

University of Denver

Digital Commons @ DU

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies

6-2023

The Politics & Poetics of Audience Creation in Contemporary Epistolary Memoir

Sarah M. Davis
University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davis, Sarah M., "The Politics & Poetics of Audience Creation in Contemporary Epistolary Memoir" (2023). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2276.
<https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/2276>



All Rights Reserved.

This Masters Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, dig-commons@du.edu.

The Politics & Poetics of Audience Creation in Contemporary Epistolary Memoir

Abstract

This thesis examines Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* as works of life writing that leverage the epistolary form to engage their direct maternal addressees and audiences beyond them in revision and reconstruction of identity. Secondary audiences are considered in light of Michael Warner's "Publics and Counterpublics," and the social affordances of the epistolary form and self-constructive affordances of life writing are analyzed in tandem as a hybrid epistolary memoir form. Specifically, this project explores how the epistolary memoir form affords Vuong and Laymon opportunities for the process of personal, relational, and communal identity construction, particularly around ideas of "American" identity.

Document Type

Masters Thesis

Degree Name

M.A.

First Advisor

R. D. Perry

Second Advisor

Joanna Howard

Third Advisor

Tayana Hardin

Keywords

Epistolary, Form, Identity construction, Life writing, Memoir

Subject Categories

Arts and Humanities | English Language and Literature | Literature in English, North America | Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority

Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the author. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

The Politics & Poetics of Audience Creation
in Contemporary Epistolary Memoir

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Sarah M. Davis
June 2023
Advisor: Dr. R. D. Perry

©Copyright by Sarah M. Davis 2023

All Rights Reserved

Author: Sarah M. Davis
Title: The Politics & Poetics of Audience Creation
in Contemporary Epistolary Memoir
Advisor: Dr. R. D. Perry
Degree Date: June 2023

Abstract

This thesis examines Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* as works of life writing that leverage the epistolary form to engage their direct maternal addressees and audiences beyond them in revision and reconstruction of identity. Secondary audiences are considered in light of Michael Warner's "Publics and Counterpublics," and the social affordances of the epistolary form and self-constructive affordances of life writing are analyzed in tandem as a hybrid epistolary memoir form. Specifically, this project explores how the epistolary memoir form affords Vuong and Laymon opportunities for the process of personal, relational, and communal identity construction, particularly around ideas of "American" identity.

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Ryan, for meeting with me so often, walking me through the thesis process like it was just a thing to be done, introducing me to new theorists and perspectives, and simply expecting I would write what I said I would write. You provided an encouraging and welcome sense of stability to this process. Thank you, Joanna, for your energy and enthusiasm for this project. Meeting with you revived my curiosity each time. Thank you, Tayana, for shepherding all of the MA students so well, but particularly for taking time to talk with me after your class my first quarter. That helped keep me here. Thank you, Sister Fred, for being a campus legend, for valuing and prioritizing diverse voices, and for showing me your quilts.

Thank you, Briana, for sharing correspondence, encouragement, intellectual companionship, neighborhood walks, coffee, and homecooked food with me. Our emails show me the capaciousness of letters and the necessity of good community, and I have been writing this year in part because of your kind and gentle prodding. Thank you, Cameron, for making our household eggs in the morning, providing unsolicited and humorous instruction on accomplishing simple tasks, and being such an unexpectedly kind roommate and friend. I am more grateful than you know. Thank you, Mack, my long-time, bad-time, good-time, every-time, every-where friend. You have so generously held out hope and confidence in and for me. Thank you, J and Boo, for sending me funny cat videos and holding down the fort while I'm gone. Thank you, Dad, for being proud of whatever I do, despite its supposed mysteriousness to you. Thank you, Momma, for writing to me and for showing me that prayers are letters, too.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Life Writing	2
Epistolarity	3
Publics and Counterpublics	6
Maternal Address	7
Chapter Summaries	9
Chapter 1: Collective Remembering and Revision in Ocean Vuong’s <i>On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous</i>	11
Introduction	11
“To Reach You” and “To Break Free:” Tracing Literary Lineages	17
Disidentifications and Counterpublics	27
Pedro Zamora and Potentialities	30
Chapter 2: Literary and Relational Revision in Kiese Laymon’s <i>Heavy: An American Memoir</i>	35
Introduction	35
Black Women’s Storytelling and Black Epistolary Traditions: Tracing Literary Lineages.....	44
Self-Construction and Worldmaking	54
Concluding Thoughts	59
References	64

Introduction

Letters are fundamentally relational. They reveal what is true of every narrative—that is never merely about an individual. They offer both distance and nearness, an intimate conversation and an opportunity to include others within the direct address. Life writing—the field of at least semi-autobiographical work consisting of memoir, autofiction, etc.—is also always social, though this feature of the genre can be obscured. The last ten years in American life writing have been marked by a turn to the epistolary form—the use of letters and direct address as a guiding narrative framework. From Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* to Julietta Singh’s *The Breaks* to Imani Perry’s *Breathe*, writers experiencing the extreme distress of this decade’s crises are turning to a form that can uniquely mediate the personal and political through address to an intimate relation(s) and to a multitude of others beyond that. These others are invited to attend to a personal narrative that also functions as “social biography” as the narrative creates a communal space for conversation.¹ Writing and reading memoir is a process of identity construction, and when multiple readerships are engaged, it can become a process of communal identity construction

¹ Avieson, Giles, and Joseph, *Mediating Memory*, 3.

Two notable examples of recent epistolary nonfiction are Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Although situated in different embodied experiences, both employ the epistolary form to address their mothers, women with whom they have complicated relationships. My hope in examining epistolarity in Laymon and Vuong is to provide further insight into intersections between the affordances of epistolary forms and memoir and to uncover the mechanisms these writers use to create spaces of both intimate and communal conversation. Specifically, this thesis explores how Vuong and Laymon employ the hybrid form of the epistolary memoir in combination with the maternal addressee to create a space of intimacy that operates to foster personal, relational, and communal identity construction, particularly around ideas of "American" identity.

Life Writing

Life writing is expansive and can describe a number of subgenres, but I use the term "memoir" to talk about both *Heavy* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. *Heavy* is subtitled a memoir, so I do not resist its self-categorization. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, on the other hand, is subtitled a novel, but I chose to read it as a memoir with potentially fictive elements. This decision is in part a move to place both Vuong's text and *Heavy* on the same plane so that their otherwise similar features—epistolarity, maternal address, invocation of the possibility of a counterpublic—can be more easily compared. But reading *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* as a memoir is not inconsistent with Vuong's own acknowledgements of the slipperiness of genre boundaries and his

cited inspiration in Maxine Hong Kingston, whose most famous work is subtitled a memoir but employs a variety of fictive elements.² I chose not to use the term autofiction, although some reviews have done so, simply because it distracts from the comparison with *Heavy*, and I do not find proposed definitions of the term to be distinctive enough from my discussion of memoir to warrant separate attention.³

If both texts will be discussed as memoir, then, what is the significance of this genre? G. Thomas Couser writes that “life writing does not register preexisting selfhood, but rather somehow creates it...in writing one’s life one may bring a new self into being.”⁴ This reciprocal relationship between textual and extratextual self is of particular interest to me. I primarily focus on the textual personas created by Vuong and Laymon rather than the writers themselves, but a self-consciousness of both a textual and extratextual self is important in considering the afterlife of the memoir’s work. If the memoir is a site of self-construction that has implications beyond the text, it is valuable to note these, especially as it relates to audiences beyond the addressee who may be enfolded into the process of self-construction.

Epistolarity

The epistolary form is not so much a genre as a mode of writing that can be applied to any genre, but criticism of the form has largely centered around its expressions in fiction.

2. Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 245.

3. Worthington, *The Story of “Me,”* 1-22.

4. Couser, *Memoir*, 14.

In their work, *The Epistolary Renaissance: A Critical Approach to Contemporary Letter Narratives in Anglophone Fiction*, Maria Löschnigg and Rebekka Schuh articulate a common understanding of epistolary fiction as being defined by “the presence of an intratextual addressee shaping the content, style and purpose of the epistolary text.”⁵ This framework of epistolarity for fiction can easily be expanded to consider epistolarity in nonfiction, but the unique inner workings of contemporary epistolary nonfiction remain an underdeveloped area of literary criticism. Additionally, although some critical work addressing epistolarity and life writing exists,⁶ scholars do not often connect the two (except in the instance of the edited papers of a historical individual).

However, with the lionization of Coates’s memoir, scholars writing in the field of Black studies have written recently about the purpose and limits of epistolarity in memoir, and James Baldwin’s work has long been recognized as popularizing “the letter-essay as a personal-political form.”⁷ Conscious of the letter’s capacities, Baldwin couched political concerns in the framing of the personal, placing them in intimate contexts, and employed the direct address to reach wider audiences. Although Baldwin has written of his distaste for the Apostle Paul and his writings,⁸ his most famous epistolary essays, “My Dungeon

5. Löschnigg and Schuh, *The Epistolary Renaissance*, 17.

6. In “The Epistolary Thread as Collaborative Writing in Grief Memoir,” included in *Mediating Memory: Tracing the Limits of Memoir* edited by Bunty Avieson, Fiona Giles, and Sue Joseph, Freya Latona considers the ethics of writing about a deceased parent and offers her decisions to use her mother’s epistolarity and her own letters to her mother after her death as both a practice of preserving her mother’s voice and a collaborative exercise in grieving.

7. Lordi, “Between the World and the Addressee,” 434–47.

8. Baldwin, “Down at the Cross,” 18, 44.

Shook” and “Down at the Cross,” address audiences similarly to the way Alain Badiou argues that Paul does, by addressing audiences composed of multiple social groups and offering a new possibility for social belonging.⁹ While neither Vuong nor Laymon are necessarily interested in the kind of universalism that Badiou identifies in Paul, the ability to invoke a kind of group—a counterpublic in Michael Warner’s terms—that is capacious enough to include writer, nominal addressee, and wider groups of readers does resonate with their projects.

Importantly, the shape and constitution of such a counterpublic is always in process. Caroline Levine helpfully offers the language of constraints and affordances in discussions of forms, both literary and social.¹⁰ The form taken by a text or a group both limits and allows the characteristics and activities with which that entity can be engaged. I will use the language of affordances when thinking about what the combination of the memoir and epistolary form helps Vuong and Laymon accomplish. In this project, I contend that memoir offers self-construction, the epistolary offers an explicitly social orientation, and together they can invite addressees and readers into collective self-construction. I will use the term “epistolary memoir” to describe this form.

⁹ Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*.

¹⁰ Levine, *Forms*.

