

Queer Male Asian American Disidentification in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Neotenica*

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Received: September 1, 2022

Accepted: February 10, 2023

Online Published: February 27, 2023

doi:10.5539/ells.v13n1p66

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v13n1p66>

Abstract

This paper offers a reading of two recent novels that grapple with queer male Asian American identity, Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) and Joon Oluchi Lee's *Neotenica* (2020), analyzing them in part through Jose Muñoz's concept of "disidentification." This concept, although produced by and for Latinx queers, is useful for exploring the simultaneous subversion of and attraction to American white patriarchal hegemony by those excluded from it. Research in the past has examined *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) from various angles, such as Cho (2022), examining refugee and queer shame, and Slopek (2021) looking at non-normative masculinities. Little research exists about *Neotenica* (2020) due to its recency. Utilizing queer theory, this paper builds off of previous research on *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) and adds to the analysis through the comparison with *Neotenica* (2020). At first look, the two books provide seemingly contrasting stories, with one appearing to affirm the stereotype of Asian men as submissive, desexualized, and feminine, the other turning this stereotype on its head. But on closer inspection, they are similar stories that both provide a nuanced look at queer Asian American male disidentification that does not define it as purely empowering or disempowering.

Keywords: disidentification, Joon Oluchi Lee, *Neotenica*, Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, hegemonic patriarchy, queer Asian American male identity, dominant stereotypes

1. Introduction

Disidentification, as defined by Jose Muñoz, is a "mode with dealing with the dominant ideology" for minoritarian subjects, "one that neither opts to assimilate nor strictly opposes it, rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against the dominant ideology" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). Disidentification exists in between the "identification" path, choosing to align with dominant images and stereotypes, and "counter-identification", resisting and turning against mainstream symbols. For many marginalized groups, it is a survival strategy in a phobic society that punishes any non-normative identities. The disidentified object can take the stereotypes society assigns them and invest new life in it, finding power in the abject. Muñoz uses the example of a performance by Marga Gomez, who speaks about her first interaction with lesbians through the seemingly homophobic image of "truck-driving closeted diesel dykes" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 3). Through an over-the-top and campy performance, this toxic representation was reconfigured by Gomez as something glamorous and sexy. This concept is widely influential, for it does not ignore mainstream stereotypes, but acknowledges the place they have in shaping and forming an identity for many marginalized groups.

Asian men, queer and non-queer, have been labeled with a multitude of stereotypes for decades. Dominant American stereotypes have described Asian men as "emasculated, effeminate, less attractive, less manly, falling short of the White hegemonic masculinity ideal in the United States" (Morgan, 2021). This image originates from discriminatory immigration practices in the 1800s stemming from "Yellow Peril" fears. Male Asian immigrants, seen as an invading force stealing white jobs, had to be portrayed as less than white men. They were forced into stereotypically female occupations such as laundry and service, leading to stereotypes of desexualization and effeminacy (Han, 2006). In the media, Asian characters are portrayed as "emasculate men...nerdy sidekicks, characters for comedic relief... perpetual foreigners...", and generally lacking in sexual desirability (Besana et al., 2019). From Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) to *2 Broke Girls* (2011) Han Lee, Asian American men have rarely been considered as romantic options and are often only the punchline for a joke (Note 1).

Asian men in the gay community occupy "the most unsexy, undesirable position of all, seen as soft, effeminate,

and poorly endowed” (Nguyen, 2014, p. 2). This intersection of prejudice of sexuality and race pits the survival and thriving of queer Asian American men against dominant images of desexualization and impotence. Fortunately, in recent years, mainstream white-dominated media has shifted to expand the image of Asian American men, such as in *Fire Island* (2022) or *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), where they become romantic leads and are shown as sexually attractive. However, it must be noted that movies cannot access the inner minds of the characters. The two novels examined by this paper can discuss non-normative presentations of Asian American male identity in a way other media cannot, exploring the internal disidentification that these characters perform.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous (2019) by Ocean Vuong tells a semi-autobiographical story of an unlikely queer romance between Little Dog and Trevor. The novel navigates queerness, identity, trauma, and race through beautiful prose; Vuong is also an award-winning poet. Critically acclaimed, the novel won the 2019 New England Book Award for Fiction and was longlisted for the National Book Award. The story tells how the narrator-protagonist, Little Dog, survived in the United States with his family as immigrants from Vietnam and describes the relationship between Little Dog and his first love, Trevor. Their relationship, full of tension and contradictions, is at the heart of Little Dog's disidentification, as he both “work[s] on and against” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11) prevailing images of Asian male effeminacy and desexualization. Vuong intended to represent Asian Americans from New England in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), as working-class Asian immigrants from this area are often ignored in the media (Note 2). The novel's representation of Little Dog carries themes worth examining regarding queer male Asian American identity.

