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BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN ENGLISH STUDIES

Coming-of-Age Narratives in American Literature. Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction 1

2. Theoretical Framework: The Coming-of-Age Question 3

2.1. The Origin of Coming-of-Age Literature: The *Bildungsroman* 3

2.2. Growing Up American 6

2.3. Immigration: A Hyphenated Identity 8

2.4. The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Trauma and the Self 11

3. Analyzing Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* 14

3.1. When Words Fail: Language and Identity 14

3.2. Epigenetic Trauma: Fragmented Selves 18

3.3. Growing Up in a Queer Asian Body: Masculinity and Sexuality 22

4. Conclusions 27

5. Works Cited 30

1. Introduction

The transition from childhood to adult life, along with all that it entails, has become a recurring literary theme since the eighteenth century. Those narratives that deal with the intricacies of the coming of age have been traditionally grouped under the umbrella term *Bildungsroman*. This thesis starts from the premise that this genre has evolved in recent decades, making it more appropriate to speak of coming-of-age narratives, a category that encompasses a much more prolific and diverse variety of texts. Focusing on the context of the United States, different phenomena such as multiculturalism, diasporic migration, and decolonization have fostered a new literary scene in which historically marginalized subjects have found their voice. The hybrid space of these narratives offers "an appropriate site for the negotiation of a number of enduring and contentious tensions in ethnic American writing" (Bolaki 2011, 11). Therefore, the social function of the genre is not outdated, but rather the opposite. Coming-of-age stories explore individual development within a community, a relevant background for the portrayal of current growing-up experiences being African American, Caribbean, Asian American, Chicano, etc. in the United States. They still use tropes related to adolescence −such as the search for identity, sexual awakening, and intergenerational conflict− which are characteristic of *Bildungsromane*. Nevertheless, new elements are also introduced −such as trauma, homophobia, and racism− which have an impact on the growth of the protagonist.

The aim of this BA thesis is to not only revisit this literary genre from a theoretical and historical point of view to show its evolution, but also to thoroughly analyze a topical American coming-of-age story by an ethnic author. The object of study has been Ocean Vuong's 2019 debut novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, which tackles the issues of growing up in America as an immigrant Vietnamese boy. The research findings indicate that while inherent psychological traits of the adolescent play a fundamental role in their transition, other issues such as race, sexuality, and trauma may radically change the outcome of the story. In fact, the case study has shown how the racialized male protagonist, who is also a diasporic subject, has to undergo extremely more difficult experiences than the canonical white American teenage boy. Furthermore, it is of paramount importance to examine this work from a contemporary perspective, due to the current political climate in the United States. The ongoing global

COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a wave of xenophobic and racist violence towards the Asian American community since early 2020, due to the fact that the virus was first reported in Wuhan, China. From the use of derogatory phrases to refer to the coronavirus disease −such as *Chinese flu*, *China flu*, or *Wuhan flu*− to verbal and physical attacks, there has been an overall increase of anti-Asian sentiment among the American population. However, a study by the New York University College of Arts & Science found that the escalation in hate crimes may reflect "elite authorization of offenses by already prejudiced persons rather than a broad increase in antagonism toward Asian-Americans" (Daniels et al. 2020, 23). This shows that racism, bigotry, and xenophobia are still deeply ingrained in the American collective consciousness. Thus, including narratives by Asian American authors in the country's literary canon would be highly beneficial in educating the American population on the importance of diversity, a fundamental pillar of the multicultural society that makes up the United States.

This thesis deals with Vuong's novel as a response to this imperative need to draw attention to more Asian American coming-of-age stories. For this purpose, it was first necessary to create a theoretical framework on which to support the subsequent analysis of the work. It is structured in four sections, following a general-to-specific order. The first section focuses on the origins of the genre and the earliest-known *Bildungsromane*, continuing with its development in the United States in the second section. After having discussed how this country was the perfect setting for the proliferation of the coming-of-age genre, as well as its misrepresentation of diversity, this paper moves on to explore the particular case of the American immigrant experience through coming-of-age literature. Finally, the last section focuses on the historical and sociocultural context of Vietnamese Americans in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, further examining issues of vital importance for the plot of the novel. All in all, having considered the myriad of topics that Vuong's work deals with, it became apparent that the analysis should be approached through three main categories: the importance of language, the impact of trauma, and masculinity and sexuality. The main character, Little Dog, is a gay boy raised by Vietnamese refugee women with post-traumatic stress disorder in America. Therefore, considering how his experience is conditioned by these particular circumstances is relevant to comprehend Little Dog's complex coming-of-age process.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Coming-of-Age Question

Coming of age is the multidimensional process of transitioning from childhood to adult life. Usually, this developmental stage occurs during adolescence, a period of life characterized by continuous physical, psychological, and intellectual changes. Coming of age is generally conceived as "a two-pronged process of identity formation and community integration" (Hemmings 2004, 12). Identity formation begins in infancy, when children become aware of their existence as individual beings, both physically and mentally. This process continues into adolescence as they try to define their true self within a more intricate and complex socio-emotional context. Community integration refers to the way adolescents navigate multifaceted situations within their particular kinship and peer groups. This individual-community interface forms a dynamic tension between them that guides the configuration of the adolescent's identity towards a specific direction. Moreover, this external influence is especially relevant to the maturation process, since exposure to traumatic life events −such as war, natural disasters, abuse, or death− can force a child to come of age prematurely. Nevertheless, even though the specific time in which it occurs may vary depending on each person's unique experiences, coming of age is a universal phenomenon. In fact, numerous cultures worldwide have specific ceremonies, celebrations, or rites of passage in order to symbolically represent this transition. Some examples are the Jewish Bar and Bat mitzvah and the Mexican *fiesta de quinceañera*. Furthermore, this dramatic shift from childhood innocence to the tribulations of adult life is also a constant source of inspiration in popular culture. Movies, books, songs... for the last three centuries, human beings have tried to depict the coming of age and its challenges through diverse artistic forms, demonstrating the essential role that this process has in human life.

2.1. The Origin of Coming-of-Age Literature: The *Bildungsroman*

Although the transition from childhood to adult life is a universally shared experience, coming-of-age narratives did not become popular until the late eighteenth century. This is because the conception of adolescence as a life stage differentiated from childhood and adulthood is fairly recent. In the 1960s, the French historian Philippe Ariès was the first to define the concepts of *childhood* and *adolescence* as social constructs rather than natural processes. He stated that in the pre-modern era children were considered

miniature adults and hence the need for a transitional phase into adult life was not taken into account (Ariès 1962, 15-33). One of his main arguments to support these claims is the lack of specific terms for this phase found in texts of the time. Nowadays, terms such as *adolescence*, *youth*, and *teenager* are part of our common vocabulary, used regularly with connotations of growth and incompleteness, and with the term *adulthood* as the end point of that transition. However, Ariès has since been questioned by other scholars, who affirm that there was indeed a differentiation between youth and adults, although this distinction was gendered. They argue that apprenticeship served as a mechanism to gradually integrate young males into adulthood, with marriage marking "the step over the threshold from adolescence into the adult world" (Mawhinney 2015, 31). In the case of women, motherhood within marriage was what granted them adult status in society, thus having a somewhat muted experience of adolescence in comparison to their male counterparts. Nevertheless, since there was no general defining process indicating the transition between these two life stages, critics have not reached a consensus on this issue. What is clear is that, despite the fact that adolescence was an ambiguous concept, a visible coming-of-age process was not signaled during the pre-modern era, thus making it impossible for a specific literary genre about it to exist.

