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**“To Be Gorgeous, You Must First Be Seen, But to Be Seen Allows You to Be  
Hunted”: Exploring Trauma, Memory, and Healing in Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth  
We’re Briefly Gorgeous***

**BA thesis**

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## Abstract

This BA thesis examines Ocean Vuong's debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), which follows the genre of an epistolary novel presented as a letter written for a mother who cannot read. This paper argues that through a non-linear narrative, shifting linguistic modes, and metaphor, Vuong constructs a translingual and intergenerational trauma narrative that depicts and disrupts inherited pain while also exploring the identity of a marginalised migrant and queer individual in the United States. The analysis is divided into three parts: the first employs Hirsch's concept of postmemory and Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory to analyse how the Vietnam War trauma transfers across generations. The second chapter explores identity construction within the context of familial violence and American xenophobia, focusing on the narrator's intersecting queer, migrant, and ethnic identities through the lens of Sedgwick's queer theory. The final section examines literary devices, particularly the metaphor of light and the epistolary form itself, that suggest opportunities for survival, self-definition, and healing. The analysis demonstrates how these theoretical frameworks interact to reveal that memory in the novel functions as both a personal and collective attribute that enables the transmission of trauma. Simultaneously, it shows how Vuong's fragmented narrative structure, metaphoric language, and linguistic shifts mirror the disjointed nature of memory and the protagonist's struggle for selfhood amid inherited pain.

**Keywords:** Vietnam war; memory transference; postmemory; multidirectional memory; transgenerational trauma; queer identity; fragmentation.

# 1. Introduction

Among the conflicts that arose globally during the Cold War, the Vietnam War (1954-1975) was one of the longest disputes in Asia. Concerning the unification of a post-colonial nation, the war was “at its core, a civil war greatly exacerbated by foreign intervention” (Chapman 2004: 33). As a result, Herring acknowledges the war as a bridge between two major geopolitical forces at the time – decolonisation and the Cold war (1990: 18). After experiencing the occupation of Japan and France, Vietnam was left split into the Chinese and Russian communist regime inspired north and the French and American supported south (Chapman 2004: 33). While both – north and south sought a united Vietnam, the main reason for the war became the disagreement between governing the country while following other communist countries or the West, leading to the beginning of an open war between the two sides. As the war stretched on, fights between the opposing parties led to a vast involvement of the United States, which sent military troops that would aid at fighting against the communist invasion to the south of Vietnam (Hopkins 2000: 100). After more than two decades, the war came to an end with the communists capturing the south’s capital city – Saigon (Chapman 2004: 34).

The Vietnam War resulted not only in the suffering and death of Vietnamese citizens and American soldiers, but also in over 700,000 of refugees who moved to the United States of America where they suffered from racial discrimination, cultural shock, and financial difficulties (Marino 1998: 90). Vietnamese refugees had poor or non-existent English language skills which resulted in them being employed in low-income workplaces that accepted unskilled labour (Kelly 1986: 147). However, employment was not always guaranteed for Vietnamese refugees because they were a reminder of America’s “first major defeat”, reinforcing the local citizens’ hostility towards incomers (Kelly 1986: 148-149; Hopkins 2000: 100). Therefore, besides having to flee their homeland, the Vietnamese refugees’ lives in the new country were not easy. In addition, it is stated that the perspective of Vietnamese Americans, “those who personally experienced the war, as well as subsequent generations who are still contending with its consequences”, is often forgotten (Nguyen 2021: 432). Hence, the Vietnamese refugees not only experienced direct consequences of the war but also suffered from the trauma of adapting to the American culture, transmitting their trauma to the generations that followed.

Ocean Vuong, the author of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, shares a similar fate by being a part of the Vietnamese American population. Born in Vietnam, at the age of two, Vuong became an immigrant in the United States, where he was brought up by his grandmother and a mother who was illiterate and had no knowledge of English (Soler I Arjona 2024: 1; Diamanti 2023: 216). A

complicated background, lack of a father figure, and a difficult familial relationship with his mother motivated Vuong to find solace in taking up a creative writing path. A Vietnamese contemporary poet, writer, editor, and professor is primarily famous for his poetry collections *Time Is a Mother* (2022) and *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* (2016)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, other than being a poet, Vuong also became a successful novelist by publishing *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) which became a *New York Times* bestseller and was nominated for awards like the 2019 National Book Award for Fiction, the Andrew Carnegie Medal in Fiction, and the PEN/Hemingway Debut novel award (*Ibid.*). After being selected for several awards, the novel won the American Book Award for Fiction and the Mark Twain American Voice in Literature award in 2019 (*Ibid.*).

Ocean Vuong's writing explores themes of transformation, desire and loss. The subject of change can be associated with the post-war refugeehood that changed many Vietnamese lives. For example, in his first poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2017), Vuong examines the memories and post-memories of the Vietnam War survivors (Nguyen 2021: 432) and the anxieties caused by forced migration (Diamanti 2023: 216). Besides transformation, Vuong's poetry also explores desire by delving into the theme of queerness. For instance, the aforementioned poetry collection contains a poem *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. The poem's writing style – split sentences and broken-off lines – can be a symbol of precarity and danger of queerness as well as “an uncontainable potential to queerness” (Slopek 2021: 740). As a result, Vuong's writing conveys its meaning not only through themes prevalent in the writing itself but also through its syntax. Lastly, the author's writing also explores the matter of loss – the loss of a home or the loss of a family member. The violent loss of a home concerns Vietnamese refugeehood and the search for a new identity that follows after migration. Moreover, the topic of loss is especially prevalent in Vuong's poetry collection, *Time is a Mother* (2022), which concerns a feeling of grief since it was published after the death of the author's mother<sup>2</sup>. Finally, Vuong's first novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), encompasses themes of transgenerational trauma, queer bodies, and the willfulness to bring change. Therefore, Vuong's writing is characterised by themes familiar to the writer from his personal experiences – coping with change and trauma, desiring something deemed forbidden, and grieving something lost.

Vuong's debut novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) is an epistolary novel – a letter written for a mother who cannot read (Vuong 2019: 15). Similar to a call that cannot be answered, the narrator – Little Dog – writes a letter to his mother – Rose – and tells his life story. Writing in a

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<sup>1</sup> [Ocean Vuong - Poems, 'On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous' & 'Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong'](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Ocean Vuong - Poems, 'On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous' & 'Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong'](#)

non-linear manner, Little Dog expresses the difficulties his family had to endure after immigrating to the United States – the main causes being race and a lack of English language skills. For instance, the family experiences confusion and humiliation after not being able to communicate their needs at a butcher’s shop (Vuong 2019: 38-39). This moment fosters Little Dog’s motivation to learn English, making him the family’s spokesperson and translator. Nevertheless, while Little Dog takes on the burdens of his family at a young age, he cannot hide away from the trauma and abuse that exist behind closed doors. Little Dog witnesses the results of the Vietnam War through his grandmother and mother, and their continuous suffering from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Moreover, related to the previous point, Little Dog becomes a victim of his mother’s violence. Besides writing about the difficulties present in his household, Little Dog also tells a story of his struggles of carrying generational trauma and expressing his identity as a queer Asian. Race becomes the first thing that turns Little Dog into a victim of school bullying. However, his queer identity which was prevalent from a young age when he would secretly wear his mother’s dresses, also result in the boy’s alienation from the rest of society (Vuong 2019: 24). Throughout his early years, Little Dog tries to suppress his true identity, however, everything changes when one summer he meets an American boy named Trevor who also comes from a problematic household. The two soon begin a relationship filled with desire, but at the same time, abuse. While Little Dog slowly comes to terms with his queer identity, Trevor is unable to do so which leads to him choosing drugs to forget about his real-life problems, resulting in the character’s death. Therefore, encompassing themes of memory, trauma, queer identity, and healing *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* concludes that “to be gorgeous, even from the day you’re born to the day you die, is to be gorgeous only briefly” (Vuong 2019: 211).

