Graphic Remembrance: Recuperation and Absence in Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do* (2017)

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To those whom I love, I hope you know that I love you.
Waves of red flow across the pages of Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do*, a graphic memoir tracing the lives of Bui’s family as refugees in the Việt Nam War. The pale, bloodlike watercolors of the memoir stain the backdrop of a scene (see fig. 1) where Bui ponders how the memoir is an undertaking she hopes will restore her relationship with her parents (Bui 36). In this moment, framed in a panel at the top of the page, red brush strokes form a small wooden boat adrift in an ocean whose waters frame Bui’s body depicted in the foreground. Bui sits at a desk, almond-shaped eyes\(^1\) filled with intent, drawing what appears to be the graphic novel itself as waves crash behind her. This framed depiction of the simultaneous act of writing and being “adrift” in an imaginary red ocean is followed below by a self-portrait that is instead unbound. Bleeding to the edges, the rest of this page presents Bui’s back to the reader as a breeze blows her hair towards the painted shape of a large, pale Việt Nam looming above her. Bui brings her fingers up to her chest to feel the edges of a gaping hole also in the shape of Việt Nam cut from her body. The captions, separated into boxes populating the open air above her and drifting downwards toward the bottom read:

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

\(^{1}\) In her introduction to the collection of essays, *Drawing New Color Lines: Transnational Asian American Graphic Narratives*, entitled “Visual Realities of Race,” Monica Chiu discusses the ways that Asian American graphic novelists depict themselves and other Asians in their work, particularly how Asian American artists draw their own eyes to be “almond-shaped” (Chiu 11). This is in contrast to the ways Japanese manga visual language (VL) depicts characters with “raceless” large, doe eyes (Chiu 4). Chiu demonstrates that this self-aware tendency to depict the self with qualities and traits that seem to be derived from racist stereotypes arises from the formal context of the graphic narrative—comics—wherein readers approach the work with a set of visual preconceptions. But the medium of the graphic novel allows for a novelist to take hold of those stereotypes, actively using them and simultaneously deconstructing them. The sequenced, panel-by-panel format of the graphic novel provides a temporal component that counters the ahistorical, misconceived stereotype. In that vein, Bui takes advantage of the stereotype-crushing power of the graphic novel to emphasize her intent to actively shape her selfhood as it proceeds as protagonist in her narrative.
and me. And that 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.² (Bui 36)

Bui articulates her hopes for *The Best We Could Do*, intending for it to serve as a bridge between an empty self and a fulfilled one. The memoir is implemented as a mode of becoming; Bui wants to become a person who has reacquired a way of relating to her parents, a person whose perspective of Viet Nam isn’t marred in trauma, and a person who is ready to take on nurturing responsibilities of motherhood. Bui suggests the possibility of such a resolution through the embodied archival work of recounting memories that the graphic memoir engages in (Chute 183). At once, this page in which Bui depicts herself writing the memoir offers up an opportunity for her to reconfigure her body in ways that grant her positionality simultaneously as author, text, and reader. It is this reconfiguration that gives her the ability to empower herself to achieve her goals. In favor of this, Bui’s implementation of visual elements presents a dispersal of her identity; in general, she occupies a multitude of spaces in her graphic memoir. Bui is in the top third of the page, where she is framed, a body seated and writing. She is also located at the bottom of the page, where her body exists in a metaphysical sense, understanding itself to be representative of her inner life. But beyond the page, Bui’s body also exists in several modes in relation to the “text” she creates, her invisible hand extending from her “real body” to illustrate the images the reader sees, including that of her own body, itself illustrating and creating the

² Quotes from the graphic memoir reproduced in this essay carry a different modality than the captions they represent found in the book. In the memoir, captions are written either boxed or, in the case of dialogue, in “balloons.” They are decisively split into chunks, the order of which is also relevant to the reading of the memoir. Quotes from *The Best We Could Do* in this essay are unable to fully reproduce the effect of the hand-written captions Bui writes herself.
memoir. Her voice narrates and can be heard from inside the text as well, speaking from the boxed captions she writes herself. The page, too, along with its words and images, encompasses those memories and feelings that belong to her, and can be understood to embody her. Bui writes her own body, using the pages of the graphic memoir as an archive for that body. Inscribed on her body is the primary cause for her anxiety, a conception of the “void” that defines the way she relates to her family and to herself. This multiplicity of self, this ability to string together different positions in relation to an artwork she creates, demonstrates the graphic memoir’s ability to bridge connections, to create links between an author who creates a text (Bui illustrates the graphic memoir), a text that enacts its own creation as archived and archiver (Bui locates herself within the memoir, a graphic novel whose format incorporates formal repetition and regeneration of self), and a reader gathering an assemblage of memories, of absence and loss (Bui reads her own and her family’s memories, the graphic memoir reads these memories as it depicts them, and the reader reads those depictions).

Bui is a woman who was forced to flee her home country as a child, whose childhood was littered with visceral experiences of trauma and survival, and whose adulthood is shaped by memories of the past and anxieties for the future. She is a mother unsure of how motherhood has figured into her life. She is a daughter of parents who did their best to keep her alive and safe amidst national turmoil. She is a Vietnamese-American woman uncertain of what a mother nation holds for her identity. That nation is etched onto her back, a viscerally embodied image of an emptiness in the shape of that country. When Bui brings her hands up to her chest to feel the Việt Nam-shaped absence that is cut from her body, she familiarizes herself with how it affects

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3 Distinguishing between the act of “writing” and “drawing” in a graphic novel draws attention to the interaction of two mediums that helps shape graphic novel’s complexity. When it comes to graphic memoirs, this distinction further complicates the ways in which the self is articulated, with words and/or images. The lines between to write and to draw oneself become blurred as that self becomes undoubtedly stored within the graphic memoir’s pages.
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her. Bui explores the edges of this empty space, seeing the red of the larger, imaginary Việt Nam looming in front of her; the visual aspect of this page thus elicits a comparison between a large image of the country and the “void” within herself, the perception of an absent, stable home—and perhaps most defining, the critical absence in her life of her parents. It is apt then that the graphic memoir implements formal absences in order to tell its story, grafting a narrative from past moments floating in the memories of Bui’s and her parents’ lives. It does this in order to demonstrate how such a Việt Nam-shaped absence constituted by absences of innocence, stability, and family represents things that are recuperable. For example, in moments where the memoir’s frames, considered the boundaries of narrative in any graphic novel, fall, identities, emotions, and even times meld together. The innocence and stability Bui is able to recover when she reproduces dreams and memories in this way demonstrates the graphic memoir’s visual regenerative efficacy. The emotional resonance of her self-portrait (fig.1) and its role in defining the parameters of Bui’s project make it apt for demarcating the scope of *The Best We Could Do*.

