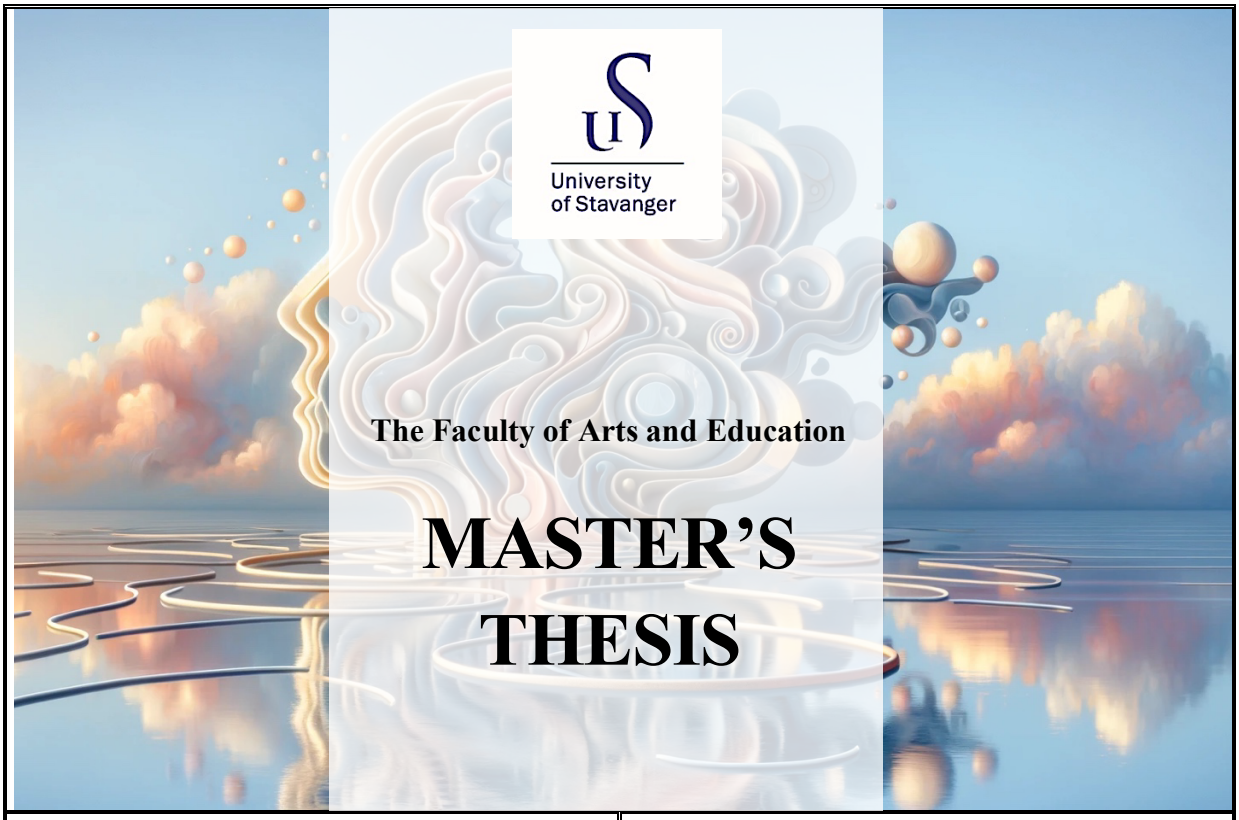

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Author: Judith Ofosua Boakye-Nkrumah	 (Signature of author)
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Abstract

This thesis investigates the thematic concern of subjectivity as problematised in two literary works by Brit Bennett and Ocean Vuong. The primary objective is to explore how these authors use narrative techniques to articulate complex identities shaped by race, gender, and trauma. Employing the technique of close reading, the study examines Bennett's *The Vanishing Half (*2020) and Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), highlighting their distinct narrative strategies and thematic explorations.

The analysis reveals that Bennett employs settings and quest narratives to discuss racial passing and identity formation, while Vuong uses epistolary form, fragmented narrative, and rich symbolism to examine trauma and the immigrant experience. Both authors intricately weave intersectionality into their narratives, offering deep insights into how societal structures influence personal identity.

The conclusions drawn underscore the significance of literary narratives in understanding and challenging societal norms and biases. This research contributes to literary studies by providing a nuanced understanding of how contemporary literature reflects and reshapes discourses on identity and subjectivity in the context of intersectionality. The findings highlight the importance of narrative form in exploring the complexity of individual and collective identities, enriching discussions on race, gender, and the enduring impacts of trauma in literature. The thesis highlights the significance of understanding subjectivity as a fundamental aspect of human experience, emphasizing its relevance in identity studies and the critical analysis of contemporary narratives.

List of Abbreviations

OEWBG— On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

TVH— Vanishing Half

LD— Little Dog

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1 Introduction

Literature, as an enduring mirror of life, has long served as a platform where the intricacies of personal identity are not only depicted, but critically examined. In contemporary literature, the thematic concern of subjectivity often takes center stage, unraveling characters' multifaceted experiences in relation to an ever-shifting societal backdrop (Bennett and Royle 151). This exploration is increasingly pertinent in a world where the question of "Who do you think you are?" prompts not just introspection but a dialogue with the world at large.

Subjectivity in contemporary literature represents a labyrinth where an individual consciousness is inextricably intertwined with the communal, historical, and cultural dimensions of existence. It captures the fluidity of the self, which is continually reshaped by societal influences and personal experiences. That is theme prevalent in *The Vanishing Half* (*TVH*) by Brit Bennett and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (*OEWBG*) by Ocean Vuong, emphasising the constructed nature of identities, where societal norms and personal desires engage in a constant performative dance. The novels are pivotal for their articulation of characters' struggles within the entwined layers of race, class, gender, and history. This thesis uses the concept of intersectionality to navigate the complexity of subjecitivity within the multicultural landscape of American literature.

The concept of intersectionality highlights how various social categories interact on multiple levels, leading to complex individual experiences. This makes subjectivity difficult to define as it varies widely from person to person, depending on their unique confluence of circumstances. As societal norms and values shift, so too do the definitions and understandings of identity. What it means to be "American," for instance, is continually redefined through cultural debates, legislative changes, and shifts in national mood. The American society itself, characterized by its diversity and ongoing socio-political changes, complicates the notion of a static or unified identity. In today’s America, being American transcends a mere label of nationality, weaving through a complex tapestry of personal identity and societal interaction. In this era, to be American is to inhabit a space where identity is both a personal quest and a social construct shaped by history, culture, and the continual negotiations between the two. This identity is multifaceted and fluid, reflecting the diversity of experiences and backgrounds that comprise the American populace.The varying degrees of privilege, discrimination, and cultural heritage that individuals experience can alter their perceptions of self and how they relate to the world.

This where literature and historical narratives tend play significant roles, contributing to shaping subjectivity by influencing how individuals understand their place in society. Authors like Brit Bennett and Ocean Vuong explore these themes deeply, showing how personal histories and societal expectations intertwine, thus affecting individual subjectivity. Bennett's narrative delves into the American racial experience through the life choices of twin sisters, unveiling the performative nature of identity and the weight of colorism; while Vuong's poignant prose reflects the Vietnamese-American perspective, exploring the contours of self amidst the dualities of cultural inheritance and sexual identity. Both texts serve as crucial points of reference in understanding the interaction of individual experiences and societal frameworks, providing a lens through which readers can engage with the broader discourse on the complexities of subjectivity shaped by intersectional axes and cultural diversity. These works stand as testament to the resilience of identity in the face of historical and personal upheavals, making significant contributions to the evolving narrative of American literature.

The thesis, therefore argues that an intersectional approach is crucial in understanding these narratives. It posits that overlooking the intersectional nature of these characters' identities risks marginalizing stories that offer critical insights into American and global history, especially those that empower individuals with complex, layered identities.. Thus, by intertwining diverse theories and perspectives, the thesis aims to offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of the narratives in question. It seeks to underscore the importance of recognizing the multiple dimensions of subjectivity in literature, especially as it pertains to the African-American and Asian American experiences, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive and inclusive view of literature and its role in reflecting and shaping societal narratives.

1.1 Primary Literary Works

The objective in this thesis to dissect and comprehend the complex subjectivities portrayed in these novels, as they navigate through intricate social, cultural and political landscapes. Both *TVH* and *OEWBG* are meaningful in this exploration, as they present characters whose identities are not just multifaceted but are also influenced by their surroundings in ways that both enhance and challenge their subjectivities.

Vuong's *OEWBG* is a novel that navigates the complexities of the Vietnamese American existence, highlighting themes of immigration, queerness, the interplay of personal and collective trauma, the dualities of Vietnameseness and Americanness, and the role of language in constructing subjectivity. It follows the journey of a second generation immigrant, Little Dog, who navigates the complexities of being of America, rather than merely being in America.The narrative, scripted as a letter from Little Dog to his illiterate mother, uses memory and language to trace the trauma stemming from the Vietnam War and its impact on his family's life in America (Vallone). The narrative is not just a recounting of events; it is an exploration of how these events are remembered and spoken of, and how both silence and articulation are significant in the portrayal of a Vietnamese American experience (Tran iii-iv).The novel's division into three parts guides the reader through the complex layers of Little Dog's family history, his own experiences of coming out, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. These sections represent a journey through the past and present, weaving the personal with the historical, as Little Dog grapples with the residue from his mother’s and grandmother’s past in Saigon, Vietnam, his life in America, and the collective memory of a war that has shaped his existence (Tran 8).

Vuong's story is, in a sense, a testament to the power of storytelling and language in reconciling the different facets of one's identity and history (Hong *OEWBG*). He uses autobiographical elements in the narrative which reveal Vuong’s own life as a gay Vietnamese American poet, reflecting on survival, transformation, and the forging of a new identity from the fragmented pieces of past and present. He uses the character of Trevor as a significant figure in illustrating the complexities of queer relationships, addiction, and the personal scars of historical traumas. The relationship between Little Dog and Trevor is a microcosm of the broader themes of love, loss, and the struggles to connect across the various divides imposed by history, culture, and personal pain (Nguyen 66).

In essence, Ocean Vuong's *OEWBG* is a poignant examination of how individual and collective memories shape immigrant subjectivity, and how trauma and language are essential

for understanding and expressing one's subjectivity. In the novel, language is both a barrier and a bridge, revealing possibilities and the limitations in expressing the full scope of human experience. The novel stands as a powerful exploration of the interconnectedness of identity, memory, and language, ultimately illuminating the complex human endeavor to find self, beauty and meaning amidst pain and fragmentation (Weekly). In Vuong's work, therefore, subjectivity becomes a vehicle for exploring broader existential questions through the lens of individual consciousness.

Brit Bennet's novel, *TVH*, equally unfolds as an intergenerational epic that explores the African-American experience, focusing on themes of racial identity, trauma, family, reinvention, and societal stratifications (Ennie Bostrom 35). Brit Bennett's TVH, on the other hand, provides a compelling narrative that explores the African-American experience, focusing on themes of racial identity, trauma, family, and belonging. It delves into the lives of twin sisters who choose to live in two different racial realities, thereby offering a nuanced exploration of Americanness in the context of race and personal choice.

At merely 16 years old, the Vignes twins, Desiree and Stella, escape the confining boundaries of Mallard, Louisiana in 1954, ultimately finding refuge in New Orleans (Hong). Over a span of 14 years, their paths diverge significantly (Hong *The Vanishing Half*). Desiree eventually returns to Mallard with her dark-skinned daughter, Jude, fleeing an abusive husband in Washington, DC. Meanwhile, Stella embarks on a life passing as a white, privileged woman in Los Angeles after marrying her employer and birthing a fair-skinned daughter, Kennedy. Desiree 's daughter, Jude goes to study at UCLA, leading her to unearth her connection to Stella, her mother's estranged twin. This revelation inadvertently sows the seeds for the Vignes family's eventual reunion. Bennett gracefully guides readers through decades and a diverse cast of evolving characters, like Stella and Jude, whose journeys reflect shifting racial, age, and background identities (ibid.).

Bennett's exploration of passing as a choice underscores the societal pressures contributing to trauma and identity crises (Siemes 147). The act of "passing" emerges as a choice to evade the frequently aggressive social categorizations imposed, encompassing aspects like race, gender, or sexuality. Often, individuals are identified and integrated into specific categories grounded on their visual attributes and milieu. Thus, alterations in appearance, locale, diction, or attire can serve as endeavors to transition into an alternate social designation (Siemes 147). Bennett is careful to set this up beautifully with two people—Desiree and Stella—born on the same day, same mother, same father, same

upbringing, same age, same race, who experience different life and privileges because they chose to embrace different parts of themselves.

The contemporary relevance of Bennett's work is unquestionable as her exploration of racial passing seamlessly intersects with timely discussions on gender constructs and the boundaries of self-definition (Jones 42). By transitioning narrative focus between generations, from the Vignes twins to Kennedy and Jude, Bennett emphasizes the perpetuation and transformation of racial and identity-related trauma (Al Areqi 41). In this intricate narrative, Bennett underscores the importance of continued discourse on racial trauma and identity across generations—from the Fredrick Douglas-es of the 1700s, to Toni Morrisons of the 1970s to Brit Bennetts of 2020s. She meticulously shows how varying access to education and economic independence shapes characters' abilities to navigate and articulate their traumas. Her contrasting character portrayals highlight the diverse ways individuals experience and respond to trauma, bringing attention to the systemic issues that often hinder healing and restoration. Bennett's intricate narrative provides a rich foundation to invite readers to delve deeper into various aspects of human experience— including racial, gender and sexuality, trauma and family—fostering discussions on the complexities of subjectivity.

A notable aspect common to both texts is the temporal setting, which, despite being recently penned, unfold in the distant past. Voung's *OEWBAG*, written in 2019, is set in the mid-1960s, while Bennett's *TVH*, crafted in 2020, spans from the 1960s to the 1990s. This choice of setting is not just a mere backdrop but holds symbolic significance, particularly in the context of trauma and the journey toward healing. Time, it appears, holds crucial currency when it comes to trauma. The intricate relationship between the past and the present is unbreakable, as the roots of trauma are often buried deep in the past while its triggers may be nestled in the present. Healing from trauma, therefore, mandates an acknowledgment and understanding of the past and its complex interplay with the present.

The novels underscore the position that identities are shaped by a matrix of factors—race, class, gender, power dynamics and trauma—that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of individual's subjectivity.

2 Literary Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review chapter delves into the intricate layers of subjectivity as it intersects with the societal constructs of race, gender, class, and the ramifications of trauma. Drawing upon a rich array of scholarly dialogues, this section scrutinizes the nuanced interplay between individual experiences and the broader cultural forces at work in forming subjectivity. It pivots on the concept of intersectionality to explore the complex fabric of of the two novels. The upcoming discussions with scholarly literatuere will illuminate how these literary works serve as microcosms for larger societal narratives, shedding light on the effects of personal histories interwoven with collective memory and societal pressures, thereby contributing to the contemporary discourse on subjectivity.

2.2 The Concept of Subjectivity

Exploring the concept of subjectivity is pivotal to understanding the complexities of identity in contemporary literature, as highlighted by Ruth Robbins' pointed question, 'Who do you think you are?' (Robbins 1). This inquiry not only sets the stage for my project but also delves into the essence of personal and collective subjectivity, a theme central to the works of Brit Bennett and Ocean Vuong. Nick Mansfield further illuminates this discussion, noting the late twentieth century as a time when both intellectuals and ordinary individuals grappled with identity's multifaceted nature, shaped by both societal pressures and deep personal reflection (Mansfield 2). In a world where modern and postmodern frameworks place the self at the forefront of experience and meaning, understanding subjectivity becomes crucial. Mansfield defines subjectivity as

> …an abstract or general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves and that encourages us to imagine that, or simply helps us to understand why, our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience (Mansfield 3)

This foundational perspective is essential for analyzing how the characters in Bennett's and Vuong's novels navigate their identities amidst complex social landscapes, making it a

cornerstone of my thesis exploration. Mansfield's conceptualization of subjectivity highlights that it is not a self-contained concept but a broader, interconnected principle. It underscores the notion that our inner lives are intrinsically linked with others, whether they serve as the objects of our needs, desires, and interests, or they participate as fellow individuals sharing common experiences. In essence, subjectivity is not a solitary existence; it thrives in the context of relationships, interactions, and shared human experiences. In sum, Mansfield's definition invites us to recognize the interconnectedness of our internal worlds with the external world, emphasizing that our subjectivity is deeply rooted in our interactions and connections with others.

Mansfield's insights into subjectivity offer a comprehensive framework that resonates profoundly within the realm of literature. Mansfield posits that the concept of self has gained significant importance in comprehending the lives of individuals in modern and postmodern cultures. In these cultural contexts, he suggests that various life events and experiences, such as “trauma, loss and achievement; birth, death, survival, crime, consumption, career” (Mansfield 2) have taken on new significance as triggers for emotional responses. His perspective underscores the idea that the concept of self has evolved to encompass a wide range of emotions and reactions, where these life events serve as pretexts for individuals to engage with and express their emotions. In this view, the self becomes a central framework for understanding how people navigate and respond to the complexities of modern and postmodern life. Mansfield therefore, sets the stage for a deep dive into the personal and collective intricacies of identity as portrayed in Bennett and Vuong’s works. His discussion is crucial for framing the complex interplay of societal influences and individual experiences that shape the characters in their narratives.

For many years, literary critics have discussed the concepts of 'the person' and 'the individual.' However, in recent times, there has been a shift towards using terms like 'the human subject' or simply “the subject” (Bennett and Royle 151). Specifically in cultural theories about the self, the word ‘subject’ is preferred than “self” because it “captures the sense of social and cultural entanglement (Mansfield 2). This is what Michel Foucault refers to as being ‘being subject to someone else by control and dependence’ (Foucault qtd. in (Bennett and Royle 151).

Furthermore, the term “subject” can be understood in multiple ways; four are relevant for this thesis. The first is grammatical subject which pertains to the pronoun “I” in a statement, appearing to echo our self-identity. Yet, as this term is common across languages, it associates us with a more extensive historical network of significance (Mansfield 3). This

suggests the concept of self or individual identity is inextricably subject to language such that 'beginning with the name itself, or with the words "I", "me", "mine", "myself", and any other way of thinking about ourselves is necessarily linguistic (Bennett and Royle 151).

Politico-legal is the second context within which the word subject is understood, where individuals are viewed concerning laws and societal frameworks. The politico-legal subject 'needs to be rational and responsible, a morally and rationally capable being… (with) the ability to take part in legal' and political actions (Mäki-Petajä-Leinonen et al. 5). In democracies, this bond is rooted in a balance of duties and privileges, commonly termed as a "social contract" (Mansfield 4). The philosophical subject is the third understanding where the "I" is pivotal to queries about cognition, ethics, and worldviews (Mansfield 4). The fourth is the subject as an Individual where the "subject" symbolizes distinct human experiences beyond language, politics, and philosophy. This covers various ways people project themselves, either aiming for simplicity or wishing to be notable. It mirrors the core of individuality (Mansfield 4), embracing the internal perspectives, feelings, beliefs, and desires of an individual. Crafting sentences, upholding societal norms, justifying philosophical viewpoints, and addressing personal challenges, are all facets that shape individuals' experiences as subjects (Mansfield 4). These aspects influence how characters perceive the world and, by extension, how readers relate to their stories. These aspects of the subject therefore, set the stage for a deep dive into the personal and collective intricacies of identity as portrayed in Bennett and Vuong's works. This is crucial for framing and understanding the complex interplay of societal influences and individual experiences that shape the characters in their narratives.

Historically, Freudian psychoanalysis has profoundly influenced our conceptualization of subjectivity, challenging Cartesian views of a conscious, rational self and introducing the complex dynamics of the unconscious (Mansfield 25-27) It provided the context 'over the past century in thinking about thinking, and in thinking about the model of the rational subject'(Bennett and Royle 153).This influence can be seen throughout 20th-century culture, from the startling shifts of surrealism to the self-help trends in popular psychology, underscoring Freud's profound insights. It has profoundly shaped cultural experiences and ways of understanding these experiences (Marcus and Mukherjee 16). It has evolved from its clinical origins to become an integral part of cultural life, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and their surroundings. This influence is rooted in the idea that humans, as social subjects, continually interpret their identities through the cultural discourses surrounding them. While Freud himself did not consider it his best work, it

remains one of his most significant contributions (Rodríguez). This work is not just a historical artifact but continues to influence contemporary discussions in psychology, literature, politics, and more. It ushered in a revolutionary perspective on the human mind and its complexities (Rodríguez).

In the nineteenth century, discussions about subjectivity began to take on explicit political dimensions. Several significant events and movements during this period illustrate this transformation (Hall 32). The French Revolution of 1789 marked a significant shift in awareness regarding class oppression and the reasons behind violent revolutions. Simultaneously, a vocal group of women started challenging societal norms related to gender identity and the unjust treatment of women. However, the issue that particularly highlights the inadequacies of early modern and Enlightenment theories of subjectivity is the matter of slavery and the ongoing devaluation of racial groups which consequently extends the discussion of subjectivity to how objectification affects the subjectivity of oppressed groups. Case in point is the United States, where the "Declaration of Independence" asserted the equality of all men, yet simultaneously excluded Native Americans and slaves from the category of individuals with unalienable rights (Hall 37) Thus, different and more nuanced theories of subjectivity were required to understand how the systemic degradation of these groups affected their self-identities. Abolitionists, former slaves, and early Black commentators provided valuable insights during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, for instance, vividly portrays the daily horrors of slave existence and the impact of slavery on the self-identities of the enslaved. It reveals how slaves had to adopt tactical dissembling to survive and protect themselves. This approach contrasted starkly with Kant's ideals (Hall 38). Harriet Jacobs, in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (year), similarly discusses how slavery had negative effects on both whites and blacks, deforming their subjectivities. These authors offered unique perspectives due to their experiential knowledge, and their works laid the foundation for identity politics (ibid.).

W. E. B. Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), examined the enduring effects of slavery and racism on African-Americans' psyches and self-conceptions (Hall 38). He coined the term "double-consciousness" to describe the experience of African-Americans, who constantly viewed themselves through the eyes of others, leading to a sense of duality and internal conflict. Du Bois recognized the complexity of identity, with multiple subject positions and the desire for internal integration. He believed that healing and self-recovery for oppressed individuals required education, consciousness raising, and gradual processes of

change. The legacy of slavery continues to impact subjectivity in various parts of the world, including the African continent and the USA (Hall 39).

