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TESTIMONIES OF TRAUMA AND POSSIBILITIES OF HEALING IN OCEAN VUONG'S *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS* (2019)

Abstract
The present paper explores the concept of trauma and its intergenerational transmission in Ocean Vuong's semi-autobiographical novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). This paper aims to present a study of the Vietnamese American immigrant experience within the context of literary trauma studies and argue for both the transgressive power of trauma and the potential of writing to effect healing. Family becomes the space of the intergenerational transmission of trauma, but also a locus of transformation, with Vuong highlighting the intimacy that also defines the family members' relationships. The potential of strong familial bonds and intimate relationships to counteract a legacy of violence and precarity is explored, alongside generic experimentation undertaken by the author.

Key words: intergenerational trauma, Vietnam War, Vietnamese diaspora, healing

1. Introduction

In his debut novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), Ocean Vuong presents the chronicle of a Vietnamese family that immigrates to America during the Vietnam War. The story sheds light on the great impact of the

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war upon the Vietnamese survivors and the transmission of trauma within the family. Inspired by his own experience of being a Vietnamese American raised by his mother and grandmother, Vuong has created a narrative that does not only focus on the suffering of the family, but also brings to the fore their perseverance and continual attempts at healing. This literary work received numerous positive reviews and resulted in Ocean Vuong winning significant awards, including the American Book Award and the Mark Twain American Voice in Literature Award. Ocean Vuong had already made his presence known in the world of American literature and literary studies through his essays and poetry, particularly through his poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016) that won the T.S. Elliot Prize in 2017. The trajectory of his life is proven to be both turbulent and inspiring, with Vuong experiencing immigration from his homeland at the age of two, suffering difficult living conditions in the US, and yet becoming a critically acclaimed and best-selling author. His poetry, as well as his fiction, capture the anxieties of Vietnamese American subjects, especially the troubles of young queer people, and the long-lasting impact of the Vietnam War and the forced immigration on the Vietnamese immigrants' psyche.

In the interview Vuong gave to the acclaimed Vietnamese American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen, which was published by the Los Angeles Review of Books (2019), Ocean Vuong states that through his novel – and particularly through his focus on the history, and the stories of the older generations of refugees – he tries to "preserve that act of survival", to bring to the spotlight the minority group's resistance and perseverance despite the hardships. The protagonist and narrator of the novel, who goes by his nick-name Little Dog[1], offers his recollections through letters he addresses to his mother. Written in the form of an epistolary novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* articulates traumatic memories and events that marked Little Dog's childhood and adolescence. By addressing the series of letters to his mother, Rose, Little Dog ultimately tries to create a more intimate relationship with her and initiate a process of healing. Through his narrative, Little Dog has the opportunity to reflect upon his grandmother's and mother's trauma. He finds space to voice the effects on his psyche of that accumulation of trauma within the family, but also uses writing as a coping mechanism that can facilitate his healing. As Thanh Nguyen points out in one of his essays on minority discourse, the act of narrating their experiences facilitates minorities to both claim their history and "recover from history" (2006: 32). This essay will explore the

importance of 'recollecting' violent histories in order for survivors to bear witness to trauma and claim visibility, but also the importance of narrative as a means of healing and re-articulating selfhood in the face of adversity.

More precisely, this essay will explore the intergenerational transmission of trauma that transforms home into a space of turbulence but will also go beyond that and will address the possibilities of healing that arise by breaking the silence that conceals trauma. As it will be shown, writing allows Little Dog to unburden himself of traumatic memories that trigger inner turmoil and reflect upon his familial and romantic relationships, acknowledging their role both as a source of suffering and as a trigger for self-empowerment. The construction of that testimonial narrative is a challenging process as the story is rather fragmented and episodic, resembling the way memories are unearthed. Such fragmentation and difficulty in articulating past events are common narrative techniques employed, as Michelle Balaev states, to "embody the psychological 'action' of traumatic memory" (2008: 159). In other words, they reveal the subject's struggle to convey the emotional burden of traumatic memories.

The transformative power of writing lies not only in the creative means one often resorts to in order to communicate traumatic memories buried in the unconscious, but also in the fact that it allows individuals to recognize their own transformation, to become aware of a difference between their past and present self. To externalize one's psychic pain and decide to bear witness to one's trauma instead of suppressing it indicates the individual's willingness to make peace with the past and focus on his mental and psychological well-being. Particularly, writing provides traumatized individuals with a safe space in which they can gradually externalize their pain and confront traumatic memories that trigger inner upheaval. As Marian M. MacCurdy accurately puts it, "[i]t is image that burns itself into our minds whether we want it to or not, and it is image which can free us from a past that will always have a hold on us until we look straight at the images that live behind our eyes" (2000: 190). Therefore, constructing a narrative that addresses traumatic affects and the haunting presence of memories of a traumatic past initiates an intimate process towards healing and, ultimately, "enables us to feel that we have begun to form order from chaos" (MacCurdy 2000: 185). Little Dog resorts to narrative writing and, as will be explicated later in this paper, to experimentations with language to release the emotional and psychic burden of living with unresolved trauma and even more, to gain a sense of control since he is determined

to confront the past and not surrender to it. "Since trauma creates a condition of unreliability in its telling," argues Meera Atkinson, "it is an act of empowerment for a writer to knowingly work with this unreliability, to bring imagination to bear on the psychic and bodily remnants and traces of trauma in order to produce a literature that offers itself to witnessing and unlying" (2017: 17). Likewise, Little Dog's narrative, with its nonlinearity, its fragmentations and language experimentations, constitutes a strenuous attempt to speak about the 'unspeakability' of trauma. He confesses that although once he would delve into books searching for narratives that would have a cathartic effect on him, that "sentences would save [him]", he has reached a point where he feels the need to become the author of his own narrative and, as he writes to his mother Rose, he is ready "to tell [her] everything [she'll] never know" (Vuong 2019: 15). By addressing a traumatic past and its great impact on his psyche through the construction of a personal narrative, Little Dog is placed in a vulnerable position, yet not one that leads to retraumatization but rather one that requires of him to acknowledge his emotional turmoil and bear witness to his life experiences. What should be taken into consideration is the fact that Little Dog reflects upon his past through the perspective of an adult self who recognizes that although trauma permeates a major part of his family's life, it cannot completely dictate his present and future. It will be argued that through writing, the male narrator contemplates the love and care he has also received from his mother and grandmother, as well as reflecting on the sense of belonging and of being desired he has experienced in his queer romantic relationship. Thereupon, writing functions as a safe space for Little Dog, allowing him to confront the past and simultaneously bring to the spotlight aspects of his life that oppose the bleakness of traumatic events.

