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Queering the Vietnam Trauma Narrative in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Queering la narrativa del trauma de Vietnam en *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* de Ocean Vuong

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Abstract: Veteran memoirs, imbued with white, masculinist bias, dominate US perceptions of the Vietnam War. Drawing from an intersectional approach to trauma studies, this article examines Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) as a rewriting of the paradigmatic Vietnam trauma narrative. Vuong challenges normative understandings of traumatic events by shedding light on the effects of the war upon female civilians and their descendants, as well as on the traumatogenic aftermath of all-American masculinist violence for its queer, Asian American protagonist. Vuong also calls for an alternative model to working through trauma based on empathy and relationality.
Keywords: Vietnam War; Ocean Vuong; trauma; queer.
Summary: Introduction. The Vietnam War Story. Rewriting the Vietnam Trauma Narrative in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Writing as Healing? Conclusions.

Resumen: Las memorias de veteranos, imbuidas de un sesgo blanco y masculinista, dominan las percepciones estadounidenses de la guerra de Vietnam. Partiendo de un enfoque interseccional de los estudios del trauma, este artículo examina la novela de Ocean Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) como una reescritura de esta narrativa del trauma paradigmática. Vuong desafía las definiciones normativas del trauma, denunciando los efectos de la guerra sobre las civiles y sus descendientes, así como las secuelas de la violencia masculinista sobre su protagonista queer y asiático-americano. Además, Vuong reclama un modelo alternativo para trabajar el trauma basado en la empatía y la relacionalidad.
Palabras clave: Guerra de Vietnam; Ocean Vuong; trauma; queer.
Sumario: Introducción. La narrativa de la Guerra de Vietnam. Reescribiendo la narrativa del trauma de Vietnam en *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. ¿Escritura como cura? Conclusión.

INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam War continues to grip the American imagination, turned into an ideological arena for questions of masculinity, race, and exceptionalism. From Hollywood blockbusters to bestseller novels, the white ex-combatant perspective has reigned supreme in popular accounts of the conflict, privileging the exploration of the soldiers' traumatized psyche. These works have disseminated a particular vision of the war, intrinsically linked with hypermasculinity, whiteness, and heterosexism, that has rendered the marginal views of Vietnamese locals invisible. However, in recent years, writing penned by Vietnamese-American writers has offered new perspectives on the "American war," seeking to fill in the gaps left in memory and history by hegemonic narratives. In this context, Ocean Vuong's debut novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) stands as a powerful contribution to the Vietnam War literary canon. Through the story of Little Dog, a queer Vietnamese-American narrator, Vuong's novel reimagines the paradigmatic Vietnam War story, challenging dominant conceptions of gender, sexuality, and trauma.

In this article I will examine the rewriting of the Vietnam trauma narrative in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, drawing from an intersectional approach to trauma theory, informed by feminist and postcolonial tenets. By concentrating on the experiences of female Vietnamese civilians, as well as the narrator's reality as a racialized, queer immigrant in the United States, Vuong's novel inscribes an othered standpoint into the memory of the war and explores the traumatogenic aftermath of the American masculinist cult of violence in both the Vietnamese past and the American present. Besides, this article will claim, *On Earth* challenges the individualist approach to healing proposed by Western trauma paradigms, calling instead for acts of empathy and community as the path to working through the traumatic past. In so doing, I contend, the novel adopts a sociopolitical approach to trauma, aligned with the denunciation of insidious oppression and political compromise that are the keynote of intersectional reappraisals of trauma studies.

1. THE VIETNAM WAR STORY

1.1 Masculinity, Race and the Vietnam Veteran

In *War and Gender* (2001), Joshua Goldstein explores how gender identity becomes "a tool with which societies induce men to fight" (252), attaching the achievement of manhood to qualities such as physical courage, endurance, strength, honor, and sexual prowess. Men who fail to comply with this standard are publicly shamed and held as a corrective example, particularly by associating their lack of virility with homosexuality and effeminacy. Hence, under the militaristic cult of violence, gender and sexuality become "a code for domination" (Goldstein 333), whereby enemies and subordinates are gendered as feminine, and defeat is conveyed in terms of castration.

These codes animated political and social discourses on the Vietnam War. The American intervention in the country was projected as a "Western 'Orientalist fantasy' of sexual conquest in Asia" (Goldstein 359), interwoven with longstanding racist discourses that conceptualized Asian males as effeminate,[1] and all-American myths of exceptionalism. As Ron Eyerman puts it, the American youth was recruited as much by the draft board as by the cultural discourses that linked masculinity with warmongering and patriotic sacrifice (20).

This normative construction of masculinity undergirds the plethora of novels, memoirs, and films on the Vietnam War, which have become the dominant intertext mediating the conflict for the American public. It would be difficult to overestimate the salience of books such as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), Philip Caputo's *Indian Country* (1987), or Larry Heinemann's *Paco Story* (1987), and films such as Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), or Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) for the construction of the collective memory of the conflict.

