

Asian Migrant in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*: Barthes Semiotics Analysis of Animals and Popular Brands**Dyah Suryaningrum¹, Theodore Alexander Atmaja²**English Language and Culture Department Faculty of Language
Universitas Widya Dharma Pontianak¹dyah.suryaningrum@widyadharma.ac.id, ²theodore@widyadharma.ac.id**Abstract**

Diasporic literature has been growing to an extent, signifying various aspects from contestation of identity, postcolonialism, trauma, and memory. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong is prominent contemporary work of literature exhibiting narratives about Asian migrant in the United States. Applying qualitative literature research, this study aims to reveal how life of migrant lives is reflected through the uses signs and symbols of certain animals and popular brands showcasing character struggles in adaptation to new environment. The framework from Roland Barthes in semiotics analysis helps to decode the symbols or signs within the plot through concept of semiotics level of meaning at denotative and connotative forms. The finding shows that popular brands and animals mentioned in the narration amplify nuance in depicting Asian migrants in pursuits of being independent and respected.

Keywords: diasporic, migrant, sign, symbol, semiotics

INTRODUCTION

Diasporic literature, a vibrant and evolving field within literary studies, explores themes of displacement, identity, and cultural hybridity as experienced by migrant, refugee, and expatriate communities. Rooted in historical and contemporary movements of people across borders, this body of literature captures the emotional, psychological, and socio-political challenges of exile and belonging. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie navigate the liminal spaces between homeland and host country, articulating the complex negotiations of identity formation in transnational contexts (Bhabha, 1994; Mishra, 2008). Diasporic narratives often engage with postcolonial theory, memory studies, and transnationalism, offering insights into how historical dislocations, such as colonialism and forced migration, shape literary production and personal identity. These texts not only serve as cultural archives of diasporic experiences but also challenge monolithic notions of nationality, ethnicity, and belonging by foregrounding hybrid identities and fluid cultural affiliations (Brah, 1996).

Furthermore, diasporic literature interrogates the role of language, nostalgia, and intergenerational memory in shaping diasporic subjectivities. Many diasporic authors employ multilingualism, code-switching, and fragmented narratives to reflect the fractured yet dynamic nature of diasporic existence (Ramraj, 2009). The recurring motifs of home and exile highlight the psychological tensions between longing for an ancestral homeland and adapting to new cultural landscapes (Clifford, 1997). By examining the politics of representation in diasporic texts, scholars contribute to broader discourses on globalization, identity politics, and cultural syncretism. As globalization accelerates transnational mobility, diasporic literature remains a crucial site of inquiry, offering nuanced perspectives on the human condition in an era of displacement and cross-cultural entanglements (Cohen, 2008).

Building upon these broader discussions of diasporic literature, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) suggests a deep personal exploration about migrant identity, intergenerational trauma, and the complexities of language as both a barrier and a bridge.

Vuong, a Vietnamese American poet and novelist, crafts his semi-autobiographical narrative in the form of a letter, navigating the tensions between past and present, homeland and host country, silence and articulation. The novel encapsulates the fragmented consciousness of diasporic existence, where memory and language intertwine to reconstruct a sense of self in the aftermath of war, displacement, and assimilation. Through its poetic prose and nonlinear structure, Vuong's work embodies the essence of diasporic literature—unsettling fixed notions of identity while situating migrant lives within the broader historical and socio-political landscape of post-war America (Nguyen, 2020).

A defining characteristic of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* lies on its raw, visceral portrayal of migrant lives, particularly the struggles of working-class immigrants in America. Vuong depicts the precarious existence of his protagonist, Little Dog, whose Vietnamese heritage and queer identity place him at multiple intersections of marginalization. The novel foregrounds themes of labor, familial sacrifice, and cultural estrangement, emphasizing the bodily toll of migrant labor and the inherited weight of wartime trauma. Vuong's prose oscillates between tenderness and brutality, exposing both the tenderness of love and the cruelty of systemic oppression. His use of auto-fictional storytelling blurs the boundaries between memory and fiction, offering a deeply intimate perspective on the diasporic condition, where history is felt most acutely within the body and its lived experiences (Yeh, 2021).