Neotenica (2020) by Joon Oluchi Lee is a short book about casual encounters and day-to-day interactions. The novel won a 2021 Lambda Literary Award and was shortlisted for a Ferro-Grumley Award for LGBTQ Fiction. *Neotenica* (2020) is a much more experimental novel than *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), and it has not had anything like the success of Vuong's novel. Its avant-garde nature allows it to play with boundaries in creative ways, confounding readers' expectations of stereotypes. Young Ae and her husband are at the core of the story. Their casual queer and heterosexual sexual experiences, arranged marriages, and family dynamics explore queerness through both a discounting and acceptance of social conventions on race, sexuality, and gender.

The two novels depict and interact with gay male Asian American identity through various lenses, both from an internal identification level and from an external societal level, and disidentification can be used to understand the contradictory nature of these identities. Though research exists about *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), only a few articles touch on queer theory. Cho (2022) examines the depiction of the United States as a paternalistic savior to the queer refugee from Vietnam, while Slopek (2021) highlights the subversion of masculine hegemonic norms performed by Little Dog and Trevor. *Neotenica* (2020) has not been examined through a queer theory lens as of yet. Building off of existing research on Vuong's book, this paper seeks to examine these novels through the ways that queer theory has theorized gender.

2. Affirmation/Rejection of Stereotypes

Little Dog from *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* can be read as exemplifying the stereotype of a gay Asian American man. Bullied on the school bus, Little Dog writes, “I willed myself into a severe obedience and said his name. I let their laughter enter me” (Vuong, 2019, p. 25). Vuong describes Little Dog's innate submissiveness, unable to stand up for himself in hostile situations. The use of the word “enter” here signifies laughter as being penetrative, alluding to Little Dog's sexual position. Rose, his mother, points out Little Dog's lack of traditional masculinity, asking “What kind of boy would let them do that?” (Vuong, 2019, p. 26). In a homophobic and patriarchal world, the bottom, receptive position in sex is seen as innately feminine (Han, 2006). As gay Asian American men have an “expected femininity”, they are also assumed to be the penetrated partner in sexual situations (Han, 2006, p. 6, Note 3). In his relationship with Trevor, Little Dog accepts the bottom position, and Trevor assumes that he likes it, saying, “I can't, man. I'm sorry, it's not for me...It's for you, right?” (Vuong, 2019, p. 120). Many stereotypes place Asian men as the “feminine” counterpart to the “masculine” gay white male, and the relationship between the two boys fits into this preconception (Note 4).

Another stereotype Little Dog seemingly fulfills is Asian invisibility. Asian Americans have historically been sidelined, being rare in politics, and seldom represented in the media. This holds for queer discourse, where Asian Americans have historically been sidelined (Note 5). Little Dog and his family, who are at a disadvantaged status as refugees, can only “participate in a mimicry of silence and invisibility expected from obedient Asian subjects” (Cho, 2022, p. 136). When Little Dog meets Trevor's father for the first time, the father says, “Hey-that boy with you? That China boy with you, huh? I know it. I hear him. He doesn't talk but I hear him” (Vuong, 2019, p. 142). Trevor's father's words show how Little Dog fades into the background, especially compared to Trevor, seemingly an exemplar of white masculinity. He is quiet and unassuming, just as dominant images would expect of an Asian

man.

