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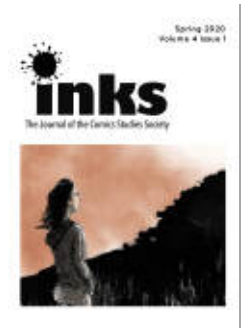
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Layli Maria Miron

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## No Reclaimed Homeland: Thi Bui's Postcolonial Historiography in *The Best We Could Do*

*Layli Maria Miron*

**ABSTRACT:** Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*, a graphic memoir centering on her family's experience with war in Vietnam and resettlement in the United States, earned critical acclaim upon its publication in 2017. It touched a nerve with US readers attuned to their country's rising xenophobia, eliciting praise for humanizing refugees. Her comic certainly stirs compassion with its fusion of emotive drawings and text—but it does more. Bui subtly encourages readers not only to see refugees as human but also to realize that no polity exists apart from migrancy. Situating her book in recent postcolonial theory, I read it as a commentary on the shifting nature of history and nation. Bui presents no singular homeland, past or present, implicitly calling into question some Americans' desire for a walled nation and bounded culture.

**KEYWORDS:** *documentary comics, immigration, family memoir, postcolonial literature, Vietnam*



IN THE THIRD CHAPTER of *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*, Thi Bui (b. 1975) depicts herself soon after her family's 1978 migration to the United States. She is a young girl in San Diego, an ocean away from the warfare in Vietnam. In a neat three-by-three grid [Figure 1], Bui depicts her "induction into Americanhood" through books, TV, and her sisters' schooling.<sup>1</sup> Spotlighted in the central panel, Bui portrays herself walking with her father; a blond cyclist passes by them and yells, "You stupid GOOK!!"<sup>2</sup> The speech balloon bearing the slur overshadows the small figures, dominating the scene. Next, the cyclist spits on her father. Bui paints the result: a stain of spittle across her father's face, its shape peninsular like Vietnam. After her father silently wipes his face and they walk on, Bui reflects, "there were reasons to not want to be anything OTHER." Early in Bui's 330-page saga, which traces her family's history from the 1940s to 2015, she alerts her readers to the sputum of xenophobia launched at refugees in the United States. Bui views her book as intervening in contemporary US xenophobia, hoping that it will "remind people that these are human beings we're talking about, not 'others.'"<sup>3</sup>



FIGURE 1.  
Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*. This and all subsequent images are used by permission of Abrams Books and Thi Bui.

*The Best We Could Do*, Bui's first book, came out in March 2017, in a period of "boat people" making perilous journeys across the Mediterranean rather than the South China Sea, as her family had.<sup>4</sup> March 2017 marked the seventh year of war in Syria, with five million Syrian refugees registered in surrounding countries.<sup>5</sup> Bui sees "parallels between the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis and that which brought her family to the States."<sup>6</sup> March 2017 also marked the second full month of the Trump presidency, following an election that signaled a nativist triumph, as the winning candidate pledged to build a wall against unauthorized migrants and, regarding Syrian refugees, promised, "If I win, they're going back."<sup>7</sup> Trump's election, Bui commented, manifested a regression "back to the early 1980s, where immigrants are being demonized and treated as something we need to be afraid of."<sup>8</sup> In contrast, her memoir sends a pro-immigrant message; as reviewer Robert Kirby opined, Bui's "timely" story "puts a human face to new arrivals."<sup>9</sup> This humanizing message found a willing audience, as critics ranked her book among the year's best graphic narratives,<sup>10</sup> autobiographies,<sup>11</sup> and nonfiction,<sup>12</sup> and even Bill Gates gave it his imprimatur.<sup>13</sup>

The challenge of humanizing is to balance enabling reader empathy with immigrants against the risk of turning them into pathetic, hapless, or childlike figures. The latter perpetuates colonial mindsets where childlike natives needed to be saved and governed by Westerners. This is a challenge confronted by Vietnamese refugees and their offspring who depict their experiences for Western audiences. Postcolonial theory indicates the significance of reflexivity in such representations, positing that, by providing alternative interpretations, subaltern versions of history call mainstream narratives into question. By drawing attention to colonialism's consequences, stories of subaltern migration supplement empathy with an analytical view of global injustices. The reflexivity required for such postcolonial historiography finds an ideal platform in comics because this medium makes visible the artifice of documentation. Thi Bui employs comics' affordances both to persuade readers of immigrants' right to belong and to critique the nationalistic concepts that create borders of belonging in the first place. Bui gives the lie to stable nationalism and cultural purism, subtly encouraging readers not only to see refugees as human but also to realize that no polity exists apart from migrancy—the confluences and collisions of diverse peoples.

## REFUGEES WRITING FOR WESTERN READERS

Bui's memoir humanizes Vietnamese refugees for US readers by recording individual stories, especially those of her mother and father.<sup>14</sup> As an adult, she worries about being "the lame second generation."<sup>15</sup> To bridge the generations, Bui draws out her parents' memories, collecting oral history and rendering it visually in the medium of comics. Her effort to understand Vietnamese history aligns with a tradition in Vietnamese-American literature that Michele Janette calls "tales of witness," memoirs that explain Vietnam, especially the war and subsequent migration, to Americans.<sup>16</sup> These memoirs seek to counteract the silencing of Vietnamese perceptions in the West—as Viet Thanh Nguyen contends, "when

[diasporic communities] produce memories [of Vietnam] in their adopted countries, the memories remain mostly invisible, inaudible, and illegible to those outside the communities.”<sup>17</sup> But some tales of witness, such as *The Best We Could Do* and Lan Cao’s semiautobiographical *Monkey Bridge*, do attain visibility, reaching non-Vietnamese readers. There may be a cost to making refugee experiences legible to mainstream audiences, however.

Tales of Vietnam produced for a US audience can resemble exposés by native informants, as Isabelle Thuy Pelaud warns.<sup>18</sup> By packaging trauma into a digestible form, these works attract mainstream readers, especially since “minority” memoirs are a hot commodity.<sup>19</sup> The problem is that, even as they humanize, such texts also simplify; readers might mistakenly believe they understand an entire diaspora based on one member’s experience. Moreover, they might use the text to assuage their guilt over the Vietnam War, Pelaud explains. This last point pertains more to readers alive during the war; my generation of readers might be less interested in rationalizing the US loss in Vietnam and more interested in comprehending the “other.” Such an audience might feel compassion for the migrant struggle presented in a work like Bui’s. Yet, if readers feel self-congratulatory about their compassion, they risk imagining that empathy alone can solve refugee crises.

