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“How Much of Me Is My Own?”: Imagining the Ocean in Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do*

ABSTRACT In many American narratives, oceans play a significant role, often as routes that are traveled in order to start a new life. The voluntary or involuntary journey across the ocean often changes the protagonists, hence rendering the sea a space of identity formation. The ocean in Thi Bui’s graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2017) is not only a reoccurring motif, but signifies the ordeal, trauma, and dislocation of refugees from Vietnam. The images of the ocean and waves visually connect the personal story of the protagonist to the larger history of Vietnam and the trauma of her parents and, at the same time, signify the hopes and anxieties connected to flight and relocation experienced by refugees.

KEYWORDS refugee narratives, ocean, postcolonialism, trauma, Southeast Asia

*„How much of ME is my own, and how much is stamped
into my blood and bone, predestined?“*

(Bui 2017, 324)

Introduction

Currently, the world is witnessing—again—a massive global refugee crisis as we see women and children fleeing from the Russian invasion and war in Ukraine to Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. While European Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič has noted that “[w]e are witnessing what could become the largest humanitarian crisis on our European continent in many, many years” (France24 2022), it is important to remember that the conflict in Syria had triggered the 2015

refugee crisis. To date, it is striking how significantly differently Europe has treated refugees from Ukraine and refugees from Syria and North Africa. While Ukraine's neighboring countries have responded with generous public and political support for the refugees, refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan were trapped in border camps under horrendous conditions, proving that not all refugees are treated equally.

When thinking of the 2015 refugee crisis, haunting images of shipwrecked and drowned people from Libya who tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea come to mind. In 2015 alone, approximately 137,000 refugees crossed the Mediterranean Sea (UNHCR 2015). Since 2014, approximately 23,566 people are missing or have lost their lives trying to reach Europe via the ocean (Missing Migrants Project 2022). The images of hundreds of refugees crammed on small boats and dinghies in the Mediterranean Sea eerily reminded us of the images of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

As Violeta Moreno-Lax and Efthymios Papastavridis argue, “[m]aritime migration, despite increased media attention in recent times, is not a new phenomenon. People have been crossing the oceans in search of protection or opportunities since the beginning of mankind” (2017, 3). Consequently, oceans play a significant role when it comes to transportation and are experienced in many different, often contradictory ways by different people: they can connect as well as divide, provide food and pose serious threats.

Literary as well as filmic representations mirror these manifold, juxtaposing experiences of humans with the sea. Stephen Crane's short story “The Open Boat” (1897), for example, renders the ocean as an unforgiving natural force that has the potential to destroy human life. In Hermann Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) the ocean becomes a route of escape and space of initiation for Ishmael, the narrator and sole survivor of the novel, and it brings death and destruction to the rest of the crew. While the ocean in *Moby-Dick* is more than just a backdrop to the story of Captain Ahab chasing the white whale, many narratives—fictional as well as historical—create a myth of an “empty” ocean that follows Western imperialist conceptions, reflected in map-making traditions that assumed and then rendered the sea a blank space. The explicit link between colonialism and different patterns of migration turn oceans into significant sites where power relations are exercised in the context of both voluntary as well as forced migration.

Especially when discussing US-American history and an American identity formation, the Atlantic continues to hold a central position in most narratives as the ocean that both divides and connects the “new

world” and the “old world.” In the early seventeenth century, for example, Puritans, considering themselves to be God’s chosen people, embarked on a providential quest, crossing the waters of the Atlantic to create God’s kingdom on earth. For mainly European immigrants, the Atlantic continued to retain its significant role as a waterway to the “new world” when they arrived at the east coast of the United States in the nineteenth century and moved westwards to explore and claim new territory, further pushing the Indigenous population to the margins. At the same time, to millions of enslaved Africans, who were forcefully shipped from Africa across the Atlantic, this ocean meant something completely different. For them, the ocean turned into a traumatizing site of loss and suffering. Being critical to the origin of African Americans, the ocean remains a crucial part of the Black American experience. The Atlantic takes center stage as thousands of captured Africans had to endure the Middle Passage. For these people, the ocean became their route to enslavement, an escape through death, or, for a few fugitives, a route to freedom (Mustakeem 2016, 129). At the same time, the huge and remote space of the Atlantic Ocean granted the mariners on slave ships “[...] complete autonomy to impose the most intense dismantling of their human goods [...],” ultimately serving as “[...] a staging ground for the circulation of violence, terrorizing abuses, and the medical decline of slaves.” (Mustakeem 2016, 56). These experiences of African American slaves with the ocean are reflected in works such as Caribbean poet Derek Walcott’s poem “The Sea is History” (1979) or Fred D’Aguiar’s novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997).

