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# Intersectional Narratives of Migration and Queer Sexuality: A Look into the (Autobiographical) Writings of Ocean Vuong, Saif ur Rehman Raja and Jean-Baptiste Phou

## *Riassunto*

Le narrazioni della migrazione offrono agli autori uno spazio per esplorare identità complesse, intrecciando appartenenza culturale, razza e sessualità, e fungono da ponte tra culture diverse. Questo articolo analizza tre testi autobiografici – *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* di Ocean Vuong, *Hijra* di Saif ur Rehman Raja e *La Peau hors du placard* di Jean-Baptiste Phou – per evidenziare comuni dinamiche all'intersezione tra migrazione ed esperienza queer. Vuong mantiene un legame con il Vietnam segnato da traumi familiari; Raja vive una duplice appartenenza tra Pakistan e Italia; Phou riscopre in età adulta il suo rapporto con la Cambogia e riflette sulla mascolinità asiatica. Tematiche condivise sono il multilinguismo, il razzismo e l'omofobia, ma anche le tensioni familiari, che emergono soprattutto nei momenti di coming out. La stessa crescita sessuale dei protagonisti è segnata da vulnerabilità e violenza, rivelando le sfide intersezionali affrontate da individui queer e diasporici.

## *Abstract*

Migration narratives offer a space for their authors to explore complex identities, intertwining cultural belonging, race and sexuality, and serve as a bridge between cultures. This paper analyses three autobiographical texts – *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong, *Hijra* by Saif ur Rehman Raja and *La Peau hors du placard* by Jean-Baptiste Phou – and tries to highlight common patterns of interplay at the intersection of migration and queer experience. Vuong keeps a link to Vietnam marked by family trauma; Raja experiences a double belonging to Pakistan and Italy;

Phou rediscovers his connection to Cambodia as an adult while reflecting on Asian masculinity. Shared themes are multilingualism, racism and homophobia, but also family tensions, which emerge especially during the protagonists' coming out. Their sexual awakening is also marked by vulnerability and violence, thus revealing the intersectional challenges faced by queer and diasporic individuals.

*Parole chiave*: Saif ur Rehman Raja, Jean-Baptiste Phou, Ocean Vuong, narrazioni di migrazione, letteratura queer, intersezionalità, identità, relazioni familiari, razzismo

*Keywords*: Saif ur Rehman Raja, Jean-Baptiste Phou, Ocean Vuong, migrant narratives, queer literature, intersectionality, identity, family relationships, racism

## *Introduction*

«Although migrants are compelled to move across borders and live in internment camps with little baggage, as if only things and places defined them, they carry with them their stories – stories in which they use their migrant self to put things and places in perspective»[1]. Having risked their life to cross borders, those migrants that turn to writing may also have to cross another border, that of the obstacles posed by the publishing industry, to show how much they treasure the stories they carry with themselves. Stories of migration such as these, however, are only a facet of a larger literary and writing phenomenon, still suffering the stigma of a minor or niche genre, for which many terms have been in use in literary theories, each one delimiting a section of it, such as exile literature, allochthonous literature, hyphenated literature, multicultural literature, to name only a few. Migration writing might be a convenient term to embrace under a "big umbrella" these diverse types of texts. As Joanna Kosmalska has tried to pin down, migration writing is intended to be an intentionally inclusive hypernym that includes a variety of literary and non-literary texts, stemming from autobiography, travel literature and postcolonial literature, published since the 1990s, a period which is made to coincide with the emer-

[1] Boelhower, Zittel 2020, p. 15.

gence of globalisation. Indeed, Gnisci observes that since the early 1990s there have been more and more authors of migrant background producing literary works, often in the language of their "host" country[2]. For example, Ganeri holds that the beginning of migrant literature in Italy should be dated to the 1990s when it first became a subject of literary studies[3]. As for the topic matter, these texts either tackle the topic of migration, even from an external point of view, or emerge from an experience of migration, for example, when the author may be a migrant, or, in the case they are not, it is enough that the work is imbued with a vision of a cosmopolitan, hybrid society[4].

Joanna Kosmalska goes on in her definition by listing a few recurring characteristics of migration writing: the real-life nature of the writing, the multilingualism in the text, reference to multiple cultures/geographical locations, Internet and online communication, common themes and motifs, among which are exploration of belonging and identity issues, intercultural relationships and revision of gender roles[5]. Intuitively, issues related to identity are central to a narrative where different constructions of belonging, knowledge, gender and sexuality clash with one another, if they cannot come to terms with each other in a more peaceful way. Particularly relevant, as Maria Luisa Di Martino points out, are the categories of identity and belonging and the conceptualisation of "home" that challenge the relations of power and oppression, characteristic of migration experiences[6]. Furthermore, the concept of "self-reflexivity" is central in analysing migrant writers' works: it is defined as the act of reflection of writers' subjectivities and their own experiences of migration into literary works, as well as the act of navigating through different personal and collective deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning[7].

2 Gnisci 2017, p. 674.
3 Ganeri 2010, p. 438.
4 Kosmalska 2022, pp. 344-345.
5 Ivi, p. 345.
6 Di Martino 2024, p. 5.
7 Ivi, p. 7.

The texts selected in this article also add another element to the picture, and that is the queer experience. It is not simply an issue of intersectionality, where the protagonists are subjected to discrimination and oppression because of race and, more broadly, culture, on the one hand, and their homosexuality, on the other. Sexuality studies have started to explore how migration is implicated in the construction of sexual identities (for example, other cultures have different categorisations and acceptance levels towards gender roles, other than what is generally perceived as the norm in Western canons of heteronormativity), and at the same time migration scholarship has begun to consider sexuality as an element that structures migration (for example, people who seek asylum on the basis of discrimination for sexual orientation). Nonetheless, one also needs to use the lens of queer migration scholarship, which explores the multiple conjunctions between sexuality and migration, and how overlapping regimes of power and knowledge generate and transform identity categories[8].

