

**OPPRESSION AND TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA  
IN OCEAN VUONG'S  
*ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*<sup>a</sup>**

**Natalija Stevanović\*, Ana Kocić Stanković**

University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Niš, Serbia

ORCID iDs: Natalija Stevanović  
Ana Kocić Stanković

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5340-3805>  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4509-2776>

**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to analyse Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), first and foremost as a life testimony. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub define life testimony as a "point of conflation between text and life [...] a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life" (*Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 1992). The theoretical framework is based on trauma studies, specifically on transgenerational trauma, as well as the studies which deal with autobiographies and autobiographical fiction, so that this fictionalised account of the author's own life could be read as a life testimony depicting real-life traumatic events. The main focus of the paper are the characters in the novel, who are traumatised due to the oppression based on their race, gender, sexuality, and class. We argue that the main cohesive tissue of Vuong's novel is transgenerational trauma which becomes a major element of characterisation.

**Key words:** oppression, life testimony, Ocean Vuong, transgenerational trauma, trauma studies.

**ОПРЕСИЈА И ТРАНСГЕНЕРАЦИЈСКА ТРАУМА  
У РОМАНУ „НА ЗЕМЉИ СМО НАКРАТКО ПРЕДИВНИ“  
ОУШНА ВУОНГА**

**Апстракт**

Циљ овог рада је да понуди анализу романа „На земљи смо накратко предивни“ Оушна Вуонга (2019), првенствено као сведочанства о животу. Шошана

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author: Natalija Stevanović, University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Ćirila i Metodija 2, 18105 Niš, Serbia | [natalija.stevanovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs](mailto:natalija.stevanovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs)

<sup>a</sup> The paper is published as part of conference proceedings of the *Language, Literature, Intersectionality Conference 2024*, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, April 27–28, 2024.

Фелман и Дори Лауб дефинишу сведочанство о животу као „тачку сусрета између текста и живота [...] текстуално сведочанство које нас може пројети као стварни живот” (*Сведочанство: Кризе сведочења у књижевности, психоанализи и историји*, 1992). Теоријски оквир је заснован на студијама трауме, посебно на идеји трансгенерацијске трауме, као и на студијама које се баве аутобиографијама и аутобиографском фикцијом, тако да се ова фикционализована верзија живота аутора може читати као аутобиографско сведочанство које приказује и стварне трауматске догађаје. Главни фокус рада су ликови у роману, који су трауматизовани јер су жртве угњетавања на основу расе, пола, сексуалности и класне припадности. Ауторке тврде да је главно везивно ткиво Вуонгов романа трансгенерацијска траума која постаје један од главних аспеката у поступку карактеризације.

**Кључне речи:** опресија, Оушн Вуонг, студије трауме, сведочанства о животу, трансгенерацијска траума.

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of the novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, written by a Vietnamese American poet and author, Ocean Vuong, and published in 2019. In its essence, the novel is a letter from a son to an illiterate mother, a letter which encompasses twenty-seven years of life in America as a child (and a grandchild) of Vietnamese immigrants. Ocean Vuong dedicated the novel to his mother, Rose, who died of cancer later in the same year the novel was published. Considering the fact that the novel is a fictionalised account of the real-life traumatic experiences of the author and his family, the analysis relies not only on trauma studies as a theoretical framework but it also covers aspects of transgenerational trauma. The omnipresent oppression the characters face adds to the overall trauma, and it is also analysed and explained. An important element of our argument is reading the novel as a life testimony, which Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub define as a “point of conflation between text and life [...] a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992, p. 2). The paper also investigates the novel’s connection to the genres of autobiography and autobiographical fiction. The final aim is to give a critical reading of the characters’ traumatic experiences and examine the author’s narrative strategy of incorporating transgenerational trauma and oppression into the characterisation process.