In addition, Chris Barker also makes some contributions that sheds light on this discussion in his book *Making Sense of Cultural Studies* (2002). He notes that

> while subjectivity is a social and cultural accomplishment, our individuality can be understood in terms of the specific ways in which the resources of the self are arranged. That is, while we are all subject to the 'impress of history', the particular form that we take and the specific arrangements of discursive elements are unique to each individual, for we have all had singular patterns of biochemistry, family relations, friends, work and access to discursive resources. (Barker 92-03)

Chris Barker's insight into subjectivity as a social and cultural accomplishment resonates deeply with the idea that individuality can be best comprehended through the unique organization of one's internal resources. While we all share the common imprint of history's influence on our lives, the distinctive form we each assume and the specific arrangements of discursive elements within us are what set us apart. This distinctiveness arises from our singular patterns of biochemistry, family relationships, friendships, work experiences, and access to various discursive resources. Subjectivity, therefore, emerges as a collective construction, with individuals actively participating in the arrangement of their subjective elements. Even when cultural backgrounds may appear similar, the variations in how we organize these elements lead to the diversity of human experiences. Every inner emotion and experience can be attributed to this unique arrangement.

Furthermore, Althusser and Foucault challenge traditional notions of the subject by presenting it as a construct shaped by language, social discourse, and power (Gritzner 329). Foucault particularly criticizes the idea of an autonomous 'interior self,' asserting that what we consider our subjective experience is a production of historical discourse without transcendental continuity from one subject position to another. Speaking, then, is not an act of personal origin but an adoption of pre-existing discursive roles that subject us to their inherent power (Barker 88). Foucault contends that all discourse is historically contingent, shaped by its temporal and spatial contexts. For example, religious movements like the Bhakti or Arya Samaj in Hinduism signify shifts in religious discourse over time, illustrating how no discourse is free from historical influence. Thus, what might seem like individual expression is deeply rooted in and constrained by existing discourse frameworks. This means

that any statement we make is filled by taking on roles available within the discourse, diminishing the notion of personal agency in creating our narratives. These ideas challenge the concept of a unique personal identity, suggesting instead that our subjectivities are fluid and interchangeable within the confines of historical discourse (Foucault, 1972: 94 qtd in Barker 88). From a postmodern perspective, it's acknowledged that individuals can exist within multiple discourses and express themselves from these distinct discursive contexts, resulting in different subject positions. This multiplicity of subject positions can be viewed as a liberating condition, as it enables individuals to transition from one discursive paradigm to another, avoiding confinement to a singular discourse. This fluidity is only achievable when we recognize that individuals are subjected to the influence of various discourses. Consequently, individuals can choose to immerse themselves in specific discursive paradigms to free themselves from the constraints of others, allowing for a more flexible and diverse expression of their subjectivity.

Barker notes the process through which we are shaped into subjects, emphasizing that we are "subject to" social processes that ultimately define us as "subjects for" both ourselves and others. In this dynamic, when we articulate thoughts within specific discourses, others act as witnesses and audiences, just as we do when they speak. This mutual exchange involves a continuous process of self-definition and judgment. We are actively engaged in this ongoing journey of becoming, as we navigate the complex interplay of social processes that shape our subjectivity.

Foucault's perspective on subjectivity is illuminating in its assertion that there are no universally shared subjectivities that apply to all individuals in all respects. He underscores the inherent diversity in our subjectivities, which emerges from our active engagement in configuring the resources of the self. Furthermore, Foucault introduces the notion that subjectivity is a product of discourse, wherein discourses serve as regulated frameworks for discussing and defining particular concepts. For instance, the term “man.” Various discourses attempt to define 'man' by pulling it into their respective discursive realms, each with its unique terminology and perspectives. For example, religion might define 'man' differently from fields like psychology, psychiatry, economics, or politics. Each of these discursive domains has a vested interest in delineating the boundaries of what an entity is. Consequently, an individual's subjectivity, shaped by their religious beliefs, becomes an effect of the discourse of religion, simultaneously subjecting them to its influence. Conversely, if the same person identifies as atheistic, their subjectivity, experiences, and

condition as an atheist are influenced by atheistic discourses, exemplifying the concept of subjectedness.

Additionally, while discursive practices and discourses play a significant role in shaping our subjectivities, individuals also possess agency in arranging their subjectivities based on the resources available to them. As a result, it becomes appealing for people to frame their subjectivities from multiple discourses, avoiding confinement within a single, limiting discursive field. This multifaceted approach to subjectivity enables individuals to explore and express the rich complexity of their identities beyond the constraints of any single discourse.

Before concluding, I would want to briefly touch on the concept of identity that is inetxtricably linked to subjectivity. In his essay “Philosophical History of identity, Algis Mickunas identity as the core of what remains consistent and recognizable within the flux of an individual’s experiences and transformations (Jackson 560). It provides a framework for understanding ourselves and the world around us. For instance, in philosophical and cultural discussions, identity is often portrayed as a permanent, unchanging essence that interacts with, but distinct from, the ever-changing phenomena or 'flux' surrounding it (ibid.). Moreover, the essay elaborates on how identity functions within social structures and personal psychology. In societies, identity shapes and is shaped by the roles, norms, and practices prevalent in those societies. Psychologically, identity relates to how individuals see themselves and maintain continuity of this self-perception through changes in life. This dual perspective highlights the complexity of identity as both an internal, personal construct and an external, socially mediated one (562).

From the foregoing, identity can be understood as the culmination of a person's essence at any given moment, shaped by a myriad of influences including cultural, social, political, and legal factors. At any specific point, a person can describe their identity, which acts as a snapshot of who they are—a snapshot influenced by ongoing social and cultural negotiations. These negotiations continually shift, driven by evolving values, norms, and societal agreements, thus ensuring that identity, while momentarily definable, is always in a state of evolution. This thesis, therefore, uses this understanding to emphasize the distinction between identity and subjectivity, as the two terms are occassionally used interchangeably. Identity, in the context of this work, refers to the specific characteristics that define an individual at a particular moment. In contrast, subjectivity delves into the underlying forces and resources that shape and influence this identity. Subjectivity reveals the broader factors at play, providing a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics that constitute identity. This

distinction is crucial because subjectivity plays a vital role in our understanding of identity. It allows us to appreciate the broader context—the myriad factors and forces contributing to the formation of identity. By exploring subjectivity, we gain insight into the extensions and factors that shape identity, thus offering a more comprehensive picture of an individual's being and the societal currents that influence it.

Therefore, while identity and subjectivity are related, they are not necessarily interchangeable. They interact to provide a fuller picture of an individual's being and the societal currents that influence it, which is essential for understanding the complex nature of identity as it evolves over time.

To finish up on this section on subjectivity, Barker's perspective on the formation of the subject within the realm of cultural studies presents three fundamental aspects. Firstly, cultural studies perceive the subject as being shaped through discourse, emphasizing that our identities are constructed through language and communication. Secondly, it underscores our roles as both cultural and political actors, implying that we actively participate in shaping our own identities within the broader cultural and political contexts. Lastly, it emphasizes the necessity of having the ability to navigate between these various discourses effectively, adapting our language and behaviours according to the context and goals we have in mind. In essence, Barker's framework highlights the discursive nature of subjectivity, our agency in cultural and political realms, and our capacity to flexibly switch between discourses as needed. In other words, subjectivity can therefore be considered in three dimensions. First, subjectivity is a condition of being a person; secondly, refers to the processes that go into the construction of a person; thirdly, the very experience of being a particular person, that inner world connected to culture.

In the context presented, discourse plays a dual role: it not only shapes and constructs individuals as subjects but also subjects these individuals to the influence of discourse itself. Readers assume a specific position from which they interpret and make sense of the world, largely influenced by the kind of discourse they engage with. Consequently, the concept of a subject position, which can be understood as an individual's orientation, placement, obligations, and what is brought to the forefront of their consciousness, is fundamentally a product of discourse. It is within this framework that subjectivity is perceived as both an inherent aspect of one's existence and an ongoing process of development, with a greater emphasis placed on the latter—highlighting the dynamic nature of becoming a subject. The sections that follow will delve into the concept of intersectionality as it provides context for the intricate web of discourses that shape and define constructed subjectivities. The section

will keenly focus on the interplay of intersectional—race and gender, class and power dynamics, as well as the haunting presence of trauma— that infuence subjectivity.

The upcoming sections will explore the concept of intersectionality, providing a framework to understand the complex discourses that shape and define constructed subjectivities. These sections will closely examine how intersectional factors axes —such as race, gender, class, and power dynamics— amidst the pervasive influence of trauma, interact to shape individual subjectivities.

2.3 Intersectionality

Using intersectionality as an analytic lens highlights the multiple nature of individual identities and how varying combinations of class, gender, race, sexuality, and citizenship categories differentially position everyone these axes of social division work together and influence one another to shape each individual biography. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that posits that multiple social categorizations, such as race, class, and gender, intersect and interact to create a unique system of discrimination or privilege for an individual or group. The term underscores the idea that singular categorical labels cannot adequately capture the essence of a person's lived experience. The concept traces its roots back to Black feminist thought, particularly in the United States. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal scholar, is credited with coining the term intersectionality in the late 1980s. The term intersectionality highlights the multifaceted nature of identity and oppression (Kimberle Crenshaw)Crenshaw used it primarily to address the unique discrimination faced by Black women—a discrimination that couldn’t be understood solely through the lenses of race or gender independently but rather from their intersection. Besides Kimberlé Crenshaw’s foundational work, several other scholars have expanded and built upon the concept of intersectionality. Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought emphasizes the importance of viewing race and gender as interconnected systems of oppression. Other foundational texts and proponents include Bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Angela Davis, among others, each contributing nuanced insights and critiques to the framework.

The concept of intersectionality is particularly useful to this thesis to the extent it has gained traction in many interdisciplinary studies (Collins 1). In …, Collins and Bilge define intersectionality as,

> …intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age – among others – as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences." (Collins 1)

Essentially, intersectionality helps explain the intricacies in the world and people's experiences. It posits that power dynamics, such as race and gender, don't operate in isolation but combine and interact in society (Collins 1). Intersectionality is an analytic tool employed to address multifaceted problems arising from overlapping power dynamics. Intersectionality offers a comprehensive strategy to address the varied needs and experiences of diverse groups. This concept also emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, when African American women activists found their unique challenges unaddressed by singularly focused movements like civil rights or feminism (Collins 2). Black women's concerns were often overlooked in various social movements, leading them to adopt intersectionality to address their multifaceted discriminations.

2.4 Subjectivity through Intersectional Analysis

Collins and Bilge clarify six core ideas that appear and reappear when people use intersectionality as an analytic tool: power, inequality, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice (Collins and Bilge 25). These ideas are neither always present in a particular project, nor do they appear on projects in the same way. Instead, they provide guideposts for thinking through intersectionality. First is the interpersonal domain of power; power relations are about people's lives, how people relate to one another, and who is advantaged or disadvantaged within social interactions (Collins and Bilge 7). Then there is the disciplinary domain of power. When it comes to the organization of power, different people find themselves encountering different treatment regarding which rules apply to them and how those rules will be implemented (Collins and Bilge 9).

Third is the cultural domain of power. When it comes to t h e organization of power, ideas matter in providing explanations for social inequality and fair play. This is where the idea of a level or flat playing field becomes crucial. Imagine a tilted football field that was

installed on the side of a gently sloped hill with the red team's goal on top of the hill and the blue team's goal in the valley. The red team has a clear advantage. Football fans would be outraged if the actual playing field were tilted in this way. Yet this is what social divisions of class, gender, and race (Collins and Bilge 11). The sports metaphor of a level playing field speaks to the desire for fairness. The cultural domain of power helps manufacture messages that playing fields are level, that all competitions are fair, and that any resulting patterns of winners and losers have been fairly accomplished. With the advent of new communications technologies, mass media has increased in significance for the cultural domain of power. Via contests between nations, cities, regions, and all sorts of things, mass media stages entertainment that reinforces the myth of a level playing field where one doesn't actually exist. (Collins and Bilge 11)

Competing mass-media spectacles reiterate the belief that unequal outcomes of winners and losers are normal outcomes of marketplace competition. In other words, social inequalities that are fairly produced are socially just (Collins and Bilge 11). The repetitive nature of sporting events, beauty pageants, reality television, and the like provide a useful interpretive context for viewing the marketplace relations of capitalism as being similarly organized (Collins and Bilge 11). These mass media spectacles and associated events also present important scripts of gender, race, and nation that work together and influence one another. The bravery of male athletes on national teams makes them akin to war heroes on battlefields, while the beauty, grace, and virtue of national beauty pageants are thought to represent the beauty, grace, and virtue of the nation. Mass-media spectacles may appear to be mere entertainment, yet they serve political ends (Collins and Bilge 11).

In other words, Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience (Collins and Bilge 25). Collins and Bilge sheds light on how the events and conditions of social and political life at play were not shaped by any one factor. Rather, the dynamics in each case reflected many factors that worked together in diverse and mutually influencing ways. For instance, using intersectionality as an analytic tool can foster a better understanding of growing global inequality (Collins and Bilge 15). Intersectional frameworks fosters a rethinking of the categories used to understand economic inequality (Collins and Bilge 16). Intersectional frameworks reveal how race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and citizenship relate in complex and intersecting ways to produce economic inequality Intersectional (Collins and Bilge 16). The central themes of intersectionality remain consistent: addressing social inequality, understanding intersecting power dynamics, and promoting social justice (Collins 24).

The primary objective is to dissect and comprehend the complex identities portrayed in these novels, identities that navigate through intricate social and political landscapes. Both *TVH* and *OEWBAG* are meaningful in this exploration, as they present characters whose identities are not just multifaceted but are also influenced by their surroundings in ways that both enhance and challenge their sense of self. *TVH* explores the African-American experience, focusing on the diverging paths of twin sisters within the context of race, identity, and family. *OEWBG* , conversely, delves into the Asian American experience, particularly the Vietnamese diaspora, highlighting themes of immigration, queerness, and the impact of historical events like war.

Intersectionality therefore becomes indispensable in unpacking the subjectivities portrayed in *TVH* and *OEWBAG*. Both novels present characters navigating multifaceted identities in societies that often seek to compartmentalize or stereotype them. In *TVH*, Stella's choice to pass as white isn't just about race—it's also about gender, socioeconomic class, and the societal privileges and oppressions these intersections entail. Desiree's life, juxtaposed against Stella's, provides a counterpoint of how different intersections of identity can shape life trajectories. *OEWBAG*, meanwhile, showcases the overlapping oppressions and privileges of LD's life as a queer Vietnamese American. His experiences cannot be separated into distinct categories of race, sexuality, or socioeconomic class; they coalesce, creating a complex tapestry of identity, trauma, and growth.

At this point, the discussion will progress by examining how race, gender and sexuality, class, and trauma function as intersectional axes that shape subjectivity.

2.4.1 Race

Kwame Anthony Appiah's discussion of race in "Race," offers a rich examination of the historical development and implications of racial thought. Appiah delves into the complexities of race theory, tracing its origins from ancient times to the modern era, and exploring its intersections with literature, culture, and society. Appiah's analysis underscores the pervasive influence of racial thinking on literature and culture, shaping narratives of identity, power, and belonging. Through an intersectional lens, we can unpack the complex interplay between race and other social categories, revealing how systems of oppression intersect and reinforce one another.

Appiah's exploration of the historical development and implications of racial thought provides a backdrop against which we can critically examine how race intersects with other axes of subjectivity, such as gender, sexuality in *TVH* and *OEWBG*. Appiah contextualizes the emergence of racial thinking in the 19th century, referencing Martin Tupper's poem “The Anglo-Saxon Race” as emblematic of the shift in English identity and self-perception during that period (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 274). Tupper's poem reflects a burgeoning sense of racial superiority and entitlement among the educated English elite, laying the groundwork for a new racialist ideology that permeated literature and culture. Central to Appiah's analysis is the distinction between racialist and non-racialist perspectives on race. While ancient civilizations such as Greece and Israel held views on human differences based on ancestry and culture, they did not conceive of race in the modern sense. Instead, their conceptualizations of difference were rooted in environmental factors, religious beliefs, and divine covenant (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 275-6). Appiah contrasts these ancient perspectives with the racialism that emerged in the 19th century, characterized by the belief in distinct racial groups possessing inherent, biologically determined traits. Racialists categorized individuals into discrete racial categories based on physical characteristics and purportedly immutable characteristics of intellect and morality. This racial essentialism, Appiah argues, underpinned scientific racism and justified colonial domination and oppression (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 275-6). An intersectional analysis of Appiah's discussion reveals the entanglement of race with other axes of identity, such as gender, class, and nationality. Appiah highlights how racialized stereotypes in literature, such as Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello and *The Merchant of Venice*, were shaped not only by physical appearance but also by religious and cultural biases. The characterization of Moors and Jews reflected theological conceptions of the "Other" as morally and intellectually inferior, reinforcing racial hierarchies (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 277-78).

Furthermore, Appiah's distinction between racialist and non-racialist perspectives on race sheds light on the ways in which race is constructed and portrayed in literature. In Bennett's *TVH,* the characters' racial identities are central to their experiences and interactions. The novel explores the complexities of racial passing[1] and the impact of race on individual subjectivity and familial relationships. By delving into the characters' internal

[1] "Racial passing," typically referred "passing," involves being recognized, or successfully presenting oneself, as a member of a different racial group. More broadly, it pertains to instances where individuals of nonwhite backgrounds may present themselves as white (Dawkins, Marcia Alesan. "Clearly Invisible : Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity." 2012.

struggles with race, Bennett challenges racial essentialism and highlights the fluidity and complexity of racial identity. Similarly, in Vuong's *OEWBG* race intersects with other dimensions of identity, such as sexuality and immigration, to shape the protagonist's experiences and perceptions of self. Through Vuong's lyrical prose, the novel illuminates the ways in which race is intertwined with memory, trauma, and desire, offering a nuanced portrayal of Vietnamese-American subjectivity.

Appiah's analysis of the historical connection between race and nationalism particularly in European contexts, provides a framework for understanding how racial identity intersects with notions of belonging and citizenship, in the novels. He underscores how the emergence of nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was deeply intertwined with conceptions of race, as nations began to define themselves based on shared descent and cultural heritage (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 282). This fusion of race and nationality laid the groundwork for the racialization of literature, as national identity became closely linked with literary expression. Appiah delves into the role of language in shaping national identity, drawing attention to figures like Johann Gottfried Herder, who argued that language embodies the essence of the nation (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 283). This linguistic nationalism, as Appiah explains, contributed to the racialization of literature, with certain literary traditions being viewed as expressions of the national spirit encoded within specific racial or ethnic groups. Brit Bennett explores of racial passing in *TVH* reflects the ways in which racial identity is often tied to social acceptance and belonging within a community. Similarly, Vuong's portrayal of immigrant experiences underscores the ways in which race intersects with notions of citizenship and national identity, particularly within the context of the Vietnam War and its aftermath.

Moreover, Appiah discusses the evolution of racial ideologies such as Anglo-Saxonism, which valorized certain racial and ethnic groups while marginalizing others. He explores how the construction of a racial hierarchy, with Anglo-Saxons positioned at the top, served to reinforce existing power structures and justify colonial domination. An intersectional perspective highlights how race intersects with class and colonialism, with dominant racial groups exerting their power to subjugate and exploit marginalized populations. Appiah examines literature as a site of racial contestation and identity formation. He discusses how the exclusion of certain racial and ethnic groups from the literary canon reflects broader patterns of discrimination and marginalization (Lentricchia and McLaughlin

286). For example, Appiah delves into the history of Afro-American literary criticism, which emerged as a response to the erasure of black voices from the literary mainstream. This discussion of literature as a site of racial contestation and identity formation resonates with the thematic concerns of both novels. Bennett's examination of racial passing and identity negotiation reflects the ways in which literature can serve as a space for marginalized voices to assert their subjectivity and challenge dominant narratives of race. Similarly, Vuong's exploration of trauma and memory highlights the role of literature in shaping individual and collective understandings of racial identity and belonging.

Furthermore, Appiah citicizes the politics of literary canonization, highlighting how race influences which texts are deemed worthy of study and recognition. He discusses efforts to diversify the literary canon by including works from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, challenging the Eurocentric biases that have historically dominated literary scholarship (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 287). This reveals how race interacts with other intersectional axes like gender and class within the realm of literature. Black women writers, for instance, faced unique challenges in navigating both racial and gendered stereotypes within literary discourse. Similarly, writers from lower socio-economic backgrounds often grappled with intersecting forms of oppression that shaped their literary production and reception.

The discussion of race as articulated by Kwame Anthony Appiah offers a rich framework for analyzing the complexities of racial dynamics in literature, as exemplified in Bennett's *TVH* and Vuong's *OEWBG*.

2.4.1.1 Racial Subjectivity and Literature

Bennett and Royle's exploration of racial dynamics and colonialism in literature provides a useful lens through which to view the themes in *TVH* and *OEWBG*. Both novels engage deeply with questions of racial identity, as well as the legacy of colonial history, much like the issues addressed through the character of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*.

Bennett and Royle offer a nuanced exploration of how racial dynamics intersect with gender, sexuality, colonialism, and aesthetics in literature. They argue that questions of race are not confined to specific works explicitly addressing these themes but are deeply ingrained in the cultural and historical fabric of literature. They analyze Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a classic English novel that tackles not only gender but also racial difference. Rochester's

marriage to Bertha Mason, a Creole woman from the West Indies, who is portrayed as mad and imprisoned in the attic, forms the central conflict of the novel. This portrayal of Bertha highlights the intersection of race and colonial oppression. Rochester's flirtatious remarks about purchasing slaves and Jane's rejection of being seen as an object for purchase underscore the intertwined nature of race, gender, and economics in the narrative (Bennett and Royle 280-81).

Furthermore, they delve into the symbolism of Bertha's imprisonment and dehumanization, emphasizing how she embodies the racial other in contrast to Jane's whiteness and Englishness. Bertha's invisibility and non-human portrayal reflect the racialized discourse of otherness prevalent in Western literature (Bennett and Royle 282). In *TVH,* the twins' choices to either pass as white or live as a Black woman in America echo these themes of visibility and invisibility, similar to Bertha's portrayal as the racialized other who is both physically and metaphorically locked away and silenced. Bennett and Royle argue that representations of racial otherness are central to canonical works of English literature, citing examples from Shakespeare, Emily Brontë, George Eliot (Bennett and Royle 283). They critique the notion of universality in Western aesthetics, challenging the idea that one culture's aesthetic standards can be universally applied. They highlight the ideological biases inherent in such assertions, particularly in colonial contexts, as demonstrated by Thomas Babington Macaulay's arguments for the superiority of Western literature over indigenous Indian texts, discussed on page (Bennett and Royle 284). Moreover, they discuss the double marginalization experienced by black women in literature, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the plurality of identity and the subversive potential of black women's writing (Bennett and Royle 285).

