Trauma processing by going beyond the Mother Tongue

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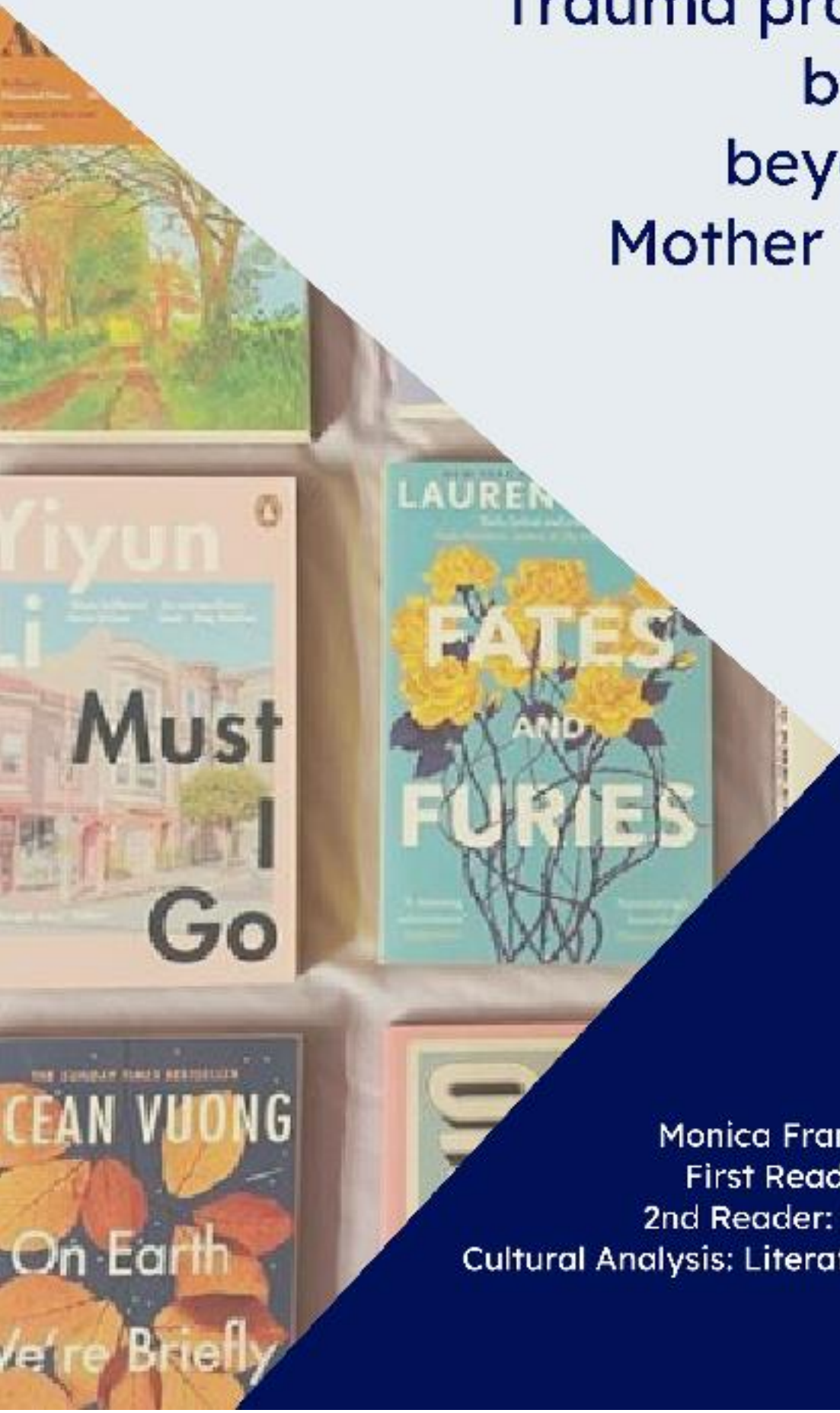

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Cultural Analysis: Literature and Theory

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INTRODUCTION

"No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure, wrote Barthes. For the writer, however, it is the mother tongue. But what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out? (...) Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all – but an orphan."

(Ocean Vuong On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel 31)

Migration, translocation, and immigration happen to people due to a variety of factors, including economic, geopolitical, societal, familial, environmental, and opportunities. People often need to learn new languages and adapt to different cultural norms when they move. Or a different culture has sparked such a big interest that one finds oneself interested in living within this culture. These changes can cause individuals to express emotions and respond to trauma differently than before.

Trauma refers to a psychological, emotional, or physical response to an event or experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing. It can stem from a single incident or prolonged exposure to stress, and it can have long-lasting adverse effects on a person's mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Many trauma survivors use written text as a therapeutic tool to heal and process their emotions.

This thesis aims to explore how bilingual writers[1] utilize their second language to process trauma. By examining the experiences of two writers, Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong, this study will offer insights into diverse approaches to how individuals use language and narrative to navigate and heal from traumatic experiences.

[1] Writers who write in two languages, either simultaneously in one work or those who have published books in two languages are titled bilingual writers.

Connected to trauma is the concept of the mother tongue, also known as one's native language, which can feel foreign to those who live their lives within two languages. An interest in the connection between the mother tongue and trauma was sparked when reading Ocean Vuong's debut novel, which describes how his mother tongue is foreign to him. In the book *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel*[2], he explores his traumas related to his immigration background, his development in learning English and discovering his queer sexuality. This made me wonder, why Ocean decided to write a novel about his traumas in his second language English.

In relation to *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous,* Birgit Neumann wrote an article about "how the tongue functions as a trope to explore possibilities of self-articulation after the loss of the mother tongue". Because what happens to a writer when they have been a child in one language and an adult in another? (277) Vuong suggests that distancing himself from his mother tongue has allowed him to grow and express his trauma more accessibly. He writes, "I took off our language [Vietnamese] and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours [his mother's face]" (On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel, 32). Neumann explores how Vuong's work exemplifies a unique form of trauma writing, inspiring a deeper examination of the relationship between trauma and the mother tongue in this work.

Ocean Vuong's novel On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel centers on an American immigrant from Vietnam. The protagonist and Vuong share many similarities in their reflections on his trauma, love, and family. The protagonist speaks about his relationship with the English language in which I can recognize the author when reading into his history. Seeking other writers with similar experiences, I discovered Where Reasons End by Yiyun Li.

[2] To create a readable and cohesive document, I will refer to Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* as *On Earth.*

This book features a protagonist who converses with her deceased son, who committed suicide, directly reflecting Li's own tragic loss of her son in the same manner.

Both writers chose to write their stories in English, their second language, instead of writing in their mother tongue. When reading about the lives of the writers, similarities can be found between the stories of the protagonists and the writers' own lives. An interest for me lies here, as I recognize how the trauma of the writers can be found between the lines of their novels. This work was inspired by their decision to write in English as non-native speakers and how they have used the novel as a medium to both express and process their trauma.

The aim of this study is to explore connections among writers who seek to process their trauma, choosing to step away from their mother tongue and write a novel in English. The primary research question I ask here is:

> *How are writers Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong processing their trauma by writing a novel in English, thus stepping away from their mother tongue?*

This overarching question leads to several related sub-questions that must be addressed:

1. *How do writers Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong depict and communicate trauma in their novels?*
2. *How is trauma represented and processed in the novels of Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong?*
3. *Why did both Ocean Vuong and Yiyun Li choose English, a non-native language, to explore and process their trauma?*
4. *What factors influenced both writers to use the novel as their chosen medium for addressing and working through their trauma?*

This framework aims to delve into the complexities of trauma processing through literary expression, particularly focusing on the language choice and narrative techniques employed by writers like Vuong and Li.

The novels by Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong have served as the catalyst for this study, prompting an exploration of language as a tool for healing. I aim to investigate how both writers navigated their personal journeys towards understanding and processing trauma through their writing. Initially, I will analyze how trauma shapes the creation of novels that serve as platforms for narratives of trauma.

Before delving into the multiple statements and terms discussed in this introduction, it is important to note that this work sought out books that met several specific criteria. Both Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong are immigrants who have chosen to step away from their mother tongue and write about their traumas in English, their second language. Adding that both writers chose the novel as the medium for their narrative, instead of an autobiography or memoir. Finding a comparable example after *On Earth* was challenging as his book met all the criteria. This suggests a new trend in trauma writing that is not yet widely recognized or established.

Case Studies

To make this work easier to read, I will introduce both examples to establish the foundation of whom I aim to analyze and why these particular cases were chosen. Ocean Vuong was born in Saigon, Vietnam, and arrived in Hartford, Connecticut (US) as a refugee with his family at the age of two (Vuong "About | Oceanvuong"). *The New Yorker* describes how his life in those early years in America “was defined by survival”. His father left the family and his mother worked long hours at a nail salon (Hsu 2). At eleven years old, Vuong became the first in his family to learn English. His novel On Earth is described as "a story borrowed from his own

life growing up queer and surrounded by despair and addiction" (Hsu). As this interview with Vuong suggests, the author has borrowed his own story of trauma for a narrative that needed to be told. Another compelling example is found in Yiyun Li. Born in China, she relocated to the US in her early twenties. Following the tragic suicide of her son in 2017, Li recounted in an interview with The New York Times how she wrote Where Reasons End "about a mother losing a son to suicide in one furious draft" (Sehgal). Like Vuong, Li's narrative is shockingly autobiographical. She, too, chose to distance herself from her mother tongue, Chinese, opting instead to write in her second language, English. In another interview with The New York Times, Sehgal notes how Li mastered English in her twenties, drawn to the idea of working in a language she could claim as uniquely her own, distinct from her personal history (Sehgal).

Both *Where Reasons End* and *On Earth* delve into weighty themes within the medium of the novel. However, these examples diverge significantly in their reasons for not being written in the writers' mother tongues. As I immersed myself in these novels, questions emerged concerning trauma, language, and the art of storytelling. Exploring this genre of trauma writing offers insights into literature and the heartfelt narratives it can convey. This study seeks to analyze how writers process their trauma through novels, aiming to contribute to the humanities by examining these narratives and revealing what they can teach us about human experiences.

What will be discussed

Chapter 1 will provide an extensive overview of both the concepts of mother tongue and trauma to establish a foundational understanding. Literary research will be discussed to establish a greater understanding of the relationship between the mother tongue, trauma, and the need to distance oneself from this mother tongue due to traumatic experiences.

Chapter 2 will further explore the connection between trauma and memory, utilizing the concept of traumatic recall to elucidate how memory influences the identification and representation of trauma within literary works. This psychological theory will be used to analyze *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Where Reasons End* to show how memory plays a role in their works.

Chapter 3 will examine the relationship between nations and their languages, particularly focusing on the implications for bilingual writers who choose to write in a language other than their mother tongue. If these connotations are negative, the mother tongue connected to this nation will be tainted. As bilingual writers have found themselves outside of their native country, voluntarily or not, their perspective changes with the new nation they find themselves in. The emotional links built with both languages, the mother tongue and their second language, can cause writers to feel more kinship and belongingness in the second language. The impact of these emotional ties on writing will be discussed, emphasizing how creative identity can become intertwined with a second language.

As this creative identity gives writers the freedom to explore their traumatic experiences and emotions, it is needed to analyze what tools are used by them to process their trauma. Chapter 4 will analyze the tools and techniques used by writers to process trauma through their creative works. While psychology explores how writing can aid in trauma processing, this chapter will delve into the unique genre of *bilingual trauma writing* pioneered by writers like Li and Vuong. This genre explores how bilingualism influences the depiction and processing of trauma, offering insights into its significance within the humanities.

After establishing how important writing can be as a technique to process trauma, the medium for this technique must be acknowledged. Chapter 5 will examine how the novel is a medium for writers to write anonymously about their trauma. This chapter will compare novels with other genres to establish why the novel is particularly effective for bilingual

writers such as Li and Vuong in creating a *new linguistic context*. The relationship between the protagonist, the author, and the audience will also be explored to emphasize how the novel genre facilitates the expression of complex themes.

Connected to the novel as a medium is the concept of fiction and how this relates to creating a distance between the writer and their trauma. This is why *fictionalization* is the topic of Chapter 6, discussing how fictionalizing traumatic experiences aids writers in processing their trauma and how this impacts the audience.

Chapter 7 will investigate how bilingual writers utilize their languages to create a distance between their identities, particularly between their child and adult selves. This chapter will analyze how Li and Vuong employ their bilingualism to separate their traumatic memories from their present adult identities, often linking these memories to their childhood experiences.

The final chapter will provide a detailed analysis of On Earth and Where Reasons End, delving deeper into Li's and Vuong's journeys toward understanding and processing their trauma. This chapter will explore the use of symbolism and metaphor within these case studies to illustrate how these elements enrich the narratives and convey deeper meanings.

Each chapter will make connections with the novels and their protagonists, illustrating how the narratives are constructed and how the presence of trauma can be recognized. The overarching themes of empowerment through writing, the role of language in creating distance and identity, and the significance of reclaiming trauma narratives through novels will be emphasized throughout this work. These themes represent a critical area of study within the humanities that merits further exploration and analysis.