However, Vuong does not fully commit Little Dog to these stereotypes. Despite Little Dog's invisibility, when he looks into the mirror, he "let[s] the mirror hold those flaws - because for once, drying, they were not wrong to me but something that was wanted, that was sought and found..." (Vuong, 2019, p. 107). Little Dog finds himself wanted, needed, and beautiful. Asian Americans, especially in gay circles, have long been viewed as undesirable and desexualized – when they are not being fetishized. For Little Dog to find power in his appearance subverts these traditional stereotypes.

At first glance, *Neotenica's* Young Ae's husband is the antithesis of Asian American male stereotypes. In the first chapter, Young Ae's husband is described as a naturally masculine man, being "relatively tall" (Lee, 2020, p. 3) and "traditionally handsome" (Lee, 2020, p. 34), denying stereotypes of femininity and unattractiveness. Furthermore, he is a self-defined heterosexual and "a top, myopically and obviously so" (Lee, 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, Bradley's boyfriend, a white man, serves as the receptive partner for Young Ae's husband, reversing the assumed dichotomy of the white top and Asian bottom.

But from the very same chapter, expectations of masculinity are subverted. Before describing him as a top, Lee also writes, "His little penis did not, as the condition seemed to dictate to some gay men, force him into a life of sexual bottoming" (Lee, 2020, p. 1). Though he is a top, the acknowledgment of the size of his penis falls into Asian stereotypes, both affirming and denying his masculinity. In addition, Young Ae's husband calls himself a "heterosexual", but also has sex with men. Having homosexual relations is also something seen by mainstream patriarchal society as inherently effeminate for its transgression of gender norms (Bersani, 1987).

Another example of subverted expectations is when Young Ae's husband is riding the subway, when a group of young men come up to him and assault him. Even though he could have fought back, "...he chose not to. He let those big arms lay still..." (Lee, 2020, p. 5). The contrast of the masculine "big arms" with their stillness indicates a degree of weakness and submission despite his masculine appearance, as his insides are "soft as buttercream..." (Lee, 2020, p. 3). Interestingly, this character never gets his own name. He is always referred to in relation to the female partner, Young Ae, rather than the male partner's name, as expected by traditional gender norms. This reversal of conventions displays another form of subversion, giving ownership of the relationship to the female partner rather than the male. Lee plays with stereotypes from the very first page, exhibiting both traditionally effeminate and masculine sides of the character. These juxtapositions situate Young Ae's husband at an intersection of disparate gender norms that challenge traditional images of gay Asian American men.

Little Dog and Young Ae's husband have varying degrees of femininity and masculinity. Vuong and Lee embrace identity as complex and multi-faceted, without deliberately trying to conform to or avoid stereotypes. These contradictions can appear illogical, but they display the realities of some queer Asian American men and how they interact with gender norms.

3. Femininity as Power

As defined by Merriam-Webster, femininity is "the quality or nature of the female sex". There are no fixed traits to that femininity can be ascribed. However, traditionally, characteristics such as submissiveness, gentleness, and frailty have been assumed to be typical of women. These definitions are sexist and can marginalize non-normative femininities. Effeminacy, on the other hand, is defined as when men exhibit traits traditionally associated with women. However, in these two books, the women are shown as powerful and independent. Thus, effeminacy does not come from acting like women, but rather lies within subverting hegemonic masculine norms, such as exhibiting weakness or bottoming. Men do not need to act as women do to be labeled as "feminine" or "effeminate". In this sense, queerness is inherently effeminate, as it rejects traditional gender expression and sexuality.

In 1987, Leo Bersani published the landmark essay "Is the Rectum a Grave". Bersani wrote this essay in response to the AIDS crisis, and how mainstream media othered gay men as carriers of disease. This essay was one of the inaugural texts in queer theory, providing insight into sex, gender, and power. Leo Bersani says that patriarchy views "...female sexuality as intrinsically diseased; and promiscuity in this fantasy, far from merely increasing the risk of infection, is the sign of infection. Women and gay men spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction" (Bersani, 1987, p. 211). For hegemonic patriarchy, traditional femininity is inferior and submissive, and for a man to become effeminate is twisted and sick. In the world of male power and phallocentrism, being the bottom is to be dominated and to surrender power, thus demeaning, self-destructive, and the ultimate emasculation. These dominant narratives do not always hold true, and queer men have fought against them with many tools including the disidentification that Muñoz proposes.