In the Pacific, Americans were latecomers, only joining European colonial forces such as Great Britain, Spain, and the Netherlands in the 1890s. It was only after the Spanish–American War of 1898 that the United States expanded its territory into the Pacific by annexing the former Spanish colonies of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, before annexing Hawai‘i the same year. As Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen claim, the Pacific has been relevant for Europe and America since the sixteenth century “as an area of economic development and imperial fantasy” (2014, 3). This notion is further reflected in nineteenth-century literature set in the Pacific, written by white, male, Western authors such as Hermann Melville, Mark Twain, Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson, and F. E. Manning, who focused their works on the adventures of white men in an “exotic” environment.

In the United States, the Pacific was used as a waterway by many Asian, mainly Japanese and Chinese, immigrants to start a new life in the United States. Whereas Ellis Island in New York served as a gateway for millions of mainly European immigrants, Angel Island in San Francisco was the

entry point for the majority of immigrants arriving via the Pacific. While stories of Asian immigrants such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* ([1976] 1989), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* ([1989] 1995 [1989]), or Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011) have already been widely discussed within the canon of American literature, until more recently the history and stories of refugees from Southeast Asia have not been investigated in much detail.

Furthermore, the genre of refugee narratives, which significantly diverge from immigrant narratives, has not yet been defined as such. Part of this lack of definition can be traced back to the fact that a definition of the term "refugee" was only provided in 1951 by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR 2015). This means that many supposed "immigrant narratives," for example many narratives of Puritans, who fled persecution in Great Britain, are indeed refugee narratives. Given the fact that the immigrant experience is essentially different from refugee experiences, merging these terms is problematic. Indeed, refugees can become immigrants after their arrival in their host country when they have settled and built a new life there, yet the initial impulse for why they left their home country is crucial to their experience and status. While the majority of immigrants willingly move for economical, educational, or other personal reasons from their country of origin to another country, refugees have no choice but to leave. They have to flee their home due to war or political, religious, or any other forms of persecution. Within an American context, the terms "immigrant" and "refugee" are connoted very differently. As Viet Thanh Nguyen argues in his article "On Being a Refugee, an American—and a Human Being," the term "refugee embodies fear, failure, and flight" (V. Nguyen 2017a), while the idea of immigrants is closely connected to the American Dream and the idea of the United States being a melting pot and promised land. The fact that immigrants actively choose their new home country leads to the assumption that they consider, in this case, the United States superior to their country of origin, hence catering to the idea of American Exceptionalism. Asian American immigrants in particular are considered to be a model minority, described as an "ideal" racial minority excelling in school and working hard for their successful careers. Yet, no matter how ostensibly positively connoted this term seems, it is still a term that is used "by outsiders, especially whites with power over them" (Chou and Feagin 2010, 2). Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin argue in their book *The Myth of the Model Minority* that this label "creates great pressure [on Asian Americans] to conform to the white-dominated culture" (2010, 2), often forcing them to assimilate to the American culture. As Nguyen explains, being an immigrant is part

of the American myth of the American Dream, while “refugees are unwanted where they come from [and] where they go” (V. Nguyen 2017a). Often being denied a choice, refugees have to move to the country that is willing or obliged to take them in. Their uprooting experience is repeatedly reflected in numerous refugee narratives, which unlike the majority of immigrant narratives, do not necessarily depict the United States as an ideal country. Instead, most refugee narratives reflect a certain nostalgia and yearning for their home country, while the United States is a rather hostile, unwelcoming place to which they need to adapt. As one of the Vietnamese refugee characters in Viet Than Nguyen’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer* (2015) says, “My American Dream is to see once more, before I die, the land where I was born, to taste once more the ripe persimmons from the tree of my family’s garden in Tay Ninh” (V. Nguyen 2015, 227), hence challenging America’s self-proclaimed idea of being the greatest nation in the world.

Refugees are constantly depicted by the media and narratives written from a non-refugee perspective as distressing figures without agency, who had to flee from supposedly uncivilized nations with non-democratic governments, hence suggesting that their tragic fate will not befall Westerners, thereby completely ignoring the role of the West and the post/colonial history of many nations that ultimately led to upheaval, war, and their distress. Timothy K. August observes in his book *The Refugee Aesthetic. Reimagining Southeast Asian America* “for a long time, the experiences of refugees have been reductively cast as unusual and marginal, used to garner support through pity rather than identification of those afflicted with the refugee condition” (2021, 1). This again is problematic, as pitying inferiorizes the other. Similarly, when it comes to representing wars, there is usually a dominant narrative of what a war was about and how it was fought; and in most cases those who win the wars also represent the wars.

