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# ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF TRAUMA NARRATIVE IN OCEAN VUONG'S DEBUT NOVEL *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*

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# Introduction

*"I didn't know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves – but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son. Boom."* (Vuong 2019, 4)

*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) is a powerful and poignant novel by Ocean Vuong, hailed as one of the most significant voices in contemporary literature. The novel is a deeply personal exploration of trauma, memory, identity, and the complexities of being an immigrant in America, all dominant leitmotifs in Vietnamese American literature dealing with the aftermath of the war. Written in the form of a semi-autobiographical epistolary novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a long letter from the narrator, Little Dog, to his illiterate mother. Through Little Dog's voice, Vuong brings to life the experiences of those who have been subjected to violence, discrimination, and other forms of oppression and who continue to be affected by their trauma.

Ocean Vuong seems to define himself to a large extent by his connection to a traumatic past, the Vietnam war, going as far as describing himself as "a product of war" in a podcast interview ("A Life Worthy of Our Breath" 2021). He was born in Vietnam in 1988 to a family of rice farmers who had gone to Saigon during the war (1965-1975). His maternal grandfather was an American soldier, a Michigan farm boy, who married a Vietnamese girl from the rice paddies, a story recounted in Vuong's poem "Notebook Fragments" (*Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 65-69). When Ocean Vuong was two years old, he and his family were evacuated to a refugee camp in the Philippines. From there, the family immigrated to the United States through Operation Babylift, and settled in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1990. Not long after emigrating to America, Vuong's father left the family, leaving him to be raised by his mother, aunts and grandmother. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the first-person narrator Little Dog was born in poverty-stricken post-war Vietnam. He then comes to the U.S. as a refugee at the age of six with both his mother, Rose, and his grandmother, Lan. In America, Little Dog's childhood is defined by xenophobic bullying and domestic abuse from his mother who suffers from PTSD from her own childhood experience of the Vietnam war. Confined to the margins of American society and disoriented by war-induced displacement, the family has to contend with the challenges of living as refugees. To some extent, one could say the novel focuses

primarily on transgenerational trauma, historical amnesia, and on Little Dog's role as the storyteller and interpreter of his family's history. Although there are some obvious similarities between events that occurred in Vuong's own childhood and events occurring in the life of the fictional character of Little Dog (similar "biographemes" in other words), I am not going to study the narrative as an example of autofiction but as a literary construction with a strong focus on intergenerational bonds and fault lines and assessing the power of novelistic representation to mend these fault lines.

The novel is divided into three parts. It begins by delving into the life of Little Dog and his family (composed of his mother, Rose, and his grandmother, Lan), offering temporally nonlinear vignettes into their life in America. These vignettes provide insight into their first years after the family settled in Hartford, Connecticut, in a series of childhood memories. Vuong also goes back in time, writing about Lan's interactions with American soldiers during the Vietnam war era. This chronological back-and-forth aligns with Vuong's creative approach and intention behind writing a coming-of-age narrative like *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous.* Rather than beginning the narrative directly with the protagonist's life experiences, he decides to initiate the narrative by focusing on the lives of the people who played a crucial role in shaping the protagonist's existence ("OCEAN VUONG in conversation with Tommy Orange"). This unconventional starting point provides a unique and captivating perspective on the storytelling process. By exploring the backgrounds and experiences of those who influenced the main character's life, Vuong aims to provide a richer context and deeper understanding of the protagonist's journey and development:

> And I wanted to write a coming-of-age story that begins not with the main character's life, but the lives of those who made his life possible. And I thought that was an interesting thing, to start beforehand. (Vuong, "OCEAN VUONG in conversation with Tommy Orange")

In the second section, the narrative then broadens its scope beyond family history, encompassing Rose's experiences working in a nail salon, Little Dog's employment on a tobacco field, anecdotes from his Chicano and Latin American colleagues, and his romantic relationship with Trevor. Little Dog opens up about his sexuality to his mother. The concluding section portrays Little Dog's journey through the grieving process following two significant losses: Trevor's tragic death due to a drug overdose and Lan's passing from cancer.

From the very beginning of the novel, the Vietnam war is used as a frame of departure for the narrative. Even though the conflict took place before the narrator's birth, it continues to play a defining role in his family's history and identity. The events and memories shared in Little Dog's letter to his mother reveal how the trauma caused by war still impacts the life of his family and how this suffering goes on to affect even the generation who never experienced war. To define this inherited legacy of trauma, Marianne Hirsch created the concept of "postmemory" in her essay "From 'The Generation of Postmemory'." It describes the relationship that the generation after those who directly experienced trauma has with those experiences. She argues that the second generation remembers not as witnesses themselves but rather through stories, images, and behaviors that transmit the trauma of the first generation to their children. Vuong's novel showcases transgenerational trauma through the depiction of the PTSD episodes of Little Dog's mother and grandmother, and the consequences of witnessing such violent outbursts. In his poetic prose, Vuong endeavors to encapsulate the enduring effects of trauma while also speaking of the reality of life as a refugee in the United States.

In this sense, we could characterize *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* as a trauma narrative. In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002), Laurie Vickroy contends that trauma literature explores how fiction narratives represent trauma and how fiction can provide a response to overwhelming events which impair normal emotional and cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption (ix). She suggests that trauma can be manifested in narrative through formal techniques and narrative tools representing the ways in which the past can continue to haunt characters. According to Vickroy, trauma narrative is a structured yet flexible method of exploring personal experiences of trauma through writing or storytelling. It involves identifying the effects of traumatic experiences on the individual and possibly on a group of individuals as sharing details about the event, acknowledging the emotions associated with the trauma, and finding ways to integrate and create meaning out of these experiences well, something one can find in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Rather than just surrendering to pathos in solely depicting traumatic experiences and their consequences, trauma narrative can be used as a therapeutic tool to promote healing and resilience in individuals who have experienced trauma through personal narrative and formal techniques used to convey said experience. Suzette Henke's concept of "scriptotherapy", the idea that writing about trauma can lead toward individual and collective healing, supports the argument for the ethical and healing functions of trauma literature through the interpretation and integration of previously disjointed sensory and affective memories (*Shattered Subjects:*

*Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*). Through my reading of Little Dog's epistolary narrative, I intend to explore how Ocean Vuong stylistically unravels the effects of trauma and how the form of his prose convey the characters' own hardships in regards to their experiences.

However, one cannot objectively define *On Earth We're Briefly* Gorgeous as a story of memory only. While the novel includes the Vietnam war as a frame of departure, it eludes being reduced to its historical context. The novel shares its title with a poem from Vuong's 2017 poetry collection, "Night Sky with Exit Wounds." This poem skillfully juxtaposes intimacy, fragility, and violence, illustrating how these elements entwine within the speaker's familial or sexual relationships. Upon reading the novel, it becomes clear how the enduring patterns of trauma and violence that have persisted through generations within Little Dog's family profoundly mold his existence and impact his perspectives on relationships. And yet this emphasis on violence does not necessarily negate the love that binds the characters together. Little Dog's prose highlights both affection and violence in his family bonds, a trait which also marks the evocation of his romantic relationship. This dynamic is portrayed as Little Dog explores his queer sexuality with Trevor, his first love who ultimately falls victim to drug addiction towards the end of the narrative. In describing his bond with Trevor, Little Dog asserts, "[V]iolence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love" (Vuong 119). In this way, both the poem and the novel examine how emotions channeled through acts of love, desire, or violence can generate a peculiar intimacy, verging on delicacy. In a narrative devoid of a definitive plot or climax, the focal point takes on a different aspect. Vuong, in conversation with Tommy Orange, underscores that "when you let go of plot, what you gain is people" (2020). Bearing this in mind, I aim to explore the intricate web of relationships within the epistolary narrative, revolving around the figure of Little Dog: these relationships, while crucial to the novel's fabric, often teeter between expressions of love and sources of anguish. Through this exploration, I will examine how Vuong adeptly communicates the significance of Little Dog's relationships, which fundamentally shape the entire novel. This examination will encompass the delicate balance between love and violence, portraying the complexity of presence and absence, separation and reconnection, communication and alienation. While echoes of the tumultuous relationship between Little Dog and his mother resonate in his connection with Trevor, a distinction arises between his familial and romantic lives as Little Dog regains a sense of agency with Trevor.

It is in these jarring and almost paradoxical juxtapositions that Vuong truly showcases his art and his conception of writing which he describes as building an architecture in which he can experience the vulnerability and fragility of human existence ("The Weight of Our Living"). The novel holds together a collection of childhood memories, historical events and figures, journalistic accounts of both national and global politics, oral narratives from elders, and poetic fragments. These are the elements that intricately bind the pages of this book. On another hand, the text maintains its unique epistolary structure through the consistent use of the second person pronoun "you" and the recurring address of "Dear Ma." This leads to the simultaneous reinforcement and deconstruction of the narrative's own structural foundation. Between the transition from section two to section three, the prose undergoes a transformation, breaking into verse, a juxtaposition of incomplete sentences and frequent line breaks. During this juncture, the novel's visual and mechanical presentation mirrors the format of poetry, offering a brief interlude of stylistic dissonance within the narrative which taps into the postmodern tradition. In the presence of a loosely defined plot, the novel's emphasis lies in evoking emotions and achieving a form of affective preservation rather than adhering to a traditional or linear structure. Encompassing the love, trauma, and adversity experienced across generations by Little Dog and his two primary caregivers, Rose and Lan, the narrative rejects a straightforward plot and a definitive structure. Instead, it shifts its focus toward individuals and the emotional exchanges between the various characters.

Through his postmodern style and his poetic and lyrical prose, Vuong weaves a narrative that is equal parts heartbreaking and uplifting, allowing readers to explore the ways in which trauma can shape people's lives and shape their relationships with those around them. While striving to encapsulate the enduring effects of trauma, Vuong also manages to speak of the reality of life as a refugee in a post-war American society. Ultimately, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a testament to the beauty found in the resilience of the human spirit, and a tribute to those who have suffered and survived. In his review for the *Los Angeles Review*, Min Hyoung Song comments:

> It is a beauty that asserts itself against vociferous claims to the contrary and demands a different way of looking and valuing what is seen. The novel asks readers to pay attention to what they might otherwise turn away from. (Song, "The Beauty of Men: Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*")

As Vuong shares stories that remained untold for so long in the dominant narrative of the war and in its aftermath, he asserts through his writing the beauty of these characters and their

stories, even as he exposes their pain and the violence they are capable of. Vuong has explained that the title is also a declaration on Vuong's part that the bodies of people of color are beautiful. In an interview with Michel Martin (Amanpour and Company), Vuong states:

> I dare to call poor black and brown and yellow bodies gorgeous. It felt like, here's my chance to say it out the gate. The first sentence in the book is the title and I want to start with beauty, because that's a given to me. That's a fact. These people are beautiful and I want to start there and then show the world they are beautiful. (Amanpour and Company, "Ocean Vuong on War, Sexuality and Asian-American Identity")

The title Vuong chose thus articulates an awareness of his purpose and intention. And the narrator Little Dog then does the same thing when he opens the novel with the words "Let me begin again." The phrasing "begin again" asks for a change of perspective, a fresh method of approaching and seeing the world as well as a new way of engaging with it through writing. Vuong places an emphasis on the intricacies of constructing a narrative. Through its self-referential musings and direct interactions with prominent figures of the Western literary canon such as Roland Barthes, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* places the writer's stance, represented by both Vuong and his narrator Little Dog, front and center on both the textual and narrative levels of the work.

In this dissertation, I mean to examine the articulation of trauma and self-representation in Ocean Vuong's debut novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. But I also endeavor to show how Vuong's writing stands out in its ability to intertwine the beauty of intimacy and resilience with the violence of trauma, displacement and war. I intend to discuss how this Vietnamese American novel shapes, depicts, and structures the narrator's traumatic past while also allowing him to write himself and his family into beauty and survival. I believe that the extensive literature on life-writing as well as on questions of trauma and Vietnamese American identity can help in shedding light on Ocean Vuong's novel. As a starting point, my first part addresses contextual elements, mainly how the Vietnam war can be seen as the determining factor in the creation and development of Vietnamese American literature and how this original trauma is constitutive of said literature. I touch upon the concerns related to identity and representation often found in this type of literature. Building on these contextual elements, my second part explores the representation of and discussion around trauma in Ocean Vuong's narrative. I am interested in examining how trauma can be manifested in the narrative through formal

techniques and how it shapes Little Dog's life. However, the novel surpasses the limited scope of being exclusively focused on trauma and moving out of silence towards revelation and resolution. One of its distinctive hallmark lies in its adept exploration of the intricate web of relationships woven throughout the story. My third part delves into the complexities of these connections and how Little Dog's relationships shape his understanding of both the world and himself, revealing a multi-dimensional narrative that goes beyond an exclusive focus on trauma. By intricately navigating the characters' interactions, the novel unfolds as a rich tapestry where relationships play a pivotal role. While *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* constitutes a trauma narrative intent on representing the trials and tribulations that the characters have gone through, I argue in my fourth and final part that Ocean Vuong adopts a more metaliterary perspective, going beyond only representing trauma as a subject matter or an element of characterization, as his novel offers a "language of regeneration" (Vuong 179) in which imagination and beauty prevail over pain and suffering.

# Part I. Vietnamese American literature

Considering that the major surge of emigration out of Vietnam happened two generations ago and was primarily prompted by war, much of Vietnamese American literature engages the history of imperialism and war in Vietnam. That is why I think it necessary to provide a brief historical overview of the conflict. This especially holds true for Vuong's novel insofar as the Vietnam war constitutes the backdrop to Little Dog's story as he is a member of a Vietnamese refugee family. Even though the book does not require an extensive knowledge of the war to understand the plot, the trauma related to the conflict still plays an important part in the story. In order to succinctly relay and examine the history of the Vietnam war and its consequences regarding the formation of a Vietnamese diaspora in the US, I will base my analysis on Michelle Janette's article "Vietnamese American Literature" (2018).

## A. The Vietnam war and Vietnamese diaspora

While French overt military colonization of Vietnam really began in 1858, the French had been present in this part of Asia since the early 17th century with the arrival of Catholic missionaries. Among them was Alexandre de Rhodes who codified the Vietnamese language into Romanized alphabet: Quoc Ngu. By the 1880s, Vietnam had been subjugated and divided into one French colony (Cochinchina) and two French protectorates (Tonkin and Annam). While I am not going to go into details about the intricacies of the sixty years French colonial rule over Vietnam, one cannot ignore the devastating effects colonization had on the Vietnamese. The turning point occurred during World War II when France was overtaken by Hitler and the Vichy government gave access to and resources within French colonies to Germany's ally: Japan. When the Axis forces were defeated, Vietnam (where anticolonial movements and resistance to French colonization had been ongoing for decades) hoped to be acknowledged as a sovereign state and Ho Chi Minh, who had by then emerged as leader of the anticolonialist Viet Minh movement, proclaimed Vietnamese independence in 1945. And yet, while the Allies assigned Chinese and British forces to oversee the Japanese withdrawal from Vietnam, British General Douglas Gracey also disarmed the Viet Minh, rearmed the French Indochina Army and imposed martial law. His actions allowed for the French to

officially reclaim Vietnam as their colony in 1946 thus igniting the Franco-Viet War. Contrary to what the French believed, mainly that they would defeat the Vietnamese uprising in a matter of days, they were defeated after eight years of fighting. During this time, they were able to control for the most part the cities but the countryside remained dominated by the Viet Minh. France hoped for a time to increase its political support by reinstating Emperor Bao Dai who was emperor of Annam and de jure monarch of Tonkin until he abdicated in 1945 when the Japanese ousted the Vichy French administration. Furthermore, France hoped to ease tensions with the Vietnamese by offering Cochinchina the status of a constituent state of France. This move granted Vietnam a measure of sovereignty while France determined its next course of action concerning foreign policy and international military actions. But none of this mattered when the Communist Party came to power in China in 1949, becoming a powerful ally for the Viet Minh to whom it provided weapons and training.

At the same time, French support for the war in Vietnam decreased, prompting the government to address the topic of the war at the Geneva Conference of 1954 which was given the unenviable task of arranging for Vietnam's reunification and self-government. The conference resulting in a set of resolutions known as the Geneva Accords was supposed to pave the way for Vietnam's transition to independence. However, the Accords were not supported by major players and so had little chance of success. Additionally, Viet Minh General Vo Nguyen Giap launched an attack against the French base in the mountainous region of Dien Bien Phu between 13 March and 7 May 1954. The siege cost at least 1,500 French lives and between 8,000 and 10,000 Vietnamese lives before concluding in Vietnamese defeat of the French. The battle of Dien Bien Phu was decisive the war ended shortly after and Vietnam won its independence from France. Codifying the terms of peace at the Geneva Conference, France agreed to withdraw its forces from all its colonies in French Indochina, while stipulating that Vietnam would be temporarily divided at the 17th parallel, with control of the north given to the Viet Minh as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, and the south becoming the State of Vietnam, nominally under Emperor Bao Dai, thus preventing Ho Chi Minh from gaining control of the entire country. Urged by China and the USSR, the Vietnamese delegates reluctantly accepted the compromise with the promise that this division would only be temporary, that general elections would be held in 1956, and that the nation would be reunited under whichever government won—the northern communists or the pro-Western southern government. However, those elections never took place and Vietnam remained divided.

The North Vietnamese government was still led by Ho Chi Minh whereas, in the South, a new president came to power, Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem's government was closely allied to the US which, in the context of the Cold War, was anxious about communist expansion in Asia and the already close relationship between North Vietnam and Maoist China. Yet, Diem's presidency was considered corrupt and ineffective and he was then assassinated in 1963 during a coup sanctioned by the United States. The following years were marked by political instability as South Vietnam went through numerous coups. While American advisors and diplomats were heavily involved in South Vietnamese affairs, military troops were not deployed until 1965 when the US began sending Marines, Army, Air Force, support personnel, bombers, weapons, and machinery. By 1968, American military presence in Vietnam accounted for more than 500,000 persons but as the war dragged on and the number of casualties increased on both sides, the war became increasingly unpopular in the US. In 1969, the US began sending their troops back as part of the "Vietnamization" of the war and the last troops left in 1973. Negotiations to end the war had been ongoing since 1969, resulting in the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement which granted each government the territory it held at the time (giving a considerable advantage to the North). However, after the departure of the Americans, civil war continued for two more years. North Vietnam launched the "Ho Chi Minh Campaign" in March 1975, hoping to gain southern territories going as far as Saigon. The campaign was met with surprisingly little resistance and, within a month, the South Vietnamese government capitulated. Following the North's victory, over 130,000 South Vietnamese (most of them having ties with the Southern military or government) fled Vietnam. Some flew directly to the US while others were sent to refugee-processing centres in nearby nations by boat (mainly to Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines) before settling in permanent homes abroad.

For those who could not escape after the communist victory in reunified Vietnam, many former participants in the South Vietnamese government, military, or civil service (as well as teachers, artists, and religious leaders) were told to attend "re-education classes" which were revealed to be forced labor camps lacking food, medicine, and proper shelter. In the following years, business owners were also targeted and sent to "New Economic Zones" that is to say uncultivated regions (where there were often unexploded landmines) where they were to clear and farm land. There were also new military conflicts, including against previous regional allies. In 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and ousted the Khmer Rouge regime. In response, China invaded Vietnam in 1979. On top of all that, Vietnam suffered a disastrous harvest in 1980 resulting in food shortages. And considering the fact the US had placed an embargo on

Vietnam after the war, the government had only limited access to international resources. These were the reasons that prompted many Vietnamese to leave Vietnam, even illegally. Thus began the "boat people" exodus in which almost two million people fled Vietnam between 1976 and 1996 – most before 1982. In addition to the suffering endured during the crossing and the risk of encountering pirates, many refugees died in the process. The "boat people" exodus rapidly became a major humanitarian crisis as neighboring nations began turning away refugees while those who managed to land were parked into camps where they experienced terrible conditions. It was thanks to changes in many nations' laws concerning refugees and programs such as the Orderly Departure Program and the US Amerasian Resettlement Program that the emigration surge became more manageable. Additionally, a relaxation of Vietnam's harshest political sanctions and policies as well as a period of economic growth helped in slowing emigration flow. Most of the refugee camps were closed by 1996 and the Orderly Departure Program ended in 1997. The largest refugee resettlement occurred in the United States, with other major diasporic populations moving to Australia, Canada, and France. While Vietnamese Americans are present in all fifty US states, the largest diasporic settlement remains "Little Saigon" in Orange County, California. Other major communities have developed near San Jose and Los Angeles in California, and in Texas near Houston and Dallas. Now, in the 21st century, many Vietnamese Americans live at the intersection of their two cultures, maintaining transnational relationships between the United States and the Republic of Vietnam that involve family, business, and cultural connections.

## B. Vietnamese American literature: "this ethnic cycle of silence to speech"

As a writer of color, Ocean Vuong appears very much aware of the literary traditions that came before him. In an interview with David Winter in 2016 he insisted on the need for lineage for writers of color, saying that:

> for othered bodies, the fostering of elders, the seeking of paths, the linking from one word to another, to further and nurture our own voices, is vital. Although it seems nice as an artistic practice to shatter a linear trajectory of influence, POCs don't have the luxury of throwing lineage out the window. The institution of erasure was not built with democratic intent; it cannot be dismantled using democratic ideals ("Surviving the Survival").

Vuong here discusses the importance of acknowledging and preserving cultural heritage and lineage for marginalized individuals, particularly people of color (POCs), by using the maternal connotations of words such as “fostering” and “nurturing”. It emphasizes that for those who have been historically marginalized or “othered,” such as POCs, it is crucial to connect with their elders, seek guidance from their experiences and knowledge, and establish connections between different aspects of their culture and identity. This process is seen as essential for nurturing and strengthening their own voices and identities. Vuong underscores the collective strength of marginalized voices coming together, highlighting the importance of fostering a sense of unity and solidarity among individuals who have been historically marginalized or “othered.” This unity is seen as a means to counter the erasure of their cultures and identities, a means to make their bodies and experiences legible. Vuong contrasts this perspective with the idea of shattering a linear trajectory of influence, which might be viewed as artistic freedom but is not a luxury that POCs can afford. Instead, he argues that POCs cannot simply discard their cultural lineage which has been systematically erased and marginalized over time. The institution of erasure, likely referring to the historical suppression and erasure of non-dominant cultures and voices, was not created with democratic intentions. Therefore, it cannot be effectively dismantled using democratic ideals (such as freedom) alone. As an Asian American writer, and more particularly as a Vietnamese American writer, Ocean Vuong highlights the importance of preserving and connecting with cultural lineage for marginalized individuals, particularly POCs, and suggests that addressing historical erasure and inequality requires more than democratic ideals.

Understanding the artistic and literary history that precedes contemporary works such as *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* thus seems paramount. This explanation is even more necessary considering U.S. depictions of Vietnam have tended to misrepresent Vietnamese identities and experiences, often erasing representations of the South Vietnamese government and its supporters, as well as that of the common folks trapped in the logics of war. The dominant image of the Vietnamese body in American media has instead been the image of the Vietcong, the “enemy.” Driven by the desire to correct cultural biases and the need to claim a spot in the American psyche, an artistic practice (as defined by Ocean Vuong) should endeavor to reaffirm the existence of earlier creators of Vietnamese American literature thus carving a space where these writers and the ones that follow them can be seen for who they are rather than through misconceptions and stereotypes. That is why it I intend to present an historical overview of the Vietnamese American literary tradition as these narratives offer new

perspectives on the war, Vietnam and the Vietnamese American experience. To do so, I will mainly base such a survey on theoretical works by Isabelle Thuy Pelaud and Viet Thanh Nguyen as well as Michelle Janette once again.

As I have stated earlier, following the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the end of the Vietnam war, approximately two million Vietnamese had to leave their homeland and move to refugee camps in surrounding regions such as Hong Kong and Thailand before emigrating further west. Out of those two million, 700,000 refugees came to the U.S. making this exodus the largest migratory episode since the immigration of Jews during and after WWII. This in turn led to the development of what could be called transnational identities considering the strong familial and emotional ties linking individuals across borders. Despite being uprooted from their home in the aftermath of war, Vietnamese immigrants did not necessarily experience a loss of cultural and national identity. Upon their arrival in the U.S., Vietnamese refugees were subject to dispersal policies. This was in fact motivated by a wish on the U.S. government's part to avoid repeating the situation in Florida which had become the center of the Cuban immigrant community. Indeed the states wanted to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves where people would be more dependent on welfare assistance during a time of economic recession. However, the attempts to disperse Vietnamese refugees throughout the country proved to be in vain. Following the second (associated with the "boat people" who left Vietnam between 1978 and 1980) and tertiary surges of immigration (under the Orderly Departure Program between 1980 and 1997), Vietnamese enclaves were formed in places such as Orange County, San Jose, Houston, Dallas and Washington D.C.

Historian Viet Thanh Nguyen argues in *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016) that, out of the Southeast Asians in America, Vietnamese Americans are the ones who have published the largest literary production. They are also the ones who have the longest literary tradition, something that was encouraged by French colonial policies. Indeed, the French authorities favoured the Vietnamese over Cambodians and Laotians in dealing with colonial bureaucracy, an inclination that helped develop the literary class. While some authors were already writing in Vietnam prior to immigration, in the United States, others became writers out of the desire to tell the suffering of Southern Vietnamese people. The first generation of Vietnamese American literature was largely preoccupied with the political history I outlined in the previous section. Two of the earliest Vietnamese American writers who worked and studied in the U.S. in the 1960s well before the major phases of Vietnamese immigration, Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai and Tran Van Dinh, are examples of the type of literature that would follow. They chose to

publish their works in English for an American audience. Mai's personal essay "Electioneering Vietnamese Style" (1962) explains her unsuccessful run for a governmental office in South Vietnam with the intend to teach American population about the regime they were supporting during the war. Dinh's novel, *No Passenger on the River* (1965), was published when the first American Marines arrived in Vietnam and showcases the instability of the South Vietnamese government American troops were sent to reinforce. It focuses on the corruption, propaganda and military shortcomings that led to the coup against President Diem. These two works lay important foundations both historically and thematically to the field of Vietnamese American literature. They also forecast the efforts to explain Vietnam and educate the American reader. Most of the writers of the following decades writing in English, mainly of the 1970s and 1980S, wrote not only because they themselves felt the need to share their stories but also because they felt American audiences needed to hear and understand these stories.

These English-language works differ from the literature produced in Vietnamese in the postwar context. Vietnamese-language literature published in the U.S., which was often termed "exile literature," has been shown to contain greater expression of anger, lament and criticism of American society according to critics such as Qui-Phiet Tran. Most of these first narratives written in Vietnamese were published in literary journals issued in the U.S. such as *Van Hoc Nghe Thuat* ("Art and Literature"). While English-language works of this period predominantly emphases notions of achievement, reconciliation, survival and potential healing, Vietnamese-language works more overtly denounce reunified Vietnam while also criticizing American individualism and workaholism. Stranded at the margins, they resort to feelings of nostalgia, trying to recreate the lost Vietnamese homeland. Poets such as Le Tat Dieu, who wrote under the penname Cao Tan, and Nguyen Mong Giac are prime examples of writers wanting to express their experience of exile by putting forth their deep sense of loneliness, alienation and guilt steaming from having left their country and loved ones behind:

> Breaking our back, we carry on the rest of our lives in exile
>
> While our heart is laden with tons of sorrow and
>
> homesickness.[1] (Cao Tan, *Poetry by Cao Tan*, 1977)

It should be noted that in the beginnings especially, many Vietnamese American texts were then written in Vietnamese and that the few authors writing in English had difficulties being

[1] Cao Tan, *Poetry of Cao Tan*, Westminster: But Lua Publishing House, 1977. Translated from Vietnamese to English.

published: mainly because of their lack of language proficiency, the perceived foreignness of their writing style and their perspective on the war. Indeed, "politics pushed Vietnamese American narratives to the margins of the increasingly corporate publishing industry of the 1980s […] After the Viet Nam War, Vietnamese Americans were the only Americans who did not want to forget Viet Nam" (Pelaud 25-26). The few texts published in English struggled to find an audience outside of the community but also among Vietnamese Americans. Some writers decided to found their own printing presses and to independently distribute their work, mostly in Vietnamese. It appears that the first generation of Vietnamese Americans preferred reading texts written in Vietnamese, favoring a more direct approach in which they could recognize their own anger regarding the loss of their country and American abandonment in the war. Soon, Vietnamese-language literary magazines and journals blossomed including *Dat Moi* (New Land), *Van Hoc* (Literary Studies), *Viet Chien* (The Vietnamese Struggle), *Nhan Chung* (Witness), and *Thoi Tap* (The Times).

However, things changed starting in the mid-1980s when Vietnamese American literature began to attract the interest of large publishing houses. Up until that point, being dissociated from communist Vietnam was central for refugees living overseas and the first generation of Vietnamese American writers was acutely conscious of that fact. The cold war logic pushed them to denounce the communist regime to whom they had lost their home, their friends and family members. But ironically, just a decade after the end of the war, a new interest in Vietnamese American literature was ignited by the publication of texts providing a North Vietnamese perspective such as *A Vietcong Memoir* by Truong Nhu Tang (1986), which is written from the perspective of a disillusioned former communist official, and *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* by Le Ly Hayslip (1989) which tells the story of the author's childhood in Vietnam where she was pressed into service by the Vietcong which led to her being captured and imprisoned by government forces before she finally fled to the U.S. Then, in 1994, Bill Clinton's government lifted the 19-year-old embargo on Vietnam. This corresponds to a time when Vietnamese American writers began translating texts written by Vietnamese authors into English. Such a spirit of collaboration facilitated the entry of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American cultural production to the U.S. national narrative and allowed the emergence of what would become a relatively popular genre: the Vietnamese American memoir. There seemed to be a definite struggle for the immigrant, the refugee, the exiled to be heard outside of their "ethnic walls" that is to say their community, the homes and enclaves they carved out for themselves. This partly explains why Vietnamese Americans

waited for the next generation (raised or born in America) to speak for them. While large numbers of Vietnamese Americans began to arrive in 1975, time passed before a new generation was able to master the English language and to acquire a secondary education. In that sense, Vietnamese American literature written in English follows "this ethnic cycle of silence to speech" (Nguyen 198). More emotionally and politically detached from Vietnam, these second-generation writers articulate a new sense of home and identity in their narratives.

However, Asian American literary critics only really started paying attention to Vietnamese American literature in the 1990s. It was in 1993 that Monique Truong published the first comprehensive essay on this type of literature from 1975 to 1990 in the *Amerasia Journal*, an essay which was reprinted a few years later in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (edited by King-Kok Cheung). In the context of American literature, any ethnically defined literature is bound up with the history of that ethnic group in America. Because of the circumstances of their arrival in the U.S. as refugees, many Vietnamese Americans' art focuses on mourning the dead and remembering who and what was left behind as well as considering the place of survivors:

> If Vietnamese American literature could avoid the war, then it could avoid this challenge of confronting the mythology and the contradictions of America. But the literature cannot avoid the war, because the literature is inseparable from the Vietnamese American population itself, which exists only because of the war. This is the history that critic Isabelle Thuy Pelaud speaks of when she characterizes Vietnamese American literature as being located between the poles of history and hybridity (Nguyen 200).

