"The truth is memory has not forgotten us": Memory, Identity, and Storytelling in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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Traumatic memory and diasporic identity are dominant leitmotifs in Vietnamese American literature about the Vietnam War and its aftermath because Vietnamese American refugees continue to struggle with displacement, homeland nostalgia, psychological wounds, and unspeakable sorrows for their many losses. Ocean Vuong, an emerging Vietnamese American author, addresses these issues in his award-winning debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, which takes the form of a semi-autobiographical epistolary novel—it is a letter from the narrator, Little Dog, to his illiterate mother, Rose. The Vietnam War, called the American War by the Vietnamese, took place before the narrator's birth, yet it plays a defining role in his family's history, struggles, and identity. Little Dog's letter to his mother shows how the trauma generated by the war lingers and continues to impact generations who never experienced the war. The novel demonstrates transgenerational trauma, as parents experiencing the terror of war raise their children and pass on their psychological and emotional pain. Through his fragmented, lyrical, postmodern writing style, Vuong examines the deep-seated trauma, offering a place in history to previously unrecounted stories of suffering. Through the voice of Little Dog, the novel attempts to preserve the truth of a suppressed legacy and to reclaim his ethnic identity by reconstructing and narrating his family's tumultuous past.

An Overview of the Novel

The first-person narrator, Little Dog, was born in poverty-stricken postwar Vietnam. At the age of six, he fled to the United States with his mother, Rose, and his grandmother, Lan. As a multigenerational family, they sought new opportunities and a sense of belonging in the country that had devastated their homeland. In the United States,

Little Dog's childhood experience is defined by xenophobic bullying and domestic abuse from Rose, who suffers from PTSD caused by the napalm and mortar rounds that fell on Vietnam when she was a child. Unwelcome and disoriented by war-induced displacement, the three of them confront the difficulties of living as refugees. Little Dog also discovers and explores his queer sexuality with Trevor, his first lover, who is debilitated by drug addiction. Although the second half of the novel addresses Little Dog's sexuality, this article focuses primarily on transgenerational trauma, historical amnesia, and his role as the storyteller and interpreter of his family's history.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous shares its title with a poem that Vuong published in 2014. The poem juxtaposes intimacy and violence to reveal how they intertwine in Little's Dog's sexual and familial relationships. The generational violence that his family endured influences how he seeks out romantic relationships. Speaking of his physical association with Trevor, Little Dog says, "[V]iolence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love" (Vuong 119). Both the poem and the novel examine how unmitigated emotions released in acts of desire or violence can equate to intimacy. While the turmoil that Little Dog experienced with his mother reoccurs in his relationship with Trevor, his family and romantic life contrast each other since Little Dog claims agency with Trevor. He finds a sense of power in his sex life: "It felt good to name what was already happening to me all my life. I was being fucked up, at last, by choice. In Trevor's grip, I had a say in how I would be taken apart" (119). Despite patterns of shame and inconsistency with Trevor, feeling desired and reclaiming control over his body after years of being physically abused by Rose give Little Dog a sense of personal empowerment as well as a mode of expression in response to his violent upbringing.

The novel's title is also Vuong's declaration that the bodies of people of color are beautiful. In an interview, Vuong says, "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 how they are beautiful" (qtd. in Amanpour and Company). Beauty is a dominant theme throughout the novel, as Vuong intertwines the beauty of family bonds, resilience, and intimacy

with the horrors of trauma, drug abuse, displacement, and war. These jagged and sometimes jarring juxtapositions encapsulate the author's tendency to be unapologetically candid, inviting his readers to bear witness as he leaves no rock unturned.

The novel became an instant *New York Times* bestseller and won numerous awards after its 2019 publication. Vuong was widely praised for his stunning prose, creative wordplay, and haunting imagery. For instance, Justin Torres, a *New York Times* book reviewer, states:, "The tenderness of the prose feels like a triumph against a world hellbent on embittering the tenderhearted." 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." As Vuong uncovers stories that remained untold in the dominant narrative of the war and its aftermath, his writing emphasizes beauty within his characters, even as he exposes their pain.