The first subsection of this paper will focus on the trauma of Lan and Rose, Little Dog's grandmother and mother respectively, whose psychological wounds are mainly manifested in the form of PTSD. Their repetitive storytelling about the past and their implication in domestic abuse create an unstable environment for Little Dog's upbringing and produce the conditions for the perpetuation of trauma. Nevertheless, Little Dog does not assume the role of the victim but uses writing as a means of better understanding the vulnerability and struggles of his loved ones. Particularly, the second subsection of this paper will explore the fundamental role of his familial and romantic relationships in helping him

overcome his struggles. His relationships motivate his writing, for it is through his narrative that he tries to reconnect with his mother, appreciate his grandmother's constant support for the family and reflect upon his complex sexual relationship with a young American man named Trevor. Ultimately, the third subsection of this paper will revolve around the act of writing and the narrative techniques used by the narrator that allow him to gain agency over his own and family's stories and offer him the possibility of healing.

2. Intergenerational Trauma: Haunted by War and Immigration

Rachel Yehuda and Amy Lehrner, whose paper reviews intergenerational trauma theories and the role of epigenetic mechanisms for this multigenerational transmission, state that the idea that predominates in most trauma theories is that descendants of individuals who experienced traumatic events "find themselves grappling with their parents' post-traumatic state" (2018: 243). Yehuda and Lehrner underscore that the conditions faced by later generations can "augment or mitigate offspring effects" (2018: 252) and argue for the need for further research on the role of environmental conditions in transmitting trauma. They also acknowledge the significance of new research that focuses on possible DNA modifications that may trigger the transmission of trauma effects. Additionally, literary scholar and professor Gabriele Schwab insists that "histories of violence can be put in a dialogical relationship with one another" and can reveal "a transferential dynamic" of trauma and the effects of the violence experienced (2010: 29). In Vuong's novel, pain and trauma bequeathed from generation to generation are both signified through literary techniques and through the family's continual struggles and traumatic experiences that place them in a constant state of vulnerability.

Trauma within the family is highlighted from the beginning of the narrative, with a focus placed on Lan, the protagonist's grandmother. As Meera Atkinson argues, trauma "challenges the notion of a distinct psychic past and present" (2017: 5) and such a situation leads the individual to be trapped in a cycle of repetitive traumatic memories, constantly reliving the past. In particular, Lan suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and schizophrenia, and the narrative demonstrates the consequences of war upon Lan, a war survivor, and its impact on those close to her. Having run

away from her home at the age of seventeen and resorting to prostitution as a way of surviving in war-torn Vietnam (Vuong 2019: 39–40, 46), Lan's life is defined by precarity[2]. The effects of experiencing war remain engraved in her psyche for her whole life, affecting her mental and psychological state years after her arrival in the US. This becomes evident when she is startled by the sound of the neighbors' fireworks as they prepare for the celebrations of Independence Day. Lan anxiously orders young Little Dog to stay silent and hide with her under the windowsill to avoid being caught by the mortars (ibid, 19). The sound of the fireworks conjures memories of the war buried in Lan's unconscious. Yet, these memories remain vivid and powerful, making Lan mistake fireworks for bombs and thus evoking a feeling of dislocation. "[T]he mortars will know where we are", whispers Lan to her grandson who remembers her panicked behavior and that "[s]he went on, in whispered bursts, about the mortars, her hand periodically covering [his] lower face" (ibid, 19–20). Lan loses touch with reality for a few moments and surrenders to traumatic memories of the past, reliving the trauma of the Vietnam War. Michelle Balaev paraphrases Cathy Caruth when referring to traumatic experience as "a fixed and timeless photographic negative stored in an unlocatable place of the brain" (2008: 151), underlining how deeply engraved traumatic memories are in one's psyche and hence stressing their power over the consciousness of the traumatized person. Alongside Lan is Little Dog, who witnesses his grandmother always "dipping in and out of sense" (Vuong 2019: 16), struggling to find a balance between the haunting memories of the past and her current reality. So used is Little Dog to Lan's fixation with the past and her unpredictable behavior when she is awake that Lan's peaceful figure while sleeping takes him by surprise and makes him wonder whether he is looking at a "stranger", since "[o]nly in this twitching quiet did her brain, wild and explosive during waking hours, cool itself into something like calm" (ibid, 16). "Trauma as a mode of being", argues Gabriele Schwab, disrupts one's sense of time and reality, and "fractures the self" (2010: 42) and as Little Dog witnesses, trauma becomes an intrinsic part of Lan's life after surviving the war. As he confesses, "wildness is how [he] had always known her" (Vuong 2019: 16).

Lan's unstable psychological state, induced by her experience of war and adversity, gradually affects Little Dog, who observes and internalizes his grandmother's pain from a young age. Lan's storytelling does not only indicate the haunting presence of the past, but also triggers the

