, duty-based identity (e.g., language brokering and family service), and public/institutional encounters that moralize language, race/class, labor, and authority; scenes where queer desire is framed as socially risky were also included (Furidha, 2024); they can develop research methods because the research needs to adhere to scientific principles. Because of this matter, a methodical scientific approach is required to guarantee that the study can be reaffirmed by other researchers. Moreover, the descriptive qualitative method has become popular due to its less reliance on numerical values or metrics for variable measurement. The aim of this research is to provide a general review of the literature on descriptive qualitative research methods. The researcher can determine that qualitative descriptive research is a descriptively described research method that employs qualitative data based on the findings of the research. Analyzing events, phenomena, or social conditions is a common use for this kind of descriptive qualitative research. Furthermore, qualitative research does not rely on numerical measurements for its research object, nor does it employ statistical methods to test elaborative characteristics. Its application

allows for the combination of different data collection techniques, data analysis, instrument creation, and other research stages commonly used in qualitative and descriptive research methodologies (Furidha, 2024 Candra Susanto et al., 2024). Excerpts that did not display a traceable relation to moralized norms or internal self-discipline were excluded, and the final dataset was distributed across domestic, public/institutional, and intimate narrative contexts to avoid chapter-bound sampling.

Analysis followed a thematic textual procedure that combined open coding, iterative code grouping, and theme refinement, while prioritizing close reading in the write-up (Ohrvik, 2024). Codes were generated from recurring textual indicators (e.g., moral silence, accent stigma, labor-as-virtue, toughness rules, erasure/in-betweenness) and consolidated into themes based on their normative sources (family, institutions, gender regime, heteronormativity) and psychic effects (self-surveillance, anticipatory compliance, guilt/shame) (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2025). "Africa" is spoken of in terms of crisis: as a place of failure and seemingly insurmountable problems, as a moral challenge to the international community. What, though, is really at stake in discussions about Africa, its problems, and its place in the world? And what should be the response of those scholars who have sought to understand not the "Africa" portrayed in broad strokes in journalistic accounts and policy papers but rather specific places and social realities within Africa? In *Global Shadows* the renowned anthropologist James Ferguson moves beyond the traditional anthropological focus on local communities to explore more general questions about Africa and its place in the contemporary world. Ferguson develops his argument through a series of provocative essays which open—as he

shows they must—into interrogations of globalization, modernity, worldwide inequality, and social justice. He maintains that Africans in a variety of social and geographical locations increasingly seek to make claims of membership within a global community, claims that contest the marginalization that has so far been the principal fruit of "globalization" for Africa. Ferguson contends that such claims demand new understandings of the global, centered less on transnational flows and images of unfettered connection than on the social relations that selectively constitute global society and on the rights and obligations that characterize it. Ferguson points out that anthropologists and others who have refused the category of Africa as empirically problematic have, in their devotion to particularity, allowed themselves to remain bystanders in the broader conversations about Africa. In *Global Shadows*, he urges fellow scholars into the arena, encouraging them to find a way to speak beyond the academy about Africa's position within an egregiously imbalanced world order (Ahmed et al., 2025). Trustworthiness was supported through an audit trail of excerpts, codes, and revisions, supplemented by re-coding checks and peer debriefing to refine theme boundaries. Freudian psychoanalysis was selected because it directly theorizes the internalization of moral authority (superego) as a regulator of what feels permissible or sayable; however, the study acknowledges the limitations of Freud's Eurocentric and historically bounded assumptions, and therefore applies the framework cautiously, text-led, and in dialogue with the novel's narrative form and language.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that Little Dog's identity in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is shaped through a continuous negotiation

with cultural pressures that become internal self-regulation. The discussion moves from the domestic moral regime, familial duty, moralized silence, and affective endurance, to the public and institutional moral regime, where language stigma, racial/class judgement, labor morality, and hierarchy intensify discrimination into inward discipline. It then examines masculinity as a gendered code policing vulnerability, cultural gaps as sources of shame and erasure, and queer desire as especially precarious under heteronormative and masculine constraint. Finally, it argues that these dynamics are also formal, as *Vuong's* epistolary address, fragmentation, and lyrical metaphors stage narrative voice and structure as sites of both constraint and resistance.