Moreover, Vuong's novel employs a distinct semiotic landscape in which animals and popular brands function as crucial symbols, offering insights into identity, consumerism, and cultural assimilation. Drawing from Roland Barthes' concept on semiotics, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* engages with signs and myths that shape the migrant experience in America. The recurring imagery of butterflies, for instance, serves as a metaphor for transformation and ephemerality, reflecting both the fragility and resilience of diasporic identity. Likewise, references to consumer brands such as Marlboro cigarettes and McDonald's signal the entanglement of personal histories with American capitalist culture, where commodities become markers of both belonging and alienation. Vuong's semiotic play reveals how everyday objects and symbols construct narratives of power, desire, and identity in the lives of migrants, making his novel a compelling site for a Barthesian analysis of contemporary diasporic literature (Pham, 2022).

The Author: Ocean Vuong

Ocean Vuong, born in Vietnam, is a critically acclaimed author whose work delves into themes of identity, trauma, and loss, of immigrant experience. Vuong's poignant and lyrical voice has earned him numerous awards and a reputation as one of the most distinctive literary talents of his age group. Ocean Vuong was born into a family with a history marked by the Vietnam War. In 1990, his family immigrated to the United States as refugees when Vuong was just two years old. They first settled in Hartford, Connecticut, where Vuong grew up in a working-class neighborhood.

Vuong's upbringing was shaped by his family's struggles to adapt to life in America. Raised by a single mother who worked in a nail salon, Vuong faced the challenges of navigating his identity as a queer Asian immigrant in a predominantly white society. He later reflected, "I came to the page as an immigrant, as an alien in this language... To write is to reclaim something of myself" (Yong, 2022). Vuong attended Manchester Community College in Connecticut before transferring to Brooklyn College, where he studied under the mentorship of poet Ben Lerner. He earned a degree, Master of Fine Arts in English with a focus on creative writing from New York University, where he began to develop the distinct poetic style that would garner widespread acclaim.

Ocean Vuong's literary journey began with poetry. His debut chapbook, *Burnings* (2010), attracted early attention for its emotional depth and vivid imagery. His later

collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) catapulted him to international fame. This collection explores themes of war, intergenerational trauma, love, and identity, drawing heavily from his family's history and his personal experiences. As Vuong explained, Poetry is the closest thing to prayer (Kellaway, 2017). The book won the Best First Collection in awards such as the Whiting Award, the T. S. Eliot Prize, and the Forward Prize.

In 2019, Vuong published his debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, which was a semi-autobiographical work written as a letter form. Characterized by its poetic prose and raw emotional honesty, the novel examines themes of race, class, queerness, and the complexities of familial relationships. Reflecting on the novel's resonance, Vuong said, "This book is for those who survived" (Hsu, 2019). It became a New York Times Bestseller, received the MacArthur "Genius" Grant, and was longlisted for the National Book Award for Fiction. Vuong returned to poetry in 2022 with his second collection, *Time Is a Mother*, which explores grief, particularly following the death of his mother, and the resilience of the human spirit.

Ocean Vuong's writing is celebrated for its lyrical beauty, experimental structure, and profound emotional resonance. He frequently incorporates fragmented narratives, lush imagery, and a fluid blending of past and present. Central to his work are the intersections of his identities as a queer individual, an immigrant, and a person shaped by generational trauma. Vuong's work often meditates on language itself, reflecting his journey of learning English and the power of words to both wound and heal. He explained, "To enter this language was a privilege... but it also meant learning to transform loss into song" (Yong, 2022). His poetic sensibility imbues even his prose with a rhythmic and evocative quality, earning comparisons to literary figures like James Baldwin and Maggie Nelson.