Queer migration itself might not necessarily be concerned with the migration of queer subjects (people who, for fear of persecution in their country, or simply for the desire of greater freedom to express their sexuality, gender and subjectivity, decide to migrate) but also with what Gray and Baynham call "queering the migration story"[9], that is, adopting the queer perspective in analysing the issues broadly related to migration. The two authors analyse three cases of queer migration trajectories, i.e., within the borders of a state, usually from a provincial to a metropolitan setting, across states of the European Union and from the South to the North of the world. The texts analysed in the present article offer a more complex scenario since the protagonists either migrate as young children or are born in the host country by migrant parents and come to terms with their queer sexuality as they grow up, still facing different issues of racism, integration and belonging. However, further migrations, or movements, occur, not necessarily motivated by

[8] Luibhéid 2008, pp. 169-170.
[9] Gray, Baynham 2020, p. 3.

a desire of sexual affirmation and fulfilment, but these "travels" are pivotal in the queer becoming of the protagonists, thus stressing the interconnection between migration and identity construction. Indeed, from an intersectional perspective, concepts of identity, changing identities and power are all central to understanding queer migrants' lives as they reflect how these individuals perceived themselves and are perceived by others[10].

The texts selected for this article are:

Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). Vuong is an American Vietnamese poet, who, at age of two, migrated with his family to the United States of America around 1990 due to his mother's mixed heritage and resultant discrimination under Vietnamese law[11]. The story is subtitled *A Novel*, warning about its mixed autobiographical and fictional nature. The protagonist, dubbed Little Dog by his family, tells his story as a letter to his mother, suffering from dementia later in her life, and who is not likely to ever read it – also because of her poor mastery of the English language and illiteracy. The story moves freely among childhood and teenage memories of Little Dog's life in Hartford with his mother, working in a beauty salon, and his grandmother, suffering from schizophrenia. Struggling to fit in as an Asian in the provincial American society and also suffering from abuse at the hands of his mentally ill family, Little Dog finds his first romance in Trevor, a white teenager he met during his summer job in the tobacco fields. Even though the two revel in their mutual understanding and in the fulfilment of their sexual desire, Trevor is dragged down by his consumption of drugs and dies while Little Dog is at college in New York. After describing the last agonising hours and death of his grandmother, Little Dog accompanies his mother to Vietnam to put the old woman's ashes to their final rest.

Saif ur Rehman Raja, *Hijra* (2024). Raja is a Pakistani-born PhD student in pedagogy at the University of Siena. In the book, he tells his story in Italian, beginning with his early years in his native town, Rawalpindi, then his migration to Belluno in North-

[10] Merrill, Fejes 2018, p. 7.
[11] See Armitstead 2017.

ern Italy around 2005, and finally his university years in Bologna. His novel is a narration of dual belonging and of double exclusion, and of the affirmation of his own contaminated identity. His father's decision to move to Italy seeking employment and a better future is part of the Pakistani diaspora in the world.

Jean-Baptiste Phou, *La Peau hors du placard: Asiatique et gay, une vie de lutte* (2024). This author and artist was born in Paris in 1981 from a Sino-Cambodian family, and his text is an autobiography, or a memoir, from his early childhood to his adulthood, conceived as a long search for identity and a place in the world, and also as a meditation where he challenges stereotypical notions of gayness, Asianness and masculinity. Such lengthy reflections are provided with quotations from various sources, such as published essays, online articles, enquiries and videos on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. All these sources place the book within contemporary debates on current topics. His family's migration is part of the Cambodian diaspora following the political instability and the atrocities of the 1960s and the 1970s.

These texts offer a fertile ground for comparison because, despite the many differences, or precisely on account of those, they allow for the identification of similar patterns across different blends of factors, such are the socio-economic contexts of America, Italy and France, on one hand, and the cultural heritage of Vietnam, Cambodia and Pakistan, on the other. In addition, this would also be an occasion to reproduce and deconstruct the opposition West-East that Said analyses in his *Orientalism* (1979): what emerges here is a commonality of attitudes towards non-conformative sexuality, which are more typical of patriarchy rather than individual cultures or grouping thereof. The texts thus interrogate traditional conceptions of masculinity as a product of the disturbing effect of migration on notions of gender, class and race, a field, as Wojnicka and Nowicka stress, which are understudied[12]. The three texts will be comparatively analysed according to the following areas: how the texts fit in the definition of migration writing, with special

[12] Wojnicka, Nowicka 2022, p. 234.

attention to the category of autobiography; the choice of language(s) to give voice to these accounts of self-reflexivity; experiences of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and sexual orientation, also seen in their intersectionality; the relationship between family, home culture and gender expectations, with a focus on the scene of the protagonists' coming out; and how the romantic and sexual experiences, as well as the queer becoming of the protagonists, is marked by violence and vulnerability on account of intersectional issues of race and sexuality.

## 1. *From Life to Literature: Framing the Novels as Migration Writing*

The selected texts, while telling individual and unique stories positioned in different social and geopolitical contexts, clearly exhibit, to varying degrees, the elements proposed by Kosmalska for migration writing, which we have discussed earlier. While only Raja personally experienced the migration journey (Vuong being too young to remember, Phou having been born in Paris), both he and Vuong detail their adaptation process, and all three experience discrimination and prejudice. All three texts exhibit a real-life nature of writing, even though they position themselves differently vis-à-vis the category of autobiography, where, as Kosmalska warns, a fictionalised rendering of migration with more or less pronounced literary aspirations does not exclude the truth about the migration issues that the author wants to discuss[13]. Of the three texts, Phou is the most certainly autobiographical, also on account of his scholarly accuracy in providing his sources. Vuong has certainly produced literary fiction, where a good portion of autobiographical elements seem mixed with rewritten or invented ones, as well as with experimentalism and poetry. For example, Vuong's younger brother does not appear in the novel, while the character of Trevor is a composite of many boys whom the author met[14]. Raja may be positioned in the middle, with an appearance of real-life events, but construct-

[13] Kosmalska 2022, p. 345.
[14] Allardice 2022.

ed with an eye to a pleasant, entertaining style. Internet and online communication also have an impact on the structure of the works: Vuong learns from a post on Facebook that Trevor has died and is compelled to send him a text message, wishing for him to come back, only to be afraid that he might reply. As for Raja and Phou, they both use gay dating platforms, where they experience racism within the gay community.

## 2. *Linguistic Choices and the Negotiation of Identity*

Language, in the context of migration and queer self-fashioning, is never a neutral medium: it becomes a site of both struggle and assertion, a tool through which identity is expressed, negotiated and sometimes constrained. In the three texts, linguistic choices reflect complex relationships with cultural heritage, national identity and the desire to be heard and understood within dominant societies. All three authors notably utilise the language of their respective host countries, thereby directly addressing the society into which they have assimilated. Multilingualism is also incorporated in the narrative, even though with some nuances due to the different circumstances and intentions.