Cultural Superego Operation

In this article, the cultural superego refers to an internalized form of collective moral authority through which social norms become psychological imperatives. Instead of functioning primarily through direct external punishment, it operates as an inward regulator that produces guilt, shame, anxiety, and self-surveillance whenever the subject perceives a deviation from culturally sanctioned ideals of belonging (Hamali, 2018). These ideals are not abstract; they are concretized in expectations surrounding “proper” language use, respectable labor, racialized visibility, gendered toughness, and family duty, which collectively define what counts as acceptable conduct and identity (Maniadakis, 2016; King & Schmid Noerr, 2020). Operationally, the cultural superego is identified in the novel when Little Dog’s selfhood is organized around recurring experiences of moralized pressure, moments where he feels compelled to silence himself, to translate and serve as an obligation, to endure harm as if it were a virtue, or to treat desire as inherently dan-

gerous (King & Schmid Noerr, 2020). Such moments show that the novel does not merely depict social constraint from the outside; it stages the process by which those constraints are absorbed and reproduced internally as self-regulation (Atho & Thohiriyah, 2025). Therefore, the following themes do not restate Freud’s theory, but trace how *Vuong's* narrative renders cultural norms as internal restraints that shape Little Dog’s ongoing negotiation of identity (Jesus, 2023).

Domestic Moral Regime: Familial Duty, Guilt, Emotional Discipline

Little Dog’s earliest experience of the cultural superego emerges through the family’s moral economy of duty, where linguistic competence becomes a measure of worth rather than a neutral skill. When his mother demands that he be “bellyful of English” (Vuong, 2019, p. 18), the phrase frames language as something bodily—something that must be ingested, carried, and made sufficient for survival. This metaphor turns assimilation into a moral necessity that must be filled inside the self, not merely performed in public. The narrative then crystallizes duty into identity when Little Dog promises to become the “family’s official interpreter” (Vuong, 2019, p. 22), a role that does not simply describe what he does but what he must be. In this way, the family functions as the first site where external cultural pressure (English as access, protection, and legitimacy) is translated into an internal obligation that organizes Little Dog’s selfhood around responsibility rather than autonomy (Agustina & Thohiriyah, 2025; P. N., 2016; Septriani & Mulyasih, 2022; Wunseh & Nomlomo, 2023; Lansford et al., 2021).

Alongside duty, guilt is cultivated through silence, presented not as a communicative choice but as an ethical stra-

tegy that defines the “good child.” The maternal instruction to “know when to shut your mouth” (Vuong, 2019, p. 38) is delivered as an imperative, compressing fear, caution, and obedience into a single rule of conduct. What matters here is not only the content of the advice, but how it functions narratively: the command is remembered as a moral script that Little Dog carries forward, shaping his inner monitor of what can be said and what must be withheld. Silence becomes a learned form of self-management, turning vulnerability into something that risks burdening the family or inviting danger from the outside world (Chen & Cheng, 2025; Tanjung et al., 2023; Leung & Shek, 2024). As a result, guilt operates less as a temporary feeling and more as an internal regulator that disciplines emotion and speech, aligning Little Dog’s self-expression with the household’s moral demand for endurance and restraint (Li et al., 2021; Hasugian et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2022; Su et al., 2022).

The novel further reveals how familial affection is coded through endurance and conflict, making emotional discipline indistinguishable from love. The grandmother’s explanation “She pain. She hurt. But she want you,... She loves you, Little Dog” (Vuong, 2019, p. 85), offers a compressed, fractured syntax that mirrors a familial affective style in which tenderness is expressed through survival logic rather than direct reassurance. Love is narrated as something proven through suffering, and care is shown through actions (for instance, the intimate gesture of “plucking white hairs”) rather than explicit declarations (M. Allen et al., 2025; Francot et al., 2025). Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway, hereby considering the different national integration policies. Using a data-driven approach by applying Latent Profile Analysis, we identified four acculturation profiles in the total

