

## **Beyond Homonormativity: Fluidity of Love in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous***



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### **Abstract**

Dominant narratives of love, as perceived in society, and bound by rigid categories, are Eurocentric and heteronormative ones. This contemporary conception considers love and sexual intimacy as mutually inclusive, and is usually understood as involving a 'romantic relationship' whereas acts of kindness and care are separately categorised as 'platonic emotions.' Our society obsesses over definitions and categories, which police and limit the understanding of 'love.' By engaging with the works of queer, Black, Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC) authors who have challenged these white-supremacist sensibilities surrounding 'love,' this paper analyses the novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) by Ocean Vuong. This analysis focuses on the representation and construction of love through a queered lens. Using the works of authors such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde, this textual and contextual analysis works to shatter heteronormative (and, in extension, homonormative) ideas of love to bring forth a more fluid, nuanced framework.

### **Keywords**

*Homonormativity, heteronormativity, love, queer, fluidity, non-Eurocentric*

### **Introduction**

Human relationships have long been shaped by prototypes treated as universal standards, often overlooking the complexities and nuances they bring to individual lives (Thorne et al., 2019). Such prototypes are formed and promoted through heteronormativity, which has shaped societal understandings of relationships for centuries. This framework assumes a

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rigid template of emotions and relationships, built around the idea that heterosexuality is the ideal and default state (Sprayregen, 2023), that is akin to a prescriptive formula rather than an invitation to natural human connection. Closely related to heteronormativity is the concept of homonormativity, which, as an assimilatory politics through which some queer individuals' relationships are deemed socially acceptable (Duggan, 2002, p. 175-194), further reinforces stagnant, predefined norms for love and relationships. Through this stagnancy, perceptions and experiences of love and human relationships become lacking in adaptability and sensitivity.

Eurocentric social and political frameworks, predominantly rooted in the Global North, have significantly shaped dominant sensibilities regarding love and relationships. Many queer theorists, including Wilchins (2004), often trace contemporary understanding of love and relationships back to colonialism, where Church and state collaborated to impose rigid binaries—male/female, white/Black, heterosexual/homosexual—that served to naturalize certain identities while pathologising others. This colonial logic framed heterosexuality as biologically and morally superior, upholding reproductive marriage and the patriarchal family as civilising ideals, while queerness was rendered unnatural and invisible. As Wilchins explains, femaleness and homosexuality came to be seen as 'odd, unnatural, and in need of explanation,' enabling heterosexual maleness to appear neutral and inevitable (Wilchins, 2004, p. 116). Such narratives laid the groundwork for both heteronormativity and homonormativity, reinforcing stagnant relational ideals under the guise of social order.

In recent decades, this Eurocentric narrative has been deconstructed by queer—especially queer BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour)—theorists and authors, such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Their work actively challenges oppressive structures, including neoliberalism, colonialism, and heteronormativity, to offer more fluid and inclusive understandings of love and relationships. These voices highlight the need to rupture stagnant ideologies and embrace love as an evolving, unbounded emotion.

This paper builds on the critical frameworks introduced by these scholars to explore the fluidity of love and relationships, particularly through the analysis of Ocean Vuong's (2019) novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Vuong, as a queer Vietnamese author, presents a narrative of love that diverges from dominant media portrayals, offering an intricate and fluid representation. This paper utilises the theories of queer and BIPOC writers to critique heteronormative and homonormative paradigms, proposing a non-linear, dynamic conception of love.

Examining the distinctions between stagnant, concrete understandings of love and queer interpretations that highlight fluidity, this paper will analyse how Ocean Vuong's (2019) work portrays love within a queer framework and in divergence from heteronormative or homonormative

structures. This analysis will focus on how queer conceptions of love challenge the rigidity of Eurocentric narratives, presenting love as a dynamic phenomenon. Through this analysis, the paper aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about love's potential to transcend societal norms, promoting a deeper understanding of its transformative power. This paper intentionally centres non-romantic expressions of love—such as kinship, care, survival, and self-expression—as forms of queer resistance, rather than relying solely on romantic intimacy to define queerness.

## **Literature Review: Conceptualising Love**

The concept of love, despite its ubiquity in human discourse, remains remarkably elusive in its definition. As hooks (2018, pp. 1-2) notes, love is often treated as a 'great intangible'—widely admired yet rarely agreed upon in meaning. This ambiguity is deepened by the influence of popular media, which tends to promote idealised portrayals of romantic love. For example, Hefner and Wilson (2013) found that 75% of popular romance films reinforce a singular model of love, with 82% depicting 'love conquers all' narratives. Such portrayals obscure the emotional and spiritual complexities that define human intimacy. Social frameworks further entrench these limitations by privileging heteronormative relational models; Thorne et al. (2021) demonstrate that heterosexuality is often the implicit default in cultural prototypes of romantic love. In contrast, Lorde (1978) reframes love through the erotic, describing it as a 'resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane,' foregrounding an internal, liberatory essence that resists reductive categorisation.

