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# Affective Chemistries of Care: Slow Activism and the Limits of the Molecular in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous*

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Ocean Vuong's 2019 debut novel, *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* (hereafter *On Earth*) proceeds as a series of letters from the first-person narrator, Little Dog, to his mostly Vietnamese-speaking mother.<sup>1</sup> In these epistles, we learn of the storytelling prowess of both Ma (Rose) and Lan (Rose's mother), and how the narrator's own path toward becoming a writer stems from his vow, as a young refugee living in Connecticut, to help these two women—to have on his tongue the correct English words.<sup>2</sup> Also detailed are Little Dog's teenage and early adult years, and his sense of becoming beautiful through the erotic gaze of a white boy, Trevor. The letters meditate on loss and grief, specifically of two persons whose deaths are recounted in these missives: Trevor, at age twenty-two, dies from a fentanyl overdose linked to his addiction to prescription opioids, and grandma Lan dies of advanced bone cancer.

Disabling infrastructures—such as chemical weaponry dropped on Vietnam throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, inhalational toxicants in US nail salon products from the 1990s forward, and the widespread prescribing of opioids by medical personnel in the US from 1996 onward—provide historical background for the cancers, mental illnesses, addiction, and skin, liver, and lung ailments with which the main characters grapple. Vuong's book interleaves elegy, the Asian refugee story, the tale of coming out (first love), and journalistic vignettes on topics ranging from the tobacco industry in Connecticut to the military service of Tiger Woods's father in the Asia-Pacific. Through this *mélange* of genres, *On Earth* portrays the lingering afterlives of the military-poison complex and the narcotic-pharmaceutical industries as both of these intersect with structures of settler-colonialism, late capitalism, and a biopolitics

invested in the life extension of white men, the prime beneficiaries of revanchist American nationalism.

To give a sense of the breadth of chemosensory intimacies addressed by *On Earth*, I could begin by listing the more notorious molecules featured in the novel, such as the psychoactive alkaloids, heroin and nicotine; or the way in which Vuong connects effects from herbicides dropped on Asian terrains and peoples “over there” to the lives of citizens living in the eastern US seaboard “over here.” Or I could offer comparative portraits of the business practices of the manufacturers of these intoxicants and chemical weapons: Purdue Pharma (OxyContin), the Connecticut Tobacco Growers Association (high-end cigars); and Monsanto and Dow Chemical (Agent Orange). However, to do so would likely perpetuate an overly “damage-centered” account of the Vietnamese refugee story.<sup>3</sup>

With this arsenal of violence forming the background to my reading, this essay focuses on the novel’s depiction of care performed as emotional and erotic support labor in the long aftermath of such assaults. This repertoire of care emerges alongside 1) molecular entreaties in the forms of chemical fixes promising to optimize mood or alleviate pain, and 2) heightened attentiveness to the air’s conditioning—how it is engineered for curing and masking.<sup>4</sup> Because they address chemical solicitation or occur amidst settings suffused with airborne toxicants, these acts of care, I argue, ought to be viewed as a type of environmental action, a “hypo-intervention”—to borrow Manuel Tironi’s locution—as part of a program of “intimate” or “slow activism” whereby “poor, illiterate and otherwise marginalized people ... interrupt, even if minimally, the trajectory of industrial,” to which I would add, militarized “harm [to] articulate a space of ethical potentiality.”<sup>5</sup>

This essay proceeds in three parts. Part One close reads a language lesson through which the narrator, Little Dog, contemplates a children’s book and its message regarding the possibility of meeting an atmospheric threat not with standard security measures but with an act of cooking. Here, I develop a heuristic distinction between what I’m calling molecular entreaties and *affective chemistries of care*. Part Two turns to the novel’s characterization of Ma and the immigrant-run nail salon, specifically the way incendiary and industrial chemicals haunt places in Ma’s past and present. I also dwell on Ma’s wordless intuiting of a salon customer’s palpable loss as demonstration of Ma’s “femme” and “crip” intelligence.<sup>6</sup> Part Three focuses on *On Earth*’s portrait of the Buford tobacco farm, and specifically the curing barn—the setting for a thrilling and dangerous erotic consummation. Vuong’s narration of Little Dog and Trevor’s sex act also underscores an affective chemistry that occurs not in the sex exactly but in the enjoining of a worry-free disposition, as a salve to feelings of shame. Drawing out *On Earth*’s focalization of irruptions of care in atmospheres dense with chemistry, this essay models a humanistic, decolonial, and intersectional framework that (re)values crip practical knowledge and that also attends to the novel’s focalizing of queer interracial intimacy.

### 1. Molecular Entreaty, Molecular Conjuring

In *On Earth's* opening chapter, Little Dog recalls when his third grade ESL teacher introduced him to *Thunder Cake*, by Patricia Polacco. This picture book tells of a grandmother coaxing from under the bed her terrified granddaughter, who has been hiding from an oncoming thunderstorm. As the loudening booms trumpet the impending downpour, the grandmother asks her granddaughter to fetch ingredients for a cake. Vuong's narrator describes being "unmoored by this act, its precarious yet bold refusal of common sense":

instead of shuttering the windows or nailing boards on the doors, they set out to make a cake. ... As [Teacher] Callahan stood behind me, her mouth at my ear, I was pulled deeper into the current of the language. The story unfurled, its storm rolled in as she spoke, then rolled in once more as I repeated the words. *To bake a cake in the eye of a storm; to feed yourself sugar on the cusp of danger.* (5, emphasis added)

At least two aspects of this story seduce Little Dog: first, the notion that refusing practicality ("commonsense") could be not careless but courageously supportive. Second, to help those in the grip of fear, one can elicit countering feelings of security not through actions that buttress the fortress, e.g., "shuttering the windows or nailing boards on the doors"; rather, an act of cooking—a provisioning of food for others—can double as a modulation of mood for the self. Feminists and other scholars have dubbed such efforts reproductive labor or just reproduction,<sup>7</sup> referring not strictly to birthing new generations, but the entire affective and "immaterial" landscape of tasks that go into replenishing the exhausted or anxious (eventual) worker.<sup>8</sup>

Notably, in the passage above, three repertoires of action are, in actuality, mapped in relation to impending danger, even as attention is focalized on the binary opposition between what a military or ship's captain might consider practical manly enterprise—battening the hatches—versus an extravagance—the concocting of a dessert.<sup>9</sup> That is, in the couplet italicized above whereby Little Dog paraphrases the message of *Thunder Cake*, a subtle blurring occurs across the semicolon: "*To bake a cake in the eye of a storm; to feed yourself sugar on the cusp of danger.*" Baking describes the carrying out of a chemical reaction, a task involving the sourcing of materials—fetching the eggs from the hen, milk from the cow, flour and sugar from the shed—and catalyzing a transubstantiation of form—churning milk into butter, liquid batter into sponge, and so forth—all these steps pictured in the children's book. Nevertheless, Little Dog condenses such lengthier undertakings of chemistry and grandmotherly coaxing into an act of consumption. "To feed yourself sugar" stands as both a felicitous *and* catachrestic metaphor, not only because "sugar" condenses an addictive, commodified pleasure linked, historically, to inhumane and ecologically

damaging practices;<sup>10</sup> but also because in its thematic and stylistic emphases, *On Earth* continually questions the adequacy of molecules (here, of sweetness) substituting for elongated acts of care.<sup>11</sup>

Though in the above passage Little Dog takes poetic license in his substituting eating sugar for baking and coaxing, in other sections of the novel, this same narrator voices skepticism regarding his own recruitment to the chemical fix. Revealing his proximity to those who've become opioid addicts, Little Dog writes,

They say addiction might be linked to bipolar disorder. It's the chemicals in our brains, they say. I got the wrong chemicals, Ma. Or rather, I don't get enough of one or the other. They have a pill for it. They have an industry ... Do you know people get rich off of sadness? I want to meet the millionaire of American sadness. I want to look him in the eye ... and say "It's been an honor to serve my country." (181)

This passage appears in Chapter Twelve composed of a series of fragments ("pieces floating" [190]) through which Little Dog conveys to Ma, in both style and content, the "shipwreck" and "war" her son has somehow survived, manifest as "seven [of Little Dog's] friends [already] dead," five from drug overdoses (190, 173, 174). The narrator takes to task the "pill ... industry"—the pharmaceutical companies alongside a psychiatric profession that increasingly regards treatment as the dispensing of molecules over and above the practice of expansive counseling.<sup>12</sup>

In the highly resonant line "[i]t's been an honor to serve my county," Little Dog likens his taking of psychoactive chemicals to military conscription. In so doing, he reminds the reader, first, that his Vietnamese forbears have already "served" his adoptive country, America, both through dying *en masse* (even though Vietnam ostensibly won the war) and providing so-called "rest and relaxation" services for deployed American troops, as did grandma Lan who, during the War of Resistance against America (1955–1975), supported her family as a sex worker. Second, he implies that by being prescribed and taking medication to stabilize mood, the next generation of Vietnamese/Americans (here Little Dog) serve, yet again, this time not quite as experimental medical labor,<sup>13</sup> but as lifetime consumers of psychoactive drugs designed to keep them getting up every day, despite enervation from war's transgenerational aftermath.