However, all of this changed during the eighteenth century with the Enlightenment. A new social, economic, and political context emerged in Europe at this time, laying the foundation for modern Western culture and ideology. Central ideas of the Enlightenment such as individualism were also applied to children, whose autonomy was recognized for the first time. In fact, it could be said that the concept that we understand as *childhood* today was originally defined by Romantic authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was a pioneer in describing children as beings with their own needs and capacities in his 1762 treatise *Emile, or On Education*. However, it was the German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who published in 1795 what is considered to be the founding text of coming-of-age narratives: *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, translated into English as *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. It was a major breakthrough at the time, since, as opposed to traditional literary genres, the protagonist was not a ready-made hero who remained unchanged throughout the story (Jeffers 2005, 9). In Goethe's work, the main theme is the change −physical, psychological, and moral− that Wilhelm Meister undergoes; what the Russian literary theorist Mikhail

Bakhtin calls "the image of man in the process of becoming" ([1979] 1986, 21). In 1819, the philologist Karl Morgenstern named this new literary genre *Bildungsroman*. However, this term did not become popular until almost a century later, when in 1905 the German philosopher and sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey brought the term into general usage.

Goethe's novel was translated into English by Thomas Carlyle in 1824, contributing to its popularity in Europe. Within the English-speaking world of the nineteenth century, it is worth highlighting some canonical *Bildungsromane* such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) or Charles Dicken's *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and *Great Expectations* (1861). All these works are characterized by an individual cultivation of the main character as an emerging adult, an inherent feature in the very etymology of the word *Bildungsroman*. While *roman* simply means *novel*, the exclusively German root *Bildung* is univocally untranslatable. Nevertheless, *Bildung* is usually interpreted as *formation* −or as Bakhtin calls it, *becoming*− since it implies the psychological and corporal development of human beings. Goethe's novel established a narrative pattern in which the young hero's development is often represented as an identity-forming process, which is why the terms *Bildungsroman* and *coming-of-age novel* are generally used interchangeably. Although they share certain thematic and structural characteristics −transition, individual self-discovery, and transformation− there are some slight differences between the two. To begin with, the *Bildungsroman* is a well-established literary genre, while a coming-of-age story is a more loosely defined concept. The latter can be more experimental in both form and content, moving away from the rigid structure of traditional *Bildungsromane*. Taking the current literary panorama in the United States as an example, this genre has been reclaimed by historically ignored or misrepresented communities, such as women, people of color, immigrants, or LGBTQ+ individuals. By adapting the idiosyncrasies of the conventional *Bildungsroman* to narrate their particular experiences as marginalized subjects, these authors have created a much more transgressive and experimental sort of subgenre. Therefore, I will speak of *coming-of-age stories* when referring to certain contemporary literary works −including Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*− rather than using the umbrella term *Bildungsroman*.

2.2. Growing Up American

The youth of America is their oldest tradition.
(Oscar Wilde)

Having defined the basics of *coming of age* and *Bildungsroman*, and having traced back their literary origins to eighteenth-century Europe, this section will be devoted to the specific context of the United States. This country has a long-standing tradition of attempting to portray the quintessential coming-of-age experience through diverse art forms, especially those of literature, film, and music. In fact, published as early as in 1791, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* is often regarded as the prototype of the American *Bildungsroman*. Although technically it would not be classified as fiction, this memoir shares the fundamental attributes of a coming-of-age story, as it recounts Franklin's life from his humble childhood to his successful adulthood, becoming the original *self-made man*. This cultural archetype was born together with the country itself in a quasi-biblical way: the American founding myth refers to the conception that the United States emerged as a nation by breaking away from the Old-World regime that was Europe, a New World where "individuals of all nations [were] melted into a new race of men" (Crèvecœur [1782] 2007, 55). Thus, it could be argued that America, a young and rebellious nation, went through its own coming-of-age process by distancing itself from its European parent in order to establish its own identity, based on a set of utopian ideals. This is why this section begins with a quote by Oscar Wilde, in which he conceptualizes youth as a transcendental element within American national mythology, making this burgeoning country the perfect setting for the proliferation of the coming-of-age genre.

Moreover, America's almost unhealthy fascination with the idea of innocence partly explains the popularity of these developmental stories. The loss of innocence is a thematic continuum in the country's literary tradition, usually represented as an inevitable consequence of leaving childhood behind. This idea is embedded in the American creation mythos, which as a whole is reminiscent of the creation narrative found in the *Book of Genesis*. In *The American Adam* (1955), preeminent literature scholar R. W. B. Lewis argues that nineteenth-century coming-of-age novels place America as a kind of prelapsarian Eden where the Adamic protagonist is fleetingly caught in a state of childlike innocence. Only by eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree

of the Knowledge −that is, by acknowledging America's history− will the hero come of age and hence lose his innocence. The epitome of this type of American *Bildungsroman* would be Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), which chronicles the journey of moral and psychological growth that Huck, a fourteen-year-old outcast, undergoes. In the words of American scholar Leslie Fiedler, Twain creates "a myth of childhood (...) in its natural Eden" (1960, 561), which ends as Huck matures and reflects on the hypocrisies existing within the American society. This novel has had a great influence on the evolution of twentieth-century coming-of-age narratives, as can be seen with what is probably the best-known of all: J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Surrounded by hypocrites and *phonies*, Holden Caulfield is a seventeen-year-old misfit who is struggling to leave "the timeless world of childhood" behind (Rosen 1977, 555). Even though both Huck and Holden feel as outsiders, their integration into society is actually expected: they are white, straight boys, the canonical protagonist of coming-of-age fiction. Thus, they are in a privileged position with respect to racial, sexual, and gender minorities, which have been historically ignored in much of the American literary corpus.

Coming of age in America is not a homogenous experience, since culture in the United States is "a dynamic seascape with a myriad of crosscurrents comprised of conflicting discourses and practices" (Hemmings 2004, 11). However, to this day there is still a marked lack of representation of diversity in most of the country's literary production. For example, one of the most influential works in history is Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), which chronicles the coming of age of the four March sisters during the American Civil War. According to literary historian Sarah Elbert, this book contributed to the creation of the "all-American girl" archetype (1987, 171), usually characterized as a virginal, fair-skinned, and blond-haired girl. Later, throughout the twentieth century, some writers began addressing the harsh realities of American society, such as child poverty in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943) or racial inequality in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). However, post-World War II suburbanization led to the popularization of books in which the protagonist was a white middle-class teenager. For instance, while Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) were turning points in the way that coming-of-age narratives dealt with sexuality and mental

health issues in adolescents, they were narrated from the prototypical white suburban teenager's point of view. In the twenty-first century, dystopian young adult works in which there is a lead white female hero, such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008) or Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011), stand out. It has not been until the last few years that books like Rebecca Albertalli's *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) or Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017) −which deal with homophobia and police brutality against the African American community, respectively− have begun to portray other coming-of-age experiences away from the canon.