Even a cursory glance at this cluster of works evidences the overpowering predominance of the veteran perspective in what Susan Faludi has christened "the Vietnam War Story" (1999). The prototypical

[1] As David L. Eng has argued at length (18), the historical division of labor and citizenship in terms of gender and race in America has located male Asian bodies at the intersection of a double discrimination, whereby they are projected as effeminate, queer, and subordinate to the white, cis-heterosexual male citizen.

Vietnam War story, labeled the "Vietnam Veteran Narrative" by Christina D. Weber, centers on the experience of the white male veteran, who stands as a banner of unjustly discriminated masculinity. In these accounts, the Narrator is identified with the Good Son—as opposed to the undutiful draft dodgers—bound to attain the social power allotted to the masculine subject through the rite of passage of war. Nonetheless, the American defeat at the hands of North Vietnamese soldiers denies the veteran identification with the patriarchal figure of domination and dispels his ability to maintain belief in American exceptionalism. As Faludi puts it:

> The frontier, the enemy, the institutions of brotherhood, the women in need of protection—all the elements of the old formula of attaining manhood had vanished in short order. The boy who had been told he was going to be the master of the universe and all that was in it found himself master of none. (30)

His passage into social power castrated, the protagonist of the Vietnam War story finds himself doubly stigmatized, as he faces public backlash on part of the anti-war majority and is chided for indiscipline and lack of manliness by war supporters. In popular narratives such as the *Rambo* films, the Vietnam veteran appears as an "emblem of an unjustly discriminated masculinity," victimized by society, and betrayed by the feminized, weak-willed political establishment (Jeffords 116).

Contemporary discourses and accounts of the Vietnam War, in a word, were permeated by a hierarchical structure that linked power, whiteness, and masculinist codes of violence, privileging the experience of the white veteran and alienating the perspective of those othered by hegemonic codes of masculinity: women, queer, and racialized men. Even though drafting took a disproportionate toll on the African American population, and there was a remarkable presence of Hispanic soldiers and women in the front, these viewpoints are eroded from popular renderings of the conflict in favor of the white ex-combatant stance. Likewise obliterated is the experience of the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese civilians that fell prey to Agent Orange, Napalm, bombings, poverty or famine.

1.2 Classical Trauma Theory and Intersectional Reappraisals

The centrality of white, male experiences which suffuses canonical Vietnam War stories is also at the core of one of the most salient offshoots of the conflict: modern trauma theory.

Trauma studies as conceived today are indebted to the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud. In *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Freud and Breuer formulated trauma as a malfunctioning of conscious memory caused by the subject's incapacity to assimilate an overwhelming event, which is lodged in the mind without being fully registered into ordinary narrative memory. The traumatic reminiscence remains repressed during a period of latency, "completely absent from the patient's memory when they are in a normal psychological state," but lying "astonishingly intact" and with "remarkable sensory force" in the threshold of consciousness (Freud and Breuer 9–10). Because of its unassimilated nature, the traumatic memory can be triggered by any stressor in the present, manifesting compulsively and involuntarily in the form of intrusive hallucinations, dreams, or flashbacks, in a vivid reliving of the events that, "like an unlaid ghost" (281), haunts the subject. Thus, trauma takes place in a two-stage process, dubbed "belatedness" by Cathy Caruth (18): the event is not experienced fully at the time of its occurrence, but rather in its recurring possession of the subject, in a phase known as "acting out."

As is well documented, activism by Vietnam veteran associations and rap groups pressed the American Psychiatry Association to recognize post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as an official diagnosis in 1980. In its definition, the APA's 1987 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* described trauma as "an event that is outside the range of normal human experience," threatening to life or limb (247). The suffering of such events lead to the appearance of a series of symptoms such as the unconscious "acting out" of traumatic memories, hyperarousal, emotional numbing, substance abuse, and outbursts of violence; comprised under the stamp of PTSD. Within the APA's conception of trauma, the war veterans' harrowing war experiences—violence, bombings, injuries, torture—were viewed as the archetypical instance of an event "outside the range of normal human experience" and have become shorthand for what is popularly understood as trauma (247).

In the 1990s, the work of Yale scholars such as Cathy Caruth or Geoffrey Hartman, who applied medical insights on trauma to the analysis

of literary texts, inaugurated the burgeoning field of Trauma Studies. Thereafter, feminist and postcolonial interventions into trauma scholarship have contested the narrow, biased understanding of trauma in its classical conception. The seminal feminist psychologist Laura S. Brown spells out how, in the DSM definition,

> The range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is thus that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other. War and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture, are agreed-upon traumata. Public events, visible to all, rarely themselves harbingers of stigma for their victims, things that can and do happen to men, all of these constitute trauma in the official lexicon. "Real" trauma is often only that form of trauma in which the dominant group can participate as a victim rather than as the perpetrator or etiology of the trauma. ("Not Outside" 121–22)