Absence is archived within Bui’s body. Her body mirrors the graphic memoir (or vice versa), and the graphic memoir is the resolution and reconciliation of what has been loss and what is absent. Because an emphasis on water imagery pervades the graphic memoir, I will focus on locating innocence and stability, tied closely with parenthood in Bui’s life, and their absence in and presupposed by the depicted act of swimming. I hope to counterpoise instances where characters in Bui’s memoir are learning to swim with instances where they swim for survival. This study of swimming extends to moments when literal swimming transforms into metaphysical swimming as in dreams or astral projection. The act of swimming is visualized as

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4 Bui describes how her father used to tell her about a Vietnamese folk tradition of leaving the body when asleep, retelling an anecdote in which a friend who regularly left his body at night was dressed in his sleep by his friends to appear as a woman (Bui 84). When he would return to his body in the morning, he wouldn’t recognize his body and as result, other “spirits” would enter his vacant body. Bui’s father recounts tales of how this man subsequently went
an escape for the characters of *The Best We Could Do*. Whether that escape is from imminent danger or from the anxieties of life, understanding swimming as escape allows for an understanding of where innocence and stability is present for these characters as it pertains to the presence of or the lack of parents. I analyze the role of labor in pregnancy in periods of situational distress as instances of perturbed liminal spaces in which disorientation inculcates what Dominick LaCapra describes is the conflation of absence and loss (LaCapra 699). The trauma induced by labor and the traumatic situations in which labor takes place contribute to the perceived loss of motherhood, contrived as a sort of irrevocable “failure.” When Bui reproduces these moments, she deconstructs such perceived “failures.” In fact, these moments manage to recuperate motherhood via Bui’s use of visual sympathy. This visual sympathy permeates all parts of *The Best We Could Do*, helping to draw connections between Bui and her parents. Along the lines of finding connections between Bui and her family, I analyze the temporally confounded depictions of family members, living and dead, as the manifestations of the graphic memoirist’s ability to archive what or who is “absent.” The archive—here taken to be the memories belonging to Bui’s family and herself—takes on both Bui’s body and the graphic memoir as what Jacques Derrida calls an exterior or “substrate” (Derrida 15). As the memoir-archive works to reacquire the “dead” within its pages, so do depictions of swimming and of labor implement a sort of realization of “dead” moments—memories—in which absence realizes presence. The literal depiction of absent bodies, together with those of key emotional and traumatic moments living within the memories of Bui’s family members, allow for *The Best We
Could Do to regenerate those things that appear lost, including a sort of revivification of dead bodies. Ultimately, the graphic memoir works to reveal how “lost” things have indeed been present all along.

Understanding the graphic memoir involves considering the ways in which it expands the storytelling capabilities of the traditional verbal memoir via the combination of image and text. Both piece together a created story with an assemblage of personal artifacts like documents, letters, photographs, recorded memories, and historical events, arriving at the artifice of the memoir-narrative. The medium of the graphic novel—comics—is one that takes special care to define itself by the intentional sequencing of images and text, through framed, panel-by-panel storytelling expressing narrative temporality using the spatial distribution of these elements (McCloud 25). The graphic memoir, in turn, arises as a branch of this medium in works like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980), Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006), or Pheobe Gloeckner’s *Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2006). These works are installments in a genre of the graphic novel in which the memoirist’s hands articulate a narrative actively through the intentional use of spacing and textual layout. Graphic novels as an intermedium also lend an entirely new visual and verbal layer to the creation of memoir (Klütsch et al. 11), one that allows for a graphic memoir to manifest anew a formative aspect of their narrative: absence.

Just one of the many elements that plays a constitutive role in the graphic memoir, absence archives a whole host of memories in Bui’s memoir. Formal absences, in presupposing narrative presences, give Bui the ability to record memories that function to recuperate perceived “losses.” Absence also manifests in the memoir’s narrative. Bui records imagined memories: her own as if she sees them from the third person, her parents’ as though she’s lived through their
experiences, and those of social-political significance. Formal and narrative absences are thus housed in *The Best We Could Do*. Derrida’s “Archive Fever” suggests that the act of housing memory in framed, sequenced panels parallels the act of assembling archival materials, also known as “consignation” (Derrida 10). This act creates something that is more than simply archive and external container, but the assemblage of a unified “body” of elements. A notion of consignation thus indicates the graphic memoir’s ability to presuppose itself, valorizing itself as having multiple positionalities with regards to its form, including positions as archive and guardian to that archive. This notion suggests the self-sufficiency of the graphic memoir, the way it exists simultaneously as writer, text, and reader, reproducing itself endlessly. What is remarkable here is that the graphic memoir seeks to implement absence in order to “consign” absence within itself. The graphic memoir itself is the location of the memories Bui aims to store. Yet, to be able to store memories within it Bui must also be in charge of creating the substrate, of recreating herself, the graphic memoir embodying her, that guards it as archive. It’s for this sake that Bui creates an avatar on the page that is depicted drawing the graphic memoir, framing and sequencing images from memory, storing and re-storing them. Hilary Chute cites the usefulness of the Lacanian Triad—the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real—in order to map the elements of graphic memoirs (Chute 191). The relationship *The Best We Could Do* has with conveying and resolving absence can also be usefully mapped thus; the memoir’s formally depicted absences on-page work as the symbolic; the absences of innocence, stability, and family that shape Bui’s narrative are the imaginary; the presence of such absent things presupposed both

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6 Bui recounts the experiences of her parents as they have recounted them to her, reimagining the memories in her text.

7 On page 209, Bui makes reference to the famous photograph shot by Eddie Adams in which a Southern Vietnamese general executes a Việt Cộng soldier. Adams’s photo was famous for its effect in garnering popular support for the end of American involvement in the Việt Nam War (Ruane). What the photo does not show is how the war continued to fundamentally affect Vietnamese lives even after American demobilization.
by formal and narrative absences are the “real.” But even this mapping, the locating of the “real,” becomes confounded when analyzing the relationship between the graphic memoir’s formal structure, the memories it archives, and the reader. The graphic memoir “reads” the memories and reproduces them in its formal elements. It also consistently “re-reads” itself as each instant is visually reproduced again and again, sequenced in time. The reader of a graphic memoir then internally creates the memory-narrative they’ve pieced together from those visual sequences, saturating it, and transforming, too, into an author of the work. In this way, a graphic memoir sustains the mutability of that Lacanian “real” between the people who are “reading.” Reading, writing, and text are all thusly gathered together, and between them, each is employed as auxiliary to the regenerative goals of Bui’s memoir.

A number of formal absences work to presuppose presence in *The Best We Could Do*. Firstly, the framed, sequenced, and snapshot storytelling nature of graphic novels lends itself to absence. Illustration in a graphic memoir, and in graphic novels overall, put to work visual stereotypes (Chiu 5) belonging to readers (McCloud 39). Bui’s use of an artistically simplistic visualization of herself in order to demonstrate a personal sense of similarity and connectedness to her mother via visual sympathy exemplifies this (Bui 131). Narrative presentation and progression are also affected by the illustrative decision making that goes into graphic novel page layout. Splash pages, in which a graphic novelist drops the use of frames altogether, when the images “splash,” don’t delineate the boundaries of sequenced images, the whole page a singular continuous telling of a narrative. Gutters, spaces between framed panels, leave room—

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8 Derrida himself navigates the idea of the archive—and the word from which it is derived, “arkhē”—holding the power of “commandment” (Derrida 9). He discusses how on a nomological level, the level of ordering, archives in and of themselves exist in and control their own ordering. The extent to which a reader is able to access that ordering power of archives to impose order onto the archive is magnified in the case of graphic novels. Derrida says that externality helps protect the archive, but graphic memoirs show, while not necessarily exclusive in this, that externality, in this case the reader, also changes the archive.
and time—for the diegesis and the reader who perceives it to fill in narrative for themselves (McCloud 68). A reader doesn’t simply absorb a set of scenes chopped up into partial bits. Rather, gutters provide readers with an opportunity to create an internal narrative from the graphic novel. The effect of absence in gutters allows for a reader of *The Best We Could Do* to tie for themselves a conclusive, closed narrative\(^9\) in much the same way Bui’s narrativizing of her memories becomes a type of closure for herself. All of these formal absences help to open up a generative space in Bui’s memoir for presupposing the narrative presence of things otherwise absent.