*On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is viewed as a work of literature that incorporates multiple themes of marginalisation and self-development, which are materialised through the ambiguous genre and literary devices present in the narrative. Vuong’s work is primarily recognised as an epistolary novel by many scholars. However, Ha and Tompkins (2021: 199) state that *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is a “semi-autobiographical epistolary novel”, whereas Neumann (2020: 279) adds that the novel also incorporates aspects of a “coming-of-age story” or “coming-out novel”. Moreover, several scholars identify the novel as a “homosexual bildungsroman” or a “refugee bildungsroman” (August 2024: 681; Furlanetto 2024: 185). Hence, these examples showcase the differing views about the genre of the novel and illustrate the ambiguity surrounding Vuong’s literary work which incorporates and borrows elements from multiple styles of writing, presenting *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* as a postmodern literary text. In addition, Diamanti argues that Vuong’s novel incorporates nonlinearity, fragmentation, and language experimentation into its narrative (2023: 218). Moreover, scholars also recognise the use of poetic language and metaphors present throughout the novel that

facilitate and unravel the main themes of the narrative (Diamanti 2023: 238; Neumann 2020: 293). Therefore, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is recognised as a complex piece of text that integrates multiple literary genres and devices not only to signal the postmodern style of writing but also to convey the primary themes of the novel.

By analysing the postmodern aesthetic of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, literary scholars distinguish marginalisation, transgenerational trauma, and queer identity as the main themes that are combined in the narrative of the novel. Ha and Tompkins assert that the postmodern style of the novel “insists upon challenging authority” by bringing to light the ramifications of the Vietnam War that continue to affect the lives of marginalised bodies (2021: 202). Furthermore, many scholars mention that the novel problematises migration and queerness as intersecting themes relating to subjugation (Slopek 2021: 740; Cho 2022: 131). However, Soler I Arjona (2024:1) and Diamanti (2023: 216) also add that while the novel focuses on trauma and oppressed bodies, it also touches upon the prospect of survival and healing. The latter is done by including experiences of marginalised groups, shifting the general society’s abjection of both – refugees and queer individuals (Cho 2022: 141). Diamanti (2023: 237) adds that the process of healing in the context of refugeehood is induced by Little Dog’s narrative, which breaks “the silence about the trauma that permeates the lives of his family”. At the same time, Slopek (2021: 740) asserts that by writing about the experience and identity development of a queer individual living in America the novel confronts societal views on gender and sexuality. Therefore, while Vuong’s novel discusses sensitive topics of migration, trauma, and sexuality, literary scholars assert that it also encourages an open discussion of taboo topics and the search for healing.

As mentioned previously, most of the scholarly literature emphasises the importance of transgenerational trauma, refugeehood, and queerness in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. The themes mentioned above are an undeniable part of the novel as they convey the central message of the book – the rarely spoken-about life of marginalised groups. Hence, Soler I Arjona (2024), Diamanti (2023), and Cho (2022) suggest that with his book, Vuong provides a chance of healing and brings change to the deeply rooted societal views towards the oppressed. However, there is a lack of scholarly research about the themes of memory and queerness as multilayered structures of the narrative that create a possibility to explore several topics of oppression, as well as survival and healing in the novel. Consequently, this BA paper aims to explore the theme of individual and collective memory in relation to transgenerational trauma provided by the narrator in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Moreover, the analysis will also include an examination of identity construction in both familial and public environments. Lastly, the BA paper will discuss the theme of healing, which is expressed through language and specific literary devices. The theoretical framework that will

support the binding of memory and transgenerational trauma includes Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* and Rothberg's *multidirectional memory*. In addition, the theme of identity development and queer identity navigation in public space will be based on Eve K. Sedgwick's *epistemology of the closet*.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The following chapter sets forth the theoretical framework employed in this BA paper. To provide an in-depth analysis of the themes of memory transmission in correlation to trauma and queer identity in private and public spaces in Vuong's novel, this section will consist of three parts. The first segment will concern memory and its transmission in correlation to transgenerational trauma, relying upon the concept of *postmemory* provided by Marianne Hirsch in her essay *The Generation of Postmemory* (2008). The second part of this section will delve deeper into the memory aspect and its broader implications by basing itself on the *multidirectional memory* and how it is realised in Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009). Finally, Eve K. Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) will serve as the basis while analysing the theme of queer identity in Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

### 2.1. Marianne Hirsch's Concept of Postmemory

Memory is a broad term often used to relate to personal as well as social remembrances of individuals who have a direct association with a past event (Hirsch 2008: 111). In her essay, Hirsch focuses on traumatic memories and their transmission to future generations (2008). The author states that the younger generation can build a deep-rooted connection to the previous generations' experiences and view them as memories (*Ibid.*, 106). In this case, the preceding generation acts as a "living connection", providing insight into the past (*Ibid.*, 104). However, Hirsch claims that the "received memory is distinct from the recall of contemporary witnesses and participants" since the descendants' absence during past events results in them having only indirect knowledge, which can also be shaped by other collective narratives (*Ibid.*, 106). This dichotomy of memories between the first and the second generation fosters Hirsch's introduction of the term *postmemory*.

The suffix post- in *postmemory* emphasises its recalling nature, which conveys the act of defying novelty and instead looking backwards (*Ibid.*). *Postmemory*, as suggested by Hirsch, is a "structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience" (*Ibid.*). In this case, the focus is on the process of transferring memory and how it is perceived and reshaped by the recipients. A result of first-hand traumatic experience is post-traumatic stress disorder, however, unlike the survivors, the descendants bear the trauma only by perceiving its effects. This Hirsch calls "a consequence of traumatic recall but <...> at a generational remove" (*Ibid.*). Moreover, *postmemory* is misunderstood as a direct memory of a past event since the deep

and affective transmission of firsthand memories is achieved with the help of stories, images, and behaviours, making it seem like the memories also belong to the generation that was not present during the event (*Ibid.*). This deception signals the connection between *postmemory* and the past being constructed by imaginary creation and projection, not by remembrance (*Ibid.*, 107). However, it is not to say that *postmemory*, in this case, becomes unreliable or unimportant. The inheritance of traumatic events that lead up to one's birth results in a displacement of one's own experiences that become dominated by memories of a previous generation (*Ibid.*). Therefore, in Hirsch's view, *postmemory* is concerned with the transmission of firsthand traumatic memories, leading to their projection and resulting in a deeply rooted connection with the postgeneration's life.