Publics and Counterpublics

Michael Warner's "Publics and Counterpublics" informs how I think about the secondary audiences with which Vuong and Laymon engage. Warner thinks of publics as social entities that come "into being only in relation to texts and their circulation."¹¹ Publics exist both by virtue of being directly or indirectly rhetorically addressed and by the attention of those who choose to respond to the text.¹² Counterpublics can be conceived of as publics that are oriented against a dominant public with the intent of transforming it. They are invested in altering the status quo, an undertaking which is accomplished by the text as it articulates the shape of the lifeworld in which the text circulates and by the counterpublic itself as it substantiates that lifeworld by its existence.

Warner also identifies that the intended public of a text is reflected in its forms; a text "elaborates (and masks as unmarked humanity) a particular culture, its embodied way of life."¹³ For our purposes, Vuong and Laymon then intend the form of the epistolary memoir to uniquely reach a public beyond their mothers, or in Warner's terms, the "nominal addressee."¹⁴ Interestingly, Warner names correspondence among genres which are not intended to circulate or to invoke a public. However, this

11. Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 50.

12. Warner, 50, 60.

13. Warner, 76.

14. Warner, 54.

classification of correspondence fails to take into account epistolary forms that are meant for wider circulation, such as our epistolary memoir.

The relationship between authorial invocation and necessity for collective response places tension on some of the tenets of agency discussed with José Esteban Muñoz's disidentificatory self which I address in "Collective Remembering and Revision in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." Part of the process of constructing the disidentificatory self involves the self's ability to select how it will express itself in light of its multiple identities, and the risk required in invoking a counterpublic seems to undercut that. However, Laymon and Vuong both expressly decide to construct themselves around complex engagement with their mothers, a choice indicative of their disidentificatory agency. The participation and risk of the counterpublic lies not so much in their personal identities or even in the revision of their maternal relationships but in the construction of different lifeworlds in which their selves can exist more freely.

Maternal Address

Although it is common to analyze the roles of maternal figures in literature through a psychoanalytic lens, I will instead focus on address to mothers as an opportunity for intimacy between the writer and nominal addressee and as a rhetorical move that extends the feeling of familiarity to readers. That both of these texts are addressed within the context of mother-son relationships is unique among contemporary epistolary memoirs. Other iterations of the epistolary form in nonfiction have focused on relationships between elders and younger addressees. For instance,

Baldwin addresses his nephew; Coates directs his memoir to his son; Perry writes to her sons. This elder-to-youth relationship positions these authors as more experienced people passing on wisdom to those who have yet to fully encounter a hostile world, and it allows secondary audiences to be more naturally caught up in an explanatory tone. If these authors discuss experiences about which secondary audiences are not familiar, the secondary audiences are enfolded into the in-group as inexperienced ones like the nominal addressees. Vuong and Laymon, however, write as sons who address their mothers, reversing this more common direction of elder-youth address. Both still use the opportunity of the letter to express what their mothers may not yet know, but they do so as those disclosing previously unknown factors of a shared life. As such, the tone of both Vuong's and Laymon's texts resists simplicity and explanation and instead expects its readers to already possess intimate knowledge. For readers beyond the nominal addressees, this may feel estranging, but Vuong and Laymon are consistent in prioritizing the lives and perspectives of their mothers.

Although the intimacy of the direct address to a mother emphasizes the reader's position outside that relationship, writing to one's mother also serves to universalize the address. Although most contemporary readers can relate to the experience of having a mother, this relationship is of course unique to the individual mother and child. Writing to such an essential site of human connection is a way of both defamiliarizing and including readers beyond the nominal addressee. This also mimics the way the

epistolary form creates spaces of intimacy accessible to all readers while prioritizing the nominal addressee.

Chapter Summaries

I address Laymon and Vuong largely separately in order to reveal how writers from different contexts and with different concerns employ the epistolary for their own purposes. Vuong and Laymon are deeply influenced by identities of place, race, nationality, and sexual orientation. Although both authors engage in projects of personal and communal identity construction, Vuong's text seems to remain on a more intimate scale while Laymon traces the effects of the political on the personal and is more direct about the implications his relationship with his mother has on the possibilities of American identity. Similarly, Vuong's text is clearly interested in relational repair, but he is less specific about how that might be accomplished. Laymon identifies necessary, if costly, actions to enact revisions of his relationship with his mother and of American-ness. With these differing goals, come slightly different awareness of specific audiences. Beyond his mother, Vuong does not seem to identify who his readership might be, while Laymon, wary of the influence of white publics, postures his text to and for Black Southern audiences that can identify with him and his mother. The goal of the following chapters is to explore how these texts accomplish different goals with similar formal methods.

In "Collective Remembering and Revision in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," I examine Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

as a work of life writing and consider how Vuong employs the persona of Little Dog to engage in collaborative self-construction with his mother and the possibilities of the counterpublics he invokes. I trace the ways Little Dog roots his creative abilities and methods of remembering in the maternal figures in his life and explore how Vuong employs elements of fiction and autobiography after the examples of James Baldwin and Maxine Hong Kingston. Thinking with José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications*, I consider how Vuong includes others in Little Dog's process of self-construction through the invocation of counterpublics enacted by Little Dog's care of self in service of others.

In "Literary and Relational Revision in Kiese Laymon's *Heavy: An American Memoir*," I examine Kiese Laymon's *Heavy: An American Memoir* and consider Laymon's revision of his relationship with his mother, of the capacities of the American memoir, and of the term "American" itself. I explore how Laymon situates himself within the revision practices taught by his mother, the imaginative linguistic play of his grandmother, and the style and intersectional considerations of writers like Margaret Walker and Toni Cade Bambara, as well as James Baldwin's personal-political epistolary tradition. Thinking with Kevin Quashie's *Black Aliveness, Or A Poetics of Being*, I explore how Laymon creates *Heavy* as a preparation for encounter between him and his mother on and off the page.

Collective Remembering and Revision in Ocean

Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Introduction

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous is poet Ocean Vuong's first full length prose work, an epistolary text written from the speaker, identified as Little Dog, to the speaker's illiterate mother, Rose. It explores his relationships with Rose; with his grandmother, Lan; and with his high school love, Trevor, and articulates a revision of those relationships beyond the confines of violence and death.

The book's subtitle brands it a novel, but Little Dog's experiences as a queer Vietnamese immigrant align closely with Vuong's own experiences, and Vuong notes in his acknowledgements to mentor Ben Lerner that "genre borders are only as real as our imaginations are small."¹⁵ If my intentions were to calcify such genre borders, the generic categorization of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* could be considered from several directions. It could be seen as an autobiographical novel¹⁶ or a work of autofiction,¹⁷ but

¹⁵. Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 245.

¹⁶. Nguyen, "*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* Is a Daring Tale of Queer Love and Pain."

¹⁷. Rashid, "review of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*."

for the purposes of this thesis, the text will be discussed as a work of life writing with fictive elements. This seems consistent with the text's early iteration—a 2017 seemingly nonfictive letter in the *New Yorker* titled “A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read” that became the first chapter of the novel¹⁸—and with Vuong's sources of inspiration which include James Baldwin and Maxine Hong Kingston.¹⁹ Life writing scholarship asserts that, just as memory is never recalled but always reinvented, the textual self is constructed. G. Thomas Couser writes that “life writing does not register preexisting selfhood, but rather somehow creates it...in writing one's life one may bring a new self into being.”²⁰ In other words, the textual self exists in a reciprocal relationship with the extratextual self, each recreating the other. Further, José Esteban Muñoz asserts in the introduction to *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* that “The ‘real self’ who comes into being through fiction is not the self who produces fiction, but is instead produced by fiction.”²¹ The self that Little Dog and Vuong construct comes into being specifically through the writing of it. Reading *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* as a memoir allows us to more directly consider how Vuong engages in the work of self-(re)construction directly available to the life writer.

18. Vuong, “A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read.”

19. Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 246.

20. Couser, *Memoir*, 14.

21. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 20.

However, if we analyze the text as a work of life writing, the ambiguous connection between Vuong and the textual speaker, Little Dog, requires clarification. Little Dog offers Vuong a measure of distance and freedom with which to explore his life experience without burdening himself with the responsibility of facticity. The proximity between the details of Vuong's and Little Dog's lives are ultimately of lesser importance than the opportunity Little Dog offers Vuong to consider his life from a different vantage point. As such, my reading of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* analyzes Little Dog as an authorial persona of Vuong, or what Hugh M. Richmond calls "the self-conscious power of subjective projection into alternative identities."²² Richmond describes the historical development of authorial personas as a response to both a growing sense of the value of the individual consciousness and the felt need for writers to respond to their public critics.²³ By this account, Little Dog can be seen as a persona, because he affords Vuong a different vantage point from which to consider his own life and because the letter form positions Little Dog in direct engagement with his primary addressee, his mother, as well as audiences beyond Rose. As we will discuss later in relation to Laymon, the framework of authorial persona can also be usefully applied to texts in which author and persona have a much closer, more directly mediated relationship, such as those that identify themselves as memoirs. Although both Laymon and Vuong leverage personas in

²². Richmond, "Personal Identity and Literary Personae," 219.

²³. Richmond, 218.

the acts of self-construction, Vuong's engagement with a supposedly fictionalized persona accomplishes self-construction in a more layered way.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous is thus a site of self-creation for Little Dog, and by extension, Ocean Vuong. That the text is composed as a letter further expands its self-creative possibility into a communal endeavor. Little Dog contends that the acts of writing both *about* and *to* his mother are attempts to negotiate the distance between them, and his letter both reinforces and resists their separation. The arc of Little Dog's letter traces the violence that informed his upbringing and his intimate relationships: his mother's PTSD and grandmother's schizophrenia from their experiences as refugees fleeing the Vietnam War;²⁴ his now-absent father's abuse of his mother; his mother's physical abuse of him; the bullying he endures as a child for being queer and Vietnamese; the internalized homophobia Trevor projects onto him. But the letter is an attempt to outrun or elide these structures of violence and to forge relationships and ways of being not defined by trauma and harm. Rather than choosing to allow violence to be his point of origin, he identifies another way to see himself: beauty. Eventually he is able to assert that, "All this time I told myself we were born from war—but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty."²⁵ Importantly, however, Little Dog refuses the trap of positioning beauty and war as a dichotomy. In articulating beauty as his point of origin, he remains unflinching in his attention to the trauma of his childhood *and* ferociously committed to

²⁴ Cho, "We Were Born from Beauty," 136.