Bui repeats and regenerates memories in which both her parents learn to swim, as well as memories in which she swims, in order to regenerate her parents’ and her own childhood innocence and stability, the perceived loss of which underlies their lives. This regeneration encases within it a deeper and more meaningful restoration—that of her parents and the narrative presence of parenthood altogether. It is the location of innocence and stability in her parents’ memories that gives Bui an avenue for understanding them. LaCapra demonstrates “absence (not loss) applies to ultimate foundations in general, notably to metaphysical grounds” (LaCapra 701). If, vis-à-vis LaCapra, innocence and stability are metaphysical in quality, then Bui aims to locate where the absence of both is confused with their perceived loss. Bui recreates moments of innocence and stability in depicting and regenerating her parents’ childhood memories in her graphic memoir proving the recoverability of those “metaphysical” things. While her parents themselves might not be metaphysical, the notion of their parenthood, and parenthood in Bui’s

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\(^9\) Hayden White in “The Value of Narrativity in Representation of Reality” describes how narrativizing historical events satisfies an innate human need for closure, a need for the “moral drama” of history (White 20). However, the moral authority in *The Best We Could Do* seems instead to stem from Bui’s personal moralized judgement of herself deeming her insufficient as a mother or as a daughter. The graphic memoir’s narrative aims to set the record straight, creating a moral drama that instead clarifies the authenticity of such perceived “insufficiency.”
life, exists and stops existing in much the same way innocence and stability does. The graphic memoir allows Bui to continuously draw again and again that innocence and stability, narrativizing her parents’ lives in time over space on the page, reinvigorating them and the role parenthood has played in her life overall. Bui begins this process in telling the story of how her father’s grandfather and great-uncle began building the foundations of a village in 1951, digging clay for houses from the ground, creating a growing hole that would eventually be filled with rainwater (Bui 95). Even in this early narrative of the past, long before Bui or even her father were alive, a hole—or a “void”—opens up as the creation of the swimming hole is tied to the foundations of domestic living. “It was there that Bố (Father) taught himself how to swim—” and Bui depicts in a full-width panel\textsuperscript{10} the front of a boy’s head pushing a washtub on the water, his feet paddling and splashing behind him (see fig. 2) (Bui 97). In the second full-width panel of this page, Bui depicts her father from below the water as if she looks up at his swimming body on the surface. Without any true visual differentiation between open air and underwater, the panel makes it seem as though Bui’s father is adrift in the sky, floating in space on the page. He learns to swim “with a washtub… then with a wooden plank.” In depicting her father’s youth, learning to swim in a pond created from building homes, Bui presents a core innocence and stability in this scene. For Bui’s father, the pond is a freeing space where he floats amid aquatic vegetation. But she shows how innocence and stability immediately begin to unravel as her father’s trivial dependence on the wooden plank to stay afloat in the pond foreshadows the swim for survival he later embarks upon as an adult (Bui 256). As a child, the water offers Bui’s father childlike happiness, a memory that engenders sympathy in Bui and the reader. But that childlike happiness begins to undo itself in what it presupposes.

\textsuperscript{10} A full-width rectangular panel spanning the width of a page.
Bui’s act of remembering through a reconfiguration of her body seems to take on a literal meaning as well. The memories she illustrates in her memoir come from what seems to be a disembodied place even as they are embodied in the graphic memoir’s form. This disembodied/embodied “remembering” characterizes the formal absence the graphic memoir represents for Bui, a compilation of imagined memories recounted to her by her father. The images Bui here depicts in *The Best We Could Do* can’t possibly mirror the scenes that her father remembers, not even if Bui drew the panels of his swimming from his first-person point of view. Even as Bui relives her father’s memories as he tells her, what she regenerates onto the page is recreation all her own, and by extension, all the graphic memoir’s own. Much like Bechdel in *Fun Home*, Bui reproduces an archive, albeit an intangible, absent one, from what she imagines of her father’s memories. These memories, then, are disembodied ones, removed from the body of Bui’s father, much like the perspective from which she shows him swimming (Bui 97). However, these memories return to embodiment even as they are disembodied when *consigned* to the graphic memoir, its pages the archival substrate of Bui’s father’s memories. In this way, Bui is successfully able to reinvigorate her father’s childhood, and consequently, the innocence and stability to be found there, proving that they’ve not truly been lost by giving them body in her memoir. This evidences the ever-changing quality of the archive of memories, changes that are dependent upon its external substrate: first her father, then Bui, then the memoir (Derrida 15). The absence here is and is of memory, as Derrida says, an archive that “shelters [sic] itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to saying also that it forgets it” (Derrida 9). But Bui doesn’t forget the archive in the sense that it is lost to her forever, but that the memories effect change on the graphic memoir as they are changed by it, the “real” evolving with every new “rememberer.” The graphic memoir guards the archived memories of Bui’s father’s
childhood memories—its form giving the reader a uniquely illustrated perspective of that memory, who then remembers the memories themselves.

Bui “remembers” her mother’s innocence in a similar way she “remembers” her father’s; when Bui’s mother receives permission to go on a trip to the beach, she heads for the water—an interaction with the Pacific coast that, similar to Bui’s father’s interaction with the pond, foreshadows a crossing—and begins to play (see fig. 3) (Bui 139). In a nine-panel arrangement moments from a scene at the beach are clipped together, the critical narrative absence of the graphic memoir coming into play. The reader may choose to move through the panels in ways that don’t necessarily progress left to right, top to bottom. Although the narrative of The Best We Could Do isn’t made to be a temporal tossup, Bui doesn’t actually provide the reader with a defined sequence for reading the panels on this page. Bui’s mother learns to swim, enjoys the innocence of being a kid at the beach, and experiences the happiness of family; “Hi, Daddy!” says Bui’s mother to a father who responds “Hi, baby! How was your day?” One affective reading of this page lies in looking at how each positive moment frames one that may be construed as emotionally destabilizing. Eight panels surround one in the middle where Bui’s mother is overwhelmed by a large, red wave, a thought balloon illuminating her inner world with “Uh oh!” (Bui 139). At the center of Bui’s mother’s experience learning to swim is an absence of stability and the presence of imminent danger. An absence of stability also rocks the narrative progression of the nine-panel arrangement. But, as she does with her father, Bui demonstrates

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11 McCloud presents a similar arrangement in his book Understanding Comics and beckons the reader to experiment with ways of reading sequentially (McCloud 25). In some instances, readers will predictably read left to right through each row and then proceed downwards. Fortunately, the language of comics allows for freedom in this act, and McCloud’s exercise is receptive to reading top to bottom through the columns first, then proceeding rightward. But even this is only one of many alternative ways to read a gridded-panel arrangement. A reader may proceed through a randomized path of panels, sequencing the narrative as they see fit. This suggests for the medium of the graphic memoir that the reader can also become what Derrida calls the substrate for the archived which is the memory.
this scene of swimming to presuppose an absence of stability that also lies at the heart of Bui’s conception of self (Bui 36). The visual sympathy Bui employs when drawing her mother is in the simple way she depicts her as a little girl in her memories. Similar to the little girl Bui draws herself as in *The Best We Could Do* (Bui 89), her mother is excited and free to explore the water herself. The reader is able to make a passing connection between Bui and her mother, the absence of specific, distinguishing features providing Bui with access to her mother’s memories. Another way of reading the moment follows each of the eight panels surrounding the central one inward, depictions of innocence, stability, and family leading inevitably to an oceanic uncertainty. For Bui, notions of family have always led to this uncertainty. This depiction of her mother’s experience learning to swim not only presupposes absence of innocence, stability, and family, it houses a moment at the precipice of a realization of such absences. Absence of innocence and stability is fully realized when swimming becomes an act of survival, rather than as child’s play.

