

**BECAUSE TENDERNESS DEPENDS ON HOW LITTLE THE WORLD TOUCHES YOU:
ASPECTS OF DISPLACEMENT IN *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*, BY
OCEAN VUONG**

*PORQUE A TERNURA DEPENDE DE QUÃO POUCO O MUNDO TOCA EM VOCÊ: ASPECTOS
DE DESLOCAMENTO EM *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*, DE OCEAN VUONG*

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ABSTRACT: *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is an epistolary novel by Ocean Vuong that narrates the story of Little Dog through letters he writes to his mother. Not belonging is what constitutes the protagonist and this fact can be related mainly to his nationality, race and sexuality, identity categories which intersect. Vuong's novel is marked by post-colonial features, considering that the consequences of colonialism are remarkably identified. The aim of this study is to analyze aspects of displacement in Vuong's novel, according to Antonsich (2010), Ashcroft; Griffiths; Tiffin (2002), Hooks (1994), Neumann (2022), and Quintana-Vallejo (2021).

Keywords: Ocean Vuong. Displacement. Non-belonging.

RESUMO: *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, de Ocean Vuong, é um romance epistolar que narra a história de Little Dog através de cartas escritas a sua mãe. O não-pertencimento é o que constitui o protagonista e esse fato está relacionado, principalmente, à nacionalidade, raça e sexualidade, categorias identitárias interseccionais. A obra de Vuong é marcada por traços pós-coloniais, considerando que as consequências do colonialismo são notavelmente identificadas. O objetivo deste estudo é analisar aspectos de deslocamento no romance de Vuong de acordo com o que foi proposto por Antonsich (2010), Ashcroft; Griffiths; Tiffin (2002), Hooks (1994), Neumann (2022) e Quintana-Vallejo (2021).

Palavras-chave: Ocean Vuong. Deslocamento. Não-pertencimento.

1. INTRODUCTION

The epistolary novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, by Ocean Vuong, narrates the story of Little Dog through the letters he writes to his mother, an illiterate woman. In this narrative, Little Dog's family, heritage and relationships take shape in dissecting several themes, such as war, trauma, grief, language, communication, gender and sexuality, racism and memory. As a novel, Vuong's *work* "is a model of modern society, not simply a reflection on it" (Eagleton, 2010, p. 11); centered on the mundane life of ordinary people, it is a constituent part of humanity, not necessarily a simple simple echo of it. Vuong's novel is marked by "the

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dialectic of place and displacement” (Ashcroft; Griffiths; Tiffins, 2004, p. 9). The feeling of displacement, addressed here in this essay, is a common matter when it comes to post-colonial literature.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffins (2004, p. 9, authors’ emphasis) stress that, in post-colonial novels “a valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by *dislocation*, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or ‘voluntary’ removal for indentured labour”. Still on Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffins’ (2004, p. 9) perspective, the connection between place and self is an important component of post-colonial literatures; according to these authors, a trait of post-colonial literatures in the English language is related to the myths of identity, beyond cultural and historical differences. Hence, the concept of *displacement* is deeply connected with the consequences of diaspora in the contemporary world considering the radical dislocation provoked by the oppression experienced in colonialism. Here, *displacement* is taken by a feeling of non-place; a dislocation provoked by the state of being an outsider. Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyze aspects of displacement in this novel, considering the deep and complex relation between the search of a self and non-belonging in *On earth we’re briefly gorgeous* — considering, especially, features related to language, gender and sexuality, and race, in an intersectional perspective.

Ocean Vuong is a Vietnamese American poet, activist and novelist who was born in Saigon, in 1988. Vuong has published poetry and a novel, *On earth we’re briefly gorgeous* being his first prose literary work. His grandfather, a US Navy soldier, met his grandmother during the Vietnam War and they had three children, including Vuong’s mother. His grandfather went back to the US to visit, but was unable to return when Saigon fell to the communist forces. Years later, his grandmother fled the country when a police officer suspected Vuong’s mother was of mixed race. Vuong’s trajectory of life and the protagonist’s history might overlap in the narrative, based on its similarities.