Phou was born in France and educated in French. However, within his larger family of Sino-Cambodian origins, cousins cannot communicate in Chinese because they speak different dialects. There is a somewhat humorous scene when a child Phou misunderstands the question «Are you gay?» for «Are you happy?» and the giggle following his affirmative reply leaves him wondering what signs may have betrayed him[15]. Apart from a couple of instances, the text is in fact monolingual, and the author does not mention his ability to speak Cambodian. It is quite revealing that during one of his visits to Cambodia, he refers to it as «pays détesté, fantasmé, retrouvé»[16]. In another work of his, however, *80 mots du Cambodge* (2023), he carries out the task of exploring Cambodian culture through a number of significant words. Here, on the other hand, he does not feel

[15] Phou 2024, p. 15.

[16] «hated, fantasised about, found again country» (ivi, p. 98).

the need to bridge the Cambodian, the Chinese, and the French cultures, having a solid conviction of being primarily French (by his own admission, when he was in Spain, he used to tell people he was French[17]).

Radically different is the use of language for Vuong and Raja. Both experience a dual belonging and learn the language of their host country at school. To write and to publish a work in the language of the identity that they have struggled to acquire is, as Jesse van Amelsvoort puts it, an act of citizenship – not a formal, but a symbolic one[18], one that signals, however, their full mastery of their second language, which they have taken pains to learn and for which they have suffered discrimination. Thus, addressing the host society in its language, they also offer knowledge of their respective cultures of origin so as to familiarise their readers with them, with the purpose of shortening the distance between cultures and paving the way to a more inclusive, multicultural society.

Vuong's process of mastery of the English language parallels his process of integration but also continues towards its appropriation as an expressive and artistic medium. He even experiments with narrative devices in his attempt to adopt a second-person narration, an almost impossible task. When the narrator is retelling some event where the mother is a character, she being also the narratee, the second person singular is employed, as in this passage: «That time at the Chinese butcher, you pointed to the roasted pig hanging from its hook. "The ribs are just like a person's after they're burned." You let out a clipped chuckle, then paused, took out your pocketbook, your face pinched, and recounted our money»[19]. This is paired with another impossibility, i.e., that his mother is unlikely to read or understand the letter so addressed to her, something which is plainly expressed through an oxymoron when he states: «What matters is that all of it, even if I didn't know it then, brought me here, to this page, to tell you everything you'll never know»[20].

17 Phou 2024, p. 65.
18 van Amelsvoort 2019, p. 153.
19 Vuong 2019, pp. 8-9.
20 Ivi, p. 15.

The novel features two sections which are characterised by a sequence of short paragraphs, sometimes just one or two phrases, that reminisce of poetry[21]: not surprisingly, since Ocean Vuong is primarily a poet. The poetic nature of the language emerges in the rhythm of the prose, in the vivid imagery, and in the tentative, playful new associations of words. We can see as an example the sentence «The first time you hit me, I must have been four. A hand, a flash, a reckoning. My mouth a blaze of touch»[22], which is the beginning of a series of paragraphs on different memories anaphorically linked with the repetitive use of the word "time" («That time […] I,» «The time you threw…,» «Then the time with the remote control»). Elsewhere, he plays with the word "monster": when he tells his mother she is not a monster in reply to her self-deprecation as a good mother, he adds that he has lied, taking the words in its Latin and Old French etymology, where he concludes that «To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once»[23]. He then connects this commentary to a later episode: «At recess the next day, the kids would call me *freak*, *fairy*, *fag*. I would learn, much later, that those words were also iterations of *monster*»[24]. This imaginative and metalingual use of language is what enables him to make sense of his life experiences and look for his identity. The text also meditates on the function of reading, writing and how he came to be a writer, especially how he enrolled in a degree in English and how literature saved his life: «reading obscure texts by dead people, most of whom never dreamed a face like mine floating over their sentence, and last of all that those sentences would save me»[25]. However, he glides over how he actually became a writer, saying that he explained the reason in an earlier draft of this letter, long deleted. The novel itself starts with the phrase «Let me begin again»[26],

[21] Ocean Vuong is a prolific poet and essayist; his first collection of poetry, *Burnings*, was published in 2010, while *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is his debut novel. His second novel, *The Emperor of Gladness*, was published in 2024.

[22] Vuong 2019, p. 5.

[23] Ivi, p. 13.

[24] Ivi, p. 14.

[25] Ivi, p. 15; italics in the original.

[26] Ivi, p. 3.

and the same words are repeated in the third section of the novel. The process of writing is thus thinly woven into the fiction, perhaps to stress its strained and painful nature, as it is connected to memory and to the very search for identity: it is through language and writing that the author/narrator/protagonist crystallises his innermost self. Also, he is providing his mother an eternal life in the pages of his work of fiction: «They say nothing lasts forever and I'm writing you in the voice of an endangered species»; thus we understand the force and the urgency of the imperative «Write that down»[27] as a self-imposed duty to turn his experience into a literary work.

Multilingualism is also part of the exploration of identity through a metalinguistic use of language. Vuong inserts some short phrases in Vietnamese that his mother utters, or that he finds interesting in the course of his narration. For example, he explains that the Vietnamese word *nhớ* means both to miss someone and to remember. When his mother asks him on the phone if he is missing her, he flinches, thinking that she may mean if he remembers her; his aphoristic commentary is «I miss you more than I remember you»[28]. Since his mother and grandmother only speak Vietnamese, or very little English, especially in their first years in America, Little Dog is frequently asked to translate, even when the lack of proper linguistic and translation skills put him as a child in a difficult position. Sometimes, he uses that as a shield for his mother, such as when he found an offensive, homophobic writing on their front door and he translated it as "Merry Christmas," and even interpreted the red paint as a sign of good luck[29]. He is thus put in an ambiguous position by his mother: Little Dog is the linguistic bridge between his family and American society, but he is also clearly marked as other. As his mother tells him, «don't draw attention to yourself. You're already Vietnamese»[30]. The same thought is elsewhere internalised by Little Dog, regarding his relationship with white, American Trevor: «You and I, we were American

[27] Ivi, p. 176.
[28] Vuong 2019, p. 186.
[29] Ivi, p. 181.
[30] Ivi, p. 219.

until we opened our eyes»[31], referring to the unifying power of speaking the same language. However, his mother, as usually happens with people in a diasporic community, is undergoing the well-known phenomenon of language erosion, something Little Dog notices: «When it comes to words, you possess fewer than the coins you saved from your nail salon tips»[32]; he then goes on to say that his mother is also starting to rely on him when she does not remember a word in Vietnamese, such as when she asked for the name of a beautiful bird – of course, the son can only provide the English for it, which she soon forgets. These examples reinforce the idea of how the acquisition of the language of the host country is itself a process of negotiation of identity, and one that is never a peaceful one.