Throughout his career, Ocean Vuong has received several honors, including: MacArthur Fellowship (2019), T. S. Eliot Prize (2017), Whiting Award (2016), Forward Prize (2017), Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Fellowship. Ocean Vuong has made himself as a powerful voice in contemporary literature, one that bridges cultures and generations. His work continues to inspire readers and writers alike, providing a lens through which to explore complex questions about identity, memory, and human connection. Through his poetry and prose, Vuong invites us to confront our shared vulnerabilities and embrace the transformative power of storytelling.

Synopsis

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous (2019) is a powerful and poetic novel written as a letter from a son named Little Dog to his mother. The narrative explores themes of identity, love, trauma, and family, as Little Dog attempts to reconcile his personal experiences with his family's history of war and immigration. Moving between past and present, the novel reflects on Little Dog's upbringing in a working-class immigrant household in Hartford, Connecticut, shaped by his mother's struggles with PTSD and his grandmother's memories of wartime Vietnam.

The story is also a deeply intimate exploration of queer identity, particularly through relationship with Trevor, a young man battling addiction and familial instability. Through fragmented yet lyrical prose, Vuong examines the intersections of love, pain, and survival while confronting issues of racism, masculinity, and cultural displacement. As much about self-discovery as it is about the immigrant experience, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a contemplation on language, memory, and passing beauty found within human connections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review mainly consists of two parts; the theoretical framework on Roland Barthes theory of semiotics and the previous studies related to *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. The explanation on the theory provides understanding about concept in

revealing meaning of symbols or signs while the previous studies give clear landscape and gaps of research related to the selected work.

Semiotics of Roland Barthes

Semiotics is study of signs and symbols to find out conception on how meaning is created and transferred through many forms of illustration. Rooted in the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, semiotics examines the association between the signifier; generally, the physical form of a sign and the signified; mainly the concept it represents. According to Saussure, the sign is a combination of these two elements, with meaning emerging from their interaction (Saussure, 2011). Semiotics extends beyond language to include visual images, gestures, and cultural practices, analyzing how these systems function within broader social contexts. Roland Barthes expanded semiotics to explore the layers of meaning within texts, distinguishing between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (cultural and symbolic associations) (Barthes, 1972). This framework is widely applied in media studies, advertising, and cultural analysis to uncover implicit ideologies and values embedded in everyday signs.

The concepts of signified and signifier are foundational to semiotics, introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in his seminal work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916/2011). Saussure defined a sign as the basic unit of meaning, comprising two inseparable parts: the signifier and the signified. The *signifier* refers to the physical form of the sign, such as a word, sound, image, or gesture. It is the tangible or perceivable aspect that conveys meaning. For example, the word "tree" is a signifier in the English language. The *signified* is the concept or idea that the signifier represents. It is the mental image or meaning associated with the signifier. In the case of the word "tree," the signified would be the idea of a tall plant with a trunk, twigs, branches, roots, and leaves. For example, in a stop sign, the signifier is the physical red octagonal sign with the word "STOP" written on it. The signified is the concept of halting or ceasing motion, which is universally understood in the context of road traffic rules. Saussure emphasized that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and culturally specific. For instance, the English word "tree" has no inherent connection to the concept it represents, and other languages use different signifiers, such as "arbre" in French or "pohon" in Indonesian, for the same signified (Saussure, 2011).

Roland Barthes expanded on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics framework by applying it to cultural analysis and exploring how signs function within social and ideological contexts. Saussure's semiotic model defines a sign as a relationship between the signifier (the physical form) and the signified (the concept it represents), emphasizing the arbitrary and conventional nature of this relationship (Saussure, 2011). Barthes adopted this foundational framework and built upon it to develop his theory of mythology and cultural semiotics in works like *Mythologies* (1972).