These narratives of femininity and effeminacy as inferior are present in both novels. Queerness, and therefore effeminacy, is scorned by characters in the two books. Vuong writes of Little Dog's experiences at school, where "the kids would call me freak, fairy, fag" (Vuong, 2019, p. 14). Little Dog only realizes later "that those words were also iterations of monster" (Vuong, 2019, p. 14). In addition, the Vietnamese word for "gay" also means criminal, and when Little Dog comes out, his mother treats his sexuality as something abnormal or perverse. In *Neotenica* (2020), Young Ae's husband does not identify as queer despite his frequent sexual encounters with men, saying that he gets off "on the dirtiness of the act" (Lee, 2020, p. 15). For him, gay sex is dirty, tainted, and not something that can define him. Labels like "gay" or "bottom" still have negative connotations to them, which may have led to these characters avoiding their usage.

Historically, in response to the stereotypes Asian American men have faced, authors like Frank Chin sought to masculinize their image. He helped publish the almost-all-male collection *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974), in which he presents the "ideal" Asian American as "male, heterosexual, American born, and English speaking" (as described by Nguyen, 2014, p. 4, Note 6). However, many criticized these ideas for marginalizing women and queer Asian Americans. In the recent book *A View From the Bottom* (2014), Tan Hoang Nguyen challenges the notion that femininity and effeminacy are abject. He asserts that gay Asian American men have the unique position of being doubly emasculated and sidelined by both gay and Asian American stereotypes, calling it a "racial castration" (Nguyen, 2014, p. 19). Nguyen proposes that the idea of "disidentification" can help rewrite Asian American femininity with pleasure and agency, rather than the patriarchal subjugation of it.

Disidentification is neither assimilating nor strictly opposing existing structures, but finding the power in negative stereotypes. Vuong and Lee's works can be read through this context to see how they redefine and recontextualize Asian American male femininity and effeminacy as potentially empowering. Nguyen quotes Joon Oluchi Lee, author of *Neotenica* (2020), in *A View From The Bottom* (2014) when discussing disidentification. Lee writes, the "'castrated [Asian American] boy' delights in being 'mistaken for something' the world deems abject...embracing racial castration can be a potentially liberatory willingness to embrace femininity as a race and, vice versa, race as femininity" (Nguyen, 2014, p. 19). This mutual awareness of each other is important to note in framing Lee's work with disidentification and queer theory, as Lee may have written *Neotenica* (2020) with these concepts in mind.

Femininity is not displayed in a traditional manner in these books, which rely on powerful female characters for plot development. Their femininity, not defined by arbitrary standards such as patience, gentleness, or weakness, is power for these women. Little Dog, raised by his grandmother and mother, talks about how in his community, "grandmothers, abuelas, abas, nanas, babas, and bangoais were kings, crowned with nothing but salvaged and improvised pride and the stubborn testament of their tongues..." (Vuong, 2019, p. 213). *Neotenica* (2020) also has a powerful female figure: the mother-in-law of Young Ae. She is described as "intimidating" and "certainly not beautiful" (Lee, 2020, p. 20). It would be inaccurate to say the Asian men in these stories are "effeminate" because they are similar to their mothers, as they exhibit strength and resilience unlike what traditional femininity expects of them.

Though both femininity and effeminacy are traditionally linked with submission, which is generally seen as negative, the novels show yielding power as a useful tool. As defined by disidentification, in order to survive, marginalized groups must sometimes find power in what is considered degrading. Vuong writes, "In the nail salon, 'sorry' is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency. It no longer merely apologizes, but insists, reminds: I'm here, right here, beneath you...one's definition of sorry is deranged into a new word entirely, one that's charged and reused as both power and defacement at once" (Vuong, 2019, pp. 91–92). The contrast of "power" and "defacement" illustrate the contradictory power of voluntarily submitting to another person. These actions can seem demeaning, but by lowering themselves and abdicating power, these workers are able to earn a living and survive.