The starting point of the novel is a letter that the protagonist writes to his own mother addressing his relationship with his family, and the struggles they faced, which are intertwined with his family history and social background. Little Dog’s first words, “Let me begin again (Vuong, 2019, p. 11), suggest the existence of other attempts of communicating with his mother — or with himself, since he writes letters to someone who cannot read —, not necessarily by writing, but by all of the ways he tried during his lifetime. Little Dog admits the incompleteness of communication since, despite aiming to reach his mother, “each word I put down is one word further from where you are” (Vuong, 2019, p. 11). The effort to connect with his mother, writing words that she would not be able to read, is, ironically, one element that separates them. At the same time, he asserts the fact that words are bound to fail in his attempt to reach her. Language fails, and this broken language is an echo of her displacement in the United States, as a victim of diaspora.

The novel, in its epistolary format, does not follow a chronological order. Little Dog's relationship with his mother is the pivotal point in the novel, as it addresses the theme of intergenerational trauma. It all started in the Vietnam War and the traumatic events still echoed in the present. Little Dog writes to Rose, his mother, and their history, as a mother and child, is what has shaped his present and the way he carries himself in the world. In the novel, the passage "You're a mother, Ma. You're also a monster. But so am I— which is why I can't turn away from you (Vuong, 2019, p. 18)" represents this complex dialectic bond. By recounting his family's — mainly his mother and grandmother, Lan — experiences during the Vietnam War, the author is able to construct the recurrence of history and illustrates throughout the narrative how the intergenerational trauma is represented. It is also notable how the author clarifies the relative distance of time, history and its lasting effects as in the passage: "Some people say history moves in a spiral, not the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed." (Vuong, 2019, p. 27). Time, in *On earth we're briefly gorgeous*, is not linear; it is a spiral with an omnipresent past that keeps coming back; to some extent, it is a past-present that comes and goes, visiting the protagonist with hurtful memories that escape his own lifetime.

The fact that the novel does not follow a chronological path reflects the "circular trajectory" (Vuong, 2019, p. 27), especially inside one's conscience: a consonance between the novel's form and content; past and present; self and ancestry. Memory, in Vuong's novel, is an important trait that drives the reader not only through Little Dog's storyline, but also with those who bear traumas much older than the present.

2. TO OPEN A MOUTH, IN SPEECH, IS TO LEAVE ONLY THE BONES: LANGUAGE AS A FRAGMENT OF IDENTITY

Language constitutes an important part of Vuong's novel and a relevant marker when it comes to aspects of displacement that the characters face. For instance, at a certain point, in search of a *bún bò Huế* to prepare a dish, Rose starts mimicking and mooing at an oxtail in a supermarket in order to make herself understood. She, then, asks Little Dog for help, but he does not know how to translate it. At the sound of laughter, Rose recurs to gestures and sounds, and then French. The act of *giving up* on buying an oxtail is not a mere act of *giving up* on a simple task, since this dish is representative of her culture. This situation builds a demarcation between *them*, American English speakers, and *we*, Vietnamese immigrants, considering that the protagonist, at this moment, becomes his family's interpreter. Language, then, assumes the function of a mask, and also a mirror. While speaking English and stripping Vietnamese out of his body, Little Dog reflects his mother's face; it gives her a voice that connects her to the world that she does not belong to. In that sense,

on the one hand, language can certainly be activated in the politics of belonging, demarcating ‘we’ from ‘them’, on the other hand it can also evoke a sense of community, the ‘warm sensation’ to be among people who not merely understand what you say, but also what you mean (Antonsich, 2010, p. 648).

Moreover, as bell hooks (1994, p. 168) highlights, it is not the English language that offends, “but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize”. When assuming the function of an interpreter, Little Dog instantly puts himself in an in-between culture situation — nonetheless, the in-between is also a non-place.