Spurning the "other[ing]" of his sadness as well as euphoria, the narrator rejects the notion that it is unnatural to respond with intense emotions to environmental inputs: "The thing is, I don't want my sadness to be othered from me just as I don't want my happiness to be othered ... What if the elation I feel is not another 'bipolar episode' but something I fought hard for? ... What if I'm running outside because the moon tonight is children's-book huge ... the sight of it a strange sphere of medicine"

(21). The ethos stated here is that mood—what others have called affect, the motivational system<sup>14</sup>—isn't strictly inside persons but circulates between and among beings,<sup>15</sup> or put another way, at the interface of persons and their environments. Nevertheless, there is almost no practical scrutiny of environmental stressors—that range from social isolation to the chronic stress of living in an occupied, polluted territory or being deployed for combat in an active war theater, or living as one dispossessed by the vagaries of US late capitalism—as the most salient upstream arena in which health professionals can intervene, in caring for those with mental illness or labile mood. Instead, “They have a pill for it. They have an industry” (181).

One might recall, here, the history whereby tools of psychiatry functional to the medical industrial complex saw their development in efforts to return troops to the war front. During the World Wars, doctors attending to soldiers suffering from shell-shock (aka PTSD) discovered that “food, comfort, rest, and the reassurance at the nearby aid station... alone, helped sixty-five percent of men return to action in four or five days.”<sup>16</sup> The remaining third with a harder time recovering might need weeks or months away from the frontlines. Such interventions were codified into field manuals referred to as “forward psychiatry” to assist nonmedical personnel, such as a commanding officer in the field—these handbooks evolving into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. At the same time, strategic imperatives to treat service-related anxiety and other nervous effects spawned “wartime barbiturates and ... [their] many chemical children.”<sup>17</sup> Created as drugs to manage trauma from abnormal environments of war, that these “chemical children” now find wide distribution among US civilians in times of ostensible “peace” affirms the logic of “pure war,”<sup>18</sup> or what Dwight D. Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex (and which Barbara and John Ehrenreich allude to in their notion of the medical industrial complex).<sup>19</sup>

It is not only that the novel voices skepticism toward a molecular substitute to encapsulate elongated acts of care, but also that the narrative documents a historical moment in which “organized medicine” played a major role in generating “the worst man-made epidemic in history”<sup>20</sup>—namely, the addictions and accidental overdose deaths linked to prescription opioids.<sup>21</sup> The broad parameters of this ongoing national health crisis have been well-documented: “since 2000, the annual number of drug overdose deaths has nearly quadrupled from 17,500 to 67,400 in 2018” with most of these deaths involving “opioids, including heroin, prescription painkillers, and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl.”<sup>22</sup> In the yearlong period ending in April 2021, the number of overdose deaths in the US topped one hundred thousand, “more than the total of car crashes and gun fatalities combined.”<sup>23</sup> Documenting overdose deaths specifically in the state of Connecticut during the period 1997–2007, epidemiologist Traci C. Green and colleagues found that opioids were involved in seventy-seven percent of all accidental overdose deaths; with the state (in 2016) having the eighth highest rate in the nation of age-adjusted deaths for unintentional opioid overdose.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Green et al. report on the distinct character of those whose deaths were due to prescription opioids as opposed to heroin:

Prescription opioid-only deaths were more likely ... to have occurred among residents of a suburban or small town location, compared to heroin-involved or methadone-involved deaths ... . Prescription opioid-only decedents were more likely to be White than non-White, were more likely residents of small towns (population <100,000) rather than cities (population ≥100,000), and tended to die in their hometowns rather than elsewhere.<sup>25</sup>

The authors frame these findings with the caveat that Connecticut has only five cities, as partial explanation for the distributed character of opioid deaths across the state. Nonetheless, much has been made of the demographic shifts in the twenty-first-century opioid crisis, with the affected population composed of a much larger proportion of (non-Hispanic) whites living in suburban, rural and mid-size cities when compared to preceding addiction waves linked to heroin (1970s) and cocaine abuse (1980s to 1990s).<sup>26</sup>

Vuong's sketch of the character Trevor, a white Connecticut-born boy two years senior to Little Dog with whom the narrator has his first love affair, cleaves to the typical profile of the twenty-first-century addict: "Trevor was put on OxyContin after breaking his ankle doing dirt bike jumps .... He was fifteen .... After a month on Oxy, Trevor's ankle healed, but he was a full blown addict" (174–75). Little Dog also offers these details on the Stamford-based company that aggressively marketed its prescription drug OxyContin to doctors through a focused technique innovated by Arthur Sackler:

First developed as a painkiller for cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, OxyContin, along with its generic forms [was mass produced by Purdue Pharma starting in 1996];<sup>27</sup> using a multimillion-dollar ad campaign, Purdue sold OxyContin to doctors as a safe, "abuse-resistant" means of managing pain. The company went on to claim that less than one percent of users became addicted, which was a lie.<sup>28</sup> [Doctors prescribed it] for all bodily pain: arthritis, muscle spasms, and migraines;<sup>29</sup> by 2002, prescriptions of OxyContin for non-cancer pain increased nearly ten times, with total sales reaching over \$3 billion. (*On Earth* 183)

A capitalist imperative toward maximizing profit overwrites hard-won historical wisdom regarding the inherent addictiveness of opiates. In the late 1890s, the Bayer company manufactured a new product named for its projected "heroic" properties—heroin—as that which could rescue large swaths of the population from morphine dependency—in hindsight, a most regrettable substitution. Molecular entreaty, in the passage above, involves Big Pharma (the millionaires, too, of American pain) supplying

a population of worker-consumers with a pill to magically relieve their distress, bypassing alternative methods of care that would, over a longer period of time, supply the needed outcome—e.g., a duration of laying in so that inflammation in the body can recede, and/or a commitment of resources (without docked pay or demerits for truancy) to allow for periods of sadness, injury, and nonwork.

While *On Earth's* exposé of Purdue Pharma certainly underscores Trevor's falling prey to the medical industrial complex, I would argue that the molecular accounting of what kills him ("official cause of death ... an overdose from heroin laced with fentanyl"), neglects the larger systemic reasons for Trevor's despair (178). I will later return to the further symbolic dimensions of Trevor's character; here, I would simply note that the novel's portrait of this "boy who had a name, who wanted to go to community college to study physical therapy, [who] was alone in his room when he died" (178), appears to fit the profile, sketched by two economists, of working-class whites dying from "deaths of despair."<sup>30</sup>

The foregoing has mapped *On Earth's* ambivalent depictions of molecular recruitment as they take the forms of 1) substituting molecules of sweetness for elongated acts of care, 2) a disowning of neuro-affective intensity (and lability) as a handicap too unproductive for American society to accommodate, and 3) an accumulative ethos underwriting the US's medical industrial complex that puts profits above patient health. In the next two sections, I turn to the molecular aftermaths lived as "the war still in[side] you" (5)—for survivors of hot military theaters—and a heritage of armed security (settler-colonialist muscular masculinity)—for the descendants of US veterans. *On Earth* envelops its readers with settings rich in toxicant chemicals; at the same time, the text emphasizes care work as skilled and cultivated knowledge that stubbornly resists compression into molecules duplicative of reproductive labor's benefits.

## 2. At the Cusp of Danger Toxicity Lingers

As previously mentioned, *On Earth* proceeds as a series of letters to Rose, the narrator's mother, who is sketched by her son as both "mother" and "monster"—"a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once" (13). Chapter one strings together flashes of memory, from the more innocuous—"the time, at forty-six, when you had a sudden desire to color"—to more scary episodes such as "the time when I was five or six, playing a prank [and] leapt out at you ... shouting, 'Boom!' [and] you screamed, face raked and twisted, then burst into sobs" (4),<sup>31</sup> to more alarming memories of "the first time you hit me," or "the time with the remote control," and "the time you threw the box of Legos at my head" (5–6). Using anaphora ("the time you ...") to leaven the bruising content, this chapter does not so much blunt the "blaze" (5) of Ma's fiery touch as much as contextualize it both as a consequence of the Vietnam war ("I read that parents suffering PTSD are more likely to hit their children") (13), and as countered by her other sheltering acts: consoling Little Dog

through a panic attack, or accompanying him for the umpteenth time on the roller-coaster (to the point of vomiting) because Little Dog is too scared to ride alone (9–10).

