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"Fruit of Violence": The Subaltern Refugee and the Intersection of Oppressions in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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Abstract

This article examines Ocean Vuong's semi-autobiographical novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by focusing on how the oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality overlap for the Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in America. Among many difficulties, many Vietnamese lives are marked by the intergenerational transmission of emotional pain, and it deterred parents from forming a healthy relationship with their offsprings. As a queer, second-generation Vietnamese American writer, Vuong is raised in a toxic household since he is subjected to physical and emotional abuse of his war traumatized mother. *On Earth*, written in epistolary form, offers a glimpse into the many-layered anxieties, insecurities of Vuong's family and reveals how the legacy of the Vietnam War still pervades their life in all spheres in America. His narrative, "as a line of communication," is a significant step towards liberating the women in his family from the subaltern status. Speaking from the terrain of otherness and rejecting castration by the forces that victimized his mother and grandmother, Vuong also proves that it is possible to transform the resentment he harbors into something fruitful, and anger can be instrumental in reconciliation and healing.

Keywords: The Vietnam War, Ocean Vuong, Vietnamese American, Trauma, the Subaltern

"Şiddetin Meyvesi": Ocean Vuong'un *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* Adlı Romanında Madun Mülteci ve Toplumsal Baskılar

Öz

Bu makale, Ocean Vuong'un yarı-otobiyografik *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* romanını, Amerika'daki ırk, toplumsal cinsiyet, sınıf ve cinsellik baskılarının Vietnamlı sığınmacılar ve göçmenlerin yaşamlarındaki yansımalarına odaklanarak inceler. Vietnamlı hayatların çoğu duygusal travmaların ya da kolektif keder duygusunun nesiller arasında aktarımıyla şekillenmiş ve bu durum ebeveynlerin çocuklarıyla sağlıklı bir ilişki kurmalarını engellemiştir. Queer kimliğiyle bilinen ikinci nesil Vietnamlı Amerikalı yazar Vuong, savaşın travmatik etkilerinden kurtulamamış annesinin hem fiziksel hem de duygusal şiddetine maruz kaldığı bir evde büyümüştür. Mektup formunda yazılan *On Earth*, Vuong'un ailesinin çok katmanlı kaygıları ve güvensizliklerini ele alarak Vietnam Savaşı'nın aile bireylerinin Amerika'daki hayatını hala etkilediğini gösterir. Vuong'un "bir iletişim kanalı" olarak kaleme aldığı romanı, ailesindeki kadınları madun konumundan kurtarmak için önemli bir adımdır. Bir öteki olarak, annesi ve anneannesini mağdur eden güçlerin boyunduruğunu reddeden Vuong, kırgınlıkların nihayetinde yararlı deneyimlere dönüşebileceğini ve öfkenin uzlaşma ya da iyileşme aracı olabileceğini kanıtlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Vietnam Savaşı, Ocean Vuong, Vietnamlı Amerikalı, Travma, Madun

We're beginning to understand that a male-dominant culture tries to addict males to dominance in order to perpetuate itself, and to persuade men to risk their lives in wars that have nothing to do with their own self-interest.

Gloria Steinem

In his debut novel *On Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), which is based on one of his poems of the same name, Ocean Vuong tackles fundamental issues such as war, immigration, queerness, race,

class, and trauma in the context of the Vietnamese experience in America. Born in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) in 1988, Vietnam, Ocean Vuong is a second-generation Vietnamese American poet and novelist who immigrated to the United States with his family in 1990 when he was only two. He lived in Hartford, Connecticut, and was raised by his war traumatized mother who suffered from PTSD, and his schizophrenic grandmother, a former sex worker in Vietnam.

On the novel's multilayered narrative content, Emma Brockes comments that "[i]t might have been the Opioid Novel, or the Vietnam Novel, or the Exploitative World of the Nail Salon novel. It might have been the Gay Adolescent Love novel or the Violent Childhood novel, all themes that are touched upon lightly while still assuming a fully weighted presence in the narrative" ("Ocean Vuong"). Written in epistolary form, Vuong's narrative consists of beautifully crafted letters to his illiterate mother, whose psychological disturbances related to the Vietnam War and life in the U.S. profoundly impact his psyche. As Tolentino notes, it is "both an immigrant novel and a work of autofiction" (Ocean Vuong's Life Sentences"). Combined with the autobiographic elements in the novel, Vuong's work is a product of his resentment and anger against American society, which he thinks "fucked" him "up" (*On Earth* 119). When the cost of the unsaid things finds permanent place itself on the individual's conscience, it becomes imperative, for Vuong, to give voice to that unspoken yet disturbing past.