CHAPTER 1. THE MOTHER TONGUE

Both Ocean Vuong and Yiyun Li use fiction to convey their narratives, notably choosing to write in English, their second language. They have made a conscious choice to write about their stories in the form of a novel, giving them the ability to distance themselves from their mother tongues and, I suggest, the cultural norms of their upbringings. This distance, I propose, serves as a means to address their individual traumas. In first-person interviews, both writers describe their writing processes and the content of their novels. Vuong, for instance, poignantly describes his mother tongue as becoming an orphan, a sentiment echoed in his fictional writing, illustrating how his native language has grown estranged and foreign to him (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 31). This metaphor raises critical questions regarding the dynamics between a writer and their mother tongue, particularly in the context of trauma and trauma writing. It invites an exploration into how such a relationship may become tainted and the implications this has for the author's expression of traumatic experiences. To comprehensively understand this intricate connection, it is imperative to first provide an in-depth introduction to the concepts of the mother tongue and trauma. This foundational understanding will illuminate how language and trauma intersect and influence novel writing.

To begin with the concept of the mother tongue (also labelled as the native language), Yasemin Yildiz's work provides crucial insights into the traditional and evolving perceptions about this topic. Yildiz discusses how language how language has historically been understood within a monolingual framework. This perspective posits that individuals possess "one "true" language, otherwise referred to as the mother tongue. This language is purported to form a fundamental connection to an individual's ethnicity, culture, and nation. According to Yildiz, the mother tongue is traditionally seen as "the formation of disciplines and

institutions" that construct a person's identity and sense of belonging (Yildiz 2). It is believed that within the mother tongue, one can express oneself most completely.

Yildiz presents a new framework in which monolingualism and multilingualism are defined by their interaction with each other and how they coexist (Butler 1). This study is inspired by her research in how the mother tongue has been regarded as the ultimate means of self-expression and identity formation. The mother tongue is believed to uniquely link individuals to their nation, providing a clear sense of origin and contributing significantly to their personal identity. Thus, the concept of the mother tongue has historically been viewed as a critical element in expressing one's true self and establishing a coherent connection to one's cultural and national roots.

Additionally, the mother tongue was seen as a language that “an individual is connected to … through family and kinship” which ties to the experiences they had in their childhood. This connection represents how the mother tongue is seen as the primary medium through which one first articulates and realizes their sense of self, or the concept of “I” (Yildiz 203). Within the monolingual framework, the mother tongue is thus imbued with significant emotional and psychological attachments, symbolizing belonging and identity.

The mother tongue language is often regarded as the language that one masters most proficiently, serving as the foundational linguistic and cognitive tool through which individuals navigate and interpret the world. It is expected to provide not only practical communication skills but also a deep sense of cultural and personal identity. This perspective emphasizes the belief that the mother tongue plays an essential role in shaping one's thought processes, emotional development, and overall worldview.

Yildiz’s work challenges this traditional view by exploring the complexities of multilingual identities and the potential for individuals to go beyond the limits of a singular linguistic framework. Her analysis reveals that the idea of a unique mother tongue may be

insufficient to capture the fluid and dynamic nature of language and identity in contemporary contexts. This critique opens new directions for understanding how individuals, particularly those with multilingual backgrounds, navigate their linguistic and cultural landscapes, especially in relation to experiences of trauma and self-expression.

Along with examining how the mother tongue is perceived through the lens of monolingualism, it is compelling to consider the origins of the term itself. In her introduction to Beyond the Mother Tongue, Yildiz references Friedrich Kittler's insights on this subject. Kittler puts forward how the mother tongue is imparted to a child by the mother, who teaches the proper production of sounds and pronunciation. This process establishes a deep-seated connection between the child and their mother, as the language literally originates from the mother's mouth (Yildiz 11-12). The manner in which the mother speaks, including her tone and emotional context, deeply influences the child's linguistic development.

This primary linguistic transmission from mother to child signifies more than just the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar; it also surrounds the emotional and psychological nuances embedded in the mother's speech patterns. If the mother employs a negative tone when speaking the mother tongue or harbors reluctance toward learning a second language, these attitudes can affect the child's linguistic development and emotional relationship with language. Thus, the mother's influence can ingrain the mother tongue with both positive and negative connotations, depending on her attitudes and behaviors during the language acquisition phase.

Kittler's perspective emphasizes the intrinsic link between the mother and the child's native language, suggesting that the emotional and cognitive associations with the mother tongue are deeply rooted in childhood experiences. This direct connection in the brain between the mother and the mother tongue highlights the deep impact of linguistic interactions on an individual's subsequent relationship with their mother tongue.

Understanding this connection is essential for exploring how disruptions in these linguistic bonds, such as those caused by migration or trauma, can influence an individual's ability to express and process complex emotions, including trauma, in their mother tongue or second language.

A child or adult can create more positive associations when learning a second language, either independently or with assistance from others. As writer Eva Hoffman expresses in her memoir Lost in Translation, at a young age, she "lacks a voice of her own" (Hoffman 220). Hoffman taught herself English, cultivating more positive associations with this language than with her mother tongue. Initially, she experienced languages as "the voices of others [who] invade me as if I were a silent ventriloquist" (Hoffman 220). These external voices initially dominated her perception, but over time, she connected both English and the mother tongue with her own emotions, ingraining them with personal meaning. Hoffman describes how both her mother tongue, Polish, and her second language, English, have formed her identity, likening it to a patchwork quilt. By deeply understanding and integrating both languages, she perceives a richer, more nuanced world than she previously knew (Hoffman 220).

Both Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong have embarked on similar journeys of self-discovery through their engagement with their second language, echoing Hoffman's experience. This process of linguistic and emotional integration has allowed them to process their traumas and articulate their identities in more complex and multifaceted ways. As this study will explore, the experiences of Li and Vuong demonstrate how acquiring and mastering a second language can serve as a powerful tool for reconstituting selfhood and achieving a deeper understanding of one's personal history and emotional landscape. This discussion will delve into the specific ways in which these writers have navigated their bilingual identities to confront and express

their traumas, thus contributing to a broader understanding of the therapeutic and transformative potential of multilingualism in literary expression.

CHAPTER 2. TRAUMA AND MEMORY

The term trauma writing was used in the introduction of this work, but before continuing, the concept of trauma should be explained. The term trauma comes from the Greek word for wound ("τραύμα" (trauma)). Trauma is defined as “a very severe shock or very upsetting experience, which may cause psychological damage” (Collins Online Dictionary "Trauma"). Cathy Caruth explains trauma as: “when certain events have such an impact because they are too unexpected or overwhelming at that moment that they cannot be fully understood or memorized by an individual” (Caruth qtd. in; Yildiz 161). Caruth goes on to describes trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” ” (Caruth 11).

According to Gene Griffin trauma is defined by three factors: events, experiences, and effects (S279). The event is an incident that was so unfavorable that it produced toxic stress for an individual. Toxic stress refers to prolonged or intense stress that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, especially in the absence of supportive relationships. Unlike typical stress responses that can be managed and resolved, toxic stress occurs when a person experiences strong, frequent, or prolonged adversity, such as abuse, neglect, or extreme poverty, without adequate support from caregivers or others who can mitigate the stress. This type of stress can disrupt brain development, impair cognitive functioning, and increase the risk of physical and mental health problems later in life (Shonkoff). Examples of toxic stress include a death, a violent episode the individual witnessed, or a verbal attack.

The second factor is the experience, which is described as the way in which this individual responded to the event. Different people have different neurodevelopment and different genetics, which means everyone would respond differently to an incident. Overall health and resilience also influence their experience. Lastly, defining which individuals have

suffered from trauma requires identifying the relevant effect. Some events have short-term consequences, but for others, effects will continue to manifest long-term (Griffin S279).

Specifically for bilingual immigrant writers, it is important to recognize how immigration can be a form of toxic stress. The mother tongue is connected to belonging, giving the writers a sense of where they are from and who they feel connected to. The mother and the mother tongue connect directly to this sense of belonging, as the mother expresses her beliefs and belonging to the language and the nation it belongs to. The mother is linked to the mother tongue as much as the native country is.

This connection between a parent and their nation has significant implications, as their trauma can be transmitted through the use of the mother tongue. For instance, when families are forced to immigrate abruptly due to events like conflict, economic strife or environmental issues, they often find themselves in a stressful and traumatic sequence of events. The loss of family, community, and physical environment are prevalent themes that deeply affect the mental health of these individuals (Foster 153). Such experiences frequently lead to mental health issues, constituting what is known as immigrant trauma.

Vuong addresses the trauma experienced by his family in On Earth. This familial trauma, intertwined with themes of immigration and displacement, emphasizes the significant impact of historical and personal upheavals on individuals and families. Later in this discussion, these themes will be further explored to illustrate how Vuong's narrative reflects and engages with the complexities of immigrant trauma.

Another way the connection between the native country, the mother, and the mother tongue has a significant impact on bilingual writers. When the relationship between an author and their mother is one of conflict, the mother tongue becomes a direct reminder of the trauma these writers experienced. The toxic stress related to the mother creates a traumatized relationship between an author and their mother tongue, fueling their feelings of displacement

within the native country and mother tongue. This conflict can be related to the decision to immigrate, as the child will see this move as a choice rather than a necessity. Or the decision to follow the native culture, forcing the child to fit into a system it does not feel a connection with.

The relationships of both Li and Vuong with their mothers are fueled by this toxic stress, causing the mother tongue to be fueled with trauma. Li does not have a link to immigrant trauma like Vuong, but she does have a difficult relationship with her mother. Later in this dissertation, this theme will be further explored to illustrate how Li's and Vuong's narratives reflect and engage with the traumatic relationship they have with their mother and their native country.

The intricate nature of trauma, as explained by these scholars, highlights the significant and often weakening impact such experiences can have on individuals. This understanding is essential when examining the works of bilingual writers like Vuong and Li, who use their novels as a medium to process and express their traumatic experiences. The exploration of trauma through the lens of a second language offers a unique perspective on how language can serve as both a barrier and a bridge in articulating pain and healing.

Traumatic recall

Traumatic events that cause toxic stress, and thus trauma, are important to discuss as they cause an author to relive these memories. Cathy Caruth explains how traumatic events repeatedly and consistently return in the subconscious with a delay. Traumatic recall, as described by Cathy Caruth, explains how traumatic events resurface in the subconscious mind, often with a delayed and intrusive persistence. Caruth posits that these memories return, as if happening in the present, against the conscious control or will of the individual who experienced them (Caruth 3). This phenomenon of traumatic recall manifests through

flashbacks, where individuals involuntarily re-experience intense emotions associated with the trauma.

Caruth emphasizes that the most challenging aspect of trauma lies in its insistence on being remembered (Caruth 3). The emotions and sensations embedded within traumatic memories can be so overpowering that they become overwhelming if not adequately processed or addressed soon after the initial experience. To cope with traumatic recall, Caruth suggests that individuals must confront these memories within a controlled and supportive environment.

The author's ability to recall trauma is often accompanied by an incomplete understanding of its full emotional impact, a concept Katherine Anderson explores further in her paper published in 2017:

> "By the nature of the emotional intensity of traumatic events, this declarative information is only imperfectly, if at all, absorbed into the initial impression of a traumatic event, and that traumatic recall, for this reason, does not release declarative details about the event, but rather the emotional response imprints on the memory". (Anderson 76)[3]

This perspective highlights how traumatic recall operates at the intersection of memory and emotional experience, revealing the complex dynamics through which individuals navigate and process traumatic events over time.

[3] Katherine Anderson recognizes trauma narratives as " a first-person account, marked by challenges to traditional boundaries between fantasy and reality and to time" Anderson, Katherine Elizabeth. "Foreign Writing Agency: Abbas Khider and María Cecilia Barbetta Writing Towards Catharsis in German as a Foreign Language after Trauma." 2017.

To process trauma effectively, individuals must find ways to confront and understand their experiences. Caruth explores the paradoxical nature of trauma processing, where individuals simultaneously seek to escape from and revisit traumatic events in an effort to comprehend their emotional impact. Writing narratives allows writers to engage in this process by revisiting traumatic events in a controlled manner, fulfilling the urge to both distance themselves from and delve into the trauma (Caruth 3).

Yildiz further elaborates on the representation of trauma narratives within texts, noting how narrators often recall memories with vivid detail while simultaneously acknowledging discrepancies and uncertainties in their recollections:

> The narrator recalls monologues, snapshots, and dreams in vivid detail, yet at the same time [they] insist that something is amiss in [their] memory (…) There is a strangeness in [their] mode of recall.
> (Yildiz 162)

Recognition of traumatic recall

In On Earth and Where Reasons End, the narrative structure expressed by Vuong and Li respectively reflects this complexity of traumatic recall. Both texts cope with the challenge that memories, which are supposed to serve as primary testimony of one's life, often feel disjointed and unfamiliar due to the overwhelming nature of trauma (Yildiz 151). The writers, Vuong and Li, use their narratives not merely to document the past but to capture the deep emotional impact of their experiences.

Traumatic recall compels these writers to obsessively revisit their memories as a means of gaining understanding. This repetition, as noted by Anderson, defines the experience

of trauma and serves as a tool for rehabilitating the traumatized: “Repeating their traumatic memories is what gives them a sense of understanding.” (Anderson 76).

This process emphasizes the therapeutic function of narrative in trauma writing, where writers strive to make sense of their experiences through the act of remembering and retelling. Trauma writing is a literary practice that involves narrating and processing traumatic experiences through written works. It is characterized by fragmented narratives, repetition, and a focus on memory and recall (Caruth 4-6). This form of writing reflects the disrupted nature of traumatic memories and allows both the writer and readers to engage with and understand the psychological and emotional aftermath of trauma.

Repetition of memories serves as a therapeutic technique for individuals coping with trauma. This practice not only helps them understand their feelings about the traumatic events but also enables them to build resilience and gain control over their experiences. Through the act of writing, traumatized individuals actively reconstruct their personal timelines repeatedly, seeking to make sense of and integrate their traumatic memories into their life narratives (Anderson 138-139; Brison).