Later in the graphic memoir, Bui’s family has embarked on their journey from the coast of Viêt Nam towards Malaysia on their way to America (Bui 256). The narration in this section of *The Best We Could Do* grows terse as the images depicting the events of the escape grow darker. Time in Bui’s narrative seems to slow as panels are illustrated with less happening in the gutters between them. Every sleepless moment becomes one where the family—one family among many on the same boat—is adrift at sea, without food or clean drinking water, Bui’s mother far along in her pregnancy (Bui 251). Sleeplessness characterizes the visceral, traumatic quality of these experiences, which are visually disembodied from Bui in illustration, the momentary quality of the panel progression lengthening each depicted moment. When Bui’s father sees the Malaysian shores, he suddenly loses his stance, hitting his head on the side of the
boat and falling overboard. Unconscious for a split-second, he opens his eyes underwater to the rotary of a motor boat spinning dangerously close to his face. He moves on instinct, an immediate thought permeating his entire body: “Swim.” (see fig. 4) (Bui 256). The first panel depicts Bui’s father’s face wrinkling in panic as air bubbles populate the water around him. But he thinks back to when he first learns to swim as a child in the pond near his home, wooden plank in hand, and he closes his eyes. This recall is shown using the visual replication and insertion of a previous panel of her father as a child (Bui 97). In the next panel, she draws his feet propelling him forward.\textsuperscript{12} In the following panels, he makes it to land where he informs a Malaysian coast guard of his Vietnamese identity and asks them for permission to land his family on shore. Bui assembles the images of her father awakening to the realization of his own immediate mortality, of her father learning to swim as a child, and of her father’s resolve to survive, his feet kicking him forward, to archive simultaneously the innocence and stability that characterized childhood and the precise moment innocence and stability were enshrouded by a deep, embodied, and desperate drive for survival. In recreating for herself these images derived from crucial absences, the imagined memories belonging to her parents, belonging to a time past, Bui manages to acquire what has evaded her as she has lived in the shadow of trauma: an identification of the absences that originates the “void” within her. When swimming becomes an escape from danger, a way of survival, Bui’s father, and eventually, Bui, loses touch with the innocence and stability once connected to it. When Bui painstakingly rearranges a traumatic memory, juxtaposing dark moments with memories of a happier past, she identifies a moment when her father’s innocence fades into absence. But she is able to regenerate and store that innocence in such an insertion, literally recreating it for the page where it is embedded in a

\textsuperscript{12} A visual motif of feet permeates \textit{The Best We Could Do}. Feet take the characters of Bui’s graphic memoir away from the peril of trauma and loss, towards freedom and safety (Bui 97, 314, 329).
traumatic experience, evidencing its own recuperability. She is then able to distinguish it from the very real loss she’s experienced. In much the same way her father regains a calm resolve to survive, pushing forth with his feet to swim to shore, Bui delves into a sea of memories, including those that don’t quite belong to her to regain clarity.

Bui also makes an interesting visual connection between moments of swimming and moments in which characters in The Best We Could Do engage in a “metaphysical swim.” Earlier in the graphic memoir, as Bui recounts her memories of living in San Diego after her family has made it to America, she describes how dreaming offered her an escape from the daily struggle of living a childhood in which her parents were the primary absent figures. Bui depicts herself as a little girl, sleeping, delving into her dreams, moving through her house as though it were submerged underwater (Bui 89). Here, as if to emphasize the blurred lines of reality in her narrative, Bui depicts a child-version of herself falling asleep with splash pages, doing away with frames to demonstrate a fluid storytelling. Taking advantage of a reader’s tendency to read from left to right, top to bottom, Bui begins the page with a drawing of herself, asleep in her bed, a bed that melts into a world underwater. As the reader continues to move down the page, Bui recreates her body as a child traveling in the water, illustrated with floating air bubbles indicating her aquatic location, faced in the direction of the reader as if traveling off the page. Moving down the page, Bui once more draws herself as a child swimming away from the reader, placing emphasis on her paddling feet, propelling her into the dream. Unboxed captions read: “Though my world was small, I would sometimes dream of being free in it.” (Bui 89) The formal absence of frames, the unboxed captions, and the melting away of time, space, and reality, an absence of consciousness, of limitations, indicates that to some extent, this dream of “being free” exists in the memoir’s narrative present, as well. Bui uses the formal absence that is produced from splash
pages to confound time and space, to let the reader into an internal world where what was previously absent, innocence and stability, are present. On the next page, another splash page, she presents an aerial image of her swimming body, as if to emphasize the way, as the illustrator and narrative arbiter of this graphic memoir, she is looking down at her past self. “This was my favorite dream.” (see fig. 5) (Bui 90) Bui draws a top-down view of her San Diego home, a small apartment with few rooms, meant for her entire family. Bui swims through the rooms, whose walls are hued with a faint red wash that highlights the underwater quality of the setting. This page may be read as Bui, the author-narrator of The Best We Could Do, returning herself to a moment of innocence exemplified by her younger self previously believed to be absent. Regenerating this image, a memory of a dream, a solidly absent existence, allows her to regenerate that which she may have believed was lost. LaCapra advocates for distinguishing between what has been lost and what is simply absent in order to prevent “interminable melancholia” (LaCapra 706) and Bui, in recreating what was absent, and, subsequently, not lost, does just that. She also manages to recuperate a sense of stability in this page, if a domestic world can be read to mean the presence of stability. A “freeing” dream taking place within the home presents for the reader an opportunity to perceive the home’s importance. In fact, the “freeing” aspect of Bui’s dream is further evidenced in the “freeing” of the image from the bounds of frames. The splash-page format can be understood to mean that an image spills over frames of any singular panel, the image spilling over and affecting other parts of the narrative. An absence of frames indicates that this singular page represents a powerful overarching theme for the narrative, that the absence of innocence and stability may be supplemented by a regeneration of those in an archive of the memory of a dream. To some extent, this dream of home supplicates the absence of her parents. Here, too, the memoir becomes a substrate (Derrida
for the archive of Bui’s memories, domiciliating within itself the precious moments when innocence and stability are recuperated.

In the act of creating the memoir, Bui also finds that her father, too, had recreated for himself moments in which he was freed to return to swimming in dreams, namely in performing the act of astral projection (see fig. 6) (Bui 85). This disembodiment mirrors that which characterizes the formal absence of imagined memories employed by Bui to depict her father’s childhood. In this case, disembodiment via dreaming for Bui’s father allowed him to forget the absences that characterized his own conception of self at the time, of country and homeland, to reenter that place of innocence where he swam as a child. Here, too, Bui enacts visual sympathy, the implementation of the splash page layout tying Bui’s dreams to her father’s. Bui depicts with another splash page, an image where her father lies in a bed that melts into water, where he floats, a man adrift in dark ocean waters. The image Bui creates is an inverse of her own dream, and instead of the white space in her dreams, her father swims in an ocean of black ink on the page. In recreating his dream, Bui parallels her own inner life with that of her father, an act that attempts to recuperate her relationship with him. Not only does she hope to employ the graphic memoir’s form to clarify her own perception of absence in her life, she strives to archive the absence in her father’s, an absence whose effects she hopes to recognize, all to understand him better. Her intentions for The Best We Could Do to clarify “Việt Nam as a real place, and not as a symbol of something lost,” to distinguish the absence against the accountable loss in her life, to “see my parents as real people and learn to love them better” feels particularly relevant here (Bui

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13 Chute argues that Bechdel performs the same archival reproduction in Fun Home in order to stop the repetition of a traumatic image and move on from it, a somewhat similar process to the regeneration of a dream representing innocence Bui thought was lost (Chute 183): “She inhabits the past not only, in a general way, by giving it visual form, but further by the embodied process of reinscribing archival documents.” The regeneration of an image from the past is embodied in the sense that Bui herself draws by hand an image that she is able to revisit. Bui can literally recreate something that, while not entirely faithful to an original feeling, she formerly believed was lost.
If she can reconcile her father’s absence with the trauma that he faces she might recuperate her relationship with him.