²⁵ Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 231.

writing what is tender and beautiful. Memoir allows him the opportunity to reconstruct his memories and his relationship with his mother into something that is capacious enough to hold both beauty and violence. But the epistolary memoir form empowers Little Dog to negotiate the distance between him and Rose by enacting this reconstruction of origin and the past together, making possible different collective presents and futures.

Michael Warner's examination of publics and counterpublics is productive in thinking more specifically about with whom Vuong seeks to co-create. Warner asserts that beyond the nominal addressee of a text—Rose, in this case—and any implied addressees, writers and speakers engage with a public. A public is in part created or invoked by the writer; they design their work to be received by a particular type of reader who exists in a particular world. Warner elaborates, writing that

discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, projecting for that world a concrete and livable shape, and attempting to realize that world through address.²⁶

So, what kind of world does Vuong imagine? The novel opens with an epigraph from Qiu Maijin that reads in part, "I can build you a center,"²⁷ and Little Dog seems to try to place those he loves—particularly Rose—at the center of his narrative, weaving himself around them, and to recenter their stories around something other than pain, violence, and trauma. His letter is an opportunity to build a new center for him and his loved ones. But

²⁶. Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 81.

²⁷. Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 1.

on a broader scale, Vuong, speaking through the persona of Little Dog, also engages with what Warner calls a counterpublic. Counterpublics are publics positioned against dominant cultural forces; they are “spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative.”²⁸ A counterpublic exists both within and outside a public with the intention of altering its environment. Importantly, address to a public or counterpublic involves risk to the enterprise, because a public is ultimately substantiated by those who choose to inhabit and attend to it. A writer has no real control over who will respond to their discourse. They can only write towards the public in which they hope to participate.

The epistolary memoir form affords Vuong a unique ability to engage in self-construction in an explicitly social way, allowing him the ability to enact collective revision on both a textual and extratextual level. Through the persona of Little Dog, he revises relationships, particularly with Rose. Although he enacts the distance the letter form magnifies, he also enfolds Lan, Rose, and Trevor into the self-construction in which he participates. In doing so, Vuong reaches out beyond the text to invoke the possibility of a counterpublic that can co-create a different lifeworld with him. By engaging in the revision of Little Dog’s relationships via writing, Vuong envelops the possibility of a counterpublic in the direct address. This chapter examines how Little Dog engages in collaborative self-construction in light of the literary lineages Vuong places himself within in order to explore how the epistolary memoir form affords opportunities for

²⁸ Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” 88.

collective revision of textual relationships and becomes a portal to extratextual revision via the invocation of the possibility of a counterpublic.

“To Reach You” and “To Break Free:” Tracing Literary Lineages

In the text’s opening chapter, Little Dog establishes one purpose of writing to his mother: “I am trying to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are.”²⁹ But despite this stated intention of connection, he enacts the distance and impasse of their relationship by writing a letter to someone whom he believes will never be able to read it. Little Dog connects his attempt to teach Rose to read with the first time she hit him. The role reversal implicit in learning from her young son threatens Rose’s already unstable sense of identity as a Vietnamese American immigrant woman, and she responds violently and refuses Little Dog’s lesson.³⁰ Thus, for Little Dog to write to Rose is to choose to communicate with her in a way she cannot understand. As he prepares to write of his sexual relationship with Trevor, he declares to Rose, “the very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling it possible.”³¹ Writing a letter to an illiterate addressee ensures Little Dog a measure of control over his own narrative; he can write intimately without fear of the consequences of Rose’s reaction, and the letter reinforces their lack of connection.

²⁹. Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 3.

³⁰. Vuong, 5.

³¹. Vuong, 13.

However, Little Dog also writes that the letter is an attempt to reach Rose and an expression of “trying to break free”³² from violence. In it, he strives to collaboratively include both Rose and Lan in Little Dog’s budding career as a writer by showing them the efficacy of their own storytelling and by writing his own story in order to preserve, amend, and understand theirs. Although many of Vuong’s poems, especially in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, concern his father, Little Dog’s father only figures briefly as an absence and occasion of violence. Instead, Little Dog comes to trace genealogy, both creatively and in memory, through his mother and grandmother. It is their stories that he finds necessary and valuable to retell and reconstruct, and he leverages them as portals through which he enters into and assembles knowledge of himself.

It is also these stories and his mother’s and grandmother’s manner of storytelling that inspires him in his writing. In his letter, Little Dog recreates scenes in which both Lan and Rose function as imaginative, world-building storytellers. For example, after she gives up on Little Dog’s reading lessons, Rose takes up coloring pages. She is mesmerized by the experience of coloring in the images and imagining herself within them. “Have you ever made a scene...and then put yourself inside it? Have you ever watched yourself from behind, going further and deeper into that landscape away from you?” she asks Little Dog. He responds, not in the moment but in the letter, asking, “How could I tell you that what you were describing was writing? How could I say that we, after all, are so close, the shadows of our hands, on two different pages, merging?”³³

³². Vuong, 4.

Although Rose's refusal to learn to read and write prohibits her from creating written narratives, Little Dog is clear that the ways she engages with other creative outlets mirror the ways he engages with language.

Lan's storytelling is primarily located in the fantastical legends and stories from her own life with which she regales a young Little Dog whose imagination works vividly alongside her words. He writes of those experiences like this:

She would start to talk, her tone dropping an octave, drifting deep into a narrative. Mostly, as was her way, she rambled, the tales cycling one after another. They spiraled out from her mind only to return the next week with the same introduction: 'Now this one, Little Dog, this one will really take you out. You ready? Are you even interested in what I'm saying? Good. Because I never lie.' A familiar story would follow, punctuated with the same dramatic pauses and inflections during moments of suspense or crucial turns. I'd mouth along with the sentences, as if watching a film for the umpteenth time—a movie made by Lan's words and animated by my imagination. In this way, we collaborated.³⁴

Little Dog writes of Lan's repetitive stories as familiar, not boring. The way that her mind welcomes the circling of the same stories lends him the freedom to allow his own tale to weave in and out of youth and adolescence and to occasionally switch to a dream-line third person perspective. By extension, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* can be seen as a kind of collaboration involving Vuong's words and the memories and experiences of his mother, his grandmother, and himself. Lan's collaborative storytelling methods, whether she knows that or not, are a practice of revision. Lan's stories enact

³³. Vuong, 6.

³⁴. Vuong, 22.

revisions, not of the stories themselves, but in the selves Lan and Little Dog create for themselves.

Little Dog's engagement with his mother's and grandmother's storytelling seems to trace a lineage of creative work between them, and the methods he employs to do so call to mind Maxine Hong Kingston and James Baldwin. Baldwin also employs what could be called literary personas, notably in the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The protagonist of this novel is a young Black boy growing up in Harlem who navigates conflicting fidelities to his family—which includes a violent step-father—; his spirituality; and his emerging queer identity. The character of John Grimes resembles parts of Baldwin's identities and offers him opportunity to explore elements of himself, his loved ones, and their past, similarly to how Vuong interacts with the persona of Little Dog. Baldwin's novel is not written in epistolary form, but it does substantially feature the voices of characters other than John. While John's perspective bookends the text, the middle chapters are written from the perspectives of his aunt, stepfather, and mother. Because the novel's narration is in third person, John is not necessarily given the opportunity to engage with his family's memories the way Little Dog does, but Vuong's use of persona to locate his past self amidst complex relationships and open them up for reconstruction has Baldwinian echoes.

Little Dog's collaborative storytelling with his maternal addressee recalls Kingston's engagement with her mother in her memoir, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, especially when it comes to writing about events that

occurred before the speaker's birth or memory. Kingston's speaker was born in the U. S. and has never been to China, the country from which her family emigrated. So, she writes fictively into her mother's stories, filling in the gaps she encounters with her own imagination. The chapters "No Name Woman" and "Shaman" particularly apply this model; both open with a story or artifact that the speaker's mother shares with her daughter, but the chapter is then taken over by the speaker's imagination of events as they may or may not have occurred. Kingston writes, "my mother has given me pictures to dream,"³⁵ identifying the text as a kind of collaboration between her and her mother.

Vuong uses this method both between characters in the text and in larger, structural ways. When relating experiences that happened before his birth or beyond his memory, Little Dog uses Lan's and Rose's stories as portals through which to enter into their memories. The chapters in which he relates these events are often told in present tense in the third person, but they maintain an awareness of their own unreliability.³⁶ However, Little Dog also uses these stories to enter into his own. When Rose begins to tell her young son the story of the monkey, the text shifts into a vision of Little Dog running fast and fearless through tobacco fields. Much like how his imagination animated Lan's stories when he was a child, he uses this memory of Rose's storytelling to submerge himself in his own mind. Engaging with the storytelling of his mother and

³⁵. Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 86.

³⁶. Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 35, 232.

grandmother consistently helps Little Dog collaborate with their lives and memories and activate his own through them.

For example, in a chapter on Lan's migration through war torn Vietnam with an infant Rose, Little Dog sets the scene with the following phrase:

It is a beautiful country depending on where you look. Depending on where you look you might see the woman waiting on the shoulder of the dirt road, an infant girl wrapped in a sky-blue shawl in her arms."³⁷

The opening sentence indicates that perspective and attention are the operative factors in identifying beauty or even witnessing the woman at all. The use of a modal verb creates a sense of uncertainty that both acknowledges the limitations of the speaker's vision of the memory and offers the addressee an opportunity to participate in the creation of the scene. This is further suggested by a moment in the same chapter in which Little Dog steps out of the memory he describes to ask directly

If I say the woman. If I say the woman is bearing down, her back hunched below this man-made storm, would you see her? From where you are standing, inches, which is to say years, from this page, would you see the shred of blue shawl blowing across her collarbones...?³⁸

The "you" whom Little Dog addresses is still Rose, but it also seems to reach to include other readers. It opens the address out beyond Rose, mimicking the way that the chapter opens Lan's memory out beyond her. While Rose is, in Warner's terms, Vuong's nominal

³⁷. Vuong, 35.

³⁸. Vuong, 37.

addressee, the counterpublic which Vuong seeks to invoke is also enfolded into this (re)creation of memory and self. The repetition of “would you see” locates a sense of agency with the reader as well. The reader, whether that is Rose—or you or I—, has the ability to focus the scene around different figures, namely the woman and her child. This moment is both an example of Little Dog’s intent to focus his narrative around his mother and grandmother and to construct his identity in collaboration with them and an acknowledgement that the visibility of this narrative and identity is subject to the risk of other potential readers, even Rose herself.