To continue, in Daniela Cârstea's analysis of trauma narratives, she observes how uncertainty permeates these accounts, often expressed through phrases like "or I forget myself" and "unless I am greatly mistaken" (5). There is a sense of uncertainty that reflects the deep impact of trauma on memory, where events may be remembered inaccurately or incompletely due to the psychological fragmentation caused by trauma. Cârstea suggests that trauma narratives are characterized by a continual process of refiguring and grappling with the discrepancy between lived experiences and memory tainted by trauma.

Given that traumatic recall is a common experience among those who have undergone trauma, it is understandable why memory features prominently in both On Earth and Where

Reasons End. Both Vuong and Li express a significant need to remember and revisit their past experiences, highlighting an obsessive fixation on memory within their narratives.

One can identify traumatic recall through literary techniques such as ellipses[4] and temporal markers[5], which signify the protagonist's struggle with fragmented memories. Anderson notes that even after extensive rewriting and editing, the persistence of ellipses in a text emphasizes the lasting impact of trauma on the writer's psyche. Structuring memories chronologically within the narrative provides a semblance of order and completeness, aiding the writer in piecing together their fragmented experiences (Anderson 114). Harrington et al. further emphasize the therapeutic importance of repeated exposure in processing trauma, highlighting its role in fostering emotional resilience and integration (117).

Repetition and memory in On Earth *and* Where Reasons End

Repetition and memory play crucial roles in On Earth, where Vuong explores how the protagonist uses language and memory to confront and process trauma. Early in the novel, Vuong draws a parallel between human and macaque (monkey) memory capabilities, noting how macaques employ memory for survival, displaying traits such as self-doubt, introspection, and problem-solving through the recall of past images (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 42-43). This comparison sets the stage for understanding how the protagonist utilizes memory as a tool to navigate his own traumatic experiences.

[4] Definition: Ellipses are a series of three dots (…) used in writing to indicate the omission of words, a pause, or an unfinished thought. They can serve various functions, such as creating suspense, indicating a trailing off in thought, or showing that part of a quotation has been left out (Dictionary, Collins Online. "Ellipsis". *Collins Online Dictionary* HarperCollins Publishers, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/ellipses.).
[5] Temporal markers in literary writing are words or phrases that indicate the passage of time, the sequence of events, or the specific timing of actions within a narrative. These markers help readers understand when events are taking place and the relationship between different events in terms of time. Temporal markers can be explicit (e.g., specific dates or times) or implicit (e.g., words that suggest a sequence or duration).

> Macaques are capable of self-doubt and introspection, traits once thought attributable only to humans. Some species have displayed indicating the use of judgment, creativity, and even language. They are able to recall past images and apply them to current problem-solving. In other words, macaques employ memory in order to survive.
>
> (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 42-43)

Vuong's protagonist (Little Dog) explicitly discusses the act of remembering as a means of survival and healing. Little Dog recounts his mother's perspective on memory, portraying it as a choice—indicating her reluctance to confront or discuss her past (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 75-78). The novel is structured partly as a letter addressed to the protagonist's mother, emphasizing his desire to communicate and reconcile their differing approaches to memory. For the protagonist, memory functions not just as a passive recollection but as a flood of emotions and fragmented images—a manifestation of traumatic recall that drives his narrative journey (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 78).

A poignant moment occurs towards the novel's conclusion when the protagonist reflects on the significance of remembering their family's relocation to Hartford[6]. This recollection emphasizes the protagonist's ongoing struggle with memory and how essential it is to revisit crucial life events, seeking to comprehend their impact on personal identity and familial bonds.

[6] "I remember the table. I remember the table made of words given to me from your mouth. I remember the room burning. The room was burning because Lan spoke of fire. I remember the fire as it was told to me in the apartment in Harford, all of us sleep on the hardwood floor, swaddled in blankets from the Salvation Army. I remember the man from the Salvation Army handing my father a stack of coupons for Kentucky Fried Chicken, … "Remember," you said each morning before we stepped out in cold Connecticut air, "don't draw attention to yourself. You're already Vietnamese." Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel.* International edition, Penguin Random House UK, 2019.

In line with Caruth's insights on traumatic recall, Vuong's narrative illustrates how traumatic memories persistently resurface, compelling individuals to engage with their past experiences in order to achieve emotional integration and healing (Caruth 3). The protagonist's use of language and memory in On Earth exemplifies the complex interplay between memory and trauma, demonstrating how narrative can serve as both a tool for self-expression and a means of grappling with unresolved emotional turmoil.

In On Earth, Vuong's protagonist grapples with the complex nature of memory, recognizing that many of his memories are not entirely his own but have been shaped and influenced by others. He acknowledges this complexity when he reflects on a memory of a burning room, clarifying that the sensation of fire was metaphorical, evoked by a conversation rather than a literal event (Vuong 219). . He dissects his memories, realizing moments that he should not take literally, such as “the room was burning” (Vuong *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 219). He realizes he room was only burning “because Lan spoke of fire”. This realization prompts him to dissect his memories further, distinguishing between what actually happened and how he felt in those moments.

The narrative is permeated by Vuong’s protagonist's childhood experiences as an immigrant, characterized by emotional intensity and feelings of displacement. Little Dog poignantly remembers their first home in Hartford, metaphorically likening it to a place consumed by fire, symbolizing their intense sense of alienation and struggle to find belonging ” (Vuong *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 219).

In Vuong's novel, the protagonist, Little Dog, narrates his story through letters to his mother, written in the first person. Central to Little Dog’s narrative journey is his use of writing as a means to process and articulate his trauma. This method is exemplified in a chapter dedicated to remembering (pages 219-233), where he repeatedly begins paragraphs with "I remember," recounting memories related to his absent father, paternal grandfather, and

moments with his mother in both Vietnam and the US (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 220, 224-225, 221, 228-229, 231). These recollections blend actual events and imaginings, reflecting his efforts to piece together fragments of his past and make sense of his identity. The motif of the table in their first Hartford apartment serves as a focal point throughout these recollections, symbolizing stability amidst the upheaval of immigration. The protagonist's repetitive invocation of "I remember the table" emphasizes its significance as a tangible anchor to his memories and emotions (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 219, 222, 226, 232).

Through his narrative approach, Vuong's protagonist not only confronts his fragmented memories but also confronts the emotional complexities associated with his traumatic past. Writing becomes a cathartic process—a way to unload the burden of unprocessed experiences and reconstruct a narrative that integrates his lived realities and imagined histories.

In Li's Where Reasons End, memory serves as a pivotal theme through which the protagonist, an unnamed person, grapples with grief and attempts to reconcile with the loss of her son, Nikolai, who took his own life. The narrative, also written in the first person, unfolds as a series of conversations between the protagonist and her deceased son, where she detailed recalls and reproduces past interactions in an effort to sustain his presence and process her deepest and most important emotions.

Initially, these memories were not inherently traumatic when they were created; they were ordinary moments of Nikolai's childhood—recollections of poems he wrote, his activities during weekends, and disbelief in Santa (Yiyun Li 20, 70, 126). However, in the aftermath of Nikolai's death, these recollections become filled with grief and sorrow, transforming into triggers that unveil the emotional weight of her loss (Yiyun Li 20, 117, 133).

The unnamed protagonist's engagement with memory is deeply introspective, reflecting her attempt to understand the trajectory that led to Nikolai's tragic end. She delves into her subconscious, triggered by objects and spaces associated with Nikolai, seeking to uncover clues about their shared past and the nuances of his emotional journey (Yiyun Li 46).

Central to Li's narrative is the protagonist's contemplation on the nature of memory itself. The protagonist questions: "What are the rules of knowing and remembering for him now?" (Yiyun Li 22). She questions the rules that govern remembering for Nikolai in his current state beyond life, contemplating memory as an archive of feelings that persist even after physical existence ceases (Yiyun Li 22). The act of remembering becomes a vital mechanism for her, akin to constructing a "memory book" in collaboration with her son, an endeavor recommended by a psychologist to preserve and process their shared memories (Yiyun Li 76).

In essence, *Where Reasons End* portrays memory not just as a recollection of past events but as a medium through which the protagonist navigates her grief and seeks understanding. The novel itself becomes a "memory book" for both the protagonist and Li, a testament to her relentless effort to preserve Nikolai's essence and come to terms with the complex emotions surrounding his loss. The protagonist engages deeply with her memories of her deceased son, Nikolai, as a means to navigate her grief and make sense of his tragic death. Throughout the narrative, she recounts various moments from Nikolai's life, seeking solace and understanding through these recollections.

As she revisits these memories, the protagonist attempts to "rewrite life," reshaping her understanding of Nikolai's existence and their relationship (Yiyun Li 85). Her memories serve as a channel for her sorrow, allowing her to mourn deeply and connect with the essence of who Nikolai was. The pain of his absence is described as a perpetual wound that remains open, echoing the etymology of trauma deriving from the Greek word for wound (Caruth 11).

Through the act of remembering, she tends to this emotional wound, embracing her grief and nurturing it in a way that allows her to process and eventually heal.

This novel portrays a poignant dialogue between the protagonist and Nikolai, where they discuss the fleetingness of memory. Nikolai asks her if she thinks memories don't last, as "memories are like cells, always replaced by new ones" (Yiyun Li 97). But she wonders if she can keep the memories, as there are no replacements, if "memories now remain unfaded and unfadable" (Yiyun Li 97-98). For the protagonist, these memories of Nikolai are indelible, irreplaceable, and essential to preserving his presence in her life.

Towards the conclusion of the novel, the protagonist grapples with the inevitability of moving forward. She acknowledges the ephemeral nature of her conversations with Nikolai, realizing that while the memories are real, the ongoing dialogue is not (Yiyun Li 163, 168). This realization marks a turning point where she begins to accept the impermanence of their interactions while cherishing the enduring impact of their shared memories.

Despite the differences in how memory is conceptualized and utilized by the characters in *On Earth* and *Where Reasons End*, both Vuong and Li emphasize the centrality of memory in processing trauma. Memory serves as a foundational theme in both narratives, enabling the characters to confront their traumatic experiences and find meaning in their emotional journeys. Through the act of remembering, both writers take crucial steps towards acknowledging and ultimately coming to terms with their respective traumas.

CHAPTER 3. NATIONS, LANGUAGE, AND IDENTITY

The notion that one's identity is inherently tied to their native language has evolved significantly over the past 150 years (Yildiz 12). Societal changes in the 20th and 21st centuries have intricately complicated this relationship. Increased global mobility and the accessibility of international travel have enabled individuals to explore and integrate into diverse cultures and languages more freely. This societal shift has facilitated journeys of self-discovery in new cultural contexts, whether through voluntary relocation or forced migration as refugees. As a result, the idea that identity is exclusively tied to one's native country has grown more nuanced. One compelling reason for bilingual writers to venture beyond their mother tongue is political repression, compelling individuals not only to seek a new homeland but also to adopt a new language, sometimes forsaking their original one entirely (Anderman 201).

New nation, new perspective

A new nation offers a new linguistic environment and cultural contexts that can unveil fresh perspectives on the world, providing an initial step towards psychological liberation. The mother tongue, and the country it represents, might be associated with negative experiences such as conflict, war, or cultural connotations. Living and growing up in a different nation can weaken the intrinsic link to the mother tongue previously suggested. Immigration, therefore, offers new perspectives on the native language and provides an avenue for individuals to redefine themselves.

Regina Müller views these new perspectives as "a consequence of migration," quoting another writer who observes that "when she thinks of her 'mother sentences' spoken by her mother in her mother tongue, they sound like a foreign language mastered well" (qtd. in Yildiz 154). This concept is echoed in the writings of Eva Hoffman, who states:

> The price of emigration (…) being cut off from one's own story is apt to veil in nostalgia, which is an ineffectual relationship to the past, and the haze of alienation, which is an ineffectual relationship to the present.
> (Hoffman 242)

These examples elucidate why individuals like Li and Vuong might choose to distance themselves from their mother tongue. Yildiz succinctly encapsulates this phenomenon by stating that "new languages can open up new intellectual and affective pathways" (Yildiz 13).

In today's society, immigrants like Li and Vuong are often expected to feel a connection and a sense of belonging with two places at once—with their native country and their adopted host country, in this case, the US where both Li and Vuong have immigrated. Their narratives explore the evolving identity of immigrants who navigate the complexities of belonging to multiple languages, cultures, and nations simultaneously.

Emotional link to language

Traditionally, monolingualism has emphasized the emotional connection solely to one's mother tongue (Yildiz 12). However, contemporary literature challenges this notion by illustrating how individuals can forge deep emotional ties to languages and cultures beyond their native one, sometimes feeling more connected outside of their mother tongue and homeland. Despite the entrenched monolingual mindset, numerous writers have produced acclaimed literature in languages other than their first. In the 20th and 21st centuries, postcolonial writers such as Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, and Eva Hoffman have notably excelled in this regard. The writers of this study, Ocean Vuong and Yiyun Li, have

both contributed to this legacy with their poignant trauma narratives crafted in their second languages.

Both Li and Vuong incorporate the immigrant experience and their trauma narratives into their works, promoting for the validity and richness of writing in a second language. They challenge the traditional view of the mother tongue, as Yildiz suggests:

> The concept of the mother tongue and its rich connotations (…), offers a strong model of the exclusive link between language and identity. Yet, while this vision may be true for some, it is just as often untrue for others.
> (Yildiz 203)

This perspective emphasizes the evolving understanding of language and identity, demonstrating that emotional and cultural affiliations can extend beyond the boundaries of one's mother tongue.