Raja's novel linguistically expresses the dual identity of its author, Pakistani and Italian, in the double numbering of the chapters in the Arabic and Latin-based scripts[33]. The chapters numbered in Arabic relate to events in Pakistan, while in the case of chapter ".٨" (this is the number corresponding to "eight" in the Latin script) the description of the festivity of Eid in Italy stresses the isolation from and/or the exclusion by Italian culture, as well as a sort of familial sanctuary into Pakistani culture. The title, *Hijra*, is a derogatory term for a gay, effeminate person. Flung at him by his father, the author decided to own it as a way to exorcise its negatively defining power: this is another instance of the force of linguistic choices in relation to the construction of identity. Raja's recourse to Urdu is otherwise more limited, apart from his use of kinship terms. He consistently refers to his relatives with Urdu words, but he points out that while he calls his mother *amma*, his younger brothers, who have been living in Italy before him and since a much younger age, call her with the Italian referent, *mamma*: a difference that sets

31 Ivi, p. 185.

32 Ivi, p. 29.

33 The first chapter is thus a chapter ".١" (number "one" in the Arabic script), while the second chapter is still numbered "1." but in the Latin script, and so on. From the number "11." only the Western numbers are used. Each page is however numbered in both scripts, e.g. "76 - ٧٦".

apart their respective paths of integration into Italian culture[34]. Another relevant aspect is the incorporation of Italian regional varieties in the narration, more specifically in Puglia. In Chapter 16, his college friend Pierpaolo has invited him to his parents' house near Gallipoli and the Italy that he experiences there feels like home to him. First the sun-scorched, dusty landscape and the houses, with flat roofs that serve as terraces, remind him of Pakistan, as opposed to the wetter, greyer climate of Northern Italy. Secondly, the conception of family and of how to welcome guests in Southern Italy also draws a parallel with the customs of Pakistan. In fact, Saif even recognises the same migration dynamics as his friend Pierpaolo, originally from Puglia but studying in the city of Bologna, when his friend's mother says: «Devi andare a salutare i nonni e gli zii. Altrimenti cosa dicono, che è tornato da Bologna e non ci viene nemmeno a salutare? Che è diventato così bolognese?»[35]. The incorporation of the Southern dialect, which Saif can barely understand, thus signals his discovery of how Italian society is multifaceted and potentially more inclusive than he had previously thought.

### 3. *Discrimination: Intersecting Racism and Homophobia*

The intersection of racial, cultural and sexual exclusion creates a unique site of vulnerability for the queer migrant, exposed to forms of discrimination that often intertwine racism with homophobia. These, in turn, influence how each protagonist shapes his view of his appearance, belonging and, more broadly, identity. The experiences of racism as presented in the three texts have as a common element the colour of the skin, and since physical appearance is considered essential in finding partners, discrimination on the basis of ethnicity is also featured, although only in *Hijra* and *La Peau hors du placard*. This only paves the way to a more generalised discrimination

[34] Raja 2024, p. 129.

[35] «You have to go and greet grandparents, aunts and uncles. Otherwise, what will they say? That he is back and does not want to come to say hi? That he's lost his origins?» (ivi, p. 202).

based on cultural differences and stereotypes, to which the authors oppose concepts of contamination and hybridisation as tools to reshape their respective societies.

In *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous*, Little Dog appears to have internalised "racial difference" soon after his arrival on account of his mother's commentaries that his physical appearance betrayed him as Vietnamese, that he is conscious of his «rare features in these parts»[36], which he tried to hide in order to avoid bullying by other kids. The acts of bullying involved physical threats and violence, as well as the injunction to speak English, because in a multicultural society proficiency in the dominant language can mark out who has been born there and who has not. His mother's suggestion is that he has to be a real boy and be strong, which has the undesired effect of turning the issue of racism into one of intersectionality. In the case of people of East Asian or Southeast Asian origin, says the narrator, they are racialised as being yellow. He then cites a case in which an unnamed Chinese body in 1884 was not considered a case of murder, because, he reports, the law considered a human only as White, African, American or Mexican[37]. It is typical enough that East Asians and Southeast Asians are mistaken for Chinese, as is the case with Little Dog when he meets his Mexican co-workers at the tobacco plantation: they call him Chinito, and he decides not to correct them, also because they do not have a language in common[38]. His mother, whose skin tone was considerably lighter due to her American heritage, had suffered opposite racism as a girl in Vietnam, when kids wanted to get the white off her skin with spoons, and her family tried to make her *brown again* by applying buffalo dung on her face[39]. Racism may also come in the form of more subtle, apparently harmless commentaries: when Little Dog goes for a walk with his American grandfather Paul, a neighbour mistakes him for a dog boy, and greets him

36 Vuong 2019, p. 24.

37 Ivi, p. 63.

38 Ivi, p. 87. It is to be noted, though, that in some American countries the word "chinito" can also be used as a term of endearment.-

39 Ivi, pp. 61-63.

by articulating every syllable[40]. Paul's reaction is to state that he is his grandson. The neighbour changes her attitude and welcomes him again, speaking normally, and adding that she really meant to be welcoming. The neighbour's commentary may feel offensive, because it implies that, if a foreign-looking boy is walking with an elderly white man, their relation is more likely to be professional[41] rather than affective, of friendship or family relation. It must be noted that, in the fiction, Paul is not Little Dog's biological grandfather, and that when he married his grandmother, she was already pregnant with another American soldier's baby. This recognition of Little Dog as Paul's grandson thus takes on a symbolic meaning and embodies the wish for acceptance of all migrants by American society.