Resistance to Historical Amnesia and the Myth of the American Dream

The length, cost, ferocity, and mass casualties of the Vietnam War made it a highly controversial enterprise that was contested by public demonstrations of many Americans in the 1960s and 1970s. The US government responded to this dissent by attempting to control the narrative of the war through propaganda, the media, literature, and records. Immigrant children, subjected to American education, tend to either forget or disregard the sufferings and sorrows of their previous generations, while aiming to realize the American Dream in the Promised Land—this is often referred to as the American imperialistic education. Many who grow up as assimilated Americans become victims of historical amnesia. Literature, history, and films written and produced for mainstream American culture have been criticized for their Americentric perspective that disregards the Vietnamese experience or that relegates the Vietnamese people to invisibility. According to Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, Vietnamese American historical remembrances repudiate "American normative social history of the Vietnam War," which has continuously distorted and displaced the refugee perspective (51-52). Similarly, in "Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique," Viet Thanh Nguyen eloquently restates

Yến Lê Espiritu's insight: "the Vietnamese refugee's narrative in the United States has been rewritten so that American responsibility for its failures in Southeast Asia is forgotten in favor of remembering how Americans rescued Vietnamese refugees at war's end" (929). In the two decades after the war's end in 1975, about 1.3 million Southeast Asian refugees were granted legal entry into the US (Novas 289), the majority of whom were Vietnamese; their voices, however, are often unheard or simply silenced. Vuong's novel, as well as many other Vietnamese American memoirs and writings, attempts to give a voice to this marginalized community by highlighting the long-lasting impact of the violent and lengthy war and critiquing the myth of the American Dream.

Historical amnesia in the United States is an organized, systematic, and intentional mechanism for maintaining dominance. Rather than admitting responsibility or expressing shame, the US has selectively promoted its questionable notion of patriotism in order to sustain the nation's ideological position. Moreover, some state legislators have recently prohibited instructors from teaching "critical race theory and other 'divisive' concepts" such as sexism and racism (McMurtrie 20). Despite the counterarguments that have developed beyond America's borders, and Vietnam having suffered roughly fifty times the number of casualties as the US, the generally held American version of late twentieth-century history continues to portray the Vietnam War as a "just cause" and as an American tragedy. Imperialistic historiography too often leads to the strategic erasure of VietnameseAmerican refugee narratives in the US. Vuong alludes to this erasure in the grotesque scene of men cutting open a live macaque's skull and scooping out its brain with spoons: "When nothing is left, when all of its memories dissolve into the men's bloodstreams, the monkey dies. . . . Who will be lost in the story we tell ourselves?" (43). The metaphor calls attention to the people whose memories have been lost in theUnited State's overpowering and distorted coverage of the war. As Espiritu points out in "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship," scholars emphasize socioeconomic and political factors in their discussion of why the Vietnamese fled their homeland, while failing to acknowledge "the aggressive roles that the US government, military, and corporations have played in generating this exodus in the first place" (422-23). Historical amnesia has grave

and lasting consequences for refugee families like Little Dog's who were unwelcome and treated as "the excluded Others" upon their arrival in the United States.

Over time, a skewed portrayal of historical narratives began to affect the psyche of Americans and Vietnamese alike through what is commonly known as *intellectual imperialism*. Syed Hussein Alatas states that imperialism can come not only in the form of political and economic policies, but also as an intellectual position that dominates a group of people in the very structure of their thinking (24). After decades of war and propaganda, the United States developed political and economic power as it also gained intellectual control of the historical narrative. Intellectual imperialism and historical amnesia preclude engagement with the reality of racial discrimination against Asian people, replacing American atrocities in favor of myths about promoting equality among repressed peoples, freedom from political and religious oppression, and economic opportunity. To challenge these pervasive myths, traumatic memory must be understood as a condition that makes visible the subdued truths of the suffering of war victims and the relationship between war, racism, and violence (Espiritu 422). Thus, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* counters American mythology by highlighting the extent to which Vietnamese American refugees often have been strategically erased from the public eye.

Decades of historical amnesia and political propaganda have resulted in a refusal to acknowledge how the United States has benefited from disregarding marginalized voices. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Vuong speaks of our collective cultural resistance to discussing someone's prehistory: "[we are wary because] if we go pre enough we'll arrive at slavery and American genocide. So, understandably, those in power and those looking at this country in review, have amnesia" (qtd. in Kreizman). To promote historical amnesia, the United States demands conformity as a prerequisite for integration. As a result, Little Dog, for instance, was raised to blend into the shadows and subdue his thoughts and aspirations in order to survive. When he first began to go against the grain and find his voice as a writer, he could not help hesitating before articulating each word: "I hated myself for being so uncertain, about images, clauses, ideas, even the pen or journal I used. Everything I wrote began with *maybe* and *perhaps* and ended with *I think* or *I believe*. But my doubt is

everywhere, Ma. Even when I know something to be true as bone I fear the knowledge will dissolve, will not, despite my writing it, stay real" (Vuong 62). To generations before him whose stories were buried and untold, Little Dog says, "Sometimes you are erased before you are given the choice of stating who you are" (Vuong 63). By writing Little Dog's story, Vuong gives voice to a refugee family disadvantaged by sociohistorical circumstances; he illustrates the isolating and debilitating consequences of living as a Vietnamese refugee in a country conditioned by historical amnesia.

