Queer Orientation and Space in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Anne Stellberger
University of Bayreuth

Abstract Ocean Vuong raises the question of whose stories are heard in his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*: Vuong premises the story with a never-to-be-read letter to the narrator's mother – Little Dog is a writer while his mother is illiterate. The protagonist, a queer Vietnamese immigrant navigating post-Vietnam War US society, struggles to be seen and acknowledged within his relationships and society at large. By retelling stories of his mother and grandmother, he destabilizes prevailing US-societal narratives of the war, offering an alternative perspective. Within Little Dog's transformative queer sexual and romantic encounter with Trevor, he experiences visibility and beauty for the first time, enabling him to develop an oriented sense of self rooted in self-recognition. The intersection of this queer experience, his racial-ethnic identity, and his upbringing cultivates a sense of belonging within the queer Asian American community. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's notion of orientation as spatial, the following essay argues that writing from this perspective orients readers towards a different experience and story of space, namely the U.S. nation-state, realms of trauma and home, and the embodied resistance, agency, and self-representation of the protagonist.

Keywords Gaze; (In)Visibility; Orientation; Queerness; Space; Vietnamese American.

DOI: 10.25364/27.6:2026.1.6

Introduction: Queering Space and Orientation in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Whose stories are heard and read? Ocean Vuong indirectly poses this question in his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by making a never-to-be-read letter to the narrator's mother the premise of his story – Little Dog is a writer while his mother is illiterate. As a queer Vietnamese immigrant who was born in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, being heard and seen not only by his mother but by US society becomes an overarching theme of the novel. In re-telling his mothers' and grandmothers' stories, he shifts the American perspective on and destabilizes the common US societal narrative of the Vietnam War, tracing, as Jennifer Cho observes "how dominant narratives of ethnic and queer assimilation in the United States both inform and restrict the narrator's progression toward self-actualization" (Cho 130). Upon meeting Trevor, with whom he shares his first romantic and sexual experiences, Little Dog feels seen and beautiful for the first time. Through this queer experience he then learns to see and recognize himself. At the intersection of his queerness and racial-ethnic background and upbringing, this development enables his identity to evolve from a disoriented to an oriented understanding of self that is based on a sense of belonging to the queer Asian American community. By writing down his own story he eventually engages in self-representation. This intersection is narrated through a (visual) focus on different (relational) spaces throughout the story: the home-space, the US nation, and the queer relational space with Trevor.

Sexual orientation is related to space and spatiality (Ahmed 543). Sara Ahmed's phenomenological theorization of sexual orientation connects spatiality, power, sexuality, and gaze. Further relating her argument to the home-space, she states: "If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence, of how we inhabit spaces, and who or what we inhabit spaces with" (Ahmed 543). Queer scholars develop a notion of space that is based on geographical definitions thereof but include sexual orientation as an aspect of analysis. Geography and philosophy scholars like Henry Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Doreen Massey, Michel Foucault, and bell hooks build the foundation for their argument. While queer scholars agree with them that space is a dynamic, fluid, and continuously reproduced social construct embedded in power structures (Lefebvre; Soja; Massey; Foucault; hooks), they argue that space is sexualized, and sexuality is spatial in a way that is oriented towards the heterosexual subject and privileges heteronormative ways of being (Bell and Valentine; Bell and Binnie; Ahmed). This, in turn, can be disrupted by a change of directionality. In his acclaimed book *In a Queer Time and Place*, Jack Halberstam claims that an interrogation of the relations between sexuality, time and space reveals the works of power structures. He defines queer space as referring to queer place-making practices that produce altered understandings of space and even queer counterpublics (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*). Queer people and communities thus use space and time in ways that challenge conventional logics of development, adulthood, and responsibility. Applying a queer intersectional lens to Doreen Massey's definition of space as a conglomerate of "stories-so-far" (Massey 9) means that writing from the queer Asian American positionality occupied by Vuong's narrator orients the reader towards a different experience and narrative of space and history.

Even though queerness, bottomhood, gender, and queer aesthetics have been considered in scholarly discussions of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, (queer) space and (sexual) orientation have not been a focus in research articles (Slopek; Shia; Cho; Lippert; Soler i Arjona). Articles on queer aesthetics have mostly explored form and temporality in the novel. Only Joshua Parker and Jian Zhu have touched more explicitly on space and orientation in their analyses, however Parker focuses on rural space and sexuality specifically, whereas Zhu mostly discusses imagism and orientation in the novel. While also considering aspects of refugeehood, language, and memory in the novel (discussed more thoroughly by Pham; Kocić Stanković, Vân Anh; Neumann; Furlanetto; D'urso; Ha, Tompkins), this article primarily examines spatiotemporal dimensions of abuse Little Dog experiences at home, outside of it, and within his queer relationship – aspects of the novel that have not been thoroughly discussed, although they are constitutive of Little Dog's queer Asian American identity development. In reading the text through a spatial lens, another layer and aspect of queer agency and desire is revealed: the protagonist's gaze. Queer aspects of looking and being looked at tie in with Little Dog's Vietnamese American experience of invisibility. Thus, an intersectional approach to the novel is imperative. In order to contribute to the scholarship on Vuong's novel by highlighting the importance of queer space, the article will subsequently discuss the spaces of home, the US, and the relationship between Trevor and Little Dog.

Precarious Positionality within the Home and the US

Little Dog's family's constitution challenges a traditional, heteronormative, and *white* imagination of home as a comfortable space of the nuclear family. Little Dog grows up in the United States with his grandmother Lan and mother Rose; his father is almost fully absent from the novel. We only learn that he was abusive towards his wife during the time they were together. Both his parental figures suffer mental health issues as a consequence of the Vietnam War, from which they fled together. Growing up in a home with two refugee women traumatized by war, struggling with mental health, shapes Little Dog's identity. He lacks a place for recovery as he is subjected to physical violence at the hand of his mother inside of his home, and racialized and homophobic discrimination outside of it. In the first part out of three, the narrator orients himself and the reader towards the home-space, the relational space and the memories of his relatives, the space of the US, and the space of the protagonist's racialized, violated, and resistant body.