Or, as Rodi-Risberg succinctly puts it: "not all trauma victims are constructed equally" (115). Against the conventional understanding of trauma as individual and event-based, feminist psychology widens the lens to a broader spectrum of traumata, shedding light on "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being, but which do violence to the soul and spirit," (Brown, "Not Outside" 128). Maria P.P. Root uses the case of rape to illustrate this concept of "insidious trauma" (240): due to the high rates of sexual assault among American women, awareness of the danger of rape may cause women who have not suffered it to exhibit symptoms akin to rape victims, including hypervigilance, avoidance or emotional numbness. Similar insidious traumata haunt other marginalized groups:

> The African-American who must constantly anticipate a Howard Beach, the lesbian or gay man who must walk in fear of being murdered for who they love, the person with a disability never knowing when she or he will be dropped, perhaps fatally, through the cracks of the social so-called safety net. (Brown, "Not Outside" 128)

A parallel warning against the shortcomings of the classical trauma paradigm is taken up by postcolonial criticism. In his seminal monograph *Postcolonial Witnessing* (2013), Stef Craps contends that the uncritical adoption of a Western event-based model of trauma fails to account for the

experiences of non-Western cultures and diasporic, postcolonial, or disenfranchised groups living in Western countries. For instance, the feelings of self-hatred and inferiority caused by the continuous exposure to racist stereotypes and prejudices among racialized communities are unaccounted for by the "accident model" of trauma studies, but are described by Frantz Fanon as akin to "psychic splitting and physical amputation" in their traumatic dimension (qtd. in Craps and Buelens 3).

Against the exclusionary Eurocentric paradigm, intersectional emendations of the field advocate for widening definitions of trauma to encompass the psychological pain caused by the insidious experiences of marginalization and exclusion lived under the structures of racism and colonization.[2] This represents a shift in focus from events to living conditions as the source of trauma, since, as Craps asserts, "for many disempowered groups, trauma is a constant presence, meaning that there is no pre-traumatized state of being that can be restored in any straightforward manner" (33).

Intersectional trauma criticism also draws attention to how the uncritical cross-cultural application of event-based notions of trauma "fails to live up to its promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement" (Craps 2), reproducing instead the practices and structures that sustain inequality. Since racist, sexist, or homophobic oppression are not occurrences "outside the range of normal human experience," but rather "the intended consequences of institutionalized forms of discrimination" (Brown, "Feminist" 465), those who respond with psychic pain to these subthreshold traumata are pathologized and chemically silenced, "consigned to the category of less-than-human, less-than-deserving of fair treatment" (Brown, "Not Outside" 124). In its biased recognition of valid sources of psychic pain, then, Western paradigms of trauma sanction the perpetuation of social and political discrimination, further disempowering the disenfranchised communities subjected to insidious oppression, and turning Western culture into "a factory for the production of so many walking wounded" (Brown, "Not Outside" 123).

[2] Labels such as complex PTSD (Herman), insidious trauma (Root), postcolonial traumatic stress disorder (Turia) or oppression-based trauma (Spanierman and Poteat) have been suggested to expand the scope of DSM definition of PTSD to account for the chronic psychic suffering caused by structural oppression.

2. REWRITING THE VIETNAM TRAUMA NARRATIVE IN *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*

The reclaiming of othered forms of psychic suffering rehearsed by intersectional reappraisals of trauma studies is at the core of Ocean Vuong's rearticulation of the memory of the Vietnam conflict in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

Vuong's novel has been described as a work at the crossroads of "the epistolary novel, the coming-of-age story, and the coming-out novel" (Neumann 279). Written as Little Dog's, Vuong's alter ego, epistle to his illiterate mother, the novel is composed by fragmented, highly lyrical vignettes, recounting Little Dog's memories across different times and settings, intertwined with episodes from the war recounted by his grandmother. The narrator reflects upon his family's history in Vietnam and immigration to the States and grapples with his experiences growing up in Hartford, Connecticut, as the son of an immigrant single mother, and a queer Asian-American. The novel dwells especially in Little Dog's struggles with identity and sexuality, particularly in relation with Trevor, a white boy with whom he shares his romantic and sexual awakening.

By foregrounding the aftermath of war and migration for Vietnamese civilians, as well as the overlapping of race, class, and sexual oppression upon arrival to America, Vuong introduces into the idiosyncratic Vietnam War narrative the subjectivities and experiences historically been deemed "outside the range." In this sense, Vuong follows in the footsteps of the so-called "1.5 generation" of Vietnamese-American writers,[3] who have sought to revise the American-centeredness of popular accounts of the conflict, narrating the Vietnamese experience of war and displacement and grappling with questions of identity and belonging in the new continent (Tuon 4). By centering the perspectives alienated in mainstream Vietnam stories as an enunciative site, these narratives amount to an effort for creating a post- or counter-memory, resisting "the erasure of Vietnamese

[3] Some notable instances of this corpus are Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997), Lê Thị Diễm Thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003), Anh Vu Sawyer's *Song of Saigon* (2003), Aimee Phans' *We Should Never Meet* (2004), Nguyen Kien's *The Unwanted* (2001), Bich Minh Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007), the short story anthologies *Other Moons* (2020) and *Family of Fallen Leaves* (2010), etc. Some of these works, including Hieu Minh Nguyen's *This Way to the Sugar* (2014), Monique Troung's *The Book of Salt* (2004) or Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees* (2017) address issues of sexuality, anticipating Vuong's grappling with queerness in his writings.

existence and experience" from the collective remembrance of the war (Ryeng 27).

