CORPOREAL LANGUAGE:
THE MATERIAL EMBODIMENT OF LINGUISTIC LIMINALITY

By

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This thesis explores how language and materiality encounter each other, shaping the world and how we conceive of it. Language has historically been developed for colonial and imperial purposes, so it inherently excludes people of color, women and queer people as meaning-making subjects. Language in its normative capacity, is also not equipped to reify the complex and dynamic material and social realities of these subjects. However, at the hands of these subjectivities, language as a fundamental mode of production of knowledge, is challenged; its codes and conventions are rewritten, and its semantic and linguistic rationale is disrupted as a strategic and intentional maneuver at dismantling hegemonic power structures. The exploration of moments of rupture, dissonance and disconnect where the material and the linguistic does not coincide, allow for relational, partial, contradictory and discontinuous affectivity and act as sites of generation that produces agential identity formation for these subjectivities. This unsettles the coherent, continuous and unitary conditions of the Western Liberal Human/Self, giving rise to the
possibilities of alternative modes of production of knowledge and epistemologies, that work to create new non-identitarian, non-unitary reconfigurations of be-ing human. The project sets up a theoretical framework in the first chapter that guides the critical analysis of the two primary texts chosen for the research. The second chapter focuses on Ocean Vuong’s novel *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous*, exploring the untranslatability between physical embodiment and linguistic representation. The third chapter is based on Arundhuti Roy’s novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, analyzing how the queering of literary language can render non-heteronormative bodies visible and portray the vibrant performance of their gender expression. Both of these works signify transformative sites of meaning-making, where newer ways of conceiving, configuring and embodying otherized subjectivities can be discovered.
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Dedication

For Ma,
To whom I do not have to translate myself
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon wonders, “It has always baffled me why those most interested in understanding and changing the barbaric domination that characterizes our modernity often—not always— withhold from the very people they are most concerned with the right to complex personhood” (4). I very much share Gordon’s bafflement, and it’s a question that has directed much of my own work, both critical and creative, though I have never been able to put it quite as succinctly as she does in the quote above. Perhaps a more pertinent question would be, how do we give these people the right to determine their complex personhood, or whether that is even possible in a constructivist world built on the shoulders of hegemonic power structures. And whether any production of knowledge under these conditions will simply be a reproduction of the same expression of power, and thus is an inescapable reality. Putting these questions in conjunction with Weheliye’s saying, “What different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?” (3). What he suggests is not simply a change in perspective or even methodology, he is asking us to question the very basis of our postmodern constructivist world, raising questions such as, *Who is considered as human, What does it take to be human* and *What does it mean to be human*. These inquiries are what guides what I hope to explore in this work. To bring the people who have been excluded from sphere of the liberal humanist subject, through elimination, subjugation, oppression, disqualification, into the position of knowledge production and meaning making is a daunting task. One which demands
not only a change in perspective, but an overhaul of the very foundation of normativity that we have come to associate with what qualifies as a ‘Human’.

Sylvia Wynter’s work on giving humanness a different future, stems from her concerns “about the ways in which the figure of the human is tied to epistemological histories that presently value a genre of the human that reifies Western bourgeois tenets” (McKittrick 9). What remains then are what Rosi Braidotti calls, “missing people” (Braidotti 114), which is all of the world’s populations who have been systematically and epistemologically marginalized. In making the colonized, commodified, gendered, racialized, disabled population the subjects of my work, I will have the opportunity to analyze the grounded implications of the ways in which linguistic power operates today in such lived realities, and how its discursive nature is embedded in the social and physical reality of these people and how they are materialized within these spheres. In our postmodern world, the language/reality model constitutes what we now understand to be social constructions, ideas such as gender, race, sexuality and nature, all of which guide and formulate the socio-political life we live as the citizens of a ‘globalized’ world today. Since language is both the medium and method of constructing the language/reality model, hence it emerges as perhaps a significant system through which power relations are manifested and reveals itself in the social reality of the world today. It is able to contain the inherent contradictoriness of language as both a colonial and imperial apparatus historically used in the marginalization of dehumanized subjects but has also emerged as the inevitable way towards reifying a liberatory and non-identitarian future that is being re-envisioned for these subjects now. The ethics of imagination as a political tool is a way to collectively share and constitute affinities and solidarities.
Because this process always leans towards what’s possible, and into the generative momentum of active ‘becoming’, it rests its meaning-making abilities on relational and affective contingencies. This is an embodiment of thinking that acknowledges decolonial present and prepares for a postcolonial future.

So most, if not all poststructuralist theory that governs our epistemological foundation in life today: Feminist Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Queer Theory, all have emerged out of the attempts to decolonize epistemology that is centered around the figure of the liberal humanist. This idea of the human is neither universal nor neutral (Braidotti 64), and is always exclusionary, working to create socio-structural differentiations among the human population and it is able to foreground itself as the normative category with defined privileges and entitlements. They inevitably find themselves in masterful entanglements with the very methodology and system of language, that has supported the conception of theories they are working to deconstruct in the first place. In this exhaustive and stagnant space that postmodern epistemology finds itself, the discursive mode of thought and the linguistic production of reality, becomes implicated in its own power structures. And Wynter iterates that our postcolonial present has been “epistemologically co-opted and globally reincorporated into the western world system—a system that is now in its postcolonial, postapartheid but still liberal (or now neoliberal) monohumanist symbolically encoded configuration” (McKittrick 11). And as the notion of this ‘human’ becomes embedded in ideas and practices that inform much of the world, what increasingly becomes glaring to me, is the space occupied by all that do not fit into the scope of this notion: the dehumanized others/subjects.
The definition of the western liberal humanist subject is linguistic at its foundations, and highlights the imperative influence of discursive power in the creation of the postmodern social constructivist reality that we now live in. To untangle the interconnectedness of power and language, we would have to explore the exercise of control one has over the other and vice versa. Particularly in the postcolonial future that we currently inhabit, and many of the decolonizing efforts that we encounter led by anticolonial thinkers, “in turn advocated practices of mastery— corporeal, linguistic, and intellectual— toward their own liberation” (Singh 2). So, in the countermeasure of postcolonial movements across the world, the actions and practices were geared towards fighting the various forms of colonial power, in the hopes of creating decolonized subjectivities. But these very processes are intertwined in their attempt at creating a form of manifesting power relations that would be able to contend with the colonial one. Here, I turn to Julietta Singh’s work in *Unthinking Mastery* to help me think through humanist exclusion because her work offers a way of approaching this question as an opening onto a decolonial present:

“I argue that this discourse of anticolonialism, which was geared toward the future, did not interrogate thoroughly enough its own masterful engagements. It did not dwell enough, in other words, on how its complex entanglements with mastery would come to resonate in the postcolonial future it so passionately anticipated. Precisely because mastery served as a motive for revolutionary action and as an antidote for colonial domination, it is a vital site from which to analyze the work of mastery in “globalized” life today.” (Singh 3).

She proposes an epistemological shift, one that is cognizant of its foundation in colonial, imperial, Euro-centric, masculine ideology, and in doing so can critically examine the very nature of its constituents, its methodology and its subsequent constructions. This is an inconclusive practice, one that does not really seek to provide
any resolution to the questions it raises, or the ruptures that it unveils. It attempts to trace just how far the effect of mastery resonates in today’s world. The major directive of decolonization movements was to render subjectivities that were dehumanized under colonial mastery into a subject that was coincidentally modeled more along the boundaries of what we recognize to be the figure of the liberal human. It is turn of events such of these that makes the reaches of mastery apparent. In this way, not only are producing knowledge that are masterful iterations, but subjectivities and bodies as well that are forced to conform to the binding, restrictive model of a ‘Human’.

In this paper I grapple specifically with the limitations of language, as a system, that becomes glaringly obvious in a postmodern, constructivist world, and its ability to be both a source and a mode of meaning making for these subjects. Language has been a particularly pressing question within the postcolonial themes of the subject. Thus it brings into conversation, the racist, colonial, imperial, and sexist foundations of such a system, especially one that has been the instrumental in the creation and maintenance of Western liberalism since its inception. Language is nonetheless, always entangled, with the lived realities it is burdened with communicating. It’s manyfold existence and affectability make it difficult to extricate its connections with the other aspects of our reality, both dialectical and material, and critically analyze them. With discourse being a masterful technique, materiality has the potential as a dehumanist process, which allows for the deconstruction of the western liberal humanist image and encourages the reimagining/reconstruction of a new modality that account for knowledge production and meaning-making that is informed by the lived experience, one that is relational by nature.
This will furthermore compound the cognitive and political importance of imagination as a non-exclusionary resource that is shared among all human subjects.