According to Ahmed "[t]he starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds" (545). When Little Dog starts his letter with the sentence "Let me begin again" (Vuong 3), the starting point of the novel marks his and his story's orientation towards his mother, who occupies the position of the addressee. Little Dog exposes his vulnerability in this first sentence, having had to start over writing the letter multiple times, perhaps searching for the right words. By using the word 'again', he opens multiple spatiotemporal levels (see also Neumann 278). Furthermore, he locates himself at a temporal distance towards the content of his letter, thus telling his and his family's story in retrospect. When and where exactly he writes the letter is not clear. Little Dog's writing thus grapples with memory, proposing an

alternative overlooked history of two women who survived the aftermath of the Vietnam War and sought refuge in the United States – ironically in the country significantly escalating the war (see also Ha and Tompkins 201). By asking: "When does war end?" (Vuong 12), Little Dog points to the continuity of violence and the inheritance of trauma by connecting his mothers' and grandmothers' trauma caused by the war and its aftermath to his own upbringing. Little Dog therefore hints at the lasting impact that the US intervention and participation in the Vietnam War had and has, even generations later. Now arriving in a country that was and is convinced of its own superiority shapes his and his family's life and drives them towards submission. In positioning himself and his family as postcolonial subjects by linking US imperialism to the Vietnam War and his family's story, the narrative unfolds as a complex assemblage interweaving two spatiotemporal realms – Little Dog's childhood in an immigrant household marked by abuse and the journey of his mother and grandmother.[1]

This non-linear structure aligns with a queer mode of storytelling since queer temporality bends the norms of linear temporality and development (see e.g., Halberstam, Muñoz, Freeman). Halberstam's claim that the capitalist US-society is organized around the future is queered by Little Dog through mainly focusing on the past and narrating his and his family's stories in a disorganized manner. The narrator's vulnerability continues to increase when Little Dog articulates the intention of his writing: "I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (Vuong 3). The state of ambivalence (towards his mother) and his writing endeavor is expressed spatially. The story is not told, to use Ahmed's words again, to straighten any oblique, queer lines (566), instead it accommodates vulnerability, ambiguity, and the prospect of failure (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*), which further speaks to a queer storytelling. However probable the failure, Little Dog still attempts to reach his mother. This shows a sense of hope for a better future, which José Esteban Muñoz ascribes to queer utopian thinking.[2] According to Muñoz, this hope entails a "rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility of another world" (1). Little Dog wants to change the present relationship between him and his mother to bring them closer.

Yet, attempting this, he has to initially recall the ambiguous relationship between them that is marked by conflict and violence. Little Dog recounts several instances of abuse endured during his childhood at the hands of his mother in the beginning of the novel. Each paragraph commences with the temporal marker "The time" followed by a spatial reference of his mother's acts of aggression or the object she used to attack him (Vuong 4-13). This anaphoric construction and enumeration signify a continuity of abuse, even when in some descriptions physical violence remains implicit. Further, these examples show that time and space are narrated as inextricably linked. The violence he endures is told as a spatial manifestation of positionality. When her son tries to explain to her how to read, Little Dog's mother gets angry: "But that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed our hierarchies and with it our identities, which, in this country, were already tenuous and tethered" (Vuong 5). When the suggested continuity of abuse is interrupted with instances of tenderness and support from her, the ambivalence of his relationship towards his mother is revealed. For example, when

Little Dog has a panic attack, his mother soothes him by singing to him (10). Still, the paragraph starts with "The time", playing with and subverting the reader's expectation of the continuous report of instances of abuse. Little Dog realizes then that his mother is a survivor as well as a perpetrator and describes this ambivalence spatially: "To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once" (13). Language, identity, and race intersect in the relational space towards his mother.

The continuity of his mother's ambivalence and unpredictability leads to a feeling of unsafety within the home-space, which becomes mundane and quotidian to Little Dog. For example, Little Dog recalls a time he wet his bed and was locked in the basement as a punishment: "His snot-plastered nose, its salt on his lips, his tongue, he's at home" (98). This enumeration as well as finishing it with his location "at home", places the home space as a mundane syntactical consequence of his emotional state. This expresses the banality of feeling unsafe at home. For Little Dog, crying, sadness, and being punished then equates with being at home. Again, this memory is told in relation to space: "He stands with one foot on the other, as if touching less of the basement meant he was less inside it" (98). Consequently, as the home-space is associated with discomfort, Little Dog tries to feel less inside of it.

Trying to escape the embodied experience of violence within his dysfunctional home, Little Dog finds solace in his imagination and stories. One day, he tries to run away from home and only takes two books with him because "he knew how far a story could take him, and holding these books meant there were at least two more worlds he could eventually step into" (121). Writing down his own story, then, means turning towards his own memory-world and a world of potential readers; he later reflects: "It could be, in writing you here, I am writing to everyone – for how can there be a private space if there is no safe space, if a boy's name can both shield him and turn him into an animal all at once" (33). His name, the very term for one's personality and identity, reflects the ambivalence that is emphasized by Little Dog continuously: He is called an animal, which dehumanizes him, yet it was given to him to protect him from ghosts following a Vietnamese tradition (18).[3] His thought further indicates that his writing is not solely directed at his mother but at a broader readership, particularly Americans unfamiliar with the Vietnamese American perspective he represents by telling his story. In the absence of a safe space, the letter he writes to his mother cannot be kept private. For Little Dog, home was a space of mental health crises, physical abuse, and a non-normative family with traumatic pasts. His statement then suggests that he views the private home-space and his personal story as political, destabilizing the private/public binary. One way to use his imagination to escape the violence and trauma he endured, is to make his story public.

His grandmother and mother also tell him stories about Vietnam, which he re-narrates alternating with his own memories. Vietnam is mostly talked about in relation to war, in which "[i]t is a beautiful country depending on where you look" (35), and later: "It's a beautiful country, she's been told, depending on who you are" (36). Here, the orientation of the gaze and space are connected to identity. In re-telling his mother's and grandmother's stories, he connects them to a different time and space – his own current life in the US. When Little Dog plucks out his grandmother's grey hair one night, she tells him a story: "As I plucked, the blank

walls around us did not so much fill with fantastical landscapes as open into them, the plaster disintegrating to reveal the past behind it" (22). These memories then create spaces within his home-space through Little Dog's imagination. Notably, these stories are told to Little Dog often while caring for his mother or grandmother: plucking out grey hair or massaging his mother's back to relax her from a long day at work in the nail salon.[4] Through a lens of queer decolonial diasporic practice, Sandeep Bakshi adds that the language of touch is a way for the protagonist to access the past and intergenerational memories (Bakshi 546-547). At home, then, the family practices their own cultural traditions (of care) (e.g., Vuong 33).