Though Bui employs scenes in which she and her parents swim as children in order to organize and understand the absence/presence of innocence and stability in her life, tracing the ways those absences shaped her father and her relationship with him, she takes a different avenue when considering the absence/presence of motherhood as it pertains to her own mother and to herself. Analyzing scenes in which Bui depicts her mother and herself in labor allows for the reader to unravel the confusion of such instances to sort between absence and loss in motherhood. If Bui implements swimming in order to foster a visual sympathy with her parents to “understand them better” (Bui 36), depicting her own experience of labor together with her mother’s in *The Best We Could Do* is a somewhat different—if more direct—course for doing the same. In doing so, Bui hopes to acquire an understanding of her mother, even as she articulates how recuperating such a relationship with her mother has always presented a challenge (Bui 131). “Writing about my mother is harder [than writing about my father] for me—maybe because my image of her is too tied up with my opinion of myself.” In words, then, as in images, Bui ties herself to her mother. Indeed, labor itself is a traumatic experience that produces the “radical disorientation” LaCapra says obstructs a clear distinction between absence and loss (LaCapra 701). In recreating radically disorientating scenes of labor, Bui implements illustrative decisions that reposition her with relation to the graphic memoir, the memory narrative contained inside it, and the reader who moves through the sequenced images. Bui almost purposefully “confuses” the embodiment that occurs in the memoir so as to displace herself, not only onto a sympathizing reader, but onto her own mother. Losing track of herself in this way precisely reveals the kinds of emotions associated with perceiving one’s own
motherhood as loss rather than absent. Reproducing these images, however, gives her access to a nurturing and meaningful motherhood can be recuperated. From the outset of her memoir, Bui offers up a diegetic absence of motherhood in presenting the disappearance of her mother during her labor. In the first panel of *The Best We Could Do*, Bui’s perspective places the reader in view over her own pregnant body, her arms grasping her womb, with a boxed location and date floating above. There is no introduction of the memoir’s protagonist (see fig. 7) (Bui 1). There is only a sentence declaring the state of things: “I’m in labor.” This is followed by “The pain comes in twenty-foot waves and Má [Mother] has disappeared.” The pain of motherhood, its perceived lack, like water imagery, spans the entirety of *The Best We Could Do*. Even at the beginning of the memoir, such a disappearance epitomizes one of the primary diegetic absences that characterizes the narrative, the absence of Bui’s parents, particularly the absence of her mother. In the moments before Bui herself enters into motherhood, her own mother has disappeared. The reader witnesses no face, no personage attached to the body of the narrator herself on the first page as this split-second realization occurs. The absence of her mother rattles at several levels of the text. The narrator of *The Best We Could Do*, Bui herself, dismisses herself on the page, obscuring herself, giving the reader a first-person perspective of her experience. This formal absence draws the reader closer to both the narrator and the tense, emotionally challenging experience of the scene depicted, but also demonstrates the way Bui loses track herself when she loses track of her mother. “Loss is often correlated with lack, for as loss is to the past, so lack is to the present and future. A lost object is one that may be felt to be lacking, although a lack need not necessarily involve a loss.” (LaCapra 703) As a result of her mother’s absence, portrayed in the way she presents herself, Bui sees herself as lacking the capabilities of becoming a good mother, and it’s the perception of this lack that lies at the center of her motivation for the
memoir. A reader of the memoir experiences the “radical disorientation” Bui feels as Bui dismisses her own identity on the page. As her son is coming into the world, she is at a loss for what exactly it means to be a mother. The absence of the mother is, in this traumatic moment, conflated with a feeling of lack in regards of motherhood.

Only after turning the page does the reader see the face of the woman whose story shapes the book, still only a profile. Her husband, a man whose complexion remains hidden, supports her back, informing Bui that her mother “had to excuse herself.” Bui looks at an empty chair in the corner of the hospital room (see fig. 8) (Bui 2). “In her place my husband, Travis, steps in.” The absence of the mother is filled by the husband, himself an absent figure. His hands stretch out to help his wife, and he serves almost as an extension of her own body, aware of their surroundings and confirming the absence of Bui’s mother. The critical parental absence—Bui’s mother is missing and Bui herself has yet to become a mother—signals absence of nurturing, care, and love along with a depicted half absence of self. The sequence and arrangement of images of Bui’s and her husband’s bodies provides a possible look into how they serve the overarching message of the text; in the face of parental absence, Bui supplements herself and her husband who is an extension of herself, both of which might be insufficient to take on impending responsibility. The reader of the page only sees Bui’s half-face, the hands of her other “half,” her husband, at her back. Bui’s husband’s hands appear in a panel directly after one in which she is turning out of bed. Spanning the top half of the second page, these panels connect the two with the appearance of a continuous bottom frame where Travis’ hands seem visually to extend from Bui’s body. But where Travis’ hands emerge to support Bui, a gutter cuts one body off from the other. Despite the fact that Travis is an extension of herself, Bui demonstrates how even with his support, she has yet to discover how exactly to face imminent parenthood. An underlying
message of the rest of the text lies in this truth, that, upon being confronted with a fear of the overwhelming responsibility of being a parent, Bui looks to her own parents, specifically her own mother—a figure who is visualized as absent. One of the central questions of the memoir is thus poised at its outset: “what does it mean to fail as a mother?” When a needle pierces into Bui’s back, anesthesia dripping into her body, “numbness” (see fig. 9) (Bui 8), Bui illustrates an image that foreshadows the Viêt Nam-shaped hole she later carves into her back (Bui 36) in order to show the “void” that defines her. She writes “This is the beginning of my defeat” as though to suggest she has somehow failed herself as a mother. Bui draws the head of a syringe without showing the hand that holds it, implying that something beyond the control of any human inserts “numbness”—another form of absence—into her. The perspective from which Bui draws the syringe creates the illusion that it outsizes Bui, overpowering her. Once more, the reader is unable to see Bui’s face, suggesting shame of both the body on the page and of the hand that illustrates the scene.

Perhaps what affects Bui the most in considering her own entry into motherhood is the traumatic loss her mother faced in the past in giving birth. “Má was only 22 years old at the time” reads the first caption box on a page where Bui recounts her mother’s second childbirth (see fig. 10) (Bui 51). While the page is not a splash page, the panels are unframed by the black lines that ink the borders of other panels in the memoir, indicating the emotional unboundedness of this scene. The composition of the images here are reminiscent of that of Bui’s dreamscape (Bui 89) in that they flow seamlessly into one another, an initial picture of Bui’s mother in bed in anxious labor followed closely by a comforting one of her holding a newborn, Bui’s second eldest sibling, Lan. This first childbirth is shadowed by the dark truth that Bui has already hinted at previously: “Lan, like me, was a replacement.” (Bui 50) Lan’s birth is already mired in the
death of Bui’s mother’s first child—in this instance, the innocence of the first child presupposes the actual loss of the first. The full-width panel at the bottom of the page begins to reveal the loss that would affect Bui’s mother’s—and subsequently her own—life thereafter. Bui’s mother looks out onto the ocean reflecting, Bui’s caption reading, “She was twenty-one when my oldest sister died.” Over the next few pages, Bui continues: “Some people in Việt Nam say you shouldn’t give a baby a beautiful name or jealous spirits will come take the baby away. My parents defiantly gave their firstborn a name that sounded like and meant ‘Great River’—Giang Quyên.” (Bui 53) Bui depicts the powerful waters her sister’s name signifies in a large establishing panel (see fig. 11) (Bui 53). The river beats against the bottom of the frame in waves\(^{14}\), its origin snaking into the distance. Bui somehow suggests the uncontrollable nature of the events that surround her sister’s death, implying that having been named “Giang Quyên” by her parents, that by some supernatural causality, they were at fault. Scenes in panels below show family members and a doctor evidencing the decline of Bui’s sister’s health, a sequence of anxiety-inducing confrontations eventually leading to the sad event. “So many stories surround the death of this baby, my mother’s firstborn” (Bui 55). Prefacing the death of the firstborn with the birth of the second child serves the function of revealing that quality of motherhood which was presumed lost, even as evidence of motherhood—a literal childbirth—proves otherwise. Though Bui’s mother is able to mother several more children, having lost her first daughter affected her to such