Other reminiscences hint at the death and destruction haunting Rose's memory. The narrator recalls "that time at the Chinese butcher, you pointed to the roasted pig hanging from its hook [and said] 'The ribs are just like a person's after they're burned.' You let out a clipped chuckle, then paused, took out your pocketbook ... and recounted our money" (9). The comment shocks in its casualness, in the implied mundanity of burnt human remains as part of the street scene of Rose's youth. The infelicity of this speech act (its imagistic rendering of what were once neighbors and friends as selfsame with tasty victuals) is striking precisely because it remembers the enhanced incendiary warfare unleashed on Vietnamese civilians. If there is a chemical molecule condensing the danger that has gotten inside of Ma, it might be napalm (that infernal jelly), a chemical compound designed to extend both the spatial reach and temporal duration of burn.<sup>32</sup> We also learn that because "your [Rose's] schoolhouse collapsed after an American napalm raid. At five, you never stepped into a classroom again" (11); jellied gasoline is the proximate cause of Ma's curtailed education and indirect contributor to her illiteracy in the US.

Having moved to and now residing in the East Hartford area, Rose cannot adjust herself to not anticipate crisis, as in the next dropped bomb. On an outing to the Goodwill store, Ma pulls a dress from her cart, hands it to Little Dog, and asks him to see "if it's fireproof" (13). The salience of Ma's request lies less in the further dramatization of her PTSD (though mention of her "eyes glazed and wide" imply a dissociative state) and more in the further testament to the totalizing system of molecular recruitment: for a trauma essentially concocted and refined by military chemists (e.g., the disfigurements of napalm, the nauseating odor of burning flesh), Ma seeks a prophylactic invention—a dress treated with flame retardants—the functional molecules of which have been engineered by this same industry (13). Even as "precautionary consumerism"<sup>33</sup> has been critiqued for its limited usefulness in addressing place-based toxicity,<sup>34</sup> Rose acts as if she can purchase some sort of cladding to protect her from weapons that maximize psychic terror, ones already invented and still to be engineered.<sup>35</sup>

Even should she find vestments infused with flame-retardants, Ma—who works at a nail salon—still could not avoid the more hard-to-perceive chemical hazards that circulate in her everyday life. Indeed, flame retardants, known endocrine disruptors, comprise one such menace.<sup>36</sup> Specific molecules currently listed on the US Labor Department's website as hazards in the workplace of nail technicians include toluene, acetone, and formaldehyde (the last a carcinogen). All three volatilize at room temperature, making their circulation in the air inescapable, so that toxicants get incorporated into the underreproduction of the children of technicians, too:

the nail salon ... is also a place where our children are raised—a number of whom, like cousin Victor, will get asthma from years of breathing the noxious fumes into their still-developing lungs. The salon is also a kitchen where, in the back rooms ... huge woks ... pop and sizzle over electric burners, cauldrons of phở simmer and steam up the cramped spaces with aromas of cloves, cinnamon, ginger, mint, and cardamom mixing with formaldehyde, toluene, acetone, Pine-Sol, and bleach. (79–80)

The narrator brews up a clashing miasmatic palette, half drawn from aromas of the Asian spice trade and half from the sting of Anglo-American disinfection rites. This mélange of smells, formed from the airborne trails of reproductive labor that these mothers do for themselves and their children (e.g., the steam of Vietnamese beef soup) combined with the after-scents of pampering labor these same women do for their clients (overtones of toluene, acetone, and formaldehyde—these cusps of danger), turn *Thunder Cake's* message on its head. That is, the lightning's zap is already in the room, inside the makeshift kitchen. The choice to shut the window and doors (externalize the storm) and reproduce others in a space closed off to toxic trespass no longer exists.

Linking this slow violence to latent harms realized only decades later as “lungs [that] can no longer breathe without swelling ... livers hardening with chemicals ... [and] joints brittle and inflamed from arthritis,” the novel underscores that this knowledge isn't new (it's “calcified” [80]).<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the US Labor Department (OSHA) currently lists these health endpoints associated with the three chemicals named in the passage above: dry or cracked skin, headaches, dizziness, numbness; damage to liver and kidneys; harm to unborn children, and difficulty breathing, among others. Knowing that these chemicals are perilous, however, does not lead to opportunities for avoidance on the part of workers, if their clients don't care, or are careless<sup>38</sup> in thinking only about their own infrequent exposures rather than the forty-plus-hours-a-week ones required of these technicians. Thus, even when Ma leaves work, the chemicals do not leave her. Upon returning home, Little Dog scrapes her back—using a traditional Vietnamese coining technique—to “release[e] the bad winds from your body” (84). It is as if her body needs its own ventilation because the salon has so little. While Ma's labor reproduces others (helping them return to work each day), the toxicant exposures of her workplace mean this reproduction she conducts actively under-reproduces her. Rose's life in Connecticut may not involve napalm raids, but other chemical exposures that are more slowly violent persist in her work hours, her condition not unique but part of the general condition of being “awake in American bones—with or without citizenship—aching, toxic, and underpaid” (80).

Still, that *On Earth* questions the adequacy of molecules substituting for elongated acts of care can be difficult to discern. Sometimes there is only lament regarding

a particular toxicant, or skepticism toward an addictive molecule that promises immediate relief, rather than also a counterdepiction of what would prove restorative in the latter's stead. Such a scene, where Vuong pays as much attention to the absence that still remains even after a "cure" has been delivered, centers on Ma, not as mother or monster but, riffing on terms used by queer disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarahinsa, as a "femme scientist" and "crip emotional laborer." Both are knowledgeable in reading "someone's face, body language, and energy to tell that they are in pain or struggling."<sup>39</sup>

Helping out Ma at the salon on a slow Sunday afternoon, Little Dog witnesses firsthand her dexterity. A blue-eyed woman in her seventies, smelling of "dried sweat mixed with the strong sweetness of drugstore perfume" comes into the shop requesting, "A pedicure, please" (82, 81). Little Dog ushers this customer to a footbath, while Ma turns on the bubble jets and puts salts into the tub—"the scent of synthetic lavender fills the room" (81). Reluctant to place her feet in the bath, the elderly woman eventually reaches down "her right pant leg ... [and] detach[es] her entire lower leg at the knee. A prosthesis" (82). Little Dog's eyes are drawn toward "the puckered nub" of the older woman's amputated leg that shakes from the massage Ma conducts on the left—the fleshly remaining leg (82). This nub remains "dry this whole time" still "hovering above the water" as the woman sways "her head from side to side, eyes half-closed [moaning] with relief when you [Ma] massage her one calf" (82–83).

When Ma turns to Little Dog for the towel, marking the end of the foot-massage, the woman squeaks forth another request: "Would you mind ... this one also. If it's not too much ...' Again, you say nothing—but turn, almost imperceptibly, to her right leg, run a measured caress along the nub's length, before cradling a handful of warm water over the tip" (83). Twice-over, the narrator stresses the wordlessness with which Ma proceeds not simply to accommodate the woman's positively stated requests ("pedicure," "this one also") but to actualize what is not being affirmatively said by this client but is nonetheless what she desires. As Ma rinses soap from the "brownish stub" (82), the woman pleads with Ma further, "[i]f it's the same price anyway,' she says. 'I can still feel it down there. It's silly, but I can. I can'" (83):

You pause—a flicker across your face. Then ... you wrap your fingers around the air where her calf should be, knead it as if it were fully there. You continue down her invisible foot, rub its bony upper side before cupping the heel with your other hand, pinching along the Achilles' tendon, then stretching the stiff cords along the ankle's underside .... I run to fetch a towel from the case. Without a word, you slide the towel under the phantom limb, pad down the air, the muscle memory in your arms firing the familiar efficient motions, revealing what's not there, the way a conductor's movements make the music somehow more real. (83)

Notably, the woman casts as “silly” the persistence of feeling that materializes her right leg (which has been severed and likely incinerated) as a still living presence. Indeed, it is as if she ventriloquizes the voice of her insurance provider, who considers the “cure” to be a molded imitation of her leg, that which allows the amputee to resume two-legged mobility.<sup>40</sup> Anticipating too high a psychic or economic cost in asking a professional doctor for relief to an injury American medicine has already cured, this elderly woman turns to a stranger, a Vietnamese refugee worker, to receive affirmation as to the reality of her itch.