Commenting on his book, Vuong states that he examines "American failure," arguing that "American masculinity is a failure in itself in which no one thrives" ("Ocean Vuong Explores the Coming-of-Age of Queerness"). Generally speaking, beginning from the 1960s, the "crisis" American men have experienced and the rage that they felt as a result of this "failure" can sometimes be discerned in the tone of a harsh father who beats his son for being "soft" or "weak." The act of beating corresponds to exposing the "tough" masculinity that resides in his son. However, "[t]he defeat in Vietnam battered U.S. masculinity" (Espiritu, "The We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose Syndrome" 334). Without knowing where to direct his released rigor, the son, as emphasized by Gloria Steinem in the quote that begins this essay, engages in a dominance effort so as to legitimize his hegemony. Vietnamese women, in this specific work by Vuong, Rose and Grandma Lan, are the ones who are severely affected by this random male rage as the "subaltern" refugee women who are stripped of their rights to "speak"

(Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? 28). While Vuong's mother, Rose expresses her distress and trauma with unintentional violence towards her son, Little Dog, Grandma Lan, a schizophrenic, tries to survive by telling stories to exorcize her painful memories haunting her. Little Dog, who is at the center of all this tragedy, is a product of a dysfunctional family as his childhood is largely shaped by anxiety, alienation and fear due to intergenerational trauma.

Through Little Dog's family story in *On Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous*, this article analyzes the intersecting oppressions by focusing on Vietnamese refugees' disadvantageous social positions related to the American patriarchy, heterosexuality, racism, and class division. The novel's central themes, such as poverty, violence, race, trauma, and deteriorating mental health, all boil down to being Vietnamese in America. Growing up in a predominantly black and Puerto Rican neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut, Ocean Vuong is among those few Vietnamese refugee/immigrant children who succeeded after enduring racism and oppression as a minority. However, his experience, as can be seen in his semi-autobiographical novel, was coupled with his mother's emotional abuse, overwhelmed by the lingering effects of the war. The study argues that despite the intersection of oppressions stemming from the hierarchical social categories inherent in American society, Vuong proves that there is a possibility of drawing a survival narrative even if he does not intend to offer an exclusive representation of his community. Moreover, his narrative, "as a line of communication" is a significant step towards deconstructing the subaltern status of the women in his family (Spivak, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason* 310).

On the other hand, in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall draws attention to the evolving nature of diasporic identities saying they "are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (235). Hall's insistence on the recognition of "heterogeneity and diversity" to explore displacement experience provides an avenue for Vuong toward agency as his struggle to recover "the past" through his writing ensures a move away from tragic mode (225). He is disowning the victim trope for its potential of denying a proper negotiation of the forces that placed the Vietnamese in their current state. Purposefully bespeaking Vietnamese ethnic culture, roots, and history, Vuong chooses to "empower" his community ("Amanpour and Company," 00:02:06).

Drawing on the failures of the white, heterosexual and patriarchal men of America, Vuong self-consciously affirms his otherness as a queer writer of color, speaking from the terrain of otherness and rejecting castration by the forces that victimized his mother and grandmother. As he comes to witness the wounds on her mother's psyche, however, he starts to forgive her and accompanies her to overcome the social and cultural barriers that increase her emotional tension. He puts, "[a]ll 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" (231). In his interview with Amanpour and Company, Vuong emphasizes the critical role of writing in his life saying, "writing helped me understand that although you can technically be a victim, . . . whether you will live in victimhood or not is up to you. We can't change what happens to us; we can change how we live in order to have a successful life" (00:12:44-00:13:10). Through his writing, he tries to transform the resentment he harbors into something fruitful, proving that anger can be hopeful and instrumental in reconciliation and healing.

The Vietnamese American Experience and Intergenerational Trauma

In December 2018, *The Atlantic* magazine announced that Vietnam war refugees in America were under threat of deportation for the Trump administration declared that "Vietnamese immigrants who arrived in the country before the establishment of diplomatic ties between the United States and Vietnam are subject to standard immigration law" (Dunst and Calamur). To put it simply, the US was engaging in an effort to repeal a 2008 bilateral agreement between Vietnam and the United States that would mean deporting Vietnamese refugees and immigrants who came to the United States before 1995. Despite his growing fame as a writer and academic, Vuong is highly uncomfortable with the current developments regarding his people. On the government's step towards identifying Vietnamese refugees and immigrants as "violent-crime aliens," Vuong voices his objection by saying that "[t]hose are my people! We come from a troubled history, and with such trauma come problems. It's unfair to penalize a community for an affliction exacerbated by this country's participation in the Vietnam conflict" (González). Saying this, Vuong points to the intervention of

the US in Vietnam that precipitated the Southeast Asian refugee diaspora.