When asked about the novel, and why it heavily relied on his life, Ocean Vuong, who prior to publishing the novel exclusively wrote poems, said:

It was important to me to insist that these lives are real, that these folks who live in poverty—white, brown, yellow—are actual people. [...] A lot of the characters in the book are Frankensteins—composites of people. But the underlying set-

up is based on my life. My family are refugees from Vietnam and work a nail salon. I myself worked in a tobacco farm in Connecticut. These basic truths were important to me

(Haber, 2019)

In another interview, Vuong mentions that he writes fictional autobiography because, as a poet, he is “always beginning with truth” (Pineda, 2020). Sometimes, difficult truths need to be transformed and toned down in an artistic manner in order to be digestible for the readers. This is precisely what Ocean Vuong attempts to do, to talk about the traumatic history of his mother and grandmother, as well as his own traumatic life due to being not only a child of an immigrant but also a homosexual, and through that create a story “founded in truth but realized by the imagination”, to be “a historian” who would end as “an artist” (Quong, 2019). Numerous scholars have been investigating the effects of war<sup>1</sup> trauma on Vietnamese refugees and their “failure to acculturate into American society” (Lieu, 2011, p. xix); however, most of the aspects of their traumatic process of adapting have remained obscure. For this very reason, Ocean Vuong’s first-person narrative, albeit labelled as a fictionalised account, provides an in-depth insight into the turmoil and obstacles faced not only by the Vietnamese immigrants but also by their offspring. The truth in this novel is one of omnipresent trauma, which affects not only the narrator, Little Dog, but also his mother Rose, and his grandma Lan. The novel follows Little Dog’s life, from childhood, living in rather poor conditions with his mother, Rose, who works at a nail salon, and his grandma, Lan, who suffers from PTSD. The novel is a story of a family, the relationships between its members, the history they share, the traumas they are not aware of and those they learn about along the way. The novel follows a non-linear narrative, where the past and the present often overlap, and Laurie Vickroy sees that way of writing as something that brings readers to the trauma experience, where the readers become “immersed in fictional mind frames” (2015, p. 74). One of the attempts of this paper is to bring those traumatic experiences forward and analyse them. First and foremost, it is necessary to investigate the novel in terms of it belonging to autobiographical fiction, not autobiography, and how it can be read as a life testimony.

---

<sup>1</sup> The conflict in Vietnam remains one of the “most brutal and destructive wars fought between Western imperial powers and the peoples of Asia” (Lieu, 2011, p. 1). Not only did this war have tremendous physical consequences on both the country (due to the chemical warfare meant to render the land barren for its inhabitants) and the citizens (who were physically mutilated in the conflict) but it also left a legacy of debilitating psychological wounds, haunting Vietnamese people to this day. Those fortunate enough to survive the atrocities of the war sought asylum, but asylum seekers often endured “tremendous stress and psychological trauma,” not only because of their traumatic memories but also due to the “strenuous screening process through which they were disciplined and managed” (Lieu, 2011, p. 8).

*LIFE TESTIMONY/AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION*

In their aforementioned 1992 study, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub say that the act of writing is tied up with the act of bearing witness, as to bear witness means to “transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for other and to others” (p. 3). Considering the fact that testimony cannot be “simply revealed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony,” it is necessary for the author to retell the events, and the burden of such an approach is “a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary” (Felman, Laub, 1992, p. 3). This painstaking process often means to “transgress the confines of that isolated stance” and in doing so to “speak *for* other, and *to* others” (Ibid., emphasis in the original). This is necessary in order to bring to light the truth behind the trauma of both personal and collective experiences. The testimony is understood “not as a mode of *statement of*, but rather as a mode of *access to*, that truth” (Ibid., p. 16). Little Dog, Ocean Vuong’s fictionalised identity, directs the letters to his mother in the novel, he speaks to her, but he also speaks *for* her, as he talks about his life which is inevitably intertwined with hers, and also inevitably affected by her own life. He is a witness to a life filled with transgenerational trauma, starting with his grandma, who had to survive the atrocities during and in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and his mother, a half-Vietnamese, half-white woman who never learned to speak the language of the country she fled to. These events are heavily based on the life which Ocean Vuong and his family led. Due to the fact that both his grandmother and his mother are illiterate, able to utter only a few fragmented sentences in English, Vuong takes it upon himself to tell their, and his own story, and in doing so, “revive it” (Ricks, 2021, p. 6). The fragmentary form of the novel, its traveling back and forth to the events in Vietnam from the past, and the present events in America, eventually manages to “superimpose these temporally fragmented histories onto one unified plane of remembrance” (Ibid.).