transmission of trauma to the younger member of the family, Little Dog. Lan's oral stories, driven both by her need to externalize her pain and her difficulty in controlling traumatic memories, are central to her relationship with her grandson, who does not merely listen to stories about war and evil spirits, but participates in those events with his imagination. He becomes absorbed in those stories, "[mouthing] along with the sentences", imagining his presence next to Lan "as her purple dress swayed in the smoky bar" where she was waiting for a soldier to notice her (Vuong 2019: 22–23). Marianne Hirsch uses the term "postmemory" to refer to the close connection of the younger generation with "the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (2012: 50). Hirsch underlines the younger generation's access to the past through creative means and their own "imaginative investment" rather than remembrance (2012: 5). Little Dog's active engagement with his grandmother's stories can be an example of the workings of postmemory. Little Dog actively delves into his grandmother's past and experiences particular events of the past, as if they were his own memories, by empathizing with her, "as if watching a film for the umpteenth time – a movie made by Lan's words and animated by [his] imagination" (Vuong 2019: 22). The past is interwoven with the present not only for Lan but also for Little Dog, who both observes the effects of war on Lan's psyche and is burdened by her tumultuous memories. As Schwab argues, for most people who survived extremely devastating situations "the stories have grown over the open wound like a second skin" (2010: 42), that is, stories about the past become an intrinsic part of the survivors' lives and function as another manifestation of unresolved trauma. Through her storytelling, Lan discloses her traumatization distinctly, often losing touch with reality and dwelling on the past. Particularly, while narrating to Little Dog what led her to become a sex worker for the American troops, she abruptly interrupts the flow of the story by acting out her dialogue with her mother before fleeing her home (ibid, 46–7). With "eyes shut, face lifted toward the ceiling", Lan relives the past (ibid, 46–7). Her loss of control over her narration indicates that traumatic memories dictate her storytelling ability and increase the possibilities of retraumatization. Such narration resembles what Dana Amir calls "the metonymic mode of witnessing", manifested when the traumatized person fails to reflect upon the traumatic event and separate between a past and present identity but rather perpetuates "a living continuum with the traumatic memories" (2019: 11). The boundaries between past and present, here and there,

become blurry in Lan's stories and Little Dog bears witness to her dislocation and suffering. Hence, Little Dog shares in Lan's traumatic experience and is unavoidably affected by his loved one's psychological wounds.

While Lan's role in reinforcing intergenerational trauma can be traced mostly through the workings of postmemory, Little Dog's mother Rose is more directly implicated in the intergenerational reenactment of a cycle of violence. Rose's suffering is not manifested through language but through her violent behavior towards Little Dog that not only illuminates her struggle with mental and psychological health, but also perpetuates trauma within the family. In the first part of the narrative, Little Dog counts the times and ways he was physically abused by his mother. What he remembers of his mother's first aggressive behavior towards his four-year-old self is a tactile sensation, "[a] hand, a flash, a reckoning. [His] mouth a blaze of touch" (Vuong 2019: 5). The list unfolds and Little Dog is confronted with stigmatizing situations such as the time he was hit "with the remote control" and "the box of Legos", "[t]he time with a gallon of milk", and even "[t]he time with the kitchen knife – the one [she] picked up, then put down, shaking, saying quietly, 'Get out. Get out'" (ibid, 5, 6, 9). Thus, he immediately reveals that home was not a safe space for him and indicates Rose's inner psychological disturbance as the trigger that fueled that domestic violence. Surviving the Vietnam War induced Rose's initial trauma, transforming her identity, and leaving an indelible mark on her psyche. Little Dog perceives that from an early age, witnessing, for instance, his mother's distress after he scares her by imitating an American soldier (Vuong 2019: 4). Little Dog realizes that "once [war] enters you it never leaves" (ibid, 4). In addition, the abuse she suffers from her husband (ibid, 115) and the precarious conditions she experiences as a refugee in America contribute to her further traumatization. Rose struggles financially; she works long hours at factories and nail salons, and returns home exhausted, "night after night, plop[s] down on the couch, and fall[s] asleep inside a minute" (ibid, 79). Such struggles seriously affect her mental and psychological state and, as Fatma Eren claims in her essay on Vuong's novel, this chronic presence of trauma "manifests itself in the form of toxic femininity" (2021: 32). Even when Little Dog seeks his mother's comfort after being bullied at school, she hits him and demands of him to "to be a real boy and be strong" or never tell her about such incidents again. He is the one with "a bellyful of English" and should "find a way" to use the language to defend himself (Vuong 2019: 26). As Isabelle Thuy

Pelaud claims, "a deep sense of vulnerability that leads to survival strategies heavy with contradictions" is triggered when people experience psychic pain without any "support from family, community, and nation" (2011: 65), and in Vuong's narrative Rose is portrayed as a traumatized individual whose inner turmoil disrupts her sense of identity and negatively affects her role as mother. On the one hand, Rose's aforementioned reaction is hurtful for Little Dog, who experiences violence both from strangers and his own mother. On the other hand, Rose's anger is indicative of her own disappointment and rage at being marginalized and struggling in America. She cannot bear to face the possibility of her son experiencing a similar situation.

Violence becomes mundane within Little Dog's family, with Rose being triggered by her son's slightest misbehavior. She locks him up, for instance, in the basement for wetting his bed, despite his screams and crying (Vuong 2019: 98). Rose channels her frustration and negative emotions against her own offspring and thus perpetuates a cycle of violence. Dana Amir refers to the *Muselmann* mode of witnessing, which is part of the psychotic mode, to demonstrate those cases when trauma inhibits one from both maintaining a "vital contact" to a particular traumatic experience and communicating it through language (2019: 12). "In the *Muselmann* mode", argues Amir, "trauma operates like an impoverishing, reductive, and sterilizing mechanism", a condition that engenders a sense of trauma's continuity, that "it happens now and might go on forever" (2019: 14). Rose is unable to provide a testimony of her trauma and use language to release the burden of traumatic experience; on the contrary, she remains silent and often struggles with explosive outbursts. Her violent behavior discloses her inability to separate her traumatic past from her current situation, placing her in a constant state of turmoil.