In 'Does Sexuality Have a Past?,' Boehringer (2012) explores the ancient Greek and Roman perspectives on sexual needs, which were seen as natural human impulses rather than identity markers. She argues that both love and sexuality are products of their respective social, cultural, and political contexts. This view aligns with Foucault's assertion that '*sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given ... but the name that can be given to a historical construct*' (Foucault, 1978, pp. 105–106). In contrast to the relative simplicity of ancient attitudes, contemporary society has increasingly linked sexual and romantic identity with individual self-definition. This shift reflects broader societal changes influenced by history, culture, and political structures, leading to a unanimous hyper-fixation on sexual identity at the expense of emotional nuance (Boehringer, 2012; Garton, 2004; Foucault, 1978).

Wilchins (2004) examined the historical impact of the ideologies of the Church and State—primarily those of the colonisers onto the colonies (which would constitute most of the world)—particularly its confessional practices, in framing sexuality as a marker of morality. According to Wilchins (2004, p. 49-50), this conflation of sexuality with morality created a system that separated sex from pleasure and framed it as a desire requiring regulation. The Church's emphasis on controlling sexuality was later absorbed by the

state, which extended these narratives to serve its political ends. The state propagated the idea that controlling sexuality was for the 'greater good,' often linking sexual 'deviance' to societal harm, such as public health crises like HIV/AIDS.

The regulatory role of these institutions in defining sexuality and relationships is evident in the concept of heteronormativity, which refers to the idea that being in a heterosexual relationship is the only normal setting and anything beyond it is 'different,' 'deviant, or 'queer' (Harris and White, 2018). Warner (1993, p. xxi) notes that heterosexual culture 'thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association,' positioning queerness as a deviation to be normalised or absorbed into dominant norms. Under this framework, love is typically depicted as occurring between a cisgender man and woman within a monogamous marriage, prioritising reproduction, economic cooperation, and emotional restraint. As Berlant (2000, p. 283-285) argues, heteronormative love often idealises the private, domestic couple form as the site of intimacy and moral citizenship. Similarly, Ahmed (2006, p. 21-22) notes that such love scripts 'orient' individuals toward life paths deemed socially legitimate—marriage, homeownership, and childrearing—by aligning love with national and familial ideals. This format of love also reinforces the patriarchal, traditional, and normative stereotypes of men and women.

Wilchins (2004) notes that this framework extends to queer identities, which were initially rejected outright and later assimilated into the mainstream through the perpetuation of homonormativity. Duggan (2003) coined the term "homonormativity" to refer to the incorporation of queer individuals into heteronormative frameworks, provided they conform to similar societal expectations, such as marriage, child-rearing, and economic productivity (Williams and Dellinger, 2010). While this assimilation offers some degree of acceptance, it does so at the cost of limiting queer identities to a narrowly defined structure. Critics of homonormativity, such as Griffin (2007), Duggan (2003), and Ward and Schneider (2009), argue that it reflects the selfish principles of neoliberalism, prioritising societal stability over genuine inclusivity. These critics highlight how this system enforces a pornographic (Lorde, 1978) mode of existence, where individuals perform identity roles rather than embracing their full emotional and human potential. Lorde highlights that humans, when focusing on anything, either use the erotic or the pornographic—distinguishing the erotic as a deeply felt, empowering force rooted in emotional and spiritual authenticity, in contrast to the pornographic, which she defines as a superficial distortion of true feeling, stripped of depth and connection. The fight for queer acceptance has often prioritised legal and social recognition over the exploration of emotional and erotic depth, leading to a neglect of the richer, more nuanced aspects of human relationships.