\(^{14}\) Water imagery in *The Best We Could Do* is employed in order to reference a multitude of events and narrative elements in Bui’s recollection of her family’s memories, not least among them the naming scheme used by her parents to name her eldest sister, “Giang Quyên,” meaning “Great River” (Bui 53). Instead of depicting her sister in the panel in which she describes her, Bui opts instead to draw a raging river. The graphic memoir itself also employs images of the waves in the ocean where Bui’s family was adrift, scenes of swimming, images of birth that show water, watercolors, washes, etc. If *The Best We Could Do* is to serve as an archive for Bui’s memories (Derrida 10) and, therefore, herself, in much the same way Alison Bechdel depicts her memories with a streak of blue in *Fun Home* (Chute 179), then to some extent the graphic memoir becomes a site where Bui can locate an embodied, pre-language, articulation of self that has yet to be realized, in the ways she strives to put together pieces in order to become the mother she has yet to be (Kristeva and Moi 93).
a degree that she felt an irrevocable failure of motherhood. Bui indicates the origin of the name of the memoir in a panel that reveals the death of the child (fig. 11). “Hôpital Grall, September 1965” spans Bui’s reimaginations of the sign that reads the name of the death place of Giang Quyên. A voice that speaks from nowhere, disembodied, says in a couple of balloons, “I’m sorry. We did the best that we could do.” These words presumably come from one or many doctors who tried in vain to save Bui’s sister. This recreation of a moment where Bui’s mother assumes her own failure as a mother, in which the actual loss of a child becomes conflated with a loss of motherhood, an archive of a memory that may have already forgotten itself (Derrida 10), allows Bui—at least the version of her that is the memoir’s narrator—to revisit a painful experience one last time (Chute 216). Indeed, the loss is archivable as an actual occurrence; it has a date and a location. But for Bui’s mother, the loss of a first child, has remained with her ever since, Bui using a depiction of her mother at two different ages in order to present how she has been frozen in that time of loss (see fig. 12) (Bui 55). “I don’t know how long Má went over the reasons in her head. Maybe she never stopped.” These captions are split between one panel where Bui’s mother is depicted as a young woman walking towards a river, a breeze blowing her hair to the right, an image reminiscent of Bui’s self-portrait (fig. 1). In the next, she is aged and looks ahead with a hardened complexion, glasses shielding eyes that have seen too much loss. The trauma of living as a woman in the Việt Nam War gives way to a confusion, a disorientation (LaCapra 701), reasonably causes her to conflated the loss of a child with the failure as a mother and subsequent loss of motherhood; while literal “motherhood” may become absent, Bui articulates through visual and verbal reproduction that it is indeed not lost.

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15 Chute describes how Bechdel in *Fun Home* employs repetition in order to mitigate the effects of trauma, when traumatic experiences become repeated over and over again for a survivor (Chute 216). Bechdel thereby halts trauma by reproducing it.
Conversely, the “failure” of Bui’s mother to shield her firstborn from death doesn’t stop her from giving birth to several more children, including Bui, even as another of her children perishes at birth. If Bui is behind a reproduction and archivization of her parents’ and her own memories in *The Best We Could Do*, all to serve as proof that what seems to be lost is in fact recuperable, Bui’s mother works in the literal reproduction of the family, mothering four more daughters and, at last, one son, whose birth is fraught with the hardships of a family fleeing war. Not only does Bui’s mother continue the process of giving birth even after perceiving an initial personal “failure” as a mother, Bui herself also repeats moments in her graphic memoir in which her mother births new life. This “reproductive” archival act demonstrates that motherhood, while at some points absent, can be recuperated. Epitomizing this regenerative act, Bui’s mother gives birth to her little brother, Tâm, while at a refugee camp in Malaysia. She is already familiar with and well-versed in the “mothering” act, and Bui describes her mother’s “single-minded effort, uncluttered and clear in its objective.” (see fig. 13) (Bui 273). She gains the moniker of motherhood for the sixth time.\(^\text{16}\) This page also depicts Bui’s mother giving birth to Tâm for the second time in *The Best We Could Do*, the first occurring when she describes the births of all the children in her family (Bui 42). Only, as Tâm’s birth is an act that exists within the parameters of their escape from Việt Nam, Bui regenerates the image, showing, even in the traumas of flight, the presence—not absence—of motherhood. Bui has recreated Tâm’s birth in order to show precisely this: for Bui’s mother, motherhood—and by extension, parenthood—was never truly lost. Bui is able to recuperate that motherhood in *The Best We Could Do*, a store of strength she finds in her mother and father as she gives birth to and raises her son. Bui, too, is able to commit the “single-minded” reproductive act of drawing and redrawing in her graphic memoir. She, like

\(^{16}\) Bui’s mother has at this point given birth six times; first to Quyên, then Lan, Bích, Thảo, Thi, and finally, Tâm. Quyên dies soon after birth and Thảo is stillborn.
her mother, evidences the ability to restore such an absent thing as motherhood. “Just as loss need not be conflated with absence, for example, by not construing historical losses as constitutive of existence or as implying an original full presence, identity, or intactness, so lack may be postulated without the implication that whatever would fill or compensate for it was once there.” (LaCapra 701).

A splash page appearing near the end of the memoir, in which Bui proceeds through the cold winter winds to visit her son at the hospital and feed him, pictures Bui together with both her parents: her father navigating the boat they sailed to Malaysia and her mother in a hammock in labor (see fig. 14) (Bui 314). The inked bodies of her father and mother, struggling to keep their family safe, are linked by the wooden boat, whose bottom arc parallels the bottom of the hammock where Bui’s mother rests. A single foot proceeds off frame embodying the never-ending movement of survival, what Bui earlier refers to as her inherited “refugee reflex” (Bui 305). It seems that a parent’s love is stored into every footprint, a parent “called to be HEROIC.” This page draws that invisible, continuous line between Bui’s parents and Bui herself demonstrating that recuperation she had hoped for, the unboxed words “KEEP HIM ALIVE” carrying the weight of her obligation to her child, a manifestation of what she’d perceived as having lost. At this point in her memoir, Bui is able to “see” the memories and the images that pertain to those things she thought had been lost in the “void” in herself shaped like Việt Nam, those things trauma had buried. Bui realizes that the strength of a good mother and daughter, much like the blood that runs in her veins and the red that splashes across her graphic memoir, was inside her all along. The page epitomizes Bui’s use of visual sympathy to connect with her