Rose's distress and declining psychological state further transform the family into a turbulent space that defines Little Dog's youth and adolescence. Witnessing his mother in pain has a great impact on Little Dog's psyche, who as an adult narrating his story recalls mainly traumatic memories of his formative years living with his mother. Memories of his mother becoming distant, withdrawing into herself, still haunt him as he constructs his narrative. He recalls a particular night when his mother was hiding in the closet, dwelling on her sadness, and ignoring Little Dog's presence, who eventually returned to his room terrified, pleading for his mother to "come back" (Vuong 2019: 12). Rose's dissociation and

depressive episodes are symptoms of her trauma that paralyze her. The fact that Little Dog experiences what it looks like for his mother to lose agency over her life causes him emotional distress. As Gabriele Schwab argues, the parents' behavior has such a strong impact on their offspring's psyche that traumatic memories are not transmitted to the younger generation only through language and stories but "body memories and forms of somatic psychic life" further perpetuate the transmission of trauma effects within the family (2010: 51). It is through body language that trauma can be visible. In the above scene of the novel, Little Dog becomes aware of his mother's suffering by paying attention to "[her] steady breathing" and the stillness in the room (Vuong 2019: 12). Despite her usual explosive behavior, this time Rose's body is frozen. On the contrary, Little Dog's body is alert as he starts shaking and calling for his mother despite knowing that she will not respond. The fact that Little Dog is present in moments when Rose's inner turmoil intensifies places him in a vulnerable position. For example, this becomes evident in the scene where, in the middle of the night, Rose is driving manically towards where she remembers her sister's house to be. Rose is worried that her sister Mai would be murdered by her husband. Trauma blurs Rose's consciousness, who years after her sister had moved to another city is filled with traumatic memories of the past that distort her perception of the present. Little Dog is sitting in the backseat of the car confused, thinking that they are detached from the actual world, lost in their own universe, "an everything hurling through the cosmic dark while, in the front seat, the women who raised [him] are losing their minds" (ibid, 68). In Caruth's work on trauma and the belated reenactment of traumatic events, the fact that the victim does not recognize the event of trauma facilitates its belated repetitive re-enactment and guarantees that traumatic events will never cease to affect the individual's life (1996: 7). Rose's inability to distinguish between reality and traumatic memory establishes a cyclical pattern of intergenerational emotional and physical abuse within her household and indelibly brands her son, who internalizes traumatic experience and suffers silently alongside his mother.

3. Care Matters: Relations of Dependency and Love

Although trauma pervades the characters' lives, what is a significant part of the novel is the crucial role of relationships. Notably, it is Little Dog's

relationship with his mother that lays the foundation for his narrative journey towards healing. "I am writing to reach you" (Vuong 2019: 3), states Little Dog at the beginning of the novel, as he addresses his mother, demonstrating that their bond functions as a driving force for his narrative. Despite the fact that Little Dog has difficulty expressing his thoughts in written form – and occasionally declares that he must "begin again" (ibid, 3, 173) – and despite his mother's lack of knowledge of English, Little Dog resorts to writing letters in English and addressing them to his mother. Through these letters he is determined to communicate both the pain and affection he keeps inside. He shows that his narrative is an act of reconciliation by underlining that his letters are written by Rose's son, "from inside a body that used to be [hers]" (ibid, 10). Thus, Little Dog underscores the importance of their relationship and his care for his mother despite their past conflicts.

T. R. Johnson conceives of writing as "a material activity of hope", a practice that can help the traumatized person connect with others by overcoming their feeling of isolation (2000: 88), thereby helping one to communicate their trauma and search for support and understanding in another person. Through his narrative, Little Dog tries to reflect not only upon the suffering, but also upon the love rooted in his relationship with his mother. His narrative testimony functions as an act of care and love toward his mother. Towards the end of the narrative, he reaches the conclusion that "[they] were born from beauty" and advises his mother to remember that, despite the violence they experienced, "that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it" (Vuong 2019: 231). That is, Little Dog indicates that they are not defined by trauma, but they have the power to rise above adversity. Yue Gu, exploring the process of narrative therapy and the construction of life narratives, argues that through writing, people engage in a process of healing as they have the chance to assign their own meaning to their experiences (2018: 488). In other words, by weaving a narrative pattern, one gains agency over their life story, for they are in a position to choose from which perspective to look at their life. With the above in mind, one can argue that Little Dog's writing offers him space to acknowledge the great impact his mother has had on his life: he refuses to dwell only on the consequences of being the recipient of intergenerational violence as a result of trauma, but also acknowledges the deep love and affection that permeates his relationship with his mother.

Little Dog's grandmother is also a prominent figure in his life, portrayed as a caring person who would struggle to keep the family united and protect her grandson from falling prey to emotional and physical abuse by his mother. In his narrative, Little Dog reminisces about those moments when he could find comfort in Lan's company and feel their deep connection. He remembers the time when he was physically abused by his mother and Lan took care of his bruises by rolling a boiled egg on his face, telling him that "[his] bruises are inside it now" and only by eating it will his pain fade, and thus Lan becomes resourceful in her attempt to console young Little Dog (Vuong 2019: 105–06). The fact that this memory emerges spontaneously to Little Dog's mind years later while he is peeling a boiled egg (ibid, 105), indicates the depth to which Lan's caring acts are engraved in his memory years after her death. Despite the turbulence at home and Lan's inability to protect Little Dog from being abused by his mother, Lan's concern and attentiveness would ameliorate his suffering and facilitate the strengthening of their bond. Butler argues that grief reveals the great extent to which people are dependent on their ties with others (2006: 23), indicating that the loss of a loved one leaves a mark upon one's psyche that can affect their life trajectory. In Little Dog's case, his incorporation of his memories of Lan into his narrative contributes to his healing as he recalls her caring acts that helped him persevere through the suffering when he was growing up and that function as a reminder of hope for overcoming trauma. In times of turmoil within the family, Lan is the one consoling Little Dog, trying to explain to him that although his mother is suffering, "[s]he pain", "she sick", she still loves him, repeating again and again that he shouldn't be scared of his mother (Vuong 2019: 122). Lan tries to show to her grandson that despite the pain he experiences, his family is the place where he belongs and is welcome. As a mature narrator exploring his past, Little Dog can conceive of his relationship with his grandmother as vital for his healing and, as Yue Gu claims, writing allows a person to revisit the past and approach it from a different perspective "so that healing and letting-go can take place" (2018: 486). Although complete healing is not attained but is rather a process in which the protagonist engages in, writing about his relationship with Lan allows Little Dog to grieve for his grandmother's loss and articulate both his pain and gratitude for her tenderness. Therefore, mourning the loss of a loved one allows for the release of an excess of emotions and suppressed pain, while grief, as Schwab maintains, also "prepares the ground for a future-oriented integration of the past" (2011:

13); that is, the loss of a person is processed, the pain caused by that loss is expressed and the one who suffered that loss can carry that memory without it haunting and further traumatizing the individual.