Barthes introduced a second-order semiotic system, where the denotative sign from Saussure's framework becomes a signifier in a broader cultural or ideological context. This second layer of meaning produces connotations, which are shaped by cultural, social, and historical factors. For example, a photograph of a soldier saluting has a denotative meaning (a military gesture) but can connote patriotism, loyalty, or sacrifice depending on the viewer's cultural context (Barthes, 1972). Barthes further argued that these second-order connotations form myths, which naturalize dominant ideologies and make them appear universal or self-evident. This process of myth-making transforms cultural constructs into seemingly neutral truths, subtly reinforcing societal values and power structures (Barthes, 1972). Barthes' work expanded the scope of semiotics from a linguistic framework to a powerful tool for analyzing media, literature, advertising, and other cultural phenomena. While Saussure's theory focused on the structure of signs, Barthes demonstrated how these

signs function within broader systems of meaning, making semiotics a cornerstone of cultural and critical theory.

Roland Barthes distinguished between denotation and connotation to analyze how meanings are constructed in texts, particularly in visual and linguistic systems. These concepts are central to his semiotic theory, as outlined in works such as *Mythologies* (1957). Denotation discusses the straightforward, objective representation of an object, word, or image. For example, in a photograph of a rose, the denotative meaning is simply "a rose" as a botanical entity. This is the first level of signification, where the signifier directly correlates with the signified (Barthes, 1972). Connotation drives outside the literal, encompassing the symbolic associations that a sign evokes. Using the same example, a rose may connote beauty, passion, or romance depending on cultural or contextual factors. Connotation operates on the second level of signification, where the sign's meaning is shaped by broader cultural codes and individual experiences (Barthes, 1972). Barthes emphasized that connotation is shaped by ideology and cultural context, making it a powerful tool for conveying meaning. In *Mythologies*, he argued that these layers of meaning create myths—deeply embedded cultural narratives that naturalize specific values or ideologies. For example, an image of a soldier saluting may denotatively show a military gesture, but its connotative meaning could evoke patriotism, discipline, or sacrifice, depending on the viewer's cultural background and the intended ideological message.

Roland Barthes' textual analysis framework, introduced in *S/Z* (1970), outlines five "codes" that guide the interpretation of texts. These codes reveal the layers of meaning embedded within narratives and emphasize the reader's role in constructing meaning. *Hermeneutic Code* (Enigma Code) refers to elements of mystery or unanswered questions in a narrative that drive the reader to seek closure. It creates suspense and curiosity, as the story unfolds to resolve these enigmas (Barthes, 1974). *Proairetic Code* (Action Code) pertains to actions and events in a story that suggest further developments. It creates the narrative's sequential logic by linking cause and effect, moving the plot forward (Barthes, 1974). *Semantic Code* involves connotations and meanings associated with particular words, phrases, or symbols in a text. These elements contribute to deeper, implicit meanings beyond the surface narrative (Barthes, 1974). *Symbolic Code* operates on a structural level, highlighting oppositions, binaries, and thematic contrasts within a text. It reflects underlying systems of meaning, such as life/death, light/dark, or good/evil (Barthes, 1974). *Cultural Code* (Referential Code) relates to references to shared cultural knowledge, beliefs, or practices that the reader recognizes. It anchors the narrative in a specific cultural or historical context, enriching its meaning (Barthes, 1974).

Previous Studies

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous has been subject of extensive scholarly analysis, with numerous studies exploring its intricate themes, narrative structure, and linguistic style. D'Urso (2022) delves into the novel's syntax and power dynamics, examining how Vuong's subversion of traditional sentence structures challenges established linguistic norms and reflects the complexities of immigrant identity. By analyzing Vuong's unconventional use of fragmented sentences and poetic prose, D'Urso argues that the novel's syntax mirrors the protagonist's fractured sense of belonging and linguistic alienation as a second-generation immigrant navigating between English and Vietnamese. This study underscores the broader implications of language as both an oppressive and liberating force for diasporic individuals, positioning Vuong's work within the tradition of experimental immigrant narratives.

