Hybrid Monstrosity: Reading Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* as a Border-Crossing Representation of Trauma

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Abstract

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous (2019 is a semi-autographical account loosely based on the author's own childhood experiences as a Vietnamese immigrant in the US. Written in the form of a letter from a son to his mother, the novel seeks to come to terms with the traumatic past the narrator has inherited from the maternal figures in his life. I argue that the novel expands on the trope of 'the monster', exploring the hybridity present in the term through cultural and intergenerational trauma, and suggesting that, as a hybrid signal, "monstrosity" becomes a moral category that may classify you inside a collective or regard you as the 'Other'. Besides, the use of formal and textual monstrosity serves as a metaphorical doorway to enter the core of Little Dog's traumatic memories, a clever way to exhibit a family that is entrapped in an intergenerational traumatic experience that does not allow them to move forward. The aim of this dissertation is to explore Little Dog's border-crossing identity and assert the necessity of blurring the borders of literary genres, chronological time and language in order to fully represent the complexity of war, diaspora and intergenerational trauma.

Keywords: Monstrosity, borders, the Other, hybridity, intergenerational trauma, self-representation

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1. Introduction

"In minutes, I became more of myself. Which is to say the monstrous part of me got so large, so familiar, I could want it. I could kiss it."

Vuong, 2019: 176

The term "monster" has traditionally been associated with unnatural, frightening creatures that pose a threat to society. If we rely on Gothic fiction,[1] the monster is a devious being that lives outside the community, an entity that terrorises human life in some way and that is, most importantly, not human. However, as professor Stephen Asma claims, the term *monster* is a "flexible, multiuse concept" (2009: 7). Expanding on this idea, Dauber asserts that what is interesting about monsters is that their creation is both a social and cultural process (2014: VIII). In this dissertation, I will borrow the nineteenth-century gothic concept of 'the monster', understanding monstrosity as an entity that invades the subject's life,[2] and apply it to my reading of Ocean Vuong's *On Earth* (2019). In order to do so, I will build my thesis upon contemporary criticism of gothic fiction and, more specifically, on contemporary readings of the gothic trope of 'the monster'. Expanding closely on these readings, I will argue that, in the novel, the concept of

[1] Classic examples of gothic fiction that deal with the trope of the monster would be Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818/1831), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) or Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

[2] In the late nineteenth-century neo-gothic English tradition, there is an "intermediate phase of development" of the concept of 'monstrosity' that can be clearly seen in novels such as *R. L.* Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) or in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). In these novels, the traditional gothic monster, which is othered and distinct from society, and thus separated from it, is transformed into an entity that no longer occupies a specific physical place, but actually invades the individual's space and life. The suspicion or fear of the outsider/other is a continuing concern of the contemporary gothic. Vuong, although he is a 21st century writer, seems to explore the same pressing fear as seen in Stevenson or Wilde: the realization that the monster might be much closer to home, or even within the self. In other words, the Gothic trope of the 'distant and distinct otherness' is adapted and made so close to the self that it might actually be inside it.

monstrosity is essentially associated with the conflicted identity of the narrator, with trauma representation and therefore, inevitably, that it will be a key tool to analyse the border-crossing aesthetics in the text. I will therefore rely on the concept of monstrosity as an expression of vulnerability and apply it both to the analysis of the text, which consists of different parts sewn together and therefore resembles Frankenstein's monster in form, and to the study of the narrator and protagonist, who feels alienated from society's expectations.

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous, Ocean Vuong's debut novel, is a semi-autographical account loosely based on the author's own childhood experiences as a Vietnamese American. Written in the form of a letter from a son to his mother, the novel seeks to come to terms with the traumatic past that the author has inherited from the maternal figures in his life: although the protagonist was just two years old when his family fled to the US, both his mother and grandmother were physically and emotionally scarred during the Vietnam War and the ripple effects of their traumatic experiences certainly affected him.[3]

The novel is a mixture of fiction, memoir, autobiography and epistolary novel, with poetical traces that link everything together. Taking the literary complexity of the text into account, I argue that this novel crosses and blurs the borders of literary genres, of temporal experience —as it does not follow a chronological order of events— and even of language itself, in order to fully represent the conflicted identity of the narrator as a

[3] The Vietnam War was a long, horrendous conflict between North and South Vietnam that soon became aggravated by the Cold War between communist and capitalist powers. North Vietnam, which was communist, was backed up by the Soviet Union and China, while South Vietnam's main ally would be the United States. In the almost twenty years of conflict, from 1955 to 1975, it is estimated that more than 3 million people died and many others, like the protagonist's mother and grandmother, fled the country and resettled elsewhere.

result of his "inherited" experience of war, diaspora and trauma[4]. In this respect, I will claim that it is an example of what Gilmore defines as a 'limit case narrative', a story that explores the inevitable combination of autobiography with other literary genres when the representation of trauma involves self-representation (2001: 5).

Although this epistolary novel cannot be considered gothic, and I do not intend to imply otherwise, I believe that it expands on the previously mentioned trope of 'monstrosity'. Through a depiction of the narrator's cultural and intergenerational trauma, *On Earth* explores the hybridity of the term 'monster', and suggests that, as a hybrid signal, "monstrosity" becomes an identity giver, a moral category that classifies oneself inside a minority group. In the case of the author and of the narrator, both belong to the minority group of Asian Americans. For example, in *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (2002), Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that "Asian Americans can frequently occupy both situations—that is to say the model minority discourse and the bad subject discourse—simultaneously or, at the very least alternate between them" (144). In fact, the narrator himself uses the term 'hybrid' to define monstrosity in terms of his Asian American experience: "to be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once" (13). Along the same lines, Marina Werner states in *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time* (1994) that "the word *monstrum* has come under the influence of Latin *monstrare*, to show" (31), which contributes to the idea that monsters both make something evident and that they "issue a warning" (1994: 31). In other words, the notion acts both as a vessel of safety, of belonging somewhere, and as a

[4] Other works by Vietnamese authors that deal with issues of war and intergenerational trauma and with their representation are *The Mountains Sing* (2020) by Phan Que Mai Nguyen, *The Refugees* (2017) and *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016) by Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Family in Six Tones: A refugee Mother, an American Daughter* (2020) or *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014) by Lan Cao, and *Things We Lost to the Water* (2021) by Eric Nguyen, among others.

life sentence, an invisible border that deems us as the *Other*. The mixture of literary genres also enhances the feeling that this story is, both formally and textually, made up of different fragments, which inevitably remits us to Mary Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein* (1818/1831).

The hybridity that is present in *On Earth* is reflected in the stream-of-consciousness-like overview of memories coming not only from the narrator's past, but also from that of his family. The novel presents instances that show the narrator as a child, as a teenager and also as a mere imaginary spectator of the traumatic instances he has been told about by his own grandmother and mother, travelling back and forth between Vietnam and the US. In my own view, Vuong uses this non-chronological presentation of events to evoke the timelessness of trauma. Although life and time move on, trauma remains a constant in the narrator's life, an entity that keeps coming back to haunt him. The text is made up of different pieces in the sense that it is a story composed of different stories, different languages and different genres, all their complexities working together in order to convey the complexity of trauma in itself.