While Little Dog is intent on preserving his own memories and the stories of his loved ones, he knows that the act of writing changes and reshapes the subject; this is the reconstruction of the self. By weaving together his own experiences with those of Lan, Rose, and Trevor, Little Dog seeks not merely to collaborate but also to revise the possibilities of their relationships. Of writing the person of his mother, he says, “But by writing, I mar it. I change, embellish, and preserve you all at once.”³⁹ Just as memory is never a recalling of experience but always a reconstruction, so writing recreates reality. As Little Dog wrestles with the implications of writing these lives on the page, what is implicitly true is that he is also rewriting his own life and relationships with theirs. As he describes the process of writing to Rose, he insists that his writing and his explanations of its process are honest and bent toward revelation: “I’m giving you a mess, I know. But it’s a mess, Ma—I’m not making this up. I made it down. That’s what writing is after all

³⁹ Vuong, 85.

the nonsense, getting so low the world offers a merciful new angle.”⁴⁰ Little Dog chases that new angle that, despite his honest descriptions of their violence, fictively offers he and his mother opportunities to exist beyond that. Initially, he thinks it can be found with Trevor, a relationship he at first finds to be exploratory and negotiable. Trevor gives him an opportunity to see himself in new ways, but Little Dog eventually recognizes that he and Trevor replicate the violence they both knew growing up, and that their relationship ultimately cannot provide him with a new center.

Little Dog also engages with other, more distant relationships that maintain the structures from which he desires to break free. In one of the few instances in the text in which Little Dog explicitly refers to other readers of his work, he introduces this audience’s relationship with the project of his letter by stating, “I am writing because they told me never to start a sentence with *because*. But I wasn’t trying to make a sentence—I was trying to break free.”⁴¹ This “they” that fails to understand Little Dog’s intentions in creating resurfaces later in the text in a meditation about the role of politics in art. He pauses the flow of the narrative to state that “they” believe politics sully art and that good art is transcendent and universalizing,⁴² although he refuses to respond to the gulf between what “they” expect of good art and what he accomplishes instead.

40. Vuong, 189.

41. Vuong, 4.

42. Vuong, 186-7.

Echoes of James Baldwin's "Letter to My Nephew on the Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation" can be heard in this approach to the "they." In this essay, Baldwin employs the intimacy of the epistolary form to speak to his nephew about the complexity of integration and American racial politics and to circumstantially address the liberal white readership of the magazine in which the essay was originally published. Baldwin asserts that his nephew is his primary addressee ("I am writing this letter to *you*"), but he indirectly acknowledges those "countrymen" and "innocents" who refuse or are unable to understand Baldwin's intentions.⁴³ What might be said to be Baldwin's own call to "break free" is heard by them as bitterness. Vuong is less explicit in his negotiation with this "they," but he is aware of their opinions, of how they may interpret his work. Warner might refer to these readers as Vuong's public. In the rare places in which Vuong refers to a "they," he characterizes them as restrictive forces that work to neutralize any figure or rhetoric that seems dangerously outside their power. "They will tell you that great writing 'breaks free' from the political," he observes wryly, even as they "write their names on your leash."⁴⁴

Through *Little Dog* as persona, Vuong acknowledges a public that existed long before he identifies it. *Little Dog* demonstrates an awareness of this public while also identifying other confining publics through his Baldwinian use of the "they." On the one hand, his writing is careful to identify the public of tragically toxic American masculinity

⁴³. Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," 6.

⁴⁴. Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 185-6.

that Trevor represents, that of an American boy with a gun who “move[s] from one end of a cage to another.”⁴⁵ But the “they” refers to a kind of progressive (read: white) public which feels itself to be disdainfully distinct from toxic masculinity but which in fact operates against Little Dog similarly. Both are invested in negating his voice. The public of toxic masculinity would have his vulnerability squelched as weakness, and the “they” calls his vulnerability embarrassingly “political.” Vuong is not specific about what texts have conjured this public, but it seems to emanate from his experiences in higher education and the publishing world. He writes about a “previous draft of this letter” that details his journey out of refugee camps and low-income school systems to become a writer with some degree of distinction.⁴⁶ His life is exactly the kind of narrative that “they” might call “urgent” or “necessary,” a satisfying arc from supposedly nothing into something.⁴⁷ But Little Dog writes that none of that is important; “what matters is that all of it, even if I didn’t know it then, brought me here, to this page, to tell you everything you’ll never know.”⁴⁸ This first draft of Little Dog’s letter articulated a narrative that did not prioritize Rose, even if it would have spoken to the “they,” and so he leaves it behind for a letter that places Rose and their relationship at the center.

45. Vuong, 116.

46. Vuong, 15.

47. Vuong, 185.

48. Vuong, 15.

Disidentifications and Counterpublics

José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications* provides insight into the motivations and mechanisms by which Vuong creates the possibility of a counterpublic that prioritizes the stories of people like Rose and Little Dog and that refuses to accept violence and beauty as dichotomized. Muñoz describes disidentification as “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere.”⁴⁹ Specifically, disidentification is an approach available to minority subjects, especially those whose embodied existence is marked by multiple minoritized identities. It involves complexly identifying with and against parts of one's identities in order to construct a visible version of oneself that is not beholden to the dominant order but rather defies limiting categories.⁵⁰ This constructed, disidentified self participates in a potential counterpublic and the lifeworld it inhabits. In Warner's discussion of counterpublics, he is relatively open about who might constitute them or what forces help to create them. Muñoz is more specific—it is queer performances of memory and self-formation that create the possibilities for the emergence of counterpublics. Muñoz employs “public” and “counterpublic” as both nouns and adjectives. Counterpublics are created, but counterpublic acts can also be performed. In performing Little Dog's self-formation—and enacting his own—Vuong creates the possibility of a counterpublic and invites readers to engage in collective self-formation alongside him.

⁴⁹. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 4.

⁵⁰. Muñoz, 11.

Vuong models what collective self-formation might look like in Little Dog's revisions of himself and with his relationships with Rose and with Trevor, all of which involve resisting easy answers. It is not that Little Dog attempts to rewrite what happened or revise past experience; instead, as he writes, he reformulates the meaning he has made of interactions between him and his mother. This reformulation is full of complex, both/and exchanges. Little Dog knows that he writes to Rose but also to everyone, and Lan's pet name for him acts as both affectionate protection from bad luck and brutalizing limitation.⁵¹ He writes to bridge a gap between he and his mother while also further widening it.⁵² But it is through the process of writing who his mother is as a person and as a character on the page that he is able to trace a line of beauty through their lives rather than just the effects of war and violence.

One potent example of this revision is in the way Little Dog reimagines the word "monster" as it applies to him and Rose. In the chapter in which Little Dog reminds Rose of the period in his childhood in which, conditioned by her experiences in war torn Vietnam and the intimate partner violence she experienced at the hands of Little Dog's father, she physically abused him, Rose shakily states, "I'm not a monster. I'm a mother."⁵³ In the moment, Little Dog assures her that she is indeed not a monster, but in rewriting the scene in his letter to her, he meditates on ways in which monster may

⁵¹. Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 33-4.

⁵². Vuong, 3.

⁵³. Vuong, 13.

simply be a true name and not a bad one. “To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning,” he revises before asserting that Rose is both mother and monster and that he, her son, is a monster as well.⁵⁴ Monster becomes a mythical category of both/and, a shapeshifting identity of hybrid violence and possibility in which both he and Rose partake. However, it is an identity that they inhabit with tension. Little Dog also writes to Rose of a dream in which he confronts Rose in the backyard while her back is turned to him. He yells that he does not want her to be his mother and angrily calls her a monster, a speech-act which seems to physically decapitate her, until Little Dog remorsefully realizes that he is alone and clearly also capable of violence.⁵⁵

The monkey is another symbol that Little Dog revises. Rose is born in 1968, the Year of the Monkey, and Little Dog associates the animal with her, although he uses a variety of animals—dogs, monarch butterflies, buffalo—to stand in for members of the family and their experience at times. Initially, Little Dog presents the monkey as a pitiful figure. As he steps into Lan’s memory of fleeing through Vietnam under American occupation with an infant Rose, he recounts a cruel and gruesome scene of a monkey’s brains being eaten while it is still alive.⁵⁶ Little Dog weaves meditations on macaque monkey’s memories and capacity for introspection and the practice of eating their brains

⁵⁴. Vuong, 13.

⁵⁵. Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 127.

⁵⁶. Kingston, *Woman Warrior*, 91-92. This recalls a scene from Kingston’s memoir.

with Lan's memories of pleading for her and Rose's lives before American soldiers. Since the scene is set in the year of Rose's birth, he traces connections between the expansive capacity yet disadvantaged positions of both Rose and the monkey. But, by the book's end, when Little Dog recounts asking Rose to tell him the "real life" story of the monkey, the monkey is not chained miserably to a table. It is instead running fast and free away from all harm, so fast it disappears like a ghost, and the story becomes an opportunity for Little Dog to slip into a vision of himself running freely as well.⁵⁷

Little Dog attempts to enact a similar revision in his relationship with Trevor, but Trevor's death curtails some of its potency. When he hears news of Trevor's death, Little Dog texts him "Trevor I'm sorry come back."⁵⁸ He performs the sending of an unreadable letter, not in an attempt to exercise control, but in a futile effort to reach the beloved. Because the potential to alter his relationship with Trevor now exists only in text and cannot be enacted extratextually, Trevor must remain a tragic figure, and Little Dog is limited in his ability to revise their relationship. However, he is still able to extend revision beyond he and Trevor to a potential, extratextual counterpublic.

Pedro Zamora and Potentialities

Through his collaborative revision of his own identity and his relationship with Rose, he leverages the epistolary memoir form as a way to create the possibility of a counterpublic marked by a refusal of binary categories. Vuong initiates the possibility of

^{57.} Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 239-42.

^{58.} Vuong, 166.

a counterpublic that inhabits a lifeworld in which queer and Vietnamese-American identities, contested as they already are, can be simultaneously disidentified with by empowering Little Dog to engage in disidentification regarding his queer identity and his ethnic and national identities. It is through Little Dog's reconstitution of his identities and the relationships in which he theorizes them that Vuong performs and models both the counterpublic act of disidentification and participates in the counterpublic itself. In writing about the queer Latino reality TV activist Pedro Zamora, Muñoz conceptualizes the way Zamora invitationally cared for himself in public in terms of Foucault's "care of oneself,"⁵⁹ in that his performance of queer love in the midst of the AIDS epidemic invited an audience including "*potentially* politicized queers and Latinos" to care for themselves as well.⁶⁰ But, in keeping with the practice of disidentificatory performance, Muñoz highlights how he disidentifies with Foucault. He accepts what is helpful from Foucault's work (technologies of the self) and refuses what is limiting (what is "elitist and First World"⁶¹), ultimately refusing binary categories of good/bad at all. Muñoz, a queer of color, performs the counterpublic act of disidentification as he interprets the work of another queer of color performing the counterpublic act of care of self and inviting others to do so with him. Similarly, Vuong employs the persona of Little Dog as a kind of public "care of self" in order to invoke the possibility of a counterpublic in

59. Foucault, 19.

60. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 146.