2.1 "This Man-made Storm": The Other Side of Vietnam Trauma

In the typical fashion of Vietnam War stories, the traumatic aftershock of the conflict takes a central role in *On Earth*. PTSD symptoms, a commonplace of veteran memoirs, are exhibited by Little Dog's mother and grandmother, Rose and Lan. Both women are, in Lan's own words, "sick in the brains" (103): they suffer flashbacks from the American air raids upon hearing the Fourth of July fireworks, are plagued by nightmares, and bear a constant feeling of threat—as when Rose maniacally counts money to buy a secret bunker (72) or makes Little Dog check if the dress she intends to buy is "fireproof" (9). Rose's frequent beatings of Little Dog can also be ascribed to the outbursts of violence and emotional numbing perceived among PTSD patients. The novel's showcasing of the traumatic aftermath of the war for its civilian victims entails a turn away from traditional narratives on the Vietnam conflict, shifting the focus from the male combatant to the overlooked reality of the Vietnamese victims.

Significantly, besides the usual stressors present in a military conflict—raids, bombs, the impending threat of death—many of the traumatogenic situations endured by Lan and Rose are gender-inflected, specific to the experience of women. In line with Vietnamese patriarchal traditions, Lan is labeled "the rot of the harvest" (33) for escaping her forced marriage to a man thirty years her senior, disowned by her own mother, and forced to work as a prostitute for American "johns." Decades later, recounting her story to Little Dog, she reminisces about "how the soldiers' boots were so heavy, when they kicked them off as they climbed into bed, the thumps sounded like bodies dropping, making her flinch under their searching hands" (40). After the war's end, the village ostracizes her as "a traitor and a whore" for sleeping with American soldiers (52).

The half-white Rose, in turn, is shunned for being a "ghost-girl" and harassed by the village's children, who cut her auburn hair and slap "buffalo shit" on her skin "to make her brown again" (52). When the war ends, the famine forces her to abort her firstborn, who is "scraped out of [her], like seeds from a papaya, with only Novocain injected between [her] thighs," in a hospital that "still smelled of smoke and gasoline" (114). After her family migrates to the States fleeing Vietnam's widespread poverty,

she becomes a victim of domestic abuse, in an on-and-off toxic relationship culminating in a nearly deadly beating.

Particularly telling of the Vietnamese women's distinct experience of the "man-made storm" (30) of war are the parallel vignettes that depict Lan crossing an American patrol checkpoint carrying her daughter, permeated by the looming threat of rape or assault; and a group of American businessmen hacking a macaque monkey's skull open to devour its brain as a cure against impotence. The montage of these two scenes, which takes up a large section of Part I, invokes images of the predatory consumption of Orientalized, vulnerable bodies, animal and woman alike, at the whim of Western fantasies of masculine dominance.

The fact that these gender-declined traumatic events—forced marriages, rape, prostitution, gender violence—prove as harrowing for Lan and Rose as mainstream stressors of war testifies to the inadequacy of the definition of traumatic events as "outside the range of normal human experience" (247), since these are all too common occurrences in the lives of women worldwide. In illuminating the traumatic potential of the insidious oppression in women's experiences, overlooked in the canonical conceptions of trauma dictated by men's experiences, the novel enacts a further shift away from the paradigmatic Vietnam trauma narrative.

2.2 "When Does a War End?": Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

At the onset of his epistle, Little Dog raises a rhetorical question to his mother: "When does a war end?" (9). Trauma theory provides an uneasy answer to Little Dog's inquiry: the distressing effects of traumatic events are not circumscribed to those directly affected by the experience, but can be vicariously absorbed across generations and acted out by the victims' descendants. A valuable contribution to this notion is the "theory of the phantom" formulated by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in *The Shell and the Kernel*. Abraham and Torok postulate that descendants of trauma victims might unconsciously become the lodgers of the silenced traumas of their forebears (173). This vicarious traumatization may trigger PTSD symptoms such as anxiety, nightmares, guilt, hypervigilance, and difficulties in interpersonal functioning, a compulsion to enact the parents' traumas, and struggles in establishing firm demarcations between "the time after" and "the immediacy of the present" (Aarons and Berger 34).

