Master's thesis

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

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Resistance, Healing, and Ghostly Bodies in Diasporic Vietnamese Narratives

Master's thesis in English Literature
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Abstract

Drawing on Jean Langford's, Achille Mbembe's and Viet Thanh Nguyen's respective works on migration, ghost, and consolation, this thesis focuses on diasporic Vietnamese narratives as healing practices. Specifically, the project explores how Thi Bui's graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* and Ocean Vuong's autobiographical novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* narrate resistance and healing through the figure of the ghost. Chapter One explores Bui's text through the lens of Hillary Chute's *Disaster Drawn*, arguing that Bui employs the techniques of spatialization, mapping and combining multiple media (photographs and official documents). Not only do these techniques confront and deconstruct the political artefacts that have rendered the Vietnamese non-intimate and non-personal, but they also console the wounded Vietnamese bodies. Chapter Two explores Vuong's work through Sandeep Bakshi's scholarship on "decolonial queer diasporas," arguing that Vuong focuses on the body and its organs as narrative devices in order to reopen "the colonial wound" and signals towards healing through sensations. I conclude the thesis by arguing that Bui's book ventures towards a healing that is rooted in a heteroreproductive future, whereas Vuong's text views the body as having the regenerative capacity for healing the wound.

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To dig up bones and clean them, to listen to the requests
of the dead in dreams, to feed the dead in annual feasts:
all these are theaters for enacting hospitality to the dead.

—Jean Langford

All this time I told myself we were born from war—
but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty.
Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—
but that violence, having passed through the fruit,
failed to spoil it.

—Ocean Vuong

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Introduction

Achille Mbembe once describes Western political present as a nightmarish regime that establishes "*extreme forms of human life, death-worlds,* forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life that confer upon them the status of living dead (ghosts)" ("Life" 1). Here, Mbembe conceptualises "ghosts" not in terms of the supernatural but as ordinary human beings who are alive in one moment yet dead in another. Indeed, this way of seeing ghosts anew reflects the American practice of spectralising the Vietnamese refugee subject[1], a silent yet systemic process that subjects the Vietnamese to an anonymous, invisible existence just as that of ghosts. A prominent example of such process is the national monument Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. with roughly 58,000 American names inscribed on it. In contrast to the American presence that is powerfully felt on the wall is the lack of Vietnamese names[2] in their roles "either as victims, enemies, or even the people on whose land and for whom this war was ostensibly fought" (Sturken, "The Wall" 128). Similarly, in Hollywood films[3] about the "Vietnam War,"[4] the Vietnamese are only nameless faces residing in the background to enhance the narratives' "shiny center: the white American soldier and his complex feelings of fear, hatred, guilt and

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[1] According to Viet Thanh Nguyen, the United Nations define the term "refugee" as "someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence" (*The Displaced* 8). This definition is problematic because its oversimplified classification of refugees overlooks the existence of internally displaced people, those who do not cross their country's borders. Therefore, throughout my thesis I use the term "Vietnamese refugees" to refer to the Vietnamese who fled war-torn Vietnam to America *and* the internally displaced Vietnamese who were forced to move within Vietnam when the war took place.

[2] I should mention that the monument entails not just a Vietnamese absence but also an erasure of Lao, Khmer, Hmong, and Kmhmu dead (Langford 42).

[3] Examples of such films are Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*, Ken Burns 2017 documentary series *The Vietnam War*.

[4] Although my thesis does not discuss why the name "Vietnam War" is controversial, it is important to note that for many Vietnamese, the term is "a misnomer not only because Viet Nam is a noun and not an adjective, a country and not a war; it's a misnomer because in the very naming, in the way Viet Nam burns in memory, other Southeast Asians are erased, other names displaced" (Nguyen, "Speak" 33). In other words, not only does the name "Vietnam War" reduce a country and its people to a single war, it also fails to recognise the damages inflicted upon other Southeast Asian countries, such as Cambodia and Laos, during the war.

remorse" (Phan). Upon closer inspection, what make these aesthetic sites problematic is that their attempts to heal the integrity of the American nation are founded upon the forgetting of Vietnamese refugees. When art is used as a weapon to conceal traces of violence, we are left pondering: Has aesthetics closed the door on us?

To combat such pessimism, this project explores the narrative art in literature and its potential power of resistance and healing. According to Viet Thanh Nguyen, the act of reading allows us to become "citizens of the imagination," which entails "a sense of belonging without borders, of allegiance to one's ideas and feelings versus one's nation" ("No Excuses"). Highlighting the condition of "belonging without borders," Nguyen reveals the remarkable capability of literature to cultivate an alternative community where its residents are not obligated to "belong" in terms of a nation's legal and social citizenship. In this way, readers of literature are granted a stateless existence, one that liberates us from the nation's hegemonic power that dictates our responses to struggles over culture and equality, over power and identity. Being a citizen of the imagination, Nguyen emphasises, requires empathy to "take those who are far and feared and bringing them into the circle of the near and dear" ("No Excuses"). Empathy in this sense describes compassion and the willingness to read about lives that are excluded from the nation's dominant discourse, lives that are destroyed, rejected, invalidated, and relegated to the periphery of society. As such, literature becomes an important medium in which the Vietnamese tell their own stories not only to confront and deconstruct the misrepresentation of the Vietnamese refugee subject, but also to console Vietnamese ghosts and help them heal from their traumatic deaths.

This thesis thus explores diasporic Vietnamese literary works that rewrite the Vietnamese refugee subject through the lens of healing and resistance. These are Thi Bui's 2017 graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do*, and Ocean Vuong's 2019 semi-autobiographical novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous.* Casting light on the Vietnamese

refugee experience, both texts are narratives about the war in Vietnam, intergenerational trauma, displacement, interpersonal and structural violence, and life as refugees in the United States. Thi Bui's graphic novel tells of her family's escape after the fall of Saigon in the 1970s and the hardships they faced making a new life in America. As both the creator and narrator of the book, Bui documents her parents' lives prior to and after resettlement, at the same time as she describes her experience as a first-time mother. The text ends with Bui's reflection on family, inheritance, and her optimism that her son will live a life untouched by the violent repercussions of war. Vuong's *On Earth* follows the Vietnamese-American queer narrator called Little Dog, who was born on a rice farm in Vietnam but grows up in Hartford with an abusive mother and a schizophrenic grandmother and becomes a writer. Halfway through the narrative, Little Dog engages in a fraught relationship with an American boy named Trevor, who eventually dies from an overdose. Skimming through the historical and the political, Vuong's and Bui's respective works access history in a rather intimate way as their narratives always veer back to the Vietnamese in their roles as parents, children, friends, lovers, and not least, as ghosts. Depicting their respective characters as the "living dead", both Vuong and Bui suggest the importance of reviving dead and dying bodies, testifying for them and comforting them.

Of the available literary works by diasporic Vietnamese writers, I choose Vuong's *On Earth* and Bui's *The Best* for a number of reasons. As descendants of the first-generation Vietnamese refugees, both Bui's and Vuong's respective works carry the imperative to document stories not just of their own but also of their parents. In rewriting and retelling these narratives, they close the gap between the Vietnamese generations and suggest ways to deal with the trauma of war and structural violence in American society. Whereas the topics of home, belongingness, identity and community are usually discarded or simply ignored in U.S. public discussions about Vietnam and the war, these themes are openly discussed in the two

texts in order to draw on the writers' double project of resistance and healing. It is also important to conduct an in-depth reading of Bui's and Vuong's books taken into consideration the fact that they both have received multiple high-profile U.S. literary awards. *The Best* won the American Book Award and was the 2017-2018 Common Book at UCLA, as well as the 2018-2019 Common Book at the University of Oregon. *On Earth* also won the American Book Award, the Mark Twain American Voice and Literature Award, the New England Book Award. Both Bui's and Vuong's texts touch upon topics that are excluded from the nation's dominant culture, not to mention that their works provoke and defy American traditional values that are rooted in whiteness, heterosexuality and freedom.

This project analyses the ghosts in Vuong's and Bui's texts based on Jean Langford's interpretation of Southeast Asian ghosts in *Consoling Ghosts*. Langford engages in conversations with emigrants from Laos and Cambodia who are traumatised by the brutality of Southeast Asian war zones and the structural violence of North American institutions. She listens to the emigrants tell of their encounters with ghosts in dreams, memories, and even in their physical daily life. The ghosts in their stories are the spirits of the seriously ill, the angry ghosts of those who died a "bad death" and of those displaced from their original homes (Langford 17). Inspired by these conversations, Langford conceptualises the ghost as a figure unrestrained by the chronological sequence of time, who move freely from past to present, present back to past. Langford further interprets ghosts as wielding the power to act as witnesses because these figures are embedded in how survivors remember and respond to violence. As such, she explores ghosts as entities with agency who are not reducible to merely symbols of trauma or supplements to official history. More importantly, Langford notes that instead of driving spirits away, we have to acknowledge ghosts as part of our social world and console the ghosts, enabling spirits to heal from their violent deaths. Healing, for Langford, must emphasise the continuity of our reciprocal relationships with the dead and the dying.

I will read Bui's graphic novel through the lens of Hillary Chute's *Disaster Drawn* and Vuong's novel through Sandeep Bakshi's scholarship of "decolonial queer diasporas" (Bakshi 534). Chute's *Disaster Drawn* looks into how the devastations of war are narrated in graphic novels by diverse artists, such as Jacques Callot, Keiji Nakazawa and Art Spiegelman. In the book, Chute argues that the grammar of the graphic novel makes this medium ideal for documenting history and making it personal. Through the typical arrangement of panels and gutters, the graphic narrative bring together multiple temporalities on the page in order to testify for that which is present and that which is absent. Importantly, the graphic novel needs to be viewed as historical evidence because the form gives rise to hand-drawn images, which, for Chute, are profoundly crucial to bearing witness to the brutality of history. In short, the book highlights the aesthetic form of the graphic novel as important to express trauma in ethical ways. In his article "The Decolonial Eye/I: Decolonial Enunciations of Queer Diasporic Practices," Sandeep Bakshi develops the concept of "decolonial queer diasporas" to emphasise the need for an interdisciplinary crossing of queer and decolonial scholarship (534). Throughout his text, he makes frequent references to Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and of Raju Rage's London-based artworks. For Bakshi, the practices of writing and artmaking enable the queer diasporic subject to reopens "the colonial wound" and heals from it (544). He also highlights Walter Mignolo's concept of "decolonial aesthesis," a mode of knowledge production that is rooted in the realm of sensation, affect, memory, and touch (544).

This thesis explores how resistance and healing are narrated in Thi Bui's *The Best* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth* through the figure of the ghost. The two works propose different strategies for resisting dominant history and healing the ghostly bodies, queers, and refugees, but they differ from each other precisely in the respective messages they deliver. Chapter One, "The 'Good Refugee' and Visual Violence and Intimacy in Thi Bui's *The Best We*

Could Do," argues that *The Best* brings visibility to the Vietnamese experience by depicting the Vietnamese home and family all the while resurrecting Vietnamese ghosts hidden in political, historical artefacts. In doing so, the memoir blurs the boundaries between the political and the personal, an attempt that re-intimates spectralised Vietnamese bodies. I argue that Bui's graphic novel employs the techniques of spatialization, mapping and combining different media (photographs and official documents). Chapter Two, "Wounded Bodies, Sensations and Beauty in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," focuses on how Vuong's novel deploys the body and different body parts—the tongue, the eye, the hand—to signal towards a healing that is rooted in sensations and beauty. This thesis concludes with a reflection that whereas Bui's *The Best* sees healing in a heteroreproductive future, Vuong's *On Earth* views the body as an unlimited resource for healing.

Chapter One: The "Good Refugee" and Visual Violence and Intimacy in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*

"… to intimate is to communicate with the sparest of sign and gestures."
—Lauren Berlant

In her article that centres on the Vietnamese refugee subject, Yến Lê Espiritu asks: "How do we as scholars pay attention to what has been rendered ghostly, and write into being the seething presence of things that appear to be not there?" (424). For Espiritu, the task of discovering and consoling spectralised subjects relies on a determination to dismantle the American narrative about Vietnamese refugees, the "good refugee" myth (421). When the Vietnamese arrived in the U.S. at the end of the war, the American government was deeply concerned about "protect[ing] the interests of the American public" from the Vietnamese who come from a culture "so markedly different from that of America" (412-413). As a result, mass media and policy makers deployed the narrative of the "good refugee", a process of assimilation that pressures the Vietnamese into believing that their worthiness is measured out of how law-abiding and socioeconomically successful they are. By portraying the Vietnamese as "the desperate-turned-successful," the "good refugee" myth produces a hegemonic narrative of America as rescuing and liberating the Vietnamese (411). As such, the "good refugee" myth is a device of power that enables America to turn a controversial war into the nation's "necessary, moral, and successful" crusade (421). Expanding on Espiritu's criticism, Viet Thanh Nguyen posits that equally alarming is the false sense of security that the "good refugee" narrative provides Vietnamese Americans. For former Vietnamese refugees, the safety of their new citizenship makes them comfortable about being rendered invisible in the U.S. public imagination at the same time as it encourages them to avoid seeing or hearing other refugees (*The Displaced* 7). From the perspective of the Vietnamese who are rendered

ghostly and forgotten by the U.S. nation and their own Vietnamese community, the narrative of the "good refugee" reveals itself to be a deadly, unethical model that has to be disrupted.

In this case, Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* disrupts the myth of the "good refugee" by moving in and out of the public and private sphere, looking for stories and bodies that are excluded from the nation's dominant discourse. As such, the book exposes the daily struggles that Bui's Vietnamese-American family face: they are persistently haunted by the ghostly aftermath of the war all the while being consigned to displacement "by the discourses of race, gender, assimilation, and exclusion … in the United States" (McWilliams 317). As Yen Le Espiritu notes, "the domains of the intimate—in this case, Vietnamese family life—constitute a key site to register the lingering costs of war that often have been designated as over and done within the public realm" (Miron 57). This chapter, "The 'Good Refugee' and Visual Violence and Intimacy in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*," argues that Bui both resists the misrepresentation of the Vietnamese refugee subject and consoles the wounded Vietnamese body as she deploys the graphic form to "materialize" the absent and ghostly. The Vietnamese female and male characters in *The Best* embody different aspects of what happened to Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. While their bodily disintegration alludes to the violation on the integrity of the country of Vietnam, Bui's act of redrawing rewrites the Vietnamese refugee body as a site for healing from loss. In doing so, Bui views the Vietnamese female body through the intimate lens of birthing and motherhood and portrays the Vietnamese male body as relentless in rebuilding his self in the midst of chaos. Throughout this chapter, I am interested in the ways Thi Bui's illustrated memoir deploys techniques of spatialization and the practice of redrawing maps and photographs in order to raise ghosts, testify for them and sustain a continuous, reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead.

According to Hillary Chute, the graphic form "operat[es] as documentary and addressing history, witness, and testimony" (*Disaster Drawn* 2). And *The Best* is a graphic

novel, a medium that is frequently used in the last decades to depict the theme of trauma and ghostliness. It is an autobiographical memoir that bears witness to the author's own traumas and to those of others, including the horrors of the war, the violence of assimilation, and, not least, the agony of living in a traumatic, spectral time. While being referred to as an autobiography, the book is not solely a personal story of familial relationships but also a collective narrative that aims to reclaim the Vietnamese voice. For Chute, to think of documentation is to examine how evidence is represented, and *The Best* shows how the graphic novel "calls attention to itself as evidence" in its organisation of frames (2). The graphic form, according to Hillary Chute, is sustained by its panel-gutter architecture: the panels illustrate "the presence" whereas the gutters hint at "the absence" (21). As such, the co-existence of the absent and present on the graphic page demonstrates the ghostliness of trauma: that memories can be recovered but not entirely. In the act of reading, readers bridge a connection between the gutters and panels not simply to discover the absent and the ghostly but also to connect with the dead on a personal and intimate level. In this way, the medium of the graphic novel reveals to be an interactive platform that creates a conversational space between the dead in the book and the living audience.

Upon closer investigation of the Western literary marketplace, Layli Miron argues that "tales of witness" by writers of Vietnamese descent have favoured the graphic form over the last decades (47).[5] Following in the footsteps of previous cartoonists, Thi Bui employs the form of the graphic novel to bring visibility to forgotten Vietnamese people, memories and stories. Her own unique way of storytelling and drawing makes *The Best* stand out. For instance, whereas Clement Baloup's graphic narrative *Memoires de Viet Kieu* separates the past (grayscale) from the present (multicolour), Bui's book portrays past and present as

[5] In recent years, diasporic Vietnamese graphic writers and artists have published a growing number of works in the graphic novel form: Clement Baloup's *Memoires de Viet Kieu* (*Quitter Saigon*; 2006), Marcelino Truong's *Give Peace a Chance* (2015), Matt Huynh's adaptation of Nam Le's "The Boat" (2015), Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (2017), GB Tran's *Vietnamerica* (2010).

inseparable through her consistent use of an orange-red wash that varies in translucency. Her use of colours illustrates haunting as "unfold[ing] in knotty temporalities where present and past collapse" (Langford 17). Importantly, the colour of red represents blood both literally (corpses and dying bodies on the battlefield) and figuratively (family bloodlines and ethnicity). Different moods and tones are displayed through the use of black and white. Bui combines these contrastive colours of light and darkness either to denote optimism and hope or to recreate phantasmal scenes. In frequent scenes she illustrates the elusiveness of the ghost through drawing figures without distinctive facial features and painted in grey or black. Indeed, Bui uses minimal brushstrokes to draw her characters: their faces are simple, sparse in details. Her simple drawing of faces is what Scott McCloud calls "masking," a technique that draws cartoon faces so basic that it enables readers to project themselves into the page and identify with the characters (36). In this way, Bui's style of drawing invites readers to express empathy and compassion that are necessary in the act of reading a narrative about trauma and ghostliness.

In Thi Bui's *The Best*, ghostliness is deeply incorporated into the bodies of Bui's family. Born in Saigon three months before South Vietnam lost the war to North Vietnam, Bui flees Vietnam with her family and migrates to America at the age of three. She grows up in San Jose with her parents, two older sisters and a younger brother. Bui becomes a teacher, marries Travis and has a son with him. It is through writing *The Best* that Bui gradually learns to understand why her parents became the way they are and works through the trauma she has inherited from them. Bui's mother, *Má*, was born to a rich family in Cambodia and grows up in Nha Trang, where her father works for the French colonial government. Attending different French schools in Vietnam, Má learns to think of marriage as a trap and education as freedom. However, for different reasons, she ends up marrying Bui's father at the age of nineteen and becomes a teacher. Má is persistently haunted by the deaths of her daughters, Quyên and

Thảo. Bui's father, Bố, was born in a city near North Vietnam. The first half of his life is infused with danger and violence: he witnesses his father evict his mother during a famine, he hides underground while his village is massacred. When Bố is accepted into a French school in Saigon, he meets Bui's mother. They spend the next decade trying to live a normal life as teachers and parents despite their disagreements with the political situations in Vietnam. When Bố migrates to the U.S. with his family, he refuses to work, becomes a stay-at-home father who frequently abuses Bui and her younger brother emotionally. Throughout the book, Bui's new role as a first-time mother allows her to arrive at a better understanding for her parents. She closes the story with the image of her son, who is ten years old at the moment, lives a life of freedom.