Additionally, Frantz Fanon's reflections in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986), resonate deeply with the themes explored in *TVH* and *OEWBG*, as both novels intricately navigate the tension between being seen as an object by others and experiencing one's own rich interior subjectivity. Frantz Fanon remarks,

> “Dirty nigger! " Or simply, "Look, a Negro!"
> I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.
>
> (Fanon 109)

Frantz Fanon's poignant reflection in his book intricately delves into the complex dynamic of being both a subject and an object, an experience marked by the ‘gaze of the other’(Stephens 314). He astutely captures the essence of this predicament, wherein the observer becomes the judge, and the observed becomes the object under scrutiny. This intricate dance unfolds particularly vividly in oppressive contexts, whether one is a man or woman, Black, Hispanic, or any marginalized identity, especially in the North American context. Fanon eloquently expresses the yearning inherent in every individual to unearth the profound meaning behind their existence. However, when Fanon is referred to as a 'negro,' he discerns that he has been reduced to an object in the eyes of the person using this label. In this moment, his subjectivity seems to vanish, overshadowed by the perception of another. Lacan’s idea of the 'gaze of the other' ((Stephens 314) comes into play, as this external perspective constructs Fanon's subjectivity, relegating him to an object within their gaze. It's vital to recognize that Fanon, like anyone else, possesses an inner world, a rich subjectivity, an interiority teeming with desires to be the originator of meaning. This profound interior world stands in stark contrast to the objectification imposed upon him by another's gaze. Fanon's poignant narrative vividly illustrates the struggle to reclaim one's subjectivity in the face of external objectification, highlighting the perpetual tension between the inner world and the external gaze of society.

Both novels explore how characters are perceived by others versus how they perceive themselves, a fundamental aspect of Fanon's critique of racial dynamics. The narrative setup in *TVH* directly engages with Fanon's idea of being an object in the eyes of society; Stella's passing allows her to escape the external gaze that objectifies her as a Black woman, yet internally she grapples with the dissonance between her true self and the identity she performs. Similarly, Vuong's novel probes the depths of LD's personal identity against external perceptions and the historical trauma of war. Fanon’s concept of the “gaze of the other” is relevant here as LD faces societal objectification not only for his race but also for his sexuality, highlighting the intersectional nature of his experiences.

2.4.2 Gender

In examining the nuances of gender in *TVH* and *OEWBG*, Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman,” frames our understanding of gender as a dynamic and constructed subjectivity (Leitch et al. 1211). This principle crucially underpins both novels, highlighting how characters navigate their complex identities within

restricitve societal structures, thus reflecting and challenging the multifaceted nature of subjectivity shaped by gender, race, class, and trauma.

Beauvoir's position contributes to the discussion of subjectivity by challenging traditional notions of gender and identity. She statement calls attention to the fact that subjectivity is not a universal experience shared by all individuals; it varies greatly depending on factors such as gender, culture, and societal norms. It prompts a deeper exploration of how subjectivity is influenced by external factors and the extent to which individuals can challenge and redefine their subjectivities in the face of societal expectations and constraints.

Furthermore, this thesis will make significant reference to Judith Butler's insights into identity formation through performativity. She provides a foundational lens for my analysis of subjectivity in *TVH* and *OEWBG,* as both novels explore the fluid and constructed nature of identity in the face of societal norms and personal struggles. Commenting on Beauvoir, Judith Butler remarks that,

> If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to inter- vention and resignification.
>
> (Butler ***Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*** 43)

Judith Butler's view on subjectivity emphasizes that our identities, including 'womanhood,' are not innate but are continuously shaped by cultural and societal influences. She argues that identities and behavioral patterns are not fixed from birth, but evolve over time. This perspective is particularly relevant to the concept of 'womanhood,' which Butler sees as a fluid and ever-changing category, constantly redefined and reshaped by societal and individual actions. Rather than a static state, 'womanhood' is a dynamic process of becoming, open to intervention and reinterpretation. This approach challenges rigid definitions and encourages a more flexible understanding of gender identity, highlighting its diversity and potential for evolution. Through this lens, we can appreciate the ongoing, discursive nature of 'womanhood' and its capacity for change.

Barker also underscores the significance of Butler's concept of performativity, particularly concerning the cultural construction of 'sex.' According to Butler, 'sex' is not a fixed, biological category but rather a cultural construct that is continuously reiterated

through the performance of hegemonic norms (Barker 43). This performativity is not a one-time event but an ongoing practice of citation and reiteration that enacts what it names. One crucial aspect emphasized by Butler is that the performance of 'sex' does not create the norms but invokes them through appeal to an authority that lacks a universal foundation. This act of citation produces and reconstitutes the very authority it references. Consequently, when someone declares, "It's a girl," it initiates a process in which the performative act of 'girling' is compelled (Barker 43).

However, this 'girl' is not merely performing out of choice; rather, she is compelled to 'cite' the norm to qualify and maintain her status as a viable subject. Femininity, according to Butler, is not a matter of choice but a forced citation of a norm, deeply intertwined with disciplinary, regulatory, and punitive mechanisms. It is vital to understand that no single individual voluntarily takes on a gender norm; instead, the citation of gender norms is necessary for one to qualify as a subject, becoming a 'one' is contingent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms.

In essence, performativity, as conceptualized by Butler, is not the result of conscious, intentional acts by self-aware actors. Instead, it is compelled by a regulatory apparatus rooted in heterosexuality, perpetually reproducing itself through the enforced production of 'sex.' The very idea of an intentional sexed actor is, in fact, a product of performativity itself, as gender constitutes an effect rather than an expression of a pre-existing subject. Barker acknowledges the strengths of Butler's notion of performativity while also highlighting its limitations and the need to explore sex as both biochemistry and cultural performance. He underscores the central role of performance in cultural analysis, emphasizing that it encompasses embodied actions, various languages of meaning production, and intentional as well as non-intentional actions, making it a valuable framework for understanding the complexity of subjectivity and identity.

As we shall see in the following, Judith Butler's ideas on performativity and the construction of gender and identity are highly relevant to the discussion of subjectivity in Brit Bennett's *TVH* and Ocean Vuong's *OEWBAG*. In *TVH*, Brit Bennett explores the intricacies of racial identity, passing, and the performative aspects of race and gender. Butler's notion of performativity becomes particularly relevant when considering the characters' decisions to pass as white, effectively performing a different racial identity to navigate societal expectations and opportunities. The characters' subjectivities are shaped by their performative actions, as they grapple with the consequences of concealing their true racial identities. Similarly, in *OEWBAG*, the novel delves into the experiences of a Vietnamese-American

protagonist as he navigates questions of identity, sexuality, and the interplay between cultural and personal subjectivity. Butler's ideas on the performative nature of gender and identity resonate in the protagonist's exploration of his own sexuality and his attempts to understand and express his desires within the context of his cultural background.

Both novels underscore the fluid and constructed nature of subjectivity, highlighting how individuals perform various aspects of their identities in response to societal norms, expectations, and pressures. Butler's ideas provide a valuable lens through which to analyze the characters' struggles with self-identity, societal expectations, and the performative elements inherent in their experiences.

In addition, Bennett and Royle's discussion on gender provides a valuable framework for analyzing the nuanced portrayals of gender and sexuality in *TVH* and *OEWBAG* highlighting the ways in which literature serves as a site of resistance and critique against societal norms and power structures. They explore the concepts of patriarchy and phallocentrism, where male dominance is maintained not just through overt power structures but also through symbolic means, such as language and cultural narratives (Bennett and Royle 214-5). It critiques the historical prioritization of male perspectives and highlights the subtle ways in which power and authority are gendered. Another important aspect of the discussion is the deconstruction of gender identity (Bennett and Royle 217-8).They argue against essentialist views of gender, suggesting that literary texts challenge our fixed ideas about gender by presenting complex characters and narratives that cannot be easily categorized. This deconstruction is aligned with feminist and deconstructive critiques, which emphasize the fluidity of identity and the problematic nature of binary oppositions.They therefore suggests moving beyond a binary understanding of gender to consider multiple forms of difference, including those within individuals. It highlights the importance of recognizing and exploring the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and other identity markers, suggesting that identities are multifaceted and complex. Their ideas will help explore the ways in which the novels serve as commentaries on the performance of gender and the fluidity of sexual identity, drawing parallels with Gilman's work to underscore the societal constraints that shape women's experiences. These ideas also help to examine the characters' navigation of their sexualities in a world that polices the boundaries of race and gender, reflecting broader societal tensions around these issues.

One can thus, argue that an intersectional analysis of gender and sexuality in literature reveals the ways in which narratives both reflect societal norms and serve as sites of resistance and critique. Literature has the potential to question and expand our understanding

of gender and sexuality by examining how characters navigate, conform to, or challenge gender stereotypes and power dynamics.

Overall, Bennett and Royle's examination of gender offers a crucial perspective for interpreting the intricate representations of gender and sexuality in *TVH* and *OEWBAG*. Their analysis underscores how literature acts as a powerful medium for challenging and critiquing prevailing social norms and power dynamics. Through an intersectional analysis, readers can gain deeper insights into the complexities of identity and subjectivity in these contemporary novels. Bennett and Royle's emphasis on the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and other axes of subjectivity resonates with the themes of the novels, which depict characters grappling with multiple forms of oppression and marginalization. By examining how the characters negotiate their sexualities in a world that polices the boundaries of race and gender, readers can better understand the broader societal tensions surrounding these issues and appreciate the characters' resilience and agency in challenging dominant narratives of gender and sexuality.

2.4.3 Class and Power Dynamics

In this section, Daniel T. O'Hara's examination of class dynamics offers a crucial perspective for analyzing how Bennett's *TVH* and Vuong's *TVH* and *OEWBAG* explore the intersections of class, race, and gender, revealing the profound influence of socioeconomic structures on personal identity and power relations within society. In his essay on *Class*, Daniel T. O'Hara engages with the concept of class through a multifaceted lens that incorporates historical, cultural, and theoretical perspectives, making it highly relevant for intersectional analysis. He explores the evolution of the class concept, its incorporation into literary and cultural criticism, the interplay of class with race, gender, and other identity markers, and the implications of these intersections for understanding social dynamics and power structures.

First, O'Hara critiques the incorporation of class into cultural criticism without further depth, indicating a lack of engagement with subsequent revisions in class theory (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 406). He argues that American criticism, despite its invocation of “race, class, and gender,” has not adequately kept up with advancements in class theory within relevant disciplines. In his analysis, O'Hara focuses on the American academic landscape as a microcosm representative of broader economic developments (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 407). He suggests that the academy, despite its claims of intellectual freedom, reflects harsh

economic truths, showcasing a hypocritical divide between critical theory and economic realities. Relevant to an intersectional analysis, O'Hara's discussion highlights how class intersects with other axes of identity and power within academia. He critiques the dichotomy between a select few "critical stars" and the mass of "intellectual drones," illustrating how both are shaped by and contribute to a capitalist rationality (Leitch et al., p. 408). This analysis underscores the importance of considering class dynamics alongside other forms of privilege and oppression within literary studies and academia as a whole.

Furthermore, O'Hara proposes a post-Marxist social analysis, exemplified through Jon Elster's theory of class, as a framework to understand the academic situation and its broader implications for radical change (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 408). By linking literary analysis with contemporary economic and social realities, O'Hara invites a nuanced understanding of class that intersects with various aspects of identity and power within the academic sphere. He continues his analysis by providing statistics regarding the academic job market in English literature departments, highlighting the challenges faced by new Ph.D. graduates (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 409). He notes that the number of Ph.D.'s produced far exceeds the number of available tenure-track positions, resulting in high rates of unemployment and underemployment. He emphasizes the precariousness of academic employment, with many Ph.D.'s resorting to part-time or adjunct teaching positions. In response to these challenges, universities adopt survival strategies, including selective tenure-track hires, increased faculty workload, and reliance on adjunct instructors for basic courses (409-410). He observes a shift in hiring practices towards multicultural specialties, driven partly by affirmative action. While these initiatives aim to diversify the professoriate, O'Hara suggests they may also reflect administrative pressure to meet diversity targets. He further explores the impact of these hiring practices on graduate students and faculty, identifying two distinct approaches to literary criticism: the archival dig and the cookie-cutter take. The archival dig involves thorough research and critical analysis, whereas the cookie-cutter take prioritizes marketability and quick-fix solutions. O'Hara also introduces the concept of "multicultural proles" to describe adjunct instructors and graduate students navigating the challenging academic landscape (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 411)

O'Hara continues to explore the dynamics of academia, particularly within the literary studies field. He introduces the concept of "powerbook radicals," referring to the rising stars in the profession who rely heavily on technology and embrace a globalist theoretical posture (412). These individuals, equipped with laptops, PCs, and internet access, engage in critiques of the global economic system while paradoxically contributing to its extension and

profitability. He then highlights two dangers faced by multicultural proles, adjunct instructors, and graduate students navigating the academic landscape. One danger involves students sacrificing genuine intellectual exploration for the sake of marketability, as exemplified by a graduate student's decision to commodify himself as a queer theorist (413). The other danger concerns the appropriation of cultural experiences by academics, often leading to shallow or misguided interpretations, as illustrated by a Caribbean student's experience at a conference.

Reflecting on Marxist theories of class, O'Hara therefore critiques traditional classifications and proposes a post-Marxist theory that emphasizes individual agency and rational choice (413-416). Drawing on Jon Elster's definition of class as groups of individuals compelled to engage in similar activities to maximize their endowments, He suggests a more fluid and nuanced understanding of social class (416). He argues that this approach allows for a deeper analysis of collective action and historical change, challenging fixed stereotypes and promoting strategic critical engagements (416-417). Ultimately, O'Hara advocates for a revisionary approach to understanding class dynamics, one that acknowledges the complexities of individual agency and collective action within a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. He emphasizes the importance of storytelling and rhetorical persuasion in shaping collective identities and promoting radical change (417-418).

O'Hara's discussion on class is highly relevant for a critical analysis of subjectivity in Brit Bennett's *TVH* and *OEWBAG*. Both novels delve into themes of identity, race, gender, and social class, making O'Hara's multifaceted lens on class particularly applicable. In *TVH* , Bennett explores the complexities of race and identity within the context of social class. The novel follows the lives of twin sisters Desiree and Stella, who navigate different paths based on their racial identities. Stella, who passes as white, gains access to privileges and opportunities denied to Desiree, highlighting how race intersects with class to shape individual experiences and opportunities. O'Hara's critique of the incorporation of class into cultural criticism without depth resonates here, as the novel prompts readers to consider how class dynamics intersect with other axes of privilege and oppression.

Similarly, Ocean Vuong's offers a poignant exploration of identity, trauma, and social class. The protagonist, LD, grapples with his Vietnamese immigrant background, poverty, and queerness while navigating the complexities of American society. O'Hara's discussion of the academic landscape as a microcosm of broader economic developments is relevant here, as LD's experiences reflect the challenges faced by marginalized individuals in accessing education and social mobility.

Moreover, O'Hara's proposal of a post-Marxist social analysis, exemplified through Jon Elster's theory of class, provides a framework for understanding the characters' struggles within the context of larger socio-economic structures. The characters in both novels are compelled to navigate systems of power and privilege that shape their identities and opportunities. His emphasis on individual agency and rational choice aligns with the characters' efforts to assert themselves and challenge societal norms. Overall, O'Hara's discussion on class offers valuable insights for analyzing the nuanced depictions of subjectivity, identity, and power in *TVH* and *OEWBG.* By considering how class intersects with race, gender, and other identity markers, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the characters' experiences and the socio-economic contexts in which they unfold.

2.4.4 Intersectional axis of Trauma

Subjectivity also borders on how a person's experience contributes to a person's identity. Roger Luckhurst recognizes the modern subject's inseparability from experiences of 'shock and trauma' (Luckhurst 20); one such experience on the global scale occurred in 2019, when the world was gripped by the onset of the coronavirus (CoViD-19) pandemic, a global crisis of unprecedented proportions (Talevi et al.). In 2020, the World Health Organization declared the CoViD-19 outbreak a public health emergency of international concern, underscoring the profound impact it had on the physical health of millions and the significant mental health threat it posed on a global scale (Talevi et al.). Consequently, people worldwide began seeking tailored interventions to address the varying degrees of psychological aftermath that resulted from this pandemic (Talevi et al.).

As the world grappled with the consequences of the pandemic, the United States was confronted with sporadic violent episodes stemming from a historically contentious relationship between the police and African Americans, sparking the "Black Lives Matter" campaign. This movement specifically protested against the use of excessive lethal force and police brutality against Black individuals(Graham et al.). However, violence is not confined to America alone; it is a pervasive global phenomenon with universal consequences. A 2002 World Report on Violence and Health by the World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that each year, "more than 1.6 million people worldwide lose their lives to violence" (Krug et al. 1). The WHO defines violence as the

> intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation (Krug et al. 1).

This inescapable exposure to violence, as documented by Luckhurst, has become an integral part of the modern subject's experience (Luckhurst 20), with recent violent shocks shaking the 21st-century European block, including events between Russia and Ukraine in 2022 and Israel and Palestine in 2023. The media inundates its viewers with images of vandalized homes, collapsing buildings, displaced populations, and the harrowing imagery of flayed and brutalized bodies. It is inconceivable to think that all this violence has not inflicted varying degrees of mental and psychological harm upon individuals (Luckhurst 20). The global experiences of traumatic aftermaths, whether caused by the CoViD-19 pandemic, racial violence, or international conflicts, have become integral aspects of the modern subject's life. These traumatic events and their psychological impact motivates the critical context for exploring the complex interplay between subjectivity and trauma in this thesis.
Intersectional frameworks highlight the multifaceted nature of trauma, recognizing that it is encountered within a complex, multi-layered context that includes race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, and age. This perspective is crucial for understanding how these intersecting identities shape individual experiences of trauma and contribute to the formation of subjectivity.

Recent studies underscore the importance of considering intersectionality in trauma analysis. For instance, Baird, Alaggia, and Jenney emphasize the need for an intersectional lens to understand the experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) survivors, revealing how varying identities and experiences of oppression shape individual trauma experiences (Baird et al.). Similarly, Quiros and Berger highlight the significance of considering race, class, and gender in trauma-informed care, particularly for women from marginalized populations (Quiros & Berger).

In the context of subjectivity, Scarfone addresses the impact of psychic trauma on the patient’s status as a subject, suggesting that trauma affects how individuals perceive and understand themselves (Scarfone, D. et al.). Furthermore, Watson et al. explore how multiple forms of oppression, such as racism and sexism, are related to trauma symptoms in Women of Color, demonstrating the intricate relationship between intersectionality and trauma (Watson et al.). These studies collectively affirm the importance of an intersectional approach

in understanding trauma and its role in shaping subjectivity. By recognizing the interconnectedness of various social identities and their influence on individual experiences of trauma, we can gain a deeper understanding of subjectivity and its formation in diverse contexts.

Trauma theory is a central term within psychoanalytic approaches to literary analysis that offers a critical framework that opens new avenues for interpretation and understanding. It serves as a prominent concept in contemporary times, with relevance to individuals, cultures, and nations alike (Kurtz i). Cathy Caruth, a prominent voice in trauma studies, reconceives Freudian elements of trauma and describes it as

> an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (Davis 363).

Trauma theory is relevant to subjectivity as it has been effectively used to shed light on various social issues as rape, child abuse, racist violence, and class domination, revealing unprocessed, recurrent psychic expressions of trauma, like Freud's concept of “repetition compulsion” (Forter 260). Roger Luckhurst also links trauma to modernity, attributing its emergence to the rise of technological and statistical societies that quantify the shocks of modern life (Luckhurst 19). He argues that trauma is intrinsic to and responsive to the wounds inflicted by the contradictory transformations of traditional society in modernity. The standardization of time and the dislocation of fixity of place and local traditions, driven by the rise of the modern nation-state, contribute to the modern subject's inseparability from ‘shock and trauma’ (Luckhurst 20). To this point, he argues that “the modern subject has become inseparable from the categories of shock and trauma” (Luckhurst 20). Trauma.

However, the applicability of trauma theory extends beyond extreme “shocks” and “surprises” as advanced by Caruth and Luckhurst. Building on earlier notions of trauma, Greg Forter (2007) addresses one limitation of not “accounting for those forms of trauma that are not punctual, that are more mundanely catastrophic than such spectacular instances of violence as the Holocaust” (Forter 260). Forter’s model addresses non-punctual, everyday forms of trauma such as patriarchal identity formation and everyday racism. This highlights the intersectional dimension to the conversation, to address multifaceted problems of the the modern subject arising from overlapping power dynamics (Collins 2). These chronic and cumulative traumas, deeply integrated into societal fabric, may not be "shocks" like the

Holocaust but are indeed decisive, deformative psychic disturbances. He describes these forms of trauma as socially sublimated; systemic traumas perpetuated by society's self-reproducing mechanisms. According to Forter (2007),

> the contemporary version of trauma theory makes the human predicament a trauma we can only "know" by repeating. This repetition happens precisely by virtue of our common linguistic condition: through our talking and listening, our reading and writing—in short, our very being-in-language (Forter 282).

Thus, through the instrumentality of text, sounds and sights, literary writers can mediate trauma as an intersectional phenomenon to reflect either sides of the perspectives or a combination thereof. Trauma can be mediated as bodily or internal experience but also external. Trauma can be understood in the present but also in the past; trauma can be individual but also collective and systemic.

Sturm et al. also discusses the evolving perspectives on trauma and subjectivity, particularly in the context of refugees and displaced persons (Sturm et al. 27). Over the past two decades, there has been a shift away from viewing refugees solely as victims of political violence to a more medicalized perspective, where they are seen as individuals suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This shift has had social, political, and medical implications, including the moral disqualification and criminalization of unsuccessful asylum seekers (Sturm et al. 27). Critics have raised concerns about the one-sided and reductive nature of the PTSD conception of trauma and its social consequences, especially in the context of service provision for refugees. Additionally, clinicians who use psychoanalytic approaches have criticized the dominance of the PTSD framework .
In response to these criticisms, there have emerged new paradigms that emphasize focusing on the lifeworlds and experiences of refugees, while others emphasize the importance of considering social, institutional, and political factors (Sturm et al. 27).