The mother tongue has traditionally been seen as unique and irreplaceable, closely linked to the notion of an individual's unique native country and their innate sense of belonging. Yildiz characterizes this perception as a "linguistic family romance," a fantasy that idealizes the natural, bodily origin of one’s first language and its unalienable familiarity, which purportedly establishes kinship and belonging (127-128). However, this study seeks to challenge and reconsider the notion of this "linguistic family romance".

It is evident that individuals can experience kinship and belonging beyond their mother tongue and nation. They may forge deep connections and identify more closely with a language and its culture that is not their native one. Shannon Winnubst prompts us to rethink relations as open-ended affections, affinities, and possibilities, rather than predetermined, closed organic bonds (qtd. in Yildiz 129). By adopting a more expansive perspective on

belonging and kinship, individuals can find creativity and cultivate their identity outside the confines of their mother tongue.

In this light, individuals may view the mother tongue not as an exclusive and singular maternal figure to whom they must inherently belong, but rather as one aspect of their multifaceted identity. They are empowered to perceive their native language and its associated nation as a foundational origin that they can depart from and integrate into their broader sense of self. Thus, the notion of the mother tongue as the sole "true" language is reconsidered, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of linguistic and cultural identity.

Connection between the mother and the mother tongue

The connection between an individual's native language and their sense of national identity extends beyond cultural associations; it holds a significant link with a parent and the country where their identity took shape. Both Li and Vuong illustrate this complex relationship through their experiences with their mother tongues, which are intrinsically tied to the native countries of their mothers.

For Vuong, Vietnam represents a backdrop of war and trauma, conditions that compelled his family to seek refuge abroad. Reflecting on his relationship with Vietnamese, Vuong describes it as:

> In [a] Vietnamese context – words are like spells. There's a lot of taboo around speech and how it brings forth the darkness. … I wanted to create a foreign experience of something very familiar.
>
> (Hsu)

Immigrant trauma has infused his mother tongue with unsettling connotations, prompting him to embrace English – the language of his adulthood and creative expression in the liberating environment of the US.

Conversely, Li's distancing from her mother tongue and native China is shaped by personal and cultural strife. Raised in an abusive environment, she encountered significant barriers in discussing her trauma within Chinese culture, where such topics are often taboo (Laity). Her mother, specifically, was abusive and accused Li of being selfish saying that Li "deserved the ugliest death" because Li did not love her enough (Laity). Li sought refuge in the United States, drawn to its openness and acceptance of narratives that her native culture suppressed. English, which she adopted later in life, offered her a fresh start—a language untouched by her past and unburdened by political constraints (Sehgal).

In both cases, the adoption of a second language symbolizes more than linguistic proficiency; it represents a pathway to autonomy, creative expression, and a sense of belonging in new cultural landscapes. Their narratives point out how language, shaped by familial and national histories, becomes intertwined with personal identity and the quest for freedom from traumatic pasts.

In Li's case, her desire to transcend her mother tongue is not explicitly articulated in Where Reasons End. Nevertheless, understanding her trajectory reveals a deeper narrative of trauma processing. Her novel becomes a second avenue for confronting and navigating her trauma, leveraging the English language once more, which she finds to be a more suitable creative outlet due to its liberating qualities.

Moreover, it's interesting to note that both Li and Vuong find solace in the fact that their mothers cannot read their works written in English (Armitstead; Hsu). This language barrier serves to shield their innermost thoughts, allowing them to express themselves freely in a language their mothers do not comprehend and thus avoid judgement or comment.

Cultural connotations

The relationship between the mother tongue and the writer is connected to their relationship with their mother. Both Li and Vuong have experienced toxic stress from this relationship, which produced the need to step away from the mother tongue.

Cultural connotations[7] are closely linked to the nation of the mother, the native country, which for Li is China and for Vuong is Vietnam, that influence how these writers perceive and interpret various aspects of their environment, including language, traditions, rituals, and societal norms. Cultural connotations are significant as they contribute to the richness and complexity of cultural identity and communication.

In *On Earth,* cultural connotations are deeply integrated into the narrative and the novel intricately describes the immigrant experience. Vuong explores the traumatic memories of the Vietnamese culture, including the impact of the Vietnam War. The trauma carried by Little Dog's mother and grandmother is filled with the lingering effects of the native country.

The mother tongue Vietnamese is associated with the war as Vuong describes how his grandmother sings about "…someone who is looking through a field of corpses…" (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 49-50). The war is part of the Vietnamese heritage Vuong wants to escape from. He is glad nobody understands Vietnamese as he can hide his family's trauma behind the language barrier.

Language plays a significant role in the novel as it symbolizes both connection and disconnection. Little Dog's letters to his mother reflect the fragmented communication with the family. His mother speaks often in anger and chaos as her trauma takes over and becomes

[7] Cultural connotations refer to the associations, implications, or meanings that are culturally specific and attached to particular words, symbols, gestures, behaviors, or customs within a society or community. Dictionary, Collins Online. "Connotation". HarperCollins Publishers, 2024, 31 July 2024. These connotations are often shaped by historical, social, political, and linguistic factors unique to a culture.

"a storm of mother" (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 101). His only escape becomes the American dream, associated with the American English language.

Connotations of the American culture are recognized through the lens of the protagonist, Little Dog, the promise of freedom drives them to America in the first place. He connects his memories of becoming a free adult with the American Dream[8], his grandmother soothing him after his mother's outburst with Mickey Mouse (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 101).

The timeline Vuong creates to navigate through his emotions are linked to associations of the American culture, such as The Black Eyed Peas, Coca-Cola, Star Wars, Elvis and others (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 86-87, 101, 109-111, 151). The American connotations as a free, creative space where a friendly mouse welcomes you into the culture is interwoven within these cultural symbols. *On Earth* presents American freedom as a multifaced experience, the protagonist and his family navigating it with difficulty. Little Dog's use of English as a translator of the American Dream is crucial to navigating his linguistic and cultural identity.

In *Where Reasons End*, Chinese culture and its connotations are more subtly integrated into the narrative by Li, reflecting her background and adding depth to the story. In Chinese culture, filial piety[9] is a fundamental value, emphasizing respect and duty towards one's mother. The protagonist reflects on her relationship with her son and her role as a mother, looking through the lens of these cultural connotations. The pressure to be a good parent and

[8] The term "American dream" refers to the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society in which upward mobility is possible for everyone. Team, Investopedia. "What Is the American Dream? Examples and How to Measure It." Investopedia www.investopedia.com/terms/a/american-dream.asp. Accessed 1 August.

[9] Filial piety in Chinese culture requires children to offer love, respect, support, and deference to their parents and other elders in the family, such as grandparents or older siblings. The idea follows from the fact that parents give life to their children, and support them throughout their developing years, providing food, education, and material needs. After receiving all these benefits, children are thus forever in debt to their parents. In order to acknowledge this eternal debt, children must respect and serve their parents all their lives. Mack, Lauren. "Filial Piety: An Important Chinese Cultural Value." ThoughtCo www.thoughtco.com/filial-piety-in-chinese-688386#:~:text=Meaning,as%20grandparents%20or%20older%20siblings. Accessed 4 August 2024.

the sense of responsibility towards her child are of great importance because of these cultural norms.

Another Chinese connotation is the notion of parental sacrifice, where the mother is often expected to put her child's needs above their own. Li's feelings of guilt for her son's death are emphasized by this cultural background, as she has failed to nurture and protect her child which is seen as a personal and familial failure.

The new perspective Li has gained gives her a way to navigate through her grief without the heavy connotation she feels from her mother tongue. She blames herself in the beginning, questioning what type of mother would consider her son's suicide a burden (Yiyun Li 72). The Chinese culture has caused her to need children in her life, which her son questions. ""You really didn't think through everything, before you had children. … Why did you have children… if you knew this might happen?" (Yiyun Li 89). Li rethinks her relationship with her son, trying to establish that the pair no longer have to abide by the rules that connect child and mother.

These cultural connotations pay a role for the reason why this study has connected these two works. Both writers are looking for a way to navigate their trauma within a linguistic context, which they accomplish by looking through the lens of these cultural connotations. Li and Vuong create tension between their two cultural identities which contributes to their exploration of identity and belonging. The relationship between son and mother changes, going against the cultural connotations of the native culture, causing this relationship to alter indefinitely and for the better.

Creative identity in a second language

Regarding creative identity in a second language, it challenges the traditional monolingual perspective that regards the mother tongue as the only "true" way for creative expression.

Yildiz affirms this view by quoting Friedrich Schleiermacher, who posits that true originality can only emerge in one's mother tongue (Yildiz 112). However, contemporary insights, such as those offered by Erik Gleibermann, propose that creativity can thrive in a second language where individuals can best articulate their thoughts and emotions (31). This process of discovering one's creative voice in a second language involves reconciliation and conflict, as articulated by Anderson: “Writing in a second language forces [them] to acquire an individual voice” (202-203).

When embarking on this journey, writers often encounter a process involving stages of processing, staggering, returning, and reprocessing, as noted by Aleida Assmann, who suggests that trauma-induced speechlessness can ignite a literary impulse (qtd. in Anderson; Assmann 100-101). Amongst the flood of emotions and vivid images demanding expression, writers feel compelled to harness their creativity.

This work posits that creative expression in a second language can foster a deeper connection to a particular nation. Each language carries its own cultural and national connotations, shaping intimate family dynamics and societal norms (Yildiz 152). Recognizing this link between language and culture suggests that writers can navigate and transcend national boundaries by expressing themselves in another language.

Just as the concept of motherhood varies, so does the significance of language. A second language can serve as a nurturing outlet for writers like Li and Vuong, providing a comfortable and creative space to process trauma and explore their identities outside their native tongue. In this sense, a second language can become a new metaphorical home, offering solace and freedom from the constraints of their birth country and its linguistic conventions. This exploration of finding belonging beyond one's country of origin through language is a central theme for further analysis in this study.

CHAPTER 4. PUTTING TRAUMA INTO WORDS

Alongside the need or desire to adopt a new language for self-expression, bilingual writers often experience a sense of speechlessness[10]. Their notions of home, national identity, and personal agency become compromised, leaving them feeling voiceless in shaping their own narratives. Seeking to articulate their experiences of trauma, bilingual writers navigate a complex terrain where Assmann and Anderson observe this clear speechlessness within their literary works (qtd. in Anderson 89; Assmann). Their narratives reflect a struggle where the native tongue, once a tool for personal expression, process inadequate, prompting a quest to reclaim autonomy through language.

The initial phase in overcoming this speechlessness, as posited by Susan J. Brison, involves narrating the traumatic events, thereby enabling the writer to regain a sense of control. Brison highlights how traumatic experiences often induce speechlessness, disrupting personal development and "leaving an unbridgeable gap in one's life story" (qtd. in Anderson 91; Brison). Through narrative reconstruction, the writer can begin to reconcile with their trauma and integrate these experiences into their life story, thereby healing the dissociation with the memories. It is important to mention that for narrative writing to be successful in processing trauma, the writer must make a conscious decision towards self-healing (Anderson 101).

Both Li and Vuong have articulated how their adoption of writing is a therapeutic tool for recovery and how it is, therefore, a positive aspect of trauma processing. . In the opening of Where Reasons End, the protagonist reflects on her lifelong practice of "writing stories," emphasizing her commitment to this creative endeavor (Yiyun Li 6-7). The protagonist navigates an unbridgeable gap left by her son's absence, finding solace and control through storytelling.

[10] The term speechlessness is not limited to the verbal and can be expressed when speaking about the written form.

> In this one [story] the child Nikolai (which was not his real name, but a name he had given himself, … and his mother dear meet in a world unspecified in time and space. … And it was not a world dreamed up by me; even my dreams mundane and landlocked in reality. It was a world made up by words, and words only.
> (Yiyun Li 6-7)

She, Li, has lost her sense of control, which she finds again by doing what she does best: narrating stories, using the voice of her protagonist, the mother of Nikolai.

Similarly, Vuong's On Earth opens with a letter expressing the need to communicate with his mother through writing: "Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you ... I am writing to go back to the time ..." (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 3).). Vuong explores the complexity of communicating with his mother indirectly through writing, seeking to articulate emotions and experiences that are difficult to express verbally. He reflects, "How could I tell you that what you were describing was writing? How could I say that we, after all, are so close, the shadows of our hands, on two different pages, merging?" (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 6).

It is evident that Vuong was looking for a way to talk to his mother about topics he could not discuss with her and uses his protagonist to express this sentiment. Both Li and Vuong needed to find a way to speak to their loved ones, needing to find a tool to do so. They vocalize their feelings through the medium of narrative within their novels and through this process their own trauma.

Writing against speechlessness

Writing to combat speechlessness is a theme recognized by Dominick LaCapra, who views literature and art as therapeutic avenues for exploring personal issues and processing trauma (27). LaCapra writes that literature provides a haven where individuals can safely delve into their problems and alleviate trauma-related symptoms. He states: literature "can be a source of refuge, in which one can explore personal problems and, at least in part, process trauma and its effects" (LaCapra 27). Similarly, Bessel van der Kolk suggests that writing offers access to one's inner emotional world (238), highlighting its therapeutic potential in trauma processing.

Research indicates that constructing a coherent narrative about personal experiences can significantly improve mental health outcomes. James W. Pennebaker emphasizes that therapeutic writing facilitates a direct connection between verbal expression and the autonomic nervous system, thereby exerting a positive influence on both physical and psychological well-being (539). This suggests that the act of writing not only helps individuals articulate and confront negative emotions but also promotes physiological regulation through trauma processing.