sample as well as in the samples per country: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Although nearly complete metric measurement equivalence of the profiles across countries was established, one deviating profile was found in the Netherlands. The profiles across countries differed in size, which was tentatively related to the predominant integration policies of the countries. In England, characterized by a relatively multicultural national integration policy, the integration profile was more prominent compared to other countries, whereas in countries with a stronger emphasis on assimilation (the Netherlands, Norway regarding language education. This pattern normalizes a form of intimacy where restraint and sacrifice become moral virtues, and where being loved is inseparable from being shaped disciplined by the family’s expectations. Consequently, the family operates as the first and most intimate layer of the cultural superego, teaching Little Dog that belonging and goodness are measured through service, silence, and the capacity to endure (Larasati, 2025; Y. Zhang, 2016; G. Yu et al., 2025; Sun & Lau, 2018) general reductions in social cognitive abilities and interpersonal adjustment. This may be because theoretically, habitual suppression requires the fixation of attention to the self instead of to others. The present research explored the association between the habitual tendency to suppress one’s own emotions and accuracy in recognizing the emotions of others. Emotion recognition accuracy was tested across two tasks, a limited-channel task that presents limited emotional information and a multimodal full-channel task. We further explored cultural differences in this association given that expressive suppression may be normative for individuals of Asian descent due to cultural motivations toward social harmony and interdependence. Our findings

revealed few cultural group differences. U.S.-born Asian Americans outperformed foreign-born Asian Americans and European Americans in limited-channel emotion recognition. However, the three groups did not differ in terms of interdependent self-construal, habitual emotion suppression, and full-channel emotion recognition ability. Interdependent self-construal was related to greater habitual suppression and emotion recognition accuracy in the full-channel task. Habitual emotion suppression was negatively related to limited-channel but not full-channel emotion recognition. There was no evidence of cultural differences in the link between habitual suppression and emotion recognition (Sun & Lau, 2018; Syamira & Thohiriyah, 2024). Having learned to equate goodness with service, silence, and endurance within the family, Little Dog carries these moral scripts into public and institutional spaces, where they are amplified into heightened self-surveillance under the scrutiny of language, race/class, labor, and authority.

Public/Institutional Moral Regime: Language, Race/Class, Labor, and Surveillance

Beyond the household, the cultural superego intensifies through public spaces and institutions that repeatedly evaluate Little Dog's language, body, and social value. The classroom, nail salon, workplace, and everyday encounters function as arenas where norms of belonging are enforced and then internalized as self-discipline. In Vuong's narrative, discrimination does not remain external hostility; it becomes an inward pressure that trains Little Dog to monitor, correct, and minimize himself.

Language

Little Dog's navigation of English is narrated not as a neutral act of commu-

nication, but as a moral performance required for safety and legitimacy. When he recalls wearing English "like a mask" (Vuong, 2019, p. 22), the metaphor positions language as a protective surface something that must cover the self to pass as acceptable. The mask does not simply hide an accent; it suggests a psychological splitting in which belonging requires concealment. This moralization becomes explicit in the question "Don't you speak English?" (Vuong, 2019, p. 31), which frames linguistic difference as deficiency and places the burden of correction on the speaker. Under such recurrent scrutiny, silence functions as a learned strategy: not the absence of voice, but the internalization of risk, where speaking incorrectly invites judgement and therefore must be pre-emptively managed. Consequently, linguistic hierarchy is converted into self-surveillance, shaping how Little Dog calculates what may be safely expressed.

Race/Class

Public naming further compresses Little Dog's identity into stereotypes that he is expected to carry as if they were truths. The racialized label "Chinito!" (Vuong, 2019, p. 60) reduces him to an externally assigned category, signaling that his body is readable before his voice is heard. The insult is not only interpersonal; it teaches him that visibility itself is regulated one must be seen in the "right" way or risk being fixed into a degrading narrative. Class shame is layered onto this racialization when deprivation is recounted in moralizing terms, such as "You were lucky if you had rats to eat" (Vuong, 2019, p. 93). The remark does not merely describe poverty; it frames it as a marker of inferiority that can be inherited, turning scarcity into an internal stigma that shapes self-esteem and belonging. In this way, race and class operate as moral

codes that instruct Little Dog to anticipate judgement and to limit his presence as a condition of social survival.

