

RECOVERED HISTORIES IN G.B. TRAN'S *VIETNAMERICA: A FAMILY'S JOURNEY*: COMICS AS SITES OF REMEMBRANCE AND RESISTANCE

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by

Michael Raymond Villegas

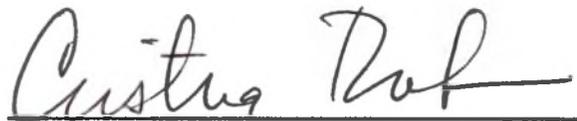
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read Recovered Histories in G.B. Tran's *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey: Comics as Sites of Remembrance and Resistance* by Michael Raymond Villegas, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Humanities at San Francisco State University.



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RECOVERED HISTORIES IN G.B. TRAN'S *VIETNAMERICA: A FAMILY'S JOURNEY*: COMICS AS SITES OF REMEMBRANCE AND RESISTANCE

Michael Raymond Villegas
San Francisco, California
2018

In this thesis I explore the comic form's capacity to document experiences with war and become a witness to history by analyzing G.B. Tran's graphic family memoir *VietnamERICA: A Family's Journey*. Positioning Tran's comic as an alternative history pushing back against dominant historical remembrances of the Vietnam War in America and one-dimensional representations of Vietnamese refugees, I see his work as a radical act of historical recovery, remembrance and resistance presenting a fresh storytelling modality capable of documenting marginalized experiences and memories. I draw upon various Vietnamese American scholars to discuss the way Tran's work creatively combats erasure and misrepresentation in official American history by visualizing Vietnamese as multi-dimensional subjects, historical authors and sources of knowledge and truth. Additionally, integrating the work of several leading comics scholars I highlight the storytelling advantages graphic narratives present by discussing how the formal and structural elements of comics make the hybrid medium well equipped to reconstruct history and memory with visual affect and literary force.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis



Chair, Thesis Committee

7/30/18

Date

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Visual Registers of History: Documenting and Witnessing in Comic Form

Throughout the majority of the 20th century, American comics¹ were consistently viewed as an affront to U.S. cultural sensibilities, generally treated with disinterest or disdain by academics, cultural critics and government officials alike. Accessible and inexpensive forms of entertainment, initially comics were considered lowbrow cultural productions, consistently vilified and dismissed as adolescent entertainment at best, or considered a detriment to the intellectual and literary development of society's youth at worst. Indeed, as Joseph Witek explained in his seminal text, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Johnson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar*, comic books in particular have "historically been considered solely the domain of subliterate adolescent fantasies and of the crassest commercial exploitation of rote generic formulas" (Witek, 5). The question concerning the influence of comics in American society created quite a stir during the mid-20th century. Despite ultimately falling under the protection of the First Amendment,² intensified cultural hostility was directed at comics during the 1940s and 1950s, culminating in "a congressional investigation and the threat of federal anticomic legislation." In 1954, responding to this threat the comic book industry established a self-censoring board, the Comics Code Authority.³ For about a decade this effectively constrained the thematic horizons, narrative frameworks and creative possibilities of American comics. Nevertheless, self-censoring actions by the comic book

industry became an impetus of sorts, leading to the emergence of a parallel but alternative comics counter-culture with the explosion of the Underground Comix Movement in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴ Led by a group of counter-cultural rebels – including Robert Crumb, Spain Rodriguez, Kim Deitch, Justin Green, Patricia Moodian and Trina Robbins – underground comix championed the value of creative freedom and economic autonomy in comic arts, addressing social taboos while aiming a critical eye at dominant American values and culture.⁵ Underground comix rapidly expanded the aesthetic and storytelling possibilities of comics, exhibiting its potent visuality and literary sophistication, in turn opening up a space for the recognition of this burgeoning hybrid form as a legitimate artistic medium capable of producing serious works of art. The unique creativity and thematic developments sparked by these counter-cultural artists gradually transformed perceptions of the comic form. As Charles Hatfield notes in his text *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, by the 1970s a slight shift occurred in the way comics were viewed and received by American society, with academics (led largely by educators and librarians) gradually positioning them as an “aid to literacy,” albeit with a “guarded endorsement” as “instructional tools” (Hatfield, 35).

Despite the hostile terrain of the 20th century, comics proved to be remarkably adaptable popular culture creations that continue to experience a favorable reception, marking a dramatic shift in public perception over a few decades. Embracing various experimental permutations the comics form has exhibited a dynamic creative visual-textual flexibility accelerating an increased recognition for its hybrid narratorial

sophistication. While still a staple in American popular culture, today the form has expanded beyond its confines, and is respected as an innovative art form garnering sustained attention from the academic world.⁶ To a certain extent, comics categorized as “graphic novels,” or what Hatfield has called long format comics, and more recently, Hilary Chute and Marianne DeKoven have dubbed graphic narratives are largely responsible for the comics medium’s new found respectability. The tail end of the 20th century proved to be a transformative period for the graphic novel, with three pivotal publications – originally released as serialized periodicals, and later combined and sold as complete bound works – that would alter the trajectory of comics, beginning in 1986 with the release of the first volume of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* and Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, followed by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s *Watchmen* in 1987.⁷ Although not immediate, these watershed moments are clear historical reference points indicating when comics began to experience increased critical examination and acclaim. Perhaps more importantly, concerning the longevity of the comics medium, these three groundbreaking publications – albeit radically different from a thematic standpoint – allowed comics to gradually enter the book trade industry under the graphic novel label. Rapidly growing in popularity, the rising marketability of comics has correlated with the emergence of the graphic novel categorization, now a secure genre found everywhere from your local bookstore to big chain corporate booksellers⁸ (Hatfield, ix). Of particular importance for my interests, *Maus* introduced the world to comics as biographical nonfiction. While Spiegelman’s work may never

attain the popular culture appeal of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight*, the success of *Maus* extends beyond this arena. Among the three, *Maus* would go on to have arguably the greatest cultural impact upon the comics world, eventually becoming the first comic to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1992.⁹ Nevertheless, these publications did not pave a perfect path for comics to move smoothly unto the shelves of bookstores or into university and high school classrooms. Suffice it to say, riding the expansive literary and aesthetic wave of underground comix, and the innovative energy sparked by these groundbreaking works of comic art, by the late 1990s/early 2000s, graphic novels successfully entered the book trade industry with force and became widely employed as pedagogical tools for education¹⁰ (Hatfield, 29-31). This was significantly aided by Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, published in 1993, which laid out a theoretical framework detailing the formal aspects of comics in comic form, spearheading the development of comics theory as an area of academic study.

Currently, no consensus exists over the merit or accuracy of the "graphic novel" moniker. Overall, this categorization has been met with resistance and certainly has not been fully accepted across the spectrum of comics creators, theorists and enthusiasts. To a certain extent it is a misnomer of sorts that was largely pushed by the imperatives of the market, that is, the need for book stores to categorize comics into a more appealing (read: marketable and sellable) form. Terminology and definitional debates aside, for better or worse the emergence of this categorization has radically transformed the comics and literature industry. One advantage is the incredible plasticity of the term graphic novel,

which has exhibited the capacity to encompass a diverse range of mixed media productions. As Hatfield notes, “What might have seemed at first to denote a distinct genre has instead become an all-purpose tag for a vague new class of social object (one that, unlike the ‘comic book,’ need not be grounded in the exact specifications of a given physical format)”¹¹ (Hatfield, 5). One thing can be certain: the meteoric rise of the graphic novel has become a rite of passage, playing a key role in facilitating the recognition of comics as a legitimate art form meriting sustained academic and popular cultural attention. Indeed, some of the most fascinating works of literature are currently coming from the comics medium, along with some of the most creative and groundbreaking examples of visual storytelling, running the thematic gamut, from fantasy and science fiction, to memoir and investigative journalism.

For the purposes of my work, I am interested in the development of comics as a visual-textual form capable of reconstructing history, particularly through memoir. Viewing comics through the paradigm of history allows us to explore the art form’s creative capacities as a versatile cultural template where inscriptions of alternative historical narratives can find a home. Comics as autobiography, biography and memoir realize the medium’s potential as a visual-literary space for the embodiment of marginalized experiences, and the amplification of personal testimonials, becoming sites for the projection of complex and fully realized representations of people of color. It is my view that comics concerned with documenting stories existing on the fringes of our social consciousness have the potential to actively takes part in the critical work of

historical intervention, forcefully challenging dominant hegemonic discourse when written from the perspective of people of color (or any marginalized community for that matter) reimagining and revisiting the past through memories grounded in their lived experiences and drawn by their hands.¹² In order to explore the creative possibilities of comics as vehicles capable of transmitting historical documentation, I will be examining Gia-Bao (G.B.) Tran's graphic family memoir *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey*, which retraces his family's experience during the Vietnam War and afterwards as refugees. Acknowledging comics as producers of critical historical narratives, I view *Vietnamerica* as a salient example of the medium's capacity to document family testimonials and chronicle personal experiences with visual veracity and literary force. Mapping out memory through the spatial-temporal syntax and grammar of comics Tran's work takes full advantage of this hybridity to construct a fragmented, disorientating, and at times perplexing narrative that weaves in a multiplicity of voices and storytellers to unearth a sprawling history of love and loss, heartbreak and healing, family and friendship, and yes, politics and war. Capturing experiences from the Vietnamese diaspora the family narratives gathered are among countless experiences that have been marginalized or rendered invisible amid American society's dominant historical memory. At first glance *Vietnamerica* is a seemingly haphazardly constructed narrative, shuttling sporadically through multiple timelines and spaces without evident direction. Yet, upon careful meditation, the testimonial fragments dispersed through Tran's work link together to create an expansive historical document, establishing an emotionally powerful vision of

the past. Kaleidoscopic in form, Tran's graphic family memoir allows stories to overlap, interact even, by drawing upon various family experiences simultaneously. His comic recreates an intricate narrative of his family living amidst the uncertainty of war, while also documenting the isolation of their displacement and the painfully public experiences of marginalization in the U.S. Perhaps of greater significance, he visualizes the normalcy of their daily life in Vietnam despite the war, highlighting his family's self-determination and displaying the complexities of wartime experiences.

I recognize Tran's graphic family memoir as an example of comics being used as a renegade cultural and political template upon which alternative narratives can be inscribed, combatting erasure by reproducing stories that act as historical interruptions to dominant hegemonic discourse. *Vietnamerica* actively challenges officially sanctioned American historical recollections concerning the Vietnam War, while simultaneously pushing back against publicly disseminated misrepresentations of Vietnamese refugees. In doing so it becomes a radical act of remembrance and remembering, reexamining and redefining how we view the American War in Vietnam¹⁹ and Vietnamese refugees. In order to situate *Vietnamerica* as a continuation of recent thematic and creative developments in the comics medium, I will begin with a discussion of the emergence of comics being used as a form of historical documentation and visual witness to war, following the insights of various comics scholars, particularly Hilary Chute's meticulously documented work, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. This lineage locates *Vietnamerica* within an evolving thematic

trajectory in the comics form, deeply concerned and preoccupied specifically with documenting and witnessing war, following in the footsteps of Spiegelman's *Maus* among others. Grounding my analysis specifically within the context of American history, I will also read *Vietnamerica* through the research of various Vietnamese American thinkers, particularly the intersectional interpretive framework of Yen Le Espiritu's critical refugee studies, as she puts forth in her foundational text *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*. When applied, their collective insights allow for an illuminating discussion of how Tran's comic pushes back against dominant representations and remembrances of the Vietnam War in the U.S., historical discourse produced solely from an American vantage point.

As I will discuss later in greater detail, Espiritu's work highlights the militarized aspects of Vietnamese refugees' experiences, situating the context of their flight, displacement, and resettlement in relation to the expansion of the American empire. Providing a brief description of critical refugee studies she explains how her scholarship "conceptualizes the 'refugee' as a critical idea but also as a social actor whose life, when traced, illuminates the interconnections of colonization, war, and global social change" (Espiritu, 11). Examining key events in *Vietnamerica* through the lens of Espiritu's critical refugee studies, specifically the documentation of Tran's family's escape route from Vietnam to America, along with his family's citizenship process, I underscore how his comic makes visible the intersections of American imperialism, war and the Vietnamese diaspora. By instantiating the process of passing along personal testimonials

through the materialization of his family's memories and experiences as Vietnamese refugees, Tran's graphic family memoir becomes a flesh and blood documentation of these intersections. Perhaps more importantly, *Vietnamerica* projects multi-dimensional representations of Vietnamese refugees, countering depictions that have narrowed their existence down to images of war, death and suffering.