The primary medium of memory transmission is familial space. Hirsch compares the language of family to the language of the body – non-verbal and affective – noncognitively transmitting the terrible and unknown past to future generations (*Ibid.*, 112). Following this idea, the scholar states that testimonies of the second generation aim to identify and set forth the pain and suffering of trauma survivors (*Ibid.*). In addition, the testimonies “are shaped by the child's confusion and responsibility, by the desire to repair” the loss of the previous generation (*Ibid.*). Hence, the works of the postgeneration become a mediation to transmit and resolve the trauma by blending itself with collective imagery, public narratives and projections (*Ibid.*, 114). This leads Hirsch to separate *postmemory* into familial and affiliative structures. Familial *postmemory* refers to “an intergenerational vertical identification of child and parent occurring within the family”, whereas the affiliative *postmemory* is concerned with “intra-generational horizontal identification that makes that child's position more broadly available to other contemporaries” (*Ibid.*, 114-115). In this case, familial *postmemory* combined with the postgeneration's artistic testimonies provides an opportunity for the memories of victims to become available to the general public, creating “an organic web of transmission” (*Ibid.*, 115). In Hirsch's view, postmemorial works allow the victim's memories and testimonies to survive not only through several generations of their family but also through generations of the more general public (*Ibid.*, 111). Thus, *postmemory* acts as a structure that transmits memory in familial and contemporary spaces.

## **2.2. Michael Rothberg's Multidirectional Memory**

Memory cannot be limited only to the personal or familial level, which is the focal point of Hirsch's argument. In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Rothberg introduces *multidirectional memory* – a concept which focuses on “the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance”

(2009: 11). According to his idea, memory, despite its personal or public level, is not singular or linear but rather an act that encompasses several public narratives at the time of its transference, making *multidirectional memory* highly “transversal” (*Ibid.*, 18). It happens so that “memories are mobile” and “histories are implicated in each other”, which further illustrates the multidirectionality of memory (*Ibid.*, 313). Moreover, shifting from personal narratives and memory’s psychological importance to an individual’s psyche to the analysis of public recollections provides a possibility to combine both – the political and psychic nature of memory (*Ibid.*). Such movement provides an anthropological perspective while considering the essence of memory and its vertical as well as horizontal transmission.

Expanding into the macro level of memory studies, Rothberg discusses collective memory in relation to *multidirectional memory*. While the latter focuses more on the horizontal transfer of recollections, he argues that “multidirectional memory is collective memory insofar as it is formed within social frameworks” (*Ibid.*, 15). This illustrates that social context and communication are the main elements of *multidirectional memory*. Rothberg further explores collective memory as a mediated and multilayered structure, emphasising how memory is grounded in human interaction and “mediated through networks of communication, institutions of the state, and the social groupings of civil society” (*Ibid.*, 15-16). However, the transmission of remembrances, particularly of traumatic experiences, within the social sphere can develop into a “zero-sum struggle for preeminence”, creating a competitive tension between different social groups regarding the desire to become more significant (*Ibid.*, 3). This poses a threat to collective narratives as it creates a “hierarchy of suffering” – a need for one’s suffering to be recognised as greater than the others, isolating them from “the field of historical agency” (*Ibid.*, 9). Thus, Rothberg recognises the problematic aspect of collective memory turning into a competitive one, which also illustrates the multidirectionality and productivity of memory through a means of “ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” (*Ibid.*).

Expanding on the differentiation between personal and public layers of memory, Rothberg amplifies his ideas by comparing *multidirectional memory* to Hirsch’s concept of *postmemory*. The latter explores the transference of intimate traumatic experiences within familial spaces, contributing to how collective memories are shaped in the current age of mass media and ongoing discussions about unresolved past trauma (*Ibid.*, 271). Rothberg does not entirely oppose Hirsch’s theory but instead focuses and expands on one aspect – the horizontal transference of private memories across different social groups and contexts (*Ibid.*). In this case, *postmemory* serves as the starting point of collective memory due to its “mediation and belatedness”, along with its “spatially and temporally differentiated” aspect, which brings *multidirectional memory* into focus (*Ibid.*). Therefore,

Rothberg's term encompasses communicated histories of various times and places from the past, leading the scholar to conclude that "coming to terms with the past always happens in comparative contexts and via the circulation of memories linked to <...> separate histories and national or ethnic constituencies" (*Ibid.*, 272). This illustrates that the exploration of one's memory is possible only by comparing it with the histories of others, which is the essence of *multidirectional memory*.

Comparing various histories of differing spatial and temporal qualities illustrates the imaginative property of *multidirectional memory* in creating reality by incorporating past histories into the present, which Rothberg refers to as "memory's anachronistic quality" (*Ibid.*, 5). However, the scholar notes that focusing on the power of imagination while discussing memory does not imply "memory's insubstantiality", indicating that recollection is not merely a product of creativity (*Ibid.*, 19). Furthermore, Rothberg emphasises that not all representations of memory carry equal significance, directing attention to the fact that various social, psychological, and political factors constantly influence the process of recollecting experiences from the past (*Ibid.*, 16). Consequently, some remembrances acquire importance throughout history while others fade away entirely, highlighting the unpredictable nature of memory (*Ibid.*, 17). Thus, the latter does not develop in a singular linear pattern – instead, it is characterised by intricacy, irregularity, and the use of creativity, which are the defining properties of *multidirectional memory*.

### **2.3. Eve K. Sedgwick's Epistemology of the Closet**

Memory and trauma acquisition also affect one's identity. In the modern age, the metaphor of the closet has been an often-occurring subject of conversations about queer identity, remaining as "the fundamental feature of social life" of the community in question (Sedgwick 1990:68). In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick introduces the structural metaphor of coming in and out of the closet, brings to light new perspectives of viewing queerness, and discusses the binarisms that are present while making an effort to define fluid identities and place them in the political and societal realm of the general public. First of all, the author argues against binary thinking of being strictly in or out of the closet, stating that "there are remarkably few of <...> openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them" (*Ibid.*, 68). Following this idea, the queer identity may perpetually oscillate between disclosure and secrecy, according to the social, political, and personal context of an individual (*Ibid.*, 67-68). However, while coming out and remaining in the closet in this case act as opposites, they also work as a pair together with binarisms of private and public, knowledge and ignorance (*Ibid.*, 72-73). Therefore, while the closet has become one of the consistent features while discussing queer identity,

Sedgwick aims to present a broader perspective of it and looks for new possibilities on viewing the closet not as exclusive but rather as a trait present in the general society (*Ibid.*, 68-69).

In the context of public and private, Sedgwick describes the closet as a “defining structure for gay oppression in this century” (*Ibid.*, 71). Coming out of the closet is perceived as an act of coming to terms with one’s true identity, whereas keeping one’s identity a secret is viewed as ambiguous, making the epistemological declaration the only way to ensure one’s identity as concrete (*Ibid.*). Sedgwick provides an example of political decisions and laws that come into view as one of the many parts of life when the closet acts as a modern-day persecution for queer individuals (*Ibid.*, 74-75). In this case, closeted individuals may have had an effect in bringing forth “ignominious majority opinions” and homophobic laws only because of the minority position of queer individuals, turning the closet into one of the causes that weaken the queer community (*Ibid.*). However, a problematic aspect arises not only with concealing one’s identity but also with publicly declaring queerness. The issue in question is the doubt over the certainty of one’s statement and the request for proof that emerges from the surrounding space, which uncovers “how problematical at present is the very concept of gay identity, as well as how intensely it is resisted” (*Ibid.*, 79). Therefore, primarily stemming from the level of knowledge and acceptance of the general public, the closet is a structure of two-way oppression for the queer community.