Sturm et al.'s ethnopsychoanalytic approach and focus on cultural dimensions in therapy provide a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of subjectivity in *OEWBAG.* The novel revolves around the experiences of LD, a Vietnamese-American protagonist who explores his complex identity as a refugee and a member of the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States. LD's subjectivity is deeply intertwined with his family's traumatic past, their journey as refugees, and their adaptation to a new cultural context. This

aligns with Sturm et al.'s emphasis on understanding the cultural dimensions of subjectivity. Sturm et al.'s approach encourages considering the interplay between individual experiences and broader cultural forces. In the case of LD and his family, their subjectivities are shaped by the trauma of war, the loss of their homeland, and their efforts to assimilate into American society. Their cultural background, language, and experiences as refugees are integral to their subjectivities. The novel explores the themes of intergenerational trauma, language barriers, and the challenges of belonging in a new country. Sturm et al.'s ideas can be applied to analyze how these cultural factors influence the characters' subjectivities and their struggles to communicate their experiences and emotions.

Overall, the discussion on trauma enriches the critical analysis of subjectivity in *TVH* and *OEWBG* by providing a framework for understanding how traumatic experiences intersect with other aspects of identity and contribute to the formation of individual subjectivities. It highlights the interconnectedness of trauma and identity, emphasizing the importance of considering these factors in literary analysis. Both novels explore the psychological aftermath of traumatic events and how they shape the characters' identities and experiences. In *TVH*, trauma is depicted through the experiences of the characters, particularly Desiree and Stella, who face various forms of violence and discrimination based on their racial identities. The novel delves into the intergenerational trauma passed down through families and communities, highlighting the lasting impact of historical injustices such as slavery and segregation. Bennett's portrayal of trauma intersects with race, class, and gender, illustrating how these intersecting identities shape individual experiences and contribute to the formation of subjectivity.

Similarly, in *OEWBG* , trauma is a central theme as the protagonist, LD, navigates the complexities of his Vietnamese immigrant background, poverty, and queerness while grappling with the traumatic experiences of his past. Vuong's novel explores how trauma is not just an individual experience but also a collective and systemic phenomenon, deeply integrated into societal fabric. The novel highlights the intersectionality of trauma, showing how various forms of oppression, including racism and homophobia, intersect to shape LD 's subjectivity.

The intersectional framework discussed underscores the importance of considering how trauma intersects with other axes of identity, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, and age, in shaping individual experiences. This perspective is crucial for understanding the characters' responses to trauma and the ways in which it influences their sense of self and their relationships with others. Moreover, the discussion on trauma theory as

a central term within psychoanalytic approaches to literary analysis offers a critical framework for interpreting and understanding the characters' experiences in both novels. Trauma theory allows readers to explore how the characters' responses to traumatic events manifest in their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, shedding light on the psychological complexities of their subjectivity.

2.5 Closing

Subjectivity is not something that exists in isolation, but something that is largely created by one’s surroundings. This is something that is thematized by the authors. Also, there is a specific theoretical framework that is useful in this context, because it takes such external factors into account. That framework is intersectionality. In the following intersectionality will be explained, and you will outline which of the external factors that are useful to look at specifically in this thesis because they are thematized by the two authors. While trauma is not something that is thematized in intersectionality, it is frequently the result of certain conflicts concerning race, gender and class. This is also the case with these two novels. Hence, trauma theory will also play an important part in your reading of these two texts, to comprehend the mechanisms of subjectivity.

3 Analysis of Subjectivity in Brit Bennet's *The Vanishing Half*

This chapter narrows the analytical lens onto Brit Bennett's *TVH*, examining the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and power within varied settings of Mallard, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. This analysis delves into the characters' subjectivities, unraveled through their movements across different geographies, and seeks to understand how these migrations between spaces shape their identities. This analysis helps to understand how the characters' identities are not only influenced by individual experiences but also by broader social structures and cultural norms, ultimately illustrating how different settings with pointed differences in the novel enrich the depiction of subjectivity in *TVH*. The analysis also offers a closer look at characters' evolution amidst the intersecting societal dimensions.

3.1 Subjectivity through the Setting in *TVH*

The story of this novel unfolds within the fictional town of Mallard, Louisiana, a setting so seamlessly integrated into the narrative that one might assume it is entirely fictional. In an interview, however, Bennett explains that the inspiration for this locale came from her mother's recounted memories of a town from her own childhood in Louisiana (Bennett "Us Author). This real place became a wellspring of ideas, and she embraced the rich mythology that had evolved from her mother's vivid descriptions. Mallard stands as a town deeply entrenched in colorism, where preferences for lighter skin tones prevail. The narrative's focal point centers on Stella and Desiree, twin sisters who share their lives until a pivotal moment when their paths diverge, leading Stella living her life as a white woman (Bennett "Us Author"). It sparked her contemplation about the implications of living in such a town, where colorism was not merely an individual or sociological bias, but a deeply ingrained institutionalized aspect of the community (Bennett And Hughes).

The inception of *TVH* occurred in 2014, during the Obama administration, and as Bennett embarked on this literary journey, she found herself probing questions that would later take center stage in society. These questions, which later became themes that permeated the narrative of her novel, revolved around racism and institutionalized violence against minorities, issues that eventually became focal points in political discourse and erupted in street protests (Bennett Us Author). The novel was coincidentally launched during the week when the George Floyd protests gained momentum. Although Bennett did not foresee this

exact moment, she acknowledged that the ideas explored in her book had always existed within the broader context of racial questions in the United States.

While a significant portion of the narrative is set in the 1960s during the Jim Crow era in the segregated South, Bennett approached this historical period as a 21st-century writer, bringing a contemporary perspective to the complexities of identity and fluidity. The choice to set the story in 1968, a year marked by social division, upheaval, and a crucial election, was deliberate, as it resonated with contemporary audiences and echoed their experiences with social unrest and political change (Bennett "Us Author). The novel's narrative duality also extends to its shifts in time and space. As indicated earlier, Bennett's decision to select specific decades and geographic settings was influenced by personal connections. Her mother's journey from Louisiana to Washington DC during a period of historical significance, including Dr. King's assassination, played a pivotal role in shaping the novel's temporal context. This tumultuous period challenged established scripts of whiteness, and characters like Stella grappled with navigating this evolving performance of whiteness, often struggling to conform to societal expectations (Bennett And Hughes). Notably, Bennett chose to set her narrative in a later timeframe than many famous passing stories, specifically during the civil rights and post-civil rights eras, offering a distinct perspective on the themes of identity and passing (Bennett and Hughes).

The following sections will delve into an analysis of race, gender, and class within *TVH*, with a specific emphasis on the role of setting in shaping these themes.

3.2 Mallard: A Microcosm of Identity

As mentioned above, Bennett's novel employs the fictional town of Mallard, Louisiana, as its central backdrop. This is the setting where the Vignes sisters, Desiree and Stella, are born and raised. Mallard is “a strange town” (*TVH* 5). It is a small, racially stratified town where light skin is revered and coveted. The town's obsession with skin color perpetuates a culture of colorism, deeply impacting the residents' perceptions of themselves and others. The idea of creating the town is conceptualized by Alphonse Decuir, the Vignes’ grandfather, in 1848 as he stood amidst the sugarcane fields he inherits from his late father, a former slave owner. This time period alludes to the broader historical context of the 1848 presidential election that sparked debates over slavery and expansionism. This helps to understand the political climate of the time as well as insights into the potential societal forces shaping Decuir's ambitions

and the racial dynamics within Mallard, albeit indirectly. In the novel, Alphonse is simultanaeously a son and slave “who’d once (been) owned” by his father (*TVH* 10). His mother does not fully accept him either, “she had hated his lightness; when he was a boy, she’d shoved him under the sun, begging him to darken” (5). Once a freed man, he envisions a place where individuals like him, who were not accepted as white but refused to be treated as Negroes, could belong—a third place. This vision stems from his own experiences of being marginalized due to his light skin which he perceives as a lonely gift. Alphonse's marriage to a mulatto woman even lighter than himself and his anticipation of their future descendants becoming progressively lighter illustrate his aspiration for a more perfect Negro, symbolized by “a cup of coffee steadily diluted with cream. A more perfect Negro. Each generation lighter than the one before” (ibid.).

This narrative of Alphonse's aspirations and reflections serves as evidence of the cultural context depicted in *TVH*, particularly in Mallard, Louisiana. Mallard, described by Bennett as "a town that, like any other, was more idea than place" (ibid.) represents a microcosm of racial stratification and colorism. The obsession with pigmentation in Mallard reinforces a social order where racial categorization is inflexible, often measuring individuals against an imposed standard of whiteness. Scholars like Matthew Desmond and Mustapha Emirbayer argue that behaviors resulting from a desire to be perceived as white and pure are deeply influenced by the historical trauma of Black enslavement and subsequent discrimination in America. They highlight how, in this societal context, blackness was seen as a mark or imperfection, while whiteness was idealized as the embodiment of racial purity (Akre 455).

This obsession with light skin is also akin to Louisiana as a geographical setting in the United states. Dethloff asserts that Louisiana's history is marked by significant yet overlooked racial dynamics and even the impact of Jim Crow legislation on the Louisiana's society in the late 80’s. In her fifteen months of archival research and participant observation in Creole communities of Louisiana, Virginia Dominguez resolves that, “race is the issue in Louisiana. All amount to criteria of social classification by which rights are differentially distributed.” (Dominguez xiv) With this historical pretext, Bennett explores how the town's emphasis on skin color affects characters' self-perception and shapes their destinies. It is a town that associates darkness to beauty and darkness or any association to it as commonness and ugliness (*TVH* 62, 66). Why so, because,

> In Mallard, nobody married dark. Nobody left either, but Desiree had already done that. Marrying a dark man and dragging his blueblack child all over town was one step too far. (9)

Dominguez's assertion underscores how Bennett leverages Louisiana's complex racial history to intensify the narrative in the novel. This historical backdrop enriches the story, highlighting the entrenched biases associated with skin color. Bennett's exploration of the town of Mallard, mirrors the broader societal issues evident in Louisiana's own history with Jim Crow laws and racial classification. This context adds depth to the novel's examination of colorism, showcasing how historical and geographical settings perpetuate racial dynamics and affect individual subjectivities.

3.2.1 Racial Identity and Class Mobility in Mallard

In *TVH*, racial identity and passing play central roles in shaping the narratives of characters who navigate the complexities of race and identity. Through the experiences of characters like Stella, Desiree, Jude, Early and the Walkers, Bennett shows how individuals navigate the intersections of race and social privilege, grappling with the consequences of their individual decisions to either pass as white or embrace their Black heritage. Their experiences highlight the ways in which racial identity is fluid and contingent upon social context, challenging essentialist notions of race and ethnicity. Their differing experiences also highlight the social construction of race and the ways in which it intersects with gender, class, and other identity markers.

Kweku Appiah also contextualizes the emergence of racial thinking in the 19th century, referencing Martin Tupper's poem The Anglo-Saxon Race as emblematic of the shift in English identity and self-perception during that period (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 274). Appiah contrasts ancient perspectives with the racialism that emerged in the 19th century, characterized by the belief in distinct racial groups possessing inherent, biologically determined traits. Racialists categorized individuals into discrete racial categories based on physical characteristics and purportedly immutable characteristics of intellect and morality. This racial essentialism, Appiah argues, underpinned scientific racism and justified colonial domination and oppression (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 275-6). Bennett uses Mallard to reveal yet another layer of complexity of racial identity even within the same race. Mallard is

a community of Black people who seek to distance themselves from the broader Black community, solely based on gradient of skin lightness, reflecting themes of colorism and internalized racism. Alphonse Decuir, the founder of Mallard, himself internalizes this idea of racial superiority when he is subjected to alienation from his father due to race. He is not exempt from this racial barricade around his father, not even for blood's sake. He is just like any other slave his father owns on his "sugarcane fields" (10). This suggests that "whiteness" is tantamount to superiority; and so, creating Mallard is a means to redeem or enact his sense of belonging. Mallard is to be the place of escape where those "who would never be accepted as white" are accepted and not "to be treated like Negroes" (10), a place where "you were supposed to be safe… hidden amongst your own" (38). However, Decuir builds on his father's legacy of racial superiority on the land he inherits from his father. Ironically, "even here… you were still colored," (38) perpetuating colorism and making people the more conscious of their skin color.

It is not surprising, then, that Desiree feels a sense of displacement and yearns to escape the limitations of her small Southern town. Why, because she lives in a town that is neither here nor there— "A third place" (10)—hanging in the balance. Desiree's struggle with the pressure to conform to societal norms, particularly regarding skin color, is vividly portrayed throughout the novel. In Mallard, Desiree feels the weight of expectations imposed by the town's fixation on light skin as an ideal. She is not able to uphold the racial hierarchies within her own town. On one hand, Desiree reflects on her lightness as "lonely gift," highlighting the isolation that comes with being perceived as different within her own community. This points towards a rigid social hierarchy where she cannot be freely involved with or marry "dark." On the other hand, this lightness that is supposed to garner her superiority, only affords her riding "the morning bus into Opelousas, where they reported to a giant white house hidden behind iron gates," the house of the "rich and white" Dupont's (17). As Desiree continues to grapple with her sense of identity, "she knew…" that "there was one way out… she'd always known it…" (18). Eventually, she "escapes" with Stella to New Orleans in search of a better life.

Conversely, Stella, is able to navigate Mallard's social hierarchy with relative ease. She embodies the town's ideal of beauty and is afforded privileges that elude her darker-skinned counterparts. Once "she'd gone inside some shop called Darlene's Charms, where the shopgirl mistook her for white" (71). Stella's ability to pass as white highlights the fluidity of racial identity in Mallard and underscores the arbitrary nature of racial categorization. Despite being biracial like her sister, Stella chooses to embrace her proximity

to whiteness as a means of escaping Mallard's suffocating racial confines; afterall, “who didn’t want to get over on white folks for a change?” (*TVH* 71). Also, Mallard‘s fixation on light skin as an ideal also exacerbates her struggle to assert her identity authentically, trapping her in a cycle of societal expectations and judgment. A town that is “Colorstruck” and only celebrates lightness as long as it does not trascend into whiteness. This ambivalence related to colour is resident in Stella because even after “she’d gone inside… Darlene’s Charms” she ensures that Willie Lee doesn’t disclose it to her mother (72).

Moreover, the town's emphasis on light skin not only affects the sisters' self-perception but also shapes their life trajectories. Desiree, feeling constrained by Mallard's narrow definitions of beauty and success, eventually leaves the town in search of a better life (58). Her decision to flee Mallard reflects her rejection of the town's oppressive racial norms and her desire to forge her own path. In contrast, Stella chooses to embrace her perceived whiteness and pass as white, effectively severing ties with her past (106) and assuming a new identity outsiede Mallard. Mallard's racial dynamics therefore drive a wedge between the sisters, leading them down divergent paths that ultimately define their adult lives.

3.2.2 Beyond the Shadows of Mallard

As the narrative progresses, we also see how Jude, Desiree's daughter, grapples with her racial identity and struggles to find a sense of belonging. Raised in Mallard, Jude experiences firsthand the town's colorist attitudes and the pressure to conform to its narrow standards of beauty and acceptance (104). Despite this, Jude yearns to assert her individuality and embrace her Black heritage, a desire that becomes difficult in Mallard's homogenous environment. Jude's internal conflict is mirrored in her interactions within Mallard, where she faces discrimination and prejudice due to her dark skin. In Mallard, she is “a dark speck on the pews at Sunday Mass, a shadow lingering on the riverbank while the other children swam. So black that you could see nothing but her. A fly in milk, contaminating everything.” Even her mother knew she could not be herself. So when the opportunity to travel knocks, she knows “that she’d never come back to Mallard” (83). Her experiences highlight the pervasive influence of the town's racial dynamics on its residents and the challenges of navigating conflicting desires for belonging and individuality within such a restrictive environment.

Furthermore, Jude's journey is marked by a sense of alienation and displacement, as she struggles to reconcile her identity as a Black woman with the societal expectations and prejudices she encounters. She observes that,

> she was the fastest girl on the track team, and on another team in another town, she might have been captain. But on this team in this town, she stretched alone before practice and sat by herself on the team bus, and after she won the gold medal at the state championship, no one congratulated her but Coach Weaver. (88)

So Jude is marginalized, first as a black girl, and second as darker skin-toned girl. In this vein, Bennett and Royle's discussion of double marginalization experienced by black women in literature, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the plurality of identity (Bennett and Royle 285) helps us to understand Jude's experiences within the broader context of systemic racism and colorism. Her experiences as a dark-skinned woman navigating the world underscore the pervasive influence of race on individual lives. However, Jude rises beyond all the struggles and forges ahead to pursue her dreams. She leaves Mallard to pursue a medical degree in UCLA; her quest for self-discovery and acceptance reflects resilience and agency in the face of adversity.

3.2.3 Subjectivity in the Shadow of Beauty Standards

Also, in *TVH*, Brit Bennett criticizes colorism and beauty standards as an added dimension to the conversation on racial identity. In the novel, beauty is associated with lightness and darkness is associated with darkness. In the novel, Mrs. Dupont recognizes the Vignes twins as "pretty girls" because they are "so light" (17). Alphonse Decuir "imagined his children's children, lighter … each generation lighter than the one before," associating perfection with lightness (10). Darker complexions are associated with derogatory connotations, reflecting western attitudes towards skin colour. In Mallard, Jude is referred to as "black as tar… Blueblack… Like she flown direct from Africa."

Bennett challenges the cultural pressure for people to change the way they are, just to fit social standards of beauty. Her grandmother, Adele creates "potions. She poured baths with lemon and milk and instructed Jude to soak. She pasted honey masks on her face, then slowly peeled them off. She juiced oranges, mixed them with spices, and applied the mixture

to Jude's face before she went to bed. Nothing worked. She never lightened" (104). Jude even shies away from makeup because "she knew what people called dark girls wearing red lipstick. Baboon ass" (111). She internalizes such colour-struck attitudes that she believes to be,

> true. She was black. Blueblack. No, so black she looked purple. Black as coffee, asphalt, outer space, black as the beginning and the end of the world… A black dot in the school pictures, a dark speck on the pews at Sunday Mass, a shadow lingering on the riverbank while the other children swam. So black that you could see nothing but her. A fly in milk, contaminating everything (84).

Jude becomes uncomfortable in her own skin. She revolts when Reese, her boyfriend she later meets in Los Angeles, compliments her "beautiful skin" because she, "hated to be called beautiful. It was the type of thing people only said because they felt they ought to." This gives her an affinity with darkness into she retreats to feel invisible and safe; rather than be exposed and vulnerable under the shutters of a camera as "she always felt vulnerable seeing herself through Reese's lens" (105). She prefers to be "in the dark, (where) everyone was the same color" (104).

Adele also notices that in all of Jude's "school pictures, she'd either looked too black or overexposed, invisible except for the whites of her eyes and teeth" (105). This reflects practices even in the fashion and film industries where industry creators do not dedicate effort to know what makeup products, clothing—colours, shapes and sizes— camera and lighting profiles work best for people of diverse racial identities. Like Reese says to Jude, "the camera…worked like the human eye. Meaning, it was not created to notice her" (105); even in the makeup store, "Jude doubted that she would find any shade to match her skin" (111). Bennett and Royle argue that representations of racial otherness are central to canonical works of English literature, and critique the notion of universality in Western aesthetics, challenging the idea that one culture's aesthetic standards can be universally applied. (Bennett and Royle 285). This is also reflected in how ugliness with "black rag doll with a plastic head and queer red lips," "a nigger doll" that Blake's father hated and destroyed.

This also reveals Bennett's critique of the consumer industry and how darker toned dolls are not made enough or with as much intentionality. It is no surprise that Brit Bennett goes ahead to introduce the latest addition to the American Girl Doll collection, "Claudie Wells," with vibrant authenticity ("The Takeaway" Bennett). Claudie, the fourth Black girl doll in the franchise, is depicted as coming of age in 1920s Harlem during the flourishing

cultural period known as the Harlem Renaissance. In an interview with *The Takeaway*, Bennett discusses the intricate process of bringing Claudie to life, emphasizing the importance of maintaining historical fidelity while ensuring the dolls remain engaging and playful. Like the portrayal of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, as the racial other, Jude struggles to navigate her identity within a society that marginalizes her based on her race. She notes that in a town like Mallard, she stood out because of her darker colour and with that people would think "that being one of a kind made you special. No, it just made you lonely. What was special was belonging with someone else" (*TVH* 88).

Through Desiree and Stella's experiences, Bennett illustrates how Mallard's unique racial dynamics perpetuate a cycle of internalized racism and self-rejection. The town's emphasis on light skin creates a hierarchy of worth based on skin color, where darker-skinned individuals are marginalized and excluded. Desiree and Stella's divergent responses to Mallard's racial dynamics highlight the complexities of navigating racial identity in a society that prizes whiteness above all else. Through their experiences in Mallard, Bennett explores the lasting effects of internalized racism and the complexities of racial identity in a society where skin color carries immense social significance.

3.2.4 Subjectivity in the Shadow of Racial Trauma

Furthermore, Stella and Desiree Vignes' early exposure to racial violence profoundly influences their racial identities and life paths. The trauma of witnessing their father, Leon Vignes, suffer a violent, racially motivated attack leaves an indelible mark on their psyches, shaping their views on race and possibly informing Stella's decision to pass as white. Their father's lynching, where he is accused of a crime he could not have committed due to his illiteracy, as he "made all of his marks with an X" (35), is a pivotal moment, leaving an enduring impact and a legacy of fear.

Their father, Leon Vignes, is youngest of the the Vignes brothers all of who meet violent demises. Leon himself is "lynched twice, the first time at home while his twin girls watched through a crack in the closet door" (35). Later, the final, fatal attack occurs when,

> must have been sleeping, his head slumped, the way he nodded off in his chair after supper. How the thundering boots woke him. He screamed, or maybe had no time to, his swollen hands bandaged and useless at his sides. From the closet, she'd watched

> the white men drag her father out of the house, his long legs drumming against the floor. (36)

This brutal injustice not only robs the girls of a parent but also embeds a perpetual sense of insecurity and mistrust towards white individuals.

The recurrence of these memories and the ongoing psychological impact resonate with Cathy Caruth's conceptualization of trauma, which often manifests as fragmented recollections, nightmares, and flashbacks (Davis 363). The girls' memories are "haunted by nightmares" where Stella recounts “these nightmares,” in which “these men would drag me out of bed. It felt so real. I could feel their hands on my ankles, even after I woke up” (*TVH* 241).