In order to unpack the historical significance of Tran's comic I will examine how the Vietnam War has been documented, alongside the ways Vietnamese refugees have been represented in American society, setting up a discussion of *Vietnamerica* as an alternative narrative by centering the experiences and perspectives of Vietnamese refugees. Grounded in testimonials rediscovered through the transmission of fragmented family stories, Tran's work allows Vietnamese refugees to become historical actors, actively creating their own histories through the visual amplification of their voices and the critical projection and materialization of their experiences in comic form. In this capacity, as visual witness and historical document, my thesis emphasizes the way *Vietnamerica* becomes a subversive narrative from the ground level, a radical act of remembrance engaging world history by tracing the trajectory of personal, family history, purposefully decentering dominant American memory connected to the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees. Finally, highlighting the structural fragmentation of the comics page, specifically its capacity to contain multiple temporalities simultaneously and allow separate experiences visually to overlap and intersect, I will conclude with a discussion of the ways *Vietnamerica* takes advantage of the dynamic storytelling possibilities of the

comics form. The fundamental structure of comics, specifically the spatial mapping out of time, combined with the democratizing power of memoir, allows a plurality of voices to emerge in Tran's work that collectively document the reverberating impact of the Vietnam War.

All things considered, America's version of events has been plagued by orchestrated omissions and historical distortions. Keeping this in mind, exploring how the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees have been depicted historically provides the opportunity to emphasize the ways *Vietnamerica* engages with this discourse. By positioning individual members of one Vietnamese family as historical actors documenting their own lives, *Vietnamerica* actively disrupts official historical memory in the U.S. by centering human lives ignored or erased from dominant American recollections and representations. The recording of their testimonials produces an alternative historical narrative reimagining otherwise invisible aspects of the Vietnam War, while also taking steps towards recreating undocumented experiences and projecting multi-dimensional depictions of Vietnamese refugees that disrupts publicly consumed images of the Vietnamese diasporic community. In this capacity, Tran's graphic family memoir expands our understanding of history by relying on a plurality of voices and personal testimonials, allowing multiple experiences to converge as a form of renegade visual witness.

I began this thesis by briefly discussing radical shifts in social perceptions connected to comics, from cultural vilification to cultural celebration. This was largely

due to pivotal thematic developments in graphic storytelling. I will now trace these creative transformations, which led to the hybrid medium being employed as a visual-verbal template to document personal historical narratives and convey experiences from first-hand witness accounts, becoming an essential catalyst for the emergence of graphic narratives in the form of autobiography, biography and memoir.¹⁴ Tracing these developments will situate *Vietnamerica* along a trajectory of comics confronting the realities of war, addressing the traumas of human existence while emphasizing the resilience of the human spirit, setting the stage for my examination of the ways Tran takes advantage of the medium to affectively document his family's experiences with war and its reverberating impact. The comics form has proven to be remarkably adept at containing these kinds of stories, aiding in the burden of representing the past, while navigating around traditional knowledge-production models and orthodox modes of documenting history by providing a platform for the recovery of discarded memories and the amplification of previously unarchived voices. In the current moment, comics are forcefully affirming new storytelling modalities, authoritatively validating a new breed of rebel storytellers, and redefining understandings of historical authenticity and what is recognized as genuine historical truth.

According to Witek the lineage of American comics used in the service of retelling history and addressing the violence of war originates in the early 1950s, but the roots of what he calls "fact-based" comics can be traced to the underground comix of the 1960s.¹⁵ Witek's aforementioned *Comic Books as History* is of enormous significance as

an early example of scholarship that laid the groundwork for comics studies, situating the hybrid medium as a serious art form capable of effectively and accurately documenting history. Examining comics in the form of personal history, Hatfield's *Alternative Comics* situated underground comix as antecedents for the development of an explicit autobiographical approach from what he described as "alternative" comics, exemplified by Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* and Spiegelman's *Maus* (Hatfield, 152). Chute's recent text, *Disaster Drawn* traces this lineage back several centuries, specifically pinpointing paintings and engravings from artists like Francisco Goya (*Disasters of War*) and Jacques Callot (*Miseries of War*) as key antecedents. Picking up on distinct thematic elements coalescing along the historical trajectory of the comics form laid out by both Witek and Hatfield, Chute's research pinpoints the early 1970s as the time period when comic creators (globally) ushered in a new genre of testimonial nonfiction. Narrowing our field of vision, she focuses specifically on the historical documentation and visual witnessing of war in comics by analyzing the work of Spiegelman, Keiji Nakazawa and Joe Sacco. Chute draws our attention to two exemplary comic publications as immediate predecessors of contemporary graphic narratives as history, Spiegelman's original three page *Maus* and Nakazawa's *Ore Wa Mita/I Saw It: The Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima: A Survivor's True Story*. Her work signals a slight shift in comics studies, as many scholars often distinguish comics permutations in the global arena, demarcating U.S. and European comics tradition from Japanese manga (with particular attention paid to cultural distinctions). Chute's research brings manga

into the fold of comics studies in a new way, framing Nakazawa's *I Saw It* alongside Spiegelman's *Maus* as pivotal publications that mark the global emergence of a new mode of graphic narrative.¹⁶ Chute's approach to *Maus*, *I Saw It*, and Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* as forms of historical documentation and visual witness to war is of particular significance to my examination of *Vietnamerica*.¹⁷

In 1972, responding to the massive destruction of World War II, Nakazawa's *I Saw It* was published in *Boy's Jump*, and Spiegelman's *Maus* appeared in *Funny Animals*, laying the foundation for comics as a form of witnessing, capable of addressing, confronting and documenting the atrocities and realities of war, violence that eluded representation and for so long seemed ineffable.¹⁸ Nakazawa's *I Saw It* would eventually become the revolutionary manga and anime *Barefoot Gen* while Spiegelman's three-page *Maus* provided the foundation for his remarkable two-part comic *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Since its publication *Maus* has been unequivocally recognized as the quintessential graphic novel that introduced the world to the thematic and narrative possibilities of comics, responsible for sparking a consistent stream of academic inquiries into the growing art form and transforming public perceptions of comics, while simultaneously asserting the literary merit of the art form. While not as widely recognized amidst American popular culture, *Barefoot Gen* has long been acknowledged as a groundbreaking work of comic art by comics enthusiasts and scholars globally. Although these trailblazing works of comic art record historical events within the same time frame, each emerged out of two very distinct experiences with war. Nakazawa's

autobiographical *I Saw It* grappled with America's use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima at the end of WWII (on August 6, 1945). Spiegelman's genre-bending *Maus* confronted the horrific events of the Holocaust mediated through first-hand witness accounts and recollections from his father, Vladek Spiegelman. Taking on the task of representing traumatic historical events and human experiences with war, both comics were crafted with visual affect and literary force. While not immediately discernable, these works sparked a creative momentum, leading to an innovative expansion of the visual-textual narrative possibilities within comics, exhibiting the hybrid medium's capacity to represent historical realities. *Maus* and *I Saw It* set an incredible precedent as subversive graphic narratives, and *Vietnamerica* continues their legacy, acting as a conduit for the verbal articulation and visual projection of subjugated histories, intervening with what gets remembered in world history by documenting personal recollections often overshadowed, or simply ignored. Dealing with a new era of American war, *Vietnamerica* registers on multiple fronts. Tran's graphic family memoir confronts the erasure of Vietnamese perspectives from official American history documenting the Vietnam War, and pushes back against historical and popular cultural distortions and misrepresentations of the Vietnamese people in the U.S.

While Chute pays considerable attention to the 1970s, recent scholarship has pulled Mine Okubo's *Citizen 13660* into the fold of comics studies.¹⁹ Originally released in 1946, Okubo's work was the first memoir to be published documenting the Japanese American internment experience, in addition to being the first graphic narrative

contribution from an Asian American creator (it would be decades before another Asian American artist entered the comics world). Sharing an immediate connection to *Vietnamerica* her work is a kind of collective memoir, transmitting the stories of friends and her own experiences incarcerated in internment camps during WWII. From the perspective of participant and observer, her memoir challenged the state-sponsored depictions of life for Japanese-American's incarcerated in internment camps circulated during WWII. While Okubo's work does not utilize some of the traditionally recognized formal elements of the comics medium, particularly notable is the absence of sequential paneling on the same page or speech balloons, it does exhibit the most basic and fundamental attributes of a comic: the use of images and text simultaneously to produce a narrative.²⁰ Of particular significance, her work predates the confrontational work of underground comix and Spiegelman's groundbreaking *Maus*, as Xiaojing Zhou notes in her essay *Spatial Construction of the "Enemy Race": Mine Okubo's Visual Strategies in Citizen 13660*, "The embodied racial meanings and social positions of *Citizen 13660* prefigure Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale, I and II*, which have the characteristics of a novel, a biography, a memoir, a documentary, and a comic book." Directing our attention to Kimberley Phillips work on *Citizen 13660*, Zhou explains how she articulated, "'Okubo's visual memoir anticipates the confrontational qualities of...Art Spiegelman's *Maus [I]* and *Maus [II]* (1986 and 1991)'" (Zhou, 54-5). While Okubo's work may have been buried in relative obscurity for several decades, its reemergence has provided an opportunity for the recovery of an incredible piece of

comics history, illuminating an overlooked contribution from a Japanese American woman. A trailblazing work of comic art, *Citizen 13660* exhibits the hybrid medium's capacity to document experiences with the impact of war, in the form of racism, exclusion, and social injustice. Although *Citizen 13660* marks a thematic shift in graphic narratives towards memoir, biography and autobiography, due to her specialized interest Chute relegates Okubo's work to an extensive footnote. While she does acknowledge that *Citizen 13660* was an important precursor to comics as a form of witnessing and documenting history in a nonfiction context, she excludes Okubo's work from her analysis, stating that her interests lie with a body of comic works that "specifically understands itself as comics and articulating comics conventions" (Chute, 146). I would just note that Zhou's research certainly positions *Citizen 13660* within the range of graphic narratives that specifically articulate comic conventions, regardless of whether or not Okubo understood her work as a comic in the contemporary sense. Decades after Okubo published her work, with the underground comix movement in full effect, the comics medium caught up to her artistic vision and flourished into a powerful visual-literary mechanism for re-recording and re-imagining the past.

Returning to the development of underground comix, the Vietnam War set a wave of social and political rebellion in motion, generating an explosive atmosphere of dissent where the expansion of creative possibilities in comics came to fruition.²¹ Following Chute's lead, we must return to 1972, that pivotal year marking "the global emergence of comics as a form of bearing witness to war and historical devastation" (Chute, 111).

Numerous scholars and cartoonists alike have noted that underground comix emerged out of the historical context of the underground press and the Vietnam War in particular.²² As I touched upon in my introductory remarks, in addition to these contexts, cartoonists at the forefront of underground comix were responding to attacks aimed at the comics industry, by polite society and government institutions alike, leading to American comics witnessing a renaissance of sorts. Describing underground comix, Spiegelman has quite plainly and directly expressed that they were “inspired by Vietnam [even when] not *about* Vietnam” (Chute, 154). Lingering Cold War anxieties, the rapid growth of consumerism and materialism in America, combined with the increased visibility of the chaos brought about by the American War in Vietnam during the late 1960s and early 1970s, set the atmospheric stage for the development of a range of thematic possibilities in comics.²³ Discussing the genre innovation of one of the most influential underground comix works, Justin Green’s 1972 fictionalized autobiography *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, Chute explains that it “developed directly out of the collective trauma of Vietnam”. If we sidestep Okubo’s contribution and follow Chute’s lineage, Green’s stand-alone work established comics as a medium fit for autobiography, opening up the possibility to represent intimate personal experiences through the hybrid form (Chute, 153-4). This is no small contribution, and is of particular importance as many of the most groundbreaking non-fiction works in the comics medium since have included some kind of autobiographical element, including *Vietnamerica*.