During the time, the conflict in the Southeast Asia sparked heated debates beyond the Pacific Ocean within the context of the ideological conflict between the United States and Soviet Union. When American institutions engaged in an effort to prove their "superiority" to that of Soviet institutions through "masculine power, diplomatic and military assertiveness, . . . and patriotism" (Winter 331) the debates took another dimension and un/support turned into a test of American men's manhood in the US which included the elderly, young, men and women depending on their stance on the war. With the support of baby boomer parents who were raised with traditional definitions of manhood, the government's post war policies led American men to construct "a masculinity based on martial virtues" (Kimmel 196). This incongruous correlation in wartime, specifically for white, middle-class, heterosexual men, drove many of them to engage in an aggressive willingness to support the war which ultimately resulted in the US involvement in Vietnam.

However, in 1975, the fall of Saigon marked not only the end of Vietnam War but it also started the Vietnamese refugee flow into the United States that would last for nearly three decades. Under various evacuation programs, the U.S. seemingly saved thousands of Vietnamese lives in a war that it shares a great responsibility for its acceleration and exile. During the 2000s, the group became one of the largest Asian American immigrant groups after the Chinese and Filipinos (Zhou and Bankston 1). On the other hand, Yen Le Espiritu underlines, the images of the soldiers' which depict seemingly benevolent attitude toward "Vietnamese evacuees" in those years or the complacent look on Vietnamese people's faces in the pictures obscures the critical reality: "the majority of Americans did not welcome the refugees' arrival" (*Body Counts* 34). They were critical, however, in terms of "recuperate[ing] the veterans' and thus U.S. failure of masculinity" (104). Serving as "a visible reminder of the war" (144), Vietnamese in the U.S. are associated with the war, which culminates an "American's racialized understanding of 'Vietnam' and its people" (145).

Vuong depicts the reflections of the US government's contrived benevolence with including his mother's cautious warning into his narrative: "'Remember,'" you said each morning before we stepped out in

cold Connecticut air, "'don't draw attention to yourself. You're already Vietnamese'" (*On Earth* 219). From the preceding lines, one can state that the Vietnamese experience in America has a social and systematic aspect that is based on discrimination and hostility even towards a Vietnamese child. Deciphering his mother's words for the reader, Vuong states that his "goal is to be invisible" ("Amanpour and Company" 00:03:59-00:04:00). He continues, saying "that's very strange for a mother to tell the child to disappear, go out and you go on go out there and disappear. . . . If you stay out of the limelight you can get by do your work make a living quietly" (04:03-04:15). His anger dissolves as he writes because he notices his mother's effort to protect him with a motherly instinct.

The caution of Little Dog's mother discloses not only the awareness of the probable psychological and physical damage but also the low self-esteem and an acceptance of socially assigned inferiority by the colonized women. "Caught in the relay between 'benevolent' colonial interventions and national liberation struggles" the subaltern, to use Spivak's term, "cannot speak" (Didur and Heffernan 3). As Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in America, they are always under threat either by the US government or Americans themselves. As seen in his mother's warning, even nearly four decades after the war, American people are still not ready to adopt racially tolerant behavior towards these people. The supposedly inclusive settlement policies, which Aguilar-San Juan refers to as "'calculated kindness'" is to announce Vietnamese success in America "'a triumph for democracy,'" and it does not impede "prejudice and racial lumping" towards Vietnamese Americans in their everyday life (44). The conditions they lived within all walks of life made Vietnamese targets of racial stereotypes. Accordingly, "[l]ike a child being torn between two divorcing (or married) parents, the subaltern are silenced even when attempting to speak" (Maggio 425).

Internalized racism takes a heavy toll on not only first but also second-generation Vietnamese. Little Dog's experiences of discriminatory behavior extend to his early childhood years. For instance, he is physically bullied by his peers at school bus who force him to speak English. Unable to handle the situation as a child, he submits and fulfills their demands. He could reflect his helpless situation only by ceaselessly stomping his feet in the seat. At this point, looking at the red lights in the soles of his shoes, Little Dog resembles his feet

to "world's smallest ambulances" which were "going nowhere" (25). The scene is significant in terms of displaying the extent of destruction on a child's psyche. When he says it to his mother, she forces him to resolve it on his own, arguing that he has English to protect himself. In other words, beginning from his childhood, Little Dog is preached to be resilient to handle insecurity targeting his small body. His mother responds to incident by saying "[y]ou have to be a real boy and be strong" (26).