Vuong's novel presents a voice on behalf of the Vietnamese refugees who have been unwelcome, unassimilable, and erased from history. In addition to writing about Little Dog, Vuong includes a long meditation on Tiger Woods. Although Woods is commonly labeled as Black, his father met his mother, a Thai-Chinese woman, while serving as a soldier in the Vietnam War. Vuong includes this excerpt to acknowledge how, in the public sphere, even a celebrity gets no media coverage of his Asian heritage. Vuong also writes about the trial of a White railroad worker who murdered an unarmed Chinese man in 1884. The case was ultimately dismissed when the judge cited a Texas law that criminalized the murder of human beings, but defined humans as White, Black, or Mexican. In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe states that exposing the culture and history of Asian America "shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state" (29). By including these anecdotes, Vuong not only exposes how Asians have been systematically effaced from American society as he attempts to reestablish their presence in the written record, but also allows for new ways of considering accountability within the negligence of American historiography.

As Vuong writes about the hardships Little Dog and his family encountered following their arrival in the United States, he challenges the American myths of inclusion, prosperity, and success that appear in celebratory narratives and public accolades of Asian Americans as the "model minority." Vietnamese refugees' opportunities for successful integration have been impeded by America's exercise of power in Asia. The psychological damage caused by combat, loss, violence, and terror

during the Vietnam War has been compounded by the long-lasting psychological consequences of a one-sided narrative of the war. The biased narrative "established images—of inferiority, immorality, and unassimilability—that 'traveled' with Vietnamese to the United States and prescribed their racialization here" (Espiritu 424). Racist attitudes about the war affected the opportunities and sense of belonging for Little Dog and for other Vietnamese refugees in the US. In relating Rose and Lan's inability to achieve upward mobility in their asylum, Vuong also challenges the often-repeated American myth of equal opportunity for all because US history has held a "pernicious prejudice" against Asian Americans by continuously labeling them as "essentially foreign, inassimilable," and treacherous (Hsu 5).

In *The Making of Asian America*, Erika Lee devotes a chapter to Southeast Asian refugees that draws attention to how their aspirations to achieve the American Dream often lead to "contradictions and unfinished journeys" (315). In Vuong's novel, Rose's job at a nail salon depicts how intangible and unattainable the American Dream is for first-generation refugees. Rose had hoped that the nail salon would be a temporary stop until her English skills improved and a better job came along. This stop grew, ingloriously, into decades that damaged the manicurists' health: "our lungs can no longer breathe without swelling, our livers hardening with chemicals—our joints brittle and inflamed from arthritis—stringing together a kind of life" (Vuong 80). Little Dog contends that "[a] new immigrant, within two years, will come to know that the salon is, in the end, a place where dreams become calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones—with or without citizenship—aching, toxic, and underpaid" (80-81). Despite Rose's tenacity and decades of debilitating work, she could not find equal footing to become an integrated member of society. As the novel presses on, with Little Dog being violently bullied and Rose tethered to the nail salon, it becomes clear that diligence and perseverance do not guarantee the American Dream or even upward mobility.

Little Dog's mixed-race background also limits his family's sense of belonging and potential for integration into Vietnamese or American communities. Rose is the daughter of Lan, a Vietnamese sex worker during the war and her client, an American soldier. As Rose grew up in Vietnam, her lighter skin made her unwelcome and subject to

racist attacks from neighborhood kids who would scrape her arms with spoons, shouting, "Get the white off her, get the white off her!" (Vuong 63). Ironically, when Rose brought her family to the United States, the lighter color of their skin did not grant them acceptance either; Little Dog was also targeted for being Asian. The day he was attacked for riding a pink bicycle was "the day [he] learned how dangerous a color can be" because "[e]ven if color is nothing but what light reveals, that *nothing* has laws" (134, 135). Discrimination based on color and, in his case, also sexual orientation, hindered his family's sense of belonging in Vietnam and the US. It should be noted that, due to their illiteracy and mixed-race identity, Rose and Lan could be considered voiceless subalterns in both societies. Nguyen urges Asian Americans to "remember a shared past" that the United States tries to erase from its history—one that is characterized by "a shameful rebuke to the national myth of inclusion and opportunity for all" ("Speak" 14). *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* discloses how the American Dream comes into conflict with the ubiquitous perception that Asian people in the US are perpetual foreigners. This paradox keeps immigrants hopeful for a prosperous future, while also hindering their access to upward mobility and maintaining control over how they must conform in order to be granted a sense of belonging.