This is true for the Vietnam War, which is still dominantly represented through a Western, mainly American, lens. Yet critical Vietnamese perceptions of the Vietnam War are especially important as they question the dominant white American narrative of this war. The extent to which a one-sided representation can alter history writing and understanding becomes evident when looking at the different names of this war. While Westerners call this war the “Vietnam War” or “Second Indochina War,” in Vietnam the war is called “The Resistance War Against America.” The different terms for this military conflict suggest that this war (just as any other war) has been perceived differently by the different parties involved. Hence, while the United States creates a narrative that focuses on

the Vietnam War as a “just” war against Communism, in which America aided South Vietnam, from a Vietnamese perspective, the US involvement is perceived as a result of the long, violent colonial history of Vietnam, a history dominated by oppression and exploitation of the Asian nation by Europeans, Americans, and other Asians. The majority of American accounts, both fictional and non-fictional, have been written by authors who have either fought in this war or witnessed it as journalists. Often being highly traumatized by this experience themselves, many of them used literature to “purge the self-torment, hostilities, frustrations, and moral doubts haunting them” (Herzog 1980, 682), hence turning the Vietnam War and its aftermath into an American tragedy. More recently, Southeast Asian American refugee narratives like Chanrity Him’s *When Broken Glass Floats* (2000), Vaddy Ratner’s *In the Shadow of the Banyan* (2012) and *Music of the Ghosts* (2017), Varyi Yim’s *The Immigrant Princess* (2016), Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), as well as the poetry collections *Sông Sing* (2011) by Bao Phi and *Dance Among Elephants* (2016) by Krysada Panusith Phounsiri added Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese voices to the memory of the Vietnam War. In many of these narratives, the ocean plays an important role as a site of trauma and transitions as well as the gateway to a new life.

The following chapter will focus on the experience of Vietnamese refugees who, as a result of the Vietnam War, had to leave their home country by boat and were subsequently transferred to the United States. Focusing on Thi Bui’s graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2017), it will be argued that the ocean in Vietnamese-American refugee narratives is not only used as a recurring motif. Instead, it is a vital part of the narratives that signifies the ordeal and subsequent dislocation of these refugees. In many of these narratives, such as Lê Thi Diem Thúy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2004), Viet Thanh Nguyen’s short story “Black-Eyed Women” (2017b), or Matt Huynh’s short comic *Ma* (2013), the ocean frequently serves as both a route of escape as well as the root of loss. In Bui’s graphic memoir, the image of the ocean and waves connects her personal story as the child of Vietnamese refugees who has been raised in the United States to the history of Vietnam and the trauma of her parents. *The Best We Could Do* does not only visually feature the ocean as a natural as well as symbolical border. In the text, the fluidity of water as well as the incessant swelling and receding of the tides also mirror, both on the narrative and on the stylistic level, the experiences and unstable lives of many refugees, dominated by constant struggles and changes. The journey to this new life started for many refugees of the Vietnam War on rocky boats and continued to be unstable and hard once they arrived at shore.

Boats and the Ocean in Refugee Narratives

Whereas the Fall of Saigon in 1975 marked the end of the Vietnam War for the US, it was only the beginning of a decade-long ordeal for many Vietnamese as well as Cambodian and Laotian people. Almost overnight, those who had resisted the Communist forces became refugees. The so-called first Indochinese refugee crisis in 1975 was followed by a second wave of refugees from 1978–1979 that continued until the early 1990s. Threatened in their home country, thousands of desperate Vietnamese boarded boats to flee from the new communist regime.

The approximately two million Vietnamese who were forced into exile on ships or boats in the aftermath of the Vietnam War are referred to as “boat people,” a term that has come to be considered as rather offensive by many Vietnamese. Although the term does not exclusively apply to refugees from Southeast Asia but is used to refer to all people who are forced to leave their home country due to wars or other crises and use boats in their flight, it has been closely associated with exiled Vietnamese refugees. The term, however, is not devoid of derogatory implications, as “beneath its purely descriptive meaning lies a more sinister intention of stigmatizing and racializing” these people (Wann and Henken 2008, 186). As most Southeast Asian refugees were rendered poor and desperate, the utilization of the term “boat people” helped to shape public opinions, led to hostility by local host communities and fostered enduring negative stereotypes (Wann and Henken 2008, 186). Photographs showing refugees crammed on small boats being rescued in the South China Sea by passing ships were spread by the mainstream media in the 1970s and 1980s, instrumentalizing their fate for political interests (P. Nguyen 2017, 55).

The conditions on these boats, often riverboats not made to navigate the rough waters of an ocean, were horrific. Hundreds of people were crammed below deck, scared and often soaked in salt water, as the boats were barely fit to sail. As one survivor recalls, “people were crying and vomiting and praying in terror to Buddha, to Fatima, or Christ. I prayed, ‘Let this boat not break apart’” (Minh 1989, 17). Many refugees did not survive the passage, as they were robbed, raped, and killed by pirates or drowned when their overcrowded vessels sank. The majority of those who survived first sailed to Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and British Hong Kong, where they were gathered in refugee camps to eventually be resettled in Canada, Australia, West Germany, the UK, France, and the United States.