Tales of witness by members of the Vietnamese diaspora have increasingly taken graphic form over the last decade; the comics medium might facilitate empathy even more than text. Scott McCloud famously argues that, in “viewer identification,” readers project themselves onto comics characters’ simply drawn faces.<sup>20</sup> A relatively well-off US reader might overidentify with refugee characters without recognizing that their susceptibility to war and poverty indicates a gulf of inequalities.<sup>21</sup> Graphic narratives by Vietnamese immigrants in the West confront this risk. *Vietnamerica* by G. B. Tran (2011) and *The Best We Could Do* reconstruct decades of Vietnamese history for US readers. French readers can learn about the troubles of Vietnam during and after their colonial rule from Clément Baloup’s *Mémoires de Viet Kieu* series (2006–2017) and Marcelino Truong’s *Une Si Jolie Petite Guerre* (2012) and *Give Peace a Chance* (2015) (English translations have recently been published as *Vietnamese Memories*, *Such a Lovely Little War*, and *Saigon Calling*, respectively). Australians can witness the trauma of “boat people” by viewing an adaptation of Nam Le’s “The Boat” by Matt Huynh (2015). The sudden efflorescence of comics, mostly autobiographical, about Vietnamese immigration reflects the rising popularity of graphic memoirs that interweave personal stories with (inter)national histories, as Harriet Earle posits in reference to *Vietnamerica* and *The Best We Could Do*.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Hillary Chute comments that today, “Work that is historical and specifically ‘testamentary’ or testimonial is the strongest genre of comics.”<sup>23</sup> Even historians concur that historical comics can attract broad readerships because they resonate with the “contemporary ‘unflattening’ of intellectual discourse . . . from writing alone to image, video, and meme.”<sup>24</sup> By taking advantage of historical comics’ present visibility, graphic memoirists can shed light on subaltern stories.

Bui’s book forms an ideal case study for how a refugee writer reaches a mainstream audience since, of the aforementioned graphic narratives, it appears to have achieved the

widest circulation and thus has the best chance of intervening in the public imagination.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Bui wanted to make “accessible to a wider audience” the academic research she did in graduate school on “bad representations of Vietnamese people in the Vietnam War in movies and pop culture and American scholarship,” according to an interview on NPR.<sup>26</sup> But, returning to the problem of identification, even if thousands of readers are empathizing with Bui’s family, their feelings do little to address the post- and neo-colonial structures that continue to displace people and stigmatize migrants. The popular uptake of Bui’s comic might allow Americans to replace a critical examination of our nation’s ongoing role in producing and refusing refugees with an empathetic reaction to refugee characters. *The Best We Could Do* encounters this problem along with any refugee memoir composed for a non-refugee audience, like the abovementioned comics, not to mention recent humanitarian comics by Westerners.<sup>27</sup> However, Bui manages both to attract mainstream readers and to explicitly warn them against simplifying a diaspora into a single story. This critical message comes into focus through a lens combining postcolonialism and comics theory—a lens I develop in the next two sections.

### **FROM HUMANIZING TO HISTORICIZING: IMMIGRANTS, SUBALTERNS, AND POSTCOLONIALISM**

As we have seen, simply humanizing refugees for Western audiences does not unsettle structures that displace some people while allowing others to gaze and empathize. Taking humanizing a step further to historicize, however, makes these systemic inequalities visible—which is, as postcolonial studies assumes, a prerequisite for disassembling them. Postcolonial scholars like Gayatri Spivak have identified silenced subaltern histories and compared them with dominant histories, a process that exposes how colonialism and nationalism color our usual interpretations. Such historiography, examining multiple versions of a single event, inculcates reflexivity.

Beyond encouraging reflexivity, postcolonialism is also apt for examining diasporas because it highlights the roots of migration in colonial relations. Many of today’s immigrants to the Global North come from decolonized countries, destabilized by centuries of Western intervention.<sup>28</sup> The diaspora out of Vietnam reflects this pattern. The decades-long conflict there after decolonization—known in the United States as the Vietnam War—constitutes a watershed moment in postcolonial history, as Ato Quayson notes,<sup>29</sup> with leftists viewing it as a clash between Western neocolonial and indigenous decolonial forces. In any case, the subsequent refugee surge exemplifies how postcolonial conditions like impoverishment and militaristic governance, fostered by colonialism’s inequalities, drives mass emigration. Indeed, the totalitarian regime that some million refugees fled after the Vietnam War ended had arisen decades earlier in response to imperialism: the Communist Viet Minh party was formed to oppose colonial rule, winning Vietnam’s independence from France—but only control over North Vietnam—in 1954. In the consequent civil war (1955–1975), US support for South Vietnam exacerbated the

anti-West ideology of the Viet Minh, who, after reunification, persecuted the Southerners for their contamination by “capitalist filth,” as Bui recounts.<sup>30</sup>

The refugees fleeing persecution, such as Bui’s family, were branded in the West as “boat people,” an example of how simplifying terms mask subaltern histories.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, unprivileged migrants, including refugees, should be defined as subalterns, according to postcolonial stalwarts like Homi Bhabha, Richard Young, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Chakrabarty contemplates what “the new subalterns of the global economy—refugees, asylum seekers, illegal workers” show us about the postcolonial human condition.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Young suggests that global migration is postcolonialism’s next frontier.<sup>33</sup>

If immigrants from the Global South are indeed subalterns living with the consequences of colonialism, why are they so often represented as a cause of danger to culture, economy, and security in the Global North? Postcolonialism points us toward the stories we consume for an answer. As Spivak famously demonstrated with her study of *sati*, most histories are written through a colonialist or nationalist lens; the historian speaks for subalterns, imputing motives, uninterested in their perspective.<sup>34</sup> If the subaltern immigrant could speak and be heard, she would likely tell a story different from the histories in mainstream discourse. When such postcolonial historiography finds an audience, it may lead that audience to realize that the stories we have been told about immigrants are partial, excising the role of past injustice in present migrations. Instead, we need “an active sense of imperial and colonial residues for properly grasping the past and its impact upon the present,” as Quayson suggests.<sup>35</sup> We need to promote a better “historiographical framework,” he claims—in a word, we need reflexivity.

## COMICS AS A MEDIUM FOR POSTCOLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

Reflexive historiographical work is not just the work of scholars; artists play a significant role in expanding the public imagination. As Homi Bhabha suggests, diasporic artwork that challenges models of national fixity pulls viewers into a “third space,”<sup>36</sup> a roving outlook spanning both sending and receiving societies. *The Best We Could Do* constitutes such artwork. It constantly turns between contexts. It jumps between places—Malaysia to Indiana, San Diego to Saigon. It leaps among times—2005 to 1978, 1945 to 1980—rejecting chronological sequencing. It loops between modes: text and image, line and letter—the dual nature of comics. Comics, refusing the verbal/visual dichotomy, is a medium suited to the third space of diasporic artwork. In their introduction to *Postcolonial Comics*, Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji contend that comics’ unconventional “visual grammars, image-texts, and graphic performances” “are uniquely able to perform the characteristic ‘deconstructive image functions’ that remain a central paradigm of resistance [against] . . . dominant ‘economic image-functions’ signifying cultures of current global neo-liberalism.”<sup>37</sup> Comics’ capacity for unconventionality is a boon for postcolonial critique.