Finding Identity through Storytelling

Storytelling, arising from his own experience and the stories heard from his mother and grandmother, is an integral part of how Little Dog constructs his identity, which should be understood as "the relation between the self, discovered through the articulation of remembered emotional disturbances, and the group" (Pelaud 64). Because Little Dog emigrated from Vietnam as a toddler, he relies on Rose and Lan to help him understand his Vietnamese history. He often pieces together his family's stories by witnessing his mother's and grandmother's nightmares, flashbacks, and visceral triggers. Stephen H. Sumida calls this *the transmission of culture*, or "the continuation of an awareness of history from one generation to the next" (212). Out of these fitful and fragmented sources, Little Dog strives to understand his family and himself. By sharing Little Dog's tale, Vuong sheds light on experiences that have been marginalized or excluded from the dominant written narrative of non-Vietnamese American authors. In "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Vietnam," Nguyen states that

only through self-representation and self-narrativity can Vietnamese American refugees restore their history and claim ownership of their own stories and experiences (31). Little Dog thus recreates and reimagines history to preserve his family's experiences as well as to understand his own heritage and claim his place in it. The war-induced identity of Little Dog and his loved ones is constructed through the act of remembrance since the war defines their refugee status. Jan Assman explains: "if 'We Are What We Remember,' the truth of memory lies in the identity that it shapes . . . [and] we are the stories that we are able to tell ourselves" (211).

Little Dog begins assembling his life story through his remaining connections to Vietnam: Rose and Lan. The stories that they pass down to him are not the linear, homogenized, or patriotic version of history taught in American schools because their memories are "broken by war, occupation, and displacement. Asian American culture 're-members' the past in and through the fragmentation, loss, and dispersal that constitutes the past" (Lowe 29). Little Dog learns about the conditions Rose endured as she tells of her life in postwar Vietnam when, in 1986, four months into her first pregnancy, her husband coerced her into having an abortion. She is haunted by memories of the hospital, its unpleasant odor that smelled of "smoke and gasoline from the war," and her baby being scraped out of her "like seeds from a papaya" (Vuong 135). She explains that, due to food scarcity at the time, people mixed rice with sawdust to augment it and that even rats were considered edible. Little Dog was born after nearly triple the number of bombs dropped in all of World War II had been dropped on Vietnam, in what became known as a policy of "lunarization" (Lockard 239). Little Dog exists only because American soldiers were in Vietnam; he must grapple with the fact that he is the direct product of war: "*It wasn't me . . . who was inside my mother's womb, but this bullet, this seed I bloomed around*" (Vuong 77). Through the stories recounted by his mother and grandmother, Little Dog learns that victory for the Vietnamese did not cease their hardships. For his family, and for all but the three million Vietnamese who lost their lives, victory brought still more suffering or, as Nguyen eloquently articulates it in *Nothing Ever Dies*, "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (4). Those who witnessed the war firsthand, like Lan and Rose, developed devastating psychological effects that

they passed down through generations.

Postmemory is tellingly woven into the novel as Little Dog's life is filled with fragmented and traumatic memories of events that, though predating him, continue to define him. Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as a recollection that is inherited from someone else and transmitted "so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (347). Little Dog did not live the war as Rose and Lan did, but he does witness their violent outbursts, flashbacks, and nightmares. He observes how trauma distorts the boundaries of space and time. For instance, Little Dog sees Lan's confusion when she is startled by the booming sound of Independence Day fireworks. He recalls, "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 finger over her lips." Then Lan whispered, "Shhh. If you scream . . . the mortars will know where we are" (Vuong 19). When her memories are triggered, her foothold in the present is ruptured. The sound swiftly transports Lan away from her American home and back to wartime Vietnam. Through his intimate proximity to Rose and Lan's psychological damage from the war, Little Dog inherits their memories as postmemory.