Edward J. Murray and Daniel L. Segal define another goal of trauma processing as "a process whereby emotional disturbances are absorbed and declined to the extent that other experiences and behavior can proceed without disruption" (391). The act of writing also helps an individual to continue their life without disruption from their past. They learn to live with the trauma instead of being repressed or defined by it.

In his work Putting Stress into Words: Health, Linguistic, and Therapeutic Implications, Pennebaker discusses findings that individuals randomly assigned to write about deeply personal topics tend to exhibit improved health compared to those who do not engage in such expressive writing (539). This emphasizes the therapeutic value of translating

upsetting experiences into written form, regardless of whether the writing process extends to the public or remains private.

The exploration of how writing about trauma aids in its processing presents an opportunity for further investigation. Understanding the deeper impact of the written word on both physical and psychological health can contribute valuable insights to therapeutic practices and interventions aimed at trauma recovery.

Further studies have delved into the significant impact of expressive writing on mental health. Harrington et al. conducted research highlighting how emotional processing can be catalyzed through expressive writing, particularly emphasizing its role as a potent intervention for trauma (116). Central to this approach is the depth of emotional engagement—an essential aspect within psychotherapeutic contexts, where individuals actively confront and explore their feelings and the underlying meanings associated with personal distress (Harrington et al. 117).

The depth of engagement in this context varies, influencing the effectiveness of expressive writing as a therapeutic tool. Experiential avoidance, characterized by efforts to sidestep or suppress emotional experiences, contrasts sharply with the immersive, non-avoidant approach advocated in expressive writing interventions. The latter method encourages individuals to delve deeply into the complexities of their traumatic experiences, facilitating a thorough and comprehensive processing of their trauma (Harrington et al. 116).

This research emphasizes the importance of structured expressive writing as a means to effectively navigate and integrate traumatic experiences, promoting adaptive psychological responses and moderating symptoms associated with toxic stress and trauma.

Additional voices in the field have highlighted the therapeutic benefits of repeated writing in weakening the link between distressing memories and emotional turmoil (Bootzin 167). Engaging in structured writing about one's memories enables individuals to confront

and process the associated distressing emotions, thereby separating the trauma from its emotional impact. This process allows individuals to reinterpret their memories as mere recollections, enabling future reflections without the burden of emotional distress. Greenberg et al. similarly suggest that writing about trauma in a controlled environment yields positive effects by fostering a sense of efficacy and enhancing emotional regulation among writers (Greenberg et al.; qtd. in Park and Blumberg 598).

Pennebaker emphasizes the empowering potential of writing as a therapeutic technique, emphasizing that individuals can effectively guide their own therapeutic journeys through writing (546). He posits that the act of writing, devoid of external instructions or feedback, can independently evolve into a powerful tool for improving psychological well-being.

These insights collectively emphasize the transformative potential of expressive writing as a method for individuals to process and heal from traumatic experiences, providing a means to navigate emotional landscapes and regain agency over their psychological health.

The ultimate objective of writing about trauma is to facilitate its processing, enabling individuals to assert control over their narrative and articulate their experiences. Trauma researcher Judith Lewis Herman emphasizes the importance of integrating traumatic memories rather than erasing them, emphasizing that the goal is not exorcism but rather integration into one's life story. As Herman states, “The trauma does undergo a transformation, but only in the sense of becoming more present and more real” (qtd. in Anderson 125; Herman). Writing about trauma does not eradicate the experience itself, but it allows individuals to coexist with their memories and move forward without being defined or confined by them.

Novels serve as a potent form of expressive writing, characterized by continual writing and rewriting processes that enable writers to deeply engage with their material and explore

the emotional and cognitive dimensions of their trauma. Unlike traditional therapeutic interventions mediated by a therapist, the narrative process in novels can be done independently and self-directed (qtd. in Anderson 91; Brison). Scholars such as Brison advocate for further exploration into how writing in a second language can empower bilingual writers to reclaim their voices and navigate through speechlessness (qtd. in Anderson 91; Boothe; Brison).

In conclusion, writers like Li and Vuong have transformed contemporary literature into a therapeutic tool by using their novels to process their traumas and find healing. Through the act of consciously committing their experiences to paper, they have not only engaged in self-guided therapeutic processes but have also reshaped the literary landscape. Further investigation into the intricate relationship between trauma and writership can make clear how these writers have discovered and claimed their voices within their narratives of trauma.

Bilingual trauma writing

As discussed, the relationship between trauma and the author is clearly seen in the works of Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong. Both writers have confronted their traumatic experiences through the medium of writing, specifically novels, which has not only facilitated personal healing but also enriched literary discourse. The development of their narratives provides a compelling lens through which to reconsider the role of literature in contemporary society. The multilingual mindset prevalent in contemporary society, coupled with rapid cultural shifts, has greatly influenced writers particularly bilingual writers like Li and Vuong. This intersection of language, culture, and trauma has spurred the evolution of new literary strategies and genres, going beyond conventional categories such as fiction or contemporary novels.

The interconnectedness facilitated by globalization in the modern era has amplified the potential of literature as a tool for storytelling and healing. As societies become increasingly interconnected, literature serves not only to entertain but also to inform and engage readers on a global scale. Bilingual writers, drawing from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, bring unique perspectives and narrative techniques to their works, thereby enriching the literary landscape with nuanced explorations of personal and collective trauma.

Literature written by bilingual writers like Li and Vuong challenges traditional genre boundaries by incorporating innovative narrative approaches to express their experiences and address trauma. Language itself becomes a dynamic medium through which these writers navigate their identities and confront histories shaped by displacement, migration, and cultural assimilation. By weaving together multiple linguistic and cultural threads, these writers create narratives that resonate across diverse audiences, fostering empathy and understanding amongst cultural diversity.

The literature written by bilingual writers shows a transformative potential wherein personal trauma is not just told but actively processed and incorporated into broader cultural narratives. As literature continues to evolve alongside global societal changes, the voices of bilingual writers like Li and Vuong contribute significantly to expanding the horizons of literary expression, offering new insights into the complex interplay between language, trauma, and identity.

Katherine Anderson wrote an analysis that highlights the transformative potential of literature in processing and narrating traumatic experiences. In her article, Anderson explores how novels serve as emotional buffers for writers, enabling them to construct narratives that mediate their interactions with challenging past events. Central to Anderson's argument is the assertion that literature should be acknowledged as a suitable means of psychological healing, particularly in the context of historical trauma. She puts forward the idea that trauma

narratives offer writers a degree of agency over their experiences by facilitating the selection and reinterpretation of personal histories through storytelling (Anderson 64).

Anderson emphasizes that trauma narratives help writers in two ways: they empower writers to control the narrative of their trauma by choosing what aspects of their past to disclose, while simultaneously fostering a deeper comprehension of their experiences through narrative writing (64). This process not only aids individual healing but also contributes to broader discussions within the humanities about the role of literature in articulating and interpreting trauma.

Anderson's insights resonate particularly strongly in the context of bilingual writers, who navigate their trauma narratives through a second language. The act of writing in a second language introduces additional layers of complexity and nuance, as writers negotiate between linguistic and cultural identities to articulate their lived experiences. This bilingual approach not only enriches the literary canon with diverse perspectives but also expands the potential impact of trauma narratives on literature as a whole.

Furthermore, Anderson's research emphasizes the significance of trauma narratives written by bilingual writers in shaping literary discourse. By connecting multiple linguistic and cultural aspects, these narratives challenge conventional genre boundaries and offer new insights into the interplay between language, trauma, and identity. As such, they contribute significantly to the evolution of literature as a dynamic tool for personal expression and collective understanding.

Anderson’s research of trauma narratives in literature shows the significant impact of storytelling on individual and cultural healing. By empowering writers to reclaim agency over their traumatic experiences through narrative reconstruction, literature emerges as a transformative force in both personal catharsis and trauma research. Bilingual writers, in particular, play an important role in expanding the scope and depth of trauma narratives,

thereby enriching the literary landscape with their unique perspectives and linguistic expertise.

A new genre of storytelling has been developed by writers as they go beyond their mother tongue, defined as bilingual trauma writing. This genre specifically includes novels written by bilingual writers who write their traumatic experiences in their second language. Analysis of these novels offers valuable insights into how writers utilize the novel as a therapeutic medium for processing trauma. While Yildiz has conducted foundational research on this genre (20), the focus of this work is specifically on the analysis of novels within this context.

Scholars such as Anderson emphasize the significance of narrative sharing in trauma literature and how they provide "a primal human practice, through which understanding of self and the world [is] solidified". Both Li and Vuong tell narratives that express personally experienced traumas, with a "flexible faithfulness to reality" (Anderson 67-68). From my perspective, these works can be viewed as trauma narratives, particularly in terms of their impact on the writers themselves.

A critical aspect of analyzing bilingual trauma writing involves considering the social, individual, and affective implications embedded within the use of each language (Yildiz 25). Bilingual writers navigate moving between two languages, each with its own cultural and emotional connotations, thereby enabling them to configure language in ways that evoke novel forms, subjects, and modes of belonging (Yildiz 25). This phenomenon presents a novel perspective on literature and the creative process, offering a new angle for exploration into how language influences narrative construction and identity formation.

Yildiz identifies bilingual writing as a distinctive new genre in literature, emphasizing the capacity of bilingual writers to introduce unique perspectives and innovative language use. Elizabeth K. Beaujour, as cited by Yildiz, notes that bilingual writers possess a

heightened sensitivity to patterns of sound and potential meanings in words that otherwise would not be recognized. This sensitivity allows them to forge novel word combinations and linguistic innovations (119). Such creative endeavors often lead to the emergence of stylistic expertise that sets bilingual writers apart from their monolingual counterparts. Through careful analysis of these works, one can uncover interesting linguistic patterns that are not typically found in other literary genres.

Furthermore, research indicates that bilingual writers exhibit distinct neurocognitive patterns in their language processing. Foster's study illustrates how the brain stores the mother tongue and the second language in separate places in the brain, each with its own linguistic code (161). The cultures linked to these languages are therefore stored with their own linguistic code as well. This split allows for the separate storage of memories associated with each language, influencing how these writers navigate and express their experiences through language.

In *Beyond the Mother Tongue,* the exploration of bilingualism in literature is exemplified to show how writers who have embraced being bilingual in their novels and engage with the themes of processing trauma. These 21st-century bilingual writers are the next generation of writers who speak about “social changes, especially modes of displacement such as travel, exile and migration” (Yildiz 110). Through their narratives, shaped by personal and collective traumas, they forge new multilingual forms that resonate deeply with readers.

The traumatic experiences endured by bilingual writers often serve as catalysts for these innovative literary expressions. By connecting bilingualism and cultural contexts, these novels offer significant insights into the human condition, challenging conventional perspectives and broadening readers’ understanding of societal issues. Through such literature, readers gain a newfound appreciation of the complexities surrounding migration, processing trauma, and finding identity and belonging.

In conclusion, the impact of bilingual trauma writing extends beyond individual catharsis. These narratives not only document personal journeys but also show universal truths about resilience, adaptation, and the need for belonging in a rapidly changing world. As such, they represent how big of an impact contemporary literature can have, adding to our collective understanding of human experiences across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

CHAPTER 5. THE NOVEL AS A MEDIUM

The novel has been mentioned many times in this study as the primary instrument used by writers such as Li and Vuong to confront and process their trauma. The importance of using the novel as a medium lies in the process of novel writing. Just as Neuner et al. highlight the therapeutic value of organizing and integrating patient autobiographies chronologically in therapy — "With every meeting, the timeline is reviewed, edited, and expanded" (qtd. in Anderson 133; Neuner et al. 329-340) — so too does the novel demand writers to revisit and actively engage with their memories of trauma through continual writing and rewriting.

This repetitive process not only helps in the creative refinement of the writers' narratives, but it also serves as a crucial therapeutic function by allowing writers to confront and make sense of their traumatic experiences over time. Once the novel has been finished, the document is shown to witnesses, putting weight on the document as an official testimony (Anderson 134).

In contrast to other written genres like autobiography or memoir, which demand a direct and often explicit link between the writer and their narrative, the novel provides a unique form of expression for writers like Li and Vuong as they navigate the complexities of trauma processing. Autobiography and memoir, both seen as part of the category "life-writing", are characterized by their close connection to the author's personal experiences and are typically presented as non-fiction, grounded in reality (Rak 309). These genres focus on narrating the author's life, with memoir emphasizing the writer's role as an observer of events and autobiography focusing only on events crucial to the author's life story (Rak 310).

The privacy of the novel gives Li and Vuong the possibility desire to engage in a therapeutic process through writing while maintaining a degree of privacy and detachment. Unlike autobiography or memoir, the novel allows them to create protagonists who serve as a buffer, providing emotional distance between themselves and the traumatic events they

explore. In essence, by choosing this genre the author can fictionalize their own narratives. This distancing mechanism permits the writers to explore deeply personal themes without explicitly acknowledging themselves as the direct subject of their narratives. The novel's fictionality offers a protective shield, enabling writers to present their stories as imaginative creations rather than factual accounts of their lives. For instance, Vuong's protagonist, Little Dog, and Li's depiction of the mother bear resemblances to their own experiences, yet the narrative framing allows them to hide personal details behind the idea of it being fiction.

By selecting the novel as their medium, Li and Vuong exercise control and agency over how their trauma is represented and perceived by their audience. They use the novel's narrative flexibility to guide their own therapeutic journey, shaping their stories while navigating their trauma processing in a way that preserves both their privacy and creative freedom.