This capacity is seen in comics’ affordances for making documentation reflexive and reading interactive, diverging from the “view from nowhere” proffered by most (colonial) histories. Comics divulge their process of creation more readily than mediums like pho-

tography that claim to index reality, as Hillary Chute demonstrates. Because the traces of the artists' bodies, the marks of hands, pervade the art and lettering, the artifice of these choices is more readily apparent than in written texts' tidy typesetting. Panels—their borders, size, and shape—and the gaps between (“gutters”) draw attention to what the artist has left out, such as time, information, or events in a sequence. Sometimes artists even pit “visual and verbal discourses against each other,” as when peaceful messages overlay violent scenes, leading the reader to question which type of discourse counts as evidence.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, as McCloud argues, in addition to encouraging readers to identify with characters, comics also require them to participate in creating “closure”—bridging gutters to see connections between panels and perceive “change, time, and motion.”<sup>39</sup> Given Chute's argument that comics enable reflexive documentation and McCloud's theory of participation, it seems comics invite the reader to recognize their artifice, forswearing the claims of truth and objectivity made by typical historical mediums like photographs and typeset books. Thus, comics is uniquely conducive to critical—and postcolonial—readings of history.

Bui capitalizes on the affordances of comics to underscore her points about history's subjective nature, leading readers to question the representations of history they have received. Though the plot spans eight decades and three countries, Bui's striking line drawings with gray and orange washes remain consistent in style over these disparate nations and eras, in contrast to narratives like Baloup's *Leaving Saigon* that separate the past (grayscale) and present (color). Bui's chosen uniformity indicates the equal weight of both mundane and catastrophic experiences in a refugee's history. In this way, her art evokes the accumulative time of postcolonial consciousness identified by Ian Baucom: history piles up like seabed sediments.<sup>40</sup> Bui shows that in the accumulation of years, seemingly mundane moments often become catastrophic, as the spitting example described above attests. In addition, Bui visually displays her behind-the-scenes research and reflects on its outcomes, revealing history's partiality. She depicts her efforts to document and interview, to collect the past. Yet, she pronounces her collection incomplete—“There is no single story”<sup>41</sup>—and her experience unexceptional—“Nothing that happened makes me special.”<sup>42</sup> By the end, she declares, “I no longer feel the need to reclaim a homeland.”<sup>43</sup> Having reviewed the twentieth-century history of Vietnam, she recognizes its mutability.

In past and present alike, Bui encounters always-shifting “imperial and colonial residues,” to use Quayson's term, but no singular homeland. If US readers likewise research our “residues,” she implies, we will discover no bounded homeland separate from “others.” Bui's memoir offers a “third space” that is both global in its portrayal of international forces and intimate in its focus on family life. Moreover, it is highly self-reflexive—a mark of robust historiography. Though her memoir certainly humanizes refugees, it also calls upon the audience to recognize the artifice of history, and in turn to question historical narratives that distinguish between “us” and “them.” *The Best We Could Do* provokes such questions by pointing out that history (1) is not past, (2) is constructed with imperfect tools, (3) depends on perspective, and (4) is epigenetic, as I explain in the subsequent sections.



## (I) HISTORY IS NOT PAST

Thi Bui began *The Best We Could Do* in 2005, as she states in the preface, and spent more than a decade creating it. Such an investment stemmed not just from intellectual curiosity or artistic practice, but from an emotional—even bodily—need. In chapter 2, Bui explains that her desire to bond with her parents inspired her research into family history. This desire arises from a haunting loss that Bui symbolizes with a boat—the boat, as we find out in chapter 7, that carried her family from Vietnam to Malaysia in 1978. Her family was among some 800,000 Vietnamese refugees who fled by sea after the war, a number that does not count those who drowned.<sup>44</sup> From a postcolonial viewpoint, migrant boats and the oceans they cross—and sometimes die in—form a fulcrum of history. The most “exceptional” fulcrum is “the Atlantic abyss,” laden with the corpses of African slaves, according to Baucom.<sup>45</sup> The seas of the Pacific have also seen their share of migrant deaths—most recently, of Rohingya refugees. Bui’s motif of the boat cresting swelling waves thus evinces a postcolonial sensitivity to the alluvium of transnational trauma.

Like a ghost impelling her research, the boat motif first appears when Bui introduces her foray into historiography [Figure 2]. Rendered as a pale background to scenes of drawing and talking, the boat confronts billowing waves. Atop the first panel on page 36—showing Bui at her desk in the foreground and the boat behind her<sup>46</sup>—floats a caption: “Soon after that trip back to Việt Nam (our first since we escaped in 1978) / I began to record our family history / thinking that if I bridged the gap between the past and the present / I could fill the void between my parents and me.”<sup>47</sup> Bui analogizes recording history to building a bridge between temporalities and generations, depicting historiography as an emotional act. Beneath this panel, bleeding over its border like the past bleeding into the present, is an image that fills most of the page. On the left is a naked child, her torso pierced by a hole shaped like Vietnam. The child faces away from us, gazing toward a second rendition of the peninsula, this one painted soft orange like the haunting waves above. Bui captions this striking scene, “And that if I could see Việt Nam as a real place, and not as a symbol of something lost / I would see my parents as real people / and learn to love them better.” This caption critiques the representation of Vietnam as a symbol of loss. Yet, Bui perpetuates that problematic representation by drawing Vietnam as a wound, a haunting metaphor rather than a living nation. Thus, this scene pits “visual and verbal discourses against each other” to question the reliability of both.<sup>48</sup> What should we believe—the text that critiques the image, or the image that dwarfs the text? Can either lead us to a “real place”?