Little Dog struggles to understand the trauma that haunts his family because he only experiences the war by witnessing its lasting effects. He constantly wrestles to understand Rose as she reflects on her wartime experiences and reacts with outbursts of violence, rage, and fear. Little Dog recalls when he once leapt out from behind a door to play a prank on his mother and then pointed out to her: "You screamed, face raked, and twisted, then burst into sobs, clutched your chest as you leaned against the door, gasping. . . . 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" (Vuong 4). Through Rose's unpredictable reactions and torrents of abuse, Little Dog indirectly learns of the war that continues to flood Rose and Lan's daily lives, and it becomes integrated into his own identity. For instance, he recalls seeing a deer standing in a fog so dense that when he noticed a second one behind it, "it looked like an unfinished shadow of the first" (8). Resembling the ghostly deer in the fog, Little Dog belongs only halfway inside two different worlds. In the

United States, he uses his mother's fragmented and nonlinear stories to integrate his Vietnamese history into the gaps of his identity.

For Little Dog, the challenge of having a cohesive understanding of his history is magnified because Rose and Lan's communication skills have remained minimal since the war deprived them of their education. Vuong comments on the lingering effects of trauma: "to destroy a people . . . is to set them back in time" (60). Rose never returned to school after the age of five when she watched from a banana grove the bombing of her elementary school. Her limitations in language exacerbate her isolation in the US and within her own family, with which she must struggle to communicate. Without adequate language skills, Little Dog and his family connect with each other in ways that transcend words. Most often, instead of using language, they communicate nonverbally. Little Dog explains how "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 on your son to absorb a plane's turbulence and, therefore, his fear" (33). With limited access to language, Little Dog relies on nonverbal communication to haphazardly develop an understanding of his family's past and its impacts on his identity.

Vuong exposes how a fluid, non-traditional language can emerge from diasporic communities that have lost access to language. Speaking of his mother, Little Dog writes, "When it comes to words, you possess fewer than the coins you saved from your nail salon tips in the milk gallon under the kitchen cabinet" (Vuong 29). Owing to language barriers, Little Dog's family adopts a third kind of language: "Sometimes our words are few and far between, or simply ghosted. In which case the hand, although limited by the borders of skin and cartilage, can be that third language that animates where the tongue falters" (33). Vuong writes extended, elaborate, and beautiful scenes of Little Dog massaging Rose on the floor after her long days at the nail salon. He scrapes the curves of her spine with a coin dipped in Vicks VapoRub, watching her skin turn from white, to pink, to violet bruises: "Through this careful bruising," Little Dog says, "you heal" (85). Rather than a verbal expression of love, Little Dog physically tends to his mother's knotted and exhausted body. This symbolic act of affection embodies the kind of communication that emerges in the absence of language. In her critical analysis of the nexus between

the mother tongue and translation in Vuong's novel, Birgit Neumann states: "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).

The stories of Rose and Lan are Little Dog's only connection to his Vietnamese roots, even though they are linguistically stunted, trauma-filled, and fragmented. His inability to communicate with them using precise phrasing leaves Little Dog's identity intangible and abstract: "[S]ometimes I don't know what or who we are. [Some] Days I feel like a human being, while other days I feel more like a sound. I touch the world not as myself but as an echo of who I was. Can you hear me yet? Can you read me?" (Vuong 62). Thus, their generational differences are magnified by cultural disjunctions that are not easily explained, particularly out of their native contexts. Little Dog, of course, is being educated into American culture, even as his family still views its social reality through a Vietnamese lens. He reflects on the distance he feels from his Vietnamese identity and his search for meaning amid the pain he has inherited: "I was no shore, Ma. I was driftwood trying to remember where I had broken from to get here" (108). His confession reveals his double consciousness, or his "unstable sense of self" caused by forced migration (Tyson 403). His American education has taught him only the myopic narrative that omits the suffering of the Vietnamese, a narrative that conflicts with the suffering he witnesses at home.

The wounds left unaccounted for in Little Dog's education reveal to him the damage that historical amnesia can cause. Conversely, Little Dog realizes the power of remembrance when Rose tends to a customer with a prosthetic leg at the nail salon. After Rose finishes filing, scrubbing, and massaging the client's intact foot, the client softly asks Rose to massage her phantom limb, explaining that she can still feel it. Vuong describes: "Without a word, you slide the towel under the phantom limb, pad down the air, the muscle memory in your arms firing the familiar efficient motions, revealing what's not there, the way a conductor's movements make the music somehow more real" (83). Before hobbling out of the salon and with her eyes lowered, the client rewards Rose with a one-hundred-dollar

bill. The acknowledgment and validation of the customer's physiological pain create a therapeutic effect. Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, describes how atrocities cannot be cognitively obliterated and that "[r]emembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims" (1). The narrator's writing about psychological pain and Rose's massaging the phantom limb are similarly healing because they both address an invisible and yet haunting past. Vuong begins a process of reconciliation by framing *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* around a history that had been systematically erased. He stitches the splintered stories together until Little Dog's family history converges, and the jagged and disjointed narrative connects him to his roots.