Labor

Vuong also depicts labor as a moral regime where exploitation is naturalized and endurance becomes proof of worth. Descriptions of immigrant work as “aching, toxic, and underpaid” (Vuong, 2019, p. 52) present pain not as an aberration but as an expected baseline of survival. Rather than producing open resistance, this setting trains the self to interpret harm as normal, even necessary, within a logic of economic belonging. The narrative sharpens this logic through the observation that people “get rich off of sadness” (Vuong, 2019, p. 126), exposing how suffering can be commodified and converted into value. When “being sorry pays” (Vuong, 2019, p. 63), apology is no longer an interpersonal gesture; it becomes a survival technique, a moral posture that makes one employable, tolerable, and safe. Under this capitalist morality, guilt and humility are rewarded, and the subject learns to discipline not only speech but also aspiration, anger, and dignity.

Institutional

Institutional power in the novel appears as a hierarchy that demands compliance even when it provides no ethical justification beyond its own authority. The recognition that he is “not a god” (Vuong, 2019, p. 52) signals the internal boundary imposed by institutional structures: one must accept limitation, obey rules, and remain within assigned positions. The phrase works less as a theological statement than as a disciplinary reminder, an injunction against agency that might challenge the system. Across these public and institutional sites, authority therefore becomes morali-

zed: to comply is to be “reasonable,” while resistance risks punishment, exclusion, or further humiliation. The cumulative result is a public cultural superego that converts external surveillance into internal restraint, shaping Little Dog’s identity through precaution, self-minimization, and learned endurance.

Taken together, language stigma, racialized and classed judgement, labor discipline, and institutional hierarchy operate as a single moral regime that transforms discrimination into self-regulation, making Little Dog’s negotiation of identity inseparable from the constant management of how he speaks, appears, works, and obeys.

Gendered Superego: Masculinity as Moral Regulation

Masculinity in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* operates as a gendered superego that moralizes emotional restraint, teaching Little Dog that vulnerability is not merely unsafe but ethically disallowed. The command from his mother “Stop crying... Nobody touched you yet” (Vuong, 2019, p. 18), frames pain as something that must be endured silently, as if the absence of visible injury invalidates the legitimacy of fear or grief. (Cenușă & Turliuc, 2023). The phrasing functions less as comfort than as a disciplinary script: it trains the child to evaluate his own emotions through an external code of toughness, thereby converting distress into something to be monitored and suppressed (the lack of emotional regulation as well as a poor impulse control have been related to aggression and, in particular, with reactive and proactive aggression. The objective of this study is to examine the role of gender stereotypes (masculinity/femininity Cleary, 2022). In this way, masculinity becomes an internal rule that equates self-control with moral worth and renders tenderness as a liability

that must be managed (L. Allen, 2025; has resulted in the idea that “changing men” is a solution to gender inequality. Men are subsequently encouraged to shed negative characteristics like aggression and emotional detachment to create more gender positive masculinities. Recent examples of research documenting inclusive masculinities, reveal this solution is inadequate, as such masculinities continue to contribute to unequal gender relations. These configurations of masculinity also involve an operation of power that is not captured by Connell’s conceptualization of hegemony. The article calls for new ways of thinking about how power operates beyond its articulation as hegemony, to identify where potential agency for significantly destabilizing the unequal gender order lies (L. Allen, 2025; Genuchi et al., 2025).

This gendered discipline is reinforced in public-facing models of authority where “being a man” is linked to dominance, command, and symbolic violence. When Little Dog’s father asserts, “You gonna man me now, huh? I was the general... When I told them to laugh, they laughed” (Vuong, 2019, p. 99), masculinity is staged as hierarchy and control, an identity earned through coercive power rather than emotional truth. (Wojnicka, 2021; Reidy et al., 2022). Read together, the domestic injunction against tears and the paternal militaristic posture produce a coherent pattern: masculinity functions as a moral regime that polices the body and the voice, pushing Little Dog toward self-surveillance and emotional minimization as conditions of social legibility (Jewkes et al., 2015; Patal et al., 2025). Consequently, the cultural superego does not only regulate belonging through language or race/class; it also regulates personhood through gendered imperatives that normalize hardness and delegitimize vulnerability (Lubis et al., 2024).