Vuong also plays with this double nature of language, specially with the meaning of mother tongue. In *On earth we’re briefly gorgeous*, a mother tongue carries all the weight that its speakers bear; it is the expression of a history, and not only of a self. And to Little Dog and his family, “to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war” (Vuong, 2019, p. 29). To speak in Vietnamese is to evoke a past full of horrors that haunts these survivors throughout their lives. This horrific dimension cannot be excluded from a linguistic one, whereas “the experience of living in the diaspora deprives them of a shared language, a mother tongue, to which they could lay claim in any natural way” (Neumann, 2020, p. 278).

Nonetheless, it is through writing that Little Dog reinvents himself. When writing to his mother, Little Dog realizes that he was, indeed, wrong:

All this time I told myself we were born from war — but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty.

Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence — but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it (Vuong, 2019, p. 186).

The protagonist, then, realizes, in contact with his own ancestry, that despite the horrors of war, this is not a categorical fate. However, the violence still contaminates the fruit — yet, not deep enough to rotten it. This reinvention is similar to when Lan renames herself and, by doing it so, detains a beauty that only language can restore.

Little Dog’s name, for instance, carries a meaning, specially taking into account that he is so called in the entire book:

I have and have had many names. Little Dog was what Lan called me. What made a woman who named herself and her daughter after flowers call her grandson a dog? A woman who watches out for her own, that’s who. As you know, in the village where Lan grew up, a child, often the smallest or weakest of the flock, as I was, is named after the most despicable things: demon, ghost child, pig snout, monkey-born, buffalo head, bastard—little dog being the more tender one. Because evil spirits, roaming the land for healthy, beautiful children, would hear the name of something hideous and ghastly being called in for supper and pass over the house, sparing the child.

To love something, then, is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched—and alive. A name, thin as air, can also be a shield. A Little Dog shield (Vuong, 2019, p. 26).

Hence, the name *Little Dog* represents not only a fragile characteristic, but also the fact that the protagonist received a burden bigger than he, as his name conveys, can bear. In different contexts, this significant gains different connotations; Little Dog becomes a name representative of his identity in the United States: an outsider. A name, imbued of such traits, would prevent any supernatural attack. Little Dog is, therefore, the promise of protection, since these evil spirits, when hearing his name, would spare the child and pass over the house. Furthermore, “Before I was Little Dog, I had another name — the name I was born with” (Vuong, 2019, p. 28), thus, the protagonist becomes Little Dog despite being, at first, someone with a completely different name:

Screaming, ash smudged across my forehead, I was placed in my father’s arms and the shaman whispered the name he had given me. It means Patriotic Leader of the Nation, the shaman explained. Having been hired by my father, and noticing my old man’s gruff demeanor, the way he puffed out his chest to widen his 5ft-2in frame as he walked, speaking with gestures that resembled blows, the shaman picked a name, I imagine, that would satisfy the man who paid him. And he was right. My father beamed, Lan said, lifting me over his head at the hut’s threshold. “My son will be the leader of Vietnam,” he shouted. But in two years, Vietnam—which, thirteen years after the war and still in shambles—would grow so dire that we would flee the very ground he stood on, the soil where, a few feet away, your blood had made a dark red circle between your legs, turning the dirt there into fresh mud—and I was alive.

His first name strongly contrasts with his second name, denoting that the intentions projected by Little Dog’s father represent the rupture provoked by North-American imperialism in Vietnam. It seems to ask what Little Dog and many other Vietnamese people could have been if there was no war. More than the intentions of the protagonist’s family, especially his father, the act of being called by what Lan named him, expecting protection, rather than his first and actual name, expresses a fracture in Vietnam’s history and its people. The symbolic gesture of changing a child’s name can illustrate the abdication of an identity to survive war, which constitutes an act of resistance after all. Little Dog is the name by which the protagonist is called all over the book and the first name — the name his father gave to him in a cultural ritual — is not presented to readers. This fact suggests that Vietnamese people had to modify their perception of reality and also of themselves to survive the advancement of colonialism, and that this dislocation shaped their life experiences.