Diep (2021) offers a comprehensive review that highlights the novel's exploration of queer identity within Vietnamese American culture, discussing how Vuong addresses taboo subjects such as mental health, masculinity, and intergenerational trauma. The study draws attention to the novel's depiction of same-sex desire and its intersection with the

protagonist's status as an immigrant, framing his experiences within a broader discourse of cultural expectations and societal marginalization. Diep's analysis provides an important contribution to the study of queer diasporic literature, demonstrating how Vuong intertwines personal and collective histories to challenge dominant narratives of both queerness and migration.

Further, an article published in MELUS (2019) examines the novel's engagement with memory, identity, and storytelling, illustrating how Vuong counters dominant American mythology by foregrounding the Vietnamese American refugee experience. The study argues that *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* disrupts conventional linear narratives by blending personal recollections, historical trauma, and intergenerational dialogue, reflecting the disjointed and cyclical nature of memory. The research highlights how Vuong's novel functions as a counter-narrative to mainstream American literature, which often marginalizes or romanticizes immigrant experiences. By emphasizing the novel's treatment of war memories, cultural displacement, and the transmission of trauma across generations, the study situates Vuong's work within broader discourses on postcolonial and transnational literature.

Smith (2024) further expands on the novel's aesthetic and linguistic elements, focusing on its use of imagism and queer aesthetics. Through close textual analysis, Smith argues that Vuong employs heightened sensory descriptions and lyrical language to construct a narrative that is both deeply intimate and politically charged. The study examines how Vuong's poetic approach to prose blurs the boundaries between fiction and autobiography, reinforcing the novel's themes of fluidity and impermanence. Smith's research contributes to the growing scholarship on queer literary aesthetics, demonstrating how Vuong's stylistic choices reflect his characters' experiences of love, trauma, and identity negotiation.

Additionally, an article in the Los Angeles Review of Books (2019) explores the novel's portrayal of masculinity and beauty, emphasizing Vuong's challenge to traditional perceptions of strength and vulnerability. The study discusses how Vuong's depiction of male bodies, from the protagonist's tender encounters with his lover to the brutal realities of his grandfather's wartime past, complicates hegemonic notions of masculinity. By integrating personal and collective histories, Vuong reframes beauty as an act of survival and resistance, positioning his work as a vital intervention in contemporary literary representations of masculinity.

DISCUSSION

The discussion presents analysis on the sign of animals and popular brands in the work to reveal meanings dominantly at the connotative level related to the life of migrants. The presence of different animals in the narration carries certain aspects of meaning for the whole story in conjunction with the popular brands included, building the unique characteristics.

A Semiotic Analysis of Animals in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong employs animals as potent semiotic symbols, embedding them with layers of meaning that reveal the novel's core themes of trauma, survival, and transformation. Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, which differentiates between denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural and emotional associations), and myth (larger ideological structures), helps us unpack the deeper significance of these animals within the narrative. Vuong does not use animals as mere background details but instead transforms them into reflections of the characters' inner struggles, memories, and identities.

One of the most striking animal motifs in the novel is the monarch butterfly, which serves as a powerful metaphor for migration, metamorphosis, and the precarity of life. Denotatively, a monarch is simply an insect known for its striking orange wings and its long migratory journey across North America. However, connotatively, it becomes a symbol of the immigrant experience—its journey mirroring that of Little Dog’s family, who must traverse borders in search of survival. The monarch’s fragility also reflects the vulnerability of migrants in an often-hostile world, emphasizing how displacement, like migration, is both a physical and psychological ordeal. The myth of the monarch butterfly—that transformation leads to freedom—is complicated in the novel. While the butterfly undergoes a metamorphosis, its life remains transient and fragile, much like Little Dog’s existence in America, where change does not necessarily guarantee stability.