In their article, “Racial Trauma: Theory, Research, and Healing: Introduction to the Special Issue”, Comas-Díaz et al. highlights the point that apart from psychological and physical impact, “the exposure (direct and or vicarious) and reexposure to race-based stress” or violence results in what they refer to as “hidden wounds” (Comas-Díaz et al. 2-3). The story of Leon Vignes and his daughters underscores this impact, as they witness the ultimate consequence of such violence. Similarly Cénat expands the idea that racial trauma surrounds the victims’ life course and engenders consequences on their physical and mental health, behavior, cognition, and relationships, necessitating a life-course approach to capturing the complex nature of racial trauma (Cenat 675). The Vignes sisters’ experience not only demonstrates the raw personal trauma of a violent act but also the complex racial trauma that has historically affected Black communities. Stella and Desiree's story is thus emblematic of the broader struggle of African Americans. Their father's lynching becomes not just a personal tragedy but a representation of the collective historical and intergenerational trauma of racism and violence against Black people in America. The decision of Stella to pass as white becomes a survival mechanism, a means to navigate a world that continues to be hostile to their true identities. This narrative detail from the novel, coupled with scholarly insights into the lasting impact of racial trauma, offers a multifaceted understanding of the complexity and gravity of racial violence and its consequences on the lives of those who experience it..

Moreover, Stella endures further trauma through sexual abuse at the hands of Mr. Dupont. As she recounts,

> dodging Mr. Dupont, who followed her into the pantry, shut the door, and stuck his hand up her dress. Three times he’d touched her and himself too, panting, his breath

> thick with brandy, while she tried to get away, but the pantry was too small and he was too strong, pressing her against the shelves… Soon her fear of him became worse than the touching. (148)

This compounds her vulnerability and violation to her already traumatized self. The fear of him becomes a corrosive part of her daily life, affecting her mental health and contributing to her desire to escape Mallard, her past and her racial identity. Extensive research has shown that childhood trauma, particularly sexual abuse, can profoundly affect identity formation and decision-making. Finkelhor and Browne also conceptualize the traumagenic dynamics of child sexual abuse, which include traumatic sexualization, betrayal, stigmatization, and powerlessness, further reinforcing how such experiences can distort a child's self-concept and world view (Finkelhor and Browne). Stella's and Desiree's narratives demonstrate this deep psychological consequences of racial and sexual trauma. This aligns with Young explores the embodiment issues in individuals with a history of sexual abuse and how it impacts personal identity and psychological integrity (Young 91-93). These scholarly perspectives provide a backdrop to understand the profound effects that the traumatic experiences of lynching and sexual abuse have on the Vignes twins, especially Stella, shaping her into someone who continuously seeks to dissociate from her past and her racial identity in an attempt to find safety and agency in a world that has repeatedly shown her violence and oppression.

3.3 Transformative Journeys in American Subjectivity and Myth

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that setting is crucial to Bennett and she carefully imagines setting, not only general location, but also the historical period, and social context where a story unfolds, encompassing both the broad environment of the narrative and plays a crucial role in creating the atmosphere, significantly influencing the narrative's mood and character development (Abrams 362-63). Bennett therefore uses setting as a crucial context to convey some of her poignant messages, including of subjectivity and identity. In the literature review section, I have established that subjectivity thrives in the context of relationships, interactions, and shared human experiences (Mansfield 3). Fleer et al. suggest that our sense of self is deeply intertwined with the cultural and social environment we live in (Fleer et al. 3). They emphasize that things like societal norms, beliefs, and social structures shape how we see ourselves and experience the world around us. However, they argue that this isn't just

about absorbing these influences passively; instead, we actively engage with and create different perspectives as we go through life (ibid.).

Furthermore, they point out that our inner experiences, like thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, are all part of this larger picture of subjectivity (Fleer et al. 4). Rather than being separate processes, they're all connected within a framework that shapes how we see ourselves and make sense of the world. This framework isn't something we can see or measure objectively; it's more like an invisible system that guides our understanding of ourselves and our surroundings (ibid.). In simpler terms, Fleer et al. are saying that who we are and how we see the world is heavily influenced by the society we live in. Our thoughts, feelings, and experiences are all part of this bigger picture, and they're shaped by the cultural and social environment around us. These ideas about subjectivity also align with the theory of intersectionality, which emphasizes our interconnectedness to our socio-cultural, politico-legal ecology and how they bear our subjectivity. Intersectionality, therefore, suggests that various social categories like race, class, and gender intersect to shape individuals' experiences and identities; and in *TVH*, we see how the characters' subjectivities are deeply intertwined with these intersecting social factors.

In *TVH* the journey motif is central to the protagonists' exploration of identity within the confines of color, especially in the Southern town of Mallard, Louisiana. As mentioned earlier, the town's obsession with lighter skin, serving as a "color benchmark that holds light skin as the minimum requirement" (Akre 454), propels Desiree and Stella Vignes to flee to New Orleans in pursuit of autonomy and self-discovery. Their subsequent movements across the country, from the South to New Orleans, then to Washington, DC, and Los Angeles, mirror a traditional journey narrative often seen in literature, where characters move from one place to another seeking redemption or transformation.

This geographical progression can be interpreted through the lens of the archetypal journey motif—a narrative structure deeply rooted in folklore and literature, serving as a metaphor for personal growth and self-realization (Garry and El-Shamy 248). Bennett leverages this tendency of journey narratives that often represent the protagonist's internal quest as much as their physical voyage to pattern the joruneys within narrative. As the Vignes sisters and their daughters traverse the United States, their story unfolds in patterns of exploration, escape, and homeseeking (Griffin 607-8). Each location in the novel marks a stage in their individual and joint quests for identity, mirroring archetypal patterns that are a staple in both mythological and modern storytelling. Their journey is one of transformation, where the character is changed through experiences, much like Stella and Desiree are

changed through their experiences and exposure to New Orleans, DC, Los Angeles— a world beyond Mallard. Their personal growth, dictated by encounters with racism and the pressures of colorism, is symbolic of a larger societal journey toward understanding and overcoming deeply ingrained prejudices.

In the context of the mythical journey, one might say that the characters are heading towards the frontier which is the space of freedom and reinvention. However, one might also pose the question of whether these settings in the novel actually offer freedom and endless possibilities to the charcters. In his book, *The Frontier in American History*, Frederick Jackson Turner observes that

> the advance of American settlement westward…to meet changing conditions. The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people… and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life.
>
> (Frederick Jackson Turner 10)

Turner argues that the frontier served as a force for national integration, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds and laying the groundwork for the formation of a cohesive American nation. Moreover, he suggests that the challenges of frontier life, including the need to overcome obstacles independently while also cooperating with neighbors, cultivated a unique form of American individualism. This individualism, rooted in self-reliance and resilience, contributed to the development of democratic values and institutions in frontier communities.

Joan Didion also writes about this in her essay “Where I am From”. Here, Didion writes that,

> our great-great-grandparents were pushing America’s frontier westward, to California… They who came to California were not the self-satisfied, happy and content people, but the adventurous, the restless, and the daring […]
>
> (Didion 43)

Didion reflects on California's significance as both a geographical location and a symbol of American ideals and aspirations. She notes that California's image is deeply rooted in myth and auto-mythology, stemming from the historical narrative of westward expansion and the

promise of a fresh start in the American West. Didion suggests that California's allure lies not only in its physical landscape but also in the romanticized notions of opportunity, redemption, and rebirth associated with it (McGilchrist 355).

However, Didion also presents a critical perspective, arguing that California's mythical status has led to a disconnect between its perceived image and its actual reality. She observes that California, like the rest of America, is undergoing a process of degeneration and disintegration, challenging the myth of the Western frontier as a utopian space of endless possibility (McGilchrist 356).

Relating this to the topic at hand, Didion's thoughts underscore the subjective nature of the American West's mythology and its impact on individuals' perceptions and experiences. The Vignes sisters' move from Mallard, Louisiana to New Orleans and then Los Angeles in *TVH* reflects a desire to escape the constraints of their past and pursue new opportunities in the West. However, their journey also exposes the complexities and contradictions inherent in the myth of the Western frontier, highlighting the tension between idealized notions of freedom and the harsh realities of race, identity, and societal expectations.

3.3.1 New Orleans as a Transitional Mileu

As we have seen above, then, larger, more diverse cities like New Orleans offer characters like Desiree and Stella the opportunity to reinvent themselves or explore parts of their identities that were suppressed in their hometown of Mallard. In the novel, New Orleans represents a stark departure from the insular world of Mallard. As the Vignes sisters embark on separate journeys, New Orleans symbolizes freedom and reinvention. Nonetheless, Bennett also presents New Orleans as a setting that is not geopgraphically removed from Mallard, making both towns parts of Louisiana which possesses reverbrations of racial proclivities that is seen in Mallard. As Virginia Dominguez insightfully remarks on this social dynamism, noting,

> Race is the issue in Louisiana … All amount to criteria of social classification by which rights are differentially distributed … Individuals cross boundaries that they do not individually create. Individuals manipulate criteria of classification in order to change their individual identities according to those criteria (Dominguez xiv).

This assertion resonates deeply with the narrative trajectory of the twins, particularly Stella, who redefines her racial identity when " became white..." (*TVH* 9), by crossing into a world that does not recognize her origins. New Orleans affords her the anonymity necessary to reinvent herself. The city becomes a backdrop against which she can dissolve her ties to her past, because "(being) white wasn't the most exciting part," (*TVH* 175), rather, it is the ability to explore the boundaries of identity, morphing into "Miss Vignes" (178), and relishing in the newfound liberties this transformation grants her. Her personal journey reflects the broader societal constructs that Dominguez addresses, wherein social classification is a fluid currency that individuals can strategically navigate to redefine their place in the world.

Similarly, New Orleans offers Desiree a sense of liberation and rediscovery. Here, amidst the vibrant tapestry of the city's cultural heritage, Desiree finds solace in the city's diverse population that provide her with the opportunity to explore different facets of herself, free from the constraints of Mallard's suffocating insularity. In New Orleans, Desiree experiences a newfound sense of autonomy, allowing her to assert her individuality and live on her own terms. However, for Desiree, New Orleans also embodies a realm of uncertainty and turmoil, where she grapples with the complexities of her biracial identity (p. 58). Despite her disdain for the precarious conditions of her job at Dixie Laundry, Desiree feels trapped, with few alternatives available to her:

> "I don't care how many toilets I got to jump in," she asserts. "I ain't goin back to Mallard" (58).

Desiree's resolve shines through in her defiant declaration, yet beneath her outward determination lies a deep-seated sense of guilt over abandoning their mother (58). Despite her outward facade of strength, Desiree grapples with conflicting emotions and uncertainties as she navigates the challenges of life in New Orleans.

Furthermore, Desiree's journey to New Orleans offers a glimpse into the complexities of her identity. Six months after Stella abandons her "to craft a new life without her in it… Desiree was miserable living in the city" (23). She then moves to DC "to escape the memory of" Stella and start over. To this end, Bennett and Royle's exploration of how racial dynamics intersect with gender, sexuality, colonialism, and aesthetics in literature resonate deeply with Desiree's experiences as depicted in the novel. Brit Bennett uses DC as an idyllic symbol of cultural, civil and political liberty as it houses the highest number of decently employed

colored persons in the novel. In the vibrant city, she finds solace and liberty to fully embrace her Black heritage. She finds a job in a "fingerprint department" at the Bureau, where she can boldly mark herself as "colored," yet be afforded good opportunity (*TVH* 23). DC extends opportunities, not only to Desiree but other coloured individuals like Roberta Thomas (23) and Sam Winston, "coloured prosecutor"(24). One other significant liberty Desiree enjoys is captured in she freely being able to pursue an intimate relationship with Sam, "a jet-black brother" who would not find such intimate liberty in the "colourstruck" town of Mallard (24).

Additionally, Desiree Vignes' journey in Washington, DC, illustrates the intersectionality of race, gender, and power within the fabric of her life. Her relationship with Sam, reveals the internal complexities and the hierarchy that exists even within intraracial dynamics. Despite sharing the same race, Sam exerts control and inflicts harm upon Desiree, both physically and emotionally, asserting dominance with the cruel insinuation that "She thinks she better than us" (88). Here, Sam draws a divisive line, othering Desiree and implying a collective from which she is excluded based on her aspirations and behaviors. This dynamic reflects Beenna Han's discussion on how intraracial relationships are influenced by race and gender configurations, shaping perceptions of decision-making power (Han 2-3). He underscores that intraracial dynamics are not free from power struggles and that individual identities influence relationship experiences, suggesting that Desiree's trials are rooted in a broader societal context. Although Desiree's relationship with Sam is intraracial, the power dynamics at play mirror the pressures and discriminations faced by those in interracial unions, as they too grapple with society's perceptions and their implications.The interplay of race, gender, and power within Desiree's experiences illuminates the complexities of intraracial relationships, offering a glimpse into the impact of societal structures on personal interactions and individual subjectivity formation.

Moreover, the themes of intraracial and domestic oppression are further complicated by Desiree's status within her relationship and her community. Despite her efforts to assert her autonomy and individuality, Desiree is constantly confronted with the limitations imposed upon her by society. She cannot even decide what to do with her own body… she is also afraid of going back to her roots because to the prejudice and scorn she would face, even from her own mother, who said,

> "Hadn't she told Desiree that a dark man would be no good to her? Hadn't she tried to warn her all her life? A dark man would trample her beauty. He'd love it at first but like anything he desired and could never attain, he would soon grow to resent it. Now he was punishing her for it." (*TVH* 39)

Her personal struggles resonate with Crenshaw's analysis of intersecting forms of social control and how they reinforce the positionality of individuals within their private and public lives (Kimberlé W. Crenshaw 26). Crenshaw elucidates the overlapping systems of oppression that Desiree navigates, accentuating her vulnerability and the cultural forces that shape her existence.

3.3.2 Los Angeles as a Catalyst for Identity Exploration

As I have established in the previous sections, setting plays a crucial role in shaping the characters' identities and journeys of self-discovery in Brit Bennett's novel *TVH*. Within this narrative framework, Los Angeles emerges as more than a mere backdrop; it becomes a crucible of identity exploration and societal reflection, a dynamic stage upon which the complex subjectivities of the characters are intricately woven. Contrasting with the insular community of Mallard, Los Angeles is depicted as a cultural mosaic, teeming with individuals from diverse backgrounds and origins. This section delves into how characters like Stella, Loretta, Jude, Reese, and Barry navigate the dynamic cityscape of Los Angeles. Through their journeys, we witness the transformative power of urban environments in fostering individual agency and facilitating paths of reinvention and self-discovery. Additionally, we'll analyze how Bennett employs setting to delve into complex themes of race, gender, and belonging, inviting readers to reflect on their own experiences and perceptions of identity within diverse and ever-changing landscapes.

Bennett vividly portrays Los Angeles as a melting pot of cultures and identities, with Jude hailing from Mallard, Kennedy from Palace Estate, Reese from Arkansas, and Barry from elsewhere (*TVH* 101). This eclectic mix fosters an environment of acceptance and inclusivity, where individuals from disparate backgrounds find common ground and camaraderie. In this dynamic cityscape, it “seems like everybody is… from somewhere else.” Los Angeles becomes a fertile ground for self-exploration and personal growth (101).

First, Stella embarks on a profound journey of self-reinvention, utilizing the Los Angeles' dynamic environment as a canvas for her transformation. Los Angeles becomes a sanctuary where Stella seizes the opportunity to craft a new identity, shedding the shackles of her past in Mallard and embracing a fresh persona unburdened by the racial stigma that once defined her existence (140). Assuming the guise of a white woman, Stella undergoes a

metamorphosis into Stella Sanders, effectively severing ties with her black family and the painful memories of Mallard (145). She solidifies her place as a white woman named Stella Sanders married to a white man, named Mr Blake Sanders and gives birth to a daughter whose eyes are so blue, they are violet. Embracing this new identity with fervor, she immerses herself in a reality where her past traumas and familial struggles cease to haunt her (146). As "white Stella," she grapples with the discomfort of confronting her former self, feeling disconcerted at the mere thought of her colored family becoming her neighbors (p. 153). With resolute determination, Stella constructs an alternate existence, free from the echoes of past trauma and societal constraints. Through her transformation, she cultivates "another life, another past," purging her mind of the haunting recollections that once plagued her:

> No footsteps thundering up the porch steps, no ruddy white man grabbing her father, no Mr. Dupont pressing against her in the pantry. No Mama, no Desiree.She let he mind go blank, her whole life vanishing, until she became new and clean as a baby (*TVH* 178-9).

Yet, she still struggles with the life she's severed herself from. She lives in constant dread – that her child might not turn out white, that Kennedy might figure out her past and realize that she is biracial; that Loretta would figure her out, that her neighbours will figure her out because of her association with her black neighbours. Bennett masterfully explores the intricacies of Stella's journey, delving into the psychological complexities of living a fabricated existence and the profound consequences of forsaking one's true identity.

On the hand, Stella's decision to pass as white reveals another layer to the complexity of racial identity and the privilege associated with whiteness. Stella is systemically conditioned to pass as white because she well acquainted with, "…stories about folks who'd pretended to be white" and thus access some societal privileges. She hears of Warren Fontenot who rides,

> a train in the white section…; Marlena Goudeau becoming white to earn her teaching certificate…; Luther Thibodeaux, whose foreman marked him white and gave him more pay" (71).

These charcters only pass “like this, from moment to moment” but Stella decides to pass over permanently “to become someone else” (72). Adele admits that “New Orleans was just (Stella’s) chance to do it for real” (70).

Also, Stella has her own experiences that conditions her with the idea of privileges associated with whiteness.The first time Stella pretends to be white, “she’d gone inside some shop called Darlene’s Charms, where the shopgirl mistook her for white” (71). Willie initially dissuades Stella from having ideas about “Passin over” beacause “it’s dangerous… it’s ain’t no game,” (71). However, she insists that “all there was to being white was acting like you were. (80) and that “white folks can’t tell” (71). All it took was Stella deciding “to become someone else” (72). The second time Stella passes as white,

> she’d gone to the South Louisiana Museum of Art on an ordinary Saturday morning, not Negro Day, and walked right up to the main entrance, not the side door where Negroes lined up in the alley. Nobody stopped her, and again, she’d felt stupid for not trying this sooner.” (*TVH* 149)

Stella's passing therefore underscores the fluidity of racial identity and the performative nature of race. She is certain that “there was nothing to being white except boldness. You could convince anyone you belonged somewhere if you acted like you did” (ibid.). Furthermore, Stella's decision to pass as white highlights ways in which racial identity intersects with notions of belonging and assimilation within broader historical and cultural frameworks. Appiah discusses the evolution of racial ideologies such as Anglo-Saxonism, which valorized certain racial and ethnic groups while marginalizing others (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 286). Stella's passing therefore demonstrates a conscious choice to assimilate into the favorable spectrum of her racial identity. Her passing enables her to access opportunities and privileges denied to her Black counterparts, illustrating the social advantages conferred by white skin. Farrah referred to “how happy (Stella) looked” in her white identity and Desiree’s attempt to find her would only be “trying to drag her back into a life she no longer wanted” (*TVH* 76). The life that makes “responsible for cleaning a home filled with expensive things that she would never be able to afford” (148). The life she now lives, “was comfort … spent floating across a swimming pool, a two-story house with cabinets always filled with food, a chestful of toys for her daughter, a bookshelf that held an entire encyclopedia set. This was comfort, no longer wanting anything” (148).

Thus, Brit Bennett challenges of essentialist views of race by depicting the complexity of Stella's experience as she navigates societal expectations and cultural narratives surrounding race and identity. Stella would easily be categorized as a cultural subject is who are shunned by her Black community for choosing her equally bonafied white identity and all the access associated with it. Bennett is therefore interested in the cost of passing, all that a person has to shed and lose to embrace one side of themselves and not the other. Stella does not not count the cost before she ventures out into her white adventure. First, "she hadn't realized how long it takes to become somebody else, or how lonely it can be living in a world not meant for you" (162). Despite her outward appearance as a white woman, Stella also grapples with feelings of guilt and shame over her decision to abandon her family and heritage. She has to lie in New Orleans to initiate the life she has with Blake and "Now what began as a lie felt closer to the truth" (149). Her new life comes a the cost of not being able to speak "to her sister in thirteen years," constantly wondering "where was Desiree now? How was their mother?" (149). Now she is white Stella with "no family, no friends, no former lovers" (181).

Moreover, Stella's passing has implications for her relationship with her daughter, Kennedy, who grows up unaware of her Black ancestry. Kennedy was so removed from Stella's Black identity that "sometimes, Kennedy felt like a daughter who belonged to someone else, a child Stella was borrowing while she loaned a life that never should have been hers" (145). She lies to Kennedy about her origin, upbringing, family and everything that connected her to her past. The resulting effect is emotional distance created by Stella's fear that the closer Kennedy probed, the closer she would come to finding out the truth of her past. Her lies stirs ambivalence in Kennedy regarding her relationship with people with other racial identities. Kennedy becomes a pawn in her mental game. Initially, she vehemently opposes the idea of Black residents moving into the neighbourhood and refuses to associate with them (140), or denies it when she confronted by white neighbours. Even Blake admits that "in all the time he'd known (Stella), she'd never spoken kindly of a Negro" (140). Later, she permits Kennedy to play with Cindy, Lorretta's daughter yet fumes and slaps Kennedy acrosss the face for calling Cindy "a nigger" (190), an opinion she has internalized from Stella's own interactions. Even after Kennedy discovers the truth from Jude about her Black ancestry, Stella denies it. Their relationship remains strained over the years because for Kennedy, the emotional distance is a "curtain hung between (Stella's) past and present and she could never peek behind it." Kennedy's discovery of her mother's secret exposes the

fragility of racial categories and challenges her understanding of identity and belonging (146).

At the same time, Stella's odyssey to Los Angeles serves as a poignant testament to the transformative power of urban environments, offering individuals the opportunity to liberate themselves from the confines of their past and embrace a future brimming with newfound possibilities (*TVH* 152). Similarly, Jude, Desiree's daughter, finds herself undergoing a profound journey of self-discovery and reinvention, much like her aunt, Stella, before her. The vibrant energy and cosmopolitan ethos in Los Angeles offers Jude a chance to explore her true self free from the constraints of Mallard's conservative milieu (140).

As a queer woman of color, Jude finds solace in the city's embrace of diverse sexualities and gender identities (108). In Los Angeles, Jude finds companionship and acceptance in her relationship with Reese, a transgender individual (102-3). Their partnership flourishes in an environment that celebrates individuality and encourages self-expression, free from the confines of Mallard's conservative social norms. Through Jude's experiences, Bennett underscores the transformative power of urban environments like Los Angeles, where marginalized individuals can authentically explore their identities and pursue their dreams without fear of judgment or discrimination.