As I often find myself returning to Spivak’s baffling and frustrating conclusion in *Can The Subaltern Speak?* where she questions whether the subjects she classifies as *subaltern* can speak, or that they can only be spoken for, about and around, becoming objects of study (Spivak, 1988). In modulating the rhetoric surrounding ‘speak’, I want to draw attention to ‘language’ as a form of mastery that needs be accessed and exercised to be able to render visible the social reality that these subjects have experienced. Extending Spivak’s claim, what is evident is that these dehumanized subjects will not have to capacity to speak the ‘language’ that humanized subjects can hear and understand. And if they are able to, then it implies that they have stepped out of the space formed through exclusionary construction of liberal humanism and has begun to model their social reality onto the boundaries of the Euro-centric liberal man. This is a familiar process where western defined and directed education has been used as a colonial and imperial apparatus to negotiate through exertion of domination the conformity of its subjects. So with the understanding that any subject occupying the space of ‘dehumanized other’ will never be speak in a manner and through a language which will be able to accurately embody their own individual social reality, we come to same standstill that Spivak arrives at.

But perhaps we are asking the wrong question. What draws me about the use of ‘speak’ is the absolute embedded and embodied materiality of this action. So, what happens when we reach the exhaustive liminality of the very medium (language, in this case) which we depend on to construct and communicate our reality? Stacey Alaimo and
Susan Hekman in *Material Feminism*, discusses the idea of ‘new settlement’ which is “a new way of understanding the relationship between discourse and matter that does not privilege the former to the exclusion of the latter” (Alaimo and Hekman 6). This process acknowledges the fact that these parallel existing realities can be brought to a converging, simultaneous insight. The tangible implication of this confront the dilemma of practice and principle, particularly an ethical one. Alaimo and Hekman supports the praxis, as it does “not seek to extend themselves and over material realities, but instead emerge from them, taking into account multiple material consequences” (Alaimo and Hekman 8).

Ethical practice is always informed by ethical principle; however principle alone does not ensure that it will be manifested in practice. This then is a question of comparing an ontological approach to an epistemological one. This ensures ubiquitous access that every subject regardless of its position in the humanized/dehumanized binary can have on the experience of their own materiality, and the ability to reify their own social reality. And it is this understanding that access to language, does not in anyway impend the embodied experience of speaking, it simply limits who is able to hear, recognize and understand it. And this grounds us in the embodied reality of liberal human subjects, for whom these others have always been objects of study, and who are now confronted with the possibility that they might not be able to process what these ‘others’ are speaking, where the experience is foregrounded on the lived experience of speaking and hearing, instead of the system of communication that renders these experiences visible. It is this leveling of the field, where we bring back a parameter of comparison that is not exclusionary but is just simply distinct depending upon its embodiment. What the focus on materiality brings to this conversation is the potential of forming partial and contradictory, yet
affective relations that can represent the social realities of both of these types of subjectivities without the bias of a system that stems from discriminatory, ideological foregrounding.

Human corporeality then exemplifies how the discursive and the material work to constitute the body, and that the discursive has material consequences, and hence will require ethical responses. Though matter does not have to be rendered meaningful by thought, Claire Colebrook argues for the materiality of language, which is when language “resists relations and vibrate in itself” (Colebrook, “On Not Becoming Man: The Materialist Politics of Unactualized Potential” 59). Because this experience of language can not be returned to the domain of the ‘Man’ and its reproductions, it reveals the political potential of materialism as a way to understand how “bodily life has unfolded historically to produce certain relations, and acknowledge that freedom from that requires recognition of our materiality” (Colebrook, “On Not Becoming Man: The Materialist Politics of Unactualized Potential” 63). That ‘matter’ exerts its tangibility through the relations it inhabits. So to render the full scope of a material existence, Colebrook argues: “Bodies matter not because they cause our being but because the living of them as material as the very nature that is our own – is made possible only through regarding ourselves as subjects, as beings who have some recognizable, repeatable, and accountable identity.” (Colebrook, “On Not Becoming Man: The Materialist Politics of Unactualized Potential” 68). So both the body and the language, then contains within itself an inherent vibrancy that isn’t essential to its nature, but rather is one which comes to life in its exertion of agency and its relational be-ing.
Christopher Breu expands upon this notion further in his book, *Insistence of the Material*, of what he labels as the ‘materiality of language’, where he says “in order for us to fully attend to the materialities of our bodies, we need to insist on the ways in which the materiality of language (as well as the forms of subjectivity shaped by language) and the materiality of the body not only interpenetrate and merge but also remain importantly distinct and sometimes form in contradiction to each other” (Christopher Breu 9). So, language allows not only for the method of manifesting multiplicities but also a system inherently inhabited by pluralities. Breu’s analysis shows that “both language and bodies are material and have material effects that are interpenetrating and divergent. While the linguistic turn emphasized how language and discourse crucially shape our conceptualization of materiality, new materialisms have sought instead to attune to how materiality affects discourse, and how there are material relations that exceed what we can capture through language” (Singh 20). This attention to language as power observes a shift in anticolonial method in decolonial scholarship. In her 2017 book, *Unthinking Mastery*, Julietta Singh mediates on this work as ‘mastery’ and attempts to ‘unfold’ a meaning of mastery, an approach that resists offering a definition and thus reproducing an act of masterful. Perhaps mastery is more suited to be understood, not by what it is, but through what it produces: a power imbalance that creates, among other effects, the dehumanized subjects (Braidotti’s “missing people”) which serves as the central focus of this paper. Singh proposes that critically examining mastery will open the vibrant possibilities of decolonization. It is this reconfiguration of the relationship between language and material reality that is crucial in the dehumanist and decolonial process that Singh outlines because it embodies the very partial, affective relationship and its
generative potential that it is now also equipped to represent. This in turn purports a form of language that remains susceptible to change, revision and conversation, and continues a developing an alterity being cognizant of its very own shortcomings.

Colebrook takes an approach to this, from a poststructuralist perspective, saying “to refer to the materiality of the signifier – is both to locate all relations and productions beyond the myth of self-present mind and to define matter as a process of relations, as that which unfolds from itself to produce its own ‘before’ and ‘after’” (Colebrook, “On Not Becoming Man: The Materialist Politics of Unactualized Potential” 68). This shows that the performativity and distinction of bodily life is not located within the constraint of the liberal human subjectivity as we have usually associated it with, but rather in the dynamic and interactive life that the subjectivity is embodying. What language and literature is able to do is allow that embedded corporeality to stand alone and narrate. As Sylvia Wynter reminds us that “our capacity to produce narrative as physiological beings allow us to critically re-envision our futures in new and provocative ways” (McKittrick 4). Haraway in her hugely influential 1985 article “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980’s,” said “Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction” (Haraway 191). In binding social and lived reality within the potential of the fictive, she tries to hold fiction and fact together in a new motif (Haraway 203). This connection between fact and fiction is also crucial in Avery Gordon’s argument in Ghostly Matters, because literature is allowed to not always be restrained by the norms of disciplinary subjects and can “often teach us, through imaginative design, what we need to know but cannot quite get access to with our given rules of method and modes of apprehension” (25). This
acknowledgement of our epistemological limitations is really the first step considering alternative methods of knowledge production.

The text as a literary product then becomes a space for active interpretation where both the reader and the act of reading can give form to what lies beyond actuality and goes to the core of its conception. Text is then a signifier, a “mark or trace through which communicative and lived relations are organized; the aim of reading is actualization – to take the matter of the text and unfold all its potentialities” (Hekman 77). Text operates in very much the same way that bodies do, and thence ties all the constituents of this assemblage: the lived reality, the social reality, the human body, the text, the narrative, and even the reader and the act of reading, in a relational capacity where the material is redefined in discursive terms and the dialectical is lived out in the corporeal existence of subjects and can be understood by the application of the linguistic paradigm. This ensures that no one mode of knowledge production is valued over the other. This is Hekman, as many of the other New Materialists referred to in this work, are insistent on a new system that is able to bring these two divergent modes of thought into conversation with each other. Her focus is on Ontology theories because they “are about matter; unlike epistemological theories, they can not ‘lose’ the real – it is their subject matter.” (Hekman 98) and thus allow the linguistic system to reify the ontological but not “constitute it”. So the relational dynamism between the material and the discursive is much more complex and often arbitrary than simply one being the source of the other. Thus narrative or literature is allowed to explore the multitudes of this dynamism and push at the boundaries of what is possible for both material existence and language as a system.
To delve further into this relationality within the texts I will be analyzing in the following chapters, I turn to what Singh has outlined as the method of ‘dehumanism’: “a practice of recuperation, of stripping away the violent foundations (always structural and ideological) of colonial and neocolonial mastery that continue to render some beings more human than others. Dehumanism requires not an easy repudiation and renunciation of dehumanization but a form of radical dwelling in and with dehumanization through the narrative excesses and insufficiencies of the “good” human— a cohabitation that acts on and through us in order to other forms of political allegiance” (Singh 4). It highlights ‘mastery’ as the dominant, constructivist measure to define what is 'Human'. This view of ‘Human’ as a malleable term, designed and defined through the reproduction of mastery, is a testimony to the interweaving of mastery within the foundations of many systemic structures that construct our lives and realities. However, what dehumanist approach entitles is a methodological shift that allows for arriving at partial, relational and contradictory conclusions, and consider them to be just as valuable sources of meaning-making, as a constructivist orientation would have. It is the focus on ‘radical dwelling’ where as dehumanist practitioners we need to become accustomed to the discomfort and account this space as where unforeseen, or what Braidotti calls “to think the unthinkable” to take place. I am even more drawn to Singh’s idea of ‘narrative excess and inadequacies’, which not only implies the limitations of the social constructivist interpretation but acknowledge ‘narrative’ as a primary source and method of uncovering these conclusions, and that these are also exactly the spaces where we need to ‘radically dwell’ if we hope to arrive at the affective relationalities that would signify a turn away from the dialectical and move towards a more grounded, representational source of
knowledge production. As Coole and Frost concludes, “the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy” (Coole and Frost 6). This ‘queer dispossession’ of dehumanized subjects demands new ways of inhabiting for themselves, which acts on overturning negativity to achieve “freedom through the understanding of the conditions that make us unfree, that is to say through the awareness of our limits, of our oppression.” (Braidotti 125).