Popular culture has also played a major role in this misrepresentation of American diversity. During the second half of the twentieth century, Hollywood began mass-producing movies targeted at teenagers, which were full of clichés and stereotypes. In the end, a film is a cultural artifact that reflects the societal values of the moment in which it was created. There is a plethora of American mainstream coming-of-age movies from the last decades of the twentieth century that perpetuate detrimental attitudes towards minorities. Some examples could be the blockbusters *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) −whose plot is blatantly sexist− and *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985) −in which homophobic slurs are tossed around. Also, it is noteworthy that all characters are white. In recent years, films like *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) and *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017) or television series like *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-present) and *Atypical* (Netflix, 2017-present) have tried to change this narrative, giving more visibility to marginalized communities. However, they tend to maintain the same popular culture tropes: fitting in, peer pressure, interpersonal conflict with older generations, consumption of alcohol and illegal substances, virginity, teen pregnancy, etc. These movies, both new and old, are usually set in a high school, in which adult actors play a series of stereotypical teenage archetypes, such as the unkind blonde cheerleader, the gay best friend, or the misfit protagonist. Therefore, although coming-of-age narratives have become a distinctly American phenomenon, neither adolescents nor the true multicultural reality of the country have been faithfully represented in them.

2.3. Immigration: A Hyphenated Identity

In the opening line of *The Uprooted* (1951), Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Oscar Handlin wrote: "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I

discovered that the immigrants were American history." The United States is a nation built by immigrants, all of whom come from diverse national and socioeconomic backgrounds. Throughout the country's history there have been four different waves of migration. The first one began with the arrival of the first English settlers in 1607, who were in search of religious freedom, and lasted until the beginning of the American Revolution in 1775. The second wave took place between the 1830s and 1860s, coinciding with the Irish Famine and the California Gold Rush. Additionally, many Chinese immigrants arrived to work on the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad. During the 1880s there was a massive arrival of immigrants to America during the Industrial Age. However, in the 1920s the government passed restrictive immigration legislation, especially targeted to those of Chinese and Japanese origin, putting an end to the third migration wave. Finally, from the 1960s to the present, the United States has been the recipient of immigrants from Mexico and other parts of Latin America, who are trying to escape situations of political unrest and poverty in their countries. Moreover, during this fourth wave Asian immigration has also increased after conflicts such as the Korean and Vietnam wars. All in all, each of these migratory flows have remarkably changed the sociocultural context of the country, thereby redefining the true meaning of what being American is.

According to the latest report from the Urban Institute (Lou, Adams and Bernstein 2019), in 2019 one in every four children in the United States was either an immigrant or the child of an immigrant. This is one of the long-term consequences of the fourth migration wave, since these children will come of age as a new generation of Americans. Furthermore, they will have to construct their identity within two different material and discursive frameworks: that of their home, with their immigrant parents, and that of their adoptive society. The vast cultural and ethnic diversity of the United States provides the perfect setting to explore the American immigrant experience through literature, particularly through coming-of-age narratives. This type of novel not only offers a cross-cultural reflection on central adolescent topics, but it puts them in conversation with other critical issues such as race, class, or religion. Some examples are Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* (1981), Rakesh Satyal's *Blue Boy* (2009) and Ibi Zoboi's *American Street* (2017). In these narratives, self-

identification is a central theme, paying special attention to national identity. In a study focused on ethnic self-identity labels (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2018, 26-46), it was concluded that immigrants' children most commonly use national-origin identities (e.g., Jamaican, Mexican) and hyphenated-American identities (e.g., Japanese-American, Chinese-American), while other labels such as pan-ethnic (e.g., Latino, Chicano) or mixed are used less often. Furthermore, almost none identified themselves with having a plain *American* identity. The popularity of the hyphenated label thus alludes to a shared sense of hybridity within the American immigrant community.

Another major theme in these coming-of-age novels is intergenerational tension between immigrant parents and their children. This tension is created "by the way one generation pulls −emotionally, psychologically, and even physically− on the other" (Shiffman 2010, 30). In some novels, such as Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* (1934) or Julia Álvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1992), this tension is central to the development of the plot, serving as a catalyst for the adolescent to ponder on their true identity. However, in other books, such as Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), intergenerational conflict plays a secondary role as a way of foregrounding other issues, an example being the young characters' cultural dislocation. These novels reveal that, on many occasions, second- and third-generation immigrants are subjected to a process of acculturation by which they tend to assimilate society's predominant culture, which in this case is the American one. Consequently, they may experience feelings of anger, resentment, and even rejection towards the different customs, language, religion, and habits of their parents. On the other hand, this intergenerational conflict may also help adolescents to acquire a better understanding of who their parents are, which is an integral part of their personal growth process. In fact, when coming to terms with their cultural heritage, adolescents will need to find a balance between "the desire to root themselves in their parents' communities of origin" (Behtoui 2019, 358) and finding their own identity as ethnic subjects within the American nation. Therefore, this sense of in-betweenness, of not fully belonging anywhere, is intrinsically related to the generalized self-identification with the hyphenated identity label. All in all, the critical study of coming-of-age immigration literature offers a window into the multicultural

reality of American society, while giving a voice to those communities who have been silenced throughout history.

2.4. The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Trauma and the Self

The United States is home to the world's largest community of *Người Việt hải ngoại*, that is, of overseas Vietnamese. Most first-generation immigrants came to the country as refugees during the Vietnam War, a migratory movement known as the Vietnamese Diaspora. The Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indochina War, was a military conflict that took place in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from 1955 to 1975. It was fought between the Republic of Vietnam −or South Vietnam− and the communist insurgent guerrillas of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam −North Vietnam or Viet Cong. Both sides were helped by their respective allied countries, such as the United States, which supported South Vietnam in an attempt to suppress the communist advance. Already during Harry S. Truman's presidency (1945-1963), the United States was indirectly involved in the Indochinese conflict, providing anti-communist forces with money, ammunition, soldiers, etc. American involvement gradually escalated with Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961) and John F. Kennedy (1961-1963), culminating in an aggressive offensive under Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969). In 1964, he started an extensive bombing campaign, which resulted in a planeload of bombs being dropped every eight minutes for the next nine years. He also approved an herbicidal warfare program, by which they sprayed chemicals −particularly Agent Orange and Napalm− that destroyed vegetation and burned enemy soldiers. Additionally, communist guerrilla fighters did not wear uniforms, which often triggered attacks on civilians by paranoid American ground soldiers. This extreme violence towards the innocent Vietnamese population was televised and covered by the media, sparking a mass anti-war movement in the United States. Finally, in 1973 President Richard Nixon (1969-1974) ordered the progressive withdrawal of American forces from the battlefield, trying to *Vietnamize* the war.[1] In 1975, the war ended with the Fall of Saigon by the North Vietnamese troops. Overall, it was estimated that around

[1] This term refers strictly to the context of Nixon's policy to de-escalate the Vietnam War by withdrawing American forces and leaving South Vietnamese troops to fight on their own.