Despite it heavily relying on the real-life events of the author’s life, it would be a mistake to claim that *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* is an autobiography. Roy Pascal sees autobiography as “the reconstruction of the movement of a life,” or its part, taking into account the actual circumstances in which that life is lived. Pascal also emphasises that the centre of interest in autobiography is the self, and not the outside world (2016, p. 9). However, he claims that there are certain limitations inherent in autobiography which means that autobiography can never investigate a character the way a novel does (Ibid. p. 165). As *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* does not only focus on the narrator but also on the outside world, analysing and investigating other real-life people, there is another term which it could fit under, and that is autofiction, or autobiographical fiction. “Autofiction” is a term coined by a French writer and critic, Serge

Dubrovsky, who claims that “the insufficiency of human memory causes autofiction” and that autofiction “transgresses the boundaries between autobiography and literature as well as the boundaries between literature and life” (Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2019, p. 2). Sometimes, some aspects of one’s life are too difficult to write about as pure facts, and that is exactly the moment when one has to introduce some figurative language. Meg Jensen, a professor whose research focuses on trauma and who also wrote fiction about her own traumatic past, says that:

Because traumatic experience exists in the body as a perpetual ‘now’, the usual reflective process of assigning meaning to experience through memory may be stalled at the first hurdle. Autobiographical fiction, by contrast, offers another, and perhaps more useful, form of reflection in the upside down epistemology of trauma, when the very nature of facts, figures, memories and meaning are in question.

(2016, p. 14)

When pure facts are insufficient to convey the depth of a person’s experience, imagination, metaphors, and symbolic language help convey the impossible. Thus, it is the author’s endeavour that helps autobiographical fiction remain faithful to the notion of truth, even though this truth “cannot be objective truth but subjective truthfulness” (Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2019, p. 284). This connects the genre of autobiographical fiction to life testimonies, as they are useful because “one does not have to *possess* or *own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness* to it”, because speech is in itself testimonial, and “the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker” (Felman, Laub, 1992, p. 15 emphasis in the original). In the novel, Little Dog writes to his mother, recalling her question about what it is to be a writer, and he admits that “it’s a mess, Ma—I’m not making this up. I made it down. That’s what writing is, after all the nonsense, getting down so low the world offers a merciful new angle, a larger vision made of small thing” (Vuong, 2019, 189). Bearing in mind the awful aspects of war, PTSD, migration, racism, (auto-)homophobia, it is evident why Vuong chose autobiographical fiction as an approach to his life story. Essentially, autobiographical fiction provides the writer with a chance to “inhabit” the other version of the world lived in, whether that “alternative narrative offers solace, suffering, empowerment or pain” (Jensen, 2016, p. 12). However, sometimes, using those alternative narratives can be a safe space “for the reflection upon and the processing of experience” (Ibid., p. 5). Sometimes, it can even be a way to start anew:

If we are lucky, the end of the sentence is where we might begin.  
If we are lucky, something is passed on, another alphabet written

in the blood, sinew, and neuron; ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast.