Memory Is Not a Choice

Despite never having experienced the war himself, Little Dog's connection to his mother and grandmother allows the specter of war, which physically torments and psychologically haunts his family, to extend throughout his generation. Therefore, while Rose and Lan must live with the memories of war, its impact on Little Dog comes second-hand as vicarious trauma. Vuong expresses the nuances of their transgenerational trauma by mimicking the symptoms of PTSD, writing in a fractured and non-sequential narrative. Little Dog writes unconventionally "because this was how it was given to me: from mouths that never articulated the sounds inside a book" (Vuong 224). This postmodern narrative style allows for the pain within this family's history to be understood not only through the content of the writing, but also through its style and structure. Because Little Dog learns of his family history through Rose's fractured memories and strained communication, he similarly appeals to his readers non-conventionally. Beyond the vivid scenes and poetic prose, the epistolary structure of the work provokes empathy in a peculiar way. His confessions and recollections told in the second person seemingly address the readers, inviting them into the narrative and advancing their understanding of what it means to be a part of a traumatized family.

Little Dog, having grown up in the United States, has the option of disconnecting himself from his family's history and Vietnam by assimilating America's distorted ways of remembrance. To many Vietnamese growing up in the US, Vietnam represents their parents' country, not theirs (Rutledge 61). Consequently, members of the 1.5

generation, who were born in Vietnam and grew up in the United States, tend to disassociate themselves from Vietnam and their parents' memories of the homeland. Yet, rather than distancing himself from his family's sorrows, Little Dog aims to understand the past and uses the English language to advocate for his family. Although Little Dog's mother once told him, "Memory is a choice," he questions, "When does a war end?" and then states that memory is a "flood" rather than a "choice" (75, 12, 78). Sandeep Bakshi elucidates the narrator's perspective on memory: "Memory makes intelligible not just the ubiquitous presence of war in the lives of three generations . . ., but in a simultaneous movement it mobilizes the regeneration of intergenerational alliance" (542). Absorbing Rose and Lan's pain was inevitable for Little Dog, as symptoms of their trauma inundated every facet of his childhood. He equates memory not to a choice, but to a flood. He was left submerged in the waters of his family's painful past, while the country responsible for opening the floodgates feigned innocence, ignorance, and benevolence. As Bakshi suggests above, the traumatic bond between them solidifies his loyalty to his family and their history, and it fuels his writing. Had Little Dog not preserved Rose and Lan's narratives, their experiences would have remained unknown, and a piece of history would have vanished with them.

History is not just what took place in the past; it is also how the past is remembered and recorded. As a malleable structure, history is continuously shifting as voices from the past and present collide and resynthesize: "Every history has more than one thread, each thread a story of division" (Vuong 8). It is subject to manipulation and, in the case of this narrative, reconciliation. Nguyen writes about the importance of a counternarrative novel like Vuong's: "It is in history that the humanity of the oppressed is warped and distorted" ("Speak" 18). He suggests that for American history to inspire a sense of white patriotism, marginalized voices are either misrepresented or silenced. Little Dog fights to save his family's humanity by writing down their memories to "preserve these, our bodies, breathing and unaccounted for, inside the work" (Vuong 175). He reminds us that war is not just about a soldier's battle on the frontlines. By writing about its cascading and brutalizing personal effects on the lives of Rose and Lan, Little Dog rewrites history.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous is an invaluable account of the

effects of war, both because the Vietnamese perspective has been suppressed in the writings of American authors, and because these writings emphasize hegemonic voices that are masculine, combative, and ostensibly heroic. Vuong shifts attention to women, gender, and family, facilitating a more complex picture of the impacts of war beyond battlefields. The narrator is Little Dog, but his understanding of the war is mediated through Lan and Rose, whose experiences illustrate its existential costs. Revealing his alliance to them, Little Dog notes, "I am writing as a son" (Vuong 10). He inherits their stories, and by engaging with the memories that have been passed down, he steps into his identity as the interpreter and translator of his family's experiences. Through the story of Little Dog's family, Vuong ushers a forgotten past into the recorded present.