2,000,000 civilians had been killed during the war, and more than 3,000,000 people had to flee Vietnam over the span of two decades (Hirschman, Preston and Loi 1995, 791).

Most refugees escaped by sea between 1976 and 2000, in what is known as the Boat People exodus. Many of them did not survive the journey, due to overloaded boats, dire conditions, storms, and frequent pirate attacks. Those who were able to land in refugee camps in Southeast Asia were then forcibly resettled in other countries, mainly the United States. These immigrants shared a collective trauma caused by their wartime experiences and the loss of loved ones, in addition to suffering from culture shock and economic hardship (Gold 1992, 290-294). Moreover, they frequently reported having symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and derived mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and violent tendencies (Pham 1986, 5-9). However, due to institutionalized racism in mental health services −in which American soldiers were prioritized− and the stigmatization of mental illness by the Vietnamese society, these immigrants were unable to receive the necessary treatment to overcome their trauma. Consequently, parent-child relationships deteriorated, and, on many occasions, the traditional Vietnamese family ethos was disrupted. To begin with, the older generation found themselves in straitened circumstances while undergoing a process of acculturation, leading to an inability to provide their children with a sense of family stability and support. This was a source of intergenerational conflict, since the developmental hurdles of adolescence were exacerbated, especially those of self-identification and sense of alienation. Furthermore, "Vietnamese-born adolescents want[ed] both to be American and to please their parents" (Dinh, Sarason and Sarason 1994, 472) due to their own distinct acculturation process, as explained above. Those who emigrated from Vietnam and grew up in America are called the Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation, and they have found a way to deal with their trauma through the narration of their particular coming-of-age experiences.

The works of Asian writers are usually included under the *Asian American literature* label. However, this is a problematic term. Valerie Lee, director of the 1992 Asian American Renaissance Conference, ironically asked: "What do [Asian Americans] have in common except for racism and rice?" (as cited in Ho 2004, 12). The diversity of the Asian ethnic communities −Han Chinese, Uzbeks, Kurds, Evenks, Tagalog, Khmer, Ainu, Hmong, etc.− in the United States fails to be correctly

represented by the pan-ethnic term *Asian American*. Thus, their stories cannot be communalized either, since each Asian ethnic group belongs to a particularly distinct historical and geographical context. Therefore, we must speak of *Vietnamese American* literature when we refer specifically to that type of narrative, which is the main focus of this case study. While early writers −such as Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai (1931-) and Tran Van Dinh (1923-2011)− were concerned with mostly Vietnamese politics and history, during the twenty-first century Vietnamese American literature has "diversified in both form and content, expanding the field beyond direct engagement with the Vietnam War and the refugee experience" (Janette 2018, 1). Although memoirs remain the preferred genre to share their coming-of-age experiences, such as Nguyen Qui Duc's *Where the Ashes Are* (2009) and Phuc Tran's *Sigh, Gone* (2020), other writers have opted for poetry, such as Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out & Back Again* (2011) and Ocean Vuong's *NightSky with Exit Wounds* (2016). It should be noted that Vuong is the most experimental and daring Vietnamese American writer on the current literary scene, a series of characteristics that can be found in his debut novel: *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019).

3. Analyzing Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

I wanted to start with truth and end with art.
(Ocean Vuong)

Just like the Pacific Ocean touches the coasts of both the United States and Vietnam, Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (henceforth *On Earth*) resides in a place between these two nations, offering a liminal space in which to explore the coming-of-age question beyond a U.S.-centric vision. His work shows the true multidimensional nature of this transitional process, moving away from conventional expectations of a monolithic coming-of-age immigrant experience. Written in the form of a letter to an illiterate mother who will never read it, fiction and reality are intertwined in the novel. Vuong creates multiple parallels between his real life and that of the protagonist, Little Dog, so *On Earth* could be deemed semi-autobiographical. Like Little Dog, Vuong is a Vietnamese diasporic subject who came to the United States when he was a little child. He also grew up in Hartford, Connecticut, in a predominantly Black and Latino neighborhood, raised by his mother and grandmother. In the novel, a twenty-eight-year-old Little Dog reflects on his troubled childhood and adolescence, both within and outside the household, as well as on other intersectional aspects that affected his coming-of-age process. Characteristic issues of the pubertal mythos can be found at the core of the story, such as Little Dog's search for his own identity and his sexual awakening. However, there are other recurring themes in Vuong's work −such as displacement, war, violence, and trauma− which highlight the great conundrum of growing up as a Vietnamese refugee in America. Even though there is a lack of theoretical studies on coming-of-age narratives by Asian American authors, as Vuong puts it: "[immigrant] bodies are worthy of Literature with a capital *L*" (Penguin Random House 2019). For this reason, this paper will analyze his novel in response to the imperative need to treat this type of multicultural works as its own mythology within the American literary canon.

3.1. When Words Fail: Language and Identity

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, coming of age is usually perceived as a dual phenomenon, encompassing identity formation and community integration within a

particular cultural context. Language is therefore inextricable from the process. To begin with, language is the means by which human beings can define themselves as individuals. Nonetheless, it also fulfills a broader social function, since it allows a group of people to transmit their shared values, beliefs, and customs from one generation to another, as well as to foster feelings of belonging and group identity (Mercuri 2012, 14). In the case of Little Dog in *On Earth*, he arrives in the United States when he is only two years old, a crucial age in the development of his psycholinguistic skills. From that moment, his linguistic identity will undergo a hybridization process, since he will begin to be exposed to two completely different languages that are context-dependent. On the one hand, his family speaks Vietnamese, the language his grandmother uses to instill in him the values and traditions of their country of origin. However, in the American society in which Little Dog is suddenly forced to grow up in, non-English speaking immigrants are brainwashed to believe that, in order to succeed in the United States and become *true* Americans, they have to "turn their back on everything that they brought from their home country, including their language" (Rovira 2008, 70). These English-only policies, which are rooted in a xenophobic and racist culture, aim for a homogeneous and monolingual society. Nevertheless, as Little Dog reflects on the novel, "[t]o be or not to be. That is the question. A question, yes, but not a choice" (63).[2] By giving a twist to the famous Shakespearean quote, he is interrogating the intrinsic relation between language and cultural identity: children cannot *choose* to abandon their first language without erasing part of their culture and, with it, losing an essential element of their identity.

The first memory that Little Dog recalls about the impact of language on his coming of age is an incident on the school bus when he was nine years old. As usual, he was sitting alone, otherized by his peers due to his Asian features and poor command of English. Vuong has explained in several interviews (Wenger 2016, Haber 2019, Wolk 2020) that neither he nor Little Dog learned to read fluently until the age of eleven, as a result of dyslexia running in their families and a lack of foundational education. So, when all of a sudden, a white boy shoved his head against the bus window demanding that he speak English, Little Dog could only close his eyes and remain silent. The nine-year-old boy, who "had already mastered the dialect of damaged American fathers"

[2] The references to Vuong's novel will always be from the 2019 edition. In order to avoid unnecessary repetition, I will cite them by page number only.