(Vuong, 2019, p. 10)

In an interview, Vuong recalls the stories told by his grandmother and mother, the stories he was privy to only as a listener. He sees those stories as “folklore,” because, through the act of listening to them and asking questions in order to fill in the gaps in his own narrative knowledge, he manages to weave a narrative about those who came before him. He thinks that through the “cycles of these stories” his grandmother and mother created “a mythology of their lives, because they were so powerless” (Brockes, 2019). However, in the act of allowing them to tell their stories and listening to them, “they held everything” (Ibid.). It is impossible to tell the story of one’s own life without involving the facts from the past. Edward Said says that past cannot be “quarantined from the present,” as they inform and co-exist with the other, and how we formulate the past “shapes our understanding and views of the present” (1994, p. 4). “Nations themselves are narrations,” in the words of Edward Said (Ibid.), and those narrations provide one with a sense of identity. Through writing about his mother, his grandmother, and their lives, Vuong “changes(s), embellish(es), and preserve(s)” them all at once (Vuong, 2019, p. 85). Through the act of creating a life testimony, an autobiographical (and fictional) account of their and his own life, he also tackles (transgenerational) trauma. Trauma texts are sometimes used to understand human behaviour which “eludes our usual understanding and awareness in lived situations” (Vickroy, 2015, p. 6), and this could be the reason Vuong chose to use autobiographical fiction. For him, autobiographical fiction was a way to combine past traumas with his present perspective, in order to make sense of the past and offer himself a chance to overcome its undeniable presence in his present life.

### *TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA*

When talking about trauma, it is necessary to start with Sigmund Freud who states in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) that traumatic neurosis can result from “an extensive breach of the protective barrier,” and names the events as traumatic in order to “describe those excitations from outside that are strong enough to break through the protective barrier” (Freud 2003, p. 68). Trauma is “a piercing or breach of a border” which “violently opens passageways between systems that were once discreet,” and also “leaks” between the symptoms it leaves in its wake, as well as between the people who both live through it or witness it (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 3). This “breach” is not something that is easy to narrate, as it constantly eludes proper definition, especially by the very

people who have lived through it, and due to the fact that there is a certain period necessary for the effects of the experience to become apparent. Cathy Caruth terms this period "latency," invoking Freud, and claims that the nature of the traumatic experience is such that the victim never becomes fully aware of it (1996, p. 23). It is precisely for this reason that fictionalised accounts of a traumatic event become helpful. Meg Jensen says that "narrative negotiation" is at the heart of autobiographical fiction (2016, p. 9). Not only does this negotiation help the victim investigate the causes of their trauma but it also helps them connect it to "larger social factors and cultural ideologies" (Balaev, 2012, p. 17).

The nature of trauma is such that it takes time for a person to be aware of it, but it is always there in the subconsciousness. Sometimes, some traumas do not end with a person, but tend to be transmitted onto the offspring. Vuong is aware of that when he says in an interview that it was important to him to write a book as a Southeast Asian American, who came out "of a diaspora of war," and he says that the parents of such generation are "the first generation to come out of that trauma" (Pineda, 2020). However, in the fictionalised account of his own life, Little Dog's, the narrator's mother, does not have that opportunity. She comes from a generation which had to silence their history, because some histories "collective and personal, are so violent" they could render a person unable to live their daily lives unless they "temporarily silence them" (Casper, Wertheimer, 2016, p. 120). However, too much silence can lead to internal psychic splitting, which in turn may lead to the "transgenerational transmission of trauma and the phantomatic return of the past" (Ibid.). Gabriele Schwab, whose research focuses on transgenerational trauma, says that due to violent histories, psychic deformations may be generated and passed from one generation to another. Even when people seem to be rather fine in aspects of rebuilding their lives, the dehumanising aspects of both war and other atrocities cannot be eluded. The consequences of former violence and trauma can "hibernate in the unconscious," waiting to be transmitted to the next generation "like an undetected disease" (Schwab, 2010, p. 3). In the novel, Little Dog is aware of the fact that the trauma his mother and grandmother went through (the Vietnamese war, the occupation, child loss, migration) somehow exists within himself as well. He tells his mother in a letter:

There are times, late at night, when your son would wake believing a bullet is lodged inside him. He'd feel it floating on the right side of his chest, just between the ribs. The bullet was always here, the boy thinks, older even than himself – and his bones, tendons, and veins had merely wrapped around the metal shard, sealing it inside him. It wasn't me, the boy thinks, who was inside my mother's womb, but this bullet, this seed I bloomed around.