To better understand the notion of queer oppression in the modern age it is important to touch upon the implications of epistemology – the study of how we know things<sup>3</sup> – in regard to revealing one’s queer identity. The act of coming out “can bring about the revelation of a powerful unknowing as unknowing”, bringing attention not necessarily to the one who is revealing their identity but to the surrounding environment and its active ignorance towards the unknown, which also has homophobic qualities (*Ibid.*, 77-78). Revealing one’s queer identity in a homophobic environment can cause “ a potential for serious injury that is likely to go both directions”, bearing risk and shame not only to the individual in question but also to their loved ones which can bring the notion of the closet into the latter’s lives (*Ibid.*, 80). Drawing attention to the surrounding environment in which heterosexuality is the norm, Sedgwick highlights queerness as an evocative and conflicting quality that arises in modern society, leading to various risks of coming out of the closet (*Ibid.*, 81). However, the undeniable fact is that similar interests, worldviews, and social contexts can bring together people of the same gender, even on “the axis of sexual desire” (*Ibid.*, 87). According to the latter view, identification with others is a significant factor of queer identity yet it functions differently in such

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<sup>3</sup> [EPISTEMOLOGY | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary](#)

circumstances. For instance, gender inversion – individuals identifying with the opposite gender – is especially common among the homosexual community (*Ibid.*, 89). Ultimately, epistemology plays a key role in determining how coming out of the closet is received in modern society, where heterosexuality is the accepted standard.

In conclusion, the ideas introduced by Hirsch, Rothberg, and Sedgwick will serve as the foundation for the following part of the BA thesis, which focuses on memory and trauma transference, self-exploration, and the possibility of healing. The analysis section will be divided into three parts and discuss the aforementioned themes in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

### 3. Postmemory, Multidirectional Memory, and Transgenerational Trauma

The present section of this BA thesis discusses the themes of memory transference and intergenerational trauma in Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). The narrative of the book preludes instances of trauma as a result of the Vietnam War, occurring in the context of familial relations while utilising storytelling, acts of violence and silence. However, the novel also provides a broader understanding of the implications and origins of the war by incorporating collective histories into the story. A combination of these factors results in the narrator's identity development as a marginalised individual. Consequently, to gather a better understanding of the importance and intricacy of the underlying themes of memory and trauma in the novel, the further analysis is based on Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* and Michael Rothberg's *multidirectional memory*.

Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* imparts recollections of the Vietnam War to introduce more profound themes of transgenerational trauma, memory, and its transference. In the context of migration and displacement, the narrator, Little Dog, witnesses the effects that the Vietnam War had on the lives of innocent people, particularly women. This is depicted through his experiences living in the United States alongside his mother, Rose, and grandmother, Lan. The latter is the primary source of memory for Little Dog – she uses verbal storytelling and shares personal recollections about her life in Vietnam (Vuong 2019: 31-32). As a result, memory in the novel serves as a deeply personal and collective element, encompassing the experiences of Little Dog's family members and the broader histories that shape the narrative. However, Little Dog's mother believes that “memory is a choice”, depriving him of the stories of her life during the war (*Ibid.*, 76). Despite this, Little Dog is able to make sense of Rose's trauma by experiencing her abuse, witnessing her reaction after hearing gunshots, and seeing Rose suffer from nightmares (*Ibid.*, 17, 30, 85). Hence, for Little Dog, the memories and effects of war primarily stem from the intimate environment of his family, creating a deep connection with his identity as a Vietnamese migrant in the United States. Furthermore, the inheritance of memories and transgenerational trauma results in Little Dog's understanding of the war as a reflection of his family's trauma, reflecting Hirsch's idea of acquired memories dominating the minds of the recipients (2008: 107). However, the inherited personal trauma in the novel also intersects with larger historical and cultural narratives of violence and marginalisation.

To explore the realm of memory in Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, it is important to analyse the role of storytelling – the most direct way of memory transference – and how it navigates while preserving family as well as collective histories of trauma and suffering. In the novel, Little

Dog acquires stories of the Vietnam War from his grandmother Lan, whose narrative can be characterised as fragmented and non-linear. Moreover, Lan's stories perpetually refer to war, often combining fundamental historical and sociological facts as well as intimate recollections which can be exemplified by her sharing the story of Rose's birth and simultaneously referring to the "navy destroyer in Cam Ranh Bay" (Vuong 2019: 31). This instance of recollection can be analysed from Hirsch's point of view, which claims that traumatic memories of the past are facilitated by a combination of personal and collective narratives (2008: 112). However, Lan incorporating a historical fact into the story of Rose's birth also signifies a case of Rothberg's *multidirectional memory*, which combines testimonies of "diverse places and times" (2009: 11). In this case, lying beneath an intimate memory of Rose's birth which would typically be described in a positive light is a well-known historical event which acts as a signifier of Vietnam as a meaningful centre of warfare and suffering, reminding of the basis for storytelling in the novel – war and trauma.

Delving further into the topic of private and public storytelling, Lan incorporates not only references to the Vietnam War but also mythical narratives into her stories. For instance, among the many tales, "there's a story Lan would tell, of Lady Triệu, the mythical woman warrior who led an army of men and repelled the Chinese invasion of ancient Vietnam" (Vuong 2019: 70). Hirsch states that shared memories can be inspired by "generational structures of fantasy" (2008: 114), making familial stories entrenched not only with references to historical events but also generational myths and fiction. The usage of mythical tradition in this context also signals a moment of inspiration for Little Dog since later in the novel the narrator relates this story to his mother's bravery and resistance against the difficulties of life (Vuong 2019: 70). As a result, Little Dog's interpretation of Lan's story can be analysed by employing Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* that reflects on how the first generation's memories are inflected by personal imaginary renditions of their recipients (2008: 114). In such a way, Little Dog learns to gather fragmented stories into one cohesive narrative of his family's life, which aligns with Hirsch's statement that *postmemory* is mediated by imaginative creation combined with perceived stories (2008: 107). Therefore, these examples portray the idea that intimate memories in the novel are constantly influenced by public fictional narratives and overshadowed by psychological wounds from the past. The latter are transferred to younger generations who employ imaginative interpretations to grasp the meaning and purpose of distant memories. Continuing on the idea of the power of imagination in the act of remembrance, Little Dog relates to the life history of Eldrick "Tiger" Woods – an American-Vietnamese golfer – and finds that his origin is comparable to that of Rose's – both born from parents of different ethnicity but having an extremely different lives (Vuong 2019: 57-58). Creating connections between the past and the present, the personal and the public memories, Vuong blurs the lines between temporal and cultural

contexts. This illustrates that memory in the novel is not a singular, straight-lined process but rather an act that encompasses multiple collective narratives that help the post-generation interpret and connect with the testimonies acquired from the generations prior. This combination is described by Rothberg, who sheds light upon the anachronistic quality of *multidirectional memory* to combine multiple spatial and temporal contexts into one while forming a narrative of one's history (2009: 5). Therefore, the textual references that occur in both Lan and Little Dog's narratives symbolise the intricate act of remembrance as a fluid, all-embracing process.