All these signs of vicarious traumatization become apparent in Little Dog's account. Throughout the novel, his mother's and grandmother's traumatic experiences compulsively haunt his imagination, besieging his narrative like a "flood" (65). Some of these episodes are transmitted through Lan's oral narration. Some others, however, have not even been witnessed by nor explicitly narrated to Little Dog, but still plague his memories, in tune with the phantom-like transgenerational transmission of trauma described by Abraham and Torok. The vivid imagery and sensory quality of these episodes correspond with the unassimilated nature and belated manifestation of traumatic memories. In this sense, Little Dog becomes a reservoir for his family's trauma, which becomes, in his own words,

> A bullet lodged inside him. He'd feel it floating on the right side of his chest, just between the ribs. The bullet was always here, 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. (64)

In this portrayal of the longstanding harm endured by the Vietnamese population and its descendants, *On Earth* treads one step further away from normative narratives about the war, further evidencing the inadequacy of individual, event-based paradigms for conceptualizing what counts as trauma.

2.3 "The Dialect of Damaged American Fathers": Masculinity, Race, and Insidious Trauma

Hitherto, this paper has looked at Vuong's articulation of a trauma narrative on the Vietnamese past, one that brings the experience of female civilians and their descendants to the forefront to contest veteran-centered accounts of the war. However, the American cult of masculinist, colonial violence that informed military aggression in Vietnam is not conscripted to the bygone experiences of the conflict, but remains ubiquitous in Little Dog's American present. As a queer, immigrant Asian American boy, Little Dog falls prey to the same all-American masculinity that encouraged imperialist violence against his foremothers.

As Goldstein remarks, the first manifestations of the military code of manhood can be located in the "toughening up process" and "socialization

for aggression" of young boys, which turns into "the seed of later homophobia," and works toward the perpetuation of normative gender roles (290). As someone marked from an early age as a "queer yellow faggot" (166), Little Dog fails to live up to requirements of all-American masculinity, and is severely punished for it. Throughout his childhood, he is repeatedly humiliated by his classmates for his perceived effeminacy: he is called "freak, fairy, fag" after being seen playing with his mother's dress (11), thrown off his pink bike by an older boy who scrapes the paint off the metal, and publicly branded a "FAG4LIFE" by a red spray graffito on his front door (151). The most illustrative episode in this regard takes place when Little Dog is bullied by one of his classmates on the school bus. The boy's words, charged with sexist codes of domination, reveal the all-pervasiveness of masculinity and aggression in young boys' socialization:

> 'Don't you ever say nothin'? Don't you speak English?' He grabbed my shoulder and spun me to face him. 'Look at me when I'm talking to you.'
> He was only nine but had already mastered the dialect of damaged American fathers. When I did nothing but close my eyes, the boy slapped me.
> 'Say something.' He shoved his fleshy nose against my blazed cheek. 'Can't you say even one thing?' The second slap came from above, from another boy. Bowlcut cupped my chin and steered my head toward him.
> 'Say my name then . . . Like your mom did last night.'. . . I willed myself into a severe obedience and said his name. 'Again,' he said. 'Kyle.' 'Louder.' 'Kyle.' My eyes still shut. 'That's a good little bitch.' (20)

Significantly, Little Dog's own mother partakes of the process of "manning him up," encouraging him to become "a real boy and be strong" (22), and systematically assaulting him until he is finally capable of standing up to her, an act that Little Dog rationalizes by relating it to his mother's condition: "I read that parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war" (10). Furthermore, when Little Dog comes out as gay to her, Rose laments the "healthy, normal boy" she gave birth to (110) and warns him against the homophobic aggressions that he is bound to confront: "They'll kill you. They kill people for wearing dresses. You know that" (110). Rose, well aware of the price to pay for being alien to the American standard, reproduces the equation of masculinity and violence with power, attempting to ensure her son's survival.

These direct attacks are intertwined in Little Dog's narration with pieces of news relating episodes of homophobic aggressions, which appear as cautionary tales of the consequences for those deemed deviant by heterosexism:

> A few months before our talk at Dunkin' Donuts, a fourteen-year-old boy in rural Vietnam had acid thrown in his face after he slipped a love letter into another boy's locker. Last summer, twenty-eight-year-old Florida native Omar Mateen walked into an Orlando nightclub, raised his automatic rifle, and opened fire. Forty-nine people were killed. It was a gay club and the boys, because that's who they were—sons, teenagers-looked like me: a colored thing born of one mother, rummaging the dark, each other, for happiness. (116)

Little Dog's inability to fit in the cage of American masculinity as a queer boy is aggravated by him being a first-generation Asian migrant: his bullies urge him to "speak English" (20), his mother forces him to drink American milk to "erase all the dark inside him with a flood of brightness" (22), and he feels compelled to become "invisible in order to be safe" (80) in a country where normalcy comes only in "pink and beige" (51). These insidious racist aggressions become a further source of inadequacy and self-loathing for Little Dog.[4]