Stuart Hall explains the immigrant/migrant subject's inclination to affirm his/her status as the Other by his idea of otherness as "an inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 226). Through various channels of power and representation, the Western regimes drive the individual to acknowledge his/her socially imposed subordination (226). It is safe to assume that Vuong's mother identifies strength as an attribute of rugged American masculinity and believes that physical strength would enable his son to overcome the oppression. After that day, she forces Little Dog to drink a large glass of "American" milk every day, hoping that he will grow taller (27). In their familial struggle to fight against oppression, his mother desperately builds her hope on the strength that white fluid; the milk will deliver.

> "Drink," you said, your lips pouted with pride. "This is American milk so you're gonna grow a lot. No doubt about it."
>
> I drank so much of that cold milk it grew tasteless on my numbed tongue. Each morning, after that, we'd repeat this ritual; the milk poured with a thick white braid, I'd drink it down, gulping, making sure you could see, both of us hoping the whiteness vanishing into me would make more of a yellow boy. (27)

Rose's illiteracy also plays a determinative role in her internalizing racial oppression combined with limited opportunities in the public sphere. Working in a manicure salon, Rose, as a mixed-raced, refugee woman exemplifies the public space reserved for the subaltern minorities. She has to endure low-quality jobs that confine her and her family to a low socioeconomic status. In this sense, their disadvantage in the work domain curbs Vietnamese's access to ideal living standards and constitutes a site where gender and race oppression intersect. These social inequalities are also transmitted through various channels,

mainly, social interactions as it is clearly illustrated in manicure salon scenes in one of which Little Dog elaborates on the meanings of "sorry." The word "sorry"

> [n]o 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, . . . (even) when one has no fault, is worth every self-deprecating syllable the mouth allows. Because the mouth must eat. (original emphasis, 91-92)

Accepting their subordination becomes a strategy for finding a place in the social hierarchy as the Other: "The subaltern can speak as long as they speak in a "language" that is already recognized by the dominant culture of the West" (Maggio 431). In other words, their sociocultural adjustment and, indeed, their ideological surrender regulate their lives within White hegemony structures. As Kibria notes, financial insecurity becomes an undesired aspect of Vietnamese families' lives (74). While economic deprivation shapes Vietnamese American self-perception, their prevailing treatment as gender and racial inferiors also leads them to accept inferior social positions and the superiority of the white.

Moreover, the supermarket scene where Rose uses bodily gestures to tell the butcher that she wants to buy "oxtail" illustrates how the subaltern refugee is marginalized due to her lack of English. Vuong says, [b]ut he [the butcher] only laughed, his hand over his mouth at first, then louder, booming" (*On Earth* 30). Being embarrassed, they give up and buy bread and mayonnaise instead. From that point onward, Little Dog, as a child, who does not know the meaning of "oxtail" in English at the time, becomes the guardian angel of his family, devoting himself to improve their lives, to the extent that he, as the only English-speaking member of his family, calls his mother's boss as a child to reduce her working hours, and he succeeds.

Speaking of the language barrier, Little Dog refers to his mother's education life in Vietnam that is cut short by the napalm bombs destroying her school building during an airstrike when she is only five. Coming to the US, Rose and Grandma Lan's incompetence, or

possibly their disinclination to learn English indicates another fraught dimension of the adaptation process connected with the war memories. Her inadequacy in learning English partly results from the trauma that somehow discourages her to make an effort to learn it. Despite her relatively fair skin being Amerasian, Rose cannot fit in as Little Dog writes, "[o]ne does not 'pass' in America, it seems, without English" (52). He constantly tries to overcome the challenges they, especially his mother, come across in their daily life due to being a stranger to language. Neumann explains Little Dog's being "his mother's representative" as the transformation of the English language into an institution cementing the acculturation of Little Dog's family into American ways of living (290). Learning English becomes a kind of shield that protects Little Dog and his family from intersecting oppressions of race and social class.

In this vein, color/ism has an extensive place in Vuong's narrative. "When we arrived in America in 1990, color was one of the first things we knew of yet knew nothing about" (51). With an effort to reveal the impact of color on his family, Little Dog traces his mother's suffering into her childhood. Rose is the daughter of a white American serviceman who is sent as a naval destroyer to Vietnam. Leaving her arranged marriage when she is seventeen, Granma Lan tries to survive in Vietnam doing sex work. However, for Rose, being a product of mixed-race constitutes a disadvantage in Vietnam since as "a half-white child in Go Cong, which meant the children called her ghost-girl, called Lan a traitor and a whore for sleeping with the enemy" (61). She is bullied violently by her Vietnamese peers who cut her red-brown hair in the street, throwing buffalo shit on her "to make her brown again, as if to be born lighter was a wrong that could be reversed" (61). Her light skin, however, does not enable her to fully integrate to larger society in America without learning language. The in-betweenness of her Vietnamese American identity causes immense distress on her already low self-esteem and psychological distress, which is also reflected in her using physical force on Little Dog.