Despite the overarching power of memory in the novel, Vuong provides an instance of silent memory transference, which is created by the absence of stories by Little Dog's mother. However, for Rose, repressed emotions and silence begin to manifest as violence, acting as a coping mechanism for trauma. In the novel, Little Dog becomes the recipient of his mother's emotional wounds during his early childhood: "The first time you hit me, I must have been four" (Vuong 2019: 17). This instance can be dissected by incorporating Van der Kolk's idea which suggests that individuals suffering from trauma opt for silencing their emotions as a controlling mechanism (2014: 250). Consequently, the author states that this option results in "being inhibited and being uptight or reactive and explosive" (*Ibid.*, 251). Rose's actions illustrate not only the constant shift between calmness and aggression, but also a fluctuation from less extreme instances of abuse to serious acts of harm: "The time with the kitchen knife—the one you picked up, then put down, shaking, saying quietly, 'Get out. Get out' " (Vuong 2019: 20). In this situation, Rose is blinded by her anger yet manages to exert control. Therefore, domestic abuse in the novel arises from past trauma and serves as a coping mechanism for personal pain, resulting in the transmission of trauma to the younger generations.

To fully grasp the complex nature of memory and trauma transference, it is essential to examine not only Rose's psychological wounds but also their impact on Little Dog's psyche. Rose is the primary source of love for Little Dog, which alters the way he perceives affection in both familial and romantic relationships: "By then, violence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love" (*Ibid.*, 113). Consequently, abuse becomes an inseparable aspect of Little Dog's life, shaping his identity and future relationships. Hirsch refers to this as one of the outcomes of *postmemory*, which leads not only to the inheritance of traumatic memories and trauma itself but also to a sensation of displacement (2008: 107). This feeling is further intensified by the violence Little Dog encounters as an immigrant in the U.S. For instance, in addition to the household environment, school emerges as another potential space of violence for Little Dog:

*Knowing the face I possess, <...> I pushed my head harder against the window to avoid them. That's when I saw a spark in the middle of a parking lot outside. It wasn't until I heard their voices behind me that I realized the spark came from inside my head. That someone had shoved my face into the glass. "Speak English," said the boy with a yellow bowl cut, his jowls flushed and rippling. (Vuong 2019: 32-33).*

Ethnicity and the language barrier become the factors that turn Little Dog into a bullying target for his peers at school. This illustrates the broader implications of racial discrimination characteristic of the multi-ethnic society of the United States. Moreover, Little Dog becoming a racialised subject in America and a victim of violence in familial and social environments can be indicative of Rothberg's idea of how closely related memory and identity can be in the context of *multidirectional memory* (2009: 5). The scholar states that identity is not entirely personal – parts of it can be formed with the help of foreign histories (*Ibid.*). Thus, the examples of Little Dog's traumatic experiences render him as a bridge where post-war trauma and American racism meet in the form of violence, shaping his identity and showcasing the multidirectionality of Little Dog's memory.

Emotional wounds can be transferred to future generations not simply by articulating memories or unleashing psychological wounds on others, but instead through non-verbal signs of trauma. Little Dog is not ignorant of his family's historical and ethnic background, however, age plays a crucial role in the difficulty of understanding certain situations. His young age together with his development precisely in the United States result in occurrences of behaviour that trigger Rose and Lan's PTSD (Vuong 2019: 16). For instance, growing up in a country that propagates violence as a part of its culture, Little Dog decides to play a prank which heavily frightens Rose. This leads Little Dog to realise that once the war "enters you it never leaves", highlighting the long-lasting effects that the war might have on its victims (*Ibid.*, 16). Little Dog's behaviour can be analysed through Rothberg's idea of exploring the past by comparing different national or ethnic testimonies (2009: 272). In this case, it is important to view memory and trauma transference in the novel by paying attention to both the Vietnamese culture as well as the American culture. Little Dog's observations and behaviour can also be dissected by employing Hirsch's idea, according to which it is important to pay attention to "the language of the body", occurring in familial settings while analysing memory transfer (2008: 112). The scholar accentuates the importance of non-verbal language as implicitly conveyed messages and how such instances of bodily reactions portray the true essence of *postmemory* (*Ibid.*, 109). Language of the body in the novel also occurs through Rose's experiences during the night. The former suffers from nightmares which result in sleepless nights "at the kitchen table at some god-awful hour, butt naked, sweating, and counting your tips to buy 'a secret bunker' " (Vuong 2019: 85). This scene portrays the language of a body that has experienced the cruelties of war, specifically as a woman. Rose's nightmares are also a symbol of her inner state of mind – lack of safety, the fear of the past repeating itself, and the wish to protect her family. As a result, the night becomes the time

when she has the opportunity to express suppressed emotions. Additionally, the novel illustrates how Rose and Lan's PTSD mark the beginning of Little Dog's interpretation of trauma that he observes in his household. Therefore, the memory that Little Dog acquires is a combination of national and ethnic contexts as well as instances of non-verbal language and trauma.

Having developed the idea of the significance of the host country's cultural setting, it is inevitable to acquire minimal parts of not only war trauma but also traumatic experiences caused by the context of migration and displacement. Being the primary provider of their family, Rose has to endure the injustices that arise because of the position that they possess in the social hierarchy after moving to the United States. This struggle can be captured while looking at Rose's work experience at the nail salon:

*In the nail salon, sorry is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency. It no longer merely apologizes, but insists, reminds: I'm here, right here, beneath you. It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable. In the nail salon, one's definition of sorry is deranged into a new word entirely, one that's charged and reused as both power and defacement at once. Being sorry pays, being sorry even, or especially, when one has no fault, is worth every self-deprecating syllable the mouth allows. Because the mouth must eat. (Ibid., 90)*

Rose's submissive and self-deprecating role at the nail salon reflects the societal power structures in the United States, where refugees or immigrants take on the lowest positions in the social hierarchy. According to Kelly (1986: 147), the low status of refugees is determined by their poor English language skills, which results in them being able to work only in low-income environments that do not require additional skills. The salon scene in the novel essentially depicts Rose's marginalised position as an exploited service worker. Moreover, the usage of "sorry" acts as a "form of submission" (D'urso 2022: 10) and further illustrates the language barrier as a powerful tool for minoritising the other in the novel, contributing to Little Dog's perception of society and acquired memory. Rothberg also shares an idea of the formation of memories that are mediated through social institutions and human relationships (2009: 15). This is indicative of Little Dog's view of the interactions, happening to his mother at the nail salon and the way that societal norms can have an effect not only on Rose's private life but also on Little Dog's identity, creating a chain of experiences and testimonies that intertwine with one another.

Despite the connection between generational and collective transference of memories, the concept of transmitting and acquiring memory in the novel is initially presented as a choice (Vuong 2019: 76). However, as the narrative unfolds the fragmented stories that Lan shares, Rose's violent acts, the women's symptoms of post-war trauma, and the family's social status as immigrants become an inseparable part of Little Dog's development, identity and most importantly – life: "You once told me that memory is a choice. But if you were god, you'd know that it's a flood" (*Ibid.*, 78). Following

this idea, the concept of memory as a flood can be understood from two perspectives – as inescapable memories of the Vietnam War and their generational transference to Little Dog and as the collective histories that overlap with personal memories that together form Little Dog’s identity. As a recipient of various memories, trauma, and experiences, Little Dog begins to feel isolated and uncertain:

*I guess what I mean is that sometimes I don't know what or who we are. 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. <...> When I first started writing, I hated myself for being so uncertain <...>. 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. (Ibid., 66)*

This case of being shaped by traumatic events and inheriting memories that individuals did not experience for themselves can be seen to lead to a displaced identity, which Hirsch refers to as one of the consequences of *postmemory* (2008: 107). Correspondingly, Little Dog feels uncertain about his identity, which is portrayed in his writing, inciting him to acknowledge the inherited trauma and its effects.