Bui provides no overt answer, but she devotes further pages to her relationship with the past—accompanied by the boat—before diving into her family history, which accumulates via births. In a double spread covering pages 40 and 41 [Figure 3], Bui brings together two locations, two eras. On the left page, Bui looks across a calm inlet; on the right, the refugee boat once again appears amidst choppy water, this time with its captain—perhaps her father—visible. The juxtaposition of Bui’s body with the boat, no borders intervening,

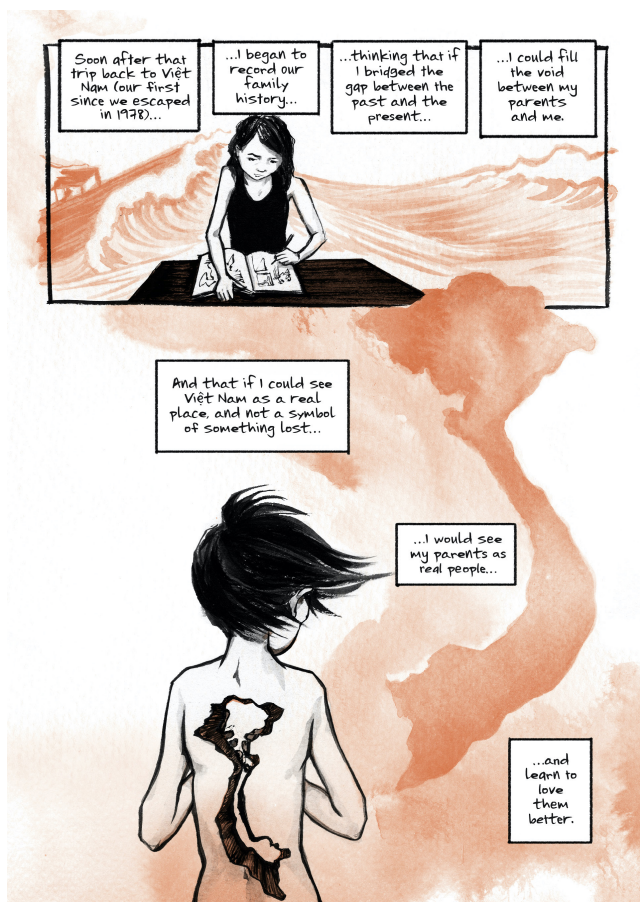


FIGURE 2.

*Thi Bui's The Best We Could Do*

makes it appear that she is looking from present to past, across continents, “tracing our journey in reverse / over the ocean / through the war / seeking an origin story / that will set everything right,” as the captions say. The five caption boxes’ diagonal descent across this diptych, from a calm sky to wild waves, evokes Bui’s plunge into a disorderly, fluid past in pursuit of that “origin story.” From here, Bui moves to narrating the births of her parents’ six children, starting with the most recent in 1978 and ending in 1965. Births furnish origin stories; moreover, Bui’s turn to the pregnant body of her mother and the emerging bodies of infants shows how bodies serve as bridges to the past. With each birth, Bui burrows deeper into history. As Baucom declares, “Time does not pass, it accumulates, and as it accumulates it deposits an ever greater freight of material within the cargo holds of a present”<sup>49</sup>—or, in this case, within the infant bodies of the present. History is not past; it endures in bodies (cf. the fourth point below).



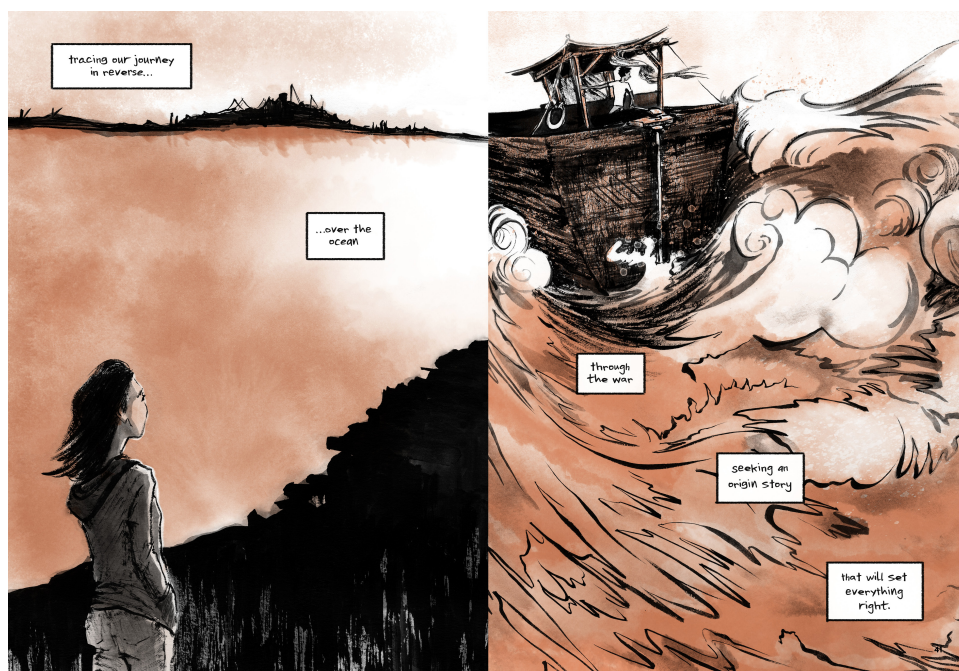


FIGURE 3.  
*Thi Bui's The Best We Could Do*

## (2) HISTORY IS CONSTRUCTED WITH IMPERFECT TOOLS

The tools we have for constructing history are imperfect. This idea, in the case of Bui's text, is reinforced by the constant mark of her own tools—the lines and strokes showing where her hands traveled, sometimes contravening the grid's edges, as paint travels outside borders. For instance, examine Figure 2 again: the panel's border is doubly contested. The silhouette of Vietnam overrides the lower line, while the boat and waves subtly extend beyond the sides. As Aurélie Chevant points out regarding Baloup's *Quitter Saigon* (*Leaving Saigon*), comics can advance consciousness of "postcolonial legacies" by rejecting conventional delineations like *ligne claire* and panel borders.<sup>50</sup> In so doing, they blur the boundaries between races and spaces upon which colonialism relies. Moreover, such leakiness in comics makes visible what most documentary mediums hide: any historiographic method—interviewing, archiving, photographing—seeps outside the borders of objectivity. This lesson undermines the colonialist endeavor, the project of capturing "cultural and racial essences" decried by Edward Said, by unveiling the putatively impartial historian as an erring human limning a scene with erring tools.<sup>51</sup>

There is no objective method of producing history: Bui makes this point by exposing her own historiographic process. She illustrates herself confronting her parents with “endless questions” and zealously collecting information.<sup>52</sup> Her effort to gather oral histories from her parents depends on their willingness to participate; especially with her mother, Bui struggles to develop mutual investment in her research. Her mother “humors” her project, but wonders why they cannot spend time together in other ways.<sup>53</sup> Bui admits that they both struggle to say, “I love you.”<sup>54</sup> What else can they not say—what does her mother omit from their interviews? Bui reveals later that her own attitude might play a role in her mother’s reticence: she judges her mother for her luxurious upbringing, which benefited from French colonialism. In a panel showing Bui tape-recording her mother, thought balloons spring from Bui’s head: “French schools,” “Class privilege,” “1950s morality.”<sup>55</sup> As though her mother can hear these critiques, she looks away. Bui elaborates, “Má talked more freely about herself to my husband, Travis, than to me.”<sup>56</sup> The historian’s attitude constrains what can be recorded.