(Vuong, 2019, p. 77)

Little Dog has inherited the trauma his mother went through and he can feel it like a phantom bullet lodged in his body, aware that the trauma is older than himself, and something which has been within his mother longer than he existed. From the opening of the novel, it is obvious that the narrator is trying to bridge the gap between his experience of his own trauma, as well as his position within the trauma he inherited from his family. Dominick LaCapra mentions postmemory in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2014) and defines it as “the acquired memory of those, particularly intimates, not directly experiencing an event [...] those who relive what others have lived” and also says that the key problem is to understand and analyse “bearing witness and giving testimony with respect to both events in the past and the experience of those living through or, subsequently, having an affective response to them and to those undergoing them” (p. xx). Little Dog is torn between trying to live his life despite being aware of the traces of trauma in his mother and grandmother, traces which have inevitably become part of him, traces which sometimes leave him disoriented, and disconnected from his body:

Sometimes, when I’m careless, I think survival is easy: you just keep moving forward with what you have, or what’s left of what you were given, until something changes—or you realize, at last, that you can change without disappearing, that all you had to do was wait until the storm passes you over and you find that—yes—your name is still attached to a living thing. [...] Sometimes, when I’m careless, I believe the wound is also the place where the skin reencounters itself, asking of each end, where have you been? Where have we been, Ma?

(Vuong, 2019, p. 137)

Not only is he trying to move forward despite everything that is burdening him, he is also trying to move forward despite everything that has left the two women in his life damaged, but still trying to survive. Dominick LaCapra says that in post-traumatic situations, one remains “possessed or haunted by the past” (2014, p. 46). In another instance, the narrator in the novel says: “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” (Vuong, 2019, p. 139). This continuation can be understood as one of transmission – transmission of traumatic memories, and events, which, even though Little Dog did not go through himself, he still feels as something traumatic. Gabriele Schwab also mentions the term “postmemory.” Essentially, victims of trauma live with the scars of memory, “gaps, amnesia, distortion, revision, or even fugue states or intrusive flashbacks,” and the recipients of transgenerational trauma live with a “postmemory” which comes to them secondhand (2010, p. 14). This postmemory is to

the recipients of transgenerational trauma "fragmentary and shot through with holes and gaps," and they have to "patch a history together they have never lived by using whatever props they can find" (Ibid.). That is obvious to the reader in the instances in the novel where the narrator is offering glimpses into the past of his mother and grandmother, either as an abused wife of a white man, or a single mother cradling an infant daughter to her chest, standing in front of the soldiers carrying rifles.

Little Dog offers this patching together of the past of his family by imagining everyone he has ever loved as "a single black dot on a bright page. I remember drawing a line from one dot to another with a name on each one until I ended with a family tree that looked more like a barbed-wire fence. I remember tearing it to shreds" (Vuong 2019, p. 225) The children who are recipients of transgenerational trauma also live with gaps and fragmentary memory, as well as with photographs and stories and letters, but also "silences, grief, rage, despair, or sudden unexplainable shifts in moods" (Schwab, 2010, p. 14). Little Dog witnesses his grandma suffering from PTSD, being scared of gunshots in the neighbourhood and hiding in the closet, having moments when she is talking about her past in gruesome details or other moments when she does not even recognise her loved ones. His mother, Rose, who was beaten by his father, sometimes beats him so hard that he has come to equate violence with love, which we can see in his relationship with an American boy, Trevor, explained later in the paper. At one instance, his Grandma, healing him from the bruises from his mother's beatings, tells him that his mother loves him but she is sick like her, "in the brains," and that "she pain" (Vuong, 2019, p. 122). Said talks about the necessity of fully comprehending "the pastness of the past," as it cannot be "quarantined from the present"; he continues to say that past and present both inform and imply each other, they co-exist, and "how we formulate or represent the past shapes our understanding and views of the present" (1994, p. 4). Sometimes, the traumatic past is written in the bodies of those who came before us, and only if one carefully observes, one can see its traces written on the skin. At one point, when his grandmother is asleep, Little Dog is looking at her as if he is "watching a stranger," the one "alien to the Lan" he knew awake. Schizophrenia has taken the worst of her, and she is constantly "dipping in and out of sense" before Little Dog. However, in the stillness of sleep, as he is studying her, he feels as if he is "looking back in time" (Vuong, 2019, 16). Their whole family is just a story of pain being transferred and being inflicted, unwillingly, unconsciously, and devastatingly. Besides their personal traumas, the members of his family are also the victims of oppression on multiple levels, as will be discussed further.