As noted above, Ma herself remains illiterate, her Vietnamese schooling cut short at the age of five. This female worker—devalued as unskilled, nonfluent in English, and uncredentialed as a healthcare worker—can be tasked with this “silly” request. Yet, in the narrator’s rendering of the “muscle memory” of Ma’s arms, compared to that of a symphony conductor, great attention is paid to the skill with which Rose articulates the calf, heel, Achilles tendon, and foot’s bony upper-side—revealing “what’s not there” as “more real.” Her wordless dexterity, in sum, materializes the immaterial, imparting validity to this woman’s psychic needs.<sup>41</sup>

Significantly, no molecular signatures underwrite this scene. There is no listing of molecules of sweetness, so to speak—the serotonin equivalent or hit of oxytocin and dopamine—delivered through Ma’s sweep of the arms and fine finger work. Nor is there a description of the beautiful designs painted on this woman’s toenails. There are the moans of pleasure that this client emits when her remaining calf is massaged, and her gratitude voiced to Ma as “[t]he lord keep you,” alongside a one-hundred-dollar tip (84).<sup>42</sup> Focalized, here, is a healing virtue—aka not a heroic cure but a trial met with the balm of attention and curiosity. Delivered in this scene of elongated care work are not molecules of scent (or pills to modulate mood) that can resolve the amputee to her postsurgical body map. Instead, Vuong crafts a scene that silhouettes Rose as she literally massages the air.

To recall an earlier detail, this performance of care occurs in an atmosphere replete with molecules of fragrance—the drugstore perfume the customer wears and the synthetic lavender of the bath salts, as well as the acetone that hits the nose upon entering the salon before one gets acclimated (81). The middle of these three (the lavender) is an official masking scent to cover up the salon’s industrial and acerbic odors. Their noted presence in the narrative is important, however, for it underscores the author’s attention to a molecular mode of air conditioning. The diffusing of masking and/or branding molecules is a technique refined by oil well operators and boutique stores to mitigate and enhance their (adjacent) atmospheres. Such corporate air conditioning stands juxtaposed to Ma’s alternative, nonmolecular orchestration of the air.

In the novel’s consideration of Ma and the nail salon, the reader encounters some care work that remains congruent with practical chemistry akin to baking (e.g., the cooking of food for children using the hot plates). Leaving aside the argument that we need to reclaim as practical chemistry the repertoires of “old-wives”—qua

traditional growers, gardeners, cheese-makers, and cooks—I want to modify my terminology, now, to claim that *On Earth* presents as “gorgeous” and prolonged (pace the brevity insisted on in the novel’s full title) the irruption of care work that intervenes (alleviates through a subtractive rather than additive logic—as in adding masking scents) in atmospheres heavy with industrial chemicals and their cosmetic offspring. This type of care work, that materializes the immaterial, remains humanistic in its dimensions, not lending itself to molecular translation or losing too much (of its affective, felt) value in a reduction to that idiom. To expand upon this point, I now return to the novel’s portrait of Trevor.

### 3. Affective Chemistries and Irruptions of Care

Through Trevor’s storyline, Vuong depicts what looks like a relatively privileged life lived electively at the cusp of danger—fast cars, guns, drugs, and sex. Little Dog and Trevor meet while working “the spear crew” on a tobacco farm owned by Trevor’s grandfather, the seventy-year-old Mr. Buford who resembles “that maniac sergeant in *Full Metal Jacket*” (88–89). Trevor—whose birth name means “of the large homestead/settlement” (from the Welsh *tref* meaning “a homestead or hamlet under old Cymric law ... constituting a taxable unit, and consisting typically of nine houses, one plow, one oven, one churn ... and one herdsman,”<sup>43</sup> and *fawr/mawr* for “large, big, great”)<sup>44</sup>—appears the inheritor of this tobacco estate, even though his speech, home life, and educational prospects are depicted as working-class.<sup>45</sup> Displaying an insider’s knowledge of the farm, Trevor tells Little Dog that the tobacco they harvest “ain’t even legit ... the crop [is] low-grade, the burn bitter in the throat, sour [with the entire crop destined] for cigars exported to Africa and East Asia ... where anything that came from America still had an aura of promise to it” (96). This crop is a far cry from the famed Connecticut Shade variety used as the outer, most blemish-free wrapping on high-end cigars.<sup>46</sup> These premium leaves grown in the Windsor Valley made tobacco the second-largest industry in Connecticut during the early twentieth century. With the Buford farm turning out tobacco with wormholes in the leaves, Trevor guesstimates that “we got two good years, maybe three, and then ... it’s a wrap” (96). This sense of a future foreclosed stands not only as Trevor’s assessment of the farm’s fate but also of himself: “Why was I even born?” he asks (109). Part of an agrarian community in the US struggling with contracting livelihoods,<sup>47</sup> Trevor represents a swath of white Americans, with no greater than a high school degree, nostalgic for a return of American greatness equated with US military invasions abroad (as suggested by references to movies such as *The Empire Strikes Back*). These patriots grapple with a market imperialism qua globalization that is not selfsame with nation-state protections.

Insofar as author Vuong crafts symbolic dimensions to Trevor’s character, this “white boy” (97) stands as the legatee of Anglo-American settler colonialism and cruel military exploits in Vietnam. Within earshot of Little Dog, Trevor’s dad recounts how Uncle James, a Nam vet, “whooped them in that jungle [and] did good for us. He

burned them up. You know that, Trev? ... He told you yet? How he burned up four of them in a ditch with gasoline? He told me that on his wedding night, can you believe it?" (142). The narrative repeatedly stresses Trevor's whiteness, Second Amendment fetishism (hoisting his grandpa's Smith and Wesson [184] and intending to get work at the Colt factory [98]), casual misogyny (153), and ambivalence toward his own queerness.<sup>48</sup> Yet, despite his white masculine privilege, Trevor drifts in a mood of insecurity.

The narrative toggles between sketching Trevor, on the one hand, as an incendiary "action, the pine-stuck thumb on the Bic lighter" (156), and "[the] loading [of] the shotgun two red shells at a time" (153)—in short, as the hunter to Little Dog-as-the-hunted—and, on the other hand, as a goofball who loves sunflowers. Repeatedly emphasized with respect to Trevor are his aforementioned adjacency to US servicemen (both Uncle James and Grandpa Buford completed tours in the Asia/Pacific) and this young boy's massive underreproduction: he lives alone with his "vodka-soaked" dad in a mobile home next to the interstate (94), his mother having left the household when Trevor was eleven. Indeed, one can see in these two factors contours of the systemic national infrastructures contributing to Trevor's spiritual despair: overinvestment in militarism and disinvestment in human health and welfare.

In 2015, economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton reported a disturbing trend in the age-specific mortality rates of white middle-aged Americans (ages forty-five to fifty-five) with no more than a high school degree. In 1999, among whites in this age span and education level, there were seven hundred and twenty-two deaths per one hundred thousand people, while in 2015 that number increased to nine hundred and twenty-seven. The finding was notable because this increase in deaths contrasted trends, again at that same age bracket, amongst *all* whites (the number of deaths varying little across those sixteen years), *all* Blacks (the number of deaths trending significantly downward), and *all* Hispanics (the number of deaths trending slightly downward). When they dug deeper into the causes of death, the economists noticed both a steep increase in deaths of despair—a term they coined to refer to deaths from suicide, drug overdose, and alcohol-related liver disease—and not as large an offsetting decrease in deaths due to the next two biggest causes of death in that age span—cancer and heart disease. Case and Deaton claim that this evidence is part of the story of "the collapse of the white working class after its heyday in the early 1970s, and the pathologies that accompany this decline."<sup>49</sup>

At age twenty-two, Trevor does not fall into the age bracket that forms the key findings of the above research. However, his father certainly does. Earlier, I referred to the small farming class to which Grandpa Buford and Trevor's father belong, and the novel's oblique allusion to globalization (the cheap tobacco is going to Asia and Africa) as one of the reasons for the farm's impending demise. Trevor's male forebears live a contradiction of both being unable to maintain their former way of life built on labor exploitation<sup>50</sup>—which is to say, they are on the cusp of selling the farm and becoming themselves unpropertied wage laborers—and nonetheless identifying with owners of

capital—whose “good life”<sup>51</sup> fully depends on (and perversely casts as virtuous) the exploitation and underpayment of both undocumented workers and the white working-class. The transit of this white agrarian class into this sector of waged workers is actively disavowed, the narrative implies, through repertoires of self-sufficiency such as hunting, shooting, and approving recollections of toxic masculinity and imperialist ventures (e.g., “good man ... your Uncle [James]” [142]).

In the case of the tobacco farm, the novel focuses less on the Bufords as purveyors of addictive or cancer-causing molecules, and more on the extraction of cigar tobacco from sacred practices of Indigenous “Agawam” whom “white settlers ... drove ... off the land” and the repurposing of tobacco as “a cash crop” (85). To recapitulate, the toxicity limned in relation to the Buford settlement does not take the shape of nicotine molecules; rather the toxicity that Trevor exudes, and to which he has been ideologically hailed, is that of a predatory white masculinity rooted in settler colonialism and militarized theft of tribal lands and crops.