Even the ostensibly truth-telling medium of film is imbricated with the photographer’s attitude. In chapter 2, Bui states that she began recording family history after “that trip back to Việt Nam.”<sup>57</sup> She describes this visit in chapter 6, in the context of recounting her father’s life as a teen moving to a house in Saigon, where she would eventually live as a baby, “too little” to recall it later.<sup>58</sup> When her family visits this house during their 2001 trip, Bui and her younger brother wear melancholy frowns. In one panel, her mom and older sisters smile as they gaze at their house, while Bui and her brother hold cameras, “documenting in lieu of remembering.”<sup>59</sup> She recalls, “Even standing right in front of our old home, I had to rely completely on my family’s stories to picture how it was when we lived there.”<sup>60</sup> In a grid of panels [Figure 4], Bui depicts her sisters talking and picturing their memories. But she devotes the grid’s first and last panel to portraits of her own glum face alongside her camera’s noisy “CLICK.” Sideline by her sisters’ nostalgia, she can only participate by recording and researching.<sup>61</sup> It might seem that Bui dichotomizes the history that lives in firsthand memory and the “postmemory” history assembled via documentation.<sup>62</sup> Yet, she undercuts this dichotomy by showing that, while photography is a limited substitute for remembering, memory itself is a faulty medium: at first, her mother cannot identify their house, relying on a former neighbor to guide her memory.<sup>63</sup> Photography and memory are imperfect tools, their documentary power limited as they inevitably crop images and forget contexts. Indeed, no tool can capture an unlimited perspective.

### (3) HISTORY DEPENDS ON PERSPECTIVE

Bui reveals biases in dominant histories by narrating her research into the Vietnam War, exposing how US narratives peripheralize Vietnamese civilians. In the midst of her research spree following the 2001 trip, her father offers her a video, *Vietnam War with Walter Cronkite*, which contains “footage of our old neighborhood,” nicknamed “the chessboard.”<sup>64</sup> She takes notes on the documentary, which highlights the neighborhood’s poverty and crime—in her view, a “caricature.”<sup>65</sup> Mulling over the documen-



FIGURE 4.

*Thi Bui's The Best We Could Do*

tary, Bui presents a full-page image of a chessboard with captions: “none of the Vietnamese people in that video have a name or a voice. / . . . [W]e weren’t any of the pieces on the chessboard.”<sup>66</sup> Bui thus critiques the US perspective assumed by the documentary for prioritizing combatants, ignoring people just trying to survive—the little ones scrambling off the chessboard to save their lives, an analogy Bui visualizes in the next panel.<sup>67</sup> These non-players, stripped of name and voice by the dominant history, are a subaltern class that “in the context of colonial production, has no history and cannot speak.”<sup>68</sup> But Bui makes these subalterns speak by placing them literally in the middle of her historiography. History depends on perspective; Bui represents Saigon’s inhabitants as individuals,



while the Cronkite documentary constructs a caricature akin to Americans' insulting stereotypes of South Vietnamese people: women are prostitutes, men are impotent, children are beggars [Figure 5]. Bui exposes "the oversimplifications and stereotypes in American versions of the Vietnam War," which flatten a complex situation into "Good Guys" and "Bad Guys."<sup>69</sup>

To extend her lesson on US "oversimplifications," Bui analyzes one example: the iconic "Saigon Execution" photograph. Earlier in the chapter, with her clicking camera in Saigon, Bui implies how the photographer's subjectivity influences photography. Now



FIGURE 5.

*Thi Bui's The Best We Could Do*

she makes this point explicit. She reproduces “Saigon Execution” in her typical gestural style,<sup>70</sup> thus rendering it part of her own story and also revealing the mark of the author’s hand—in contrast to the original film medium, which conceals any trace of the US photographer who shot the image. As Chevant writes, postcolonial comics can challenge primary sources on the Vietnam War by recreating them in a complicating context.<sup>71</sup> “Saigon Execution” shows a South Vietnamese general mercilessly shooting a Viet Cong soldier. Or does it? Bui depicts her father complaining that US media broadcasted the photo to make South Vietnam “look bad” while ignoring the murders committed by the soldiers.<sup>72</sup> Bui replicates the photo a second time, now zooming in on the face of the soldier who grimaces as blood, which she paints orange, explodes from his head. This close-up version erases the context even further, problematizing the way the limited information in the photo turned “popular opinion in America against the war.”<sup>73</sup> Beyond pointing out the soldier’s crimes, Bui shows us what else is “absent from the photograph,”<sup>74</sup> illustrating the photographer’s relation with the image, its public reception, and the day-to-day experience of warfare—even after the US withdrawal—for people like her parents. Juxtaposed with these detail-laden contextualizing panels, the reproduced photograph looks even more minimal. As Bui highlights the mass of activity happening beyond its edges, she reveals just how reductive its version of history is.

No perspective can capture a complete history, Bui warns; like “Saigon Execution,” US representations of Vietnam crop out the wider context, excluding elements that fail to fit the Good Guys versus Bad Guys narrative. But to an observer like her father with intimate knowledge of the various players in the conflict, there can be no straightforward history. To Bui, her father’s story seems riddled with “contradiction[s],” because he imputes evil to both sides.<sup>75</sup> Yet, Bui prefers such complexity to oversimplification; she illustrates the mess hidden behind facile narratives. This mess can be found in the mundane difficulties of common people, unacknowledged by neocolonial war lore.

Bui spotlights these subaltern stories, the undocumented collateral damage: the suffering of her parents and countless other noncombatants through assaults, miscarriages, poverty, and hazardous boat journeys.<sup>76</sup> Bui comments, “I think a lot of Americans forget that for the Vietnamese, the war continued, whether America was involved or not.”<sup>77</sup> Her parents’ private suffering persisted after the Fall of Saigon, Bui shows us. As Yến Lê Espiritu argues in her ethnography on postmemory, “the domains of the intimate—in this case, Vietnamese family life—constitute a key site to register the lingering costs of war that often have been designated as over and done with in the public realm.”<sup>78</sup> Bui’s portrayal of her parents’ woes exposes lingering harms that pervade even the most intimate realm, the womb: the two babies lost in wartime, the four surviving children potentially inheriting their parents’ sorrow.

#### (4) HISTORY IS EPIGENETIC

Although Bui explains in chapter 1 that, in her twenties, her desire to bond with her parents drove her to collect her family history, she later reveals that she has been absorbing

history since childhood. Indeed, her family has always been transmitting history—but not with the intentionality she brings about in 2001 when she starts transcribing it. This transmission resembles the scientific concept of epigenetics, “the collective heritable changes in phenotype due to processes that arise independent of the primary DNA sequence.”<sup>79</sup> An organism’s experiences, especially its environment, can switch genes on or off; these changes can be passed on to offspring. Did Bui inherit from her parents a “gene for sorrow,”<sup>80</sup> provoked by their war-marred circumstances, that she will pass on to her own offspring?