Cultural Gap and Self-Dislocation: Translation, Erasure, and In-betweenness

The cultural gap in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* first registers as a moralized experience of linguistic dislocation, where not-knowing becomes a source of shame rather than a neutral absence of vocabulary. Little Dog’s unfamiliarity with “oxtail” (Vuong, 2019, p. 21) marks a small lexical moment that carries disproportionate affective weight: the word signals a mismatch between everyday American language and the cultural memory available to him (Popescu & Pudelko, 2024; Shaikh, 2024). What matters is not simply that translation fails, but that the failure is felt as exposure an instance where he becomes aware of himself as lacking the “right” cultural competence to belong without friction (R. Zhang et al., 2017). In this sense, the gap operates as a pressure that trains self-monitoring: language becomes a site where belonging is tested, and where the self is made to anticipate embarrassment and correction (Sadig, 2025; Huggins et al., 2023).

This moral pressure intensifies when Little Dog articulates a more fundamental uncertainty: “Sometimes I don’t know what or who we are” (Vuong, 2019, p. 43), a statement that frames identity not as a stable synthesis of two cultures but as a recurring disruption in self-recognition (Süleymanoğlu-kürüm et al., 2025; Mirra, 2023). The sentence is temporally suggestive—“sometimes” indicates an episodic return, as if dislocation is not resolved but periodically reactivated by encounters, memories, and translation demands (Guo et al., 2022; Niayu & Novianti, 2022). Vuong makes the psychic violence of this condition explicit through the claim that “sometimes you are erased before you are given the choice of stating who you are” (Vuong, 2019, p. 43). Here, “erasure” does

not describe a purely social phenomenon; it names an internal consequence of being positioned by dominant cultural categories before one can speak, choose, or narrate the self on one's own terms. The cultural gap therefore functions as a psychological regulator: it compels continual negotiation without offering closure, producing a self that is repeatedly made to manage visibility, meaning, and belonging in the space of in-betweenness.

Negotiating Queer Desire Under Cultural Superego: Love, Violence, and Fear

Queer desire in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is portrayed as the most vulnerable form of identity negotiation because it is policed by a convergence of heteronormativity and masculinity norms that become internal moral constraints. Little Dog's intimacy with Trevor is repeatedly framed through an atmosphere where desire must be managed, concealed, or translated into acceptable behavior, rather than openly inhabited. In this sense, the novel does not treat queer love as a private, autonomous space; it renders it as a site where cultural permission and cultural danger constantly coexist, shaping the self through fear-driven self-monitoring.

A pivotal moment occurs when Trevor withdraws from intimacy out of fear of appearing "like a girl" (Vuong, 2019, p. 84). The phrase functions as more than adolescent teasing; it articulates femininity as stigma and positions queer desire as a threat to masculine legitimacy (Amjad & Tayyab, 2025; Thi et al., 2025). Volume. XX, Issue. XX, 21 April 2025\nIn this article, we examine how migrants with a language other than English background are exposed to linguistic discrimination in relation to the English-only discourse of their daily life in Australia, labelling such discrimination as

everyday linguisticism. By engaging in a scholarly conversation on subjectivity, discourse, and power, we conceptualize and make use of the notion linguicized subjectivity as a thinking tool to interpret incidents of linguisticism encountered by our participants. While discussing interview-based findings, we explore how the participants were discursively shaped as linguicized subjects in different linguistic situations in various contexts, and how they negotiated such an imposed 'abnormal' and 'Other' subject position, subordinated to the power of English and English speakers. The linguisticism experienced by the participants alerts us to Australia's monolingualist structure which has linguicized minority people's subjectivity at different levels of their social participation. Remedies for such English-only linguisticism should involve 'saying enough' to linguistic oppression and inequality as well as connecting individual agency, collective actions, and social dialogue to facilitate a social transformation where new possibilities of Australia's multilingual subjectivity are enabled (Thi et al., 2025). What is being disciplined here is not only sexual orientation but also gendered comportment, how tenderness, receptivity, and emotional closeness are coded as moral weaknesses (including couple and family therapy models. This article draws on poststructuralist governmentality studies and processual affect theory to offer insight into how the therapeutic concept of emotion regulation may reflect and support neoliberal affective forms of self-governance. We suggest that couple and family therapy-through using professional discourses and affect-oriented techniques or interventions-may be another site wherein neoliberal governmentality is implemented and extended in contemporary westernized neoliberalized societies. In facilitating emotion regulation, we argue that there is a risk that therapists may imp-