Through his narrative, Little Dog conceives of the family's effort to protect each other and persevere, reflecting upon the significance of name-giving. He realizes that their names reveal a truth about their identity and since Lan was the one naming both his mother and him, their names are influenced by her experience of war. For instance, while Lan, as an act of self-empowerment, chooses a name for herself that symbolizes something beautiful, namely, the flower Orchid, Little Dog's image of a bloomed Orchid reminds him of "something torn apart" (Vuong 2019: 39, 41). In naming herself after a flower, Lan creates a juxtaposition with the precarity around her during the Vietnam War. Yet, Little Dog, who witnesses the haunting presence of war on Lan's psyche, makes a connection to trauma and associates the blooming process of the orchid with the fragmentation of the petals and subsequently, with Lan's fragmented consciousness. Little Dog searches for a double meaning hidden in his guardians' names. He rethinks the significance of his mother's name and reinterprets it not merely as Lan's intention to name her daughter after the flower rose, but also as "the past tense of rise" (ibid, 215). His realization that her name conveys a completed action, that she has risen, illuminates her strength and resilience: she does not succumb to the hardships but rises above them. In her critical work on creative writing and healing, poet and professor of English Judith Harris claims that the stories individuals create about themselves contribute to a better understanding of their identity and engender a sense of "change and possibility" that can facilitate one's healing (2003: 8). She underlines the significance of writing and narrative choices not only in contributing to one's representation of oneself, but also in conveying one's emotions (Harris 2003: 8), suggesting that written language and the construction of narratives provides space for reflecting upon one's life. Both Lan and Little Dog need to draw strength to overcome their pain and while Lan's name provides her with hope for her future, Little Dog assigns a specific narrative to his mother – that of a resilient person and not a helpless victim. His own name is also another caring act of Lan. Having experienced the violence of war, Lan reaches the conclusion that to keep something dear to her protected, she has to "name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched – and alive" (Vuong 2019: 18). Lan's chosen nickname for her grandson reflects her concern

about trauma and devastation being perpetuated and affecting the younger generation. By calling her grandson Little Dog, Lan hopes to create "a shield" against the "evil spirits, roaming the land for healthy, beautiful children" (ibid, 18), against the precarious conditions they experience in war-torn Vietnam. Thus, Little Dog's writings bring to the fore the family's desire to defy traumatic experiences and persevere.

As Jeffrey T. Gibbons argues, novels that revolve around war trauma shed light on the possibilities and the characters' endeavors for healing "even in the midst of persistent post-traumatic suffering" (2022: 5). Little Dog's first sexual relationship is crucial to his journey towards healing, providing him space to self-explore and gain the power to write. His relationship with Trevor, the young man he meets the summer he starts working at the tobacco fields, allows Little Dog to explore his sexuality and reveal this part of his identity to another person. "I was seen", he writes to his mother, who used to tell him to remain "invisible" in order to avoid any harm (Vuong 2019: 96). The way his mother taught him to use language is gradually being transformed by his need to voice his desire for Trevor. The word "sorry", which was commonly used by his mother and the other immigrant women at the nail salon as an indication of their subservient role, had entered Little Dog's vocabulary, i.e. "had become, by then, an extension of [himself]", and thus the first time he meets Trevor, he greets him with the word "sorry" (ibid, 91, 94). Yet, as he experiences attraction from Trevor, he acquires a sense of liberation that becomes visible in his writing. He notes that it is something more than a bodily desire; it is a desire for everything that characterized Trevor, "the scent, the atmosphere of him, the taste of French fries and peanut butter underneath the salve of his tongue" (ibid, 110–11). Gradually, he is transformed into a young man who explores his sexuality and identity. Trevor's interest in Little Dog has a great influence on how the latter thinks of himself, helping him conceive of himself as beautiful. For the first time he thinks of the imperfections he notices while looking at himself in the mirror as "something that was wanted, that was sought and found" (ibid, 107). As Harris argues, through writing, one brings past events into "the ephemeral flow of talk and redefinition" (2003: 15), that is, the past can be reinterpreted, and specific experiences acquire a new meaning. Writing about how transformative his relationship with Trevor was, that he could feel colors "[n]ot words— but shades, penumbras" when the two of them were being intimate and could better understand who he was (Vuong 2019: 106), gives Little Dog the

opportunity to recognize that his past was not entirely defined by suffering. Particularly, by reflecting upon their private moments in the barn where they would engage in intercourse and embrace their queer selves, Little Dog acknowledges the importance of having created a space where "[they] weren't afraid of anybody" and were not trapped in a cage, as he writes, by society's restrictions placed on gay identities, claiming that "sometimes not seeing the bars is enough" (ibid, 140, 216). Those memories are juxtaposed with the traumatic ones haunting his psyche, and by incorporating them in his narrative, he indicates his endeavor to heal

Nevertheless, he does not romanticize his relationship with Trevor, but in order to heal, he also reflects upon the emotional and verbal abuse he was subjected to by Trevor. Trevor carries his own psychological wounds, living with his alcoholic father who was often abusive towards him and disapproved of Trevor's friendship with Little Dog whom he would call "China boy" (Vuong 2019: 142). Notably, when Trevor confesses to Little Dog his hate for his father, Little Dog is surprised that "a white boy could hate anything about his life" (ibid, 97). Trevor's turbulent relationship with his father has a great impact on his psyche and further exacerbates his struggles with exploring and accepting his sexuality without guilt. Little Dog remembers the time when Trevor appeared at his doorstep in distress, begging Little Dog to tell him that "[he isn't] a faggot" (ibid, 155). Thus, he demonstrates his discomfort and internalized shame for being gay and discloses the pressure placed upon non-heterosexual individuals to conform to the norms. As Christina Slopek rightly points out, his efforts to perform according to ideals of accepted hegemonic masculinity are a form of self-destruction (2021: 748); they magnify his struggle to accept his homosexuality and further keep him oppressed by gender norms. His obsession with heterosexual masculinity also creates tension within his relationship with Little Dog, who is the recipient of homophobic discourse triggered by Trevor's inner turmoil as he struggles to conceal his gay identity. Trevor finds it "crazy" that Little Dog will always be gay, while he believes that "[he'll] be good in a few years" (Vuong 2019: 188), suggesting that homosexuality is only a phase he is going through. Even in Little Dog's presence, he has difficulty claiming his homosexuality. In his essay about gay relationships and masculinity, Matt G. Mutchler claims that a great number of gay men perform their sexuality according to "socially and culturally produced masculinity expectations" (2000: 17). That is, gender norms of masculinity do not only apply to heterosexual men, but also define