One of the main ideas *The Best* proposes is that the process of healing from intergenerational trauma requires the survivors to "look toward the past" in order to move on (Bui 39). In a double spread, Bui conjoins two different locations and temporalities (40-41). On the left page, Bui is standing with her hands in her pockets; her posture suggests a sense of calmness. On the right, a refugee boat is crashing against the threatening, swelling waves; Bố as the captain is trying to steer the boat. The way the subjects are positioned in this scene suggests that Bui is looking from the present to the past, "tracing our journey in reverse / over the ocean / through the war / seeking an origin story / that will set everything right" (40-41). In her reading of this spread, Layli Miron remarks that there are "no borders intervening" in Bui's act of looking (51). Indeed, the lack of frames in this scene allows the images to extend to the edge of the pages, visually portraying the overflowing pain of trauma. While words alone oftentimes fail to provide a full-fledged depiction of trauma, the graphic narrative fuses the verbal and the visual together to call attention to the inexpressible. Hillary Chute argues that the "grammar" of the graphic narrative

> exhibits the legibility of double narration—and stages disjuncts between presence and absence and between word and image—in order to pressure linearity, causality, and sequence: to express the simultaneity of traumatic temporality, and the doubled view of the witness as inhabiting the present and the past. (206)

For Chute, trauma compels the subject to exist in a "traumatic temporality" in which past and present collapse and merge together. In Bui's double spread, the five caption boxes are thoroughly sprinkled from the serene sky on the left page to the unsettling water on the right page. This visual demonstration of the textual boxes depicts a haunting that "rather than being rooted in the past, shifts restlessly between past and present" (Langford 43). Her usage of colours in this picture, including orange, black and white, creates for the narrative a tone mixed between hope and agony. Furthermore, through her evocative choice of prepositional words, "*over* the ocean" and "*through* the war", Bui dives into a chaotic yet fluid temporality in order to act as "witness". Her role as a witness enables her to pursue a "death drive", which Jean Langford defines as "an orientation or surrendering to death that is not a desire to return to the inanimate, but a desire to reanimate and reunite with the dead" (216). In actively engaging with a past laden with absence, loss and trauma, Bui views her graphic narrative as a movement towards death, a gesture that signals her willingness to nourish a continuous relationship between the living and the dead.

As such, Bui's graphic memoir carries the responsibility to locate and "materialize" ghosts onto the page. According to Hillary Chute, the act of rewriting the past on the page is simultaneously a practice of "materializing" history (27). For Chute, the graphic novel "materializes" or gives a physical form to the physically absent in order to "make … the twisting lines of history legible through form" (27). In this way, the embodied act of drawing wields the potential power to testify for stories that are erased from official history. At one point during her research for the memoir, Bui stumbles across the video "Vietnam War with Walter Cronkite", which contains footage of her family's old neighbourhood called Bàn Cờ

("the chessboard") (Bui 183). The video highlights the neighbourhood's poverty and crime, which, for Bui, is a "caricature" of Vietnam and Vietnamese people (184). As with other American documentary films on the war, this video told from the perspective of an American broadcast journalist fails to convey the Vietnamese experience during and after the war with the U.S. In an attempt to deconstruct American dominant discourse, Bui "materializes" the Vietnamese absence through the form of a chessboard. In a full-page panel that illustrates a close-up of a wooden chessboard, the captions read:

> I still have the chessboard my father made when I was a kid, and the wooden set of pieces we played with. / Revisiting this game of war and strategy, I think about how none of the Vietnamese people in that video have a name or a voice. / My grandparents, my parents, my sisters, and me— / —we weren't any of the pieces on the chessboard. (Bui 185)

In the image, Bui writes the roles of "the Chariot", "the Elephant", "the General", "the Counselor" and "the Soldiers" in white to visualise the American presence and contrast it with ghostly Vietnamese absence. Indeed, the chessboard exposes a poignant fact about the war: despite being the forefront victims, Vietnamese civilians have no say in a war on their land. The body of the chessboard thus functions as a map that "reveal[s] the systematic yet slippery forces of colonialism and national politics, and the tenuous delineation of who is inside, who is outside the parameters of the demarcated geographies" (McWilliams 329). In omitting Vietnamese bodies, the chessboard map is imagined as a site of political repression. However, Bui transforms the site of political disenfranchisement to a space of possibility and change through her frequent use of spatialization. Chute views spatialization as the "narrative architecture built on the establishment of or deviation from regular intervals of space" as a result of the verbal blending with the visual (34). In this panel, Bui fragments boxes of text and scatters the captions throughout the body of the chessboard. The printed words are spatialized into the body of the image, a symbolic act that enables Bui to integrate the

Vietnamese psyche into a historical and political artefact. She further draws her hand emplacing a chess piece on the board. The caption that names Bui and her family hovers above her hand, connoting Bui's conscious effort to represent the Vietnamese whose names and voices have been stripped off from dominant history. In *Disaster Drawn*, Hillary Chute argues that graphic novels "that bear witness to authors' own traumas or to those of others materially retrace inscriptional effacement; they repeat and reconstruct in order to counteract" (4). In this sense, graphic narratives, particularly those devoted to express war-marred trauma, are about the reciprocal relationship between form and ethics. In the panel of the chessboard, Bui displays this interplay as she "pit[s] visual and verbal discourses against each other" (Chute 7). As Bui represents the nation's dominant history through the visual narrative of the chessboard, she simultaneously provokes and challenges it by spatializing the verbal narrative of the caption boxes around her hand. In doing so, she enables the ghostly to "reappear at the site of her inscriptional effacement" (4). In this instance, the narrator's hand as an intimate touch is an aesthetic resistance. The technique of spatialization blending with the practice of mapping allows Bui to present an alternate reading to received notions of history not only to counter dominant discourse but also to offer a relationship with that which has remained ghostly and absent.

Bui's *The Best* further raises Vietnamese spectres as the text brings into question the iconic photograph "the Saigon Execution". According to Layli Miron, "graphic narratives about the Vietnamese diaspora share an imperative to confront—and deconstruct—the famous images that have come to define Vietnam in the West" (65). Taken by photojournalist Eddie Adams in February 1968, the photo General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, chief of the South Vietnamese National Police, shooting Nguyễn Văn Lém, a Viet Cong suspect, in the head. This execution took place on a Saigon street in Februrary 1968 during Tet Offensive, a time when both the war itself and the anti-war movement escalated. Taken out of context, the

photograph presents the General as a villain to "ma[k]e South Vietnam look bad", and, at the same time, it fails to convey the fact that "that same Viet Cong, just hours before, had murdered an entire family in their home" (Bui 206). One may even argue that Adams's photograph manages to erase the wider context since it captures such a grotesque scene in an eye-catching, unforgettable way. The photograph freezes the moment when the bullet penetrates Lém's head and enables us to linger on his facial expression of "eyes cringing, mouth contorted, and skin on the bullet's side of his head seeming to buckle under the impact" (Malkowski 36). In her interpretation of Adams's picture, Marita Sturken argues that the photograph became iconic for its "simplicity": instead of depicting "the complex war of bombs, defoliation, and unseen enemies", it simply portrays Vietnamese killing Vietnamese (*Tangled* 93). It is precisely this simplicity that enables America to maintain "the oversimplifications and stereotypes in American versions of the Vietnam War", which wrongfully downplays the complex situation into "Good Guys" narrative versus "Bad Guys" narrative (Bui 207). The impacts of such "oversimplifications" is detrimental: being portrayed through a non-intimate political lens of American camera, the Vietnamese men in the photograph are rarely recognised as fully human. They remain as forever ghostly.

It is here that the medium of graphic memoir reveals its potential power to console these Vietnamese spectres as it enables the narrator to bring these ghosts into the intimate context of the family and the personal. Bui inserts in the memoir her hand-drawn versions of Eddie Adams's "the Saigon Execution" through opening a family discussion about the different interpretations of the war. She draws her father and mother disagreeing how one should view the South Vietnamese military actions against Vietnamese nationals, then draws herself with a thought bubbles asking whether her father "hate[s] the general or is … defending him" (Bui 206). In situating the Vietnamese male bodies in Adams's photograph within the familial narrative of trauma, Bui attaches affects to their bodies. In her first hand-

drawn version of the photograph, she blurs Nguyễn Ngọc Loan's and Nguyễn Văn Lém's faces, and draws instead a sketchy outline of the men's bodies (208). The focus of her drawing is not the two Vietnamese men but rather Eddie Adams, who is capturing of the execution with his own camera. In Adams's original photograph, America is conveniently absent and thus avoids to take responsibility for playing part in Lém's death and even in the social death brought upon Loan by the photo itself. Interestingly, Hillary Chute views the hand-drawn form of the graphic novel as "a major location for documentary investigation" (5). So by inserting Adams's presence into her drawing of "the Saigon Execution", Bui openly addresses U.S. brutality which otherwise remains unmentioned and forgotten in American public discussions of the Vietnam War. In the next page, Bui redraws Adams's photo a second time, now providing a close-up of Lém's head with red blood spurting over the uppermost border of the panel (Bui 209; see figure 1). While Adams's original photograph captures "the *moment* of death" (Sturken, *Tangled* 93; emphasis added), Bui's second re-drawn version depicts the *process* of dying. This process of dying is not captured through the cold, non-intimate political lens of the camera, but by the illustrator's hand. In this way, Bui saturates the Vietnamese body with a sense of intimacy, creating closeness to the subject of her drawing. Notably, Bui's close-up version omits Loan's presence from the context, showing only an anonymous hand holding the gun. Here, her reductive version shows Bui's conscious efforts to disable the American narrative which keeps the Vietnamese responsible for Vietnamese death. Rather, the act of redrawing enables Bui to redirect the course of the photograph to depict the Vietnamese male body as undergoing an ongoing death, a depiction that allows Bui to "express trauma ethically" (Chute 4).

Figure 1 Thi Bui, The Best We Could Do (209).

In many ways, Vietnamese men can be seen as encountering their death(s) facing war, displacement and resettlement. In exploring the impacts of migration on gender roles and power within the Vietnamese immigrant community in the United States, Nazli Kibria argues that war and its impacts caused a drastic shift in Vietnamese households. Prior to social turmoil of the 1950s, the traditional Vietnamese family was based on the ideology of patriarchy and thus structured around the ties of the male descent line (Kibria 12). Women entered the household of their husband's father at a young age, and had minimal power in the families until they birthed sons. In contrast, Vietnamese men's role as the primary source of economic incomes gave men much higher status both in the family and community. Notably, men also expressed their sense of authority in the cultural and legal acceptance of wife beating (14). As the end of the Vietnam war led to mass migration to the United States, Vietnamese men found their male authority deeply challenged. Whereas Vietnamese women "continued to engage in a variety of income-generating activities, including employment in informal and low-level, urban, service-sector jobs", Vietnamese men had significantly reduced their contribution to the family's economic well-being (13). Living in America as first-generation refugees, these men either struggled with unemployment or had low-paying

jobs that could not enable them to continue to be the family's breadwinners. Detached from the principle of male authority they were born into, Vietnamese male refugees in America lose touch with the very privileges that had come to define them. They also found their masculinity constantly threatened by the American culture of emasculating Asian men, all the while feeling powerless when facing "the persistent pressures to assimilate into the United States discourses of 'good,' 'grateful,' and 'healthy' refugee status" (McWilliams 324). As such, Vietnamese male refugees experience displacement not just geographically but also spiritually and psychologically. As Jean Langford describes displacement as an experience "infused with the presence of the dead", it is not surprising that displaced Vietnamese men retreat to the invisible, deadly life of ghosts (6).

In *The Best*, Bui depicts how her father comes to adopt a ghostly persona after her family migrates to the United States in 1978. In her memory, San Diego, "where the wounds of the Vietnam War were still fresh," is a place that scorns the living bodies of Vietnamese refugees (Bui 66). In a three-by-three grid, Bui explains that as a young girl in San Diego, she first learned about America through books, television, and her older sisters' schooling (67). Describing her process of learning about America as an "induction into Americanhood", Bui implies that she creates her American identity not from the position of someone who is seen as family but from the position of someone who is recruited (67). In the first row of three panels, she draws what her sisters learned in school: "Every morning we have to say, 'I pledge allegiance to the flag / one nation, under GOD, indivisible'" (67). As such, young Bui in the top-right panel places her hand on her heart, an act that pledges her commitment to her new home country, America. Nevertheless, this sense of commitment is crowded by the terrifying memory of witnessing her father being degraded publicly by an American man. The next six panels show Bui walking with Bố on the street when a cyclist passes by them and shouts, "You stupid GOOK!!", a term which is used as a contemptuous and hateful slur for

people of Asian descent (67). The cyclist then spits on Bo's face, the spittle on his cheek "peninsular like Vietnam" (Miron 45). Wiping his face in silence, Bố holds Bui's hand and they walk on. In the last panel, hovering above the two small figures is the unboxed caption, "there were reasons to not want to be anything OTHER" (Bui 67). The "induction into Americanhood" turns out to be an essential tool for her survival, because without it she and her family would be seen as the "other", as lesser than humans, as ghosts. Ironically, although America refers to itself as one "indivisible" nation, America in the eyes of Bui the refugee child is a deeply divided country that sets communities against each other. Rearranging the nine images into a nine-panel grid, Bui deploys the empty space of the gutters to embody the poignant sense of disconnectivity that characterises contemporary America. According to Hillary Chute, the traditional nine-panel grid of the graphic novel "is constantly open to meaningful de- and reconstruction" (37). Remarkably, Bui's reductive drawing of the last panel gives an impression that everything, including Bui and Bo, is on the verge of disappearing. For Bui, the fear of being an "other" threatens her already fragile Vietnamese identity. For Bo, the humiliation and shame turn him into an abusive, angry ghost in the eye of his daughter.

Alluding to her portrait of Bố as a ghost, Bui describes home as "the holding pen for the frustrations and the unexorcised demons that had nowhere to go in America's Finest City" (Bui 68). Being looked down upon for his ethnicity all the while haunted by the sense of emasculation that comes along with his role as a stay-at-home parent, Bố feels utterly powerless and defeated. He is a war survivor, but also a man who is on the verge of losing the only thing that defines him, his male authority, and it is not something that men growing up in Vietnamese patriarchal society feels proud to admit. In his lonely struggle to rebuild his life, Bố is forced to exist in a limbo state between life and death. It is therefore no wonder that he turns into an "unexorcised demon", a disturbed and disturbing ghost who is unpredictable,

constantly angry, and beats his children. In one panel, Bui draws her father sitting on a chair, telling his children "scary stories—not to entertain, but to educate [them]": "If you hear a voice calling your name that you don't recognize … don't answer it. It is the spirit trying to trick you into opening your mouth to enter your body" (Bui 73). On the right border of this panel, Bố is painted grey and has no facial feature. He is merely a shadow, a ghost. It is remarkable that the ghost sits where the gutter is; he is the doorway between the left and right panel, the hinge between different spaces and times. According to Chute, a bleed into the margin of the gutter suggests "an unendingness" (35). That the apparition of Bố bleeds into the space of the gutter demonstrates the ghost as embodying a trauma that has no end. As the gutter "is … where the division of time is marked", the way the ghost destructs the borders of the panel to bleed into the gutter implies that he wields the power to disrupt spatiotemporal boundaries (35). As a result, the ghost of Bố touches the back of young Bui's head in the panel on the right. In this second panel, a close-up of Bui's anxious face reduces to a blurry sketch of her body, which changes into a whisper bubble[6] that murmurs her name. Here, Bo's spectral haunting are too destructive that it turns his living daughter into merely a spectral echo.

In many ways, Bui's depiction of Bố as a damaging ghost refers to the question of ethics in diasporic Vietnamese literature. Viet Thanh Nguyen asserts that ethics "forces us to consider how the speaker or storyteller must take responsibility for speech and not merely claim poetic or aesthetic license" ("Speak" 10). Writers, particularly those coming from minority background, need to be held responsible for the way they depict themselves and their community in their work. Upon closer investigation of Vietnamese diasporic literature, Nguyen notes a destructive temptation in which minorities see themselves as victims because they are "smaller in terms of numbers but smaller in terms of power as well" ("Speak" 9-10).

[6] In graphic novels, whisper bubbles are usually drawn with a dotted outline to indicate the tone is softer.

It is here that the question of ethics become relevant, since ethics forces us to be fully aware of the fact that everyone possesses power, and that acknowledging this fact is accepting that everyone is capable of using and/or abusing their power. In the introduction to this chapter, I discussed the importance of defying the "good refugee" narrative. Such narrative forces the Vietnamese refugees to become "the virtuous human extra in the margins"; it attempts to erase their full subjectivity precisely through rejecting their inhumanity[7] (Tran 397). As Nguyen further notes, "Dominant culture is perfectly willing [to feature], and often claims, inhumanity as part of subjectivity" (Tran 397). In *The Best*, Bui shows no hesitance in her portrait of Bố as an erratic, violent father; an "unexorcised demon" as she puts it (Bui 68). Her characterisation of Bố as a minority who is both capable of love and harm represents him as an agent with power, rather than just a passive victim. Her representation of him as both human and inhuman is her way to challenge the subordinate position that Vietnamese refugees reside in in the nation's dominant culture. Although the type of power Bố wields as a Vietnamese refugee in America is not identical to that which the American majority possesses, Bui's illustration of Bo's power plays a central role in her imperative to further "the idea that a minority can and must resist" (Nguyen, "Speak" 11).