In *Hijra*, Saif's arrival in Italy is initially described as a second birth, though it turns out to be more problematic. As soon as he approaches Italian society, Saif records a generalised sense of being different and unwelcome, starting from the mispronouncing of his name, which he as a young boy interprets as a possible sign of antipathy[42]. At the onset of puberty, the growth of bodily hair becomes a further motive of refusal by his peers, under a general prejudice that he is dirty and smells bad. He then compares himself with his only friend Filippo: «se Filippo ruba una caramella, la ruba lui e basta. Se la rubo io, la rubiamo noi pakistani, tutti»[43]. The bias of generalisation provokes in him a sense of responsibility, as if he was constantly under scrutiny, and felt like an "ambassador of his country." His physical appearance, together with his provenance, creates obstacles to finding a job as a waiter: one restaurant owner blatantly tells him that customers do not want to be served by foreigners[44]. His eating habits are also a source of prejudice and racist commentaries. The first time he eats in an Italian house at Filippo's, he finds it difficult to eat spaghetti with a fork, since

[40] Ivi, pp. 63-65.

[41] We can expand this case to professions of assistance and care, for example.

[42] Raja 2024, p. 52.

[43] «if Filippo steals a candy, he steals it and that is all. If I steal it, all of us Pakistani steal it» (ivi, p. 70).

[44] Ivi, p. 174.

they usually eat with their hands in Pakistan. Filippo's mother comments: «Che strano. La civiltà deve ancora arrivare lì, immagino»[45]. This generates a sense of guilt in him because he has not been able to blend in with the locals, so as not to have others mark him out. He feels that only if he behaves in a certain way, can he be accepted. Additionally, his Muslim prohibition to eat pork and obligation to eat halal meat cause unwanted attention and create occasions in which he is left out, such as when his schoolmates forget to prepare food that he can eat. Most importantly, he feels fed up with the continuous jokes about his eating prescriptions[46]. Growing up in Italy, he feels anxiety and resentment at this stereotyped gaze of people: «Agli occhi della gente, noi siamo tutto: proiezioni, aspettative, paure, angosce, curiosità, gruppi, etnie, religioni, colpevoli, incivili, animali. Agli occhi della gente, noi siamo tutto, fuorché esseri umani individuali»[47].

One episode shows a series of racist and homophobic acts that intersect with one another: one morning, when he is seventeen and already out of the closet, Saif is beaten by three boys of his age, one of whom he had contacted on Grindr. The attack is accompanied by homophobic insults and is motivated by the suspicion that Saif might have outed one of these boys to their friends, even though this is not the case. Saif explains to himself: «E non tollera che la sua virilità venga macchiata. Lui è un uomo vero. Lo dimostra prendendomi a botte»[48], thus positioning the event in the context of a model of toxic masculinity. However, even at the police station he feels disrespected, discriminated against and unprotected. First, it is because the police officer addresses a boy of Saif's same age with the courtesy pronoun *Lei*, while he addresses him with the second personal singular *tu*, which in Italian may indicate an asymmetric relation of

[45] «How strange it is. Civilisation still has to arrive there, I think» (ivi, p. 72).

[46] Ivi, p. 123.

[47] «Within the gaze of the dominant society, we are everything: projections, expectations, fears, anguish, curiosities, groups, ethnicities, religions, culprits, uncivilised, animals. In people's eyes, we are everything but individual humans» (ivi, p. 175).

[48] «And he does not tolerate the idea that his virility is stained. He is a real man. He shows that by beating me» (ivi, p. 162).

subalternity. Then, the police hypocritically insinuates that he may have done something to provoke the beating and suggests he maintains a lower key profile as regards his sexuality. Finally, Saif relates an experience of racism he suffered on the popular gay chatting app Grindr, where someone tells him with surprise: «Sei bello per essere pakistano»[49]. Here migration and queer issues clearly intersect because the apparently innocent remark implies a categorisation of beauty and desirability based on ethnicity.

Only later, at the university, will a more welcoming and accepting group of friends help him build a sense of confidence and self-acceptance. The novel ends in a scene where reconciliation with his family and his double belonging are epitomised by the joint celebration of Eid by family and friends. This scene shows how contamination is a tool for survival and a wish for a renewed society, not just a byproduct of migration, as Raja claims when he says: «Il tempo dei non contaminati è scaduto. Ora il mondo appartiene ai meticci»[50], where the mix implied in the word *meticci* is not biological but cultural. Therefore, his identity is defined by being other and beyond his Pakistaniness and Italianness, where hybridisation and contamination are a way to bypass the Enten-Eller approach and move towards the search for a unique balance based on personal choice. A powerful image offered is that of food and cooking. Saif repeatedly emphasises the worship-like attention given to spices in Pakistani cuisine, which he pairs with his acquired respect of Italian traditional cuisine: if for Pakistani Saif the already-mixed spices called curry to be found in supermarkets in Italy are disappointing, the same could be said of pasta with ketchup for his Italian self. The contamination is taken a step further in the already mentioned scene of the Eid celebration, where Italian people have wine and pork at the same table with Muslim people, while some dirty their fingers by eating with their hands, as is customary in Pakistan. This symbolises the

[49] «You are good-looking to be Pakistani» (ivi, p. 195).

[50] «The time of the pure race has expired. Now the world belongs to the mixed race» (ivi, p. 221).

freedom of choice deprived of any judgment of value that the author wishes will inform our future society.

The same case of intersectional discrimination experienced by Saif can be found in *La Peau hors du placard*, where Phou meditates on biological racism. Having also experienced repeated rejection in the gay community on the basis of his ethnicity («*Désolé, pas branché Asiatique*»)[51], Phou argues that even though refusal of an entire ethnic group in the romantic sphere is generally accepted as a matter of personal taste, this should actually be considered as an act of racism[52]. He then goes on specifically analysing the widespread idea of Asian masculinity, which, in his opinion, stereotypes Asian men as hard working, obedient, almost effeminate or certainly lacking in virility. This, transposed into the gay community, fits the sexual category of the passive and extends to an exoticisation of the Asian male body: the term *Asiaphile* refers to such a niche preference[53]. His conclusion is that the gay community reprises and reinforces heteronormative models where the so-called alpha male, in addition to being exalted, is also elevated to object of desire for gay men[54]. His considerations on this regard might be taken as an example of the concept of surface in Henning Bech's discussion of masculinity: in the urban space where everyone is a stranger – and we might extend the same to dating apps – the surface of people becomes the object of a gaze that operates an aesthetic evaluation, which paves the way to a second process, a sexualisation of the other, that is, an evaluation on terms of potential sexual attraction[55].

