



ᄁ Mask to be Visible? - Language and Authenticity in Ocean Vuong's Novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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A mask is an object that covers up what's underneath and gives the person who wears it a different appearance to the outside world. If we approach language as a mask, does it merely serve to help the speaker assimilate into a culture, or is it more than that? Language in Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is particularly relevant, as the novel is written in English, not the Vietnamese passed down to the protagonist Little Dog by his mother Rose.

The novel is written in the form of a letter from Little Dog to his illiterate mother. It explores their family history as immigrants from Vietnam living in the US, and centers around Little Dog's relationship to his mother, their new surroundings, and what it means to love. The contrast between Little Dog's inherited language and adopted English runs throughout the novel, serving as a central theme on how he not only identifies himself, but is also identified by others. Key to this is the concept of English as a mask that is brought up at one point in the novel, raising questions about Little Dog's identity and authenticity in using the English language.

In this essay I will argue that Little Dog makes use of and adapts English as the language of his self-representation beyond the point where the language serves purely for his daily communication as the "family's official interpreter" (Vuong 32). I will limit my scope to investigate the image of the mask and its ability to be the medium that represents Little Dog's own reality and values. Firstly, I will refer to Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986) in which he discusses language as a mask – a form of assimilation and conformity. Secondly, I will continue to discuss the topic of self-representation

and visibility in connection to the seemingly contradictory notion of a mask.

Lastly, I will refer to the language of the novel as a representation of Little Dog's English to reiterate my argument that English to him is a way to express himself as an artist.

The role of Little Dog as a translator, primarily for his mother Rose, is introduced when they are grocery shopping and Rose is unable to communicate what she wants to buy. Little Dog is deeply ashamed of his own inability to help his mother in the situation and makes a promise to himself:

That night I promised myself I'd never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you. So began my career as our family's official interpreter. From then on, I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. I code switched. I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours. (Vuong 32)

In this passage, English is treated as an object that one can wear "like a mask." In the literal sense, a mask suggests that reality is hidden underneath, and as Neumann proposes in her article on the mother-tongue and translation in Vuong's novel, this comes with a lack of authenticity (290). She sees that Little Dog's decision to use English in this passage is for practical reasons and that it does not show his 'real self'. Language here can be seen as something that can give the speaker a different identity and, just like a mask, a different appearance to the outside world. For Little Dog, the decision to 'wear the mask' in this situation emerges from his feeling of shame and insecurity, of being wordless next to a mother who has to rely on gestures to try and make herself understood.

Mask Makes Little Dog Visible

The notion of a mask as a tool for social assimilation is not a new one, and can be linked to the ideas of Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon critically observes how colonized people sometimes copy the colonizer's behavior by adopting their language to gain a sense of superiority. He states that a person "betrays himself in his speech" (24) when abandoning his mother tongue to speak and act in a different language, thus suggesting that the true self of the speaker is invisible behind the mask of the colonizer's language. Taking Fanon's view, using English as an adopted language is to betray oneself, and to bury your true identity for social assimilation. But a reading of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* provides a contrasting perspective on the use of language as a mask. Little Dog says that he wants to wear English "so that others would see my face, and therefore yours" (Vuong 32). This idea may appear surprising and thought provoking to the reader as a mask in the literal sense, and as Fanon indicates, would hide and not show a person's face. For Little Dog, English is a way to exist and be visible in the English-speaking world. It may have been put on like a mask, but it enables him to have a voice in a surrounding where he once could only silently stand next to his mother, as if he were invisible.

The theme of visibility is addressed for the first time when Little Dog talks about the origin of his name. His Grandmother Lan gave him an insignificant name on purpose so that he would be protected from evil spirits. It is underlined in the passage that Lan is acting out of love for her grandson on the assumption that being invisible may serve as a strategy for survival: "To love something, then, is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched – and alive" (Vuong 18). Ocean Vuong talks about this in an interview on *PBS*, where he refers to a line in the novel that he himself heard in his childhood: "You're already Vietnamese" (Vuong 224). The word 'already' suggests a sense of shame that is connected to the family's Vietnamese origin. Reading the novel against the backdrop of Vuong's words from the interview can give an interesting perspective, knowing that the novel is semi-autobiographical. Little Dog too seems to grow up with a lack of confidence and a sense of shame which is partially encouraged by his family. Ocean Vuong believes that exactly this question of visibility is something that distinguishes himself as a second-generation immigrant from the generation

of his mother and grandmother.

In making the same distinction between generations as Vuong does, Little Dog's and Rose's perspectives address the concept of English as a mask quite differently. Using English as a tool to handle everyday situations and to stay out of trouble is something that Rose asks of Little Dog very directly. She enforces his use of English as a way to assimilate in the US, along with other rituals such as drinking "American milk" to make him stronger (Vuong 27). But while Little Dog is diligently carrying out the role of his mother's representative and the family's translator, the novel also suggests that the English language holds more meaning for Little Dog than that. He writes to his mother: "They say nothing lasts forever and I'm writing you in the voice of an endangered species. The truth is I'm worried they will get us before they get us" (Vuong 176). Little Dog wants to be heard and makes the decision to write, in order to be heard, understood, and appreciated for who he is. According to Vuong, becoming an artist can serve as a strategy to be visible and recognized: "It is so easy for a small, yellow child to vanish that the hard work, the real work that requires innovation is to be known. And one of the most perennial, powerful ways to be known is to be an artist" (Vuong 5:15). English as the language of Vuong's and Little Dog's writing ultimately appears to be a medium of self-representation rather than one of assimilation.

Being written in the form of a letter from Little Dog to Rose, the novel itself can serve as a representation of the language that Little Dog is using as a writer. As Neumann points out, the novel connects American English to the language of toxic masculinity and violence (291). Little Dog notices how many English phrases that describe success are rooted in destruction: "You killed that poem, we say. You're a killer. You came into that novel guns blazing" (Vuong 179). He ponders over the question whether this destruction is necessary, but comes to the conclusion that to him writing is "getting down so low the world offers a merciful new angle, a larger vision made of small things" (Vuong 189). This 'new angle' creates an atmosphere that provokes and encourages emotion and is non-conforming with the language of toxic masculinity. In that way, the adaptation of the English language by Little Dog transgresses the notion of a mere copy of a language as described by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In an article on Vietnamese American Literature, Viet Thanh Nguyen concludes that

“sometimes the impulses toward collaboration and betrayal are found in the same works” (61). This interplay between two seemingly opposing sides is emphasized in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. Vuong writes in English but makes the language his own and perhaps ‘betrays’ the notion of what American Literature is. By adapting language to illustrate Little Dog’s own reality and system of values, Vuong demonstrates the fluidity and heterogeneity of language in his novel.

To sum up, the novel’s experimental form, frequent poetic digressions, and manipulation of English in order to create a beautiful and personal letter; reinforce Little Dog’s ‘mask’ as one of expression and self-representation, not of conformity under Fanon’s definition. In this yearning for visibility, we can draw parallels to Ocean Vuong’s own history as a writer. On the relationship between language and visibility, Little Dog sees that “sometimes you are erased before you are given the choice of stating who you are” (Vuong 63). He not only chooses to speak for his mother, but also becomes a writer who touches the hearts of others through his words.

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