After analysing modes of personal and collective memory transfer through storytelling, silence, violence, body language, and social position, it can be seen that the novel illustrates how much memory in the novel is infused with traumatic experiences. Moreover, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* provides an opportunity to see Little Dog’s experiences as a recipient of both memories and trauma. After having discussed the significance of these aspects in the novel, the subsequent section of the analysis will develop ideas on Little Dog’s identity construction and navigation in familial and public spaces that can be deemed as destructive environments. The following part of the analysis will overview Sedgwick’s ideas from *Epistemology of the Closet* to gather a better understanding of queer identity in the novel.

## 4. Identity amid a Destructive Environment

The present section of the analysis will analyse identity construction in a destructive environment in the narrative of Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). After establishing how memory and trauma function amid familial and public contexts, this part will examine how identity is shaped according to both environments. Furthermore, the formation and disclosure of Little Dog's queer identity will be investigated by looking at broader themes of masculinity, racism, and homophobia in the narrative. To provide a better understanding of the theme of identity in the novel, Eve K. Sedgwick's *queer theory* will be employed as the primary theoretical source of this part of the analysis. Hence, this section will examine identity in domestic and public spaces separately.

### 4.1. Identity Construction Amid Familial Space

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the familial space is significant for the development of Little Dog's queer identity, which is shaped by the importance of female figures in his early life years. Surrounded by a woman-dominated environment where the primary provider and guardian is his mother, Rose, Little Dog begins to view the female figure as a symbol of strength and power. This perception is influenced by transgenerational memories of Rose and Lan during the Vietnam War, particularly of Lan escaping her arranged marriage and becoming a prostitute to survive: "it was her body, her purple dress, that kept her alive" (Vuong 2019: 32). Furthermore, the capabilities of women in Little Dog's life are strengthened by their ability to escape the war, overlook the difficulties, and start a new life in the United States. An example that illustrates this can be seen in the names of flowers that the women possess, initiating an idea of being "born from beauty" instead of dwelling on the emotional scars of their trauma (*Ibid.*, 47; 206). Looking up to the women in his life, Little Dog's early development can be related to Sedgwick's idea of "gender inversion" when a queer male searches for identification with straight women because of shared interests and characteristics (1990: 89). According to this idea, one can conclude that the environment in which Little Dog grows up is overwhelmingly female, leading him to construct different values and identify with female struggles and marking the beginning of his identity formation as a queer individual.

Little Dog's identification with women is further motivated by the absence of a father figure in the family and the abusive and uncertain nature of relationships with males in his life. The absence of a male figure is deeply rooted in generations of Little Dog's family since he discovers that his grandfather is not a "grandfather by blood – but by action" (Vuong 2019: 204). This creates a gap which exacerbates Little Dog's connection and understanding of a functioning male figure in his life:

*Up to that point I thought I had, if nothing else, a tether to this country, a grandfather, one with a face, an identity, a man who could read and write, one who called me on my birthdays, whom I was a part of, whose American name ran inside my blood. Now that cord was cut. (Ibid., 60)*

These thoughts lead Little Dog to question everything that he knew before and signify his feeling of uncertainty about his identity. Furthermore, it is important to move to the micro level and acknowledge the primary male figure in Little Dog's life – his father. The latter is completely absent, the only connection between him and the protagonist being the memories acquired through Rose and Lan's storytelling and his early childhood memories. Placing aside his vacancy, Little Dog's father can be characterised as highly abusive towards his wife, leading the protagonist to experience scenes of violence from an early age: "It was not until the blood ran from his mother's nose, turning her white shirt the color of Elmo he had seen on Sesame Street, that he started to scream" (*Ibid.*, 111). Even in moments of domestic abuse, the woman figure remains as important as before since Little Dog's grandmother, Lan, becomes the saviour of her daughter and calls for help (*Ibid.*). Thereby, Little Dog's emotional identification with women rather than men is enhanced not only by perceiving the actions of the women in his family but also by the failure to connect with male figures in his closest environment. In addition, the knowledge of not knowing his ancestry opens up a path to Little Dog's uncertainty not only about his sexual orientation but also his ethnic identity.

Little Dog's relationships in familial space determine the early occurrences of his queer identity which occur through the usage of conventionally female colours and objects. The first example of such an instance is Little Dog riding on his first bicycle – "a hot-pink Schwinn with training wheels and white streamers on the handgrips that rattled, like tiny pom-poms" (*Ibid.*, 126). This choice is not initiated by Little Dog, however, he has to suffer the consequences of this action in the form of abuse and damage from his peers:

*The large boy took out a key chain and started scraping the paint off my bike. It came off so easily, in rosy sparks. <...> That was the day I learned how dangerous a color can be. That a boy could be knocked off that shade and made to reckon his trespass. Even if color is nothing but what the light reveals, that nothing has laws, and a boy on a pink bike must learn, above all else, the law of gravity. (Ibid., 127)*

This extract illustrates the standardised gender binarism that is prevalent in American society, which Little Dog learns early in his life. Despite the abuse, later in his childhood, Little Dog decides to make a conscious decision to secretly wear his mother's dress out in public (*Ibid.*, 24). Thus, this marks the first occurrence of what Sedgwick refers to as staying in and coming out of the closet (1990: 68). According to the scholar, staying in the closet with certain individuals is characteristic even of those who have already come out of the closet publicly (*Ibid.*). Such an instance can be found in the previous example where Little Dog sets forth his queer identity to the public for the first time but keeps it a secret from the closest person – his mother. Therefore, the novel presents the formation

and demonstration of a queer identity that can take place unconsciously during the early years of childhood.

Despite hiding his identity during early adolescence, the burden of keeping it a secret from his mother leads Little Dog to finally share his thoughts. Throughout this process, the protagonist struggles to articulate queerness since the Vietnamese language employs a problematic word: “pê-đê— from the French pédé, short for pedophile” (Vuong 2019:122). This reflects the oppression embedded in language, complicating open conversations about queer identities. Similarly, Sedgwick argues that the metaphor of the closet, commonly used in discussions about homosexuality, serves as subjugation of queer bodies (1990: 71). Furthermore, after declaring his homosexuality, Little Dog faces questions that undermine the certainty of his statement, illustrating ongoing resistance to queer identities in modern society (Vuong 2019: 122-123; Sedgwick 1990: 79). Finally, Little Dog’s mother recognises the dangers, including abuse and murder, associated with coming out as queer in American society (Vuong 2019: 123). This shows that revealing one’s identity in familial space can lead to viewing it as a “pathogenic secret”, causing feelings of exposure and vulnerability to both the informant and the recipient while standing face-to-face with the homophobic general public (Sedgwick 1990: 80). Therefore, the example of Little Dog coming out of the closet illustrates not only the functioning of queerness in personal space but also the broader implications that come together with declaring one’s identity in the closest environment.