While *Binky Brown* does not contain any immediate or direct references to the Vietnam War, Green has explained that the war weighed heavily on his mind before and during the comic's production. Further reflecting on its influence Green has said, "Everyone I knew knew at least someone that was killed. And a couple people that were injured. There was a feeling of a real collision." Here we see the limitations of empathy and our capacity to remember others, as Green's recollections privilege American casualties, with no acknowledgement of Vietnamese losses (not even in a common expression of limited empathy, something along the lines of: "I can only imagine what the Vietnamese people went through"). Chute continues to explain that this atmosphere created an urgency to discover creative "modalities of self-expression in which the self was both conspicuously looking and looked at" (Chute, 154). Her statement prompts several questions. Was this urgent push specifically from an American vantage point, in relation to our losses as a nation and a society? To what degree did the recognition of wartime violence experienced by Vietnamese people take part in influencing this sudden urgency to create new ways of constructing history and new "modalities of self-expression"? Indeed, when Chute describes how *Binky* "developed directly out of the *collective trauma* of Vietnam" (my italics) she makes no mention of the "collective trauma" experienced by the transnational diasporic Vietnamese refugee community. The influence of "Vietnam" she emphasizes extends only to the impact the war had on the American social body, specifically directing our attention towards the way the American War in Vietnam influenced the cartoonist that led the underground comix movement.

Both Chute and Spiegelman's ideological and discursive use of "Vietnam" as a synonym for the Vietnam War itself reinforces a common erasure of Vietnamese experiences in American discourse. This metaphorical deployment of "Vietnam" dovetails with my thesis. In the decades following the Fall of Saigon, for the general American public the Vietnam War became synonymous with Vietnam the country, and by extension, Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese diasporic artist and intellectual community have stressed the importance of discursively demarcating and acknowledging that Vietnam is a country, not a war, and by decentralizing the war in his work Tran continues these efforts. Discussing the symbolic associations connected to Vietnam (in America) Vietnamese American novelist and cultural critic Andrew Lam wrote in his article for *The Nation*, titled *An American Tragedy*,

For almost three decades after US helicopters flew over a smoke-filled Saigon, Vietnam served as a vault of tragic metaphors for every American to use. In movies and literature, someone who went to 'Nam was someone who came back a wreck, a traumatized soul who has seen or committed too many horrors to ever return to normal life.

Lam continues to describe how even in the 21st century, "Vietnam" remained an "unhealed wound" that symbolized a "spectacular American failure" decades later, noting that purposeful forgetting and repression of the country's sole military defeat characterized America's historical memory in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, at least insofar as mainstream media and state sanctioned official documentation was concerned. This atmosphere of willful amnesia would be followed by an explosion of novels and movies depicting the Vietnam War, which together created a "mythic

reality around the nation's experience in Vietnam that challenged our old notion of manifest destiny and examined our loss of innocence" (Lam). Notice the focus is aimed specifically at the impact the war had on our brave military warriors, and consequently upon the collective psyche of American society, while ignoring the trauma and loss felt by Vietnamese people. Lam's article purposefully calls attention to the ways that the Vietnam War has been recognized as an "American" tragedy, excluding and virtually negating the tragedies experienced by the people of Vietnam.

I am not calling attention to this in order to claim that either Chute, Spiegelman or Green intentionally equated Vietnam the country with the Vietnam War, rather, I believe that their use of "Vietnam" as symbolically and discursively equivalent to the American War in Vietnam reveals traces of powerful ideological underpinnings, exemplifying various historical misrepresentations concretized in official American history about the Vietnam War and its reverberating impact. Unfortunately, Chute's unconscious use of "Vietnam" to designate the war betrays powerful associations established in American culture and society that over time has conflated Vietnam the country with the Vietnam War. It also reflects the far-reaching influence of official American historical remembrances and popular cultural representations, which have prioritized the losses America suffered. This despite the fact that no American soldier or civilian ever spilled blood on U.S. soil during this military intervention and occupation, rather, the country of Vietnam soaked up the blood of both its countrymen and American soldiers. The Vietnamese population faced the "scorched earth" policies of the American government

and military. The Vietnamese witnessed the destruction of their homeland, while American citizens watched in shock and awe from the safety of their living rooms. Of course, it is natural to prioritize personal losses. By privileging our country's losses Chute unintentionally mirrors tendencies in American public memories that render the tragedies and collective trauma experienced by Vietnamese people invisible, ironically, despite the hyper-visibility of images capturing the violence of the war upon the Vietnamese population.²⁴ Several of these photographs have now become iconic images informing American society's understanding of the Vietnam War. Most notably, Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of Phan Thi Kim as a young girl, running from her village with arms stretched out, clothes burned off by napalm (otherwise known as "Napalm girl"), or yet another Pulitzer Prize winning photograph taken by Eddie Adams, capturing the moment a bullet exited North Vietnamese officer Nguyen Van Lem's head (infamously known as "Saigon Execution"). These photographs have been seared into the collective imagination of American society, establishing a powerful link between Vietnam, the war, and the Vietnamese population. Lam's insights help us see that while underground comix creators like Green were responding to the horrific realities of the Vietnam War experienced by the American social body, the devastating violence encountered by the Vietnamese people during the war seemed to remain a distant afterthought, only indirectly experienced with the increased visibility of war atrocities brought home via modern technology, through photographs and film footage. The unimaginable devastation and tragedy of the war, along with its impact upon Vietnamese

people was only accessible through images, very specific, horrific and otherwise one-dimensional visuals of death, pain, hopelessness and suffering. All of this violent entropy directly confronted American society with the horrific revelation of the My Lai massacre, which occurred in 1968 but was only made public in 1969, making the sheer brutality of American military forces painfully transparent.²⁴ In many ways this monstrous event came to define perceptions and understandings of the American War in Vietnam for many in the U.S. Furthermore, this narrowed vision of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese people was only exacerbated in the days leading up to the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, and in the immediate aftermath, as mainstream American media outlets proliferated images of Vietnamese refugees as poor, helpless and in need of saving from the insidious clutches of Communist North Vietnam. These images worked to position Vietnamese refugees as “grief-stricken objects” on the receiving end of American humanitarian assistance. Conveniently, this narrative erased the role the U.S. played in creating the conditions that produced the Vietnamese diaspora, allowing the American empire to continue business as usual. As I will go on to discuss in the next chapter, we will see that these manufactured narratives were part of an organized effort to recast America’s failed military intervention in Vietnam into a successful humanitarian operation, rescuing helpless Vietnamese from the so-called tyranny of communism.

All things considered, her oversight is more than likely due to this reality existing beyond the scope of her analysis, rather than due to some callous and purposeful intent to ignore or marginalize. Nevertheless, she unintentionally conjures up that “vault of tragic

metaphors” Lam posited. It is worth noting that in many ways Chute’s emphasis on the immediate, or most closely recognizable impact of the war reflects a common tendency when it comes to memory and war, as articulated by Viet Thanh Nguyen in his text *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, “...that nations and peoples operate, for the most part, through what I call an ethics of remembering one’s own” (Nguyen, 9). Chute’s and others’ inadvertent reinforcement of these tendencies underscores the widespread influence of dominant historical remembrances of the Vietnam War and representations of Vietnamese refugees circulated by mass media outlets and academic scholarship, remembrances grounded solely in an American perspective. Even the most meticulous researchers and scholars can be influenced – even if subconsciously – by dominant historical narratives characterized by purposeful forgetting that renders specific groups of peoples trauma invisible, and their stories left unspoken and undocumented. We will see that the privileging of American losses was part of an organized effort to recast America’s failed military intervention in Vietnam into a successful humanitarian operation, rescuing helpless Vietnamese from the so-called tyranny of communism. Exploring these official historical discourses and visual reference points introduces my next contextual thread. With a brief overview of pivotal thematic developments in the comics form, particularly as a means to document personal experiences and bear witness to war, I will move on to provide an analytical framework through which I will examine *Vietnamerica* as an alternative narrative and critical

historical document that constitutes a radical act of collective visual storytelling pushing back against historical misrepresentation and erasure.

Alternative Histories in *Vietnamerica*: Countering Dominant Narratives

This ‘skipping over’ of the devastation of the Vietnam War, especially the costs borne by the Vietnamese, constitutes an organized and strategic forgetting that has enabled ‘patriotic’ Americans to continue to push military interventions as key in America’s self-appointed role as liberators – protectors of democracy, liberty, and equality, both at home and abroad (Espiritu, 82).

There is no such event in history. Noam Chomsky’s admonition underscores the fact that much of official U.S. history about the Vietnam War is based on organized forgetting (Espiritu, 81).

Due, in part, to the aforementioned developments contemporary comics have emerged as a radical hybrid storytelling modality with the capacity to chronicle personal testimonials and creatively disrupt dominant historical narratives. By challenging historical amnesia associated with the Vietnam War, and confronting misrepresentations connected to Vietnamese refugees in America, Tran’s graphic family memoir participates in this visual rebellion. My analytical approach to *Vietnamerica* is grounded in the conviction that individual testimonials, personal lived experiences, and recollections transmitted through oral storytelling are authentic historical documents. Taking this stance, I am following the lead of Espiritu who moves from the foundational principle that the story of the refugee is much more than an “object of study,” it is a critical “source of knowledge” (Espiritu, 171). Existing outside – and often in opposition to – the realm of official state-sanctioned histories, the personal stories made visible in Tran’s work become examples of subversive alternative narratives, revolutionary acts of speaking that complicate what we have traditionally come to consider reliable, and viable (read: true) historical documentation.²⁶ Utilizing the genre of memoir Tran moves away from

normative descriptions of the past and explanations of reality, sidestepping traditional modes of knowledge production, which have privileged imperialist versions of events, and allowed power brokers to control truth and determine the public narratives and memories that shape our lives. Tran's family testimonials invite readers to bear witness to intimate and intensely personal memories, illuminating a collection of experiences that often overlap with pivotal events in both the U.S. and Vietnam. Accessing these key documents allows readers to view the past through a first-person witness account of events. Like Spiegelman's and Nakazawa's work, Tran's graphic family memoir confronts the realities of war, exploring new ways to document history in comic form. As Chute notes, compelled "by the urgencies of re-seeing or re-visioning the war," these two pioneering artists (alongside their contemporaries) established a "new seeing," positioning comics as a means to "defamiliarize received images of history," communicating and circulating within popular culture (Chute, 142). With these developments the comics form has transformed into a cultural template where stories of historical witnesses can be etched, demonstrating the ability to document the disasters of war, panel by panel providing fragmented snapshots of information – in the form of experiences and memories – becoming dynamic evidence of the past. For Spiegelman and Nakazawa, the impact of WWII created an urgency to discover affective ways to visualize historical disaster. Also concerned with the devastation of war, specifically the impact of the American War in Vietnam, Tran's work is motivated by the urgency to

document his family's fading testimonials and bear witness to their journey from rooted citizens to dislocated refugees.

In order to position Tran's comic as an alternative narrative intervening with dominant American recollections of the Vietnam War and disrupting representations of Vietnamese refugees, it is important to understand how American-centric remembrances of the Vietnam War and mediated images of Vietnamese refugees circulating the U.S. recasted a failed military intervention into an act of benevolence. Controlled narratives were aimed at positioning the U.S. as humanitarian actors intervening to rescue poor and helpless Vietnamese from the political persecution of North Vietnamese communism. This historical reconstruction purposefully ignored the role played by U.S. foreign policy decisions to engage in a violent imperial intervention in Vietnam, creating the circumstances that led to the mass displacement of the Vietnamese population. Examining how the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees have been represented and defined by various American apparatuses allows for a comparative analysis of the ways that *Vietnamerica* provides an alternative historical approach, a fresh interpretive framework visualizing and embodying Vietnamese refugees as "intentionalized beings," to borrow Espiritu's terminology, who actively create lives amidst unpredictable circumstances. Echoing Chute, *Vietnamerica* works to "defamiliarize received images of history" associated with the Vietnam War, public memories too often defined by depictions of death and destruction. Establishing a stark contrast, Tran's personal histories project an image of the Vietnamese community as multi-dimensional subjects,

working towards dismantling reductive representations circulated in America. Presenting the story of one Vietnamese refugee family, the stories of Tran's family concretize the human costs of imperialism, war, and displacement. While this may not have been Tran's intention or his immediate concern, by collecting the stories and experiences of various family members into a visual-textual narrative, his graphic family memoir weaves an intricate historical tapestry, providing a candid glimpse into the history of colonization and war in Vietnam. The reality is unavoidable, his family's stories overlap multiple colonial legacies (with Japan, France and the U.S.), offering tangible evidence that takes into account the destructive nature of war and colonization, allowing readers to trace some of the root causes of their displacement directly to imperial military aggression and occupation from multiple countries. Granting visibility to a marginalized history – whether intentional or not – *Vietnamerica* calls into question the legitimacy of America's imperial intervention in Vietnam.²⁷ From a political standpoint Tran's family history is not presented as an explicit condemnation of imperialism, colonialism or war. On the surface, his work is not necessarily intended to be a political statement or form of visual protest. Nevertheless, as Espiritu's research emphasizes, when the lives of refugees are traced a set of intersecting political and social concerns becomes visible. Viewed through this particular lens, I would argue that the documentation of his family's experiences, specifically their forced migration, places readers in a position where a sense of moral obligation intervenes, establishing a reading experience that urges its audience to question (and ultimately condemn) the militarized violence connected to the processes

of imperialism, colonization and war. In this respect, *Vietnamerica* creates a political experience as much as it produces a social, cultural and historical one. Our interaction with the comic stimulates a complex internal processing – of reading, interpretation and making meaning of the information provided – prompting readers to confront moral, ethical and political questions. Was American military aggression necessary or just? Does *Vietnamerica's* representation of the Vietnamese community re-affirm or challenge popularized images and perceptions in the U.S.? Was the reception given to Tran's family as Vietnamese refugees a reflection of the values assumedly held by American society, with its notions of freedom and equality, liberty and justice? Actively engaging these questions places readers into ethical and political dilemmas capable of beginning or continuing to propel the personal and collective processes of raising socio-political consciousness and cultural awareness.