Lorde's (1978) framework underscores how societal structures have reduced human relationships to performative acts that lack genuine

emotional resonance. Many other queer BIPOC writers have similarly rejected the assimilationist tendencies of both heteronormativity and homonormativity. Instead, they embrace their ‘deviance’ as a source of strength and creativity, while ‘queering’ our understanding of love and relationships. For instance, Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) concept of the *Coatlicue State* captures the turbulent, non-binary space of identity formation—a psychic state that blends pain, self-rupture, and rebirth—which she links to an emotional and spiritual practice of love that exceeds patriarchal, linear narratives. Love here is not domesticated but visionary and resistant, embedded in survival and self-invention. Similarly, Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989), in *Woman, Native, Other*, critiques the colonial and heteropatriarchal frameworks that silence marginalised voices, and instead advocates for a poetic, nonlinear, and self-reflexive mode of expression. Her writing itself enacts a form of intimate resistance, reclaiming storytelling and emotion as political tools. Both scholars, like Lorde, invoke the erotic—not as sexuality alone, but as an embodied and affective knowledge that refuses binary structures. In doing so, they challenge both heteronormativity’s rigid relational ideals and homonormativity’s pressure to assimilate into them. Many of these writers foreground what Lorde (1978) would call the ‘erotic’ as a way to challenge binary frameworks of identity and reclaim narratives of love, passion, and human connection that exist beyond societal constraints.

In the introduction to her foundational work *All About Love*, hooks (2018, p. 19-20) critiques the lack of substantive discourse on love. She notes that most books on love are written by men and often fail to provide a meaningful definition of the concept. This lack of clarity reflects the broader societal tendency to prioritise performative aspects of relationships over their emotional core. Calling for a more inclusive and holistic understanding of love, hooks offers ways to explore relationships, care, and intimacy that transcend narrow definitions and embraces love’s complexity.

From the literature discussed above, it is evident that there is no singular, universally accepted understanding of ‘love.’ Scholars have critiqued how love has been historically reduced to its ‘pornographic’ or performative dimensions, shaped by the shifting demands of socio-political contexts and dominated by heteronormative and, increasingly, homonormative ideals. Additionally, it is clear that love is not discussed beyond heteronormative or homonormative romantic encounters. In contrast, theorists such as Lorde (1978), Anzaldúa (1987), Minh-ha (1989), and others have foregrounded the ‘erotic’ as a radical, affective force that resists reduction to surface-level performance or normative scripts. Yet, representations of this love, one that transcends normative expectations, are not always recognised as queered versions of love in art—particularly literature and cinema—especially when emerging outside of traditional relational categories. This paper seeks to intervene in that gap by analysing *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong (2019), a queer author of colour whose work resists the binary boundaries of homo/heteronormativity when

it comes to love. Through this analysis, the paper aims to articulate an understanding of love as a passionate force—one that exists beyond assimilationist models and conventional romantic or platonic classifications.

## **Philosophical Analysis of Love as a Fluid Emotion Through Vuong's Experience**

The Greek understanding of love categorises it into three primary forms: ἔρως (eros), which represents passionate romantic love; φιλία (philia), encompassing fondness and loyalties within relationships such as family, friendships, and communities; and αγάπη (agape), denoting divine love extending towards humankind (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2022). For scholars such as Audre Lorde (1978) and bell hooks (2018), these distinctions dissolve within their broader interpretations of love, which transcend traditional boundaries. This synthesis allows for a richer understanding of love's fluid nature, a perspective well-suited for exploring Ocean Vuong's (2019) semi-autobiographical novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. The novel, structured as a letter from a queer Vietnamese-American son, Little Dog, to his mother, intertwines memory, trauma, and desire in a way that blurs the boundaries between erotic and platonic love, echoing Lorde's call for affective depth. As Lippert (2022) observes, Vuong's work reclaims erotic vulnerability as a site of queer agency, while D'Urso (2022) highlights how his syntax itself destabilises narrative linearity, reflecting the fluid nature of emotion and identity central to this analysis.

In 'Uses of the Erotic,' Lorde (1978) reclaims the Greek term eros to describe love as 'the personification of love in all its forms – born of Chaos, and personifying creative harmony and power' (p. 3). This redefinition diverges significantly from the conventional interpretation of eros as merely romantic or sexual passion. Lorde's conception of the erotic encompasses physical, emotional, psychic, and intellectual realms, framing it as an internal drive for excellence and fullness in all endeavours. She notes, '[t]he erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing' (p. 2), or how acutely and fully we love. This holistic understanding is reflected in Vuong's depiction of love not only through scenes of queer intimacy, but also in moments of chosen kinship. When his grandmother's estranged, white partner, Paul, introduces the Little Dog to a neighbour as his grandson, the simple affirmation—"My grandson. This is my grandson"—resonates as a quietly radical act of love untethered to biology or duty (Vuong, 2019, p. 64-65). It embodies the erotic as Lorde defines it: a deeply felt, self-defined bond that emerges not from structure but from emotional clarity and care.

hooks' work defies the stereotypical notions and expectations of love. hooks (2018) defines love as 'the will to extend one's own or another's spiritual growth' (p. 42). As hooks contends, love is frequently misconstrued as mere care or kindness due to formative experiences in childhood, which can skew individuals' understanding of affection and acceptance (p. 30-33). She

critiques these simplistic, often binary views of love, arguing instead for its role as a transformative and radical act. This notion of reimagining love aligns with Vuong's exploration of maternal, romantic, and communal relationships within his novel, challenging normative assumptions about the forms and functions of love.

