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HURTING AND HEALING: THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE
AND THE BIRTH OF A POET IN OCEAN VUONG'S *ON EARTH*
*WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS**

INTRODUCTION

Not only was Ocean Vuong's epistolary debut novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) a critical success¹ and a surprise, as it was written by an author best known as a poet laureate, but it also continued the current trend of popularity of Vietnamese American writers. Just like in many other works of immigrant literature, the issue of identity takes a central place in Vuong's narrative. Yet, what sets this novel apart from similar works is its peculiar narrative style based on contradiction and uncertainty, as argued in this paper. Our thesis is that Ocean Vuong shapes his narrative in a manner that reflects the complexity and contradictoriness of the immigrant situation as well as the nature of a deeply personal and human(e) creative impulse of an individual. In his interviews, Vuong admits that he embraces a complex identity of a poet/queer/Vietnamese American/American, etc., and translates that life experience into the characterization of his protagonist, Little Dog. In the novel, Little Dog emerges as a poet, but also as a young gay man who

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¹ The writer was the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction finalist and was long-listed for the National Book Award for Fiction.

comes out to his mother, and a survivor of childhood trauma and abuse perpetrated by his family members and by (American) society at large. Drawing on Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity being in a constant state of production, change, flux, and fluctuation, i.e., "becoming" rather than "being,"² we connect the idea of fluid identity with an expression of that identity through a poetic language and a narrative procedure that would reflect such a state of constant change. Furthermore, we analyze Vuong's novel in light of the link between immigrant literature and its potential function in the post-traumatic healing process.

1. FLUIDITY AND CONTRADICTION OF IMMIGRANT IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE

Hall defines cultural identities as "the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture," and claims that they are "always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth."³ On a similar note, in one of his interviews, Vuong describes his notion of identity in almost the same terms highlighting the connection between language and identity. As he claims, "To talk about language is to talk about identity.... I see identity more as a thread being pushed through a piece of fabric as it's being woven, and that all of our identities are fibers woven in that thread."⁴ The potential for the implication of the word "suture" is particularly interesting as it can be connected to the notions of identity, immigrant literature, Vuong's personal narrative style, and the process of healing. On the one hand, we have the image of stitching together, piecing the puzzle, which is what reading Vuong's novel feels like owing to the fragmentary nature of his epistolary narrative. On the other hand, there is the idea of healing and the paradoxical nature of the act of suturing which is at the same time violent *and* necessary to complete the healing process. Vuong expresses a similar view in another interview. Discussing his poetry, he uses the word "suture" to denote his writing process: "I believe that I'm participating in the species' wide endeavor to complicate the difficult histories and in a strange way that is a suturing,

² Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222, 225.

³ Hall, 226.

⁴ Ocean Vuong, "'We're Singing of Solitude, but We're Singing It to One Another,'" Dive Dapper, June 6, 2016, www.divedapper.com/interview/ocean-vuong.

a sharp suturing but that is a suturing for me.”⁵ The contradiction that lies within the word and its meaning and implications has its parallel in Vuong’s act of writing: his protagonist is writing a letter to his mother, the letter he knows she is unable to read; yet, he feels compelled to write (it).

Contradiction can also be seen as the keyword when describing the Vietnamese-American experience and literature. One of the reasons for that could lie in the fact that the status of Vietnamese Americans in the U.S. is often dual and ambivalent: on the one hand, they are immigrants, which implies some voluntariness in the very act of migration. On the other hand, they are refugees or descendants of the refugees, which means an involuntary action. Peché et al. claim that

the numerous paradoxes and contradictions about Vietnamese Americans reflect the complex history of modern Vietnam, the diversity of South Vietnamese society where they came from, the politics of the Vietnam War, racial and ethnic relations in the United States, intergenerational conflicts within the community, and the evolving relationship between the United States and communist Vietnam.⁶

