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The Re-seen Past: Refugee Stories and
Postmemorial Revisionism in
Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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Abstract

The article examines instances of Vietnamese refugee storytelling and their potential to challenge exclusionary and discriminatory discourses surrounding the Vietnam War through an analysis of Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). Using the theoretical framework of re-storying, proposed by Critical Refugee Studies (CRS), we look at intergenerational storytelling in *On Earth* as a collaborative memory-making process capable of resisting the discursive marginalization of Vietnamese refugees in the USA. The storytelling sessions between Little Dog, the protagonist, and his grandmother Lan lead to the formation of postmemory. The article also finds that through the novel's first-person narrator, Little Dog, Vuong implements a strategy that we term "postmemorial revisionism" – using parental memories as alternative historical knowledge to offer subaltern perspectives of a state-appropriated cultural phenomenon. In *On Earth*, Little Dog's postmemory entails a revisionist strategy by which certain public images from the American cultural discourses, archives, and productions on the Vietnam War are rewritten with his grandmother's and mother's life stories. It thus becomes a means to engage with discriminatory narratives and resist neocolonial discourses of exclusion.

Keywords: Refugee storytelling, Vietnamese refugee stories, re-storying, postmemory, postmemorial revisionism, the Vietnam War

Introduction

Refugee stories, in many ways, are counternarratives that destabilize imposed discourses of the host state, which marginalize refugees and confine them to the liminalities of society. Critical Refugee Studies (CRS) highlights the significance of stories by analytically looking at them as a medium through which refugees claim themselves as “experiencing subjects” (Um, *From the Land of Shadows* 16). Identifying refugee stories as modes of reclamation and resistance, CRS puts forward storytelling/re-storying as a critical concept that engages with how refugees, through their stories, stake a claim to the discourses from which they are excluded, marginalized, or misrepresented (Espiritu et al. 20). Refugee stories, unsurprisingly, are often not a part of popular cultural spaces and have a restricted existence within refugee families. They warrant critical study because their reproductions by refugee children in literary works, films, artwork, and memorial projects form a link between private stories and public discourses, raising critical questions about refugee resistance.

Several studies establish the presence of intergenerational transmission of memory, especially traumatic memories, through stories in refugee and diaspora communities (Lacroix and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 691; Feron 275; Müller-Suleymanova 264), underscoring the significant role the 1.5- and second generation plays in the preservation, mobilization, and reclamation of their parental memories.

Parental stories are testimonies that become sources of knowledge for refugee children, revealing an epistemic dependence on the parents for what they consider authentic knowledge (Krämer and Weigel xv) about their community’s history amidst hostile discourses of the host country. The children witness their parents’ memories of life before, during, and after the exodus, potentially leading to the formation of what Marianne Hirsch terms “postmemory” (4) in *The Generation of Postmemory*. Postmemory, according to Hirsch, is a narratively organized and affectively appropriated body of memory that results from the intergenerational transmission of trauma memories. Consequently, refugee children seek autobiographical knowledge in parental stories and become

witnesses to their memories. Refugee children's postmemory then becomes a body of mnemonic knowledge capable of resistance.

To study the movement of refugee stories in familial spaces and the potential of their reproductions for resistance and reclamation, we close-read Vietnamese-American writer Ocean Vuong's semi-autobiographical novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), for its themes of refugee storytelling and postmemorial resistance. Many parts of *On Earth* are reproductions of refugee stories, exploring the protagonist's life with his refugee mother and grandmother in Hartford, Connecticut. The novel, structured as letters written by a young Vietnamese American, named Little Dog, to his illiterate mother, offers readers a profoundly personal insight into the exchange of memories through stories and objects within a refugee family.

On Earth is a formative account of Little Dog's queer and refugee identities, and surprisingly, these identities exist in parallel worlds that rarely intersect in the novel. The only instances in the novel where these two worlds collide are when Little Dog gets bullied for being queer by his peers in his neighborhood, and when he comes out to his mother, Rose. Most studies on *On Earth* do not explore the running tension between Little Dog's refugee and queer identities. This friction is caused by his position as the son of an Asian refugee, who seems hostile to queerness, and his homosexuality. His queerness, however, distances Little Dog from "masculinist codes" (Abizanda-Cardona 220) of war and exclusion in America and lets him embrace a feminist epistemological perspective (Espiritu et al. 23), making him a fitting receptor of his mother's and grandmother's memories.

The available literature on *On Earth* explores the novel from multiple perspectives. For instance, Brigit Neumann analyzes the linguistic aspects of *On Earth*, arguing that Vuong's language challenges dominant linguistic orders to make possible new ways of understanding and inhabiting a transcultural world. She identifies the linguistic negotiation between Vietnamese and English as an enabler of non-identitarian ways of community building that cut across borders. Likewise, focusing on the syntax of Vuong's language, Sophia D'Urso suggests that Little Dog searches for a new language as a form of resistance.