Little Dog, being raised in this environment, expresses similar ideas. When he first meets Trevor at the farm, Vuong writes, "Because I am your son, my apology had become, by then, an extension of myself. It was my Hello" (Vuong, 2019, p. 94). This first encounter hints at the two's future relationship dynamics. Little Dog continues to be the more submissive partner, his "sorry" a currency just like it is for the nail salon workers. His abdication of power keeps the relationship afloat, and thus this defiance of masculine norms empowers him. Little Dog lies to Trevor at times, to give himself "the power of this small knowledge" over Trevor (Vuong, 2019, p. 109). He describes himself as turning "into a doorway, a place [Trevor] can go through again and again" (Vuong, 2019, p. 111).

In a self-aware passage, Little Dog confronts his own effeminacy. Vuong writes:

What do you call the animal that, finding the hunter, offers itself to be eaten? A martyr? A weakling? No, a beast gaining the rare agency to stop. Yes, the period in the sentence—it's what makes us human, Ma, I swear. It lets us stop in order to keep going. Because submission, I soon learned, was also a kind of power. To be inside of pleasure, Trevor needed me. I had a choice, a craft, whether he ascends or falls depends on my willingness to make room for him, for you cannot rise without having something to rise over. Submission does not require elevation in order to control. I lower myself (Vuong, 2019, p. 119).

This passage lies at the crux of the disidentification Little Dog employs. He revalues and gives power to the scorned qualities of effeminacy. Though Trevor may appear to have more power, sexually and romantically, Little Dog has the agency to take away that pleasure from Trevor. He only gets to be “fucked up”, “by choice” (Vuong, 2019, p. 119). It is that agency that is crucial to understanding the power that lies in effeminacy and submission.

Neotenica (2020) treats effeminacy differently than *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). Instead of flipping the script, it treats effeminacy and gender expression in a neutral tone, and some moments could be read with a lens of disidentification. As a young boy, Young Ae's husband wants a dog, a request which is repeatedly refuted by his mother. He is compared to his brothers for “how strong they are even though they are younger and smaller than you” (Lee, 2020, p. 20). When he gets a dog as an adult, he is berated by his mother for wasting love on the dog, when he should “focus on Young Ae” (Lee, 2020, p. 98). He responds, saying, “I don't know why you think about love as a can of stuff to be used up. I have more than enough for my wife and a dog” (Lee, 2020, p. 98). This dog can be read as a manifestation of queerness. The dog does not produce something of value from receiving love. As the mother says, it “will bring you nothing at the end” (Lee, 2020, p. 99), unlike the productive tasks heterosexual couples are expected to perform, such as bearing children and continuing the family line. Young Ae's husband has always wanted one, but his mother never agreed, much like how many men may desire effeminacy without being allowed to by hegemonic patriarchy. The dog can be read as a symbol of queerness and thus effeminacy, from which Young Ae's husband finds power.

Young Ae's husband chooses not to identify as queer, but when prompted that his wife looks “like a man”, he does not refuse the connection and says, “Yeah, maybe, It's probably not that important though” (Lee, 2020, p. 41). He wears a shirt that says “Every straight guy should have a man's tongue in his mouth at least once” (Lee, 2020, p. 8). These demonstrations of sexuality show how he is at peace with his identity instead of constantly reinforcing his heterosexual masculinity, giving up the privilege that comes with that identification. *Neotenica* (2020) engages with the effeminate dominant image of gay Asian American men in a different way than Vuong's book, as Young Ae's husband does not appear to fit into typical stereotypes. Instead, Young Ae's husband interacts with his effeminacy without doubt or shame. He can empower himself through effeminacy rather than solely engaging with traditionally masculine ideals.

Emasculation had long been defined as something inherently negative, as a man without masculinity was viewed as effeminate, and thus powerless. But these novels challenge that perspective, instead showing the value of effeminacy and femininity through disidentification. The use of the word “monster” (Vuong, 2019, p. 14) by Vuong to describe hegemonic views of queerness is particularly interesting. The word carries a negative connotation, meaning a subhuman and disgusting animal. But “monster” can also signify a creature “above human”, a creature that is much more powerful than everyone else. In these reversals of longstanding norms, Vuong and Lee subvert the status quo and offer up a new interpretation (Note 7).