As signalled earlier, Reese finds expression in the city of Los Angeles, embarking on a journey of reinvention and self-discovery. Formerly known as Therese Anne Carter, Reese undergoes a significant transformation upon moving from Eldorado to Los Angeles. The maiden name “Therese Anne Carter” later comes to exist only as a distant memory, confined to a birth certificate in the archives of Union County Public Records (*TVH* 108). The transition from Therese to Reese Carter is not without its challenges. Reese grapples with the loss of familial connections, unable to return home as his true self. Moreover, the process of transitioning was financially demanding, as Reese desires physical changes such as a new chest (123). Despite the difficulties, Los Angeles provides Reese with a supportive environment where he can explore his identity and embrace his true self. The city's vibrant and diverse culture allows Reese to find acceptance and belonging, offering opportunities for personal growth and expression. In Los Angeles, Reese discovers the freedom to live authentically and pursue his journey of self-realization.

Barry also finds expression in the city of Los Angeles through his alter ego, Bianca, a persona he embodies during performances at Mirage, a club in West Hollywood (107). Twice a month at the club, Barry transforms into Bianca delighting in the freedom of expression and

the illusion created by his performances to escape his everyday identity as a high school chemistry teacher in Santa Monica. His apartment is also a reflection of his dual identities, adorned with wig heads displaying an array of colorful hairpieces (108). He keeps his lives separate, maintaining a clear distinction between his roles as Barry and Bianca. Bianca remains on the periphery of his mind, always present but concealed from the outside world, while Barry lingers in the mundane regions of his life. Barry takes pride in his skill to compartmentalize his identities, convinced that as long as he maintains clarity about who is in control, he can successfully navigate his split existence.

Barry's experiences highlight the complexity of identity and self-expression in a city known for its diversity and acceptance of alternative lifestyles. Through his performances as Bianca, Barry finds a space where he can freely express aspects of himself that are not readily accepted in other areas of his life, illustrating the transformative power of art and community in shaping individual identity. Moreover, at Barry's parties, a diverse array of characters find expression in the vibrant atmosphere of Los Angeles (108). Among them were Luis, who dons pink fur while singing Celia Cruz while working as an accountant; Jamie, who sports a Supremes wig and go-go boots and is employed by the power company; and Harley, who transforms into Bette Midler while work as a costume designer for a minor theater company, aiding others in finding their wigs (108). These individuals embrace the freedom of expression offered by the city, each finding their own unique way to navigate and flourish within its diverse cultural landscape. The camaraderie among Barry and his fellow performers, referred to as "the girls," provides a sense of community and support within the drag scene of Los Angeles (125).

Unlike Reese, Barry shape shifts in out of the character of Bianca and therefore does not suffer the consequences the others do. This underscores society’s inadequacy to fully embrace complex subjectivities. Bennett therefore critiques how society rewards or punishes people based on which side they express or supress, forcing people to choose sides, whether politically or culturally. It is crucial for a society to have a “this-and” perspective rather that an “either or” inclination, in order to embrace the complexity of individual subjectivity. A person can be Jewish-American, African-American, African and Asian, Jewish-European, and a woman, and a man, and society must hold place for this tension. A person must not be guilt-tripped or systemically conditioned to choose only a side of who they are, leaving them in a psychological limbo.

In essence, Bennett uses larger, more diverse cities like Los Angeles serve as catalysts for personal growth and self-discovery for characters like Desiree, Jude, and Stella in *TVH*.

These urban environments offer opportunities for reinvention and exploration of suppressed identities, empowering individuals to redefine themselves and pursue their dreams. Through the characters' experiences in Los Angeles, Bennett illuminates the transformative potential of urban spaces in shaping individual agency and facilitating journeys of self-discovery. From the oppressive racial dynamics of Mallard to the diverse landscapes of New Orleans and Los Angeles, each setting reflects broader themes of race, gender, and social mobility, shaping the characters' journeys of self-discovery and belonging.

3.3.2.1 Gender Performance and Societal Norms

Within the narrative, Los Angeles also serves as a backdrop against which the characters' subjectivities are explored, particularly in terms of gender identity, societal norms, and trauma. The city's diverse and dynamic environment mirrors the complexities of the characters' experiences, highlighting the intersections of race, class, and gender.

Los Angeles becomes a microcosm of societal expectations and norms, particularly in the context of gender performance. Stella's journey, from conforming to white, middle-class expectations of femininity to challenging these norms by pursuing her own academic and professional aspirations, reflects the tension between individual agency and societal constraints. Her decision to pass also necessitates the performance of gender in accordance with white, middle-class norms. For example, Loretta Walker studies history, with the hope of becoming a professor but did not follow through with it (163). In the new life with Blake, Stella, like Loretta Walker, belongs to the class of women who ends up marrying rich man and gets “swept up in his dreams” at the expense of hers (184). Together with other white middle class wives like Mrs Johansen, Mrs Pearson, Mrs Roberts, they attended and hosted social events and keeping the social decorum of their class. Bennett and Royle's examination of patriarchy and phallocentrism elucidates the ways in which Stella's performance of femininity is shaped by societal power structures, particularly as she conforms to the expectations of her white husband and community (Bennett and Royle 214-5). When Blake senses that Stella is upset and worked, he only attributes it to boredom and recommends she “take a class or something. Something you’ve always wanted to do. Like learn Italian or make pottery”.

Nonetheless, Stella resists the societal norms that seeks to box her and takes a GED class (212). Her narrative highlights the complexities of personal and professional growth, as well as the impact of societal expectations on individual choices. Stella's academic journey,

from receiving her diploma and dreaming of becoming an adjunct professor, is met with mixed reactions from her partner, Blake. Every time Stella broached the topic of pursuing a master's program with Blake, his reaction was predictably immature. He questioned the necessity of more schooling and accused her of neglecting the family (220). Despite his reservations, Stella found fulfillment in teaching and aspired to pursue further education. However, tensions arise as Blake attributed Stella's ambitions to the influence of feminism, contrasting her choices with those of a colleague. He reminds her, “you have family. Obligations” (212).Yet, reflecting on her decisions, Stella realizes that her pursuit of success is driven by practicality rather than familial obligations.

Judith Butler's concept of performativity helps to appreciate Stella's performance of whiteness and femininity as a strategic enactment of societal norms to navigate her way through a racially stratified and patriarchal society. Stella's performance of gender is also not a conscious choice driven by self-awareness but rather a compelled citation of normative expectations, as she seeks to qualify as a viable subject within the dominant social order. In effect, Bennett uses Stella's character to explore the intricate interplay between race and gender, highlighting how individuals negotiate their identities within systems of power and oppression.

Also, characters like Peg Davis, Carla Stewart, and Jude further challenge traditional gender roles, demonstrating the diverse ways in which individuals navigate and resist societal expectations in pursuit of their dreams. Stella admires Peg Davis, her faculty mentor who inspires her to go further in her education. Peg is a math professor at Santa Monica College (212) and an activist, “protesting … sexist advertisement inside Los Angeles Magazine, … that glorified violence against women.” Stella also admires Peg because,

> Pegstood for something, fought for something. She went to war with the university over everything: paid maternity leave, sexist faculty hiring, and exploitation of adjunct labor. She argued about these things even though she had no children and had already secured tenure—she argued even though her advocating wouldn’t benefit her at all… protesting out of a sense of duty (219).

Then there is also Carla Stewart, another character who runs a smart catering business in the city. She establises the business after the death of her husband, as to imply she couldn not do so when she was tethered to her husband. She is described as being “tough but fair”, traits she has to possess as “a woman in the food world” (215). Jude also challenges the dominant

norms that restrict her in her society to pursue her career as a doctor. This is a soceity that affords men, even dull boys easy access to medical school, where she "a good GPA" will not suffice. Jude has to,

> compete against students who'd grown up in rich families, attended private schools, hired personal tutors. People who had been dreaming since kindergarten of becoming doctors. Who had family photos of themselves in tiny white coats, holding plastic stethoscopes to teddy bear bellies. Not people who grew up in nowhere towns, where there was one doctor you saw only when you were puking sick. Not people who'd stumbled into the whole idea of medical school after dissecting a sheep's heart in an anatomy class. (196)

Thankfully, though, she definitely has the "nerve to apply" to medical school because she knows she has the intellectual capacity (195) and she is admitted at the University of Minnesota (266). Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning emphasizes the agency individuals have in constructing their own identities, albeit within the constraints of societal expectations.These narratives these exemplify the tension between individual autonomy and social conformity, illustrating the complex interplay between personal agency and external influences on identity formation.

Moreover, Los Angeles provides a setting where rigid binary conceptions of gender and sexuality challenged. Even though Los Angeles is relatively accommodating with regards to non-binary gender roles, some characters do not feel entirely confident in their chosen sexual identity as they would rather not face the society's reservations. As Jude explores her own identity and desires, she confronts societal expectations and norms surrounding femininity and sexual orientation. Bennett and Royle's discussion on the fluidity of identity resonates with Jude's journey of self-discovery that leads her to admit that " she couldn't imagine any boy loving her" (110) and gives in to love with Reese Carter. Falling in love with Reese, a transsexual man, Jude's experiences of love and desire transcend traditional gender norms, challenging of traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality. Also, the trauma of growing up in a racially stratified environment leaves a lasting impact on Jude's psyche, hindering her ability to fully embrace her true self. If her racial identity which is inherent to her identity is not accepted; if she does not feel comfortable in the skin she is born in, not even in the place she is "supposed to be safe … hidden amongst your own" (*TVH* 38), how confident could she be with her non-traditional sexual identity, even in a seemingly

culturally tolerating space like Los Angeles. The possibility of love with a transsexual man hovers over her, “the feeling scared her. A big feeling. It took up all the space in her chest, choking her” (111).

Barry and Reese also share in this reality with Jude, being “so hidden away … Maybe that was what drew them together. Maybe this was the only way they knew how to love … ducking away” (*TVH* 198). Barry and Reese experiences as transsexuals navigating a conservative environment shed light on the complexities of sexual identity within the context of rigid gender norms (135). Barry hides behind the persona of Bianca to live out his transsexual life only at his house parties and bars in (107-8); while Reese hides away behind sheet wraps so that Jude will not see the person she used to be (101-102). Their journey towards self-acceptance and authenticity serves as a counterpoint to the heteronormative expectations prevalent in the novel's setting. On one hand, their experiences highlight the ways in which individuals negotiate their subjectivities in response to external pressures and internal conflicts. On the other hand, the experiences of these characters highlight the complex interplay between trauma and gender identity, underscoring the importance of creating supportive and inclusive environments for individuals to explore and express their true selves.

However, as the novel progresses, Jude begins to confront her internalized shame and reclaim agency over her identity. Through her interactions with supportive friends, such as Reese Carter and Barry, Jude gradually learns to embrace her gender identity and assert her right to live authentically. Together they decide “No more hiding” (*TVH* 198)
By shedding light on the psychological toll of societal discrimination and prejudice, Brit Bennett's portrayal of Jude attest to the capacity of the human spirit to display fortitude and resilience amidst challenges..

Furthermore, the novel underscores the impact of socioeconomic disparities on individual subjectivities and journeys of self-discovery with the portrayal of characters navigating settings marked by economic inequalities. In Los Angeles, Reese Carter, forexample another character grapples systemic inequality and economic hardship weighs heavily on Reese, shaping his perceptions of self-worth and her aspirations for the future. Even though he is so removed from the restrictions of Mallard, Reese shares Early's working-class background and experiences similar challenges. As a transsexual, Reese faces intersecting forms of marginalization based on his gender, and socioeconomic status. “He’d shed his family right along with his entire past” (106) because he cannot live in an evironment that is not accepting of his sexual identity. He journeys to Los Angeles to

reconcile with the identity he has chosen yet the closer he tries to get it, the farther he seems to go. His inability to afford the necessary medical procedures for his transition hinders his full realization of his identity as Reese. The high costs associated with gender-affirming treatments create a significant obstacle, preventing Reese from aligning his external appearance with his internal sense of self. He is even insecure about himself and struggles with embracing love with Jude and revealing all of himself to her. This financial burden not only affects his physical transformation but also undermines his psychological well-being and sense of belonging. Reese's journey to embrace his true identity is thus impeded by economic inequalities that limit his access to crucial healthcare services.

Moreover, Reese's experiences highlight the broader impact of economic disparities on individual subjectivities. The inability to afford essential medical care underscores the enduring legacy of economic hardship, which perpetuates cycles of marginalization and inequality. In Los Angeles, a city known for its diversity and opportunity, Reese's struggle reflects the harsh reality faced by many marginalized individuals who are unable to access vital resources due to financial constraints. This narrative underscores the urgent need for systemic change to address the root causes of economic inequality and ensure that all individuals have equal access to essential healthcare services, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

3.4 Closing

Reflecting on how Bennett uses setting to explore complex themes of identity, race, and belonging, it becomes evident that each setting serves as a microcosm of broader societal issues. Mallard represents the oppressive forces of colorism and racial hierarchy, while Los Angeles and New Orleans offer glimpses of liberation and self-discovery. Through nuanced depictions of these settings, Bennett delves into the intricacies of racial identity and the quest for belonging in a diverse and ever-changing world. The interactions between characters and their environments reveal the complexities of race, gender, and social mobility, providing readers with a rich tapestry of human experiences and perspectives to contemplate. Ultimately, Bennett's adept use of setting enriches the narrative and deepens the exploration of identity, inviting readers to reflect on their own experiences and perceptions of race, belonging, and individuality. The next chapter will focus on how Ocean Vuong employs poignant narrative forms and style such as the epistolary form and language to discuss subjectivity in *OEWBG*.

4 Intersectional Analysis of Subjectivity in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong

4.1 Introduction

In the literary world, certain works compel attention not just for their content but for their form and the powerful interplay between the two. Ocean Vuong's debut novel, *OEWBG* is one such work that does more than tell a story—it creates an experience. The novel is presented as a letter from a young man, known as LD to his mother, who cannot read. Through this epistolary form, Vuong reveals a life in vignettes—a fractured narrative that reflects the fragmented identity of the protagonist. The novel traverses themes of family history, the Vietnamese-American experience, and the struggles of queerness, all intertwined with the specters of trauma and the pursuit of beauty in a world that seems to offer little. Vuong's prose, marked by its poetic intensity, weaves a tale that is at once intimate and expansive, personal and political. His narrative style uses rich imagery and a tender, introspective voice to invite readers into the protagonist's inner world.

Vuong's narrative style provides the gateway through which readers connect with the internal realm and subjectivities of characters, rendering their experiences palpable and relatable. This connection is explained by Suzanne Keen's work on narrative empathy in her book, Empathy and the Novel. Keen examines how empathy operates in fictional narratives and its effects on the reader's experience (Keen 66-67); thus supporting the argument that subjectivity in literature is crucial for engaging the reader with the characters' emotional landscapes and internal experiences. It provides the narrative with the necessary layers and depth for a multidimensional portrayal of characters. In Vuong's work, subjectivity becomes a vehicle for exploring broader existential questions through the lens of individual consciousness.

In *OEWBG*, the subjectivity of LD is not only a personal odyssey but a canvas for reflecting socio-cultural subjectivities and traumas. This resonates with Judith Butler's assertion that "the 'I' has no story to tell itself apart from the conditions of its emergence" (Butler "Giving an Account of Oneself" 8). Subjectivity in Vuong's narrative does not exist in a vacuum but strings along elements from history, culture, and personal experience, akin to Butler's ideas of performativity in identity formation. This reflection upon the individual's journey stirs the reader's introspection, making the act of reading both a discovery of the self and the other.

Similar to the discussion of subjectivity in Brit Bennett's *TVH*, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is once again indispensable in attempting to understand the complexities associated with character development and thematic exploration in Vuong's narrative. Vuong's *OEWBG* necessitates such an intersectional analysis because the protagonist's life is a tapestry of intersecting strands of identity—his race, sexuality, language and trauma form a circuit that shapes his experiences. In exploring these intersections, Vuong echoes the sentiment that "the personal is political," a mantra central to intersectional feminist thought, indicating how individual experiences reflect larger social and political structures (Shulman 590). The relevance of this analysis in Vuong's novel is evident in its nuanced portrayal of characters who inhabit multiple worlds, navigating the boundaries and binaries imposed upon them.

Furthermore, Vuong's background, rich with the narratives of post-war Vietnam and the displacement that followed, manifests itself in his storytelling. The shadow of history—its traumas, silences, and resiliencies – casts a profound influence over his narrative. After the Vietnam War, Ocean Vuong's family left Vietnam for Hartford, Connecticut. Using the persona LD in his novel, Vuong reflects on migrating to the U.S. and contemplates the essence of becoming American (Diep 1) The novel is therefore a canvas where the personal and the historical merge, crafting a story that is a testament to the survival and scars of the immigrant experience (Ha and Tompkins). This approach of integrating personal and collective histories is a testament to his understanding of the self as a product of intersecting narratives. His work is a dialogue between the past and the present, between the personal traumas of LD and the historical trauma of the Vietnam War. Vuong presents a narrative that is both a novel and a monument, acknowledging the debts to the past and the imprints it leaves on individual identity (Vuong, O.). *OEWBG* becomes a space where Vuong confronts the silence surrounding his family's history. It is a reclamation of stories untold, of lives fragmented by displacement and war. The act of writing becomes an act of remembrance and reparation – for Vuong, for LD, and for the readers who find echoes of their own histories within the text.

This chapter therefore, examines Ocean Vuong's *OEWBG* suggesting that Vuong uses storytelling techniques and artistic language to explore the main character's personal thoughts and feelings, offering a deep look at how an individual's story is connected to larger societal stories. The sections of this chapter will discuss how Ocean Vuong employs the narrative form—epistolary and fragmented narrative—as well as language, rich with motifs, symbols imagery, to shed light on the formation of complex identities in the presence of intersecting factors like immigration, sexuality, language, memory and trauma.

4.2 The Power of Epistolary Intimacy to Convey Subjectivity

Ocean Vuong employs the epistolary form to craft an intimate narrative that allows for a profound exploration of subjectivity. The use of a letter written by the protagonist, LD to his mother, Rose, who is unable to read, transcends traditional storytelling by creating a paradoxically one-sided dialogue that is both deeply private and expansively illuminative. Vuong's choice to present the novel as a letter creates an immediate sense of intimacy, positioning the reader as an interloper into the personal thoughts and histories of Little. The letter, as a medium of communication, has historically been a "vehicle" for personal expression. The epistolary form allows for the direct articulation of the protagonist's thoughts and feelings without the need for external dialogue or interaction, enabling a kind of introspection that is raw and unmediated. The author can freely express himself in a form that Thomas Beebee refers to as "the epistolary 'I' of self-reflexivity" (Sol 446). The letter begins,

> "Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (Vuong 3).

This expresses a poignant sense of distance and longing. The protagonist, LD, is reaching out to his mother through a letter she will never read, highlighting a complex interplay between communication and silence, presence and absence, which is intrinsic to the novel's examination of identity. This could be seen to reflects Vuong's own introspection to the extent that it recounts the loss of his own mother to stage four breast cancer before his novel came out (Biograph). Thus the line encapsulates the paradox at the heart of the novel— the act of writing to someone who cannot read it as a means of connection. The letter is a physical manifestation of LD's thoughts and emotions, a tangible bridge across the chasm of their differing worlds— her traumatic past in Vietnam and his struggle with identity in America; her illiteracy and his education, because "when it comes to words," Rose "possess(es) fewer than the coins you saved…" (29) compared to his "degree in English" (15).

Moreover, the letter reveals LD's self-reflexivity, enabling a deep dive into the protagonist's psyche, making room for soliloquies on subjectivity. Comtemplating his own individiality, he observes,

> I am twenty-eight years old, 5ft 4in tall, 112lbs. I am handsome at exactly three angles and deadly from everywhere else. I am writing you from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son. If we are lucky, the end of the sentence

> is where we might begin. If we are lucky, something is passed on, another alphabet written in the blood, sinew, and neuron; ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast. (10)

In this reflection, LD is cognizant of his own physicality, noting that he is attractive from "exactly three angles," which speaks to a hyperconscious observation of his appearance. Moreover, his remark about being "deadly from everywhere else" suggests a metaphor for the potentially harmful aspects of his identity or experiences, indicating a complex and perhaps critical self-perception. Furthermore, LD articulates his physical connection to his lineage—"I am writing you from inside a body that used to be yours"—which signifies an intimate bond with his heritage. He understands his body as a continuation of his ancestors', carrying not just their genetic blueprint but also their historical narratives. In this way, his existence is a vessel for his forebears' stories, echoing a literary tradition of a dialogue that transcends generations. Consequently, the notion of beginnings at "the end of the sentence" alludes to a cyclical concept of time and being. This idea posits that the legacies we leave can establish the foundation for future generations. Through this lens, LD contemplates the enduring impact of ancestral inheritance—the "alphabet written in the blood, sinew, and neuron"—which represents the unspoken yet profound legacy that propels one forward.
Ultimately, the quote culminates with a reflection on migration and existential boundaries, as seen in the "silent propulsion to fly south" and the quest for one's place in an ongoing narrative. It is a powerful metaphor for the immigrant experience, highlighting the instinctual drive for survival and belonging. In essence, LD ¨"s ruminations on his identity, heritage, and the human journey frame an introspective examination of his place within the world's tapestry.

Similarly, the letter in the narrative transcends mere communication; it becomes a medium for LD, to dissect and understand the layers of his trauma and subjectivity. Greg Forter establishes the connection between trauma and writing in …title…, where he observes,

> the contemporary version of trauma theory makes the human predicament a trauma we can only "know" by repeating. This repetition happens precisely by virtue of our common linguistic condition: through our talking and listening, our reading and writing—in short, our very being-in-language. (Forter 282)

Forter suggests that trauma is something that we can only truly "know" or understand through repetition that is inherent in our linguistic condition. This suggests that the act of speaking, listening, reading, and writing—our engagement with language—is not just a way of communicating trauma but a means of knowing and perhaps even coming to terms with it. The characters "very being-in-language" is what enables this repetitive process, implying that the articulation and re-articulation of their traumatic experiences in language is central to how they process and understand trauma. Thus, the letter is not just a message to his mother but a reflection on the act of writing itself and how the process helps him to interrogate his emotions. He writes,

> I don't know what I'm saying. I guess what I mean is that sometimes I don't know what or who we are… When I first started writing, I hated myself for being so uncertain, about images, clauses, ideas, even the pen or journal I used. Everything I wrote began with maybe and perhaps and ended with I think or I believe. But my doubt is everywhere, Ma. Even when I know something to be true as bone I fear the knowledge will dissolve, will not, despite my writing it, stay real (62)

Writing is not merely an outlet for his feelings, but "in writing you here" in this "private space … safe space," LD becomes both the subject and the object of his narrative, an observer of his own life who is attempting to make sense of it through the process of storytelling.