*THE TRAUMA OF OPPRESSION*

Oppression is omnipresent in the novel. Homi Bhabha talks about “the liminality of migrant experience,” and explains that the migrant culture is the one of the ‘in-between,’ “the minority position” (1994, p. 224). Essentially, oppression is defined as “an institutionally structured, unjust harm perpetrated on groups by other groups through direct and indirect material and psychological forces” (Cudd, 2006, p. 28). A life in a country where one does not fit in can be laced with oppression on a daily basis. William Du Bois talks about African-American experience, which in a way can also be the experience of every single person of different skin colour in America, and he says that the world does not yield true self-consciousness, but rather “double consciousness,” which is a sense of always looking at oneself through the eye of others, “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (2015, p. 5). Little Dog talks about the experience of being of different colour in America and it reflects the words of Du Bois: “Sometimes you are erased before you are given the choice of stating who you are. [...] To be or not to be. That is the question. A question, yes, but not a choice” (Vuong, 2019, p. 63).

Ever since his childhood, Little Dog has been aware of the fact that both his family and he are different. For one, his grandma and mother are dark skinned, even though his mother has lighter skin than grandma, but darker than himself, the two of them do not speak English, apart from his mother knowing some simple phrases to talk to the customers in the nail salon. There is one scene in the book where Little Dog, his mother, and his grandmother go to the butcher’s in order to purchase meat for their traditional Vietnamese meal. However, due to the fact that neither his mother nor his grandmother know the word for ‘oxtail,’ his mother is trying different languages, and in the end even starts mimicking a cow, which elicits bursts of laughter from the seller. Little Dog was too young at the time to help with his English. As he reminisces walking out of that shop with no meat, his mother’s head bowed in embarrassment, Little Dog says: “None of us spoke as we checked out, our words suddenly wrong everywhere, even in our mouths” (Vuong, 2019, p.31). This scene testifies to the power of language, of spoken words and the potential disastrous and traumatic effects the lack of verbal expression may bring to a person.

In school, the protagonist is bullied, discriminated due to his race, forced to speak English, even beaten on one occasion. The whole existence of this family in America is based on trying to remain unseen, trying to keep to themselves, and live a life without having to face the contempt of the white people. The oppression which the narrator and his family experience eventually becomes something internalised, and they tend to adopt the harmful narrative. The narrator’s mother, Rose, reminds him not to draw attention to himself, as he is “already Vietnamese” (Vuong,

2019, p. 219). Being Vietnamese would be enough for the people to look down on him, to discriminate against him, so he has to make sure not to draw additional, unwanted attention to himself.

Little Dog says that in the nail salon, where his mother and most immigrant women worked, as their lack of English skills and their skin colour limited their possibilities of finding a better job, "sorry is a tool," the purpose of which is no longer to merely apologize, but to show to the clients who belong to a higher class, and white race: "I'm here, right here, beneath you" (Vuong, 2019, p. 91). He connects this situation to a situation which inevitably awaits new immigrants, who would come to know "that the salon is, in the end, a place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones—with or without citizenship—aching, toxic, and underpaid" (Vuong, 2019, p. 80/81). This is connected to the oppression immigrants face, because "racial job segregation is due to a combination of human capital differences and racist social closure processes" (Cudd, 2006, p. 140). Immigrants are not given equal opportunities as those who already live in the country, because the racist practices determine their worth, and as a result, the position they can take in the society they are trying to become a part of.