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17 Although this page is indeed a splash page, the “splashed” images sit inside a larger frame that circles the main body of the page (Bui 314). The only person who steps outside of the frame, aptly so as she is the memoirist and the graphic memoir embodies her, is Bui herself (fig. 14).
parents. Each act performed by a parent—Bui, her father, and her mother—demonstrates the presence of those “absent” things located in the struggle for survival. Bui’s father navigates his family to safety for the sake of protecting the innocence and stability of his family. Bui’s mother faces labor for the sake of ensuring a future for children born and unborn. Bui herself treks sleeplessly through the cold to care for her newborn son hoping to free him from the same chains of trauma that have weighed on her life. This trek doesn’t just evidence itself in her movement through the cold, but also does so in the act of creating the graphic memoir, of drawing and re-drawing family memories, and of sorting through absence and loss to recuperate parenthood. It may be useful to consider this page in relation to the establishing page at the beginning the memoir where the reader sees Bui’s self portrait (fig.1). The initial page outlines a constitutive absence that the later page might be construed as filling. The Việt Nam-shaped “void” in Bui’s body, like the watercolor Việt Nam that looms above her (Bui 36), is a transparent, invisible-seeming, water-like conglomeration of memories, the splash page depicting the continuum from her parents to her.

This is only one of many images in The Best We Could Do, in which she archives family, recording their absence and loss, and reinvigorating their bodies. Bui doesn’t just fill a void she feels at the outset of her memoir, she goes on to revive the “dead.” Chute argues that Bechdel’s repetition of familial archives in Fun Home performs a similar function, to demonstrate an embodied and reviving archive (Chute 183). Not only does the graphic memoir domiciliate a self-sufficient archive (Derrida 10), it extends this reviving power to the dead, the memories of whom it archives. Once Bui realizes the strength passed down to her from those who came before, Bui recreates her drawing body on the page of the memoir (Bui 36) to recreate her
family, remembering and giving thanks to them by revivifying them.\textsuperscript{18} When Bui first recreates her family on the page, sequencing family portraits first of her parents, then of her siblings, and then of her own nuclear family, her husband, herself, and her child, she creates a living sequence of family (fig. 14) (Bui 29). This living sequence is paralleled by the living sequence of the panels themselves. Perhaps most striking in an otherwise standard assembly of full-width panels followed by shortened square panels is the appearance of those siblings of hers that have long passed away. Quyên and Thảo stand in the background, behind Bui and her siblings, aged as though they’d gone on living, too. Their names, unlike those of the live members of Bui’s family, remain unboxed, a formal absence, that indicates the state of their spirits—free and unbound to the earth. The ghosts of family haunts Bui—but not necessarily in the pejorative way ghosts are normally believed to. While Bui’s project of recording her family’s story in the format of the graphic memoir serves the arduous purpose of accounting for the loss as distinguished from absent things, Bui from the outset (see fig. 15) (Bui 29) shows exactly what, or who, was lost in the traumatic experiences of their lives. Even then, their presence is recuperable in that Bui illustrates her dead sisters as having grown up alongside her. Living or dead, her siblings are “the people I come from.”

But this depiction holds deeper implications for the revivification of the dead. LaCapra describes how “the very conflation [of absence and loss] attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions (such as that between absence and loss). Indeed, post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realize one is living in the

\textsuperscript{18} Ancestor worship is prevalent in Vietnamese and other traditions that trace themselves from Confucianism.
here and now with future possibilities.” (LaCapra 699). What LaCapra says about the conflation
of the past and present resulting from a resistance to the distinction between absence and loss
applies to the way in which Bui reproduces her family on the page in the graphic memoir. It’s
fair to say that Bui is haunted by a past that affects her deeply—the self-inscribed Việt Nam-
shaped hole on her back indicates as much. But LaCapra’s point about crucial distinctions seem
to be made in the case of Bui’s sisters. She draws them as having aged alongside her siblings
(fig. 15). In death, she hasn’t frozen them as the babies they were when they’d died, locked
frozen in the traumatic memory of their loss as their mother was; conversely, she has managed to
convey through the graphic memoir that how she conceives of her sisters, whom she has lost,
comes from a place of having mourned them. Reproducing them on the page as having aged
situates them in time, and indeed reinvigorates them. Their memory lives on alongside those of
Bui’s siblings who’ve survived. In fact, the memoir narrative recorded in the form of the graphic
novel by their very existence counters the notion of an ahistoricized self. Elisabeth Krieber
describes the ways in which the depiction of the self on the page, the character-avatar that serves
as the protagonist of a memoirist’s tales, allows for the an author of a graphic memoir to
demonstrate an agency-in-time particularly in narratives of trauma (Krieber 60). In undertaking
the format of the graphic narrative in order to tell her story, not only does Bui resist freezing
herself in time, in the trauma of the past, she uses formal absences associated with the graphic
novel’s form, sequenced images, gutters and frames, even illustrative vagueness in depicting
herself, illustrating visual sympathy for her mother (Bui 36, 55), in order to demonstrate an

19 “By outlining multiple aspects of Minnie’s character, the author further outlines the constantly shifting
process of identity formation. Via text, illustrations and comic sequences she presents different versions
of her protagonist’s identity that resist clear categorization.” (Krieber 60). Bui achieves the same
autonomy that characterizes The Best We Could Do.
intentional fostering of personal narrative. When Bui performs this archival act for her family, she provides them with the same resistance—while also defying temporality.

Of interest to me is the way in which Bui draws herself as a child on the page that embodies her (see fig. 16) (Bui 88). In archiving her childhood memories Bui recreates herself from a perspective outside her own body, redrawning herself as a child over and over again, illustrating herself onto the page, framed within the panel. Perhaps she resists ahistoricization because she resists temporality altogether. Bui who is located within the graphic memoir and embodied by it (Bui 36) is both adult and child (Chute 188). The absence of a first-person perspective represents the graphic memoir’s attempt to display the memoirist’s character-avatar progressing through time. Once more, formal absence makes way for distinguishing between absence and presence. This recreation of herself resisting boundaries of temporality via employing drawn boundaries in panels is manifold when she depicts herself engaging with her father. When Bui first begins unraveling her father’s past, in depicting a conversation she begins with her father, she repeats and recreates both images of herself and her father both depicted, both as adult and as child, demonstrating the varied ways in which she engages with her father’s life (see fig. 17) (Bui 92). Similar to the nine-panel arrangement, the four-panel arrangement in graphic novels suggests alternative ways of proceeding through narrative—this narrative temporality is quashed alongside personal temporality. In the top-left panel, Bui approaches her adult father sitting at a table as a child, a scene indicative of the time after the family arrived in San Diego. “To understand how my father became the way he was, I had to learn what happened to him as a little boy.” In the panel to the right, Bui drops her doll—a possible nod to a sudden absence of innocence—as her father has de-aged to childhood, a hard-faced boy sitting in his chair smoking. In the bottom-left panel, Bui takes a seat at the table as if to begin talking, the boy
looking down in reflection. There’s an indication that Bui has to confound temporality and step into herself as a child to understand the story she’s about to hear. To the right, the two are seated at the same table, but presumably in their respective present day bodies, Bui an adult working on her memoir, her father an aged old man recounting stories far in the past. “It took a long time to learn the right questions to ask,” she writes in caption. But, as the graphic memoir shows, reconfiguring herself and her family empowers her to make sense of the narratives at hand. The graphic memoir’s sequencing of images in time and simultaneous denial of temporality allows Bui, her father, mother, and even the reader to escape temporality. Paradoxically, then, resisting temporality allows Bui to understand the historical context of her father’s trauma. This recreation of self, as a child or as an adult, is Bui’s key to approaching an understanding of her parents, recovering their parenthood.