During a one-on-one conversation with G.B. he explained to me how various family members spontaneously passed along oral histories, calling attention to the ways that remembrances of past experiences can emerge randomly and without warning. This dynamic documentation process took several years. Never certain when he would encounter the emergence of family histories, Tran recalled how he would write stories down via any available means, noting with a laugh that he remembers using a napkin in one instance.²⁸ This gradual and meticulous method of gathering stories is sporadically visualized throughout the narrative, revealing the wonderful messiness of memory and the unpredictable procedure of reconstructing history. Among the most noticeable

examples, Tran's mother Dzung Chung Tran becomes a central narrative voice in *Vietnamerica*, with each chapter oscillating between G.B. and his mother's perspective. Six of the twelve chapters open with his mother passing along the stories of their journey to her son while cooking, encapsulating the essence of transferring oral histories, and visualizing the intimate proximity of the process. A more random encounter can be seen with G.B. receiving memories from his Uncle Vinh as they zoom through the streets of Vietnam on a moped. Recapturing the process of recording history, Tran's work hints at the idea that the actual work of collecting memories is as significant as their physical documentation. It is worth noting, G.B. made it clear that he avoided doing any extensive background research about the war itself, or the diverse experiences of separate waves of Vietnamese refugees, expressing that he did not want to create some kind of didactic recording of history, in turn becoming nothing more than a static and emotionless list of events. To a certain extent, his approach ensured world history would never have the opportunity to eclipse the recording of personal history. Tran avoids this outcome by maneuvering around direct recreations of those now iconic images ("Saigon Execution" or "Napalm Girl"), never overemphasizing what American society has come to recognize as the pivotal events of the Vietnam War (My Lai Massacre, Tet Offensive or Fall of Saigon). In this way *Vietnamerica* takes steps towards severing and dissolving associations in the American social imagination between these images, events and the Vietnamese community. As Espiritu stresses, in the years immediately following the "end" of the Vietnam War, "Emphasizing the traumas of war, flight, and exile, social

scientists have constructed Vietnamese refugees as ‘only lives to be saved,’ a people ‘incapacitated by grief and therefore in need of care’” (Espiritu, 5). Avoiding these worn out narratives, *Vietnamerica* becomes a powerful visual witness, both personal and collective, documenting confrontations with violent imperial military intervention, while emphasizing the lingering effects of the American War in Vietnam via recollections of his family’s displacement from their home country, and the accompanying struggles they experienced while attempting to assimilate into the American social body. Countering the hyper-visibility of Pulitzer Prize winning images of death and suffering, Tran not only captures the chaotic process of his family’s forced migration, but also the mundane and ordinary moments of their daily life during the war. The recovery of these memories constitutes private and intimate realities that technological forms of documentation never observed or sought to preserve. Providing such radical visual juxtapositions, Tran’s graphic family memoir begins to establish new associations and representations of the Vietnamese diasporic community and their connection to the Vietnam War. Like Espiritu, his comic creatively combats the “one-dimensional notion of racialized communities as ‘depleted, ruined, and hopeless’” (Espiritu, 5). Furthermore, as expressed by Derek Parker Royal in his introduction to a special issue of MELUS, *Introduction: Coloring America: Multi-Ethnic Engagements with Graphic Narrative*, because of the comic form’s “foundational reliance on character iconography” and its capacity to represent “ethnoracial subject matter,” the hybrid medium is “well suited to dismantle those very assumptions that problematize ethnic representation,” particularly

when realized through visual languages (Royal, 9). Therein lies the significance of *Vietnamerica* as a necessary intervention against dominant historical memory, visually disrupting repetitive racialized and one-dimensional imagery of Vietnamese refugees. Tran's work bears witness by carefully documenting lives that cameras failed to capture, and what ultimately the U.S. government, media, and academy systematically distorted, marginalized, failed to acknowledge, and in large part, purposefully forgot. He shows how they *lived*, how they were autonomous agents, human subjects with hopes, aspirations and desires that sought to reestablish *lives* despite their displacement.

In the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, the recuperation of the U.S.'s image as righteous defenders of democracy and ideal place of refuge for the world's oppressed populations took precedence over acknowledging the role American military intervention played in producing the conditions that lead to the mass displacement of Vietnamese. Footage capturing the destruction of Vietnam, alongside the hyper-visibility of Vietnamese suffering, was followed by carefully mediated images of Vietnamese refugees being rescued by humanitarian operations from the American government and military. As we will see, historical distortion has been deployed in the service of imperialism. By circumnavigating the source of military violence, American mass media outlets, academic publications, and publicly consumed popular culture recollections have established a powerful narrative of a mythicized and romanticized Western empire characterized by humanitarian interventions abroad and a multicultural, post-racial democracy at home. Calling attention to the role played by American popular culture

since WWII, Espiritu describes how calculated narratives have positioned the U.S. “as the leader of the ‘free’ world, often recasting its history of imperialism and racial exclusion into triumphant stories of Western benevolence and racial democracy” (Espiritu, 83-4). This triumphantly benevolent image was suddenly shaken and disrupted with the military defeat in Vietnam, leading to a rapid emergence of antiwar sentiments amid significant segments of American society, what some politicians described as the “Vietnam Syndrome.”²⁹ In his seminal text *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*, the late Howard Zinn discussed the fervent antiwar sentiment and political dissent that erupted among segments of American society openly challenging this false narrative, noting that “In the course of that war, there developed in the United States the greatest antiwar movement the nation had ever experienced, a movement that played a critical part in bringing the war to an end” (Zinn, 469). Despite these sociopolitical eruptions of dissent and protest, the gradual recuperation of America’s pristine image as defenders of the Western democratic free world would follow.

Considered the “good war” master narrative, dominant history associated with the U.S. in the post-WWII era describes the nation as rescuers, a global beacon of freedom fighting against tyrannical governments and liberating destitute peoples, reforming them “into free and advanced citizens of the postwar democratic world” (Espiritu, 1). This historical manipulation firmly positions America as a global peacekeeping force, valiant protectors of freedom and democracy at home and abroad, triumphant and undoubtedly moral. Following America’s failed imperial intervention in Vietnam, with neither a

military victory nor a liberated people to showcase in the war's aftermath, this once unshakeable narrative began to show cracks in its foundation, rapidly losing social currency and national credibility. In order to preserve the "good war" master narrative and reestablish the romanticized, and otherwise mythic image of the U.S. in the post-Vietnam War era, it was necessary to construct a symbol (or object) of American benevolence and righteousness to showcase to the global community, albeit nearly out of whole cloth. As Espiritu explains, "in the absence of a liberated Vietnam and people, the U.S. government, academy, and mainstream media have produced a substitute: the freed and reformed Vietnamese refugees" (Espiritu, 1). The transformation of the Vietnam War into a "good war" was enabled by controlled narratives, specifically the molding of displaced Vietnamese into "good refugees" and the U.S. as the "good *refuge*" and "magnanimous rescuers" of "shell-shocked refugees." This ideological construction allowed the U.S. to assert itself as the "savior of Vietnam's 'runaways'" (Espiritu, 25-6). Ultimately, South Vietnamese refugees were transformed into the "featured evidence of the appropriateness of U.S. action in Vietnam: that the war, no matter the cost, was ultimately necessary, just, and successful" (Espiritu, 2). Vietnamese refugees were hardly "freed" or "reformed". As a whole, American society did not necessarily welcome them with open arms of acceptance. What many discovered in America was a hostile populace, racial tensions and socio-economic inequality. After all, the initial wave of Vietnamese refugees, of which Tran's family was a part, arrived just a decade after racial segregation ended (at least on paper) in the U.S.

From a legal and federal standpoint U.S. foreign policy and provisions for asylum worked to cement America as a beacon of liberty further increasing the international appeal of the country's "brand of 'freedom.'" Shortly after the Fall of Saigon in 1975 congress passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act "granting refugees from South Vietnam and Cambodia unprecedented large-scale entry to, and resettlement in, the United States." From 1975 through the mid-1980s, nearly 360,000 refugees entered the U.S. from Southeast Asia (Espiritu, 8-9).³⁰ This massive relocation effort spearheaded by the U.S. military was made possible in large part due to the federal program Operation New Arrivals. These acts of so-called generosity and compassion only obscured the role the U.S. played in creating the geo-political conditions that led to the mass displacement of South Vietnamese from Vietnam. Considerable attention was placed upon the reception a democratic America gave to Vietnamese refugees fleeing what was viewed as a corrupt communist government, working to reinforce the image of the U.S. as a beacon of freedom and ideal sanctuary for the world's impoverished and oppressed masses. With such surface level attention placed on the U.S. military and government rescue and resettlement operations, the actual reception given to Vietnamese by American society was ignored. Furthermore, the difficulties that confronted the Vietnamese refugee community as they attempted to integrate into a hostile society were left unaccounted for amidst all the controlled images of military soldiers assisting arriving Vietnamese refugees, and the attention directed at immigration and refugee policies passed by congress. These efforts were essential for the recuperation of the

country's domestic and global image, while simultaneously providing a kind of redemption for U.S. soldiers after the defeat in Vietnam, allowing America to immediately transition away from military aggressor, recasting a failed imperial intervention and empire building project into a massive humanitarian operation. This seemingly impossible pivot occurred "without a pause" working to publicly transform the U.S. into an ideal country of refuge. While the entire nation was attempting to reconcile the social tensions that erupted across America due to the divisive war, for the average American watching carefully mediated images of U.S. Marines working to provide food, shelter and refuge for the initial wave of some 18,000 refugees provided a sense of social healing. In retrospect, the increased visibility of American marines working as humanitarians assisting Vietnamese refugees was necessary, if only to render the destructive impact of the U.S. military intervention in Vietnam invisible. This calculated vision of American forces "must have been cathartic, a step toward reclaiming faith in America's goodness and moving beyond the extremely unpopular war." Yet, as Espiritu notes, these widely disseminated images provided partial truths, as "They conveniently erase the fact that the majority of Americans did not welcome the refugees' arrival" (Espiritu, 34). Indeed, according to public opinion polls done in 1975, over half of the American population opposed the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees into the U.S.³¹ All things considered, in the immediate aftermath of the war, mediated images took part in a calculated and organized forgetting becoming a defining characteristic of American narratives connected to the Vietnam War moving forward. The hyper-visibility of

Vietnamese refugees that fled Vietnam after 1975, combined with the invisibility of an internally displaced refugee population within Vietnam allowed the U.S. to transform itself into a “refuge-providing rather than a refugee-producing nation” (Espiritu, 40).

This narratorial and discursive repositioning of the U.S. was further validated through the ideological construction of Vietnamese “refugeeness” in the U.S.