In the discussion of generative spaces, Singh identifies an aspect that is crucial to the exercise of mastery, which is ‘splitting’. Without delving into the ontological history that she provides of the production of ‘master-slave’ coalition, I return to the original idea of understanding what mastery is through another approach asking how does it manifest in the world? Mastery strives for “indiscriminate and relentless control over something”, desires the “full submission of any object”. So, if mastery reifies the process of submission, then it finds itself with the binary production of the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of a process. But since we have already denounced a binary system that can account for an over encompassing effect as that of mastery, we turn to the process itself, and the understanding that the process enables a ‘splitting’. “Mastery”, Singh writes, “requires a rupturing of the object being mastered, because to be mastered means to be weakened to a point of fracture. Mastery is in this sense a splitting of the object that is mastered from itself, a way of estranging the mastered object from its previous state of being” (10). When mastery causes the disruption of the unitary conception of ‘self’ through subjegation, the ‘fracture’ appears on a multitude of levels, including the dialectical, the
social and the physical, reproducing the disassociation among all of these layers so that the subsequent objects (or the subjects of our inquiry) have been mastered in all the ways it counts. The spatial and temporal representation of such a ‘self’ causes a definitive agential transformation for their subjectivities. This grounded affect of the discursive ways in which power operates is essential to the negotiation of liminality across many boundaries. And perhaps the one we are most concerned with for this paper, is the fracture of a self contained within a bodily existence, and the linguistic capacity to accommodate the full scope of this reality and render it visible, comprehensible and a potent source of meaning-making. This is crucial to understanding the masterful entanglements that we find ourselves and our world in, the inexplicability that wrongly implies that it is a natural, inevitable process of adaptable and integration instead of an intentional and systemic method of domination.

The split creates a gap, a space for imbalance which demonstrates the possibilities of the dehumanization method. All dehumanized subjects (racialized, gendered, colonized, sexualized, indigenous) experience this rupture, and the bodies of these subjects carry the histories of their oppressions by acknowledging the very physical ways in which they are not free in relation to the world around them (Ahmed 139). This self-reflexivity is essential to the expression and performance of what Alexander Weheliye calls the different “modalities of the human” (Weheliye 8). It is an active being and becoming that bridges the dissonance between the imagined fantasy of human agency and the lived reality of corporeality caught within the web of masterful conditioning. To resist such conditioning and reclaim the way of life that have been lived and will be lived by those who have been subjected to masterful forces, awareness of their own inheritance, so
that the subjectivities produced will approach these complications with a critical, and self-facing perspective. Diana Fuss positions identification within a particularly colonial history, explaining that identification “is itself an imperial process, a form of violent appropriation in which the Other is deposed and assimilated into the lordly domain of Self. Through a psychical process of colonization, the imperial subject builds an Empire of the Same and installs at its center a tyrannical dictator.” (Fuss 141). So, even identitarian model of modern political thought that has been instrumental in the creation of otherized subjectivities will continue to exercise the influence of mastery because of its imperial foundations, even if it has been in contemporary times remodeled to suit the purpose of folding the dehumanized subjects into the domain of the liberal human.

Positioning her work as a resistance to this model, Rosi Braidotti asks us to consider the multi-dimensional and differential nature of the collective ‘we’. She defines subjectivity as “a structural relational capacity, coupled with the specific degree of force or power that any one entity is endowed with: their ability to extend towards and in proximity with others” (Braidotti 36). This reaching or becoming allows a constant negotiation, redefining and redrawing of the parameters that foreclose our subjectivities, one that is cognizant of their own materiality, their position in this world, and their relation with everyone and everything inhabiting this shared space but never one at the expense of the others. And when these subjectivities are tasked with producing adequate understandings and expressions of alternative knowledge, they turn the painful experience of ruptures and dissonances into generative relational encounters and knowledge production. For resistance and independence comes from the cognitive examination of our defining experiences. It is a way of extracting knowledge and
activism from traumatic events, and a way to claim agency and action over their own pain and hardships and allow that to become some more, something with the potential for generative change. This is what Braidotti coins as “affirmative ethics” which collectively can transform these moments into spaces for exploration of alternative ways of living. She elaborates, “Affirmative ethics is a clinical practice about detoxing from the poison of un-freedom, servitude and betrayal of our inner nature as dynamic entities of desire. The ethical good is accordingly equated with radical relationality aiming at affirmative empowerment. The ethical ideal is to increase one’s ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others and to create a community that actualizes this ethical propensity” (Braidotti 121–23). Based on the ethical inscription of Braidotti’s argument, the collective ‘we’ is held accountable for their capacity to understand and enact our individual performance of being ‘human’. Because the methodology of affirmative ethics frees subjects from the confines of a prescribed existence, it rather insists on an interpretation that defies definition and celebrates connections. So, it is imperative that subjects and their actions are geared towards a proliferating stage of worldly consciousness that is aware of its past but also hopeful of its future.

In the second chapter of this project, I focus on Ocean Vuong’s On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous, where the writer-narrator explores the ways in which his physical reality is intertwined with the linguistic realm and how the full breadth of his lived reality and his ability to render it is determined by the negotiation of power between them. I analyze how Vuong constructs the affective connections between these two domains and uses moments of dissonance and rupture where the material and the discursive do not coincide, where one is unable to be translated into the codes and structure of the other, as
generative sites of meaning-making. By establishing discontinuous, inconsistent and incoherent relationalities as significant for creating newer spaces of belonging and reconfiguring the pre-existing definition of the human. The third chapter of the project examines the portrayal of queer bodies in Arundhuti Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The essay argues for how Roy uses alternative modalities of linguistic and semantic meaning-making as a process to establish agency of self-determination and self-articulation for queer/non-heteronormative bodies. The conventional codes of language as the primary mode of making a physical and lived reality legible, visible and comprehensible, are deconstructed. The limits of this system are stretched and redefined to accommodate the presence and articulation of bodies and lives that refuse to be reduced despite the inadequacies of the linguistic paradigm in translating them.
Ocean Vuong’s debut novel *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) is a genre defying piece of work, mixing the traditional elements of a migrant/diasporic literature, fashioned in an epistolary novel, with Vuong themselves in the narrator-protagonist role placing it within the literary parameters of autofiction. The text’s adherence to such liminal positions indicates a conscious representation of what Mignolo defines as “critical border thinking” which “is the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside; and as such, it is always a decolonial project” (206). This threshold location is able to render an agential narrative for Vuong replete with both the benefit and loss pertaining to this position. The text’s categorical liminality is just one expression of Vuong’s own marginality: national, linguistic, sexual. The language of the writing aims to render this position legible and performs the metaficitonal act of not only presenting to a primarily urban, educated, anglophone audience, but also to his biracial, illiterate mother Rose. The novel is a collection of letters addressed to her is an effort to reach out, to relate, to express the narrator’s lived reality throughout his whole life. And coincidentally enough, the novel begins with a moment that recognizes this entire project as a communication failure:

“Let me begin again.
Dear Ma,
I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are. (3)”
This task to express, to translate himself and his life, is one where both the author and the text itself are aware of their own futility. What he achieves in this novel is the generative potential of moments of failure, within which he explores and create meaning despite this failure. These spaces are unbound by the conventional boundaries of language and semantics because it acknowledges its own limits and inadequacies and proceeds to unravel connections that embody dissonance and rupture.