What is more, as various critics highlight, many Vietnamese Americans harbor conflicting feelings of attachment to their homeland and hatred towards the regime in Hanoi.⁷ They will also often exhibit racist attitudes toward other people of color while at the same time being victims of racial and ethnic discrimination.⁸ In his novel, Vuong also addresses this contradiction when he discusses his family origin and the fact that his mother was a child of an unknown American soldier, repeatedly abused and ridiculed while still in Vietnam. The contradiction is also shown in the portrayal of his protagonist, Little Dog, whose existence is a result of the war and the conflict between the Americans and the Vietnamese. This conflicting and even paradoxical attitude towards the war itself, recognized as destructive and far-reaching in traumatic consequences, but also constructive and conducive to one’s identity, may find its expression in the very form of the narrative and

⁵ Ocean Vuong, “An Evening of Poetry with Sally Wen Mao, Jennifer Tseng, Ocean Vuong,” filmed January 22, 2019, in Brookline Booksmith, Boston, MA, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMPPTSrxJQ>.

⁶ Linda Ho Peché, Alex-Thai Dinh Vo, and Tuong Vu, *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies: History, Community, and Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2023), 11.

⁷ Ho Peché, Dinh Vo, and Tuong Vu, 11.

⁸ Ho Peché, Dinh Vo, and Tuong Vu, 11.

its refusal to follow a linear path, to position any absolutes, or take any sides. Matthew Scully in his article discussing the aesthetics of Vuong's poetry recognizes the feeling of anxiety arising from Vuong's poems and the tension the poet maintains by deliberately acknowledging negativity and fragmentation as opposed to unity implied by the notion of democracy.⁹ In other words, similar to Hall's notion of cultural identity formation, Vietnamese American literature can also be considered a suture bringing together various impulses and influences to enable personal and collective healing.

2. IMMIGRANT LITERATURE, TRAUMA AND HEALING

Immigrant literature and the works by Vietnamese American authors have been recognized and analyzed in terms of their disruptive and disunited qualities and characteristics. Immigrant literature is said to contain "broken narratives of disrupted lives," forgotten histories, and conflated languages (those of the mother and the host countries) reflecting complex social structures that are difficult to comprehend for those coming to a foreign country.¹⁰ In her discussion of the traits of Vietnamese American literature, Isabelle Pelaud maintains that "recalling the past through storytelling can contribute to individual and collective healing by making sense of an emotionally incomprehensible past."¹¹

The core concept of the analysis, that is the "suture," intersects intriguingly with the notions of trauma and narrative. In what is regarded as a classic work in trauma theory, Cathy Caruth highlights the potential of a narrative in giving a "voice" to the "wound," emphasizing the urgent need for trauma to be transformed into "text": "[trauma] is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available."¹² The act of storytelling acts as a means of confronting and presenting trauma, an essential yet painful part

⁹ Matthew Scully, "Democratic Aesthetics: Scenes of Political Violence and Anxiety in Nari Ward and Ocean Vuong," *American Literature* 93, no. 4 (2021): 686–88, <http://doi.org/10.1215/000298319520236>.

¹⁰ Bharati Mukherjee, "Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 683–84, <http://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajr027>.

¹¹ Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 2, 35–36.

¹² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

of the healing process. Vuong experiences being a subject of trauma as well as an immigrant in danger of losing his voice. The act of writing, therefore, serves as a “suture”: simultaneously a healing and self-prescribed therapy, yet also a painful puncture to an unhealed wound.

3. STORYTELLING, UNCERTAINTY AND TRAUMA IN *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*

Three important themes that the novel keeps revisiting are the relationship between language and identity, the importance and form of storytelling, and the experience of war. This broadly corresponds to some of the general features of immigrant literature as identified by David Cowart. They include: immigrants’ struggle with the sense of psychological and cultural doubleness, fragmented narration, generational conflicts and misunderstandings, and the view of the home country as unlivable yet being the source of myths and legends.¹³ In the novel, Little Dog’s first sentence is: “Let me begin again.”¹⁴ From the start, the narrator introduces the notion of circularity, of a repeated process of storytelling and a constant compulsion to tell and retell a story; in other words, the focus is on becoming, rather than being. He also explains his reasons for writing in the first letter to his mother: “I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with *because*. But I wasn’t trying to make a sentence—I was trying to break free. Because freedom, I am told, is nothing but the distance between the hunter and its prey.”¹⁵ Thus, for Little Dog, writing is about breaking the rules and equating the use of language and syntax with the personal act of survival and self-liberation. Although he is instructed at school that a sentence should not begin with “because,” he starts the following sentence in a letter to his mother with this specific word in defiance of the imposed rules. Later on in the novel, when he remembers his grandmother Lan and her storytelling style, the narrator again points out the importance of the act of telling a story and its role in personal survival and healing. The way Little Dog describes his grandmother’s storytelling style corresponds to his own narrative technique:

¹³ David Cowart, *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 7–8.

¹⁴ Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), e-book.

¹⁵ Vuong, *On Earth*.

Mostly, as was her way, she rambled, the tales cycling one after another. They spiraled out from her mind only to return the next week with the same introduction: ... Some people say history moves in a spiral, not the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed. Lan, through her stories, was also traveling in a spiral.... Shifts in the narrative would occur—the past never a fixed and dormant landscape but one that is re-seen. Whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something new from what is gone.¹⁶

Firstly, Little Dog notices that his grandmother's stories move in circles, constantly changing, fluctuating and revisiting certain memories. Then, he makes a connection between the form of storytelling and the very concept of history and the historical narrative as an ever-changing interpretation of the past; it is seen and re-seen as a process rather than a final product. Little Dog's narration also follows this pattern: his imagination is activated by a certain event which then starts a chain reaction of memories flooding. At one point in the novel, he also turns his mother's statement that memory is a choice into the image of a memory as a flood. As readers, we constantly have a feeling that the narrator is adjusting and re-adjusting his memories, trying to catch all the fragments and producing a narrative that resists linearity and straightforwardness.

Secondly, he points out that storytelling is a collaborative effort between himself as a listener and his grandmother as a storyteller. Throughout the narrative, Little Dog insists that he is the spokesperson for his mother and grandmother, not only as an interpreter in American shops but also as the voice making their story known to the world. This collaborative quality is another link between the act of storytelling and the process of identity formation, a link discussed by other authors as well.¹⁷ Finally, these passages also reveal the key characteristic of Vuong's literary style and credo—uncertainty. Little Dog admits that his writing is permeated with a sense of doubt. As he states, “[e]ven when I know something to be true as bone I fear the knowledge will dissolve, will not, despite my writing it, stay real. I'm breaking us apart again so that I might carry us somewhere else—where, exactly, I'm not sure.”¹⁸ The contradiction seems to be inherent in the

¹⁶ Vuong, *On Earth*.

¹⁷ See, for example, Manh Quan Ha, and Mia Tompkins, “The Truth Is Memory Has Not Forgotten Us,” *Rocky Mountain Review* 75, no. 2 (2021): 199–220, <http://doi.org/10.1353/rmr.2021.0033>.

¹⁸ Vuong, *On Earth*.

writing process itself, resulting in an uncertain and disjointed narrative. On the one hand, we have a fear of fading memory and, on the other hand, the uncertainty of a written narrative as the reality it is supposed to reflect is in a state of constant change. Vuong has stated that he does not believe a writer's task to be reconciliation. His narrative corroborates that perspective as the language of uncertainty becomes the means of expressing one's reality as well as the experiences of his community and family.¹⁹

Uncertainty in Vuong's writing reflects the nature of the trauma narrative. As Caruth claims, "this truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language."²⁰ Unlike his mother, Little Dog chooses to give voice to his wound, even though this action causes him personal pain. This act echoes Anna Gotlib's question: "Trauma unmakes the world of the self. Can stories repair it?"²¹ Through the form of letter-writing, Vuong invites Western readers into a deeply personal conversation between an immigrant mother and her child. As readers witness this intimate exchange, they are compelled to observe it from a cultural distance. Therefore, reading the novel can be interpreted metaphorically as being situated at the threshold of a private world, hearing fragments of a secret conversation.²² Simultaneously with his desire to give his trauma a voice that speaks to the world, Vuong remains committed to preserving the intactness of his vulnerable traumatic immigration experiences.