The traumatizing experiences at sea are retold in Southeast Asian refugee narratives, assigning water in general and oceans in particular

a significant role. Viet Thanh Nguyen's "Black-Eyed Women," for example, revolves around a female Vietnamese author, who came to the United States as a child and is highly traumatized by her refugee experience. In the course of the story, it is revealed that she has suppressed the memories of her and her family escaping Vietnam on a boat that smelled "rancid with human sweat and excreta" (V. Nguyen 2017b, 8). Just as slowly as the narrator starts to cope with her past and uncovers her own story of suffering, the short story reveals layer after layer the whole extent of the horrors and suffering that she, her family, and other refugees had to endure. The nameless author recalls that she and many other young girls were raped by pirates while on the boat and that her brother was killed and thrown overboard when trying to protect her. In this story, the boat, and by extension the sea, become a battlefield, where not only the narrator's brother loses his life, but where the narrator herself also stops living. Feeling guilty for the death of her brother, she is not capable of talking about her traumatizing experience. Furthermore, her relationship to her parents is also disturbed as they cannot stand the memory of witnessing their daughter being raped and their son being murdered. The narrator realizes that this incident at sea has had a significant impact on her life and that although she physically survived the flight, it has prevented her from living a life worth living. Instead, she only exists in the shadow of society as a ghost writer, preserving the memories for other people at night in her basement.

The New York-based Vietnamese Australian graphic artist Matt Huynh similarly refers to the ocean and its traumatic implications for refugees in his works, such as his biographical graphic novel *Ma*, which traces the story of his family's journey from Vietnam to a Malaysian refugee camp. The black-and-white comic opens with eight frames, each showing a very calm ocean. The last two frames visualizing a calm ocean are arranged on one page with an additional frame that shows a solitary man standing on the beach, gazing at the water. The first frame on the next page shows a close up of the face of this man, suddenly screaming for help. The reason for his agitated behavior is revealed in the following frames, which show a boat in distress that is almost sinking. The former quiet and rather peaceful imagery of this graphic novel is suddenly disrupted as the reader sees chaotic scenes of people running into the water, trying to rescue the drowning refugees. As for many refugees, Huynh's story starts with the ocean as well, and plays with the image of a beautiful sea that people gaze at from the shore that can suddenly turn into hostile waters. Similarly, for many Southeast Asian refugees, the ocean was both a route of escape as well as dangerous territory where many lost their lives.

In Huynh’s graphic novel, images of the ocean keep recurring as the rescued refugees wait in the refugee camps of Pulau Bidong in Malaysia for permission to relocate to another country. Sitting on the beach and watching her children, Ma, the mother and female protagonist of the narrative, is haunted by traumatizing memories of their journey on the boat and constantly panics when her children approach the waves on the beach. While she is obviously afraid of the water, she also constantly longingly gazes at the ocean, “ready to leave who knows when to build a home who knows where” (Huynh 2019, n.p.). Here, the ocean becomes an in-between space that separates the protagonists from their past and home country as well as from their future and the place they will ultimately relocate to.

This central position of the ocean in Vietnamese refugee narratives is once more emphasized in Huynh’s interactive webcomic *The Boat*, which is a visual adaptation of a short story by Nam Le of the same title. *The Boat*, as the title already suggests, solely focuses on the harrowing experience of Vietnamese refugees on the open sea. Like *Ma*, the webcomic is created using the Japanese *sumie* ink painting style, which is traditionally used to capture the beauty and complexity of nature. The plot traces the story of Mai, a Vietnamese refugee on a boat. The reader can choose at which pace to scroll down on the webpage to follow Mai’s journey. The reading and viewing experience is intensified by the moving imagery behind the text as well as the unsettling sound of rain and thunder that accompany the beginning of the story. The constantly moving waves, as well as unexpectedly tilting frames put the reader onto the boat with the refugees, hence making the reading experience even more uncomfortable, sometimes even literally nauseating. Again, the ocean is a rather unpleasant space, where the refugees are exposed to the relentless elements, which they have to survive in order to be able to start a new life.

Similarly, Thi Bui’s illustrated memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2017) uses the ocean in general and the Pacific in particular as a recurring motif. However, unlike in the other narratives, water in general, and the ocean in particular, have a more complex and significant role in this narrative.