Avery Gordon encapsulates the idea of such productive positionality in: “What is challenging is to take up the historical, theoretical, and methodological challenges of our own changing cultural landscape and to grapple with issues related to the narrative structuring, fictive composition, and historical provisionality of claims to true knowledge” (Gordon and Radway 37). This concern of translating the material world, with its hegemonic power structures, into a linguistic form that conforms to the embodied reality it is portraying, is a means to enact change and model new forms of belonging in this world. Language is a colonial and imperial apparatus, so to use it as the primary mode of production of knowledge comes with acknowledging hegemonic power structures and the ways in which language is intertwined with them and the ways in which power-language regimes influence such reality, both material and discursive. In Foucault’s discussion of power/knowledge, he unravels this perpetual cycle of reproduction where power is constituted through normative perceptions of knowledge and truth, but also how these regimes of power permeate individual modes of behavior and their will to knowledge (Foucault 11). Since language is foundational to the constructivist world-building we have in our postmodern and postcolonial society, the reconfiguration, refamiliarization of dominant conventions and codes of language, has the
potential to induce an epistemological shift in the perception and the representation of the Western liberal subject. This will allow the excluded and the invisible subjects to claim agential portrayal and self-expression of themselves and reconfigure inclusive and creative definitions of human and its practice of be-ing. What is essential is to always foreground these narratives in the embedded and embodied experience of these people. That is in building upon the contingent and affective affinities between language and materiality, the materiality of language, as well as the language of materiality in situated realities.

When Vuong is not able to forge a linguistic connection, he foregrounds communication in a material relation, he says, “I am writing you from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son.”(10). He draws on an association that precedes a discursive one, which is the corporeally intimate connection between that of a mother and a son. By doing so, he ties the material and linguistic in a complex network of affectability. No longer is one simply a subsequent conclusion deduced from the another, usually the physical being represented in the dialectical, but rather is one that bleeds across the meta-physical and fictional layers of this relationship. Vuong’s attempt to reify his lived reality in the letters to his mother, is saturated with the potential of forging affective connections, where the materiality of his life corresponds to that of the novel and its use of language. Writing in this novel is not simply a means of expression, but also as a medium of embodiment, establishing the craft and the text as a site of malleability and appropriation. Vuong confesses, “I never wanted to build a ‘body of work,’ but to preserve these, our bodies, breathing and unaccounted for, inside the work.” (175). Here, Vuong explicitly comments on the linguistic and material in an affirming,
ethical stance. The language seeks proximity to the world it is trying to render, and the
physical space is being constructed and comprehended through the discursive. Thus, in
the sentence above, and in the novel at large, these two alignments are given a space to
converge. What emerges out of this are new, unforeseen, partial and relative ways of
understanding, and being understood in the world. The novel seeks to inhabit a
transcultural, globalized world in ways that it allows for the visibility and representation
of both its own bodily expression, as well as that of the author.

This chapter argues that the affective relation between the material and the
linguistic is the foundational framework for this novel, which enables sites of disruption
and dissonance to become generative spaces for creative methods of connection and
communication. This relation allows Vuong to indulge in crossing the borders of
seemingly fixed entities of nationality, sexuality, and linguistic identities and explore
what this positionality is in relation to the world he lives in, and the medium through
which he understands it. The acute sense of untranslatability, that makes the novel
comparable to what Avery Gordon defines as ‘haunting’ in her work in *Ghostly Matters*.
She says:

“To be haunted and to write from that location, to take on the condition of what
you study, is not a methodology or a consciousness you can simply adopt or adapt
as a set of rules or an identity; it produces its own insights and blindness.
Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions
the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where
only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It
is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair
representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under
which a memory was produced in the first place, towards a countermemory, for
the future.” (22).

Vuong places himself right from the beginning in a position that is aware of the
conditions of its ‘haunting’. In taking on the dual role of the writer-narrator, he traces his
situated reality, for the writer that reality would be the lived experience, and for the narrator it would be the linguistic scape of his writing. And while these two domains are tied in an affective relationship, they bear the burdens of their own restraint and shortcomings. To agree to be haunted is choosing to persevere, to engage with these sites of rupture and dissonance, and allowing them to aggravate the established modes of self-articulation and representation, destabilizing their relation to their social reality. And perhaps the most important of her claims is the production of this ‘countermemory,’ a reimagination that is informed by all the provisions of social reality and material functionality. It is in creating knowledge that survives and thrives beyond the confines of these two domains. It is a process that is inherently marked with failure, with “notions of blurred boundaries, crossed loyalties, and unrooted languages” (Yildiz 8).

Some of the most striking parts of Vuong’s novel are where the author is directly addressing his mother and describing his relationship to language and writing. He shares that he was “once foolish enough to believe knowledge would clarify, but some things are so gauzed behind layers of syntax and semantics” (62). Revealing not only the limitations of language, but its systemic and exclusionary trappings, he unsettles the very basis of his craft, highlighting the inevitable disconnect between language and reality that emerges in a writing practice. The narrator for whom, writing is the primary method of meaning-making in the world, recognizes the dissonance of not being able to translate himself to his mother. He says, “I envy words for doing what we can never do – how they can tell all of themselves simply by standing still, simply by being…every cell, radiates a clear, singular meaning, not so a writer as a word pressed down beside you.” (Vuong 171). Vuong’s worldly presence isn’t irrefutable either; it is just as susceptible to change
as his writing. “While other days I feel more like a sound”, Vuong writes, “I touch the world not as myself but as an echo of who I was. Can you hear me yet? Can you read me?” (62). The narrator blurs the boundaries of these two domains and expressed a form of articulation and emerges from one domain to reach the conclusion in another. Despite not finding this resolution, a structure of relationality is established where new methods of meaning making can be discovered. When the narrator asks if he can be “heard” or ‘read’, his desire to be legible manifests in both the linguistic and material world, so in bringing together contradictory expressions, he is able to fully encapsulate this want. This implies a fascinating dichotomy in Vuong’s writing, where his language has a materiality that is inscrutable, but his own bodily manifestation can never be fully legible, especially to his mother. Writing as a practice can does not render a physical existence is such clear, defining terms. These moments are also marked by transience, shifting boundaries prohibiting meaning to be absolute, but always relational. Vuong fears “the knowledge will dissolve, will not, despite my writing it, stay real. I’m breaking us apart again so that I might carry us somewhere else – where, exactly, I’m not sure.” (62). Despite this instability, and with the perpetual fear that despite his best attempts, he will not be able to produce anything definite, he understands that it is the only way to move forward. Regardless, Vuong moves along with the hope that he can find and shape new spaces of belonging.

The novel is dispersed with pockets of separate narratives tied together by paragraphs of reflection and conversation and is responsible for providing much of the depictions of the embodied experience that propels Vuong’s writing. Storytelling, captured within his narrative, as well as through his writing, is crucial to the construction
of home and history. The tangibility of a story told or shared, or a story narrated, allows for personal and historical memory to be accessible across generations. This is a particularly crucial aspect of diasporic integration, that Vuong and his family has undergone since their arrival in the United States. Lan, Vuong’s grandmother, in particular paid him in “stories”. Vuong describes memories of her storytelling: “A familiar memory would follow, punctuated with the same dramatic pauses and inflections during moments of suspense or crucial turns. I’d mouth along with the sentences, as if watching a film for the umpteenth time – a movie made by Lan’s words and animated by my imagination. I this way, we collaborated.” (22). Storytelling, an act which is primarily driven by an oratory experience, is rendered almost entirely in these lines through her embodied conditions. How she told her stories, how the narrator listened to them, how he remembers them now are just affective as the stories themselves. The narrator is also a physical and reactionary presence in these narratives. His bodily actions in the lines quoted, imply the ability to access and appropriate national, historical, familial trauma in manners that makes the narrator be able to agentially preserve them. Choosing to define this process as a collaboration introduces an affective continuity of knowledge production, between Lan and the narrator. It enables not only in finding plurality within singular narratives, but also distinguishing layers of perspective, as well as highlighting spatial and temporal significance. Gordon addresses this complexity when she wrote, “How can we tell the difference between the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real, the insisted?” (38). In thinking through such sites of collaboration in which multiple iterations of a narrative take place, it is important to ‘distinguish’ and ‘recount’ the different modalities of storytelling, but also be able to place them in relation to each
other, even if the connections are at times contradictory, or partial. It’s an example of “building bridges”, forming relational and reflexive encounters that are able to create inter-generational connections, and support instances of subsequent meaning-making stemming from this process. In the attempt to convey social relations in terms that are both fictive and real, these sites blur political, disciplinary and institutional boundaries, and in doing so, implicates them within a system that is inherently relational. As the narrative in this scenario emerges as a "will to heal", "What is at stake, then in this passage, is help - recourse and relief"(Clément 75). When Vuong wonders, “Who will be lost in the story we tell ourselves? Who will be lost in ourselves? A story, after all, is a kind of swallowing. To open the mouth, in speech, is to leave only the bones, which remain untold. It is a beautiful country because you are still breathing.” (43). It is both an acknowledgement of loss, but also of what remains and outlasts all. It is a consideration of what can be preserved, and how to do it, a transformation of negativity that Braidotti argues can transform in reaffirming and re-enforcing sites of belonging.