Vuong depicts the migration of monarch butterflies as a symbol of generational knowledge and of the impulse of children to examine their family's history. He notes that the butterflies' offspring return to the migration paths of their progenitors: "only the future revisits the past" (Vuong 8). Little Dog recognizes that remembrance is not a personal choice, but he is motivated by something much larger than himself when he feels his "ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn towards the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast" (10). Fragility and vigor coexist as attributes of migrating butterflies and make them an apposite symbol for Little Dog's quest to revisit his family's history, as the process can be simultaneously delicate, arduous, and empowering. He says that he sometimes imagines "the monarchs fleeing not winter, but the napalm clouds of your childhood in Vietnam. I imagine them flying from blazed blasts unscathed, . . . their wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof" (14). Like the monarchs, Little Dog follows the path of his ancestors and, by connecting his identity to their stories, he arrives at the source of their traumatic memory.

The novel addresses the question of whether language is a suitable means to articulate the nuances of Little Dog's coming-of-age story as a member of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans. This endeavor is difficult because of Rose's and Little Dog's conflicting relationships with language. Rose cannot speak English and is illiterate because her education abruptly ended when American bombs destroyed her elementary school in Vietnam. As Little Dog undergoes his education in

the US, he propels himself past the limitations of language that restrain his mother: "Dear Ma," Little Dog begins, "I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (Vuong 3). His writing is complex, layered, playful, and ambitious as he regularly shifts between multiple stories and timelines, slowly advancing each narrative and simultaneously developing multiple plots. Neumann 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). The unconventional writing style speaks to the multifaceted identity of a child scarred and displaced by war, but Rose may never be able to read her son's letter; their vastly different upbringings prevent them from fully understanding each other. Nevertheless, Vuong pushes the boundaries of language to get to the heart of the cultural and linguistic borders that mold Little Dog's experience in the United States.

Little Dog plays an integral role in Rose's and Lan's connection to the US because he is the only family member who speaks English. He becomes aware of his advantage by observing that Lan and Rose's inability to communicate impedes their integration into American society: "Even when you looked the part, your tongue outed you," and English is the prerequisite criterion for passing in America (Vuong 52). Rose was particularly reluctant to improve her Vietnamese and to learn English because the process reminds her of the violence and loss she suffered in childhood. Little Dog's attempts at teaching her to read as he is taught in school leave her feeling embarrassed, defensive, and defeated. She concludes that reading is a privilege that she made possible for her son with her loss. The Vietnamese language, for Little Dog's family, symbolizes a dark history given that "[o]ur mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan. Our Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark 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). Rose struggles to verbally express her turbulent emotions, and she communicates instead through violent outbursts and unpredictable eruptions fueled by the wounds of trauma. That Rose and Lan are ostracized due to their lack of language proficiency compels Little Dog to intervene. He has promised to "never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you. So began

my career as our family's official interpreter. . . . 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" (32). Little Dog straddles two worlds and uses his English to become his family's mediator, thereby connecting them to the United States.

Only through writing in English is Vuong able to make Little Dog's story significant in the US.. Nguyen notes the importance of writing in English in order to gain recognition from the American public: "American studies does not generally read, write, or hear in anything besides English" ("Refugee" 919). Neumann notes that by writing Rose's and Lan's stories in the hegemonic language of English, "the book itself is an uneasy manifestation of an act of translation that, despite its good intentions, reflects the Anglocentrism that makes translation necessary in the first place" (290). Although learning English and having access to an American education were essential tools for Little Dog, before he could start writing, he had to find his voice after decades of conditioning to remain silent and invisible. The novel exposes why many immigrants and refugees choose silent conformity as a means of survival because race, language, and sexuality determine one's ability to integrate successfully into mainstream America. After the narrator's birth, his grandmother wanted to protect him from evil spirits that steal firstborns, a folkloric belief in Vietnam, so she named him Little Dog—a name associated with worthlessness. By choosing this name, his grandmother sought to protect him from the public view, hoping that he would go unnoticed: "To love something, then, is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched—and alive" (Vuong 18). One is advised to be "silent and invisible" to survive in a hostile country (Nguyen, *Nothing* 66); in the United States, Little Dog does not accept his downplayed status for long, soon becoming weary of how he is limited and rebelling against his expected silence. By speaking out to share his family's story, Little Dog is breaking free from the confining box he is expected to inhabit as a Vietnamese refugee.