4. SURVIVAL AND SUFFERING IN *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS*

The themes of war and violence are also constantly invoked in the novel; although the war is not a central theme and is seldom addressed directly, its memory and traumatic consequences permeate both the narrative and the everyday experience of Little Dog and his family. Both his mother and his

¹⁹ Vuong, "An Evening of Poetry."

²⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

²¹ Anna Gotlib, "Trauma Unmakes the World of the Self. Can Stories Repair It?" *Psyche*, November 23, 2020, <https://psyche.co/ideas/trauma-unmakes-the-world-of-the-self-can-stories-repair-it>.

²² Ocean Vuong, "I Don't Want to Serve the Expectations of the United States," *Vietcetera*, January 19, 2022, <https://vietcetera.com/en/ocean-vuong-i-dont-want-to-serve-american-expectations>.

grandmother suffer from PTSD, which is the explanation Little Dog offers for his mother's violence towards him. Trying to find a reason for the beatings he receives from his mother, Little Dog contemplates the difference between the words a "mother" and a "monster": "To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once.... Perhaps to lay hands on your child is to prepare him for war."²³ The narrator points out the hybridity of the very concept of monstrosity, thus emphasizing the uncertainty and contradiction of every linguistic denominator when placed under scrutiny and deconstructed. Vuong uses wordplay and puns to signal how the fragmentation and fluidity of the immigrant's identity are reflected in the fragmentation of the language at the lexical level. In the novel, the narrator notices: "It's not fair that the word *laughter* is trapped inside *slaughter*."²⁴ Also, in the word "Hồng" (which means "rose" in Vietnamese), Vuong identifies the verb to "rise" in the past tense, and the noun "hồn" which means a "spirit/soul" in Vietnamese. Therefore, the fractures and connections visible at the lexical level in Vuong's writing can also be attributed to the layers of language experience that pile up in his immigrant subject.

The theme of migration is also repeatedly invoked in the novel, often with reference to different types of animals, like monarch butterflies, and their migratory patterns. Pondering on monarch butterflies, Little Dog also thinks about (his own) history and uses the metaphor of threads discussed previously:

Every history has more than one thread, each thread a story of division.... Only their children return; only the future revisits the past.... 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.²⁵

He deliberately conflates writing and language with the body and the genetic information written in it. Thus, he also highlights the issues of posterity and the experience of intragenerational memory (and trauma). He uses narrative as a tool for piecing together different threads of memory. Monarch butterflies' migration meant to secure the survival of posterity is juxtaposed with the Vietnamese American experience, the general immigrant experi-

²³ Vuong, *On Earth*.

²⁴ Vuong, *On Earth*.

²⁵ Vuong, *On Earth*.

ence, and the first generation often willingly sacrificing themselves for the better life of their children. It is also compared with the Vuong family's personal experience of his mother and grandmother's suffering in their homeland and the host country for Little Dog to have a future of his choice. This aligns Vuong's novel with some contemporary considerations of the immigrant narrative which consider suffering "as an inherent part of the immigrant narrative,"²⁶ reflecting collective immigrant experiences and their identity.

The image of butterflies used in this novel is yet another symbol of hybridity, reflecting the essence of the experience of both immigration and trauma. The symbolic meaning of migration mentioned above is combined with its symbolic meaning of the soul/spirit in Vietnamese culture. In traditional Vietnamese culture, the appearance of butterflies during a death anniversary²⁷ is sometimes believed to be the return of the soul of the deceased. The image of the surviving posterity witnessing the symbolic return of the ancestral souls implies the connection between the "yin and yang" generations in Eastern culture.²⁸ At the same time, it is also connected to the obsession of being a survivor of a traumatic experience as an inherent part of the immigrant's identity.