Translation, as a process that is both generative and futile, is a recurring motif in much of the novel. These moments unravel not only the semantic limitations of language as a system, but also entwine two or more languages in a relationship that is contingent upon each other. In a scene depicting the narrator, his mother and his grandmother attempting to buy oxtail from a grocery store, they are confronted with a moment of absolute untranslatability. Vuong recalls his mother:

“you placed your index finger at the small of your back, turned slightly, so the man could see your backside, then wiggled your finger while making mooing sounds. With your other hand, you made a pair of horns above your head. You moved, carefully twisting and gyrating so he could recognize each piece of this performance: horns, tail, ox.”(Vuong 30).
She tried explaining in French, and even our narrator is helpless because he “didn’t know that oxtail was called oxtail.” (Vuong 31). In this scenario, both the linguistic and the material fails to connect, leading to an epistemological stagnancy. The significant question to raise, is why did it collapse. The methodological paradigm reveals how the systemic and structural forces that appear to not be contingent in this particular case, makes its influence felt in everyday lives and how it able to complicate the boundaries of separate social conditions. Emily Apter coined this term “Translation Zone” which she defines as “as an act of love, and as an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself.” (6). The narrator’s mother purposefully placed herself in such a site, as a way to reach beyond the limitations of her linguistic abilities, and to render a physical expression that can fill in the gaps left behind such boundaries.

These methods of expanding or extending the boundaries of closed entities, discovering creative uses of these fissures are a characteristic epistemic principle of On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous, where multiple disjunctive relations converge and can inhabit such liminal positions. On the other side, the American man who is on the receiving end of this struggle “laughed…louder, and booming” (30). So, he is exerting unequal power relations by choosing not to participate in the translation zone (Neumann 290). The body and language are simply inadequate here, but here the body is actively being used a way to uphold linguistic and social hierarchies. When Vuong says, “our words suddenly wrong everywhere, even in our mouths” (31), it emphasizes a linguistic estrangement fueled by the assimilative burden of translation on non-native English speakers, and then materializes in a bodily expression. This rupture is affective in the
linguistic domain of both Vietnamese and English. On one hand, this acute sense of dispossession severs the sense of belonging that stems from “the “mother tongue” being “organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation” (Yildiz 2). On the other hand, it also destabilizes the hope of transcultural and transnational integration that is crucial to the formation of diasporic identity formation.

These dichotomies are fundamental to extracting the ways in which translation is embedded in the systems of power. This was a defining moment for our writer-protagonist, as he becomes keenly aware of his position in this transcultural and translingual model. He writes, “I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. 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 32). In this moment, the dialectics of visibility and invisibility includes a negotiation of who can be seen and who remains shrouded. Vuong begins to congruously render himself visible, and subsequently legible, comprehensible and overall discernible. This materializes in the act and performativity of his writing, as well as the complexities of his lived reality. Gordon’s claim that “To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities, is to write ghost stories” (Gordon and Radway 8) expands upon her definition of haunting discussed earlier, portraying how both material and discursive power can manifest in reality and its modes of production.

In a snippet of story immediately preceding the memory of the incident in the grocery store, the narrator’s mother asks to learn the English word of Đẹp quá so that she could use it in appropriate situations. The narrator tells her that it means, “It’s beautiful!”, and even though she is not able to retain this information, she is able to recognize entities
that she could attribute it to. She uses this word to describe a hummingbird, “a bird you
could not name but could nonetheless recognize.” (Vuong 29). In such instances, the aim
to communicate and express is not bound to the normative notion of meaning-making.
Instead, it relies on proximity and being responsive and receptive to unfamiliar stimulus,
and allowing it generates new modalities of understanding that extend beyond the
essentialist structure of language. Towards the end of the novel, Vuong ruminated on the
fact that “In Vietnamese, the word for missing someone and remembering them is the
same” which comes up in his conversations with his mother, when she asks “cón nhỏ me
không?”, the writer flinches “thinking you meant, Do you remember me?”(Vuong 186).
The rupture of meaning between the two words are intentional, they illustrate the nuances
of linguistic expression across languages, the untranslatability of it, and then the
possibilities of connection and reconfiguration. This relationality sustains itself on
grounded differential experience; the distinct separation explaining that English does not
have the association between ‘missing’ and ‘remembering’. Hence, the meanings
concluded from these specific dictions are inherently different in different linguistic and
social context. What Vuong does is that it swaps the language-context methodology in
the case of these two words, the Vietnamese words despite being spoken in the context of
the source language, is being understood within the conditions determined by the English
language paradigm. Subsequently, Vuong’s confession: “I miss you more than I
remember you.” (Vuong 186) takes the dissonance introduced by this exchange and joins
them in semantic and epistemological affinity. The translation of this particular discourse
broadens the scope of typical linguistic expressions within the English language, and
acknowledges, sustains and utilizes this differential condition of multiple linguistic
influences and traditions as the epistemic agent for generating new meaning-making. It argues that affinity does not come at the expense of linguistic difference. The pluralistic potential in the connection *between* Vietnamese and English, as well as that *within* the individual languages as well, also is then an indication of the transformative and liberating political possibilities of the “translated men” (Rushdie 17). The ethical practice of translation is one which manifests through the enactment of agency, instead of upholding and reproducing hegemonic ideals and power relations. Since the language-power-regime is foregrounded in historically and politically embedded subjectivities, such narratives act as radical dehumanist sites where writing can unsettle hierarchical power structures and their modes of representation in material reality.

Vuong introduces the idea of a ‘third language’ that is able to address these new forms of immediacy:

> “Two languages cancel each other out, suggests Barthes, beckoning a third. Sometimes our words are few and far between, or simply ghosted. In which case the hand, although limited by the borders of skin and cartilage, can be that third language that animates where the tongue falters.” (Vuong 33).

The distinction between language and body collapses in the conception of the third language. Vuong’s narrative does not see these entities as separate, but rather two who are inexplicably conjunct relationship. For all its defiance, in regards to genre, form, and syntax, this novel does not seek to extend itself over material realities, but instead emerge from them, taking into account the assembly of material consequences. In reinstating the political appeal of materialism, Claire Colebrook argues that “bodily life has unfolded historically to produce certain relations, and acknowledge that freedom from that requires recognition of our materiality.” (Colebrook, “On Not Becoming Man: The Materialist
Politics of Unactualized Potential” 63). Language, as an exclusionary political instrument, is a manifestation of such relations, and one that continues to reproduce it. So seeking this ‘third language’, is a quest for liberation, that comes following the acknowledgement of the limitations of hegemonic structure of language. That is why the ‘hand’ that ‘animates’ is a turn to new direction of communication and self-articulation, one that is distinctly aware of the restraints of its material and linguistic model, but also is open and receptive to the promise of the conjunction of these modalities. The sentence provides an image of a corporeal performance corporeal performance, one that offers writing as the radical act that bridges these two paradigms. It is a literal description, where the writing is a physical act of rendering that produces material effect in the form of a variety of tests. But it is also a symbolic one, which argues for the visibility of the ‘hand’. Because the text is a clearly defined signifier on a poststructuralist term, it is a space where the lived reality can find expression and reflection. Returning to Vuong’s concerns that he “never wanted to build a ‘body of work,’ but to preserve these, our bodies, breathing and unaccounted for, inside the work” (175). We can bring what is being written into conversation with who is writing, why is it being written, and how is it being written. These are not distinct modes of production of knowledge, but a set of networks that relate, resist and compound upon each other to produce the text. This system of production also ensures that no text is ripped from the context of the embedded and embodied reality from which it ascends and which it is seeking to reify, and so this process of “collectively constructive affirmative ethics” concerns the composition of new planes of becoming and belonging for missing/invisible/dehumanized people (Braidotti 121).
Writing opens as much as it constraints in Vuong’s practice. For all that it can not encapsulate, language can be reappropriated to redefine its normative structure. It allows the experience to mold its rules, generating a space where language can enact such revisions. This removes language from its pedestal within a constructivist world and opens up this location to be inhabited by a variety of subjectivities, even the ones that the linguistic system was previously developed to exclude. This is an act of radical dwelling where the narrative excesses, insufficiencies and undesirability of dehumanized subjectivities create modalities of generative failure. This in turn transform formerly hostile locations into a space re-envisioning and reconstruction identity formation. His use of poetics, in particular metaphors, is what has been utilized to expand on the vibrancy of the language to compliment the characterization of the physical reality. One of the recurring model is the use of punctuation as a metaphor for various social and material conditions. In portraying his relationship to Trevor, Vuong writes: “Even now I see the folds of your waist and hips as I knead out the tensions, the small bones along your spine, a row of ellipses no silence translates. Even after all these years, the contrast between our skin surprises me – the way a blank page does when my hand, gripping a pen, begins to move through its spatial field, by trying to act upon its life without marring it. But by writing, I mar it. I change, embellish and preserve you all at once. “ (Vuong 85). In the striking comparison of Trevor’s body to that of a row of ellipses, the commonality of trying to render a moment of silence is what connects these two elements, even beyond the visual similarity. When Vuong describes the act of writing down on a blank page, it is to parallel the rendering of the corporeal experience if this particular instance with Trevor. A materialistic analysis of this comparison reveals the
open, relational nature of it which can produce creative and unpredictable results. The method of literary materiality alone is multifaceted, because it acknowledges the loss inherent in such figurative practices, that in comparing we are altering the representation of both the aspects in positive and negative ways. But the aim remains same, it is to create something that outlasts, that is able to sustain its own be-ing.