Aside from the challenges of the assimilation process and racism, the Vietnamese people suffered from "nightmares, depression, antisocial behavior, and posttraumatic stress disorders" that still trouble Americans and Vietnamese Americans today (Zhou and Bankston 4). The cumulative trauma of Little Dog's mother manifests itself in the form of toxic femininity. Inserting the scenes of violence by her mother

throughout his narrative, Little Dog poetically writes about his mother's throwing lego box at his head, chasing him with the kitchen knife, locking him in the basement, beating him for finding the house messy "after overtime at the clock factory" (Vuong, *On Earth* 101). In one of those instances, she takes Little Dog to McDonalds as a gesture of apology. At this point, Little Dog's exposure to violence can be interpreted as a release of traumatic memory which is hard to be suppressed and rotates throughout generations. The feeling of nonbelonging either to her country Vietnam or the US, also intensifies her feelings of frustration, powerlessness and anger.

Initially unaware, Little Dog exemplifies the impact of persistent war memories on his mother's psyche as he recalls a memory in which his mother has a breakdown after he, as a child, intending to prank his mother screamed "boom" behind her back. Emphasizing his naivety as a child, he says, "I was an American boy parroting what I saw on TV. I didn't know that the war was still inside you" (4). In another instance, he finds his mother at a late hour of the night in kitchen, checking her tips to buy "'a secret bunker'" for her fear of a possible terrorist attack when President Bush declared war on Iraq in 2003 (86). Yen Le Espiritu explains it by stating "[f]or the children of survivors and witnesses of the Vietnam War, these [kinds of] episodes confirm that the war is ever-present for their parents, whether they speak about it or not" (*Body Counts* 148). Although she survives, Rose is haunted by the trauma, and she exerts her hidden injuries, usually through violence. Furthermore, her mental distress sometimes drives Rose to show schizophrenia signs which is apparent when she hastily sets off to save her sister Mai from her abusive husband though Mai has moved to Florida five years ago. As a way to cope with her emotional pain, she unconsciously detaches from reality, confusing the past and the present.

Little Dog's psyche is also shaped by war trauma, escape, her racial ambiguity and poverty in the US. The misery of his primary caretakers shatters his hopes and sense of self: "I'm dragged into a hole, darker than the night around it, by two women. Only when one of them screams do I know who I am" (*On Earth* 67). His despair evidently indicates the transmission of "intergenerational tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions of Vietnamese American lives." (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 165). Out of desperation, he runs away from home at ten, as an attempt to defend himself as a child. Not knowing where to go, he

climbs a tree until his grandma finds and persuades him to return home. To comfort her grandchild, Little Dog, she pours out unarticulated yet bitter truth about herself and her daughter: "'Your mom. . . . She pain. She hurt. But she . . . love[s] you, Little Dog. But she sick. Sick like me. In the brains'" (Vuong, *On Earth* 122).

On the other hand, his grandmother's way of expressing trauma occurs though storytelling. Periodically, she asks Little Dog to pluck the white hairs from her head, and in those moments, she tries to recover from her sorrow, pain, and losses telling her grandchild, "Help me, Little Dog . . . Help me stay young, get this snow off of my life—get it all off my life" (Vuong, *On Earth* 23). Turning it into a ritual, Little Dog listens to the confessions and stories from her grandma's fragmented memory related to her years in Vietnam "[b]ecause denial, fabrication—storytelling—was her way of staying one step ahead of her life, how could any of us tell her she was wrong?" (197).

Upon her escape from her husband, who is thirty-four years older than her, Lan comes to Saigon, with her daughter from her first marriage. To feed her daughter, Lan begins engaging in sex work with the US soldiers. Falling in love with Paul, a US navy serviceman, she marries him two months after meeting him in a bar. Little Dog specifically notes that he was not her client, but her romantic partner. Thinking that Paul is his biological grandfather, Little Dog confronts the disturbing truth when he is nine. He learns that his grandmother was already four months pregnant with his mother when they met: "The father, the real one, was just another American john—faceless, nameless, less" (55). Until he learns the truth about Paul, Little Dog is consoling himself with the thought that he has a tangible connection to the US relying on Paul's physical presence in his life. He abruptly tumbles to the fact that he has actually never had a genetic/hereditary linkage to America. He says, "[u]p 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 (55). Although he later comes to the resolution that one does not necessarily share a blood line to call someone "grandpa" as a child, Little Dog feels like losing the thin string that provides him with a partial psychological comfort in identifying his individuality, family and nation.