Christina Slopek, on the other hand, finds migrant homosexual identity as a means of empowerment for Little Dog. Naiara Lopez Alcazar's study finds Little Dog's queer and hyphenated identity a transnational border-crossing identity. In an affect-centered study of the novel, Jennifer Cho recognizes shame as an inherited emotion among Vietnamese Americans like Little Dog. Cho's analysis concludes that Vuong acknowledges and rejects the suffocating queer and refugee discourses that produce shame through double marginalization; instead, he reconceives shame as "a creative and socially affirmative force" (134). Similarly, Sara Soler i Arjona explores queer and refugee temporalities, juxtaposing both to reveal Little Dog's identity formation as an ongoing process.

While Nerry Agustin's article examines postmemorial transmission in *On Earth*, Maria Abizanda-Cardona investigates how Little Dog leverages his identity as a queer refugee to challenge dominant narratives of trauma surrounding the Vietnam War. We extend both these studies to understand how, through Little Dog's character, Vuong uses images and metaphors drawn from refugee postmemory to revise popular public images and discourses related to the Vietnam War in America.

Refugee Stories and Memory-Making: Towards a New Refugee Revisionist Strategy

By combining methodological insights from CRS with conceptual insights from memory studies, the article builds a theoretical framework to understand the multivalent movement of refugee memory in *On Earth* and its potential for rewriting public memory. The Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC), in their introduction to CRS, proposes re-storying as a methodology to understand refugee experiences. Re-storying takes refugees at their word, focusing on the narrative styles and images refugees use to tell their stories. According to the authors, re-storying looks at refugee stories through "Feminist Refugee Epistemology (FRE)" a methodology that searches for unsaid things by relying on feelings and emotions within familial interaction (Espiritu et al. 22-23). Refugee

stories thus tend to base themselves on private moments of grief and reflection that most importantly steer away from “over-generalized and de-individualizing images” (Eastmond 254) in a host society; instead, these stories highlight hope, resilience, and survival.

Through storytelling, refugees claim belonging, social justice, and, most importantly, the right to self-representation amidst performative narratives that build the refugees as strangers and the excluded (Saltsman and Majidi 3; Rajaram 254; Baldini 133). Moreover, stories also help them engage in cultural, political, and social conversations (Fobear 103) instead of having conversations filtered through governmental or non-governmental humanitarian agencies (Rajaram 250). Since refugee life experiences are characterized by ruptures, the narrativization of these often bestows a continuity upon such recollections (Eastmond 256). Besides, in refugee families, stories are inherited memories that create bonds and even exclude, marking boundaries (Bloch 648). These stories are also conditioned by the relationship between the teller and the recipient. While the teller may want to transfer stories as a coping mechanism, as a means to preserve their history, or to give their children a solid sense of identity (Granata and Sarcinelli 87), the listeners, aka refugee children, make sense of their parents’ past and situate these histories in the present (Bloch 649).

Vietnamese Americans Viet Thanh Nguyen (“Just Memory” 145) and Trangdai Tranguyen (120) point out that storytelling is a form of memory exchange in refugee families; this idea theoretically aligns with concepts from memory studies, such as collective, communicative, and social memory. This is because, drawing on theories of collective memory by Jan Assmann and Aledia Assmann, refugee memory can operate through everyday conversations within social frameworks, with the stories circulating in an intersubjective semantic system accessible to all members of the particular mnemonic framework.

Refugee storytelling also facilitates the formation of “refugee postmemories” (Espiritu 139), a body of inherited memory formed in refugee children through parental stories and behaviors, objects, or even silences (Hirsch 33). Even though postmemories like that of refugee children are constituted of parental stories, they are also mediated or

influenced by public images, archives, and dominant cultural productions. Thus, Hirsch's concept of postmemory links private memory with public archives.

However, for refugees, the archives are not just impersonal but also exclusionary and discriminatory. In the presence of such dehumanizing public memory narratives, parental stories are "refugee assets" (Bui, "Refugee" 57) – unfiltered, personal, and authentic. Even so, not all refugee families exhibit a smooth generational transfer of stories; many parents remain silent about their past (Kidron 8), complicating the second generation's understanding of their past. For instance, Yen Le Espiritu establishes that there is a 'don't ask, don't tell' strategy in Vietnamese families, and the children often create an organized narrative only through the stories they overhear (170).

The refugee postmemory thus created is "a constant political negotiation of historical violence" (Bui, *Returns of War* 59), as the postwar refugee familial dynamics are deeply influenced by the political and economic dimensions of refugee survival strategies (Bui, *Returns of War* 67). Additionally, these postmemorial refugee narratives can talk back to the Center because they offer insights into history from the perspectives of the subaltern, like the Vietnamese refugees in the USA, thereby exhibiting revisionist potential.