As American allies during the war and due to the fact the war was lost, Vietnamese Americans were pushed to the margins of both American and Vietnamese histories. In this regard, it is no coincidence that the recollection and processing of the history of the war is central to Vietnamese American literature. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud borrows the term "hybridity" from Lisa Lowe for whom it refers to "the uneven process through which immigrant communities encounter the violence of the. U.S. state, and the capital imperatives served by the United States and by the Asian states from which they come, and the process through which they survive those violences by living, inventing, and reproducing different cultural alternatives" (*Immigrant Acts* 82). However, Pelaud uses the term to "refer more precisely to those experiences and identities shaped by colonialism, war, immigration, and racism" (2011, 49). By doing so she suggests examining the simultaneous resistance and accommodation at play in tactics of

survival when Vietnamese refugees were assimilated within the nation that had in fact abandoned them (the U.S.) but still continues to emphasize having rescued them.

Looking for common generic features within the large variety of Vietnamese American literature, one cannot deny the weight of the legacy and memory of the war and the importance given to the refugee experience as defining elements. But Viet Thanh Nguyen also puts forth other characteristic traits in his book *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016). First, he mentions the necessity for "translation." By this he refers to the way the author, sometimes through the narrator, explains some features of the ethnic community such as language, food, and history. This implies an audience unfamiliar with the habits and customs of this community. Ironically, "translation" as understood by Nguyen is thus particularly needed when Vietnamese American authors are writing in English for a readership mainly made up of non-Vietnamese Americans. In that case, authors can speak for the community to those that are not part of the community to begin with. The second element Nguyen singles out is what he calls "affirmation." This means an endorsement of the American Way, the belief that things are better in America compared to Vietnam. Such a belief seems to be also present in works and stories that criticize American exceptionalism. As argued before when talking about Pelaud's concept of "hybridity," refugees appear to feel bound to America both by a feeling of resentment for being betrayed and by one of gratitude for being rescued. This position in which Vietnamese American writers find themselves explains to a certain extent the choice commonly made to avoid mentioning the Vietnamese revolution stained by communism. The idea is to focus on finding a place at the intersection of two cultures. For Nguyen, "[t]here is sympathy for others, bred from the experience of being others. There is an awareness of history, because these authors are shaped by a history they cannot forget. There is an investment in the individual, in education, in free speech, and in the marketplace" that stems from a desire for closure and reconciliation (206). The third and final common feature Nguyen highlights in his reflection is the movement from the homeland to the adopted land (as refugees and exiles) and, through this return, the quest for healing and reconciliation.

## Part II. "I refuse to die": the aesthetics of trauma in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Even before the end of the conflict in 1975, the Vietnam war has occupied an important place in American national history and memory. A great number of Vietnamese came to the U.S. as a direct result of the conflict. Because the existence of Vietnamese Americans is a direct consequence of the war in Vietnam, Vietnamese American literature has almost always been linked with the war. As the catastrophic experiences of war and exile becomes defining experiences constitutive of Vietnamese American identity, most of the published works by Vietnamese American writers are refugee narratives or deal in some shape or form with the war, articulating and trying to process its violences and losses. Traumatic memory and diasporic identity thus constitute defining leitmotifs in Vietnamese American literature which oftentimes deals with the Vietnam war and its aftermath. Much of the Vietnamese American literary production is characterized by the need to process the traumas war and forced migrations have inflicted upon Vietnamese Americans as well as by the need to provide affective resolution, emotional and mnemonic closure for not only Vietnamese Americans but also for the larger part of white American society. Vietnamese American literature has thus always been prescribed with expectations of trauma and eventually, healing. Even if more recent Vietnamese American literary works do not explicitly or directly engage with the refugee experience, they still deal with questions of history and memory often related to Vietnam and the war.

Ocean Vuong's debut novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* offers a personal insight into the Vietnamese American refugee experience, addressing issues of displacement, loss, homeland nostalgia as well as of the psychological trauma related to the Vietnam war. In his exploration of trauma, memory and identity, Vuong releases the history of the Vietnam war from temporal and narrative fixity as is shown in the novel's navigations across three generations and as well as between the borders of United States and Vietnam. Indeed we can see how, through Vuong's nonlinear and sometimes elliptical style of writing, memories and recollections of the war surface all throughout the novel, often linking Little Dog and his family to the past in Vietnam despite their resettlement in Hartford, Connecticut. Written in the form of a semi-autobiographical epistolary novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a long letter from the narrator, Little Dog, to his illiterate mother. Through Little Dog's voice, Vuong brings

to life the experiences of those who have been subjected to violence, discrimination, and other forms of oppression and who continue to be affected by their trauma.

Therefore, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* can be described as a trauma narrative as Little Dog's letter both represents trauma and provides a response to it. Highlighting Little Dog's family history and its political context, Vuong engages readers in personal stories, inviting them to consider the implications of the war and forced migration on family histories. I shall discuss the formal techniques and narrative tools, such as the image of taxidermy and the monarch metaphor, Vuong uses to represent the ways in which the past continues to haunt the characters.

## A. Writing "a death that won't finish": the legacies of trauma

### a. Remembering History

#### i. *"I didn't know that the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves": the permanence of trauma*

Little Dog did not live the Vietnam war as his mother Rose and his grandmother Lan did but throughout the novel, we learn that his ignorance of the conflict is only short-lived as he does witness their violent outbursts as well as their flashbacks and nightmares. In the beginning of the novel, Little Dog appears to struggle to understand the trauma related to the war that continues to haunt his family because he only experiences the war indirectly by witnessing its lasting consequences. He recalls for example when he once leapt out from behind a door to play a prank on his mother whose extreme reaction of fear left him at a loss:

> That time when I was five or six and, playing a prank, leapt out at you from behind the hallway door, shouting "Boom!" You screamed, face raked, and twisted, then burst into sobs, clutched your chest as you leaned against the door, gasping. I stood bewildered, my toy army helmet tilted on my head. I was an American boy parroting what I saw on TV. I didn't know the war was still inside you, that there was a war to begin with, that once it enters you it never leaves – but merely echoes, a sound forming the face of your own son. Boom. (Vuong 4)

The war is "still inside [Rose]," its memories carried in the mother's body and symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder. This memory encapsulates the innocence of childhood, represented by the boy's toy army helmet and his imitation of what he has seen portrayed on television. At the same time, it offers a stark contrast to the profound, hidden trauma of his startled mother. The onomatopoeia "Boom" takes on a double meaning, signifying both the child's playful intent and the unspoken war-related trauma haunting the mother's psyche, demonstrating how the echoes of war can continue to affect generations. The trauma of war, as it warps Rose's mind and body, has not been resolved despite the distance time and space have put between her and the war. Traumatic memories repeat through Rose's mental illness thus denying her the benefit of closure. In the passage, synaesthesia is subtly suggested through sensory imagery and emotional resonance. The phrase "face raked" implies a merging of visual and tactile sensations, as if the act of screaming has a physical, almost painful quality that can be seen or felt. This synesthetic description enhances the reader's understanding of the intensity of the moment, emphasizing how deeply Little Dog's mother was affected by the sudden "Boom." Additionally, the phrase "a sound forming the face of your own son" hints at a synesthetic connection between sound and visual perception, suggesting that the traumatic sound has left a lasting mark on the mother's perception of her own child. It could also express the way in which the son's identity and experience (symbolized by his face) is defined by the repercussions (the echo) of the war, just like his mother's are.

Little Dog's grandmother Lan is also entrapped in her memories of the past, victim of the disruption of time, space and self brought about by her trauma. On a night closely preceding Independence Day, a neighbor's use of fireworks is transformed into "huge explosions" (19) reminiscent of artillery fire which triggers Lan's flight response and prompts her to frenetically hide:

> Phosphorescent streaks raked up the purple, light-polluted sky and shredded into huge explosions that reverberated through our apartment. I was asleep on the living room floor, wedged between you and Lan, when I felt the warmth of her body, which was pressed all night against my back, vanish. When I turned, she was on her knees, scratching wildly at the blankets. Before I could ask what was wrong, her hand, cold and wet, grabbed my mouth. She placed her fingers over my lips.
>
> "Shhh. If you scream," I heard her say, "the mortars will know where we are." (Vuong 19)

The use of the verb "shredded" evokes the image of a grenade detonating in the sky, drawing heavily on the visual parallel between fireworks and explosions. But the narrator then expands on this parallel by also playing on the sonorities in this short excerpt. The alliterative pattern made of /f/ and /s/ sounds in the sentence "phosphorescent streaks raked up the purple, light-polluted sky and shredded into huge explosions that reverberated through our apartment" could also be reminiscent of the sound produced by the ascent of both fireworks and a missile while the alliterations of occlusive and plosive consonants such as /p/ (in words such as "up", "purple", "polluted", "explosions" and "apartment") remind the reader of the sound of an explosion. Through this play on both sounds and images, Vuong is able to showcase how an outside celebration becomes a direct threat that invades, both visually and in terms of sound, not only the intimate space that is the interior of the family home, but also Lan's mind in a way. Even though Lan has survived the war and the initial flight to the United States, her exhibitions of PTSD throughout the novel go to show her unresolved trauma which manifests itself in a confusion of present time, present space and memory. When her memories are triggered by the sound of fireworks, her foothold in the present is ruptured and she is immediately transported away from her American home and back to wartime Vietnam.

Little Dog cannot escape Rose and Lan's pain as symptoms of their trauma inundated every part of his childhood. This prompts him to see memory not as a choice but rather as a "flood" (78). Submerged in the waters of his family's pain and their past, Little Dog provides an invaluable account of the effects of war beyond the battlefield illustrating their existential costs. History reveals itself to be not just the events that happened in the past but also the ways in which the past is remembered. Vuong expresses the nuances of Little Dog's family's trauma by mimicking the symptoms of PTSD and writing in a fractured way which mirrors the instability of psychological trauma. This allows for their pain to be understood not only through the content of the writing but also through the narrative style and its structure. In that sense, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* can be considered a trauma narrative. Laurie Vickroy contends in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* that "Trauma narratives […] go beyond presenting trauma as a subject matter or in characterization; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structures of these works" (xiv). The novel provides insight into Lan's and Rose's perspectives in the collapse of chronological order through repetitions and the insertion of flashbacks into the narrative's flow.

In the passage that closes the first section of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Little Dog witnesses once again the manifestation of his mother's trauma as she storms to a house

armed with a nine-inches machete to supposedly retrieve her sister from an abusive boyfriend. She then comes to the realization that they have moved away years ago and that this particular house is now the home of strangers. Little Dog's image shifts from being compared to "Lady Triệu, the mythical woman warrior who led an army of men and repelled the Chinese invasion of ancient Vietnam" (68) to being described as a small figure retreating back to the car while a "huge" white man with "shoulders sloped under a grey Yankees sweatshirt" points his shotgun at her. Because of the mention of the invasion of Vietnam and the presence of this American antagonist, one could perceive this scene as a form of re-enactment of the Vietnam war, an impression reenforced by Lan's comparison of the car with a helicopter. But it is not just the mother and the man that seem to re-enact the conflict but also Little Dog himself as well as the man's son observing the scene from his window:

> The engine starts, the car lurches into a U-turn. As we pull away, from the porch, a boy, no older than I am, points a toy pistol at us. The gun jumps and his mouth makes blasting noises. His father turns to yell at him. He shoots once, two more times. From the window of my helicopter, I look at him. I look at him dead in the eyes and do what you do. I refuse to die. (Vuong 71)

Despite the shift in power that sees the mother fleeing the scene, Vuong does not allow the passage to represent surrender. The use of the present tense anchors the action in the current moment of the scene and thus conveys a sense of immediacy and emotional intensity with the segment "I look at him dead in the eyes" signifying a powerful and direct confrontation. This choice creates a vivid and immediate mental image, placing the reader alongside the narrator as he gazes out of an imagined helicopter window, thus engaging us in the unfolding moment. The sentence "I look at him dead in the eyes and do what you do" continues with the present tense and yet, one could interpret the second iteration of the verb "do" in "do what you do" as the expression of an habit. Here, the narrator then goes on clarifying what it is exactly that the mother does by saying: "I refuse to die." He signifies his mother's continual resistance as an action that has become part of her identity, this is something she does, something almost being ingrained in her character. This implies that her refusing to die has become so habitual or significant in her life that it has become a defining aspect of who she is and how she is perceived by her son. This can be interpreted as a form of resistance against her past trauma and the specter of death that is associated with it. It implies that her life is a continuous act of defiance, an ongoing struggle to assert her survival and resilience. The use of present tenses in this passage immerses the reader in the immediate and continuous experiences of the narrator and

his mother, creating a strong sense of presence, urgency, and resilience in the narrative. The parallelism present in the expression "I […] do what you do" also that Little Dog is emulating or mirroring his mother's actions, and by extension, but it implies a sense of unity or shared experience. This parallelism between him and his mother underscores the idea that their lives are intertwined, that they have a deep emotional bond, and that they are both navigating similar challenges or traumas. Told from the perspective of Little Dog, the final line "I refuse to die" affirms his own form of resistance, underscoring his determination and will to survive. In Little Dog's refusal to look away, admit defeat and fall victim to the boy's faux-shooting, one could read the assurance that what happened in the war will not be repeated in the present and that trauma and memory will not completely overtake the story.

### ii. *"A death that won't finish, a death that keeps on dying": the haunting of ghosts*

Be it through Little Dog's family's PTSD episodes or the recounting of war stories, the war and its traumatic memory continues to haunt Rose's and Lan's daily lives and it becomes integrated into Little Dog's own identity and experience. We have to remind ourselves of the double meaning of trauma developed by Freud with the word 'trauma' possibly referring either to a new wound or to the reopening of an old wound. Trauma thus has the power to outlast the duration of the initial wound's infliction. In regards to *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, this means that even though the Vietnam war is over, its power to harm is not. Vuong indeed prevents the narrative from progressing linearly and he pushes the story forward in concentric circles. Thus history and its traumatic baggage (represented in the form of memories) appears to move in a spiral: "Some people say history moves in a spiral, not in the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed" (Vuong 27). Cathy Caruth's work on trauma in narrative fiction suggests that trauma requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence. Trauma constitutes a sort of temporal fragmentation which disrupts the usually linear chronology. Often, traumatized people are seen engaging with the source of their trauma (consciously or unconsciously) by going back to the traumatic event which almost appears as a form of obsession. This never-ending repetition of the original traumatic event illustrates the complex relationship of traumatized subjects with memory and forgetting. This re-enactment can be translated in attitudes and actions as with Rose's and Lan's

PTSD episodes. Little Dog's narrative, because to a certain extent it recounts his family's history as much as his own, could be seen as another form of re-enactment as the story constitutes a way of reliving the past.

The irruption of one a past period, the Vietnam war, into his family's life in the United States, can be figured as a form of haunting. For Caruth, the ghost represents an appropriate embodiment of this disjunction of temporality brought about by trauma (20). In contemporary Vietnamese American fiction, there has been an abundance of works which explore haunted histories, traces of unresolved past events, or the ghosts of those who died too suddenly and violently to be properly mourned. These ghosts then possess those who are seeking to get on with the task of living, haunting them. In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Viet Thanh Nguyen underscores how much of the writing, art and politics dealing with Vietnam War focus on mourning the dead and remembering the missing who are often represented as ghosts. He argues that it is rather common among refugees to sustain and share the memories and stories of the ones left behind. In his short story "Black-Eyed Women" (from the collection *The Refugees*), Nguyen himself plays with this trope: told through the eyes of a female ghost-writer living with her mother in American, the story begins when she is visited by the ghost of her brother who died on the boat that allowed the family to escape from war-torn Vietnam, setting off a chain of buried memories (Nguyen 2018). Similarly, Ocean Vuong evokes the issue of ghosts through the metaphor of the monarch butterflies (which I will discuss more later) and also when Little Dog asks the question: "What do we mean when we say survivor? Maybe a survivor is the last one to come home, the final monarch that lands on a branch weighted with ghosts" (13). The use of the word "weighted" is telling as it refers to the haunting memory of the war and the ones left behind. It hints at how traumatic history can be passed along as symbol of loss. Surviving then does not mean escaping unscathed as the final monarch continues to be haunted by all the others that came before it or with it. One could argue that the novel offers the image of a haunting history, for it represents a version of history in which the effects of the war are far from over. From the very beginning of the novel, Little Dog explores the nature of his family's trauma. On the very first page, he states his intention by saying

> I am writing to go back to the time, at the rest stop in Virginia, when you stared, horror-struck, at the taxidermy buck hung over the soda machine by the restrooms, its antlers shadowing your face. In the car, you kept shaking your head. "I don't understand why they would do that. Can't they see it's a corpse? A corpse should go away, not get stuck forever like this."

> I think now of that buck, how you stared into its black glass eyes and saw your reflection, your whole body, warped in that lifeless mirror. How it was not the grotesque mounting of a decapitated animal that shook you – but that the taxidermy embodied a death that won't finish, a death that keeps dying as we walk past it to relieve ourselves. (Vuong 3)

The image of the taxidermy buck is important as it embodies "a death that won't finish". We are not exactly presented with the metaphor of the ghost here but it is a similar one nonetheless as taxidermy is "the activity of cleaning, preserving, and filling the skins of dead animals with special material to make them look as if they are still alive" (*Cambridge Dictionary*). It gives the illusion of life even if the animal is indeed dead, keeping it in a form of stasis or limbo. To the mother, the taxidermy is synonym of continuation with no hope of moving on, a trace of what is no longer living. In that sense, the taxidermy becomes a symbol similar to a ghost for it suggests a rupture of linear temporality through its refusal to accept death as an end. Additionally, the buck constitutes a permanent reminder of her traumatic past for the mother. Because a buck is a hunting prey, we can surmise its death was not natural but rather the result of violence. We could perhaps go as far as draw a parallel between its possible violent death and the experience of the violence of war as the analogy between hunting and war violence is a structuring one in European and American literature and cinema (one can think for instance of the 1978 movie *The Deerhunter* by Michael Cimino). More evident perhaps is the explicit parallel drawn between the mother and the dead buck. The connection between the two beings is established through the mother's stare which Little Dog points out when he remembers "how [she] stared into [the buck's] black glass eyes and saw [her] reflection, [her] whole body, warped in that lifeless mirror". By stating that her reflection in the buck's eyes is "warped," Little Dog suggests that the act of seeing herself in this lifeless mirror had a profound and unsettling effect on her sense of self. It implies that the reflection triggered a significant shift in her perception of herself and her identity. The word "warped" implies a sense of distortion or alteration, as if the reflection revealed a version of herself that she had not fully recognized or understood before. Confronted with the image of the buck, Rose is forced to acknowledge (perhaps unconsciously) the similarities she shares with the buck as both of them fell victim to a violence exterior to them. More importantly, none of them are able to escape this violence. The buck is stuck in a parody of life which paradoxically only glorifies its death. Similarly, even after having escaped her war-torn country, Rose remains affected by her experience of the war which creeps up on her in the most mundane circumstances (even at a rest stop in Virginia). Just like the buck's antlers cast a shadow on her face, the war continues to cast a shadow on her

life in the United Sates. For Caruth, trauma is not a symptom of the unconscious but rather a symptom of history. The traumatic experience has not yet been assimilated by the person in the forms of memory or even narrative. Trauma thus assumes a haunting quality by continuing to possess the subject through insistent repetitions, returns and re-enactments. In accordance with Freud's observations in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), she argues that trauma is inextricable from the ghostly or the spectral as, in its disrupted temporality, it testifies to the profoundly unresolved nature of the traumatic past: "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 1995, 4-5). Here, behind the image of the buck is the Vietnam war.

### b. Inherited trauma and memory

#### *i. Postmemory: Lan's stories and her encounter with American soldiers*

The ghost is a variant of the return of the repressed. But what returns to haunt a person does not necessarily have to be their personal trauma, it can be the trauma of another. In *The Shell and the Kernel*, Nicolas Abraham talks about the "phantom effects" that haunt the children of parents who have experienced a traumatic history. Assuming that individuals can inherit their ancestors' experiences, memories and secrets, Abraham argues that a person can manifest symptoms that do not directly come from their own life experiences. Using the rhetoric of ghosts (he speaks of "phantom," "haunting," "phantasmatic haunting"), he suggests a foreign presence in the self. As stated by his editor Rand, Abraham suggests "the existence within an individual of a collective psychology comprised of several generations" (166). Such haunting is the effect of unresolved trauma.

Even though the Vietnam war took place before Little Dog's birth, it still haunts him and plays a defining role in his life and identity, something that is showcased in Vuong's writing and notably in his use of metaphor. One metaphor that particularly comes to mind in that of the embryo developing around a bullet in his mother's womb: "*The bullet was always here*, the boy thinks, older even than himself – and his bones, tendons, and veins had merely wrapped around the metal shard, sealing it inside him" (Vuong 76). The metaphor of the bullet, symbol of war, being previously implanted in the mother's womb and then being 'transferred', so to say, into the child's body is a powerful visualization of transgenerational trauma. The role of the Vietnam

war in the family's history and their struggles is shown through the way the trauma generated by the war still lingers and continues to impact even the generations who never experienced the war in the first place. In that sense, Vuong's novel represents transgenerational trauma as older generations, having experienced directly the terror of war and often still suffering from its aftermath, raise their children and pass on their psychological wounds and emotional pain against their will. Because Little Dog emigrated from Vietnam as a toddler, he lacks general knowledge about Vietnam and the war. He thus relies on both his mother Rose and grandmother Lan, his only remaining connections to Vietnam, to help him understand his history. A telling example of this fact is the time shared by Little Dog and Lan when she would ask him to pluck the grey hairs from her head: "For this work I was paid in stories. After positioning her head under the window's light, I would kneel on a pillow behind her, the tweezers ready in my grip. She would start to talk, her tone dropping an octave, drifting deep into a narrative" (Vuong 22). This underscores the importance of narrative in understanding one's history and hints at the idea that sharing stories is a way of building connections and intimacy, bringing Little Dog closer to his family. The act of positioning Lan's head under the window's light and kneeling behind her with tweezers ready creates a vivid image of a close and intimate interaction. This physical closeness, combined with the act of grooming, implies a sense of care and attention to detail. It is not merely a transaction but a ritualized form of care and bonding. The shift in Lan's tone, described as "dropping an octave" and "drifting deep into a narrative," signifies the power of storytelling to transport and transform. The tone change implies a shift into a deeper, more personal, and perhaps emotional space as Lan recounts her past.

Apart from the stories they share with him, he often pieces together his family's history by witnessing his mother's and grandmother's nightmares and flashbacks. For his family, like for many if not all survivors of the conflict, victory for the Vietnamese did not in fact put a stop to their suffering but on the contrary, it brought more suffering in the aftermath. Indeed, as Viet Thanh Nguyen states in *Nothing Ever Dies*, "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (4). Those who were forced to witness the war first-hand, like Rose and Lan, later suffered from important psychological after-effects which not only affect them but also the following generations. Little Dog inherits Rose and Lan's memories as postmemory due to his intimate proximity to their psychological wounds from the war. In an attempt to define this inherited legacy of trauma, Marianne Hirsch came up with the concept of "postmemory" in her essay "From 'The Generation of Postmemory'" (Hirsch 346-7) to describe the relationship that the generation after those who experienced trauma directly

has with those experiences. She argues that the second generation remembers not as direct witnesses having experienced trauma themselves but rather as having inherited the first generation's experience of trauma through stories, images, and behaviors. Even though postmemory is a recollection inherited from someone else, it is transmitted "so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsh 347). Parents' experiences of exile, loss and mourning, transmitted affectively, are thus deeply internalized by their children. Postmemory is woven into Vuong's novel, clearly showcasing the idea of transgenerational trauma through the depiction of the PTSD episodes of Little Dog's mother and grandmother and the consequences of witnessing such violent outbursts as a child. We can see that Little Dog's life is filled with fragmented and traumatic memories related to events that, though they predate him, continue to define him against his will.

Nowhere else in the novel does the role of postmemory is as evident as it is in the passage in which Little Dog goes back to war-torn Vietnam. Assuming a third-person narrative and thus positioning himself as a witness, he describes a scene in which a woman is "waiting on the shoulder of the dirt road, an infant girl wrapped in a sky-blue shawl in her arms" (35). The two are stopped by American soldiers at a checkpoint: "A woman, a girl, a gun. This is an old story, one anyone can tell" (35). The woman then reveals herself to be a twenty-eight-year-old Lan travelling with baby Rose. Lan's encounter with American soldiers displays a certain cinematographic dimension, relying heavily on visual descriptions, and the scene is even described as "a trope in a movie" (35). However, the passage is not explicitly framed as a memory but is rather introduced as a separate part of the novel, almost a mini-chapter of sorts, following the exchange between Lan and Little Dog in which the latter plucks her hair in exchange for stories. Lan's stories are presented as a communal experience shared with Little Dog, a form of collaborative work: "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" (22). Similarly, one could see the scene at the checkpoint as a collaborative work, albeit it remains a pure invention on Little Dog's part. It being the fruit of Little Dog's imagination does not downplay its importance in the overall narrative but rather highlights its being an example of postmemory as postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsh 347). This particular scene expresses Little Dog's need to (re)create a pivotal moment in his family's history. It constitutes a reconstruction of the past aimed at reconnection and continuity. Providing a recounting (be it true or not) of the familial past that explores traumatic memory

allows Little Dog to fill in the gaps in his family's history and to better understand where his grandmother and mother are coming from.

### *i. The monarch metaphor*

Vuong's attention to Little Dog's familial, and particularly maternal, bonds emphasizes a form of inheritance rooted in traumatic wartime memory of Vietnam. He invokes this question of inheritance and generational knowledge of trauma through the metaphor of monarch butterflies migrating from southern Canada to Mexico. Mentioning this long journey, he indirectly compares the monarchs which "fly south [and] will not make it back north" (Vuong 8) to Vietnamese refugees who, having left their country and loved ones behind and often still carrying this pain and a sense of guilt because of it, are reluctant to go back Vietnam after the war, meaning that "each departure, then, is final" (8). A finality marks the first generation's migration while the next generation is burdened with the responsibility of revisiting the past, thus preserving it through active engagement and remembrance. He thus depicts the butterflies' offspring, here representing 1,5 and 2nd generation Vietnamese Americans, as the ones able and willing to return to the migration paths of their predecessors: "Only their children return; only the future revisits the past" (8). In that sense, Little Dog's narrative appears, to quote Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, "More emotionally and politically detached from Viet Nam than those of the first generation […]. Identity is depicted to a different degree in terms of movement, one that goes back and forth between North America and Viet Nam, either by actual travel there or by acts of memory, imagined or recollected" (Pelaud 36). Like the monarchs, Little Dog follows the path of his ancestors, rediscovering the "memory of family members from the initial winter […] woven into [his] genes" (Vuong 12), passed down to him through his family's history. Memories take on an important significance for Little Dog as he has no first-hand recollections of the war that cost so much to his family and still continue to haunt Rose and Lan. But while one could see these memories as something that can only separate him from the rest of his family, "this message" (12) is one of the things that ties him to his family and by extension to Vietnam. To quote Sandeep Bakshi, "Memory makes intelligible not just the ubiquitous presence of the war in the lives of three generations […] but in a simultaneous movement it mobilizes the regeneration of intergenerational alliance" (542). One could see memories as shackles to the past and as only capable to prolong the suffering caused by the war, something that Vuong himself expresses in an interview with Jonathan Fields: "to remember is a very

costly thing, for anyone, whether it's a national memory or a personal one because you literally risk the present. You forsake the present in order to go back, and so, the cost of remembering is your very life" (Fiels, "Ocean Vuong | *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*"). And indeed, "some monarchs, on their way south, simply stop flying, their wings all of a sudden too heavy, not entirely their own – and fall away, deleting themselves from the story" (Vuong 229). But Little Dog, even though he inherited his family's memories and their trauma to some extent, does not succumb to it ("I refuse to die" 71). He uses his voice to record their traumatic experiences thus both reconciling himself with his family's past and distancing himself from it.

## B. The diasporic experience as another form of trauma

### a. "Sometimes you are erased before you are given the choice of stating who you are": the experience of erasure

#### *i. The oxtail episode at the butcher*

One could argue that *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* represents another form of trauma which can be tied to the experience not only of displacement but also to the struggle of assimilating in American society. This is particularly noticeable in the scene where Little Dog, Rose and Lan go shopping for ingredients to make bún bò huế which requires oxtail as the main ingredient. The scene is relevant in that it revolves around a power imbalance in which the mother is unable to speak English and thus unable to communicate with the butcher, leaving her powerless in an otherwise ordinary situation. This power imbalance is staged in the very interaction between the mother wanting to buy oxtail and the owner of the shop. Rose asks for oxtail in Vietnamese: "Đuôi bò. Anh có Đuôi bò không?" (Vuong 30). When the mother's words in her native tongue fail her, she resorts to mimicking the bodily movements of a cow: "Floundering, you placed your index finger at the small of your back, turned slightly, so the man could see your backside, then wiggled your finger while making mooing sounds. With your other hand, you made a pair of horns above your head. You moved, carefully twisting and gyrating so he could recognize each piece of this performance: horns, tail, ox." (30). The body enters when words fail, every movement and choreography of the mother's "finger," "back," "hand," and "head" correlated with a particular word: "horns, tail, ox." But what is striking in that moment is the way in which Rose is led to mime what she eats, thus dehumanizing herself,

because she does not know English. The use of the term “performance” here should not go unnoticed as it provides a theatrical dimension to the scene. Here, the mother’s desperate attempt to be understood is turned into a farce, an experience that, for her, brings ridicule and shame while it is a source of entertainment for the shop owner. The mother, soon joined by the grandmother Lan, is not perceived here as a subject by her interlocutor. The two women are indeed considered not in their totality, their description focusing rather on the different parts of their bodies relevant to their performance. The imitation itself, intended at first to convey meaning and establish a successful communication without words, has the secondary effect of initiating an animalization process. More than a frustrating experience of powerlessness, this scene turns into a dehumanizing experience. This is particularly discernable in the transition from longer descriptive sentences in which the mother (“you”) is shown as an active and willing participant in what is in fact a one-sided exchange, to a short apposition: “horns, tail, ox”. The mother seems be represented as the assortment of parts (horns and tail) which constitutes then an ensemble (ox) highlighted by its position at the end of both the apposition and the sentence. In this way, the mother is thus reduced to the different acts of her performance (the body parts she mimes) and likened to the object of said performance, an animal. But the mother is not represented here as any animal. Arguably, one should pay attention to the possible meanings and imagery associated with the ox and how they may be subverted during the exchange between the characters. The ox, as a draught animal, has long been associated with positive qualities such as strength and prosperity. It is synonymous with the hard labor necessary to working the soil. Yet, here, the analogy between woman and ox is not exactly admirable but once again a literary device that serves the dehumanizing process displayed in this excerpt. The symbolism of the ox is thus subverted by the power imbalance that drives the scene. The ox is no longer a symbol of strength but a passive being forced to endure ridicule and which is powerless to defend itself. This power imbalance is reinforced by another animalization process, that of the two men working in the shop. Said animalization is perceptible in the description of their reaction to the women’s performance: “The men roared, slapping the counter, their teeth showing huge and white” (31). The focus put on their teeth calls forth the image of a wolf. Thus the men appear as predators while the women-oxen fall prey to their laughter.