(24), slapped him and yelled: "Say my name then, (...) like your mom did last night" (25). According to linguist Lilly Wong Fillmore, non-English speaking children and adolescents "quickly discover that in the social world of the school, English is the only language that is acceptable" (2000, 207), while their first language is stigmatized and deemed inferior. After this humiliating incident, Little Dog goes back home to his mother, Rose. However, she also slaps him and blames him for what happened. She then hugs him, kisses his forehead, and whispers: "You have to find a way, Little Dog, (…) because I don't have the English to help you. (…) You have a bellyful of English. (…) You have to use it, okay?" (26). His mother feels helpless because she does not have the appropriate language to navigate American society and defend her son. She perceives the English language as a shield, asking Little Dog to use it to protect himself.

This is an idiosyncratic reasoning of first-generation immigrants, who educate their children in self-erasure as a means of survival. As seen in the novel, they teach them to hide their differences in the host American society, since it is the dominant one: "to be invisible in order to survive" (96). Little Dog shows the impact this mindset had on his upbringing, recalling when an elementary school teacher once sent him to the fifteen-minute time-out corner and forgot about him for two hours. He had not dared to raise his voice to remind her that he was still in the classroom. "Remember," his mother would tell him every morning, "do not draw attention to yourself. You're already Vietnamese" (219). However, this reminder had already been ingrained in his identity from the day Lan, his grandmother, renamed him Little Dog as an act of protection. Although he never reveals his birth name in the novel, Little Dog does report that a shaman had given him a name meaning "Patriotic Leader of the Nation"(capitals in the original) in order to satisfy his father. Nevertheless, two years later they would migrate to America, where his father would no longer be a part of his life and, instead, the little *leader* would be under the care of two resourceless immigrant women. In the Vietnamese village where Lan grew up, it was tradition to call the most vulnerable of the flock hideous names, such as *demon*, *pig snout* or *monkey-born*. In this way, evil spirits that came to steal healthy babies, hearing those horrible monikers, would spare them: "To love something, then, is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched −and alive" (18). Therefore, renaming their children in an attempt to

protect them is one of the few acts of verbal agency that women like Lan, illiterate and traumatized by war, can have in America.

Nevertheless, this use of language as a cloak is in stark contrast to the attitude of second-generation immigrants −also referred to as the Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation, as explained in section 2.4− who no longer want to hide their differences. Vuong's novel is a clear example of this. Not only is he telling his story, but he is unapologetically proud of it. The very title of the novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, refers to the beauty of poor black, brown, and yellow bodies who, he says, "are inspiring bodies, (...) not just victims of a geopolitical plight" (Filgate 2019). As Little Dog ruminates at the end of his letter, "[t]o be gorgeous, you must first be seen," although he cautions, "but to be seen allows you to be hunted" (238). Therefore, even though *hideous* and *gorgeous* are binary oppositions in terms of description, the outcome of this change will be different, since *alive* and *hunted* are not antonyms. Towards the middle of the book, Little Dog reflects on his desire to write Literature on the beauty of Asian bodies and its inherent intergenerational conflict:

> It is no accident, Ma, that the comma resembles a fetus −that curve of continuation. We were all once inside our mothers, saying, with our entire curved and silent selves, more, more, more. I want to insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication. And so what? So what if all I ever made of my life was more of it? (139)

Little Dog has been raised in fear of being seen, instructed to use his voice only as a defense, but he decides to challenge everything he has been taught when he comes of age. Notwithstanding the possibility of being *hunted*, he becomes a writer and uses the English language, his second language, to reclaim his identity as a hybrid Vietnamese American subject, as well as to tell the story of his family, who never had the opportunity to do it.

In fact, this letter he has written already as an adult is not the first time Little Dog has acted as an interpreter between his family and America. The last time his mother set foot in a school was at the age of five, just before the building collapsed after an American napalm raid. Therefore, the Vietnamese she possessed −and the one she taught her son− was very basic: "Our mother tongue, then, was no mother at all −but an orphan" (31). One night, when Little Dog was still a child, she decided to buy oxtail to prepare *Bún bò Huế*, a traditional Vietnamese soup. Not seeing the meat on the

butcher's counter, and not knowing the English word for *oxtail*, she tried to communicate with gestures the animal and piece of meat she wanted. However, her effort was only met by the butcher's laughter. Desperate, she asked Little Dog to explain what she was asking for in English, but the boy did not have enough vocabulary to do so. That night, Little Dog decided that he would never again be wordless when his mother needed his help to speak: he would become the family's official interpreter. According to Renu Narchal (2016), immigrant children experience an increase in responsibility when they become the linguistic and cultural translators of their parents, which entails a reversal role whereby parents express dependent behaviors and children acquire care-giving ones. This can be seen countless times throughout Little Dog's childhood and adolescence, when he cares for his mother and grandmother by giving them back massages, plucking their gray hairs, or even reassuring them until they fall asleep after a panic attack, caused by the psychological aftermath of war. As he explains, these physical acts are the way in which love is expressed when words fail, both in Vietnamese and in English: "Sometimes our words are few and far between, or simply ghosted. In which case, the hand, although limited by the borders of skin and cartilage, can be the third language that animates where the tongue falters" (33). Thus, all in all, language −and not just words− plays a fundamental role in Little Dog's coming-of-age process, from forming his own identity to engaging with the communities to which he belongs.

3.2. Epigenetic Trauma: Fragmented Selves

> An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists.
> Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me.
> Yikes. (Vuong 2016, 70)

These lines belong to "Notebook Fragments", a poem included in Vuong's 2016 poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Like Little Dog, Vuong was a direct product of the Vietnam War. His grandmother, having abandoned her first husband from an arranged marriage, had no choice but to become a sex worker for American servicemen in order to survive. The short lines of the poem are loaded with explicit and crude vocabulary, in an attempt to emulate the violence of his mother's conception in real life. Vuong also intertwines this brief reflection on the origin of his existence with mundane events and other seemingly unrelated sentences, purposefully breaking apart the overall

narrative. This fragmentation, which is alluded to in the title of the poem itself, is similar to the way *On Earth* is structured. The memories that Little Dog recalls in the novel are organized into vignettes, a literary device used by several immigrant authors in their coming-of-age narratives, such as Sandra Cisneros, who explains: "I wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with a reverberation" (1987, 78). Indeed, the use of vignettes allows the author to succinctly convey a powerfully poetic and vivid imagery that is full of meaning. Furthermore, by presenting his memories as fragments, Little Dog is reflecting through words his own fragmented identity, the result of exposure to traumatic experiences during his childhood and adolescence.