Mnemonic Othering of the Vietnamese Refugees in the USA

For Vietnamese Americans like Vuong and *On Earth*'s protagonist Little Dog, the cultural memory in the USA relating to the Vietnam War does not faithfully represent their refugee parents' history and truth. In the USA, there was a concerted effort in the 1970s and 1980s to build a cultural memory about the Vietnam War rooted in nationalism and exclusion. In order to neutralize the hatred of the American public towards the Vietnam War and its veterans that developed from the public dissemination of horrific television clips and documentary images of war atrocities, various "technologies of memory" (Sturken 9), such as films, memorials, and

documentary images, were constructed to create a one-sided history of the Vietnam War for future generations of Americans.

As a result, in the American imagination, Viet Nam represents the war that caused trauma to the brave American soldiers. Hugely successful movies like *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Rambo* (1982) stereotyped the Vietnamese as cold-blooded communists, corrupt South Vietnamese officers, prostitutes, or dragon ladies (Pelaud 52) and told “ethnocentrically American stories” (V.T. Nguyen, “Just Memory” 155).

In “Just Memory,” V. T. Nguyen argues that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, designed by Maya Lin and intended to be powerfully inclusive, is also powerfully exclusionary (152). It remembers every American who lost their lives in the War, but it excludes every Vietnamese who met the same fate as the American soldiers. By calling the war the Vietnam War, America places itself outside the War, taking no responsibility for its interference in the War. V. T. Nguyen writes, “even if the name is abbreviated to Vietnam . . . many people still understand it to mean the war” (*Nothing Ever Dies* 15). In *Returns of War*, Long T. Bui describes the Vietnamese presence in the US public memory as “archival others” (25), referring to the lack of authentic Vietnamese memories relating to the Vietnam War. Moreover, there are no Vietnamese perspectives on the War in public education (Espiritu 142).

These discriminatory discourses impose an othered form of refugee consciousness on the children of Vietnamese refugees in the USA because their public image somehow gets “interlaced with those of their elders” (Bui, “The Refugee Repertoire” 114). Thus, the Vietnam War and its narratives in the USA construct a “cultural trauma” (Alexander 1) for the 1.5-/second-generation Vietnamese Americans, leaving traumatic marks on their group consciousness. However, at the same time, the stories they hear from their parents about the War are vastly different from these dehumanizing popular perceptions. They are thus caught between two conflicting bodies of memory relating to the Vietnam War, the resolution of which is complicated due to their US citizenship and lack of direct connections to Viet Nam. Little Dog, like Vuong and other Vietnamese refugee children in the USA, grew up amidst these

exclusionary and depersonalized discourses about the Vietnam War and their exodus. Consequently, this refugee consciousness, constituted by both refugee postmemory and exclusionary public memory, is a site of negotiation for Little Dog.

In this study, we explore refugee consciousness in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by analyzing instances of refugee storytelling and memory transmission leading to postmemorial knowledge in Little Dog. The study investigates the potential for resistance and revision in the memories of Vietnamese refugees, inherited by the 1.5- and second-generation. The analysis finds that Little Dog's postmemory revises specific public images from the USA's cultural discourses and archives. Little Dog's perception becomes Vuong's medium to rewrite public memory from the perspective of the forgotten, such as Little Dog's Vietnamese refugee mother and grandmother. We refer to this specific revisionist strategy rooted in postmemory as postmemorial revisionism throughout this article. Postmemorial revisionism utilizes parental memories as an alternative source of historical knowledge to offer subaltern perspectives on a state-appropriated cultural and historical phenomenon.

Postmemorial Transmission in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

In *On Earth*, the protagonist Little Dog's postmemory is informed not only by the refugee family stories but also by the songs, photographs, and even behavioral patterns he grew up with. For Little Dog, as Hirsch talks about in *The Generation of Postmemory*, family is an ideal space for postmemory to flourish because "non-verbal and precognitive acts of transfer occur most clearly within a familial space" (34). He grew up listening to his grandmother Lan's stories about her homeland, the war, and its aftermath, these stories having a profound influence on Little Dog's perception of his family's refugee past. Most of Lan's life was entangled in the quagmire of the War, which lasted almost twenty years. As a result, most of her stories of Viet Nam are those related to the War and its trauma.

Intergenerational Trauma in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Little Dog's postmemory of the War is founded on Lan's stories; it is "a consequence of traumatic recall at a generational remove" (Hirsch 6). Consequently, Lan's trauma is at the center of Little Dog's postmemory. Little Dog describes Lan's memories as a vortex with her trauma at its core, taking a circular trajectory around an epicentre (Vuong 35). She might move away from the epicentre of trauma, the Vietnam War, as life progresses, but returns to it frequently. Lan's stories that she shares with the family are the memories that take her back to the epicentre, pointing to the "inescapability" of trauma (Caruth 7). Through her stories, she "was also travelling in a spiral" (Vuong 35). Lan's stories are products of what Dori Laub describes as a "trauma . . . that, in effect, *does not end*" (Laub 67). Consequently, for Lan and other first-generation Vietnamese refugees, the past is ever-present, forcing them to move in a circle, and the only choice they have is to use these experiences as a survival force to progress in life.