The outside world and society build a stark contrast to that, which points to the dichotomy between the periphery and centre established in diasporic contexts. For Little Dog's mother, this is represented by and experienced in the nail salon where she is employed. The nail salon is a racialized and stereotypical place for Vietnamese refugees and migrants to work at. Within it, a hierarchy between *white* American clients and mostly Asian American staff is established and reproduced.[5] Little Dog describes how in this context, the word 'sorry' becomes a currency to generate more tips thereby transforming its meaning. There it means "I'm here, right here, beneath you. It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable" (Vuong 91). Often, Asian American immigrants do not have a choice but to adhere to the spaces they are directed to and kept in through societal structures in order to make a living (see also Cho). Power and minority positionality are again imagined spatially. Little Dog internalizes this apologetic lowering of oneself that is built upon and enforces racial hierarchies.

He further experiences racial hierarchies within public spaces himself. The precariousness of his positionality within "this country" (Vuong 5), in which his and his family's identities are vulnerable subjects, is exemplified when the protagonist recalls a memory of a bus ride. Little Dog sits on the bus by himself, when he is suddenly pushed into the window by a *white* boy, who tells him to speak English. He reflects on this event in his letter saying that the boy "was only nine but had already mastered the dialect of damaged American fathers" (24). This racialized and gendered violence makes the public space of the bus unsafe to him. When he comes home crying, his mother blames him because he did not act like a 'real boy' by asking: "What kind of boy would let them do that?" (26). By invalidating his experiences and critiquing his behavior based on gender, she enhances Little Dog's feeling of invisibility. Queer scholars have pointed out that for queer subjects especially, home is not necessarily a safe space as queer identities might not be performed freely (see e.g. Berry; Blunt and Dowling; Bryant; Leung). This is clearly detectable in his relationship with his mother. Thus, this interplay of gender norms from two different cultures and the inexistence of a safe space where he can perform his masculinity non-normatively, as well as be shielded from (racial) violence, add to Little Dog's insecurity and suffering.

Without a safe space, Little Dog finds his own forms of agency and resistance in space through the (re)orientation of his gaze. As has been established, in the first part of the novel the narrator is oriented towards his mother, which he makes explicit at the end of the first chapter connecting it to space, orientation, and gaze: "You're a mother, Ma. You're also a mon-

ster. But so am I – which is why I can't turn away from you. Which is why I have taken god's loneliest creation and put you inside it. Look" (14). The reason for turning towards her is their sameness as 'monsters' – he was taught to associate his queerness with it, and she is a monster for hurting him. In order to explore himself, he thus has to turn to his mother, including especially the 'monstrous' parts of his childhood. By actively looking at and orienting himself towards his mother, her complex trauma, and his own childhood trauma, he reclaims parts of his story, identity, and power that was lost to her aggressions. Here, in reference to what his mother told him one day, the eye is called 'god's loneliest creation' since "so much of the world passes through the pupil and still it holds nothing" (12). On the contrary, Little Dog attempts to capture what he has seen and experienced in his writing by recalling his past. The gaze is thus an important aspect of the analysis of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* as it is related to memory, orientation, space, and agency.

Little Dog's resistance and positionality is then entangled with the spatial practices of orientation and looking that Ahmed identifies. We can trace this expression of power and agency in several instances. When Little Dog sits on the bus that day, he complies with the bullies and says what they want to hear. Yet, he resists by closing his eyes instead of looking at the bully as he had told him to: "'Look at me when I'm talking to you.' [...] When I did nothing but close my eyes, the boy slapped me" (Vuong 24). With his face pressed against the window he was looking out of one moment ago, Little Dog has the "urge to break through the pane and leap out the window" (24), but he cannot escape so he turns inward by closing his eyes and keeping them shut while saying the bully's name as asked to. In another instance, when he is locked in the basement, he also closes his eyes: "This is my superpower, he thinks: to make a dark even darker than what's around me" (98). Here, he additionally distances himself from remembering the traumatic event using 'he' and 'the boy' instead of writing in the first-person perspective (see also Slopek 754). As in the situation on the bus, he uses his gaze to protect himself and make the situation within a certain space more bearable and still feel like he holds power.

He utilizes his gaze in another way, the first time he dares to tell his mother to stop hitting him: "'Stop, Ma. Quit it. Please.' I looked at you hard, the way I had learned, by then, to look into the eyes of my bullies" (Vuong 11). The way Little Dog looks at his mother while standing up for himself accompanies the words he says to stop her from hitting him. The entanglement of verbalization and his gaze directed at her are effective, as even while he is in the situation, he knows that this would be the last time his mother would hit him (12). His mother turns away from him, which means she looks away too – how she moves in space changes immediately. The convergence of language and the directionality of his look show his resistance and agency. Returning to Sara Ahmed, she states that the conventional home "requires following a certain line, the family line that directs our gaze" (560). Little Dog queers the home-space by leaving this expected line through directing his gaze resistantly at his mother. The act of looking or not looking therefore assumes a critical and spatial role in Little Dog's (and his mother's) capacity to perceive, endure, and resist the world around him and in queering the home.

Creating a Queer Postcolonial Space and Identity

In the second part of the novel, Little Dog inhabits spacetime with Trevor, the boy with whom he shares his first sexual and romantic experiences. In contrast to the first part's focus on the home-space and the nation, here, space is narrated differently. Their encounters are often set outside on a tobacco farm or in the barn next to it, where Little Dog first meets Trevor while working together.[6] Additionally, Little Dog visits Trevor at home – he lives in a trailer park with his alcoholic dad. Space as well as the relationship between the two boys is articulated more intimately and personally. However, abuse persists in a twofold manner: Firstly, the relationship with Trevor perpetuates patterns of physical and verbal abuse, through homophobic slurs and statements. Secondly, the chapter narrating their initial sexual exploration is interrupted by flashbacks to instances of abuse inflicted upon Little Dog by his mother. Thereby, the narrator once again intertwines two spatiotemporal realms, this time alternating his first queer sexual experience and his own childhood memories. Now, he is retelling his own stories and memories instead of his relatives', more closely approaching his own identity.

