

Original Article

TRAUMA, MIGRATION, AND FRAGMENTED BELONGING: NARRATIVE RUPTURE AND POSTMEMORY IN ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS

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ABSTRACT

The research will discuss the way the book *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong reinvents the concept of trauma as a structural and historically determined state and not as a psychological injury on individual levels. Placing the story in the postwar period of the Vietnam War and the dynamics of racial capitalism, the work argues that the circulation of trauma in the novel is mediated by language loss, labor precarity, and intergenerational memory. The text enacted fragmentation as constitutive of migrant subjectivity through its epistolary form and nonlinear temporality. This research will focus on Vuong by reframing narrative rupture as a critical epistemology through the lenses of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, Marianne Hirsch's concept of post memory, and Paul Gilroy's concept of postcolonial melancholy. The sense of belonging becomes tentative and deferred, revealing the boundaries of assimilationist and therapeutic paradigms in present-day diasporic writing.

Keywords: Structural Trauma, Postmemory, Migration, Racial Capitalism, Queer Diaspora, Narrative Fragmentation

INTRODUCTION

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous, by Vietnamese American poet and novelist Ocean Vuong, born in 1988 in Ho Chi Minh City and raised in Hartford, Connecticut, published in 2019, is a huge intervention in the diasporic and Asian American literature of the twenty-first century. Vuong received international acknowledgement with his first poetry book, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, which discusses the memory of war, queerness, and displacement using lyrical experimentation. His shift to fiction still has this poetic sensibility and extends the political scope. The novel grounds the intimate family histories in the lingering legacy of the Vietnam War, proactively signalling the transnational nature of the violence of imperialism that will persist on both temporal and geographical levels and not be confined to a national boundary or a historical time frame [Vuong \(2019\)](#).

The story is presented as a letter addressed to Rose, a Vietnamese American who is illiterate in English, and is confided to Little Dog, a young Vietnamese American writer [Vuong \(2019\)](#). The novel's central conflict arises from the impossible address between expression and reception. Using the recollections that are not linear, Little Dog narrates his childhood, which was full of domestic abuse and poverty, and his grandmother has traumatic memories of war in Vietnam. The novel also follows an adolescent love affair with Trevor, a white working-class adolescent addict who is economically unable to climb up the economic ladder in rural America [Vuong \(2019\)](#). Traveling across Vietnam and the United States, memory and instantaneousness, the novel is woven with memories of individual awakening and the histories of the structure of violence, overwork, and racial exclusion.

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Received: 13 January 2025; Accepted: 08 February 2026; Published 12 March 2026

DOI: [10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2.2026.6820](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i2.2026.6820)

Page Number: 81-85

Journal Title: International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH

Journal Abbreviation: Int. J. Res. Granthaalayah

Online ISSN: 2350-0530, Print ISSN: 2394-3629

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

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This research contends that migration as depicted in the novel is not a process of upward mobility or cultural mix but that of fractured ontology, whereby belonging is a fragile state of existence. Trauma comes out in structural and intergenerational form, inherent in the loss of language, labor precarity, and family disruption as opposed to the individual psychological distress. The epistolary fragmentation and temporal dislocation of the narrative actually enact the belatedness of the trauma theory and do not succumb to the consolations of liberal multicultural inclusion. This discussion is based on trauma research, postmemory theory, and postcolonial critique, arguing that the rupture of narrative that is made political by Vuong turns identity into a process of incessant negotiation with histories that cannot be contained and closed down.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent work on *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* has preemptively anticipated its encounters with trauma, queerness, memory, and migrant subjectivity in both transnational and aesthetic terms. According to Abizanda-Cardona, Vuong reinvents the narrative of the Vietnam War by disrupting heteronormative models of the trauma witness who usually dominates the narration of the war (219). The metaphoric density of the novel is read by Yakuba as a linguistic tactic of substituting the unarticulated violence with the image of nature and the body itself that formalizes the indirect articulation of trauma [Yakuba \(2025\)](#). Soler Arjona places the text in the context of queer refugeehood and argues that temporality is more of a survival pattern, as opposed to a narrative of linear assimilation [Soler Arjona \(2024\)](#). Gibbons focuses on overlapping queer and refugee positionalities to highlight how unstable national belonging may be [Gibbons \(2025\)](#). Zhu foregrounds imagism and queer aesthetics as formal disturbances of realist narrative [Zhu \(2026\)](#). According to Das and Unnithan, autobiographical memory is constituted as a community diasporic archive [Das and Unnithan \(2024\)](#).