Thus, the novel emerges not only as a vehicle for personal healing and narrative expression but also as a powerful medium for exploring trauma in ways that defy traditional literary boundaries. As I continue to examine the connections of trauma, language, and literary form, the novel remains a powerful tool through which writers can navigate and articulate their lived experiences, teaching us an understanding of both literature and the human condition.

The relationship between writer and protagonist

In an interview, Vuong revealed that "On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous" draws heavily from his own upbringing as a queer individual amidst adversity and addiction (Hsu). Both Little Dog and Vuong were born in Vietnam and moved to the US at a young age. Both had difficult relationships with their mother and with language, cultivating a need to escape through their second language English. The personal narrative, framed as a letter to the protagonist's

mother in first-person, shows a character who learned English at a young age to serve as a family translator. Throughout the novel, the protagonist wrestles with memories, recounting them with a mixture of certainty and doubt. Vuong describes his journey of storytelling, many pages speaking about wanting to remember, as the writer and the protagonist become one.

In Vuong's own words:

> When I first started writing, I hated myself for being so uncertain, about images, clauses, ideas, even the pen or journal I used. Everything I wrote began with *maybe* and *perhaps* and ended with *I think* or *I believe.* But my doubt is everywhere, Ma. Even 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 I might carry us somewhere else – where, exactly, I'm not sure.
> (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 62)

The novel's protagonist, Little Dog, mirrors Vuong's complex relationship with his own mother. Writing as a means to communicate their shared past, both Little Dog and Vuong write their stories for their mother, uncertain their mothers will ever read their words:

> Ma, I don't know if you've made it this far in this letter – or if you've made it here at all. You always tell me it's too late for you to read, … I know you believe in reincarnation. … Maybe then in that life and in this future, you'll find this book and you'll know what happened to us. And you'll remember me.
> (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 240)

Vuong has also reflected on his mother's inability to read English and her eventual recognition of his work's impact: And you know, my mother, she was never able to read. She got to see the impact of my work. She would go to my readings and turn her seat to the audience. She didn't understand the words (Hsu). This letter-turned-novel remains a private testament, both in the book and in real life, she could understand the significant impact it had on the reader not understanding its content.

Li, like Vuong, has similarities between herself and the protagonist. Not much of the background of the mother is discussed in the book, but the protagonist is also a writer like Li. She too lost her son to suicide. Reflecting on her process, Li emphasizes that writing "Where Reasons End" was a continuation of her lifelong practice of storytelling (Yiyun Li 6). The novel revolves around a woman who struggles with the suicide of her child at the age of forty-four – a fate that Li herself had not foreseen at the same age (Yiyun Li 169). In the narrative, the protagonist's son Nikolai remarks on how the protagonist writes fiction, which Li does too, and that she can make up whatever she wants. Her response emphasizes the novel's blend of fiction and reality: "One never makes up things in fiction, ... One has to live there as one has to live here" (Yiyun Li 168).

The cultural connotations return here, as both Vietnamese and Chinese cultures are known for their views on mental health. Mental health issues often carry a significant stigma in these cultures, and speaking openly about them is disapproved of. The unwillingness to speak openly about mental health and trauma are themes that resonate with this cultural context. Both Li and Vuong navigate their need for openness by stepping into their second language, finding a more open view towards needing psychological help.

Both writers embarked on the challenge of writing novels in their second languages, a decision that involved stepping away from the mother tongue. This linguistic shift enabled them to delve into their inner thoughts without their loved ones being able to read about them,

as their narratives were not written in their mother tongue. This aspect adds a layer of complexity and intrigue to their works.

Vuong and Li show how bilingual writers navigate the complexities of trauma and identity through the medium of the novel. By choosing to write in their second languages, they not only confront personal histories of loss and struggle but also explore the transformative power of language itself. Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and Li's *Where Reasons End* serve as testaments to the ways in which literature exceeds linguistic boundaries to examine deep into the human experience.

Both writers use fiction to cope with their own traumas, blurring the lines between autobiography and creation to write narratives that resonate universally. Through their novels, they navigate the complexities of memory, grief, and self-discovery, offering readers insights into the human condition. Furthermore, their decision to write in a second language emphasizes the complexity of their identities as bilingual individuals, developing their storytelling with influential perspectives and linguistic patterns.

Ultimately, Vuong and Li show that the novel, as a medium, allows for significant exploration of trauma while providing a safe space for self-discovery and healing. Their works not only show the personal dimensions of trauma but also invite broader reflections on language, identity, and the enduring power of storytelling.

A new linguistic context

Vuong and Li needed a private space to recall and process their traumatic memories. What both writers have accomplished is the creation of "a new linguistic context" (Yildiz 164) through the novel form. Yildiz explains how envisioning traumatic memories as if they happened to someone else can aid in their processing. The novel, categorized as fiction, takes on an autobiographical aspect as the stories told are rooted in real experiences. This narrative

distance allows for a fresh perspective on memories, offering a means for the writers to work through their trauma by crafting “a slightly different story” (qtd. in Caruth 154; Janet).

As previously noted, the repetition of memories is essential for processing trauma. It is the experience of the trauma itself and the survival afterward that enables “the ability to work through [which] relies on distorting the literality” (Yildiz 163). The novel serves as an ideal medium for engaging with these recollections (Caruth qtd. in Yildiz 161) demanding the writer to write and rewrite. This repetitive process aims to construct a coherent and chronological timeline of memories, fostering a deeper understanding and expression of these events.

Dewaele and Costa's research highlights how bilingual writers can find a sense of "protection" through linguistic detachment (31). This feeling of safety within their chosen creative space allows writers to position themselves within the novel while simultaneously creating enough psychological distance to process their trauma. Further exploration into the benefits of establishing distance between trauma and the individual will be discussed later.

Additionally, Pierre Janet's work on dissociation[11][12] emphasizes how traumatic experiences can lead to the development of an alternate personality, which is expressed through writing about the trauma. Janet views memory as "an act of storytelling," suggesting that putting traumatic experiences into words and sharing them with others is crucial not only for the historical record of these events but also for the stabilization of personality after the dissociation caused by the trauma (qtd. in Anderson 54; Janet 661). Thus, by narrating their

[11] Trauma-related dissociation is described as “a process in which a person disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, memories, behaviors, physical sensations, or sense of identity”. ISSTD. "Fact Sheet Iii - Trauma Related Dissociation: An Introduction." www.isst-d.org/public-resources-home/fact-sheet-iii-trauma-related-dissociation-an-introduction/#:~:text=Trauma%2DRelated%20Dissociation%20is%20sometimes,is%20like%20%27switching%20off%27. Accessed July 31th 2024.

[12] Dissociation is a division of personality, a lack of cohesion and coordination that occurs under stress and is seen as ‘a core feature of trauma’. Lesley, Joan and Sverre Varvin. "Janet Vs Freud’on Traumatization: A Critique of the Theory of Structural Dissociation from an Object Relations Perspective." *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2016, pp. 436-455.

past experiences to themselves and to others, both Li and Vuong have effectively created a psychological distance from their traumatic events, aiding in the stabilization of their personalities.

The novel demonstrates parallels with the dynamics observed in therapy sessions, functioning as a sanctum where writers can express their trauma to an empathetic audience. This strategic transformation turns the novel into a sanctuary, allowing both Li and Vuong to establish significant emotional distance between themselves and the material they explore. The protagonists they created serve as intermediaries for their traumatic memories, facilitating the writers' deeper engagement with these experiences.

To add, language plays a crucial role here as it is portable, enabling the reliving of memories in the present and their integration into the past through narration. The novel serves as a medium through which these narratives can help ease pain and process trauma. Therefore, memory holds significant importance for the writer as it aids in the processing of trauma. The act of remembering memories can be healing, a viewpoint supported by Janet and Ruth Leys, who argue that narratives enable a form of self-understanding (Janet 661; Leys 117).

Li and Vuong's works affirm this perspective by demonstrating how they find healing and self-understanding through their novels. At the conclusion of both works, the protagonists achieve a sense of peace and closure. For Li, the end came when her son wondered how long she intended for their conversation to last (Yiyun Li 168). Similarly, for Vuong, closure comes as he finishes his letter to his mother, “Then, for no reason, I keep going.” (Vuong *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 241), indicating his ability to move forward after sharing everything with his mother.

In conclusion, Li and Vuong show how the novel, as a literary form, not only serves as a creative outlet but also as a therapeutic tool for processing trauma. Through their narratives,

they navigate the complexities of memory, language, and trauma, ultimately finding healing and closure within the act of storytelling. Their works emphasize the significant capacity of literature to offer comfort, self-reflection, and a path towards emotion recovery.

Time to remember

Anderson emphasizes that traumatic recollection often manifests as an involuntary need to remember. Memory assumes a big role due to the fragmented nature of traumatic memories, which are recalled by the writers without them having a say in the matter. This fragmentation creates a tension between past and present tenses, evident in the narrative interruptions and temporal shifts observed in their stories. These interruptions can challenge the reader's ability to maintain a coherent understanding of the sequence of events (Anderson 116).

As previously noted, *Where Reasons End* shows multiple instances where the protagonist recalls memories. The mother reminisces about her son's childhood while engaging in present-day conversations with him. The narrative goes back and forth between past and present, showing this instability. Similarly, *On Earth* shows the protagonist's flowing movement between past and present, alternating between reflections on his childhood and adulthood experiences.

The protagonists serve as tools through which writers reclaim control over the return of their memories, declaring ownership and authorship over their own stories. This process demands a clear organizational structure to effectively tell the protagonist's narrative journey. As the writer reconnects the dots between memories, their goal is to create a cohesive and meaningful storyline.

However, it is important to note that these narratives are not confined to sadness, tragedy, or difficulty; they possess the potential to be bittersweet and powerful novels. Yildiz points out, and my analysis of *On Earth* and *Where Reasons End* supports, that despite having

themes of suicide, trauma, and immigration, these stories can also contain playfulness, irony, and humor (Yildiz 164).

In conclusion, through the intentional writing of their protagonists' stories, both Li and Vuong show demonstrate how the act of remembering and narrating traumatic experiences can lead to a deeper understanding of personal history while including a range range of emotional tones and literary styles.

The audience

What remains to be explored is the relationship that forms between the reader and the author within the novel. The narrative delves deeply into the inner workings of the writer, offering a raw and introspective exploration of their journey to confront and overcome trauma. This deeply personal engagement inspires the aesthetic experience of the novel with a deep sense of intimacy, projecting the writer's emotions and trauma onto the pages of the novel. As readers identify with the protagonist, they also connect with the writer who has translated their traumatic experiences into a piece of literature.

Furthermore, the reader plays an important role in this dynamic. Just as the novel serves as a therapeutic space similar to a therapist's office, the writer seeks a receptive audience—someone who listens without the need to provide solutions or interventions (qtd. in Anderson 89-90; Brison; Janet). Trauma narratives are crucial in the process of "remaking the self," where the act of narrating becomes as crucial as the act of listening. While finding such an empathetic audience can be challenging, the novel offers an ideal medium. Within its pages, writers can imagine envision a compassionate audience willing to accompany them on their emotional journey.

In conclusion, the novel emerges not only as a tool for personal catharsis and narrative expression but also as a medium vehicle for establishing an important connection between

writer and reader. It provides a safe space where writers can express their trauma while imagining an empathetic audience, creating a dialogue that goes beyond the boundaries of language and experience. Thus, the novel becomes not just a literary form but a transformative space for healing, understanding, and shared human connection.

CHAPTER 6. FICTIONALIZATION AND DISTANCE

What has been overlooked in the study of bilingual trauma narratives, as expressed by Anderson, is the significance of creation within a foreign language rather than just focusing on translation itself. Anderson emphasizes that bilingual writers should be viewed as active participants within their writing processes and personal development within the cultural context of their second language (Anderson 38-39).

This concept resonates with the works of writers like Li and Vuong who present deeply personal trauma narratives. Their bilingual approach to novel writing not only communicates their traumatic experiences but also offers a unique literary perspective that is powerful and enlightening. Through these narratives, readers gain insight into the immigrant experience and the complexities of bilingual trauma.

In her article *Writing Trauma: Aesthetic Experience, projection and the Mechanics of Representation,* Daniela Cârstea explores how novel writing functions as a form of testimony to the realities of trauma. Cârstea cites Cathy Caruth, who argues that trauma testimonies achieve a form of truth that goes beyond what is available as a statement – a truth that emerges through the act of narrating traumatic experiences (Caruth) (qtd. in Cârstea 1).

Caruth's notion of "knowing" suggests that through narrative, writers re-create knowledge of their trauma, making it comprehensible and enabling a deeper understanding of their experiences. The act of writing a narrative becomes a process of being a witness and creating meaning from traumatic events.

In conclusion, bilingual trauma narratives shown by Li and Vuong illustrate the significant impact of novel writing as a medium for exploring and processing trauma. These narratives not only serve as personal testimonies but also expand our understanding of trauma's complexities, offering readers a powerful and empathetic look into the immigrant experience and the transformative power of narrative storytelling.

Fictionalization

The narrative of knowledge described by Caruth is seen by Cârstea as an external world in which the writer can experience their trauma through a colored filter of fantasy (2). In this fictional world, the writer's emotions and thoughts mirror those of the real world. She cites Edgar Allan Poe as an example of an author who uses his novels to process trauma, employing techniques such as dissociation and projection of his personal experiences onto fictional characters. However, unlike Poe, Li and Vuong use this narrative approach not to spiral into dread but to navigate towards resolution.

Anderson labels this process of transforming trauma into fiction as fictionalization, where writers make personal decisions about which events to include and how to interpret their realities (128). In the works of Li and Vuong, I recognize a deliberate technique of using the novel as a medium to process their trauma. They create protagonists who closely resemble themselves, crafting fictionalized narratives that parallel their actual experiences.