Bui exposes the inheritance of history by narrating her childhood after resettling in San Diego, where her parents rear their four children. Her parents teach them “intended lessons”: to be respectful, caring, and studious.<sup>81</sup> Darker lessons lurk under these, as Bui indicates in two panels portraying her father and mother against a black background [Figure 6]. A white gutter divides them and they press against the outer edges of the panels, conveying a growing distance in their marriage. Bui captions these panels, “The unintentional [lessons] came from their unexorcised demons / and from the habits they formed over so many years of trying to survive.”<sup>82</sup> A smoky substance spirals around her parents, symbolizing these demons, which, Bui suggests, push them to admonish their children to prioritize safety and academic excellence and to eschew childishness.<sup>83</sup> “This—not any particular piece of Vietnamese culture—is my inheritance: the inexplicable need and extraordinary ability to RUN when the shit hits the fan. My Refugee Reflex,” she concludes.<sup>84</sup> Her instinct to survive is the legacy bequeathed by her parents, who unconsciously transmit their traumatic past to their children, thus passing on a history forged in war. Will Bui in turn pass her Refugee Reflex on to her son?

In the final chapter, she speculates on this possibility, wondering if history is genetic. In a double spread [Figure 7], she presents a mixed metaphor: a tree’s roots stretch into black soil, bearing portraits of her deceased grandparents and great-grandparents; floating against the black soil are circular figures that appear to be blood cells.<sup>85</sup> The roots evoke the common trope of a family tree, but the cells’ perplexing meaning must be inferred from her captions: “I used to imagine that history had infused my parents’ lives with the dust of a cataclysmic explosion. / That it had seeped through their skin and become part of their blood.”<sup>86</sup> Has history, like a virus, penetrated her parents’ cells? And has she inherited this virus—is she “a product of war”?<sup>87</sup> Her anxiety around history’s heritability flares up with her son’s birth. She visually links her struggle to nurture him with her father’s effort to protect the refugee boat and her mother’s labor to deliver a baby in the refugee camp.<sup>88</sup> Given such haunting memories, Bui worries about passing “along some gene for sorrow.”<sup>89</sup> On the final pages, she watches her son frolic at the seaside. Significantly, the waves through which he swims bear no vessels; no ghostly refugee boat lurks here. Indeed, she realizes that in him, she does not “see war or loss,”<sup>90</sup> and “maybe he can be free.”<sup>91</sup> In this final scene, Bui oscillates between fearing that a traumatic history has contaminated multiple generations of her family and perceiving that it has not touched her son. With her final words, she leans toward the latter possibility, marking a limit to history’s violence.





FIGURE 6.  
*Thi Bui's The Best We Could Do*

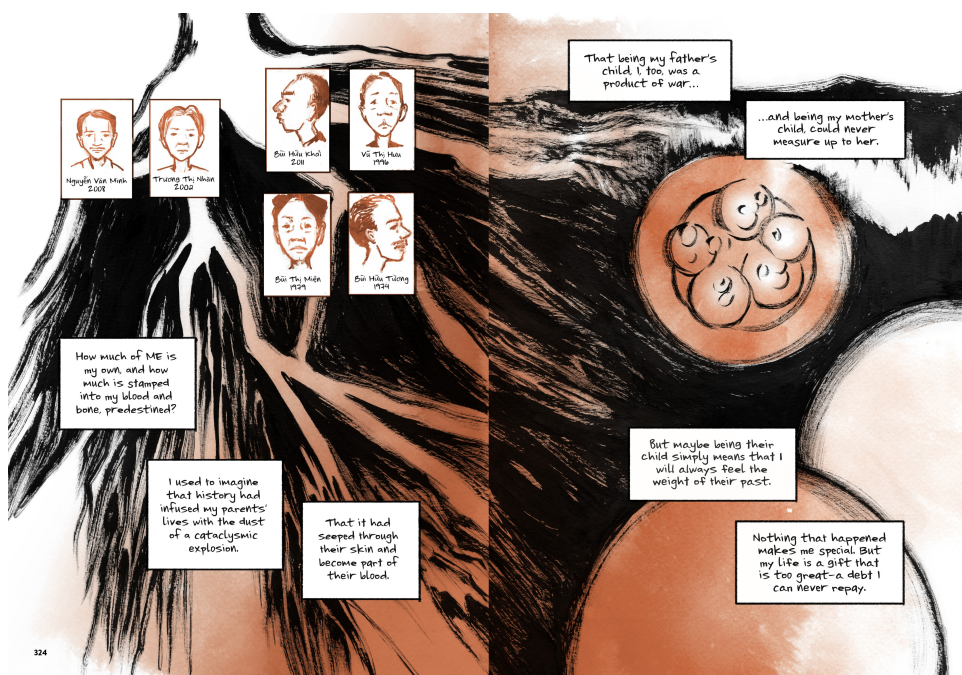


FIGURE 7.  
*Thi Bui's The Best We Could Do*

As Chakrabarty notes, while migrants often suffer from their marginality, they also *survive*, making “a zone of creativity and improvisation.”<sup>92</sup> For Bui, “FAMILY is now something I have created”: she has molded history’s alluvium into a zone of kinship.<sup>93</sup>

As a child, Bui internalized the lessons of her parents’ trauma, displaying how parents unintentionally transmit history as they rear children. Yet, her son appears “free” of that history. In this way, history is epigenetic: it influences the most basic elements of human life, but its ongoing transmission can be affected by situation. Her parents, exposed to conflict since their childhoods, flipped on a gene for sorrow that was passed to Bui. Conversely, enjoying a much more peaceful environment for parenthood, she halts the transmission. Her son’s carefree Californian childhood appears to deactivate his mother’s “gene for sorrow.” Exposure to trauma, even secondhand by inheriting a parent’s history, can shape a person; nevertheless, given the right context, she retains some prerogative in selecting what elements of history to pass on. Bui thus ends her book by arguing against determinism, granting some agency to history’s inheritors.