Even though recent criticism of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* has discussed its queer aesthetics, figurative language, refugee temporality, and autobiographical memory, the available literature has debated these three phenomena separately, rather than theorizing their inherent structural interrelationships. The issue that the study aims to solve is the lack of a single framework that places intergenerational trauma in the context of racial capitalism and postcolonial displacement, in addition to explaining the fragmented narrative structure of the novel as a political strategy. In the absence of such synthesis, the text would be read as being more of a lyrical confession as opposed to a critical intervention into the conditions that create fractured belonging.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research has conceptualized trauma as structural and not episodic, based on the writings of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra. This type of trauma is not limited to a single devastating event, but it continues through delayed repetition and generational transfer [Caruth \(2016\)](#), [LaCapra \(2002\)](#). In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* war is not historically confined, but it recurs in the domestic space, in the loss of words, and in bodily memory. Migration escalates this state by disrupting linguistic continuity and creating a subject who inherits violence without being able to access it constantly. Instead of being a singular psychological disturbance, trauma is imprinted in the family, national, and narrative structure.

This research will draw on Marianne Hirsch to clarify how the identity of Little Dog becomes mediated by the use of stories and images of a war that he was not an eyewitness to. Hirsch defines postmemory as the relationship of the second generation to traumatic experiences that preceded their birth [Hirsch \(2012\)](#). His subjectivity comes out in the form of mediated narratives that are precarious and recursive, thus making the lines between personal and collective history indistinct. In this case, postmemory is not the passive inheritance but active reconstruction by displacement. The self is a memory of usurped trauma, exposing the effect of migration that generates identities based on transmitted absence and not based on lived coherence.

The framework also includes the idea of a postcolonial melancholy by Paul Gilroy and racial capitalism theories to place belonging in the context of the imperial afterlives and economic exploitation [Gilroy \(2020\)](#). The process of American assimilation is based on selective memory loss of the imperial violence and taking up the migrants into precarious economic activities like nail salons and tobacco farms. Migration is therefore a process of integration into disproportionate capitalism and not into solid citizenship. The conditioning of belonging is based on silence, productivity, and endurance. These conditions find formal expression in the fragmented epistolary form of the novel, which formally plays out the state of rupture, discontinuity, and structural precarity as the features of migrant existence.

EPISTOLARY FORM AND THE POLITICS OF UNREADABILITY

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong presents the story as a letter from Little Dog to a mother who cannot read English, which instantly disrupts the communicative contract that normally determines the form of epistolary communication. The speech assumes closeness but ensures illegibility, turning confession into lateral expression. As Little Dog confesses, "I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" [Vuong \(2019\)](#).

This structural paradox makes the letter a place of postponed recognition as opposed to dialogue. It is a staged form of communication in which there is no opportunity to respond, indicating that the testimonies of migrants are transmitted through a system that allows speech but not cognition. The epistolary format reveals the weakness of language as a means of reconciliation.

The role of language in the novel is both bridging and alienating; on the one hand, it allows articulation, and on the other hand, it anticipates alienation. The English language gives Little Dog literary power but also alienates him from the Vietnamese linguistic universe of his mother. The letter is transformed into a non-reciprocal kind of translation and shows the way migration disjunctures intergenerational continuity. Using Cathy Caruth, the concept of trauma in this case is created indirectly as opposed to straight-line narration. The unspeakable is pushed aside into lyrical fragments, breaks, and associative memory. Meaning is given obliquely, and the implication here is that traumatic knowledge cannot be communicated in any direct statement but rather formally by rupture and dislocation of time.

Although the concept of hybridity by Homi K. Bhabha could be considered as a successful act of cultural negotiation between space, the novel does not support the celebratory view of the concept of hybridity. The bilingual state does not produce fluid production but disjointed membership. The fact of the mother not being able to be received can be compared to the impossibility of complete integration into the American nation. The migrant subjectivity will never be fully acknowledged in the prevailing linguistic and cultural systems, just as the letter will not be read. The epistolary form is therefore politicized as a metaphor of conditional visibility, revealing how the assimilation is promising of inclusion and structurally promotes the distance and incomprehension.

WAR, POSTMEMORY, AND INHERITED VIOLENCE

The specter of the Vietnam War remains imminent throughout *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, not as a remote past but as a relayed past weighed down through the grandmother's recollections. Even though Little Dog is not directly involved in the war, its violence creates the emotional structure of his childhood. The memories of the grandmother are circulated as disjointed stories that transgress the time in the past and in the present. War is an afterlife, not an event, and it pervades migration, motherhood, and memory. The family turns out to be the place where imperial history returns to prove that even after the physical displacement, intimate relationships are still being organized by the power of geopolitical catastrophe.

Based on the idea of postmemory developed by Marianne Hirsch, the subjectivity of Little Dog is constructed based on inherited narratives, visuals, and silence that have existed before he was born. Affective generational violence residues mediate his self-perception. Postmemory within the novel functions as a non-ideal archive rather than a stable one; that is, it is an unstable reconstruction that is molded by gaps and distortion. The past is not available directly but can only be reconstructed through partial testimony. This mediated inheritance results in a self that adopts fear, displacement, and precarity as part and parcel of the self instead of being imposed on the self as historical burdens.

The novel also subverts the public warped into the intimacy of the private by following the way in which inherited trauma becomes familial abuse, panic, and embodied shame. Violence on the battlefield comes to the house, showing the perpetuation of imperial violence and domestic breakup. "Sometimes I think your hand is the war. A war I have never fought, but one that has marked me nonetheless" [Vuong \(2019\)](#).