Language is a key element in the novel. Throughout the story, language is both a border and a vehicle to cross borders. Language is, therefore, also a hybrid phenomenon. The narrator uses language both as a healing mechanism and as a mask, as it is something that conceals him in American society and partially 'erases' his 'otherness' and that, at the same time, is the only tool he has to address the unresolved trauma that he has inherited. Following poststructuralist approaches such as Cathy Caruth's (1995, 1996) or Dominick LaCapra's (1994, 2001), it might be argued that Gothic and trauma narratives are characterised by gaps and aporias (Caruth, 1995: 36), that is to say, internal contradictions, and that this is something that the novel's narrator reveals through his use of language. The aporia of representation lies in the idea that it is inconceivable to fully

represent a traumatic experience, but, at the same time, that language is the only tool to represent it.

The narrator also acts as the linguistic bridge between his mother and the outside world in the US and, in turn, the English language is the narrator's tool to navigate his hybrid identity as a Vietnamese American. Moreover, his prose is both narrative and lyric, formal and colloquial. Although languages can create borders between people from different countries and cultures, Vuong seems to create a way of expressing himself that unites, both different genres and languages by acting as a translator. Little Dog acts as a literal translator between his mother and the American world, but he is also a translator in a more metaphorical sense. As Madelaine Hron claims, "immigrants find themselves figuratively 'translating' into citizens of the host country", as a process of adapting to their new homeland (2009: xv). In *On Earth*, Little Dog navigates through the language and culture he has inherited and the new one in the US, and very often reflects on linguistic differences between English and Vietnamese. He specially uses linguistic gaps, words that do not have a direct translation and therefore lose part of their meaning in the other language, to establish that his existence is hybrid. He cannot be simply contained in the terms 'Vietnamese', 'migrant' or 'American'. In order to fully see him and understand him, one has to go beyond the limitations of each language, to complement what he can express in Vietnamese and what he can tell in English. In my analysis, I will assert that Vuong uses language and literary elasticity[5] as the method to represent the search for one's identity as a migrant and also to deal with traumatic heritage.

[5] The term 'literary elasticity' can be used to describe the reshaping and combination of conventional literary genres. In Vuong, conventional literary genres become 'elastic', in the sense that he stretches the borders of autobiography, poetry and fiction and combines them in one novel.

Methodologically, I will mainly rely on the field of Trauma Studies, focusing on critical works dealing with the issues of war trauma, intergenerational trauma and post-memory. Trauma Studies emerged in the 1980s and not only focus on psychological trauma, but are also interested in how trauma is represented or conveyed through language and literary works. In order to offer theoretical background on the problem of representing trauma in contemporary literature, I will rely on Marita Nadal and Mónica Calvo's *Trauma in Contemporary Literature: Narrative and Representation* (2014). I will also draw from Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001), which explores and challenges the limits of autobiography when representing one's own trauma. As my analysis will focus on how the novel crosses borders in order to fully convey the author's inherited traumatic experience, I will use Gilmore's perception of limit-case narratives to explain that *On Earth* mixes literary genres (autobiography, fiction, history, epistolary) so as to truly represent trauma.

Along the same lines, Hein Viljoen's volume *Crossing Borders, Dissolving Boundaries* (2013) explores the idea that borders separate, but that can also connect the self and the other. Boundaries establish differences and divisions among two entities and, yet, it is precisely in that border "where communication and exchange can take place" (Viljoen, 2013: XIV). I believe this idea to be crucial for my analysis of the novel, as it will revolve around the idea of the hybrid nature of borders, and how Vuong uses this to fully convey the narrator's perception of trauma.

Another crucial topic in the field of Trauma Studies is memory, and the role it plays in shaping both individual and cultural identities. Trauma in itself can be understood as a mental condition caused by a severe, painful experience that leads a person to feel shocked, anxious and distressed over a certain period of time. This period of time may vary from weeks, months or even expand over one's whole lifetime. According to

Maurice Apprey, trauma implies the "shattering of the ego" (2019: 339) and has as the main consequence the "distortion of ego functions" (2019: 339). That is to say, trauma affects the victim's psyche and prevents the individual from being capable of living in normal conditions. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association defined this condition as 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD). Bearing this in mind, studies that focus on memory related to trauma explore how these traumatic memories shape or distort the victims' own perception of the Self and the other. In order to apply this to my own analysis, I will rely on Bond and Rapson's *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders* (2014), as it approaches trauma precisely by focusing on the issue of memory, and also through a 'transcultural' perspective. The transcultural turn mentioned in the volume's title refers to the fact that, in recent years, studies on memory have taken an international and intercultural approach and examine the processes of remembrance moving through and beyond borders. This approach to trauma will play a key role in my dissertation because the narrator —in order to represent his trauma— is not only presented with the challenge of navigating between the limits and borders of his own memory, but also between his two cultures (American and Vietnamese), his two languages and between his home (Vietnam) and his adopted land (US).

Finally, 'monstrosity' will act as a key umbrella term in my dissertation, a metaphor for the text's hybridity that will link the two main aspects that I will analyse from the novel. On the one hand, how the narrator's trauma, both inherited and personal, is explored and represented through textual, temporal and language hybridity. On the other hand, the coming to terms between the self and the Other of the narrator, and how his traumatic heritage affects the construction of his identity. In order to do so, I will divide my analysis in two main parts. The first will deal with how the narrator crosses borders

of literary genres and how, in doing so, the novel formally evokes the idea of hybrid monstrosity. The second part, on the other hand, will analyse how the narrator both explores and comes to terms with his 'otherness' by crossing the borders of the two languages he speaks, Vietnamese and English, and binary identity labels.

2. Textual and Formal Monstrosity: the Complexity of Representing the Traumatised Self

"Ma. You once told me that memory is a choice. But if you were God, you'd know it's a flood".

Vuong, 2019: 78

On Earth is, overall, a journey. It is a journey in which the narrator and protagonist, Little Dog, revisits his life and, most importantly, explores and tries to come to terms with his traumatic heritage. The journey, however, does not have a clear starting point, nor a linear path or final destination. It is a journey with great difficulties and limitations, as it is not a physical road, but a road through memories. Memory, as Ian Hacking argues, is a "powerful tool in quests for understanding, justice, and knowledge" (1995: 3), and Little Dog uses it to learn and reflect on what he has inherited from his past. There is no doubt, therefore, about the pivotal role memory plays in the search for one's past and identity. In this chapter, I intend to demonstrate the complexity of representing trauma by taking a close look at Little Dog's letter to his mother and the journey he takes through his memories, a journey that formally relies on textual monstrosity.

As I have stated in the introduction, the novel is not merely fiction, but a semi-autobiographical account of the author's life, Ocean Vuong. It is an interesting mixture of literary genres that combines and pushes the limits of representation in order to fully convey the experience of remembering. *On Earth* crosses and blurs the borders of literary genres, time and language in order to fully represent the complexity of the aftermath of war, diaspora and intergenerational trauma. Gilmore defines as 'limit case narratives' those stories that explore the inevitable combination of autobiography with other literary genres when the representation of trauma involves self-representation (2001: 5). In this

chapter, I will analyse Vuong's novel as one of Gilmore's limit case narratives, particularly in terms of how the narrator crosses the borders of linear time and literary genres and of how it tests the boundaries between truth and fiction. Moreover, I will take a close look at two key aspects in the novel, trauma and memory, and link them through the concept of 'monstrosity'.