In terms of life experience and economic inheritance, Trevor would appear worlds apart from Rose; indeed, across the time period recounted in the novel, the two never meet. Yet, after the funeral in Vietnam for grandma Lan, Little Dog recounts this dialogue between himself and Ma: “[Rose says,] ‘Where am I, Little Dog?’ [to which he gives this imagined response] You’re Rose. You’re Lan. You’re Trevor” (216). This sideways answer discursively creates a palimpsest of these three characters, perhaps suggesting that the underreproduction of all three stems from the same sources: the military industrial complex and disinvestment from the reproductive commons. The point to be registered, however, is not simply that Vuong constructs as analogous the structural harms injuring and killing Trevor and those killing Lan and injuring Ma. It is that, akin to Rose, Trevor dwells within and, indeed, emerges from a setting rich in toxicant molecules, and these impure, unideal, sullied surrounds do not prevent the novel’s insistence on “what’s good” (212) in those same spaces. “What’s good” is performed as a tactile repertoire of reproduction that validates for another his/her haunting feelings of emptiness.

Just such a space, the Buford’s tobacco farm, especially its drying or curing barn, provides the setting for Little Dog and Trevor’s acts of intimacy.<sup>52</sup> The readers have been in this barn before, as it is where the work crew of twenty-plus men mostly from Central America grab breakfast before going into the field. Likening the barn’s structure to a vast lung, Little Dog describes:

every other wood panel on the barn’s siding was raised up, creating rib-like slits, allowing air flow, where the day’s heat now ran its hot breath across my neck, carrying with it the sweet-bitter scent of tobacco and the iron of red dirt. The men too smelled of the fields. Before their boots met the soil, their bodies, even after morning showers, exuded the

salt and sunbaked underscent from the previous day's work.  
Soon the same smell would permeate my own pores. (88)

In this pneumatic chapel, its vastness compared to “the hull of a beached ship” (102), the two boys spend hours talking, smoking joints, listening to the radio (the Patriots game), and engaging in erotic intimacy, e.g., Little Dog's licking and nibbling Trevor's chest (105). This *mise-en-scène* is where the narrator dances before Trevor while swathed in Ma's red dress: “In that barn ... we weren't afraid of anybody—not even ourselves” (140).

One night Trevor takes the overnight shift in the barn, tending to the coal fires that need to remain smokeless on the floor, keeping the air dry (and preventing pole rot on the tobacco). To keep him company, the narrator too stays the night. Little Dog testifies to his own tentativeness and “thrill” at the prospect of having sex “for real” (199). He positions himself with his arm propped on the dirt, his back toward Trevor, feeling the latter's “pubes” (201) brush against his posterior. Though not mincing words regarding the agony he feels upon Trevor's entry, he tells of the hurt eventually tapering into “a strange ache, a weightless numbness that swept through me like a new, even warmer season .... Getting fucked in the ass felt good, I learned, when you outlast your own hurt” (202). Trevor's eagerness, however, drives the pace of this pleasure and pain: “I told [Trevor] to hold still as I braced against the dirt floor and gathered myself. The pain shot out from between my legs. ‘Let's keep going .... I gotta keep going. I don't wanna stop.’ Before I could respond he was pumping again, his arms planted on each side of my head” (202). The searing discomfort of anal penetration is decidedly not what places Little Dog on the cusp of danger. Instead, the narrator leaves oblique and unsayable the “something [that] happened” that does:

About ten minutes in, as Trevor went faster ... something happened. A scent rose up to my head, strong and deep, like soil, but sharp with flaw. I knew right away what it was, and panicked. In the heat of it, I didn't think, didn't yet know how to prepare myself .... I was, in that moment, more naked than I was with my clothes off—I was inside out .... Trevor being who he was, raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity, I feared for what would come. It was my fault. I had tainted him with my faggotry, the filthiness of our act exposed by my body's failure to contain itself .... Ashamed, I pressed my forehead to my wrist and let it throb there. Trevor slowed, then paused. (203)

Describing Trevor's “cock, touched at the tip with the dark inside me, puls[ing] under the lamplight as it softened” is the closest that narrator gets to stating affirmatively what has happened in their sex act to make it fail to measure up to the “porn clips [they had watched where] they just did it—quick, immediate, sure, and spotless”

(203). Or more precisely, the strong and deep odor akin to the acridness of fertilized soil is the molecular conjuration of Little Dog's inability "to contain" himself (he shits a little).

In ways similar to how the narrative draws out the circumlocutions whereby the elderly amputee speaks of the "silly" need for affirmation of her still lingering loss, here the narrative fills the pause of Trevor's noticing the "dark[ness]" on his cock with the headspace of Little Dog—his noticing the deathly effects of pesticides on the tobacco: "Above us the moths flitted between the tobacco. They had come to feed on the plants, but the pesticides left over from the fields killed them soon as they placed their mouths on the leaves. They fell all around us, their wings, in the midst of death throes, buzzed across the barn floor" (203). While formerly the cavernous space of the barn has appeared as both a ship's hull and a ventilated chamber, it now feels airless, an insufferable place to die of shame. The deep emotional hurt Little Dog anticipates but doesn't say stems from the expectation of humiliation delivered by the person to whom one has become most vulnerable (to whom one has not just become belly up—exposed—but made viscerally "inside out").

Little Dog narrates his anxiety regarding Trevor's cold anger as if real: "Lick it up," he hears Trevor say, this ugly command punctuated by "a moth, suffocating, [and] thrash[ing] against my right knee. Its huge and final death merely a quiver on my skin" (204). But what Trevor has actually said is "get up," with a proffered hand so that the two can wash themselves in a nearby stream. The imagined thunder—the sensate adjacency to danger—doesn't dissipate until a sequence of further steps involving more than verbal reassurance:

"Clean yourself," [Trevor] said, his tone oddly tender, almost frail. I pinched my nose and dunked under, gasping from the cold .... The river up to my chest now, I waved my arms to keep steady. Trevor put his hand on my neck and we stood, quiet for a moment .... He said, "Don't worry about that. You heard?" The water moved around me, through my legs .... I just nodded, then turned to shore. I was only a few steps ahead of him before I felt his palm push hard between my shoulders, leaning me forward, my hands instinctually braced on knees. Before I could turn around, I felt his stubble, first between my thighs then higher. He had knelt in the shallows, knees sunk in river muck. I shook—his tongue so impossibly warm ... the sudden wordless act, willed as a balm to my failure in the barn. It felt like an appalling second chance, to be wanted again, in this way. (205)

This emotional modulation comes about as an unexpected tenderness and reciprocity from a white boy who was "raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity" (203). This is the closest Trevor comes to fulfilling the emotional labor that Piepzna-

Samarahinsa notes is the work that femme and crip people of color are expected to and *do* perform all the time (the value of which is underestimated). Drawing out the skill, knowledge, and talent involved in this work, Piepzna-Samarahinsa describes how crip science entails “being fluent in the skills of noticing pain, fatigue, overwhelm, and trigger.”<sup>53</sup> Because this care work is “feminized and invisibilized”<sup>54</sup> and often underpaid, if paid at all, the author argues for activism to include not only doing this work but also getting the “masc, pretty, abled people to put in time.”<sup>55</sup>

In focusing on this repertoire that erotically delivers something akin to a “balm” for the narrator, we should be careful then not to understate the way that the history of white power, privilege, and toxic masculinity constitutes the incendiary danger that forms the psychic turmoil in the above account. The novel—at other points—makes clear that the relation between Trevor and Little Dog is not one of equals; nor is it primarily colored by reciprocity (Trevor refuses to let Little Dog top him, claiming that he doesn’t “wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch . . . It’s not for me” [120]). The thunderous danger that mars their first time having sex “for real,” then, lies not outside in the sky but within the history of Trevor’s white privilege, mixed up with his family’s settler-colonial, militarized, anti-Asian, and agrochemical past.

Indeed, Trevor arguably works as a characterological device for Vuong to portray vexed relations between queer Vietnamese refugees and downwardly mobile queer working-class whites. In the overall symbolic network of the novel’s depicted relations, Little Dog and Trevor’s affair doubles the queer relationship between (grandma) Lan and (grandpa) Paul. Though a minor character in the second half of *On Earth*, Paul is sketched earlier in the novel as an occupying white American soldier in Vietnam who patronizes and befriends a local sex worker, Lan. By falsely claiming Rose as his daughter, Paul later facilitates Lan’s family’s eventual migration to the US. Paul’s overall profile also appears a generic antecedent of Trevor’s: a white farm boy (now aging veteran) who is sick from chemicals (Paul from Agent Orange, Trevor from OxyContin) who claims intimate relationality to Little Dog (as his grandson rather than a nonrelated hired hand, as boyfriend rather than as enemy offspring). In crafting Trevor quite ambivalently as both loveable and degrading, as neither Paul (white sponsor) nor Uncle James (white predator-enemy) nor Buford (white property owner), Vuong would appear to be deliberately provoking debate as to whether intimate, emotional, and carnal care can be counted as political. Or put as direct question, “what type of political desires can be spoken through erotic intimacy?”