The Best We Could Do

Written from the vantage point of the adult Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do* traces her history and the history of her parents, who fled Vietnam after the Fall of Saigon. Like many refugee narratives, this graphic memoir does not recall the family history of the narrator chronologically. Instead, it jumps back and forth in time, connecting the current life and problems

of the narrator with her parents to the history of her ancestors as well as the history of Vietnam. While tracing these histories, images of the ocean and the boat on which her parents sought refuge ripple across the pages of the book, visually connecting the past of her parents to the present life of the narrator, making clear that the family history has a significant impact on her own life. By tracing and writing her family history, the narrator conjures up episodes from the past, transmitting history, the memories of her parents, and her own memories into powerful images.

Already the front cover of the graphic novel features the ocean, as we see Thi Bui's family gazing across the Pacific.

It is striking that Thi's parents as well as her older siblings are all looking towards the water, while the young girl is turning around, hence looking at the reader. The direction of the characters' view is interesting taking the geography into account, as it foreshadows the dynamic of the whole narrative. Likely gazing at the ocean somewhere in San Francisco, as indicated by the Golden Gate Bridge at the right hand side of the cover, Thi's family is looking westwards towards Asia, while she is turning to the east, towards the United States. The different attitudes of the characters towards the United States and Vietnam are hence visually represented on the cover and turn out to be one of the main sources of conflict in the narrative. Thi is the person in her family most closely related to the United States, since she has lived most of her life in America and remembers neither Vietnam nor their flight as vividly as her parents and older siblings. Gazing across the water of the Pacific close to the Golden Gate Bridge, which spans the strait connecting San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean, Thi's family seem to remember and, to a certain extent, long for their past life in Vietnam, turning the ocean into a liquid border that disconnects them from their homeland and their past.

The flyleaf of the graphic memoir also focuses on the younger Thi and the ocean, as it features the little girl calmly sitting in the trough of a plunging wave. Plunging waves, also known as plunging breakers, occur either when the ocean floor is steep or has sudden depth changes. The crest of a plunging wave becomes much steeper than the crest of any other type of wave and turns almost vertical before it curls over to form a tube and then drops to the trough of the wave, thereby releasing a significant amount of energy (Pretor-Pinney 2011, 36–7). Although much cherished by surfers, who enjoy riding the tubes of plunging waves, this particular type of wave is considered especially dangerous, as surfers or swimmers can be picked up by the wave and thrown with great force onto reefs or sandbanks. The image of the little girl sitting in the trough of a swelling wave suggests the wave symbolizing an uncontrollable force that has the power to crush the

girl. In the context of the graphic memoir, the wave could symbolize the history of Vietnam, the personal history of Thi's parents, as well as the personal trauma of the narrator. Like a wave, slowly building up to break at some point, Thi's past and her family history will at some point crash down on the narrator, turning her life upside down before either releasing her to recover and recollect or ultimately destroying and drowning her. It can be argued that this image, which opens the graphic memoir, already visually summarizes the narrative. It foreshadows the trauma that Thi and her family have been exposed to, influencing their lives, leading to estrangement and silence. Like a natural force, she has no chance to withstand these influences, but has to find a way to manage and survive the situation in the best way she can.

Waves of Trauma

The first chapter of *The Best We Can Do* is set in New York City in 2005. It introduces the reader to the narrator and protagonist of the graphic memoir, Thi Bui. The chapter entitled “Labor” shows Thi giving birth to her first child, at the same time already hinting at the problematic relationship between the narrator and her mother. While giving birth to a child and having her mother close to her should have been a bonding moment between the two women, the situation turns into a nightmare for both. Although her mother has come from California to help her when she has her first child, the birth triggers traumatic memories connected to their flight from Vietnam, leaving her incapable of helping her daughter and leaving Thi alone, angry, and scared. The birth of her first child makes the narrator aware of her new immense responsibility (Bui 2017, 22). Now, being a mother herself, she decides that it is time to learn more about her parents and their history, in order to understand the disturbed relationships in her family and to prevent handing her own trauma on to her child. On her metaphorical journey to find out more about her parents and their history, she recognizes that facing her family history and her own traumatizing experiences, which are both inseparably tied to the colonial history of Vietnam, very much resembles facing waves, as this journey has the potential to be both liberating and destructive.

Although the first panel of the chapter does not feature a visible wave, it does reference the term, as the reader sees a flashback of Thi in the New York hospital, in labor and stating that “the pain comes in twenty-foot waves and Má has disappeared” (Bui 2017, 1). Comparing her labor pains to “twenty-foot waves,” the mother-to-be verbalizes the pain that she is in,

evoking images of massive bodies of water approaching with great force and retreating only to return. The painful yet rewarding experience of giving birth changes the narrator's feelings towards her estranged mother. Now being a mother herself and having suffered through hours of labor, she realizes what her mother must have suffered through fleeing from Vietnam while pregnant, almost giving birth on a boat. This is the first time that Thi is able to reconnect with her mother; and being a mother herself now, who is concerned about the well-being of her child, she feels the urge to learn more about her heritage in order to understand why her parents have been incapable of showing affection and to understand her own feeling of being displaced. On the last panel of the first chapter, Thi states that "[a] wave of empathy for my mother washes over me" (Bui 2017, 22), comparing the unexpected feelings of sympathy towards her mother once more to an overpowering natural force. Opening and closing the first chapter of the graphic memoir with wave images, using them to verbalize extreme emotions that are hard to explain or to transmit, the narrative makes clear that waterways in general and oceans in particular will have a significant meaning.