Little Dog positions himself beneath Trevor, the way he had learnt from observing and living with his mother. When they first meet, Little Dog instinctively says 'sorry' to Trevor: "Because I am your son, my apology had become, by then, an extension of myself. It was my Hello" (Vuong 94). As his mother had in the nail salon, Little Dog apologizes and therefore assumes a submissive role immediately in line with the expectations US American society has of him based on his racial positionality (see also Cho 143). This spatial hierarchy intertwines aspects of postcoloniality and sexuality and their underlying power structures. Trevor embodies a stereotypical *white* American man who 'naturally' assumes the dominant counterpart.[7] Trevor witnesses behaviors of hypermasculinity, violence, and substance abuse by his father and his (sexual) identity issues are induced by the circumstances he grows up in. The protagonist senses Trevor's anger towards his alcoholic father and his own sexuality. He describes him and their ambiguous relationship with spatial imagery: "He came from a place on fire, a place he could never return to [...] And what do you do to a boy like that but turn yourself into a doorway, a place he can go through again and again [...]?" (Vuong 111). In this submissive role, he finds a unique form of agency, which distinguishes it from his role as a son: "Because submission, I soon learned, was also a kind of power. To be inside pleasure, Trevor needed me [and] depends on my willingness to make room for him, for you cannot rise without having something to rise over. Submission does not require elevation in order to control. I lower myself" (118). Little Dog employs similar spatial imagery as he did when describing his relationship to his mother – positionality is important here as well. This form of agency rejects stereotypes and the binaries of bottom/top equated with active/passive, powerful/powerless, and masculine/effeminate (see also Lippert). As it is Little Dog's own choice to be "fucked up" now, he does not feel powerless anymore (Vuong 119). This stands in contrast to both his mother's abuse and more generally the struggles he faces within Post-Vietnam War US society. Here, too, the gaze emerges as a critical component of agency. This is exemplified when he describes how he lets Trevor look into his eyes during sex: "I put him in my mouth, to the

base, and peer up at him, my eyes a place he might flourish" (118). As the subaltern racialized subject in this sexual encounter, Little Dog utilizes his look to feel like an agent.

Opposed to the emphasis some research articles put on this form of agency, it does not diminish the abuse present within their relationship. For example, while recognizing these abusive elements, Slopek concludes that "bottomhood" and embracing the simultaneity of pleasure and pain empowers Little Dog (752). However, as abuse entails complex power structures which have been and will be further explored in this chapter, not viewing the violence and unwanted transgression of boundaries that Little Dog endures in his relationship with Trevor as harmful, is to dismiss the racial and postcolonial power imbalance between them. Leopold Lippert (among others) notes that the racial hierarchy between the two is established from the beginning, as Little Dog is assumed to take the bottom position by Trevor, once again entangling racial and sexual dimensions of their relationship and identities spatially. This reinforces stereotypes towards Asian Americans as being effeminate, weak, and passive (Lippert 44). A passage in the novel that has been widely ignored by secondary literature which examines the agency Little Dog finds in submission is when Trevor and Little Dog have penetrative anal sex for the first time (Vuong 199-203). During this act, Little Dog describes being in a lot of pain and asking Trevor to hold still, but Trevor keeps moving because he says he does not want to stop (202), which makes the following sexual act non-consensual. Later in the same scene, Trevor practices care and gentleness for Little Dog, underscoring the ambiguity of their connection. Little Dog does eventually find pleasure in the pain, which underscores my argument here: Both exist simultaneously – pleasure and pain, agency and violence.[8] This simultaneity of Little Dog's and Trevor's pleasure and pain within their relationship reveals the complexity and intersectionality of race, sexuality, and gender and destabilizes common binaries that enforce these very power dynamics. It further shows the lasting impact of Little Dog's childhood and intergenerational trauma. Having been exposed to violence all his life, Trevor's violent behavior does not seem out of the ordinary for Little Dog: "By then, violence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love" (119). Rather, it continues the vicious cycle of violence that in turn reinforces (inherited) trauma, racialized positionalities, and hegemonic masculinity.

Trevor's identity struggles continue to disturb their relationship and sex life, even taking the form of overt homophobia. For example, Trevor does not want to take the bottom position and be penetrated by Little Dog because he does not want to "feel like a girl" (120). This displays his binary understanding of gender as well as his desire to cling to the dominant position associated with *white* (hetero)masculinity. The narrator had assumed that "sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong. The rules, they were already inside us" (112). Here, Little Dog associates not being seen by the world with being protected from it and its norms. Yet, his hopes are disappointed as Trevor reproduces patterns of heteronormativity and gender norms.[9] Little Dog's hopefulness is also expressed in his description of Trevor's ambivalent traits that show him as vulnerable, compassionate, and empathetic towards animals and himself, and an admirer of nature's beauty, while an epitome of *white* American masculinity (153-155, see

also Slopek 748). This chapter is narrated in fragments, which visualizes Trevor's diremption, as well as the distance between the two boys. Trevor's violence, homophobia, use of guns, emotional unavailability, and silence express his fear to appear vulnerable or un-masculine. Trevor's identity crisis, which is triggered by desiring another boy, radically calls into question his hegemonic masculinity. In Ahmed's words, for Trevor the felt disalignment of his gender and sexuality leads to his disorientation.