The grievous consequences of straying from the rules of white, all-American manhood are epitomized in Little Dog's relationship with Trevor, which is warped by internalized homophobia and racial power dynamics. In the novel, Trevor is equated with "the fabric and muscle of American masculinity" (170): he is white, charismatic, athletic, drives big trucks, enjoys baseball and shooting, and often wears a soldier's helmet, which explicitly evokes the image of the masculine hero. Because of his internalization of the codes of manhood, Trevor is unable to come to terms with his own sexuality: he cries "in the dark, the way boys do" the first time he and Little Dog "fake fuck" (97), refuses to be topped by Little Dog because "he don't wanna feel like a girl, like a bitch" (102), asks Little Dog "You think you'll be really gay, like, forever? I mean, I think me… I'll be good in a few years, you know?" (179), and begs him to "Please tell me I am not a faggot. Am I? Am I? Are you?" (158). Trevor's drug addiction and eventual overdose, Amin reasons at length, can even be

[4] For an in-depth exploration of the effects of internalized racism and colorism upon Little Dog, see Eren (2022).

interpreted as a form of self-harm motivated by internalized homophobia (273). As Trevor's storyline demonstrates, then, the rigid codes of masculinity allocated to American men prove harmful even for those granted dominant social positions. In Little Dog's words: "to be an American boy is to move from one end of a cage to another" (98).

Trevor and Little Dog's uneven relationship can also be read in terms of racial hierarchies. As Stephen Sohn argues in his discussion of the queer Asian-American identity,

> The queer Asian North American man is often considered as the submissive, obedient partner, mainly matched in an interracial relationship with a Caucasian man. His relative status as the "bottom" is linked to the longer racialization of Asian North American men as effeminate, sexually deviant, and undesirable. (5)

Little Dog, subject to lifelong degradations on account of his sexuality and race, and perfectly aware that "he was white. I was yellow" (94), internalizes this emasculated position, and "lowers himself" before Trevor (100). The most telling episode in this regard occurs during their first anal sexual encounter, when Trevor's penis is stained. Little Dog's reaction testifies to his feelings of inferiority, shame and guilt: "I feared for what would come. It was my fault. I had tainted him with my faggotry, the filthiness of our act exposed by my body's failure to contain itself" (170). Little Dog, who had thought that "sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply" (102), soon realizes that gender and racial hierarchies "were already inside us" (102), condemning their relationship to secrecy and shame.

From the standpoint of intersectional trauma studies, the sustained assaults to Little Dog's bodily and emotional wellbeing for failing to comply with the standards of American racism and heterosexism classify among the subthreshold agents of "insidious trauma" deemed "outside the range" by normative definitions. Despite not being threatening to life or limb, these episodes of homophobic and racist violence become traumatic, unassimilated memories, repeatedly acted out in Little Dog's narration through fragmented, impressionistic vignettes, in line with the belated manifestation of traumatic experiences.

The trauma inflicted by both the vicarious reception of his family's memory and the insidious oppression of violent, white, all-American machismo triggers in Little Dog PTSD-like symptoms, including maimed

attachments with others, jumping between "elation" and "sadness" (152), recurring nightmares, and constant re-enactment of traumatic episodes. However, because his traumatic experiences are the fruit of "institutionalized forms of discrimination" (Brown, "Feminist" 465), his reaction is pathologized, deemed the abnormal result of "wrong chemicals in his brain," of a "bipolar disorder" that must be targeted through medication (Vuong 152). Little Dog's response to this prescriptive diagnosis can be aligned with the refusal to pathologize the psychic suffering of disenfranchised communities on part of feminist and postcolonial critics:

> I don't want my sadness to be othered from me just as I don't want my happiness to be othered. They're both mine. I made them, dammit. What if the elation I feel is not another "bipolar episode" but something I fought hard for? (152)

The scope of the novel's portrayal of insidious trauma is multiplied by encompassing the experiences of other oppressed communities beyond Little Dog's perspective: the Vietnamese women working alongside Rose in the nail salon, the Latino temporary workers collecting tobacco crops in Trevor's farm, the "abuelas, abas, nanas, babas, and bà ngoại s" of Hartford raising the grandchildren left behind by estranged fathers (179), the lower-class kids overdosing with Oxycontin.

This portrayal of the aftermath of oppression for those outside the narrow confines of normalcy illustrates Laura Brown's assertion that "our culture is a factory for the production of so many walking wounded" ("Not Outside" 123). In this, Vuong adheres to a socio-political approach to trauma akin to that heralded by postcolonial and feminist critics, which departs from the individual, event-based model to consider wider socio-political dynamics. As will be discussed in the following section, this approach also informs the novel's grappling with the possibly of working through the traumatic past, which disregards the Eurocentric therapy paradigm in favor of politically charged acts of empathy and communal empowerment.

3. Writing as Healing?

To halt the "acting out" of traumatic memories, Freud and Breuer devised "the talking cure" (30), a therapeutic method where patients were asked to

discuss their memories through free association of ideas. This inscription of traumatic events into a coherent narrative allowed patients to move on to a healing phase of "working through," defusing the memory's overwhelming effect.