As the plot evolves, it becomes evident that Thi's problem with her parents and their inability to maintain emotional relationships emerge from an intergenerational trauma. The term "intergenerational trauma" refers to a traumatic experience that is inflicted on one generation but affects the well-being of the future generation as well (Connolly 2011, 609–11). Hence, intergenerational trauma has to be understood as a transmission of trauma that connects the parent's or ancestor's trauma to the well-being of future generations, as it affects their behavior. Marianne Hirsch similarly argues in her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* that trauma is passed on to the so-called "hinge generation" (2012, 1) and thus that traumatic events such as the Holocaust do not only affect people who were immediately exposed to this trauma but also affect family members and their close environment. Hirsch introduces the term postmemory, which describes how later generations, often second generations, are affected by traumatic experiences of their parents. These memories are "[...] transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right." (5). This further implies that these second-generation children "[...] grow up with overwhelming inherited memories and that to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors." (5). In *The Best We Could Do*, the trauma of the Vietnam War and the subsequent refugee experience extend far beyond the horrific moments and have a significant impact on

Thi's parents. Her father in particular is barely approachable and sometimes even acts violently while being mostly detached from his family. His behavior remains a mystery to Thi as there are gaps and discontinuities between her and her father that make it hard for her to understand him. She recalls how his anger, which seemed to erupt from nowhere, as well as his paranoid behavior, left her and her siblings scared as children. In the course of the narrative, she learns how the experience of being crammed together with many other refugees on a small boat was an especially traumatizing event for her father, who had to take responsibility for the boat and its passengers, as he turned out to be the only one capable of navigating the vessel, since the captain of the boat turned out not to be able to. Probably overburdened by the task of navigating not only his own family but all the people on the boat to safety, he starts to distance himself after their arrival in the US and becomes increasingly paranoid. Thi recalls how her parents, especially her father, were constantly alert and indoctrinated their children with what she calls her “refugee reflex” (Bui 2017, 305). As she explains, this reflex is “not any particular piece of Vietnamese culture” but her “inheritance: the inexplicable need and extraordinary ability to RUN when the shit hits the fan” (Bui 2017, 305). It is interesting that she refers to the reflex, which causes her to flee from supposedly dangerous situations, as being an “inheritance,” something that was passed on to her by her parents. Moreover, the constant stress her father was exposed to on the ocean very likely triggered a traumatic disorder that ultimately leads to the breakup of Thi's parents and further estranges him from his children. Hence, the ocean, which first brings salvation to Thi and forces the family to work closely together on the boat, becomes the source of the intergenerational trauma and the family falling apart.

Her parents' trauma also evoked a constant feeling of insecurity and guilt in her. This becomes evident at the beginning of the second chapter, when the boat on which her parents fled is shown for the first time. The caption in this panel reads: “My parents escaped Việt Nam on a boat so their children could grow up in freedom” (Bui 2017, 30). Obviously, Thi is haunted by the fact that she owes her life in the United States to the sacrifices her parents made. This notion is further emphasized by the second caption: “You'd think I could be more grateful” (Bui 2017, 30). In fact, this panel as well as the subsequent panels address the recurring issue of intergenerational traumatic experiences for children of Vietnamese refugees and their often problematic relationship to their parents. While the children of refugees hardly remember their country of origin and tend to grow up in their host country, closely relating and adapting to its culture, their parents suffer more in starting a new life in an unknown

country. The more the children identify with the new culture, the more they become estranged from their parents, who tend to cling to cultural practices and values of their home country, making it hard for both parties to keep an emotional bond. In the graphic memoir, Thi remembers in retrospect how as a young adult she moved to California to be closer to her aging parents, only to recognize that “proximity and closeness are not the same” (Bui 2017, 31).

The absence of an emotional bond between Thi and her mother is visually emphasized a few pages later. Thi Bui decides to trace and write down the history of her family in order to understand what has happened to them as well as to keep the memory alive. She further sees writing her memoir as an opportunity to seek reconciliation with the past. At the same time, while tracing the history of her family and the Vietnam War, she also starts to come to terms with her identity as a Vietnamese refugee in the United States, adding a therapeutic purpose to her project. She understands that only readdressing the displaced memories and writing about the unspeakable will enable her to overcome her own trauma and anxieties. For Thi, the only access to the past of her parents is to talk to them, which turns out to be a challenging endeavor. In one central scene of the narrative, she tries to talk to her mother about her memories of Vietnam and the flight. Yet this conversation turns out to be difficult, as her mother constantly changes the topic, leaving Thi sitting frustrated at the table. Visually, the connection between Thi’s struggle to come to terms with her identity and the history of her parents is depicted across two pages (Bui 2017, 36–7).