This power discrepancy between them is further related to Trevor's whiteness, which Little Dog acknowledges is what provides a space for them: "He was white, I never forgot this. He was always white. And I knew this was why there was a space for us: a farm, a field, a barn, a house, an hour, two" (Vuong 111). Trevor's privilege, the denial of his queerness, and the insistence on his cis-heterosexual masculinity create the necessary conditions for their relationship (see also Slopek 747). As long as they are not perceived by the world as queer, they can explore their feelings towards each other. This is accentuated when Trevor's father barely notices Little Dog's presence at their trailer, at least, he does not see him: "That China boy with you, huh? I know it. I hear him. He don't talk but I hear him" (Vuong 142). This statement infused with racism highlights the struggle of Little Dog to be recognized and seen instead of reduced to an Asian American stereotype in a predominantly *white* US America. Trevor's father goes on to tell a gruesome story about Trevor's uncle, who was a soldier in the Vietnam War and praises him for killing Vietnamese people: "He whooped them in that jungle. He did good for us. He burned them up" (142). In dehumanizing 'them', Trevor's father shows no regard for Little Dog's feelings while reproducing the very *white* colonial narrative the protagonist writes against.[10] Both Trevor and Little Dog represent the second generation after those immediately impacted by the Vietnam War. Their relationship is then complicated further by the racist and violent kindred and colonial mindset Trevor was and is surrounded by. In this context, Cho points out the connectedness of the home-space and the nation. As the US privileges narratives focusing on whiteness and heteronormativity, families can be understood "as a site where transmission of nationalist ideals occurs intergenerationally, thus contributing to enduring legacies of American exceptionalism and imperialism, especially as they have been militaristically enacted abroad in Asian countries" (Cho 133), including Vietnam. Thus, as Little Dog did from his mother and grandmother, Trevor inherits various stories of violence, *white* US American supremacy, and heteronormativity from his father. Therefore, their relationship becomes a queer postcolonial space, as it simultaneously renegotiates, reinforces, and disrupts colonial and heteronormative power structures.

In contrast to Trevor, Little Dog did not grow up in the presence of the patriarchal US-American father (see also Vuong 24). He does not comply with the heteronormative system in the same manner as Trevor, having been raised in a different cultural environment by two immigrant women.[11] This upbringing inherently contrasts the norms and expectations ingrained within hegemonic US American society, culture, and language. As a writer, Little Dog continuously reflects on his own use of language, particularly when he comes out to his mother.[12] Rather than employing the Vietnamese term for gay, which would equate to calling himself a pedophile, he states that he does not like girls. The narrator then highlights that

the rigid sexual and gender norms which persist in the Vietnamese language are of colonial origin: "Before the French occupation, our Vietnamese did not have a name for queer bodies – because they were seen, like all bodies, fleshed and of one source" (130). Little Dog's mother's poor reaction to his disclosure enforces these very norms and demonstrates her difficulty to comprehend his identity.[13] He had hoped for a different reaction that they "would see each other, you and I, with relief, a familiar face made more luminous than we had remembered" (129). This hope is rooted in the belief that his queerness would create more sameness than difference between them. When he asks his mother in his letter: "Did you ever feel colored-in when a boy found you with his mouth?" (106), he asks her if she has ever felt what he felt with Trevor. Instead of being able to share memories of experiences, Little Dog's hope for recognition, to be seen and accepted by his mother, and to reduce distance between them by realizing their commonality, remains unfulfilled. Notably, his coming out takes place at a Dunkin' Donuts, an emblem of US American culture, instead of at home, where most scenes between mother and son take place. Further, home is traditionally more associated with private and personal conversations. This firstly underlines his former statement on the absence of a private and safe space for him due to his positionality and secondly his unsafety at home due to his mother's violence and his own queerness.

It is in the relational space with Trevor that Little Dog first feels seen. In their initial convergence, the gaze functions as an expression of queer desire.[14] In this scene, an erotic atmosphere and a queer space are created through looks:

> What I felt then, however, was not desire, but the coiled charge of its possibility, a feeling that emitted, it seemed, its own gravity, holding me in place. The way he watched me back there in the field, when we worked briefly, side by side, our arms brushing against each other [...], his eyes lingering, then flitting away when I caught them. (96)

The two boys look at each other secretly and look away until finally "[o]ur eyes met" (99). Here, the narrator evokes a popular motive of movies usually associated with heterosexual characters who do not know of each other's desire, while the audience is already aware of it upon seeing their secret looks. This well-known cinematic moment is queered by the narrator, in a way that, when the two finally touch and kiss, it is not a surprise. The eyes, the looks they give each other, their gazes express queer desire and thereby queer a common narrative. Notably, then, Little Dog does not come out to the reader. The reader knows that he is queer before he verbalizes his sexual orientation. This is achieved by the way the narrator orients himself and his gaze in space.

However, this evolving relation is disrupted by Trevor's internalized homophobia. Little Dog describes enjoying looking at Trevor repeatedly: "I studied him like a word [...] It was dark enough for my eyes to swallow all of him without ever seeing him clearly" (103). Yet, when Trevor catches him looking, he tells him not to be "weird" (103), signifying his discomfort with Little Dog's overt desire. These instances show both the pleasure of looking as well as Trevor's homophobia and shame. Even though he tries to hide his own desire, Little Dog still feels

looked at and seen by him: "I was seen – I who had seldom been seen by anyone. I who was taught, by you, to be invisible in order to be safe" (96). The 'you', here, addresses his mother again, revealing that (in)visibility is located at the intersection of Little Dog's postcolonial and queer subjectivity. Little Dog goes on to recall a traumatic experience of his elementary school teacher forgetting him in the corner of the classroom after he had been punished to stand there, rendering him invisible (96). Christopher Shia approaches the text through stereotypes assigned to Asian Americans, one of them being Asian invisibility: "Asian Americans have historically been sidelined, being rare in politics, and seldom represented in the media" (Shia 67). Cho adds that it is expected from Asian refugees to participate in assimilating to the US in a way that renders them obedient, silent, and invisible (136).[15] In becoming visible with and through Trevor, Little Dog defies this (hetero)norm and racist narrative.

With Trevor, he does not only feel seen for the first time, but even beautiful. One day after finishing work, the two boys talk about their families and interests. Trevor philosophizes that Cleopatra and everyone who has ever lived must have seen the same sun and sunset (Vuong 99). Little Dog replies that it "must suck to be the sun, though" (99), because the sun does not know what it looks like, and therefore does not know who it is. Thus, to Little Dog, identity and seeing oneself are related. When Little Dog looks into the mirror after having known Trevor for a while, he feels beautiful:

> It was an accident, my beauty revealed to me [...T]he boy before the mirror stunned me. Who was he? [...] It was everything I hid from, everything that made me want to be the sun, the only thing I knew that had no shadow. And yet, I stayed. I let the mirror hold those flaws – because for once, drying, they were not wrong to me but something that was wanted, that was sought and found among a landscape as enormous as the one I had been lost in all this time. (107)

Little Dog feels beautiful because he is desired by Trevor, yet also because he sees himself. He feels a sense of belonging, orientation, and directionality, which is why he is able to look at himself without spite in this moment. This moment captures a shift within Little Dog – he actively decides to stay and look at himself instead of giving in to the urge to hide and not be looked at. Again, there is agency in looking, making himself vulnerable by letting himself feel wanted and seen, and accepting himself as an embodied flawed and beautiful being. In this second part of the novel, experiencing feeling desire and being desired for the first time, he re-orients himself towards himself by shifting his gaze to his own reflection in the mirror instead of his mother.

