

The Waves of Postmemory: Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*

American textbooks often present the Vietnam War with a narrative about the United States' loss at great expense to American soldiers with "facts" and quotes documenting the pain and trauma experienced during their time in Vietnam (GEM Report 2017). Rarely do students understand the trauma and suffering experienced by the displaced Vietnamese. Because of the contention around the war, the second generation of Vietnamese Americans, the children born to those fleeing Viet Nam, rarely had access to counter-stories that illuminated their family diaspora within historical context.

Luckily, the popularity of memoirs in graphic novel form has increased since the publication of texts such as *Maus* and *Persepolis*. In 2017, Thi Bui published her graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do*, which explores her family's escape from Vietnam in the 1970s to the United States.

As Bui pieces together her family history, she uses water as a prominent image throughout the memoir. The front cover, displaying her family facing an ocean with Vietnam on one side and San Francisco on the other, is one example. When she sits at a desk, trying to craft an origin story for her family "that will set everything right," in the background is a boat on rough ocean waves (41). Throughout, water symbolizes the distance between lands and generations. Bui spends the entire graphic novel attempting to bridge the gap between her past and present, with water acting as a metaphor. Bui's exploration of the conflict in Vietnam and its impact on her family creates a postmemory narrative. A postmemory narrative, according to Marianne Hirsch, "describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (5). Bui shows how postmemory and trauma create waves of tension, conflict, pain, and confusion for second-generation Vietnamese Americans.

This presentation will examine Thi Bui's graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* and her use of water imagery to constitute a visual pedagogy about the postmemory generation.