3. *DON'T DRAW ATTENTION TO YOURSELF. YOU'RE ALREADY VIETNAMESE: IDENTITY MARKERS IN ON EARTH...*

Later, during his adolescence, Little Dog starts working at a tobacco farm without Rose's consent. He then meets Trevor, the farmer's grandson. Eventually, Little Dog and Trevor's relationship evolves to a sexual one, and, at a certain moment, Trevor asks Little Dog "to top him, the way we had been doing it, which we now called fake fucking" (Vuong, 2019, p. 85), but gives up, suggesting that he is not a girl or a bitch, labelling the protagonist as such, as if this sexual position would fit Little dog and not himself. Little Dog attests that

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, p. 86).

Believing that the world could not see the bedroom they were in and therefore believing that their desire was allowed by their privacy, Little Dog assumes that the rules, those that forbid sexual expressions such as this, would not apply; but these same rules of the world were not circumscribed to their privacy. They are bigger than that: they are within their bodies deep enough to interrupt a sexual connection; their isolation is not enough to prevent them from laws that regulate sexual relationships and manifestations of such subaltern bodies. As Little Dog punctuates, "the rules, like streets, can only take you to known places" (Vuong, 2019, p. 132). And, indeed, the rules that regulated his sexual and romantic relationship with Trevor took him to a place long known by the protagonist: a feeling of displacement boosted by the homophobia that Little Dog narrates throughout the narrative, since his childhood.

The moment Little Dog tells his mother he is a queer teenager must be highlighted as well. Quintana-Vallejo (2021) asserts that this novel represents a *queer* coming-of-age, portrayed in the relationship between the protagonist and Trevor, a coming-to-terms with himself, and also with his mother, by means of coming out. Inside a coffee shop, a public space, they have a private conversation, in which the bond between them strengthens. Nevertheless, as he tells her his secret, a stream opens and Rose decides to share one of her secrets too: her husband forced her to abort a child during the Vietnam war and the reasons to do it were related to the hostile conditions faced by them. This scene depicts not only a sharing of the experiences of displacement between them but also the distinct social positions they assume in it: the trauma experienced by him is different from the trauma experienced by his mother, whereas their gender and sexuality demonstrates the different forces that control their imagination.

Furthermore, Vuong's novel lies between an ambiguity when it comes to trauma: letting it go despite the fact that it is always present. On the first page of the book, when both Little Dog and Rose stop at a rest stop in Virginia, Rose is shaken with a taxidermied buck hung that should not be there, since "A corpse should go away, not get stuck forever like that" (Vuong, 2019, p. 15), as Rose herself says. The dead buck, here, works as this exposed trauma, as these

wounds that do not go away; a reminder of the past. Also, the monarchs' migration is used as a metaphor to portray Little Dog's own experience. Dialoguing with a natural process, he dislocates the violent process of being a migrant in contemporaneity:

Female monarchs lay eggs along the route. Every history has more than one thread, each thread a story of division. The journey takes four thousand eight hundred and thirty miles, more than the length of this country. The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past (Vuong, 2019, p. 14).

The act of flying to a different place and environment constitutes a new perspective of existence, consequently, a new perspective of identity, since migration, here, is not only the departure of one place to another; it expresses a nuanced movement, not a stiffness. Little Dog is a survivor of the diaspora and "Maybe a survivor is the last one to come home, the final monarch that lands on a branch already weighted with ghosts" (Vuong, 2019, p. 17), and, as such, he has the right to speak. Again, the presence of these survivors cannot be dissociated from a past with many other affected people; they share a place, a symbolic one, with those who did not survive.

Regarding his nationality and race, he cannot be perceived as an American nor as a Vietnamese: being a yellow body marks his Asian roots and it works as a showcase, not giving him the possibility of hiding his otherness. Thus, being what you are is not a choice, since it is defined by the interaction with others, as he says: "To be or not to be. That is the question. A question, yes, but not a choice" (Vuong, 2019, p. 49).