The memory vortex in Little Dog's family is sustained by the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories. Little Dog's trauma is an ever-present generational trauma that preceded him, whose origin is hard to locate. Despite having no personal memories about the Vietnam War, he still lives with trauma, albeit that of his mother and grandmother, and thus feels it like an "unthought knowledge" (Schwab 8) as a result of living in a space saturated with traumatic memories. In *Haunting Legacies*, Gabrielle Schwab argues that such unregistered inherited trauma can be expressed through literature and the arts, as they "endow this knowledge with a symbolic form of expression . . . and make it indirectly accessible to others" (8). In *On Earth*, Vuong illustrates this point when Little Dog uses the image of monarch butterflies to reveal the nature of the intergenerational transfer of traumatic memories in his family. Monarch butterflies migrate to the south before winter because they cannot survive the cold winters of the north. En route, the female monarchs lay eggs, and only these children return to the north. Equating monarch butterflies to diasporic communities, he says that "only future revisits the past" (Vuong

8), implying that when children live in close proximity to familial trauma, they are compelled to revisit their parents' past, thereby reliving their parents' reality and consequently assimilating the memories of their parents as their own.

The children also bear direct witness to the effects of trauma on their parents. In Little Dog's assessment, the ripple effect of generational trauma has no temporal endpoints. And it could be the reason why he describes intergenerational trauma as something that "no one was meant to outlast" (10). Intergenerational trauma, much like Little Dog's perception of history, does not follow a linear trajectory; it is circular, with no clear beginnings or endings. It is interesting to note that history and trauma are often interchangeable in his vocabulary; in fact, Little Dog defines history as a circle that generates from an epicentre of trauma (35). Additionally, Little Dog identifies a death drive that could be associated with intergenerational trauma: the idea that one follows their family into destruction. The desire to self-destruct, an aftermath of familial trauma, is exemplified in the novel when Lan wonders, while watching TV, why a herd of buffalo would follow one another off a cliff to their death, and Little Dog replies, "They don't mean to. . . They're just following their family" (Vuong 179).

Little Dog feels this trauma as a perpetual bullet wound that has been there all the time: "The bullet was always here, the boy thinks. . . It wasn't me, the boy thinks, who was inside my mother's womb, but this bullet, this seed I bloomed around" (Vuong 77). Moreover, intergenerational trauma produces visceral effects on Little Dog. Vuong suggests that it is capable of affecting even the relationship between a mother and an unborn child. Intergenerational trauma could cause epigenetic changes, and a mother's trauma leaves traces in her child's genes: "Monarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes" (Vuong 12). These intergenerational traumatic memories, which could even alter the nature of Little Dog's genes, were mostly transferred to him through family stories.

Refugee Storytelling in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

In *On Earth*, Little Dog's exposure to refugee stories transforms these narratives into a familial collective living memory transferred through the exchange of oral stories and social interaction between family members (Erl 306). Little Dog's family becomes what Maurice Halbwachs terms in *On Collective Memory* a "social framework of memory" (38), within which Little Dog's refugee consciousness is constituted. In Little Dog's family, it was a routine for family members to gather around their grandmother, Lan, to hear stories after dinner.

In one of Lan's stories, she details the circumstances in which Little Dog was named. In the Vietnamese village where Lan grew up, the weakest child was named after something grotesque so that evil spirits in search of healthy children would keep away on hearing such a ghastly name. Naming her grandson Little Dog, after something so worthless, was a "shield" (Vuong 18) so that he may be spared by death. The name becomes, in effect, a testimony to Lan's trauma. Little Dog says, "I have and have had many names" (Vuong 18); yet, throughout the novel, the protagonist is called Little Dog by every other character. He might have many names, but no other name resonates so deeply with his family's trauma, which was now a postmemorial refugee asset. The story of the name's origin informs Little Dog's awareness of his culture, history, and identity. "What's in a name?" William Shakespeare famously asked. Nevertheless, for Little Dog, his name carries the weight of history and trauma.

Sometimes, Little Dog was "paid in stories" (Vuong 31) for the small jobs he would do for Lan, such as plucking out her grey hairs with a tweezer. Lan's stories resembled ramblings; they would go in and out of her mind to return later, due to fragmented memories and hampered historical consciousness that resulted from war trauma. The stories were also repeated so many times that Little Dog could recall the exact lines. He describes the process of listening to Lan in the following words: "I'd mouth along with the sentences, as if watching a film for the umpteenth time – a movie made by Lan's words and animated by my imagination. In this way, we collaborated" (Vuong 31). Little Dog's ideas of the War are

therefore created for him by the iterative nature of Lan's stories and are in turn consolidated in his mind as memories with no clear origins through the same repetitive and iterative process. Through repetition, Viet Nam, the War, and life in wartime attain a clearer form in Little Dog's imagination, blurring the lines of where Lan's memories end and Little Dog's begin. Little Dog's act of listening to Lan's stories is what Mead et al. term "collaborative remembering" in their work *Collaborative Remembering: Theories, Research, and Applications*, which comprises remembering in the presence of others and remembering in direct collaboration with others, such as co-constructing within small groups like pairs, couples, or families (5). In *Departures*, Espiritu et al. also emphasize the importance of collaboration, as it becomes a political act in the context of refugee stories such as Lan's, leading to the significant consolidation of refugee memory.