Under the light of Freud's notion of the talking cure, literature—or "scriptotherapy," to use Suzette Henke's term (12)—seems a privileged medium for the therapeutic reenactment of the traumatic experience. However, as Caruth notes in her influential monograph *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), because of its unassimilated nature, the narrativization of trauma is inevitably caught in a representational aporia: while the event demands narration to be integrated into the subject's consciousness, by nature trauma precludes language and representation. To bridge this representational paradox, traumatic experiences demand a particular aesthetic, one that "incorporates the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of trauma within its consciousness and structures" (Vickroy xiv). This aesthetic must, following Roger Luckhurst, be "uncompromisingly avantgarde" (81), violating the conventions of realism in favor of disrupted linearity, suspended logical causation, repetition, gaps, open endings, and dispersed narrative voices that echo the unsettling workings of traumatic memory (Whitehead 161).

A priori, Vuong's *On Earth* could be read as a talking cure, an attempt "to break free" from the traumatic past through writing (2). Vuong's epistle is definitely attuned with the avantgarde aesthetic that Luckhurst prescribes for the integration of traumatic events into narrative memory. It presents, in Little Dog's words, "not a story" but "a shipwreck—the pieces floating, finally legible" (160): he "travels in spirals" (23) through juxtaposed, fragmented stories, linked together by free association of ideas. The linear flow of the narrative is disrupted by repetitions and flashbacks, and complicated through lyrical narratorial intrusions, imitating the workings of a "fractured, short-wired" mind distorted by trauma (19). Vuong's memoir seems to echo Little Dog's question: "Why can't the language for creativity be the language of regeneration?" (150), as he attempts to "fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters" (26), translating the past's ghosts into a creative account that will grant him the power to exorcize them.

However, the narrative is permeated by a sense of failed delivery that undercuts the infallibility of the talking cure. Little Dog makes frequent allusions to his mother's illiteracy and broken English. Little Dog is aware that, even though he is "writing to reach [her]," "each word [he] puts down

is one word further from where [she is]" (2), and acknowledges that "the very impossibility of [her] reading this is all that makes [his] telling it possible" (95). Thus, the validity of language—particularly of the colonial, Western-imposed code of English—to attain healing is challenged. The talking cure prescribed by normative understandings of trauma, it seems, is ineffective to convey the particular "queer yellow" location of Little Dog's experiences.

This failure of the therapeutic model acquires greater poignancy under the light of postcolonial trauma studies. Intersectional theorists have denounced the traditional talking cure as inadequate for rendering the experience of those othered by canonical definitions of trauma, because of its narrow focus on individual, event-based traumata, and its emphasis on the return to a pre-traumatic condition unavailable for those affected by insidious oppression. Postcolonial scholars have especially taken issue with the politically disempowering effect that the counseling paradigm holds for disenfranchised communities. As Craps and Buelens expound, the counseling model is permeated by uneven power dynamics, apt to reproduce racial, class, or gender imbalances:

> The respective subject positions into which the witness and the listener/reader are interpellated are those of a passive, inarticulate victim on the one hand and a knowledgeable expert on the other. The former bears witness to a truth of which he or she is not fully conscious, and can do so only indirectly, making it impossible for his or her testimony to act as a political intervention. The latter responds to the witness's testimony by showing empathy, a reaction that supposedly obviates any need for critical self-reflection regarding his or her own implication in ongoing practices of oppression and denial, let alone political mobilization against those practices. (5–6)

Against this prescriptive and homogenizing therapeutic model, postcolonial scholars have called for a trauma paradigm "open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance" created in non-canonical contexts (Craps 43), paying attention to local coping strategies alien to the Western counselling paradigm. For instance, postcolonial studies call attention to the "healing resources of family and community" (Konner 230), and "the transformative capacities of non-narrative, even non-linguistic reparation" (Kabir 66). Furthermore, they advocate for "a non-therapeutic relation to the past, structured around the notion of survival or living on rather than recovery" (Lloyd 220),

promoting an affirmative politics of agency, empowerment, or "post-traumatic growth" (Borzaga 74). In the same vein, feminist psychology adopts a relational-cultural model of trauma treatment, based on linking individual experience to its social causes, and raising awareness of one's kinship with other survivors. In this shift from the individual to the collective, from victimization to empowerment, trauma acquires a more blatant political purchase, aiming to spark sociopolitical change.

In line with intersectional reroutings of trauma studies, Vuong's *On Earth* narrates several episodes which illustrate alternative pathways to healing that step away from the prescriptive model of the talking cure, favoring instead acts of community, empathy, and resistance. One of these pictures can be pinned down in Lan's oral storytelling to Little Dog, which weaves together fact and fiction, history, and stories, and is described as

> Traveling in a spiral. As I listened, there would be moments when the story would change—not much, just a minuscule detail. Shifts in the narrative would occur—the past never a fixed and dormant landscape but one that is re-seen. (23)

Lan's narration appears as an iteration of the idiosyncratic talking cure, but devoid of the pathologizing stance and uneven power dynamics that characterize it. As Vuong recounts in an interview, for Vietnamese women as his grandmother, doubly disenfranchised by war and diaspora, creating "a mythology of their lives" through the ancient tradition of oral storytelling was a way to acquire "rhetorical power," to step out of their powerless status and inscribe their othered testimony into the "grand historical epic" of the conflict (qtd. in Brockes).