to a great extent how one performs queerness. Gender norms are deeply rooted inside Trevor, who adopts aspects of toxic masculinity by belittling Little Dog and questioning his masculinity. Little Dog acknowledges that their relationship echoes power relationships, and yet, he does not delve only into hurtful memories, but revisits all aspects of their relationship, indicating its valuable contribution to his process of healing.

4. Connections between Writing, Articulating Trauma, and Healing

Writing is employed by Little Dog as a healing practice that allows him to articulate his trauma through creative ways, one of them being the use of metaphors. Early in the narrative, Little Dog draws a connection between immigration and precariousness, referring to the migration of monarch butterflies from north to south during the winter. Little Dog underlines that only the young ones will manage to return, that "only the future revisits the past" (Vuong 2019: 8). The monarchs' journey south resembles Little Dog's family's immigration from war-torn Vietnam to America – a movement that, while necessary for their survival, entailed adversity about which Little Dog can provide testimony. Dana Amir argues that testimonies and the creation of narratives facilitate healing by providing "space between 'ego' ('the subject of utterance') and narrator ('the subject of enunciation')" (2019: 4); that is, she finds it crucial for the traumatized individual to bear witness to their trauma, to become the narrator and address his affliction in order for trauma to "create some movement in relation to a hitherto frozen, circular traumatic present" (Amir 2019: 4). As part of the younger generation, Little Dog can attempt to resist the transmission of intergenerational trauma and aim for healing by communicating his pain and not concealing his trauma. He resembles the butterflies that survive immigration and that "turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast" (Vuong 2019: 10); that is, he perseveres through the hardships and breaks the silence about the family's struggles. The presence of this metaphor becomes prevalent in the first part of the narrative and shortly after its last mention, Little Dog reiterates the tragic deaths that occur during the monarch butterflies' migration and highlights the survivors' burden of carrying the memory of those they lost, a loss "woven into their genes" (ibid, 12). Similarly, Little Dog carries traumatic memories that are triggered not only by his own forced immigration to

America but also by witnessing the struggles of his family members, who in turn carry their own trauma of surviving war and the strenuous journey of immigration. The symbolic use of language is also representative of what Amir calls the metaphoric mode of witnessing that "struggles against traumatic stagnation" and is characterized by a change in the perspective of the witness, from being the one who experiences a situation to being the one who reflects upon it (2019: 10–11). For instance, the buffaloes that Little Dog saw once on TV with Lan and that kept running toward the cliff, reminded him of a family, each member "just following their loved ones", as he later tells Trevor (Vuong 2019: 179, 237). Yet, as an adult writing letters to his mother, Little Dog rethinks his observation about the similarity between the herd of buffalo that runs to their death and a family whose members cannot follow their own path. "You can stop", he writes to his mother (ibid, 182), reminding her of the possibilities for breaking the cycles of trauma and violence that define family history. As the narrator, he keeps a relative distance from what he experienced and witnessed and can reflect through written discourse not only on the family's past, but also on the possibilities of healing. This shift towards a more optimistic perspective about their future indicates his effort to overcome the paralyzing effects of trauma, which is a process that "never attains closure" (LaCapra 2014: xxiii). Through writing, Little Dog creates a space for constructing a narrative that can function as motivation for engaging in that continual process of resolving trauma, which LaCapra calls "working-through" (2014: xxiii).

Little Dog's non-linear narration is indicative of both the narrator's difficulty in articulating his inner turmoil and his attempts at structuring his experience and acquiring a sense of control. That turbulence conveys the strong influence on his consciousness of traumatic memories that shape the narrative and define the unravelling of the story. Towards the last section of the novel, the fragmented form of the narration intensifies, with Little Dog beginning the first paragraph with the memory of a table without elaborating on any details (Vuong 2019: 219). On the contrary, he continues writing about other memories.

> I remember the table. I remember the table made of words given to me from your mouth. I remember the room burning. The room was burning because Lan spoke of fire. I remember the fire as it was told to me in the apartment in Hartford, all of us asleep on the hardwood floor, swaddled in blankets from the Salvation

> Army. I remember the man from the Salvation Army handing my father a stack of coupons for Kentucky Fried Chicken, which we called Old-Man Chicken (Colonel Sanders's face was plastered on every red bucket). (Vuong 2019: 219)

The narration continues with Little Dog interweaving memories of the family's difficulties when they first arrived in the US, the days he spent in Saigon after Lan's funeral, and mostly memories about his father's abusive behavior. It is only after several pages that Little Dog reveals that it was at the kitchen table that his father had hit his mother for the first time (ibid, 232). The emergence of a traumatic memory triggers the overwhelming emergence of a chain of memories that, on the one hand, interrupt the flow of the narration and, on the other hand, help Little Dog release his emotional burden. For Balaev, the nonlinearity of the plot allows the author to illustrate the character's "mental confusion, chaos, or contemplation as a response to the experience" (2008: 159). In this sense, the narrative's structure can represent the traumatized psyche of the protagonist and reveal his difficulty in creating a coherent narrative out of his fragmented images of the past. Indeed, fragmented pieces of the past emerge unconsciously, and, as Little Dog admits, while he was witnessing a public ceremony of drag performers grieving the loss of a person in the streets of Saigon, "[he] kept hearing, not the song in the drag singer's throat, but the one inside [his] own" (Vuong 2019: 230). His mind evokes auditory memories of Trevor singing his favorite rap song and thus Little Dog momentarily disassociates from the reality around him and is drawn back to a specific moment in time shared with his loved one. Even more, his narration moves back and forth, interlacing the event of the drag performance with a vivid memory of Trevor. Thereupon, memories of a lost one become a psychic possession which renders Little Dog susceptible to the involuntary emergence of memories of the past, further challenging his endeavor to structure his personal narrative. To borrow Caruth's words, narratives of trauma revolve around "an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (1996; 7). That is, does surviving a shocking and stigmatizing event lead one to be constantly confronted with manifestations of trauma? Those instances of fragmentation and simultaneous interconnections of different situations and memories in Little Dog's narrative suggest indeed a major impact of traumatic events in his life despite the temporal distance from

the past, magnifying his attempts at structuring linearly any emotionally charged events and experiences.