As Niall Scott asserts in *Monsters and the Monstrous* (2007), the figure of the monster is "one of the most significant creations serving to reflect and critique human existence" (2007: 1). Although I will expand on the connection between the monster and otherness in the third chapter of my dissertation, there are certain qualities of monstrosity that can be applied to the analysis of the text. As I have stated in the previous section, the novel is a letter that Little Dog writes to his mother, Rose. The letter has two purposes, which are stated in the first chapter. On the one hand, it seeks to go back in time, to revisit important instances of his life in order to address his past. Although he states that he is "writing to reach you" (3), this 'you' being his mother, it will never be a reality, as she cannot read. Because of this, I believe that what Little Dog means is that he wants to come to terms with what she has been to him. A mother, but also a monster who abused him. Through the journey he takes so as to understand the psychological baggage that life has put on him, he also comes to understand his mother:

> "You're Rose. You're Lan. You're Trevor. As if a name can be more than one thing, deep and wide as a night with a truck idling as its edge, and you can step right out of your cage, where I wait for you. Where, under the stars, we see at last what we've made of each other in the light of long-dead things—and call it good" (217).

The use of the adjective 'good' implies that, in the end, he is able to accept her and forgive her abuse, the "long-dead things" (217) being a past that he is finally ready to leave behind.

On the other hand, with the letter he also seeks to break free. Both purposes are summarised in two metaphors: in the first one, Little Dog talks about the time when they saw a taxidermy figure in a rest stop in Virginia, and Rose, the mother, was horrified at the sight. She tells his son that "a corpse should go away, not get stuck forever like that" (3). Afterwards, Little dog describes taxidermy as the embodiment of "a death that won't finish, a death that keeps dying as we walk past it to relieve ourselves" (3). This might be seen as a perfect metaphorical description of a victim who is captive to trauma. In the second metaphor, Little Dog talks about the migration of the monarch butterflies, about how many of the butterflies that start the voyage die before reaching its destination. He uses the butterflies to convey the fragility of life, as "it only takes a single night of frost to kill off a generation" (4). He writes because living is a matter of time and timing, and he seeks to break free from what has been holding him back from living in the present.

Monstrosity, Asma argues, "is that which exists outside rational coherence" (2009: 251). The idea of the monster is closely linked to a crisis that needs revision, be it a crisis in a civilisation, as in the Greek myth of the Minotaur that tormented Crete, or a monster within the self, as could be the case of Dr Jekyll being possessed by Mr Hyde. In both cases, the presence of monstrosity evinces the existence of something that needs to be addressed by the human being. Hence, the idea of monstrosity is closely linked with the trope of 'the restoration of life' (Putner and Byron, 2004: 165), which consists of eliminating the threat caused by the monster in order to bring life back to normal. Taking this into account, I believe that Vuong's adoption of a non-chronological, fragmented narrative combining literary genres and techniques is a very clever way to represent a monstrous entity, which in his case is trauma, that has invaded his life and needs to be addressed. It is indeed a very interesting approach to trauma, and one that seems the most logical, for trauma can also be seen as a monster that lives, and often devours, the self.

Little Dog, in combining different styles, seems to want to go beyond the limits—or established characteristics—of the canonical genres of literary production, of language itself, in order to find all the pieces of the puzzle that is his past. Most of the anecdotes he retells seem incomplete, textually fragmented and interrupted by others, because that is how memory precisely works. The text, therefore, can be described as monstruous because it is composed of different genres—fiction, autobiography, epistolary and poetry—and literary techniques such as metaphors or even the overlapping of stories that seem to evoke the modernist stream of consciousness. In turn, this enhances the feeling that we are being flooded by Little Dog's memories. Little Dog's mother states that "memory is a choice" (76), to what he answers that it is not a choice, but a flood (78). What is just as interesting, nonetheless, is that Little Dog's trauma is also monstruous, as it is a combination of the suffering of different generations. This intergenerational trauma has been left unresolved, and it has transformed into an invasive entity that entraps Little Dog's family in their past.

Yet, what is trauma and how can it extend over generations? Trauma refers to the "self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury and harm" (Gilmore, 2001: 6), but also to its aftermath, that is to say, the aftereffects that it indefinitely leaves on the victim's psyche. Trauma, therefore, might be regarded as a mental condition caused by an unpleasant, painful experience that leads a person to feel shocked, anxious and distressed over a certain period of time. This period of time may vary from weeks, months or even extend over one's lifetime.

Maurice Apprey claims that trauma shatters the ego (2019: 339) and has as the main consequence the "distortion of ego functions" (2019: 339). In other words, trauma affects the victim's psyche and prevents the individual from being capable of living in normal conditions. It leaves the victim 'in pieces', an image which also evokes

monstrosity. According to the narrator, “trauma affects not only the brain, but the body too, its musculature, joints and posture” (19). In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association adopted the term ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD) to refer to the mental disorder that might follow a traumatic experience. Mental diseases such as depression, anxiety, phobias, intrusive recollection and suicidal thoughts are common indicatives of unresolved trauma, also known as PTSD symptoms (Goodman, 2013: 386). Moreover, other frequent symptoms are irritability outbursts, domestic violence, substance use and abuse, alienation and personal disintegration which, in other words, is numb depersonalization, restlessness or even self-hatred.

As Dori Laub claims, trauma “is the persistence of an event that has no beginning, no end, no before, no during and no after” (68). It is a state of being that prevents the victim from ‘being’ at all. “The survivor is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both” (Laub, 1992: 69). This imprisonment of the self to trauma is best represented in the novel by Little Dog’s apparent distance from his own reality: “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” (62). It is as if the trauma, all this heritage he has yet to address, makes him live his life not as the protagonist, but as a spectator.

In Trauma Studies, there is the distinction between personal trauma, when it affects an individual, historical or collective trauma, when a specific traumatic event affects a group of people, and transgenerational trauma. Transgenerational trauma is “the transmission of trauma withing families and communities across generations” (Goodman, 2013: 386). Historical trauma is, in fact, a form of transgenerational trauma. However, whereas transgenerational trauma occurs within a family, historical trauma affects many

people or even an entire generation, regardless of their relationship. The Holocaust or slavery are some of the clearest examples of what we understand by collective trauma. In *On Earth*, there are three generations, and each one of them presents different symptoms of PTSD. The first generation is represented by Little Dog's grandmother, Lan. Lan plays a pivotal role in the protagonist's life, not only because she is his oldest and most caring maternal figure, but also because her death forces her family to go back to Vietnam to bury her. This crucial event seems to bring some closure to Little Dog who, when returning to America, decides to sit down and write a letter to his mother. It is also a kind of poetic circular ending: the trauma started in Vietnam with the war, and it also ends there, as the final trip to Vietnam finally allows the protagonist to address the family trauma. After burying Lan, Little Dog says:

"I hold no weight in this world yet still carry my own life. And I throw it ahead of me until what I left behind becomes exactly what I'm running toward—like I'm part of a family" (241-242).

The way I see it, Little Dog is now able to accept his life as a whole, past and present, the good and the bad, without carrying the weight of unresolved trauma. In turn, he also accepts the family he belongs to.