licitly promote a neoliberal worldview that encourages clients to mobilize neoliberal techniques to become self-improving, entrepreneurial subjects, responsible for their happiness and well-being. Conditions of precarity associated with individualist, neoliberal capitalist ideologies and policies (e.g., unemployment, job insecurity, forced migration, wealth inequalities, mass incarceration, social isolation Zipin & Brennan, 2024). The scene therefore dramatizes how masculinity operates as a cultural superego that regulates desire from within: Trevor's fear becomes a mechanism of internal policing, and Little Dog learns that longing is inseparable from the risk of shame (M. Aktas et al., 2016). In close narrative terms, the relationship is shaped by a continual recalibration of what can be touched, said, or shown without triggering the punitive force of gender norms (Drydak, 2021; K. Cheng et al., 2021).

This internal regulation becomes even more explicit in the coming-out exchange with Little Dog's mother, where disclosure is met not simply with moral condemnation but with anxious protection that nevertheless disciplines desire. Her reaction is structured by fear, fear of harm in the outside world, so that acceptance cannot be separated from control, caution, and the demand to minimize visibility. The novel thus frames queer honesty as a negotiation with familial and cultural survival logic: to name the self is simultaneously to expose the self. As context, Vuong situates this fear within broader social threats, public harassment and the memory of the Pulse nightclub shooting, without requiring extended exposition, because the point is clear: violence does not need to be present in the immediate scene to structure behavior; it is already anticipated and internalized as an everyday horizon of risk. Taken together, these moments show that queer

desire is not only socially constrained but psychologically governed, as heteronormativity and masculinity are internalized into a moral regime that compels Little Dog to negotiate love under the constant pressure of fear.

Epistolary/Second-Person, Fragmentation, Temporality, Metaphor

Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* does not merely depict the cultural superego as a thematic pressure; it formalizes that pressure through a narrative design that stages confession, interruption, and self-surveillance at the level of voice and structure. The epistolary mode, addressing an illiterate mother, positions narration as an act that is simultaneously intimate and constrained: Little Dog speaks into a relationship where understanding is desired but structurally uncertain, so the very act of telling becomes a negotiation with what can be voiced. In this formal arrangement, the cultural superego is not only "about" morality; it is felt as a constant awareness of being heard, judged, or withheld, turning the narrative voice into a space where disclosure and restraint coexist.

Epistolary Address And Second-Person Voice: Confession As Negotiation

The novel's second-person address functions as a rhetorical technology of testimony, where Little Dog's "you" becomes both the intimate listener and the implied authority before whom the self must justify its existence. When he writes from a position that is bodily and relational "writing from inside a body that used to be yours" (Vuong, 2019, p. 6), the sentence makes identity inseparable from inheritance and obligation, as if the speaking self remains accountable to a maternal origin it is trying to leave but cannot abandon (Tran, 2025; Verkuyten et al., 2019). The epistolary form

thus dramatizes a double bind: the narrator speaks to gain agency, yet the addressee's presence anchors him to familial duty and culturally inherited moral codes (Harris et al., 2021; Fuchs, 2018). As a result, voice itself becomes a site where the cultural superego is both confronted (through articulation) and reproduced (through the need to explain, soften, or translate the self into acceptable terms) (Haq, 2025; H. Liu et al., 2025).