In doing so, Little Dog, along with the reader, increasingly learns to comprehend and see who he is.[16] This evolution is reflected in how he narrates space. Throughout the novel we gradually get a better sense of the spaces and places that situate Little Dog in the world, and therefore, his identity. When he first meets Trevor, he wants "for his gaze to fix me to the world I felt only halfway inside of" (96). Later, he writes about his own observations of the world, relying on his own gaze now. Little Dog describes the town of Hartford in more detail

than he did in the first part of the novel, making it easier to imagine the place he lives in. As he and Trevor ride their bikes along the streets one night, he says: "I saw all the blocks [...] Things even Trevor, having lived all his life on this side of the river, the white side, the one I was now riding on, never saw" (145). This points to a selective perception of the geography of the city in connection to race. His subjective gaze, which is oriented by his postcolonial and racialized positionality, is even beneficial in this instance: He can see more than Trevor is able to. His transformative encounter with Trevor and the discovery of his own beauty further allows him to establish a connection between his queerness and the broader world. When he recollects the attack on a gay club in Orlando, Florida in 2016, which references the instance outside the fictional world (Encyclopedia Britannica), he links the event to his own sexual and racial identity: "[A]nd the boys, because that's who they were – sons, teenagers – looked like me: a colored thing born of one mother, rummaging the dark, each other, for happiness" (Vuong 137). He thereby highlights the evolving sense of belonging to this community and the world, even reaching across the boundaries of fiction, tying his story to the present United States even more closely. Nira Yuval-Davis states that the feeling of belonging can be equated with feeling at home (4). Thus, through his growing sensation of belonging, Little Dog continuously feels more at home in the world.

Throughout the narrative, Little Dog orients himself, his story, and his gaze towards his mother, Trevor, and finally himself. Thereby, he creates a queer postcolonial space. The farther the story progresses, the more all aspects mentioned are entangled. Simultaneously, his queer identity becomes clearer to the narrator by recalling his family's history and intergenerational trauma, and his first romantic experience and sexual identity through spatiotemporal dimensions (see also Ha and Tompkins 206, and Gibbons 101). In addressing his complex and intersectional story and self, he can eventually position himself as a queer gay Vietnamese American (Vuong 199). In another step, he writes his story down to be read, potentially by his mother, thus not only becoming but representing himself to the outside world.

This development manifests in a shift of narrative perspective: Little Dog starts speaking of himself as "you", instead of just addressing his mother as you.[17] This occurs, for example, when he addresses the fleetingness of beauty that reflects the title: "If, relative to the history of our planet, an individual life is so short, a blink of an eye, as they say, then to be gorgeous, even from the day you're born to the day you die, is to be gorgeous only briefly" (238). This change conveys a departure from a sense of solitude in the world, as his experiences cease to be singular and instead, he becomes part of the communal and plural 'you' of the human experience. This is enhanced by relating himself to the history of the planet and living beings before and after his existence. Timothy K. August argues in his article analyzing character and beauty in the novel, that the relentless thematization of beauty disrupts expectations of the refugee narrative (687). Beauty is usually not a priority therein. By insisting on both beauty and pleasure as aspects of life worth pursuing, Little Dog queers and reorients the refugee narrative. In August's words: "Little Dog looks at discordant events with sensitive and determined eyes. That is, he tracks, measures, and bears witness to traumatic events but reroutes their effects and narrative direction. In this way, refugee beauty is useful for those who want

to acknowledge the plight(s) of their forebears without having their own stories or writerly outputs reduced to an echo of these events" (688). Little Dog thus not only reorients his gaze from his mother towards himself, but from the past to the present, from trauma to hope.[18] Yet to be visible and gorgeous comes at a risk: "To be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted" (238). To make oneself seen, as both a queer racialized individual and as part of marginalized communities thus is to be vulnerable. Little Dog takes this risk by writing a letter to his mother, fully exposing his vulnerable self and risking potentially being seen by her and more generally the reader, the world. Then, to make oneself seen is both a pursuit of beauty and a form of agency as it is the opposite of hiding, of making oneself small, taking up as little space as possible, remaining invisible.

Little Dog reflects on the meaning of beauty, which he argues wants to be reproduced, and connects it to his identity and his sexual orientation: "We reproduce it in order to keep it, extend it through space and time. To gaze at what pleases [...] is in itself, replication – the image prolonged in the eye, making more of it, making it last. Staring into the mirror, I replicate myself into a future where I might not exist [...] I want to insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication" (138-139). By pleasurably gazing at himself, Little Dog reproduces himself – possibly into someone else's memory. Further, this notion of existing in order to create and replicate beauty, to feel seen and make others feel seen, queers the notion of reproductive futurism in line with Muñoz's idea of hope and queer utopia. Adding to Cho's critical examination of reproductive futurism that is defied by the protagonist, Little Dog not only negotiates "conditional and absent futures" (Cho 138) but strives to create a new future that moves beyond these narratives by creating his own self-representing narrative (see also Cho 146). Thus, Little Dog's writing and his self-replication and -representation is an expression of a particularly queer agency – leaving the straight lines that were laid out for him – as well as of sincere hope for a better (queerer) future and a world where no one goes unnoticed and in which to be alive is enough.

Though he occupies a subaltern position within the relationship with Trevor, and looks rather than speaks to escape this position, Little Dog eventually leaves this place by writing down his own story. He represents himself in a vulnerable, submissive yet resistant and evolving way, showing both the violence and the measures he takes against it – looking and writing. Little Dog changes the space of his relationships, the US, and his home-space through his imagination. Writing about his experience then creates a new self-representational space that makes visible an alternative, oblique, queerly oriented, and gazed at experience of the world and identity.