61. Muñoz, 145.

which beauty and war/violence exist simultaneously as a “deep purple feeling” of both at once.⁶² The work of revision—of self, mother-son relationship, lifeworld—is one that Vuong commits to in the service of others.

But the relationship between text-creator and others, whether the nominal addressee or those beyond it, is one of mutual reliance and possibility. Vuong, through *Little Dog*, cannot constitute a counterpublic marked by care of self without the engagement of others. He can operate as if within the lifeworld he desires this counterpublic to instantiate, but he must “commit [himself], and the fate of [his] worldmaking project, to circulation among indefinite others.”⁶³ It is the attention of these “indefinite others” that can ultimately compose the counterpublic. Muñoz is careful to identify Zamora’s work as creating “the *possibility* of counterpublics” and his intended audience as, at least partly, consisting of “*potentially* politicized queers and Latinos.”⁶⁴ The way that he characterizes the potentiality latent in Zamora’s work is important. Thinking with Warner’s ideas of publics and counterpublics as both textually created and constituted by attention, Zamora’s work can create the possibility of the counterpublic, but, without the engagement of others, the counterpublic itself exists only in potentiality. It can only come into existence by the will of the people his performance has mobilized. It is not enough for Vuong to invoke or even model the kind of counterpublic in which he

⁶² Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 122.

⁶³ Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” 87.

⁶⁴ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 146.

is interested in participating. Instead, he must ultimately rely on others to create it. The invocation and modeling are a call; regardless, how others respond will shape and alter things beyond what he can imagine.

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz theorizes queerness as eminent potentiality and indeterminacy.⁶⁵ This speaks to Vuong’s insistence on identifying a more expansive, non-dichotomized way of reconsidering his memories, his relationship with his mother, his early experiences of sexuality, and what he chooses to build his understanding of the world around. The expansiveness he seeks through the persona of Little Dog remains just out of reach even toward the text’s end, but his running toward it seems to function as proof of its existence. The text closes with Little Dog’s dreams interwoven with the story he requests to hear from his mother about the monkey. As she tells the tale of the monkey that ran so fast they never caught her, Little Dog dreams himself running fast too, furiously outpacing all that could harm him even as he finds himself enfolded into a larger family of briefly gorgeous creatures. The last line of the book features Rose laughing—mysteriously, joyously. Her laughter and its mysteriousness (“for no reason at all”⁶⁶) returns Little Dog and readers alike to the beauty at the center of the lifeworld he is building. It asks what might be worth her rejoicing in now and what she might delight in again. It evokes the past and propels the narrative into a future of further beauty. Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* considers hope as “critical affect and methodology.”⁶⁷ It is

⁶⁵. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1, 3.

⁶⁶. Vuong, 242.

hope, collective engagement, and a sense of wonder—“astonished contemplation”—that are vital to queerness and futurity, and Vuong’s insistence on collective textual revision and the potentiality of a counterpublic capable of extratextual revision point the world toward a future. But most importantly is the collective necessary to create such a lifeworld. The queer utopia that Muñoz longs for can only come through entrusting this project to indefinite others, and Vuong, through Little Dog, entrusts his project to his mother and to those others whom he enfolds within his address to her.

⁶⁷. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 4.

Literary and Relational Revision in Kiese Laymon's

Heavy: An American Memoir

Introduction

Written as a letter addressed to his mother, *Heavy: An American Memoir* is Kiese Laymon's first full-length work of life writing. Laymon frequently publishes personal essays that touch on themes of race, familial relationships, Black Southern culture, addiction, and abuse, but *Heavy* is a tender, intimate exploration of the relationships in which he experienced those things through the arc of childhood, adolescence, and his life as a young professor and writer. Like Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, most chapters strongly feature a second person addressee—a "you" who represents Laymon's mother—with whom Laymon's textual "I" is always in conversation and conflict. Within this direct address, Laymon uses the epistolary to enfold multiple audiences into the process of self-fashioning in memoir in which Laymon's speaker participates.

Epistolary form is not new to Laymon. He employs the epistolary form in three of his essays from his earlier collection, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*. "Hey Mama: An Essay in Emails" reads as it sounds, engaging with the same speaker and nominal addressee of *Heavy*. "Echo: Mychal, Darnell, Kiese, Kai, and Marlon" is a vulnerable exchange of emails between Laymon and friends, and "We Will Never Ever

Know” is composed of two letters by Laymon and his aunt, respectively, to his Uncle Jimmy who has passed away. Laymon’s engagement with other voices via the epistolary form, and especially his placement of the letters he attributes to himself in these last two essays, reveals his consideration of the ethics of epistolarity. In “Echo,” Laymon’s email is neither the opening or closing letter; instead, it is nestled among the other four, generously offering the first and last word to others. In “We Will Never Ever Know,” Laymon’s letter is the first of the pair, and his aunt’s letter closes the essay and the book. Most of these texts feature an epistolary opening and sign off in keeping with the conventions of epistolarity.

In contrast, *Heavy* plays less overtly with the conventions of the form, and, like Vuong’s text, its epistolarity lies primarily in its mode of direct address to his mother as the identified, intended first reader. Michael Warner’s distinction between the nominal and implied addressees of a text and a “public of circulation” can be useful when applied to *Heavy*.⁶⁸ The epistolary address to Laymon’s mother creates a sense of intimacy between speaker and reader while still positioning the reader outside the text as one overhearing another’s conversation. It prioritizes their relationship, the forces that affect it, and the possibility they possess to grow and change.

In addition to its engagement with epistolarity, it is important to understand *Heavy* as a life writing text that explicitly affords Laymon the opportunity to (re)construct the self. Like Vuong, Laymon employs an authorial persona to accomplish

⁶⁸. Laymon, *Heavy*, 54.

this. To reiterate Richmond's definition of persona, Laymon enlists "the self-conscious power of subjective projection into alternative identities" to explore his own selfhood and to engage with external critique.⁶⁹ However, the distance between his textual and extratextual self is perhaps smaller than the distance between Little Dog and Vuong, and Laymon self-consciously engages with the affordances of life writing, namely the reciprocal relationship of self-creation between author and speaker, author and persona.

Heavy primarily explores the development of Laymon's speaker via his complex relationships with his mother and grandmother. Growing up, Laymon's mother and grandmother often required him to craft written assignments about politics and the Bible, respectively. Laymon writes of his mother, "You gave me a black southern laboratory to work with words. In that space, I learned how to assemble memory and imagination when I most wanted to die."⁷⁰ Although much of Laymon's early experience with writing seems to have been these externally assigned projects in conjunction with difficult life experience, he learns to channel them into personal opportunities for self-construction. To "assemble memory and imagination" is to engage in the work that life writing affords. To write at all, much less a published memoir, is an application of Laymon's mother's gift to him, but Laymon's childhood practice with language provides him with the skills

⁶⁹. Richmond, "Personal Identity and Literary Personae," 218-19.

⁷⁰. Laymon, *Heavy*, 9.

and models necessary to craft *Heavy* as an unprompted articulation of his own values to his mother from the vantage point of adulthood and on Laymon's own terms.

As his nominal addressee, his mother is clearly a beloved figure, and Laymon deals tenderly with her in the text. However, he does not shrink from addressing the harsh beatings she administered to him regularly, the effects of her unstable romantic relationships on his boyhood, and his relationship with a gambling addiction that he connects to her own addiction. Identification of the systemic pressures under which their mothers exist is an important part of the maternal portraits that both Vuong and Laymon create. While Vuong focuses on mental health, the trauma of enduring the Vietnam War, and racial discrimination, Laymon highlights gendered violence and systemic racism in conjunction with his mother. He complexly explores being raised by a loving single parent who was under the pressures of systemic racism and patriarchal structures and who herself experienced abuse at the hands of intimate partners.

Laymon also addresses himself to an implied addressee who can identify as Black and Southern. While Vuong seems content to envision his mother and a potential counterpublic as the readerships of his text, Laymon employs the "us" by which he refers to he and his mother to also at times envelop this implied addressee. As a seventeen-year-old, Laymon meets Margaret Walker, the great poet and a friend of his mother's, who tells him to write "to and for our people,"⁷¹ a directive which Laymon's speaker ponders. He considers that, aside from his written assignments for his mother and grandmother, he

⁷¹. Laymon, 106.

has primarily written to and for his white teachers, and the assignments he writes for his mother always carry with them the threat of violence if they are not completed and articulately crafted. Importantly, he also meditates on the minute but significant differences between the prepositions “to” and “for,” the differences between writing on behalf of someone and addressing them, invoking their presence, and inviting them to engage with you. Laymon returns to that directive of “to” and “for” throughout the text, but in his decision to write *Heavy* as a letter, he seems especially intent at prioritizing writing “to” someone.

Implicitly, Laymon also addresses himself to audiences beyond his mother who identify as American, an audience that, while similar to those that Vuong includes, seems more specific and strategically pointed in Laymon’s project of revision. Laymon uses “American” as a modifier throughout *Heavy* in primarily negative, cynical terms. Specifically, he describes American love as a refusal to be honest⁷²—an experience of “all American” parents and children.⁷³ “All American” alludes to the professional athletics world, meaning the best across the country; in this sense, what is all American (dishonesty) is both endemic to this country and indicative of the best it can offer. But “all American” can also be read as a marker of an inclusive categorization. In this sense, dishonesty is part of what it means to parent and be parented here regardless of other identity signifiers. Thus, although “American” serves in part as the catchall term for the

⁷². Laymon, 10.

⁷³. Laymon, 9.

cultural pressures that further damage the relationship between Laymon and his mother, Laymon intentionally subtitles *Heavy* as an “American memoir” in order to revise—in conjunction with his mother and his broader audiences—what both an American memoir and American identity can look like. Because of the inclusive capacity of the term, the revision extends beyond Laymon and his mother, and “American” then becomes a category of possibility.

Those to whom Laymon’s invitation of revision extends can be conceptualized in terms of Michael Warner’s publics and counterpublics. Warner conceives of a public as the listening body which responds to a text, an entity that is both invoked by the writer and constituted through the “mere attention”⁷⁴ of others. A public can be shaped by its creator, but a writer must accept that “indefinite others”⁷⁵ will ultimately determine the constitution and destiny of the public. Warner also identifies counterpublics as publics that form in response to the hegemony of a larger public. He writes that counterpublics have a specifically change-oriented purpose and are intended to be “spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely.”⁷⁶ Laymon is invested in invoking a counterpublic in which the term “American” can be reimagined through his revision of the American memoir and his relationship with his mother.