Another tableau of alternative "working through" is presented in one of Little Dog's memories, when an amputee woman comes into his mother's nail salon and nervously asks to receive a pedicure on her missing leg. No questions asked, Rose proceeds to wash and massage the phantom limb and is rewarded by a hundred-dollar tip. This episode stages an intimate, relational act of healing, as Rose acknowledges the vulnerability caused by the severing of the limb and carries out an embodied, compassionate attempt at metaphorical regeneration, animated by empathy rather than pathologizing judgement toward the woman's pain.

But perhaps the most relevant instance of alternative paths to working through trauma occurs at the end of the novel when Rose and Little Dog return to Vietnam to lay Lan's ashes to rest. Back at their Saigon hotel after

the burial, Little Dog is surprised by a neighborhood party in the small hours of the night, complete with food trucks, dancing, and a music performance by drag queens. This merrymaking, he discovers, is a common scene in Saigon, where the underfunded city coroners are unable to tend to night-shift deaths. Upon a sudden death in the middle of the night, then, a grassroots neighborhood movement pools money to hire a troupe of drag performers and organize a party with the aim of "delaying sadness" until the morning (189):

> In Saigon, the sound of music and children playing this late in the night is a sign of death—or rather, a sign of a community attempting to heal. It's through the drag performers' explosive outfits and gestures, their overdrawn faces and voices, their tabooed trespass of gender, that this relief, through extravagant spectacle, is manifest. As much as they are useful, paid, and empowered as a vital service in a society where to be queer is still a sin, the drag queens are, for as long as the dead lie in the open, an othered performance. Their presumed, reliable fraudulence is what makes their presence, to the mourners, necessary. Because grief, at its worst, is unreal. And it calls for a surreal response. The queens—in this way—are unicorns. Unicorns stamping in a graveyard. (189)

In the drag queens' performance, the embodied Otherness of being a "queer yellow faggot" that had sentenced Little Dog to a lifetime of insidious oppression becomes instead a source of regeneration and communal salve. While the homogenizing, dehistoricizing talking cure fails to become a vehicle to work through the pain, this alternative form of resistance, based upon the joyous reclaiming of difference and community, successfully brings about solace.

Despite denouncing the insidious oppression and violence exerted against Vietnamese-American, queer bodies, hence, *On Earth* also offers "a narrative of hope" (Ryeng 18), refusing to reduce his community to the passive status of pathologized victim, and choosing instead to empower it through acts of post-traumatic, communal survival.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined the revision of traditional trauma narratives on the Vietnam War in Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. As this article has noted, dominant accounts of the conflict

traditionally dealt with shell-shocked white veterans and built upon the equation of manhood with military, misogynistic, and homophobic values. In *On Earth*, Vuong neutralizes these discourses by shifting the focus to a female, queer, and diasporic perspective on the horrors and aftershock of the conflict. By bringing to the foreground the harrowing gendered violence imposed upon Rose and Lan and its vicarious consequences upon Little Dog, Vuong illuminates the experiences that hegemonic narratives of the Vietnam conflict have left in the dark. Moreover, if canonical Vietnam narratives promoted conservative notions of masculinity, race, and power that were leveraged to scorn gender, racial, and sexual difference, *On Earth* denounces the insidious oppression and aggression that arises from nonconformity with all-American standards. This rewriting is attuned with the intersectional forays into trauma theory by feminist and postcolonial critics, which disclose the traumatic aftermath of systemic oppression. The novel also points toward paths for relieving psychic pain other than the individual-based, medicalized logotherapy prescribed by classical conceptions of trauma, calling instead for communal acts of empathy and vulnerability which prompt interpersonal healing and political empowerment.

Appropriating the idiosyncratic vehicle for all-American discourses on the war, then, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* queers the Vietnam trauma narrative to bring into the spotlight the stories of those who have historically been swept "outside the range." In so doing, Vuong joins the endeavor of the growing corpus of works produced by the Vietnamese-American 1.5 generation, who aim at building an inclusive counter-memory of the conflict. The migratory monarch allegory that is repeatedly invoked throughout *On Earth* serves as an apt metaphor for the post-memory endeavor carried out by Vuong and his fellow writers, as they attempt to grapple with and work through the trauma of the Vietnamese-American community:

> The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past. . . Monarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes. . . Sometimes, I imagine the monarchs fleeing not winter but the napalm clouds of your childhood in Vietnam. I imagine them flying from the blazed blasts unscathed . . . for thousands of miles across the sky, so that, looking up, you can no longer fathom the explosion they came

from. Only a family of butterflies floating in clean, cool air, their wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof. (11, 15, 19)

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