Other remarkable animal in the novel is the monkey, which appears in the context of Little Dog’s grandmother, Lan, describing an incident from the Vietnam War. Denotatively, a monkey is simply a primate, often associated with intelligence and agility. However, connotatively, the monkey in the novel becomes a symbol of cruelty and dehumanization. Lan recounts how American soldiers set a monkey on fire for entertainment, turning it into a grotesque spectacle of suffering. This moment not only highlights the brutality of war but also mirrors the ways in which Vietnamese people were often dehumanized and treated as expendable. The myth of the monkey, typically associated with playfulness or even wisdom in various cultures, is violently subverted here—Vuong transforms it into an image of suffering, stripping away any notion of innocence or comedy and instead revealing the senseless destruction wrought by war.

The buck is another significant animal that carries multiple layers of meaning. Denotatively, a buck is a male deer, known for its strength and agility. Connotatively, the buck becomes a symbol of masculinity, freedom, and vulnerability—particularly in relation to Trevor and the rural American landscape. The image of a buck is often associated with traditional notions of strength, yet in the novel, this strength is undermined by the stark reality of violence and death. The myth of the buck as a majestic, untamed force of nature is complicated by the fact that in American culture, hunting bucks is a common pastime, turning them into trophies rather than beings of wild power. This parallels Trevor’s own fate—though he embodies a certain rugged masculinity, he is ultimately trapped in the cycles of addiction and despair, much like a hunted animal.

Another seemingly small yet symbolically rich animal is the cricket. Denotatively, a cricket is an insect known for its chirping sounds, often heard in the stillness of night. Connotatively, the cricket represents resilience and the presence of life even in moments of silence and solitude. In many cultures, crickets are seen as omens or symbols of endurance, their persistent songs cutting through the darkness. The myth surrounding crickets often links them to patience and good fortune, but in the novel, their presence evokes loneliness and contemplation. They become part of the atmosphere of rural life, punctuating moments of isolation, particularly in the scenes involving Little Dog and Trevor. Their song is a reminder of life’s ongoing nature, even in the face of suffering.

The moose appears briefly but carries symbolic weight. Denotatively, a moose is a large, imposing animal native to North America, often associated with strength and solitude. Connotatively, the moose in the novel reflects both the grandeur and the brutality of the natural world, serving as a reminder of the tension between power and vulnerability. The myth of the moose, much like the buck, is tied to ideas of the untamed wilderness and masculine strength, but Vuong disrupts this by placing it within a narrative that questions traditional notions of masculinity and survival.

The cow and heifer (a young female cow) both carry deep symbolic meaning, particularly in relation to migration, nourishment, and sacrifice. Denotatively, these animals

are common livestock, associated with farming and sustenance. Connotatively, the cow is often linked to motherhood, nourishment, and labor, while the heifer represents youth and potential. In the novel, these animals appear in contexts that evoke the struggles of working-class and rural life. The myth of the cow as a provider and symbol of abundance is undercut by the economic hardships faced by the characters. Rather than representing prosperity, cows and heifers in Vuong's novel become symbols of exhaustion and the weight of survival—beasts of burden, much like the immigrants and laborers in the story, expected to give endlessly without rest.

Another significant animal in the novel is the buffalo, which appears in stories told by Little Dog's grandmother, Lan. Denotatively, the buffalo is a large, domesticated animal essential to Vietnamese agricultural life. Connotatively, it becomes a nostalgic symbol of the homeland, representing a past that has been lost due to war and displacement. The buffalo's presence in Lan's memories is deeply tied to Vietnam's rural traditions, evoking a longing for a place that no longer exists in the same way. However, the myth of the buffalo—its association with resilience and strength—is complicated by the brutal realities of war and migration. The buffalo, once a symbol of prosperity, becomes a relic of a past life that is now inaccessible, highlighting the emotional and cultural rupture experienced by immigrants. The firefly is another crucial animal in the novel, appearing in one of its most poignant moments when Little Dog watches them with Trevor. Denotatively, a firefly is a bioluminescent insect that glows in the dark. Connotatively, it becomes a fleeting emblem of love, beauty, and impermanence. The fireflies, much like Little Dog's relationship with Trevor, shine brightly but briefly, suggesting that some connections, no matter how intense, are destined to be ephemeral. The myth surrounding fireflies often associates them with magic and childhood wonder, yet Vuong subverts this by using them to highlight the tragic transience of queer love, addiction, and loss.