Conclusion: Queering Space, Gaze, and Storytelling

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* Ocean Vuong subverts dominant colonial and heteronormative narratives, thereby offering an alternative perspective on the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese American immigrant experience. This is accomplished within the narrative world by Little Dog's insistence on hopefulness, intertwined with the awareness of its potential disappointment. Further, the upheld ambiguity of the characters and their relationships contrib-

utes to the queerness of the narrative. This subversion, however, is not only thematic but is moreover embedded in the novel's narrative structure and storytelling approach. The non-linear narrative, the shifts in perspective, and the fragmented writing style constitute a distinctly queer mode of storytelling. This structure then reflects the fluidity of queer experiences and the intricacy of queer identity formation and resists normative notions of gender and space-time. The exploration of space and orientation on both levels – the form and the plot – reveals a continuous queerness in the narrative, extending beyond explicit discussions of sexuality.

Queer spatiality and orientation in the novel can be traced within the physical space of the home and the larger society, as well as in (hierarchical) relationships, memories, imagination, and in the directionality of Little Dog's gaze as another important aspect of queer agency and desire. Within the home-space, Little Dog utilizes his gaze as a tool of resistance and protection. Abuse persists in his relationship with Trevor, underscoring the inheritance and continuity of violence along with the internalization of heteronormativity and racial hierarchies. Here, the gaze helps Little Dog to maintain a sense of agency in an abusive situation, as well. Moreover, it emerges as an embodiment of queer desire, which, accompanied by his reflective writing, eventually enables him to orient himself towards his own identity, beauty, and community. Thus, by writing a letter to his mother about himself, he finds the voice and courage to represent himself vulnerably, and therefore, to be seen by the reader fully.

Notes

[1] In this article I refer to the term postcolonial in a broader sense. I use Deborah Madsen's definition of the use of the term to "encompass the whole complex of historical and cultural processes" (Madsen 2), in the context of Vietnam this means more specifically the colonization by France and the Vietnam War, which was majorly driven by US imperialism (Daum). The term postcolonial, here, implies this complex history that impacts the characters in the novel.

[2] Birgit Neumann also notices the expression of hope for change and its likely failure in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* without explicitly linking it to queer studies (Neumann 278). However, in this context it is crucial to acknowledge the relation between queer studies and Little Dog's writing as the character himself is queer. I argue that queerness can be detected not only on a plot-level, but in his way of storytelling, too. Further, Neumann's argument of changing dominant linguistic orders and remaking master-codes (278) in Little Dog's case, can be read as a particularly queer practice. The text's resistance to fitting into one genre easily (279) can be related to queer identity formation and Vuong's attempt to portray non-normative masculinities that do not fit into the binary understandings of gender easily. Other scholars have argued similarly, for example, Sophie D'Urso who explores the connection between queerness, masculinity and language more closely. See also Jian Zhu for a discussion of queer aesthetics in the novel.

[3] See also Neumann 279.

[4] Qhan Manh Ha and Mia Tompkins, as well as D'Urso, identify touch as a means of communication and expression of love within the family. Touch becomes a third language (Ha and Tompkins 209), that, D'Urso adds, employs a non-binary position expressing the ambiguity of his relationship to his family (D'Urso 9).

Notes

[5] See Jennifer Cho for a detailed analysis of the subversion of the model minority narrative in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and the internalization of expectations that are put on (especially Asian) refugees and immigrants (134-136).

[6] Joshua Parker explores these rural spaces and their eroticization in more detail in his article. He argues that the shift from the domestic to the rural outside place of work as well as Little Dog's bike rides there and back mark "the transition from an immigrant childhood to queer adulthood" (131) adding that this is "in part a registration that queer sex is often excluded from the domestic sphere, relegated to the outdoors" (131).

[7] Christopher Shia identifies a common stereotype between gay white and Asian Americans that the Asian American assumes the bottom position as they are rendered more 'feminine', which is mirrored in the relationship between Trevor and Little Dog (Shia 67).

[8] See Elena Furlanetto for a more formal and language-focused exploration of ambiguity in the novel. Kocić Stanković and Vân Anh even classify contradiction and uncertainty as the narrative style of the novel (111).

[9] Christina Slopek shows that Little Dog himself is not free of heterosexist notions regarding sex: Little Dog only thinks of them engaging in 'real' sex when it is penetrative (749).

[10] Ha and Tompkins discuss the narrative that the US has chosen to reproduce in education and media, which disregards any Vietnamese experience and "relegates the Vietnamese people to invisibility" (201), while denying any responsibility and portraying Americans as the rescuer of Vietnamese refugees after the war (203). *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* counters this narrative (203).

[11] Shia assigns power to femininity in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, as the female characters "exhibit strength and resilience unlike what traditional femininity expects of them" (69). While I agree with this notion, his argument is still based on a binary understanding of gender and thus stays on a surface level of analysis.

[12] Neumann shows how appropriating the English language and translation (from Vietnamese to English) in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a particularly postcolonial practice (287).

[13] For a more detailed analysis of the coming-out-scene, see Slopek, who points out that once again sexuality and gender are conflated by his mother, when she warns him of violent reactions to wearing a dress as a boy.

[14] While Jian Zhu also works with Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology and mentions space and gaze, his conclusions are more directed towards exploring imagism and aesthetics in the novel. This section's focus is more on the characters embodied experience of spatial orientation and gaze.

[15] Bakshi reveals colonial epistemological hegemonies to be another aspect of rendering postcolonial queer subjects, knowledge, and history invisible, which is countered by queer and trans diasporic artists dealing with (colonial) history and memories (542).

[16] Of course, this is not to say that identity can be 'fixed', ever completely understood, or found. However, the scatteredness of Little Dog's self seems to gain more orientation upon experiencing and verbalizing his sexual orientation. See Neumann (294) for the ways Vuong shows this in his use and reflection of language and grammar. August also emphasizes that the novel decidedly moves away from reproducing a homogenous Asian American identity and refugee narrative that is based on capitalistic and patriarchal understandings of progress and success by focusing on character and beauty rather than identity and plot (681). While I agree with his interpretation, I still use the term identity in an anti-essentialist understanding. Kocić Stanković and Vân Anh add that the novel does not aim to be representative of a Vietnamese American experience but works to tell Little Dog's unique story of becoming: "Simultaneously

Notes

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" (117).