In resisting the "good refugee" model, Bui draws into being Bo's attempt to re-invent his self in the midst of chaos. In Bui's childhood, Bố once tells her a true story about a man who was known to practice astral projection in his sleep (Bui 84). As part of a prank, the man's friends dressed him up while he was sleeping. However, his spirit did not recognise his body when it tried to return. Feeling as though he had been possessed by other spirits, the man ended up losing his sanity. This story does not scare Bố away from practicing astral

[7] It should be noted that my thesis introduces theorists who understand the concept of "the inhuman" differently. Viet Thanh Nguyen defines "the inhuman" as our inherent ability to exercise power, and suggests that a transcendent humanity can emerge through a careful inspection of our inhuman tendencies. In contrast, Jean Langford focuses on the context in which Southeast Asian subjects are *made* "inhuman" in that they are denied the basic human right to claim their visibility on the American landscape.

projection, but instead fuels his interest: "Bố slept alone in his bed at night and practiced leaving his body" (Bui 85). In a splash page[8], Bố lies in darkness; his body melts into an ocean of black, swelling waves. Moving through the water is a man painted in black ink, a ghost who is both flying away from something and towards something. Arguably, this page can be viewed through the prism of Achille Mbembe's figure of the "wandering subject". Mbembe conceptualises the "wandering subject" as a ghostly subject who travels from one location to another without having a "precise destination" (*Critique* 144). The wanderer has to "escape" from himself in order to recreate himself "in the unknown", "within the unexpected, and within radical instability" (*Critique* 149). The journey of the wanderer is similar to the out-of-body experience of astral projection, which liberates the spirit from the physical body and enables it to travel throughout the universe. Therefore, in practicing leaving his body, Bố becomes the wandering subject. The splash page demonstrates Bo's act of removing himself from his physical body to wander into chaos. Bui's use of colours in this page is remarkable: the page is mostly painted black with a subtle touch of orange hue and white light. In enabling the spectralised Vietnamese male body to make and remake himself in a context of terror and danger, Bui refuses to adhere to the "good refugee" imbued with the American myth of "rescue and liberation" (Espiritu 426). As such, the portrait of Bố as a "wandering subject" imagines the Vietnamese male refugee not as a passive receiver of American generosity, but rather as an agent who wields the power to rebuild his self and heal from trauma.

Notably, Bui also portrays herself as a wanderer to ethically depict the legacy of trauma as a cross-generational phenomenon. Living in a haunted house, Bui and her siblings are terrified by the idea of leaving their bed in the middle of the night. Whereas her siblings complain that they are thirsty but think the kitchen is too "scary in the dark", young Bui insists to be the one to go to the kitchen (Bui 86). Bui discovers that in order to overcome any

[8] In the graphic novel, a splash page is a page that is mostly or entirely taken up by a single image or panel.

fear, she only needs to "reason [her] way through it": "If I could close my eyes, I could sleep / And if I could sleep, I could dream" (88). In a corresponding splash page, Bui is sleeping on a bed that develops into a dreamy scenario (89; see figure 2). Floating below her sleeping body is Bui herself with bubbles coming out of her nose; her body language suggests that she is swimming towards readers. However, as readers move further down, Bui turns away, swimming into her dream, or into "the unknown" (*Critique* 149). Just as Bo, Bui is a wanderer who has no "precise destination": rather than trying to reach a certain place, she strives to create for herself a self that remains unburdened, untouched by the anguish of her living reality. Interestingly, in spite of his description of the wandering subject as one that lacks self-rule, Achille Mbembe detects one possibility in which the wandering subject constructs for him-/herself a sense of agency. According to Mbembe, the moment when the wanderer is "set free" can "suddenly shatter everything that limited the subject's horizon, projecting him into the infinite sea of light that makes it possible to forget misery" (*Critique* 149). In contrast to the image of Bố moving into a black ocean, Bui swims into a dream painted white. Towards the left side of Bui's splash page, the white space representing the "infinite sea of light" erases the panel's border. Expanding on this sense of borderlessness, Bui unboxes the captions: "Though my world was small, / I would sometimes dream of being free in it" (Bui 89). Different examples of unboundedness are inserted into this splash page to demonstrate the potential power of the graphic novel to express "the cross-generational transmission of trauma", and to enable the narrator to reconstruct agency and self-knowledge (Jacobs 342).

Figure 2 Thi Bui, The Best We Could Do (89).

In the act of redrawing trauma and the survivor's agency, Thi Bui creates for herself and her father a dialogistic space in which he feels safe to confide in her. In a page divided into four panels of equal size, Bui reveals her attempt to understand Bo's destructive behaviour through trying to "learn what happened in him as a little boy" (Bui 92). In the top-left panel, Bui approaches Bo; both of them are around the age when they lived in their first apartment in San Diego. Holding a doll in her hand, Bui looks to her father, who sits at the table with the habitual cigarette in his hand and looks at another direction. In avoiding her gaze, he also refuses to engage in a conversation with her, an act of avoidance that turns the panel into an inarticulate space. Moving to the top-right panel, the image of Bố shifts to a little boy who takes the cigarette to his mouth. Still fixating her eyes on the boy, young Bui drops her doll on the floor. Interestingly, she and the doll are frequently painted as inseparable in situations where she is terrified of Bo's atrocity (Bui 70, 71, 73, 74). In these instances, the doll functions as a companion and protector to the girl. Therefore, in abandoning the doll, Bui also abandons the sense of powerlessness imposed on her by Bố in her childhood. Instead of trying to understand Bố from a vulnerable position, she learns about him through imagining his seven-year-old self. In doing so, she speaks to Bố not as a disempowered daughter but as a friend of the same age seeking a dialogue with "the terrified boy who became [her] father" (Bui 128). In the bottom-left panel, Bui takes a seat at the table with the boy, an act that transforms the lingering sense of inarticulation into a space in which conversations take place. In the last panel, Bui and Bố sit at the same table, yet their bodies of the past shift to their present bodies.

Significantly, what this four-panel grid also exposes is that Bố is unable to speak of a past too monstrous to recall. Jean Langford theorises the concept of "impossible testimonies" to describe a "disarticulation result[ing] from a desubjectification from which it's not possible to speak" (28). Langford further argues that if the ability to communicate is what defines us as

"living humans", then the loss of such ability leads to "a reduction to animal or inanimate status" (29). Nonetheless, looking at the circumstance from a different lens, Langford proposes that the survivor's refusal to speak needs to be recognised as an invitation for the spectral voice to speak for him. Therefore, the ghost functions as a powerful "atemporal witness" to violence (Langford 18). In the four panels, Bo's avoidance of his daughter's gaze and the constant smoke rising from his cigarette demonstrate his reluctance to tell his story, a "lapse into silence" as Langford puts it (30). Bố is unable to testify for himself; as such, Bui draws onto the page the ghost of Bo's former self so that the ghost can act as witness to the trauma and violence Bố experiences on a regular basis. Jean Langford describes a summoning of ghost as "a consolation" (212), or a call for "hospitality" to the dead (209). Remarkably, such descriptions points towards a long-lived relationship with the dead that centres around the practice of healing. The four-panel grid places Bui, Bố and their respective ghostly counterparts in a temporal entanglement. This demonstration proposes that healing does not come from assigning past loss to another time, but from enabling the dead to "belong both to a past that is still [their] own present, and to the current present" (Langford 214). Interestingly, readers are also invited to participate in this process of healing through interpreting the gutter. According to Chute, the gutter is a space of "stillness" because it frames moments as they are on the page, but the gutter also suggests "movement" because it demands readers to actively bridge the gap between panels during the simultaneous act of reading and interpreting (35). As such, the gutter allows readers, whether Vietnamese or non-Vietnamese, to partake in Vietnamese trauma and thereby actively engage in fostering intimacy and closeness with Vietnamese spectres.

Paradoxically, while the gutter is shown to be integral to the representation of ghostliness and healing in the graphic novel, at a later point in the book Bui omits the empty space of the gutter in order to console her father. During their escape from Cần Thơ to the

refugee camp in Malaysia, Bố appears to be most capable to navigate and is given command of the boat. In an extended sequence that spreads across 27 pages, the family's boat journey is illustrated through a grid layout of panels separated only by thin black lines (Bui 233-252). The lack of the gutter space between the panels recreates the sense of claustrophobia that is permanently marked in Bui's memory. Then in the middle of this sequence, a double-page spread allows readers "to breathe fresh air and regain their bearings" (Roan 246). On the left, Bố in a white shirt looks up at the night sky, gazing in awe at the Belt of Orion (Bui 248-249; see figure 3). By temporarily detaching Bố from the very boat that carries him away from Vietnam, Bui unmarks her father from the sufferings as well as stigmas attaching to the refugee subject. Under her artistic hand, Bố shifts from being a "wandering subject" who is compelled to rebuild himself in a chaotic setting to being simply a subject who *is* himself during his encounter with the aesthetic. In enabling the ghost to marvel at the beauty of his surroundings, Bui approaches the intimate side of her father with careful gentleness. Notably, this spread page both resembles and veers away from the double-page spread where Bui looks from present to past. In the two spreads, both Bui and Bố reside at the same position and divert their gazes at the same direction. But while Bui looks to the past to rewrite history, Bố is marvelling at the universe perhaps to make sure that he is still existing. There are no boxes of text in this spread and thus no space for the gutter. Hillary Chute asserts that the gutter is "where the movement of time in comics happens" (205). Arguably, the lack of a gutter in this spread suggests that Bố is locked in a space where time seems to stop. In the act of drawing, Bui the artist temporarily detaches Bố from traumatic time. She creates a sense of atemporality where the Vietnamese male body visually lingers in a timeless, aesthetic space in order to soothe and comfort his wounded soul.

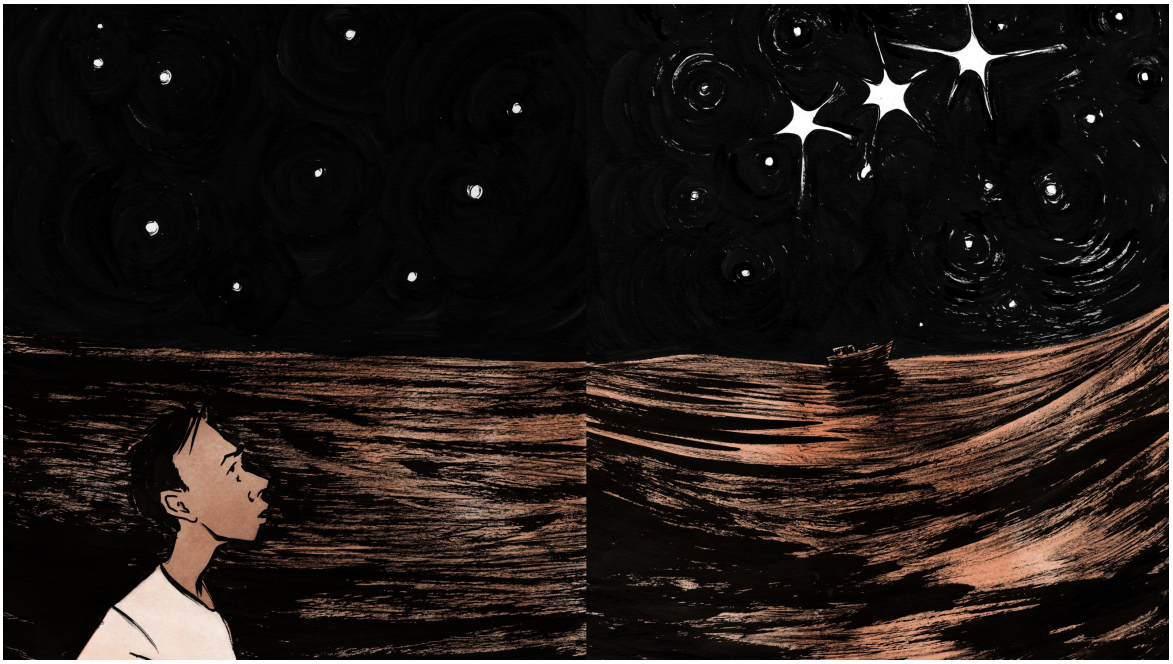

Figure 3 Thi Bui, The Best We Could Do (248-249).

Indeed, the visual form of the graphic novel enables Bui to further console Vietnamese ghosts with intimacy and aesthetics. Described as “anecdotes without shape, wounds beneath wounds”, Bo’s stories bear a ghostly shape marked by his seemingly endless sufferings. Bo’s ghostly counterpart testifies for a series of trauma scattered throughout Bo’s childhood, including surviving the 1945 famine, hiding from French soldiers underground for days, and especially “watch[ing] / as his father beat his mother badly / and threw her out” (Bui 110). It is here that Bui redraws the maternal body of Bo’s mother to soothe his vulnerable soul. In a two-page sequence, Bo’s ghost recalls a memory in which he eats a sausage with his mother in secret (107-108). In the first page, the ghost resides at the margin of the top-left panel, telling the story of his mother who buys him a blood sausage from the few scents she has scraped together (107). This page is made up of five panels stitched together as one large frame. Instead of using the more typical gutters to create gaps between the panels, Bui segregates the frames using only a thin black brushstroke. Her omission of gutters creates visual density that in turn visualises a powerful sense of closeness which further lingers in the second page. The following page consists of two long rectangular frames that span the width

of the page, and two smaller panels at the bottom (108). Similar to the earlier page, this scene visualises intimacy through replacing the empty gutter space with black lines, bringing the humans of the memory close together. In panel one, the figure of Bo's mother is enlarged as her head stretches beyond the border of the frame. She is portrayed as a mother, a safe space, a protector. Her body is resurrected in the graphic narrative in order to provide her vulnerable son protection. In panel four, young Bố and his mother eat the sausage behind the curtain that is painted with black strokes and red wash. Bui's aesthetic drawing in this scene shields the vulnerable yet intimate moment between a loving mother and her child.

At the same time, it is impossible not to notice Bui's reconstruction of Bo's mother as a disarticulated subject.[9] Throughout the two-page memory sequence, his mother does not utter a single word; we learn about her only through Bui's visual portrait of her and the ghost's narration. In the first page, her disarticulation is hinted to readers through captions filled with verbs and nouns that denote concealment and secrecy: "She'd *sneak* home / *crawl under* the *cover* of the bed *curtains* / and call to me" (107; emphasis added). Here, her "state of muteness" is an urgent call for the ghost to speak for her (Langford 30). For this reason, the ghost's voice is shifted from being inside the captions to staying in a speech bubble as in panel one. The memory sequence is enclosed with the bottom-right panel that illustrates Bố of the present with sorrow in his eyes and the habitual burning cigarette in his hand. Here, the image of present-day Bố is closely tied to his past memory. Bui's technique of spatialization creates visual proximity between two temporalities to evoke a sense of closeness and comfort; times are compressed, collapsing past and present all together. As a result, a continuous bond between the dead and living is made visible and eternal on the page. While the visual-verbal form of graphic novel reconstructs the Vietnamese female body to console the Vietnamese

[9] Every memoir, not least graphic memoir, is not a replica of past incidents but rather the author's reconstruction of such memories. Bo's two-page memory of his mother refers to an incident that happens in the past. However, under Bui's artistic hand, the memory, including her remaking of his mother as an inarticulate subject, belongs to the physical book, an object of the present.

male refugee, it also "recuperate[s] neglected, silenced, and unrecorded history, particularly of women during the war" (Oh 2). According to Stella Oh, in the span of over four decades since the end of the Vietnam War, American literature and film about the war mostly centre on "stories of rescue and masculine bravado [which] reinforce American exceptionalism and racial hierarchies" (1). As I discussed earlier in this chapter, Bui elaborates on the stereotypes of Vietnamese people in the American narrative through the categories "Good Guys", "Bad Guys" and "The South Vietnamese". The "good guys" refer to American soldiers, the "bad guys" are the Việt Cộng, and South Vietnamese women in American eye are seen in terms of "bar girls and hookers" (Bui 207). As such, Bui depicts the Vietnamese female body through the lens of motherhood to register her resistance and challenge to the misrepresentation of Vietnamese women.

Furthermore, motherhood and birthing are interwoven in the book to expose the impact of war and displacement on the family and nation. In fact, *The Best* openly confronts the violence of the war in inflicting "lingering harms that pervade even the most intimate realm, the womb" (Miron 57). Bui's own birth and the births of her siblings occur under extreme political and social turmoil: Quyên dies shortly after her birth in 1965 Saigon; Bích was born two weeks before the 1968 Tet Offensive; Thảo dies as a stillborn child in 1974 Saigon; Tâm was born in 1978 in a United Nations refugee camp in Malaysia; and Bui's "arrival / [was] three months before South Viet Nam lost the war" (Bui 210). These births are entangled in the story of war and nationhood, and, as a result, saturate collective national loss with an intimate and personal appeal. According to Hillary Chute, the spatial syntax of the graphic form "offers opportunities to place pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality" (4). Bui presents those births in a reversed chronological order to address the detrimental effects of war in interrupting the usual movement of time. Indeed, the birthing of children weaving with the disruption of time is introduced right in the opening of

the book. *The Best* starts off with a full-page panel that shows Bui's pregnant belly; her fists are tightly clenched and legs stretched wide. The captions read: "New York Methodist hospital November 28, 2005 / I'm in labor / The pain comes in twenty-foot waves and Má has disappeared" (Bui 1). Although the pain of labour is usually described as coming in "waves", the phrase "twenty-foot waves" in this text box is a direct reference to the swelling ocean that has sent her family to the refugee camp on the coast of Malaysia. Here, the combination of the visual and the verbal evokes a present that is relentlessly marked by a ghostly past. The form of the graphic novel allows the narrator to expose the singularity and cohesiveness that dominant history strives forwards. Bringing past and present together, Bui proposes a different way of commemorating the Vietnamese dead that centres on bodies who remain outside of the nation's straightforward operation of time.

Bui further retraces the violence of war on the country of Vietnam through incorporating the Vietnam map into her personal narrative. In one panel, Bui sits at a desk, drawing what appears to be the graphic novel itself (Bui 36; see figure 4). Behind her is a small boat confronting swelling waves. This image of the boat symbolises not just the boat Bui and her family were on but also any boat or ship that sent the Vietnamese away from war to a better place. The red water in the background indicates that many shed blood and even died on their dangerous journey to refugee camps. Bui narrates: "Soon after that trip back to Viet Nam (our first since we escaped in 1978) / I began to record our family history / thinking that if I bridged the gap between the past and the present / I could fill the void between my parents and me" (Bui 36). Here, her desire to reconnect with her parents urges her to delve into her family history. But in order to do so, Bui has to "attend to the dead", which is a practice that formulates the past as "a force to be viscerally reexperienced in the present" (Langford 17). As such, Bui intermingles different temporalities together, and hence the practice of documenting history becomes a ghostly act. What this entails is that the narrator

carries the imperative to break boundaries not just narratively but also visually. The border of the panel is blurred away by what appears to be a longer silhouette of Vietnam. Bui captions this haunting image, "And that if I could see Viet Nam as a real place, and not as a symbol of something lost / I would see my parents as real people / and learn to love them better" (Bui 36). While Bui's caption challenges the representation of Vietnam as a symbol of loss, her drawing of Vietnam portrays the country "as a wound, a haunting metaphor rather than a living nation" (Miron 51). Vietnam flips between being and nonbeing, the material and the immaterial. Here, the graphic novel enables Bui to juxtapose verbal narrative with visual narrative in order to portray the country of Vietnam as a ghostly nation.