Through Barthes' semiotic framework, we see that the animals in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* are far more than simple references—they are deeply embedded symbols that explore migration, memory, and love. By using animals that evoke both transformation and loss, Vuong crafts a narrative where survival is not just about endurance but about carrying the weight of histories that refuse to fade.

A Semiotic Analysis of Brands in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous uses commercial brands not just as references to consumer goods but as semiotic symbols that illuminate themes of economic struggle, assimilation, and addiction. Barthes' semiotic model allows us to deconstruct these brands beyond their denotative meanings (literal products) and explore their connotative implications (emotional, cultural, and economic associations) and their mythological functions (the ideological messages they carry about American society and identity). By embedding brands into the narrative, Vuong critiques the false promises of capitalism and the ways in which consumer culture shapes the immigrant and working-class experience.

One of the most frequently mentioned brands in the novel is Walmart, a retail giant that plays a substantial part in the lives of working-class Americans. Denotatively, Walmart is simply a store where people buy affordable goods. Connotatively, it represents both economic survival and financial limitation. Little Dog's family shops there not out of choice but out of necessity, as it is one of the few places where they can afford to buy food and household items. The myth of Walmart is that it provides accessibility and opportunity, allowing the American Dream to be within reach for all. However, Vuong dismantles this myth by showing that for many immigrants and working-class families, Walmart is not a sign of prosperity but a reminder of economic precarity, where affordability comes at the cost of dignity and better living conditions.

Another crucial brand in the novel is OxyContin, the powerful opioid that plays a tragic role in Trevor's life. Denotatively, OxyContin is a prescription painkiller used to treat severe pain. Connotatively, it becomes a symbol of addiction, loss, and the devastating impact of the opioid crisis in working-class America. The drug is not just something Trevor takes; it represents the structural forces that entrap people like him; young, poor, and with limited prospects, into cycles of addiction and despair. The myth of OxyContin, perpetuated by pharmaceutical companies, is that it offers relief and a better quality of life. However, in Vuong's narrative, this myth is violently dismantled as the drug leads not to healing but to destruction, showing how capitalism exploits the very people it claims to help.

A smaller but symbolically significant brand in the novel is Marlboro, the cigarette brand often associated with Trevor. Denotatively, Marlboro is just a tobacco product, but connotatively, it represents masculinity, rebellion, and self-destruction. The myth of Marlboro; fueled by decades of advertising featuring rugged cowboys and independent men, suggests that smoking is an act of strength and defiance. However, Vuong subverts this myth by showing that for Trevor, smoking is not an act of empowerment but a coping mechanism, a slow form of self-destruction tied to addiction and despair. Like OxyContin, Marlboro becomes another product through which capitalism manufactures both desire and suffering.

Other recognizable brands in the novel is McDonald's, a global fast-food chain synonymous with affordability and convenience. Denotatively, McDonald's is simply a place where people, especially working-class families, can grab an inexpensive meal. However, connotatively, it represents the paradox of American consumerism—both an accessible comfort and a marker of socioeconomic limitations. For Little Dog's family, McDonald's is not a luxury but a necessity; it is where meals can be bought cheaply and quickly, reinforcing their working-class reality. The myth of McDonald's, particularly in American culture, is that it embodies the "American Dream"—a place where everyone, regardless of background, can partake in the same experience. Yet, Vuong subtly deconstructs this myth by showing how McDonald's, rather than being a symbol of success, underscores the struggles of immigrant families who must rely on cheap, processed food due to financial constraints.