The dominance of the acoustic domain also highlights this unequal power dynamic. What I mean by that is that the use of both the verbs “roar” and “slap” suggests the way in which the men are truly the ones occupying the space in terms of sound considering the

women's words seem almost nullified since they are not understood. Moreover, the use of laughter in the wake of the women's performance also reinforces the power imbalance. Laughter can be ambivalent, you either laugh with someone or are laughed at by someone. In this case, it seems to be the latter. Laughing becomes an act through which the men assert their domination on the women who are made the butt of the joke. While laughter can sometimes be a shared experience allowing for a sense of camaraderie to emerge, in this scene it becomes an excluding act that leads to a feeling of discomfort.

The tension between wanting to belong, therefore adopting American society's traits as the norm, and remaining true to one's original identity is central when dealing with matters of immigration and assimilation. Yet, assimilation is never truly complete as the mother's inability to speak English shows. There remain some cultural gaps. In this particular passage, there are two main ones: a culinary one that in a way started the whole ordeal, and secondly the language barrier. What at first seems an innocuous matter, the search for oxtail which constitutes the main ingredient for the preparation of a traditional Vietnamese dish (bún bò huế) indeed quickly turns into a harrowing experience. Not because the butcher does not have any on hand, ruining the mother's cooking plans, but because this moment in a way crystallizes the inherent differences between the two groups on each side of the counter: the butcher, his associate, and a witnessing customer on one hand, and the Vietnamese family on the other. The oxtail to some extent symbolizes a part of Vietnamese culture and identity that is here denied and ridiculed by the men's laughter. The way the family renounces the object of their quest seems almost like a sign of capitulation and maybe even of acculturation: "We abandoned the oxtail, the bún bò huế. You grabbed a loaf of Wonder Bread and a jar of mayonnaise." (31). But perhaps more visible as a cultural gap is the language barrier existing between the two groups. Indeed, the only times Ocean Vuong uses direct speech during the exchange with the butcher is when the mother speaks. She first asks for oxtail in Vietnamese before resorting to the only other language she knows, French, a reminder of Vietnam's former status as a French colony between 1858 and 1954. "Drowning, it seemed, in air" from the stunted communication, she "tried French, pieces of which remained from [her] childhood. 'Derrière de vache!' [she] shouted" (30). The dramatic word choices describing Rose's body and her performance ("floundering", "wiggled", "mooing", "twisting", and "gyrating") and the metaphorical use of the verb "drowning" place her at the mercy of the English language. The scene underscores the embodied effects of the English language, or the lack of it, on a Vietnamese American body in America. What transpires in the oxtail episode is an accumulation of the historical and social

violence Rose is subjected to as a being unable to properly communicate with American society and thus reduced to a body existing at its margin. Rose's limitations in language exacerbate her isolation in the U.S. One could perhaps even go further in saying that her inability to speak English means her erasure from American society at large: "Sometimes you are erased before you are even given the choice of stating who you are. To be or not to be. That is the question. […] To be or not to be. That is the question. A question, yes, but not a choice" (63). While the binary syntax "to be or not to be" implies by nature a choice in the form of a response, here, this is not the case as it primarily reinforces American normativity and identity through the English language. Rose, because of her poor command of English, is condemned to silence. And silence deprives people of the choice of answering, meaning she is bound to be erased.

### *ii. Wearing the "mask" of English*

Even though he speaks English, Little Dog "didn't know that oxtail was called oxtail" (31) and is thus unable to speak on behalf of his mother and grandmother. As it the text navigates the written articulation of silence, the narrative foregrounds the difficulty of linguistic and affective translation for a Vietnamese American family who has to navigate life in an English-speaking society: "None of us spoke as we checked out, our words suddenly wrong everywhere, even in our mouths" (31). The fact that their "words" were "wrong everywhere, even in [their] mouth" underscores a fragmented relationship between the family and American society but also between language and the body as the only body part able to vocalize these words (the mouth) is presented as inadequate. Spoken words are inefficient in communicating the transactional and emotional needs of the characters and thus, the text directs attention to other modes of communication and more particularly to the language of the body through the description of Rose's "performance" which I touched upon earlier on. Even though her bodily imitation of a cow dehumanizes and humiliates her, Rose claims a form of agency through her ability to adapt despite not being able to speak English. Using her body, Rose creates and showcases an alternative language, she deploys a different mode of communication that does not rely on verbal language systems.

Little Dog acts as Rose's and Lan's connection to the US and their mediator as he is the only family member who speaks English. He becomes aware of his advantageous position seeing their inability to communicate with others which impedes their integration into American

society. While Rose could very well pass for an American woman due to her mixed heritage and fair complexion, she cannot assimilate linguistically: "Even when you looked the part, you tongue outed you. One does not "pass" in America, it seems, without English" (52). Through the novel, we discover that Rose was reluctant to learn English (and even to improve her Vietnamese) because that would mean confronting the reason why she lacks language skills which can only remind her of the violence and loss she suffered in childhood. Little Dog's attempt to teach English as he was taught at school leaves her defensive and embarrassed by the reversal of the child-parent dynamic, prompting her to end the lesson rapidly. But the fact that Rose and Lan are ostracized from American society due to their lack of English proficiency, as is exemplified by the scene at the butcher, compels Little Dog to intervene and take on the role of translator for his family:

> That night I promised myself I'd never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you. So began my career as our family's official interpreter. From then on, I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. I code switched. I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours. (Vuong 32)

The repetition of the /s/ sound in "silences" and "stutters" creates a pleasing phonetic effect, drawing attention to the struggle and challenges in communication. It also emphasizes the hesitations and halts, mirroring the stammering effect in the words themselves. The structure of the phrase is parallel, using the same pattern of possessive pronoun ("our") followed by a noun ("silences, stutters"). This repetition and symmetry emphasize the shared and collective experience of difficulty in communication within the family which prompts Little Dog to take on a new role. Little Dog straddles two worlds and uses his English to become his family's mediator, "their official interpreter," thereby connecting them to the United States. Scholars such as Françoise Král and Linda Hutcheon argue that for diasporic subjects, bilingualism is not the result of a choice but rather a constitutive element of their identity (Král 2009, 127). It appears that, for Little Dog, his bilingualism is paradoxically a choice resulting from the revelation of a need. It is not however his own need but rather the need for his mother to be heard and therefore, to be seen and recognized by the American society at large. While Král and Hutcheon argue that this "doubleness" of language constitutes a fundamental characteristic of the immigrant essence, placing bilingualism on the side of the immigrant's substance in the metaphysical sense, the narrator's comparison of language to a "mask" can be perplexing.

The concept of English as a mask indeed raises questions of identity and to some extent, of authenticity in using the English language. In this passage, English is presented as an object one can wear "like a mask". The phrase "like a mask" employs a simile, comparing the act of wearing English to wearing a mask. This comparison conveys the idea that using English can be a deliberate act of concealment or transformation, hiding Little Dog's true linguistic and cultural identity. In the literal sense, a mask is an object that covers up one's face, giving the person who wears it a different appearance to the outside world and allowing them to hide and conceal part of themselves. It appears as a sort of artifice, thus suggesting that reality is hidden underneath which can come with a certain lack of authenticity. One could see Little Dog's resolution to use English as motivated by practical reasons and that it therefore does not show his "real" self as a Vietnamese boy. Language can be seen here not only as something that can give a different appearance but also a different identity to the speaker as using English is a role or persona adopted by the speaker which emphasizes the performative aspect of language and identity. For Little Dog, the decision to wear the mask of English emerges at first from his felling of shame and insecurity, of having witnessed his mother being wordless and having to rely on gestures to try and make herself understood. The concept of a mask as a tool for social assimilation can be tied to Franz Fanon's philosophy developed in his book *Black Skin, White Skins* originally published in 1952. Fanon observed how sometimes colonized try to appropriate and imitate the colonizer's behaviors, adopting status symbols such as their language for instance. He argues that a person "betrays himself in his speech" (24) when abandoning his mother tongue to speak in a different language, suggesting that the speaker's true self identity is then concealed, invisible behind the mask of the colonizer's language. If we follow Fanon's view, choosing English as an adopted language (and in some ways, choosing it over Vietnamese) could be seen as Little Dog betraying or even denying a part of himself. His choice would result in him playing the part of an English speaking individual and thus burying his true identity for social assimilation. But the novel provides a contrasting perspective on the use of language as a mask. Indeed, Little Dog states that the reason he "code-switched" was "so that others would see [his] face and therefore [his mother's]" (Vuong 32). This could seem paradoxical, considering a mask would hide rather than show a person's face. But for Little Dog, English is a way to exist and be visible in an English-speaking society. It enables him to have a voice and to lend that voice to his family.

This question of visibility through using English is important as it allows Little Dog to distinguish himself as a second-generation immigrant. The opposition between the possessive

adjective “our,” which determines his family’s poor command of English (“our blanks, our silences, stutters” 32), and Little Dog’s affirmation of his own linguistic competence (“my English”) indicates the difference between first and second generations. The other distinction discernable between first and second generations in regard to English concerns how Little Dog and Rose view the concept of English as a mask differently. After having encouraged Little Dog to be invisible and even silent, Rose indeed asks him to use English as a tool to handle daily life in the U.S. but more importantly to stay out of trouble. She enforces his use of English as a means of assimilation, reflecting her desire for her child to fit into the dominant culture and perhaps attain a more privileged status within it. This reflects a common theme in immigrant literature, where parents often encourage their children to adopt the language and customs of the new country in the hope of securing a better future for them. This idea is to be tied with the way she forces Little Dog to drink “American milk” to make him stronger in a ritual motivated by the hope that “the whiteness vanishing into [him] would make more of a yellow boy” (27). The use of “whiteness” in this context can be seen as a representation of the dominant culture as well as a metaphor for privilege as it is presented as a characteristic synonymous with being “more,” suggesting that people of color are somewhat less than. The novel thus exposes how and why many immigrants and refugees adopt silent conformity as a means of survival as language can determine one’s ability to assimilate in mainstream American society. One is often advised to be “silent and invisible” to survive in a hostile country (Nguyen, *Nothing* 66). But the book also implies that the English language has greater significance for Little Dog than that, even as he diligently fulfills the roles of his mother's representative and the family's translator: Little Dog wants to be heard and wants his family to be heard and seen and this is made possible through his writing their stories. Learning English and having access to an American education proved to be useful tools in this endeavor although it may have been difficult to develop voice after decades of being told to be silent and invisible. Through his narrative, Little Dog can be seen resisting against the expected silence from minorities. And yet it seems as if Little Dog can only make his story significant in the U.S. by writing in English. Viet Thanh Nguyen states the importance of writing in English in order to acquire recognition from the American public as “American studies does not generally read, write, or hear in anything besides English” (“Refugee” 919). Neumann argues that, because Little Dog writes his family’s stories in English, Vuong’s novel is “an uneasy manifestation of an act of translation that, despite good intentions, reflects the Anglocentrism that makes translation necessary in the first place” (290). However, one could argue that Little Dog does not completely abide by this need for translation to appeal to a larger American audience. This can be seen in his use of different languages in

his narrative. If we consider once again the word "oxtail," we see that it appears six times within the scene at the butcher however it is never spoken out loud by any of the characters. Even though the event is retrospectively related in English by Little Dog, the original scene unfolds in Vietnamese from the entire family's perspective. Displaying the word "oxtail" in an italicized font ("*oxtail*," Vuong 31), the text emphasizes the act of translation and highlights the narrator's role as a mediator between experience and narration (and simultaneously the writer's role as a mediator between reader and narrative). Also highlighted here is the impossibility of perfect and complete translation. The copresence of Vietnamese, French, English and even Spanish at this moment of the narrative underscores the impossibility of speaking the English word "oxtail." The refusal to translate the Vietnamese and French dialogues puts the reader in a position similar to Rose's. Just as she is unable to verbalize "oxtail," the reader (who, for the purpose of the analysis, we will assume is only English-literate) is unable to understand the non-English exchanges. Neumann thus writes that Vuong's text "counters the inherent violence and culturally enforced dominance of English by subjecting it to the differential potential of translation, a kind of translation that strives towards the foreignization rather than domestication of the target language" (292). In this sense, Vuong pushes the limits of language to explore the linguistic and cultural barriers that shape Little Dog's experience in the U.S. (Neumann).

### b. "To speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war": language as representative of loss

Following the visit to the butcher, Little Dog quotes Roland Barthes to expand on his interrogation of the limits of language: "*No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure*, wrote Barthes. *For the writer, however, it is the mother tongue*" (31). Barthes establishes a privileged relationship between "the writer" and "the mother tongue" by expressing the universal assumption that elevates the writer through a guaranteed relationship with pleasure thanks to language. He also constructs a complementary relationship between language and the body. However, Little Dog seems to question such a conception of universal and guaranteed elevation: "But what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out? Can one take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely?" (31). Through his questioning of language and of the issue of illiteracy, Little Dog, and by extension Ocean Vuong, grapples with the geopolitics of being a Vietnamese American writer navigating his proficiency in the normative language of society (here, English)

and his own “mother tongue”. Little Dog notably engages with the work of Roland Barthes, which allows him to then articulate his own views on language. While Barthes uses the term “mother tongue” as a more abstract concept referring to a writer’s native language, Little Dog, through his three successive questions, puts forward its materiality and the physical and literal referents constituting the expression (“mother” and “tongue”). The text translates the metaphor into its embodied meaning. Focusing on the word “tongue,” Little Dog transforms it a tangible object, a body part but then turns it into “the symbol of a void” becoming “itself a void”. This metamorphosis raises inquiries about the potential for the tongue to be subjected to violence, Little Dog asking: “what if the tongue is cut out?” The transition from the figurative meaning to the literal, from a reflection on writing to physical violence, shifts the focus from language and figures of speech to the figure of Rose, a Vietnamese American woman.

The second part of the metaphor brought forth by Barthes concerns the word “mother”. This focuses on the figure of the mother Rose and her body. The shift from metaphor to physicality and an embodied meaning sheds new light on Barthes’s quote and its affective assertion by focusing on the question of loss: “Can you take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely?” (31). This question counters in some way Barthes’s claim that the writer’s relationship with the mother tongue is marked by pleasure. Indeed, Little Dog suggests on the contrary that the writer is in relationship with loss and not pleasure. To the question quoted above, he answers that “the Vietnamese [he] own[s] is the one [his mother] gave [him], the one whose diction and syntax reach only the second-grade level” (31). The mother tongue, Vietnamese here, constitutes something that brings up feelings of grief instead of pleasure. If Rose’s limitations in the English language play an important role in her isolation in the U.S., we see that her Vietnamese proficiency (which “reache[s] only the second-grade level”) is also called into question in the narrative. We learn in the following paragraph that Rose witnessed her schoolhouse being bombed during an American napalm raid when she was five years old and that she “never stepped into a classroom again” (31). Her illiteracy and her limited Vietnamese are thus presented as a direct consequence of the war in Vietnam. Reminding us of the idea of language as a “memory bank” (Wa Thiong’o, 1997, 57), language appears as fundamentally associated with the context it is rooted in and as a symbol of a people’s collective struggle. And through her relationship to language, the character of the mother is presented as a product of history and therefore of war. Her relationship to language is conditioned by her personal history which itself is tied with collective history. Because of this reminder of Rose’s childhood and of her experience of the war, the text grieves the loss she had to go through: not

only her literacy and fluency in her own "mother tongue," but also the limitations that come along with it (the impossibility to communicate and be recognized in society, a form of linguistic but also affective disjunction).

The text problematizes and complexifies Barthes's metonymy of the "mother tongue" by dismissing its universalizing implications. Literalizing the metonymy of the "mother tongue" and thus unearthing the materialized and embodied implications of the metonymy, Vuong offers new ways to look at such expressions and figures of speech by politicizing them and revealing the lived realities they can hide. Little Dog thus removes "mother tongue" from Barthes's figurative frame and by deconstructing the expression, focusing on its different parts and their material referents. Then, he comes up with a new trope or a new interpretation, claiming: "Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all – but an orphan. Our Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark of where your education ended, ashed. Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war" (31-32). In that sense, Little Dog's use of the metonymy is dual as it cumulates the literal and the figurative. As we have stated, the text begins by dismantling Barthes's figurative "mother tongue" into the materialized "mother" and "tongue" to bring to light the literal within the figurative. Little Dog then returns once again to the "mother" in "mother tongue" by comparing his underdeveloped Vietnamese to an "orphan." The phrase "orphan tongue" allows for a dual interpretation. Firstly, "orphan tongue" can be understood metonymically as "the tongue of the orphan," wherein one metonymy replaces another. Here, the word "orphan" replaces "mother," suggesting that the language (tongue) being referred to is used by an orphan. Secondly, "orphan tongue" can be viewed metaphorically, where the tongue itself is likened to an orphan. In this sense, the metaphor personifies the tongue, portraying it as abandoned, disconnected, and without the guiding influence of a mother. Both interpretations coalesce to convey the nuanced and complex relationship between language, identity, and heritage. The wordplay emphasizes the lack of direct lineage or heritage for the language, highlighting its detached and independent existence. This implies a sense of loss, particularly the loss of a language deeply rooted in familial and cultural heritage. This also underscores the isolation and struggle experienced by immigrants, especially the second generation who often grapple with their cultural identity and may feel a certain longing for a sense of belonging and a desire to preserve their cultural and linguistic roots.

Little Dog then likens Rose's Vietnamese (and therefore his own) to a "time capsule" initiating a change in the figurative imagery: from a filial imagery to a chronological one. The

metonymy indeed articulates an explicit relationship with time. A "time capsule," as a container holding historical records or objects representative of current time and culture that is buried for preservation until discovery in the future age, refers to the movement or passing of time. In other words, a time capsule holds the present moment (which soon enough will be relegated to the past) and conserves it for the future. Even though Little Dog's metonymy is very much anchored in the idea of time, it also hints at spatial positionality through the use of the spatial marker "where" that maps out Rose's life experiences. Employing "where" instead of the expected "when" results in the collapse of time and space and therefore the disruption of temporal linearity. As with a "time capsule", the past, present and future are not separated from one another but rather coexist in the narrative as well as in Rose's life. More than just marking the coexistence of time and space, the use of the word "where" can also be interpreted as a literary memorial to Rose's loss. The fact is that Little Dog sees his mother's Vietnamese as "the symbol of a void," as "itself a void". The language is not so much synonym with an absence in the sense of just lacking something (proficiency and fluency in Vietnamese above the second-grade level) but rather it is synonymous with loss in the sense that she was robbed of the opportunity to develop her linguistic skills. In terms of language, the mother appears to be stuck as her five years-old self who was left powerless, a passive observant who had to watch, "from a banana grove, [her] schoolhouse collapse after an American napalm raid" (31). Directly addressing his mother, Little Dog then says: "Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war" (32). Little Dog's statement suggests that when speaking in Vietnamese, they are not just communicating in a language; they are also invoking the memories, experiences, and legacy of war that are deeply intertwined with their culture and linguistic heritage. The use of the word "partially" suggests that the act of speaking Vietnamese is a multifaceted experience in which more than one language is spoken as the war becomes a sort of metaphorical language in its own right. On one hand, this experience connects the speaker to their cultural roots and heritage. On the other hand, it reminds them of the pain and trauma associated with war, which is an integral part of their cultural narrative. This goes to show how Vietnamese American literature and history often if not always traces back to the war, something Viet Thanh Nguyen argues saying "If Vietnamese American literature could avoid the war, then it could avoid this challenge of confronting the mythology and the contradictions of America. But the literature cannot avoid the war, because the literature is inseparable from the Vietnamese American population itself, which exists only because of the war" (*Nothing* 200). Through his deconstruction and his reinterpretation of Barthes's metaphor, Little Dog reorganizes structures of time and space by allowing the narrative to move forward

without moving on: a position particular to Vietnamese American literature's relationship with the war.

## C. The hybridity of the form: a new take on the epistolary genre and the memoir

### a. The Vietnamese American letter and memoir

Written in the form of a letter from a son to his illiterate mother, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* falls into the literary tradition of the epistle. Historically, the epistolary form played an important role in in forming Vietnamese American history and in connecting members of the Vietnamese American refugee community after they were forcibly separated at the end of the war. Examining Võ Phiến's Vietnamese-language letters in *America's Vietnam*, Marguerite Nguyen describes them as "some of the earliest conceptions of Vietnamese American subjectivity and literature" (21). Discussing how the epistolary form contributed to Vietnamese American refugee identity, she argues that "Vietnamese-language letters provide a chronotopically open portrayal of refugeeness" which is not constrained in "finite terms of crisis and emergency" (139). According to Nguyen, they offer "an open spatial and temporal structure" connoting circulation as they invite future responses. And "when combined with Vietnamese language, they create a venue through which a Vietnamese-literate public can express and consider refugeeness and conditions of refugee production as ongoing" (Nguyen 139). The epistolary form differs from other forms of writing in that it offers a certain imagined simultaneity in terms of space and time. Even though the possibility of correspondence can only come with the absence of the addressee which suggests deferred reception and delayed answers, written correspondence opens up a space for imaginary co-presence connecting the sender and recipient both chronologically and spatially. By that I mean that the letter refers both to the present of the person writing and to the possibility of a future response. In regard to space, the letter constitutes a junction between the sender and the addressee, it points back to the space in which the letter was written while also pointing forward to its destination. When one sends a letter, one thus acknowledges the passing of time and the changing of place, as well as the co-presence with at least one other person: the addressee. The writing subject is present as a function of speech, as an enunciator or narrator in the script that the addressee is reading. Even though the epistle contributed to community and identity formation, Nguyen underscores the politics and power dynamics present in Vietnamese American letters stating that, while letters

can connect people by crossing time and space, there is no guarantee that they will indeed achieve their role. Sending a letter does not necessarily mean it will reach its addressee nor that the addressee will respond. We have to remind ourselves that Vietnamese refugees, when forced to immigrate, may have tried to find missing loved ones in what Nguyen calls "the epistolary structure of the classified ad" (141). In this particular case, the designated addressees might indeed be dead, Vietnamese refugees' letters thus "also function epitaphically" (142) by demarcating the dead from the living. Those missing persons ads shed light on a form of documentation of loss through the epistolary form, the loss of home, of country, of family and ultimately the loss of lives. By adopting the form of the letter, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* honors the epistolary form and its influence on the Vietnamese American literary tradition. However, the novel breaks from its conventions from the very beginning of the narrative through the choice of an illiterate addressee, a topic I intend to expand on later on.

Just as important as the epistolary form in forming Vietnamese American refugee community and identity is the role played by the memoir in Vietnamese American literary production. As we have stated in of first part concerning the emergence and characteristics of Vietnamese American literature, the memoir was instrumental in bringing Vietnamese American voices to the larger American public. While the epistle was primarily addressed to members of the Vietnamese American community itself, the memoir reached outside of the community. In *This is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature*, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud correlates this expansion to the end of the economic embargo placed on Vietnam until 1994, claiming that "it facilitated the entry of Vietnamese American cultural production in the U.S. national narrative. The year 1994 marks the emergence of what would become a relatively popular genre, the Vietnamese American memoir" (27). Improved political and economic relations between Vietnam and the United States allowed for the creation of a market for Vietnamese American literary production. The popularity of the Vietnamese American memoir can be explained by the expectations of authenticity attached to it. Vietnamese American literature is for the most part believed to be representative of the Vietnamese American experience while also bearing the burden of resolving American anxiety regarding the war and its consequences. Pelaud evokes how "recalling the past through storytelling can contribute to individual and collective healing by making sense of an emotionally incomprehensible past" and she underscores how "for the non-Vietnamese American audience, the texts can serve an individual and collective desire for resolution of the Viet Nam War" (36). Within the larger American cultural context, Vietnamese American

writers are presumed to be spokespersons for their community and their literary productions are therefore oftentimes likened to nonfiction works rather than purely artistic productions. The success of the Vietnamese American memoir is thus seemingly tied with the public's expectations of ethnic authenticity and the public's desire for "true stories" rather than what has for so long constituted the historical consensus around the war (often associated with feelings of guilt or pity towards refugees).

While Little Dog and Ocean Vuong share many similarities, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* remains a work of fiction. While some could have been tempted to characterize it as a memoir as it focuses on specific episodes that could be traced back to Vuong's own life, the latter has constantly emphasized that his book is a work of fiction stating "I wanted to invoke or invite an autobiographical reading, but refuse it ultimately… The book would be founded on truth, but realized by the imagination" (qtd in Chow "Going Home with Ocean Vuong"). On one hand, one can find similarities between the real-life author and his character: both Vuong and Little Dog are queer Vietnamese American writers raised by mothers named Rose who worked in nail salons. But while Vuong strategically incorporates details from his own life readers can recognize, he rejects any claim of perfect authenticity. One example of the differences between Ocean Vuong and Little Dog would be that Little Dog loses his grandmother to cancer, while in real life, Ocean Vuong lost his mother to cancer. These details in Vuong's novel support the idea that *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* should be defined as a semi-autobiographical narrative, or a piece of autofiction, rather than a memoir even though it draws from the literary tradition of the Vietnamese American memoir. The novel blurs the lines between autobiography and fiction ass Vuong draws inspiration from his own life experiences, memories, and emotions but uses these elements as a foundation to construct a fictional story or characters. While the narrative may contain events, settings, or characters that closely resemble the author's own life, there is a degree of creative embellishment, alteration, restructuration, or imaginative storytelling involved:

> Hartford, Vietnam, the bodies, the history. But the rest of it, the walls, the windows, the roof, what happens inside this home, is the work of the imagination. […] To amplify things and to orchestrate things. You know, one of, the power of the novel is that it's in organizing architecture where tension is planned and orchestrated according to a system. We don't get to do that in life. (Vuong, "OCEAN VUONG in conversation with Tommy Orange")

The novel thus engages with a particular Vietnamese American literary tradition through its proximity to the memoir genre while also departing from the expectations of authenticity from ethnic writers, a set of expectations believed to offer "personal knowledge with a sense of immediacy and feeling" (Marguerite Nguyen 93). As a piece of autofiction, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* should not be reduced to questions of authenticity. Vuong avoids total adherence to factual reality thus disrupting the seamless expectations of nonfictional authenticity and manipulating the conventions of writerly retrospection. In regards to the relationship between trauma and self-representation in contemporary literature, Leigh Gilmore has pointed out that, for many writers, the conventions connected to truth-telling can be too restrictive if not harmful in putting trauma into words. The risk of being accused of not being truthful and authentic can be a hindrance to the writing process of bringing trauma out of silence. Gilmore goes on to say the autobiographical endeavor may thus deviate from the conventions attached to the autobiography while still embracing the project of self-representation. In the case of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous,* Vuong's choice of a fictional narrative, however autobiographically inspired, is consistent with the project of revisiting and processing past traumas and losses through the power of imagination. In a 2019 interview with Scott Simon, Vuong said: "I wanted to start with truth and end with art, as a writer. That was very important to me" (Simon, "Start with Truth and End with Art': Poet Ocean Vuong on His Debut Novel"). Because the narrator of this autofiction is himself a writer, the form also enables subjective and reflexive creativity by interrogating the writing process as Little Dog both relates past events and invites retrospective reflections on his doing so.

Ocean Vuong speaks of the power of the novel in organizing an architecture where tension is planned and orchestrated according to a system, something that would be impossible to achieve in "real" life. Though this system is not explicitly defined, one could interpret the epistolary form of the novel as providing such a system. The choice of this epistolary form allows for a meticulous arrangement of tensions and resolutions, akin to orchestrating a carefully composed piece of fiction. Additionally, the mention of "according to a system" hints at Vuong's utilization of a tradition deeply rooted in Asian literary heritage, a theme that will be elaborated upon in Part IV. By doing so, Vuong intertwines different literary and cultural influences, breathing life into the narrative while retaining a deliberate and meaningful structure.

### b. The epistolary form as testimony: the I/eye of the witness and an opportunity for reflexivity

At the beginning of his book entitled *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative* (2007), Thomas Larson writes that "for the last century and a half, the world of life-writing, which includes biography, autobiography, memoir, and confession, has been dominated by the personal tale of a public figure, a life socially significant in his or her own time." (11) However since the 1980s, a new kind of first-person narrative emerged in which ordinary people chose to remember and share their own stories, an evolution that particularly developed in the context of personal and historical tragedy. While the biographical value of such an introspective and reflective prose narrative is important, authenticity and factual truthfulness are not the only elements that matter, as we've discussed previously. As a trauma narrative *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* presents a mnemonic value which brings the remembering of the past, with its symbolic and often traumatic force, back into the present of the narration which is tied with questions of transmission, culture, and history.

Since the end of the 20th century, we have noticed a profusion and dissemination of writings centered on the self, the "writing of the self", recalling the expression coined by Foucault (1983). Letters, as much as memoirs, are life writing texts, writings of the self. In the course of literary historiography, letters have received distrustful attention from critics who claimed they were private and too intimate, constituting excessive exposure of the self and therefore unappealing to literary analysis. However, this reading has been revised and epistles are now considered as just another meaningful literary production susceptible to bring the self to literary analysis. Ocean Vuong makes use of the structure of the letter (its temporal, spatial and vocative markers) to produce a novel which also takes from the memoir literary tradition. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a hybrid text, making use of markers of the epistolary genre, such as the initial salutatory vocative, the use of the second person pronoun "you," to accentuate the presence of the addressee. Rebelling against generic identification, letters have been described by scholars such as Brigitte Diaz as an indefinable literary genre floating between categories: archives, documents and testimonies. Even if they are initially conceived as "letters," objects in which an "I" addresses a certain "other" and in which there is a purpose of communication, Little Dog's letter to his mother exceeds the expectations one can have from an epistle. The narration of events taken from empirical or fictional reality is mixed with literary abstractions, metaphors and reflections that might make the reader question the nature of the

narrative they is reading. In an interview given to the Spanish newspaper *El País* in 2020, Vuong justifies his choice of the epistolary form because he wanted freedom in the form of digression, which, according to him, would not be allowed by the structure of a traditional novel: "Writing it as if it were a letter allowed me to use digression, of which European aesthetics is more receptive. In the United States, it is usually more direct. The epistolary novel is a spiral that doesn't always go to a determined place" (Vuong 2020, translation my own)[2]. Interestingly, this echoes Little Dog's statement in the novel that "Some people say history moves in a spiral, not in the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed" (Vuong 27). Contrarily to the memoir genre which generally assumes a chronological and linear mode of narrative retracing the narrator's evolution, the epistolary form and the very fragmentation it implies allow for another way of exploring Little Dog's past. It allows him to revisit the same event multiple times by adding new details to it or presenting it through a different perspective. The past thus appears as something that can be continuously revisited, hence the image of the spiral. The mention of "one circle removed" can suggest that history repeats but not exactly in the same way, or that we may revisit the past at a distance from the original event, perhaps with variations or changes.