The survival sought in these haunted actualities, is not an individual, separate instance; it is an exploration of a process that demands us to get comfortable with what we do not know, what we can not understand and what we can not explain. So, instead of trying to remain within the safe, predictable boundaries of normative linguistic and literary practice, we try and reach for an encounter that does not produce any conclusive result, rather only insists on raising more questions and entangles the connections even further. For the people that that pursue these ambitions, these practices, the self-articulation of such subjectivities gives away to the unmooring of the Western liberal image of the human, and instead looks to reconfiguration this definition on their own material and linguistic terms. In the last stretch of the novel, Vuong recounts his and his family’s perseverance, he wrote:

“Yes, there was a war. Yes, we came from its epicenter…
All this time I told myself we were born from war – but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty.
Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence – but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it.” (Vuong 231)

For the writer, his mother and grandmother, there lies a life, a body that has survived. So, in turn the language used to render them legible needs to last as well. The defiance of these lives should manifest in the resistance to standardized language as well. The legacy of such a work is its audacity to take on such an endeavor. But for Vuong, a sentence and
a life are inseparable, it is the experience of this affective continuity between language and life that drives this novel. He hopes that language can continue when life ceases, and that when language is futile, life will fill in those fissures: “If we are lucky, the end of the sentence is where we might begin. If we are lucky, something is passed on” (Vuong 10). That they are inextricable intertwined to create “a narrative no one was meant to outlast”.
Chapter 3: Strange Bodies, Even Stranger Languages:
Queer Performativity of Language in Arundhuti Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Considering Claire Colebrook’s question at the beginning of her chapter ‘On The Very Possibility of Queer Theory’ where she asks, “Is queer theory a reflection on what it means to be queer, or does the concept of queerness change the ways in which we theorise?” (Colebrook, “On the Very Possibility of Queer Theory” 11), introduces this dichotomy between theory and practice within the paradigms of gender and sexuality, both of which are models of performative constructivism. Because Queer theory defies definition, both its dialectical and material manifestations are equally amorphous, entangled among partial, conflicting, and diverging relationality. Often in the case for queer characters in literature, rendering a queer experience pushes the semantic capacity of language to articulate and communicate in a manner that retains the aforementioned connectivities. In Arundhuti Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, a novel published in 2017, Anjum, one of the main characters in its ensemble cast, is a *hijra* born and raised in Old Delhi. She is the first titular character to be introduced and the struggle in the narrative to encapsulate and portray her existence and experience within the existing linguistic lexicon available for LGBTQ+ identification, allows for a more open-ended, expansive exploration of her human corporeality. The discursive and the material work to constitute the body, so that it can be rendered legible in a linguistic capacity but also as a social being that can be positioned within the existing hierarchy of power. Thus, Anjum’s characterization is a means to inhabit a queer experience that resists heteronormative attributes and flourishes beyond the boundaries of the gendered linguistic paradigm. This also implicates language as an agent that sustains the binary gender system and
introduces social categories that excludes queer bodies in their participation and representation in their lived reality.

In the moments where these constructs, such as language and social domain, that govern and dictate our postmodern world, fail to render bodies like Anjum’s in their perspective spheres, the narrative turns to alternative modes of meaning-making. Anjum, and by relation Roy, employs the construction of linguistical and spatiotemporal queer spaces, the subversive and pervasive use of slangs, the metaphorical comparison of socio-political reality, the deconstruction of essentialist rationale for biological sex, and a model of queer identity formation that relies upon the semantic and syntactical disruption of linguistic master codes and establishing relationality between opposing terminology. These are spaces where normative logic does not work; they embody rupture, dissonance, disconnect and negation which then become active of sites of designing creative modalities of belonging. These positions not only upset prevalent modes of meaning-making but encourages these queer subjects to resist coherent and essentialist notions and become comfortable with inconclusive, partial and contradictory conditions of their lived experience. This chapter engages in the analysis of these processes and hopes to articulate ways in which Anjum renders herself visible and assigns meaning to her own body and bodily experience. It is important to include a disclaimer at this point of writing about the use of ‘queer’ to identify and define Anjum’s corporeal experience. This is done to avoid the use of any form of closed and exclusionary labels, and instead introduce language that locate the fluidity of her gender expression within the scope of vocabulary available to me.
Anjum was born as Aftab, “was not medically speaking, a Hijra – a female trapped in a male body – although for practical purposes that could be used. Aftab he said, was a rare example of a Hermaphrodite, with both male and female characteristics” (Roy 20). Concerning the use of the term Hijra in the social sphere, it has emerged as an umbrella term to aggregate the variety of non-binary bodies so that the parameters of its exclusion can be determined. It is a reductive measure, one which places no significance in the potential of queer linguistics to represent queer bodies and experience, instead it is a term that upholds and reinforces the exclusionary conditions of the linguistic and social paradigm. Since, there is no model of physical configuration that has been sanctioned disciplinarily (in medical terms) or legally, the use of the term Hijra implies an agential claim, one where an individual has to come out as a hijra and display the performativity associated with the term to be socially accepted as one. Later in the novel, Anjum meets Saeeda, a new member of her community, who uses “terms cis-Man and From and MtoF and in interviews she referred to herself as a ‘transperson’” (Roy 42). Even then Anjum explicitly insists on using Hijra as her primary sexual identification, instead of opting such contemporary English terminology. To start with, these terms have no counterpart within the lexicon of Urdu. So Anjum is to use this new vocabulary, she will not be able to translate herself into Urdu which is her primary language, and the only one that she has full authority over. Because language is indispensable in the construction and expression of the self, i.e., the gendered self, in choosing to use modern English terms she will have to relinquish the power to linguistically represent her self-determination. Also, the specificity afforded by this new vocabulary is not effective within her socio-cultural context, and will bring no substantial change to her position in the social matrix. This
identification serves a dual purpose because it, one is definitely an interior-facing approach which provides Anjum with the language to affirm her identity for herself, while the other is exterior facing, where she has to make herself legible within a social context. And while the breadth of self-expression is expanded by the variety of means of production, but for social validity, she is only afforded two words which by themselves are inadequate. Roy’s use of ‘hermaphrodite’ in this line is an interesting choice, as she for the majority of the book refers to Urdu or Hindi terminology whenever something is considered to be socially, culturally, geographically, linguistically specific to the Indian subcontinent. This concludes that Roy, as a writer has reached a moment of untranslatability where she can not find an appropriate substitute for the word in Urdu that can render the same meaning. So, she opts for the English word which is a strategic decision to embrace and include the majority English-speaking readers in the conversation.

As Aftab’s mother struggles with conceptualizing her child’s existence, she considers:

“In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things, not just living things – carpets, cloths, books, pens, musical instruments – had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes, of course she knew there was a word for those like him – Hijra. Two words actually Hijra and Kinnar. But two words do not make a language.

Was it possible to live outside language? Naturally this questions did not address itself to her in words, or as a single lucid sentence. It addressed itself to her as a soundless, embryonic howl.” (Roy 12).

The limitation that gendered language system places on its users is that it takes discursive constructs that originate from the normative conception of the human body and translates it onto the material world at large. Thus, rendering all matter, living or non-living, and its
affective influence to not only be strictly comprehended within the binary model of
gender, but be impossible to even reify outside of it. So, Aftab’s mother, Jahanara Begum
has to find a place for her child, within her own lived reality where its physical existence
which preceded the discursive-material structure of gender, is rendered invisible and
unintelligible. And to have two isolated words in the system, Hijra and Kinnar, which
represent the embedded and embodied reality of certain subjects, are then left stranded,
incapable of exerting their agency and expressing their meaning through any other
linguistic reproduction. Since Urdu is dictated entirely by the gender binary, any of its
linguistic or semantic capacity will be at odds, and inherently unsuitable to render the
materiality of these subjects. So, Jahanara Begum is correct that Aftab would have to
exist ‘outside of language’, at least outside of one that maintains its master codes. But the
physical world far precedes its conceptualization by discursive-material forces, so Aftab
reinforces his existence by the agential act of crying, so that even without being
understood or communicated, his presence can not still be denied.