At the top of the left page, the reader sees Thi sitting at a desk, recollecting her family history. Her thoughts are displayed in four boxes, in which she explains that she believes that recording her family history will “bridge the gap between the past and the present,” allowing her to “fill the void between [her] parents and [her]” (Bui 2017, 36). While Thi is working on her memoir, the orange watercolor drawing of the outline of Vietnam bleeds into the lower part of the page. The image of Vietnam draws a connection between the images of the older Thi and her younger self, who is standing with her back to the audience, gazing at the image of Vietnam. The naked back of the young girl reveals a hole, ripped into her body, which resembles a mirrored shape of Vietnam. The image eerily recalls photographs of a napalm attack on a Vietnamese village, which became part of the global collective memory of the Vietnam War. Associated Press photographer Nick Ut took a series of photographs that show a naked Vietnamese girl in different stages of the attack, including images of her burnt back (Kay 2015). While his famous picture of *Thị Kim Phúc*,

also known as the “Napalm Girl,” won the Pulitzer Prize, the other images of the girl and her actual injuries, as well as the pain that she has been in ever since this attack, remain widely unknown.

The image of a younger Thi with a hole in her back visually connects the individual trauma of her being ripped of her home country, which she had to leave when she was three years old, and thus has no memory of, to the national trauma of Vietnam. As she explains: “if I could see Việt Nam as a real place and not a symbol of something lost ... I would see my parents as real people ... and learn to love them better” (Bui 2017, 36). This quote underlines that being disconnected from her country of origin is not only painful, but also has the effect that she has trouble understanding and appreciating her parents, as they do not share the same cultural values. Although the younger Thi gazes at the image of Vietnam, it is clear that she cannot fill the void she feels, as the image she is looking at is mirrored and too large to fit the gap in her body. The war and her flight clearly deprived her of her home and part of her identity. The image further suggests that the trauma, although usually not visible, is still existent and causes physical as well as psychological harm.

A connection between her personal trauma and a potential chance to metaphorically fill the void and heal the injury inflicted on her by learning about her family history is created by the waves that connect the two pages. While the full-page panel on the left-hand side focuses on Thi and her thoughts and feelings, the reader sees her on the right-hand side sitting with her mother at a table. The gap between Thi and her mother is visually emphasized by placing their conversation on the next page, with the only visible connection between these two pages being the ocean that spans across the panels. Interestingly, echoing the cover of the graphic novel, Thi is again seated on the left, representing the West (the US) while her mother is seated across the table on the right, representing the East. Given that the journey across the ocean has been one of the most traumatic refugee experiences of her parents, it is not surprising that the ocean in these panels functions as an element that connects mother and daughter, while it is at the same time the dividing force, as it represents the site of trauma for Thi’s mother that she is still suffering from. In the background, almost like a looming reminder of the flight, the reader notices the image of a boat that is positioned exactly between the narrator and her mother. The boat not only serves as a visual reminder of the ordeal of Thi and her family, but also signifies a point of no return. After embarking on the vessel, the life of the Bui family changed forever, not only because they had to leave their old world behind for good, but also because this experience traumatized all the family members, leading them to become estranged from each other.

A few pages later, the reader sees Thi again gazing at the ocean, contemplating about her project of “tracing our journey in reverse ... over the ocean through the war ... seeking an origin story ... that will set everything right” (Bui 2017, 40–1). Again, the ocean serves as a border between Thi and her Vietnamese identity. The images again span across two pages that are visually divided, with Thi again standing on the left side of the image (West) while the narrative “moves” towards the right-hand page (East). Similarly to her parents, who fled Vietnam for a better future, Thi embarks on a metaphorical journey into her past and the past of her parents, to learn more about her heritage and cultural background and to ensure that she will not pass her trauma on to her son. Her metaphorical journey happens “in reverse” not only time-wise but also geographically, as she travels westwards from the United States to Vietnam, hence following the traditional movement of frontier narratives, turning the Pacific Ocean into her own frontier and using it as a route to her past. While the ocean in the left panel reflects the narrator’s calm decision to seek closure and to overcome her intergenerational trauma, the rough waves in the right panel foreshadow a psychologically exhausting and daunting metaphorical journey.