Ocean Vuong thus provides a personal narrative in the form of hybrid life writing steeped in the subjectivity of "I" which becomes the eye of the witness of trauma. Pulling from the epistolary tradition but also from the newly ubiquitous literary memoir tradition, the novel prompts readers to focus on the person telling his story. This is especially true of first-person accounts of trauma (be it personal or collective) like in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous.* The novel subverts the epistolary genre in more ways than one by adopting some features of a memoir narrative. The perceived hybridity of the novel is arises from the tension between the sensory perception found in the more novelistic scenes and reflexive discourses. Indeed, Little Dog seems to alternate between recounting scenes of his youth, moments, and encounters that deeply affected him, and reflecting on what they meant for him, the influence they had on his past, present, and future. This indeed plays into the hybridity of the memoir narrative which is mainly characterized by the tension between eye-witnessing and reflecting on that experience

2 In the original: "Escribirla como si fuera una carta me permitió usar la digresión, a la que la estética europea es más receptiva. En Estados Unidos, se suele ir más al grano. La novela espitolar es une espiral que no siempre va a un lugar determinado" (Vuong 2020).

of bearing witness. Thomas Larson evokes this form of back-and-forth movement when he writes that

> linking experience to one's persona, one's culture, one's ideas, the memoirist uses dramatic narrative and reflective analysis to bridge the details and the expanse of what he has unleashed. Story alone will not do it. The memoir's prime stylistic distinction is a give-and-take between narration and analysis, one that directs the memoirist to both show and tell. (Larson 23)

In the context of a narrative borrowing traits from the genre of the memoir, "it is more crucial, however, to know the *perception of the rememberer*" (Larson 29). The narration hence focuses on what the narrator has seen, on what he has experienced of the world. His perceptions are relayed to the reader through the testimony that makes up his letter. This eye-witness account reinforces the perceived authenticity of the narration, making readers more inclined to believe the experience or memory the narrator is referring to.

### c. Confessing to an illiterate addressee

The privileged relation Little Dog's memories and confessions create between narrator and reader constitutes "an even more visible characteristic of the letters that typically compose epistolary narratives—their confidentiality—which structures the thematics, character relations, and narrative action of letter novels to a remarkable degree" (Altman 47). In his essay "Le Roman épistolaire et la technique narrative au XVIIIe siècle", François Jost distinguishes two fundamental uses of the letter. He first talks about what he calls the "static" or "passive" method, characterized by the "lettre-confidence" which merely reports events, meaning the writer and receiver of said letter play a more passive role. On the other hand, in the "active" or "kinetic" method (characterized by the "lettre-drame"), the narrative progresses thanks and through the letters themselves as they provoke reactions or function as agents in the plot of the novel. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* falls into the first category as Little Dog's single letter is never answered and therefore does not affect events in the narrative, it merely recounts his past and allows him to reflect on his family's history as well as to question his writing process. The novel does not contain a proper epistolary exchange for Rose remains silent. And yet, the reader is very aware of her presence throughout the narrative. This can be felt in the initial address "Dear Ma" but also through regular apostrophes all throughout the novel. The

conversational tone blends with Little Dog's storytelling. Little Dog thus associates his mother to his reflections and the reader, who can stand as a substitute for her character and may thus feel he or she is Little Dog's confidante. These questions of who is able to speak as well of who is silenced and the resulting tension between presence and absence (symbolized through language) are compelling and they call for further exploration. Indeed communication, be it effective or failed, plays a central role within the novel as Little Dog, for instance, consciously accepts the failure of the Vietnamese language to properly communicate with his mother since his ability in the language reaches "only the second-grade level" (Vuong 2019, 31).

Usually, the epistolary form provides different points of view as, unlike a journal for instance, a letter is addressed to a specific addressee whose expected response conditions the discourse. While normally the epistolary form comprises an exchange of letters in which the first-person personal pronoun successively refers to multiple characters depending on who is writing a particular letter, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a monophonic epistolary novel. Indeed, Ocean Vuong wrote his novel in the form of a letter from a son to his illiterate mother: "Let me begin again. Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (3). The letter opening stands on its own, declaring Little Dog's intention to "begin again" and thus officially begin the letter in itself. The use of "let me begin again" also signals the characteristic behavior of letter writers having to sometimes crumple the sheet of paper and start anew. But what is striking about this particular second beginning is how it is marked by the acknowledgement of the futility of Little Dog's endeavor. Because Rose is illiterate and therefore cannot read English, his words will never reach her. The epistolary novel thus opens with the recognition of its own failure, even though the sentence "Let me begin again" gives a form of impetus to the novel. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* thus departs from the epistolary tradition as the novel-letter has a singular writer and does not include or even allude to the possibility of a response from the addressee. This makes us question Vuong's choice of having an unknowing addressee.

Many scholars have claimed that testimonial projects that involve narrating require a listener as much as a speaking subject delivering the narrative. Psychoanalyst Dori Laub argues that one of the harms of trauma remains the impossibility of saying "thou." By that, he means that in the context of trauma, the person who has suffered oftentimes lacks an "other" who will accept to listen to the traumatized speaker without reacting violently. In *The Limits of Autobiography, Trauma and Testimony,* Leigh Gilmore explains that, for Laub, the act of telling is crucial as

> trauma has not happened in the same ways to someone before and after she or he can organize the story in narrative terms and recount it successfully. Narrative not only contains trauma in this formulation, but is itself an experiential category. Laub recognizes here the pain of storytelling, but also privileges narrative over experience. Experience is an insufficient category for the description of trauma: narrative, with the requirement of what I would call here a good-enough listener, is necessary. (Gilmore 31)

On the one hand, we can surmise that there was not a "good-enough listener" for Little Dog. Resorting to writing to his mother could also very well be a way to protect himself from her potentially violent reaction to what he has to say, not only about the abuse she inflicted on him when he was a child, but also the revelation of his homosexuality. One could be tempted to say it allows the narrator to confront his traumatic past and express his identity as a gay man without fearing consequences from his mother. The choice of an illiterate addressee could thus be interpreted as a literary tool that allows the narrator to share the most intimate but also perhaps the most shameful parts of himself without really exposing himself to possible repercussions. Little Dog can thus benefit from the advantage of having a makeshift audience without the inconvenience of having said audience possibly react poorly. But it could as well be a way to highlight the fractures within the family unit.

Little Dog frames his letter as a form of confession only made possible by his mother's inability to receive it, stating "I only have the nerve to tell you what comes after because the chance this letter finds you is slim – the very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling it possible" (Vuong 113). The transition from slight probability ("the chance this letter finds you is slim") to "the very impossibility" of the mother's reading and accepting her son's truth is what liberate Little Dog's speech so to speak. Confessing means telling a truth, revealing a part of oneself. The fundamental difference between confessing and confiding is that a confession historically is addressed to an external entity, most often God, the court, the public or even a person one has wronged. In confessing, one offers his life for judgement by others as the person or entity receiving the confession holds the power to condemn, punish, absolve or forgive. On the other hand, the receiver of a confidence can be sympathetic but has no true authority over the person confiding. The giving and acceptance of a confidence place the two parties involved on equal footing thus confidences do not necessarily suggest a form of hierarchy or at least some form of power dynamic. A confession however always has to do with power. The confessing person or writer is indeed either appealing to some power that he invests

in the one receiving his confession or working his own power on the receiver to make him accept the content of the confession. Those two actions are not mutually exclusive, meaning the person confessing can do both things simultaneously. But in any case the relationship between the two parties involved is not necessarily reciprocal and, according to Emily Gordon, never equal ("Confessing and Confiding").

Emily Gordon also argues that confessions tend generally to be serious or at the very least somewhat emotionally charged. While a confidence puts the emphasis on the relationship between the two parties involved, what is important about a confession is its content. Contrary to confessions, which can be coerced, confidences are innately voluntary. Often seen as the currency of friendships and other bonded relationships, confidences are meant to be exchanged. On the other hand, confessions are serious, even intense, as they can sometimes be disruptive of social order. The seriousness attached to confessions and the act of exchanging truths is made obvious in Vuong's novel. Following Little Dog's coming out to his mother, Rose reveals he had a brother she was forced to abort in Vietnam because at the time "there was nothing to eat" (Vuong 133). Reminiscing about this particular conversation he states: "We were exchanging truths, I realized, which is to say, we were cutting one another" (133). The parallelism between the two acts ("we were exchanging truths" and "we were cutting one another") presented in the form of a reformulation explicitly foregrounds how violent telling the truth can be. Their confessions here constitute precarious acts of language which highlight the power dynamic between the two parties involved in the exchange. Vuong seems to suggest that neither Little Dog or his mother can come out of this conversation unscathed thus once again underlying the fractures within the family unit. I think this particular exchange is symptomatic of the characters' difficulty in being completely honest and accepting of each other, perhaps another reason which would prompt Little Dog to use the illiterate addressee ploy in his narrative. In the address to the illiterate, Little Dog is safe from his mother in the sense that he is not harming her or being harmed by her through verbal interaction. But despite the inherent violence implied in this passage, the text still conveys a sense of intimacy between the two characters. The expression "we were cutting one another" suggests a form of physical intimacy reached through verbal violence as cutting one another implies touching one another.

## Part III. "A life in which violence and delicacy collide": an ode to Little Dog's loved ones and the complexities of interpersonal relationships

While *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* undoubtedly ties into what one could expect from a Vietnamese American work of fiction as it deals with war trauma and the refugee experience, one cannot objectively define the novel as only a story of memory and identity. And as much as this is Little Dog's story, the novel is also the story of his relationships with others and how they shape his own understanding of both the world and himself.

The novel shares its title with a poem that Vuong published in his 2017 poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. The poem juxtaposes intimacy, delicacy and violence, showcasing how they intertwine in the speaker's sexual and familial relationships. Throughout the novel, the generational cycles of trauma and violence endured by Little Dog's family inform large parts of his life and the way in which he sees his relationships without excluding the love that binds the characters together. This expression of both love and violence through Little Dog's writing does not apply only to his familial relationships but also includes his romantic relationships. This can be seen in the novel through the way Little Dog explores his queer sexuality with Trevor, his first lover who succumbs to his drug addiction at the end of the narrative, as we learn in one of the most poetic parts of the novel. Speaking of his relationship with Trevor, Little Dog states "[V]iolence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love" (Vuong 119). In that sense, both the poem and the novel examine how emotions released in acts of love, desire or violence can still produce a certain sense of intimacy, almost delicacy.

While some of the turmoil which characterizes Little Dog's relationship with his mother can also be found in his relationship with Trevor, one could argue that his family and romantic life are contrasted insofar as Little Dog reclaims agency with Trevor. In other words, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is the story of a young boy coming into his own, a Bildungsroman filled with both yearning and pain which oscillates between tenderness and brutality.

In a novel where there is no definite plot, no climax to reach, the object of focus becomes very different. When discussing his novel with Tommy Orange, Vuong thus states that "when you let go of plot, what you gain is people" (2020). With this idea in mind, I want to take a closer look at the complex network of relationships woven in the epistolary narrative around the figure of Little Dog and how they can be expressed through affection while also being the

cause of pain. I shall therefore discuss the ways in which Vuong manages to convey the importance of Little Dog's relationships as they inform the entirety of the novel without foregoing how they oftentimes teeter between love and violence, displaying the ambivalence of presence and distance, separation and (re)union, communication and alienation.

## A. The ambivalence of touch

### a. The cycle of abuse

In dealing with themes of history, memory and family, much of Vuong's work is heavily focused on familial bonds and particularly on maternal figures. Similarly to his character Little Dog, Vuong's father quickly left after the family arrived in America, leaving Vuong to be raised by his mother, grandmother and aunts, a childhood he describes saying: "I was raised by women. I was saved by women" (Mathews). But while this idea of an euphoric narrative might be true for Vuong himself, Little Dog's own narrative is somewhat more ambivalent. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is especially centered around the figure of the mother and the effect of her trauma on Little Dog's childhood. Vuong contrasts the fond memories of Little Dog's mother with the troubling memories of the physical abuse she exerted on her son:

> The time with a gallon of milk. The jug bursting on my shoulder bone, then a steady white rain on the kitchen tiles.
>
> The time at Six Flags, when you rode the Superman roller coaster with me because I was too scared to do it alone. How you threw up for hours afterward, your whole head in the garbage can. How, in my screeching delight, I forgot to say *Thank you*.
>
> The time we went to Goodwill and piled the cart with items that had a yellow tag, because on that day a yellow tag meant an additional fifty percent off. I pushed the cart and leaped on the back bar, gliding, feeling rich with our bounty of discarded treasures. It was your birthday. We were splurging. "Do I look like a real American?" you asked, pressing a white dress to your length. It was slightly too formal for you to have any occasion to wear, yet casual enough to hold a *possibility* of use. A chance. I nodded, grinning. The cart was so full by then I no longer saw what was ahead of me.

> The time with the kitchen knife—the one you picked up, then put down, shaking, saying, "Get out. Get out." And I ran out the door, down the black summer streets. I ran until I forgot I was ten, until my heartbeat was all I could hear of myself. (Vuong 9)

Both love and hurt are evident throughout this passage and the anaphora "the time" contributes to this jarring juxtaposition. Resembling a form of listing, the anaphora also constructs a vignette effect as readers are given a glimpse into these different memories. Because each small paragraph begins in the same way, it creates a sense of accumulation and expectation as it implies that these memories should be somewhat connected to each other. And yet, we can discern a certain dichotomy concerning the four memories here conjured up. The first scene mentioned is one of violence as the narrator remembers being hit with a gallon of milk in the kitchen. The two following memories are ones in which feelings and acts of love are at the forefront as the second memory centers around the shared experience of joy and carefreeness at Six Flags and the third one takes place in Goodwill, a hopeful scene in which the emphasis is put on the bond between mother and son. The fourth and final memory on the other hand constitutes once again a sign of violence through the mother's picking up a knife, even if this violence is not acted upon as the young narrator flees the scene in the end. The only temporal marker present being the reiteration of "the time", we cannot be certain these events happened in chronological order. But I still find it interesting how, in this passage, the two scenes of abuse frame the two more loving scenes. One could argue that this particular disposition was deliberate and that it illustrates in some ways the inner workings of the mother-son relationship. What I mean by that is that the succession of memories could be interpreted as emphasizing how love remains at the center of the familial relation but that the former still is open to the possibility of violence, and more particularly the possibility of physical violence. In that sense, the open-ness of the list places the reader in a position of sympathetic expectancy and uncertainty related to the sheer unpredictability of the mother's behavior.

If we consider more closely the memories presented in this passage, we arrive at the conclusion that these scenes are rooted within the world of immigrants. I would even go as far as stating that they depict a reality only refugees of war could possibly experience. This is evident in the mother's question: "Do I look like a real American?". The irruption of direct speech within an otherwise descriptive account of past memories constitutes a form of rupture within the mnemonic process. While it certainly adds to the scene's realism, it also automatically calls for the reader's attention. Such a question may seem innocent at first but it implies a deeper inner conflict with the mother's identity. The use of the adjective "real" implies

that, even though she moved to America to flee the war, she never successfully assimilated to American society. In a following scene taking place once again in Goodwill, Little Dog's mother expresses concern regarding a white dress, asking this time around "Can you read this, […] and tell me if it's fireproof?" (Vuong 13). While in the previous quote, she was concerned with looking "like a real American," here she worries explicitly about the dress being "fireproof". From a question of identity and assimilation, that is to say questions relating to her position as an immigrant, the text shifts focus by alluding to her trauma as a refugee of war who experienced the bombings on Vietnam soil and the use of napalm by American military forces. Incidentally the second question uttered by the mother appears as a question of survival in that the motivation behind it seems to be escaping the danger and violence she experienced previously in her life (here symbolized by fire). Little Dog thus answers positively, saying the dress is indeed fireproof. His lie then is symbolic of a shift in the familial power dynamic as one could argue the child becomes his mother's protector of the mother by soothing her worries. These two questions once again illustrate her concerns as an immigrant and a refugee of war. Framing these concerns of identity and violence with daily life experiences such as shopping at Goodwill creates a jarring contrast and exemplifies how the mother's past trauma and her experience as an immigrant shape the family's life and routine. In the first paragraph of this particular passage, Little Dog ponders the reasons behind his mother's abuse by suggesting that they are possibly a consequence of her PTSD:

> I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it, after all. Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war, to say that to possess a heartbeat is not as simple as the heart's task of saying *yes yes yes* to the body.
>
> I don't know.
>
> What I do know is that, back at Goodwill, you handed me the white dress, your eyes glazed and wide. "Can you read this," you said, "and tell me if it's fireproof?" I searched the hem, looked at the print on the tag and, not yet able to read myself, said, "Yeah." Said it anyway. "Yeah," I lied, holding the dress up to your chin. "It's fireproof." [...]
>
> "That's so good to know, baby." you said, staring off, stone-faced, over my shoulder, the dress held to your chest. "That's so good." (Vuong 13-14)

The fact that Little Dog tries to come up with an explanation for his mother's abuse by claiming that her abusive tendencies could potentially be tied to her PTSD is significant in that it presents

both the adult and child as victims in some ways. One could argue the reader is somewhat inclined to empathize with young Little Dog because of his more vulnerable position as a child and because of the first-person narrative style. But I would go even further in saying that through Little Dog's narration, the reader is also can empathize with the character of the mother despite her position as the perpetrator of childhood abuse. I would argue that Vuong rejects the victim/perpetrator binary as he presents the mother as both a perpetrator (of abuse) and a victim (of her trauma), prompting the reader to adopt a more nuanced and ambivalent understanding of her character. Whereas on one hand, the reader could be tempted to condemn Little Dog's mother as an abuser, Vuong never explicitly passes judgement on her. By insisting on the mother's experiences of war and of being a refugee as well as on the consequences of these factors on her daily life, both Vuong and his narrator Little Dog call for a more ambiguous reading of this particular character. Despite his suffering as a child at the hands of his own mother, Little Dog never frames his mother within a directly negative light but rather he writes her as another victim, a victim of her experiences unable to completely escape her traumatic past in spite of having relocated in the U.S. While Little Dog does not excuse the abuse he experienced, highlighting its "monstrous origin" (Vuong 13), one could say he adopts a more empathic point of view. The use of the expression "monstrous origin" is I think quote potent in that the adjective "monstrous" implies a characteristic "befitting a monster", something "inhumanly wicked or depraved," "atrocious" and "horrible" according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED Online)*. Based on that definition alone, one could easily interpret Vuong's choice of words as his condemnation of the mother's abuse as something inherently bad and reprehensible. But one could argue that, more than condemning abuse, Vuong here once again hints at another interpretation of the expression: "monstrous" indeed also qualifies something "deviating from the natural or conventional order; unnatural, extraordinary" (*OED Online*). Focusing on the "origin" of the child abuse he experienced, Little Dog shifts the reader's focus on the cause of it, a cause he himself characterizes in a way that suggests this abuse is a product of circumstances rather than an immutable outcome of his childhood. The word "monstrous" indicates that this abuse deviates from the natural order of things and therefore would probably not have happened had Little Dog's mother not gone through what she had to go through in her own childhood.

Paradoxically enough, Little Dog goes on to frame the physical abuse in an almost positive light as a form of maternal protection: "Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war, to say that to possess a heartbeat is not as simple as the heart's task of saying *yes*

*yes yes* to the body" (Vuong 13). The ternary repetition of the word "yes" represents the sound of a heartbeat directly on the page. But Little Dog here seems to differentiate two separate visions life: simply being alive and truly living. He paradoxically claims that being alive, "possessing a heartbeat," is not the same as living. In other words, he does not equate the biological and physical reality of being alive (represented here by the heartbeat, which he describes as "the heart's task of saying *yes yes yes* to the body") with living. The experience of life appears here overshadowed by the prospect of death implied by the mention of war. The explicit reference to the war here once again showcases that the mother remains trapped within the frame and the context of the war, that this singular event informs the entirety of her life, even her relationship with her child, preventing her from fully living.

### b. A love language

The question of touch remains prevalent throughout Vuong's novel, not just as a manifestation of abuse, but also as a new form of language. In that sense, touch becomes an ambivalent element capable of expressing both violence and love. Little Dog searches for a third language hoping to communicate love as a supplement to English and Vietnamese. He comes up with the language of touch, a physical language which he considers as this third language:

> Two languages cancel each other out, suggests Barthes, beckoning a third. Sometimes our words are few and far between, or simply ghosted. In which case the hand, although limited by the borders of skin and cartilage, can be that third language that animates where the tongue falters.
>
> It's true that, in Vietnamese, we rarely say *I love you*, and when we do, it is almost always in English. Care and love, for us, are pronounced clearest through service: plucking white hairs, pressing yourself on your son to absorb a plane's turbulence and, therefore, his fear. Or now – as Lan called to me, "Little Dog, get over here and help me help your mother." And we knelt on each side of you, rolling out the hardened cords in your upper arms, then down to your wrists, your fingers. For a moment almost too brief to matter, this made sense – that three people on the floor, connected to each other by touch, made something like the word family. (Vuong 33)

Little Dog's mother tongue is based on loss, his words being "few and far between, or simply ghosted." The use of such words to describe language, despite their vagueness, are ambivalent in that they are "apparitional voids which imply a presence" (D'Urso 9). In this supposed loss or absence, there is still something there: the hand which "animates where the tongue falters" (Vuong 33). Loss is not equalled to a void here but rather it provides space for something new to emerge, for the possibility of a new language. Despite their lack of adequate language skills, Little Dog and his family connect with each other in ways that transcend and even replace words. Thus Birgit Neumann states that

> While the unavailability of the mother tongue and a respective community signifies a loss, it also contains the possibility of change. Exposing the genealogical fragmentation resulting from the language dispossession, the paradigm of the orphan tongue grounds the promise of new forms of belongingness in the creation of an alternative language. (286)

While Neuman first underscores the fragmented relationships within the family and their language dispossession which can be the source of relational disconnection as in the butchery, Vuong highlights a form of communication that does not rely on linguistic fluency. The language of the body, this "third language" put forward by Little Dog, does not require words. Rather, it functions thanks to affective exchanges, physical touch and acts of service. Through the emphasis put on the body and its physicality, Vuong transforms the silence that previously suffocated Little Dog's family, giving it the opportunity to heal relational connections formerly disrupted by linguistic (dis)communication.

It can be surprising at first that English is presented as the sole language able to express affective emotions because "English is seldom presented as a mother tongue with a strong affective potential, which may be a long-term effect of its colonial legacy […]" (Kral 135). When reflecting upon Vietnamese articulations of love and affection Little Dog writes: "It's true that, in Vietnamese, we rarely say *I love you*, and when we do, it is almost always in English" (Vuong 33). In underlining the emphasis on verbal expressions of affection through the English language I would argue Little Dog does not so much indicate that English naturally suits affective expression but rather that he draws attention to a translation act that imposes English in an unnatural way on a Vietnamese-American expression of emotions. Little Dog indeed goes on to say that is their love is most often expressed through touch in the form of physical language and acts of service rather than through words thus creating space for a form of nonverbal communication within the text. This alternative language becomes a medium for

feelings and emotions that supplants verbal communication. Rather than explicitly saying "*I love you,*" Little Dog's family the hand communicates through acts of service. Vuong's use of the verb "pronounce" gives the hand, an originally nonverbal body part, the ability to still communicate thus implying that the ability to articulate feelings such as love is not solely exclusive to verbal language and here the tongue. The list of acts of service following the colon as definitions of "care and love" refers to a series of physical acts exchanged between the different members of the family throughout the novel, going from "the plucking [of] white hairs" from grandmother Lan's head to the pressing of Rose on Little Dog to "absorb a plane's turbulence and, therefore, his fear." The parallel drawn between the body's ability to "absorb" the tangible motions of a plane's turbulence as well as the intangible fear of the young boy suggests the body's capacity to both withstand physical instability or violence as well as to regulate feelings and emotions. This expression of "care and love" through service appears to be unique as is suggested by the clarification "for us" between commas. Rejecting the limitations of both English and Vietnamese, Vuong represents how words fail to express affection in this Vietnamese American family, prompting them to resort to nonverbal affective communication.

In this particular passage, Vuong mentions multiple parts of the body ("white hairs," "upper arms," "wrists," and "fingers") thus reinforcing its textual presence including through examples of relational and physical touch which represent the subjective and affective experiences of the Vietnamese American characters. Instead of defining "care and love" through linguistic means, the text defines expressions of affection through imagery. The image of Lan and Little Dog massaging Rose is equated to the word family: "For a moment almost too brief to matter, this made sense – that three people on the floor, connected to each other by touch, made something like the word family" (Vuong 33). The use of the expression "something like" adds a certain vagueness which avoids the linguistic exactitude one is expected to find in a definition. Thus Vuong prioritizes the image of the three interconnected bodies which only appears only "[f]or a moment almost too brief to matter". The fleeting nature of the image and of its affective connotations breaks from denotative conventions of linguistic precision in defining the familial bond and emotive relations of Little Dog's family. Even if the experience is relegated to a fleeting moment, choosing to embrace relational care for the body affectively registers what the English language cannot replicate through words. Through the episode at the butcher, Vuong exposed how the body whose mouth is unable to speak English is forced to perform in public while consequently losing its ability to affectively relate to others (all

throughout her exchange with the American vendors, the mother can never see eye-to-eye with them). Within the domestic Vietnamese American sphere however, here manifested by the physical interconnection of bodies on the floor, the body communicates and survives without words through physical touch. Additionally, the image of the three bodies lying on the floor brings forth the idea of togetherness as all the characters are on the same level and linked together through touch. They thus present a unified unit whose horizontal positioning rejects any form of hierarchy. In her article "Subjecting Sentences," Sophia D'Urso discusses the way in which syntax is deeply interconnected with power dynamics and how Ocean Vuong "resists the hierarchical structures produced by language" (1). She notably contends that the phrase "I love you" reduces Little Dog and Rose's relationship to hierarchy:

> the Subject "I" is positioned above the object of the sentence and its interpellated subject "you". "I love you" – with its verb "love" implying the positive term in its binary, opposite hurt and hate – communicates only the warm embraces into which Little Dog is pulled and none of the physical abuse he endures from his mother. (D'Urso 9)

She argues that such a statement of love denies the complexity inherent to most human relationships and here particularly the complexity of the mother/son relationship in which the presence of love does not mean an inability to hurt. Instead of communicating through the rigid syntax of spoken language, Little Dog and his family communicate through the more flexible and ambivalent language of physical touch, their actions being imbued with meaning and feeling. Thus their three bodies "on the floor, connected to each other by touch, ma[k]e something like the word family" (Vuong 33). As such, the new mother tongue, that is to say the language of the hand, can communicate ambivalent definitions of love: as action, "as pulling and pushing" (D'Urso). Family is no longer a written or said word, the combination of signifier and signified, but rather it appears as something to be felt and experienced.

## B. An attempt at restoring or building personal relationships

### a. The mother/son relationship

#### *i. Mother/monster and victim/perpetrator binaries*

As we have seen, touch is an ambivalent element which translates both potential for violence and love in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. One could also argue that the way in

which Ocean Vuong portrays interpersonal relationships is symbolic of this characteristic tension as they appear both delicate and sometimes violent. One of Vuong's great achievements would be his ability to convey the complexities of human relationships in his narrative. While I have discussed at length the role played by the different characters' trauma in their relationships to each other and how said relationships appear to some extent stunted, I would also argue that, in writing about his childhood and teenage years, Little Dog draws attention to the importance of these relationships with both his family, especially his mother Rose, and his friend turned lover Trevor. One could very well read the novel as an attempt at restoring or building personal relationships on the narrator's part.

From the very beginning of the novel, the mother/son relationship in particular is at the center of the narrative. Through Little Dog's narration, polarities in Rose's mothering appear in terms of tension and tenderness, an ambivalence of love and violence, intimacy and distance which resonates throughout the novel. Ocean Vuong embeds these polarities into the mother-son relationship and more notably into the mother/monster binary one can find within the text:

> The time, while pruning a basket of green beans over the sink, you said, out of nowhere, "I'm not a monster. I'm a mother." […]
>
> I put down the book. The heads of the green beans went on snapping. They thunked in the steel sink like fingers. "You're not a monster," I said.
>
> But I lied.
>
> What I really wanted to say was that a monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origin: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once. (Vuong 13)

As a poet, Ocean Vuong is particularly attuned to the fabric and sensuality of language and its propensity for wordplay. This is shown here through the way in which he plays with sounds as showcased by the paronomasia between the words "monster" and "mother." This binary which Rose interprets as conflicting identities (as shown in the opposition "I'm not" and "I am") illustrates once again the ambivalence between violence and danger on one hand, and love and safety on the other hand. This ambivalence is at the same time echoed in the scene depicting Rose's cooking through the opposition between the act of "pruning" the green beans and them "snapping." Indeed, while both verbs here suggest cutting the vegetables, the verb "pruning"

implies a conscious and meticulous process of removing an unnecessary or unwanted element from a whole (oftentimes from a plant but the verb is not limited to a botanical context) according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. On the other hand, the verb "snapping" can mean "to break suddenly and (usually) with a sharp noise or report; to give way or part suddenly owing to strain or tension" which denotes a certain suddenness, an abrupt break (*OED Online*). The narration here once again displays a certain ambivalence between violence on one hand, and safety and love on another. The pruning of the green beans represents an act of care in the form of the delicate and intentional preparation of food but this very same action is then described in a more violent undertone: "The heads of the green beans went on snapping. They thunked in the steel sink like fingers" (13). The description could almost be seen as that of a decapitation with the mention of the vegetables' "heads". This is further reinforced by the verb "thunking" which can be read as a form of onomatopoeia describing a fall ending with the sound of the impact.