Yet this ghostliness does not denote a failure to Bui's healing project but rather urges us to look at the wounded female body as a site for healing. Starring at the ghostly illustration of Vietnam is a naked child, who brings her fingers up to her chest to feel the edges of a void whose shape resembles that of Vietnam. That the map of Vietnam is etched on her back represents the child as a carrier of Vietnamese loss and absence. Interestingly, Sally McWilliams suggests that the image of the naked child on this page may refer to Nick Ut's iconic photo of Kim Phuc, colloquially referred to as "napalm girl" (345). Ut's photo of Kim Phuc captures her burned, naked body running away from American soldiers is an "embodiment of wartime trauma" (345). Ut's photo discloses the vulnerability and loss of bodily integrity experienced by Vietnamese young women during the war. Yet such loss, Sylvia Shin Chong argues, is saturated with an invisible American presence. Upon closer inspection of Ut's iconic image, Chong notes that Americans are not absent in the picture but "present offstage" in the form of the photographer taking the photo (Ut, who is Vietnamese, was employed during the war by the Associated Press) all the while serving as the privileged audience of the photograph (Chong 77). In Ut's photograph, the wounded body of Kim Phuc becomes a national symbol of loss. Her body, in other words, becomes ghostly because it has

been made impersonal in the political context of Ut's picture. In contrast, Bui's drawing of the naked child steers away from Ut's full-frontal photography. As such, her act of redrawing enables the wounded female body to turn away from the surveillance of the American gaze all the while spatializing the body within a personal story of survival. The aesthetic practice of spatialization in this case demonstrates that the female body is a site for healing collective national loss.

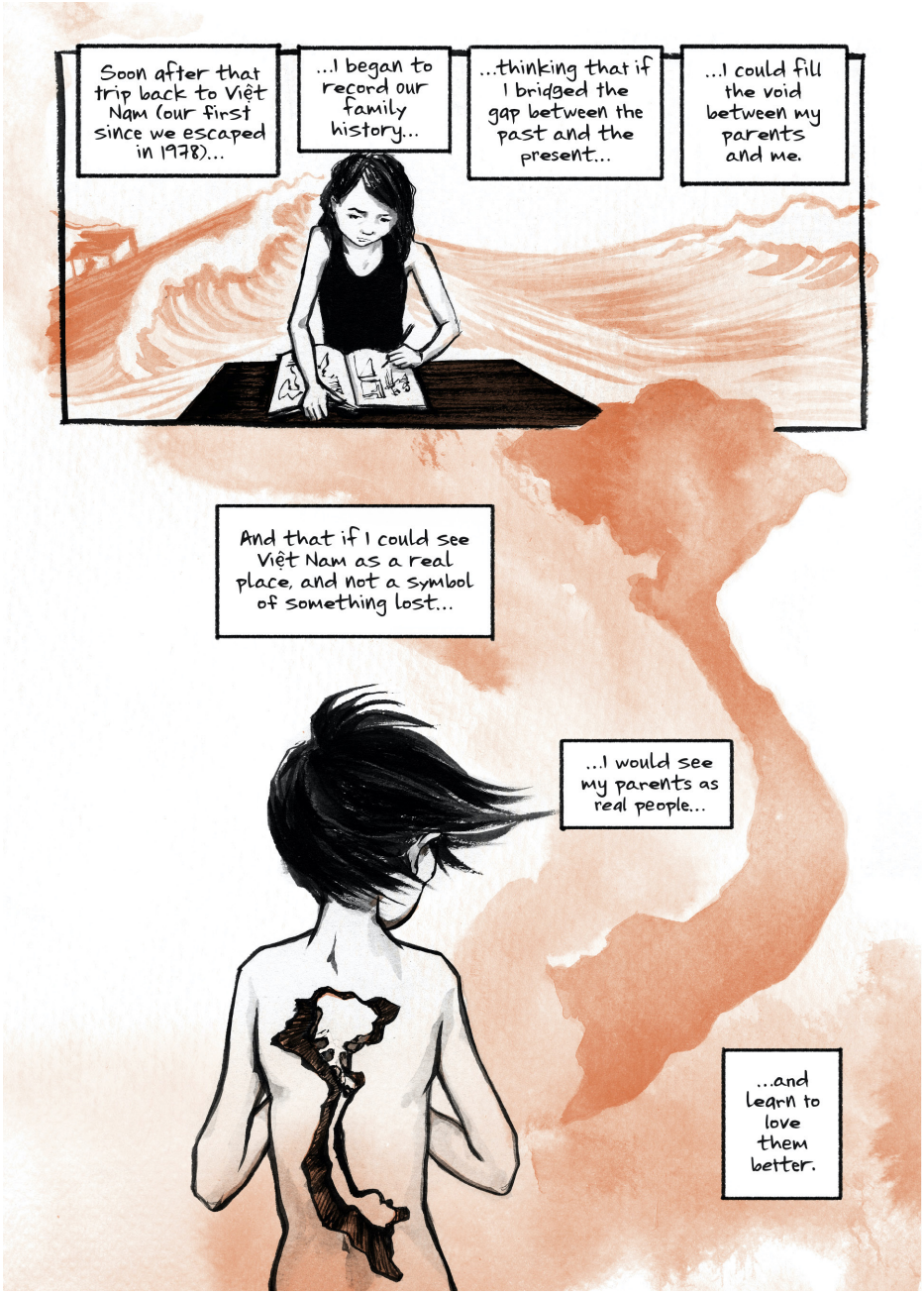

Figure 4 Thi Bui, The Best We Could Do (36).

The map of Vietnam is further deployed in the next sequence through two paralleling vertical panels. In the panel to the left, Bui inserts an outline of unified Vietnam in 1945. The unboxed caption reads: "1945 could have been the moment for a union of Vietnamese leaders from the North, Center and South to create a self-determining democracy" (Bui 118). Moving further down the image, Bui imagines how different her life would have been if "the next thirty years of war might have been avoided / millions of lives spared" (118). Drawn without internal borders, the map of Vietnam demonstrates the integrity of the country. Then in the panel to the right, Bui draws the spectre of General Phillipe Leclerc and recites his infamous statement: "We have come to reclaim our inheritance" (118). Bui's vision of Vietnam "as an organic whole" is destroyed by the enlarged body of the French male colonialist (McWilliams 329). Indeed, French colonialism did not just divide Vietnam politically and geographically but also "significantly altered the linguistic terrain of Vietnam" (Fickle et al. 23). In one full-page panel, Bui draws her younger self hugging her mother on the couch with her siblings around. She confides that her mother refers to herself as "Mẹ", "a term used in the North—a weighty, serious, more elegant word for 'Mother'" (Bui 316). However, Bui and her siblings "preferred the Southern word 'Má,' a jolly, bright sound [they] insisted fit her better" (316). Superimposed on this image is a half-page panel showing Bui's concerned face; she wonders how she would feel if her son also refuses to call her by the name she wants to be identified with. Through these superimposed images, Bui sees an invisible pattern of violence interlaced with the Vietnamese words for "mother". In rejecting her mother's northern dialect, she also refuses to acknowledge Má's "pre-French colonial history of identity" (McWilliams 327). For this reason, when Bui speaks to her newborn for the first time in Vietnamese, she "accidentally call[s] myself Mẹ / to slip myself into [Má's] shoes just for a moment" (Bui 318). Bui's subtle yet crucial moment of reclaiming her Vietnamese linguistic inheritance

"disrupts a reliance on the event and insidious trauma of French colonialism, U.S. militarism, and resettlement as refugees" (McWilliams 327).

Importantly, Bui further reclaims the image of the refugee camp as a private sphere of the home and the personal. Bui's family, along with other three thousand refugees, seeks a new home in Pulau Besar camp in Malaysia. The infrastructures of the camp resemble a landscape of deaths: "Water came out of ditches dug by previous residents and had to be boiled before drinking / Wood for boiling and cooking had to be gathered from the dwindling forest surrounding the camp / There were no proper toilets" (Bui 274). The living conditions in the camp are horrifying and violate the dignity of the inhabitants: in order to survive, the refugees are required to lower themselves and strip off their dignity. As such, the refugee camp is a space where international organizations impose domination over the camp's inhabitants precisely in subjecting the refugees to a ghostly, subhuman existence. For this reason, *The Best* as a healing narrative for Vietnamese refugees would have been incomplete without Bui's act of deconstructing and rewriting the camp and the humans of the camp. In a splash page that illustrates the camp, the caption reads: "The refugee camp was also a place where many people reinvented themselves" (Bui 269). Following this caption are superimposed images that demonstrate how the refugees make and remake their selves: some meet the love of their life in camp and list themselves on paper as married couples, while others adopt children travelling alone and resettle together. The refugees also have the freedom to change their names and age either to find better job opportunities or to retire earlier. Arguably, this process of self-reinvention closely resembles the journey of "the wandering subject", Achille Mbembe's ghostly figure which I discussed earlier in this chapter. According to the narrator, a delegation from different Western countries visits Pulau Besar camp every week, and the refugees in the camp have to decide their destination of resettlement based on "very little information" (Bui 268). In this way, the camp represents

"the unknown", and the refugees have to dive into this space of "radical instability" in order to invent and reinvent their selves (*Critique* 149). The splash page omits the frame of the panel; its borderlessness both highlights the camp as a space of unlimited opportunities and emphasises the "wandering" refugees as wielding the power to break all boundaries previously imposed on them. Her framing of the camp in terms of the personal and the intimate creates a powerful image of the Vietnamese refugees as resilient human beings who create possibilities out of chaos.

Simultaneous to Bui's framing of Pulau Besar camp in the private sphere is her depiction of the refugee camp as "a standardized, generalizable technology of power in the management of mass displacement (Malkki 497-498). Pulau Besar camp is portrayed as a device of domination through the process of accumulating documentation on the inhabitants of the camp. In a splash page, Bui inserts her family's actual identification photos (Bui 267; see figure 5). In the middle of the splash are four black-and-white photos distributed equally into two rows: the first row illustrates Lan and Bố in their individual photos, whereas the second row shows Bich in her own photo and baby Bui with Má in the same picture. In each photo, the individual is holding a blackboard that states the four facts about the individual: the individual's full name, the number of the boat he or she arrived on, the date of arrival and date of birth. Floating between the two rows is the unboxed caption "We were now BOAT PEOPLE" (Bui 267). Here, the printed words are spatialized in between the four photographs; the blending of the visual and the verbal exposes the Vietnamese refugee subject as having a "marked" personhood. According to McWilliams, the identification photos function as "a surveillance technology" because they "emphasize photography as an extension of control and distanciation, making Vietnamese individuals into documented 'refugees'" (335). The blackboards they are holding turn them into "registerable bodies" who become vulnerable under surveillance (Musiol, "Museums" 162). Although delivering a fascinating reading of

the ID photos, McWilliams does not take notice of the smaller hand-drawn pictures surrounding the four realistic ones. Looking at Bui's drawings that represent "hundreds of thousands of refugees flooding into neighboring countries, seeking asylum," we see men and women of all ages, a family without a mother, children who display a range of emotions from deep confusion to calmness (Bui 267). In recreating the ID photos of other refugees, Bui avoids listing the four facts and highlights rather the persons behind, attaching the intimate to the political process of photographic identification. Rendering these refugees not just intimate but also unidentified and thus anonymous, Bui disables the ID photos from marking these subjects. In other words, she unmarks them. In being unmarked, these bodies are no longer registerable and thus become free. Furthermore, by inserting her family's ID photos to the page, Bui confronts her readers with the refugee gaze. She situates the Vietnamese refugees in a position where they are the gazers and not the ones being gazed at. For *The Best*'s American readers, the refugee gaze puts them in an uncomfortable position as the gaze urges them to look back and investigate America's life-long histories of controlling and subjugating Vietnamese refugee bodies.

Significantly, the nation's surveillance over the Vietnamese refugee body is powerfully demonstrated in Bui's inheritance of "the papers". According to the narrator, Bố and Má prepare for each of their children a brown folder titled "Important Documents" that stores "the most essential pieces of our identity": "Our birth certificates, translated and notarized, our green cards, and our Social Security cards", but also "our report cards / certificates and awards, / and the annual class picture" (Bui 297). These documents identify the children in terms of their American citizenship and thus are essential for the Vietnamese refugee family to assimilate into the American society. According to Hanna Musiol, a "loss or confiscation of papers often marks the beginning of social disappearance for those who physically survive the border crossing but must then keep on living as social shadows"

("Cartographic" 3). Arguably, "the papers" function as a border-control regime, a necessity for survival in the aftermath of migration. In one scene, Bui recalls a fire in her apartment building when she is fourteen. It is later discovered that an old couple fall asleep with a lit cigarette, resulting in an exploded oxygen tank. In an unnumbered splash page, Bui's fragmentary state is revealed in the verbal narrative: "What would a normal fourteen-year-old's response have been? / Some kind of freak out, maybe? / All I know is a switch flipped in my brain / and I acted purely by reflex. / EVACUATE" (Bui 303; see figure 6). Superimposed on this splash page is a nine-panel grid that shows Bui grabbing the folder of "Important Documents" as she prepares to leave the building. The nine panels of equal size are marked by disembodied body parts: in panel one we see an extreme close up of Bui's face which highlights the perplexed look in her eyes, her mouth in panel three, her hand touching the document folder in panel five, and her feet in panel nine. As the panel illustrating Bui's hand grabbing the brown folder is placed in the middle of the grid, it attaches a political artefact with the narrator's psychic and bodily incoherence[10]. The political is thus blended with the personal. The folder lies at the heart of the grid, a central position that further depicts "the papers" as a prosthetic body part. In this way, the political is deeply incorporated into the refugee body; "the papers" control national borders by exerting control over the human body first. Notably, the panels are placed on a background that displays a blurry vision of black smoke, burning villages and vehicles; a ghostly image that sends us back to wartime Vietnam. The gutter space in this three-by-three grid registers a shift between two different temporalities, portraying the narrator as living in a ghost-ridden present.

[10] The lack of coherence is further reinforced by the graphic form itself because the reading of a graphic novel can occur in all directions. According to Scott McCloud, the conventional way of reading the graphic page is from left to right through each row, then proceed downwards (222). However, in reading a gridded-panel arrangement such as this Important Document scene, readers are free to use alternative ways, such as reading from top to bottom through the columns first, then proceeding rightwards. Choosing to read the scenes in alternative ways, readers actively engage in narrative interpretation, and in doing so "fostering a kind of interpretive 'intimacy'" (Chute, *Comics* 460). In this way, not only does Bui render the document (public and political archive) intimate and personal for herself, but she also enables readers to participate in creating and sustaining a sense of intimacy with the text.

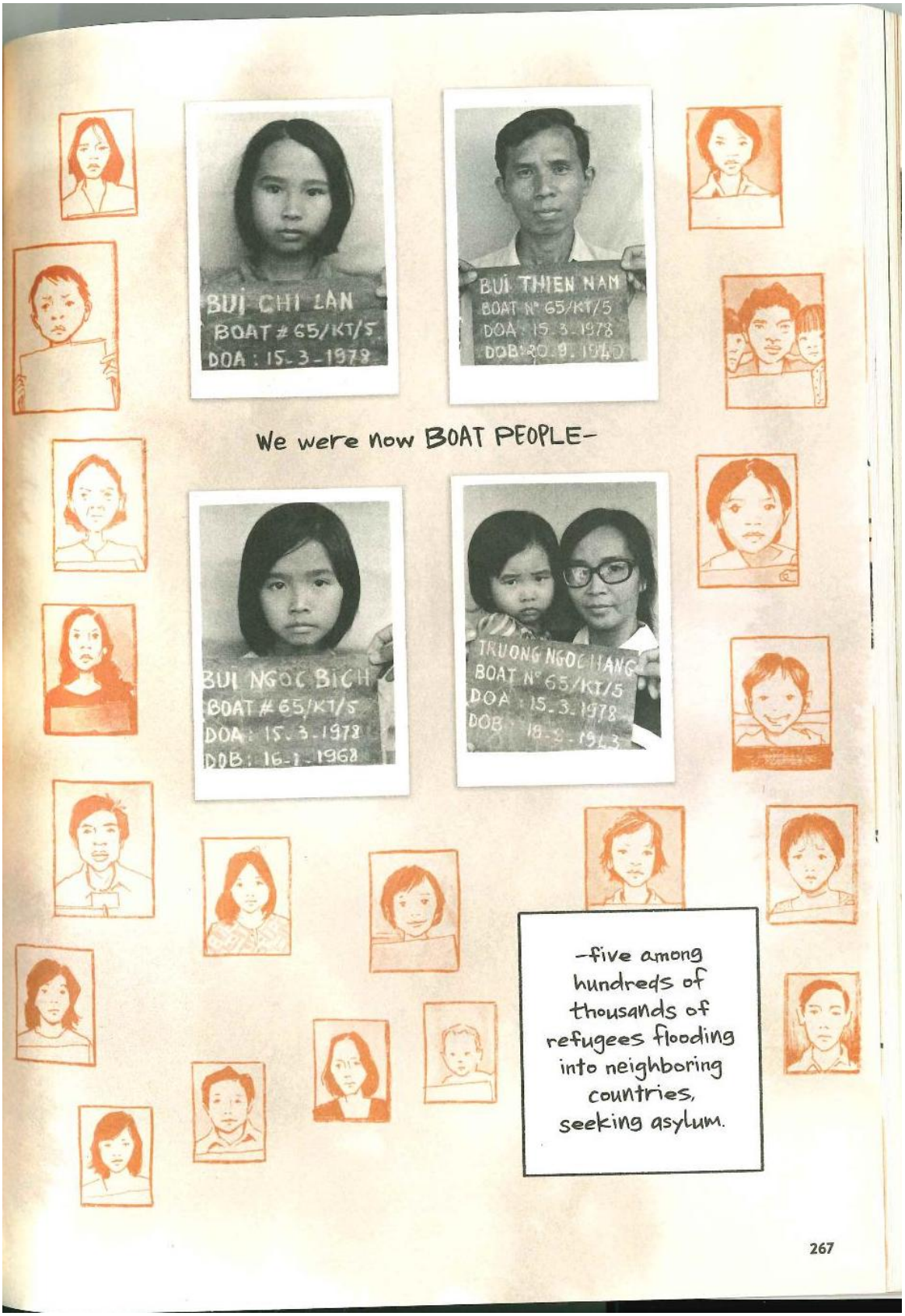

Figure 5 Thi Bui, The Best We Could Do (267).

Figure 6 Thi Bui, The Best We Could Do (302).