Through this lens, Li and Vuong's novels have turned into personalized journeys toward healing. By fictionalizing their traumas, they create narrative spaces where they can explore and confront their deepest emotions. These narratives not only document their personal histories but also provide insights into the universal human experience of trauma and resilience. In doing so, Li and Vuong demonstrate the transformative potential of literature as a tool for processing and understanding trauma.

Fiction for both reader and writer

Anderson discusses literature as a flexible medium capable of fictionalizing reality in ways that engage and captivate readers, a narrative she describes as veridical fiction or truthful fiction (Anderson 62-63). This approach allows writers to interpret and enrich their

experiences, transforming trauma into a narrative that is both entertaining and thought-provoking for readers. Thus, the trauma narrative novel serves as a medium through which both writers and readers can explore the complexities of trauma.

Furthermore, Anderson explores the relationship between reality and fantasy in trauma processing through literature. She argues that the purpose of literature in this context is not just to shock readers with trauma narratives but for writers to express and reclaim their own stories (Anderson 108). The success of trauma processing for writers lies in their ability to convey their stories clearly and authentically to their audience.

Fictionalization, according to Cârstea and Segal, harnesses the imagination to help writers transcend their traumatic experiences through symbolic reparation. It aims to restore their relationship with the past, particularly with their childhood, where memories may have lost their original clarity and satisfaction. Internal objects such as emotions, reactions, and overall mental health may have been compromised or lost due to trauma (qtd. in Cârstea 3; Segal). The novel becomes a creative tool through which writers can repair what has been damaged.

In summary, Anderson's insights emphasize how literature, particularly the trauma narrative novel, serves as a transformative medium for writers to process and communicate their traumatic experiences, offering both catharsis and connection to readers.

The goal for both Li and Vuong is to engage in a heartfelt dialogue with the person they value most in the world – Vuong with his mother and Li with her son – about their trauma. These narratives serve as a tool for processing deeply personal experiences and causes emotional healing. Whether these conversations occurred in reality is not as important to the essential act of telling their traumatic memories through writing.

For Vuong, the act of speaking to his mother through his novel allows him to confront his trauma directly, while Li uses her writing her writing to express her longing and grief to

her deceased son. Both writers use their narratives as a means to gain understanding of their trauma and establish a process of psychological and emotional repair.

Through their novels, Vuong and Li go beyond simple storytelling; they dig deep into their traumatic experiences and discover complicated emotions, battling with the emotions that have shaped their identities. By turning their trauma into narratives, they regain control over their experiences and begin to realign their mental health.

In conclusion, the act of writing these narratives is crucial for Li and Vuong, empowering them to confront, explore, and ultimately transform their traumatic experiences into narratives of healing and resilience. These novels not only show the complexity of trauma but also demonstrate literature's significant capacity to serve as a therapeutic medium for both writers and readers.

CHAPTER 7. IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE

The exploration of bilingual trauma narratives emphasizes a duality experienced by individuals who are part of two cultures and languages. For these writers, language becomes not just a means of communication but a way to move between separate cultural worlds, each filled with memories, emotions, and identities. B.L. Whorf's assertion that different languages correspond to different conceptual worlds resonates deeply here, suggesting that bilingual writers inhabit these worlds as separate sides of themselves – shifting between them as needed, similar to having different personas.

This division is important in understanding how trauma narratives develop in bilingual contexts. By using a foreign language, writers can create a space where traumatic experiences are shaped outside the emotional and cultural context of their mother tongue. This distance allows for a delicate exploration and processing of trauma, offering writers a mental safe space to confront and reinterpret their pasts. The act of narrating trauma in a second language thus becomes a tool for writers to reconstruct their identities and negotiate their histories on their own terms.

The idea of writers choosing their own terms when constructing these narratives is seen in both Li's and Vuong's work. For Vuong, English serves as a refuge from his traumatic memories associated with his native Vietnam, empowering him to create a new identity and creative expression unburdened by past traumas. In contrast, Li, despite experiencing significant personal loss in English, finds her creative voice and healing through this language, disassociating from a mother tongue that no longer aligns with her identity.

The journey of these writers mirrors the broader discourse on bilingualism and identity. Erik Gleibermann's perspective on the split between childhood and adulthood experienced through different languages emphasizes how bilingualism can be both a source of conflict and reconciliation (31). The navigation between linguistic worlds becomes a journey

of self-discovery and creative expression, where the goal is embracing the coexistence of both languages as it is an essential part of the personal and creative identity.

In conclusion, the bilingual trauma narrative offers a lens through which writers can navigate their identities, reconcile their pasts, and reinterpret their traumas. By using the flexibility of language and narrative, these writers transform their lived experiences into powerful testimonies that resonate with readers across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Through their novels, Vuong, Li, and others alike demonstrate how language, trauma, and identity connect to shape gripping narratives of resilience and healing.

The child and the adult identities

When writers navigate between their childhood and adulthood through different languages, they confront the connotations embedded in each linguistic world. According to Gleibermann, the childhood language resonates with "personal phrasing of family intimacy, whether harmonious or conflicted," illustrating how emotions and familial dynamics are intertwined with the childhood language (32).). This connection can infuse the childhood language with emotional weight particularly if it reflects experiences of anger or trauma, serving as a way to revisit and reinterpret past events.

De Zulueta emphasizes the role of language in shaping identity, positing that both the mother tongue and a second language contribute to one's sense of self (De Zulueta; qtd. in Dewaele and Costa 35). The second language can serve as a defense mechanism, creating a more resilient adult identity capable of engaging with past traumas from a safer emotional distance. This protective function becomes clear in literary ventures, where the second language supports exploration and expression of complex emotional experiences without the direct, potentially overwhelming associations of the mother tongue.

Furthermore, Pierre Janet's insights into dissociation highlight how traumatic experiences can fragment an individual's mind, creating a distinct psychological system separate from the conscious self (qtd. in Anderson 52; Janet). This dissociative process, similar to developing an additional personality or consciousness, enables writers to explore their trauma through multiple literary techniques, such as automatic writing and symbolic representation. Caruth and Cârstea further explore this concept, suggesting that fictional narratives serve as vehicles for revisiting and reconstructing traumatic memories within a controlled, creative framework (qtd. in Anderson 52; Cârstea; Caruth).

To summarize, the split between languages allows writers to navigate between their childhood selves, overwhelmed by the emotional complexities of the mother tongue, and their adult selves, armed with the protective distance of a second language. This dynamic not only helps the exploration and resolution of personal traumas but also emphasizes the transformative power of language in shaping identity and helps psychological healing through creative expression.

Code-switching

To further strengthen the idea of bilingual navigating between two separate linguistic identities, recent research highlights how the brain processes and stores languages differently. Marcos and Alpert's findings suggest that the mother tongue and second language are encoded in separate brain areas, indicating that memories associated with each language may also be stored separately (qtd. in Foster 161). This neurological separation implies that accessing memories and emotions linked to trauma may vary depending on the language used for retrieval, potentially influencing how writers engage with and interpret their past experiences.

Expanding on this, Foster discusses the implications of these distinct language codes on recollecting memory, noting that the functional access to experiential memories can be

influenced by the language through which they are recalled (qtd. in Foster 161). This suggests that bilingual writers may experience an interaction between their languages, each offering a unique perspective or emotional distance that allows the processing of traumatic events.

Furthermore, Dewaele and Costa put the detachment effect forward which emphasizes how non-native English speakers employ their second language as a tool for emotional distancing from trauma (Wei Li 14). This process, called code-switching – where individuals seamlessly transition between languages during conversations—allows writers to navigate complex emotional terrain within a therapeutic context. Code-switching thus becomes a strategic technique for bilingual writers to express and explore their trauma from various linguistic points, improving their ability to narrate and make sense of their experiences.

Essentially, the neurological and psychological dimensions of bilingualism provide a good framework for understanding how writers control the duality of language to process trauma. By using different language codes and engaging in code-switching, bilingual writers effectively navigate between their identities, memories, and emotions, thereby transforming their linguistic diversity into a powerful tool for therapeutic expression and narrative exploration.

Continuing from the discussion on bilingual writers and the way they use language in processing trauma, code-switching emerges as a crucial tool. It's noted that while code-switching can sometimes hinder effective communication between bilingual individuals and therapists, writers like Li and Vuong navigate this complexity differently. For them, the ability to seamlessly transition between languages is not a barrier but rather a unique therapeutic technique. With practice, these writers can skillfully move between their language codes, effectively using code-switching to explore and express their trauma independently (Wei Li 14).

This approach contrasts with how therapists initially adapt to multilingual clients, where attunement to language cues improves therapeutic efficacy (Costa and Dewaele 6). However, for bilingual writers engaged in creative expression, navigating between languages helps to get a deeper understanding of their own experiences. Through this process, they internalize their bilingualism as a means to attune more intimately with themselves, using their second language to express emotions and memories that may feel inaccessible or tension within the mother tongue.

In addition, research emphasizes the anxiety-reducing value of narrating traumatic experiences in a second language, especially when the trauma originated from within the mother tongue (Foster 161). This defensive function allows writers to isolate and process trauma outside the linguistic context where it initially occurred, creating a clearer narrative exploration and understanding of conflicted experiences.

P. Imberti's insights on multilingual coping mechanisms further illustrate how individuals create individual identities within each language, leading to transformative shifts in worldview and personal identity (Imberti 71). For Li and Vuong, this possibility for transformation goes beyond personal identity—it empowers them to construct narratives that not only reflect their trauma but also redefine their creative and emotional selves through fictionalized protagonists and narrative exploration.

Within the framework of memory processing, Neuner et al.'s distinction between cold and hot memories provides additional context. Traumatic events stored in hot memory are associated with intense emotions that blur the details of events, such as time, location, and order, often overwhelming individuals during recall (qtd. in Anderson 57-58; Neuner et al. 321). By engaging in narrative reconstruction through their writing, bilingual writers have the opportunity to reframe hot memories into cold memories, effectively restoring clarity and structure to their memories. This process allows them to fill gaps in memory and achieve a

more balanced understanding of their traumatic experiences, free from the overwhelming flood of emotions that characterized their initial recall.

In conclusion, bilingual writers' ability to navigate between languages serves not only as a creative strategy but also as a therapeutic pathway to processing trauma. Through code-switching and narrative exploration, they transform linguistic diversity into a powerful tool for personal and creative expression, offering insights into how language shapes identity and causes emotional healing.

CHAPTER 8. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND SYMBOLISM

To delve deeper into the writing techniques employed by Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong in processing their trauma, it's essential to understand their journeys of understanding within their novels. Throughout this analysis, the term “understanding” has been important, not as just as a simple recognition of events, but as an active process of organizing, analyzing, and restructuring their experiences to achieve clarity and reconciliation (Schmidt 213).

Eva Hoffman's concept of a "second language cure" resonates strongly here, particularly in how both Li and Vuong navigate their traumatic pasts through their second language English. For Hoffman, English represents a space where she can articulate aspects of her identity and experiences that Polish cannot fully encapsulate (Hoffman 271-272). Similarly, Li and Vuong find in English a medium that allows them to explore and express their traumas with a degree of detachment and clarity that may be difficult to describe in their mother tongues.

Vuong expresses his need for understanding the best himself, about a third of the way into the book, saying:

> There is so much I want to tell you, Ma. I was once foolish enough to believe knowledge would clarify, but some things are so gauzed behind layers of syntax and semantics, behind days and hours, names forgotten, salvaged, and shed, that simply knowing the wound exists does nothing to reveal it. I don't know what I'm saying. I guess what I mean is sometimes I don't know what or who we are. Days I feel like a human being, while other days I feel more like a sound. I touch the world not as myself but as an echo of who I was. Can you hear me yet? Can you read me? (Vuong *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 62)

His writing becomes a process of transformation, where the weight of trauma is gradually shed and the words themselves become a means of going beyond its grip on his identity. By the conclusion, he reflects on this journey: "…as if I was no heavier than the words in my name. And like a word, I hold no weight in this world yet still carry my own life." (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 241).

Li, too, grapples with memory and understanding in her own novel:

> I thought about the things I didn't understand. These days they often came back to Nikolai. … How would I know it meant nothing, I thought, when something and nothing seem to be walking hand in hand now, identical twins dressed in each other's outfits.
>
> (Yiyun Li 22-23)

Her memories are unclear. She is not sure if she knows anything, or which memories are important and which ones are not. Her exploration through writing allows her to confront the complexities of memory and emotion, the journey of understanding ending with the realization that: "Words fall short, yes, but sometimes their shadows can reach the unspeakable" (Yiyun Li 167). For Li, writing becomes a lifelong tool for self-exploration and understanding: "I have been writing to prepare myself my entire career." (Yiyun Li 169).

Through their novels, both Li and Vuong demonstrate how writing serves not only as a medium for processing trauma but also as a means of achieving significant self-understanding and emotional reconciliation. The narratives represent the power of language to go beyond cultural and linguistic boundaries, offering a path toward healing and personal growth through creative expression. By engaging with their traumas through their second language English,

they navigate the complexities of memory, identity, and emotion, ultimately finding comfort and clarity in the act of storytelling itself.

Relationship between mother and son

The narratives of Li and Vuong are stories between mother and son, one from the perspective of the son and one from the mother. Both represent the power of language to go beyond cultural and linguistic boundaries, offering a path toward healing and personal growth through creative expression. The Chinese and Vietnamese cultures caused Li and Vuong to look for a narrative that would free them from the connotations about the relationship between son and mother.