As I have already mentioned when I first discussed the ambivalence of touch, the mother/monster binary serves in part to highlight the unnatural dimension of the abuse Little Dog suffered at the hands of his mother. However Vuong goes further here in his use of the monster imagery. Reminding readers of the etymology of the word "monster," Vuong indeed highlights both the hybrid nature of the creature as he lists different monsters: a centaur which is both horse and man, then a griffin (both lion and eagle), and finally, a satyr which is a goat-man creature. He draws a parallel between the dual identity of said monsters and his mother's own duality in regards to her being both a violent and loving figure, making her a monster in her own right. He then goes on to introduce the metaphor of the lighthouse to convey how Little Dog both feels protected and threatened by his mother: "To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once" (Vuong 13). Claiming that "a monster is not such a terrible thing to be" (13), Little Dog challenges the mother/monster binary he introduced from the beginning of the novel as he never explicitly condemns his mother for her shortcomings and her violent tendencies towards him. The bittersweet fragmented memories shared by Little Dog reveal the ongoing dilemma faced by a child being or having been abused by a close family member:

> This beloved figure is inflicting harm, pain, and humiliation, yet the child is both emotionally and physically dependent. The child has to maintain two diametrically opposing views of the same person, which creates considerable tension and confusion […]. (Spiegel 2008 sec. 1, para 2)

In the novel, this tension is manifested through both the lighthouse and the monster metaphors as they unite two opposites: love and safety on the one hand, and violence and threat on the other. In Little Dog's case however, the predicament described by Spiegel goes one step further, since he identifies with his mother's duality: "You're a mother, Ma. You're also a monster. But so am I – which is why I can't turn away from you" (14). This inability to turn away from her is not just a result of his being dependent on her as a child as Spiegel suggests. Since the sentence is there written in the present tense, I would argue that it is stated by the adult version of Little Dog who looks back on the events of his childhood through his narration. As an adult, he reflects on the motivation behind his mother's abuse, thus extending her some form of understanding. As such, he challenges the mother/monster binary. And because of this, I would argue that Vuong is in line with trauma theory critics such as Dominic LaCapra who notably developed the concept of "empathic unsettlement" in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001). According to him, it means bearing witness to trauma which "involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place." (*Writing*, 78). His conception of empathy is similar to Adam Smith's "fellow-feeling" in that it "limits objectification and exposes the self to involvement or implication in the past, its actors, and victims" (idem). According to LaCapra, when we choose to empathize with a victim of trauma by bearing witness to the pain of perpetration, one might potentially overidentify with the victim "to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim's voice or subject position" (78). This would result in making the secondary witnessing process futile by ultimately silencing the victim, replacing his or her experience with the imagines experience of the witness. In opposition to what he calls a form of "empathy [that] gives way to vicarious victimhood" (47), he suggests that "desirable empathy involves not full identification but what might be termed empathic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims" (102). This means that, while an empathetic person can recognize and commiserate with a victim of trauma, they can never approach a level of understanding similar to the victim's understanding of their own experience. Unsettlement comes with a conscious awareness of being other despite having empathy for the victim. Thus the listener, or witness, remains empathetic but distant, unsettled, an outsider who cannot fully comprehend the experiences of the victim. In LaCapra's terms, this "kind of virtual experience" (78) remains distinctly separate from one's own experience. Similarly to Adam Smith and David Hume, LaCapra underscores the role played by imagination in understanding a victim's position. However, he then goes further as, for him, empathic unsettlement is a deliberate process meant

to witness, record, and critically consider trauma rather than just a method of sympathizing with a person who experienced a traumatic episode. Therefore, this allows for an opportunity to understand an other empathetically, providing a modern equivalent to Smith's "fellow-feeling" that foregoes overidentification while also giving victims a voice.

Because it prevents people from overly identifying with the victim's traumatic experience, this mode of critique is particularly helpful. This notion of empathic unsettlement was first conceived to discuss Holocaust trauma, but writers and theorists, including literary critics, have used LaCapra's idea in their literary interpretations to explore trauma and issues of empathy. However, employing the concept of empathic unsettlement can become problematic as it relies on a clear division between victim and perpetrator, a binary that is rarely so clean-cut in life as victims may be perpetrators before, during, or even after their victimization. The contrary may also be true: perpetrators may have been victims at some point or may even see themselves as victims, which they may believe leads them to perpetration. Following decades of thinking about the perpetrator/victim binary, trauma theorists have thus come to the conclusion that it is often difficult to distinguish between perpetrators and victims, an issue that I think Vuong illustrates in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Writing about this binary in her book *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility* (1999), Sharon Lamb claims that "As much as we might wish to return with clarity of vision to this simple duality, it may be impossible to do so" (5). According to her, "Too many books have examined victims or perpetrators alone and so have not been challenged to commit to a consistent view of people and apply the arguments they make for one (in terms of determinism, choice, and responsibility) to the other" (3). LaCapra similarly suggests that perpetrators deserve a more nuanced understanding in light of the blurring of the perpetrator/victim binary. But it should be noted that he does not explicitly state such understanding should come through empathy, which he defines as an "affective component of understanding [that] is difficult to control" (*Writing* 102). While some criticize the breakdown of said binary as it can run the risk of justifying perpetrations and by extension revictimizing victims, LaCapra argues that "the deconstruction of binaries is fruitful in undoing the bases of a scapegoat mechanism (sharply dividing self and other with the source of anxiety projected onto the nefarious other)" (*Writing* xxvi). He wonders whether certain perpetrators, while they have not necessarily earned or deserve mourning and empathy, warrant "modes of understanding" (215). He does not completely theorize this process but instead offers a potential tool for thinking empathically about acts of perpetration and their perpetrators in coming up with the notion of empathic

unsettlement. And although LaCapra applies this idea only to victims of perpetration, he still suggests a way that all actors in a traumatic situation might be considered empathically outside of binary terms.

Considering Vuong's novel in the context of LaCapra's notion of empathic unsettlement, I would argue that the way in which Little Dog portrays the mother/son relationship demonstrates how empathy might be extended to both victims and perpetrators, making empathic unsettlement a useful method to explore childhood abuse. The reader is indeed put into the position of a witness to Little Dog's abuse at the hands of his mother thus able to extend empathic unsettlement to the victim. But one could perhaps argue to some extent that Little Dog is also put into the position of witness to his mother's ongoing trauma and that, writing as an adult, he is able to put distance from his own position as a victim to then extend empathic unsettlement to the perpetrator (his mother) thus offering a more complex understanding of his childhood trauma. LaCapra is aware of the ethical issues raised by extending empathic unsettlement to perpetrators as it could devalue the terrible acts they committed against others and seeing them simply as other victims instead of a direct cause of trauma. But it is important to consider the perpetrator's experience in context of a traumatic experience to capture a fuller picture of the situation. One could say fiction constitutes a privileged field in which to extend the notion of empathic unsettlement to perpetrators as it offers an opportunity for such a thought experiment with diminished ethical risks (of performing such an experiment with actual perpetrators). Actually, LaCapra's idea of empathic unsettlement offers an ethically responsible way to act as a secondary witness to trauma victims. However, refusing to extend the same empathic unsettlement to perpetrators, including in fiction, would result in making the perpetrators voiceless in the traumatic experience and make the narrative incomplete. While perpetrators cannot be compared to victims and may not require the same level of empathy, they nonetheless have the right to witness. One could argue that, in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the reader is encouraged to extend empathic unsettlement to both perpetrator and victim, or something that looks very much like it, precisely because the narrator Little Dog himself empathizes with his mother as a witness of her past trauma. Through empathic unsettlement, the reader becomes a secondary witness of her trauma without compromising Little Dog's testimony, condoning perpetration or ignoring victimhood.

### *ii. Motifs of separation and a hope for reconciliation?*

Even though trauma pervades Vuong's novel and his characters' lives, the most significant aspect of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is the crucial role of relationships. Particularly, Little Dog's relationship with his mother Rose lays the very foundation of his narrative journey. "I am trying to reach you" (Vuong 3) he states in the first paragraph of the novel as he addresses his mother, thus showing that their bond functions as a driving force for his narrative. When we first begin reading the novel, we do not know the narrator's name, only that he is writing to his mother in a language she cannot read. Through these letters, Little Dog seems determined to communicate both the pain and affection he feels towards her. While the narrator may feel alienated from his mother due to the trauma she inherited from the war and the difficulties she still had to face afterwards, he remains devoted to her. Through his narrative, Little Dog reflects not only on the suffering but also on the love rooted in his relationship with his mother. One could indeed argue that his narrative constitutes an act of care and a proof of affection toward his mother as his writing offers him space to acknowledge the great and for the large part positive impact his mother had on his life. Little Dog defines himself firstly in relation to his mother and this intimately informs his writing as he says: "I am writing from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son" (10). From the very beginning, the narrative structure is telling readers something fundamental about the relational structure of Little Dog's identity. In that sense, the focus of his narration is not limited to Little Dog himself but rather it is open to his family's story, and more particularly the story of his mother. If we refer to Eakin's study of autobiographies, one could argue that *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* constitutes a form of family memoir for it is a narrative in which "the lives of other family members are rendered as either equal in importance to or more important than the life of the reporting self" (Eakin 85). It is indeed true of Vuong's writing because, when he was giving an interview for *Strand Book Store*, he explained he had wanted to "turn the *I* into a search light so that it could cast itself outward" (Vuong 2019). The intention was for readers to get a sense of who the narrator is through his own perception of his life as well as through his outlook on the women who raised him, especially his mother.

By alluding to pregnancy and the time when mother and son are one, the mention of writing from "a body that used to be yours" also paradoxically suggests the idea of separation through the expression "used to" as its phrasing indicates a past reality. It means that if Little Dog's body could once be seen as an extension of his mother's (or even as her possession) and thus attaching the existence of the mother and the son, it is no longer the case as he is now his own man. This tension between union and separation is a recurring theme within the novel. It

can be sensed in the motifs of the deer and of the shadow in which Little Dog presents himself as Rose's reflection. Through the deer imagery, Little Dog hints at the idea of a child being a shadow of the mother:

> Out of my window this morning, just before sunrise, a deer stood in a fog so dense and bright that the second one, not too far away, looked like the unfinished shadow of the first. (Vuong 8)

The use of the deer imagery echoes the first scene of the novel in which Little Dog and his mother are confronted with a taxidermy buck at a rest stop in Virginia. When writing about the aesthetics of trauma in my second part (Part II. "I refuse to die": the aesthetics of trauma in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*), I interpreted the animal corpse as a manifestation of the mother's trauma, "a death that won't finish" (Vuong 3). I think the fact that Vuong uses the same animal just a few pages later is significant. Just like the mother sees her reflection into the dead buck at the beginning, I would argue Little Dog can see himself in the second deer. Being described as a shadow in itself suggests a form of mirroring and of constant following. The main characteristic of a shadow is indeed the fact it is anchored to its caster, that is to say the object or source of the shadow, which it resembles in terms of shape and size. The image of the double deer ties together the existence of both the mother and son on a symbolical level. And yet, the fog evoked on page 8 once again hints at a form of distance between the two, perhaps a physical manifestation of the traumatic memory susceptible to separate the two characters. Mother and son appear as both close and out of reach from each other. This tension between distance and union expressed through the deer scene appears more explicitly later on in the novel when Rose and Little Dog are in Paul's garden: "You're just ahead as I approach; my shadow touches your heels" (231). Little Dog is no longer presented as his mother's shadow but rather, his own shadow leans in the direction of his mother, closing the gap between them. To my mind, this movement encapsulates Little Dog's effort to reacquaint himself with his mother, his "source" towards the end of the novel.

It goes to show that despite the troubled nature and distance of Little Dog and Rose's relationship, despite their mutual trauma and the pain they are capable of inflicting each other, there is still hope for them to find each other ultimately:

> Sometimes, when I'm careless, I believe the wound is also the place where the skin reencounters itself, asking of each end, where have you been?
>
> Where have we been, Ma? (Vuong 137)

In the quote above, the questions structured through the use of syntactic parallelism prompt us to think that mother and son represent two sides of the same wound, having lost touch and lost sight from each other. The metaphor of the wound refers to a reality in which the skin has been torn apart (separated in a way) and consequently with edges that do not touch anymore. The fact that there are two different sides, two different sides of a whole points once again at the idea of distance between mother and son. This wounded body could indeed refer to the family unit, embodied by the personal pronoun "we" which indicates union, inclusion and familiarity, or in other words: familiarity. And while this body has been torn apart (the wound possibly symbolizing the mother's trauma? Or her abuse of her son? Her son's sexual identity even perhaps? All these things that are susceptible to keep the two characters apart), Little Dog still "believe[s] the wound is also the place where the skin reencounters itself." Thus, he leaves space for potential healing of the mother/son relationship.

The distance between them is not immutable, this gap can be crossed. T. R. Johnson views writing as "a material activity of hope" serving as a kind of bridge back into a sense of community for those who were left traumatized, a practice which can help the traumatized subject overcome isolation and connect with others (88). In some ways, one could see Little Dog's narrative as an act of reconciliation with his mother as, through writing, Little Dog is able to cauterize the wound. This is made possible, I think, by his acceptance of his mother's shortcomings due to her trauma (which resulted in Little Dog developing his own personal trauma, notably related to her abuse) through empathy, as well as his acknowledgement of the deep love and affection that permeates his relationship with his mother in spite of everything. Again, Little Dog shows that his narrative is an act of reconciliation by underlining that his letters are written as a form of reaching out from the body of a son, whose body was once the body of his mother (Vuong 10). Thus, he emphasizes the importance of their relationship and his care for his mother despite their past conflicts and the pain they brought each other.

### b. Little Dog and Trevor

#### *i. "To arrive at love, then, is to arrive through obliteration": violence in the romantic relationship*

If the novel seems very much centered around the figure of the mother and the mother/son relationship at first, at the center of the novel (both literally and metaphorically) is

Little Dog and Trevor's relationship. The novel is divided into three main sections. The first one (from page 3 to page 71) focuses heavily on Little Dog's childhood among his traumatized family and the third one interweaves reflections on his past with Little Dog's present as a young adult (from page 165 to page 242). The second and central section deals with Little Dog's teenage years. The summer of his fourteenth birthday, he gets his first job in a tobacco field outside of Hartford. There he meets Trevor whom he befriends and with whom he will have his first romantic and sexual relationship. Trevor is sixteen years old and the owner's grandson. With Trevor, Little Dog experiences another scenario of love and violence which is more notably showcased in their physical intimacy and how Little Dog relates pain and pleasure: "Sometimes being offered tenderness feels like the very proof that you've been ruined" (Vuong 119). Once again, Vuong stands out by the way he juxtaposes apparent opposites. When Little Dog discusses his relationship with Trevor he writes:

> He loves me, he loves me not, we are taught to say, as we tear the flower away from its closeness. To arrive at love, then, is to arrive through obliteration. Eviscerate me, we mean to say, and I'll tell you the truth. (Vuong 118-119)

Little Dog reminds readers of the well-known game in which young children pluck flower petals to determinate if the object of their affection returns their feelings. Supposedly, the phrase they say while picking off the last petal represents the truth of the other's sentiments, whether they love them or not. From this innocent image, Little Dog brings forth an idea of violence. The plucking of the flower is described in a more sinister undertone through the use of the verb "tear from" which here connotes almost a form of mutilation, the flower losing its most recognizable and precious part. This is then reinforced by the following sentence which equates the process of finding love (here represented as a journey thanks to the expression "to arrive at love") to an experience of "obliteration". The parallelism constructed around the verb "arrive" suggests that the aim (love) is possible only a specific process of transformation (expressed by the preposition "through"). But contrary to what one could expect, this transformation is not really a positive one (like a form of rebirth) but rather one of annihilation and destruction. For the traditional "love me," Little Dog substitutes the injunction "eviscerate me". The truth of Little Dog's love is one of violence and pain.

While this new relationship allows Little Dog to explore a new side of life, away from his troubled family life, he does not fully romanticize his relationship with Trevor. Rather he displays an acute awareness of the messiness and at times abusive nature of his bond with Trevor. To some extent, Trevor appears as another mirror of Little Dog in that he also carries

psychological wounds. The boy also grew up in a single-parent family, raised by an alcoholic and physically abusive father, the same father who disapproves of Trevor's friendship with Little Dog whom he calls “China boy” (142). But while Little Dog is able to empathize with and love his mother despite their difficult relationship, Trevor says he hates his father, something that comes to a surprise to Little Dog who cannot fathom that “a white boy could hate anything about his life” (97). Trevor's turbulent relationship with his father has a significant impact on the boy's perception and his identity and in many ways it contributes to shape his attitude toward his own sexuality. When talking about the main difference between Trevor and Little Dog and their acceptance of their sexuality, Ocean Vuong pointed out that, having been raised by women, Little Dog has less trouble accepting his homosexuality and being perceived as more feminine (Amanpour and Company, “Ocean Vuong on War, Sexuality and Asian-American Identity”). On the other hand, Trevor finds himself entrenched in white, heteronormative values which lead to his feelings of discomfort and shame attached to his homosexuality. Christina Slopek sees his efforts to conform to ideals and values of accepted hegemonic masculinity as a form of self-destruction (748) as they heighten his struggle to accept his homosexuality and continue to keep him oppressed by gender norms. Reminiscing about nights he spent watching Trevor shooting up paint cans, Little Dog describes Trevor’s navigation of American masculinity ~~writing~~: “to be an American boy, and then an American boy with a gun, is to move from one end of a cage to another” (Vuong 116). The use of the cage metaphor is quite telling in that it communicates the weight of expectations and the harm it can do to American boys and men. The metaphor implies that “to be an American boy” in and of itself means occupying a cage. Trevor’s identity is represented in terms of limited space from the very beginning, and for him, identifying to the violence symbolized by the gun does not free him in any way but rather it constitutes another form of imprisonment. In that sense, Trevor appears almost a victim of American ideology in the form of hegemonic and heterosexual masculinity which creates tension within his relationship with Little Dog. Vuong discusses hegemonic masculinity in other works, particularly in an article written for the *Paris Review* in 2019. There, he explains:

> all my life being a man was inextricable from hegemonic masculinity. Everywhere I looked, he-ness was akin to an aggression that felt fraudulent in me—or worse, in the blue collar New England towns I grew up in, self-destructive. Masculinity, or what we have allowed it to be in America, is often realized through violence. (“Reimagining Masculinity”)

Hegemonic masculinity refers to a culturally idealized form of manhood connected with the institutions of male dominance. It stresses values such as courage, inner direction, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure as well as general toughness and forms of aggression (Donaldson 1993). Mike Donaldson argues that a "fundamental element of hegemonic masculinity […] is that women exist as potential sexual objects for men while men are negated as sexual objects for men" (645). Then, heterosexuality and homophobia appear as the bedrock of hegemonic masculinity. There are different reasons which would explain why homosexuality is regarded as counter-hegemonic. Donaldson first mentions the fact that hostility to homosexuality is seen as fundamental to male heterosexuality. To this, he adds that homosexuality is often associated with effeminacy which would contradict notions of masculinity, and thirdly he evokes how the form of homosexual pleasure is considered subversive in and of itself. Antagonism to gay men is seen as a standard feature of hegemonic masculinity as such hostility is presented as inherent to the construction of largely accepted heterosexual masculinity. While homosexuality has been compatible with hegemonic masculinity in other times and places, it is not the case in Little Dog and Trevor's America where queer bodies have to contend with the enduring image of white and heteronormative patriarchy put forth by "damaged American fathers" (Vuong *On Earth* 24). Trevor's obsession with hegemonic and heterosexual masculinity in terms contributes to his turmoil regarding his gay identity. He considers his homosexuality as only a phase, finding it "crazy" that Little Dog will always be gay while he himself believes he will "be good in a few years" (188). Gender norms and hegemonic masculinity are deeply rooted within Trevor, instilled in him by his father's discourse notably. This influences the relationship and intimacy he shares with Little Dog as he is seen enacting the aggression and sometimes violence which could be considered as expected of him.

### ii. *"In Trevor's grip, I had a say in how I would be taken apart": reclaiming a sense of agency*

While Little Dog's relationship with Trevor is one marked by a considerable amount of pain and violence, it reveals itself to be a crucial part of his personal development. It allows him to explore another part of his identity but, more importantly, it creates a space in which he is able to reclaim a sense of agency. "I was seen – I who had seldom been seen by anyone" he

writes to his mother who taught him "to be invisible in order to be safe" (Vuong 96). Recounting his second sexual encounter with Trevor, Little Dog writes

> A week after the first time, we did it again. His cock in my hand, we began. My grip tightened around the covers. And that inertia of his skin, damp-tight against my own, made the task feel, not merely of fucking, but of hanging on. (Vuong 117)

The beginning of the passage quoted here is blunt and terse, to the point, related through clipped and short sentences. The juxtaposition of the nominal clause "his cock in my hand" with the independent clause "we began" could be understood as merely descriptive but by preposing the nominal clause, Vuong draws attention to it. I would go so far as to argue that the sentence structure presents the first segment of the sentence as, if not a cause, a condition which, having been fulfilled, allows for the sexual process to truly begin. Since "his cock [is] in [his] hand," they can begin. Additionally, the main focus of the scene seems to be on the hand of the narrator ("hand," "grip") which can be interpreted as a symbol of both intimacy and control. Holding the "cock", symbol of masculinity and sexuality, is significant as it means that Little Dog is represented as the one in control in this particular exchange. The mention of Trevor's "inertia" indicates a form of inactivity which would support the idea that Little Dog is the main agent in the performance of the sexual act. Referring to the field of physics, the term "inertia" describes how an object "continues in its existing state, whether of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line, unless that state is altered by an external force". In this context, Little Dog's hand was the thing which spurred Trevor's movement which in turn could only be stopped by the external force that is Little Dog's own skin. But this display of control does not necessarily translate to sexual domination, though one could argue the two momentarily overlap at the beginning of the passage. Indeed, the following page sees a shift in terms of dominance within the relationship, from Little Dog holding Trevor's "cock" to him being violently grabbed by his hair.

In her article "Subjecting Sentences," Sophia D'Urso discusses the power dynamics within Vuong's novel and she pays particular attention to hierarchical structures produced through language and syntax. She argues that while Little Dog appears to conform to what is socially perceived as a more feminine identity expressing "sexual passivity," he in fact "constructs *himself* as Subject" (11). Using the non-verbal language of the body, Little Dog physically lowers himself, positioning himself beneath Trevor and thus creating space for Trevor to exert his dominance which also manifests itself in the latter's rough manhandling. But rather than viewing this fact as demeaning, he feels a certain "kind of power" (Vuong 118):

> What do you call the animal that, finding the hunter, offers itself to be eaten? A martyr? A weakling? No, a beast gaining the rare agency to stop. Yes, the period in the sentence – it's what makes us human, Ma, I swear. It lets us stop in order to keep going.
>
> Because submission, I soon learned, was also a kind of power. To be inside of pleasure, Trevor needed me. I had a choice, a craft, whether he ascends or falls depends on my willingness to make room for him, for you cannot rise without having something to rise over. Submission does not require elevation in order to control. I lower myself. I put him in my mouth, to the base, and peer up at him, my eyes a place he might flourish. After a while, it is the cocksucker who moves. And he follows, when I sway this way he swerves along. And I look up at him as if looking at a kite, his entire body tied to the teetering world of my head (Vuong 118)

Paradoxically, it is the "hunted" which gains "agency," the lowered and subjected "I" which possesses a choice: stopping or keeping the act going. The metaphor of the period is significant here in that it acts as both a connector and a barrier, embodying the dual possibility of stopping and continuing as it marks the end of a sentence while simultaneously hinting at the possibility of the start of another sentence. Metaphorically, Little Dog and Trevor represent these two sentences touching one another, being both connected and separated by the period. Little Dog's choice appears as the condition for Trevor's pleasure ("To be inside of pleasure, Trevor needed me."). D'Urso thus argues that " if it is the third language of the body which grants pleasure in communication, as Little Dog celebrates in Barthes, then the mouth (the body; the text) becomes a site *within which* pleasure is generated through a complexified connection between bodies rather than a rigidly hierarchical one" (11). Sexuality is a cultural production which is often understood in terms of a "previously rehearsed and socially encoded ideological script" of American masculinity and heteronormativity (Halperin 40). Said script often relies on binary and hierarchical understandings of sexuality in which notions of socialized feminine and masculine identities are prescribed onto homosexual relationships. And Vuong, while still playing into said script to some extent still manages to subvert it. When discussing the history of sexuality, especially of homosexuality in Ancient Greece, David Halperin writes:

> Sex is not only polarizing, however; it is also hierarchical. For the insertive partner is construed as a sexual agent, whose phallic penetration of another person's body expresses sexual 'activity,' whereas the receptive partner is construed as a sexual patient, whose submission to phallic penetration expresses sexual 'passivity.' Sexual 'activity,' moreover, is thematized as domination: the relation between the 'active' and

> the 'passive' sexual partner is thought of as the same kind of relation as that obtaining between social superior and social inferior. 'Active' and 'passive' sexual roles are therefore necessarily isomorphic with superordinate and subordinate social status. (Halperin 30)

Through the language of the body and their physical disposition, a hierarchy thus seems to emerge. On the one hand, the "insertive partner is constructed as a sexual agent" as penetration is considered an "activity" representative of masculine domination (symbolized by the hunter) while on the other hand, the "receptive partner is construed as a sexual patient" submitting to penetration which is linked to notions of feminine "passivity" (and which Vuong likens to a "prey"). If we consider Trevor and Little Dog's relationship through this binary lens, it would appear as strictly hierarchical with Trevor as the agent, the dominant, occupying the position of power whereas Little Dog, as the receiver, would be seen as the subjected one of the two. And yet, for D'Urso, "it is the *subjected* body which is positioned as the Subject of the sentence, the tether upon which Trevor – the representation of American masculinity through his socialized traits of aggression and desire to dominate – relies" (11). Little Dog indeed seems to complexify the relationship as he poses himself as the subjected "I" who has the "choice" of lowering himself and ultimately as the one who owns the scopophilic gaze. He subverts the notion that the receiver of phallic penetration showcases passive submission as here, it is the "cocksucker" who moves first and Trevor must follow: for Trevor to dominate and "be inside pleasure," Little Dog has to accommodate him, "make room" for him "for you cannot rise without having something to rise over" (Vuong 118). Thus, Little Dog develops another understanding of reception as action through which he is able gain a "rare agency" as opposed to passive submission.

As Little Dog navigates his journey of self-discovery and reclamation of agency through his relationship with Trevor, a pivotal shift occurs. The relationship becomes a conduit for his empowerment and self-acceptance. However, amidst this burgeoning sense of self, a profound challenge remains: the failure of communication and the quest to reestablish connections within the novel. As Little Dog pens his thoughts and memories, he intermittently halts his narrative, directly addressing his mother and specifically referring to her as "Ma" or through the personal pronoun "you.". These moments of direct address serve as poignant interludes, illuminating the struggle for connection, the weight of unspoken words, and the depths of longing that pervade his relationship with his mother. They encapsulate the dichotomy of reaching out and the looming barrier of silence, painting a compelling portrait of the complex intricacies that lie within the realm of communication and familial bonds.

## C. "I am trying to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are": the paradox of the letter

### a. The failure of communication or an effort to (re)establish connection? Taking a closer look at dialogues within the epistolary structure

Ocean Vuong  does something that no other writer has done by not actively including but still addressing someone who cannot read in his novel. In doing so, he communicates the language of distance between Little Dog and his mother through the epistolary structure itself. As Rose is illiterate, communication between mother and son through letters is impossible. Yet, he writes them with the explicit purpose of "reach[ing her]" (Vuong 3). Paradoxically, he acknowledges the limits of his action as he writes: "each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (3). The paradox contained in this particular line thus raises the question of the medium of the narration as, despite Little Dog's initial difficulty at expressing himself in the written form (for he states that he must "begin again") and despite his mother's lack of knowledge of English, Little Dog still resorts to writing her letters in English. While constituting an attempt at reaching out, this line puts further distance between the speaker and the addressee which in turn prompts readers to reconsider the "reaching" described by Ocean Vuong. In the same way that *On Earth* appears to defy the bounds of chronology, blending together different timelines through the juxtaposition of many different memories, oftentimes temporarily fragmented, to create a somewhat cohesive family history, the act of reaching is perhaps to be understood not just as an attempt to take hold of his mother or to get to her (as is implied by the spatial metaphor), but rather as a form of gathering as Little Dog's writing brings him and his mother together in spite of and outside of the bounds of conversation.

In an interview with Tommy Orange, Vuong states that "With a letter, the plot is dialogue" (Vuong 2020) thus underscoring the importance and significance of dialogues within the structure of the epistolary form as well as within its narrative. In his own novel, Vuong sheds light on the difficulty for his characters to communicate, especially for Little Dog and his mother Rose. In many ways, I would argue that he uses dialogues to showcase the state of the mother/son relationship and its evolution throughout the novel. Indeed, the first part of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is mainly characterized by incomplete or one-sided dialogues, snippets of conversation which are often the catalyst for Little Dog's reflections and his own musing. In the second part of the novel, from the moment Little Dog goes on to work on the tobacco farm,

Rose's presence fades into the background as Little Dog develops new bonds and relationships, especially with Trevor. There is no mention of dialogues between mother and son from page 75 to page 126. The only time Rose speaks then is during her brief exchange with a seventy-year-old woman with a prosthesis who came to the nail salon asking for a pedicure when Little Dog was ten years old, and when Rose groans in reaction to her son's massage ("This is nice… This is so nice" 85). In both instances, Little Dog is merely an observant, not an active part of the verbal communication. After that, there is just one other instance in which Little Dog is the one talking to his mother this time. It corresponds to Little Dog's outburst when confronted with yet another of Rose's PTSD episode during which she put on Chopin before fleeing to the backyard at night:

> "I hate you," he says.
>
> He studies her, to see what language can do – but she doesn't flinch. Only halfway turns her head. The cigarette, its ember bead, rises to her lips, then flutters near her chin.
>
> "I don't want you to be my mom anymore." His voice strangely deeper, more full.
>
> "You hear me? You're a monster –"
>
> And with that her head is lopped off its shoulders. […]
>
> "Ma," he says to no one, his eyes filling, "I didn't mean it."
>
> "Ma!" he calls out, taking a few clipped steps. He drops the radio, it falls mouth-down in the dirt, and turns toward the house.
>
> "Ma!" He runs back inside, his hand still wet with a single-use life, looking for her. (Vuong 127)

The text once again represents a one-sided dialogue in which only one character is entitled to a voice. Here, Rose is rendered mute by her trauma, robbed not only of her voice but also of her movements as she is only able "halfway [turn] her head" toward her son. She does not engage with him even in terms of body language. Moreover, she cannot speak because her mouth is already occupied by the cigarette. Little Dog is the one possessing a voice in this passage which he uses to express his animosity towards his mother first through the statement "I hate you" and then when he renounces her: "I don't want you to be my mom anymore". Referring the mother/monster binary which I discussed at length previously, the young boy seems to manipulate language as a weapon with which he imagines slaying the mother/monster (whose

lit cigarette almost transforms into a fire breathing dragon): “And with that her head is lopped off its shoulders.” Through his words and this symbolic beheading, Little Dog here negates Rose’s identity as a mother. But what could be seen as him turning away from her reveals itself to finally just be the outburst of a child left alone in the wake of his mother’s trauma. He almost instantly goes back on his words, calling out for his “Ma” and running back looking for her. I think his reaching out for her, both through words and movement, goes to show his willingness to perhaps forgive her or at least reconcile with her despite everything that goes on with her and her troubles. This is further reinforced by the reference to a “single-use life” which echoes an earlier statement in which he claimed “Inside a single-use life, there are no second chances” (125). Because he goes back to her, one could argue that he indeed gives her a second chance. Even though the major part of their dialogues communicates the distance between mother and son and their inability to properly communicate, this final act of reaching out hints at Little Dog’s effort to reestablish connection and to ultimately mend his relationship with his mother. In that sense, one could say there is a sort of evolution in Vuong’s treatment of dialogues within the epistolary narrative which reflects the dynamics of the mother/son relationship.