Thi Bui concludes *The Best* with questions related to inheritance in terms of what parents pass on to the next generation. As Bui arrives at a deeper understanding about herself and her relationship with Bố and Ma, she recognises that being a child to refugee parents

means that she “will always feel the weight of their past” (Bui 325). Danieli argues that “survivor parents attempt to teach their children how to survive in the event of further persecution; thus, they inadvertently transmit their own wartime experiences” (Gusain and Jha 5). In the fire incident, as Bui evacuates from the building, she discovers that her “inheritance” is “not any particular piece of Vietnamese culture” but rather “the inexplicable need and extraordinary ability to RUN when the shit hits the fan” (Bui 305). Coining this phenomenon a “refugee reflex”, Bui describes her survival instinct to flee from danger; it is a necessity but also a skill refugees develop as a coping mechanism when facing violence and death (305). Arguably, Bui’s “refugee reflex” can be interpreted as an invitation to talk openly about “the field of intermingled remembrance and anticipation of violence” (Langford 32). For Langford, the moment when violence is recalled is simultaneously a moment when violence is anticipated, even for survivors who no longer live in war-marred circumstances (31). As Pradeep Jeganathan puts it, violence is “both remembered and imminent; it is as likely to refer to an injury that did not happen, but might have, as to one that did” (Langford 32). In terms of Bui’s “refugee reflex”, the fire incident and its associations with smoke and death mentally bring her back to war-torn Vietnam. Her body is in the present, but her mind is trapped both in the deadly past and in a future fraught with anxiety and terror. She encounters her own death every time her “refugee reflex” is activated.

For this reason, Bui has been worried that she “would pass along some gene for sorrow” to her son (Bui 327). The final pages are marked with a sense of unboundedness: Bui’s son frolic in the water. Notably, the ocean in which he swims carry no ghostly refugee boat. In contrast to the black ocean that Bố the wanderer swims into to recreate his self, Bui’s son in this scene is surrounded by red-orange watercolour and white space. Her choice of colour visually emphasises her realisation that she does not “see war or loss” in her son and that “maybe he can be free” (328-329). Since Bui implies that her son breaks free from the

family's ghostly past, the text veers towards the possibility that one can put a full stop to history's violence. Furthermore, it should be noted that without being marked by page numbers, the last two pages are not "stamped with a linear logic of progression" (Chute 215). In this way, the final pages are charged with a sense of continuousness rather than closure. Nonetheless, this continuity seems to exist only within the temporal frame of family, reproduction and inheritance. As Bui's proposal of healing is based on the promise of a heteroreproductive future, her readers are left wondering: What happens when an alternate reading of the Vietnamese refugee subject is offered by a queer Vietnamese refugee? Would the non-reproductive queer body threaten this future of healing?

In this chapter, I argued that Bui shifts the framing of the Vietnamese refugee subject from the public sphere to the private domain of the home and the personal. She moves to the public sphere to look for Vietnamese bodies that have been made non-intimate through becoming national symbols of war, then emplaces these spectres within the familial context of her memoir. Further drawing on the connection between the political and the intimate, the collective and the personal, Bui visualises the destructions of war and American systemic spectralisation of the Vietnamese through her relationship with her parents. In having her characters of Vietnamese descent lead the story, Bui insists on the rights of Vietnamese refugees to speak up for themselves. Intimacy in her book is thus a powerful tool that serves to assist her Vietnamese readers to reclaim their personal memories and experiences. Declaring the Vietnamese as rightful owners of Vietnamese experiences, Bui's work resists the American act of "poaching on our own territory, grave-robbing our traumatic pasts" (Nguyen, "Speak" 33). Yet the segregation between the two identities is impossible as Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* addresses the impossibility of drawing a clear line between Vietnamese and American stories. While *The Best* is structured around the imperative to recover Vietnam's stolen narrative, *On Earth* suggests that the task to reclaim

Vietnamese memories has to run in parallel with the attempt to “give rise to vertical and transversal relations” between Vietnam and America (Neumann 295).

Chapter Two: Wounded Bodies, Sensations and Beauty in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

"Beauty brings copies of itself into being."
—Elaine Scarry

In his book on art, disability, aesthetics, violence and the human body, Tobin Siebers argues that "[a]esthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies" (1). What he posits here is that aesthetics is entirely about the body and how it maintains an affective relation to other bodies. The power of art comes into play when the beholders are compelled to experience the aesthetic not just with their eyes, but with all their senses and emotions. But what happens when the beholders experience feelings of discomfort, or even disgust, as they look at art about bodies that are broken and ruined? How do we approach what Siebers calls "modern art's love affair with misshapen and twisted bodies, stunning variety of human forms, intense representation of traumatic injury and psychological alienation, and unyielding preoccupation with wounds and tormented flesh" (4)? In many ways, Ocean Vuong's debut novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* summons images of disability through resurrecting ghostly bodies. These bodies, both mentally and physically wounded, register as phantasmal in that they are made invisible for failing to conform to American ideal of beauty that is deeply rooted in whiteness and heteronormativity. In the act of writing, Vuong actively depicts Vietnamese and American injured bodies in terms of beauty and intimacy not only to heal them, but also to resist and challenge the assumptions underlying the production of beauty. His way of viewing disability as an aesthetic value in itself is what Siebers calls "disability aesthetics", a framework that "embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet it is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result" (3).

In Chapter One, I argued that Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* spatializes Vietnamese ghostly bodies into the textual space of the graphic novel in order to re-intimate them, shifting the framing of these bodies from the non-intimate, public sphere of the political to the private realm of home and the personal. Bui's work deploys intimacy as a tool to reclaim Vietnamese memories for Vietnamese refugees, but this reclamation is founded upon notions of reproduction and the Vietnamese heterosexual family. Similar to *The Best*, Vuong's *On Earth* speaks of Vietnam and Vietnamese living dead to account for the atrocity of the war that has caused unfinished deaths for Vietnamese expats. At the same time, Vuong's work is a reflection on America and the way American conceptions of aesthetic taste produce deaths, bodies that retreat to the phantom world for being internally displaced from the nation's narrative of beauty. This chapter, "Wounded Bodies, Sensations and Beauty in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," focuses on the way *On Earth* narrates and nurtures relationships with the dead and the dying through describing the body in terms of sensations, feelings and affects. As such, Vuong's text produces beauty out of ghostly, wounded bodies in order to heal and preserve these bodies in a timeless scape that veers away from Thi Bui's heteroreproductive future. Ghostliness continues to be the main theme in *On Earth* as with *The Best,* but in Vuong's story it refers to both the ghostly existence of Vietnamese refugees and the anonymous life of queer bodies in American society. Through inspecting Vietnamese and American displaced ghostly bodies and drawing connections, rather than distinctions, between them, Vuong's book proposes that any attempt of resistance and healing must prioritise to rebuild a borderless relationship between Vietnam and America.

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth* is a series of letters written by the narrator, Little Dog, to his illiterate mother, Rose. In these letters, Little Dog ponders on their lives by revisiting the past in a non-chronological order. His life story mirrors that of the author, and these similarities problematize the boundaries between fiction and memoir: both were born on a rice farm in

Saigon when Vietnam was under the legacies of the Second Indochina War. At the age of two, Little Dog arrives in a refugee camp in the Philippines with his family. After one year of living in the camp, they migrate to the United States and settle in a one-bedroom apartment in Hartford, Connecticut. Nobody in the family can speak English. Little Dog's father regularly beats his wife and is eventually imprisoned, leaving the narrator with a mother suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and a schizophrenic grandmother. Throughout his childhood, Little Dog's grandmother, Lan, has been his sense of safety and comfort when he is physically and emotionally abused by his mother. While referring to Rose as "a monster", Little Dog understands that Rose's atrocity results from decades of witnessing and reliving the war, and of being haunted by the structural violence in American society (Vuong 14). Little Dog learns of love and hate, of violence and tenderness through the two women that have raised him, but also through Trevor. When fifteen-year-old Little Dog works on a farm outside Hartford, he engages in a sexual and romantic relationship with Trevor, an American farm boy who gives the narrator the feeling of being "seen" for the first time in his migrant life (96). Yet this visibility comes with a price: "To be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted" (238). As Trevor is raised in the ideology of white American masculinity, the relationship with Little Dog makes him anxious and insecure about his masculinity. Over the course of their relationship, Trevor becomes addicted to opioid and eventually overdoses and dies.

In many ways, the experimental form of Vuong's text creates possibilities for ghostly encounter. In her close reading of *On Earth*, Birgit Neumann describes the book as a melting pot of "elements from the epistolary novel, the coming-of-age story and coming-out novel; it is a piece of migrant literature and an instance of transcultural autofiction spanning different times, places and creative traditions" (279). In Neumann's description, the book takes on different traits from literary genres that centre around the concept of time, or more

specifically, the transition from one temporality to another. Therefore, in transgressing the boundaries between these literary categories, Vuong's narrative also moves beyond the limits of temporal borders. According to Jean Langford, spectral haunting "unfolds in knotty temporalities where present and past collapse, past erupting within the present, present enveloping the past" (17). In performing border-crossing, *On Earth* creates an in-between world that opens up an atemporal space for the living dead and the dead to exercise their haunting power. The book is divided into three chapters; they are all unnamed, "heralded simply by blank space" (Porter). The way the chapters are presented suggests that the story is told from a ghostly perspective, one that is rooted in fragmentary memories rather than in a definable certainty. Notably, towards the end of the second chapter and at one point during the last chapter, the book suddenly shifts from the form of the novel to an extended prose poem. As such, the narrator utilises line break and the white space of the page to give form to that which has been rendered ghostly and invisible. In sum, it is precisely the hybrid form of *On Earth* that enables the narrator to cross textual, temporal, even ontological borders in order to create a continuous bond with the dead and the dying.

Since Ocean Vuong's *On Earth* is a "narrative of justice, transnational imbalance of power, and ethics of solidarity across cultures and species", this chapter will read the ghostly bodies in his text through the lens of what Sandeep Bakshi terms "decolonial queer diasporas" (535). As a concept that binds the decolonial perspective together with queerness, the optic of "decolonial queer diasporas" draws upon the themes of queer migration, ethnicities, refugee politics, and coloniality of power (Bakshi 535). For Bakshi, both decolonial and queer scholarship carry the imperative to disable the categorical lines of the centre and the periphery, the majority and the minority. Hence, a transdisciplinary project of decolonial queerness registers a new way of seeing that allows us to create a mutual dialogue in which our priority is to achieve radical social and political changes. A key feature of decolonial

queerness is the creative act of writing. Bakshi argues that writing as a practice of decolonial thinking not only confronts unequal power relations but also gestures towards healing through "decolonial aesthesis" (537). He names three crucial aspects to "decolonial aesthesis": "the shock and outrage of realizing a 'colonial wound'; collective resistance to the harmer; and collective self-healing" (544). Importantly, "decolonial aesthesis" entails a type of knowledge production that is not simply conducted through the observational eye ("our vision") but through sensation, feeling, affect, memory, and touch ("our senses") (539-540).

On Earth as a form of decolonial queerness "negotiate[s] diasporic movement in multiple geographical locations, and suggest[s] other ways of being in and moving through these spaces that deviate from … hetero- and homonormative scripts" (Bakshi 539). In the text, the narrator Little Dog exposes the day-to-day violence he is subjected to for being a queer person of colour in America. He is perceived as a foreigner, a misfit in a hostile society that holds white heterosexuality as the norm. According to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, what largely constitutes contemporary America is the project of producing "national heterosexuality", which sees male-female relations as "the ordinary rightness of the world" (1037). As the heterosexual couple is the default referent example of American sexual culture, the nuclear family becomes the ideal measure of what a proper family should entail. The construction of the nuclear family in this sense becomes crucial for an America that thirsts for social unions of sexual mores, desires and behaviours. More striking is the fact that the ideal of a nuclear family continues to mark its presence in the process of migration. Indeed, as I discussed in Chapter One, it is a common practice that refugees find their potential partners and adopt children in the refugee camp so that they can resettle together. In an attempt to portray refugees as individuals with agency, Bui optimistically looks at this practice as a flexible, resilient effort to "reinvent" the self (Bui 268). Yet this self-reinvention is ultimately a practice of upholding the image of the nuclear family. In this sense, heterosexuality no

longer accounts for gender and sexuality, but it becomes a norm forcefully used as a device to govern the mobility of migration worldwide. Creating and sustaining the nuclear family is a practice that refugees, during and even after the process of migration, cannot resist because their resistance would threaten their chance for survival in the host country. Therefore, in challenging the violent conventional system of the nuclear family, Vuong's book steers away from the idea of a heteroreproductive future proposed in Bui's graphic novel. Centring his narrative instead on a family of a grandmother, a single mother and her queer son, Vuong uses their personal and genealogical memories and storytelling as techniques to turn inwards, so that the body, rather than any far-flung future, is imagined as an endless resource for resistance and healing.

In Vuong's text, the healing of the body comes across as the narrator depicts the disjointed yet close relations between humans and animals. As part of a Vietnamese tradition, the narrator's grandmother, Lan, gives him the hideous name "Little Dog" in hope that it would repel evil spirits from abducting him. Viewing this act of naming as a subtle "gesture of care and protection," he notes: "To love something, then, is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched—and alive. A name, thin as air, can also be a shield. A Little Dog shield" (Vuong 18). The binary between the human and the animal is significantly blurred out as the animal becomes the narrator's identificatory marker. But whereas Little Dog is named after an animal that is "untouched" and "alive", his mother's animal counterpart is half-alive and half-dying. The book starts off as Little Dog recalls the restroom in Virginia, where his mother, Rose, is deeply disturbed by the taxidermy hanging on the wall. Little Dog realises that what bothers Rose is the way the taxidermy reflects her existence: both of them "embodied a death that won't finish, a death that keeps dying as we walk past it to relieve ourselves" (Vuong 3). According to Katy Waldman, the taxidermied animal is often deployed in fiction as a metaphor to capture and freeze life, which associates

the animal with “a primal, spooky gravity—an aura of emptiness so staggering that the onlooker feels at risk”. Referring to the taxidermy in Virginia as “a corpse”, Rose is terrified by the fact that the dead body of the animal is “stuck forever like that” (Vuong 3). Just as the stuffed creature, Rose is subjected to a death that has no end point. Through the metaphor of the taxidermy, the narrator situates the animal as his mother “shadow sel[f]” in order to depict her as a living dead, a ghost who has not healed from her traumatic death (Tolentino). As the narrator later notes, “What we would give to have the ruined lives of animals tell a human story—when our lives are in themselves the story of animals” (Vuong 242). After all, it is not surprising that in telling a story about ghosts, who move insistently in-between categorical lines, the narrator also breaks ontological boundaries that have been separating humans from animals. It is important to note that the ghostly appearance of the taxidermied animal allows the narrator to acknowledge the wound inscribed on his mother’s body and soul. As Bakshi argues, “[a] realization of the wound can only ever be the first step in a long-drawn process that requires completion in the form of healing” (544).

The image of the injured animal is further used to embrace Little Dog’s refugee family as survivors of violence. At one point in his letter, the narrator turns to 1968, the Year of the Monkey, during which his grandmother, Lan, gives birth to Rose. At a checkpoint, Lan holds the infant in her arms while their lives are being threatened by two American soldiers. Scanning her brain for a few English words, Lan surrenders to the American men: “No bang bang. Yoo Et Aye numbuh won” (Vuong 42). Although their lives are spared, this vulnerable experience is still a powerful memory of survival. Lan and Rose remain nameless in this section, which highlights how insignificant Vietnamese lives were viewed as during the war. At the same time, the narrator’s omission of the characters’ names implies that this story is not unique at all, but one that repeats itself over and over again during the course of war. He further blends into the story grotesque images of macaque monkeys being mistreated,

complicating his statement that this scene "is a human story" (38). According to our narrator, macaque monkeys are "the most hunted primates in Southeast Asia" due to the widespread myth that the brains of macaque monkeys can cure impotence (41). During the war, American soldiers strap the monkeys under a table and eat up their brains while the animals are still alive: "The men will eat until the animal is empty, the monkey slowing as they spoon, its limbs heavy and listless. When nothing's left, when all of its memories dissolve into the men's bloodstreams, the monkey dies" (43). Here, the monkeys are subjected to a slow death; their brains became food for the men the way Vietnamese sufferings were perceived as sources of entertainment for American soldiers. Pointing at the similarities between the human brain and the brain of a macaque monkey, Little Dog asserts that macaques are capable of recalling past events to solve current problems. In this way, macaques "employ memory in order to survive" just as humans do (43). So by looking back and collecting memories, mapping these stories within the body of his letter, Little Dog paints a visceral image of Vietnamese refugees as resilient survivors. To embrace memories is to empower the past.

In depicting memory as a tool to rebuild life, the narrator switches to comparing his family's survival to the respective images of buffalo and of monarch butterflies. One afternoon as the narrator is watching a television program with Lan, they see "a herd of buffalo run, single file, off a cliff, a whole steaming row of them thundering off the mountain in Technicolor" (Vuong 179). Little Dog tells his grandmother that the buffalo do not know that there is a cliff right in front of them, and that they are only following their family. Much like the buffalo, Little Dog follows his family to the United States at the end of the war. And just as the buffalo blindly lead to each other's death, Little Dog views patterns of domestic violence in his family as a gateway to death. Rose migrates to the U.S. out of the desire to protect her son, but decades of being subjected to violence in multiple forms turn her into an

abusive mother. Throughout Little Dog's childhood, Rose hits him, threatens him with a kitchen knife, and traps him in a dark room to teach him lessons. Just as the buffalo contributing to the death of their family members, what Rose has to offer to her son is death. But moving away from the analogy of the buffalo, the narrator finds a similarity between his family and the monarch butterflies. From September to November, a colony of over fifteen thousand monarchs migrate from southern Canada and the United States to spend the winter in central Mexico (Vuong 4). The monarchs lay eggs along their journey to the south and cannot live to fly back north; therefore, they pass down knowledge about the route to the next generation. As the narrator notes, "Maybe we'll be the opposite of buffaloes … We'll grow wings and spill over the cliff as a generation of monarchs, heading home" (192). While Little Dog's analogy of the buffalo depicts families as damaging and deadly, his reference to the monarchs portray families as a caring unit that survives through sharing memories. Memory is a tool for survival because in the act of passing down memories, familial generations come together and transmit life to each other.

Indeed, the way Lan passes down her memory through storytelling enacts a type of sensory knowledge that allows her to come closer to her grandson. One night, after the family gathers around Lan to listen to her story, they hear gunshots firing off outside their apartment. Whereas gunshots are not uncommon in Hartford, the whole family, except Lan, are terrified: "We all screamed—you, Aunt Mai, and I—our cheeks and noses pressed to the floor" (Vuong 21). Although the war has ended, Little Dog's family is still haunted by the spectral quality of a "fleeting, shifting" violence that "is in the lived world, embedded in the fields of recollection and anticipation, fields that move in both temporal directions, past and future" (Langford 31). As the sound of the gunshots triggers the characters' past experience of war and violence, they simultaneously anticipate a life-threatening future infused with danger. Their present and future, in other words, are marked by their violent past. Storytelling thus

becomes an important practice because it gives survivors of violence the power to reinvent the past and thus to rebuild their selves. Lan's tales include "scenes from the war" but also personal stories in which Lan resurrects her the ghost of her younger self (Vuong 22). Arguably, Lan's memory alone is "the colonial wound" (Bakshi 544). Yet in passing down that memory to her grandson, Lan opens up the wound and gestures towards collective healing (Bakshi 544). In listening to his grandmother's stories, Little Dog ponders on the interplay between the storyteller and the listener: "I'd mouth along with the sentences, as if watching a film for the umpteenth time—a movie made by Lan's words and animated by my imagination. In this way, we collaborated" (22). Through this collaboration, the storyteller and the listener work jointly on their mutual project of healing; and, in this way, they are intimately tied together. Sandeep Bakshi argues that memory "in a simultaneous movement … mobilizes the regeneration of intergenerational alliance" (542). The collaborative project of passing down memory through storytelling thus turns the deadly, ghostly, not least, lonely past into a life-long healing project where generations transform a deep wound to a resource for collective healing.