Vuong (2019) opens his novel with the poignant line, 'let me begin again' (p. 3), signalling a deeply personal narrative that transcends traditional storytelling conventions. Structured as a letter to his (Little Dog's) mother, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* blurs the boundaries between confessional writing and literary fiction. This intimate mode of address becomes an act of love itself, as Vuong bares his vulnerabilities and seeks connection through language. hooks' assertion that love requires 'persistence and hope' (p. 174) resonates here; Vuong's letter serves as a bridge to his mother, fostering mutual understanding and spiritual growth despite the barriers of language and trauma.

The maternal bond, a recurring motif in Vuong's work, exemplifies love's capacity to persist amidst pain and imperfection. Vuong (2019) describes the visceral memory of his mother's abuse, yet he frames this recollection within a broader narrative of Little Dog's empathy and forgiveness. He writes, '[b]ecause I am your son, what I know of work I know equally of loss. And what I know of both I know of your hands...I hate everything that made them that way' (p. 97). This complex interplay of resentment and reverence echoes hooks' concept of 'redemptive love,' which encompasses compassion and a commitment to healing (p. 184). By confronting his mother's humanity, Vuong redefines their relationship through a lens of shared resilience.

Lorde's (1978) emphasis on the erotic as a source of creative and emotional vitality finds a parallel in Vuong's depictions of Little Dog's mother's attempts at self-expression. One particularly evocative scene describes her sudden desire to colour, filling their home with vivid landscapes and unfinished portraits. Vuong reflects, '[y]ou put down the sapphire pencil and stared, dreamlike, at a half-finished garden. "I just go away in it for a while," you said, "but I feel everything. Like I'm still here, in this room"' (p. 6). This act of creation, though seemingly mundane, becomes a profound assertion of identity and presence, embodying Lorde's vision of the erotic as a means of self-actualisation.

Love, as Vuong (2019) portrays it, also extends beyond the living. The novel delves into the concept of phantom love, a connection that persists even in absence. Vuong recounts moments when Little Dog senses the presence of deceased loved ones, describing these experiences with an almost mystical reverence. He recalls his mother's dream of her aborted son, interpreting it as a moment of unspoken understanding and closure (p. 138). Such

instances reflect the enduring nature of love, aligning with hooks' (2018) assertion that love encompasses both remembrance and renewal.

Vuong's (2019) work also critiques the societal constraints that limit expressions of love. He recounts a formative experience in an American church, where Little Dog and his mother felt an uncharacteristic sense of acceptance: 'It was there, inside the song, that you had permission to lose yourself and not be wrong' (p. 59). This moment highlights the potential of communal spaces to foster inclusion and compassion, reinforcing hooks' (2018) conceptualisation of love as a collective and transformative force (p. 71).

Ultimately, Vuong's (2019) narrative embodies a radical reimagining of love, which resonates with the insights of Lorde (1978) and hooks (2018). By rejecting binary and hierarchical frameworks, Vuong presents love as a multifaceted and universal experience, encompassing the physical, emotional, spiritual, and metaphysical. His novel challenges readers to reconsider their own understandings of love, urging them to embrace its complexities and contradictions. In doing so, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* not only contributes to contemporary literary discourse but also offers a powerful testament to the enduring human capacity for connection and growth.

### **Physical Manifestations of Love: Queered Understanding**

Understanding love beyond the confines of heteronormativity necessitates reimagining its physical manifestations, stripped of the boundaries imposed by dominant cultural narratives. Media portrayals, whether in films or literature, often reduce love to a pursuit, a chase (Donoughue, 2021), or a sacrificial act, perpetuating the trope of pain-laden relationships (Blair, 2016). This is evident in depictions of romantic conquests or parental sacrifices, where love is seen as inseparable from self-denial or duty (Blair, 2016; de Munck and Kronenfeld, 2016; Illouz, 2012). Such narratives confine love within transactional frameworks, neglecting the possibilities of a love that thrives on mutual growth and spiritual fulfilment. Critiquing this consumerist framework, hooks (2018) suggests that a culture steeped in individualism leaves little room for love's expansive nature (p. 108).