In the central part of the novel, mother and son are seldom sharing the same space as the narrative focuses more and more on Little Dog’s teenage years when he spends the majority of his time either on the plantation or in Trevor’s company. Thus, they are not shown talking to each other. They are brought back together when Little Dog decides to come out to his mother on a greyish Sunday in a Dunkin’ Donuts: “Then I told you the truth” (129). The content of their conversation is heavy as Rose reveals how she had to abort her first child. This two-sided discussion comes at the price of hurting each other: “We were exchanging truths, I realized, which is to say, we were cutting one another” (133). One could choose to see this conversation only as causing a rift in their relationship because of Rose’s reaction which is mainly one of incomprehension (“are you going to wear a dress now?”) and concern that “they’ll kill you” (130). The idea that Little Dog’s coming out damages his relationship with his mother also stems from implication that Little Dog is no longer the “healthy, normal boy” she gave birth to (131). And yet, I would argue that Rose’s own revelation somehow brings them closer together. Firstly, Rose does not take Little Dog up on his offer to leave (“If you don’t want me I can go. I won’t be a problem and nobody has to know…” 130) and her reaffirming that “It’s just you and me, Little Dog. I don’t have anyone else” (131). And as I have previously pointed out in my secund part, the fact that they exchange confidences puts the emphasis on their relationship. But while I previously foregrounded the violence attached their sharing of their truths

(expressed through the redefinition of "exchanging truths" as "cutting one another") which I interpreted as a manifestation of the fractures within the family unit, I now think that this particular exchange brings attention to the similarities between mother and son. Indeed, despite their very different revelations (his sexuality and her abortion) Vuong draws a parallel between the two characters now facing each other by mentioning the mother's age at the time of her abortion: "You were seventeen and back in Vietnam, the same age I was sitting across from you" (133). Thus they are both spatially and somehow temporally mirroring each other.

In the last part of the novel, Rose and Little Dog have two-sided conversations and they seem to not hurt each other so much anymore through their exchanges. Instead, they appear to finally restore their connection and their bond even though they do not understand each other fully. This is most noticeable when Little Dog comes back to Hartford as a young adult after hearing about Trevor's death. He chooses to go back to his mother's house around midnight, crawling next to her on the mat where she sleeps on the floor, seeking comfort. Rose wakes up startled and promptly ask Little Dog a series of questions to figure out what happened, "[searching him" for answers, for cuts, feeling [his] pockets, under [his] shirt" (170). After remaining silent for a while and turning away from her "even of what [he] want[s] is to tell [her] everything" (171), Little Dog finally answers:

> "I hate him, Ma," I whisper in English, knowing the words seal you off from me. "I hate him. I hate him." And I start to cry.
>
> "Please, I don't know what you're saying. What is that?"
>
> I reach back, clutching two of your fingers, and press my face into the dark slot under the bed. (Vuong 171)

Little Dog's choice to resort to English as well as his succinct and elusive statement could be seen as him maintaining his mother at a distance through his refusal to explain what he is feeling in a way she can understand. And yet, his seeking her out and ultimately reaching out for her hand showcases their bond and closeness. Even though their verbal communication appears doomed to fail from the beginning, their exchange is brought to fruition thanks to the language of the body. Through his tears, Little Dog is able to communicate his pain even though its source remains a mystery to Rose. and through her pressing her hands on her son, Rose is able to communicate both her worry and support which Little Dog is shown accepting when he reaches back for two of her fingers placed on his neck. Once again, the hand becomes the "third language that animates where the tongue falters" (33) and where words fail. Their linked hands

therefore negates in a way the distance implied by their inability to understand each other's words. Connected in this way, one could argue they have been brought together in the end despite their stunted communication. This signals the efforts put in to fix their relationship.

Little Dog begins the following page by using the same sentences he wrote at the very beginning of the novel: "Dear Ma – Let me begin again" (3, 173). Thus, he creates a sort of loop which, rather than implying that the relationship between Little Dog and his mother is the exact same as in the beginning of the novel, highlights the positive evolution of said relationship towards a new kind of understanding and intimacy. The form of the letter, while underscoring the incomplete communication of their verbal conversations which are challenged with pain, rejection and incomprehension, also provides space for other kinds of communication. It allows for a certain ambivalence between tension and tenderness, expressing both distance and the possibility of reunion through the act of reaching out, even though it might take a bit of effort and time (hence the idea of having to "begin again"). With the novel's constant highlighting of the issue of literacy, Vuong underscores the neglected distinction between literacy and communication by suggesting that although the two are related, they are not always synonymous. Literacy is intimately linked to structures of power which favor the opportunity of instruction, something Rose did not have access to as a child due to the war. Literacy actively focuses on the medium of communicative delivery and reception rather than the actual act of delivering or receiving. On the other hand, communication relies upon the exchanges that occur between people. As we have seen, it encapsulates both the verbal and the nonverbal, the written and the unreadable, the mouth and the hands. It emphasizes how other forms of "reaching out" between and among people encourage common understanding and empathy , something that verbal and written languages do not always achieve. As such, literacy enforces exclusions whereas communication encourages relations.

### b. "But let me see if […] I can build you a center": creating a space for marginalized characters and celebrating them

Other than offering a particular insight into the narrator's relationship with his mother, the act of writing letters gives him the opportunity to tell both his story and his family's story in a particularly direct, personal and accessible way. The epistolary form indeed encourages a certain sense of self as it expresses a concern for individuals. Spacks notably argues that "By choosing the epistolary form, novelists implicitly state their concern for individuals, the nuance

of their personal voice, awareness of themselves and other people, as well as their place on the world" (104-105). This is a form particularly suitable for marginalized characters as it gives them the power and opportunity to take control of language to write their own identity and their own truths (Bower; Spacks). Vuong himself discusses the power of the epistolary form during his interview with Tommy Orange stating:

> I knew that I wanted to, what excited me about the epistolary form was that, you know, for the first time in my reading, or my understanding, I got a chance to write a book where an Asian-American character spoke to another Asian-American character. And that that is central. That in fact, in order to finish the book, in order to consume the book, if you will, you must enter this conversation, that in a way excludes you. And it was a moment to hold that as the center, that as a reader, you're an eavesdropper. (Vuong 2020)

What is compelling in Vuong's statement is his understanding of the reader position within the structure of the epistle. In this form, the reader is made privy to an exchange that is not meant for him initially, thus explaining his position as an "eavesdropper." One could therefore think the choice of the epistolary form favors a form of intimacy between narrator and reader, an intimacy only heightened by the illiteracy of the stated addressee (Rose) as the reader thus becomes the only "real" recipient of the letter. By writing letters to his mother who will never read them, Little Dog locks his mother outside of his thoughts, feelings and emotions in some ways and yet, by publishing them in the form of a novel, Vuong invites the reader in to discover them. But here, the reader is not only an eavesdropper in that sense, he is also one in a more political sense as Vuong evokes a reality and a culture which some readers, especially Western readers, may not understand. The form thus constitutes a political act as it brings to the forefront marginal voices against the dominant culture from which Little Dog and more notably Rose are excluded. By not only including but actively addressing someone who cannot read in his very literary novel, Vuong also acknowledges the geopolitical violences responsible for this illiteracy and ensures that his novel remains cognizant of such contexts in both its political and aesthetic choices. Another important political act for Vuong consists in saying "this story that you're eavesdropping on is important. Not, and it's important in ways you don't have to understand all of it. That this orientation is part of the American fabric. You know, and that's okay" (Vuong, "OCEAN VUONG in conversation with Tommy Orange" 2020).

The epistolary form therefore is an interestingly powerful and meaningful choice of narrative structure. It not only embeds the ambivalence of presence and distance, separation and (re)union, communication and alienation, but it also creates a space marginalized characters can reclaim. Paradoxically, Vuong's original choice of an illiterate addressee rather than discarding the character of Rose, brings her at the center of the narrative by highlighting her importance throughout the course of Little Dog's life. Vuong prefaces his novel with a dual epigraph from authors Qui Miaojin and Joan Didion. I think Qui Miaojin's quote displays Vuong's intent very well and his wish to illuminate the lives and bodies of people who for so long have been relegated to the margins. Both Vuong and his narrator Little Dog thus transform their acts of writing into one of celebration, building a center for Little Dog's loved ones out of words, whether they are able to understand them or not:

> But let me see if – using these words as a little plot of
>
> land and my life as a cornerstone –
>
> I can build you a center. (Qui Miaojin)

## Part IV. "Surviving the survival": healing from trauma and Vuong's thoughts on writing

Ocean Vuong's fictional narrative, however autobiographically inspired, is consistent with the project of revisiting and processing the past and its traumas through the regenerative and transformative power of imagination and writing. In this regard, Vuong states in an interview, "I wanted to start with truth and end with art, as a writer. That was very important to me" (Simons). As such, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* constitutes Ocean Vuong's artist statement. And indeed, the novel exemplifies a distinct metaliterary dimension as, through his literary double Little Dog, he delves into the art and process of writing within the narrative itself. While the fictional narrative draws inspiration from autobiographical elements, it aligns seamlessly with the larger ambition of reevaluating and reconciling with the past and its associated traumas; it also aligns with the ambition of assessing the role played by art and poetry in this hypothetical reconciliation. The theme of healing emerges as a central motif, with the narrative emphasizing the potential for personal transformation. This undertaking is achieved through the dynamic interplay of imagination and the act of writing, which possess a regenerative and transformative potential. Vuong's creative work becomes a tool for not only revisiting but also reshaping personal histories, demonstrating the inherent power of literature to heal and reinterpret. Within this theme, there is a focus on finding one's identity through the specific act of storytelling and naming, providing a sense of empowerment and agency. Additionally, the narrative explores the concept of (re)creating new connections and bonds, highlighting the restorative power of forging meaningful relationships. This intentional overlay of personal and traumatic reality with artistic questioning reflects the overarching theme of literary creation and what it can accomplish for the bodies and lives of Little Dog's loved ones (and to some extent Ocean Vuong's). The novel displays the affirmation of beauty as a means of transcending suffering and achieving a form of affective preservation. By acknowledging the process of artistic construction, Vuong invites readers to consider the intricate layers that constitute the act of storytelling. Thus, his novel not only presents a poignant exploration of personal history and trauma but also embeds within its narrative fabric a reflection on the transformative essence of storytelling itself, showcasing a nuanced metaliterary dimension that enriches the reading experience.

## A. The possibility of healing

### a. Finding identity through storytelling and naming

According to Ha and Tompkins (2021), Little Dog is diligent in his investigation of the trauma that has affected his family, and he uses his voice to document both their traumatic experiences and the ongoing effects of said experiences: "Tell me where it hurts. You have my words" (Vuong 176). Through his words, Little Dog can provide a healing source for them and himself as is shown in his alliance with Lan and Rose whose past he recollects and reconstructs through his writing. For Bakshi, "Vuong asserts the primacy of healing from the wound, from the past, and from memory itself even though it implies not forgetting but paradoxically remembering the wounds" (545). Only through remembering is there hope for potential healing. But remembering means an active reappropriation of traumatic experiences, a kind of reshaping of them into a narrative where meaning can therefore emerge: "For traumatic memory to lose its power as a fragment and symptom and for it to be integrated into memory, a form of narrative reconstruction or reexternalization has to occur" (Felman and Laub, 69). Little Dog's letter writing allows him to revisit the past and the traumatic experiences attached to it from a removed point of view, as both an adult and a writer and organize it into a meaningful narrative. As such, one could argue that *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* offers an example of what Suzette Henke calls "scriptotherapy." She came up with the concept of "scriptotherapy," arguing that writing about trauma can lead towards individual and collective healing as well as the alleviation of symptoms of trauma through the "writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment" (xii).

An integral part of Little Dog's construction and understanding of his ow identity stems from his storytelling which arises from both his own experience and the stories he heard from his mother and grandmother (such as Lan's encounter with American soldiers during the war). His identity construction appears as intrinsically interpersonal as the result of "the relation between the self, discovered through the articulation of remembered emotional disturbances, and the group" (Pelaud 64). Little Dog assembles his life story through the act of remembrance and thus he recreates and reimagines history to preserve his family's experiences. This allows him to then understand his own heritage and claim his place in it (Ha, Tompkins 207). Judith Harris wrote on creative writing and healing arguing that the stories people create about themselves contribute to a better understanding of their identity. She also claims they generate

a sense of "change and possibility" which can help one's healing. In claiming so, she stresses the importance of writing and narrative choices in regards to one's representation of oneself and in conveying one's emotions (8). This suggests that written language and the creation of a narrative provide a space for one to reflect on one's existence, including one's trauma.

Through his storytelling, Little Dog reflects on his family's efforts to protect and care for each other in spite of everything, to persevere. In doing so he deviates from a narrative of victimhood and instead claims another identity for both him and his family, an identity which hints at the possibility of healing from their trauma. This is made particularly evident in the way he considers the significance of the act of name-giving. Names are intrinsically tied to the question of identity as a marker of individuality, and they hold particular meaning and hope for Little Dog and his family. Towards the beginning of the novel, Little Dog explains the origin of his own name citing an old Vietnamese tradition. He evokes the belief according to which there were evil spirits who would steal young children, especially the ones deemed healthy and beautiful. The custom was therefore to name children after the most despicable things with the hope that the unappealing names would trick the spirits into staying away: "To love something, then, is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched – and alive. A name, thin as air, can also be a shield. A Little Dog shield." (Vuong 18). Names therefore become an expected form of protection as well as an expression of care. Naming is often cited as an example of a performative speech act as it possesses the ability not only to label but to shape destinies. Here, names are not merely linguistic markers; they are figurative talismans, imbued with a dual essence of protection and influence. This cultural belief endows the act of naming with an additional layer of significance and power, as it is believed that the name bestowed upon an individual carries a prophylactic power that will safeguard them throughout their life journey. In the novel, names are also shown as deeply influenced by the experience of war but that does not necessarily mean they are just another example of how Little Dog's family remains determined by their trauma. Rather, I would argue that through the act of name-giving, the characters reclaim a form of agency and even self-empowerment. This is especially true for the character of Lan, Little Dog's grandmother: "In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name – Lan – in that naming claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into something worth keeping" (Vuong 231). For most of Lan's life, she has been deprived of things. For example, she did not have the freedom to choose her husband as she was forced in an "arranged marriage to a man three times her age" whom she ran away from at seventeen (39). But here, her name is equated to a gift and it brings a positive change to Lan's identity and life and I mean that in

the most literal sense as, thanks to the adoption of her new name, she transitions from being described in impersonal terms as "a woman" (the noun being introduced by the indefinite article) to "Lan," the name being emphasized by the use of dashes. Through the act of giving herself a name, she thus claims agency in defining her own identity as something more than she previously was. She is no longer a "girl who ran away from her faceless youth" (40-41), deprived of a name as her own mother "simply called her *Seven*, the order in which she came into the world after her siblings" (39). Naming takes on a form of transformative power making Lan a sort of demiurgic figure as she is indeed the subject of the verbs of the sentence, a wordsmith whose use of language displays a certain performativity. By choosing the name of a flower (Lan signifies "orchid"), she calls for a shift in focus, from war and survival at the beginning of the sentence to beauty. In doing so, she claims her life for herself in spite of the war and everything that could negate her existence and its value. The choice of a flower name is significant there as it symbolizes both life and beauty where the war is characterized by death, loss and pain. Lan thus creates a striking and almost paradoxical juxtaposition between the beauty of the flower imagery and the precarity around her during the Vietnam war. And while in times of war, a life can so easily be deemed worthless, Lan made herself "something worth keeping." She went from being "the rot of the harvest" (39) to being a "flower that opens like something torn apart" (41). The mention of the flower being torn apart resonates with the imagery of war. The fragmentation of the petals as they open also could suggest Lan's traumatized and fragmented consciousness. And yet, it at the same time refers to the blooming process thus implying that life and beauty still prevail. Similarly to the way in which Little Dog chooses to interpret Lan's name, he uncovers a double meaning hidden in his mother's name. When thinking about it, Little Dog realizes that "rose is also the past tense of rise. That in calling [her] name [he is] also telling [her] to get up" (215). Her name can be understood as referring to an injunction but also a completed action: "You're Rose, Ma. You have risen" (idem). Her name, her identity, is therefore not aligned with the burden of her trauma, with the idea that her past is weighing her down, but rather with her strength. In his view, her name becomes a testament of her resilience as it implies that she did not succumb to the pain and hardship but rose above them. Thanks to his reinterpretation of his mother's name, Little Dog assigns a specific narrative to her, one of perseverance rather than one of victimhood. One could argue that Lan, through her creation of a new narrative for herself, can be seen as a model chosen by Little Dog. Going back to the beginning of the novel when Lan shares stories of her youth in Vietnam with her grandson, Lan appears as the family's original storyteller, a source of

inspiration for the aspiring novelist. Little Dog is a wordsmith like her, creating his own understanding of his and his family's lives and experiences.

### b. (Re)Creating new connections and bonds

#### *i. From the nail salon to the tobacco plantation: building a new sense of community*

I have previously underscored the importance of Little Dog's relationships throughout the novel and I have only just discussed how the group can proved to be primordial in the construction of one's identity and sense of self. The narrator Little Dog, through articulating his story and through his relationship with his family and their legacy, is made to find his place in the family dynamics. But the focus of Little Dog's narrative is very much on the transitional period that is adolescence and the process of figuring one's identity outside of trauma and the family unit. As a Bildungsroman, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* puts a particular emphasis on a sense of self-discovery and growth, a process facilitated by the creation of new bonds. This transition takes place mainly within the second part of the novel and is spatially anchored into the setting of the novel and its various enclaves, mainly the nail salon his mother Rose works at and the tobacco plantation where he gets his first job. His moving from a Vietnamese dominated space largely attached to the figure of his mother to a new and more diverse place is an indicator of him growing up and distancing himself from her and the trauma attached to her, both his and her own. The summer he turns fourteen, Little Dog gets his first job in a tobacco field outside of Hartford even though he is too young to be legally employed and has to be paid under the table and in cash. There he meets not only Trevor but also the community of plantation workers with whom he finds a new form of kinship. These new experiences and bonds are examples of Little Dog's coming of age and of his entry into a more adult world while also being strategies to stay away from home and, by extension, from his abusive mother.

By setting the narrative in a nail salon at the beginning of the second part of the novel, Vuong incorporates an expected and almost familiar location of the Vietnamese American novel given the community's dominance in the nail salon industry. The nail care industry has become an ethnic niche dominated by the Vietnamese community in the U.S. and 'it is *immigrant* Vietnamese, in particular, who carved out the nail niche" (Eckstein and Nguyen 647). Most of Vietnamese nail workers are women as, in the early 2000s, one in five working

age Vietnamese women employed as manicurists (650). Vuong's own mother worked in a nail salon, as does his character Rose. Little Dog describes the nail salon to some extent as the heart of the community:

> What I know is that the nail salon is more than a place of work and workshop for beauty, it is also a place where our children are raised – a number of whom, like cousin Victor, will get asthma from years of breathing the noxious fumes into their still-developing lungs. The salon is also a kitchen where, in the back rooms, our women squat on the floor over huge woks that pop and sizzle over electric burners, cauldrons of phở simmer and steam up the cramped spaces with aromas of cloves, cinnamon, ginger, mint, and cardamon mixing with formaldehyde, toluene, acetone, Pine-sol, and bleach. A place where folklore, rumors, tall tales, and jokes from the old country are told, expanded, laughter erupting in back rooms the size of rich people's closets, then quickly lulled into an eerie, untouched quiet. (Vuong 79-80)

The nail salon is this quintessential Vietnamese space where a community of women is raising the next generation. It is a sphere in which both work and family lives are reunited. Both a comforting bubble and a site of labor, its paradoxical essence is manifested through the competing smells of chemicals ("the noxious fumes" made of "formaldehyde, toluene, acetone, Pine-sol, and bleach") and of herbs and spices used for cooking in the back rooms ("cloves, cinnamon, ginger, mint, and cardamon" used in phở). The nail salon becomes a motif of interwoven care and abuse as the space simultaneously protects and poisons children. It is also an enclave of Vietnamese culture giving visibility to a community oftentimes silenced otherwise. While Rose prompts her son to remain as invisible as possible in the outside world, and to not draw attention to himself as he "[is] already Vietnamese" (Vuong 219), in the safety of the nail salon, "folklore, rumors, tall tales, and jokes from the old country are told, expanded, laughter erupting" (80). Despite the toxicity of the labor conditions, the nail salon appears as a form of safe haven. It also encapsulates the past, present and future of the Vietnamese community as it brings together different generations all tied by the transmission of Vietnamese oral tradition in a show of intergenerational alliance.

When writing about the nail salon, Little Dog makes a point of noting that "The most common English word spoken in the nail salon was *sorry*," a refrain sung in the hopes of receiving a tip rather than an actual apology as the manicurists "had done nothing wrong" (91). He states:

> In the nail salon, *sorry* is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency. It no longer merely apologizes, but insists, reminds: *I'm here, right here, beneath you*. It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable. (Vuong 91)

In the nail salon, the interrogation of the word "sorry" represents "the rhetorical mechanism and power dynamics that transform an apology into an 'insist[ance]' and a 'remind[er]' of Vietnamese American visibility and presence" (Tran 29). This reinterpretation of the word "sorry" is accompanied by the physical act of lowering oneself which is also takes on a more symbolical meaning. It echoes the idea that Vietnamese refugees have been represented for a long time in American literature, historiography and mass media as passive objects of Western pity and charity or as grateful and compliant additions to American society (Hong 22). The use of the words "right, superior, and charitable" could describe the U.S.'s self-prescribed national identity and vision as Vietnamese's savior when they strategically chose to save the same people they previously tried to kill in the war. But *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is not what Hong calls a "grateful refugee" narrative. Rather than showcasing refugee gratitude, Little Dog frames his reinterpreting of an apology in the context of economic survival where "Being sorry pays" (Vuong 92) and feeds one's family. The nail salon stands as a space where language is used in an effective way, showcasing the profound influence of speech and the transformative power of words. The Vietnamese nail workers engage in a subtle re-purposing of an apologetic word, turning "sorry" into a phatic utterance, a reminder that they are "here." It is a shrewd way of manipulating the listener's cultural representations, challenging stereotypes of submission and societal expectations. In this intimate setting, language becomes a tool for self-empowerment and self-healing. It is just one of the many examples found in the novel of how words can wield immense power in people's lives in terms of self-discovery and empowerment. As readers witness the magic unfolding in the nail salon, they are reminded of the power of speech, how words can inspire and transform which paves the way for Little Dog's meditations on the power of poetry and narrative.

Following this emphasis on survival, Little Dog then shifts the narrative focus from the nail salon and his mother's labor to his own work on the fields, writing:

> And yet it's not only so in the nail salon, Ma. In those tobacco fields, too, we said it. "Lo siento," Manny would utter as he walked across Mr. Buford's field of vision. "Lo siento," Rigo whispered as he reached to place a machete back on the wall where Buford sat ticking off numbers on a clipboard. "Lo siento," I said to the boss after missing a day

> when Lan had another schizophrenic attack and had shoved all her clothes into the oven, saying she had to get rid of the "evidence." "Lo siento," we said when, one day, night arrived only to find the field half harvested, the tractor, its blown-out engine, sitting in the stilled dark. "Lo siento, señor," each of us said as we walked past the truck with Buford inside blasting Hank Williams and staring at his withered crop, a palm-sized photo of Ronald Reagan taped to the dash. How the day after, we began work not with "Good morning" but with "Lo siento." The phrase with its sound of a bootstep sinking, then lifted, from mud. The slick muck of it wetting our tongues as we apologized ourselves back to making our living. (Vuong 92)

Here, Little Dog recounts five times in which the words "Lo siento" were said by both himself and his peers working on the tobacco fields. The anaphora sets the tempo of the passage but also of his life, his days starting with "Lo siento" instead of "Good morning". Through the word "sorry," Little Dog connects the indoor space of the nail salon to the exterior space of the tobacco fields. But rather than giving readers an impression of repetition, Little Dog introduces a sense of slow progression. As the story shifts from English to Spanish, from "sorry" to "lo siento", Little Dog moves from his mother and the nail salon community to the tobacco workers community. "Ma" disappears from the text, supplanted by "I," "we," "Manny," "Rigo," and "each of us". With "each other" and the pronouns "we," Little Dog associates himself with a new community outside of his mother and the Vietnamese American manicurists. Instead, he aligns himself with his Black and Hispanic coworkers. This realignment is a testimony to Little Dog's distancing from his family through his stepping out into the world of labor, beyond what he knew of it within the Vietnamese community. While one could say he leaves home only to find himself in the same subaltern position as his mother (forced to constantly say "sorry"), he instead finds something else. Through "a work of unbreakable links and collaboration," he finds kinship outside the family unit (Vuong 90). This work chain he is becoming a part of, rather than meaning a form of subjugation, invokes personal ties which "sutured a fracture inside [him]" (idem). Trauma theorists such as Schwab argue that "Trauma as a mode of being fractures the self" (Shwab 42). Little Dog's phrasing would therefore suggest work allows him to heal and move on from his trauma as he involves himself into a productive process through which he finds connections and fulfilment. His entry into the workforce marks a transition from his childhood, having been raised by traumatized women and within the confines of his ethnic community, to a new chapter in his life. In investing a new place, he finds himself being part

of a new community which has its own language as "smiles, hand gestures, even silences [and] hesitations" supplant worded language once again (91).

### *ii. Trevor*

Little Dog carry the stories of his family, surviving the trauma of the war through its retelling and his reinterpretation of the past. But through language, his narrative creates space for other forms of healing, a reaching out not toward his mother this time, but towards other connections. Little Dog writes:

> It is no accident, Ma, that the comma resembles a fetus – that curve of continuation. We were all once inside our mothers, saying, with our entire curved and silent selves, more, more, more. I want to insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication. (Vuong 139)

The analogy between fetus and comma can be interpreted as an attempt to create new links and intimacies between disarticulated bodies. The comma is a punctuation mark meant to join together separate ideas or clauses. The fetus' call for "more, more, more" suggests a movement away from the figure of the mother, a yearning for life which could be interpreted as Little Dog stepping away from Rose and her trauma. This instauration of distance creates space for life to emerge where trauma could be seen as a negation of life, it also allows for new bonds to be formed. Birgit Neumann argues that Little Dog's "metaphor of the self as a punctuation character and syntactical order intimates that the self created through writing is defined by its relationality […] it reaches out for others and calls for connection" (294-295). As Little Dog responds to this call for social connection, he sees on Trevor's body a parallel yet new embodiment of the metaphor of the comma: "Trevor with the scar like a comma on his neck, syntax of what next what next what next," "A comma you now put your mouth to. That violet hook holding two complete thoughts, two complete bodies without subject" (Vuong 154, 156). The comma is the result of Trevor's father's abuse for, when he was nine, his father shot a nail gun at the front door in a fit of rage and Trevor was hit by the ricochet. Little Dog creates a new meaning for the mark which goes from being a site of violation and a proof of abuse to a physical and symbolical signifier of connection, affinity and intimacy. Jennifer Cho argues that "[T]he scar's resemblance to a comma, in addition to its invitation for touch and oral intimacy, suggests a different kind of narrative creation and continuity" (146). The comma is connecting

Little Dog's and Trevor's individual existences, creating a language "syncretizing their bodies and their histories" (idem). Thus, Little Dog revises previous markers of oppression and trauma into ones of self-formation and connection.

As stated before, Little Dog meets Trevor while working at the tobacco farm, the latter being the owner's grandson. Little Dog's romantic relationship with Trevor is crucial to his journey towards healing as it provides him space to self-explore and constitute himself as a subject outside of the traumatized family unit. The word "sorry" which was commonly used by his mother and her colleagues in the nail salon as well as by the plantation workers has also entered Little Dog's vocabulary, becoming "a portion of [his] own name," "an extension of [him]self" (Vuong 93, 94). So much so that, when he first meets Trevor, he greets him with "sorry" (93). But while these words were a signifier of community, connecting Little Dog first to the Vietnamese community and the world of the nail and then to the workers of the tobacco fields, they do not connect him to Trevor in the same way. As Little Dog experiences attraction for Trevor, he acquires another way of connecting to him through his gaze. Trevor's attention and his interest for Little Dog are conveyed thanks to another form of language almost, that of the eyes. This proves crucial for Little Dog's self-construction as he is transformed into a young man who not only explores his sexuality and identity but into an object of desire, someone worthy of being noticed but also of being wanted. "I was seen" he writes to his mother who told him repeatedly to be "invisible" to avoid harm:

> What I felt then, however, was not desire, but the coiled charge of its possibility, a feeling that emitted, it seemed, its own gravity, holding me in place. The way he watched me back there in the field, when we worked briefly, side by side, our arms brushing against each other as the plants racked themselves in a green blur before me, his eyes lingering, then flitting away when I caught them. I was seen – I who had seldom been seen by anyone. I who was taught, by you, to be invisible in order to be safe […]. (Vuong 96)

The emphasis put on the possibility of desire expressed through the gaze signifies Little Dog growing up and opening himself up to another person. But what could be seen as a precarious position as "to be gorgeous, you must first be seen," which might allow you "to be hunted" (238), can in fact be seen as a positive condition as it creates a space and an opportunity for Little Dog to construct himself as beautiful. He writes "It was an accident, my beauty revealed to me" (107). The ability to seize unpredictable opportunities provided by accidents becomes a sign of growth on Little Dog's part. For the first time, he views his imperfections as "something

that was wanted, that was sought and found" (idem). It is not just through the romantic relationship or through the eyes of Trevor that Little Dog becomes something or rather someone else, rather said relationship creates a space which allows Little Dog to change his own perception of himself. His moment of revelation happens on a random Thursday two years after he started to work on the plantation and Trevor is not there to witness it. It is a moment of self-realisation and self-creation almost. It appears almost as a sort of out-of-body experience, the "I" of the narrator distancing himself of the reflection he sees in the mirror: "Who was he? […] Seen through a mirror, I viewed my body as another, a boy a few feet away, his expression unmoved" (107-108). Similarly to the way in which Lan claimed a new identity for herself in choosing a name, transitioning from being a woman lost in a war-torn country, a "faceless youth" without a name, Little Dog is now in a position to reinvent himself. Through his description of his reflection, he constructs a different perception of himself thus creating a new narrative for himself, one of beauty. What picked my interest in Little Dog's description of his reflection is the analogy with the sun: "It was everything I hid from, everything that made me want to be a sun, the only thing I knew that had no shadow" (107). To my mind the imagery of the sun is particularly meaningful in its relation to the shadow. In the third section of this study[3] I discussed the mother/son relationship throughout the novel. In doing so I examined how the motif of the shadow suggests a form of mirroring which tied Little Dog's existence to his mother's and by extension tied him to the traumatic memory of war. In his wish to become a sun, the only thing with no shadow and therefore with no ties with the pains of the past, Little Dog states his attempt at moving on said past. But that does not mean simply turning away from it or hiding from it. Rather he seems to find healing in reinterpreting his body as something beautiful, something worthy of being wanted rather than discarded. And this development was made possible in large part thanks to Trevor.