Characteristics often associated with refugees are problematic to say the least. The socio-legal and political categorization of the “refugee” is connected to notions of “otherness,” conjuring up images of desperate, impoverished people. Indeed, common understandings of the term refugee “triggers associations with highly charged images of Third World poverty, foreignness, and statelessness.” This understanding informed public depictions of refugees as “incapacitated objects of rescue, fleeing impoverished, war-torn, or corrupt states – an unwanted problem for asylum and resettlement countries” (Espiritu, 4).

Specifically, the rescue-resettlement narrative produced in the U.S. situated Vietnamese refugees as a “national problem” for American society. Exacerbating these one-dimensional depictions associated with refugee status, when Vietnamese refugees first arrived in the U.S. in 1975, social scientists in collaboration with the federal government “initiated a series of needs assessment surveys to generate knowledge on what was widely touted as a ‘refugee resettlement crisis’” (Espiritu, 5). Espiritu exposes that the bulk of sociological literature related to refugees arrived at the same conclusions, declaring that Vietnamese refugees presented a problem to be solved, locating “the ‘refugee problem’ *not* in the geopolitical conditions that produced their massive

displacements and movements to the United States and elsewhere but within the bodies and minds of the refugees themselves” (Espiritu, 172). These conclusions reinforced the benevolent savior narrative pushed by multiple sources, supporting assertions of the war’s necessity, and further diverting attention away from the role that American military violence played in creating the massive displacement of Vietnamese. In other words, by pinpointing the ‘problem’ firmly within the minds and bodies of Vietnamese refugees, American imperial interventionist policies and military violence in Vietnam was left unaccounted for, or otherwise completely ignored. The narrative that emerges is a severely narrowed mischaracterization of a hopeless transnational community in ruin, as social scientists focused on the “traumas of war, flight, and exile” constructing an image of “Vietnamese refugees as ‘only lives to be saved,’ a people ‘incapacitated by grief and therefore in need of care’” (Espiritu, 5).

Engaging these misleading narratives, *Vietnamerica* fills several gaps of representation by providing multi-dimensional images of Vietnamese refugees that necessarily take into account the traumas of war and exile, while never narrowing the Vietnamese experience (and by extension, Vietnamese identity) down to these factors alone. Similar to other immigrant stories, *Vietnamerica* centers the experience of attempting to assimilate into the American social fabric. G.B. highlights the sacrifices made by his parents to ensure a future for their children. We see his father working, and excelling in his job with the U.S. immigration department, and his mother working as a waitress while pursuing an education. He displays how they succeeded on multiple

levels, contributing to American society as opposed to being a burden or charity case, revealing a multi-layered experience. Racially and ethnically recognized as Asian or Asian American in the U.S., Vietnamese refugees tend to be categorized according to historically constructed identifications, many of which derive from racist archetypes. Compounding perceptions of refugeeness, Vietnamese refugees were also confronted by numerous racialized identities that were paradoxically held simultaneously within the American social imagination and projected onto the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American community. Characterized as foreign threats, perpetual foreigners, inassimilable aliens (all re-invoking “yellow peril” anxieties), poor helpless refugees, or model minorities, Vietnamese refugees were confronted by irreconcilable identities upon their arrival in America. In his work *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*, Viet Thanh Nguyen succinctly encapsulates these racially constructed identities into two categories: “as an inevitably foreign threat (the ‘bad subject’) or as an exemplary example of domestic integration – the ‘model minority’” (Nguyen, 7). This oversimplified, racialized bifurcation of the Asian American body politic has been consistently invoked to compartmentalize individual Asian Americans within society. Tran’s work complicates this neat dichotomy, at times affirming and debunking these categorizations, encapsulating Espiritu’s insights concerning how “The messiness, contingency, and precarious nature of refugee life means that refugees, like all people, are beset by contradiction: neither ‘damaged victims’ nor model minorities, they – their stories,

actions, and inactions – simultaneously trouble *and* affirm regimes of power” (Espiritu, 2).

Tran’s work pushes up against deeply embedded narratives publicly perpetuated by mainstream media outlets that consistently emphasized a select handful of dichotomized figures. Further complicating these constructed identities, another symbolic figure emerged in the aftermath of the war, diametrically opposed to images of Vietnamese refugees: U.S. military soldiers as noble warriors who sacrificed for the greater good only to return as damaged souls.” Espiritu argues that the repositioning of the U.S. government and military as protectors of the worlds oppressed masses was possible in part because of the symbolic construction of “noble U.S. veterans” and “Vietnamese American model minorities,” images of the rescuers and the rescued, who “*together* re-position the United States as the ideal refuge for Vietnam’s ‘runaways’ and thus as the ultimate victor of the Vietnam War” (Espiritu, 83). While these misleading narratives were established in the years immediately following the “end” of the Vietnam War, twenty-five years after the Fall of Saigon, at the turn of the 21st century (April 2000) both narratives continued to circulate American mass media outlets, encapsulating America’s historical memory as it relates to the war and Vietnamese people. Analyzing the press coverage from American mainstream media outlets at the time, Espiritu identified two “overarching and overlapping narratives: one that center on innocent and heroic Vietnam warriors, and the other on liberated and successful Vietnamese refugees” (Espiritu, 82). Decades after the official “end” of the Vietnam War, the misleading

construction of valiant and blameless “Vietnam warriors” (read: American soldiers) and the symbolic image of free and advancing Vietnamese refugees (read: model minorities) continues to hold a powerful grip over the social imagination of the American public. Moreover, mainstream media outlets in the U.S. at the time focused primarily on “personal stories of suffering, tragedy, and success” working to normalize the position of Vietnamese refugees as desperate and needy. Aimed at further concretizing the image of America as a land of immense opportunities, riches, and socio-economic mobility, select stories of assimilated Vietnamese refugees that managed to succeed in the U.S. were simultaneously highlighted. Viewed as a whole, in the immediate aftermath of the Fall of Saigon and the decades to follow, the consistent and collective privileging of cherry picked stories continued to establish a “powerful narrative of America(ns) rescuing and caring for Vietnam’s ‘runaways’ that erased the role played by U.S. interventionist foreign policy and war in inducing this forced migration” (Espiritu, 104).

Collectively, these state-sanctioned narratives manufactured by political and academic institutions alongside mass media apparatuses in the U.S. discursively and historically transformed a violent military intervention into an act of liberation, situating Vietnamese refugees as recipients of American benevolence, while firmly positioning the U.S. as victors of the Vietnam War despite a military defeat. This orchestrated history of omissions skews the events of the Vietnam War by excluding Vietnamese voices while centering an American perspective as the sole legitimate source of historical truth. It is important to acknowledge that these globally distributed narratives have been produced

almost exclusively from an American vantage point, as very few Vietnamese voices gained visibility. Nguyen's insights on memory, and what he describes as the "memory industry" are pertinent here. In his essay *Just Memory: War and the Ethics of Remembrance* he emphasizes that on the global stage memories are not equal, rather, they are "industrially produced and distributed" publicly, and therefore are susceptible to the forces of global capitalism. Given the unfathomable concentration of wealth and power in the hands of so few,³⁴ it is an undeniable reality that countries and ethnic groups have an unequal economic standing in the global arena. The same can be said of their memories, and therefore their histories. Nguyen acknowledges that social, political and economic power determines whose stories are given a platform through these "industries of memory," and that even though the fact remains that from a military perspective the U.S. lost the war, "...it has won the war on memory on most of the world's fronts outside of Vietnam." He continues to explain, "American memories globally circulate via the most expensive circuits, whereas Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian memories are local or at most diasporic, invisible, inaudible, and illegible to the majorities in any given country" (Nguyen, 160-1). While *Vietnamerica* may not have the mass appeal, or big budget of Hollywood blockbusters like Oliver Stone's Vietnam War film trilogy (*Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and the lesser known *Heaven & Earth*), or the cult classic *Apocalypse Now* by Francis Ford Coppola – all of which have greatly influenced American perceptions of the war and the Vietnamese people – Tran's graphic family memoir does access key social domains in the U.S., that of the popular and the academic.

As a cultural object, Tran's comic traffics global communication networks and the capitalist economy, "industrially produced and distributed" through popular culture, while also travelling the academic circuits of American universities, garnering increased critical attention from scholars in diverse fields of study. *Vietnamerica* navigates two radically different social and cultural arenas, both of which are intricately involved in the aforementioned "industries of memory." This level of exposure presents opportunities to engage with a diverse demographic range, enabling greater inclusion and participation in an ongoing historical dialogue about the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees. In this capacity, Tran's work can take part in facilitating an ethically nuanced and democratically inspired understanding of history, deeply invested with visual testimony and the amplification of marginalized voices.

A testament to Tran's attention to historical authenticity and accuracy, his family's stories complicate the history of the American War in Vietnam from within as well. He never attempts to establish a neatly romanticized dichotomy of a tyrannical communist North Vietnam versus a democratic South Vietnam alongside its American allies. Experiences from Tran's uncle Vinh's life capture the internal complexities of the political and social situation in Vietnam during the war. In 1974 the American supported Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was in desperate need of reinforcements, and began exerting pressure on the young men of South Vietnam to serve their country by joining the war effort. Tran's uncle Vinh was eventually swept up by the war, drafted into the army and stationed along the far South's coast in a small village named Camau.

Of particular significance is the inclusion of Vinh's interactions and encounters with villagers in Camau, where he recounts spending his free time teaching kids too poor to attend school how to read and write. His accounts embody the internal socio-political dynamics of the Vietnamese population. Mirroring the position of the U.S. military, his squadron was hesitant to trust the villagers and their fellow countrymen/women in the surrounding region due to fear-induced assumptions that they were sympathetic to and supportive of the communist cause. Spending time with the local population, Vinh's story complicates the dichotomy of South Vietnam versus North Vietnam or communism versus democracy, as he reflects in a letter to his sister, "Out here, the war is really distant. There's no 'South versus North,' just a simple desire to coexist. People are too busy with more important things than shooting their fellow countrymen" (Tran, 167). Vinh's experiences provide tangible examples of how the simple desire to continue living, to coexist and survive amidst the war outweighed grandiose political notions of communism and democracy, or as he characterizes, "South versus North." His recollections reveal deep insights into the political situation during the war, concluding that beyond the control of ideological currents and state-sanctioned narratives, "I think in villages like Camau, words like 'communism' and 'reunification' mean nothing to the people. Just propaganda politicians in Saigon like to toss around" (Tran, 171). We can extend this analysis to the rhetoric blasted from government officials in the U.S., who initially claimed America's support for the French war effort in Vietnam was an attempt to prevent the spread of communism in Asia. Putting forth the "domino theory" as

justification for America's imperial intervention in Vietnam, officials claimed that if one country in Asia fell to communism, others would inevitably follow.³⁵ His observations provide examples of how political propaganda during the Vietnam War was received, whether it was accepted (in the case of his fellow squad members) or rejected (in the case of his interactions with villagers in Camau) at the public level.³⁶ These personal recollections become powerful illustrations of recovered experiences that counter dominant perceptions of the Vietnamese people during the war, while calling into question the ideological justification for America's military intervention.

This particular chapter also showcases the structural capacity of comics, demonstrating how the form can present layered historical narratives by overlapping disparate temporalities and experiences. This visual layering made possible through comics separates *Vietnamerica* from a traditional memoir in literary form. Vinh's recollections are re-envisioned from letters written to his sister Dzung during his military service. Employing his letters as a narratorial device, Vinh's correspondences become historical documents, intimate archival articles capturing wartime experiences from the ground level. Juxtaposing Vinh's letters with his mother's and father's contemporaneous experiences provides an incredible insight into the diverse experiences of Vietnamese during the war, revealing entire regions of Vietnam that were left virtually untouched by the ravages of war. This is exemplified in his mother's narrative prelude to the chapter. She tells her son, "By 1974, the war between the North and the South was getting much worse...but Vungtau still hadn't suffered a single attack. Living in that bubble, the war

seemed so far away” (Tran, 160-1). Inserting Vinh’s letters as an overarching narratorial voice, Tran overlap’s his written correspondences onto the visual depiction of his mother’s direct recollections of the family’s daily life in the coastal town of Vungtau, beginning with an image of them enjoying a serene day at the beach. This visual-verbal layering creates a complex juxtaposition where the distant, untouched peace of his parent’s day beside the ocean gets intertwined with the military experiences of his uncle stationed in Camau (an equally serene, but unpredictably dangerous coastal village), with the two radically different realities simultaneously visualized on opposing pages (Tran, 164-65) (see fig. 1-2). The extreme contrast of these two divergent experiences during the war constitutes concrete evidence of diverse wartime realities, shattering well-established perceptions in America that associate Vietnam with nothing more than a war, or a country in ruin, inhabited by a people devastated by military violence.