⁷⁴. Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” 60.

⁷⁵. Warner, 87.

⁷⁶. Warner, 88.

Laymon seems to invoke the possibility of counterpublics even as he acknowledges the existing public to which they will respond. Because he toggles between describing the realities of his past and creating room for possibilities beyond that—albeit in spare, negative terms—he acknowledges the dominant American public while speaking into the counterpublics he hopes will respond to his text transformatively. He identifies this dominant public when he conjures the presence of *Heavy*'s first draft. Laymon says that this book is one he wanted to write and which his mother wanted to read, but this book would have “center[ed] a something, a someone who wants us dead and dishonest.”⁷⁷ Significantly, it would have “ask[ed] nothing of you”⁷⁸—you being Laymon's mother in addition to other readers. This public is in part founded on a false narrative of progress that does not actually require change, commitment, or anything of the reader. Although it promises liberation, it subliminally undercuts such realizations.

This dominant American public is not one that Laymon creates; rather it seems to preexist his text. It is invoked by a multitude of media, but one that Laymon's speaker names is *The Cosby Show*. As an adolescent, he protests to a friend that the absence of scenes addressing racial dynamics ensured that “never in the history of real black folk could black life as depicted on *The Cosby Show* ever exist.”⁷⁹ Laymon's critique seems even more substantive given that *The Cosby Show* feigns a kind of autobiographical

⁷⁷. Laymon, *Heavy*, 1.

⁷⁸. Laymon, 2.

⁷⁹. Laymon, 101.

premise. Cliff Huxtable functions as a persona for Bill Cosby and a model of how the self could be constructed in autobiographical work. Laymon's speaker asserts that *The Cosby Show* is evidence of Bill Cosby's obsession with "how white folk watched black folk watch us watch him."⁸⁰ The American public that *The Cosby Show* helps to conjure is one that prioritizes the white gaze, postures Laymon and his mother against it, and caters to their refusal to be honest with each other, and Laymon's speaker believes his first draft of *Heavy* gratified the inhabitants of this public. Instead of publishing the first draft of his book which would have further substantiated such a dishonest American public, Laymon writes *Heavy* and addresses the possibility of a counterpublic, the existence of which he works to create and participate in by virtue of writing the book.

Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love* is one of Laymon's most formative positive exemplars of writing that commits to the kind of work in which he is interested. He reads her writing in college and takes heart from her humorous preface to *Gorilla, My Love* about the social dangers of writing about people you know.⁸¹ Not only does she provide him a guide to thinking about fiction and life writing, but in Laymon's estimation, her work portrays "blackness, in all its boredom and boom."⁸² It is her loving expression of the variety of Black life that propels him further in considering what a text written "to and for" Black Southerners, like his mother, might look like. Laymon writes

⁸⁰ Laymon, 101.

⁸¹ Bambara, qtd. in Laymon, *Heavy*, 101. "It does no good to write autobiographical fiction cause the minute the book hits the stand here comes your mama screamin..."

⁸² Laymon, *Heavy*, 130.

that Bambara's writing is honest in a way that Cosby's refuses to be, and it works toward the same kind of counterpublic Laymon desires to invoke. It seems to model the spirit he hopes animates his own work and which could reach beyond it to a potential counterpublic.

Heavy is an invocation of a counterpublic characterized by readers who are honest with themselves about the multitude of harmful connotations of "American" as a modifier, but who are invested in revising the word and themselves. This revision, although instantiated by *Heavy*, will occur off the page and in the future. Laymon invites this counterpublic within his direct address to his mother, but, in Warner's terms, he chooses "commit [himself] and the fate of [his] worldmaking project to circulation among indefinite others."⁸³

The following chapter explores the conversation around posture and address in Black studies into which Laymon writes; the ways in which Laymon draws on the practices of his mother, grandmother, and other Black women writers in his own work; and the methods Laymon employs in an effort to revise the American memoir and his relationship with his mother and to invoke this counterpublic and the world it inhabits through the self-creative possibilities of the epistolary memoir form.

⁸³. Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 87.

Black Women's Storytelling and Black Epistolary Traditions: Tracing Literary Lineages

Laymon's preoccupations with honesty, identity, and love call to mind James Baldwin's "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation," a letter-essay originally published in the Madison, WI-based publication *The Progressive*. Like Laymon, Baldwin characterizes the state of the nation as a crisis of identity and a consequence of false love. He writes "we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they really are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it."⁸⁴ In this passage, "we" refers to Black Americans, "our brothers" refers to white Americans, and love, for Baldwin, requires honest reckoning with reality. Specifically, it is white Americans who must reckon with the lies they have told themselves about their pasts and identities.

Laymon similarly imagines love as honesty and reckoning, but he departs from Baldwin's example in important ways. Laymon describes a refusal to be honest as "how we are taught to love in America."⁸⁵ Dishonesty is the mechanism by which a twisted, inadequate kind of love is perpetuated among American families. However, Laymon refuses to love in this "American" way. In characterizing his hopes for *Heavy*, he first describes what *Heavy* could have been, what some part of him wanted it to be: "I did not want to write about us. I wanted to write an American memoir. I wanted to write a lie."⁸⁶

⁸⁴. Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," 10.

⁸⁵. Laymon, *Heavy*, 10.

Laymon conceptualizes this first draft as a book that would not have prioritized his and his mother's relationship but would instead have catered to his desire to ignore elements of his own childhood that, while deeply influenced by racism and white supremacy, were also matters of relational safety, violence, and love. He writes

I wanted the book to begin and end with the assumption that if white Americans reckoned with their insatiable appetites for black American suffering, and we reckoned with our insatiable appetites for unhealthy food, we could all be ushered into a reformed era of American prosperity.⁸⁷

This narrative would have been a “literary spectacle” that refused to truly require anything of its readers, especially Laymon's mother. Laymon then tells his mother directly: “I wrote that lie. It was titillating. You would have loved it. I discovered nothing.”⁸⁸ For Laymon, writing an honest, American memoir about “us” requires willingness to remember and acknowledge the harm exchanged between Laymon and his mother, and by extension, among the counterpublics that Laymon invokes. While Laymon refers briefly throughout *Heavy* to the honesty that white Americans must commit to—usually in the negative, the work they have not yet done—this is tangential to the work of *Heavy*. In the priorities of Laymon's text, the lack of responsibility displayed by white Americans exists in the background, and *Heavy* becomes primarily an opportunity for Laymon to love differently than America has taught him and to commit to

^{86.} Laymon, 1.

^{87.} Laymon, 2.

^{88.} Laymon, 2.

honesty and responsibility with his mother and grandmother. Loving differently requires creating a different kind of identity, and for Laymon, identity has everything to do with writing and telling stories. The American memoir as he knew it did not allow him to write about the identities of him and his mother, so *Heavy* is a project that revises the form of American memoir and his construction of himself in light of such a revision.

As he reconstructs himself as a writer, Laymon is careful to trace his literary lineage through Black women writers and storytellers like his mother, grandmother, Margaret Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara. Not only does he attribute his earliest experiences with writing to his mother, but it is her method of revision as a practice in life and writing (and life writing) that he employs in *Heavy*.⁸⁹ Of his discovery of the cost of revision, he writes

I realized telling the truth was way different from finding the truth, and finding the truth had everything to do with revisiting and rearranging words. Revisiting and rearranging words didn't only require vocabulary; it required will, and maybe courage. Revised word patterns were revised thought patterns. Revised thought patterns shaped memory.⁹⁰

For Laymon, revision is a path toward new things, but it requires the courage to be honest about what existed in the first place. It is a way to shape and reshape memory in order to clear a place for new habits, patterns, and relationships to come into being. Part of his project in *Heavy* is to apply his mother's practice of revision in order to re-member what

⁸⁹. Laymon, 85-6.

⁹⁰. Laymon, 87.

their relationship has been, so that together they can compose something different in the future.

His grandmother also is a source of inspiration for Laymon in her commitment to storytelling in community and in their shared practice of creative language use. Although Laymon's speaker hates when Grandmama makes him attend church, he admires the way Grandmama and other women from the church meet for "Home Mission" and share their weeks' experiences in solidarity and prayer. He writes that Grandmama and her friends "used their lives, their mo(u)rning songs, and their Bibles as primary texts to boast, confess, and critique..."⁹¹ These women model how communal sharing of life narratives is an expression of love, and Laymon seems to draw on Grandmama's commitment to sharing stories for the sake of loving better as he writes *Heavy*.

Laymon's speaker and Grandmama also play with language and push at its possibilities together. On one occasion, Grandmama calls Laymon's speaker a "starnated fool," and he writes,

I asked Grandmama whether she meant 'star-nated' or 'stark naked.' I told her I'd rather be a 'star-nated' fool because I loved stars even though I didn't think 'star-nated' was a word. Grandmama and I loved talking about words. She was better than anyone I'd ever known at bending, breaking, and building words that weren't in the dictionary.⁹²

⁹¹. Laymon, 54.

⁹². Laymon, 56.

Playing with and inventing language is an activity Laymon and Grandmama share throughout his youth and adulthood. He meditates on how the language they exchange seems able to approach meanings and experiences beyond what is accessible in standardized English.⁹³ While his mother insists that he write in standardized academic English, it is use of the habitual *be*, like Grandmama, that enables Laymon's young speaker to write about the sexual violence he has witnessed and experienced. He writes of staying over at his grandmother's house and choosing not to write about the Psalms as she asked him to but instead trying to tell her what his body witnessed and experienced in writing. "The words Mama make me use don't work like they supposed to," he worries.⁹⁴ The structure and formality of the language Laymon associates with his mother is unable to hold the weight of his trauma, so he turns to his grandmother's language to articulate his experience. Laymon takes her language and his mother's commitment to revision and combines them in *Heavy*.

In addition to employing the language and processes of his mother's and grandmother's storytelling gifts, Laymon also places himself within the tradition of Black feminist thought and considers his own subjectivity, particularly through his engagement with Margaret Walker and Toni Cade Bambara. In his article "Black Male Studies and Contemporary African American Writing," Seulghee Lee identifies Laymon's work in *Heavy* as an expression of "Black male subjectivity that makes its claims regarding the

⁹³. Laymon, 6.