This situation of subordination is replicated in his first meeting with Trevor, when Little Dog says "sorry," instead of "hello." Trevor is a gateway for Little Dog to try to escape the omnipresent oppression, because for the first time, someone sees him for who he is, and wants him. He compares being with Trevor to reaching for freedom, through a widening in the bars of his cage, "because sometimes not seeing the bars is enough" (Vuong, 2019, p. 216). However, even with Trevor, he cannot escape being oppressed. He is not only Vietnamese, he is also a homosexual. The awareness of his own position in comparison to Trevor's, who talks about his homosexuality as something which he would eventually overcome, does not elude him: "He was white, I never forgot this. [...] He was white. I was yellow. In the dark, our facts lit us up and our acts pinned us down" (Ibid., p. 111/1112). Strangely enough, it seems that Little Dog is using this power imbalance as a way to find a foothold in the foreign country, a way to place himself somewhere, "because submission, I soon learned, was also a kind of power" (Ibid., p. 118). In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault, says that there "may be another reason that makes it so gratifying for us to define the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression [...] (i)f sex is repressed [...] condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression" (Foucault, 1978, p. 6). In being subordinate physically, in willingly letting a white boy decide what to do to his body, to degrade him, Little Dog finds a way to widen the bars of the daily oppression and allow himself to decide what is going to be done with him, to him:

He loves me, he loves me not, we are taught to say, as we tear the flower away from its floweriness. To arrive at love, then, is to arrive through obliteration. Eviscerate me, we mean to say, and I'll tell you the truth. I'll say yes. "Keep going," I begged. "Fuck me up, fuck me up." By then, violence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love. Fuck. Me. Up. It felt good to name what was already happening to me all my life. I was being fucked up, at last, by choice. In Trevor's grip, I had a say in how I would be taken apart.

(Vuong, 2019, p. 119)

### CONCLUSION

*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* provides a rather fruitful literary ground where (transgenerational) trauma and oppression can be analysed. This paper started with a guiding premise that the novel can be read as a life testimony, where transgenerational trauma and oppression are present in almost every line, along with the fact that it possesses traits of an autobiographical writing. Throughout the paper, numerous studies, scholarly articles, and interviews with the author himself have been used as tactical references upon which scenes from the novel are analysed in order to support the guiding premise. The paper uses studies about autobiographical fiction to show that Ocean Vuong's novel is not an autobiography per se, but that it is rather a fictionalised account of the author's own traumatic life. It has also combined theoretical framework of trauma studies and transgenerational trauma studies to show that the traumatic instances in the novel can be traced back to the events in the narrator's life, both past and present. The tremendous traumatic impact of the life the narrator's family led has also been investigated, and brought into connection with the consequences it has left in the narrator's own desperate attempt to make sense of the past, and reconcile it with his present. The oppression due to being a second-generation immigrant and of a different race, as well as a homosexual, has been brought to light and connected with racist practices people belonging to the 'other' race and sexuality are going through. Hopefully, this paper managed to illuminate the omnipresent trauma in the novel, as well as the oppression the characters face. Finally, the authors hope that they have successfully managed to contribute to the field of literary analysis of the genre of autobiographical writing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This study was supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovations of the Republic of Serbia (Contract No. 451-03-66/2024-03).

### REFERENCES

Balaev, M. (2012). *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*. Northwestern University Press.

Bhabha, H. K (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge. Print.

Brockes, E. (2019, June 09). *Ocean Vuong: 'As a child I would ask: What's napalm?'*. Retrieved from Ocean Vuong: 'As a child I would ask: What's napalm?' | Fiction | The Guardian

Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Casper, M., & Wertheimer, E. (Eds.). (2016). *Critical trauma studies: Understanding violence, conflict and memory in everyday life*. NYU Press.