Roy embraces this impossibility of existing ‘out of language’ with a playful
approach. In Anjum’s characterization as well as that of the other minor queer characters
in the novel, Roy uses messy, incoherent language, which are inappropriate, subversive
or pervasive depending upon the context of the narrative and disrupts and undermines
the hierarchies that normative language sustains. She catalogued comments that were
directed at Aftab, such as “He’s a She. He’s not a He or a She. He’s a He and a She. She-He, He-She, Hee! Hee!” (Roy 16). These remarks, in the original context of the story
were used as an insult, a clear attempt at denigrating Anjum’s body. But because it
displays just how inept the binary gender model is at materializing his body in linguistic
terms, as readers we come to understand just how futile the attempt was. Thus the metatextual effect of conveying the disdain of the speaker to the readers of the novel were subverted by such playful configurations.

In contrast to that when Roy writing to express the autonomy and self-articulation of her queer characters, she utilizes “orality as the tool that creates spaces and affirms proximities of bodies to rethink the affectual relationship between tongues and pleasures” (T. 35). When she is describing the other members of the communal Hijra residence, she writes, “Razia was not a Hijra. She was a man who liked to dress in women’s clothes. However, she did not want to be thought of as a woman, but as a man who wanted to be a woman.” (Roy 26). Razia identifies herself as a member of the Chitli Qabar Hijra Community, however, insists that she is not one. What this shows is that the Hijra community is a collective based not on identitarian politics, but as one whose affinity and solidarity relies on the commonality of experience exclusive to people who have been ostracized because of the non-binary or non-heteronormative nature of their gender and gender expression. So, in establishing this relationality Razia is able to institute herself as a part of a larger whole, but still retain the difference that maintains her unique gender expression. On a systemic and social level, what this does is that it confiscates power away from social and linguistic hierarchies that determine the conditions under which queer bodies and subjectivities are categorized as not being a part of heteronormative culture. This leaves Razia in control of deciding her gender representation on her own terms and of how it manifests in the written narrative. Additionally, the distinction between ‘not wanting to be thought of as a woman’ but as a ‘man wanting to be woman’ is key to exploring the potential of relational, non-unitary identification. She refuses to be
restricted within the boundary of a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’. She eludes and evokes to a process of meaning-making that is marked by transience. Her gender presentation will only manifest in the active method of ‘becoming’; this is the performative rendition of her ‘want’. But this activity never settles Razia into the territory of her ‘want’, but maintains a partial, transitory, negotiated and performative connection between her biologically assigned gender and her desired one. Roy’s use of ‘she’ as Razia’s pronoun gestures towards a positive approach to approximation, where the use of the pronoun is not to prohibit her in anyway but validate and support her autonomy and agency in performing her gender presentation.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, there is a compelling perversity to the use of slangs and other pejorative terms. And while several characters throughout the novel resort to this vocabulary, the use of slangs, especially sexual ones, is never more strategic or subversive than when it is being used by the Hijra community. In their acceptance of this lexicon and their attempt at reappropriating it, they flip the power narrative within which such language usually performs. Such linguistic terms are almost always associated with a bodily act. Since a slang denotes a performance of language as well as a physical performance, the discursive and the material embodiments work to reinforce the connotation of individual act to produce a cumulative effect. Deleuze argues that any form of queering must produce utterances (*énoncés*), as they are alternative modes of knowledge production that is not dictated by capitalist agenda. That it is a matter of undermining the order-word (that is, an utterance that bears an effect of authority or law) of a hegemony in an ongoing movement of becoming. To embody queer subjectivities then is not to long for something but to produce new ways of feeling, perceiving and
conceiving (Deleuze 285–86). In co-opting the system of language, queer subjects like Hijras, can discover the full scope of linguistic possibilities, untethered from power relations. Because a significant portion of the Hijra community does not fall within the medical definition of a Hijra, in being able to manipulate language like that, they are able to transcend beyond the limitations of such terminology, and push language to encapsulate their grounded realities. These means of striving and becoming are not yet realized in knowledge, but through the exercise of subjective agency has the force to disrupt or produce knowledge (Colebrook, Gender 236).

The most common slang used within the Hijra community that Aftab joined was “Saali Randi Hijra (Sister-fucking Whore Hijra)” and they all could iterate it “coquettishly, in jest, with affection and with genuine, bitter anger.” (Roy 24). Anjum later “learned to exaggerate the swing in her hips when she walked and to communicate with the signature spread-fingered Hijra clap… and could mean anything – Yes, No, Maybe, Wah! Behen ka Lauda (Your sister’s cock), Bhonsadi Ke (You arsehole born). Only another Hijra could decide what was specifically meant by the specific clap at that specific moment.” (Roy 30–31). Kira Hall in her extensive work on Hijras, says “In order to make any sense of the hijra’s seemingly innocuous and nonsensical utterance, the passer-by must enter into what he believes to be the hijra’s frame of reference, a linguistic space involving sexual innuendo, crudity, and gender fluidity.” (Hall 166). And it is through these verbal plays, this nonsensical vulgarity that they are able to compensate for their lack of social authority, and are able to exercise any semblance of control during physical encounters like the ones quoted above and generate a space where meaning is formed and translated according to new and unconventional conditions. In
*Opacity - Minority – Improvisation*, Anna T. describes slangs as “semantically altered words, and corrupted linguistic loans, this type of performative speech foregrounds the tension between entitlement and solidarity, various types of intersecting exclusions and inclusions, the minor, the major, and everything in between. Through the humour that queer slangs activate, brief instances of pleasure momentarily shift social hierarchies.” (T. 39). The words used in the quoted lines are whose natural order and original context of use has been muddled. Since, they were created with the intention of demeaning non-heteronormative people, in forging a lingual and social-scape where semantic and discursive rules and conventions can be discounted, the power hierarchies upheld by these codes are also disrupted. This leaves the space open to be inhabited by queer subjects, where language is malleable and susceptible to new interpretations, and whose bodies then become another medium through which subversive acts can be performed. This conjoining of the material and the discursive, manifested by queer subjectivities can form socio-lingual spaces where the delivery of slangs and the performativity that comes with it, and their combined embodiment has historically been used as methods of resistance and survival and has the potential for creating newer ways of belonging. This engagement of humor in the use of slangs is to redirect the power to inflict hurt and cause shame towards a towards an agential reciprocity of negotiating happiness and nullifying the power of the original intent.

In introducing Anjum’s life as a Hijra, once Aftab is integrated into the community, Roy foregrounds the self-regulating nature of situated knowledge and subjectivity through multiple heterogenous interconnections and coalitions. As her body is the main medium through which such relationalities can be embodied, it plants
corporeal materiality at the center of visceral political encounters. It is site at which historically, and socially situated knowledge is produced. Anjum’s (then Aftab) first instance of self-translation arrived when she noticed:

“a tall, slim-hipped woman wearing bright lipstick, gold high heels, and a shiny, green satin salwar kameez with bangles…Aftab had never seen anybody like the tall woman with lipstick…The woman Aftab followed could dress as she was dressed and walk the way she did only because she wasn’t a woman. Whatever she was, Aftab wanted to be her…He wanted to put out a hand with painted nails and a wrist full of bangles and delicately lift the gill of a fish to see how fresh it was before bargaining down the price. He wanted to lift his salwar just a little as he stopped over a puddle – just enough to show off his silver anklets.” (Roy 22–23).

The descriptions draw attention to all the details that stand out to Aftab; the visibility of this tall woman, is the first instance where Aftab is able to his own conceptualization of Self in a material and embodied form. The power imbued in this moment is staggering, because it opens Aftab up onto a generative space of gender exploration with possibilities that he hasn’t even imagined before this point. To see for himself that such realities have existed along with many others, and how they have been constituted by the interconnection of different planes of material and discursive perception. These moments of queer dispossession where a subject is only beginning to realize and imagine the multitude of ways, they can inhabit their bodies. When Aftab recognizes that he wants to be her, it allows him to radically dwell in a generative space, where he can transcend the inadequacies and excesses of his previous conception of Self. Now he has lingual, visual, and material stimulus that can propel him towards alternative modes of being and becoming. The performativity of this woman (later identified as Bombay Silk) also accomplishes the simultaneous of destabilizing the social performance of the binary gender model. To claim that Silk could only display this overt expression of femininity
only because did not fit the ideal image of a woman, uncouples the body from its performance. It severs the socio-cultural belief of nature and natural behavior to be dictated by the character of the body from which it stems. In particular for gender, as it relies so heavily on the idea of irrefutable, absolute and essential biological sex. So, by overturning the power/knowledge model of gender, the existence of such subjects are able to unsettle all social/cultural/disciplinary notions that were upon built those conditions. Later when Anjum “is finally able to dress in the clothes she longed to wear – the sequined, gossamer kurtas, and pleated Patiala salwars, shararas, ghararas, silver anklets, glad bangles and dangling earrings…” (Roy 30), she is able to locate her performativity and differential nature beyond the normative definition of Self, and in the dynamic reality in which she is in effect. So Anjum, the Hijra, different from Aftab, a boy is determined through the web of relations that resolve in an affective, embedded and embodied material existence.