Ocean Vuong incorporates his home country naming tradition into the novel as another aspect of the process of immigrant identity formation. Interestingly, there is a contradiction in the very process of name-giving: the name expresses both lifelong dreams and aspirations as well as fear for one's fate. In Vuong's case, his original name, Vương Quốc Vinh (though not mentioned explicitly in the text), carries the aspiration to be the "Patriotic Leader of the Nation," while the nickname of the narrator of the novel, Little Dog, is a way of belittling oneself. This is the reflection of the invisible fear permeating Vietnamese naming conventions in the old days. For children, their names should refer to worthless and hideous objects or animals.²⁹ As for women, some believe that those named after beautiful flowers, e.g., Lan

²⁶ Madelaine Hron, *Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 18.

²⁷ It is believed to be an important and frequent activity in the spiritual life of Vietnamese people.

²⁸ Duy Văn, *Ma quỷ dân gian kỳ* [Folk tales of spirits], vol. 2 (Hà Nội: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 2023), 64–65.

²⁹ Kể Bình Phan, *Việt Nam phong tục* [Vietnamese traditions and customs] (Hà Nội: NXB Văn Học, 2006), 13. The vague fear of wanting to hide oneself is also ingrained in the way traditional Vietnamese people converse. Vietnamese people often use the phrase "trộm vía," literally meaning "to speak quietly," discreetly to avoid the attention of evil spirits before giving compliments to children.

(Lily), are condemned to miserable fate because the beautiful name provokes the jealousy of heaven and earth. This small detail reflects the way the main protagonist's ambiguous identity is constructed. What is more, the vague fear of evil spirits or the jealousy of heaven and earth in Vietnamese culture intersect with the tendency to make oneself invisible as an immigrant in a foreign country.

The motif of immigrant invisibility is invoked in the novel through a powerful scene at the nail salon. Little Dog notices that the most common word used at the place is “sorry”:

In the nail salon, sorry is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency. It no longer merely apologizes, but insists, reminds: I'm here, right here, beneath you. It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable. In the nail salon, one's definition of sorry is deranged into a new word entirely, one that's charged and reused as both power and defacement at once. Being sorry pays, being sorry even, or especially, when one has no fault, is worth every self-deprecating syllable the mouth allows. Because the mouth must eat.³⁰

The narrator immediately recognizes the contradiction in the use of the word itself: it is both a means of self-deprecation, because the employees apologize even when there is nothing to apologize for, and, paradoxically, a mode of empowerment as it secures tips and thus the survival of the entire family and even the community. Vuong condenses the entire immigrant experience into a single word, thus emphasizing the power of language and the inherent contradiction within every act of speech. The paradox of securing one's subsistence by denying one's importance becomes a powerful metaphor for the overall immigrant experience.

According to Vuong, suffering and uncertainty seem to be integral parts of the immigrant experience, be it legal or illegal. Vuong's description of women working in a nail salon, the only job his mother and many other immigrants were able to obtain, demonstrates the author's view on the immigrant's position in American society:

to be awake in American bones—with or without citizenship—aching, toxic and underpaid.... Because no one stays long enough and someone is always just-gone. Because there are no salaries, health care, or contracts,

³⁰ Vuong, *On Earth*.

the body being the only material to work with and to work from. Having nothing, it becomes its own contract, a testimony of presence.³¹

In a state of uncertainty, suffering seems to be the only certain feeling and one's own body the only marker of visibility. Vuong, however, problematizes this idea. The scene when his mother is asked to give a foot massage to a woman with a prosthetic leg, and is then tipped generously, resonates on many levels. The image of rubbing an invisible body part challenges and contradicts even the very idea of a body as a constant. His mother understands this strange request and connects with her customer on a deeply human level, as the severed limb could signify the beaten, bruised, and exploited bodies of immigrants or the idea of a home country that is no longer there yet is still felt as being a part of immigrant identity. What is more, the suffering and pain caused by the woman's state of disability correspond to the immigrants' acute lack of certainty that stems from the feeling of disconnection from their homeland and their alienation in the host country.