Episodes of discrimination based on ethnicity and sexual orientation vary during his life. He relates when, as a child, he received homophobic insults by schoolmates and teachers alike[56], while racist stereotypes appear later, as we have seen in relation to the experiences he has on dating apps, but also at work, when

51 «Sorry, not interested in Asians» (Phou 2024, p. 27; italics in the original).
52 Ivi, pp. 28-29.
53 Ivi, p. 36.
54 Ivi, p. 52.
55 Bech 2014, p. 15.
56 Phou 2024, p. 16.

he is reproached for not being submissive and silent as his Asian colleagues are[57]. Real fears of homophobia and racism emerge much later, in his late thirties. The former does when, during an interview, he is worried that openly talking about his gayness may expose him to discrimination or hatred, even though he admits that during his travels in the 2010s he had never experienced homophobia. As for the latter, he notices a resurgence of racism in Paris in 2016, especially against Asians, when a woman in the metro tells him «Retourne chez toi, sale chinetoque»[58], a sentiment which is exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. An interesting aspect of racial stereotypes is one happening within the Asian community: perceived as a homogenous group by Westerners, different ethnicities actually have long-lasting grudges against one another, such as that of both Chinese and Cambodians against the Vietnamese, a hatred that dates back to ancient history, and which is made visible in Phou's family's prohibition to marry these «ennemis héréditaires»[59].

The relationship of Jean-Baptiste with a white, European man provides a more specifically intersectional example of migration and queer issues. In one occasion, common friends warn him that the relationship may not last because Jean-Baptiste risks being replaced, as if he were a gold-digger and had no such power of decision, even though he is earning more than his companion. Another aspect is the different treatment that they receive during a trip of theirs to Sri Lanka: Phou is more frequently checked at the airport, while in restaurants waiters address the white man, following the prejudice that it is he who has the money, makes decisions and speaks English. A conclusive remark could be Phou's reflections on a campaign launched in France on social media, *Yellow Is Beautiful*, that sought to reveal how Asian men can be beautiful and manly. In his eyes, this is only a way to transpose the Western model of the muscular man and the alpha male to Asian individuals. He previously commented on how Asians in their countries try

[57] Ivi, p. 62
[58] «Go back to where you came from, dirty Chink» (ivi, p. 132).
[59] «age-old enemies» (ivi, p. 13).

to whiten their skin to mark themselves out, something that Asians in Western countries do not do, as this would make little sense[60]. His conclusion is that there is no need to have our ideas of beauty validated by others. Beauty can have many forms, and it is up to us to reveal it, on our terms[61].

## 4. *Family, Acceptance and the Coming-Out Narrative*

In these coming-of-age narrations, family plays a central, yet ambiguous role, for multiple reasons. Family is archetypally the place of affections, of nurture and of safety, but the families represented here are tainted by trauma, mental diseases or toxic models of masculinity. As regards migration, in a context of separation from the country of origin, the family tethers new generations to the old culture, together with their childhood memories of it, so that the protagonists often experience a distorted version of the culture of origin. The coming-out of the protagonist is a point of rupture of a tension between social expectations enforced by the family and a desire to be accepted unconditionally.

In the case of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Little Dog's knowledge of Vietnamese culture and language come from his mother and grandmother, both suffering from post-war trauma, and the latter also from schizophrenia, so much so even readers with little to no knowledge of Vietnam may doubt the authenticity of some of grandmother Lan's memories (for example, the jasmine tea rice[62]). When the mother behaves violently towards her son, she often fails to acknowledge her acts, but is certainly aware of them – such as when she wondered if she was a monster instead of a mother. In other regards, even though Little Dog admits that in Vietnamese culture mutual feelings are not expressed verbally between family members[63], his mother represents a reference for him in moments of acute

60 Ivi, p. 78.
61 Ivi, p. 140.
62 Vuong 2019, p. 8.
63 Ivi, p. 33.

pain, such as when he comes home after Trevor's death, or after the race-motivated bullying on the bus. Furthermore, Vietnamese traditional culture expresses very definite gender roles, such as that boys and men need to be strong, while women must show devotion to their family, as it is encapsulated in what is offered as a traditional saying: «A girl who leaves her husband is the rot of the harvest»[64]. On these premises, we can better understand the scene of Little Dog's coming out. He simply begins by saying he does not like girls, preferring to avoid using a common Vietnamese word for gay that is derived from French *pédéraste*, an «epithet for criminals»[65]. He then continues by specifying that he likes boys. His mother seems to pay little attention and changes the topic, later showing that her real concern is that he may cross-dress, an act that might threaten his life. He assures her by promising that he will not do so. The mother then asks when all of it started, since she is sure to have birthed a normal, healthy boy, at which the narrator replies[66] by jumping back to a scene in primary school when Little Dog had a sort of a crush for a school mate, Gramoz, of Albanian origins, implying he was born gay. At this point, his mother turns the conversation to her own confession; her secret is that she was forced to miscarry an older son than him. «My jaw clenched. This was not supposed to be an equal exchange, not a trade. […] We were exchanging truths, I realized, which is to say, we were cutting one another»[67]. The narration jumps again in the past, when Little Dog was bullied for having a pink bicycle: here, he implies that, if anything, it was she who had exposed him to dangers of discrimination. The scene ends with Little Dog showing how he had already broken the promise of not dressing as a woman and would do so again. What he gathers from the exchange is that it is he who has to take care of his mum, to conceal what she cannot understand, out of love for her, as he had been

64 Ivi, p. 39.

65 Ivi, p. 130.

66 The choice of the word *reply* is motivated by the fact that the narrator is addressing his mother. The reply is thus not present in the original dialogue, but in the letter, he is fictionally writing.