At this point, Vuong's diaspora experience, to put it in Hall's terms, can be explained through "the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through not despite, difference; by hybridity" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 235). Despite knowing that Paul chose his family in America over Grandma Lan in Vietnam, his search for belonging through Paul symbolizes Vuong's desire to negotiate identity as a displaced person and get in touch with his "'lost origins'" (Hall 236). On the other hand, Hall's concept of "hybridity" as a position within "the centre" and "sufficiently outside it" provides a "double consciousness," space for Vuong to exercise his agency through writing and deal with his feeling estrangement as an insider/outsider (qtd. in Voicu 172).

To Little Dog, Grandma Lan and Rose are survivors but they are "already weighted with ghosts" (13). To put it another way, they are overwhelmingly burdened with the unspoken memories of life and war in Vietnam. In his interview with Nyugen, Vuong conveys that her storytelling "becomes an architecture for remembering and preserving, and ultimately, an act of inheritance" ("Falling Better"). Her ghost stories turn out to be the history Vuong, and Little Dog in the novel, is looking for because

> [s]he's telling a ghost story, but all of a sudden, now there are bombs, now there are gunshots, now there's a house on fire. Now, where did your mother come from? What did I do when I met your mother's father? Where do your aunts come from? There was this village over here, and over there, there was this girl. All of a sudden, we're back into that world, these blank walls of Hartford became this sort of time capsule. ("Falling Better")

Through her turbulent mind, Grandma Lan proves that there exists "different ways of knowing and writing the history" for Vuong (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 20). As Spivak puts it, "[w]hen a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road toward hegemony" (*A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason* 319). Writing about trauma, with the help of transmission of memory and history, guides Vuong to carve out a space for themselves as the subaltern. In doing so, he transforms the silence and suffering of the subaltern refugee woman into an emancipatory experience.

Masculinity and Gender Role Reversals

In one of his interviews, Ocean Vuong bitterly talks about his uncle who, a few years older than him, commits suicide after being exposed to insulting expressions in the nail salon where he works. The expressions include, "[w]hat a shame, he would be … He's so young, what a waste…This is someone…I'm sorry" ("Failing Better"). As this tragic event demonstrates, the adjustment process turns out to be a sour experience for Asian men in the US, and in this particular case, for his toxic father who eventually ends up writing to Little Dog from prison.

Espiritu declares that the history of Asian American men in the US is marked by systematic racism, primarily based on their effeminized manhood (*Men's Lives* 17). Being recruited to work in feminized occupations as cooks, laundrymen or domestic service before WWII, Chinese and Japanese men were the first victims of their Asian communities since they were excluded from white male privilege. Their association with domestic labor and the internment of Japanese Americans during the WWII, led the forthcoming Filipino and Korean men similarly to be positioned as disadvantaged groups. As Espiritu maintains, "in the economic hierarchy" they were treated as members of "an inferior race" (18). She explains their subordinate status saying, "not all men benefit equally from patriarchy. . . [and white] men share unequally in the fruits of this domination" (19).

The internment experience, further, symbolized a permanent change in terms of the gender roles for present and future Asian immigrant families in the US. Though leaving the camps behind, the Japanese men lost "the status and authority" on their family members and eventually had to exchange their breadwinner roles with Asian women (Espiritu, *Men's Lives* 20). The involuntary deprivation of power caused some Issei men to resort to domestic violence towards their children and wives who were providing financial support for their families. When it comes to the 1970s, the socioeconomic state of America created discontent in Americans against Vietnamese refugees, whom they felt would bring "an added drain on already over-burdened public assistance rolls" (Montero 625). Moreover, due to their lack of portable or "transferrable skills" they constituted "another largely disadvantaged group" in America (Espiritu, *Men's Lives* 22). Their status did not change in the 1980s, 90s, or 2000s and had its reflections in the form of desperation, hopelessness, and violence in families. Their insuffi-

ciency in skills and education came to mean low-skill and low-wage occupations for Asian American men who, again involuntarily, had to leave their already disadvantaged jobs to Asian American women. As Espiritu argues, "[t]his is due in part to the decline of male-occupied manufacturing jobs and the concurrent growth of female-intensive industries in the United States, particularly in service, microelectronics, and apparel manufacturing" (*Men's Lives* 22).