Moreover, the mother figure in the novel, to whom the letter is addressed, emerges as a complex symbol. She is both a specific individual with a rich, traumatic backstory and a universal maternal figure—absent yet omnipresent. The epistolary form enables Vuong to explore this duality, crafting a narrative that speaks to individual experiences while tapping into the collective consciousness (Vuong, 2021, pp. 110-111). This idea lies in the paradox of hoping that his words will not be lost in the silence of his mother's inability to read. However, the "very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling it possible…," the reason he has "the nerve to tell" her such intimate details about his experiences. The letter becomes the conduit for LD to reveal his most vulnerable moments, such as the times he "lied", saying one thing, but thinking the opposite. He says to his mother

> "You're not a monster", I said. But I lied. What I really wanted to say was that a monster is not such a terrible thing to be… Back at Goodwill you handed me the white dress, your eyes glazed and wide. "Can you read this… and tell me if it's fireproof?" I

> searched the hem, studied the print on the tag, and, not yet able to read myself, said, "Yeah." … I lied, holding the dress up to your chin. "It's fireproof." (Vuong 13).

He also recounts the many times he wears dresses and feels nothing less of himself, but lies to his mother for fear of being misunderstood or even rejected (13, 139-40).

Also within his letter, LD reveals his burgeoning awareness of his sexuality, recalling the sting when a classmate, Gramoz, mockingly calls him a "freak" for merely following him all day because he offers LD a "tray of pizza bagels" to choose from. (132). Later years as he refects, this incident sparks a deeper recognition that it isn just the allure of sharing food that draws him towards Gramoz, but a profound longing to be acknowledged (138). Despite the initial rejection, LD persists in seeking connection, finding in the epistolary form a sanctuary where he can express his thoughts and feelings to his mother, away from societal scrutiny and conformism. In this "a private space … (a) safe space" (33-34), he reveals to his how he navigates through his complex feelings for Trevor, the grandson of Mr. Buford (88), the owner of the tobacco farm in Hartford where LD begins working at the age of 14 (85). With Trevor, he experiences a profound sense of being "seen—I who had seldom been seen by anyone" (96). He recounts the different times they share sexual intimacy, the first of which is,

> Under the humid sheets… It was real because we didn't have to look… at a distance from our bodies, yet still inside the sensation, like a memory. We did what we had seen in porn. I wrapped my free arm around his neck, my mouth searching and taking any part of Trevor that was closest, and he did the same, pressing his nose into the crook of my neck. His tongue, his tongues. And his arms, hot along their tense muscles… the way I now dug into Trevor's bicep.
>
> (Vuong 113)

The sensual experiences shared with Trevor, from vivid descriptions of their sexual intercourses to the emotional labyrinth they navigate, are recounted with a rawness that is a hallmark of the epistolary form (Vuong 113-114,117). He admits that he "felt … tenderness for Trevor, a feeling so rare in me…" (237). Through the boldness afforded him by the epistolary intimacy, he finds a place to expose his sexual identity to his mothert with a candidness that eludes him elsewhere.

Additionally, Vuong's narrative, especially the idea that he is "writing to everyone" (33), explores the intimate and universal in tandem. The letter to his mother transcends personal

correspondence, becoming a vessel for shared human emotions and experiences. By acknowledging the commonalities in his life with the lives of others, LD bridges the gap between his specific circumstances and the collective memory. His assertion that his story could be “trope in a movie… an old story, one anyone can tell” (35), suggests an understanding that personal histories are often interwoven with archetypical stories—those that have been told and retold across generations and cultures. The repeated motifs "a woman, a girl, a gun” (35) and the image of a woman “on the shoulder of a dirt road begging, in a tongue made obsolete by gunfire” (38), and “a mother and a daughter… an old story (39)” signify the cyclical nature of these narratives. These motifs are powerful because they resonate with a broad audience; they reflect collective struggles and the perseverance of women through adversity. These symbols carry the weight of history and personal story, deeply resonating with audiences as they reveal the universal themes of survival and the strength of familial bonds in the face of adversity. LD's narrative intertwines with these motifs as he navigates his identity, caught between cultures, languages, and generational trauma. The mother-child relationship depicted is fraught with complexity, reflecting a tension between care and conflict LD’s recounting of these motifs is a testament to the shared human condition and the intimate bond between mother and child, even when marred by the inescapable scars of past conflicts.

Vuong also uses these recurrent themes to highlight the universal within the specific. Just as LD reflects on his personal history, he draws parallels to the broader, collective experiences of mothers and children—suggesting a common thread of humanity that persists despite the unique trials each individual faces. Through this lens, LD 's experiences serve as a microcosm for the reader, illuminating broader truths about maternal relationships, the inheritance of trauma, and the enduring quest for identity and understanding in a world where the past is inextricably linked to the present. These ideas will be explored further in the next section.

4.3 Fragmented Narratives, Memory and Trauma

The narrative form in *OEWBG* also plays a crucial role in Vuong's portrayal of memory and trauma. LD's narrative is marked by a fragmented, non-linear structure that mirrors the process of remembering and the impact of trauma. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed” (Davis 363). This is the nature of the trauma Lan and Rose’s experience in Saigon during war in Saigon, Vietnam, consisting of disruption of lives (31)

and bombing raids (48), the impact of which will be reserved for later years in foreign land to which they emigrate.

LD attributes his mother's inability to read the trauma of her youth. He writes that as a young girl, Rose "watched, from a banana grove, (her) schoolhouse collapse after an American napalm raid" (31). This represents Rose's first encounter as a vulnerable agent in society who cannot defend herself from violence of war and its attendant effects. The effect of war run so deep that decades after the initial event, Rose has to grapple with connecting with her son's letter because of her inability to read because "at five, (she) never stepped into a classroom again—a mark of there your education ended, ashed" (31-32)

Inability to read is not the only thing LD attributes to war as an after effect in her mother's subjectivity. LD is portrayed as a victim of generational trauma because even though he did not suffer directly from the war in his home town, he suffers from the toll it has taken on his mother's psyche. He admits reading "that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children.

In their study titled, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Suicide Risk Among Veterans, Pompili et al. explain that "posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a disabling psychiatric disorder that can result from exposure to trauma" (Pompili et al. 802). They also agree with Green and Mehlum et. al.'s observation that people, like Rose and Lan,

> in war zones are suceptible to traumatic stressors including a threat to one's life and bodily integrity, severe physical harm or injury, witnessing or learning of violence or severe harm to others, causing the death of or severe harm to another, and exposure to disfigured human bodies.

Lan and Rose experience most of these stressors in Vietnam. The psychological significance is portrayed in Lan's schizophrenia (16), PTSD (19) (21,22, 191), as well as ROSE's PTSD (13, 122), nightmares (99).

Sturm et al. contribute to the discourse on trauma by examining the evolving perspectives on refugees and displaced individuals. They highlight a paradigm shift from perceiving refugees merely as victims of political strife to recognizing them as individuals potentially grappling with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, this narrow medicalized view has drawn criticism for its dominance, particularly from those utilizing psychoanalytic approaches. In response to such critiques, there has been a movement towards paradigms that honor the personal narratives and

lived experiences of refugees, as well as those that account for the broader social, institutional, and political contexts in which they exist (Sturm et al. 27).

Within the pages of Vuong's *OEWBG* we encounter a stirring portrayal of generational trauma, particularly exemplified by the character of Rose. As a survivor of war and its associated brutalities, Rose inadvertently perpetuates a cycle of violence within her family. LD narrates instances of his mother's violence inflicted upon him, thus embodying the concept of trauma being passed down. He describes the visceral nature of these experiences: "the first time you hit me, I must have been four. A hand, a flash, a reckoning. My mouth a blaze of touch" (5), and recounts another occasion: "then the time with the remote control. A bruised welt on my forearm I would lie about to my teachers. 'I fell playing tag'" (5); “The time you threw the box of Legos at my head. The hardwood dotted with blood” (6). These moments, captured with a raw clarity, lay bare the complex interplay of love, violence, and survival within the fabric of their family history, showcasing how trauma transcends individual experiences and becomes woven into the generational narrative.

LD recognizes that a significant part of their connection as mother and son is wrapped up in trauma, either as inflicted on him by his mother (a product of war) or by extension through the stories of their experiences during the war in Vietnam. He expresses how war and violence has become an inextricable aspect of their social expression of because, even to “to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war” (32). As a result, LD’s perception of her mother is tenous and validly ambivalent. He admits, “I don’t know what to call you—White, Asian, orphan, American, mother,” (62). Thus, LD reemphasizes his mother’s complex subjectivity. He recognizes that his mother may not simply be “a monster,” but a “a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once. He cannot simply relegate his mother to checking only one box as “monster” because “perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it, after all” (13).

Voung employs this traumatic impact to also establish the dire consequence of war on individual and collective sunjectivities. To Vuong, wars are “man-made storm(s)” that engages “not men at all, but boys—eighteen, twenty at most” in the. “dismemberment of…” of inhabitated spaces, once “filled with human voices” (37). It sometimes bewildering to discern what can stir a man into annhilistic proclivities against a set people; a man like General Curtis LeMay to commence,

> mass bombing campaign in North Vietnam … he planned on bombing the Vietnamese “back into the Stone Ages.” To destroy a people, then, is to set them back in time. The

> US military would end up releasing over ten thousand tons of bombs in a country no larger than the size of California—surpassing the number of bombs deployed in all of WWII combined. (60)

It has to be a man that wields power like that of chief of staff of the US Air Force. It has to be a man that wields power like "Stalin was unrestrained in his use of political terror" (Kurlander 21) ; like Hitler whose rises "from relative obscurity to arguably the most powerful right-wing autocrat in modern history "(Kurlander 31).

On the other hand, a declaration of words—"war" (p.86)— not only means that a people are invaded, but also that lives of those who cannot "dodge the draft." War forcibly redirects the trajectories of those who cannot escape conscription, compelling them to abandon personal aspirations for the harsh realities of military life. For instance, young individuals who once harbored dreams of artistic achievements, such as becoming "a white Miles Davis," find themselves thrust into the brutal world of warfare, which alters their perceptions, experiences, and very sense of self. War potentially imposes new identities—soldier, veteran, casualty—that reshape personal narratives and community interactions. It can be a catalyst for influencing subjectivity by intertwining personal aspirations with the harsh demands of wartime realities. Such realities can in turn affect the individual's concept of self and even societal reintegration after the conflict.

4.4 Language and Linguistic Experimentation

Vuong's background as a poet deeply informs the narrative structure and language. This confluence of narrative and poetic forms breaks with conventional narrative forms and allows him to engage with the complexity of identities in a manner that defies traditional storytelling. Through a narrative imbued with lyrical prose, he utilizes language to delve into the protagonist's psyche and unpack his immigrant experience. The narrative's fragmented structure and the incorporation of bilingual elements, paired with rich imagery and metaphor, effectively capture LD's nuanced reality. Language acts simultaneously as a bridge and a divide—illustrating the complicated process of assimilation and the generational transmission of trauma.

The act of writing to his illiterate mother becomes a deeply touching endeavor for LD, reflecting his desire for a connection that the bilingual text underscores. This narrative technique mirrors his navigation between the worlds of his Vietnamese ancestry and his American present, depicting the challenges and changes inherent in the immigrant journey.

Vuong's choice of a non-linear, fragmented narrative mirrors the disjointedness of memory and the pervasive nature of trauma. Through the protagonist's reflective narrative, Vuong eloquently portrays the struggle of piecing together a coherent identity from fragments of the past and present, war and peace, cultural dislocation, and personal experiences. This section, therefore, delves into the way Vuong uses the novel as a vehicle for to convey the intricate tapestry of identity within the liminal space occupied by immigrants, a space where language is a source of both loss and profound transformation.

4.4.1 The Role of Language in Shaping Subjectivity

The novel's linguistic approach sheds light on the pivotal role that language plays in shaping our sense of self. LD often reflects deeply on how words have the dual capacity to connect and separate, both within ourselves and in our relationships with others. He confronts this paradox head-on as he attempts to reach his illiterate mother with the words, “I am writing to reach you” (3), which is a poignant effort to bridge their communicative divide despite her inability to comprehend the written word. His proactive choice to “write to you (his mother). You who are still alive” (7) to share his life experiences presents a stark contrast to the Roland Barthes, who reflected on his mother after her death and opens up “personal considerations on mourning” through his writings (Magali 53). LD's direct engagement is his way of forging a real connection, while Barthes processed his loss posthumously in literary form. This difference underscores the unique approach LD takes in using language as a tool to connect with his mother, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable barriers.

Yet, the act of penning the novel as a letter to his mother—who may never comprehend its content—becomes a profound act of yearning for connection while simultaneously recognizing the gaps that language may enforce. This contradiction embodies the immigrant experience, as highlighted when he reflects on the privilege of reading—a skill tirelessly earned by many immigrant children, yet often unattainable for their hardworking guardians. The novel poignantly captures the sentiment, recognizing that “reading is a privilege you made possible for” those children, at the cost of their guardians' wellbeing, leaving them with “poor liver, your exhausted bones,” and ultimately a skill “lost” (*OEWBG* 240). This loss echoes throughout communities where adults, after repeated attempts and public embarrassment, might relinquish their efforts with a resigned “I don’t need to read” (5). Thus, Vuong's exploration of language becomes a conduit to explore themes of connection and isolation, proficiency and loss. The narrative mirrors the

linguistic divide, creating a powerful metaphor for the immigrant journey towards assimilation and belonging in a landscape that often remains linguistically inaccessible.

Also in *OEWBG*, language transcends its conventional role as a medium of communication, collocating with survival; becoming a lifeline at moments when survival hangs in the balance. This is illustrated in a tense scene where Lan at the border. Lan, LD's maternal grandmother, also the mother of Rose and Mai, and Paul's ex-wife, originates from Vietnam's Go She crosses paths with an American serviceman named Paul in a bar in Saigon in 1967, with whom she finds love and later marries, going on to have two additional children with him. However, Paul's trip to the U.S. coincides with the Fall of Saigon, and post-1975, he finds himself unable to come back to Vietnam. This is what propels to Lan make the decision to leave Vietnam in 1990. So clutching her daughter, she encounters a soldier at the border as she attempts to cross into USA to find Paul. The stakes are life and death as she faces the barrel of an "M-16… American gun…" (42-43). In this critical moment, Lan's grasp of the English language is both her shield and her savior. Her fragmented plea, "Yoo Et Aye numbuh won. Hands up. Don't shoot. Yoo Et Aye numbuh won. Hands up. No bang bang" (43), is a desperate attempt to communicate peace and allegiance. Though her words are a distorted echo of "USA number one. My hands are up. Don't shoot," they demonstrate her quick wit and adaptability in the face of danger.

Vuong draws a powerful comparison to a macaque, a creature known for its intelligence and adaptability, suggesting that Lan, too, relies on "judgment, creativity, even language…" and employs "memory in order to survive" (43). This scene is a stark reminder of the immigrant experience that Vuong paints throughout the novel—where language is not just a cultural artifact to be preserved or a tool for basic communication but a critical instrument for navigating and enduring the complexities as well as perils of displacement and resettlement. It underscores the theme that survival often requires more than just physical perseverance; it demands mental agility and the innovative use of all resources at one's disposal, language being one of the most potent.

Survival also means access to food, which this Vietnamese family forgoes because neither their "mooing sounds," "French" or mother and daughter twirling and mooing in circles" can convey that they want to buy oxtail to make a nostalgic meal of "bún bò huế" (29).
This paradox highlights the complexities of identity formation within immigrant families, where language can be both a barrier and a bridge.

Additionally, language as it relate to survival in the narrative is not limited to the immediate danger but extends to the daily necessity of nourishment, which becomes a telling ordeal for the Vietnamese family. The act of procuring food itself at the butcher shop turns into a performance of desperate communication as they resort to "mooing sounds," an attempt to speak

"French," and engage in a display with "mother and daughter twirling and mooing in circles." Their attempts are not mere quirkiness; however, they are efforts to articulate a desire for oxtail to prepare “bún bò huế,” a dish steeped in the warmth of their cultural heritage (29). This scene is pregnant with the sorrows of displacement and the longing for a taste of home. It also lays bare the often absurd lengths to which immigrants must go to bridge the linguistic divide.

The family's inability to communicate their need for “oxtail” for a traditional Vietnamese dish underscores the deeper hunger for cultural connection and the preservation of identity. The humorous yet futile attempts comments on the broader challenge of maintaining one's cultural practices amidst the alienating forces of a new, dominant language and society. Language in this context is multifaceted—while it can unlock doors and forge bonds within the immigrant community, it can also be an insurmountable wall that isolates and alienates. This paradox of language is particularly pronounced in the lives of immigrant families, who find themselves continuously navigating the complex process of identity formation. They must learn to balance the divide between their rich cultural past and the often baffling present in a foreign land. The struggle for survival, thus, is indicative of the broader experience of immigrants: it's not just about sustaining life but also about preserving a sense of self amidst the shifting sands of identity in a new world.

4.4.2 Language and Traumatic Memory

Building on foundational trauma theory, Forter explores the interplay between language and trauma, suggesting that our grasp of traumatic experiences is mediated through a linguistic process. He posits that "knowing" trauma is a function of language—our dialogues, readings, and writings allow us to process and re-experience trauma in a pattern of repetition (Forter 282). This resonates with Cathy Caruth’s observation that the trauma response is often a delayed one, characterized by uncontrollable and repetitive occurrences, such as hallucinations and other invasive phenomena (Davis 363). In their discussion of Complexity of Trauma Narratives as an Index of Fragmented Memory in PTSD: A Critical Analysis, Gray and Lombardo further this understanding by identifying fragmented and/or disorganized trauma memories (FDTM) as indicative of the level of processing by individuals who have experienced trauma (Gray and Lombardo 171). This fragmented memory, an emblem of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), underscores the complexity and non-linear nature of trauma narratives.

In *OEWBG*, Ocean Vuong employs poetic language to mirror the fragmented and visceral nature of traumatic memories. His narrative eschews a linear path and therefore uses a fragmented narrative structure to encapsulate the notion that trauma can be "known" but not fully captured in a traditional narrative form, echoing the layers and discontinuities that characterize the lived experiences of trauma survivors. This non-linear mirrors the complexity of human recollection, the disjointed nature of trauma, and the layers that constitute subjectivity. In this narrative labyrinth, each fragment—each memory and thought—becomes a puzzle piece, and the reader is invited to join in the reconstruction of the protagonist's life, just as the protagonist attempts to piece together his own identity.

This technique is illustrated when LD reminisces about his mother's harrowing experiences during the Vietnam War juxtaposed against his own experiences in America, without a direct temporal link between the two (*OEWBG* 17-21). He writes about his grandmother Lan's stories (21,22, 47), then shifts to his own coming-of-age in the fields of Hartford, Connecticut (85, 105-115). This structure emulates the complexity of the human mind, which does not compartmentalize memories into neatly ordered sequences but instead recalls them as a tangle of interconnected threads. The reader is thrust into an immersive dive into LD's memories, with shifts in time that emulate the way past traumas and joys resurface in the mind, often unprompted and often incomplete. He recounts his memories and events starting from when he was 4 years old (4- 5), progressing to 10 years old (9), then moving forward to age 28 (10), before jumping back in time to age 13 (11), then to age 8 (15), age 6 (28), and to age 9 (55), before returning to age 10. This pattern continues throughout the narrative.

In a sense, the reader's engagement with the text is deeply affected by the fragmented narrative. Rather than being passive recipients of a story, readers become active participants, tasked with piecing together the narrative and drawing connections between disparate life events. This form of engagement mirrors the process by which individuals make sense of their lives, drawing from a mosaic of memories and experiences to form a coherent self-identity.Thus, the fragmented narrative of *OEWBG* serves as a vital tool for Vuong to convey the intricacies of subjectivity. By emulating the process of memory recall, the novel invites readers to delve into the fragmented psyche of LD and, in turn, to contemplate the nature of their own recollections and the fragmented stories that compose their identities.

Apart from the fragmented structure, Vuong uses poetic language to capture this visceral quality of traumatic memories, which often elude straightforward narration. Like "a father who raged through the rooms terrorizing his family" because of "metal: the shell lodged in" his brain, Vuong depicts traumatic memories as fragments of traumatic experience

that rages and fractured the memories of its subjects. He observes that "trauma affects not only the brain, but the body too" (19). LD's own narration his own traumatic experiences features such linguistic digressions and pulsating repetitions remiscent of emotions associated with nervousness or fragmented memory. In the final days of Lan, LD narrates how he

> fanned her with a paper plate as she drifted in and out of consciousness. I kept fanning as Mai fed her, the two women, mother's and daughter's black hair fluttering in unison, their foreheads almost touching. I kept fanning her face, jeweled with sweat, her eyes shut as you worked (198).

His choice of "fanned… fluttering … fanning… fanning" imprint the motion on the readers's senses and the translates into an airy, dreamy atmosphere. Like a bird fluttering away, his pain flies him off into artistic sensibilities and he suddenly interjects with more impactful poetry. He writes,

> We try to preserve life—even when we know it has no chance of enduring its body. We feed it, keep it comfortable, bathe it, medicate it, caress it, even sing to it. We tend to these basic functions not because we are brave or selfless but because, like breath, it is the most fundamental act of our species: to sustain the body until time leaves it behind (199).

He gives us access into how he is processing the trauma of his grandmother's fatal illness and its effects on him, Rose and Lan, reflecting how suffering can be collective. Then as he resumes his narration and tries to makes sense of "what was happening to Lan" (199), he admits that his "mind slides, unexpectedly, to Trevor. Trevor who by then had been dead just seven months" (199).

Towards the end of part two, LD gives us access into his stream of consciousness with pages of disjointed rumblings about

> Trevor rusted pickup and no license.
> Trevor sixteen; blue jeans streaked with deer blood.
> Trevor too fast and not enough.
> Three freckles on his nose.
> Three periods to a boy-sentence.
> Trevor I like sunflowers best. They go so high.