The identities of Li's and Vuong's protagonists as immigrants in the West add complexity to their sense of belonging and cultural identity. The tension between these cultural identities adds to their internal conflict and the novel's exploration of identity and belonging.

In *Where Reasons End,* the son, Nikolai, teaches his mother in various and subtle ways in their fictionalized conversations. These lessons are within their dialogue and Li's reflections, providing insights into their relationship and exploration of her trauma and grief. Doubt, sadness, trauma, fears, small arguments, and discussion on the proper use of adjectives – are all established (Yiyun Li 21, 24, 26, 29,). Instead of feeling ashamed of her, she opens herself up and lets' Nikolai teach her, which does not align with the cultural connotations of the mother tongue. The relationship between son and mother changes, going against the cultural connotations of the native culture, causing this relationship to alter indefinitely and for the better.

Similarly, Vuong falls in the position of the teacher, often navigating and translating the world for his mother, who does not speak English fluently. He emphasizes the

complexities of being a linguistic and cultural bridge (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 5, 62, 91, 130, 137). Vuong's relationship with his mother goes beyond language, containing psychological and emotional support. He becomes a caretaker, offering understanding to his mother as she is consumed by her trauma from the Vietnam War.

Both Li and Vuong change the dynamic of their relationship, turning both sons into a translator and caretakers of the mothers. However, this change is influenced by the cultural Chinese and Vietnamese lens, turning their parental sacrifice to good use. The writers' relationship with their mothers reveals the depth of their bond and the complexities of their shared linguistic experience.

Their second language was needed, for both Li and Vuong, to navigate their traumatic relationship with their mother and son. Li's story is about the listening mother, the next generation who does listen to the ones that came before, something that is lacking in the relationship between Vuong and his mother.

Both writers feel liberated from their mother tongue, navigating the connotations of their past to fit the connotations they have learned in their second language. However, the reality is that both writers are more aligned with their native language and culture than they initially considered.

Metaphors

Symbolism and metaphor play crucial roles in the narratives of Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong, enriching their exploration and understanding of trauma through their novels. These literary devices serve as bridges that connect abstract emotions and experiences to tangible objects and natural phenomena, allowing for a deeper engagement with their personal histories.

In discussing symbolism, Segal's concept of "symbolic equations" becomes relevant, particularly in cases where direct symbols may not exist for the original object of trauma (qtd.

in Cârstea 5). This concept is particularly useful in exploring deeply felt traumas, allowing writers like Li and Vuong to express and process their experiences in ways that go beyond literary descriptions.

Metaphors, as highlighted by Neuner et al. provide a pathway for discussing difficult subjects easier (qtd. in Anderson 154). They are frequently used to explain, describe, and convey a multitude of events, circumstances, and most importantly, emotions. (qtd. in Baker 258; Carpenter; Glucksberg and Keysar; Goatly; Rumelhart; Searle; Winner and Gardner). By using metaphorical language, both writers navigate complex emotional experiences, making their trauma narratives accessible not only to themselves but also to their readers.

Andriessen and Van Den Boom emphasize how metaphors convey subjects easier as they play a vital role in one's ability to think in abstract terms[13] (397). This process is crucial for Li and Vuong as they cope with concepts like grief, loss, and identity, translating these indescribable experiences into tangible images that resonate with their audience.

Alexis Kaminsky adds that metaphors offer insights into how individuals perceive and interact with the world around them (69). For Li and Vuong, metaphors serve as tools of self-examination self-expression, allowing them to express emotions and memories that are difficult to explain.

Vuong's use of the macaque monkeys in *On Earth* symbolizes memory as a survival mechanism, reflecting his own quest for connection and understanding through memory. He discussed how these monkeys "employ memory in order to survive" (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 42-43). Vuong uses these monkeys to find someone else who uses their memories to survive them. Here, Vuong is looking for an equal, someone he can relate to and who, in a way, inspires him to do the same.

[13] Abstract terms are explained as things that one cannot see, hear, or touch but that do exist.
Andriessen, D. and M. Van Den Boom. "In Search of Alternative Metaphors for Knowledge; Inspiration from Symbolism." *Electronic Journal of Knowledge Management*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2009, pp. 397-404.

Similarly, his metaphor of immigration as monarch butterflies escaping their old lives illustrates his personal journey of liberation and transformation. Vuong wants to escape from the mother tongue with its cultural connotations. His comparison between a country and a life sentence shows his need to liberate himself from his past.

> The monarchs [butterflies] that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return, and only the future revisits the past. What is a country but a borderless sentence, a life?
> (Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 8-9)

Vuong employs the metaphor to express his immigration to the US, his older family members never returning like the oldest butterflies.

In addition, Vuong uses buffaloes to emphasize his need to escape from his mother tongue, and his mother's culture. He compares the buffaloes running off a cliff with how living his life felt. He must follow his family, just as the buffaloes follow theirs: "… like their family's just going forward and they go with them?"(Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* 236-237). Before, he was concerned that he was following the same path as his family, trapped in the connotations of his mother's culture, like the buffaloes goes down the hill. However, at the end of his journey, he sees how English has empowered him to find his identity, floating into the air, like a butterfly, free from his trauma.

Li, in *Where Reasons End*, employs metaphors to explore grief and loss. Her comparison of falling leaves to the untimely death of her son illustrates her struggle to reconcile the inevitability of loss with the pain of sudden separation. The leaves have fallen, even though it is not autumn yet, using the metaphor to say it was not the time for her son to die. Li recognizes the truth, as "leaves are always falling" (Yiyun Li 35-36).

Li struggles to find the right metaphors to express herself. The concept of grief is often discussed as "coming in waves", and how this metaphor falls short: "… I am not a breakwater, I am not a boat, I am not a statue left on a rocky shore …". However, she finds an accurate metaphor as an erupted volcano, conveying the overwhelming and uncontrollable nature of her emotions (Yiyun Li 56).

Similarly, the comparison between parenting and trees is frustrating to her as parents "put down roots" and she holds on to her samplings, her child. However, her son did not stay in the same place as she did, needing to escape just as she had (Yiyun Li 88). Looking through the possible metaphors, she finds the right one, baking. The idea was right in front of her the whole time, saying baking is like writing, "sometimes the first draft of a story doesn't turn out right" (Yiyun Li 137). Nikolai interrupts her saying: "you cannot revise a cake as you cannot make the same cake twice", but Li can re-experience and reimagine her memories. *Where Reasons End* is her approach to reshaping her memories with Nikolai, hoping that if she says the right things or makes the right move, she can pick him from the page and he would be alive again. However, no matter how carefully she re-measures "the ingredients that made up days and years", it will not make this story turn out any differently " (Yiyun Li 137). Li realizes she can recreate the cake and enjoy it, but she cannot make that first cake again.

Throughout their works, both writers use metaphors deliberately chosen to reshape their narratives and explain the complex emotions associated with trauma. This intentional use of language not only improves their storytelling but also helps to understand and accept their trauma.

Ultimately, symbolism and metaphor in bilingual trauma narratives serve as powerful tools for Li and Vuong to navigate their traumatic memories, offering them pathways to express and process their experiences. By using these literary devices, both writers create connections between their inner worlds and external realities, creating narratives that resonate

deeply with readers while facilitating their own healing processes. As they symbolize their trauma through metaphorical language, Li and Vuong not only communicate the depth of their experiences but also invite others to share in their journeys of resilience and self-discovery.

In their respective novels, Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong use symbolism and metaphor to explore and understand their traumatic experiences. Vuong's use of metaphors like the macaque monkeys and butterflies in *On Earth* shows his journey for connection and transformation amidst trauma. Li, in *Where Reasons End*, uses metaphors involving nature and everyday objects to articulate grief and the complexities of memory and loss.

These literary devices not only empower the narratives of Li and Vuong but also facilitate their personal journeys of healing and understanding. By translating their traumatic experiences into symbolic and metaphorical language, both writers offer readers significant insights into the human condition and the resilience required to confront and go beyond trauma.

In conclusion, symbolism and metaphor play important roles in bilingual trauma narratives, empowering writers like Li and Vuong to navigate the complexities of their inner worlds while inviting readers into a deeper understanding of their experiences. Through these literary techniques, they transform personal pain into universal truths, demonstrating the power of storytelling as a tool for healing and self-discovery.

CONCLUSION

In this work, the exploration of how bilingual writers like Yiyun Li and Ocean Vuong process trauma through English-language novels has uncovered significant insights into the intersection of personal narrative and linguistic identity. The research explored the recognition of trauma within their works, highlighting how memory and the need for remembering play crucial roles in their healing processes. Both authors navigate their traumatic pasts through the lens of their second language, English, which provides a creative space separate from the negative associations of their mother tongues.

The study discussed why Li and Vuong chose the novel as their medium for processing trauma, emphasizing its capacity to create a therapeutic distance from personal experiences. Through fictional protagonists, they explore and express their traumas without directly revealing their own identities, thereby offering a therapeutic medium to both describe and reinterpret their narratives. This approach emphasizes the novel's unique ability to facilitate healing and self-understanding through storytelling.

Furthermore, the research examined the specific techniques employed by Li and Vuong, such as symbolism and metaphor, to express their traumas effectively. These literary devices not only improve their narratives but also provide readers with important insights into the emotional complexities of their experiences. Vuong, for instance, uses metaphors like butterflies and monkeys to symbolize transformation and memory, while Li uses nature and everyday objects to evoke grief and loss.

Ultimately, these trauma narratives not only offer personal catharsis for the authors but also serve as powerful social connections that resonate with diverse audiences. They show how language, particularly a second language, can serve as a medium for creative expression and emotional healing. By embracing their second languages, Li and Vuong show how

bilingualism develops the literary landscape and deepens our understanding of human resilience in the face of trauma.

Notes

[1] Writers who write in two languages, either simultaneously in one work or those who have published books in two languages are titled bilingual writers.

[2] To create a readable and cohesive document, I will refer to Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel* as *On Earth.*

[3] Katherine Anderson recognizes trauma narratives as " a first-person account, marked by challenges to traditional boundaries between fantasy and reality and to time" Anderson, Katherine Elizabeth. "Foreign Writing Agency: Abbas Khider and María Cecilia Barbetta Writing Towards Catharsis in German as a Foreign Language after Trauma." 2017.

[4] Definition: Ellipses are a series of three dots (…) used in writing to indicate the omission of words, a pause, or an unfinished thought. They can serve various functions, such as creating suspense, indicating a trailing off in thought, or showing that part of a quotation has been left out (Dictionary, Collins Online. "Ellipsis". *Collins Online Dictionary* HarperCollins Publishers, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/ellipses.).

[5] Temporal markers in literary writing are words or phrases that indicate the passage of time, the sequence of events, or the specific timing of actions within a narrative. These markers help readers understand when events are taking place and the relationship between different events in terms of time. Temporal markers can be explicit (e.g., specific dates or times) or implicit (e.g., words that suggest a sequence or duration).

[6] “I remember the table. I remember the table made of words given to me from your mouth. I remember the room burning. The room was burning because Lan spoke of fire. I remember the fire as it was told to me in the apartment in Harford, all of us sleep on the hardwood floor, swaddled in blankets from the Salvation Army. I remember the man from the Salvation Army handing my father a stack of coupons for Kentucky Fried Chicken, … “Remember,” you said each morning before we stepped out in cold Connecticut air, “don’t draw attention to yourself. You’re already Vietnamese.” Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous: A Novel.* International edition, Penguin Random House UK, 2019.

[7] Cultural connotations refer to the associations, implications, or meanings that are culturally specific and attached to particular words, symbols, gestures, behaviors, or customs within a society or community. Dictionary, Collins Online. "Connotation". HarperCollins Publishers, 2024, 31 July 2024. These connotations are often shaped by historical, social, political, and linguistic factors unique to a culture.

[8] The term "American dream" refers to the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society in which upward mobility is possible for everyone. Team, Investopedia. "What Is the American Dream? Examples and How to Measure It." Investopedia www.investopedia.com/terms/a/american-dream.asp. Accessed 1 August.

[9] Filial piety in Chinese culture requires children to offer love, respect, support, and deference to their parents and other elders in the family, such as grandparents or older siblings. The idea follows from the fact that parents give life to their children, and support them throughout their developing years, providing food, education, and material needs. After receiving all these

benefits, children are thus forever in debt to their parents. In order to acknowledge this eternal debt, children must respect and serve their parents all their lives. Mack, Lauren. "Filial Piety: An Important Chinese Cultural Value." ThoughtCo www.thoughtco.com/filial-piety-in-chinese-688386#:~:text=Meaning,as%20grandparents%20or%20older%20siblings. Accessed 4 August 2024.

[10] The term speechlessness is not limited to the verbal and can be expressed when speaking about the written form.

[11] Trauma-related dissociation is described as “a process in which a person disconnects from their thoughts, feelings, memories, behaviors, physical sensations, or sense of identity”. ISSTD. "Fact Sheet Iii - Trauma Related Dissociation: An Introduction." www.isst-d.org/public-resources-home/fact-sheet-iii-trauma-related-dissociation-an-introduction/#:~:text=Trauma%2DRelated%20Dissociation%20is%20sometimes,is%20like%20%27switching%20off%27. Accessed July 31th 2024.

[12] Dissociation is a division of personality, a lack of cohesion and coordination that occurs under stress and is seen as ‘a core feature of trauma’. Lesley, Joan and Sverre Varvin. "Janet Vs Freud’on Traumatization: A Critique of the Theory of Structural Dissociation from an Object Relations Perspective." *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2016, pp. 436-455.

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