The radical juxtaposition of extremely diverse wartime realities visualizes Espiritu’s insights, “that war experiences are not only tragic or spectacular but also mundane and familiar” (Espiritu, 156). Through Tran’s visual treatment of these distinct memories *Vietnamerica* documents how depending on the region or economic and social status of individuals and families, war experiences differed dramatically, realized internally within the family, and externally among the Vietnamese population. This is foregrounded immediately as the chapter begins with a scene of his mother opening an envelope containing a substantial check from her part-time job at a local bank, while her brother Vinh opens an envelope informing him that he has been drafted into the ARVN.

While the family was experiencing a degree of socio-economic stability on one level, they were also confronted with her brother being forced into military service. Here we see how the family's home in Vungtau became a kind of surreal sanctuary, yet his uncle could not avoid being swept up into the violence of war, an all-too-real reminder of the war's looming presence. Tran depicts these realities side by side throughout the chapter, giving each equal attention. The two extremes in wartime experiences are never more evident than in this section of the graphic family memoir. On one level, we become witness to the tragic realities of military conflict, as the chapter concludes with Vinh's squadron caught in an ambush, and the ensuing firefight results in him being wounded in combat. The final page reimagines Vinh lying motionless with blood spilling outwards towards readers, beyond the margins, seeping through the comic's confines and soaking up the sandy beach of his homeland (Tran, 179) (see fig. 3). The image of his uncle bleeding on the beach becomes a direct reminder of the ever-present threat of violence. In dramatic contradistinction, the familiar simplicity of everyday life consistently redirects our attention through depictions of his mother and father arranging their marriage and giving birth to their first child together in Vungtau. Capturing these vast experiential differences this visual disjuncture between the tragic and mundane realities of wartime become reminders that "even in the midst of war, people are always more than victims of their circumstances; they are also desiring subjects with both simple and complex needs and wants" (Espiritu, 157). Continually confronted with the vestiges of colonization, and threatened by the brutality of imperial violence in their daily lives, the

documentation of his family's ordinary and mundane everyday experiences provides a projection of Vietnamese as multi-dimensional subjects, thriving despite their circumstances. They were in no need of rescue from the specter of communism, and were far from hopeless or helpless people inhabiting an impoverished third world country, awaiting rescue from the American empire. These experiences instantiate a dimension of life in Vietnam during the war that runs absolutely contrary to common perceptions held by American society, where images of destruction and death consistently flooded and circulated mass media outlets. After all, the average American citizen does not associate life in Vietnam during the war with images of domesticity, or a loving family enjoying a beautiful day at the beach. Tran's comic provides ethically considered representations in dramatic contrast to the now iconic photographs and film footage capturing the inhuman, incomprehensible wartime violence. Furthermore, these remembrances discredit social scientist constructions of Vietnamese as poor and helpless victims soon to become problems for countries providing refuge. These depictions, in their simplicity and ordinariness, suddenly become extraordinary and radical in their ability to begin dissolving established associations linking Vietnamese lives with the tragedies of war. In this instance we see how *Vietnamerica* provides historical evidence that engages in a visual dialogue with Espiritu's insights, showing how despite the ever-present threat of military violence, life during wartime maintained some degree of ordinariness, however improbable. Effectively humanizing, and normalizing the ordinariness of Vietnamese life during the war, this chapter is a salient example of the

ways that Tran's comic simultaneously counters and complicates common perceptions associated with the Vietnam War and his family's refugee status.

Continuing to alter how we understand the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees, the family narratives in *Vietnamerica* represent opposing sides of the divisive war. Introducing greater nuance, Tran's grandfather Huu Nghiep was a decorated war hero for the North. His story is mediated through the tumultuous relationship, or lack thereof, with his son Tri Huu Tran (G.B.'s father). Through their irreparable relationship we catch a glimpse of the invisible impact of war, its silently lingering costs and persistence in the lives of Vietnamese refugees, revealing the far-reaching damage war inflicts upon familial bonds. No section captures this reality more poignantly than when Tran recreates his father Tri's first encounter with his estranged father Huu, after nearly fifty years of separation and silence. Huu left his family during the First Indochina War, serving as a doctor for the Northern forces throughout their opposition to both the French and American occupations. He was eventually recognized and honored as a war hero for the communist resistance. Setting up his grandfather's life story, G.B. narrates:

After decades of fighting the Japanese, French, and Americans they had finally won. They had reunified their country. Peace was what they promised. It quickly became clear their 'peace' wasn't for the people, but only those in power...So the rule of man and his corruption continued. Dad's dad was an exception (Tran, 185-6).

These words are written over a nationalist inspired image of three fists – representative of the resistance movements in Vietnam – smashing missiles with Japan, France and USA written on them. Along the bottom of the page a row of identical images, a man holding

up a clinched fist (a universally recognized sign for resistance and revolution), become symbolic of the collective actions taken against imperial forces by the Vietnamese population. All wear white shirts, except one in yellow, representative of the country's unification on the one hand, but the exception of Tran's grandfather Huu on the other, who dedicated his entire life to the communist cause only to become disillusioned with corrupt leadership during the postwar era, choosing exile and isolation in his twilight years. The following pages trace Huu's life as a leader for the communist cause, from an idealistic youth swept up with revolutionary fervor and undying love for his country and people, to a Vietminh operative under Ho Chi Minh, and finally as the chief doctor of North Vietnam's medical training facility (Tran, 187-190).⁷ A vision of a patriotic Vietnamese man who dedicated his life for his homeland's independence comes into focus, running contrary to common perceptions of a "Vietcong" enemy combatant.

After Tran reconstructs his grandfather's extraordinary journey, we learn that Huu's life story was told to Tri during their first encounter after decades of separation. At this point the comic suddenly pushes us forward to a recreation of their first meeting, father and son finally reunited, yet still miles apart. A visual impasse is mirrored in the first two panels documenting this encounter (see fig. 4). The first horizontal style panel shows a young Huu opposite an adult Tri in the present day as he sits across his father. Here the physical structure of the elongated panel lends itself to establishing a sense of distance, visually framing their separation – physically and emotionally – and enclosing it within the page. On opposing sides of the panel the two are visually disconnected by a

chasm of darkness, a void representative of histories lost between the two. This panel setup suggests their irreparable separation, visualizing how they have virtually nothing left to reconnect them. The second horizontal style panel places us as witnesses to their fateful reunion, with the two now divided by a gap of pure whiteness, visual nothingness, a pronounced emptiness emphasizing the absence of any sentimental connection or some semblance of an unconditional familial bond. From the perspective of Tri, this can be seen as an attempt by G.B. to capture his father's deep-seated emotional vacancy. The next page shifts our perspective revealing that the two are literally separated by an uncomfortable distance, as they are seen sitting across from one another on opposite sides of the room, reinforcing the seemingly infinite emotional disconnect visualized in the previous panel (see fig. 5). We see a father who sacrificed everything for his country, and his abandoned son sitting sternly with arms crossed in defiance, barely receptive to the story of his father's absence in his life (Tran, 193-4). In the pages to follow Huu explains the reasons for his absence, recounting how he attempted to track down Tri and his mother after the country was unified, all of which Tran visually archives. Nevertheless, his story falls on deaf ears. Any hope for reconciliation fades as he is faced with an unsurpassable barrier of silence and resentment from his son, a kind of apathetic coldness and indifference.²⁸ Before the chapter concludes Tran returns to their ill-fated meeting once more with yet another image of father and son separated by an indescribable distance, again pictured in pure white. It is as though the two remain floating in a sea of nothingness, suspended in time and frozen by words unspoken,

memories never had, histories lost and uncertain futures. We see a withering revolutionary in self-imposed exile sitting across from his son, still unreceptively stoic (Tran, 198). With this visual reinforcement of the emotional and physical distance between father and son, our attention is directed towards the permanent damage left in the wake of war. Here we bear witness to concrete sacrifices made by families and individuals, the unforgivable personal transgressions and the strain placed upon the family structure during wartime. An improbable encounter decades in the making, these minimalist panels symbolize an insurmountable and irreconcilable disconnect causing a father and son to become tragic strangers. In the recreation of this heartbreaking reunion we see how *Vietnamerica* manages to capture the reverberating, indefinite impact of war on families, painfully and swiftly exhibited in a few pages.

This section connects to my previous discussion concerning how people caught in the maelstrom of war must be viewed beyond the tropes of victimhood, how they must also always be recognized as “desiring subjects with both simple and complex needs and wants” who made concerted, intentional efforts to continue living their lives (Espiritu, 157). Acknowledging that these complexities must include life’s blemishes, Espiritu continues to discuss family secrets and personal transgressions that occurred during and after the war. She points to issues of infidelity or hidden ‘other’ families, which “make visible the ways that war and migration ‘create ruptures in the family narrative that can never be wholly contained by an artificial peace in the refugee home.’” Further emphasizing the ways that people continue to express autonomy, even under extreme

circumstances, she expresses that “These stories of ‘personal transgressions’ – and the silence that shrouds them – are instructive in another way: they remind us that even amid the horrors of war, people continue to *live* their lives, with warts and all” (Espiritu, 155). These transgressions and their repercussions are embodied in HUU’s revolutionary commitment to his country and people, which led him to sacrifice his personal connections and familial bonds, ultimately abandoning his son and wife for the anti-imperial communist cause. During the aforementioned reunion HUU explains how during the war he discovered Tri and his mother were living in Saigon with a high-ranking French colonel, but was unable to pursue them. Without hesitation, and perhaps an unintentional confession that nearly goes unnoticed, he also divulges that by that time Tri and his mother Le Nhi were not the only family he needed to protect (Tran, 191-93). The unexpected revelation of yet another hidden personal transgression, an entire other family, encapsulates and provides visual validation for Espiritu’s insights regarding the countless ruptures in family narratives during wartime, further embodying the ways that “people continue to *live* their lives” complete with unforgivable imperfections.

The chapter ends with G.B.’s parents returning home from their first trip back to Vietnam. Upon their return, his mother reinforces that G.B. should come with them next time, expressing that his grandmother Thi Mot wants to meet her grandson. Initially his father was indifferent towards G.B.’s resistance to his mother’s wishes that he travel with them to visit Vietnam. Looking once again to her husband to support her request, this time Tri tells his son that his mother is right, that he should go, proclaiming, “You might

learn something” (Tran, 205). Considering the previously documented encounter with his estranged father, Tri’s sentiments reflect a desire to reconcile generational and cultural divides, something he was unable to do with his father. Perhaps more importantly, his father’s insistence expresses the realization that family histories were vanishing and his son’s disinterest only assured they would be lost forever. G.B.’s ruminations towards the end of the chapter address the tragic reality that much of their family history has already disappeared due to the death’s of his grandparents Huu Nghiep and Thi Mot, about whom he and his parents knew so little. In this light, *Vietnamerica* can be viewed as an act of historical recovery, a nuanced engagement with world history displaying the ways personal, intimate family experiences can intervene with dominant memories of the Vietnam War. Recollections that show how Tran’s family found itself on both sides of the war, his uncle swept up by the American backed ARVN forces, and his grandfather’s transformation into a celebrated North Vietnamese revolutionary, become critical historical records of his family’s fading testimonials. These collective histories become visual testaments to the ways families made attempts to navigate the social and political terrain of a brutally divisive war. Documenting the pervasive social impact, Tran’s graphic family memoir underscores the ways Vietnam’s internal conflict ripped families apart, whether due to ideological and political differences, or through the deadly force of military violence aimed at the social body of Vietnam.