The great hope depicted in the above block-quoted scene of interracial sex—a queer and erotic allegory of political desire<sup>56</sup>—is vested in the possibility of an “appalling second chance” that is given and that is felt (but who is giving it and who is feeling it?). On one level, Little Dog construes himself as the recipient of this second chance, delivered by Trevor through his refraining from a meanness that he can get away with (“Lick it up”) and that historically settler-colonial whites have gotten away with, in relation to those who are weaker, soft, and edible (as Trevor’s father would say). But on the level of immaterial labor (of counterfactual imagining), it is Little

Dog—in his headspace, in his queer political knowledge of the extractive history of Trevors (tref-fawrs,<sup>57</sup> large American homesteads), resting on the labor of immigrants and the racialized, and on Indigenous dispossession—who delivers this white boy “an appalling second-chance”—a chance to arrest the doling out of more historical hurt. As with the scene of Ma’s attending to her amputee client, the narrative does not name specific molecules cascading in waves of relief, felt as grace.<sup>58</sup> These stolen hours piggybacking on work sites (rendering the figurative office also a space of erotic reproduction and emotional affirmation) transform a setting of curing (tobacco) and killing (moths) into one of reciprocated care and second chances.

### **Conclusion: Caring about Hypo-interventions**

In a special issue of *Social Studies of Science* on the topic of “Toxic Politics: Acting in a Permanently Polluted World,” Max Liboiron, Manuel Tironi, and Nerea Calvillo take aim at conventional frameworks construing environmental toxicity as unfortunate accidents involving wayward molecules. Instead, they argue that toxic harms maintain imbalances of power and “can be understood as the contravention of order at one scale and the reproduction of order at another. Chronic low levels of arsenic in water interrupt the reproduction of fish, but maintain the ability of mining companies to store mining tailings in open air mounds . . . . Toxicity is a specific genre of harm that is about ordering *living* systems, broadly defined to include scales from cells to ways of life.”<sup>59</sup> Toxicants and pollution, these critics further emphasize, are central to “industrialization, economic growth and capitalism” even as toxicants in the wild are called “externalities, entities that escape the cost and profit calculations of business accounting.”<sup>60</sup> This redefinition of toxic harm essentially uses a multispecies, ecosystemic, and political economic orientation to hybridize biopolitical theory, which has tended to focus on the dichotomy of two orders of human life: *bios*—political life, or life of the dignified subject of biography and history, on the one hand, and *zoe*—the bare life of the camp internee or the biological cell, on the other.

This understanding of toxic harm, and the imbalances of power it extends, beg the question of how to address these imbalances, especially given one’s own situatedness (e.g., as a nail technician, as a bourgeois university professor, as an anarchist disabled woman) in that unlevel field. Thus far, the tendency has been “to prioritize . . . the liberal mode of [political endeavor] that is obsessed with ‘capturing social power,’” in short “narratives of action, mobilization and publicness,” exemplified in “charismatic events with hard edges and ready [representation].”<sup>61</sup> Instead, they argue for attention to be paid to “politics as a precarious and pragmatic achievement,”<sup>62</sup> “incremental and attritional, star[ring] no one, [nor] premised on [or] produc[ing] events [of] clear-edged representation.”<sup>63</sup> They coin the terms *slow activism* and *intimate activism* to capture these “mundane yet purposeful doing[s] . . . hypo-interventions” that challenge “activism as heroic, event-based and coherent.”<sup>64</sup> The gambit of this essay has been to include the affective chemistries of care outlined in the body of this essay

as environmental hypo-interventions as well, even as they are also akin to health treatments (a modulation of mood) precisely because degradations to human health and mood have been treated as externalities to companies' bottom lines as well.

To recapitulate, this essay has registered two (seemingly contradictory) claims with regard to the molecular. On the one hand, the molecular draws our attention to sensory apprehension in modes other than the visible—e.g., a symphony of molecular events registers to nonnanosmic organisms as scent and other times as delayed altered feeling (e.g., when a molecule reaches its chemical receptor on the viscera and induces some happy or discomforting intestinal event). As such, the molecular is an apt metaphor for a scale of materiality that is invisible to the naked eye but nonetheless has material affects. On the other hand, choreographies of care do not always lend themselves to metaphoric or material reduction to a named molecule. Why then does Vuong's novel continually emphasize such extended forms of emotional care work—that flout common sense, that can be dismissed as frivolous—amidst settings with atmospheres suffused with toxicants and/or post-traumatic triggers? Perhaps it is because being “on the cusp of danger” is now simply a given, part of early twenty-first-century life in East Hartford, Connecticut and a comment generally on the constancy and ubiquity of “our permanently polluted world?” Or perhaps Vuong wishes to emphasize the specific vigilance required of Vietnamese refugees, nail salon workers, and gay Asian boys living in the heart of empire, not simply the place where Americans manufacture their toxic and intoxicating chemicals but where they have become distributed across commodities and services associated with “the good life” and have saturated worksites and wastelands in the Global North populated by the poor, Indigenous, Black and Brown. We know this permanently polluted world is upon us, not a thunderstorm approaching from afar, but above us at this moment. What hypo-interventions can sustain us as we grapple with these fears tied to both indoor and outdoor atmospheres?

In highlighting Vuong's articulations of immaterial acts of care that cannot be or haven't been translated into molecular lexicons, I have made a case for literature providing an arena for dwelling upon and valuing the thickness of such slow activism—refusing to negate it as unscalable and minor, or of tertiary priority to the more important revolutionary political work to be done. Nor should we idealize the specific repertoires—e.g., of Ma's massaging the air and Trevor's reciprocal act of anilingus on Little Dog—as forms of assuagement comprising the heroic feats that could initiate mass action. Nevertheless, they vibrate in a spirit of upholding deeper relationality—a relationality that operates despite uneven awakenings as to the specious carelessness and deep folly in atrophying our reproductive commons.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Thanks to Hsuan Hsu, David Vázquez, Kathleen McHugh, Helen Deutsch, and Anthony Kim for their helpful comments and research assistance on this essay.
- <sup>2</sup> Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin, 2019), 31.
- <sup>3</sup> Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 409–27. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>
- <sup>4</sup> Curing refers to orchestrating, through ventilation and fires, an ambient level of warmth and dryness so as to avoid tobacco pole rot; masking refers to the diffusing of synthetic fragrances to hide odors from noxious industrial extraction. For the play on “conditions of the air” and “air conditioning,” see Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, transl. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (London: MIT Press/Semiotext(e), 2009); by way of Hsuan L. Hsu, “Smelling Setting,” *Modernism/Modernity* 3, cycle 1 (March 9, 2018): n. pag. <https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0048>
- <sup>5</sup> Manuel Tironi, “Hypo-Interventions: Intimate Activism in Toxic Environments,” *Social Studies of Science* 48, no. 3 (2018): 451. Tironi and Israel Rodríguez-Giralt enunciate “care” as “a grammar and programme to cope with the cadence of slow violence (Nixon)”—the latter referring to both the wholesale poisoning of Puchuncavino workers, community members, and botanical life adjacent to a copper smelting complex, and the Chilean state’s “un-care” in failing to acknowledge or redress this violence (Manuel Tironi and Israel Rodríguez-Giralt “Healing, Knowing, Enduring: Care and Politics in Damaged Worlds,” *The Sociological Review (Keele)* 65, no. 2 supplement (2017): 91–92). Along with Max Liboiron and Nerea Calvillo, Tironi acknowledges the importance of “mundane, boring everyday chores of care—cleaning tomatoes and tending plants” as part of the work of imagining (and performatively rehearsing) a world otherwise to the blasted landscape in which one lives: these “local, low resolution, uneventful, uneven, frustrated, desireful, ethical, appropriated and incommensurate” doings can “diversify ... what counts as politics in a permanently polluted world” (Max Liboiron, Manuel Tironi, and Nerea Calvillo, “Toxic Politics: Acting in a Permanently Polluted World,” *Social Studies of Science* 48, no. 3 (2018): 333). From there, they coin the term “slow activism” of which more, in the conclusion.
- <sup>6</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).
- <sup>7</sup> Silvia Federici, “On Elder Care Work and the Limits of Marxism,” in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA; Brooklyn, NY: PM Press; Automeia, 2009), 115–25, quoted in Jordan Kisner, “The Lockdown Showed How the Economy Exploits Women. She Already Knew,” *The New York Times*

Magazine, February 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/17/magazine/waged-housework.html>.