The second generation is defined by abuse. Lan had two daughters, Rose, Little Dog's mother, and Mai. Both were abused by their partners, and both suffer the disillusion of the American dream working for minimal wages at nail salons. Rose, in turn, becomes an abuser to his son. There is an instance in which Rose tells his son that "I'm not a monster. I'm a mother" (13). She says it out of the blue, while pruning a basket of green beans over the sink. It is particularly interesting that there is no scene preceding this comment, as it hints that it is something that deeply haunts the character, that Rose is

entrapped in both her trauma and her guilt. Little Dog answers that she is not a monster, but immediately confesses to the reader that it is a lie (13). Later, he goes on to say that "parents suffering from PTSD are more likely to hit their children" (13), as if trying to provide a reason to excuse her mother's abuse, and to explain that *monster* is a hybrid signal that means both shelter and warning at once. This hybridity, etymologically speaking, comes from the meanings of the Latin words *monstrare*, which means to demonstrate, to show, and *monere*, which means to warn. Punter and Byron argue that "from classical times through to the Renaissance, monsters were interpreted either as signs of divine anger or as portents of impending disasters" (2004: 263). They were othered especially by their appearance. Nevertheless, from the nineteenth-century onwards, there is a shift in the portrayal of the monster, and monstrosity comes to serve the purpose of problematizing "binary thinking and demand a rethinking of boundaries and concepts of normality" (Punter and Byron, 2004: 264). The narrator considers that "perhaps there is a monstrous origin to it, after all" (13) to his mother's abuse, as "perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war" (13). This monstrous origin reflects in the fact that monsters are othered from humanity. Hence, inevitably, monsters either generate or will have to face a conflict against it. Little Dog, who has been physically hurt at the hands of his mother since he was a child, tries to make sense of his trauma by filling it in with meaning, with purpose: the mother suffered a war for years, so she wanted him to be ready for the one he might face one day. In this sense, I claim that the mother's main PTSD symptom is hypervigilance. Little Dog remembers how she flinched whenever he played soldiers as a kid (4 and 101), how she hates fireworks because the sound reminds her of bombs (19) and how her main concern with clothes is if they are fireproof (13). Although it is true that she escaped Vietnam, it is evident that she still carries the war inside, the traumatic aftermath. Interestingly, Little Dog reaches the same conclusion. He

says that he “didn’t know the war was still inside” his mom, that it is something “that once it enters you it never leaves—but merely echoes” (4). Moreover, he builds a bridge between his mother’s trauma and his and explicitly makes it transgenerational, as he goes on to say that it is also a “sound forming in the face of your own son” (4). The narrator cleverly uses the word ‘sound’ to establish a sensorial metaphor, meaning that the mother’s trauma echoes in the son, that the son carries on her trauma.

To fully understand how trauma is transmitted across generations, we must talk first about epigenetics, a branch in biology that studies the heritable phenotype changes that do not involve alterations in the DNA sequence. That is to say, those features that a person might inherit which are an addition to the traditional genetic basis for inheritance, but that do not modify it. Those additions might be caused by environmental or cultural factors, such as the political environment in which a person grows up, the economic and academic resources available, or derivatives of the narratives, beliefs and practices of the concrete family that raises the child. Research into epigenetics has proved that trauma is one of those factors which can affect not only a person’s DNA, but also the DNA of his/her descendants. Proof for this statement was found in research on generations who, while they never knew those in their family who experienced a specific traumatic event, showed a trauma response to a similar stimulus (Dias & Ressler, 2014: 89-96). For example, the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors were found to have trauma responses when exposed to triggers of a trauma that had never been told to them. At first, researchers assumed that such transmission was caused by environmental factors, such as the parents’ childrearing behaviour. Yet Kellerman suggest that “new research, however, indicates that these transgenerational effects may have been also (epi)genetically transmitted to their children” (2013: 33).

Little Dog cleverly uses bullets as a metaphor for the war not also being inside him, just as his mother, but having been transmitted to him when he had not yet been born:

> "Your son would wake believing a bullet is lodged inside him. He'd feel it floating on the right side of his chest, just between the ribs. *The bullet was always here*, the boy thinks, older even than himself—and his bones, tendons and veins had merely wrapped around the metal shard, sealing it inside him" (77).

The bullet, the mother's trauma, had always been there, for Rose had also been born around her mother's bullet. The boy thinks that it wasn't him "who was inside my mother's womb, but this bullet, this seed I bloomed around" (77).

There is an interesting instance where the reader can see how Lan and Little Dog deal with pain. The narrator is still a child, and his mother has just thrown a ceramic tea-pot to his face. His grandmother proceeds to boil some eggs and rubs the surface of one on his cheeks, where the tea-pot has impacted. Afterwards, she makes him eat the egg, arguing that his bruises are inside it: "swallow and it won't hurt anymore" (106), she says, "and so he eats. He is eating still" (106). This passage is very telling because Lan is also described as someone who is in denial, and relies on fabrication and storytelling as a mechanism to cope with life, with trauma (197). She does not address pain, but masks it, puts a bandage to it. She copes with trauma by pretending it did not happen. Little Dog's response is crucial, for it hints that, although this mechanism might have worked (and still works) for his grandmother, it does not work for him. He is 'still eating' because it still hurts, because the pain has not left him.

Gilmore argues that the "multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate [pain]" (2001: 5) are crucial to the experience of trauma. She defines trauma as 'unrepresentable', in the sense that trauma is "beyond language in some crucial way" (2001: 6). The novel's narrator seems to agree with this statement, as he writes that "the

truest ruins are not written down" (175). They are not written down because there is no one to talk about them, because there is no language that can capture the true horror of the experience. Representing trauma is complex because, as authors like Gilmore, Caruth or Laub argue, language fails us in the face of true horror and pain: "trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency" (Gilmore, 2001: 6). Nevertheless, at the same time, the very language that fails the traumatized victim is very often the only tool to address the traumatic event, through testimonial accounts. In contemporary literature, testimony has become a "crucial mode of our relation to events of our times—our relation to the traumas of contemporary history" (Felman and Laub, 1992: 5). It has increasingly become a means of transmission and communication. Testimonies, however, lack the objectivity of facts, for they rely on personal experiences, on memory. Because of this, Gilmore argues that "when the self-representation and the representation of trauma coincide, the conflicting demands potentially make autobiography theoretically impossible" (2001: 19). It is theoretically impossible because a traumatic testimony not only blurs the boundary between truth and lies, but it also challenges "the limit of representativeness" (2001: 5).

The novel does not only reflect on the protagonist's past, but also takes an extra step to represent the story of American immigrants. It is a story of immigrant, transcultural, intergenerational and queer pain. Because of this, it is impossible not to approach the text from a postcolonial perspective. Madeline Hron claims that "immigrants are affected to a certain degree by past traumas" (2009: 27). The pain of immigration, however, is not limited to psychological illnesses such as PTSD. There are also cases in which it also manifests through physical symptoms (2009: 31). In the novel, Little Dog narrates how Lan's back is perpetually bent (19). Hron argues that immigrants tend to be "more susceptible to diseases than mainstream populations" (2009: 31), and

this is undoubtedly linked to both the living and working conditions that are available to them in the host country. In immigrant literary texts, these traumatic side-effects are represented by memory fragments, flashbacks, nightmares, or hallucinations, which "often eclipse the difficulties of integrating into the host country" (2009: 27). Little Dog explains the immigrant experience as painful: "to be awake in American bones", with or without citizenship, means to be "aching, toxic and underpaid" (81).