As it addresses discarded stories unacknowledged by official history, *Vietnamerica* also takes part in materializing lives erased from dominant hegemonic

discourses. Chute articulates that through the drawn mark comics have the ability to reinsert lives erased from history, allowing for the rediscovery of lost and forgotten bodies. She writes that comics concerned with documenting war allow for an understanding of the mediums “ability to reconstitute lost bodies in its drawn lines,” further arguing that the very process of creating such comics “is a resurrection or materialization of bodies in form in the mark on the page” (Chute, 142). Beyond the inclusion of his North Vietnamese revolutionary grandfather, *Vietnamerica* remembers several of Tran’s deceased family members, including his other grandfathers, one shot and killed during the French occupation, the other unable to access medical attention due to a collapsed health care system in the South once the North seized power, as well as his grandmother, who was murdered in post-war Vietnam during a random burglary. An intimate act of remembrance, by materializing forgotten bodies and the dismissed stories they carry, Tran’s comic also does the crucial work of substantiating and resurrecting Vietnamese lives, recreating memories left out of the official history of America’s involvement in Vietnam and visually inscribing unto the page subjugated bodies too often discarded or dismissed as necessary collateral damage.

Documenting personal narratives from a Vietnamese perspective, *Vietnamerica* promotes a shifted historical focus, becoming an alternative to official remembrances of the Vietnam War. Focusing on stories often pushed to the margins, or relegated to nothing more than historical footnotes effectively decenters dominant narratives associated with the war, providing a more nuanced picture of the past. In Tran’s graphic

family memoir silenced and marginalized voices are made visible in large part due to a certain degree of absence. That is, what is not said and what is not visualized allows for an alternative historical emphasis. We see the everyday lives of Vietnamese, equally bearing witness to ordinary moments, as well as extraordinary circumstances, in effect reframing, reimagining and redefining how we understand the Vietnam War and the lives of Vietnamese refugees. Redirecting our historical lens, Tran creatively pulls readers attention away from repetitive images of encounters with imperial violence: the obliterated villages, faceless North Vietnamese guerilla fighters, helpless villagers running from napalm and the devastation left in the wake of relentless chemical warfare and aerial bombings done by the U.S. military. Visually normalizing the normalcy of his family's lives while in Vietnam during the war *Vietnamerica* refuses to overemphasize the violent circumstances that induced his family's displacement. In doing so Tran's graphic family memoir becomes a radical act of historical remembrance and recovery, shifting our attention to otherwise invisible and undocumented realities.

Vietnamerica also engages with how we understand the actual process of creating history. Discussing Joe Sacco's work *Footnotes in Gaza*, specifically the way his comic took part in redefining the act of historical reconstruction, recreation, and reimagining, Chute explained how his work questioned what "constitutes the production of history; when 'history' appears throughout the book, it is almost always aligned with official, hegemonic discourse, in lines like 'That's the big picture, what gets remembered in history books, and we can skip it for now'" (Chute, 246). We would do well, here, to

remember that this movement towards historical reconstruction and inclusion was largely sparked in the late 1960s through student led strikes across American universities that founded several departments and one college of Ethnic Studies.⁹ The progressive and radical scholarship (and community work) coming out of various disciplines within and around Ethnic Studies have consistently challenged the status quo in America, while working towards dismantling and disrupting dominant discourse in the U.S. Following suit, Tran's graphic family memoir continues to redefine and transform the very process of historical production. Gesturing towards hegemonic discourse Tran's father periodically warns his son to avoid viewing Vietnam (culture, country) and their family's collective history through a "myopic contemporary western filter" (Tran, 12). Recall his uncle Vinh as well, who subtly addresses official historical memory of the Vietnam War by articulating in his letters that notions of "communism" or "democracy" meant very little to the average villager in Camau where he was stationed during the war. His experiences led him to believe that such labels were grandiose political ideologies trumpeted by Saigon. Official historical documentation of the Vietnam War is often projected in a black and white manner, positioning democracy versus communism on an international scale. Taking this ideological and political dichotomy into consideration, Tran's uncle Vinh's comments can be viewed as a perspective of dissent, pushing back against hegemonic historical discourse. Not to be mistaken, dominant historical narratives are interwoven into the graphic family memoir, except they are consistently decentered, to a certain extent overshadowed by the ordinary and everyday. In one

instance we see a major historical event barely acknowledged through a simple, mundane act of daily life. His grandmother in Vietnam is seen reading a newspaper with a headline reporting that the Vietnamese President had been assassinated and the government overthrown with the help of the U.S. This is a direct reference to the CIA backed coup d'état in November of 1963 that led to the assassination of South Vietnam president and former ally Ngo Dinh Diem. This was a pivotal event during the war, yet in Tran's story it is but a footnote.

The most impactful visual instances of this kind of eclipse of heavily documented Vietnam War events can be seen through ribbon-like panels that periodically appear in the background, capturing radio announcements from the state. This also becomes a striking example of how the formal elements of comics – the reliance on panels and speech-balloons as narratorial devices – can be creatively employed to produce layers of meaning. Disengaging dominant historical narratives in this manner is of even more significance considering his decision to avoid actual visual recreations of these events, as the aimlessly floating panels only depict words. The first mention of the American military beginning to exit Vietnam is delivered in this fashion. Here we momentarily see the ways that official history intervenes in the story through a news report on the radio, with a panel streaming through Tri's home in Vietnam as he sits and converses with his friends Do and Leonard over a meal. The broadcast mentions the diminishing role of U.S. troops, along with an announcement about the My Lai massacre, all-too-familiar narratives recognized in America (Tran, 131). What is often the historical emphasis,

particularly here in the U.S., is forced to the periphery. In another instance a radio broadcast blends into the comic as background noise, while images of domestic life are foregrounded. Tran's mother is seen cooking and feeding her children as radio propaganda infringes upon the privacy of her home (see fig. 6). What is important to note here is that the reports go seemingly unnoticed and pushed aside by the necessities and demands of daily life. Wrapping around his mother, she remains the central focus, virtually erasing or at least destabilizing the broadcast, to the extent that the announcement becomes indecipherable (Tran, 170). It is as though the political propaganda disseminated from Saigon went completely ignored, or simply normalized and disregarded during the daily lives of average Vietnamese citizens. Furthermore, this section visualizes how political propaganda during the war permeated the entire society, physically streaming into and intruding the everyday lives of ordinary Vietnamese families attempting to continue normal lives while the war waged on outside of their homes, inching threateningly close to their doorsteps. By no means does this represent a callous and insensitive overlooking or downplaying of wartime atrocities and the suffering experienced by the Vietnamese people. Rather, it reflects Tran's refusal to define his family solely through the lens of war and their refugee status. Moreover, it is a creative storytelling technique applied to control the narrative and avoid diverting our attention from the comic's central concern. Visually marginalizing these over-documented realities that have come to define the Vietnam War here in America – the

events that get “remembered in history books”, as Sacco’s work articulates – ensures that the focus of *Vietnamerica* is the documentation of his family’s journey.

Returning to Chute’s discussion of Sacco’s *Footnotes*, she explains how his comics journalism not only questions what constitutes the production of history, but also consistently positions itself as a “counter to official documentation, visualizing history based on oral testimony, and meticulously archiving previously unarchived voices” (Chute, 235). In line with Sacco’s approach, I have stressed how Tran’s visual testimony constructs history from the ground level by centering stories of Vietnamese refugees. Projecting “previously unarchived voices” as authoritative historical sources of truth creates the opportunity to work outside the confines of official history and traditional models of historical production. Tran’s comic visualizes the collision of dominant narratives with particular, personal history existing on the fringes. Additionally, applying Espiritu’s critical refugee studies to my reading of *Vietnamerica* has facilitated a nuanced analysis of how stories in the comic provide multi-dimensional representations of Vietnamese refugees, forcefully establishing alternative narratives documenting ignored realities of the American War in Vietnam. In doing so Tran’s graphic family memoir grants visibility to the reverberating impact of war, materializing experiences pushed to the margins of world history, while carving out a space for the visual amplification of excluded voices silenced within dominant American narratives. By addressing glaring omissions in America’s version of events during the post-Vietnam War era, Tran’s work becomes a radical form of remembrance. The visual archiving of family stories in

Vietnamerica, so intimately dependent upon oral testimonials and historically “unarchived voices” makes Tran’s comic a subversive act of historical documentation and witnessing, a necessary disruption to official, state-sanctioned narratives.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

“Militarized Refuge(es)”: Visualizing the Intersections of American Imperialism,
Militarism and the Vietnamese Diaspora

Rather than ignore the violent uprooting of Tran’s family from their homeland, and the historical weight of the Vietnam War, *Vietnamerica*, I would argue, purposefully decentered them. My analysis of Tran’s comic up to this point has emphasized the documentation of stories ignored by dominant remembrances of the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees, positioning the graphic family memoir as a powerful alternative historical narrative. Taking into consideration the historical treatment of the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees in American recollections – histories plagued by countless omissions, purposeful erasure and marginalization – I have drawn attention to *Vietnamerica*’s specific reliance on materialized memories that decenter the war itself, generally avoiding direct recreations of military violence as a creative framing tactic aimed at addressing these representational gaps. Despite Tran’s altered and personal historical focus, *Vietnamerica* nonetheless encapsulates the intersections of American militarism, war and mass displacement made visible through the lives of Vietnamese refugees. This observation crystalizes when his comic is viewed through the lens of Espiritu’s critical refugee studies, “which reconceptualizes ‘the refugee’ not as an object of rescue but as a site of social and political critiques, whose emergence, when traced, would make visible the process of colonization, war, and displacement” (Espiritu, 174). Specifically, if Espiritu’s socio-political designation “militarized refuge(es)” is applied to

our reading of *Vietnamerica*, we begin to see how her conceptual framework exposes the invisible and otherwise unacknowledged imperial and colonial violence hidden beneath the humanitarian term “refugee.”

A climactic moment towards the end of Tran’s graphic family memoir illuminates these social and political intersections. As various narrative threads converge, the event that has been foregrounded from the opening pages is finally reached. The chapter opens by documenting the frenetic transit of G.B.’s parents and older siblings from a collapsing Vietnam followed by their eventual resettlement in the U.S. Granting brief access to the transnational pathways taken by South Vietnamese during their forced migration, Tran’s comic provides evidence of the militarized nature of their evacuation route, a reality largely forming the basis for Espiritu’s term “militarized refuge(es).” In the days leading up to the Fall of Saigon “U.S. military aircraft carriers airlifted approximately 130,000 Vietnamese citizens” out of Vietnam to be resettled into various countries of refuge across the globe. Forty-one percent of Vietnamese refugees relocated to the U.S. followed an identical path, “from Vietnam to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines to Anderson Air Force Base on Guam to Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton in California” (Espiritu, 24-5). This global passageway became the most travelled route by South Vietnamese fleeing Vietnam to America. Tran’s family were among those that managed to get out of Vietnam before North Vietnamese tanks rolled in and captured Saigon, toppling what was left of the South Vietnamese government. While Tran’s family narrowly escaped their homeland on April 25, 1975, just five days before the pivotal Fall

of Saigon, they were unable to avoid what Espiritu has described as the “*colonial and militarized nature*” of the mass evacuation of South Vietnamese citizens out of Vietnam. All together, the Vietnamese refugee flight from Vietnam to the U.S. and other destinations around the globe spanned nearly three decades, with multiple waves making up what is now recognized as the Vietnamese diaspora, resulting in the creation of a displaced, exilic transnational community.⁴⁰

Taking Espiritu’s critical refugee studies into account, specifically her assertion that the lives of refugees constitute a critical site that makes visible the intersections of American imperialism, militarism and forced migration, *Vietnamerica’s* documentation of stories from one Vietnamese refugee family becomes entangled with a range of social and political concerns. To a certain extent, when interpreted through this theoretical lens, the entire comic becomes a visual witness to these illuminating intersections. One page in particular quickly traces the militarized transit his mother, father and older siblings experienced during their escape from Vietnam. Democratically structured with a minimalist aesthetic, if you blink you may miss it (see fig. 7). Succinctly visualizing Espiritu’s insights in three horizontal panels of equal size and simplicity, the journey taken by Tran’s family documents the militarized nature of the refuge evacuation route provided by the U.S. armed forces, revealing an extended network of military bases throughout the Pacific. Mirroring the route Espiritu uncovered, one that nearly half of Vietnamese refugees coming to America travelled after escaping Vietnam, Tran’s family is first seen arriving at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, then stopping at Anderson

Air Force Base in Guam, and eventually landing on Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton in San Diego. Drawn from the perspective of the entire family, the page is presented through a first person view, granting readers the opportunity to momentarily experience events from the vantage point of Vietnamese refugees. Each panel provides quick glimpses of the relocation procedures experienced by the family at each military base. Initially, we see a frantic and unorganized frenzy with the family hastily shuttled off a military aircraft in the Philippines by an American soldier who screams "Everybody off the plane!" Tri's friend Leonard looks on with worry and concern on his face, letting the family know with three well-intentioned, but in hindsight, hollow words, "You're safe now!" In the next panel we see two military officials with clipboards politely informing the family they have arrived in Guam. The bureaucratic aspect of their escape appears as military personnel ask the family to follow them to proceed with their refugee processing. This becomes the first instance where the family is referred to as refugees. Uprooted from their homeland, in a matter of days the family was stripped of their citizenship status and labeled refugees. Just as quickly, in the third panel the family is seen stepping out of yet another military aircraft, being reassured the U.S. has prepared temporary camps in San Diego and that the search had already begun to find the family a sponsor and a new home in America. All three bases, representing an expansive global circuit of imperial conquest had become sites of refuge overnight. Tran depicts this traumatic transit in rapid succession, as we witness the family's escape from a crumbling Vietnam to their arrival in the Philippines. Traversing an international exodus, they were relocated

from San Diego and eventually resettled into a home in South Carolina, depicted in the fourth panel. While the first three panels show his family being shuttled across the globe by military personnel, by the fourth all military presence vanishes as the family finds themselves warmly welcomed by two smiling flight attendants in South Carolina. This panel is a radical change of pace, shifting from the frenetic rush to escape via military evacuation, to the slowed down safety of a domestic airline carrier (Tran, 227).