Similarly, Dunkin' Donuts appears in the novel as another emblem of working-class life. Denotatively, it is a coffee and doughnut chain, widely associated with American morning routines. Connotatively, it represents the daily grind—the endless cycle of labor, fatigue, and sustenance. Unlike artisanal coffee shops that cater to the wealthy, Dunkin' Donuts is frequented by blue-collar workers, reflecting an America where survival is prioritized over luxury. The myth surrounding Dunkin' Donuts is that it provides a small, affordable indulgence to keep workers going. Yet, in the novel, it becomes part of the broader capitalist system that demands productivity and endurance from immigrants and the working class while offering only minimal respite. The image of a tired worker clutching a Dunkin' coffee encapsulates both sustenance and exhaustion, mirroring the sacrifices made by Little Dog's mother and grandmother in pursuit of a better life.

Gatorade, a sports drink brand, serves a different but equally compelling semiotic function. Denotatively, it is marketed as a hydration and performance-enhancing beverage. Connotatively, it represents aspiration, masculinity, and physical endurance, particularly in the context of American sports culture. In the novel, Gatorade appears in relation to Trevor, who, as a working-class white teenager, embodies the toxic expectations of masculinity in rural America. The myth surrounding Gatorade is that it fuels strength, energy, and success—an image reinforced by advertisements featuring elite athletes. However, in Trevor's world, this illusion of strength contrasts with his vulnerability, addiction, and self-destruction. Vuong subtly critiques the idea that products like Gatorade, which symbolize

vitality and competition, can somehow mask or compensate for the deeper struggles of poverty, masculinity, and addiction.

Toyota, one of the world's most well-known automobile brands, serves as a symbol of mobility and economic reality. Denotatively, Toyota is simply a car manufacturer, known for producing affordable and reliable vehicles. Connotatively, Toyota in the novel represents immigrant pragmatism and working-class endurance—it is not a status symbol like luxury brands but rather a functional necessity. Many immigrant families in America, including Little Dog's, drive used or inexpensive cars, prioritizing reliability over prestige. The myth surrounding Toyota is that it enables freedom and movement, yet for characters like Little Dog's mother, a car is not a symbol of liberation but of relentless labor—a means to commute to work, perform tasks, and survive in a system that demands constant motion.

Through Barthes' semiotic approach, we can see that the brands in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* are far more than background details—they are ideological symbols that expose the harsh realities of class, addiction, and consumerism. By integrating brands into his narrative, the brands represent cheap, mass-produced consumption—fast food, snacks, and drinks that are widely accessible but also reflect economic limitations. Denotatively, they are simply food products, but connotatively, they become symbols of the working-class struggle, where survival often means consuming what is affordable rather than what is healthy. Vuong critiques the deceptive promises of capitalism and the ways in which products are marketed as pathways to success while, in reality, reinforcing cycles of poverty and despair.

CONCLUSION

Through both brands and animals, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* deconstructs the illusion of the American Dream, showing how consumer goods, food, and vehicles are marketed as symbols of success, freedom, and power, yet in reality, they reveal the economic precarity and exhaustion of the working class. Fast food brands like McDonald's, KFC, and Dunkin' Donuts expose the necessity of cheap food for immigrants and the poor, while Chevy, Toyota, and John Deere reveal how mobility and labor are both required for survival yet offer no real escape. Meanwhile, Marlboro, Zippo, and Carhartt highlight toxic masculinity and the illusion of strength, particularly for struggling young men like Trevor. The animals in the novel parallel these struggles, as they too are either hunted, consumed, or forced to labor, reflecting the brutal realities of capitalism, war, and survival. By intertwining consumer brands and animal imagery, Vuong exposes the contradictions of American life—where survival is dependent on consumption, and where symbols of power and success often conceal deep suffering and vulnerability. In the end, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* does not just depict everyday objects and creatures—it transforms them into semiotic battlegrounds, forcing us to rethink the hidden meanings behind the brands we consume and the animals we ignore. Through Vuong's lens, the American Dream is not just a promise—it is a myth that demands sacrifice, endurance, and, ultimately, loss.

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