Trauma is one of the central motifs in Vuong's novel, affecting all the characters in the story, especially Little Dog. Not only is he a victim of distressing situations that he himself has had to endure −such as being bullied at school− but he is also subjected from an early age to other people's aftermath of trauma, particularly to his mother's. According to Dylan Trigg, "the fragmented reception of the past" is implicit in all theoretical treatments of the memory of trauma (2009, 87). A clear example of this can be found in the first pages of the novel, when Little Dog intersperses joyful childhood memories with his mother with others in which she was physically abusive to him: "The first time you hit me, I must have been four" (5); "[t]he time, at forty-six, when you had a sudden desire to color" (6); "[t]he time you threw the box of Legos at my head. The hardwood dotted with blood" (6); "[t]he time at Six Flags, when you rode the Superman roller coaster with me because I was too scared to do it alone" (9); "[t]he time with the kitchen knife −the one you picked up, then put down, shaking, saying quietly, 'Get out. Get out.' (...) I ran until I forgot I was ten, until my heartbeat was all I could hear of myself" (9). All these images of mistreatment are poignantly described, illustrating the recurring abuse that Little Dog suffered throughout his childhood at the hands of a trusted authority figure. Nevertheless, he also mentions the good times, in which the role reversal whereby immigrant children acquire care-giving behaviors towards their parents −explained in section 3.1− is evident: "The time I tried to teach you to read the way Mrs. Callahan taught me (…)" (9). These bittersweet fragmented memories reveal the ongoing dilemma faced by a child who is being abused by a close family member:

> This beloved figure is inflicting harm, pain, and humiliation, yet the child is both emotionally and physically dependent. The child has to maintain two

> diametrically opposing views of the same person, which creates considerable tension and confusion (...). (Spiegel 2008, sec. 1, para. 2)

In Little Dog's case, this predicament goes one step further, since he identifies with her duality: "You're a mother, Ma. You're also a monster. But so am I −which is why I can't turn away from you" (14). Already as an adult, he reflects on the motivation behind his mother's abuse, drawing an analogy between her and the monarch butterfly. These insects must migrate thousands of kilometers, in which it will be a one-way trip due to the limitations of their short life expectancy. However, their offspring will be able to return to their places of origin thanks to genetic memory: "The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes" (12). Little Dog sees himself as a second-generation monarch butterfly, with the trauma of his ancestors deeply embedded in his own DNA, a phenomenon known as *epigenetic trauma* (Yehuda and Lehrner 2018). Both his mother and grandmother suffer from PTSD due to their refugee and Vietnam War experiences. Thus, this psychiatric disorder is one of the long-lasting generational repercussions of war, having been passed on to Little Dog, who left Vietnam as a two-year-old baby. PTSD symptomatology can be seen in Little Dog's behavior as a child: he displays signs of anxiety, distressing nightmares, exogenous depression, and "distress or physiological reactions upon exposure to cues of the trauma" (Kleber 2019, 2). For instance, one night ten-year-old Little Dog decides to run away from home, which can be read as a complex emotional response induced by prolonged abuse. That very same night, his grandmother finds him hiding in the schoolyard. For the first time, she explains Rose's mental health problems: "Your mom. She not normal okay? She pain. (...) She love you, Little Dog. But she sick. Sick like me. In the brains" (122). Little Dog is therefore stripped of his childhood innocence, expected to understand his mother's mental illness when his cognitive ability is not fully developed to do so.

When he is thirteen years old, Little Dog finally decides to stand up to his mother and put an end to the abuse: "Stop, Ma. Quit it. Please" (11). This decision marks a before and after in the relationship with his mother, serving as an indicator that Little Dog is undergoing a premature coming-of-age process, triggered by childhood stress trauma. Psychologist Donald Kalsched wrote:

> when trauma strikes the developing psyche of a child, a fragmentation of consciousness occurs in which different 'pieces' (…) organize themselves according to certain archaic and typical (archetypal) patterns (…) one part of the ego regresses to the infantile period, and another progresses, i.e., grows up too fast and becomes precociously adapted to the outer world. (1996, 3)

In the case of Little Dog, he is still a young boy, dependent on his mother for food, shelter, and care. Nevertheless, from that moment onwards he will simultaneously experience a sudden increase of agency. The summer of his fourteenth birthday, Little Dog gets his first job in a tobacco field outside Hartford, thirteen kilometers from his home. Since he is too young to be legally employed, he is paid under the table and in cash. There, he meets Trevor, with whom he would have his first relationship, both romantic and sexual. These are not only manifestations of Little Dog's forthcoming entry into the adult world, but they are also strategies to stay away from home and hence from his mother. In fact, they could be considered coping mechanisms, defined as "the thoughts and behaviors mobilized to manage internal and external stressful situations" (Algorani and Gupta 2021, 1). However, this precocious introduction to adulthood also exposes Little Dog to some serious problems, which are exacerbated by his immaturity. In the early 2000s there was a rise of synthetic opioids in Connecticut, to the point of it becoming a veritable epidemic in disadvantaged communities. Trevor, who lives in a trailer behind the interstate with his alcoholic and violent father, becomes addicted to OxyContin at the age of fifteen. Before long, he starts using other drugs like cocaine and heroin, becoming his own coping mechanism. Although Little Dog decides to engage with him in this substance abuse, he does not become an addict for a rather childish reason: "I never did heroin because I'm chicken about needles" (182). Although he is participating in activities which, according to the latest 2019 survey by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), are more typical of young adulthood than early adolescence, Little Dog still exhibits puerile behaviors.

In the end, Little Dog's coming of age was prematurely triggered by a series of external circumstances, unrelated to the natural transition that is normally linked to adolescence. Subsequently, this resulted in the fragmentation of his identity, which means that Little Dog's coming-of-age process will not be fully completed by the time he is expected to reach adulthood. This is particularly noticeable in an episode with his

mother after Trevor's death, an event that leaves him concomitantly "broken in two" and "broken into" (167). Upon hearing the news, Little Dog returns to Hartford from New York, where he is attending university. He walks into his house in the middle of the night and crawls to the mattress on the floor where his mother sleeps. Lying beside her, Little Dog begins to cry as he clutches two of her fingers, in a scene reminiscent of a little boy seeking comfort from his mother after a nightmare. Even though there is no specific moment in the novel that indicates the completion of Little Dog's transition into adulthood, the final vignettes of the book seem to indicate that he is ultimately psychologically ready for it. In a dream laden with symbolism, Little Dog is fifteen again, running through the tobacco fields, so fast that he feels like he has "finally broken out of [his] body, left it behind" (241). When he is reaching the end of the cliff, about to plunge into the void, thousands of monarch butterflies pour over the edge and soar into the sky:

> I race through the field as if my cliff was never written into this story, as if I was no heavier than the words in my name. And like a word, 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. (241-242)

Falling off the cliff could be interpreted as the fateful end for many of the young people who have fallen victim to the opioid crisis, one example being Trevor. Consequently, the monarch butterflies would represent Little Dog's intention to use the memory and trauma inherited from his ancestors to break the cycle of addiction that marked his adolescence and young adulthood. Having acknowledged and embraced his true identity, Little Dog seems to be finally ready to complete his coming-of-age process.