However, contradictorily, it's Rose's mixed identity what saves her and her mother from the war execution:

The boy watches this child, the whiteness showing from her yellow body. He could be her father, he thinks, realizes. Someone he knows could be her father—his sergeant, squad leader, platoon partner, Michael, George, Thomas, Raymond, Jackson. He considers them, rifle gripped tight, his eyes on the girl with American blood before the American gun (Vuong, 2019, p. 36).

The soldier empathizes with the mixed child because he could be her father, she could be one of them, and therefore, she could be American. This passage demonstrates the connection between race and nationality and also the role of otherness in building someone's identity — we see ourselves through the eye of the other — and, in the US, as Vuong asserts, a yellow body doesn't have the right to be human since "you are erased before you are given the choice of stating who you are" (Vuong, 2019, p. 60). Racial problematics appear all over the novel in an attempt to approach the alterity that is implied in being a racialized body in a new territory.

However, if the horrors of Vietnam still haunt Little Dog and his family, the US, and specifically Hartford and the protagonist's neighborhood, play an important role in the narrative.

It is not just the place where they live, but also the representation of a present in which the horrors of today take place. Little Dog lies in a dance between present and past — the latter in the form of Lan and Rose and the traumas that they bear. While riding a bike with Trevor, Little Dog examines the streets and people of Hartford:

I saw all the blocks in our city you were too busy at work to know about, blocks where things happened. Things even Trevor, having lived all his life on this side of the river, the white side, the one I was now riding on, never saw. I saw the lights on Asylum Ave., where there used to be an asylum (that was actually a school for the deaf) that caught fire and killed half a ward back in 18- something and to this day no one knows what caused it. But I know it as the street where my friend Sid lived with his family after they came over from India in '95. How his mom, a schoolteacher back in New Delhi, went door-to-door, hobbling on her bloated diabetic feet selling hunting knives for Cutco to make ninety-seven dollars a week—cash. There were the Canino brothers, whose father was in jail for what seemed like two lifetimes for going seventy on a sixty-five in front of a state trooper on 91. That and the twenty bags of heroin and the Glock under his passenger seat. Still, still. There was Marin, who took the bus forty-five minutes each way to work at the Sears in Farmington, who always had gold around her neck and ears, whose high heels clacked like the slowest, most deliberate applause when she walked to the corner store for cigarettes and Hot Cheetos, her Adam's apple jutting out, a middle finger to the men who called her faggot, called her homomaphedite. Who'd say, holding their daughter's or son's hand, "I'm gonna kill you, bitch, I'm gonna cut you, AIDS gonna take you out. Don't sleep tonight, don't sleep tonight, don't sleep tonight. Don't sleep (Vuong, 2019, p. 101-102).

The protagonist grows among the open wounds deep within United States' history and the terror experienced by his family in Vietnam. This long passage denotes that Little Dog's questions are not solitary; his searches, his experiences and his feelings emerge to many other queer and/or migrant people, for instance. As Quintana-Vallejo (2021, p. 288) states, "both Little Dog and Hartford are the stories that make up the city".

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Vuong's novel presents aspects that endorse the fragmentation of Little Dog's identity through the experience of being a migrant — or, better, an outsider. Not belonging is what constitutes him and this fact can be related mainly to his nationality, race and sexuality, identity categories which intersect. The attempt of recreating an identity is, therefore, an attempt of recreating a self. Language is a tool that Little Dog uses to bond this fragmented experience. Rewriting the past is a way to rescue features from his ancestry and also to overcome the traumas caused by numerous violences they witness. The novel takes place as a journey of a boy on becoming himself. When trying to communicate with his mother, the protagonist communicates truly with himself, since "the very impossibility of your [Rose] reading this is all that makes my telling it possible" (Vuong, 2019, p. 81).

Furthermore, the diaspora is not only the search for a place, but also the search of a self in an open space. To quote Vuong in a homonym poem — also called *On earth we're briefly gorgeous* — from another book: “How I wanted to be that sky—to hold every flying & falling at once” (Vuong, 2016, p. 56). Little Dog’s odyssey captures, simultaneously, highs and lows that exist long before the protagonist’s existence. Ancestry, here, is an important feature when it comes to intergenerational trauma, but also resistance.

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