Vuong employs a postmodern style in telling Little Dog's story, a type of writing characterized by resistance to earlier literary convention. Postmodern writers as well as minority authors under its influence insist upon challenging authority. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* achieves this

type of nonconformity through Vuong's frank depictions of Little Dog's lack of trust in America's mythologies: "The one good thing about national anthems is that we're already on our feet, and therefore ready to run. The truth is one nation, under drugs, under drones" (Vuong 183). In his writing, Vuong resists the pressure to remain silent or to conform as a means of living beneath society's radar in order to achieve assimilation. His forthright discussion of corruption, war crimes, mental illness, sexuality, and the opioid epidemic exposes America's vices and emboldens the marginalized voices he records. He linguistically challenges the structuralist theory of language by exploring its fluidity and arbitrary meaning. For example, after Trevor dies from an overdose, Little Dog reads his boyfriend's father's Facebook post: "*I am broken in two*" (167). After contemplating the literal meaning of the post and how the loss of someone could split apart and multiply the living, he settles into a different meaning of the same phrase: "*Into*-yes, that's more like it. As in, *Now I'm broken into*" (167). Similarly, Vuong toys with the meaning of his mother's name: "Only when I utter the word do I realize that rose is also the past tense of rise. That in calling your name I am also telling you to get up. . . . You're Rose, Ma. You have risen" (215). Stylistically, Little Dog admits that the lack of structure can cause chaos: "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" (189). The fluidity of language is further exacerbated by Vuong's depiction of traumatic memories.

To represent the traumatic family history that Little Dog grapples with, Vuong mirrors the instability of psychological trauma in his jagged, unhindered, and unpredictable writing style. Anne Whitehead, in *Trauma Fiction*, observes: "Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection" (3). By imitating the psychological experience of trauma, Vuong adapts the unreliability, fragmentation, and temporal distortion that characterize postmodern writings to meet his authorial aims. The form provides insight into Lan's and Rose's perspectives in its interruptions of chronological order through repetitions and flashback insertions into the narrative's flow. For instance, Vuong begins the first sentence of several paragraphs by alluding to similar acts of violence: "The time

you threw the box of Legos at my head. The hard wood dotted with blood" (6). Three pages later, we read, "The time with the gallon of milk. The jug bursting on my shoulder bone. . . . The time with the kitchen knife—the one you picked up, then put down, shaking, saying quietly, 'Get out. Get out'" (9). Thus, Vuong creates a flashback sequence, juxtaposing Little Dog's memories of Rose's instability while recreating how traumatic memories recur, out of sequence and fragmented. In an interview with Edward J. Rathke, Vuong states that through unconventional poetic and literary form, a writer can investigate tensions. Similarly, Vuong deviates from the constraints of traditional narrative sequencing by representing how traumatic memories must transcend the limits imposed by language.

Memories take on a unique significance for Little Dog, who has no first-hand recollection of the war that altered and scarred the family history, a conflict that was the source of Rose's and Lan's traumas. For Little Dog and many other second-generation immigrants and refugees, memory can keep one shackled to the past and prolong the suffering caused by an event that took place long ago. In an interview with Jonathan Fields, Vuong says, "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." Little Dog images this choice through his analogy of the migrating monarch butterflies: "I can't tell you why 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). Vuong acknowledges that some refugees submit to debilitating trauma, just as some monarchs cease their flight, apparently saving themselves from the agony of the journey. Little Dog is assiduous in his examination of the trauma that affects generations of his lineage and uses his voice to record their traumatic experiences and the on-going consequences of those experiences: "Tell me where it hurts," he says; "You have my word" (Vuong 176). In deciding to reconcile himself with his family's past, Little Dog is rewarded with the pain and beauty of knowing the truth. More importantly, in his words can be a healing source for traumatized victims, as shown in his alliance with Lan and Rose, because "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" (Bakshi 545). By recollecting and reconstructing the traumatic past through writing, Vuong offers an opportunity to heal, "Memory is a second chance" (159).

Conclusion

In his postmodern style and poetic prose, Vuong takes on the challenge of encapsulating the enduring effects of trauma and speaking to the reality of life as a refugee in the United States. Little Dog finds his voice in a country that is determined to silence the Vietnamese experience by strategically misrepresenting the Vietnamese position in the war. Through the voice of Little Dog and in a letter to a mother who may never be able to read it, Vuong provides representation for people whose lives remain haunted by the war. Little Dog challenges America's mythologies of freedom, opportunity, and a haven for huddled masses by juxtaposing images of famine, war, and loss in Vietnam with experiences of PTSD, discrimination, and economic repression in the United States. Vuong sheds light on what has been omitted from mainstream American history, while examining whether pushing the limitations of language can transcend cultural borders to faithfully represent the extraordinary experiences of war, trauma, and diaspora. With artistic acuity, Vuong reclaims some of the Vietnamese experience of the war, postwar pain, and obstacles to integration into a postwar American society: "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). Little Dog's story is not just about the persistence of traumatic pain: it is also about the empowering nature of disclosing history's untold stories and discovering the beauty of finding a voice.

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