The clear shift in gender roles and thereby Asian American men and women's authority and power corresponded to "a source of tension and change in the relations of Vietnamese American men and women" (Kibria 109). Growing weary of their negative socioeconomic conditions at the time, Vietnamese men started to fight with the feeling of inferiority not only in social hierarchy but also in terms of their degraded position in the family. In this regard, the notion of gender expectation lost its validity for Asian communities when women compulsorily started to take their position in the public sphere. In America, where the idea of hegemonic masculinity is intricately grounded in material success, it is seen that Asian men direct their nervousness and tension, arising from failure, toward their family members, particularly their spouses. In this sense, the experience of Vietnamese men implicates the intersections of racism, class and gender, as was the case with other Asian men in previous years.

Coming from a war-torn territory with his war-traumatized family members, Little Dog's father apparently goes through a crisis of masculinity due to the prevailing "feeling of emasculation [among the Asian American men] in America" (Espiritu, *Men's Lives* 19). His lack of qualification and education prevents him from having a proper job in the US and makes it difficult for him to integrate into American society. He exerts his feeling of entrapment through violence towards his wife, Rose. The disappointment and frustration probably increase after they have came to US as Little Dog recalls, "I remember walking with you [his mother] to the grocery store, my father's wages in your hands. How, by then, he had beaten you only twice—which meant there was still hope it would be the last" (Vuong, *On Earth* 221). It is evident that downward mobility and limited access to the economic sources constitute tension among Vietnamese couples, making their family life in America more complicated (Kibria 109). Little Dog recounts his witnessing his mother's abuse in the hands of the father for the first time saying that "[s]till a toddler, the boy laughs, believing they are dancing

. . . it was not until the blood ran from his mother's nose . . . that he started to scream" (Vuong, *On Earth* 115). His mother is saved by his grandmother and people from the neighborhood.

Vuong explains his father's entrapment and anger stating, "the society and the culture have created a space where he can no longer perform [his masculinity] in it" ("Failing Better"). The US' government's military involvement in Vietnam seemingly saved many lives, yet it relegated South East Asian men, women and children to the outside of American dream. Asian men's failure to achieve it due to various forms of oppression came to indicate something beyond an individual defeat; a deficiency for attaining much-praised white heterosexual masculinity as an ultimate/ideal model. Not detailing his father's depression, Little Dog mentions his father's happiness when his son is born; "'[m]y son will be the leader of Vietnam' he shouted" but then as he continues "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" (Vuong, *On Earth* 21). After coming to the US, his insecurities are coupled with the tension of his decreasing power in the US, seem to push him to the margins of society as Little Dog briefly mentions a letter by his father, sent from prison. As a result, he defines his father's presence over absence, putting that "[i]n my Hartford, . . . fathers were phantoms, dipping in and out of their children's lives, like my own father" (213).

In this vein, the financial hardships of Vietnamese families in America are a major issue in Vuong's book as exemplified from their poor conditions. Among the low-paid occupations, his mother finds a job in a nail saloon where long working hours and dreary conditions symbolize the subaltern refugee experience in America. As a child, Little Dog is highly aware of the restricted opportunities offered for his people: "A new immigrant, within two years, will come to know that the salon is, in the end, a place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones—with or without citizenship—aching, toxic, and underpaid" (80-81). Besides the responsibilities of being a single mother, Rose's physical and emotional exhaustion greatly contributes to her depression. The employees, however, benefited from their desperate situation, being well aware of the scarcity of their options. Their "gender logic" in the words of Espiritu, "was informed by the patriarchal and racist beliefs that women can afford to work for less, do not mind dead-end jobs, and are more

suited physiologically to certain kinds of detailed" (*Men's Lives* 22). It seems that their idea preserves its validity up to 2000s. In 2006, *Nails* magazine announces that "Vietnamese now make up 80 percent of the California's licensed manicurists, and about 45 percent of manicurists nationwide" (qtd. in Bates).

When he is fourteen, Little Dog also starts to work in a tobacco farm outside Hartford where he mostly works with other disadvantaged groups such as Latinos. While he offers glimpses of their poverty throughout the narrative, through some examples such as their having to eat only eggs for the whole week since they cannot afford rent, a conversation with Trevor, his white American lover in the tobacco farm, summarizes the discrepancy in conditions of a White and Vietnamese teenager in America. While for Trevor, the topics of their conversation consists of "his guns, of school, how he might drop out, how the Colt factory in Windsor might be hiring again . . . the next game out on Xbox, his old man, his old man's drinking," on Little Dog's side, the talk is going over "you, [his mother] about your nightmares, your loosening mind" as Trevor's face troubled as he listened" (Vuong, *On Earth* 99). For the Vietnamese, Little Dog, his mother's deteriorating mental health in the face of war and ethnicity related struggles are at the center of his life.