The limits and challenges of representing trauma, expanding on Gilmore and Hron, are closely linked with memory. This connection seems to create a dichotomy, a paradox, as it is not uncommon for trauma to cancel memory, to repress it. Ian Hacking defines *memoro-politics* as "a politics of the secret, of the forgotten event that can be turned, if only by strange flashbacks, into something monumental (1995: 214). Memoro-politics, as he describes it, has to do with a very critical issue of trauma, which is pathological forgetting or, in psychoanalytical terms, dissociation, repression and amnesia. This is important because memory is not always reliable, especially if we are talking about traumatic ones. Traumatic experiences are complex to objectively remember because, as it is in the very nature of trauma, it is something that the mind wants to escape from, and therefore very often represses. In the novel, memory is described both as a flood (Vuong, 2019, 78) and also as a mechanism that can be employed to survive (43). The notion of memory, therefore, is hybrid. It has an ambiguous nature, for it can help us survive but also storm in like a devastating flood. Some of the most common PTDS symptoms, as I have stated before, are amnesia and repression, which can be understood as the brain's attempt to stop this threatening flood shatter the normal ego functions. Thus, an autobiographical account of traumatic events is complex to achieve, as not only one has to fight against the brain's protective dams against the flood, but also because of what is known as 'false memory'. False Memory is a medical

term used to describe the phenomenon, also called the False Memory Syndrome, in which a person either recalls an incident that did not occur or they remember details that happened differently in reality (Hacking, 1995: 258). The novel seems to present the reader with one of these instances when Little Dog describes his father: “I remember my father, which is to say that I am putting him back together. I am putting him back together in a room because there must have been a room” (220). The image of his father, absent because he was sentenced to jail for abusing his mother, is shattered, scattered around the few memories he has of him so, in order to remember him, he has to try and put the pieces back together. He is merely speculating, and the last sentence confirms that this precise memory he has of his father probably never occurred.

The journey through Little Dog’s memories seems to not have a clear final destination, as if he was writing them as they come to him. This also evokes this feeling of being lost, of a trauma that extends over time, that has no beginning and no end. However, at the very end of the novel there seems to be a shift in the narration. Little Dog addresses his mother again, and hopes that reincarnation is real, so she can have another opportunity in life: to have another opportunity to have parents who read bedtime stories to her “in a country not touched by war” (240). To have the privileges he had thanks to what his mother lost. As a signing off, he hopes that maybe, in this hypothetical future, she will find the book and she will know what happened to the both of them.

From that point onwards, the narration shifts, and the paragraphs stop being addressed to the mother, and begin with the pronoun ‘I’. He starts to run, for no apparent reason, “thinking [he] will outpace it all” (241), his will to change being, perhaps for the first time in the narration, stronger than his fear of living. The sense that Little Dog is a mere spectator in his own life disappears, to show a narrator that is clearly the agent of the actions he describes. It is as if, finally, the burden of trauma has been lifted off his

shoulders, which is evinced in the sentence “I hold no weight in this world yet still carry my own life” (241). Moreover, he adds that “I throw it ahead of me until what I left behind becomes exactly what I’m running toward” (241). The way I see it, this is a clear sign that the traumatic cycle has been broken, that he has been able to come to terms both with his heritage, as he forgives his mother, and his personal trauma, which allows him not only to stop running away from it, but also to be able to revisit his past painlessly.

3. The Monster Within: Crossing the Borders of Binary Identity Labels

> "To be or not to be. That is the question. A question, yes, but not a choice."
>
> Vuong, 2019: 63

Frank Bradley claims in his review of *Of Borders and Thresholds* (2000-2001) that borders are elusive (462). Borders are man-made lines that separate two realities. They can be physical or political, as those that divide a continent into countries, for example, or linguistic, as those that separate binary opposite concepts. In this chapter, I am going to focus on Little Dog's identity, and how he constructs it and reflects upon it from the complex perspective of, on the one hand, the othered immigrant and, on the other hand, a member of the LGBT community, who is othered for being gay and not part of the hegemonic masculinity.[6] Moreover, to analyse the hybrid self of Vuong's characters, I will draw on the concept of 'multiplicity' from the trope of the hybrid monster, a creature that embodies attributes from different beings and, because of this, blurs the borders of binary categories such as race, colour or the 'self' and the 'Other'.

Nowadays, contemporary cultures are reassessing the lines of separation and blurring the borders between the strange and the monstrous, the self and the Other (Desblache, 2012: 247). In other words, in a modern world where everything is becoming increasingly interconnected, there is a need to challenge and reassess identity bordering concepts such as race. In the novel, the protagonist navigates through his bi-racial identity, and evinces how he has been othered by the fact that he is white, but not entirely.

[6] Hegemonic masculinity has traditionally been distinguished from other masculinities not because it represents the majority, in the sense that it is 'the most common', but because it is the normative one, the 'ideal'. Hence, it embodies what Connell and Messerschmidt argue to be "the currently most honored way of being a man" (2015: 832), that is to say, that which is expected from men.

There is an instance where Little Dog explains that, as a kid, he created a ritual out of drinking milk with his mother: “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). The milk, being white, becomes a magical elixir that has the power to make oneself more Caucasian, and therefore more successful and integrated in the US.

Focusing specifically on language, binary concepts describe two realities that are contrary to each other: black and white, day and night, straight and gay. However, what is interesting about borders is that this apparent opposition starts to blur as soon as you approach the limit lines of those restrictions. Bradley cleverly uses the word ‘elusive’ to describe the phenomenon in which, although it is fairly easy to understand blackness in opposition to whiteness, the clarity and precision of the opposition between extremes start to blur when you approach the threshold, that is to say, the area in which the two concepts merge. For example, Little Dog’s mother, although she is mixed-race, is able to pass as a Caucasian woman (51). Having the possibility of ‘passing’ means that she possesses physical features that would allow her to pretend she is Caucasian and obtain the privileges that this brings to a person in Western countries like the US. In her, the distinction between Asian and Caucasian is blurred, merged, as she is able to cross the border between races and pass as white.

The human language tends to classify everything that exists into categories that shape and seal identities. However, nature is not binary made, which people such as Rose reflect. There are hundreds of beings that move beyond theoretically established categories, realities that contain within themselves aspects of the realities separated by borders and, precisely because of that, they challenge arbitrary classifications. Following this line of thought, Bradley argues that these beings “draw attention simultaneously to

phenomena of separation and interconnectedness" (2000-2001: 462) that contributes to the understanding of the concept of the border and of border crossing.

All borders are liminal, hybrid spaces because, while their purpose has traditionally been to establish territorial and political sovereignty and provide a description of identity, they also challenge and threaten the delimitations and demarcations of the establishment because they bear witness to exchange. As Viljoen asserts, "crossing topographical borders thus entails physical and spiritual dislocation and alienation, but, conversely, also enriches and opens up new possibilities" (2013: XII). Borders are a sort of middle-ground that, although it should be the space where separation is made clearer, it also provides a space for communication, for exchange and for hybridity. Because of this, borders can be considered liminal spaces, and I regard them as places that produce hybrid beings. These beings cross borders because they belong to both sides of the threshold and, at the same time, to neither. There is a very interesting passage in the novel in which the narrator talks about drag performers in Saigon. In Vietnam, "to be queer is still a sin" (226), so drag performers are not included inside 'normativity'. However, their "othered performance" (226) plays a key role in the community. Little Dog explains that drag performers are hired by neighbours whenever someone dies in the middle of the night to "delay sadness" (226). As city coroners are quite understaffed and underfunded, they are not always available, so the community hires drag performers so as to heal and find relief "through [their] explosive outfits and gestures, their overdrawn faces and voices, their tabooed trespass of gender" (226). Little Dog explains that drag queens inhabit the liminal space of grief, "because grief, at its worst, is unreal. And it calls for a surreal response" (226). This grief allows queerness to become central in the 'normative' community for a period of time.