As the collaborator to Lan's stories, Little Dog is a "participant and co-owner" (Laub 57) of memories rather than a passive listener. Lan's memories acquire form only when they are heard by Little Dog and other members of the family, underscoring that memory is relational. Little Dog's inquisitiveness helps Lan recall and locate her memories. These conversations resonate with Halbwachs' argument that others' questions about things or events trigger memories in an individual (38). Little Dog is a fitting listener who is capable of getting testimony out of Lan. Lan trusts Little Dog to be a faithful, empathetic, and non-judgmental listener because he is family. He possesses what Dori Laub calls a "password" (63), which establishes an empathetic chord that acts as a "signal of [this] mutual recognition of a shared knowledge" (64) between the two of them. The chord is strengthened by the understanding that they share the same genes and history. Consequently, Little Dog is "bearing witness" (Laub 57) to Lan's past willfully: "I had forgotten myself into her story, had lost my way, willingly" (Vuong 23). By listening to these stories, Little Dog acquires Lan's history and memory, resulting in postmemory. Since family's "intimate embodied space" (Hirsch 6) is the ideal space for postmemories to flourish, experiential boundaries blur.

Even in Lan's fractured memories, Little Dog discovers knowledge that helps him understand his past and identity. He says, "I

came to know, in those afternoons, that madness can sometimes lead to discovery, that the mind, fractured and short-wired, is not entirely wrong” (Vuong 32). Little Dog was conscious of the fact that Lan sometimes did tell “half-invented tales” (Vuong 47), because “denial, fabrication-storytelling – was her way of staying one step ahead of her life” (Vuong 197). But he also recognizes that these stories contain refugee history that, if not received with empathy, would be lost to time.

Through Little Dog’s accounts, the reader understands that Lan’s life in Viet Nam was a tumultuous one, running away from a failed marriage, arriving in Saigon, and becoming a sex worker for American GIs to support her child from the first marriage. Some days, Little Dog would find Lan sobbing, confessing to her mother, who was long dead, that she “never asked to be a whore” and that she “wanted to go home . . .” (Vuong 47). As for Lan, this act of telling stories to her grandson is a way of healing her trauma; it fulfills the need for therapy. In Asian families where institutional therapy is still a stigma (Li and Seidman 170), these stories and conversations have therapeutic value (Gu 480) that helps the family members alleviate their trauma. Remembering becomes a discursive act, putting into words her pain, guilt, and regrets. Storytelling thus becomes a mechanism for Lan to revisit her painful past and even change it, which is why, many times in the novel, one encounters Lan fabricating tales to rewrite her past. This re-storying becomes a way for Lan to deal with the traumas of her life. For Little Dog, too, his curiosity is not dampened by the fact that Lan’s stories were not always the same and that the details changed every time she repeated the same story. The crises of truth arising from these storytelling sessions become insignificant to Little Dog because he understands that their truth is being re-seen every time it is put into words. And so, Little Dog does not question the authenticity of Lan’s memories because “the past [is] never a fixed and dormant landscape but one that is re-seen . . . we are creating something new from what is gone” (Vuong 28). Little Dog understands memory as a dynamic discourse that is being reconstituted perpetually. Every time a story is shared, the past is being re-storied, re-discovered and re-configured.

Apart from stories, photographs also function as time capsules that reinforce consciousness about the traumatic pasts of the characters in *On Earth* and become significant in the transmission of historical memories. In Little Dog's house, "from photographs, family 'myths' are developed through which individual family members understand themselves and their relation to places and others" (Roberts 92). For instance, all throughout Little Dog's childhood, Lan's wedding photograph hangs on the living room wall. In the photograph, his grandfather Paul, who was once a young Virginian boy, smiles happily above his new wife Lan, who was then a farm girl from Go Cong in Viet Nam. Despite their joy, Little Dog cannot look at this picture without thinking about the Vietnam War: "in the couple's hopeful smiles, it's hard to imagine the photo was snapped during one of the most brutal years of the war" (Vuong 46). The photograph serves as a permanent reminder of the War and reminds Little Dog about his emotional connection to the War and how life might have been different for him had it not been for the War. In another incident, Little Dog recounts seeing his American grandfather, Paul, wipe tears off his face while looking at photographs from his time as a soldier in Viet Nam.