Yet, writing provides Little Dog with a space to externalize his pain and ameliorate the effects of traumatic memories on his psyche. He reminisces about the time after Lan's death when he couldn't stop thinking about how his mother's eyes reminded him of Trevor's and Lan's, with memories of the two of them emerging in his mind and making him want to address his mother with their names (Vuong 2019: 216–7). His attempt to console his mother intensifies his grief for Lan, which then triggers memories of Trevor. "You're Rose. You're Lan. You're Trevor" (ibid, 217) is Little Dog's response to his mother, albeit one that does not escape from his mouth. Amid his mother's mourning for the loss of Lan, Little Dog experiences an intensified emotional turmoil and at that point, it becomes apparent that the narrative is motivated by Little Dog's emotional struggle to articulate his sorrow for Lan's and Trevor's deaths. Writing can facilitate, as Harris claims, the healing process by "allowing the intensity of feelings to emerge" (2003: 12), by being a space where the individual tries to make sense of their experience by reliving emotionally charged situations, as Little Dog does. Memories of the protagonist's loved ones, dead and alive, are interwoven in the narrative in a similar way they emerge in the character's mind, with nonlinearity better conveying Little Dog's grief and ultimately the challenging process of healing his trauma.

The use of poetic language demonstrates Little Dog's attempts at articulating trauma through a means that can convey the intensity of his psychological and emotional world. Poetic language is not merely employed for aesthetic reasons, but it also offers a way for the character to communicate his experience through a language burdened with emotion. One such instance is when Little Dog considers the abrupt interruption of Rose's education due to the Vietnam War, which resulted in their inadequate knowledge of Vietnamese, thus calling their mother tongue "an orphan", thinking that they "speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war" (Vuong 2019: 31–2). In other words, he shows that war haunts both their lives and language, and that "[to speak] entirely in war" is to speak of suffering and trauma, revealing that language is affected by the hardships they survived. The language used by Little Dog undergoes a rather expressive and emotional shift when he reflects on moments that still affect him emotionally in the present. Even when he reminisces about the time he and Trevor spent on the roof of the barn watching the sunset,

he cannot help but contemplate the fact that "the sunset, like survival, exists only on the verge of its own disappearing. To be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted" (Vuong 2019: 238). His writing is packed with emotion as he associates the brief presence of a mesmerizing sunset with the relative short span of human life, a truth he is familiarized with after Trevor's death. Even more, his conclusion that "to be seen" brings one to a precarious condition (ibid, 238) echoes Judith Butler's arguments about the precarity of human life, about "a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life" (*Precarious Life* 2006: 29). Such moving expressions indicate Little Dog's realization, as a mature narrator revisiting the past, of both the strong ties linking him to Trevor and the need to communicate the pain invoked by all the memories he carries of him and his loved one. It is in written language that he finds his coping mechanism for handling his pain. It is personal writing as Judith Harris maintains that contributes to expressing psychic pain (2003: 11).

Experimentation with language allows Little Dog to externalize his emotions. Particularly, as the narrative unfolds and Little Dog is about to refer to Trevor's death by drug overdose, Little Dog incorporates free verse in parts of the narration revolving around Trevor, demonstrating his emotional turbulence.

> Trevor *I like sunflowers best. They go so high.*
>
> Trevor with the scar like a comma on his neck, syntax of what next
>
> what next what next.
>
> *Imagine going so high and still opening that big*.
>
> Trevor loading the shotgun two red shells at a time. (Vuong 2019: 154)

Little Dog reminisces about moments with Trevor, dedicating one separate sentence like a line in a poem for each memory, alternating between remembering specific events and his own descriptions of Trevor. He links his memory of Trevor talking about the sunflowers with memories of his body, of his "hard lean arms" when aiming with the shotgun and "the scar like a comma on his neck, syntax of what next what next what next" (ibid, 154), creating a love poem about Trevor and simultaneously mourning his loss. Words are emotionally charged and with every sentence, Little Dog delves deeper into their relationship, illuminating his intense

feelings for Trevor long after his death. What becomes noticeable in such personal narratives of one's life, argues Harris at the very beginning of her book, is an "interplay between disorder and order, wounding and repair" (2003: 2). This places emphasis on the idea that healing through writing and confessing one's disquieting experiences is not an effortless process. Particularly, as the prosaic form temporarily breaks down in Little Dog's narration, it is the poetic form of the free verse that can capture the flood of emotions. Each testimonial writing includes, according to Dana Amir, a combination of juxtaposing zones such as the ones of "psychic transformation versus zones of saturated thinking" (2019: 16), that is, zones where language either conveys trauma or falters. Little Dog's writing is influenced by his emotions and turbulent psychological state, yet he endeavors to give structure to his emotions and articulate pain through his experimentation with language. As Atkinson concludes, "it is that ghosts come forth to whisper, inaudibly, into the spaces between words and grammar, and phantoms spill their secrets through the embodied affect of the writer" (2017: 111), and hence the past does not remain frozen but is closely linked to the present and requires recognition to cease disrupting the flow of time towards the future.