Ocean Vuong's (2019) *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* offers a counter-narrative to such individualistic and heteronormative discourse, presenting love in its myriad forms, untethered from traditional expectations. Vuong's portrayal of love acknowledges its transformative power, transcending societal recognition or definitions. One poignant example is Paul, the white man who marries Little Dog's grandmother, Lan. Paul's love for Lan's daughter and Little Dog himself defies biological and societal definitions of family. When Paul challenges a neighbour's slur against Little Dog, declaring, 'this is my grandson,' this affirmation of love is deeply impactful

for the young narrator (p. 64). Here, love becomes an act of claiming, a declaration that love exists beyond normative blood-ties.

Yet even love's boundlessness cannot always overcome societal conditioning. Little Dog's relationship with Trevor—his first love and lover who came about in his life during their adolescence—exemplifies this tension (Vuong, 2019). Their sexual intimacy, diverging from heteronormative and homonormative expectations, embodies Lorde's (1978) concept of the erotic as an empowering force, unshackled from 'pornographic' expectations. However, Trevor's internalised insecurities—shaped by a society steeped in rigid gender norms—fracture their connection:

I had thought sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong. The rules, they were already inside us. (Vuong, 2019, p. 120).

This illustrates the insidiousness of societal norms that infiltrate even private moments, undermining love's transformative potential.

Vuong's (2019) exploration of love also aligns with hooks' (2018) depiction of love as divine and omnipresent, a unifying force that transcends material boundaries (p. 72). This divinity manifests in acts of self-love, resistance, and care. Vuong traces this legacy of love through Little Dog's grandmother Lan, who rejects an abusive marriage and reclaims her identity by renaming herself 'Lan,' after an orchid (p. 39). This act of self-naming signifies a reclamation of agency and a refusal to accept societal rejection. Similarly, Lan's daughter, Rose, embraces small joys like colouring at the age of forty-six, defying expectations of age-appropriate behaviour. These acts of self-kindness demonstrate love's resilience, even in oppressive circumstances.

This resilience extends to familial relationships, where love motivates acts of protection and sacrifice. Little Dog becomes his mother's interpreter, navigating language barriers and societal hostility on her behalf:

I code-switched. I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours. (Vuong, 2019, p. 32).

Little Dog's mother reciprocates this love by seeking ways to shield him from racial prejudice, and Little Dog, despite his knowledge that the act would protect him no more than a feather against a sword, complies, demonstrating how love flows in all directions, refusing to be confined to singular roles or identities:

Each morning...we'd repeat this ritual: the milk poured with a thick white braid, I'd drink it down...both of us hoping the whiteness

vanishing into me would make more of a yellow boy. (Vuong, 2019, p. 27).

Building on hooks' (2018) notion of love as healing and Lorde's (1978) celebration of passion, Vuong's (2019) narrative underscores love's power to defy societal constraints. This defiance is also reflected in love's transcendence beyond life itself. Whether it is the care shown in bathing and clothing the dead or the messages left for the departed, love asserts itself as an enduring force (p. 166; 198).

Vuong's work challenges the reductive understanding of love as something bound by societal or physical limits. By exploring love through this queered understanding, he reveals its profound fluidity and transformative power, affirming that love cannot—and should not—be confined to definitions that restrict its boundless potential. Instead, love, in all its manifestations, serves as a testament to human resilience, connection, and hope.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued for a broader, queered understanding of love—one that resists both heteronormative and homonormative frameworks, and refuses to centre romantic or sexual relationships as the primary expression of intimacy. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and other BIPOC authors, it has shown how love, when viewed through the lens of queer BIPOC experience, emerges as a fluid, multi-dimensional force rooted in survival, care, and emotional truth.

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) offers a compelling narrative that exemplifies this expansive vision: love is not solely found in the romantic storyline with Trevor, but in the quiet grief of intergenerational trauma, in the care between mother and son, and in the poetic language that makes that love legible. Vuong's work affirms that love can exist in fragments, in silences, in pain, and in non-linear gestures of care—what hooks (2018) calls 'love'. This kind of love, when done in an absolutely unapologetic manner that benefits not just the beloved but the lover as well, becomes a powerful exchange, termed by Lorde (1978) as the erotic. This paper positions queer love not as a rejection of heterosexuality, but as an orientation towards feeling that transcends the transactional, the performative, and the narrowly legible. It is not who we love, but how we love that queers the frame.

However, more work remains to be done in exploring how such queered expressions of love operate outside of literary texts. While Vuong offers a powerful fictionalised meditation on intimacy, further study is needed on how these non-normative forms of love manifest across cultural, geographical, and political contexts—especially in the lives and practices of queer people of colour whose experiences remain underrepresented. Such

work can continue to challenge dominant relational scripts and expand the vocabulary of love to reflect its radical and deeply human potential.

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