[17] Slopek also addresses this change in the use of 'you', however observing it only on page 202 in the novel, when Little Dog and Trevor have penetrative sex for the first time (Slopek 751). In fact, this 'you' is already used by Little Dog earlier, first when he meets Trevor (e.g. Vuong 97, 111). That is why I argue here that his queerness and the evolution of his sense of self are closely connected. This change in his usage of the pronoun 'you' to refer to himself is accompanied by changing the narrative perspective when recalling abuse he endured from his mother, using 'he' and 'the boy'. This creates more distance to his trauma, while bringing him closer to himself in and through his queer relationship (see also Slopek 754).

[18] Jeffrey Gibbons analyzes a scene where gaze is important to this development of identity, and understanding of self and others: When Little Dog describes looking into his mother's eyes at the end, he also sees in them Trevor and his grandmother (Vuong 216). Therefore, as Gibbons argues, Little Dog blends past and present and converges the eyes in a way that lead away from isolation (Gibbons 100-101).

Works Cited and Consulted

Ahmed, Sara. "Orientations." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2006, pp. 543–74. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2006-002.

Bakshi, Sandeep. "The Decolonial Eye/I: Decolonial Enunciations of Queer Diasporic Practices." *Interventions*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2020, pp. 533–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1749707.

Bell, David, and Jon Binnie. "Authenticating Queer Space: Citizenship, Urbanism and Governance." *Urban Studies*, vol. 41, no. 9, 2004, pp. 1807–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098042000243165.

Bell, David, and Gill Valentine, editors. *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexuality*. 1995. Taylor and Francis, 2004.

Berry, Keith. "Introduction: Queering Family, Home, Love, Loss/Relational Troubling." *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2014, pp. 91–94. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708613512258.

Blunt, Alison, and Robyn Dowling. *Home*. Routledge, 2006.

Bryant, Jason. "The Meaning of Queer Home." *Home Cultures. The Journal of Architecture, Design and Domestic Space*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2015, pp. 261–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/17406315.2015.1084754.

Cho, Jennifer. "'We Were Born from Beauty': Dis/Inheriting Genealogies of Refugee and Queer Shame in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." *MELUS*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2022, pp. 130–53. https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlac024.

Daum, Andreas W., editor. *America, the Vietnam War, and the World: Comparative and International Perspectives*. Cambridge UP, 2003.

D'Urso, Sophia. "Subjecting Sentences: Syntax and Power in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." *Meliora*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2022. https://doi.org/10.52214/meliora.v1i2.8725.

Works Cited and Consulted

Encyclopedia Britannica. *Orlando Shooting of 2016 | Timeline, Motive, Deaths, & Facts*. 15 Nov. 2023, https://www.britannica.com/event/Orlando-shooting-of-2016. Accessed 15 Nov. 2023.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, edited by Neil Leach, Routledge, 1997, pp. 330–36.

Freeman, Elizabeth, editor. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke UP, 2010.

Furlanetto, Elena. "'Too Much Joy, I Swear, Is Lost': Ambiguity in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." *Mapping World Anglophone Studies*, Routledge India, 2024, pp. 183–96.

Gibbons, Jeff. "Queer and Refugee Positionalities in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." *AmLit*, 5, 1, 2025, https://doi.org/10.25364/27.5:2025.1.5.

Ha, Quan Manh, and Mia Tompkins. "'The Truth Is Memory Has Not Forgotten Us': Memory, Identity, and Storytelling in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." *Rocky Mountain Review*, vol. 75, no. 2, 2021, pp. 199–220. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27102144?seq=1.

Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York UP, 2005.

---. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke UP, 2011.

hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2015.

Kocić Stanković, Ana, and Hɑ Thɑ Vân Anh. "Hurting and Healing: The Immigrant Experience and the Birth of a Poet in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, vol. 72, no. 11, 2024, pp. 111–24. https://doi.org/10.18290/rh247211.7.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Blackwell, 1991.

Leung, Ho Hon. "Introduction: Home, Community and Identity." *Dynamics of Community Formation*, edited by Robert W. Compton et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 3–12.

Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. 2005. Sage, 2008.

Lippert, Leopold. "On Being Topped." *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2022, pp. 41–56. https://doi.org/10.47060/jaaas.v4i1.150.

Madsen, Deborah L. *Beyond the Borders: American Literature and Post-Colonial Theory*. 1st ed. Pluto Press, 2003.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York UP, 2009.

Neumann, Birgit. "'Our Mother Tongue, Then, Is No Mother at All – but an Orphan': The Mother Tongue and Translation in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." *Anglia*, vol. 138, no. 2, 2020, pp. 277–98. https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2020-0023.

Parker, Joshua. "Queer Rural Space in Early Twenty-First Century American Narrative: Listing Landscapes in George Hodgman, Ocean Vuong, and Louis Ceci." *AmLit*, 4, 2 p. 123-138, 2024, https://doi.org/10.25364/27.4:2024.2.7.

Works Cited and Consulted

Pham, David. "Touching Ash in Vietnamese Diasporic Aesthetics." *American Literature*, vol. 95, no. 3, 2023, pp. 539–67. https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-10679251.

Shia, Christopher. "Queer Male Asian American Disidentification in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Neotenica*." *English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2023, pp.66–74. https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v13n1p66.

Slopek, Christina. "Queer Masculinities: Gender Roles, the Abject and Bottomhood in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." *Anglia*, vol. 139, no. 4, 2021, pp. 739–57. https://doi.org/10.1515/ang-2021-0057 .

Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell, 1996.

Soler i Arjona, Sara. "'To Live Is a Matter of Time': Memory, Survival and Queer Refugeehood in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*." *Humanities*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2024, p. 41. https://doi.org/10.3390/h13020041.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Harvard UP, 2012, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1n1bsfh.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. "Power, Intersectionality and the Politics of Belonging." *FREIA Working Paper Series*, no. 75, 2011, pp. 1–16.

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Penguin Random House, 2019.

Zhu, Jian. "For the 'Briefly Gorgeous' Moment: Imagism and Queer Aesthetics in Ocean Vuong's on Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2026, pp. 12–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2024.2421324.

Biography

Anne Stellberger is a PhD candidate at the University of Bayreuth in the department of American Studies. Her research interests are queer, gender, and postcolonial studies, intersectionality, and literary theory. In her project, she investigates intersectional queer space in (post-)pandemic US-American fiction.