Performativity is both a generator and consequence of queerness. When it comes to queer presentation, Moe Meyer argues that “‘queer’ signals is an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts.” (Meyer 2). This is perhaps the component of queer subjectivity that has far-reaching, rule-bending outcomes, and the broadest political and critical appeal. Because performance inherently implicates an embodied act, the relation between body and performance bears crucial significance. And while he self may be performative – the body with its conditions are always materially constrained (Colebrook, “On Not Becoming Man: The Materialist Politics of
Unactualized Potential” 68). When Aftab started undergoing physical change because of puberty,

“His body had suddenly begun to wage war on him. He grew tall and muscular. And hairy…Her developed an Adam’s apple that bobbed up and down. He longed to tear it out of his throat. Next came the unkindest betrayal of all – the thing that he could do nothing about. His voice broke. A deep, powerful man’s voice appeared in place of his sweet, high voice. He was repelled by it and scared himself each time he spoke.” (Roy 28).

The body dysphoria experienced by Aftab in these lines reveals to readers the extent of his disconnect with the body he inhabits. His corporeal limits not only hinder him from performing his desired gender expression, but actively restricts his ability to even conceive of his own subjectivity and materialize it. It marks Aftab’s body as site of violence, where the dissonance between the self and the material manifests itself in the turbulent defiance of the body. Bodily changes that are in accordance with the normative development of the gender Aftab was assigned at birth, conflict with the agential reality of the queer body he desires. The relation between the self and the body tasked with manifesting them, are replete with rejection, discontinuity and contradiction, but they also demonstrate how methodology is reconfigured to render these queer subjectivities. And when the body bearing the results of these processes become visible, they enter the sphere of visual politics where they can reclaim control of it by unraveling stable, closed categories through performance.

After Aftab transitioned to Anjum, she undergoes vocal surgery which did “undeepen her voice. But it restricted its resonance, coarsened its timbre and gave it a peculiar, rasping quality, which sometimes sounded like two voices quarreling with each other instead of one. It frightened other people, but it did not frighten its owner in the
way her God-given one had. Nor did it please her.” (Roy 32–33). Anna T. refers to Édouard Glissant’s work on opacity which he argues profoundly negates being seen, let alone compared and potentially deemed non-dangerous for the status quo. It is something that is already multiple and against the singularity of clarity and transparency (Glissant 189–94). Bodies that are at the threshold of transformation exhibit opaque characteristics as partial, simultaneous, continuous and conflicting contingencies self-making are grounded in the limitations of the body. The metaphor of the two arguing voices is simply another tangible rendition of the coexistence of contradictory conditions. Anjum’s struggle for bodily agency and linguistic and narrative encapsulation of her queer experience also acts as an extending metaphor for India’s ongoing political war against Pakistan, as well as India’s own internal turmoil stemming from religious conflict and ethnic dispute: “what are the things you normal people get unhappy about... Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war, - outside things that settle down eventually. But for us the price-rise and school-admissions and beating-husbands and cheating-wives are all inside us. The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can’t.” (Roy 27). About metaphors, Lera Boroditsky, observes that “[t]he job of the metaphor is to provide relational structure to an abstract domain by importing it (by analogy) from a more concrete domain” (Boroditsky 1–28). In cataloguing moments of violent dissonance, Roy brings to light the severity of the embodied experience of queer people, what it must feel to be at odds in a relationship fundamental to human life.

In making the body even stranger and more unintelligible to the society, progress comes at the expense of extending bodily restraints, so that hard boundaries can be traversed, and bridges are built to foster connection between dissonant modalities.
Establishing this relation does not produce any conclusive effect, but it does allow Anjum to feel that her body is not completely foreign, that it can potentially accommodate her multitudes and give them a tangible form.

*Khwabgah*, the residence of Anjum and the remaining Hijra community of Chitli Qabar, is a liminal location. The name which stand for the ‘House of Dreams’ is a space marked by the hopes and desires of its residents. Created as a place of refuge, the house operates as a threshold between two linguistically crafted opposing spatiotemporal situations. Inside the house, it is where imagination and dreams can be realized, where performance is not simply a representation or a substitute of an original, but a primary meaning-making system of production as well. And on the other side was “what most ordinary people thought of as the real word – and Hijras called *Duniya*, the World.” (Roy 28), which despite being a tangible, situated space, was in many ways not ‘real’ to this community, because it had no place for the realities of these people. Aftab felt that this was “the only place in his world where he felt the air made way for him” (Roy 23) and that he had “stepped through an ordinary doorway into another universe” (Roy 29). Locating linguistically constructed queer spaces and queer temporalities, like this residence, demonstrates the ways in which language forms ephemeral spaces of safety and connection, and how language can generate positive reinforcements (T. 17). And despite the possibilities prevalent in such a space, the people at the residence are not in denial, they recognize the house for what it is, a carefully construed area where the conventions and codes of the outside world are rendered useless. The members name it, “the place of falling people” referring to the transience of the lives realized and embodied within the confines of the house. They confess “*Arre*, even we aren’t real. We don’t really
exist.” (Roy 88); the inability to escape the influence of hegemonic structures driving the understanding deep into every plane of their existence.

Regardless, at the end “What mattered was that it existed. To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it, from being written out of it altogether. A chuckle, after all, could become a foothold in the sheer wall of the future” (Roy 55). The matter of material existence is always and already given through its affective relations to world at large. So to exist, to survive is already the language of survival, of agency, and self-determination. So by doing so queerness is allowed to be envisioned and practiced and to look for alternative modes of expression and sharing that are not defined in standard and definitive terms.

Bodies governed by their subjectivities will continue to imagine and compose their natural environment in ways that are corporeally meaningful to them. This relationality precedes the influence of social and linguistic constructs and by appealing to this relationality, language can be reoriented and repurposed to bear the responsibility of rendering these bodies.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis is a work in progress, and one which perhaps will always be. My intention here was not seek any decisive results, but to slowly unravel, analyze and understand the nuanced and dynamic ways in which the discursive power embeds and integrates itself into a social and physical reality. And the extent of this influence and disparity is nowhere more evident than in the writing of/by/about alternative subjectivities that fall outside the standard spectrum of the Western Liberal Human/Self. By brandishing a mode of production of knowledge which has historically and socially engaged in exclusionary practices, these otherized subjects approach the linguistic structure, aware of its limitations and failures. They are cognizant of the fact that to yield language in an agential manner to manifest the realities of their embodied experiences, will require not simply an acquired expertise or mastery over the system, but rather strategic, subversive and playful tactics that can mold the language to occupy liminal spaces, think and express oneself in various conventions and traditions, and produce texts and narratives that are not penetrable to and by all. Instead, these texts are embody inconsistency, incoherency, discontinuity, untranslatability and unintelligibility, all of which perform as generative relationalities within the context of ruptures, dissonances and disconnect to create unforeseen means of being and becoming.

In the two primary texts discusses in this project, Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* and Arundhuti Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the narrative situates two subjects at the intersection of these affective connections. For Vuong’s novel, it is him as the writer-narrator who strives to make his body and the
realities of his embodiment legible, by reflecting or translating it onto the body of the text itself. And it is in the process of this translation where both oppressive and liberating influences of discursive power resonate. They reveal the constraints of the system to build connections and afford positive reinforcements of standardized meaning-making process. But with a body that is illegible (at least in conventional conditions) comes the undiscovered ways to think of legibility, what it means to be legible and how it can be made to do so. Vuong’s craft is in vibrant exploration between the layered modalities.

Roy’s novel deals with queer bodies that rely on queering language as a method of power subversion. This process of queering language, making it strange, funny, nonsensical is a force to affect and effect changes in the way one theorizes, its capacity to produce deviant lines along established thinking and disciplines, and inevitably that is, to undermine the self and resist any normalization of Western liberal ideologies. The performance inherent in the process of queering, both in material and linguistic context, is hopeful, defiant and proud, as the assertion of agency that drives such presentation, it thrives in its capacity to survive, persevere against obstructing power hegemonies.


Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. Penguin, 2019.