- <sup>8</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004); and Leopoldina Fortunati, “Immaterial Labor and Its Machinization,” *Ephemera* 7, no. 1 (2007): 139–57.
- <sup>9</sup> *On Earth* weaves an extended oceanic and shipwreck conceit in homage to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, after which the author modeled his own text (“Ocean Vuong: The Waterstones Interview,” YouTube, July 2, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rw\\_fvL95gFk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rw_fvL95gFk)). Contrastive to the all-male composition of the Pequod’s crew, Vuong conducts a narrative experiment in rewriting *Moby-Dick* with queer and femme dramatis personae. Melville was also a known opium eater.
- <sup>10</sup> “In every pound of sugar used, ... we may be considered as consuming two ounces of human flesh” (William Fox and William Bell Crafton, *An Address to the People of Great Britain on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum* [London: M. Gurney, 1791], 5, quoted in Ligaya Mishan, “The Activists Working to Remake the Food System,” *The New York Times Magazine*, February 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/19/t-magazine/food-security-activists.html>). As the voluminous scholarship on this global commodity attests, sugar is linked to expropriation of Indigenous lands, the practices of both chattel slavery and coolie indenture, and the nutritional restructuring of human metabolism. See Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1986); Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and Anthony Ryan Hatch, *Blood Sugar: Racial Pharmacology and Food Justice in Black America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
- <sup>11</sup> In the phrase “affective chemistries of care,” I evoke a number of events/behaviors, most immediately the cooking diversion staged by Polacco’s *Thunder Cake* (Patricia Polacco, *Thunder Cake* [New York: Philomel Books, 1990]). An affective chemistry also occurs within bodies that are soothed by such actions. Yet, at the same time, the molecular mechanisms that correspond to, e.g., meditative rituals necessary to bring one back from an anxious or disassociated state, or that could be released into the environment to clean up endocrine-disrupting chemicals known to cause reproductive debilities, are poorly understood or speculated fantasies.
- <sup>12</sup> From a hard social constructionist tack, neurodiversity and labile mood are not in and of themselves disabling; rather, it is society’s lack of accommodating and making institutions more accessible for those with so-called “mental illnesses” that is disabling. As a person who has benefited from SSRIs in the past, I do not wish to understate the seriousness of depression and the acute anguish that antidepressants relieve for many people. Still, see Ethan Watters’s critique regarding the nonexistence of depression in Japan prior to the US export of antidepressants and notions of sadness as

pathological (Ethan Watters, *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*, 1st Free Press hardcover ed. [New York: Free Press, 2010]); and Nikolas Rose on social norms replacing biological norms (Nikolas Rose, “The Politics of Life Itself,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 6 [2001]: 1–30).

- <sup>13</sup> Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby, *Clinical Labor: Tissue Donors and Research Subjects in the Global Bioeconomy*, *Clinical Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
- <sup>14</sup> Silvan S. Tomkins, *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. E. Virginia Demos, *Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- <sup>15</sup> Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801471377>
- <sup>16</sup> Mike Magee, *Code Blue: Inside America’s Medical Industrial Complex*, First Grove Atlantic hardcover edition, 1st edition (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, an imprint of Grove Atlantic, 2019), 138.
- <sup>17</sup> Magee, *Code Blue*, 94.
- <sup>18</sup> According to Paul Virilio, perpetual war is the condition of our current moment, rooted in the military classes’ investment in their own reproduction. An incessant war, in other words, occurs not just between nations but between the military and civilian classes (*Pure War*, trans. Mark Polizotti [New York: Semiotexte, 1997]).
- <sup>19</sup> In April 1953, Eisenhower delivered his famous Chance for Peace speech in which he warned of a national ethos devoted to “security ... found not in mutual trust and mutual aid but in force ... [with] the goal of power superiority at all cost.” While speaking of Stalin and the Soviets, his words have rebounded as a condemnation of the US devotion to pure war: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies ... a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals ... We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat” (Dwight Eisenhower, *April 16, 1953: Chance for Peace*, 1953, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/april-16-1953-chance-peace>); and Barbara Ehrenreich, John Ehrenreich, and Health/PAC, *The American Health Empire: Power, Profits and Politics* (New York: Random House, 1971).
- <sup>20</sup> Sam Quinones, *Dreamland: The True Tale of America’s Opiate Epidemic* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2016), 310.

- <sup>21</sup> There were previous epidemics of opiate abuse in the US prior to this latest crisis: “During the Civil War, over 400,000 people presented with morphine addiction that was referred to as ‘soldier’s disease’” (Eric Trickey, “Inside the Story of America’s 19th-Century Opiate Addiction,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/inside-story-americas-19th-century-opiate-addiction-180967673/>). In the Victorian age, “male doctors [also] turned to morphine to relieve many female patients’ menstrual cramps, ‘diseases of a nervous character,’ and even morning sickness. Overuse led to addiction. By the late 1800s, women made up more than 60 percent of opium addicts” (David Courtwright, *Dark Paradise: A History of Opiate Addiction in America* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001], quoted in Eric Trickey, “Inside the Story of America’s 19th-Century Opiate Addiction.”).
- <sup>22</sup> SHADAC (State Health Access Data Assistance Center), “The Opioid Epidemic in the United States,” SHADAC, <https://www.shadac.org/opioid-epidemic-united-states>.
- <sup>23</sup> Roni Caryn Rabin, “Overdose Deaths Reached Record High as the Pandemic Spread,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2021, sec. Health, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/17/health/drug-overdoses-fentanyl-deaths.html>.
- <sup>24</sup> Traci C. Green et al., “Epidemiologic Trends and Geographic Patterns of Fatal Opioid Intoxications in Connecticut, USA: 1997–2007,” *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 115, no. 3 (2010): 221–28; Heather A. Clinton et al., “Evaluating Opioid Overdose Using the National Violent Death Reporting System, 2016,” *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 194 (January 1, 2019): 371–76. According to data available through 2018 collected by the National Institute of Drug Abuse, Connecticut ranks sixth in opioid-involved overdose deaths, following W. Virginia, Maryland, New Hampshire, Ohio, and Massachusetts. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/opioids/opioid-summaries-by-state>.
- <sup>25</sup> Green et al., “Epidemiologic Trends and Geographic Patterns of Fatal Opioid Intoxications in Connecticut, USA,” 221, 224.
- <sup>26</sup> One salient facet of the twenty-first-century opioid crisis differentiating it from prior opiate epidemics is that “drug overdose mortality was previously concentrated in major cities like New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and San Francisco, while the contemporary epidemic has encompassed dramatic increases in drug overdose mortality in nontraditional locations, particularly midsize cities, suburbs, and rural areas” (Jessica Y. Ho, “The Contemporary American Drug Overdose Epidemic in International Perspective,” *Population and Development Review* 45, no. 1 [2019]: 8). A contrasting view is presented by Julie Netherland and Helena Hansen, who argue that the idea of a white opioid epidemic distinct from a Black and Brown one feeds into biased-media images and a racist valuing of white over Black and Brown lives (“The War on Drugs That Wasn’t: Wasted Whiteness, ‘Dirty Doctors,’ and Race in Media Coverage of Prescription Opioid Misuse,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 40, no. 4 [2016]: 2).

- <sup>27</sup> Vuong, *On Earth*, 178.
- <sup>28</sup> Vuong, 182.
- <sup>29</sup> Vuong, 178.
- <sup>30</sup> Anne Case and Angus Deaton, “Mortality and Morbidity in the 21st Century,” *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* (Spring 2017): 397–476. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90013177>
- <sup>31</sup> This sentence ends with noting Little Dog’s bewilderment because he didn’t know that there was a war, much less that the war was “still in you” (5). The war’s aftermath, then, is intergenerationally felt, Little Dog imprinted with the fiery trauma from Ma’s PTSD from napalm bombings.
- <sup>32</sup> Moreover, when the key component of napalm—polystyrene (that which aerates and lends volume to the fuel)—burns, it chemically transforms into styrene which is toxic. In short, even those not torched directly by napalm can asphyxiate on its fumes. For an excellent reading of how literary representations of the militarized devastation in Vietnam ought to be considered central (rather than peripheral) to ecocriticism, see Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, “Ecological Imaginations, the Vietnam War, and Vietnamese American Literature,” in *Asian American Literature and the Environment*, ed. Lorna Fitzsimmons, Youngsuk Chae, and Bella Adams (New York: Routledge, 2015), 111–25.
- <sup>33</sup> Norah MacKendrick, “Protecting Ourselves from Chemicals: A Study of Gender and Precautionary Consumption,” in *Our Chemical Selves: Gender, Toxics, and Environmental Health*, ed. Dayna Nadine Scott (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), 58–77.
- <sup>34</sup> For feminist critiques of toxicity that highlight the hidden hazards in domestic consumer items and that assume these are the toxicants of most concern to women, see Reena Shadaan and Michelle Murphy, “EDC’s as Industrial Chemicals and Settler Colonial Structures: Towards a Decolonial Feminist Approach,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 6, no. 1 (2020): 1–36, <https://catalystjournal.org/index.php/catalyst/article/view/32089>. For Indigenous and Black women, it may be land-based, community based, prison-based, and occupationally based hazards that may be foremost in the minds of BIPOC.
- <sup>35</sup> Though a 1980 UN convention outlawed the use of napalm on civilian targets during war, the US used bombs containing the key components of napalm—a jellied mixture of polystyrene combined with a jet fuel—in its war in Iraq in the early 2000s. See Andrew Buncombe, “US Admits It Used Napalm Bombs in Iraq,” *The Independent*, August 9, 2003, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-admits-it-used-napalm-bombs-in-iraq-99716.html>
- <sup>36</sup> Arlene Blum, “Tackling Toxics,” *Science* 351, no. 6278 (March 11, 2016): 1117, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaf5468>; and Andrea C. Gore et al., “EDC-2: The