Fragmentation And Lyric Temporality: Identity As Recurring Disruption

Vuong's fragmented structure, brief scenes, sudden temporal shifts, and lyric interruptions, visualizes identity not as linear development but as recurring disturbance. Instead of progressing toward resolution, the narrative returns to moments of shame, violence, and tenderness as if memory repeatedly reopens the same moral wounds (Van Lankveld et al., 2018; Jager et al., 2021). This temporal pattern aligns with the cultural superego's operation: the past is not "over," but reactivated as an internal tribunal that revisits what was said, what was endured, and what remains unspeakable. Fragmentation therefore does analytic work: it renders the self as discontinuous, shaped by the pressure to manage multiple moral worlds (family, public institutions, masculinity codes) without achieving stable synthesis. (Krebs, 2022; Relihan et al., 2023).

Metaphor And Lyrical Prose: Discipline And Resistance In The Same Language

The novel's metaphoric density further performs cultural regulation while offering a mode of resistance. When Little Dog describes himself as "a sound" and "an echo" (Vuong, 2019, p. 6), the imagery frames selfhood as resonance rather than origin: a voice produced in response to for-

ces already present, repeating and refracting what culture has spoken first. At the same time, the lyric quality of the prose enables him to rename experience, transforming the vocabulary of shame and constraint into aesthetic agency. The metaphors do not simply decorate; they enact a struggle over meaning, where language becomes the medium through which internal discipline is acknowledged and reworked. In this way, Vuong's form shows that resistance is not outside the cultural superego but must be articulated within its very linguistic and affective constraints.

By making address, fragmentation, and metaphor central to how the story is told, Vuong turns literary form into the primary arena where the cultural superego is both experienced as internal restraint and challenged through the act of narrating the self beyond culturally authorized scripts.

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates that Little Dog's diasporic identity is produced through a continuous negotiation with a cultural superego that converts familial obligation, public discrimination, gender norms, and heteronormative discipline into internal practices of guilt, shame, and self-surveillance. Across the domestic sphere, duty (as interpreter and caregiver) and moralized silence train the self to equate worth with endurance, while public and institutional encounters (accent stigma, racialized/classed judgment, labor morality, and hierarchy) intensify this training by turning social exposure into anticipatory self-regulation. Masculinity further operates as a moral code that polices vulnerability, and queer desire emerges as the most precarious register of negotiation because intimacy is repeatedly filtered through fear of feminization and culturally inherited risk. Importantly, the study also shows that these pressures are not only thematic but formal: Vuong's

epistolary address, fragmentation, and lyric metaphors stage the superego as a voice the narrator both answers to and resists, making narration itself a site of constraint and counter-speech. The central finding, therefore, is that identity in the novel is not a stable synthesis of “Vietnamese” and “American” values but an iterative, morally regulated process shaped by competing demands of belonging, survival, and legibility. This article contributes to psychoanalytic diaspora criticism by sharpening “cultural superego” as a framework for explaining how collective moral regimes become psychic governance in immigrant narratives, while also clarifying how literary form does analytical work in rendering, and partially undoing, that governance

CONCLUSION

The study shows that identity formation in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is governed by a cultural superego that translates social, familial, and institutional demands into internal moral self-regulation. Across the novel's domestic, public, and intimate domains, pressures such as duty, moralized silence, linguistic stigma, racialized/classed evaluation, labor discipline, masculinity codes, and cultural dislocation do not remain external constraints; they are absorbed as guilt, shame, fear, and self-surveillance that discipline speech, affect, desire, and belonging. As a result, Little Dog's selfhood is not consolidated into a stable synthesis of “Vietnamese” and “American” values, but remains an iterative negotiation shaped by competing moral imperatives and the need to endure.

This article contributes to psychoanalytic and diaspora literary criticism by sharpening cultural superego as a multi-scalar framework that links institutional power (language hierarchy, labor morality, racial/class judgement) to psychic governance

within a diasporic subject, while also recognizing that Vuong's literary form (epistolary address, fragmentation, and lyric metaphor) stages both constraint and resistance at the level of voice and structure. At the same time, the analysis treats Freud as a focused heuristic rather than a universal explanation, acknowledging the limitations of classical psychoanalysis for historically specific regimes of race, migration, and heteronormativity. Future research may extend this framework to other diasporic narratives to compare how different moral regimes are internalized, and how literary form mediates, reworks, or contests that internalization.

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