Edouard Glissant argues that the border or frontier "is a flight of passages, and in-betweens, which can be easily or uneasily crossed, but which is going to be crossed in any case" (2006: 180, qtd. in Desblache, 2012). From the perspective of postcolonialism, the frontier is no longer a fixed category, or an absolute that cannot be changed. The frontier, as Glissant claims, "has ceased to be an impossibility to become a passage [and] the Being has ceased to be an absolute in order to become a Relation" (2006: 181, qtd. in Desblache, 2012). This is crucial to this chapter, as it introduces the idea that the Other is only the Other in contraposition to a specific culture or when found in a context that alienates the physical, cultural or psychic conditions and characteristics that they embody. In Little Dog's case, it is the fact that he is a Vietnamese migrant, with Vietnamese physical attributes, in the US. Taking this into account, postcolonial studies seek to decentralise Western Culture and prove that everyone can be 'othered' when put in a context where he/she is not part of the dominant group. Hence, my reading on borders upholds the premise that they do not have a fixed theoretical or ideological consistency, but that they can be manipulated "as part of larger cultural and political agendas" (Bradley, 2000-2001: 465).

Desblache argues that, at a time when life can no longer be described with fixed labels or identities, "the creative imagination can be used to break the limits of the human exceptionalism that has dominated Western cultures" (2012: 249). Literature, therefore, can serve as a bridge or point of communication between what is considered 'us' and 'them' in a given culture, and also between the local and the global. Vuong's narrative is especially relevant in this task as, in bearing witness to a personal experience, he also reflects on the experience of a whole community. Literary texts, as Viljoen argues, are able to "model and remodel borders and bordering processes in rich and meaningful contexts" (2013: XI) and, in the case of migrant narratives such as Vuong's, evince the

'homelessness' of the othering process, the solitude of not belonging in the country of destination. Furthermore, migrant identities "occupy a liminal space between the former motherland and the host country, and are consequently stretched across the multiple ruptures between here and there" (Bammer, 1994: XII, qtd. in Bond and Rapson: 249). The liminal spaces that Little Dog and his family inhabit and the narrator's identity are forged by borders and the crossing of thresholds, both physical and linguistic: the emigration to the US, their mixed-race physical attributes and their mixture of the Vietnamese and the English language.

To understand Little Dog's othering experience and the link I intend to make with monstrosity, one has to take into account several aspects. On the crossing or transgression of boundaries, Mary Midgley asserts that the Western tradition has so far held that "the boundaries of a species should be respected" (2004: 108). Because of this, traditional mixed (or hybrid) monsters, such as minotaurs, chimeras or gorgons, "stand for a deep and threatening disorder, something not just confusing but dreadful and invasive" (109). Little Dog is regarded as Vietnamese-American, not only because those are the two places he has lived in, but because he is mixed-race. Nguyen argues that "the Asian American body is composed simultaneously through race, class, gender and sexuality" (7), their existence marked by "heterogeneity, hybridity and multiplicity" (Lowe, 60, qtd. in Nguyen, 2002: 7). In the US, Little Dog's hybrid self is simplified by the arbitrary category of Vietnamese or "yellow boy" (27, 58). In this aspect, Little Dog talks remembers an instance where he and his mom were watching golfer Tiger Woods on TV. Rose wonders why the commentators always refer to Woods as 'black', as "his mom is Taiwanese […], shouldn't they say at least half yellow?" (51). Because of the colour of his skin, therefore, Woods's race is simplified and often mislabelled, when the truth is that his father is American and his mother Taiwanese.

Little Dog's grandma, Lan, is Vietnamese, but his mother's father was a white American soldier, and she is described as "so fair [she] would "pass" for white" (Vuong: 51). She is, therefore, mixed race, but more Caucasian than Vietnamese physically. Litlle Dog, in turn, is also mixed race, but he does not pass for Caucasian. Living in a society that imposes labels on people, they would certainly occupy a liminal space in terms of racial labeling, as they belong both to the Caucasian race and the Asian and, at the same time, not quite to any of them. Because of this, I argue that they possess the hybrid quality of the monsters I have mentioned previously, as they exhibit a mixture of two arbitrary categories, of two races, that have traditionally been 'separated' in theory. Bringing back Victor Frankenstein's creature, Dominique Lestel claims that it is "the first monster to belong to the hybrid category between technology and the organic, one of the chief characteristics of Western civilization" (2012: 259). Although Ocean Vuong's caracters are clearly not the result of combining technology with flesh, I want to draw from this idea of multiplicity, of the characters' occupying different categories at the same time and, because of that, having been othered by dominant society. Little Dog and Rose are mixed-race but, as they are not 'completely' Caucasian, the dominant society rejects them. Interestingly, they are completely accepted in contexts where migrants are the majority, such as the Baptist Church they attend in their Latinx neighbourhood: "you and I were the only yellow faces in the church. But when Dionne and Miguel introduced us to their friends, we were received with warm smiles" (58). While singing a song during the mass, Rose starts shouting in Vietnamese and no one glares or "double take[s] at the yellow-white woman speaking her own tongue" (59). Rose is, perhaps for the first time since she emigrated to the US, not judged because she is surrounded by people that have also been othered as Latinx migrants. Little Dog adds that "it was there, inside the song,

that you had permission to lose yourself and not be wrong" (59), to express herself freely without the fear of being judged or rejected.

Besides their physical features, what is central to the characters' experiences as othered beings resides in language. In the novel, language is represented both as a barrier and a bridge, becoming a hybrid signal in itself. Dominique Lestel argues that one of the most remarkable innovations in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is that she dedicates special attention to the communication problems that occur between the doctor and his freakish creation (2012: 259). I believe that there is an interesting parallelism between this and migrant narratives such as Vuong's, as language plays a pivotal role not so much in helping the characters fit in the host country, but survive in it. There are several instances in which Little Dog reflects on how migrants are often forced to do the jobs that no one else wants in the host countries, jobs that involve long, underpaid shifts and for which you have to adopt a role of almost servitude, of gratitude for even having the opportunity of being there (91, 92, 93): he states that, for the immigrant, the word 'sorry' is not a mere word, but a tool, a tool "one uses to pander until the word itself becomes a currency. It no longer merely *apologizes*, but insists, reminds: *I'm here, right here, beneath you*" (91). *Sorry*, for immigrants, stops being an apology and becomes a "passport to remain" (93).