67 Ivi, p. 133.

doing since he was a little boy by translating English for her. As Sara Soler i Arjona argues[68], Vuong's continuous pull towards the past and the intricate, non-linear tapestry of memories that make up the fabric of the novel disrupt the teleological narrative of progressive assimilation prevalent in refugee discourse and demonstrates how refugeehood for Vuong is not finite but necessitates a continuous search for healing and resilience. The evocation of the past, with its double focus on trauma and healing, gives us a picture where history, memory and identity are certainly not fixed as part of the migration experience.

In *Hijra*, family similarly pulls the strings of the story and act as a place where different expectations meet, clash or face disillusionment. The story starts with the family decisions that led to the union of Saif's parents: he describes himself not as the fruit of love, but of his parents' conjugal duty, of his grandfathers' friendship, of his grandmothers' calculations and of Allah's mercy. His birth, him being the firstborn, is charged with expectations from the family, which will later clash with his emerging queer identity.

Saif's father embodies a definite model of masculinity, so much so as to appear stereotyped: seemingly cold and detached, physically and emotionally absent from Saif's life – he leaves his family in Pakistan to start working in Italy –, in addition to the fact that he is also violent against his children. His wife explains this is how he has been taught, i.e., to repress emotions, especially pain and anger, and to only use the language of violence[69]. Saif admits he does not want him as his father. Additionally, Saif has another model imposed on him: that of the eldest son, who has the responsibility to continue the family line and to be an example to his younger brothers. This sense of self-sacrifice emerges when he is only nine years old and he volunteers to be the one to remain in Pakistan while his mother and his brothers would follow their father to Italy.

His relationship with his mother is different, also because Saif, since he was child, has interiorised feminine models. In

[68] Soler i Arjona 2024, p. 2.
[69] Raja 2024, p. 144.

particular, he and his mother share a passion and devotion for cooking, and in choosing to take her son to the kitchen with her, *amma* Shakeera consciously tries to break the chain of toxic masculinity. That is why Saif expected understanding when he decided to come out to her. In fact, the mother responds unexpectedly in a violent way, by distancing him and with her first slap to him, and three weeks of silence. But this is a time where her heart is hosting a battle between her convictions – that being gay is a disease and a sin – and the love for her child. She asks him for time, and eventually she will manage to accept him and, after the scene of the group beating at the station, to unfold her unconditioned love to him. Saif's love for his mother becomes a devotion for a person whom he now considers a goddess, for her infinite capacity to love.

Her love extends to mediating the situation with her husband, whose reaction, unsurprisingly, was one of refusal. He even puts the blame on the mother: «Mia moglie ha dato vita a un *hijra*. Allah ha maledetto questa casa dandomi un mezzo uomo»[70]. Here Raja seems to reinforce the stereotype that Muslim masculinity is by default heterosexual, homophobic and a threat to gender equality, treating women disrespectfully[71]. However, the author manages to show the superior transforming power of his mother's model, proposing her behaviour as a way out of that model of patriarchal masculinity that he is actively involved in deconstructing.

As for *La Peau hors du placard*, this is the text that dwells the least on the relationship between the protagonist and his family and expresses next to nothing of the culture of origin. However, familial expectations and lack of acceptance are responsible for the unfolding of many of the events narrated. The text opens with the expression of the author's mother's expectations on her son: «*Tu te marieras avec une femme chinoise*»[72], which has the effect of creating a barrier to the young Jean-Baptiste who,

[70] «My wife gave birth to a hijra. Allah has cursed this house by giving me a half-man» (ivi, p. 93).

[71] Wojnicka, Nowicka 2022, pp. 241-242.

[72] «*You will marry a Chinese woman*» (Phou 2024, p. 9; italics in the original).

wishing to transcend gender roles, ends up excluded by both his male and female mates, incapable of finding his place.

When 16-year-old Jean-Baptiste is thinking of coming out, he imagines a scene where his parents express their love no matter what. His expectations are not met since his father leaves the room and does not speak to him for months, while his mother's reaction is in line with a conception of gayness as a disease: she wants to call a doctor and have him treated[73]. However, they do not follow that path, but they ground him, prohibiting him from going out or using the telephone – something that he manages to circumvent. Left without any support from his family, his initiation into his romantic life is marked by rebellion and disillusionment. The travel that he undertakes at the age of seventeen to Martinique with an older boyfriend is only the first of a series of journeys of the Sino-Cambodian young man, both geographical and existential, in the search for his identity in all its facets. Jumping from one job to another, before finding his vocation as performing artist and writer, Jean-Baptiste also struggles to find a stable romantic relationship, among overlapping prejudices based on race inside the gay community, as well as to position himself outside the stereotypes of an evolving idea of Asian masculinity. That the relationship with his parents is cold is further shown when he comes back from Martinique some time later: his parents do not ask him any questions, and he does not volunteer to tell anything. Jean-Baptiste's initial lack of interest for Cambodia and his Asian roots may thus find a parallel in the emotionally distant relationship with his parents, which seem to have influenced him in more ways than he chooses to admit.

Only at the end of the novel[74] does their relationship seem to be on cordial terms and a note of harmony is envisioned: along with the intention of trying again a stable relationship, and, most importantly, with the proposition of «habiter ma peau»[75], to feel at ease inside his own skin, the text closes in a

[73] Phou 2024, p. 25.
[74] Ivi, p. 175.
[75] Ivi, p. 168.

circular way, when 40-year-old Jean-Baptiste visits his parents, now relocated in Cambodia, with his partner. His parents seem to have come to accept their son's sexual orientation, so much so that his mother exclaims: «*Il serait temps de penser à avoir des enfants maintenant. Les enfants, c'est ça le véritable bonheur*»[76]. This sort of commandment, if compared to the one that opens the novel, evidently stems from an unchanged view on family, *mutatis mutandis*, even though it can also be read as a recommendation of a loving Asian mother wishing the best for her son. This reinforces the claim that parents' traditional expectations, even when informed by love, taint their relationship with a queer individual, who evidently needs to find alternative models for fitting in social, romantic and familial roles.

### 5. *Navigating Queer Sexuality: Vulnerability and Violence*

The three texts shed light on some aspects of gayness that one can broadly define as marked by violence and vulnerability. Additionally, young gay men lack proper references and often enter romantic relationships unprepared and even misguided by unrealistic representations of gay sex in pornography.