## B. "Turning yellow pain into gold": an affirmation of beauty

### a. An affirmation of beauty

In his review of Vuong's novel for the *Los Angeles Review,* Min Hyoung Song writes "It is a beauty that asserts itself against the vociferous claims to the contrary and demands a

[3] Part III. "A life in which violence and delicacy collide": an ode to Little Dog's loved ones and the complexities of interpersonal relationships

different way of looking and valuing what is seen. The novel asks readers to pay attention to what they might otherwise turn away from." And indeed the theme of beauty runs throughout the book, as Vuong juxtaposes the horrors of trauma, drug abuse, displacement, and war with the beauty of resilience, and intimacy. These jagged and occasionally jarring juxtapositions capture the author's tendency to be unapologetically candid, inviting his readers to bear witness as he leaves no stone unturned (Ha and Tompkins). From the very title of the novel, Vuong "dare[s] to call poor black and brown and yellow bodies gorgeous." When being interviewed by Michel Martin, he says:

> It felt like, here's my chance to say it right out the gate. The first sentence in the book is the title and I want to start with beauty, because that's a given to me. That's a fact. These people are beautiful and I want to start with there and then show the world how they are beautiful. (in Amanpour and Company, 2019, my transcription)

This affirmation of beauty is reiterated multiple times throughout the novel. As an overarching theme, it is perhaps most notable in the evolution showcased between two passages of the novel which to me echo one another because of their emphasis on lineage. While the first one shows Little Dog as a direct product of war, the second views him and his family not as products of war but rather of beauty. This shift in meaning and symbolism is I think representative of Vuong's intention of reclaiming the diasporic subject and the traumatized refugee narrative through the medium of language. As Vuong uncovers stories which oftentimes remain untold in the dominant narrative of the war and its aftermath, he chooses to emphasize the beauty of his characters, even though he exposes their pain in his writing:

> There are times, late at night, when your son would wake believing a bullet is lodged inside him. He'd feel it floating on the right side of his chest, just between the ribs. *The bullet was always here*, the boy thinks, older even than himself – and his bones, tendons, and veins had merely wrapped around the metal shard, sealing it inside him. *It wasn't me*, the boy thinks, *who was inside my mother's womb, but this bullet, this seed I bloomed around.* Even now, as the cold creeps around him, he feels it poking out from his chest, slightly tenting his sweater. He feels for the protrusion but, as usual, finds nothing. *It's receded*, he thinks. *It wants to stay inside me. It is nothing without me.* Because a bullet without a body is a song without ears. (Vuong 76-77, italics in the original)

Here situated in a symmetrical position to Little Dog's heart, the bullet appears as an obvious symbol of the war. Being previously implanted in the mother's body, the bullet is described

almost the point or center around which the boy was created, the seed which fecundated the egg inside his mother's womb and led to his existence. This reminds the reader that technically, Little Dog is indeed a product of war. His mother was the result of the union between a Vietnamese woman and an American soldier. His lineage is thus intrinsically linked to the Vietnam war as this passage emphasizes the role it played in his family's history. The war precedes Little Dog and yet, it still determines his life as he views it as the point he "*bloomed around.*" And yet, towards the end of the novel, Little Dog comes to the conclusion that he and his family "were born from beauty":

> Yes, there was a war. Yes, we came from its epicenter. In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name – Lan – in that naming claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into something worth keeping. From that, a daughter was born, and from that daughter, a son.
>
> All this time I told myself we were born from war – but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty.
>
> Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence – but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it. (Vuong 231)

Once again, Little Dog uses the vocabulary of filiation to articulate his connection to the painful history of the war. The fruit analogy parallels the mention of the seed in the previous passage, linking the two excerpts together. It also echoes the names of Little Dog's mother and grandmother who are both named after flowers, creating somewhat of an extended botanical metaphor. One could read the pronoun "that" ("From that, a daughter was born, and from that daughter, a son.") in one of two ways. First, one could assume the pronoun "that" refers to "that war" thus focusing on the historical circumstances in which the family was born. This reading would establish a causal link between the war and the birth of Rose, and then of Little Dog. Such an interpretation would come back to the sentiment expressed in the poem "Notebook Fragments" where Vuong writes "An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me" (*Night Sky With Exit Wounds* 67). Or, one could think the pronoun "that" refers to beauty, saying that from that beauty which Lan claimed for herself, Rose and Little Dog were born. This interpretation offers a shift in focus, a new perspective proclaiming the prevailing of beauty over the war. There is therefore no longer a direct correlation between the war and the births of Rose or Little Dog, no relation of causality between the two events. Even though violence is in fact a reality tied with the

historical circumstances of the war, it is not presented here as a cause nor consequence defining Little Dog's family's existence (it "failed to spoil it"). The use of the verb "having passed through" indicates the result of a process which I interpret as meaning that violence does not constitute an end for Little Dog's family but rather refers to a form of stage or a phase through which they had to go through. While there is no point in refusing to acknowledge their experience of the war and the violence attached to it, their life is not to be defined by trauma, they can move beyond their past by choosing to find beauty in it. Little Dog thus weaves a narrative in which he assigns his own meaning to their experiences, following the example set forth by Lan. As a writer, he is able to choose from which perspective to look at his family's story, claiming that meaning for himself. He rejects the binary opposition between beauty and violence, claiming that the former can bloom in spite of the latter.

### b. War and art: "Turning yellow pain into gold"

In recent years, there has been a notable surge in interest in Vietnamese American literature in the United States, particularly in relation to the Vietnam War. This growing fascination can be attributed to several interconnected factors that reflect both societal shifts and literary developments. In his poem titled "Not Even," from his 2022 collection *Time Is a Mother*, Vuong evokes how the American publishing industry has expressed a renewed interest in stories of Vietnam, turning tales of suffering into a profitable market:

> Because everyone knows yellow pain, pressed into American letters, turns to gold.
>
> Our sorrow Midas touched. Napalm with a rainbow afterglow.
>
> Unlike feelings, blood gets realer when you feel it.
>
> I'm trying to be real but it costs too much. (Vuong, *Time Is a Mother* 36)

The interest in tales of Vietnam relating to the war (symbolized by the reference to both "yellow pain" and "napalm") can be explained by different factors. The Vietnam war, as a pivotal and tumultuous period in American history, continues to captivate the imagination of the public due to its complex impact on American society and global geopolitics thus contributing to the increased interest in Vietnamese American literature. This protracted conflict led to profound social, cultural, and political changes within the United States, prompting a reexamination of its historical context and consequences. As a result, Vietnamese

American literature has gained traction as a means to explore the nuanced and often overlooked perspectives of those directly affected by the war, including refugees, immigrants, and veterans. The absence of consensus on what to make of the Vietnam war in the U.S. explains the ongoing reckoning with the aftermath of the Vietnam War which continues to occur within the Vietnamese American literary production. As time distances us from the historical events, there has been a growing inclination to delve into the long-lasting consequences of the war, its reverberations on individuals and families, and the process of reconciling the trauma it left behind. The realm of Vietnamese American literature provides an avenue for both authors and readers to engage with these complex issues and offer fresh perspectives on the enduring legacy of the war.

The resurgence of interest in Vietnamese American literature in the wake of the Vietnam war can be attributed to a confluence of factors, including the ongoing fascination with the war's historical significance, a commitment to empathetic storytelling, and a broader movement towards diverse and inclusive narratives. Through themes of pathos and violence, Vietnamese American authors effectively communicate the human impact of the war, allowing readers to connect on a deeply emotional level and encouraging a more nuanced understanding of this period in history. Pathos and violence, key themes within this literary movement, serve as powerful conduits for conveying the emotional toll of the war on individuals and communities. Pathos, evoking deep emotions and empathy, allows readers to connect with the personal narratives of Vietnamese Americans, enhancing understanding of their experiences and struggles. By depicting the raw emotional aftermath of the war, these narratives provide insight into the lasting psychological scars endured by those who lived through it. The emphasis on violence in Vietnamese American literature can be understood as a response to the horrors of war and the traumas inflicted upon individuals. Art and literature have long been media for grappling with the brutality of conflict and Vietnamese American authors have channelled this idea to shed light on the brutality of the Vietnam war and its reverberations, and indeed Viet Thanh Nguyen points out that “Art’s relationship to war is not unique, just extreme, for even the most mundane aspects of life are marked by the simultaneity of beauty and horror, where the intimacies of love and betrayal are observed at close range” (2016, 223). By confronting violence head-on, authors such as Ocean Vuong challenge readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the war's impact, fostering a deeper engagement with its legacy.

But as Viet Thanh Nguyen explains, the form of Vietnamese American literature “has become aesthetically refined over the past fifty years” even when “the content – war – remains

potentially troublesome and volatile" (199). The memory of the war is "inseparable from the Vietnamese American population itself, which exists only because of the war" (200) thus making it an unavoidable motif in Vietnamese American literature. I would argue that Vuong's writing is an apt example of such aesthetical refinement as he endeavors to take another look at the trope of the diasporic subject and of the war refugee whose family was left traumatized by the war. While he does not deny the reality of "yellow pain," he tries to find the idiosyncratic power within this motif. The gold mentioned in the poem "Not Even" does not have to necessarily refer to the marketing of Vietnamese American literature and the possible capitalization on "yellow pain" appealing to a predominantly White American readership. Rather, this gold can be understood as symbolizing the shift from trauma towards beauty and a certain aesthetic value. When this pain is expressed through writing ("pressed into American letters"), it undergoes a transformation, turning into something valuable or meaningful ("turns to gold"). This could imply that the act of expressing pain through art or writing can bring a form of catharsis or transformation. Here, the reference to King Midas, who turned everything he touched into gold, indicates that their sorrow has been similarly touched or transformed. The imagery of "napalm with a rainbow afterglow" is particularly striking and contradictory: napalm is destructive, associated with war and devastation, while a rainbow signifies hope and beauty. This juxtaposition is indicative of Vuong's honoring the pains and tribulations of the Vietnamese diaspora associated with the war (which prompted their migration to the U.S.) but the image of the rainbow suggests that he is not reducing his novel and its characters to those pains and tribulations. The contrast between feelings and blood in the following line of the poem might reflect the complex and contradictory emotions that the speaker is experiencing. This line contrasts feelings with physical sensations. While feelings might be subjective and elusive, not unlike psychological trauma, "blood" here refers to physical pain or bodily sensations, which become more tangible and could refer to the war's human cost. It highlights the notion that physical pain can sometimes be easier to confront and acknowledge than the emotional pain attached to trauma. The final line reflects the speaker's struggle to be authentic and genuine ("trying to be real"), but they find that the price of embracing their true self is too high ("costs too much"). This could indicate that being authentic and facing one's pain comes with emotional, psychological, or societal costs that can be difficult to bear. These lines delve into the complexities of pain, transformation, authenticity, and the emotional toll it takes to confront one's inner struggles. As such, the poem seems to explore the tension between the desire to express and transform pain into something meaningful and the challenges associated

with that process, a tension Ocean Vuong also seems to both struggle and play with in his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

### C. "Why can't the language for creativity be the language of regeneration": writing as a form of affective preservation

*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a Künstlerroman, a coming of age narrative of an artist in which the process of artistic construction is constantly acknowledged. Through his narrator, Vuong invites readers to consider the intricate layers that constitute the act of storytelling as, all throughout the novel, Little Dog constantly questions the act of writing and develops a form of metaliterary reflexion, expressing his (and by extension Vuong's) ideas and hopes for his art. While this metaliterary dimension is especially expanded upon in the third and final part of the novel but it is also present from the beginning of the novel. For instance, when discussing what prompted him to write in the early pages of the book, Little Dog refers to an instance where he reads Roland Barthes' *Journal de deuil*, a book the latter wrote daily for a year after his mother's passing and in which he discusses his experience with his sick and dying mother:

> I reread Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary* yesterday, the book he wrote each day for a year after his mother's death. *I have known the body of my mother*, he writes, *sick and then dying*. And that's where I stopped. Where I decided to write to you. You who are still alive. (Vuong 7)

This example of intertextuality effectively summons feelings of grief as the motivation behind the act of writing. Barthes' method of processing grief, which led to the creation of *Mourning Diary*, inspired Little Dog to write to his own mother. If we consider grief as the emotion at the heart of both Barthes's and Little Dog's works, one could say the narrator in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is paradoxically mourning his mother who is still alive. However, the text implies an alternative emotional perspective by not revealing the precise reason for Little Dog's decision to "[stop]" and "[decide] to write to [her]". Vuong's deliberate narrative choices underscore how grief falls short in capturing Little Dog's own personal reality, underscoring the insufficiency of grief in depicting the bond between the narrator and his mother. The question arises: How does one grieve for someone who is alive, prompted by revisiting another person's diary? While Barthes wrote "after his mother's death," Little Dog shifts from

recounting past events to addressing his mother in the present tense after being influenced by Barthes's writing. This is evident in his words, "And that's where I stopped. Where I decided to write to you. You who are still alive".

One of the key ideas put forth by Vuong through Little Dog's musings is that writing can lead to a form of affective preservation. Little Dog invokes Barthes again when he recalls another anecdote from his childhood. He evokes an evening when Rose returns from work and when he attends to her bodily discomfort utilizing a "quarter" and "Vicks VapoRub" to alleviate her backaches. This technique involves delicately massaging the skin to facilitate healing. This seemingly ordinary act of service becomes the catalyst for Little Vuong's musings in which he finds himself once again in conversation with Barthes:

> I think of Barthes again. *A writer is someone who plays with the body of his mother*, he says after the death of his own mother, *in order to glorify it, to embellish it.*
>
> How I want this to be true.
>
> And yet, even here, writing you, the physical fact of your body resists my moving in. Even in these sentences, I place my hands on your back and see how dark they are as they lie against the unchangeable white backdrop of your skin. Even now, I see the folds of your waist and hips as I knead out the tensions, the small bones along your spine, a row of ellipses no silence translates. Even after all these years, the contrast between our skin surprises me – the way a blank page does when my hand, gripping a pen, begins to move through its spatial field, trying to act upon its life without marring it. But by writing, I mar it. I change, I embellish, and preserve you all at once. (Vuong 85)

Barthes suggests that a writer can manipulate language to glorify and enhance the memory of his mother's body. Little Dog desires this to be applicable, yet even while writing to his mother, he faces the challenge of connecting with her physical presence. The metaliterary dimension of this passage is highlighted by the evolution from the "writing to you" readers could find at the beginning of the novel to the act of "writing you." In the sentence, "And yet, even here, writing you, the physical fact of your body resists my moving in," the play with syntax revolves around the word "you." The ambiguity of "you" allows the pronoun to be interpreted both as a direct object and an indirect object of the verb "writing." On one hand, "writing you" can be understood as the act of composing a text addressed to someone, where "you" is the recipient, something that reminds readers of the epistolary form of the novel here. On the other hand, "writing you" can also be seen as the act of physically writing on or about the person in question,

where “you” becomes the object upon which the writing is directed. This play with syntax adds depth to the sentence, creating a sense of tension between the abstract and the tangible, and highlighting the complex relationship between the writer and the subject. Vuong draws a parallel between Barthes’ metaphorical literary handling of the maternal body and the tangible body of Little Dog’s mother. This emphasizes the distinction between Barthes’ theoretical concept and Little Dog's lived experience. Barthes employs writing to “play” with his mother’s body, imbuing it with splendor and adornment. This implies writing as a means of beautification. In contrast, Little Dog writes not of embellishing but of a more intrusive and damaging action (“bruising”) on the skin. His approach involves harming his mother’s body as a preliminary step towards healing. The choice of words and their associated meanings in the descriptions of the mother’s body underscores an affective dissonance between the French writer and theorist and Little Dog. The latter expresses his longing to “glorify” and “embellish” his mother’s body through writing, in contrast to him potentially causing harm and further diminishment. This unattainable aspiration contributes to a recurring sense of loss evident in the text. As he cannot achieve his wish to enhance his mother's body through writing, Little Dog transforms his mother’s physical form into writing, thereby converting loss into creation. His mother’s back is compared to a blank page while “the small bones along [her] spine” are likened to “a row of ellipses that silence cannot convey.” Because written words lack the ability to fully capture Rose’s personal experience and convey her subjectivity to readers, Little Dog suggests that Rose’s body needs to become language itself to represent the “unreadability” of her lived experience (Tran 53). Placing his hands on her back, Little Dog begins to fill its metaphorical page, fleshing out her life “no silence translates.” To some extent, this can be interpreted as Little Dog’s attempt to make room for the illiterate body of his mother so that her experience is not silenced within the American literary space. And by transforming Rose’s body into the structural components of a language that she cannot comprehend or read, and let alone write in, the text emphasizes the materiality of language. However, in doing so, it also highlights an important parallel. Just as Rose’s physical body undergoes strain due to the labor she performs, Little Dog’s act of writing also causes a form of damage to the metaphorical body of his literary creation. As Little Dog writes the body of his mother and puts her life and experience into words, he transforms it. Interestingly his choice of words when talking about this process is almost paradoxical. On the one hand, he uses the verb “embellish” which refers quite openly to the artistic process that is the act of writing. The verb suggests turning the reality of her life, including of her pain and trauma, into art that is to say into something deemed beautiful and worthy. On the other hand, he uses the verb “mar” which suggests a form of degradation to

some extent, an alteration of the reality previously taken as a source of inspiration which would result in some damage. The damaging aspect of the writing process, as expressed in the quote, could lie in the tension between attempting to capture and glorify the subject (in this case, the mother's body) through words and the realization that these attempts fall short of truly encapsulating the complexity and rawness of the subject. Writing is an act of interpretation and representation, and in this act, there is a risk of altering or simplifying the essence of what is being described. Ocean Vuong describes the desire to honor and beautify his mother's body through writing, akin to glorifying and embellishing it. And yet, the act of writing itself becomes a dilemma, where trying to preserve and glorify the subject risks altering or distorting it in the process. In essence, the damage to the text lies in the inherent limitations of language and the struggle to authentically convey the profound, intricate, and deeply personal experiences and relationships through words, leaving the author acutely aware of the potential for inadequacy and alteration in the portrayal of the subject. And yet, the last few sentences of the passage quoted above presents an important accumulation of verbs: "But by writing, I mar it. I change, I embellish, and preserve you all at once." I would argue that the verb "preserve" is particularly emphasized due to its coming last. This could very well mean that the action that prevails in the end is one of preservation rather than destruction. Through language and literature, Little Dog immortalizes his mother in a way, gives her a "readability" which could have been denied, and even has been denied, to her due to her being kept at the margins of American society as a traumatized and illiterate Vietnamese refugee.

To my mind, Ocean Vuong expresses his own hopes surrounding the act of writing through Little Dog when the latter states "I never wanted to build a 'body of work,' but to preserve these, our bodies, breathing and unaccounted for, inside the work" (Vuong 175). The quote suggests that, as an author which acts as Ocean Vuong's double, Little Dog did not have the intention of creating an extensive "body of work" in the traditional sense. A literary "body of work" refers to the complete collection of written or published works created by a particular author or within a specific genre or field of literature. It encompasses all the texts, compositions, and writings produced by that author throughout their career or over a specific period. It represents the entirety of an author's creative output and provides a comprehensive view of their themes, style, and artistic evolution over time. But, for Little Dog, the focus appears to be on creating a literary space that can encapsulate the experiences and lives of individuals who have been marginalized or overlooked by the mainstream literary canon. This can be seen as a way to combat erasure, the historical tendency to neglect the stories and perspectives of those

who have been historically marginalized, oppressed, or silenced. In this context, "building a 'body of work'" takes on a dual meaning. On one hand, it could refer to the conventional idea of an individual artist's collection of creative endeavors. On the other hand, it could also signify the creation of a literary space or corpus that gathers and represents the narratives of people who have been relegated to the margins. This way, writing becomes a tool to counteract the erasure of their voices, identities, and experiences from the dominant narratives.

The choice of the phrase "preserve these, our bodies" once again is also intriguing. The word "preserve" typically invokes ideas of maintaining or safeguarding something from deterioration or decay. In the context of the quote, "our bodies" suggests a collective ownership, indicating a sense of shared identity among marginalized individuals. By using this phrase, the narrator draws attention to the idea of preserving not just individual experiences but also the broader identity of these marginalized groups. This expression also calls to mind a connection to taxidermy, a motif seen in the beginning of the novel. While at the beginning of my dissertation, I linked the image of taxidermy to the embodiment of trauma, here I think it calls for a different and more positive interpretation. Indeed taxidermy involves the careful preservation of animal bodies as a form of commemoration, often allowing them to be displayed and celebrated in a way that transcends mortality.

Similarly, the act of "preserving bodies" through writing can be seen as a way of commemorating and celebrating the lives and experiences of those who have been marginalized. It suggests that their stories deserve to be cherished, remembered, and honored, much like the preserved bodies in taxidermy. In this interpretation, the act of preservation is not just about freezing moments in time or embodying "a death that won't finish" (3); it is about acknowledging the value and significance of these experiences, even in the face of historical neglect. It is a way to pay homage to the resilience, diversity, and uniqueness of these marginalized lives.

Towards the end of the novel, Ocean Vuong (through his character Little Dog) continues to expand on metaliterary questions as Little Dog engages into a discussion of his art. At one point in particular, Little Dog imagines himself standing in a burning room:

> I remember the walls curling like a canvas as the fire blazed. The ceiling a rush of black smoke. I remember crawling to the table, how it was now a pile of soot, then dipping my fingers into it. My nails blackening with my country. My country dissolving on my tongue. I remember cupping the ash and writing the words *live live live* on the foreheads

> of the three women sitting in the room. How the ash eventually hardened into ink on a blank page. How there's ash on this very page. How's there's enough for everyone. (Vuong 233)

This invented memory encapsulates a complex interplay of destruction and transformation, trauma and rebirth. The three women referenced in the passage could represent Lan (the narrator's grandmother), Rose (his mother), and his aunt. These women are integral to Little Dog's personal history and cultural identity (the two former seemingly more than the latter). By inscribing the words on their foreheads, the act of writing becomes a way of connecting and preserving their stories. It also symbolizes the passing down of history and experience across generations – a way to ensure that these narratives are not forgotten. But what is most striking is perhaps the imagery of fire as its aftermath symbolizes both the horrors of the past and the potential for renewal. The act of writing becomes a powerful means of reclaiming voice and memory, ultimately affirming life and transcending the destructive forces of history. The imagery of fire in the passage is symbolic of destruction, particularly alluding to the devastating impact of the American bombing of Vietnam. The fire blazes and curls the walls, consuming the surroundings. This destruction is not only physical but carries emotional and cultural resonance, as suggested by the mention of "my country dissolving on my tongue." The fire represents a traumatic past, a collective memory of a country engulfed in conflict and suffering. However, from this destruction emerges a paradoxical transformation. The soot and ash, remnants of the fire, become symbolic of memories, both traumatic and vestigial, that persist despite the destruction. And these traces are then repurposed into something new: words. The act of writing becomes a way to finally express the unspeakable trauma and communicate the silenced experiences. This transformation from ash to ink mirrors the process of transmuting pain into art, allowing the author to externalize the unspoken history and bear witness to it. The passage also suggests a theme of rebirth and renewal emerging from destruction. The image of the fire, known for its capacity to destroy, is juxtaposed with the idea that even from the remnants of destruction, something new and meaningful can arise. This can be seen as a metaphorical representation of resilience and the potential for growth even in the aftermath of devastation. The mention of "*live live live*" echoes this sentiment. This phrase could be seen as operating as an incantation, a magical utterance that infuses life into the act of writing and, by extension, the act of reclaiming one's voice after trauma. This ternary repetition can also evoke the rhythm of a heartbeat, an affirmation of the vitality and persistence of life against the backdrop of destruction and trauma, counteracting the destructive force of the fire. This ternary

rhythm, its characteristic prosody and equally characteristic lack of punctuation, have a way of recurring in the text when creativity and vitality require poetic expression ("more more more," 139; "what next what next what next," 154). It is a declaration that life can persist despite the horrors of the past. And indeed, as Henry Chandonnet writes, "For Vuong, the writing itself becomes a way to perpetuate life, to confer a kind of immortality […] His words are corpses, yet read by others on the page they (and his mother) come to life" ("Poetry Review: 'Time Is a Mother' – Grieving Through Language - the Arts Fuse").

## D. Poetry and "fire escapes"

### a. Vuong's concept of "fire escape" and its application to Trevor's death

As Ocean Vuong's views on writing are directly discussed within his novel, I found it paramount to go over them. But this metaliterary dimension is not only present in Vuong's fiction. As a poet and a Professor of Creative Writing at New York University, Vuong offers a profound and insightful perspective on writing, oftentimes engaging theoretically with issues surrounding art and literature. When reading *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, I was reminded of one of his essays titled "The Weight of Our Living: On Hope, Fire Escapes, and Visible Desperation" in which he comes up with the concept of the "fire escape," an image I think could apply to a reading of his fiction. The essay is a deeply introspective and poignant piece that revolves around themes of loss, grief, vulnerability, and the power of art to communicate what words often fail to express. Vuong often employs non-linear narrative structures that blend personal anecdotes with broader reflections. And indeed the essay is a blend of personal reflection, storytelling, and philosophical contemplation around art. Vuong recounts the moment he receives news of his uncle's suicide on New Year's Eve. The news comes as a shock, and he describes his immediate emotional response as a mixture of disbelief and profound sadness. Throughout the essay, Vuong delves into the idea of visible desperation, using the metaphor of fire escapes that adorn many buildings in New York City. Fire escapes, often associated with safety and escape from danger, become symbols of the visible desperation that people carry within them. He explores how these structures, designed to provide safety, also represent vulnerability and the potential for disaster. The fire escape becomes a powerful symbol for the complex interplay between safety and danger, hope and despair. Vuong also reflects on the role of art, particularly poetry, in allowing people to communicate their deepest emotions and experiences. He discusses the limitations of language and how poetry can

transcend those limitations, offering a means of expressing what might otherwise remain unsaid. He emphasizes the importance of creating a space for open dialogue about difficult topics, even in a culture that often avoids discussing unpleasant realities:

> And I think this is the space the fire escape occupies, a space unbounded by genre or the physical limitations of the artist's tools. A space of pure potential, of possibility, where our desires, our strange and myriad ecstasies can, however brief, remain amorphous and resist the decay actualized by the rational world.
>
> And yet, in a time where the mainstream seems to continually question the power and validity of art, and especially of poetry, its need, its purpose, […] it has become more and more difficult for us to say aloud, to one another: I am hurt. I am scared. What happens now? The poem, like the fire escape, as feeble and thin as it is, has become my most concentrated architecture of resistance. A place where I can be as honest as I need to—because the fire has already begun in my home, swallowing my most valuable possessions—and even my loved ones. (Vuong, "The Weight of Our Living" 2014)

The quote above highlights the idea that literature, particularly poetry, serves as a sacred space where individuals can express the vulnerability inherent in the human experience. This space transcends traditional boundaries of genre and artistic tools, allowing for the exploration of emotions and desires that might not find a place in the rational world. By using literature as a medium, authors can create a realm of "pure potential" and possibility, where complex emotions and experiences can exist without being confined by societal norms or expectations. The metaphor of the fire escape is rich with symbolism. One could surmise the metaphor stems from the uncle's death evoking a sense of urgency, danger, and unpredictability that aligns with the concept of fire escapes as they are literal escape routes during emergencies. Vuong's newfound closeness to the idea of fire escapes might be due to the heightened awareness of life's fragility brought about by death. As I have already mentioned, on one hand, the fire escape carries an element of danger, as it signifies the possibility of fire – destruction and chaos. But one the other hand, it represents a place of safety, refuge, and possibility for escape. It is an architectural structure that offers a way out in the face of danger, alluding to the concept of finding solace and protection within art and literature. This mixed signal mirrors the complexity of human emotions and experiences. Expanding on "that sense of urgency and danger that fire escapes, in their essence, embody," Vuong then refers to the concept of shared experiences and anxieties they ultimately represent:

> the fire escape lies just a few feet away, dormant, conveniently hidden—but never completely. I gather my notions of terror and push it out the window, where it calcifies into a structure so utilitarian as to be a direct by-product of fear itself. (Vuong, "The Weight of Our Living")

Vuong seems to suggest that people may prefer such visible desperation to exist outside their home and view, allowing them to maintain a sense of normalcy in their daily life. The fire escape could therefore be a coping mechanism, but while the fears and anxieties that the fire escape symbolizes can exist as a familiar but distant presence, they are never fully out of mind. The essay continues to explore the juxtaposition between daily life and the lurking presence of the fire escape. Even as Vuong imagines himself engaging in everyday activities, the fire escape is always there, hidden but never completely out of sight. This can be seen as a metaphor for underlying anxieties or fears that persist beneath the surface of one's consciousness. The fire escape becomes a symbol of this latent fear, existing in close proximity but remaining largely dormant. The passage concludes with a transformation of Vuong's notions of terror. The fear associated with fire escapes is metaphorically pushed out of the window and crystallizes into a utilitarian structure – a fire escape itself. This transformation mirrors the process of coping with fear by rationalizing it into a practical solution. This transformation is rooted in fear, yet it evolves into a functional aspect of daily life, highlighting the human capacity for adaptation in processing complex emotions. This ability and possibility of moving on from the fear, anxiety and danger symbolized through the fire escape is representative of Vuong's aspiration to "survive the survival" (Winter 2016).

Fire escapes become a liminal space, neither fully inside nor outside, both hidden and ever-present, becoming an in-between where emotions, thoughts and fears are made to co-exist. This resonates with the way in which the novel weaves together motifs of beauty and violence. The notion of the fire escape as a place of passage is significant. It highlights the transient nature of emotions and experiences, suggesting that they pass through this space like a fleeting moment. This concept aligns with the idea of brevity and ephemerality, tying into the broader theme of the novel's title, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. This title speaks to the transient nature of life and beauty, and the imagery of the fire escape can serve as a visual representation of this transience. Other than suggesting a brief spatial transition, the fire escape as a place of passage also hints at the idea of connection. Vuong indeed emphasizes that a poem is more than a superficial arrangement of words on paper. He writes how poetry and more generally art "can create the space for our most necessary communications." Instead, the poem is likened to an

invitation for a private and essential dialogue. This dialogue goes beyond the surface, encouraging readers to engage deeply with the content and to reflect on their own perspectives and emotions. And the metaphor of a fire escape is introduced here to illustrate the path of this dialogue. Just as climbing a fire escape can lead to different perspectives, ascending or descending depending on the reader's experience, a poem offers a journey of interpretation and understanding. The essay further extends the metaphor of the fire escape, suggesting the transformative potential of engaging with poetry. While the fire escape might initially be seen as a means of escape or observation, the idea of the metal structure becoming a bridge is introduced. The fire escape becomes a means of connection between different spaces. While Vuong uses fire escapes as a metaphor to explore themes of escape and safety, he also uses it to delves into the theme of connection: "I wonder, at the risk of asking for too much, *what if a fire escape can be made into a bridge?*" ("The Weight of Our Living" 2014). This transition from escape route to bridge indicates that poetry can not only provide individual insight and understanding but also connect people, creating bridges of empathy, shared experience, and mutual understanding. The notion of a fire escape becoming a bridge suggests the transformative power of poetry to bridge gaps, foster connection, and facilitate understanding between individuals. It reminds us of our shared humanity, grounding us in our emotional and experiential cores, but also tapping into our collective experiences and emotions. According to Vuong, poetry holds a unique ability as a safeguard against forgetting what it truly means to be human.