In *On Earth*, "the colonial wound" compels survivors of violence to exist on spectral time, is to say that their presence is infused with phantasmal, brutal memories (Bakshi 544). In the apartment in Hartford, five-year-old Little Dog watches his mother collapse as he shouts, "Boom!" (Vuong 4). The innocent prank turns into an act of violence that results in Rose "screamed, face raked and twisted, then burst into sobs, clutched [her] chest as [she] leaned against the door, gasping" (4). At this instant, Little Dog realises that "the war was still inside [Rose]" (4). The war has never ended for Rose; it keeps haunting her, forcing her to relive it again and again. In this ongoing death, Rose strays further from the realm of the living. Half living, half dead, she becomes a ghost, the gateway between two different timescapes. As the narrator later notes: "To destroy a people, then, is to set them back in

time" (60). In another scene, the narrator recalls the night when he is pulled into a car by Rose and Lan. Rose insists that she is driving to rescue Mai, Little Dog's aunt, from her abusive husband; whereas Lan is convinced that they are riding a helicopter. It is only when Little Dog looks at the clock, which reads 3:04, that he thinks "the women who raised me are losing their minds" (68). This scene shows that both Lan and Rose are ridden by their ghostly pasts. In Rose's case, the memory of Mai being beaten by her boyfriend Carl parallels with Rose's past of being assaulted by her previous husband. Meanwhile, Lan's imagination of sitting inside a helicopter serves to imply that she is persistently haunted by war-torn Vietnam. Neither Rose nor Lan are capable of distinguishing present from past. As Jean Langford states, haunting is "a condition of being accosted by the dead in dreams or immersive memories where temporality no longer maintains its usual points of reference" (214).

Significantly, Rose's unfinished death results from her ghostly mother tongue. At the age of five, Rose watches her schoolhouse being burnt down during an American napalm raid. This traumatic incident puts an end to her education, sending death sentence to her mother tongue Vietnamese:

> *No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure,* wrote Barthes. *For the writer, however, it is the mother tongue*. But what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out? Can one take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely? The Vietnamese I own is the one you gave me, the one whose diction and syntax reach only the second-grade level. (Vuong 31)

Reflecting on the writings of Roland Barthes, the narrator complicates the French philosopher's assumption that the writer constantly takes pleasure in his or her own mother tongue. Barthes's statement confuses the narrator because it does not refer to a mother tongue like his or his mother's, one that is chopped-up and half grown. Their Vietnamese denotes

historical and political violence and, hence, a sense of discontinuity rather than "the kind of affective continuity typically afforded by the mother tongue" (Neumann 285). In this way, their Vietnamese is a mother tongue that has suffered an untimely and violent death, a ghostly mother tongue. Remarkably, in this paragraph, Little Dog omits the word "mother" and draws attention to the "tongue". In doing so, he highlights the corporeal and physical that is so intimately bound to the English word "mother tongue". In Birgit Neumann's description of the tongue, she views the tongue as "an immensely pliant threshold organ" because it seeks refuge in the mouth at the same time as it is capable of reaching out from inside the body (283). Nonetheless, in the context of the damaged Vietnamese mother tongue, the tongue is "cut out" and becomes "a void", hindering the body from becoming whole and intact. Neumann proposes that "linguistic insufficiency threatens the integrity of the body and our embodied sense of self" (285). In drawing on link between language (the mother tongue) and the body (the tongue), the narrator Little Dog confronts the never-ending violence of war in terms of bodily disintegration: when the mother tongue is only partly possessed, it gives way to a vulnerable, fragmented self that lacks sovereignty.

Facing a mother tongue that fails to carry notions of an autonomous self, Little Dog concludes: "Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan" (Vuong 31). Changing the concept of the mother tongue to that of the "orphan tongue" (Neumann 285), Little Dog situates their Vietnamese to the vulnerable position of a child without the protection of parents. At one point, the narrator notes that Vietnamese is "a tongue made obsolete by gunfire", and that Vietnam "dissolve[s] on [his] tongue" (Vuong 38, 233). The tongue is thus imagined as a ghost: it is a bodily landscape marked by violence. For Little Dog and his mother, to speak in their orphan tongue is to re-experience the slow death of their country. In this way, Vietnam is imagined not as a motherland capable of providing maternal protection, but as a country of orphans, children who have been made ghostly for having

encountered different forms of death. Disrupting the framework of the mother tongue that "holds on to the fetishistic fiction of a natural birth into language" (Neumann 286), Little Dog's reconceptualisation of the "orphan tongue" suggests that there is no original basis for an ethnic community. The linguistic shift helps Little Dog paint a picture of the Vietnamese-American community as resilient and malleable. As such, the unavailability of the mother tongue and the birth of the orphan tongue do not simply denote loss but in fact create possibilities for change.

Interestingly, the framework of the orphan tongue leads to the invention of an alternative language—the language of the body. In *On Earth,* the body is painted as a site of corporeal intimacy through the bodily performance of non-verbal, affective gestures of communication. As the bodies in the book remain ghostly, or "ghosted" (Vuong 33), what seems to help them linger longer in the world of the living is indeed the earthly intimate relations between these bodies. Rose constantly finds herself trapped in the realm of the dead as she struggles to come to terms with an abortion she was pressured into. In consoling his mother, Little Dog recreates the bond between Rose and her dead child by reflecting on the bodily proximity between the mother and the fetus. The placenta "where nutrients, hormones, and waste are passed between mother and fetus" is, Little Dog argues, "a kind of language—perhaps our first one, our true mother tongue" (Vuong 137). The placenta, or the language of the body, enables the narrator to create a ghostly encounter between Rose and her dead child where they "were speaking—in blood utterances" (Vuong 137). Moving beyond the limits of the language of words, the narrator turns to the language of the body, painting the body as a safe gateway where beings, alive or not alive, communicate and bond. Arguably, the body as a third language produces what Bakshi calls "sensing knowledge" because the knowledge re-emerging in this sense is founded upon the physical closeness of bodies. Bakshi notes that this type of knowledge fused with sensing and sensations "remain excluded from predominantly

circumscribed accounts of perception and observation in standard epistemology" (540). As such, the narrator's deployment of the body in this way is a queer diasporic attempt to re-intimate ghostly, distant bodies.

On Earth further speaks the language of the body as Little Dog contemplates the intimate language of the hand and its potential power to bring visibility to ghostliness. For the narrator, the hand "although limited by the borders of the skin and cartilage, can be that third language that animates where the tongue falters" (Vuong 33). When young Little Dog is helping his mother at her nail salon, they encounter a seventy-year-old disabled woman who wants to have a pedicure. The client reveals that she has a prosthetic leg, and asks Rose if she can massage the empty space where her calf should be: "I can still feel it down there. It's silly, but I can. I can" (83). Without a word, Rose carefully massages the woman's "phantom limb", and receives from her a hundred-dollar bill (83). Through Rose's gentle act of massaging the air beneath the woman's knee, the absence of the leg becomes more visible to the eye than ever. Not just simply using her hand to massage someone else's body, Rose in this scene uses the language of touch to release the pain associated with the woman's loss of her leg. But the act of confronting pain, of bringing loss which has remained hidden, repressed and ghostly to the surface, is to certain extent a form of violence. As a child, Little Dog massages his mother's back to comfort her worn-out body after days of overworking at the nail salon. He scrapes her back with a coin until her skin develops purple grains: "Through this careful bruising, you heal" (Vuong 85). The physical gesture of "careful bruising" intimately fuses violence and tenderness together, viewing both violence and tenderness as two forms of intimacy. Existence exists because of contrast: just as life cannot exist without death, there would be no healing if there was no violence to begin with. And just as the massaging hand is both brutal and consoling, the writing hand wields a healing power through "marring" a blank page: "But by writing, I mar it. I change, embellish, and preserve

you all at once" (Vuong 85). In the act of writing, the narrator's hand intimately touches the surface of the page; sensations lead both to destruction and creation. But this double mission to destruct and create is crucial for the narrator to construct and reconstruct his self. Both Little Dog's writing hand and Rose's massaging hand produce what Bakshi calls "sensing knowledge" (540). Through touch, their hands bring to the surface the wound, remembering the wound rather than forgetting it.

While the body becomes an alternative language for Little Dog and his family, their Vietnamese bodies become a failure of communication in the American public space. As a child in Hartford, Little Dog accompanies his mother and grandmother to the grocery store to buy oxtail for bún bò Huế. Not knowing the English word for "oxtail", Rose turns to bodily gestures and mooing to translate her needs:

> Floundering, you placed your index finger at the small of your back, turned slightly, so the man could see your backside, then wiggled your finger while making mooing sounds. With your other hand, you made a pair of horns above your head. You moved, carefully twisting and gyrating so he could recognize each piece of this performance: horns, tail, ox. But he only laughed, his hand over his mouth at first, then louder, booming. (Vuong 30)

In this paragraph, the context of translation is characterised by the asymmetrical power dynamics between the two unequal languages, English and Rose's half-grown Vietnamese. As Rose veers towards the alternative language of the body to express herself, she enters what Emily Apter calls the "translation zone" (6). Apter's concept refers to a site in which language is not "the property of a single nation" but subjected to pluralised interpretations by different agents, ranging from "diasporic language communities" to "institutions of governmentality and language policy-making" (6). Ironically, while aiming at creating possibilities for negotiation between non-native and native speakers, the translation zone hinders these possibilities by maintaining the hierarchy between the majority and minority. Rose desperately uses her body to translate Vietnamese, whereas the American butcher only laughs

at her, exercising his power merely by declining Rose's invitation to enter the translation zone. Not one single English word appears in Rose's bodily conversation with the butcher. Nonetheless, the presence of English is noticeable in the butcher's refusal to communicate with Rose. Without being heard, Rose becomes the spectre in the public space. Her body reaches its limits in a society where "[o]ne does not 'pass' … without English" (Vuong 52). The body as a third language is an effective, innovative instrument for Little Dog's family to heal through intimacy. However, this bodily ritual is disrupted and rendered insignificant in the public space where English, used as a device of assimilation, triumphs over any migrant attempt to heal from "the colonial wound" (Bakshi 544).

Witnessing the failure of the body in American public space, Little Dog declares that he will master the English language. The humiliating scene at the grocery store forces Rose to leave the place with just "a loaf of Wonder Bread and a jar of mayonnaise", a defeat that urges her son to act as the "family's official interpreter" (Vuong 31, 32). Not only does this new role require Little Dog to be the voice for when his mother and grandmother lapse into silence, but it also compels him to assimilate: "I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours" (32). Here, English is shown to be an essential device for his survival since the lack of it would render Little Dog and his mother invisible and ghostly in America. But in acquiring English, the narrator is forced to abandon both his Vietnamese mother tongue and the notion of the body as a means of communication. Sandeep Bakshi states that "… the often non-visible, abstract markers of coloniality such as language, literary canons, and artistic productions, to name a few, render the knowledges of non-European cultures of secondary value" (542). With the presence of English as a device of coloniality, the production of "sensing knowledge" on the Vietnamese body is invalidated and rendered as inferior. However, Little Dog's act of wearing English "like a mask" suggests that he claims the English language. He must make English his own

not simply to translate between languages, but actually to translate his queer, non-white body into American society. According to Birgit Neumann, the etymological meaning of translation is "to bear and carry across" (293). Little Dog's act of translating is therefore an attempt to cross linguistic, bodily, and even national borders. Nevertheless, translation "does not reference a straightforward, frictionless act of transfer" because the translator has to recreate according to the norms of the host country (Neumann 288). From this point of view, the answer to the question of whether a translation is successful lies in the premise of the host country. In this sense, translation is not meant to forge connections but used as a tool to disempower and pressure minorities to assimilate. For Little Dog, the act of translating becomes a necessary strategy of survival because it enables him to represent his family in the public sphere. English is a necessity that allows the narrator to "translate [Rose] into the hegemonic language of English" (Neumann 290).

As Rose falls out of language, Little Dog deploys metaphor of the comma to comfort her. At one point in the letter, the narrator compares the self to a comma: "It is no accident, Ma, that the comma resembles a fetus—that curve of continuation. We were all inside our mothers, saying, with our entire curved and silent selves, more, more, more" (Vuong 139). If the comma symbolises the continuation of life, then here the narrator refers to the comma in order to transfer the ghostly bodies in his text to the realm of the living. The metaphor of the comma reinvents for these bodies new selves, selves that are regenerative. In this way, the body is depicted as a site where endless possibilities are imagined. According to Rainer Guldin, "the structural relationship of metaphor and translation is implicitly suggested by the etymology of the Greek *metaphorá* – from the verb *metaphero*, which literally means 'to carry across' – and its Latin translation *translatio*" (Neumann 293). In this sense, both metaphor and translation refer to the queer act of transporting. In Vuong's narrative, the metaphor of the comma translates the body into a middle space where different temporalities

co-exist. The comma writes the body into its earlier form (the fetus), and therefore into the past, in order to locate the future that lies within the body. In this way, the depiction of the body as a regenerative unit allows the narrator to "reemerge decolonially, thus freeing himself from his own coloniality and colonial subjectivity" (Bakshi 545).

At the same time, as translation is never a "frictionless" process, Little Dog's attempt to translate his family is characterised by migrant resistance. Working in the nail salon, Rose is obligated to communicate with her American clients in English. With limited English proficiency, she speaks in broken English: "How I hep you?" (Vuong 81). Here, the narrator does not rewrite his mother's sentence according to Standard English but recites her broken English as it is. In *Playing in the Dark,* Toni Morrison prompts us to think about the ways in which writers of colour have been tempted to write towards dominant culture (Tran 397). Arguably, that Little Dog describes Rose's use of the English language in such an unapologetic manner hints at a crucial sign that he is not writing for dominant gazes. Indeed, he writes to embrace his mother, displaying his affection not just for her broken English but also for her half-grown Vietnamese. Although Rose's Vietnamese vocabulary is limited, she often gestures to aesthetically pleasing objects around her and compliments them in her mother tongue. Once, as Rose sees a hummingbird in the neighbour's yard, she exclaims in Vietnamese, "Đẹp quá!" (29). The presence of the bird catches Rose's eyes because it represents values which she strives for but lacks, including joy, freedom and positive energy. The bird symbolises life, opposing to Rose who is displaced and ghostly. Yet interestingly, as Rose is absorbed in the beauty of the bird and says that it is beautiful, she also becomes a beautiful subject. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Rose's half-grown Vietnamese is described as an "orphan" because it carries traces of violence (31). However, in aesthetic encounters as this instance, the Vietnamese language becomes a tool that transcends her to the realm of beauty where her "aura" is restored (Musiol, "Museums" 164). It should also be

noted that Rose's encounter with aesthetics is made possible because she is under the narrator's aesthetic scrutiny. In the act of writing, Little Dog constructs and reconstructs not just the figure of his mother but also her mother tongue. Here, the Vietnamese language is no longer strictly framed as an injured "orphan" (Vuong 31), but is framed as a device that enables the Vietnamese living dead to actually live and fully exist, even only "briefly".

To further attach the wounded body of his mother to life and the aesthetic, the narrator frames her nail salon in terms of corporeal sensations. According to Bakshi, decolonial queer diasporas "create meaning and value through their visible attachment to elements purportedly considered of inferior worth in standard narratives of art, aesthetics, literature and cultural practices" (543). In *On Earth*, the narrator he ponders on his mother's palms which are "already callused and blistered" and "ruined further" by decades of working in different factories and salons (Vuong 79). He highlights "the colonial wound" inscribed on Rose's injured hands and expresses the value of her extractive labour: "I hate and love your battered hands for what they can never be" (Vuong 81). To draw a connection between the body and the nation, the narrator views Rose's wounded body as exposing "the wreck and reckoning of a dream" (79). Here, the narrator alludes to the American dream, a widespread belief that anyone can attain success and prosperity through hard work in a society with unlimited opportunities such as America. But Rose's infected hands prove exactly the opposite: this dream does not reflect reality but is merely an illusion, a social construct that excludes and endangers certain bodies. The narrator continues, "Because there are no salaries, healthcare, or contracts, the body being the only material to work with and work from. Having nothing, it becomes its own contract, a testimony of presence" (80). The infrastructures of the nail salon demand that Rose overworks her body without articulating her suffering. As I discussed in Chapter One, when survivors of violence lapse into silence, they suffer from what Langford calls "impossible testimony", a circumstance that invites ghosts to speak for the living

(Langford 27). In this case, Rose's damaged hands are depicted as ghostly landscape that speaks of the violent structure of the nail salon and function as witnesses to the false promise of the American dream. The salon, after all, is "a place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones—with or without citizenship—aching, toxic and underpaid" (Vuong 80-81).

The salon becomes a place of toxicity also because it is where the act of saying the word "sorry" becomes a self-deprecating practice. According to the narrator, the price one has to pay for working in the service of beauty is to say "sorry" even when one has not done anything wrong (Vuong 91). The word "sorry" has a double function. On the one hand, the utterance of the English word "sorry" wields "power" because it enables workers of lower social class to make their bodies visible to the eyes of their clients (91). As Achille Mbembe argues, "The body is alive to the extent that its organs function and express themselves. It is the deployment of the organs, their malleability and their more or less autonomous power, that makes the body forever phantasmagoric" (*Critique* 144). The tongue or the mouth articulates the word "sorry" in order to mark the presence of the body and portray the body as functional. On the other hand, the deployment of a single organ relegates the workers to a position is inferior to their clients. As the narrator notes, "[the word "sorry"] no longer merely *apologizes*, but insists, reminds: *I'm here, right here, beneath you*" (Vuong 91). Through lowering themselves to the feet of their customers, the workers of the nail salon take on an existence that does not entail their humanness. To say "sorry", then, only reinstates the ghostly existence of these workers. The word "sorry" thus becomes an extension of the spectral body, but it is also a corporeal embodiment of the broken American dream.