In an attempt to reconcile with her parents and to save her own family, Thi travels across a metaphorical ocean in order to uncover her family’s history and repressed memories. This connection of the ocean and memories resonates with Carl Jung’s idea that large bodies of water symbolize the vastness and depth of the unconscious mind. Jung argued that the quintessential nature of water is a reflection of emotions, representing the often unknown depth of the inner life of human beings (Jung 1980, 18). Indeed, whenever Thi or her siblings struggle with anxieties, the motif of water, waves, and floating is used, signifying escape and freedom. The narrator, for example, recalls how as a child she was afraid at home in their house in the United States and escaped in her dreams, in which she was floating in water away from her sorrows (Bui 2017, 89). On the last pages of the narrative, the image of the younger Thi floating away from her fears is echoed when she watches her son playing in the ocean; imagining him floating in the water, she states: “But when I look at my son, now ten years old, I don’t see war and loss or even Travis and me. I see a new life bound with mine quite by coincidence, and I think maybe he can be free” (Bui 2017, 328–9). Her words underline her hope that by working through her family history and her own problematic relationship with her parents, she might have broken the vicious circle of the intergenerational trauma, freeing her son from feelings of guilt, thus ending *The Best We Could Do* on a hopeful note.

But does the narrative really provide closure and hope? It can be argued that Thi’s parents very likely also imagined a better future for their children

when they fled their home country and they probably never wanted their children to feel guilty. However, as the intergenerational trauma is too engrained in the family, Thi and her siblings were indeed affected by the trauma of their parents. Additionally, more recent studies suggest that traumatic effects might even be “transmitted through DNA modifications” (Yehuda and Lehrner 2018, 243). Researchers investigated how events in someone’s life can change the way their DNA is expressed and if and how such changes might be passed to their offspring through so-called “epigenetic marks encoded on DNA and passed through the germ line” (Yehuda, Lehrner, and Bierer 2018, 2). This transmission of effects to the offspring is understood as a form of biological learning. These findings would mean that, no matter how hard Thi tries, she might have already transmitted her trauma to her son when he was born, indicating that she and her family might not be able to escape the trauma of war.

Conclusion

Until more recently, the majority of Vietnam War narratives have traced the fate of American soldiers and were written from a dominantly male American perspective, turning this war into an almost exclusively *American* tragedy. Thi Bui’s graphic memoir offers a different, female Vietnamese perspective on this war, remembering the history of Vietnam as a *Vietnamese* tragedy. This perspective is further underlined by the painting style and the dominant orange color, which are reminiscent of the Southeast Asian country that the narrator constantly imagines and reimagines—a country that she somehow feels connected to, yet can barely remember, while struggling to find her own identity. As in many US-American narratives, the crossing of an ocean in *The Best We Could Do* signifies a journey to a yet unknown place and, consequently, the division from the country of origin.

As an element of connection and disruption, waves and the ocean visualize the emotions, hopes, and anxieties of the narrator and her family. Furthermore, the instability of waves, as well as the fact that the ocean is fluid and in constant flux, mirrors the refugee experience as well as the postcolonial refugee identity of Thi and her family. Thi and her parents literally crossed an ocean to survive the war and its aftermath, rendering the ocean an escape route from the communist government in Vietnam and not necessarily as dangerous as such. Yet the journey itself in the hull of the boat was indeed a traumatic nightmare. During their flight, the threat never came directly from the water but from other passengers misbehaving, panicking, and hence calling the attention of patrol boats,

as well as from mechanical problems with the engine and approaching pirates. Here, the ocean serves as a site of human conflict and endurance that needs to be overcome for survival. The time on the boat, crammed together with many strangers, requires the family to work together and to encourage each other, turning the ocean into a site of bonding. This bond, however, is broken once the family has settled in the United States and the parents adapt differently to the new culture than their children, who are anchored much more in the American culture.

The lack of temporal linearity and consistent chronology not only reflects the trauma from which the narrator suffers. The fragmented timeline of the graphic memoir further resembles the motion of waves, which are constantly moving back and forth. The time shifts from 2005 to 2015 and then again back to 1999, 1987, 1978, 1974 and 1965, before fast-forwarding again to 2015, only to pull back to 1951 a few pages later, reminding readers of the movement of water receding and returning. By mimicking the movement of waves, the narrative indicates that nothing in the life of the refugee family is fixed or stable. On the contrary, the refugee experience leads to a fragmentation of Thi's identity. Like the labor pain Thi refers to at the beginning of the narrative, the trauma attached to the refugee experience comes and goes in waves that she cannot control. The title of the last chapter, "Ebb and Flow," further indicates that this trauma might never really recede and that the best Thi Bui and other refugees can do is to remember and share their stories. Assembling personal memories into the historical context of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, *The Best We Could Do* reimagines and redraws Vietnam and the post/colonial history of Vietnam from a Vietnamese perspective, hence turning the tide in Asian American literary writing.

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