#### **4.2. The Navigation of Queer Identity in Public Space**

*On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* also provides insight into how queerness functions in public space, which is best illustrated by the intricacies of Little Dog’s relationship with Trevor, an American boy “raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity” (Vuong 2019: 183). To understand the nature of their romantic relationship, it is necessary to analyse the causes of what makes Little Dog and Trevor connect so deeply and what enables this connection. Despite different ethnic backgrounds and their status in American society, both boys share various similarities, motivating a close emotional bond. Firstly, both Little Dog and Trevor come from incomplete households – single-parent families. Another aspect that characterises their relationship is the connection through trauma, specifically, previous abuse. Trevor comes from a problematic household, which is brought to Little Dog’s attention shortly after their first meeting at the tobacco farm where the former works for the possibility “to get away from his vodka-soaked old man” (*Ibid.*, 92). Moreover, just like Little Dog, Trevor has experienced previous abuse from his father:

*The TV lit Trevor’s face grey save for the scar on his neck, whose reddish-dark tint never changed. He got it when he was nine; his old man, in a fit of rage, shot a nail gun at the front door and the thing ricocheted. Blood so red, so everywhere, it was Christmas in June, he told me. (Ibid., 135)*

The connection through various aspects of life in this case aligns with Sedgwick's idea of gender not being the primary aspect that determines sexual desire in modern society (1990: 87). Instead, other elements of life like similar emotional state of being are of a higher importance, which is the case in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. This can further be exemplified by Little Dog's disbelief of how "a white boy could hate anything about his life" (Vuong 2019: 94). The protagonist's view reveals broader themes of racism, the lack of migrant acceptance in the United States and their struggle to survive financially and psychologically in a hostile society. Nevertheless, Little Dog's acquaintance with Trevor spikes the former's curiosity and, for the first time, provides a feeling of being seen, which used to be discouraged by his mother for the purpose of protection (*Ibid.*, 93). As a result, Little Dog begins to discover and reveal his queer identity through his unexpected bond with a person from a distant but at the same time similar background. Therefore, the realisation of one's queerness does not directly relate to the publicity of another individual's identity but rather to the emotional bond that is formed through shared experiences, despite the individual's gender, race, or social role.

Besides portraying queerness as a symbol of connection while relating it to broader themes of class difference and racial prejudice, the novel also provides an insight into the view of queerness both as a constantly changing form of being and as a threatening state in the context of a standardised heterosexual society. As Little Dog and Trevor's relationship progresses through emotional bonds and sexual relations, both boys go through phases of identity formation. Little Dog discovers his identity and begins to find a purpose in his life by being someone's second half through submission (Vuong 2019: 113). However, a more intricate instance of queer identity formation and projection is illustrated by Trevor's understanding of their relationship. Despite multiple sexual interactions between the boys, Trevor remains defensive about his sexual orientation and avoids any conversation about the nature of their relationship. This can be exemplified by Trevor's reluctance to accept the standard feminine role during one of their sexual acts by stating that he does not want to "feel like a girl" (*Ibid.*, 115). This example provides an insight into Trevor's insecurity about his masculinity, which also relates to larger notions of gender roles and sexuality in the United States. According to Sedgwick, homosexuality is viewed through a minoritising lens in modern society, leading to the need for constant reinforcement of gender roles to ensure the stable state of heterosexuality which is usually implemented through the execution of homophobic views (1990: 84). In this case, Trevor defies taking on a feminine role during sexual relations because of the heterosexual sets of gender norms that are engraved into his worldview. Moreover, the act of changing roles specifically poses a threat to his masculinity, which is most often defined by dominance, control, and homophobic expression. The latter appears not only in Trevor's avoidance of accepting queerness but also in

inappropriate references such as the term “faggot” towards the homosexual community while he is expressing his fear of becoming one to Little Dog (Vuong 2019: 144). Expanding further, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* directly signals the larger notions of queerness that are under the control of the patriarchal systems of today’s world through the thoughts of Little Dog:

*I had thought sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong. The rules, they were already inside us.* (Vuong 2019: 115)

This example shows that the conventional rules of society are nevertheless present in the private sector of an individual’s life, blurring the lines between secrecy and publicity in the context of queerness. Therefore, through Trevor’s character, the novel showcases the intricate and problematic process of coming to terms with one’s queer identity in an environment where it is constantly being controlled, challenged, and defied by the ruling system.

The exploration of queer identity acts as a uniting symbol between the micro and macro layers of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, tying in the themes of trauma, racism, and homophobia. After having discussed the external factors that contribute to the realisation of queer identity in familial space and the navigation of the latter in the context of a primarily heterosexual society the subsequent part of the analysis will be dedicated to language as a tool for healing psychological trauma which occurs through both - intergenerational trauma transference and the discrimination stemming from the racial and homophobic injustice.

## 5. Language as a Tool for Healing

The following part of this BA thesis will analyse the use of language and literary devices employed in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) to provide insights into the novel's underlying themes of survival and healing. While the latter discusses sensitive topics of trauma, migration, and queerness, the narrative also provides an opportunity for survival and healing in a hostile environment. This is achieved through the epistolary genre of the novel, fragmentation, metaphors, and the comparison between Vietnamese and English. Therefore, the theme of survival and healing will be explored through the usage of literary devices and Vuong's writing technique.

Before delving into the intricacies of Vuong's writing style in the novel, it is important to examine the epistolary genre of the book that serves as the primary means for emotional transformation. The genre is expressed as a letter to Little Dog's mother, who cannot read, which can be seen from the first lines in the novel: "Dear Ma, I am trying to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are." (Vuong 2019: 15). By writing to his mother, Little Dog is given a safe personal space that provides an opportunity for confession and openness about his experiences. Moreover, the entire narrative employs second-person narration while introducing Little Dog's perception of their family life and his development as both a migrant and a queer individual in the United States. Ha and Tompkins state that the use of second-person narration serves to address not only Little Dog's mother but also the readers, creating a close emotional bond with the protagonist and provoking empathy (2021: 211). Therefore, the epistolary structure of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* acts as the central device, which enables confession and implicitly addresses the readers, providing a closer look into Little Dog's life story and creating a universal narrative that showcases the experiences of marginalised groups.

Moving on to the literary devices employed in the novel, the structure of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* incorporates fragmentation and non-linearity to portray the process of remembrance and how it acts as a way of coming to terms with one's past. Since the narrator – Little Dog – is a recipient of *postmemory* and the trauma of his family members, the narrative of the novel reflects not only his emotional struggles while growing up in a violent and racist environment but also the post-war trauma of Rose and Lan. This is illustrated by the constant shift between acquired memories from Rose and Lan, Little Dog's personal experiences, collective stories, metaphors, and analogies that create an emotional feel to the narrative. Such shifts are present throughout the novel, even in the smallest chapters of the book. For instance, while the beginning of a one-page chapter is a continuation of Lan's encounter with the American soldiers, the last paragraph of the chapter speaks about the

capacity of a macaque's brain, illustrating the connection between unrelated themes of the narrative (Vuong 2019: 48). The fragmented narrative acts as a symbol of Little Dog's journey towards self-discovery by exploring the past. However, it is also a story of generational and personal trauma conveyed through the disruption of the narrative. According to van der Kolk, traumatic memories are fragmented since they "intrude into the present, where they are literally relived", also taking "on a life of their own" during the act of remembrance (2014: 78). Based on van der Kolk's insights, the disrupted narrative of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* as a whole resembles a traumatic memory. However, scholars also tend to look into the micro level in which the fragmented narrative represents Little Dog's inherited trauma and "his difficulty in creating a coherent narrative out of his fragmented images of the past" (Diamanti 2023: 232). Therefore, the usage of narrative disruption showcases the nature of traumatic memories and, at the same time, illustrates the protagonist's attempt to reconcile with his problematic past.