For Rose, America becomes a broken dream as she yearns for her father. In a memory recollection, Little Dog writes about Rose's first attendance in an Afro-Latino Baptist church where they are "the only yellow faces in the church" (Vuong 58). Once the Gospel song "His

Eye Is on the Sparrow" is played, everyone stands up, clapping, shouting and celebrating their emotions. But Rose is in tears; in Vietnamese, she demands for her birth father to show up: "Where are you, Ba? … Where the hell are you? Come get me! Get me out of here! Come back and get me!" (59). Rose has never met her real father; what she knows of him is "just another American john—faceless, nameless, less" (55). The way Rose's father fails to care for his daughter is similar to America's lack of paternal responsibility for all of its children. Just as Rose's father abandons her, America excludes non-white refugee bodies from its familial narrative. Rose's longing for a father, thus, refers not only to her biological father but also to paternal America. So whereas Thi Bui's *The Best* draws on the link between the mother and the homeland, Vuong's *On Earth* centres this scene on the association between father and the adopted country. Days after their church service, Rose frequently plays the same Gospel song in the kitchen. As the narrator remarks, "It was there, inside the song, that you had permission to lose yourself and not be wrong" (59). If the song is where Rose's intense yearning resides, then her continual act of replaying it hints at her willingness to exist in the musical space, the intimate space of sound and desire. The song is a work of art, an aesthetic object that enables Rose to reinvent a self that is not "wrong", and thus not displaced.

Notably, aesthetics is further shown to wield the power to console ghostly, displaced beings. Just as Little Dog notices the ghostliness embedded in his mother's body and soul, he also views himself as a spectre. The narrator describes himself as a human being who frequently takes on the invisible persona of an "echo": "Days I feel like a human being, while other days I feel more like a sound. I touch the world not as myself but as an echo of who I was." (Vuong 62). He shifts the framing of his self from the materiality of the human body to the immateriality of a sound, all the while depicting his body as both a subject of the present and a site of the past. In interacting with the present world as "an echo of who [he] was", Little Dog portrays himself as existing in between that which is happening now and that

which has passed, a limbo state between life and death. Nevertheless, a transformation occurs as Little Dog looks at himself in the mirror. For the first time he sees himself as beautiful. And in the act of rewriting, he takes notes of his body, the bodily features that used to make him feel flawed now make him feel "wanted" (Vuong 107). According to Bakshi, as "decolonial aesthesis" prompts an "awareness of stimulation", "perception" is amongst the most powerful modalities that enable the healing of "the colonial wound" (546). The mirror reveals "everything [he] hid from"; the act of looking in the mirror is thus synonymous to the act of locating that which has been rendered ghostly (Vuong 107). Yet by perceiving himself in terms of the aesthetic, the narrator rewrites his beauty into being, soothing his wounded body with sensations.

And yet, Little Dog's newfound beauty is profoundly challenged as the narrator marks his asymmetrical relationship with Trevor. Growing up in Hartford as an Asian boy, Little Dog perceives himself as "[y]ellow and barely there" (Vuong 153). Besides being bullied by American children for not speaking English, the narrator struggles with his mother's desire to make him American and his own lack of self-acceptance for not being white. In his childhood, Little Dog and Rose follow a daily "ritual": his mother pours him a tall glass of "American milk" and he drinks it down, "both of us hoping the whiteness vanishing into me would make more of a yellow boy" (27). Here, whiteness is imposed on the non-white body in order to render it defective. While Rose ensures that she forces Little Dog to drink milk in hope that her son will "grow a lot", her emplacement of whiteness on him is actually deeply rooted in the political and cultural pressure to assimilate. Whiteness in this sense is not simply just a skin colour, but indeed a technology that exercises its power through making non-white bodies invisible and insignificant. In this way, whiteness is a process of erasing non-white bodies, a deliberate refusal to see certain bodies and thereby creates ghosts out of them. For this reason, when Little Dog meets Trevor for the first time on the tobacco farm and their eyes

locked, Little Dog is aware of his visibility: “I was seen—I who had seldom been seen by anyone” (96). Looking at Trevor who is “impossibly American” (102), Little Dog yearns “for [Trevor’s] gaze to fix me to the world I felt only halfway inside of” (96). The gaze is more than a simple act of looking. Drawing upon his desire to be healed by Trevor’s gaze, Little Dog recognises the potential power of the American gaze to validate his fragile American identity. Their relationship becomes one of unequal power in that the narrator casts Trevor as a rescuer, a role which America strategically plays to avoid taking responsibilities for having created the Vietnam War in the first place.

Nevertheless, Little Dog quickly deconstructs “the US myth of ‘rescue and liberation’” through his illustration of Trevor as a queer ghost (Espiritu 422). Every time Little Dog visits Trevor’s home, he ponders on a painting of pink peaches hung on the wall leading to Trevor’s room. The painting is placed in a hallway “too narrow” to “see it in full”, which suggests that the artwork conceals secrets that are not supposed to be discovered (Vuong 113). As Little Dog carefully inspects the brushstrokes, he realises that the picture is in fact a dollar-store computer print made to resemble a painting: “A fake. A fraud. Which was why I loved it. The materials never suggested authenticity, but rather, an inconspicuous sameness, a desire to pass as art only under the most cursory glance” (Vuong 113-114). Here, the fake painting is used as a metaphor for Trevor’s hidden queerness. Just as the computer print embodies the desire to mimic a real painting, Trevor performs an identity he is not. Trevor, who has been “raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity”, likes talking about guns and listening to music “interspersed with gunshots, men shouting, a car peeling off” (203, 109). But Trevor’s aggrieved efforts to maintain his hypermasculine image is closely linked to his conscious attempt to suppress desires that do not conform to American ideal of masculinity, including his romantic and sexual attraction to men, and even the need to cry or to express his vulnerability. Terry Castle argues that it is difficult to “see” the queer

body because the queer subject has been "ghosted—or made to seem invisible—by culture itself" (Bennett 4). Trevor represses his queer self in order to fit into the nation's narrative of life; yet ironically, his spectralisation of his queerness only seems to erase his existence even further. Accordingly, although Trevor is described as an American symbol in the text, this character is actually internally displaced in a heteronormative culture that rejects his queer identity. It is thus not surprising that Trevor's queer self is hidden in a painting that is otherwise ignored by the habitants of the house. It is only when Little Dog sets his gaze on the painting to locate queer ghosts that Trevor's queer self is brought into existence again.

In this act of raising queer ghosts, Little Dog simultaneously casts the spectral sphere as akin to queerness as he evokes readers to reflect on the themes of life and death. According to Jean Langford, modern American culture over the last century has been characterised by the obsession with controlling death in the form of "statistics, certificates, psychological profiles, obituaries, autopsy records, bereavement studies, and, most recently, self-help and motivational literature on grief and the acceptance of mortality" (18). Such an oversimplified and distorted interpretation of death is problematic in two ways. First, it only seeks to recapture specific scenes of death in order to sustain the illusion that death is a knowable entity; and second, it does nothing to restore the "sociality" of the living and dead (Langford 16). In the example of the peach painting, the character of Trevor is exposed as a queer ghost who is undergoing a traumatic unfinished death because his queer identity is neither accepted by American society at large nor by Trevor himself. It is also not surprising to learn that Trevor's queer self faces death when the nation's narrative of death rests upon institutional norms of the family and the linear temporal frames of heterosexual reproduction. According to Amy Saunders, subjects who reside outside of the "normative construction of time" are associated with death (39). These subjects involve not just ghosts, who challenges and

disrupts the normalisation of chronological time, but also queer bodies, who reside "outside or beyond the linear logic of reproductive temporality" (Chabot 11).

As such, the narrator uses the fragmentary form of prose poetry to visualise the death sentence that Trevor the queer ghost is subjected to. Towards the end of chapter two, the book suddenly shifts from traditional prose to an extended prose poem. In a section spanning across eight pages, the narrator writes a tribute to Trevor as he explores the challenges arising in their relationship. The prose poem starts off with the characterisation of Trevor as an unruly teenager, a rebellious "redneck" (Vuong 155). The narrator further depicts Trevor as having "deer blood" on his blue jeans; a "hunter", "carnivore", and "meateater" as Little Dog puts it (153, 155). The way Trevor shows no hesitance in killing deer alludes to his desire to conform to "an idealized hyper-masculine image of heterosexuality" that is strongly promoted in his own culture (Delsignore). But this quality about Trevor is only a symptom of his inner conflict. As the prose poem slowly unfolds, we learn that Trevor develops an extreme aversion to eating veal after he discovers the cruelty in the mass production of veal. According to the narrator, veal "are calves … locked in boxes the size of themselves"; the animals have to stand still so that their meat remains "tender" and appetizing (Vuong 156). While Trevor's refusal to eat veal exposes a more empathetic aspect to his character, the metaphor of the veal is also a representation of Trevor being trapped within the confines of heteronormative America. Most importantly, towards the end of the prose poem, Little Dog soothes his lover's pain through the powerful act of listening:

> shuffling inside, hoofs soft as erasers, the bell on its neck ringing
>
> and ringing. The shadow of a man growing up to it. The man with his keys, the commas of doors. Your head on Trevor's chest. The calf being led by a string, how it stops
>
> to inhale, nose pulsing with dizzying sassafras. Trevor asleep

beside you. Steady breaths. Rain. Warmth welling through his plaid shirt like steam issuing from the calf's flanks as you listen to the bell

across the star-flooded field, the sound shining

like a knife. The sound buried deep in Trevor's chest and you
listen.

That ringing. You listen like an animal

learning how to speak. (Vuong 159-160)

In this excerpt, the narrator breaks the density of the page into "clusters of continuous sentences commonly associated with prose poetry" (Hetherington and Atherton 96). At the same time, sentences are broken in two by the empty white space of the skipped line. Similar to the gutter space of the graphic novel which symbolises the absent, the blank space between the lines in this excerpt "materializes" the invisible and the ghostly (Chute 27). The skipped lines hover between the sentences above and below them, creating a body of text that is fragmentary, incomplete and, not least, vulnerable. Interestingly, that the text appears spaced and airy juxtaposes with the "body-box" or "coffin" in which the calves are trapped (Vuong 156). At the same time, this aesthetic practice of spacing enables the human and animal bodies of the text to breathe; it is the narrator's textual and visual attempt to console these bodies by offering them a slight taste of freedom. It should also be noted that the prose poem is written from the second-person point of view; and, as such, Little Dog uses the pronounce "you" not only to refer to himself but also to directly address readers. The section is thus written as an invitation for readers to participate in narrative interpretation, and thereby encourages readers to be part of this intimate construction. Significantly, a powerful sense of intimacy is visualised through the auditory imagery of the bell. In his study of the use of

animal bells in literature, Panayotis Panopoulos describes the sound of the bells as a means to "allow shepherds to collect information about the movement of their animals and other shepherds' flocks, without having to see them" (643). The ringing bell is hence no less than a device of control. Arguably, the "ringing" in Trevor's chest alludes to the compulsive practice of heteronormativity as a means of control. In listening to "that ringing", Little Dog takes on the role of a sympathetic witness. According to Sara Ahmed, queer orientation "allows things to remain askew, strange, unhoused, and unfamiliar" instead of striving for "realigning the misalignments" (Landreau 9). The narrator's act of listening does not attempt to "set things right" by reclaiming the humanity of Trevor or of himself. Rather, this queer act of listening allows the narrator to move in-between and conflate the categories of the animal and the human. He "listen[s] like an animal", yet the capacity to "speak" is exclusively a human trait. Here, the ear is deployed for Little Dog to visualise the thin line between queer life and queer death.

In other instances, the narrator turns to the eye and its gaze to nurture his relationship with Trevor. Starring at Trevor, our narrator remarks, "I *studied* him like a new word. ... It was dark enough for my eyes to *swallow* all of him without ever seeing him clearly" (Vuong 103; emphasis added). Here, their roles are reversed: the white body becomes the target in the non-white gaze. Little Dog's gaze allows him to exert domination over Trevor. Since Trevor throughout the novel is illustrated as an American symbol, Little Dog's power over him shows the narrator's resistance to American control. He becomes the one who "swallows" whiteness instead of being eaten up alive by it. As bell hooks notes, subordinates in unbalanced power relations "learns to look a certain way in order to resist" (116). Through his "reversed gaze"[11], the narrator looks rather than being looked at. His self-portrait as an Other

[11] My usage of this term is inspired by the tittle of Mwenda Ntarangwi's book *Reversed Gaze: An African Ethnography of American Anthropology*.

who gazes back allows him to take on the role of an agent. Conceptualising the gaze further, the narrator asserts that "the gaze is a singular act: to look at something is to fill your whole life with it, if only briefly" (Vuong 175). Arguably, his non-white gaze is not simply a marker of resistance, but, more importantly, a tool to "preserve" Trevor's body (175). Little Dog glances at Trevor and describes the latter's manhood in feminine terms: "The way his mud-streaked and dusty edges juxtaposed against that rounded mouth and pert lips sealed into a flushed, feminine pout" (95). Similarly, in a scene where Trevor puts on a WWII army helmet, a symbol of destruction and militarised masculinity, Little Dog rather pays attention to Trevor's "reddish lips" and his "oddly small" Adam's apple (103). Tim Wray argues that "the queer gaze looks to be reflected, looks for a mirroring of the same desires back" (70). As such, Little Dog locks Trevor in his queer gaze to unleash queer desire, deploying precisely the kind of intimacy that has been rendered spectral in order to create a sense of oneness with Trevor.

Expanding on this sense of oneness, the narrator provides a blunt and graphic account of his first sexual encounter with Trevor. Little Dog starts and closes off his description of their intercourse with the declaration: "The first time we fucked, we didn't fuck at all" (Vuong 113, 115). Little Dog has doubt and uncertainty about their first intercourse because of the way they perform the act: "I spat in my hand and reached back, grabbed tight his heated length, mimicking the real thing, as he pushed" (114). Here, Little Dog's act of "mimicking the real thing" echoes his description of the peach painting as an artwork "printed on with speckled relief, suggesting *a hand without enacting the real*" (113; emphasis added). As with the computer print that attempts to mimic an actual painting, Little Dog's role in the sexual intercourse is to mimic the female body. Amy Saunders addresses a common phenomenon in which queer subjects follow heteronormative discourses "in order to be associated with the life of the nation, rather than death" (40). During their intercourse, both Trevor and Little Dog

impose on themselves the heteronormative lifestyle that sees female-male sexual relations as normal and right. As a result, Little Dog engages in the sex using only his hand instead of his whole body, and in doing so figuratively dismembers himself. The heteronormative practice of sex does not bring life to Little Dog, but rather cuts off his limb, rendering it irrelevant, defective and dead. Describing his bodily disintegration in this way, the narrator brings the theme of disability across in terms of figurative bodily disembodiment and mental disjunction. If, as Tobin Siebers highlights, aesthetics is about how certain bodies make other feel, then the aesthetic in Vuong's story centres around the affective relations between the queer body and the heteronormative body, namely how the normalisation of the heterosexual body compels queer subjects to cast their queer bodies as impostors, unreal and non-intimate. Depicting what he sees as "a penis in a fist in place of the inner self" (Vuong 114), the narrator implies that Trevor the American symbol, too, becomes a crippled, disembodied queer ghost for having to subtract his queer self in order to fit into the American framework of heteronormativity.

Yet in the act of rewriting memories, the narrator deconstructs and reconstructs beauty, turning the unreal, undesired queer bodies into bodies of the aesthetic. Further describing their first sexual intercourse, Little Dog saturates the memory with sounds and sensations:

> […] His tongue, his tongues. And his arms, hot along their tense muscles, reminded me of the neighbor's house on Franklin Ave. the morning after it burned. I had lifted a piece of window frame, still warm, from the wreck, my fingers digging into the soft wood, damp from the hydrant, the way I now dug into Trevor's bicep. I thought I heard the hiss of steam coming of him, but it was only October slashing outside, wind making a lexicon of the leaves.
>
> We did not speak. (Vuong 114)

There are two parts to this section: one of sounds and sensations, and one of silence. Made up by long sentences, what holds the first paragraph together is not the full stop but actually the

comma. The comma enables the narrator to continually produce intimate images of body parts, times, locations, sensations and, not least, sounds, even sounds that are impossible for the human ear to capture. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Little Dog theorises that the comma is a "curve of continuation" (Vuong 139). Arguably, the comma is frequently used in this first paragraph in order for the writer to produce life, a life filled with sensory experiences that allows both the characters and readers to see, hear, taste and feel. Here, the process of healing through "decolonial aesthesis" begins as the narrator employs "taste sensation" and "auditory sensation/sound" to imagine the bodies as intimate (Bakshi 539). But while the comma and aesthesis in the first part bring life to both Little Dog and Trevor, the second part comprised of four short words and a full stop signals death. The queer subjects in the story are ultimately ghostly in their inarticulation: they must be quiet in order to "[mimic] the real thing" (Vuong 114). Here, the silencing of the queer subjects removes queer intimacy from the context; it is precisely this transition from sound to quietness that subjects Trevor and Little Dog to a deadly sphere. But while "the mouth of discourse" fails to bring life to the queer subjects, "the mouth of taste" is deployed to do so (Serres 157). According to Michel Serres, the human body is armed with "a double tongue": the "speaking tongue" that is communicative and the "tasting tongue" that is sensual (154). In the first paragraph of the excerpt, the "tasting tongue" generates knowledge and experience that are marked by the senses and desire. Serres's "tasting tongue," then, closely resembles Mignolo's "decolonial aesthesis" that employs sensations to free the diasporic queer subject from "the colonial wound" (Bakshi 539). In the act of rewriting the queer bodies with sensations, the narrator depicts his sensory queer body as an agent capable of finding his own source of power. Empowered through sounds and sensations, Little Dog recreates a safe space for the queer bodies to thrive.

One week after their first sexual experience, the narrator and Trevor do it again the same way. But halfway through their act, Trevor grabs Little Dog's hair and forcefully jerks his head back. Feeling excited by the other boy's sudden violence, the narrator tells Trevor to keep doing it all the while recognising that the reciprocal act of inflicting pain and receiving pain are oftentimes an intimate aspect of queer sex. Most importantly, it is through learning to see pain and violence anew that Little Dog comes to understand the power of submission: "I had a choice, a craft, whether [Trevor] ascends or falls depends on my willingness to make room for him, for you cannot rise without having something to rise over" (Vuong 118). Here, the narrator recognises that it is precisely his submission that forms the foundation for Trevor's dominance. Little Dog's source of power comes from his own willingness to carry out Trevor's desire; knowing how much he is wanted is a powerful weapon. In surrendering to Trevor's power, the narrator takes control. From the submissive position, he fixates his eyes on Trevor and it is only through his gaze that the latter can grow in pleasure. Arguably, the submissive and dominant roles that Little Dog and Trevor respectively play run in parallel with the power relations between Vietnamese refugees and America. Throughout the war and over four decades into its aftermath, the damages U.S. policies have inflicted on Vietnam and Vietnamese refugees are detrimental and enormous. Nonetheless, these damages are rarely recognised in public U.S. discussions about Vietnam because there is a bigger narrative that dominates the scene, namely the American's self-appointed role as rescuer and liberator (Espiritu 412). Without a population of the Vietnamese who had to yield to America in order to save their lives, the U.S. would not have been able to sustain their own narrative as a powerful and generous nation. In Little Dog's declaration that "to be inside of pleasure, Trevor needed me", he implies that America "needed" Vietnam in order to become a hegemonic power (Vuong 118). The narrator thus refers to the reciprocal relationship between

the dominant and the submissive not only to empower himself and his Vietnamese-American community but also to forge a connection between Vietnam and America.