Another marker of Little Dog's inheritance of traumatic memories in the novel is the songs that Lan sings to Little Dog. One of the songs that Lan often sings is one that describes "a woman singing among corpses strewn across sloping leafy hills" (Vuong 49). The song was originally performed by the famous Vietnamese-American singer Khanh Ly. The song describes a woman looking for her sister's dead body in a field strewn with corpses. Lan appropriated it into a lullaby for her grandson. Lullabies are characteristically iterative in nature, and, therefore, by ingeminating the images of death and suffering through her singing, Lan's songs become more than merely lullabies for Little Dog. Instead of soothing him, it serves to etch images of death in his psyche. In Little Dog's mind, therefore, Lan's lullabies acquire personal meanings within the familial space, even when the images of the war as presented in the song are impersonal in nature.

Refugee storytelling in Little Dog's family thus happens not only through conversations but also through photographs and songs. These

become the main source of postmemorial knowledge for 1.5-/second-generation Vietnamese like Little Dog. The refugee family storytelling sessions are collaborative memory-making through re-storying in which Lan and Little Dog share and create narratives around their refugee experiences. These sessions form vital historical knowledge that is progressively threatened by lack of documentation and lapse of time, which magnifies the need for memorialization in some form, like literary productions. Additionally, the postmemorial knowledge also has the potential to resist and rewrite exclusionary discourses and images of American popular culture.

Postmemorial Revisionism in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Looking at *On Earth* through the lens of postmemory, Little Dog's postmemory revises certain discriminatory representations of the Vietnamese in American cultural discourses. *On Earth* can be categorized as what Hirsch calls a "postmemorial work" in *The Generation of Postmemory* – a work that "strives to reactivate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression" (33). Little Dog's memories of the War and Viet Nam are those that he has conceived through intergenerational transfer. However, in the letters to Rose, Little Dog's recollections are not just a reproduction of Lan's or Rose's memories; they are reimaginings of the transferred memories. These reimagined memories revise distant and discriminatory discourses with embodied Vietnamese refugee experiences.

We draw attention to the autobiographical details in *On Earth* while arguing that Vuong employs his own experiences as a Vietnamese American and refugee child to build Little Dog's revisionist perspectives. Penguin Publishers, the parent company of Jonathan Cape, *On Earth's* publishers, categorizes the novel as autofiction. Autofiction is "a hybrid genre wherein the author appears as a character, the nonfiction of their autobiographical life combining with the fiction of invention and fabrication" (Gibbons 471). *On Earth* is written this way, as autofiction,

making it difficult for readers to distinguish Little Dog's voice from Vuong's own. Several review articles, including those by *The New York Times*, *NPR*, and *Time Magazine*, refer to the novel as semi-autobiographical. Vuong's interviews with *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Nervous Breakdown* reveal that Little Dog shares many biographical similarities with Vuong, who is also a Vietnamese American who grew up with his mother and grandmother in Hartford, Connecticut. Like Little Dog, Vuong is queer and worked in tobacco fields as a teen; moreover, his mother worked in a nail salon, and he had an absent father and a white Vietnam War veteran grandfather from Michigan. Therefore, Vuong's experiences as a queer Vietnamese refugee child in the US inform Little Dog's character portrayal, and we can assume that Vuong fictionalizes himself in Little Dog. In fact, in *Lived Refuge*, Vinh Nguyen calls Little Dog "a stand-in for Vuong" (88) in his analysis of *On Earth*. Due to the intimate similarities between Little Dog and Vuong in terms of family background, ethnicity, and sexual identity, we argue that the boundaries between their postmemories are also blurry.

Little Dog's character indeed becomes a representative of not only Vuong's but also other 1.5-/second-generation Vietnamese experiences in the USA. Consequently, Little Dog's postmemory, like Vuong's, is likely defined by the reality of growing up with little information due to "a lack of meaningful Vietnam War curricula in US schools, especially ones that incorporate Vietnamese history, culture, and experience" (Espiritu 143). Revealing an average Vietnamese American experience, Vuong says that he had to do his own research to find more: "So I started to do my own research, and I realized right away that one's research with the Vietnam War – something I was not prepared for was to see upwards of – hundreds of dead bodies. Asian bodies. Bodies that look like me" ("A Life Worthy"). Such stereotypical images of the dead or suffering boat people strewn across archives and the internet are a dominant picture in the global consciousness relating to the Vietnamese migration. According to Bui, many Americanized children of Vietnamese refugees are not free from the larger perceptions of the Vietnamese as the boat people ("The Refugee Repertoire" 114). Between 1975 and 1990, over 1.5 million Vietnamese fled their country to escape the oppression

and hardship that entailed the Vietnam War (Pelaud 8). In “Vietnamese Boat People: Living to Tell the Tale,” Chris McGreal writes that many Vietnamese stacked themselves into wooden boats, often driven by untrained sailors and not meant for long trips, to escape Viet Nam. Many lives were lost at sea to bad weather, lack of resources, diseases, and pirates.