4. The Portrayal of Masculinity

Masculinity, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is “the quality or nature of the male sex”. As with femininity, there are no strictly defined attributes linked with male identity. Traditionally, masculinity signifies assertiveness, dominance, and strength, as well as social recognition and legitimacy. Furthermore, it is intricately linked to race. Social Darwinism and eugenics have placed East and Southeast Asian men as effeminate and undersexed, black men as threateningly hypersexual, and white men as the most balanced between the two extremes (Fung, 1998, p. 116, Note 8). In spite of that narrative, in two works that conspicuously lack positive father figures, hegemonic masculinity is often framed as something abusive and forced upon many men.

The experiences of several of the characters highlight the fragility and closed-mindedness that can come with hyper-masculinity. Trevor is one example. He is unwilling to be the receptive partner in sex, saying that he does not “wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch” (Vuong, 2019, p. 120). Trevor has been closed off to non-normative possibilities due to the effects of hegemonic white masculinity. He equates bottoming to being effeminate and being degraded. He undergoes deep turmoil in identifying as queer, saying, “You think you'll be really gay, like forever? I mean...I think me...I'll be good in a few years, you know?” (Vuong, 2019, p. 188). The denial and fear present in Trevor's behavior portray hegemonic masculinity as troubling and entrapping.

Vuong also conveys the hereditary nature of these behaviors. Describing a bully, Little Dog says, “He was only nine but had already mastered the dialect of damaged American fathers” (Vuong, 2019, p. 25). “Damaged” masculinity here is tied to an American and implied white identity, passed on from generation to generation.

In *Neotenica* (2020), Young Ae’s husband is berated by his mother for wanting a dog. She asks him to consider what “kind of example” he is setting for his brothers, and how they are stronger than he is “even though they are younger and smaller” (Lee, 2019, p. 20). In these moments, expectations of masculinity are forced on the male characters, and linked to violence and frail confidence, rather than the strength it is known for. Thus, normative dichotomies between “good” masculinity and “bad” femininity are questioned.

5. The Inherent Contradiction in Disidentification

However, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) and *Neotenica* (2020) cannot be simply read as the reversal of masculine versus feminine narratives. Though femininity and effeminacy are put in a positive light and masculinity in a negative one, masculinity is still dominant and idolized. A certain macho style in the 1980s amongst gay men, the “leather queen”, highlights the oxymoronic nature of this disidentification. The “leather queen” was a style in Bersani’s day where leather and muscles were combined with camp and a sexually feminized body. It defied the typical macho image of men, but it also showed a yearning for that machismo. Rather than completely subverting the stereotype, the leather queens in the 1980s paid tribute to the style they defied (Bersani, 1987, p. 207). Disidentification allows marginalized groups to play and empower themselves with negative stereotypes, but for queer men, those stereotypes can also cause idealization and feelings of inferiority to certain types of masculinity on the basis of which they are judged and condemned. Bersani writes that this internalization of self-hate and love for the oppressor is central to male homosexual desire. It confuses, appropriates, and identifies, with the object of desire, though gay men “never cease to feel the appeal of [male heterosexual identity] being violated” (Bersani, 1987, p. 209). It is key to understand the self-degradation that can come with disidentification, and that it is not completely positive empowerment.

On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous (2019) and *Neotenica* (2020) demonstrate the idolization of masculinity and the feelings of inferiority that come with effeminacy. Little Dog defecates during sex with Trevor, and he goes on to say that he had “tainted him with my faggotry” (Vuong, 2019, p. 203). Though he can find power in his submission, he still views his effeminacy as something that can “taint”, thus something dirty and not wanted.