## IMPLICATIONS OF BUI’S POSTCOLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

We are such [an] ahistorical culture in America that we need these stories constantly told in America and retold. So that they remember where we come from and remember what happened. . . . [T]he Vietnam War is the reason why there is a Vietnamese American population in America. The historian in me wants to give . . . people a story that is more accurate, more representative of what people actually went through, instead of learning from the bad Vietnam War documentaries made by Americans.<sup>94</sup>

In the introduction, I suggested that Bui intervenes in contemporary US discourse about refugees on two fronts. Her most obvious intervention, which has been recognized by multiple reviewers, is to humanize refugees. What makes her book particularly noteworthy, however, is its second intervention: as she produces history, she reflects on the constraints of such production, showing us how history must be made and remade. She illustrates that history is not past, must be produced with limited methods, depends on perspective, and is transmitted epigenetically between generations. These messy, living, accumulative characteristics contravene the common perception of history as a truth existing in some transcendent past that historians simply perceive and portray. As they empathize with her, Bui’s readers should realize that, like her, we all “depend on other people’s stories” for our understanding of history.<sup>95</sup> Often we depend on dominant, neocolonial stories, like the “bad Vietnam War documentaries” that Bui, in the interview excerpted above, says she wished to counter. Bui exposes history’s partiality both in her explicit critiques of US histories of the Vietnam War and in the implications of her artistry. Bui’s visuals, constructed through combinations of symbols, color, space, and sequencing, display the thousands of artistic choices producing her historiography. As Chute contends, “Comics openly es-



chews any aesthetics of transparency; it is a conspicuously artificial form.”<sup>96</sup> This blatant artistry, manifest in Bui’s disruptions of realism—juxtaposed scenes from different timelines, leaking panel borders, tensions between captions and images, and ghostlike motifs—means her historiographical reflexivity permeates textual and visual registers alike.

At the end of Bui’s memoir, she states, “At least I no longer feel the need to reclaim a HOMELAND; I understand enough of Việt Nam’s history now to know the ground beneath my parents’ feet had always been shifting.”<sup>97</sup> The outcome of her historiographic project is not a sense of ownership over a “real place,” but rather a realization that, even in her parents’ infancy, no singular, stable Vietnam existed. This constant flux is not unique to Vietnam, or even to nations moving likewise from colonialism to independence. Indeed, the “center” should learn a lesson from the “periphery”; the United States should recognize its own instability from Vietnam’s. Even a neo-imperial nation experiences constant shifts, if less bloodshed. The mutual mutability of Vietnam and the United States is not just a pretty postmodern metaphor; it results from material relations climaxing with the United States’ neocolonial intervention, which shifted the grounds of both nations. On this side of the Pacific, the war redefined not only the United States’ supposed military invulnerability but also its sociocultural identity by generating a new migrant population. As Bui implies in the above interview, “ahistorical” Americans need reminding that Vietnamese Americans exist as a repercussion of the war. Dominant depictions in films and even comic books spotlight the war’s consequences for US soldiers, erasing the subaltern stories of displaced Vietnamese people by making them a backdrop to the development of white soldiers—to be forgotten when the soldier departs.<sup>98</sup>

A sustained study of a place’s history will reveal to the historiographer plenty of colonial residues but no unified, fixed nation, Bui’s narrative implies. Nostalgia for such fixity depends on neocolonial narratives that crop out centuries of hybridity and interdependence—and centuries of displacement and exploitation. There is no stable homeland to reclaim: this is an urgent lesson for Bui’s US audience. Heeding it would help us reframe our timeworn arguments over accepting migrants by acknowledging that, from the moment the colonial project began, our polity has been defined by its migrancy—the mobility of those the American experiment pushed aside and of those it amalgamated. Recognizing our migrancy does not entail romanticizing immigration; as Bui reminds us in panel after panel, people displaced by the violence and inequity of (neo)colonial forces undergo brutal journeys and hostile receptions. By illustrating the double role of the United States in producing and receiving migrants, Bui’s historiography asks us, is *this* the best we can do?

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## NOTES

1. Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir* (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2017), 67.
2. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 67.

3. Carrie Lanning, "'The Best We Could Do': Thi Bui Honors Family's Immigration Story in Debut Graphic Novel," *NBC News*, March 3, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/best-we-could-do-thibui-honors-family-s-immigration-n726626>.
4. Bui's second book, *A Different Pond* (North Mankato, MN: Picture Window Books, 2017), came out shortly afterwards, in August 2017. She collaborated with another Vietnamese-American author, Bao Phi, creating illustrations for his story. Her illustrations won a 2018 Caldecott Medal. The narrative resembles episodes in *The Best We Could Do* in its account of a mundane event in the life of a Vietnamese refugee family: catching fish for dinner. Bui sees her own childhood in this story; in a note at the end, she comments, "I hope that we've managed to capture the little slice of life that we experienced."
5. UN Children's Fund, "UNICEF Syria Crisis Situation Report (Humanitarian Results)—March 2017," *Relief Web*, March 31, 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unicef-syria-crisis-situation-report-humanitarian-results-march-2017>.
6. Fiona Zublin, "From Refugee to Graphic Novelist—A Story Four Decades in the Making," *OZY*, September 21, 2017, <http://www.ozy.com/rising-stars/from-refugee-to-graphic-novelist-a-story-four-decades-in-the-making/80719>.
7. "Donald Trump: I Would Send Syrian Refugees Home," *BBC*, October 1, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34397272>.
8. Zublin, "From Refugee to Graphic Novelist."
9. Robert Kirby, "Review: *The Best We Could Do*," *The Comics Journal*, March 9, 2017, <http://www.tcj.com/reviews/the-best-we-could-do/>.
10. Michael Cavanaugh, "The 10 Best Graphic Novels of 2017," *The Washington Post*, November 15, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-10-best-graphic-novels-of-2017/2017/11/10/ded1688c-af85-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-10-best-graphic-novels-of-2017/2017/11/10/ded1688c-af85-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98_story.html); Bob Salkowitz, "The 10 Best Graphic Novels of 2017," *Forbes*, December 8, 2017, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2017/12/08/the-10-best-graphic-novels-of-2017/>.
11. "National Book Critics Circle Announces Finalists for 2017 Awards," *National Book Critics Circle*, January 21, 2018, <https://www.bookcritics.org/2018/01/21/national-book-critics-circle-announces-finalists-for-2017-awards/>.
12. "2018 Notable Books List: Year's Best in Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry Announced," *American Library Association*, February 11, 2018, <http://www.ala.org/news/member-news/2018/02/2018-notable-books-list-years-best-fiction-nonfiction-and-poetry-announced>.
13. Michael Schaub, "Bill Gates' Favorite Reads of 2017 Include Viet Thanh Nguyen's 'The Sympathizer' and Matthew Desmond's 'Evicted,'" *The Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-bill-gates-20171204-story.html>.
14. In Bui's decision to record her family's history, she joins traditions of family memoir in both graphic nonfiction and Asian-American literature. Graphic memoirs including Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and G. B. Tran's *Vietnamerica* are framed around a parent's memories. Likewise, a number of Asian-American family memoirs have been identified by Rocío G. Davis, who comments that these memoirists search "for a personal story and a link with a community," which "involves mediating history through family, the public through the private," a "creative engagement with the past in order to manage the present"; see *Relative Histories: Mediating History in Asian American Family Memoirs* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 8. These dialectics of public and private, past and present, are also perceptible in *The Best We Could Do*. Indeed, Bui comments on her desire to "weave the personal and the political and the historical" in reframing the Vietnam War (Yu, "Cartoonist Thi Bui": see n. 26 below).
15. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 29.
16. Janette (Mỹ Việt: *Vietnamese American Literature in English, 1962–Present* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011]) contrasts tales of witness with "tales of imagination" that complicate familiar themes. Bui's memoir seems to straddle both categories. Her narrative of witnessing covers familiar themes, including the Vietnam War and the refugee journey, but also engages in complex reflexivity about history-making.

17. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 15–16.
18. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 121.
19. Pelaud, *This Is All*, 118.
20. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: William Morrow, 1993), 42.
21. Monica Chiu, “Introduction: Visual Realities of Race,” in *Drawing New Color Lines: Transnational Asian American Graphic Narratives* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015), 7.
22. Harriet Earle, “A New Face for an Old Fight: Reimagining Vietnam in Vietnamese-American Graphic Memoirs,” *Studies in Comics* 9.1 (2018): 87–105, 102.
23. Hillary Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 6.
24. Trevor R. Getz, “Getting Serious about Comic Histories,” *American Historical Review* 123.5 (2018): 1596–97, 1596.
25. By the admittedly imperfect measure of Amazon sales, *The Best We Could Do* drastically outranks the graphic memoirs by Baloup, Tran, and Truong. In addition, as I mention above, it has amassed an impressive number of national awards.
26. Mallory Yu, “Cartoonist Thi Bui Weaves Together Personal and Political History,” *National Public Radio*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/01/634606313/cartoonist-thi-bui-weaves-together-personal-and-political-history>.
27. For an overview of recent comics about refugees authored by Westerners, see Candida Rifkind, “Refugee Comics and Migrant Topographies,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32.3 (2017): 648–54.
28. Aristide Zolberg, “Why Not the Whole World? Ethical Dilemmas of Immigration Policy,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 56.9 (2012): 1204–22.
29. Ato Quayson, “The Sighs of History: Postcolonial Debris and the Question of (Literary) History,” *New Literary History* 43.2 (2012): 359–70, 364.
30. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 221.
31. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 267.
32. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 1–18, 8.
33. Robert J. C. Young, “Postcolonial Remains,” *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 19–42, 27.
34. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 66–111.
35. Quayson, “The Sighs of History,” 363.
36. Homi Bhabha, *Our Neighbours, Ourselves: Contemporary Reflections on Survival* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2011), 17.
37. Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji, *Postcolonial Comics: Texts, Images, Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2–3.
38. Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 7.
39. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 65.
40. Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
41. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 211.

42. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 325.
43. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 326.
44. UNHCR, "Chapter 4: Flight from Indochina," *The State of the World's Refugees 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action*, <https://www.unhcr.org/3ebf9bad0.html>.
45. Baucom, *Specters*, 320.
46. Sean X. Goudie astutely pointed out to me that the visible portion of the boat is the *bridge*, where the silhouette of a pilot is visible, punning on the bridging Bui contemplates in this panel and also implying that, like the pilot, she is taking command—of her family history.
47. I employ slashes (/) to indicate where a caption continues in a new box. Bui writes ellipses at the end of phrases to indicate that the sentence continues in another box, but for the sake of readability, I have eliminated them.
48. Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 7.
49. Baucom, *Specters*, 325.
50. Aurélie Chevant, "Graphic Heritage: Exploring Postcolonial Identities and Vietnamese Spaces in the Francophone Graphic Novel," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 21.1 (2017): 81–90, 87.
51. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 36.
52. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 37.
53. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 37.
54. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 38.
55. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 136.
56. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 136.
57. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 36.
58. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 179.
59. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 180.
60. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 181.
61. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 182.
62. Scholars such as Yến Lê Espiritu (*Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* [Oakland: University of California Press, 2014]) use the theory of postmemory to analyze the inherited traumatic memories of Vietnamese residents and refugees who did not directly experience the Vietnam War. While Thi Bui was born in the final months of the war, she was too young to recall it, so as an adult, she engages in postmemory.
63. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 181.
64. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 183–4.
65. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 184.
66. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 185.
67. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 186.
68. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 83.
69. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 207.
70. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 206.
71. Chevant, "Graphic Heritage," 88. Indeed, Bui is not the only graphic memoirist to critically engage with Vietnam War photographs. In *Saigon Calling*, Marcelino Truong likewise draws the "Saigon Execution" photo and comments that Western audiences ignored the context of the prisoner's crimes (trans. David Homel [Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2017], 136). Similarly, Clément Baloup begins *Leaving Saigon*

with paintings of photographs including the notorious “Terror of War,” in which children flee napalm, but argues that “these horrific images show us merely a small part of Vietnam’s violent history in modern times” (trans. Naomi Alice Botting, Chester Bowerman, Ruby Louise Gwynne-Evans, Jennifer Helena Karlsson, and Francesca Montemagno [Los Angeles: Humanoids, 2018], 6). It seems that graphic narratives about the Vietnamese diaspora share an imperative to confront—and deconstruct—the famous images that have come to define Vietnam in the West.

72. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 206.
73. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 209.
74. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 210.
75. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 207.
76. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 210.
77. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 209.
78. Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 165.
79. Trygve O. Tollefsbol, “An Overview of Epigenetics,” *Handbook of Epigenetics: The New Molecular and Medical Genetics*, 2nd ed. (London: Academic Press, 2017), 3.
80. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 327.
81. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 295.
82. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 295.
83. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 296.
84. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 305.
85. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 324–5.
86. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 324.
87. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 325.
88. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 312.
89. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 327.
90. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 328.
91. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 329.
92. Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies,” 6.
93. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 21.
94. Natalie Bui, “Thi Bui, Author of ‘The Best We Could Do,’ on Vietnamese Identity and Telling Her Parents’ Stories,” *Medium*, March 30, 2018, <https://medium.com/the-baton/a-conversation-with-thi-bui-author-of-the-best-we-could-do-on-vietnamese-identity-and-bursting-92689349f113>.
95. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 184.
96. Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 17.
97. Bui, *The Best We Could Do*, 326.
98. Regarding comics, consider Will Eisner’s *Last Day in Vietnam: A Memory* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 2000), where only one Vietnamese character speaks (the others are Viet Cong, noted for their tiny stature, and seductresses). Even this reductive portrayal is more agentic than those in the comic books *The Nam* and *The Punisher* (Earle, “A New Face”).