⁹⁴. Laymon, 59.

embodied realities of anti-Black misogyny via Black feminist thought.”⁹⁵ For Lee, Laymon’s commitment to “Black genealogical countenance, beginning from and including always Black feminist thought”⁹⁶ is an essential, connective part of his writing that grounds and contextualizes his experiences of trauma and connects him to a tradition of writers engaged in the same work his mother is committed to in teaching, politics, and organizing. Importantly, it helps him to consider his experiences as a cisgender Black man within the larger context of intersectionality.

Even as an adolescent, Laymon’s speaker thinks through the implications of positionality. He is puzzled when, after meeting Margaret Walker, he reads her poem “For My People” and discovers the line “let a race of men now rise and take control.”⁹⁷ He reads “men” not as humanity but as males, and he identifies what Walker seems to be calling for as the patriarchy. Her invocation confuses him, and his awareness of the different kinds of oppression that men and women experience is a guiding principle of his memoir. A mindfulness of his own positionality as a cisgender Black man is important to Laymon as he crafts his own identity in light of his mother’s. After witnessing sexual abuse as a child, Laymon’s speaker writes,

all over my neighborhood, boys were trained to harm girls in ways girls could never harm boys, straight kids were trained to harm queer kids in ways queer kids

⁹⁵. Lee, “Black Male Studies,” 215.

⁹⁶. Lee, 215.

⁹⁷. Laymon, *Heavy*, 106.

could never harm straight kids, men were trained to harm women in ways women could never harm men...⁹⁸

He knows that the harm he experiences is stratified and often emanates from those who are themselves harmed. He is also careful to consider how storytelling differs depending on one's subject position. Although he weaves his own memories with the stories of women in his life, he resists interpreting or puppeting their thoughts. Instead, he chooses to question how their experiences and perspectives may be different from his.

Baldwin and Laymon also differ in how they address their audiences. "My Dungeon Shook" was originally published in the Madison, WI-based publication *The Progressive* and catered to a primarily white readership. The letter is warm and familial, words of wisdom and warning from an uncle to a beloved nephew, but, although Baldwin never addresses white readers, he seems to be constantly hearing them. He writes "I hear the chorus of the innocents screaming"⁹⁹ and "I hear them saying, 'You exaggerate'"¹⁰⁰ in reference to white Americans, and the short letter frequently includes references to a "them" which is pitted against a "you" and "we." So, while Baldwin is clear to his nephew and to his other readers that he is "writing this letter to *you*",¹⁰¹ the noise of white publics is present, buzzing in the background.

⁹⁸. Laymon, 28.

⁹⁹. Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," 6.

¹⁰⁰. Baldwin, 8.

¹⁰¹. Baldwin, 6.

Laymon, in contrast, is far more oblique in his references to publics of white readers, although he is certainly aware of them. Instead of invoking white readerships while not directly addressing them like Baldwin, reference to white readers or a white “them” is used limitedly throughout *Heavy*. Laymon prioritizes the pronoun “you” and does not explain racism or other concepts with which his addressee would be familiar, emphasizing that his text is not performatively engaging with white readerships—it is first and foremost for his mother. When Margaret Walker tells Laymon to write “to and for our people”¹⁰² and gives him a copy of Nikki Giovanni’s *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day*, he ponders her words in light of the audience of much of his writing thus far. He reflects, “No one ever taught me to write to and for my people. They taught me how to imitate Faulkner and how to write to and for my teachers. And all of my teachers were white.”¹⁰³ Imitating Faulkner is one method of implicating himself in American genres that do not value the experiences of him or his mother or empower him to write to Black Southern audiences. In his essay “You Are the Second Person,” Laymon describes the difficulty of mediating the expectations of multiple audiences during the arduous process of publishing his novel *Long Division* the first time. The initial publisher required multiple rounds of revisions that softened the racial concerns of the text, and, while Laymon wanted to write to and for a Black, Southern audience, his publisher insisted

¹⁰². Laymon, *Heavy*, 105.

¹⁰³. Laymon, 106.

that, “The success of your book will be partially dependent on readers who have a different sensibility than your intended audience,” meaning the *Cosby Show* public.¹⁰⁴

Laymon has spoken about his deep respect for Baldwin,¹⁰⁵ but he is wary of using the epistolary form performatively and falling into the trap of engaging primarily white readers. In the chapter “Already,” a college-aged Laymon reads and rereads *The Fire Next Time* and questions its limitations, what it does not do. He writes of the book,

I wondered how it would read differently had the entire book, and not just the first section, been written to, and for, Baldwin’s nephew. I wondered what, and how, Baldwin would have written to his niece. I wondered about the purpose of warning white folk about the coming fire. Mostly, I wondered what black writers weren’t writing when we spent so much creative energy begging white folk to change.¹⁰⁶

These meditations reveal Laymon’s engagement with a text he loves but from which he also desires more. Laymon’s interest in what Black writers might write were they less conscious of white readerships informs his decision to address *Heavy* to his mother, and the questions that he asked about Baldwin in college are sparking wider conversation again. With the publication of several epistolary texts by Black writers—recently, Tanehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, Imani Perry’s *Breathe*, Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie’s *Dear Continuum: Letters to a Poet Crafting Liberation*, and Dante Stewart’s *Shoutin’ in the Fire: An American Epistle*—discussion of the legacy of Baldwin’s

¹⁰⁴. Laymon, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*.

¹⁰⁵. Traci Thomas, Ep. 122 Breathe by Imani Perry – Interview with Kiese Laymon, *The Stacks Book Club*, podcast audio, July 29, 2020, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ep-122-breathe-by-imani-perry-stacks-book-club-kiese/id1362164483?i=1000486473012>.

¹⁰⁶. Laymon, *Heavy*, 144.

personal/political epistolary writing and the stakes of posture and performance in similar literary endeavors has spanned both popular and academic circles. Much of the conversation has circled around Coates's text, the overnight popular success of which drew both warm praise and sharp criticism. In 2016, the *African American Review* featured a special roundtable conversation of short pieces discussing *Between the World and Me*, and the *College Language Association Journal* published a similarly focused issue in 2017. These published pieces center around the limits of form and genre and consider intimacy and distance in relation to intended audience; many of them also include comparisons between Coates and Laymon (although *Heavy* had not yet been published). In the *African American Review*, Dana Williams contests that the intimacy of the epistolary form undercuts discussions of racism as systemic and argues that such attempts at combining the personal and political inevitably and self-consciously address white readerships.¹⁰⁷ In *CLA*, Lisa Guerrero praises Coates and Laymon for following in the tradition of James Baldwin and notes their differing tactics of nearness or distance to their addressees.¹⁰⁸ Also, in the *CLA* roundtable, Emily Lordi addresses the rise of the "open letter" in the Internet Age and considers the subject positions of the speakers in texts by Coates, Laymon, and Tallie, favoring Tallie whose writing she argues is the least self-conscious of the white gaze.¹⁰⁹ Regardless of their position on Coates's text as a

¹⁰⁷. Williams, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 179-83.

¹⁰⁸. Guerrero, "New Native Sons," 414-33.

¹⁰⁹. Lordi, "Between the World and the Addressee," 434-47.

success or failure, each of these critics is interested in the ability of the epistolary form to be employed in such a way as to create genuine spaces of intimacy between the speaker and addressee and to evade address to white audiences.

Self-Construction and Worldmaking

Many of these concerns about form, subject posture, intimacy, and audience expressed by critics of Laymon and other contemporary Black writers of memoir and epistolary works are taken up by Kevin Quashie in his text *Black Aliveness, Or A Poetics of Being*. Quashie explores facets of black aliveness and traces its presence in select poems and essays by Black writers, particularly those in the Black feminist tradition. Without diminishing the harm of antiblackness, Quashie is interested in tracing the contours of blackness not postured against anything but instead existing completely in itself. His discussions of self-construction and worldmaking are especially pertinent to consideration of Laymon's use of address.

In his chapter "Aliveness and Aesthetics," Quashie considers the role of the essay genre and theorizes that "the speaker is not in control of the essay's working (the essay is not about transparent conclusions) but rather the speaker *arrives* through the telling."¹¹⁰ For Quashie, the essay is not an opportunity for the speaker to explain or relate something; rather, the speaker himself comes into being through the telling of his narrative. Couser's statement on the reciprocal relationship between textual and

¹¹⁰. Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 70.

extratextual self in life writing is pertinent here.¹¹¹ The self is constructed in writing, especially when it is explicitly a subject, as in memoir. However, Quashie's understanding of the essay is based on the genre's first-person narration in which the invitation to listen and be changed in the hearing extends to the speaker himself.¹¹² What if, however, the essay or memoir were directed toward another, a nominal addressee, in Warner's terms?

By prioritizing the pronouns "you," "us," and "we" via epistolary address, Laymon constructs himself, not only as a self in the process of becoming, but as a self in relation. Caroline Levine's consideration of forms as organizing principles that both constrain and afford is illuminating here.¹¹³ Although all memoir (and arguably all writing) is implicitly social,¹¹⁴ Laymon's use of the epistolary emphasizes the relational dynamics of identity construction. Epistolary form affords Laymon the ability to clearly and consciously construct himself in relation to his mother in a way that the constraints of a first-person essay could not. Direct address affords him intimate engagement with his mother instead of mediating their relationship by writing to an unknowable reader. The intimacy of the direct address does not exclude other readers, but it places them in the position of overhearing what is primarily meant for the nominal addressee. The

¹¹¹. Couser, *Memoir*, 14.

¹¹². Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 70.

¹¹³. Levine, *Forms*, 6, 16.

¹¹⁴. Avieson, Giles, and Joseph, *Mediating Memory*, 3.

counterpublics discussed above are enfolded into parts of Laymon's address to his mother that can be extended beyond their relationship, but they are not prioritized.

Thinking with Martin Buber's I-Thou/subject-subject orientation, Quashie writes of aliveness as a readiness for encounter with the other and a willingness to know the self in relation.¹¹⁵ One "encounters, and is remade, ...encounters, and becomes."¹¹⁶ In writing to his mother, Laymon chooses to encounter his mother and to be remade, constructing his identity as he engages with her in the text. This encounter and relational identity construction occurs in *Heavy* on a number of levels. For example, Laymon physically locates himself in relation to his mother throughout the text. The chapter "Train" begins with the sentence,

You stood in a West Jackson classroom teaching black children how correct usage of the word 'be' could save them from white folk while I knelt in North Jackson, preparing to steal the ID card of a fifteen-year-old black girl named Layla Weathersby.¹¹⁷

Although Laymon identifies his personhood in relation to his mother, he also positions himself opposite her in activity and motive. Many other chapters begin in similar ways, emphasizing Laymon's speaker's need to find himself in relation to his mother via

¹¹⁵. Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 21.