Rose, on the other hand, does not have the tool that is language. Although she could pass for white, she does not know how to speak English, and this leaves her defenceless amidst American society. Little Dog sadly states that "even when [she] looked the part, [her] tongue outed [her]" (51), as he remembers an instance in which they go to a butcher's shop to buy oxtail but, as they do not know the word for it in English, his mother desperately mimics some gestures in hopes of being understood. Nonetheless, the only response they get from the shop keeper are amused laughs and mockery. It is going through this traumatic experience, being mocked because language failed them and

having been shown no sympathy, what makes Little Dog 'code switch' (32), that is to say, to radically change. Even though he was just a child, he promised himself that he would never be wordless again when his family needed him to speak for them. From that point onwards, he becomes his family's "official interpreter" (32), a translator, a bridge between the Vietnamese and the English language, and therefore also between Vietnam and the US. It is striking, however, how he goes on to describe language as a mask: "I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours" (32). In using this metaphor, the mask also becomes a hybrid signal. Little Dog explains that he wears the English language as a mask in the sense that he intends to conceal his identity. Through his proficiency of the English language, he seeks to camouflage his Vietnamese traits, the ones that other him in the US. To state 'yes, we are immigrants, but we are not resourceless', to indicate that they can defend themselves. In fact, there is a specific instance in which language is described as a defence tool. As a child, Little Dog is bullied by some of his classmates, who attack him physically and constantly make racist remarks to him. One day, Little Dog comes back home with bruises, and his mother realises that he is being bullied. Instead of being compassionate, Rose slaps him. Her abusive reaction might come off as shocking to the reader, but not to his son, who claims that "violence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love" (119). Rose has always shown that she cares through abuse. Afterwards, Rose tells Little Dog that he has to find a way to stop crying and defend himself but, interestingly, she does not encourage him to fight back physically, but to use language. She believes that he can defend himself, unlike her, because he has "a bellyful of English" (26). Language, therefore, is a tool to make one's way in the world. Rose does not have it, so her only resource is violence.

Following up on Little Dog's role as a translator, I argue that he is not a mere translator between his family and the world, but also as a translator between his traumatic experience and the reader. Pain, as it has been stated in the previous section, is not easy to convey with words. Regarding this, Little Dog claims that "sometimes our words are few and far between, or simply ghosted" (33). That, even when you do know how to communicate, how to use a specific language, it falters in the presence of suffering. To this, he asks a question that is left unanswered: "is there a language for falling out of language?" (37) Besides, he also explicitly evinces the insufficiency of language when he states that he "was once foolish enough to believe knowledge would clarify, but some things are so gauzed behind layers of syntax and semantics […] that simply knowing the wound exists does nothing to reveal it" (62). In other words, a person might know the meaning of words such as 'pain' or 'wound', and yet not know what they mean exactly to another person, because true meaning, and especially that of pain, depends on each person's experience; it is unique and, thus, difficult to convey through language.

Relying on the concept of translation, Madelaine Hron provides further reflection on the complex relationship between pain and writing:

> "Like translators, writers are faced with the difficulties of finding linguistic equivalencies for their pain – be it to describe their pain, convey its intensity, explain its cause, or specify its location. The scarcity of a direct language of pain does not mean that there is no viable mode of expression for their pain; rather, like translators, writers must engage in a variety of representational tactics to render their suffering understandable to readers" (Hron, 2009: 41).

Hron argues that immigrant narratives attempt to translate the immigrant experience to readers that might not have experienced it, as they might not be migrants themselves. In these narratives, writers push through sociocultural assumptions and readapt and reappropriate literary conventions to put the othered, pained migrant in the centre of the narrative (Hron, 2009: 228-229). In order to convey migrant hardship, writers use

different techniques that can vary from explicit violence to more humorous and reflective undertones. In Vuong's case, metaphors are the main representational strategy that he uses to convey the central ideas or key discoveries that the narrator makes on his journey through his past.

Little Dog expresses an underlying anxiety to represent himself, to come to terms with who he is and, especially, to be seen in his fully hybrid identity throughout the novel. There is a passage in which Trevor, his boyfriend, and himself are watching the sunset. Trevor marvels at the sun and says that it is no wonder that people used to think it was a divinity. Little Dog, however, has a different point of view, as he replies that "it must suck to be the sun" (99). Trevor is intrigued by Little Dog's comment, who further explains that it must be an agony to be the sun because you are not able to see yourself:

"You don't even know where you are in the sky. […] Like you don't know if you're round or square or even if you're ugly or not […] Like you can only see what you do to the earth, the colors and stuff, but not who you are" (100).

There is a very specific anxiety that emanates from this passage, the anxiety that comes from a lack of representation, from not seeing yourself in the context that surrounds you nr in the media that you consume. Trevor cannot comprehend Little Dog's feelings because he is Caucasian, he has lived in America all his life and English is his mother tongue. Little Dog, however, has had a very different experience growing up in a country whose people and language have continuously othered him. Because of this, the novel seems to serve the purpose of finding his identity, of moving beyond the binary opposites he has been taught and not only find, but also come to terms with his own complexity; to fully represent himself so as to be truly seen. Since he was a child, Rose has been telling him: "don't draw attention to yourself. You're already Vietnamese" (219), so he becomes

invisible. He keeps his head down and assumes he is not supposed to be seen. Nevertheless, there is nothing more humane than wanting to be seen by another person, to stop being a solitary being and form part of a group. He tells his mother that, as a child, he followed a boy around because he had once offered him a slice of pizza, and that this offering had changed him into "something worthy of generosity, and therefore seen" (139). Moreover, he also states that he falls in love with Trevor because he feels that he sees him, and that makes him feel beautiful.

Going back to the migrant experience, Little Dog describes two main aspects of its othering process: language, on the one hand, and colour, that is to say, race, on the other. Little Dog tells his mother in his letter that she needs colour "to be a fixed and inviolable fact" (61), as race is made to be within the hegemonic Western culture. He, however, discovers that it is not, that the colour he is depends on the eye of the beholder. He says that colour is one of the first things he discovers, that they knew nothing about it when they arrived in America in 1990, that it was not this fixed category he had been made to perceive. That year, they moved into a predominantly Latinx neighbourhood, and he explains that, in doing so, the rules of colour that he had thought to be fixed changed: "Lan, who, back in Vietnam, was considered dark, was now lighter" (51), but Lan would still be considered black if she went back to Vietnam.

While reflecting upon colour and race, Little Dog remembers learning about a trial that took place in 1884. In this trial, a white railroad worker was tried for the murder of an unnamed Chinese man. There was no doubt whatsoever that the worker had killed the Chinese man, but the case was dismissed because, although the Texas law prohibited the murder of human beings, it defined 'human' only as White, African American, or Mexican: "the nameless yellow body was not considered human because it did not fit in a slot on a piece of paper" (63). The Texas law did not recognize any other races apart

from the ones mentioned above so, under the law, the Chinese man did not exist, he was not human. Referring to the unidentified man, Little Dog claims that "sometimes you are erased before you are given the choice of stating who you are" (63). As a continuation, he quotes one of the most famous lines from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1602) and gives it a postcolonial turn: "To be or not to be. That is the question. A question, yes, but not a choice" (63). There is a very clear border that separates the 'being' from the 'not being', a border that, however arbitrary and relative, dictates how you are treated by the society you live in, both by its people and by its laws. Afterwards, Little Dog tells his mother that they were Americans until they opened their eyes (185), and thus saw colour.