Endocrine Society's Second Scientific Statement on Endocrine-Disrupting Chemicals," *Endocrine Reviews* 36, no. 6 (2015): E54-56, <https://doi.org/10.1210/er.2015-1010>

- <sup>37</sup> Organizations like the California Healthy Nail Salon collective have partnered with salon owners and workers to identify and raise awareness regarding the most hazardous chemicals involved in nail salon work.
- <sup>38</sup> *On Earth* expressly weaves a conceit on how relative privilege undergirds the insouciance of carelessness: "Sometimes, when I'm careless, I think survival is easy: you just keep moving forward ... wait until the storm passes you over and you find that—yes—your name is still attached to a living thing" (136) which is followed by a litany of murderous hate and annihilating acts aimed at gay and trans people. Only those who do not have their survival threatened arbitrarily are privileged enough to be careless.
- <sup>39</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 72. Crip emotional intelligence and skills include "understanding that each disabled person is the expert on their own body/mind ... [and] understanding isolation. Deeply ... [And] understanding that when someone says, 'I feel like shit ...' the automatic reply shouldn't always be ... 'let me do that for you!' That instead, you can say ... without trying to fix it ... 'What feels possible today?'" (72).
- <sup>40</sup> From a disability standpoint, however, the choice of prosthesis over a wheelchair can be one of elective lesser mobility, for it is not the lack of two legs that renders a person disabled but the nonaccommodation of wheelchairs into spaces via curb cuts, elevators, ramps, hand hold bars, and widened doorways.
- <sup>41</sup> This episode also underscores a point made by Miliann Kang who argues that the product delivered in salon services is not merely lacquered nails but bodily and emotional care: the "carnality of the manicure sets it up as an unpredictable exchange that can lurch suddenly from relaxing to uncomfortable, if not alarming. This work requires both technical expertise and adroit emotional skills to finesse strong reactions of customers to the serving of their bodies" (2); Kang coins the term "pampering body labor" (8) to refer to the work of fulfilling both the emotional and physical needs of customers to access a former luxury service" (221). (Miliann Kang, *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender, and the Body in Beauty Service Work* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010].)
- <sup>42</sup> Arguably, the closing of this episode with a one-hundred-dollar payment belittles, even as it attempts to make concrete, the value of Rose's nonchemical balm. Rose not only attends to the worn flesh of her client's still existing leg and foot, but uses her own muscle-memory to pantomime as real her client's phantom feeling. Moreover, the seeming sufficiency of the one-hundred-dollar tip is also relative to the market of services for treatments that offer relief, for one hundred dollars is more than what

nail technicians usually receive for their services but much less than what an MD charges for an office visit.

- <sup>43</sup> Entry on *tref* (n.) (*Merriam-Webster* at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tref>).
- <sup>44</sup> Entry on *fawr* (adj. Welsh) soft mutation of *mawr* (*Wordsense Dictionary* at <https://www.wordsense.eu/fawr/>). See also “Trevor” (*Wikipedia* at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trevor>).
- <sup>45</sup> The details of Trevor’s house indicate a slovenliness born of neglect and a hyper-consciousness to rationalize the dilapidation as a choice: “the white door frames ... were stained pink with fingerprints: a house colored with work, which meant a house colored with exhaustion, disrepair. The rug uprooted ‘so no one gotta clean’ ... The cabinet doors were torn off ‘to make it easy’” (109); and in Trevor’s bedroom hangs a poster of the movie, “*The Empire Strikes Back*” (110).
- <sup>46</sup> According to a 2017 article in the *Hartford Courant*, “[h]igh-end brands that include Dunhill, Macanudo, Davidoff, Montecristo and Fonseca all have used Connecticut-grown shade leaves to wrap their cigars.” However, Honduran-grown Connecticut Shade—produced with much lower labor costs—has contributed to the decline of the Windsor-based tobacco industry: “While shade tobacco has plunged in Connecticut, many farmers are continuing to plant broadleaf tobacco ... also used for cigar wrappers, but ... considered to be of a lesser grade ... with a heavier flavor” (Gregory B. Hladky, “Foreign Competition, Labor Costs Push Connecticut Shade Tobacco Farmers To The Edge,” *Hartford Courant*, 2017). Notably, the seed stock for Connecticut Shade tobacco, itself, originated in Sumatra: “Prior to 1900, [the valley] just grew broadleaf tobacco ... In Sumatra, they were growing this beautiful plant that was ruining our trade, and farmers went over and brought back Sumatra seed. But when they grew it, the leaves burned in the sun” (David Savona and Vince McMahan, “Made In the Shade: Connecticut Shade,” *Cigar Aficionado*, Nov./Dec. 1999, <http://www.cigaraficionado.com/article/made-in-the-shade-connecticut-shade-7285>). Tenting the rows of seedlings with cheesecloth—to mimic the overcast skies in Sumatra—solved the problem; hence the birth of “Connecticut Shade.”
- <sup>47</sup> As Melville wrote about the whaling industry on the cusp of its demise (accelerated with the discovery of petroleum in Pennsylvania in 1859), Vuong renders his novel a long epistle from one of the sole survivors, Little Dog, of the “shipwreck” that is a generation of Windsor Valley youth decimated by foreclosing economic opportunities and the spread of prescription opiates. If Little Dog is *On Earth*’s Ishmael, then Trevor is the novel’s Queequeg.
- <sup>48</sup> Vuong, 188. Casual misogyny is depicted in Trevor’s tampon comment to the narrator and this further line: “Trevor ... fingered a freshman girl then tossed her underwear

in the lake for fun” (153). Internalized homophobia comes through in Trevor’s question and claim to Little Dog: “You think you’ll be really gay, like, forever? I mean ... I think me ... I’ll be good in a few years, you know?” (188).

- <sup>49</sup> Case and Deaton, “Mortality and Morbidity in the 21st Century,” 438–39. Because stagnating wages have affected other racial groups as well but have not resulted in a similar uptick in numbers of deaths for those groups, the key point of interest for these authors is “why stagnant incomes have this effect on whites but not on blacks” (429). They imply a lesser resilience of the white working class in adjusting to “the failure of life to turn out as expected” by quoting historian Carol Anderson: “If you’ve always been privileged, equality begins to look like oppression” (Case and Deaton, 429).
- <sup>50</sup> Eighty percent of the labor on Buford’s farm is “undocumented migrants from Mexico, Central American, [and the] Dominican Republic” (88), excepting Little Dog, Trevor, and Rick, the latter “a white guy in his twenties ... on the sex offender list [with tobacco picking] the only steady job he could get” (88).
- <sup>51</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- <sup>52</sup> The narrator expressly connects the opportunity for queer eroticism sexual experimentation to Trevor’s connection to whiteness and its privileges: “He was white, I never forgot this. He was always white. And I knew this was why there was a space for us: a farm, a field, a barn, a house, an hour, two. A space I never found in the city, where the tenement apartments we lived in were so cramped one could tell when a neighbor had a stomach flu in the middle of the night” (112).
- <sup>53</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 72.
- <sup>54</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, 24.
- <sup>55</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, 66.
- <sup>56</sup> Cf. Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- <sup>57</sup> See previous note 43 and 44.
- <sup>58</sup> The novel (and this essay) negotiates with a larger social problem: the lopsided perceptibility—among laypeople—around molecules that addict or harm (e.g., that up-regulate inflammatory responses) versus molecular processes ensuing from kindness and care. Moreover, even where recent research delves into molecular signatures of, for instance, meditative practices, the beneficial molecular mechanisms are also conveyed as an arrest or cessation of pro-inflammatory factors. See Ivana Buric, et al.’s account of how meditation reverses the process whereby NF-kB (nuclear factor kappa B) up-regulates genes to express cytokines, the latter causing inflammatory

responses that have been linked to deleterious chronic health effects Ivana Buric et al., “What Is the Molecular Signature of Mind–Body Interventions? A Systematic Review of Gene Expression Changes Induced by Meditation and Related Practices,” *Frontiers in Immunology* 8 (2017): 1–17.

<sup>59</sup> Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, “Toxic Politics,” 335–36.

<sup>60</sup> Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, 334.

<sup>61</sup> Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, 337.

<sup>62</sup> Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, 337.

<sup>63</sup> Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, 341.

<sup>64</sup> Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, 341.

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