CONCLUSION

Similarly to the issue of identity formation, the history of the Vietnamese American experience is complex and often contradictory. Ocean Vuong's language and narrative style mirror that complexity and contradictoriness. Towards the end of the novel, in a letter to his mother, the narrator attempts to provide a definition of what it means to be a writer:

You asked me what it's like to be a writer and I'm giving you a mess, I know. But 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 things.³²

Vuong tells us that being a writer means accepting "a mess." It means trying to find a new perspective that would incorporate all different experiences and voices. It is failing and, then, trying again to unite the disunited while at the same time honoring the fragmentary and inconclusive nature of the immigrant identity and experience. "A larger vision made of small

³¹ Vuong, *On Earth*.

³² Vuong, *On Earth*.

things”³³ invokes one more time the image of a suture, hurting, yet necessary to patch things up and enable healing.

Little Dog finishes his rumination about the act of writing with a series of questions: “Is that what art is? To be touched thinking what we feel is ours when, in the end, it was someone else, in longing, who finds us?”³⁴ The question marks leave the lingering feeling of uncertainty; yet they also remind us that the line between “ours” and “theirs,” and, by proxy, “us” and “them,” is very thin, as it is precisely through art that we are able to perceive what it really feels to be in someone else’s bones. One more time, the narrator manages to weave together different threads around the concept of contradiction that emerges as the central metaphor of the immigrant experience and the immigrant narrative style. He makes a mosaic of different experiences and sufferings, arranging and rearranging the broken pieces until a picture of universal human suffering and pain emerges.

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³³ Vuong, *On Earth*.

³⁴ Vuong, *On Earth*.

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Summary

The paper considers Ocean Vuong's critically acclaimed novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) as both a representation of the Vietnamese American immigrant experience and an experiment in narrative form. The main argument is that Vuong's narrative style, based on uncertainty, fragmentation, and fluidity, reflects the idea of cultural identity as an ever-changing process constituted within representation. We align our reading of the novel with the contemporary considerations of American immigrant literature and Asian American literature and culture which highlight agency, re-storying, dealing with individual and collective traumas, disruption of the narrative flow and fluidity (as opposed to fixity), and contradiction. Vuong's novel addresses all these issues while also discussing the racial, ethnic, sexual, and personal identities of Vietnamese immigrants in relation to their pre-American and American experiences. We argue that the main strength of the writer's literary representation lies in his efforts to find a new language to express his own experience as well as the immigrant experience of his family. This is the language that emulates his grandmother's storytelling style and defies the conventional narrative flow. Thus, the fragmentation, fluidity, and uncertainty of the narrative correspond with the fragmentation of memory, fluidity of one's identity, and uncertainty of both one's past and the future.

Keywords: immigrant literature; Ocean Vuong; Asian American literature; trauma; cultural identity

ZRANIENIE I UZDROWIENIE: DOŚWIADCZENIE MIGRACJI I NARODZINY POETY
W KSIĄŻCE *ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS* OCEANA VUONGA

Streszczenie

Doceniona przez krytyków powieść Oceana Vuonga *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) jest uważana zarówno za literacki obraz doświadczeń wietnamskich imigrantów amerykańskich, jak i eksperyment w formie narracyjnej. Styl Vuonga, bazujący na niedomówieniu, fragmentaryczności, powtarzalności i płynności, odzwierciedla ideę tożsamości kulturowej Stuarta Halla jako procesu opartego na niekończącej się przemianie. Wpisując się w kanon literatury migracyjnej, powieść omawia proces formowania tożsamości w odniesieniu do rasy, przynależności etnicznej czy orientacji seksualnej wietnamskich imigrantów. Próbując wyrazić doświadczenie własne i swojej rodziny, autor buduje narrację, która naśladuje styl opowiadania historii jego wietnamskiej babki. Kwestionuje on tym samym zachodnie koncepcje linearności i spójności narracyjnej. Fragmentaryczność, płynność i niepewność cechujące narrację Vuonga korespondują z fragmentarycznością pamięci, płynnością tożsamości i niepewnością dotyczącą zarówno przeszłości, jak i przyszłości imigranckich bohaterów powieści.

Słowa kluczowe: literatura imigracyjna; Ocean Vuong; literatura azjatycko-amerykańska; trauma; tożsamość kulturowa