3.3. Growing Up in a Queer Asian Body: Masculinity and Sexuality

At the center of the novel −both literally and metaphorically− is Little Dog and Trevor's relationship. *On Earth* is divided into three main sections, with the first focusing on Little Dog's childhood and the third intermingling reflections on his past with present situations already as an adult. Subsequently, the central section corresponds to his teenage years, during which the decisive events regarding his coming of age take place. To begin with, Little Dog reaches puberty during the transitional phase of adolescence, "an important milestone in the development of

sexuality" (Kar, Choudhury and Singh 2015, 70). In fact, his sexual awakening is one of the life-changing events that usher in his coming of age. As stated above, Little Dog meets Trevor at the age of fourteen while working at the tobacco farm. He is the owner's grandson, a sixteen-year-old white boy "raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity" (203). Shortly after becoming friends, their encounters begin to turn sexual, although their relationship is never made public. In a TV interview, Vuong claimed that his portrayal of the relationship was intended to address the "tropes of shame around queerness and sexuality" (Amanpour & Company 2019) and how Little Dog and Trevor approach shame differently due to their disparate upbringings and sociocultural contexts. In order to fully understand this, it is necessary to first explore how sexuality in the novel is inevitably conditioned by certain intersectional issues, especially the notions of *masculinity* and *race*, which underpin existing systems of discrimination and prejudice.

Currently, the construction of American hegemonic masculinity is characterized by "male heterosexuality and physical, social, and economic power," which legitimizes "white heterosexual men's dominance over women, gay men, and ethnic minorities (…), making femininity and marginalized masculinities inferior" (Wang 2000, 114). Trevor, who has been raised according to these ideals, is ashamed of being sexually attracted to men, something he considers the antithetical identity of what being masculine is. Facing reality is extremely difficult for him, something that can be seen multiple times throughout the novel. For example, the first time Little Dog masturbates him, Trevor begins to cry: "Afterward, lying next to me with his face turned away, he cried skillfully in the dark. The way boys do. The first time we fucked, we didn't fuck at all" (115). Trevor feels extremely conflicted about his queerness, as he equates being gay with being feminine and hence not being a real man by American standards. However, he perceives Little Dog's sexual identity in a different way, as can be seen after Trevor's refusal to be penetrated by him:

> "I can't. I just—I mean…" He spoke into the wall. "I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't man. I'm sorry, it's not for me—" He paused, wiped his nose. "It's for you. Right?" (120)

Not only is Little Dog gay, but he is Asian. This means that he is doubly ostracized within the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity. According to R.W. Connell's gender

order theory, there are multiple masculinities that manifest themselves according to the historical and sociocultural context of the individual, as well as to their own particular circumstances. In Little Dog's case, his status as a gay Asian boy relegates him to a position of inferiority to Trevor, in which he is attributed "subordinate and marginalized masculinities" (Connell 2005, 181). Therefore, in Trevor's eyes, it is more acceptable for Little Dog to display behaviors that are traditionally considered feminine than it is for him, since Little Dog is the inferior *other*. In fact, Trevor tries to convince himself that his homosexuality is just a transitory state typical of adolescence, and that it will change once he comes of age and becomes an adult: "'You think you'll be really gay, like, forever? I mean, (...) I think me... I'll be good in a few years, you know?'" (188).

American society builds the notion of masculinity around heterosexuality. Thus, heteronormativity is recognized as the standard, being instilled in boys in their acting of gender from an early age (Laemmle 2013, 306). One of the ways in which this is done is through the lexicon of violence. From a male perspective, boys are celebrated through words of destruction:

> You killed that poem, we say. You're a killer. You came into to that novel guns blazing. I am hammering this paragraph, I am banging them out, we say. I owned that workshop. I shut it down. I crushed them. We smashed the competition. I'm wrestling with the muse. The state, where people live, is a battleground state. The audience a target audience. "Good for you, man," a man once said to me at a party, "you're making a killing with poetry. You're knockin' 'em dead." (179)

Inevitably, this results in a toxic masculinity whereby boys, when they reach adolescence, display aggressive and violent behaviors to demonstrate their manhood. At the same time, being vulnerable and showing their feelings make them appear weak and feminine. Trevor is the prime example of this: he shoots squirrels and smashes things with an ax to feel powerful, and only cries silently in the dark, so that no one sees him being emotional. On the other hand, Little Dog, who has grown up in a female household, raised by Vietnamese women, is more comfortable with his sexuality and queerness. Still, since childhood, he has been expected to fulfill the gender roles that American society has assigned him. He was six years old when his mother bought him his first bike, a hot-pink Schwinn with training wheels. That same afternoon while he was riding the bike, a couple of boys no older than ten stopped him cold and, with a key chain, began scraping the hot-pink paint off Little Dog's bike. That day he learned "how

dangerous a color can be" (134) in America. Another spiteful episode occurred one afternoon in which Little Dog donned one of his mother's dresses while she was at work, in an attempt to look like her. A neighborhood boy saw him wearing it in his front yard and, at recess the next day, all the boys would call him *freak*, *fairy*, and *fag*, words Little Dog would soon know were "iterations of *monster*" (14). Due to these hostile incidents, Little Dog grows up hiding his queerness from his family in an attempt to protect them. As a result of the inability to be fully himself, Little Dog develops some psychological problems, such as depression, and begins to abuse drugs, snorting cocaine for the first time when he is only fourteen years old. These are signs of what is known as the *minority masculinity stress theory*, which states that the complex intersectional status of Asian American men −who are demanded to endorse a hegemonic masculinity while suffering unique racial stereotypes− is reported to have increased distress, substance use, and depression (Lu and Wong 2013, 345-347).

In spite of everything, when he is seventeen, Little Dog decides to tell his mother the truth: "I don't like girls" (130). In the Vietnamese tradition, where there is more malleability in sexuality, there was not a specific word to denominate queer bodies until the French occupation. They introduced the term *pê-đê* from the French *pédé*, short for *pédéraste* (*pederast* in English), which Little Dog refuses to use to describe himself. Rose's initial reaction is one of concern, as she is afraid that her son will be hurt if he begins to display feminine behaviors, such as wearing dresses: "They kill people for wearing dresses. It's on the news. You don't know people. You don't know them" (130). This is indeed a reality, as Little Dog later recounts:

> A few months after our talk (…) a fourteen-year-old in rural Vietnam had acid thrown in his face after he slipped a love letter into another boy's locker. Last summer, twenty-eight-year-old Florida native Omar Mateen walked into an Orlando nightclub, raised his automatic rifle, and opened fire. Forty-nine people were killed. It was a gay club and the boys (…) looked like me: a colored thing born of one mother, rummaging the dark, each other, for happiness. (137)