To enhance this sensation, he reflects upon a childhood memory. His mother bought him a pink bicycle and, as pink is a colour that cannot be associated with masculinity, some children from his neighbourhood peeled off the colour from the almost untouched bike. He says that he "wanted to cry but did not yet know how to do it in English. So I did nothing" (135), which interestingly links a physical reaction that is universal and not attached to any language, with the English language. In my view, this evokes Rose's belief that to truly defend yourself in a foreign country you need to know the language. That day, according to Little Dog, was the day he learned how dangerous a color can be because, "even if color is nothing but what the light reveals, that *nothing* has laws" (135).

The other crucial point in his othering experience is language, and of language I intend to highlight three aspects: names, mother tongues and learning experiences. In this novel, names are very important, for they carry a special meaning that somehow reflects either the life of the character or what is hoped for them by their ancestors. The case of the grandmother, Lan, is quite thought-provoking, as she renamed herself after what Little Dog describes like "a flower that opens like something torn apart" (41), an orchid. The choice of words is not arbitrary, as Lan was torn apart by the war and yet managed to

remain beautiful, kind. On the other hand, Lan is also responsible for his grandson's odd name: "what made a woman who named herself and her daughter after flowers call her grandson a dog?" (18), asks Little Dog to no one in particular. It is not because she despises him, she later explains, but because she wants to fiercely protect him. Little Dog argues that in Lan's village, there was the tradition of naming "the smallest or weakest [child] of the flock" (18) after the most despicable things, such as demons or ghosts, "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" (18). Although the war did not accompany them to America, the war was so interwoven in Lan's entire being that she would never get out of the survival mode. Her deepest acts of love, then, would be to name her family after things that would protect them, that could leave them untouched and alive because, although names are as "thin as air, [they] can also be a shield" (18).

The learning experience of language is tormented by trauma and pain, by war and struggle. Little Dog retells how, when his mother was only five, she watched from a banana grove how her school collapsed after an American raid never to step into a classroom again. For Little Dog, the only tool he has to come to terms with his past, to show the world who he is, is language, the two languages that are part of his identity. However, one of them is stunted (31). He wonders how a mother tongue can be a tool when this tongue is "not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void" (31). He writes to his mother that the Vietnamese he owns is the one that was given to him by her, "the one whose diction and syntax only reach the second-grade level". (31) As she was so young when she had to stop learning, he believes that their mother tongue is no mother at all, "but an orphan. Our Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark of where your education ended, ashed" (31). This is another evidence of how war and trauma paused Rose's life, how

they shaped her and entrapped her, how they deprived her of the most powerful defensive tool for her, which is knowledge. He tells Rose that to speak in their mother tongue is "to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war" (32) because the Vietnamese part of themselves is incomplete, and trauma lies where the rest of the Vietnamese pieces should be.

Finally, I also want to comment on the importance that language has in his acceptance of his sexuality. Little Dog states that, before the French occupation, the Vietnamese language did not "have a name for queer bodies—because they were seen, like all bodies, fleshed and of one source" (130). There was not a label that specifically identified them and that, under the wrong lens, could make them become a target, a monster. After the occupation, however, a word emerged, a word with a dangerous background: *pêdê*. This label, which in Vietnamese came to mean 'gay', came from the shortened version of the French *pédéraste*, pedophile. Hence, a sexuality that had not been distinguished from the rest in Vietnamese became engraved with very negative, criminal connotations. Language, therefore, fails him not only because it does not have the capacity to fully convey his experience, but also because it is the same language that is supposed to be his mother tongue the one that others him, or at least a very important part of himself. Because of this, the narrator chooses to use his English and say "I don't like girls" (130) when he feels ready to come out of the closet to his mother. At that time, nevertheless, the rules of hegemonic, heteropatriarchal masculinity are already engrained in his mother's mind, and that sentence is filled with otherness. Rose's response is to cry that she had given birth "to a healthy, normal boy" (131). The fact that the reader does not get the narrator's response is quite meaningful, as it evinces that Little Dog does not know how to counterargue that opinion, that he does not know how to defend that he is

‘normal’, in the hegemonic normative sense, because perhaps the rules, the norms, are also engraved within himself.

All in all, this chapter has sought to analyse how Little Dog finds and shapes his identity on the letter he writes to his mother. *On Earth* is a migrant narrative that moves beyond physical and linguistic borders, and that aims to give voice, to represent and to showcase those who inhabit liminal, hybrid spaces. In one instance, Little Dog asks himself why “can’t the language for creativity be the language of regeneration” (179), and I believe that this is precisely what Vuong does through the written word. The way I see it, in writing the letter Little Dog attempts to restore, to regenerate himself through the tool that he knows how to use best: language. Through language, he is trying to put back the pieces together, to create a ‘self’ from all the instances that have deemed him the ‘other’.

3. Conclusions

"I was no shore, Ma. I was driftwood trying to remember what I had broken from to get here."

Vuong, 2019: 108

This dissertation has approached Ocean Vuong's semi-autobiographical novel through a postcolonial perspective on Trauma and Contemporary Gothic Studies. In order to provide an original approach to migrant narratives, I have relied on the nineteenth-century gothic trope of 'the monster', which identifies monstrosity with an entity that invades the subject's life, be it from outside or from within.

All in all, my reading of the novel has aimed to evince that the concept of monstrosity is essentially associated with the conflicted identity of the narrator and with the traumatic heritage that entraps him. I have argued that trauma is a monster that corrupts the self from within, that shatters the normal pace of one's life and that is able to extend over generations if the cycle is not broken, which is the case of Little Dog's mother, Rose.

I have also claimed that there is a need for novels that deal with the narrator's own traumatic experiences to cross and blur the borders of literary genres and temporal experience, so as to fully represent its complexity. In the case of Vuong's debut novel, the narrator's inherited and personal experience of war, migration and trauma is showcased through ruptures in time and language, through evoking a non-chronological flood of memories and reflections that, in turn, make the reader travel from the narrator's local experience to the global migrant reality. Due to timing and spatial limits, my analysis has focused on two main areas: firstly, on the textual and formal 'monstrosity'

that the novel presents, and, secondly, on the exploration of the narrator's hybrid, monstrous self.

In the first section, I have upheld the idea that formal hybridity serves as a metaphorical doorway to enter the core of Little Dog's traumatic memories, a clever way to exhibit a family that is entrapped in an intergenerational traumatic experience that does not allow them to move forward. My reading on the ending, however, claims that, after this journey, Little Dog is able to come to terms with his past and forgive his mother for being his main abuser.

Additionally, the second section, has focused on how Little Dog finds and shapes his identity through this journey through his memories. I have analysed the novel as a migrant narrative that moves beyond the thresholds imposed by Western culture and the English language, and how the border-crossing quality of the narrator has borne witness to those who inhabit liminal, hybrid spaces, be it because of race, because of physical differences or because of their sexuality.

To conclude, I believe that Little Dog uses language as a tool to bring back his identity, and also that of those who are like him, out of those liminal spaces and back to the centre of the narrative, to regenerate himself not as 'the Other', not as someone defined by his trauma, but as his 'self', a self that can heal.

All in all, I believe that my dissertation opens the door to very interesting further research on the matters of regeneration through language. As my primary focus was intergenerational trauma, I decided to focus on the traumatic experience that links Little Dog's family together, but one compelling point of departure for future research could be to delve into Little Dog's othering, 'emasculating' experience as a gay young man.

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