Clover. Sassafras. Douglas fir. Scottish myrtle.
The boy. The motor oil. The body, it fills up.
Trevor asleep beside you. Steady breaths. Rain. (154-160)

This reads like a highlightreel of LD's memories of Trevor. The langugae he uses is also akin display of the anxiety and pent up emotions at the thought of going back to Hartford; because the beginning, LD is travelling from New York to Hartford after he hears of Trevor's death. That means he has to confront the pain of the death of a loved on and the separation and the knowing that that person is no more in his life. This use of evocative imagery and fragmented sentences conveys the disjointedness of LD 's recollections, reflecting the fragmented nature of a traumatized psyche. This narrative style not only depicts the protagonist's struggle with past traumas but also emphasizes the power of language to both evoke and heal. Language gives him a way to make sense of what is happening inside and around him.

4.4.3 Linguistic Experimentation and Bilingual Text

Vuong's innovative use of language is also evident in his incorporation of bilingual text. The inclusion of Vietnamese language within the primarily English narrative serves multiple functions. The bilingual inclusion first of all authenticates the cultural backdrop of the novel. LD notes that "Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark of where" (31) he, Lan, Rose come from—their home in Saigon. LD equates losing one's language—a symbol for language,and more intensively, the mother tongue—he wonders if it is possible "to take pleasure in loss (of the tongue) without losing oneself entirely?"

So whether it is Rose admiring "Đẹp quá"— "the hummingbird" (29); or Lan inquiring about oxtail and recalling the familiar "Đuôi bò. Anh có đuôi bò không?" (30); or Paul and LD singing "Ca trù … the folk songs—the ones Grandma used to sing" (49), they forge a deep connection to their heritage through language and cultural references. Like the "organ where nutrients, hormones, and waste are passed between mother and fetus," (137) their mother tongue is the placenta to to the mother land, Saigon,Vietnam. Vuong depicts bilingualism as a vital conduit, akin to the biological placenta, nourishing the bond between the homeland of Saigon, Vietnam, and their individual identities. LD mourns the loss of one's mother tongue, equating it to the lifeline between mother and fetus, emphasizing its essential role in maintaining cultural identity.

Moreover, the inclusion of Vietnamese in the novel not only lends authenticity to the cultural backdrop but also invites readers who speak English to engage more deeply with the narrative, echoing the protagonist's quest for comprehension and belonging. Vuong invites reflection on the essence of language, pondering the experience of pleasure amidst loss and the possibility of expressing the inexpressible. He challenges readers to consider that Language goes beyond words; for "what if the tongue is cut out? Can one take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely?" (31) "Is there a language for falling out of language?" (37). In this sense, LD observes that,

> 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 (33).

LD notes that when words are scarce or absent, our bodies speak a 'third language' through gestures where words fail. The novel urges readers to appreciate nonverbal forms of expression and to recognize the full spectrum of communication. The novel challenges people to consider non-verbal communication to connect with people, and not marginalize people because of linguistic inadequacy; embrace "gesture to a bird, a flower, or a pair of lace curtains from Walmart" (29). Engaging all senses, the subtlest gestures like "that three people on the floor, connected to each other by touch" can convey complex concepts " like the word family" (33) than overt actions or words, thereby expanding the understanding of connection beyond the confines of language. So instead of resorting to "slapping the counter" with "teeth showing huge and white" and "chortling," a keen look at "mother and daughter twirling and mooing in circles," gesturing "horns, tail, ox" can most likely scream "oxtail" (30)

Moreover, bilingualism in the narrative highlights the intricacies of immigrant subjectivity against a backdrop of cultural dissonance. LD reflects on the conflation of memory and longing in Vietnamese, revealing the complexity of emotions in simple interactions. LD notes that,

> in Vietnamese, the word for missing someone and remembering them is the same: nhớ. Sometimes, when you ask me over the phone, Con nhớ mẹ không? I flinch, thinking you meant, Do you remember me? (186)

Vuong therefore uses bilingualism to address misunderstandings about immigrant cultural heritage. LD addresses such a misunderstanding on the occasion where he tries to correct the

blonde clerk who mistakes him to be an adopted child. LD confronts the clerk who blurts at him, “what the hell did you say” because she presumes him crude for saying "that's my mom I came out her asshole" (52). However, this statement shocks the clerk simply because of cultural taboos and linguistic differences. Her blunt correction highlights cultural nuances—as she is not cognizant that discussions of birth are humorously shifted to avoid mentioning female genitalia, emphasizing the mother-son relationship's modesty in Vietnamese culture. As LD explains,

> like many Vietnamese mothers … to speak of female genitalia, especially between mothers and sons, is considered taboo—so when talking about birth, you always mentioned that I had come out of your anus. You would playfully slap my head and say, “This huge noggin nearly tore up my asshole!” (52)

This also comments on the tendency to pass quick judgments on people based on superficial characteristics like race, gender, class, just as LD faces assumptions due to the skin tone difference with his mother, Rose (52). The clerk mistakes LD to be Rose’s adopted child because Rose is lighter skin toned than LD (51). Similarly, Lan's commentary on Tiger Woods' identity challenges the rigid socio-cultural categories often imposed. Lan is vexed that Tiger Woods is referred to as “black?”, which could not be further from fact, at least because “his mom is Taiwanese” (50-51). Vuong showcases this complexity of identity through Tiger Woods' self-description as “‘Cablinasian,’ a portmanteau he invented to contain his ethnic makeup of Chinese, Thai, Black, Dutch, and Native American” (63). This description defies conventional racial classifications, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of individual identities.

This also reinforces the inherent inadequacies of language across cultures to accommodate all the nuances culture and people’s lived experieences. It exposes the gap where words in one language may lack the depth or connotations they hold in their native context, necessitating linguistic adaptation to carry the full weight of cultural subtleties. This adaptation, which includes semantic shifts—broadening or narrowing meanings—is crucial for language to truly convey the richness of culture. In esesence, Vuong illustrates how language and cultural dislocation shape the characters, weaving a fragmented narrative that echoes their internal struggles and highlights the intrinsic link between language and identity.

Furthermore, by weaving Vietnamese words and phrases into the predominantly English narrative and demonstration of the cultural dissonace, Vuong highlights the liminal space occupied by immigrants, navigating between cultures and languages. “In this country”, they sojourn LD observes, “ identities, already tenous” (5). In “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites

de Passage" (1996), Victor Turner contextualizes liminal spaces in the transitional rites of passage, where participants are often rendered symbolically invisible and become "not yet classified", neither here nor there (Victor W. Turner 48). His mother tongue is his invisibility cloak because speaking Vietnamese implies he,

> had seldom been seen by anyone. I who was taught … to be invisible in order to be safe, who, in elementary school, was sent to the fifteen-minute time-out in the corner only to be found two hours later, when everyone was long gone and Mrs. Harding, eating lunch at her desk, peered over her macaroni salad and gasped. "My god! My god, I forgot you were still here! (p.96)

To speak Vietnamese is to be literally unheard or misunderstood only way out is, "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" (33). He has to lose or cover one aspect of his idenity in other to be recognized and accepted in social spaces. He desires to escape this liminality into a place where he is seen; "be seen" by Trevor, by Mrs Harding (96) by Gramoz (139). This linguistic duality therefore serves as a metaphor for LD's liminality, straddling the realms of his Vietnamese heritage and his American present. Vuong's poetic prose amplifies this struggle, illustrating how language can both reveal and obscure the essence of one's identity. His mother tongue becomes "not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void;" a void LD seeks to fill. It is his life pursuit, becoming,

> the first in our family to go to college, squandered it on a degree in English…How I fled … to spend my days in New York lost in library stacks, reading obscure texts by dead people... (15)

Language itself becomes a symbolic terrain where LD wrestles with expression and silence. His attempts to articulate his experiences and feelings in a language that is both his own and not—English, not Vietnamese—symbolize the broader struggle of forming an identity that balances different cultures, histories, and expectations.

4.5 Motifs and Symbolism to Convey Subjectivity

In literary art, motifs and symbols function as the brushstrokes that color the canvas of narrative, offering layers of meaning and depth. Ocean Vuong, with the sensibility of a poet, wields these tools with deftness in *OEWBG*, rendering an intricate depiction of his characters' psychological landscapes. Within the text, each recurring motif and symbol—be it the steadfast buffalo, the emblematic Superman, the metamorphic monarch butterflies, or the primal macaque monkeys—is a thread in the fabric of the characters' subjectivities, contributing to a portrait that resonates on both personal and universal levels.
This section probes how Vuong employs these literary elements to explore the nuanced dimensions of subjectivity. Through motifs and symbols, he articulates the complex experiences of his characters, including how they deal with change and loss, enveloping readers in a world where the quintessence of America is scrutinized through the eyes of an immigrant family.

4.5.1 The Buffalo as a Symbol of Tradition and Displacement

In Vuong's *OEWBG*, the buffalo is not just an animal; it's a symbol rich with the layers of tradition and the harsh realities of displacement. Through the use of direct quotes from the novel, we can explore how the buffalo's image deepens the narrative's exploration of identity, specifically within the context of intersectionality, where the facets of race, class, gender, and sexuality converge.

LD, reflecting on his life's journey, offers a poignant metaphor: "When all you've been seeing before you is a cliff and then this bright bridge appears out of nowhere, you run fast across it knowing there'll be another cliff on the other side... You don't have to be like the buffaloes. You can stop." (*OEWBG*140). Here, Vuong draws a parallel between the inevitability of challenges and the relentless march of the buffaloes toward the cliff's edge. It suggests a shared instinct to continue despite imminent peril but also hints at the autonomy in choosing one's path—acknowledging the agency we possess in the face of inherited trajectories of identity and displacement.

This choice, however, is contrasted by the ingrained patterns of memory and loss that often dictate our internal narratives: "And we were still, letting the buffaloes go on falling, hundreds of them trotting silently down the cliffs in our heads." (177). In this haunting visualization, Vuong captures how past traumas and histories are replayed in the mind, reflecting the relentless tug of inherited identities and the struggle to reconcile them with the present.

LD's musings on a nature documentary prompt a reflection on this ceaseless momentum: "You ever think about those buffaloes... how they keep running off those cliffs?" (176). The buffaloes' plight becomes a metaphor for the human condition—specifically that of immigrant families who, driven by forces larger than themselves, often find themselves in a continuous cycle of survival, echoing the broader theme of the immigrant journey marked by both determination and an ever-present risk of falling.

Yet, there is room for transformation and a re-envisioning of destiny: "Maybe in the next life... Maybe we'll be the opposite of buffaloes. We'll grow wings and spill over the cliff as a generation of monarchs, heading home." (147). Vuong here imagines a transcendence of the buffalo's fate, a metamorphosis that allows for a return to origins, a regaining of agency, and a reimagination of identity. This evolution from earthbound to airborne is a powerful metaphor for the potential for change in the face of intersectional identities—reshaping the narrative from one of falling to one of rising and returning.

In weaving these images of the buffalo throughout his narrative, Vuong not only reflects on the individual experiences of LD but also comments on the collective experience of Vietnamese immigrants. The buffalo's presence in the novel serves as a testament to the enduring impact of tradition, the weight of displacement, and the multifaceted nature of identity. Through LD's eyes, we see how the intersectionality of his identity—shaped by race, immigration, and personal history—is a living force that, much like the buffalo, can either be led to the edge or learn to soar above it.

4.5.2 The Symbolism of Monarch Butterflies in OEWBG

Ocean Vuong also weaves a tapestry of intersectional identity through the recurring imagery of monarch butterflies, a motif laden with meaning and transformation. Vuong's poetic depiction of these delicate creatures serves as a potent symbol, illuminating the characters' journey through the complex realms of memory, trauma, heritage, and belonging.

The migration of the monarchs is Vuong's metaphor for survival across generations, boundaries, and the most challenging conditions. "Autumn. Somewhere over Michigan, a colony of monarch butterflies, numbering more than fifteen thousand, are beginning their yearly migration south" (4). This annual trek from Canada to Mexico is a feat of endurance and instinct, representing not only the butterflies' lifecycle but also echoing the immigrant experience of LD's family—resiliently journeying towards hope and preservation despite the threat of extinction at every turn.

The monarchs also capture the essence of intersectional identity by embodying transformation—a thread linking each instance of their mention to the broader thematic canvas. "It only takes a single night of frost to kill off a generation. To live, then, is a matter of time, of timing" (*OEWBG* 4). Here, the fragility of existence mirrors the precariousness of an identity forged at the crossroads of multiple marginalities—race, immigration status, sexuality, and class.

Furthermore, the monarchs symbolize the continuity and change inherent in the intersectional experience. "The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past" (8). The butterflies become emblems of the diasporic journey, where the past is both a starting point and a distant land never to be returned to, only to be revisited in memory and in the lives of the progeny. This analogy is particularly poignant in considering how Vuong explores the intergenerational trauma and the inheritance of memories, where the personal history of LD's family intertwines with the collective history of the Vietnam War.

The moment LD, at thirteen, tells his mother to stop the violence— "The time, at thirteen, when I finally said stop" (12)—is akin to the monarchs' inherited knowledge of migration. The cessation of a painful cycle in LD's life resonates with the monarchs' instinctual, generational wisdom, which is encoded in their very being. Vuong suggests that, just as the butterflies carry the memory of migration routes through their DNA, individuals carry the traumas and strengths of their ancestors within them, influencing their identities and their responses to the world.

Vuong also touches upon the resilience required to survive both literal and metaphorical winters, tying this to the concept of survival against adversity: "What do we mean when we say survivor? Maybe a survivor is the last one to come home, the final monarch that lands on a branch already weighted with ghosts" (13). The image of the survivor monarch evokes the lived experiences of those marginalized by society—often the last to be acknowledged, carrying the weight of lost loved ones and the histories of violence and displacement.

Finally, Vuong draws a parallel between the monarchs and the napalm clouds of the Vietnam War, juxtaposing the natural and the unnatural, beauty and horror: "Sometimes, I imagine the monarchs fleeing not winter but the napalm clouds of your childhood in Vietnam" (14). The image of fireproof monarchs serves as a symbol of hope and transformation, suggesting that despite the destructiveness of war, there remains the potential for renewal and healing.

These evocative representations of monarch butterflies serve as Vuong's vehicle to express the intricate and often painful dynamics of intersectional identity. Through the lens of these migrating creatures, Vuong not only portrays the fluidity and multiplicity of identity but also offers a profound commentary on the interplay between personal and collective history, individual and

communal survival, and the enduring quest for a sense of belonging. In essence, the butterfly's life cycle, marked by significant transformation, mirrors LD's own journey towards understanding and accepting his identity amidst the backdrop of familial and societal expectations.

4.5.3 Superman as a Symbol of America in OEWBG

Ocean Vuong employs the symbol of Superman as a nuanced exploration of the protagonist's assimilation into American culture. This symbol becomes a canvas where issues of race, class, and cultural identity intersect, reflecting the aspirational yet often elusive nature of the American Dream.

Superman, an emblem of quintessential American heroism, is entwined with LD's experience as a Vietnamese-American. The narrative reflects on moments where Superman's invincibility contrasts sharply with the vulnerabilities of immigrant life. Vuong writes, “The time at Six Flags, when you rode the Superman roller coaster with me because I was too scared to do it alone. How you threw up afterward, your whole head in the garbage can" (*OEWBG* 9), juxtaposing the thrill and fear associated with American amusement—a metaphor for the immigrant's daring plunge into the unknown, which can be both exhilarating and overwhelming.

The symbol of Superman also carries undertones of transformation and Americanization, especially in LD's childhood recollections. "The next morning, in the kitchen, I watched as you poured the milk into a glass tall as my head. 'Drink,' you said, your lips pouted with pride. 'This is American milk so you’re gonna grow a lot. No doubt about it'" (27). Here, the expectation of growth and assimilation is linked to the consumption of American goods, suggesting that American identity can be absorbed and manifested physically.

Yet, Vuong introduces a dissonance in the symbol—a suggestion that the promise of becoming like Superman is fraught with disillusionment. "The boy is six and wearing nothing but a pair of white underwear with Supermans patterned everywhere... He’s at home" (97-98). The stark image of a child locked away, juxtaposed with the iconography of Superman, illustrates the disparity between the dream and reality for many immigrants. This poignant scene mirrors Desiree's experience in Brit Bennett's *TVH*, where the move from Mallard to New Orleans is laden with hopes of a better life, only to confront the complexities and hardships that come with such a change.

This theme is further expounded upon in the depiction of LD's mother’s labor in America: “Because I am your son, what I know of work I know equally of loss... Your hands are hideous—

and I hate everything that made them that way" (79-81). The physical toll on his mother's hands stands as a testament to the strenuous, often unrecognized labor that immigrants endure. It signifies the disillusionment akin to that of the Vignes sisters in New Orleans, where the allure of a fresh start clashes with the reality of persistent inequalities and unmet promises.

Lastly, the mention of tobacco farming in Vuong's narrative adds another layer to this exploration of the American mythos. "Trevor and I talked about the fields... anything that came from America still had an aura of promise to it. But truth was, Trevor said, the crop was low-grade" (96). This reveals a dichotomy where products from America are associated with quality and promise abroad, yet the reality is a far cry from such perceptions, echoing the overarching theme of disillusionment.

In a nuanced narrative, Vuong uses the Superman symbol to interrogate the complexities of identity and the immigrant experience in America. Through the protagonist's journey, the novel questions the feasibility of the American Dream, revealing the ways in which it can be both an empowering ideal and a source of disillusionment. Vuong's portrayal invites readers to reflect on the multifaceted nature of assimilation and the cost it exacts on the individual and familial level, echoing the experiences of characters like Desiree and the hardships they face in pursuit of a better life.

5 Conclusion

This thesis has explored the intricate ways in which subjectivity is constructed within contemporary literature, specifically through the lens of Brit Bennett's *TVH* and Ocean Vuong's *OEWBG*. Both authors navigate the complex terrains of race, gender, class and trauma, illustrating how these factors profoundly shape individual subjectivities and experiences. The analysis has demonstrated that subjectivity is not an isolated or static phenomenon but that it is deeply interconnected with broader societal narratives and individual histories. The characters in these novels are not merely subjects within their own narratives; they are representations of the ongoing struggle to define oneself against the backdrop of societal expectations and historical legacies. This thesis reaffirms that literature is a powerful medium for examining the fluidity of identity and the dynamics of personal subjectivity in relation to larger cultural and political realities. Through this scholarly exploration, the significance of understanding subjectivity as a fundamental aspect of human experience is underscored, emphasizing its relevance in identity studies and the critical analysis of contemporary narratives.

5.1 Final Thoughts

Researching and writing this thesis has been an enlightening journey, deeply enhancing my understanding of intersectionality, subjectivity, and trauma within contemporary literature. Immersing myself in the works of Brit Bennett and Ocean Vuong allowed me to explore the nuanced ways literature can reflect and challenge societal norms. This process not only broadened my academic perspective but also fostered a profound personal growth. Engaging with these texts has sharpened my analytical skills and increased my empathy for the complex lives of others, reinforcing the power of literature to influence and inspire.

This thesis underscores the critical role of literature in dissecting and portraying the complex layers of human subjectivity. As society continues to evolve, so too should our engagement with literature that challenges, reflects, and reshapes our understanding of ourselves and the world. Continuing to delve into the complexities of subjectivity within literature is not just an academic pursuit but a necessary engagement with our continually changing world.

Despite its contributions, this study faced constraints, particularly temporal limitations that affected the scope of analysis. Time constraints limited a deeper exploration of secondary characters and themes which could have provided additional layers of interpretation regarding the socio-political contexts influencing the protagonists' identities. For instance, the potential exploration of peripheral narratives that echo and reinforce main trajectories was curtailed, which could have enriched the understanding of the pervasive influence of trauma across different demographic settings.

Moreover, while the thesis provides a robust analysis of the primary texts, it could not fully delve into the broader theoretical implications of postcolonial and feminist theories that intersect with the authors' narrative strategies. These frameworks could potentially highlight how the novels not only reflect but also resist prevailing power dynamics through their narrative structures and character development.

Additionally, the analysis is confined to only two contemporary novels, suggesting a broader scope could enrich understanding of subjectivity across more varied literary voices and styles. Future studies might consider a more extensive range of authors and genres to encompass a wider spectrum of intersectional identities.

These limitations also suggest avenues for further research, including a more detailed examination of the interplay between different levels of narrative and their implications for understanding subjectivity and intersectionality. Future studies could also benefit from a broader incorporation of theoretical perspectives that challenge and expand upon the intersectional approach used here. This study primarily utilized close-reading as its analytical method. However, other approaches such as reader-response theory and affect theory might offer equally valuable insights. Particularly relevant to this research is Suzanne Keen's concept of narrative empathy, which is crucial for understanding how readers engage with the emotional dimensions of fictional characters. Narrative empathy bridges the gap between individual and collective human experiences by reflecting our own internal dialogues through the characters' lives. In her seminal work, *Empathy and the Nove*l (2007), Keen explores how empathy is not only evoked but also maintained during the readers' engagement with a narrative. This allows readers to connect deeply with the characters' most intimate thoughts and emotions, enriching their reading experience (Keen 66-67).

Additionally, while the thesis focuses on narrative techniques and their implications for understanding identity, subsequent research could incorporate reader response theory to examine how different audiences perceive and interact with the themes of race, gender, and trauma presented in these works. This could provide a more comprehensive view of the

impact of narrative structures on reader engagement and empathy. Exploring non-Western perspectives on subjectivity would also broaden the scope of literary analysis, contributing to a more global understanding of the themes discussed. Such research could integrate comparative literature approaches to discern universal versus culturally specific aspects of subjectivity in literature. By acknowledging these limitations, this thesis underscores the complexity of literary analysis and the continual need for critical engagement with diverse theoretical frameworks to deepen our understanding of literature's role in reflecting and shaping human experiences.

It is my view that the findings of this thesis has potential implications beyond academic discourse, particularly in education, policy-making, and cultural discourse. In educational settings, the themes explored can enhance curricula in literature, sociology, and psychology courses by providing students with complex narratives that challenge simple understandings of subjectivity and society. These narratives foster critical thinking and empathy, crucial skills in an increasingly diverse world.

In policy-making, insights from this study could inform initiatives aimed at increasing cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness in media representation. Understanding the profound impact of narrative techniques on shaping perceptions of race and identity can guide policymakers in supporting arts and literature that promote diversity and inclusion.

Finally, the analysis of how literature reflects and shapes societal attitudes towards race and identity can inspire writers and artists to engage more deeply with issues of marginalization and resilience, influencing how societies conceive of and discuss these crucial topics. Engaging with these narratives in public forums and discussions can also promote a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of individual experiences within the socio-political landscape.

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