Vuong describes the first intercourses between Little Dog and Trevor as *fake sex*, because it is not penetrative[77], demonstrating a narrow conception of it. Little Dog is conditioned by the relation with his mother, a relation of love and violence, and this is reflected in his desire for "rougher sex." He says: «violence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love. Fuck. Me. Up»[78]. Additionally, the social conditioning is sometimes incredibly strong, also on the part of Trevor, who, imbued with American masculinity, refuses to see himself as gay, especially when he suddenly withdraws from his proposition to act as "bottom," and viewing the passive role

[76] «*It might be time to think about having children. That is the true happiness*» (ivi, p. 175; italics in the original).

[77] Vuong 2019, p. 113.

[78] Ivi, p. 119.

as inherently feminine and submissive[79]. Little Dog feels taken aback because he had hoped that theirs was a safe space: «I had thought sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong. The rules, they were always inside us»[80]. Their first anal intercourse shows how the insufferable pain it entails was unexpected – but becomes a sort of masochistic pleasure for violence-ridden Little Dog – and how fake its representation in pornography is. Upon his release of faeces during the sexual act, the narrator comments:

> I knew right away what it was, and panicked. In the heat of it, I didn't think, didn't know yet how to prepare myself. The porn clips I had seen never showed what it took to arrive where we were. They just did it – quick, immediate, sure, and spotless. No one had shown us how this was to be done. No one had taught us how to be this deep – and deeply broken[81].

His sense of inadequacy is followed by a deep sense of shame: «Trevor being who he was, raised in the fabric of American masculinity, I feared for what would come. It was my fault. I had tainted him with my faggotry, the filthiness of our act exposed by my body's failure to contain itself»[82]. Even though Trevor is understanding, gentle and caring, the experience can be said to epitomise the situation of many young gays, who lack proper sex education in addition to the negative effects of toxic models of masculinity.

For Raja, a first encounter with gay sex is when he is raped at the age of ten by a private teacher of English[83]. With his sexuality having not bloomed yet, his lack of understanding of what is happening only enhances the physical pain and the sense of disgust, betrayal and unsafety. The episode, complemented by the incredulity and imposition of silence by his grandmother[84], is clearly a further example of how a deviant model of masculinity, where same-sex attraction is sinful and to be hidden, can only

79 Ivi, p. 120.
80 *Ibidem.*
81 Ivi, p. 203.
82 *Ibidem.*
83 Raja 2024, pp. 80-83.
84 Ivi, p. 84.

give way to unspeakable violence. Child Saif has to face on his own the trauma that this act of abuse entails, convincing himself that he is strong enough to withstand the recurring nightmares and the sense of being alone, abandoned and unloved. Raja does not seem to relate his later sexual life to this episode. Instead, he makes reference to the use of pornography as a source of self-pleasure as early as middle school, while his recourse to Grindr since his late teens betrays a search for casual sex, until one hookup turns out to be what in the book is described as the love of his life, Carlo[85].

Set a decade or so earlier than the other, younger protagonists, 15-year-old Jean-Baptiste's first sexual encounter is through announcements in a magazine with an older man, who proposes that he lick his chest and armpits. When Jean-Baptiste refuses, the man starts threatening him, but he manages to say no[86]. Other times he cannot push himself to leave such situations of predatory sex, and comments: «Pour moi, la brutalité, la contrainte et le risque étaient inhérents à la condition gay»[87]. The sexual acts in which he engages are seen as dehumanising, totally detached from any human connection. People are reduced to one characteristic, comparing this to an online search for pornographic materials based on key words. He gets so entangled in this set of mind that when a love interest of his declines an invitation to his place on their first date, he is almost offended. However, the episodes provokes a revealing meditation on the nature of sex between men: automatic, mechanical, immediate, shallow[88]. Another aspect that he highlights as his narration unfolds is that of unprotected sex. In a point of his life characterised by lack of purpose, unprotected sex becomes for him an exciting transgression, and he wonders if he is flirting with death or looking for a way to feel alive. At a certain point, he realises that he must stop because his body is

[85] Ivi, p. 208.

[86] Phou 2024, p. 22.

[87] «For me, the brutality, the coercion and the risk were inherent to being gay» (ivi, p. 23).

[88] Ivi, p. 89.

reacting badly to the medication that he needs to take after the unprotected sex, as well as the PrEP.

All the three protagonists, despite their different cultural background and life experiences, share some similar patterns in their first sexual encounters, marked by violence and vulnerability. These point towards a universal dimension of the queer experience: lack of education and discussion about safe sex and the resultant disillusionment after first encounters. However, for gay migrants or those from migrant families, the consequences may add another layer of vulnerability to their already fragile situation of having to navigate multiple strata of norms and expectations in at least two societies as well as from their families, communities and themselves.

## *Conclusion*

These three texts, distinct in context, tone and form, converge in their portrayal of queer migrant lives as shaped by overlapping systems of displacement, desire and cultural negotiation. Whether through Vuong's lyrical autofiction, Raja's dual coming-of-age narrative or Phou's reflective memoir, each author offers not just a story of migration, but a critical intervention in how identity is formed at the crossroads of race, sexuality and memory. By framing their experience within the dominant language of the host country and by reclaiming narrative authority, these writers perform acts of symbolic citizenship – asserting presence in societies that often render them invisible or marginal. Their narratives do not simply recount trauma or exclusion: they articulate complex processes of self-fashioning, where shame and violence coexist with resilience, reconciliation and, ultimately, love.

These narratives invite us to rethink categories such as "queer," "migrant" and "autobiographical" not as static labels, but as dynamic, lived processes. As Stuart Hall once observed: «Thinking about my own sense of identity, I realise that it has always depended on the fact of being a *migrant*, on the *difference* from the rest of you […]. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be *the* representative

modern experience»[89]. In this light, the fragmented, plural identities expressed by Vuong, Raja and Phou do not signal marginality but rather embody Hall's idea of «representative modern experience», something that Raja rephrases with his statement «Siamo il futuro. […] Il tempo dei non contaminati è scaduto. Ora il mondo appartiene ai meticci»[90]. Thus, these texts fulfil the promise of migration literature as envisioned by Amy Burge that migration literature can tell us something about migration and can contribute to combatting dominant narratives, challenging nationalist ideologies and providing therapeutic practices against intergenerational trauma[91].

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[89] Hall 1987, p. 44, italics in the original.

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[91] Burge 2020, pp. 11-14.

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