Compared to Trevor, the “impossible American” (Vuong, 2019, p. 102) boy, Little Dog lowers himself in this relationship, instead of standing on equal ground. This behavior is similar to how many Asian American gay men have to play up their effeminacy and exoticize themselves, fitting into stereotypes to be viewed as desirable (Han, 2006, p. 17, Note 9). Little Dog finds himself attracted to the white masculinity Trevor offers, so he is willing to put himself in a weaker position to do so. There is power in Little’s Dog’s submissive position, but it cannot be ignored that to find pleasure, he has to “outlast [his] own hurt” (Vuong, 2019, p. 201). Little Dog describes the relationship as “being fucked up, at last, by choice” (Vuong, 2019, p. 119). The latter part of the sentence, “by choice”, indicates agency in giving up power, the key to the disidentification of effeminacy. However, the first part of the sentence cannot be ignored. “Fucked up” still indicates destruction and pain, conveying an abusive or unequal relationship. This sentence highlights the contradictory nature of disidentification, carrying both the negative and the positive in one sentence.

Vuong’s discussion of the customs surrounding drag queens in Vietnam is also worthy of note. When someone dies suddenly in Vietnamese cities, drag queens are paid to sing and dance as a form of grieving. “Through the drag performers’ explosive outfits and gestures, their overdrawn faces and voices, their tabooed trespass of gender, that this relief, through extravagant spectacle, is manifest” (Vuong, 2019, p. 226). However, “as much as they are useful, paid, and empowered as a vital service in a society where to be queer is still a sin, the drag queens are, for as long as the dead lie in the open, an othered performance” (Vuong, 2019, p. 226). These drag queens are an important cultural service for many Vietnamese people, yet they are not accepted and are always treated as something “other”. They are only allowed to exist within the moments when “the corpse remains inside its death” (Vuong, 2019, p. 226). Little Dog describes them as “unicorns stamping in a graveyard” (Vuong, 2019, p. 226), highlighting the abnormal and surreal status that the drag queens inhabit in mainstream society, as rare and strange as a mythical animal. They may be celebrated at certain moments, but only when the hegemonic patriarchy allows them to be. Like the drag queens of Vietnam, Little Dog is still subservient to hegemonic masculinity.

For all that *Neotenica* (2020) tries to confuse readers’ perceptions of dominant images, biases are still present. Young Ae’s husband refuses to identify as queer and describes his homosexual desires as “dirty” (Lee, 2020, p. 15). Bradley’s boyfriend also avoids “gay labels” (Lee, 2020, p. 31), similar to how gay men used to use words like “greek active” and “french passive” to avoid the stigma of effeminacy (Note 10). Effeminacy continues to be

viewed as derogatory, as Bradley's boyfriend needs to use labels like "bitch" to lower himself to gain sexual attention. He idolizes the masculine appearance Young Ae's husband has, saying that he likes it "when there is a touch of a beast, or at least unkempt wild messiness" (Lee, 2020, p. 34). Bradley's boyfriend's behavior hints at how dominant masculinity is adored and valued in the gay community, even when the men themselves may choose not to identify with it. In many instances in the book, Young Ae's husband appears to be rejecting Asian American stereotypes. However, even though he accepts his inner effeminacy, he gains sexual privilege from his masculine presentation. He is still "heterosexual" at the end of the day, even if he is queer and defies normative masculinities.

Nguyen himself acknowledged that bottoming is not revolutionary, describing it as a "gleeful surrendering of power" (Nguyen, 2014, p. 20). For these characters, though it may be "gleeful" to inhabit effeminacy and its stereotypes, they are still subservient to hegemonic patriarchy and masculinity. These two novels are partial representations of the reality that gay Asian American men live, and the nuances of effeminacy must be noted to start understanding these portrayals.

6. Conclusion

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), Little Dog describes his submissive status in his relationship with Trevor as like prey offering itself up to its predator. Though there is power in the act of allowing itself to be eaten, the animal is being devoured and killed regardless. In a small episode near the end of *Neotenica* (2020), a woman is described. "Her entire vibe was, if she had to acknowledge that there might be anything demeaning in any sexual act, that acknowledgment would put a crack in her brilliant milky diamond skin" (Lee, 2020, p. 87). The woman chooses not to make note of the unequal power dynamics inherent in her relationship, instead pretending as if nothing is wrong all along.