The narrator's attempt to foster a sense of oneness between Vietnam and America is further displayed in the blunt description of Little Dog's penetrative sex with Trevor. Although the sex is painful, Little Dog learns to endure it until the pain is transformed to pleasure. Their bodily proximity allows the narrator to think of Trevor as an "extension" of himself, and he describes the sex act as "as if two people mining one body, and in doing so, merged, until no corner was left saying *I*" (Vuong 202). Whereas Little Dog's first sexual encounter with Trevor causes both of them bodily disintegration, their penetrative sex in this case restores them to corporeal wholeness, but this wholeness is only possible through the merging of two imperfect bodies. Aesthetics in this sense is a tool that transforms disconnectivity to a deep kinship; consciousness is imagined as one. More important is the way elements of disability creeps into the aesthetic scene, forcing readers to comprehend the "disability aesthetics" of bodily failure (Siebers 3). Midway through the penetration, Little Dog defecates. He describes his inability to control his bowels in terms of disability: "I had tainted him with my faggotry, the filthiness of our act exposed by my body's failure to contain itself" (Vuong 203). He utilises bodily failure and mental rupture in order to denote a queer resistance to the "aesthetic production and appreciation" in American culture (Siebers 3). Ian Scott Todd describes postwar America as both "heteronormative" and "germophobic," and argues that American culture's disgust for dirt and waste echoes in the cultural and social aversion to homosexuality (111). Todd continues: "Anality and excrement have consistently borne associations with queer or non-normative sexual desire and, vice versa, queer sex … has traditionally signified as dirty" (111). In the act of writing the letter, Little Dog reconstructs the sex scene. He scatters images of dirt throughout the narration and attaches to those pictures olfactory perception: the "scent of dirt" and "spilled beer" raising from the barn

floor blend with the odour of faeces (Vuong 201). Dirt is also present on Trevor's body that is "touched … with the dark inside [Little Dog]" (203). Here, the narrator literally and figuratively queers the American symbol with his bodily waste.

The moment of bodily failure quickly shifts to a moment of tenderness as Trevor takes Little Dog to the river to clean himself. After telling Little Dog not to "worry" about the messiness of their intercourse, Trevor kneels down and performs fellatio on the narrator. Once again, the image of the tongue is deployed in Little Dog's narration: "I shook—his tongue so impossibly warm compared to the cold water, the sudden, wordless act, willed as a balm to my failure in the barn" (Vuong 205). In this scene, Trevor utilises his "tasting tongue" to facilitate bodily proximity and closeness with the narrator. The tongue allows both characters to arrive at a mutual understanding that is based upon longing and desire. Contemplating on the act of being "devoured" by desire, Little Dog writes: "To be reclaimed by that want, to be baptized by its pure need. That's what I was" (206). In being retrieved by a yearning, the narrator marks his rebirth into desire, if not, defines himself in the name of desire. According to Tobin Siebers, aesthetics "defines the process by which human beings attempt to modify themselves, by which they imagine their feelings, forms, and futures in radically different ways, and by which they bestow upon these new feelings, forms, and futures real appearances in the world" (3). What is aesthetically beautiful about this scene is indeed the act of rewriting that enables Little Dog to mend his "deeply broken" body with the "mercy" of desire (Vuong 203, 206). By writing his body anew with desire, he writes the queer body from a shameful context into a beautiful existence on the page where two bodies hold on to each other and start rescuing each other. It is in residing within desire that they find agency in survival.

Furthering the intimate image of bodies rescuing bodies, the narrator in the final chapter proposes ways to "enact hospitality to the dead" through haunting and mourning (Langford 213). Suffering from stage four bone cancer, Little Dog's grandmother has been

lying in the same mat for two weeks. She is slowly dying. Staring into an X-ray of Lan's skeleton, the narrator literally sees the way her body is being eaten up alive by cancer. Her body of emptiness makes him wonders: "Where was the translucent cartilage, the marrow, the minerals, the salt and sinew, the calcium that once formed her bones?" (Vuong 196). Just as the void marked on the female body in Bui's work elicits a sense of ghostliness (see figure 4), Lan's misshapen, empty body resembles that of a ghost. According to Jean Langford, the ghost "operates as a hinge to draw together two forms of engagement with the dead: haunting, where one is seized involuntarily, and mourning, where one actively strives to give the dead their due" (210). In an in-depth description, Little Dog carefully observes the ways Lan's two daughters, Mai and Rose, take care of her dying body. Mai feeds Lan with oatmeal, "their foreheads almost touching" (Vuong 198). Rose, on the other hand, stays close to Lan and gently brushes strands of hair away from her face, hoping the subtle act of care can make Lan's transition to death less painful. At one point, both Rose and Mai help clean her mother by removing faeces from Lan's body. Interestingly, these careful gestures are heightened as Lan requests "[a] spoonful of rice … from Go Cong" (Vuong 209). Here, her request to eat rice from the Vietnamese town she comes from demonstrates Lan's wish to reclaim her Vietnamese identity. While the request seems impossible, Mai runs to the kitchen and brings out a bowl of rice, telling her mother that "it's Go Cong rice, just harvested last week" (209). Lan then takes one bite, chewing and swallowing the rice; a spark of relief is painted on her lips. As Jean Langford suggests, "To dig up bones and clean them, to listen to the requests of the dead in dreams, to feed the dead in annual feasts: all these are theaters for enacting hospitality to the dead" (213). At last, after Lan has drawn her last breath, Mai, Rose and Little Dog still gather around her corpse; the two daughters perform rituals that offer a bodily and sensory intimacy with the corpse of their mother. While Lan's spectral haunting demands the persistent act of mourning, Rose and Mai surrender to being haunted by the ghost of their

mother. It is in this combination of haunting and mourning that the living maintains a reciprocal relationship with spirits. The story of *On Earth* thus creates a dialogistic space in which ethics, care for the dying and the dead, becomes the backbone of the narrative.

At last, *On Earth* closes off with Little Dog's conclusion to his healing project, one that is rooted in change, forgiveness and beauty. For no particular reason, the narrator begins running. He runs "past the clearing, back into the tobacco's stiff shade", but also into specific versions of the past in which the people he loves are still alive, including Trevor and his grandmother (Vuong 240). Facing multiple losses within a short time frame, Little Dog finds no consolation in bearing his sufferings; he runs in an attempt to escape from reality. He further notes: "… I push through so fast I feel like I've finally broken out of my body, left it behind" (241). The practice of running in this sense is a self-willing movement towards death. Nonetheless, the narrator suddenly arrives at a realisation: "my will to change being stronger than my fear of living" (241). At this moment, Little Dog starts seeing a range of animals undergoing metamorphosis: he is with a herd of buffaloes that race towards the cliff, then the buffaloes become moose, then dogs, and finally, head-cut macaques with their brains exposed in the air. What these animals all have in common is that throughout the novel, their images have been employed in order to depict the ruined lives of displaced bodies in contemporary American society. That Little Dog, in the act of running, watches these animals all run towards the cliff suggests that death is still hovering right in front of him. Yet rather than choosing to fall, he rises up. The first monkey to step off the cliff transforms into monarch butterflies: "Thousands of monarchs pour over the edge, fan into the white air, like a bloodjet hitting water" (241). The image of the butterflies soaring above the narrator's head creates an aesthetically beautiful scenario infused with a powerful sense of freedom. The taste of freedom towards the end of *On Earth* is characterised by a sense of unboundedness that is marked in *The Best*'s two final pages. Yet whereas Bui's graphic novel imagines freedom in

terms of reproductive futurity, Vuong's novel draws on a healing project that is not reliant on a fixated, straightforward timescape. At the end of *On Earth*, the narrator notes a short conversation between him and Rose, then concludes with an ambiguous statement: "Then, for no reason, you start to laugh" (Vuong 242). This sentence carries no promise of a future untouched by pain and violence. In fact, Rose's laughter suggests that the body itself is capable of regenerating happiness and beauty regardless of how much damage it has received.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the ways Thi Bui's graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* and Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* narrate resistance and healing. While using the Vietnam War as the historical context to their books, Bui and Vuong do not centre on the war as a narrative event but actually on the second-generation's attempt to rekindle their damaged relationship to their refugee parents. As demonstrated in both books, the first-generation Vietnamese refugees carry the responsibility to keep the family safe in the face of war and displacement. But their pain and sufferings, including the traumatic deaths they witness, escape and experience, are not recorded in any American official documents or recognised in American public discussions of the war. This cultural process of forgetting the Vietnamese is precisely a procedure of spectralisation that strips off the Vietnamese voices, making them unheard, nameless and invisible. As such, the second-generation Vietnamese Americans grow up learning that their whole existence is not much different than that of a ghost. Thi Bui brings into question this sense of ghostliness in her text as she depicts the way she looks at her motherland not as a country but as "a symbol of something lost" (Bui 36). Meanwhile, the narrator Little Dog in Vuong's text struggles to be "seen" because being a Vietnamese queer person of colour in America is equivalent to being ghostly (Vuong 96). As the dual themes of resistance and healing run throughout the two books, *The Best* and *On Earth* embrace the Vietnamese refugee experience in both similar and different ways.

In Chapter One, "The 'Good Refugee' and Visual Violence and Intimacy in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*," I argued that Bui challenges the American myth of the "good refugee" as she looks for Vietnamese spectres in both the private and public sphere. Into the realm of the home, Bui centres the narrative on her family and portrays her parents as scarred survivors of violence. Bui's father, Bố, has a traumatic upbringing as he is forced to live

through the destructions of war, all the while struggling to rebuild his life in the face of resettlement. While depicting Bố as an erratic, furious ghost, Bui also describes him in terms of Achille Mbembe's figure of the "wandering subject" who are willing to reinvent his self in the context of chaos and danger (*Critique* 144). At the same time, Bố suffers from the "impossibility of testimony", which, for Jean Langford, renders the survivor unable to speak of the brutality he has been subjected to (28). The form of the graphic novel reveals itself to be a medium of evidence and testimony as it enables Bui to "materializes" the ghost of Bo's former self, so that the ghost can act as witness (Chute 27). The aesthetics of the graphic novel also assists Bui to console Bố through the act of drawing, of spatializing the traumatised subject within spaces where he is temporarily free from trauma. Through her characterisation of Bo, Bui demonstrates the Vietnamese male body as undergoing an ongoing death. This notion is further reinforced in Bui's hand-drawn versions of Eddie Adams's iconic photograph "the Saigon Execution". And as Bui further collects public, political artefacts during her research for *The Best*, she conflates her body of emptiness to that of Kim Phuc, the "napalm girl" in Ut's photograph. In doing so, she spatializes the ghostly map of Vietnam into the Vietnamese female body, suggesting that the Vietnamese female body is not just a site for historical loss but also a site for collective healing.

Another important key point I raised in Chapter One is Bui's attempt to visually re-intimate the Vietnamese refugee subject. On the one hand, Bui raises the image of the refugee camp to criticize the infrastructures of the camp as a deathscape, a device of control and punishment. The living conditions of the camp are dehumanizing; however, Bui does not retreat to explaining the humanity of the Vietnamese refugees in the camp. Rather, she spatializes families, children's innocence and the individual into the space of the camp to turn this political space into the intimate realm of the home. As such, she depicts the Vietnamese as resilient human beings who, like a "wandering subject", wield the power to make and

remake their selves "into the unknown" (*Critique* 149). And as intimacy reaches its conclusion in *The Best*, Bui ponders on what type of inheritance being passed down from a traumatised generation to the next. Being a child to her refugee parents, Bui is aware that her ghostliness and her "refugee reflex" are part of a legacy she cannot refuse (Bui 305). Yet as Bui looks at her son who lives a free life untouched by the devastations of the war, she proposes a healing that is framed by family, reproduction and inheritance. Her project of healing and resistance here rests upon the notion of a heteroreproductive future.

The end of *The Best* is amongst one of the few things that divert Bui's graphic novel from Vuong's text. In Chapter Two, "Wounded Bodies, Sensations and Beauty in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," I argued that Vuong's novel perceives the body as an endless resource for regenerating beauty, and that the body thus holds the potential for healing and life. Reading *On Earth* through Bakshi's framework of "decolonial queer diasporas", we come to learn of the capacity of the body. The narrator Little Dog recognises "the colonial wound" through comparing the wounded human life to the injured life of animals (Bakshi 544). The metaphors of butterflies, buffalos, macaque monkeys, and the taxidermied animal are scattered throughout the novel. Metaphor, the act of translating an image to another, is a subtle act of crossing borders that the narrator deploys to highlight the uncertain existence of a ghost (Neumann 293). Ghostliness comes across through the narrator's depiction of his mother's half-grown Vietnamese mother tongue. Rose's mother tongue entails historical and political violence; it is a symbol of absence that persuades the narrator to shift to naming it an "orphan tongue" (Vuong 31). Healing is further addressed as Little Dog speaks of the third language, the language of the body. The body as a language produces "sensing knowledge" in ways that re-intimate ghostly bodies with sensations (Bakshi 540). Nonetheless, the Vietnamese body fails to become a means of communication in the American public space that prioritises English. Indeed, bodily failure is further brought

into discussion as Little Dog tells of his romantic and sexual relationship with Trevor. The messiness of their queer sex makes visible patterns of heteronormativity that are deeply embedded in their relationship as well as in their individual bodies. Although hyper-masculine Trevor is imagined as an American symbol, his attempt to suppress his queer identity renders him internally displaced within contemporary American heteronormative culture. The queer is then casted as akin to the ghost because both figures reside in-between the space of life and death. As such, Little Dog employs bodily parts such as the eye and the tongue to re-intimate Trevor. Intimacy and desire are therefore viewed as powerful tools to soothe the injured soul. But healing the Vietnamese ghostly subject, as Vuong's book demonstrates, also entails a willingness to mend the broken relationship between Vietnamese community and America. The relationship between Trevor and Little Dog thus serves as a narrative device that fosters a new way of seeing countries as shifting and borderless.

Together, Thi Bui's *The Best* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth* embraces the Vietnamese refugee subject precisely in asserting a claim upon suffering, pain, visibility, resistance, and healing. These texts are not simply literature about cultural differences; in fact, the two books give rise to an ethical discussion of life and death. Through the aesthetic space of the narrative art, Vuong and Bui invite us to conversations on care for the dying and the dead, suggesting that the only ethical way to heal from trauma is to reopen the wound and mend it.

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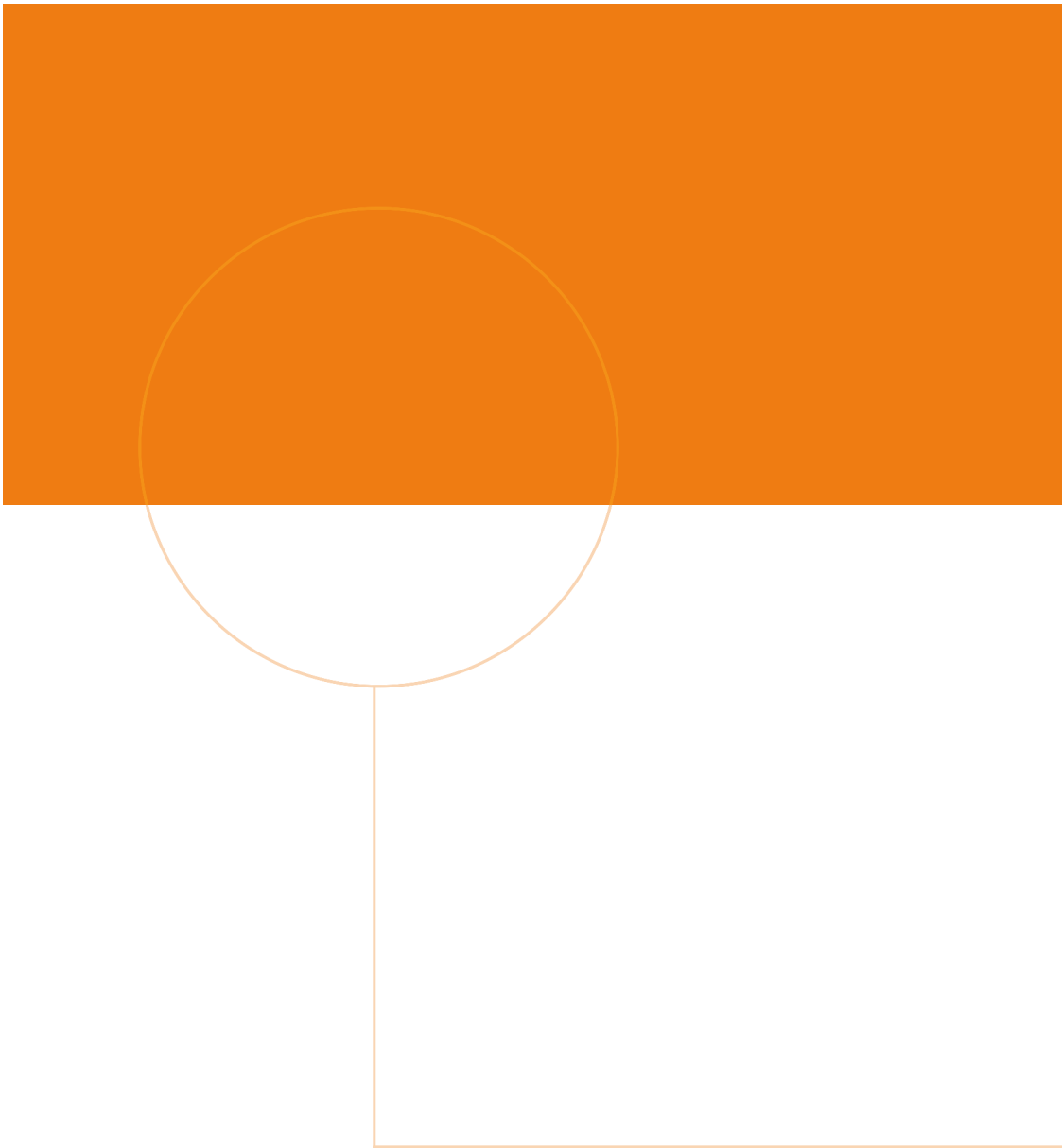

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