Through his narrative, Little Dog bears witness to the trauma of his intimate others and creates space for the stories and struggles of the women of his family to become visible. He acknowledges the vulnerable position Lan and Rose occupy in American society as refugee women and becomes familiar with aspects of their lives that had a great impact on their psyches. He remembers the humiliation they experienced at the market as Lan and Rose, not knowing English, used body gestures and sounds to ask for an oxtail, with the men laughing behind the counter and them leaving the store ashamed (Vuong 2019: 30–1). Language is a barrier for the two women and each attempt to communicate through other means magnifies their sense of non-belonging and their retreat to silence. Yet, Little Dog's promise to be the "family's official interpreter" (ibid, 32) facilitates the women's claim for a place in society and through his narrative he further illuminates "the refugees' desire for legibility- to be seen and acknowledged" (Gibbons 2022: 128). His narrative provides him also with space to cope with the knowledge of traumatic events that happened to his loved ones, and especially to contemplate his mother's suffering and perseverance. After Little Dog's confession to his mother of being gay, Rose decides to share a secret: her forced abortion during the

war. Little Dog finds it hard to listen to the details his mother provides of her traumatic experience, thinking that by revealing their secrets, "[they] were cutting one another" (Vuong 2019: 133). That is, he gets traumatized by bearing witness to his mother's testimony and particularly by the image, induced by Rose's description of the operation, of the baby being "'scraped ... like seeds from a papaya'" (ibid, 135). Rose shares her pain with her son, and the latter resorts to writing as his way of both coping with this revelation about his mother's past and further breaking the silence of the difficulties his mother experienced that shaped her identity.

According to Judith Harris, empathy is at the center of narratives exploring pain. She argues that to represent "intimate pain" through language can be therapeutic for the one engaging in a written testimony, as well as for "the larger groups of family, community, and society" (2003: 8). The suggestion here is that the written narrative is to be read by other individuals who can empathize with the writer's story. Little Dog's narrative draws him closer to his family and offers him a new perspective from which to approach his guardians' unsettling experiences. He immerses himself in their painful experiences, even as he struggles with language in order to give voice to their stories. Thus, Vuong shows that it is through writing that trauma can be articulated, and a process of healing be initiated. By creating a narrative out of his experience of being raised in an unstable domestic environment and of his tumultuous sexual relationship, Little Dog offers a testimony of his struggles and creates a space where he can express his emotional turmoil. What becomes evident in his narrative, and particularly in his attempt to structure memories, is the impossibility of suppressing trauma indefinitely since, as it is argued, "[t]raumatic affect rumbles, spills, bursts forth, erupts, leaks, emits, fumes, whispers, screams, and acts from its restless grave, because at the deepest level it seeks recognition" (Atkinson 2017: 131). Little Dog highlights the haunting presence of the Vietnam War in his family's lives long after their forced immigration to the US. He sheds light on its grave consequences upon Lan's and Rose's psyche and depicts the family as a space of suffering and of intergenerational transmission of trauma. At the same time, Little Dog's affection for his mother, his grandmother and Trevor permeates his narrative and helps Little Dog recognize their involvement not only in his traumatization but also in his healing. According to Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, "[t]he act of returning to fragmented memories reflects what Derrida calls 'learning to live with ghosts'" (2011: 64–65) and particularly, it is written language

that Little Dog chooses as a means to "learn to live with ghosts" (ibid, 65); that is, a means of creating possibilities of healing through primarily externalizing his psychological wounds in an attempt to gain agency over the effects of past experience. Through writing, he tries to keep a distance from the past and reflect upon traumatic memories and events that disturb his consciousness, embarking on a process of healing that is constantly challenged by the immensity of the unresolved trauma.

5. Conclusion

This paper has offered a critical exploration of a contemporary work of fiction by a diasporic American writer, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). The focus of this paper has fallen on the literary representations of trauma, its intergenerational transmission, and the possibility of healing. In particular, emphasis has been placed on the double role of the family, with home being both a space of suffering and possible healing. The paper has also explored the way the novel foregrounds the role of writing in the protagonist's attempts to claim his vulnerability and heal. Vuong's novel provides a testimony of family trauma through Little Dog's narration of his tumultuous life with his Vietnamese refugee mother and grandmother. As argued, Vuong's narrative creates a space for Little Dog to revisit the past and attempt to communicate his pain, to break the silence about the trauma that permeates the lives of his family, and to embark on a process of healing.

Vuong's first-person narrator delves into his memories of being brought up by his mother Rose and grandmother Lan, two psychologically wounded women, and seeks a possibility of healing. Surviving the Vietnam War is presented as an extremely traumatizing experience that has left an indelible mark upon Lan's and Rose's psyche, affecting their mental and psychological state years after their forced immigration to the US. For Rose, her inner turmoil intensifies due to the abuse she suffers from her husband and the precarious conditions she experiences in America, working in factories and nail salons, and struggling to claim her space. Her inner struggle to suppress trauma leads to her abusive behavior towards her son, Little Dog. Here, home is transformed into a space of violence that further traumatizes Little Dog. As it was argued, writing provides Little Dog with space both to articulate his trauma and engage in a process of healing.

His use of poetic language, metaphors, and nonlinear narration allow him to demonstrate his difficulty of communicating his pain and his desire to release that emotional burden. It is through writing that he acknowledges the pivotal role of his intimate relationships in helping him cope with traumatic experiences. He underlines his deep connection to his mother and conveys the transformative impact his first (homo)sexual relationship with a white, working-class, young man had on him. Incorporating positive aspects of his life into his testimony fosters his process of healing and helps him recognize that he can still find a glimpse of hope despite the painful memories.

Examining the intergenerational transmission of trauma in this novel through the lens of trauma theory contributes to acknowledging the perpetuation of cycles of violence and trauma, and the emergence of possibilities of resistance and healing. The Vietnam War is presented as the origin of a long history of trauma that is interwoven within personal stories of individuals belonging to minority groups within the United States. Creative writing provides authors of Asian descent with the means to claim visibility and expose silenced parts of their history that conceal a violent past. Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* illuminates the interconnection between present struggles of minority groups and legacies of trauma, and the role of writing and storytelling as mediums for accessing the past and reflecting upon the influence of traumatic histories on the trajectory of one's life.

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