Society's construction of hegemonic masculinity through the lexicon of violence takes a physical form, manifesting itself in vicious acts of rejection towards those who challenge it. Little Dog reflects on his self-exposure to this brutality, especially regarding his relationship with Trevor: "What do you call an animal that, finding the hunter, offers itself to be eaten?" (118). Nevertheless, although according to American

culture a privileged white boy like Trevor would be the *hunter*, his sexuality puts him in a situation of powerlessness. In a vignette ruminating about a past conversation with Trevor, Little Dog reflects on the emasculating stereotypes that render gay men as not being truly masculine, which causes Trevor a great deal of anguish:

> *Please tell me I am not*, he said, *I am not*
> *a faggot. Am I? Am I? Are you?*
> Trevor the hunter. Trevor the carnivore, the redneck, not
> a pansy, shotgunner, sharpshooter, not fruit or fairy. (155)

Consequently, even though Trevor is expected to have everything, including ultimate freedom, American society's hegemonic masculinity negates it to him. Paradoxically, Little Dog finds support in his Vietnamese family. This ultimately leads, once again, to the sentence: "To be gorgeous, you must first be seen" (238). As part of his coming-of-age process, Little Dog needs to challenge conventions and embrace his sexuality and queerness, even though this might allow him "to be hunted" (238). By deeming beautiful his queer Asian body, he is not only contesting racist and homophobic stereotypes embedded in American culture, but also taking the first step to accept his real identity. This will be necessary in order to finish his coming-of-age process and be able to start living his truth: "They say if you want something bad enough you'll end up making a god out of it. But what if all I ever wanted was my life, Ma?" (238).

4. Conclusions

The analysis carried out in this dissertation of Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* offers insight into the important social role that coming-of-age narratives play in representing the experiences of immigrant ethnic groups growing up in the United States. It has been concluded that, in addition to being a distinctively American phenomenon, coming-of-age stories present a cross-cultural reflection on central pubescent topics while reexamining other critical intersectional issues such as race, class, gender, or sexuality. The genre originated in the late eighteenth century in Europe under the name *Bildungsroman*, when the notions of *childhood*, *adolescence*, and *adulthood* were delimited for the first time due to the new economic and social order of the Enlightenment. However, the genre started evolving upon arrival in the United States, a newly-formed country that was undergoing its own coming-of-age process by separating from its European father. Therefore, the United States became the ideal setting for the development of these stories of identity formation and individual growth.

Bildungsromane became progressively more experimental, both in form and content, making it more appropriate to include them in the broader category of *coming-of-age stories*. However, after four migration waves that have categorically changed the country's sociocultural context and hence redefined the meaning of what being American is, it has become clear that the American literary canon fails to demonstrate its true multicultural reality. Consequently, this thesis aimed to shed light on this issue by analyzing a novel written by an author of the Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation, that is, a Vietnamese-born refugee who fled to the United States as a child to escape the aftermath of the Vietnam War. By establishing parallels between his real life and that of Little Dog, Vuong presents *On Earth* as a liminal space in which to question the true multidimensional nature of the coming-of-age question. This paper has addressed how certain aspects that are commonly associated with the transitional period that is adolescence −such as the search for identity, intergenerational tension, and sexual awakening− are affected by Little Dog's particular condition as a queer Asian immigrant boy.

To begin with, the importance of language has been analyzed, especially in relation to identity formation and community integration, which are the two

fundamental parts that constitute the coming-of-age process. It has been established that exposure to two completely different languages from an early age resulted in the hybridization of Little Dog's linguistic identity. While Vietnamese was relegated to the domestic sphere and his family environment, English became the necessary language to navigate American society. Subsequently, Little Dog had to become the official interpreter for the family, as his mother and grandmother depended on him to communicate with English-speakers. The research findings reveal that this reversal of roles placed an undue burden of responsibility on a child whose psycholinguistic skills were still developing, a common occurrence among children of immigrants.

On the other hand, section 3.2 focuses on the psychological impact that the geopolitical conflict of the Vietnam War had on his family and how this affected his upbringing. As part of the Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation, Vuong finds in the narration of his coming-of-age experience a way to deal with his trauma. In fact, he explores the concept of *epigenetic trauma* through the character of Little Dog, who displays PTSD symptoms without having experienced the war first-hand, thus suggesting that his parents' trauma is ingrained in his own DNA. The evidence presented has shown that exposure to traumatic experiences such as his mother's constant physical and verbal abuse −coupled with epigenetic trauma− has resulted in the fragmentation of Little Dog's identity. While he rejects his mother and considers her "a monster" (14), at the same time he cannot help identifying with her. This can be seen in the structuring of the novel into vignettes, where joyful childhood memories are intermingled with others that are full of violence. As explained above, Little Dog's coming of age was prematurely triggered by these traumatic experiences. However, since his infantile psyche was not yet prepared to face such complex emotional hardship, he developed some adult coping mechanisms such as using drugs, which were eventually detrimental for him. Therefore, all things considered, only after coming to terms with his trauma and fragmented identity will he be able to complete his transition into the adult world.

Finally, Trevor and Little Dog's relationship is the focal point of the last analytical section. It approaches the protagonist's experience of growing up as a queer Asian boy in America, paying particular attention to how his sexuality is conditioned by the notions of *masculinity* and *race*. Little Dog's sexual awakening begins upon

reaching puberty, thus abandoning the innocence of childhood and initiating his coming of age. As previously discussed, his engagement in sexual relations with Trevor is portrayed in the novel through the tropes of shame that exist around queerness in American society. Trevor is extremely ashamed of his homosexuality, as he has been brought up in the ideals of American hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. Even though Little Dog feels more comfortable in his queerness, having been raised by Vietnamese women, he soon learns that his Asian status makes him doubly discriminated against within the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity. During his childhood he is the victim of multiple aggressions for displaying behaviors considered feminine, such as wearing dresses or having a hot-pink bicycle. Therefore, he represses his sexuality in public during his adolescence, in an attempt to protect himself and his family. As a result, he ends up developing some psychological problems such as depression, symptoms of what is known as *minority masculinity stress theory*. Consequently, by the time Little Dog is expected to reach adulthood, he has not fully embraced his sexuality yet, which is a fundamental part of the identity-formation process during the coming-of-age journey. Thus, the moment he decides to come out to his mother and openly accept his queerness will be the last necessary step Little Dog needed to take in order to finally complete his coming of age.

In conclusion, the main purposes of this thesis have been fulfilled. The analysis of Vuong's novel has shown that, while the *Bildungsroman* category is obsolete, the literary genre still serves a powerful social function. Contemporary ethnic authors have reshaped the traditional stories of individual self-formation within a community from novel perspectives, introducing new elements that intersect common adolescent topics. Placing Little Dog at the center of analysis, this thesis has critically examined the extremely challenging situations and personal circumstances that he has had to endure to come of age. At the same time, this analysis has great relevance today. The Asian American community is currently being the victim of racist and xenophobic attacks due to the ongoing global outbreak of COVID-19 that was first reported in China. Therefore, the study of works such as Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* not only fulfills the need to illustrate the multicultural reality of the United States, but also serves an edifying purpose by raising awareness about the existing systems of prejudice and discrimination that are still deeply ingrained in American culture.

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