Bui’s active recreation of self in *The Best We Could Do* mimics how Vietnamese refugee families, as Bui shows, recreated identity in seeking asylum (Bui 269). It is the direct act of reproducing her family on the page, illustrating them in continuity with herself in the graphic memoir, that serves the purpose of re-forming her body in response to the absence and loss that has affected her. After recounting their family’s arrival in Malaysia, Bui discusses how families would form on the spot, often for the sake of survival. “Some people met each other in camp… and listed themselves on paper as married couples. Some even adopted children traveling alone… Some changed their names or their age” (Bui 269). While Krieber describes a refusal of a static self in graphic memoirs (Krieber 60), what Bui does consistently in her graphic memoir to distinguish absence and loss, Vietnamese refugees refused static notions of “family” as well. This act of redefining the self, to adopt a stranger as family, to reorder a life narrative for the sake of survival, parallels Bui’s implementation of the graphic novel format to record her
memoir. Perhaps, it can be said that these refugees similar to the memoir employed a “consignation” (Derrida 10), an assembling of “family” in service of protecting one another. Families reshuffled to protect one another as Bui reshuffles elements in the memoir to protect her family’s memory. Thus, the archival act of illustrating and writing memories in the graphic memoir can be literalized to the archiving and storing and restoring of family. She performs such a reconstitution of family in the illustration of a family tree, where the portraits of ancestors find their place in the branches that extend across a two-page spread (see fig. 18, 19) (Bui 324, 325). Bui identifies herself as part of line of people whose lives were torn apart in a way that defined who she was, “[t]hat being my father’s child, I, too, was a product of war and being my mother’s child, could never measure up to her.” These captions float above an image of what appears to be embryos carrying the offspring of a large tree. Bui continues, “But maybe being their child simply means that I will always feel the weight of their past. Nothing that happened makes me special. But my life is a gift that is too great—a debt I can never repay.” Bui’s final resolution, in trying to understand her parents, in trying to distinguish the absences of innocence, of stability, of parenthood and of motherhood in her life, embraces the accountable losses their family faced in being driven from Việt Nam. Much as she did with the page connecting her with her parents, Bui supplements a Việt Nam-shaped void with the complex, ever-moving, ever-redefined image of family stretching over generations.

Perhaps the most affecting image serving as an archivization of her family and embodying her as memoirist driven to understand the effects of trauma on her family lies in the family portrait on the cover of the graphic memoir (see fig. 20) (Bui Title). Bui’s family—her mother holding her hand, her father to her right, her two sisters, Lan and Bích, and Tâm, who has

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20 A two-page spread in comics is an attachment of two splash pages.
yet to be born—are turned away from the reader in the act of moving forward. This is a snapshot of a family, not frozen in time, in between one place and another, proceeding ahead. Bui’s image of her family exemplifies her goals for the piece, to present a family moving on from the trauma that has defined their lives, learning to resist the collapse of a “distinction between then and now” (LaCapra 701)—all except for Bui. She looks back on the reader, back on the path behind her. She is a little girl, a nod at Bui’s implosion of temporality, and she holds a worried look on her face—and it is precisely in the shoes of a worried Bui, unsure of how to sort through her past, where the reader finds themselves at the outset of her graphic memoir. In much the same way Chute says Bechdel creates a home for herself and her father in *Fun Home* (Chute 179), Bui domiciliates the archive of her own and her parents’ memories, consigning them inside *The Best We Could Do* to give them a place to live and breathe (Derrida 10).

Thi Bui begins *The Best We Could Do* by critically examining her own capabilities as mother. Uncertain and in the excruciating and limning place that is labor (and the hospital room), she looks to her own mother for answers only to find that she is absent. Visual and verbal anecdotes initiate a quest for a reader to sort through a past that seems muddled in deeply held emotions stemming from the unaccountable traumas of living through the Việt Nam War. What Bui finds in these waters, an ocean inhabited by her family’s memories, sets right those absent and lost parts. Elements of the graphic memoir, of the graphic novel, provide for such an organization of memories, even as they feel boundless like water. Ironically, it is formal absences that make the medium useful for housing a living, moving, constantly self-regenerating archive (gutters, splash pages, sequential art, etc.). In this way, *The Best We Could Do* reproduces memory, arranging reimagined moments, to recuperate narrative absences of innocence, stability, and family, namely the critical absence of parenthood and motherhood.
When it comes to looking ahead and moving on, in becoming a mother for her son, Bui sees “a new life, bound with mine quite by coincidence, and,” most importantly, “I think maybe he can be free” (see fig. 21) (Bui 329). She draws her son swimming through the ocean, propelled by his feet, just as his grandfather was by his. In the absence of frames, captions unboxed as well, Bui employs visual sympathy this time to express a hope that both she and her son will find a way to be free. For her son, hopefully, a traumatic history will be recounted in a living, breathing way, so that he isn’t weighed down by the disorientation of trauma and a feeling of emptiness.

Perhaps, Bui’s second child, the graphic memoir she has created from the memories she has reproduced, the graphic memoir that reproduces itself, will perform this function for him. When Bui’s son is worried about the future, when he asks his mother about the past, The Best We Could Do might provide answers.
Bibliography


Appendix

Fig. 1. Page 36. Bui, Thi. The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir. 2018.
It was there that Bò taught himself how to swim—

first with a washtub

Yes!

then with a wooden plank.

Fig. 2. Page 97.
Fig. 3. Page 139.
Fig. 4. Page 256.
This was my favorite dream.
Bo slept alone in his bed at night and practiced leaving his body.

I practiced being brave.
Fig. 7. Page 1.
In her place

my husband
Travis, steps in.

In the corner,
an empty chair.

She had to
excuse herself.

Mã?
This is the beginning of my defeat—

—a catheter inserted into the space between my backbone and my spinal cord, dripping numbness.
Fig. 10. Page 51.

Mã was only twenty-two years old at the time.

What a brave girl.

She was twenty-one when my oldest sister died.
My parents defiantly gave their firstborn a name that sounded like and meant "GREAT RIVER".

-Giang Quyen.

My mother, a well-to-do woman, told her not to breast-feed.

At one month, the baby's health declined.

The baby's skin turned a strange yellow from the carrot diet. 80's grandmother, who lived with them, lamented:

She can't digest the milk formula!

Give her juiced carrots instead.

Can't you just put a little milk in her juice?

I didn't, and I had seven children!

Look at the poor child!
HôPITAL GRALL, SEPTEMBER 1965

So many stories surround the death of this baby, my mother’s firstborn.

I’m sorry.

We did the best that we could do.

I don’t know how long Mā went over the reasons in her head.

Maybe she never stopped.

Fig. 12. Page 55.
Fig. 12. Page 273.
That first week of parenting was the hardest week of my life, and the only time I ever felt called upon to be HEROIC.

However much my body wanted to rest, a force pulled me onto my feet with the clear and simple directive—

KEEP HIM ALIVE.
Fig. 15. Page 29.
And I can close my eyes and turn away.

And if I could sleep, I could dream.

If I could close my eyes, I could sleep.

...we can also shut it.
To understand how my father became the way he was,

I had to learn what happened to him as a little boy.

It took a long time to learn the right questions to ask.
How much of ME is my own and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined?

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.
That being my father's child, I, too, was a product of war...

...and being my mother's child, I could never measure up to her.

But maybe being their child simply means that I will always feel the weight of their past.

Nothing that happened makes me special. But my life is a gift that is too great—a debt I can never repay.

Fig. 19. Page 325.
Fig. 20. Title.
Fig. 21. Page 329.