Effeminacy can be powerful for queer Asian American men. Though the emasculation of Asian American men in dominant images is always viewed as demeaning, "disidentification", as proposed by Muñoz, allows for a different reading, that defines effeminacy as power and mobility for queer Asian American men. Yet, "the rules, they were already inside us" (Vuong, 2019, p. 120). The "abject" femininity in queer Asian American men is not solely empowering. It still depends on hegemonic masculinity for its power. To recognize and redefine femininity and bottomhood as revolutionary or subversive has to come with an understanding of disidentification and its oxymoronic nature. An oxymoron like "beautifully ugly" places two contradictory qualities next to one another, working in concert to define one thing. Similarly, "disidentification" captures both the positive and negative, the celebratory and abject nature of marginalized identities. Vuong and Lee show that for queer Asian American men, effeminacy can be both empowering and demeaning at the same time, without committing fully to one or the other.

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Notes

Note 1. Han Lee was asked questions about a “sex change” on the show, mocking his effeminacy.

Note 2. “I wanted to have a much more diverse look at New England life, which is dependent on these brown and yellow folks to clean for them, to cook for them...I really wanted to capture that — within the midst of all this WASP life — Asian American identity thrives, immigrant identity thrives, and that working class folks live here. That is also a major part of New England identity, it is not just the mansions” (Gandhi, 2019).

Note 3. In the world of male power and penile power, “fucking” is the essential power (Bersani, 1987, p. 214). During intercourse, the penetrating partner is seen as “possessing” the penetrated partner, viewed as active, dominant, and masculine. Conversely, the “receiving” partner is seen as passive, submissive, and feminine. These heteronormative gender roles are reinforced in gay relationships (Han 8). As Asian American men are portrayed as feminine, they are often assumed to be a bottom (Han, 2006, p. 6).

Note 4. Gay Asian American men are often portrayed as the feminized “other” to a masculinized white male. For example, in the sitcom *Some of My Best Friends*, the only Asian character played by Filipino American actor Alec Mapa is very feminine, in flamboyant shirts and tight pants, starkly contrasting masculine white gay characters in the show. Mapa's character is also shown to be undesirable due to his feminine mannerisms. (Han, 2006, pp. 14–15).

Note 5. Gay Asian American men are virtually non-existent in gay media unless exotified for the pleasure of white men. “Reading through gay publications, it is almost as if no gay Asian men exist outside of the ‘fantasy cruises’ to the ‘Orient’” (Han, 2006, p. 14).

Note 6. The book *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974), worked on by Chin and other authors, presents the “ideal” Asian American as “male, heterosexual, American born, and English speaking” (Nguyen, 2014, p. 4). There was a desire for Asian American straight men to be included in dominant masculinity rather than involved in an alliance with other oppressed groups, dismissing female and queer Asian Americans in the process (Nguyen, 2014, p. 6).

Note 7. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen is a book about exploring “our fascination for the monstrous testifies to our continued desire to explore difference and prohibition” (Cohen, 1996). He uses monsters as a means to explore culture, and Vuong similarly describes the power of language and meaning.

Note 8. Latinx men, South Asian men, and many other racial groups are unrecognized by this spectrum (Fung, 1998, p. 116).

Note 9. Though Asian men are seen as undesirable, many fetishize them. One such group is the “rice queens”, non-Asian men who exclusively date Asian men. Asian men are “portrayed as an exotic but ultimately pliant sexual creature whose sexuality is directed outward toward the [gay white male]” (Han, 2006, p. 15). Gay Asian men are “rewarded” with desirability by the dominant gay community for performing the expected position (Han, 2006, p. 17). Due to these narratives, some Asian gay men internalize stereotypes and take on a “white is best” mentality, only being open to relationships with white men.

Note 10. These titles from the 1960s–80s “allowed gay men to liberate themselves from the stigma of effeminacy by redefining their passivity as a specific set of acts that occurred in a specific location—namely, during

sex—rather than as a general style of flaming behavior that they were forced to adopt in public” (Nguyen, 2014, p. 11).

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