Moreover, Little Dog recounts his first queer love story through his romantic relationship with Trevor who is a poor white American boy. Living with his alcoholic and dysfunctional father whose tendency to use medication eventually makes him a heroin addict, Trevor is also an addict of OxyContin, developing it as a cure for his psychological problems. During their first sexual intercourse, Little Dog blames himself for "taint[ing]" Trevor with his "faggotry" (203). He later finds consolation in their love, owning and acceptance of his feelings towards Trevor. Trevor, on the other hand, denies his sexual orientation and distances himself from his queer experience. Little Dog explains his attitude saying, "Trevor, being who he was, raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity" (203). In a way, they both attempt to cure their wounded manhood stemming from their low socioeconomic status and dysfunctional families. However, Trevor's internalization of the supremacy of White heterosexuality and Little Dog's internalization of the emasculated position of Asian American men in American society influence the course of their relationship. While Trevor asserts his masculinity through his sexual domination, Little Dog acts more

submissively (Hadley). Trevor sees homosexuality as a disease and thinks that he "will be good in a few years" (Vuong, *On Earth* 188). Five years after leaving his dead-end relationship and toxic household in Hartford, Little Dog learns that Trevor has died from a drug overdose.

In this regard, Vuong's work can be examined as a reflection of the traumatic consequences of the systematic exclusion of South East Asian groups from the mainstream. Through his work, he reveals the entrapment of refugee people in low socioeconomic status, including his family, by negotiating their many layered anxieties and insecurities. Being deprived of the privileges socially constructed hegemonic masculinity particularly in terms of economic sufficiency, Asian men had to live through their failure in achieving it, taking on their frustration on their families. On the other hand, in the face of fragile nature of hegemonic masculinities, Vuong finds "his queerness as a source of strength in the way he thinks about the world" ("Be Bold"). Exposing their sex scenes explicitly, Vuong attempts to normalize being a queer as opposed to the homophobic groups which seek to disempower and frighten queer lives. At this point, Vuong's way of tackling his homosexual identity as a Vietnamese American appears as an effort to subvert the power assigned to white heterosexual patriarchy. As is the case in Trevor, the denial of same-sex attraction does not prevent one from falling short of the narrow scope of ideal American manhood or guarantee of being a participant in it. Considering Vuong's apparent success in literary world, however, an alternative model of manhood does not necessarily end up in failure.

Conclusion

In *Body Counts,* Espiritu underscores that there should be "a necessary retelling of their [Vietnamese] history, lest it be further forgotten by the American public and/or the next generation of Vietnamese Americans" (79). Viewed from this perspective, it is safe to assume that the past continues to haunt Vuong until teh present day. However, as a member of postwar generation, he does not give up feeding on those painful memories to create a powerful narrative in which he reveals the devastating impacts of the Vietnamese War, particularly on Vietnamese women and children. From a multigenerational aspect, Vuong exposes

underlying psychological processes regarding the Vietnamese women's struggles against the war trauma and his own struggle as a queer Vietnamese man in America. Without exploiting the victim trope, very much associated with the Vietnamese American experience, he proves that recovery is possible despite the stereotypical representation of Vietnamese Americans as victims at the mercy of the U.S. benevolence.

For the Vietnamese refugees and immigrants, the war continued as they have to resist race, gender, and economic disparities in America. As a second-generation Vietnamese member, Vuong manages to communicate the transmission of war memories and these systematic oppressions aiming at Vietnamese presence in America. The overlapping oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality do not deter Vuong from presenting a decisive stance against "damaged American fathers" (24).

Against all forces impairing Vietnamese experience in America, he survives while his psyche is shaped by war trauma, poverty, and various forms of oppression. Not concealing his deep resentment against his toxic mother, Vuong opts to write with an attempt to reconcile. As he says, "[y]ou're a mother, Ma. You're also a monster. But so am I—which is why I can't turn away from you" (*On Earth* 14). On the one hand, Vuong opens his narrative writing that "Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (3). On the other hand, in his interview, he says, "[i]t was an attempt to see if language can really be a bridge, as it is often aspired to be" ("Inside the Book," 00:00:23-00:00.31). Taking these quotes into consideration, one can state that Vuong tries to bridge this "gap" since writing enables him to put his intergenerational trauma for possibly a cathartic effect. Moreover, as one of "the fruit[s] of violence" he resists to "spoil."

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