¹¹⁶. Quashie, 44.

¹¹⁷. Laymon, *Heavy*, 46.

physical space and literary scene-setting yet to also distinguish between their persons and trajectories.

More importantly, Laymon attributes his ability to read, write, and revise to his mother; to write at all, much less a published memoir, is to apply the gift she gave him.¹¹⁸ The practice of writing assigned essays about local and national politics or of crafting short stories that imitated Faulkner's style are some of the first experiences Laymon had with writing.¹¹⁹ They required Laymon to engage with his mother's values, and *Heavy* becomes an opportunity for Laymon to articulate his own values in response to hers. He even writes that he sent his mother a draft of the manuscript and incorporated changes she suggested, including her in the revision of the text.¹²⁰ It is Laymon's mother's commitment to revision that Laymon tries to make good on in the project of *Heavy*—both literarily and relationally. *Heavy* is an opportunity for Laymon to encounter his mother and engage in the process of self-construction with the presence of her and his grandmother while revising, not only his own identity, but their relationship together. However, the site of much of this revision will occur off the page and in the future. *Heavy* reckons with the past and present in order to clear the ground for Laymon and his

¹¹⁸. Laymon, 85.

¹¹⁹. Laymon, 14.

¹²⁰. Laymon, 239.

mother to truly create together; it is a preparation for encounter, in Quashie's terms, an act of making ready for what could be.

Laymon closes *Heavy* with his fear that “we will do what Americans do,” followed by the verbs “abuse,” “forget,” “hunt,” “hide,” “love,” “lie,” and “die.”¹²¹ These are primarily verbs that indicate the imposition of separation and distance, and love—what could be connective—is tinged with the harm that the other verbs in the list carry. They are verbs that isolate one from another. *Heavy*, however, is an effort to prepare for encounter and connection both between Laymon and his mother and among the possibility of a counterpublic that commits to revising “American.”

¹²¹. Laymon, 241.

Concluding Thoughts

In this project, I have focused primarily on the affordances of the epistolary memoir and the avenues it offers Vuong and Laymon as they textually engage with their mothers. To reiterate, the epistolary memoir seems to afford an expansion of the reciprocal self-construction afforded by the memoir alone. It allows Vuong and Laymon to include their textual addressees, their extratextual counterparts, and audiences even further afield in the process of relational identity creation. Importantly, although these secondary audiences are included in some ways, the prioritization of the mother is an important feature of both texts. Epistolarity allows Vuong and Laymon to shed, for a moment, the expectations of others, and to focus on their mothers. Laymon expresses that the American memoir as such is not interested in highlighting the experiences of a Black Southern woman academic, and for him to write to his mother about their lives is for him to attempt to revise such a limiting definition of the memoir.¹²² Vuong is also aware of how uninterested American audiences have traditionally been in narratives of immigrant women. So, he tells his mother that “I can’t turn away from you. Which is why I have taken god’s loneliest creation [the eye]

¹²². Laymon, *Heavy*, 1-10.

and put you inside it.”¹²³ He explicitly chooses to attend to her person, and she is the center around which he constructs himself.

However, what of the limitations of the epistolary memoir? One glaring concern is that these texts, while still engaging collaboratively with the lives, wisdom, and memories of Rose and Laymon’s mother, are both singular letters, unilateral missives in which the maternal voice cannot speak for herself. Although ostensibly connective, letters can be used to maintain distance between parties, and *Heavy* and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* do so on some level. Laymon notes that he shared a draft of the book with his mother and accepted some of her suggestions for revision, but we have no real understanding of her agency in the process.¹²⁴ Rose’s illiteracy is an even clearer indication of her preclusion from engagement with Little Dog’s written narrative. Does the exclusion of the maternal voice nullify the supposedly collaborative efforts toward self-construction that Vuong and Laymon make?

While the unilateral direction of both epistolary memoirs certainly undercuts some of the potency of the form’s affordances and exemplifies a possible limitation,¹²⁵ I wonder if it may be useful to consider how this might actually be a particularly social feature of the epistolary memoir form in that it invites, or even ensures, extratextual

¹²³. Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, 14.

¹²⁴. Laymon, *Heavy*, 239.

¹²⁵. Although, we know from Laymon’s essays in *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, that epistolary nonfiction can incorporate letters from multiple writers. The epistolary memoir does not have to be unilateral.

action of sorts. Is it possible that, in writing to someone unilaterally, in refusing the space for response within the text, the writer creates the necessity for response outside the text? In this schema, then, the addressee or invoked counterpublic is expressly given the option to respond in their own nonprescriptive ways beyond the address of the text. Although this feature may seem similar to those of an essay or other first person narrative, I think the invocation of the other within the direct address establishes a populated, social world that is less available in other forms. Although it defers actual social engagement for experiences outside the text, it refuses a false sense of isolation and individualism and invites further dialogue. The space for opportunity to reconstruct relationships and identities is created in both *Heavy* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, but the opportunity itself can only be engaged in outside of or beyond the text. Perhaps, then, these texts are not one-sided conversations but are instead the first letters in a dearly hoped-for correspondence.

Furthermore, as I read both of these texts, I believe that the voices of Laymon's and Vuong's mothers do live within them, although we may not hear from Rose or Laymon's mother as directly as we might wish. Although part of Little Dog's project of revision is to intentionally reinterpret memories he and Rose share, Vuong also often allows Rose's voice—via the pieces of dialogue and description attributed to her—to conclude a scene. We see an especially powerful example of this in the way that Vuong chooses to close the book: with Rose's storytelling and laughter. Little Dog relates Rose's voice:

‘Why didn’t they get me? Well, ‘cause I was *fast*, baby. Some monkeys are so fast, they’re more like ghosts, you know? They just—*poof*,’ you open your palm in a gesture of a small explosion, ‘disappear.’ Without moving your head, you look at me, the way a mother looks at anything—for too long.

Then, for no reason, you start to laugh.¹²⁶

Little Dog opens *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* with his own epistolary intentions (“Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you—”¹²⁷), but he steps back at its end to allow the narrative to return to Rose’s person, the center around which it has been constructed.

Little interpretation is made by Little Dog, and we as readers are asked to continue attending to her in the ways that Little Dog has done. Importantly, this last scene is not merely an image or a line from Rose, but it is a window into her as a storyteller and an acknowledgement that Little Dog’s story could not exist without her life and example. She looks at him “for too long,” and Little Dog’s letter is his way of returning her gaze.

Laymon’s mother’s voice exists in *Heavy* in part as the originator of the conversation in which Laymon participates in his memoir. He seems to constantly see his mother in himself while also trying to tug out the threads of his identity that he desires to be distinct from her. Laymon opens most chapters by identifying where he and his mother are located and what they are doing. These scene-setting sentences provide glimpses of Laymon’s mother in the mundane and prepare us to listen for echoes of her in the ways that Laymon chooses to both identify with and against her. Most often, these

¹²⁶ Vuong, 242.

¹²⁷ Vuong, 1.

sentences reveal distance, whether physical or emotional, but the penultimate chapter detailing their confrontation over their gambling addictions—“Promises”— places them near each other. Laymon writes,

You were sitting in front of a slot machine in Connecticut, looking nervously over both shoulders, while I was hiding fifteen feet behind you with ten dollars I'd stolen from Flora Wadley's apartment in my back pocket.¹²⁸

What has been a marker of distance in the text becomes a recognition of their similarity. While Laymon's mother's voice might live most explicitly as the opponent with which he engages, she is equally present in the positive construction of his own voice.

In fact, both maternal voices—Rose's and Laymon's mother's—are in some way present in the voices of their sons. A matrilineal creative heritage is essential to both Vuong and Laymon as they piece together their senses of selfhood in mother-son relationships and the world in which they want those to exist. Rose's storytelling practices, her decision to attend to her son, and her joy are present in Vuong's writing, and Laymon's mother's commitment to revision and excellence and care for Black children is evident in Laymon's writing. The very existence of *Heavy* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is evidence of the voice of Rose and Laymon's mother, and these texts can invite us to listen for the voices of women like them.

¹²⁸ Laymon, 213.

References

- Avieson, Bunty, Fiona Giles, and Sue Joseph, eds. *Mediating Memory: Tracing the Limits of Memoir*. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2018.
- Badiou, Alain. *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Translated by Ray Brassier. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Baldwin, James. "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation," *The Fire Next Time*, New York: Vintage International, 1993.
- Cho, Jennifer. "'We Were Born from Beauty': Dis/Inheriting Genealogies of Refugee and Queer Shame in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." *MELUS* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2022).
- Couser, G. Thomas. *Memoir: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of A Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage International, 1989.
- Laymon, Kiese. *Heavy: An American Memoir*. New York: Scribner, 2018.
- Laymon, Kiese. *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America: Essays*. Rev. ed. New York: Scribner, 2020.
- Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

- Lee, Seulghee. "Male Studies and Contemporary African American Writing." In *Gender in American Literature and Culture*, edited by Jean M. Lutes and Jennifer Travis, 204–18. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Lordi, Emily J. "Between the World and the Addressee: Epistolary Nonfiction by Tanehisi Coates and His Peers." *CLA Journal* 60, no. 4 (July 2017): 434–47. doi:0.1353/caj.2017.0000.
- Löschnigg, Maria, and Rebekka Schuh, eds. *The Epistolary Renaissance: A Critical Approach to Contemporary Letter Narratives in Anglophone Fiction*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999: 4.
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh. "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous Is a Daring Tale of Queer Love and Pain." Review of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, by Ocean Vuong. *Time Magazine*, June 6, 2019.
- Quashie, Kevin. *Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being*. New Brunswick: Duke University Press, 2021.
- Rashid, Tanjil. Review of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, by Ocean Vuong. *Brooklyn Rail*, June 2019.

Richmond, Hugh M. "Personal Identity and Literary Personae: A Study in Historical Psychology." *PMLA* 90, no. 2 (March 1975): 209-221.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/461605>.

Thomas, Traci. "Ep. 122 *Breathe* by Imani Perry – Interview with Kiese Laymon." *The Stacks Book Club*. Podcast audio. July 29, 2020.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ep-122-breathe-by-imani-perry-stacks-book-club-kiese/id1362164483?i=1000486473012>.

Vuong, Ocean. "A Letter to My Mother That She Will Never Read." *New Yorker*, 13

May 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/a-letter-to-my-mother-that-she-will-never-read>.

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. London: Penguin Press, 2019.

Warner, Michael. "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1, (Winter 2002).

Worthington, Marjorie. *The Story of "Me": Contemporary American Autofiction*.

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018.