Trauma is incised on the body with abrupt eruptions, silence, and emotional volatility, making the home a continuation of the geopolitical confrontation. The fact that Vuong breaks down the distinctions between the global history and the domestic space proves that the empire continues to exist in the textures of everyday life. The informal space does not protect subjects against the past but recreates its unsolved contradictions in intimate relations.

QUEER DESIRE, RACIAL CAPITALISM, AND CONDITIONAL BELONGING

The relationship between Little Dog and Trevor does not seem like a true solution at first in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, as it seems to provide a close escape from familial violence and cultural displacement. However, the queer desire in the text is not a fully emancipatory or unstructured desire. Their sexuality is enacted in areas characterized by economic marginality and rural stagnation, which makes it difficult to think of sexuality as an autonomous freedom. Based on Jose Esteban Muñoz, queer futurity tends to point to different horizons of possibility. Nevertheless, Vuong refuses utopian fixation, and desire is depicted as sweet but weak and is always under the pressure of addiction, poverty, and social pressure.

Racial capitalism is foreshadowed in the tobacco farm, where Little Dog and Trevor are employed as the disciplinary mode of forming migrant and rural bodies. Labor is a place of economic exploitation and masculinity, whiteness, and vulnerability. Bodily exposure and physical exhaustion show how capitalism takes away value in precarious lives and provides very low stability in return. "We were worth more dead than alive. The leaves had to be handled carefully. Us, less so" [Vuong \(2019\)](#).

In this perspective, the migration does not end in upward mobility but is absorbed into the low-wage industries that perpetuate national prosperity. The farm then turns into a mini world of larger economies of control over belonging by way of productivity, sustenance, and sell-off. By appealing to the idea of postcolonial melancholy by Paul Gilroy, American belonging becomes conditional on the selective memory lapse of imperial violence and racial order. Queerness does not go beyond these requirements but is

intertwined with them, being conditioned by the difference in classes and the racial line. Being white means that Trevor is conditionally privileged, whereas Little Dog is an immigrant and therefore is in high precarity. Every family structure, country, and economy replicates instability as opposed to security. The sense of belonging is still divided since intimacy is not able to get out of the forces that control labor, citizenship, and memory. The novel finally shows that freedom that was not achieved through structural change is incomplete and temporary.

The above discussion shows that trauma in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a process of repetition and not healing. War, migration, and domestic violence do not tend to their closure but echo through and across generations in their own way, creating subjectivity in repetition and displacement. Migration rather than mending this inheritance brings about a stratified instability in its place instead of coherent hybridity. The novel, hence, criticizes celebration frameworks of diasporic synthesis. The fragmentation is not transitional but constitutive, where the migrant condition is arranged through continuous negotiation with the past, not one that fades away but exists in the present.

Language is born as an injury and a weapon in this native land. English empowers the voice of narrative in Little Dog, but it is also a sign of alienation from the mother bond and cultural continuity. Speech is turned into the means of articulation that reveals the boundaries of recognition. The stages of the epistolary address highlight the expression without the guarantee of reception, highlighting the mediation of communication in migrant contexts through asymmetrical power. Even as it becomes the instrument of making visible the scars of war and displacement, language bears the marks of the former. Articulation, therefore, has its contradiction, acting as a survival strategy and a reminder of loss.

Ocean Vuong criticizes liberal multicultural discourse through this formal and thematic complexity, which conceives American identity as an inclusive mosaic. The novel redefines national belonging as an imperial history of sedimented violence of racial capitalism. Fragmented narration is an epistemic rebellion of refusing flow, of redemptive closure. Disruption turns into a political technique, revealing the reflection between the need for narrative cohesiveness and the need for assimilation. In rejecting reconciliation, the text states that unresolved pasts cannot be hidden; the challenge to the reader is how to face the structural conditions that make becoming a subject conditional and never stable.

CONCLUSION

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous eventually assembles trauma as structural, intergenerational, and racialized instead of episodic and internalized. War continues to exist outside of the historical chronology and is interwoven into the domestic space, linguistic discontinuity, and bodily memory. Migration does not disperse this inheritance but becomes more fragmented as it breaks cultural continuity and repositions the subjects in racial capitalism. The migrant condition is developed as multi-layered instability through the aspects of empire, labor exploitation, and conditional visibility. This belonging is thus tentative, negotiated by productivity and silence, not by citizenship or intimacy, and showing assimilation to be as partial and tactical as possible.

In the context of twenty-first-century diasporic literature, Ocean Vuong reinvents the symbolism of narrative fragmentation as a method of aesthetics and morality. Formal rupture opposes the wish of consistent testifying or therapeutic closure, demanding rather the continuation of unresolved pasts. The novel questions mainstream paradigms of healing and liberal inclusion according to which representation is synonymous with justice. Fragmentation turns into a form of witnessing, which keeps it complex and contradictory. By so doing, the text broadens the potential of migrant writing, anticipating precarity as a structural fact, as opposed to the transitional stage of national belonging.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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