Cudd, A. E. (2006). *Analyzing Oppression*. Oxford University Press.

Du Bois, W. (2015). *Souls of black folk*. Routledge.

Felman, S. & Laub, D. (1992). *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature psychoanalysis and history*. Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality*. Pantheon Books.

Freud, S. (2003). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*. Penguin Classics.

Haber, L. (2019, June 03). *Ocean Vuong Opens Up About His Lyrical Debut Novel On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Retrieved from Ocean Vuong on His Lyrical Novel On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous (oprahdaily.com)

Jensen, M. (2016). *Surviving the Wreck: Post-traumatic Writers, Bodies in Transition and the point of Autobiographical Fiction, Life Writing*, DOI: 10.1080/14484528.2016.1141034, 2016.

LaCapra, D. (2014). *Writing history, writing trauma*. JHU Press.

Lieu, N. T. (2011). *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (NED-New edition). University of Minnesota Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttvbnn>

Luckhurst, R. (2008). *The Trauma Question*. Routledge.

Pascal, R. (2016). *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. Routledge.

Pineda, D. (2020, January 28). *Ocean Vuong shares stories behind 'On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous'*. Retrieved from Ocean Vuong talks "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous" - Los Angeles Times (latimes.com)

Quong, S. (2019, June 05). *Survival as a Creative Force: An Interview with Ocean Vuong*. Retrieved from The Paris Review - Survival as a Creative Force: An Interview with Ocean Vuong - The Paris Review

Ricks, J. (2021). *Gorgeous Healing: Liminality in Memoir and Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (Honors thesis).

Said, E. W. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Schwab, G. (2010). *Haunting legacies: Violent histories and transgenerational trauma*. Columbia University Press.

Vickroy, L. (2015). *Reading Trauma Narratives - The Contemporary Novel & the Psychology of Oppression*. University of Virginia Press.

Vuong, O. (2019). *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Vintage.

Wagner-Egelhaaf, M. ed (2019). *Handbook of autobiography/autofiction*. de Gruyter.

## ОПРЕСИЈА И ТРАНСГЕНЕРАЦИЈСКА ТРАУМА У РОМАНУ „НА ЗЕМЉИ СМО НАКРАТКО ПРЕДИВНИ“ ОУШНА ВУОНГА

Наталија Стевановић, Ана Коцић Станковић  
Универзитет у Нишу, Филозофски факултет, Ниш, Србија

### Резиме

Циљ овог рада је анализа романа „На земљи смо накратко предивни“ аутора Оушна Вуонга. Прецизније, рад првенствено анализира овај роман кроз призму студија трауме, као и трансгенерацијске трауме. Такође се повезује и опресија која је очигледна у роману, и која додатно утиче на трауме ликова. Наратор, Мали Пас, је фикционализовани идентитет самог аутора, Оушна Вуонга, па самим тим рад полази од читања романа као текстуалног сведочанства о траумама и повезује читање са тенденцијама у писању аутобиографске фикције.

Рад се у суштини заснива на студијама о трауми, чије је основе поставил Сигмунд Фројд, те даље разрадила Кети Керут, а укључене су и савремене студије трауме које повезују и читање књижевних дела као текстуалних сведочанстава о траумама ликова. Студија Габријеле Шваб о трансгенерацијској трауми доприноси дубљој анализи ликова у роману, као и томе да се њихове трауме повезују и утичу једна на другу. Рад покушава да покаже како се кроз фикционализовани идентитет може причати о стварним траумама кроз које аутор пролази, као и да постоје различити друштвени фактори који доводе до опресије и даље трауматизације. Расизам, хомофобија и дисфункционална породица као резултат трауме услед имиграције се преиспитују како би допринели целокупној слици о читању романа као аутобиографске фикције у којој су представљени живот једног младића, трауме које је наследио, као и оне кроз које сам пролази.