The many heartbreaking images of the Vietnamese boat people in the public archives mostly contribute to stereotypical “trauma porn” narratives about the refugees (Espiritu et al. 27). Moreover, Vuong has discussed the challenge of reconciling what he learned about the war in Viet Nam from American textbooks with what he learned from his own research. While conversing with Krista Tippet for the *On Being Project* podcast, Vuong says, “. . . part of my education with the history of Vietnam and America’s involvement in it became something very different from what was given to me in the textbooks.” Little Dog’s postmemory, like Vuong’s, could also be shaped by these public images and his family’s memories because, when he hears the word ‘boat’ from Lan, the image that immediately comes to his mind is that of all three of them, Lan, Rose, and himself, on a wooden boat to America:

I looked down and saw it, the brown, yellowish floorboards swirling into muddy currents. I saw the weak ebb thick with grease and dead grass. We weren’t rowing, but adrift. We were clinging to a mother the size of a raft until the mother beneath us grew stiff with sleep. And we soon fell silent as the raft took us all down this great brown river called America, finally happy. (Vuong 34)

Such vividness in Little Dog’s description draws our attention to the process of personalizing historical communal memory. Though Little Dog’s postmemory began with the image of his family and himself on a boat, it gradually transformed into the image of a child clinging to its mother on a raft that was roughly the size of a human. Similar images of “refugitude” (Um, “Crossing Borders” 207) can be found in Vuong’s poetry as well. For instance, in “Immigrant Haibun,” a poem from Vuong’s *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, images of the boat people are abundant, like sinking ships, rafts, and the sea: “We had been sailing – but the edge of the world was nowhere in sight” (13). In his conversation with

Tippet, Vuong says that he chose his family photograph as the cover for *Night Sky* so that the memory of the War should not be only about the dead but also the living – about those who lived to tell the tales.

Similarly, there are parallels between Little Dog's storytelling sessions with Lan and Vuong's with his grandmother, which ultimately become sources of postmemory for both. Vuong's preliminary ideas about the War came from the conversations within the family. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2019, Vuong says, "My grandmother would tell a ghost story, and then she would say: oh, that was after the napalm. So, through the cycles of these stories, that world started opening, and as a child, I would ask, "What's napalm?" At first, as a child, Vuong says he had no context for what he was hearing. However, as an adult writer with access to books, archives, and public records, Vuong could create a context for the stories. And so, in *On Earth*, he creates a fictional context for the napalm raid, re-embodying the image with Little Dog's mother's experience. Little Dog describes a postmemory related to the napalm raid as "Sometimes, I imagine the monarchs fleeing not winter but the napalm clouds of your childhood in Vietnam. I imagine them flying from the blazed blasts unscathed . . . debris that kept blowing for thousands of miles across the sky" (Vuong 14). Moreover, various photographs and video clips of napalm bombings are available in the public archives. The photograph of nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc, taken by Vietnamese American photographer Nick Ut, running naked on the road along with other kids who were severely burnt after a napalm raid, is one of the most terrifying images of the Vietnam War that is available in the public space. Little Dog's mother was also a little girl who watched her school collapse in a napalm raid, as she was hiding in a banana grove (Vuong 31).

Another instance of Vuong re-embodying public signifiers with personal memories can be seen in his use of the term post-traumatic stress disorder, or popularly known as PTSD. The American Psychiatric Association defines PTSD as "a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, series of events, or set of circumstances" ("What Is"). The term made its first appearance in 1980, in the 3rd edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric

Association (APA), after studies done on data collected from the veteran soldiers of the Vietnam War supported the APA's earlier observations on post-traumatic behavioral patterns in World War II veterans, Holocaust survivors, and rape victims (Freidman et al. 4). Thus, the term PTSD has its formal origin in the legacy of the Vietnam War (Horwitz 85). In *On Earth*, Vuong uses this term to describe Little Dog's mother, Rose's trauma, which was also a product of the Vietnam War. Vietnamese refugee trauma was unacknowledged by American cultural discourses, and by using PTSD to describe his mother's trauma, Vuong reembodies a popular word in American vocabulary with subaltern trauma.

In another instance, the American golfer Tiger Woods, who, at first glance, seems like someone unrelated to the Vietnam War, is described by Little Dog as a product of the Vietnam War: "Eldrick 'Tiger' Woods, one of the greatest golfers in the world, is, like you, Ma, a direct product of the war in Vietnam" (Vuong 53). Tiger's father, Earl Woods, a Black American Vietnam War veteran, named his child after his South Vietnamese veteran friend who fought alongside him in the Vietnam War, Vuong Dang Phong. Tiger's mother, Kutilda, was of Thai-Chinese descent. Vuong makes Tiger's mixed ancestry a point of contemplation for Little Dog in the novel. Little Dog reminisces about an instance when his mother, Rose, asks him why Tiger Woods is described exclusively as a Black American in the American media. Her extreme disappointment at the erasure of Tiger's Asian ancestry can be seen in the words, "Everything good is always somewhere else" (Vuong 51). By connecting Tiger Woods's ethnicity and legacy to the Vietnam War and to Asian history, Vuong revises the widely propagated ethnicity of Woods in American media and popular culture.