Especially towards the end of the essay, Vuong captures a blend of contrasting emotions and desires, from wanting to escape to desiring to stand steadfast in the face of adversity. The imagery of visible desperation intertwined with hope portrays the complexity of human experience. The essay culminates in an affirmation of resilience that underscores the potential for growth, even in the midst of uncertainty and challenges:

> I want to leave the party through the window and find my uncle standing on a piece of iron shaped into visible desperation, which must also be (how can it not?) the beginning of visible hope. I want to stay there until the building burns down. I want to love more than death can harm. And I want to tell you this often: That despite being so human and so terrified, here, standing on this unfinished staircase to nowhere and everywhere, surrounded by the cold and starless night—we can live. And we will. (Vuong, "The Weight of Our Living")

The quote here begins by conveying Vuong's desire to leave a party through the window in order to join his late uncle. This sense of departure is juxtaposed with the image of the uncle standing on a piece of iron, shaped into "visible desperation." This imagery evokes a poignant contrast between desperation and hope, highlighting the duality of human experiences. The uncle's position on the iron structure represents both desperation and hope simultaneously. The phrase "visible desperation" implies a stark and overt expression of negative emotion, yet the very act of standing on this iron piece denotes a glimmer of hope. This paradox suggests that even in moments of despair, the potential for positive change and progress exists. This resonates with the idea that hope can emerge from the most challenging circumstances. The passage evolves to express Vuong's yearning to stay in that moment with his uncle, even as the building burns down. This intense desire speaks to a longing for meaningful connections and the willingness to endure even in the face of destruction. In Ocean Vuong's essay, the conjured gathering or dialogue between uncle and nephew stands as a symbol of hope amidst the challenges presented by the reality of loss and absence. This imaginative interaction represents a powerful metaphor for the human need to seek connection and understanding even in the face of adversity and absence. In a broader context, this notion of an imagined gathering or conversation extends to the narrative of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Within the novel, a similar construct is employed, albeit with the narrator's mother rather than an uncle. Their imagined conversations in the form of letters serve as a poignant depiction of reaching out and attempting to bridge the emotional gaps that life's circumstances have imposed. The novel thus showcases how the text, whether a poem, a narrative, or an essay, becomes a symbolic fire escape and a meeting point, an imaginative realm where a form of togetherness is crafted, offering solace and the possibility of reconnection even in the absence of physical presence or understanding. This imaginative togetherness serves as a glimmer of hope and a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of loss and separation. The notion of "loving more than death can harm" suggests a form of defiance against despair, a commitment to embracing life's experiences fully, despite their difficulties and the fears and vulnerability they entail. The essay therefore concludes with a powerful affirmation of resilience and of potential for growth. Standing on an "unfinished staircase to nowhere and everywhere" symbolizes life's uncertain paths, while the "cold and starless night" underscores the challenges of existence. However, the end of the passage (and of the essay) asserts that despite these obstacles, people can still choose to live. This assertion is presented with unwavering conviction, signaling a refusal to succumb to despair.

For Vuong, poetry can become an "architecture of resistance" like the fire escape. This implies that poetry, akin to the fire escape, can act as a form of defiance against erasure, oppression, and even literary conventions. It becomes a structure through which the experiences and emotions can be crafted with depth and authenticity. It also carves a literary space for Vuong's loved ones. This resistance is not just against external forces but also against the limitations of language itself. The act of crafting a form that encapsulates the complexity and beauty of the lives of Vuong's loved ones becomes a way of preserving and celebrating them in the face of challenges. This echoes this line from his poem "Nothing": "Let the stanza be one room, then. Let it be big enough for everyone, even the ghosts rising now from this bread we tear open to see what we've made of each other" (*Time Is a Mother* 44).

The image of the "fire escape" seems particularly relevant when reading *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* in the sense that it implies the possibility of not only surviving through art and language but really living in this space full of uncertainties. This also opens the door to studying the hybridity that constitutes Ocean Vuong's writing style as it is imbued with lyricism and poetry. While most of the narration is written in a prose that uses epistolary and autobiographical features (as has been mentioned earlier), there are definite moments where Little Dog's inner monologue looks rather like fragments of poetry as can be seen in the last section of the second part of the novel. In these few pages (153-160), the text is mostly composed of run-on lines and small paragraphs, memories and images of Little Dog's relationship with Trevor that preludes the revelation of the latter's death. Indeed, five years after Little Dog left Trevor and his family in Hartford to go study in New York, he learns that Trevor has died from a drug overdose. The way speech is disarticulated in this passage, words hardly put together on the page and yet still drawing a semblance of meaning in which "every box will be opened in time, in language" (157), could be seen as a visual and symbolic representation of the "fire escape," this iron-shaped architecture of desperation, of "life touching the possibility of its extinguishment" ("The Weight of Our Living" 2014). It is one of the most poetic passages of the novel and constitutes an oblique ode to Trevor. As Vuong's writing breaks into verse, the textual fragmentation (the breaking apart of the narrative structure as well as of syntax) on the page creates a visual representation of falling which parallels Trevor's demise. Beginning with the anaphora of the name "Trevor," the passage offers vivid snapshots of his character, exploring the different facets of his life and personality. Each sentence acts as a sort of vignette evoking Trevor's youthful and somewhat wild persona, him driving a "rusted pickup" with "no licence," "going fifty through his daddy's wheat field" (153).

Trevor's reckless actions are then juxtaposed with his moments of vulnerability embodied by the image of the calf trapped in "a body-box, like a coffin, but alive, like a home" (156), creating a multidimensional portrait of his character. The passage not only offers insights into Trevor's character but also contributes to the novel's exploration of memory, vulnerability, and human complexity. The image of the "body-box" can be seen as another metaphor for the poetic text which creates an opportunity to once again transcend death through the power of words. Because this passage is dedicated to the figure of Trevor, Little Dog remembers him. Through language and poetry, Little Dog is able not to explore his relationship with him once again. And " memory is a second chance" (159). Thus, in writing this passage, Little Dog attempts to put the pieces of Trevor and their relationship back together. This is an act of celebration and love which defies desperation and death, bringing us back to Vuong's want "to love more than death can harm" ("The Weight of Our Living").

### b. "What if it wasn't the crash that made us but the debris?": the kishōtenketsu narrative structure

More than anything, Ocean Vuong advocates for the idiosyncratic power of writing to "hold things together" ("OCEAN VUONG in conversation with Tommy Orange") as well as to hold people together in the form of a narrative which acts as a sort of literary architecture (to expand on the image of the fire escape). He sees the "act of making" as "a work of accretion" which allows him not to compromise, not to "say 'either', 'or" (idem). His narrator Little Dog explores the essence of being a writer, painting a vivid picture with the quote: "You asked me what it's like to be a writer and I'm giving you a mess, I know. But it's a mess, Ma – I'm not making this up. I made it down" (*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* 189). Here, he encapsulates the intricacies of the creative process, admitting that writing is not about fabrication or rationalization but about capturing the complexities of human experience. Through his writing, he is delving into the stories of his loved ones as well as into the depths of his own reality. This sentiment resonates with Vuong's description of his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* as a "book written in vignettes" (Strand Book Store, "Ocean Vuong | On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous"). As he eloquently puts it, these vignettes form a "larger vision made of small things" (*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* 189). In his readings and interviews, he emphasizes that the different elements (characters or storylines) that make up the novel need not be directly or explicitly connected; they can coexist in proximity and still make up a whole story,

collectively forming a narrative. This idea aligns with his metaphor of "a series of debris touching ever so slightly one another," a description that underscores the beauty of fragments coming together to shape a whole, much like the process of writing itself (Harvard Radcliffe Institute, "Reading and Conversation with Ocean Vuong"). Just as Vuong's writing journeys "so low the world offers a merciful new angle," his novel unfolds to offer readers a unique perspective, a larger understanding crafted from the intricate interplay of what could be perceived as an accumulation of "nonsense" (*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* 189).

Vuong's foregoing of a defined plot (or even conflict) for what he calls "proximity" was inspired by Miyazaki's films and more particularly a Japanese form of narratology called *kishōtenketsu* ("OCEAN VUONG in conversation with Tommy Orange"). It is a narrative technique which is relatively unknown in the Western writing tradition, but it is prominently employed in the cultural contexts of the Far East, particularly in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean fictions. This technique traces its origins back to ancient Chinese poetry known as *qǐ chéng zhuǎn hé* (起承转合). According to Korean writer and artist Kim Yoonmi (who has a heavy academic interest in East Asian media and media exchange even if she is not a scholar herself), it is originally consisting of four stages: *qǐ* (start or introduction), *chéng* (handling, process, hardships), *zhuǎn* (turn, crescendo), and *hé* (result). *Qǐ chéng zhuǎn hé* focuses on narrative development rather than conflict. While conflict might emerge in the third stage, it often takes a backseat to character growth and introspection. Subsequently, this structural approach was embraced in Korea as *gi seung jeon gyeol* (기승전결), involving four acts: *gi* (raising issues, introducing characters), *seung* (beginning of action), *jeon* (change in direction, reversal), and *gyeol* (conclusion and lessons). The most pertinent form for the present discussion, *kishōtenketsu* (起承転合), was the last to emerge. While sharing many features with the Korean style, it diverges notably in the third stage: unlike *gi seung jeon gyeol*, where characters revisit a previous point in their lives for re-evaluation, *kishōtenketsu* introduces unexpected developments or revelations about the past that reshape prior events and unveil the core problem at hand ( Kim, "Worldwide Story Structures"). In terms of the individual stages within this narrative structure, the sequence is as follows: *ki* (introduction), *shō* (development), *ten* (turning point), and *ketsu* (conclusion). To elaborate further, the introductory stage, *ki*, serves to acquaint the audience with both the setting and the characters, essentially playing a role similar to what is conventionally known as the "Set-up" phase in Western storytelling. Subsequently, *shō* takes the narrative into the development phase, where characters and their circumstances are fleshed

out. Notably, this phase deviates from the common approach of introducing a central conflict to drive the story forward. Following this, the *ten* stage disrupts the established pattern by introducing an unexpected turn in the ongoing narrative, infusing it with new directions and complexities. Lastly, *ketsu*, the concluding phase, focuses on elucidating the impact of this twist on the characters' emotions and lives, ultimately bringing the narrative to a satisfying resolution.

The first act of the narrative structure works as an introduction as it establishes the main cast and the backdrop for the story. In the absence of a driving conflict, *kishōtenketsu* delves much deeper into the mind and soul of the cast of characters, providing a comprehensive look into their mentality, their approach on life as well as their experiences. With that in mind, I would argue that Vuong's choice of a epistolary narrative is a pertinent one as it gives a direct insight into the mind of the narrator Little Dog in particular. The role of the inciting incident holds significant value in solidifying the significance of the central conflict within the kind of three-act narrative framework often found in the Western literary canon. This conflict becomes an integral part of the narrative structure. However, the *kishōtenketsu* technique radically departs from this concept. In *kishōtenketsu*, conflict does not have to occupy a prominent position in the characters' roles, nor is it required to drive their motivations. While a conflict might exist, it is entirely possible to exclude it, just as the inciting incident itself can be omitted without detriment to the storytelling process. Without central conflict, the first act eases readers into the story's setting and fosters a better understanding of the characters, something Vuong endeavors to do in the first part of his novel (from page 3 to 73). Even if the novel, as a monophonic epistolary narrative, centers primarily around the narrator Little Dog, the fact remains that the other characters are not to be discarded as plot devices whose relevance is only tied to the protagonist's own development. While readers are not given access to their subjectivity, Little Dog's descriptions and memories still provide great insight into their minds and the challenges they face. In Vuong's novel, this means learning about the conditions in which Little Dog and his family came to be in the U.S. It means delving into their dynamics and into their past, especially in regards to the trauma of the Vietnam war. The flashbacks themselves are paramount to his family's development. The ramifications of the events Lan and Rose relive continue to manifest later on in the novel as majority of these memories are traumatic, describing the difficult environment in which Little Dog grew up, the abuse by his mother notably. They uncover the strained relationship between him and his family. Thus the unveiled details provide valuable context for what made Little Dog into the man and the writer he is when the story takes place. Throughout his epistolary novel, Ocean Vuong masterfully

navigates two literary traditions that diverge from the typical conflict-driven plot narrative. First, the kishōtenketsu emphasizes a progression of introduction, development, twist, and conclusion, harmonizing diverse elements without a central conflict. Second, the modernist literary tradition, which often eschews traditional plot frameworks, leans towards nuanced exploration of characters and themes rather than linear plotlines. Vuong adeptly weaves these traditions into his narrative tapestry, imbuing his storytelling with a unique and compelling approach to the form that defies conventional norms.

The first act then transitions into the second, *shō*, which could be translated as development. As Vuong explains, it is a continuation of the process the story is already engaged in, a sort of "deepening" of the elements introduced in the beginning (Harvard Radcliffe Institute, "Reading and Conversation with Ocean Vuong"). As more details are uncovered and elaborated upon, the momentum of the story rises steadily. Rather than showcasing a series of events driven by conflict, *shō* offers a more thorough exploration of the main cast of characters, their situation and potential problems: "The important thing to remember about this stage is that it is about expansion, but not change. No major changes occur during this development stage" (John, Kishotenketsu: Exploring the Four Act Story Structure). In other words, this act fleshes out the elements readers are already familiar with, hence the idea of expansion. While there may be events, revelations, or problems spurring the story along and putting the characters' arcs into motion, they are most and foremost there to deepen readers' understanding of the characters rather than to necessarily drive the plot forward. The emphasis is very much put on people and their relationships, something Vuong seems to particularly agree with and something he implements in his novel. Character development takes precedence over conflict and for Little Dog, his character growth is particularly tied with his encounter with Trevor on the tobacco plantation. Instead of anchoring the plot and causing the story to revolve around them, conflictual elements and obstacles serve as distraction from the cast's routine which can drive them apart or bring them closer together. The second part (from page 75 to 151) of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is indeed marked by these tensions which are most noticeable in Little Dog's relationship with his mother. I discussed in my third part ("A life in which violence and delicacy collide": an ode to Little Dog's loved ones and the complexities of interpersonal relationships) the complexities of their bond and the different ways in which Vuong represent the ambivalence between distance and presence, separation and reunion, which characterize their relationship. In the absence of a central conflict, the plot tends to focus on introspection, delving into character relationships, emotions towards unfolding events, and the impact of

individuals and surroundings on the characters. This examination of human nature reflects Buddhist and Confucian influences seen in ancient Chinese poetry, the origin of *kishōtenketsu*. The appeal lies not in external hero-versus-enemy dynamics, but in internal battles, encompassing feelings, fears, doubts, joys, and hopes of the characters involved (Rivera, "Western vs Eastern Storytelling").

Despite initial inertia, the story gradually builds toward a pinnacle of momentum called *ten* or the turn, which contrasts with the climax where the protagonist faces off against their antagonist. This turn, however, essentially upends the narrative. A common approach to introducing the turn is a complete switch in the narrative's point of view, aiming to prompt a perspective shift and unveil a new element that reinterprets the story. This juncture significantly alters the context, guiding the story towards its conclusion. In some instances, the twist can take the form of a reversal, also known as reexamination. Within *kishōtenketsu*, this reexamination emerges at the peak of the story's momentum. The accumulated knowledge about characters and settings is either refined by past experiences or contrasted with memories, culminating in either dissonance or harmony in the plot's resolution. I would argue that the end of the second part of the novel (from page 153 to 160) constitutes this turn in the story. While the focus was put Little Dog's teenage years and his journey towards self-discovery and self-realization, the story is somewhat turned upside down in a dramatic fashion. This dissonance is marked by Vuong's writing breaks into verse in an oblique and fragmented ode to Trevor. The poetic rupture offers a shift in structure as well as in perspective which is very symbolic. It offers a sort of reexamination as Little Dog vividly remembers Trevor, drawing a complex portrait of him and evoking past anecdotes between the two. The passage also preludes the revelation of the Trevor's death, the event which will prompt Little Dog to go back to Hartford and reunite with his family.

Following the twist that introduces an unexpected narrative shift, the story's pace gradually slows to a conclusion. *Ketsu*, the final act, differs slightly from the resolution in a three-act structure. With the major twist already unfolded and lacking a driving conflict, there's no imminent battle of fate. Instead, the conclusion aligns divergent perspectives and plot threads side by side, encouraging the audience to interpret the ending independently. While the backdrop typically remains consistent from the story's outset for narrative continuity, the evolution stems from within the characters themselves. Their internal issues are generally resolved by the conclusion. In the final part of the novel (from page 165 to 242), Little Dog seems to finally come to terms with what him and his family went through, using language and

writing to find healing and assign a new meaning to their lives. He carves out space to remember and celebrate the important people in his life. Thus he combines the different "pieces" which make up his narrative into a meaningful work of art: "I'm not telling you a story so much as a shipwreck – the pieces floating, finally legible" (Vuong 190). This quote encapsulates the intricate narrative structure of the novel while reflecting its thematic undercurrents. The metaphor of a shipwreck speaks to fragmentation, a central motif that intertwines with the novel's postmodern narrative style. This fragmentation extends beyond the narrative structure and finds manifestation in the characters' memories, particularly the fractured recollections of the mother and Lan, as well as in the strained communication between characters. Little Dog's own memories are also presented erratically, reinforcing the theme of disintegration. The reference to "mouths that never articulated the sounds inside a book" (Vuong 224) alludes to the narrator's role as a writer as he endeavors to provide cohesion to these fragmented pieces, making them "legible" within the framework of a book. The metaphor of the shipwreck aptly captures the scattered nature of the narrative while symbolizing the challenge of reconstructing and interpreting experiences from the shards of memory and communication. In the *kishōtenketsu* narrative, the personal development of the characters does not necessarily mean all plot threads are tied up. A unique aspect of *ketsu* is its reunification of remaining plot threads, both resolved and open-ended. This absence of a definite resolution, replacing it with lingering tension, is what captivates readers. This quality, defined as "reconciliation," merges the lessons from the turn with the insights gained throughout the narrative's progression. It illustrates how *ten* influenced both *ki* and *shō*, interweaving the ideas presented across all three stages in the aftermath of the plot, *ketsu* (Ödlund, Kishotenketsu for Beginners).

In Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, there is a deliberate departure from the conventional structure of plot-driven narratives. Vuong appears keen on deviating from the traditional trajectory of conflict and resolution, placing the spotlight on the human experience. His interview with Tommy Orange encapsulates this notion succinctly, portraying a narrative where conflict is exchanged for a profound sense of proximity among characters. In relinquishing a structured plot, Vuong endeavors to unravel the essence of people and their raw, unfiltered emotions. This departure from the expected extends to the resolution of the novel as, without conflict, there is no need for resolution. Vuong challenges conventional endings marked by explosive events, opting instead for fragmented pieces, a shift that engenders intrigue and reflection. Amidst this deviation, the central theme remains steadfast:

exploring the profound interplay between beauty and survival, a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of violence and trauma.

# Conclusion

This dissertation on Ocean Vuong's semi-autobiographical novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* offers insights into the haunting trauma related to the Vietnam war. As discussed in my first part, Vietnamese American literary works are frequently interpreted within the context of the Vietnam war's pervasive influence, leading them to be anchored in a "overdetermined and mythically constructed past" (Truong 224). Scholars analyzing Vietnamese American literature often note the challenging fact that this emerging literary tradition remains rooted in the wartime backdrop. But while the novel indeed aligns with this literary trend in raising the question of whether the ghosts of the past can be exorcised, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* endeavors to carve out its distinct place amid these circumstances to find an idiosyncratic power in this position.

In my second part, I wrote about how, through Little Dog's voice, Vuong brings to life the experiences of those who have been subjected to violence, discrimination, and other forms of oppression, and who continue to be affected by their trauma. I discussed how Vuong illuminates experiences often omitted from mainstream American history while exploring the potential of language to authentically convey and represent experiences of war, trauma, and diasporic identity. I argued how, through Little Dog's family's PTSD episodes or the recounting of war stories, the war and its traumatic memory continue to haunt the characters' daily lives and how they become integrated into Little Dog's own identity and experience. I mentioned the importance of language, analyzed as a potential marker of alienation, prompting Little Dog to take on the role of translator for his family. In regards to the form of the novel, I discussed how it engages with the Vietnamese American literary heritage by closely aligning itself with both the memoir genre and the epistolary structure. Letters, similar to memoirs, serve as autobiographical modes of expressions, placing the inner self at the center of the narrative. Ocean Vuong, in this way, presents a deeply personal account of trauma using a hybrid form of life writing that immerses itself in the first-person perspective. The book is a blend of different forms, incorporating elements of the epistolary genre, such as the initial apostrophe and the use of the second-person pronoun "you" to emphasize the presence of the intended addressee. Ocean Vuong does something that no other writer has done by not actively including but still addressing someone who cannot read in his novel. In doing so, he communicates the language of distance between Little Dog and his mother through the epistolary structure itself. I have argued that the choice of an illiterate addressee can be seen as a narrative device enabling the

narrator to divulge the most intimate and potentially shameful parts of himself without subjecting himself to potential consequences while also serving to emphasize the divisions within the family structure.

Within the context of themes related to history, memory, and family, Vuong's work places significant emphasis on familial connections, particularly those with maternal figures. When Ocean Vuong discusses his novel with Tommy Orange, he articulates how the central focus shifts significantly from plot to a greater emphasis on people (2020). Keeping this concept in mind, I examined in my third part the intricate web of relationships interwoven within the epistolary narrative centering around the character of the Little Dog; and how these relationships can convey both affection and pain. In doing so, I focused particularly on the theme of touch which remains a prevailing element throughout Vuong's novel, serving not only as a manifestation of abuse but also as a new form of language. In this sense, touch becomes a complex element capable of expressing both violence and love. I argued that Ocean Vuong's portrayal of interpersonal relationships reflects this inherent tension, as they appear simultaneously caring and turbulent. An impressive feat achieved by Vuong is his capacity to depict the intricacies of human relationships within his narrative. While the novel's premises, marked by the choice of an illiterate addressee, underscores themes of separation and estrangement, Little Dog subsequently shows that his letters serve as an act of reconciliation. He emphasizes how these letters are penned as an attempt to bridge the gap, a form of reaching out from the body of a son, whose body was once the body of his mother (Vuong 10). In doing so, he accentuates the significance of their relationship and his enduring care for his mother, despite their past conflicts and the pain she inflicted on him. Another relationship that garners attention within the novel is that of Little Dog and Trevor. Although Little Dog's connection with Trevor is characterized by a substantial degree of pain and brutality, it emerges as an essential component of his individual growth. I explained how their relationship enables him to discover another facet of his identity; but, most significantly, how it establishes an environment in which he can regain a sense of control and empowerment. Questioning once again the epistolary form and the choice of an illiterate addressee, I argued that it implies both a form of distance and the hope for reconnection. I would also argue that it suggests a deliberate deferral of resolution. The inability of Little Dog's mother to read her son's letters prolongs the agony of unresolved emotions and unspoken truths, perpetuating a state of suspended understanding. This deferral illustrates the larger theme of deferred closure and the persistent struggle to bridge the emotional chasm between them. It encapsulates the perpetual hope for connection, even

though the means to achieve it are obstructed, emphasizing the profound impact of uncommunicated feelings within the narrative.

The final part of this dissertation addressed how certain aspects that are commonly associated with Vietnamese American literature (such as the aftermath of the war, intergenerational trauma and refugee identity) are affected by Little Dog's particular perspective as a writer himself. Through his art, Little Dog (and by extension, Ocean Vuong) reclaims fragments of the Vietnamese experience during the war, the pain that entails, and the challenges of assimilation into post-war American society. This illustrates how grief and trauma can be a catalyst to one's creative process without necessarily reducing the novel to the representation of pain as Little Dog asserts, "All this time I told myself we were born from war – but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence – but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it" (Vuong 231). In Little Dog's narrative, the focus expands beyond the endurance of traumatic suffering; it also encompasses the empowering act of unveiling history's silenced narratives and unearthing the beauty inherent in discovering one's own voice and reclaiming one's life and experience through writing. Writing these letters offers Little Dog the opportunity to express his breaking free from the bindings of his situation, which is embodied through the breaking free of language rules. Throughout the novel, Little Dog illustrates his breaking-free will against language pressure by the repetition of *because:* "I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with because. But I wasn't trying to make a sentence—I was trying to break free" (3). He continues using *because* at the beginning of his sentences to reinforce his breaking free from the limitations of his and his family's existence. This deliberate choice reflects not only a rebellion in content but also a defiance of formal conventions, challenging the established norms of language and its rules as well as challenging generic categorization and conventions. By defying these linguistic and literary traditions, he asserts his independence and creative autonomy, refusing to be confined by the predetermined structures that society and grammar impose. In doing so, he crafts a narrative that echoes the very essence of his struggle: to break free, both in meaning and in form. In many ways, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* serves as Ocean Vuong's artistic manifesto. The novel indeed embodies a distinct metaliterary dimension as Vuong, through his mirror narrator Little Dog, delves into the art and craft of writing within the very fabric of the narrative. The theme of healing emerges as a central motif, with the narrative highlighting the potential for profound personal transformation. This transformation is accomplished through the dynamic interplay of imagination and the act of writing, both of

which possess a regenerating and transformative potential. Vuong's creative work becomes a tool not only for revisiting, but also for reshaping personal histories, and showcasing the inherent power of literature to mend and reinterpret. Within this thematic exploration, there is a strong emphasis on the quest for identity through the act of storytelling and naming, offering a profound sense of empowerment and agency. Furthermore, the narrative examines the idea of (re)establishing new connections and bonds, underscoring the beneficial influence of forging meaningful relationships.

Inspired by his own concept of "fire escape," Ocean Vuong advocates for the idiosyncratic power of writing and poetry to "hold things together" ("OCEAN VUONG in conversation with Tommy Orange"). *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* demonstrates how writing has the capacity to both bind not only elements and plot lines together through the framework of a narrative, but also to hold people together. The novel thus becomes a form of literary architecture (extending the metaphor of the fire escape) in which the characters find a chance to both express their pain, trauma and vulnerability, as well as to move beyond the painful premises of the narrative. The novel, as a literary embodiment of the "fire escape," offers an opportunity to create a space where Little Dog and his loved ones can start again and live outside of their trauma, keeping with Vuong's idea "That the paragraph, the stanza break, is a chance to start over. And the book begins with, 'let me begin again'" ("OCEAN VUONG in conversation with Tommy Orange"). Vuong therefore views the process of creation as a gradual accumulation, enabling him to avoid making compromises or resorting to binary choices, as he eloquently puts it, to refrain from saying "either" or "or." Similarly, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* defies clean-cut categorization as it is not only a story of trauma, but also one of love and survival with beautiful yet complex characters at its center. It is an affirmation of life and resilience achieved through the medium of art. In regards to this shift from trauma to survival in art, I find Vuong's choice of having an epigraph at the end of the novel quite striking. Hoa Nguyen's quote, "The past tense of sing is not singed," indeed encapsulates a nuanced interplay of imagery and meaning. Through the juxtaposition of "sing" and "singed," the quote navigates the terrain of post-Vietnam war literary discourse. The reference to "singed" evokes the haunting aftermath of the war, conjuring images of destruction and trauma, particularly through the symbolism of fire. In contrast, the verb "sing" carries connotations of resilience, artistry, and human expression. This dichotomy seems to underscore the enduring power of creativity amidst adversity, emphasizing the prevailing of art over pain, violence, and trauma. The quote's temporal and linguistic play also mirrors the complexity of

memory and history, suggesting that the aftermath of significant events defies singular interpretations. Not unlike Vuong's novel, Nguyen's quote artfully encapsulates the tension between destruction and creation, trauma and resilience, while advocating for the enduring strength of artistic expression in the face of historical turmoil.

When I first started working on Ocean Vuong′s novel in 2021, there were few articles and scholarly works at my disposal, most of which primarily centered on the novel as a trauma narrative. Quan Manh Ha and Mia Tompkins were among the first scholars to attempt studying the crossing of violence and intimacy which I found so compelling in the novel. However, the abundance of book reviews since then, as well as the numerous interviews given by Ocean Vuong on his own work, helped me shape my own understanding of his novel and guide my analysis. Despite the fact that Ocean Vuong is a relatively new author who has only published three literary works (two poetry collections and one novel), more and more people are starting to look at what he has produced with critical interest. From the very beginning of this scholarly endeavor, my primary focus was the question of intergenerational trauma and memory. That is why I decided to focus at first on the traumatic experience that links Little Dog's family together. The other main element which captivated my attention was Vuong's original choice of an illiterate addressee which prompted me to pay closer attention to questions of language and to examine the complex relationships between the different characters.

But one compelling point of departure for future research could be to delve more into Little Dog's othering and his experience as a gay young man, a perspective which could provide a rich opportunity to understand the intersections of sexuality, culture, and personal identity in the context of the novel. His identity as a gay individual within a traditional and often conservative society like Vietnam (even if he does not live in Vietnam, he lives in a Vietnamese community) and even in the United States, where certain prejudices persist, shapes his worldview and experiences. Future research can delve more into how Little Dog grapples with his identity, analyzing how he copes with societal expectations, homophobia, and self-acceptance. Similarly, one could adopt a decolonial perspective on the novel for viewing it through a decolonial lens could offer a critical framework to examine power dynamics involving Little Dog, his family, and the broader society. Little Dog, as a Vietnamese immigrant and a marginalized individual, experiences power dynamics that are deeply entrenched in historical, cultural, and social contexts. A decolonial perspective could allow for an exploration

of the impacts of colonization, racism, and socio-political systems on Little Dog's life and those around him. It would enable an in-depth analysis of how power is distributed, maintained, and resisted, shedding light on the dynamics of oppression, resilience, and agency within the narrative. This approach would encourage a deeper understanding of the novel's socio-political themes and the broader implications of colonial legacies on marginalized communities. Another potentially significant object of study within the novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* lies in exploring the intricate connection and unity between poetic writing and narrative prose fiction that Ocean Vuong weaves into his work. This integration of poetic elements and narrative prose presents an exciting avenue for analysis, delving into how Vuong employs poetic techniques, imagery, and language to enrich the storytelling and elevate the emotional impact of the narrative. While I tried to explore how Vuong seamlessly merges the lyrical qualities of poetry with the structural aspects of prose fiction, shedding light on his distinctive literary style, others could also offer valuable insights into the synthesis of these traditionally distinct forms.

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