Metaphorical language in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is another recurring literary device that provides a voice for the unspoken trauma and portrays the themes of migration and marginalisation from a different perspective. According to van der Kolk, "traumatic events are almost impossible to put into words" (2014: 249). For this reason, Vuong employs a variety of metaphors related to nature and animals, which facilitate the process of conveying the meaning behind human struggles. The most prominent example of metaphor usage in segmented parts of the novel is related to the life and migration of monarch butterflies:

*Monarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes.* (Vuong 2019: 22)

The metaphorical meaning behind the life of monarch butterflies directly refers to the memory and trauma transmission after migrating to the United States in Little Dog's family. Another example of metaphor in the story includes the war soldiers' tradition to consume the macaques' brains, later moving on to the comparison of their brains to those of humans: "macaques employ memory in order to survive" (*Ibid.*, 2019: 48). This example illustrates not only the power of memory in traumatic circumstances but also the larger implication of Vietnam war and its cruelties. As a result, metaphorical writing in the narrative showcases a possibility of healing and coming to terms with trauma by expressing emotions through language. Therefore, the novel provides an opportunity for the expression of Little Dog's emotional burdens as well as identity formation through metaphorical language.

Another instance of language as a means of survival is the relation and discrepancies between Vietnamese and English in the narrative. On one hand, the usage of Vietnamese demonstrates the

power of language in the context of surviving in a destructive environment. For example, Little Dog's peculiar name comes from a Vietnamese tradition to name the youngest child of the family "after the most despicable things" in a wish to protect a family member from evil spirits (Vuong 2019: 27). However, this tradition can also be interpreted from the perspective of protecting a loved one from the cruelties of life in general. On the other hand, the Vietnamese language is portrayed as a weakening factor that negatively affects the family and Little Dog's ability to express himself, encouraging Little Dog to "take off" his Vietnamese language and "wear" his English to be seen (*Ibid.*, 39). This opposing view of the Vietnamese language as a form of survival and weakness creates a space that illustrates the impossibility of full healing. This can further be demonstrated by Rose's inability to express herself in the novel, resulting in what Neumann (2020: 285) refers to as the loss of one's mother tongue, metaphorically and literally. For this reason, it is important to investigate the usage of English, which provides another medium of expression for Little Dog. By switching to English as the primary language of self-presentation, Little Dog "breaks free" from his past trauma and expresses himself authentically (Vuong 2019:15). However, the usage of English can also act as a minoritising factor for marginalised groups. For example, a difference in bilingualism among different generations of the family occurs throughout the novel. This is best illustrated by Little Dog's letter to Rose and the latter never being able to read it, which portrays a knowledge gap that can occur because of a lack of English language knowledge. As a result, the usage of the English language acts as a means of both weakness and healing in the context of migration and ethnic discrimination, illustrating the power of language in the narrative. Neumann (2020: 292) states that the incorporation of a multilingual aspect in the novel "propels movement", self-expression, and the invention of "transcultural forms of citizenship". Therefore, the combination of strengths and weaknesses of both languages illustrates the desire for change and connection that transcends separate languages and cultures.

In conclusion, the stylistic narrative techniques and switches between Vietnamese and English in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* demonstrate the opportunity for healing from past trauma and social isolation. This is achieved through the epistolary genre of the novel, the incorporation of fragmentation, non-linearity, metaphors, and connection between English and Vietnamese. The stylistic features present in the novel enable confession, reconciliation with the past, and the formation of an authentic identity.

## 6. Conclusions

Being a Vietnamese immigrant in the United States, Vuong portrays inherited trauma, its effects, and a possibility for healing in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Emotional and psychological pain in the novel was analysed by delving into the theme of generational and public memory transference by following Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* and Rothberg's idea of *multidirectional memory*. The latter provided an opportunity to view remembrance as both a personal and collective act, transversing generations of a family and incorporating several collective narratives, all of which occurred through storytelling, violence, and silence. Memory transference was shown to accord with memory acquisition which was dissected by analysing Little Dog's queer identity formation in personal space and its navigation in public environment. The analysis of identity formation and functioning was expanded by drawing on Sedgwick's theoretical work on the *queer theory*. The analysis of this BA paper illustrated that Little Dog's queer identity was shaped not only by a women dominated household and a lack of father figure but also the conventional rules of heterosexual relationships and homophobia which were present not only in public life but also in private and intimate familial and romantic relationships. Lastly, the BA paper focused on the chance for healing generational and social trauma by discussing language usage as a tool for self-reflection and self-expression. The latter was achieved through the epistolary genre of the novel, which acted as an expression of love. Moreover, the fragmented narrative of the book provided an opportunity for Little Dog to come to terms with the past, whereas the usage of metaphorical language encouraged the protagonist to gather a better understanding of his identity. Therefore, this BA thesis illustrated the multidirectionality and diversity that *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* depicts through a trauma narrative that at the same time suggests an opportunity for healing. By creating a novel full of binaries, Vuong does not aim to choose one side, instead, his narrative reveals the intricate process of finding one's place on earth and drawing attention to the experiences of marginalised individuals.

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## Summary in Lithuanian

### Trauma, atmintis ir gijimas Oceano Vuongo romane „Žemėje žavūs mes tik akimirka“

Šiame bakalauro darbe nagrinėjamas debiutinis Oceano Vuongo romanas „Žemėje žavūs mes tik akimirka“ (2019), kuriame epistolinio romano žanras pateikiamas kaip laiškas, parašytas motinai, kuri nemoka skaityti. Šiame darbe teigiama, kad pasitelkdamas nechronologinę pasakojimo struktūrą, kintančias kalbines formas ir metaforas, Vuongas konstruoja tarpkalbinį ir tarpgeneracinį traumos naratyvą. Jame ne tik vaizduojamas, bet ir ardomas paveldėtas skausmas, kartu tyrinėjant izoliuoto migranto ir queer individo tapatybę Jungtinėse Amerikos Valstijose. Siekiant išsamiai aptarti minėtas temas, analizė suskirstyta į tris dalis: pirmoje dalyje, analizuojant atminties perdavimą, susijusį su įgyta trauma, pasitelkiama Hirsch postmemory koncepcija ir Rothbergo daugiakryptės atminties teorija. Antrajame skyriuje nagrinėjamas tapatybės kūrimas destruktyvioje aplinkoje, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant pasakotojo queer, migranto ir etninei tapatybei, pasitelkiant Sedgwick queer teoriją, kuri padeda analizuoti minėtų tapatybių sankirtą romane. Paskutinėje analizės dalyje dėmesys sutelkiamas į literatūrines priemones, kurias pasakojime pasitelkiamos, siekiant atkreipti dėmesį į išgyvenimo, savęs apibrėžimo ir gijimo galimybę. Analizė atskleidžia, kad atmintis romane veikia kaip asmeninis, ir kaip kolektyvinis atributas, kuris yra galingas įrankis įgyjant ir išgyvenant traumą. Nepaisant to, pasitelkdamas nelinijinę pasakojimo struktūrą, metaforą ir kalbinius poslinkius, Vuongas vaizduoja fragmentišką atminties prigimtį ir protagonisto kovą už savastį paveldėto skausmo apsuptyje.

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** Vietnamo karas; atminties perdavimas; postmemory; daugiakryptė atmintis; transgeneracinė trauma; queer tapatybė; fragmentacija.