Similarly, Agent Orange is a term widely popular in the USA's Vietnam War vocabulary. Little Dog mentions this destructive chemical weapon, which caused irreversible damage to the Vietnamese people, in relation to his white veteran grandfather Paul, who believed that his cancer was a result of his exposure to the pesticide during his time as a soldier in Viet Nam, suggesting that it harmed not only the Vietnamese but also the US soldiers who knowingly or unknowingly enabled the use of Agent Orange.

Vuong's preoccupation with the re-signification of populist images can also be seen in Little Dog's musings about the artist Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917). Little Dog thinks about how Duchamp was able to turn an object like a urinal into art and radicalize its reception. By naming it *Fountain*, he divested the object of its accepted identity, giving it an unrecognizable new form. Little Dog believes that Duchamp proved that the entire existence of an object could be changed by revealing a new angle to its name or meaning.

As a writer, for Vuong, re-imagining and re-writing signifiers with new meanings is an "agency for evolution" (*On Earth* 199). For a postgeneration writer like Vuong, diasporic identities are constantly evolving, especially over generations, and postmemorial work like *On Earth* helps in expressing the evolution of their identities. Ascribing legitimacy to the familial memories becomes an important project for Vuong to understand his identity. Therefore, in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, he chose a family photo for the cover to show that the war's memory is not only about the dead but also the living.

By choosing autofiction as a genre for postmemorial work, Vuong selects a style that suits the induction of his own familial and generational memories into the public space while also maintaining a fictional distance, thereby ascribing generality to the experiences described. At one point in the novel, the thinly veiled boundary between Little Dog and Vuong disappears when *On Earth* juxtaposes Little Dog writing letters to Rose with writing in general: "It could be, in writing you here, I am writing to everyone" (34). This metatextual reference might suggest that, although the writing process occurs within a private space, once published, the work will become part of the public sphere, where it will be discussed and reviewed, thus building a discourse around the work. Therefore, when it is a deeply autobiographical work founded on familial memories, the family's stories are infused into the public discourse. Through Little Dog in *On Earth*, Vuong is able to make some of his grandmother's and mother's memories a part of the public discourse on the Vietnam War, merging the personal with the public.

Thus, *On Earth* contributes to "a base of knowledge in the absence of a formal or refugee archive of knowledge" (Bui "The Refugee

Repertoire” 114). This base knowledge contains not just memories received from stories but also several mnemonically mediated and remediated public images relating to the collective Vietnamese refugee experience, such as the boat people exodus, napalm raids, Agent Orange, bombings, and exit wounds. *On Earth* tells the story of the Vietnam War from the perspective of Vietnamese refugees, portraying it as a shifting, changing narrative – not fixed or dormant – much like Lan’s stories. *On Earth* presents a “re-seen past” (28) through inherited familial stories and memories presented via Little Dog’s narration.

Postmemorial revisionism could entail memory activism of some sort, as it engages with representational politics, consciously or unconsciously reimagining historical instances through mnemonic knowledge, giving voice to the history of the other side, the Vietnamese part. It holds the potential to bring about a change in the way the public perceives the war and its aftermath, pushing for a pluralistic understanding of tragedy and engendering a holistic mode of remembrance that can lead to collective healing for those whose sufferings were marginalized or erased. In such cases, the second generation’s hyphenated identity not only bridges two forms of historical consciousness but also reinforces the boundaries between collective memories of the same event, highlighting the importance of coexistence among various memories.

Conclusion

As a refugee child, Little Dog’s storytelling sessions with his grandmother, Lan, reveal insights into the subaltern war experiences, helping him and the readers re-see the Vietnamese-American past. These stories help him create the “History of Memory,” because refugee histories are hidden in refugee memories like an “unfinished shadow” (*On Earth* 8). Many parts of *On Earth* are dedicated to themes of family storytelling and descriptions of the transformative power of stories on a refugee child, such as Little Dog, who has no other resources to explore their past. Little Dog perceives storytelling as a collaboration, the creative act of producing

personal refugee narratives. In this way, *On Earth* demonstrates that stories are important sources of Vietnamese refugee memories.

Moreover, *On Earth*, which is largely about Little Dog's life with his refugee family, contributes to an alternative source of knowledge because there are only a few formal sources or archives about Vietnamese refugee experiences in the USA. This is a re-storied history, as it contains memories of Little Dog's marginalized family and his experiences as a member of the Vietnamese diaspora.

In *On Earth*, we also see postmemorial revisionism by which Little Dog's inherited stories, memories, and images revise and rewrite discriminatory American discourses about the Vietnam War. Through Little Dog, Vuong reclaims objectified images of Vietnamese refugees in public memory and reinfuses them with Vietnamese memories. *On Earth* makes the Vietnam War-specific vocabulary inclusive of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American experiences. The dehumanizing napalm raids and bombing attacks of the American army are rewritten from Little Dog's perspective. Thus, *On Earth* demonstrates that postmemorial revision is a creative strategy that 1.5/second-generation Vietnamese-Americans can employ to resist neocolonial discourses of exclusion.

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