In this section what is unseen and left undocumented is equally as important as what is seen. The empty spaces between each horizontal panel, the indeterminate amount of time and imagined causality trapped in the gutters of the comic hold the key to interpretation. Normally, it is in these in-between spaces that reader participation becomes so integral in graphic narratives, facilitating the process of creating meaning through audience engagement, a process that relies heavily upon the reader's imagination to fill in the gap of one sequence to another.⁴¹ In this case, the basic structure and form of comics work to a slight disadvantage for readers, as so much remains unrecognized and imperceptible in this particular instance, so much history is left unrepresented and misplaced from one panel to another, unrealized in the gutters if you will, awaiting interpretation. Nevertheless, the core narrative remains intact, and *Vietnamerica's* audience receives the most basic information necessary for understanding that his family traversed a global route that eventually brought them to the U.S. This section exhibits the tension always present on the comics page, the ever-present disjuncture that gestures towards the limitations of representation, concerning what can be visualized and what

cannot. As Chute suggests, “In comics, one feels the constant tension between what can be contained within the frame and what cannot be contained within it – both in terms of historical realities and in terms of the burden of expressing those realities.” It is primarily in the interpretive and imaginative space of the gutters that the militarized nature of the mass evacuation of Vietnamese from Vietnam becomes visible. With Espiritu’s analysis mapped over these particular panels, we begin to understand what Chute means when she asserts “Comics makes readers aware of what can be pictured and what cannot be pictured. It is a form, then, that is *about* disjuncture at its most basic: in what we see in the frame and do not see in the gutter, in what we make of the gap between word and image” (Chute, 140). Unfortunately, without extensive historical knowledge of the American empire, specifically the imperial legacy of military expansion into the Pacific, this disjuncture between what is visually framed and what is unseen in the gutters is especially pronounced and ultimately unintelligible. While *Vietnamerica* unearths the militarized nature of the Vietnamese diaspora I would argue that this historical revelation was unintentional and otherwise unbeknownst to Tran. Remember, he did not do extensive historical research while creating his graphic family memoir. This is most evident in the fact that none of the military bases are actually named. We are simply informed of the country or state, further intensifying the inability to produce meaning of the gap between what is written and what is visualized. I do not believe that this is a detriment to the reading experience, nor am I criticizing Tran for not doing rigorous historical research, rather, I believe the unspoken, invisible realities present on the page

through absence reveal how essential reader participation and visual literacy can be in comics. This realization only concretizes the medium as a profoundly interactive form, facilitating a collaborative interpretive engagement between reader and author/illustrator, countering commonly held perceptions that comics perpetuate a disengaged and otherwise passive reading experience.

The materialization of this particular memory jumps rapidly across time and space, swiftly illustrating Espiritu's central argument about the colonial and militarized nature of the Vietnamese refugee experience: that the so-called humanitarian assistance provided to South Vietnamese refugees escaping the political turmoil and military violence of their homeland revealed a far reaching military network laid out by years of imperial expansion in the Pacific by the U.S., dating back to 1898 and the Spanish-American War. Precisely how long his family stayed at each location is not indicated, but historical research shows that Vietnamese refugees ended up temporarily housed in makeshift tent cities at these military compounds for days to months at a time. Again, this reality is left unspoken, and never fully visualized, remaining suspended in the spaces between the panels, begging to be deciphered. What we do know is that the relocation efforts dubbed Operation New Arrivals and the massive airlifting of countless South Vietnamese from their homeland was central to the transformation of a failed U.S. intervention in Vietnam from an act of military aggression guided by the imperatives of imperialism, to a massive humanitarian effort, providing emergency escape and refuge for thousands of now homeless South Vietnamese fleeing social and political persecution

from the North Vietnamese government. As Espiritu explains, “The material and ideological conversion of U.S. military bases into places of *refuge* – places that were meant to *resolve* the refugee crisis, promising peace and protection – discursively transformed the United States from violent aggressor in Vietnam to benevolent rescuer of its people” (Espiritu, 35).

What gets lost amidst the veneer of this fabricated metamorphosis is the fact that the very same military planes that took part in relentless bombing runs, the very same war-machines responsible for dropping napalm and agent orange upon Vietnam and throughout Southeast Asia were suddenly transformed into humanitarian vehicles of a mass exodus. In a twist of fate that only makes sense through the destructive logic of imperialism, the aircrafts that wreaked havoc from above Vietnam and engaged in indiscriminate chemical warfare, carrying out the scorched earth policies of the American government and military, were transformed into spaces of refuge overnight. While the militarized nature of his family’s evacuation is not immediately evident from the panels of Tran’s comic, it is hidden in plain sight. The contradictions lying latent upon the surface of Tran’s visualization of his family’s escape route from Vietnam to the U.S. come into focus and crystalize with the aid of Espiritu’s research. Most readers will likely pass over this section of *Vietnamerica* without questioning the route that Tran’s family was frenetically shuttled through, seeing nothing more than a safe and successful escape aided by the American military. Of course, this would not be due to a careless reading, or a lack of interpretive sophistication. What gets glossed over and ignored in

most accounts of the refugee resettlement operations is the fact that the military bases located in the Pacific – Clark and Anderson AFBs – in addition to California’s Camp Pendleton, which were “credited and valorized for resettling Vietnamese refugees in 1975” were also “the very ones responsible for inducing the refugee displacement” (Espiritu, 39). The nonstop bombing and ground forces deployed by these military bases were largely responsible for internally and externally displacing twelve million South Vietnamese, nearly half of the country’s population at the time.⁴² Virtually overnight, these military bases – the departure point for war machines lifting off for their bombing missions – became temporary refugee holding sites. In a heartbreaking twist of historical fate, California’s Camp Pendleton in San Diego County became the first home in the U.S. for many Vietnamese refugees, including Tran’s family. This military base provides a deeper historical connection to the violent construction and forceful carving out of U.S. territorial boundaries. Once again, the intersections of conquest, colonization, militarization and domination emerge. In this case, we are dealing with the displacement of indigenous tribes in the North American continent, the Juaneno, Luiseno, and Kumeyaay tribes, documenting and connecting another dimension of the historical legacy of conquest, initially by Spanish powers in the late 18th century.⁴³ Control of these territories would transfer over to America, and in the 1940s the U.S. Marine Corps established Camp Pendleton, continuing the legacy of colonization in the region. Fast-forward to 1975 and what was once the land of indigenous American Indian tribes who were displaced two centuries before had become a space of refuge for displaced South

Vietnamese arriving in the U.S. Further compounding these apparent contradictions, General Paul Graham, who oversaw several major military operations in Vietnam resulting in countless Vietnamese deaths also organized military rescue and refugee relocation efforts, suddenly positioned as savior to the very same people his military displaced. Such a dramatic shift from military aggressors to humanitarian actors was a calculated effort meant to work as a recuperative mechanism for U.S. public relations. The evacuation efforts, combined with the image of South Vietnamese refugees ostensibly rescued by the U.S. were put forth as justification for the war. Ultimately, these so-called redemptive acts were aimed at diverting attention away from American military aggression in Vietnam, with the massive airlift operations and the objects of rescue – Vietnamese refugees – positioned as the featured evidence for the necessity of America's involvement in Vietnam. In *Vietnamerica*, Tran's family's experience travelling this militarized escape route aboard a U.S. war machine turned refuge becomes a visual record, concrete evidence supporting Espiritu's historical insights. Given the confined space of three swift, minimalist panels, the depiction of his family's escape route reveals the traces of American imperialism and militarism, providing a glimpse into the expansive reach of the U.S. empire in the North American continent and the wider Pacific region.

The final panel of the page transports readers to an American courtroom, with a judge standing over the family explaining their naturalization processing. An American flag placed on her right side becomes a subtle reminder of the role the U.S. played in both

the refugee displacement and resettlement. Here we see a direct depiction of the ways the U.S. government managed to position itself as saviors rather than perpetrators of unspeakable atrocities. This is immediately established as we see an image of the entire family shortly after their arrival in the U.S., with a prominent reversal of perspectives as they now look outwards towards readers, while the first words uttered by the judge float above their heads: “Freedom” and “Liberty”, alluding to America’s “Founding Father’s” who supposedly established a government grounded in these principles, for and by the people. The family is again informed of their refugee status as the judge explains that the naturalization process takes about five years. As though their displacement was some fortunate turn of events, she tells them that their refugee residency grants them access, or as she says, “will let” them find work and attend school while starting their lives in the U.S. (Tran, 228) Continuing to reinforce America’s position as benevolent saviors, during the family’s immigration hearing years later, the judge presiding over their citizenship processing proclaims that their resettlement and path to citizenship must have been an easy transition, seeing that they were able to live the “American dream” in the five years since their arrival in the states.⁴ This simple statement effectively ignores their experiences of marginalization and alienation while in America, along with the emotional and psychological impact of being indefinitely separated from their homeland and family members abroad. Their personal histories are invalidated with a few simple words from this American judge, whose assumption can easily go unnoticed. To a certain degree, the position of the American judge presiding over their immigration case exemplifies widely

held assumptions in the U.S. regarding the war and Vietnamese refugees. It is paramount to understand that the “American dream” is nothing more than an unattainable myth for the large majority of American society, and is a particularly troubling narrative for people of color who disproportionately inhabit the lowest socio-economic strata. This sweeping generalization dictated by an unnamed government figure towering over the courtroom speaks to the ways that the histories of Vietnamese refugees are consistently confronted by the marginalization of their stories and experiences by state powers and government apparatuses. Furthermore, such uninformed comments play right into the idea that as Vietnamese refugees they were fortunate recipients of American kindness, rescued from communist corruption and given the privilege to access the assumed socio-economic mobility of America. With an emphatic stamp of approval on their citizenship papers, the judge declares, “Let me be the first to *officially* congratulate you... Your journey has ended!” (my italics) (Tran, 243) What we see here is the persistent, seemingly unshakable narrative of “America(ns) rescuing and caring for Vietnam’s discarded,” which Espiritu stresses effectively “erases the role that U.S. foreign policy and war played in inducing the ‘refugee crisis’ in the first place” (Espiritu, 18). These memories encapsulate striking examples of the ways that dominant American understandings of the war, and perceptions of Vietnamese refugees have failed to take into account Vietnamese experiences and perspectives, relegating their stories to the margins of history. Creatively combatting these statements of erasure, the two courtroom scenes bracket depictions of displacement, family separation, economic hardships and social alienation

in America, stories ignored by the American judge's misplaced assumptions. In this section the multiplicity of storytellers present throughout *Vietnamerica* converge, revealing a layered historical narrative that takes full advantage of the structural elements of the comics form. I will continue by highlighting these elements in the next chapter, emphasizing the storytelling advantages possible through graphic narrative.



Fig. 7

Democratizing Graphic Storytelling: Projecting Refugee Experiences in Comics

My memories of becoming a refugee are fragments of a dream, hallucinatory and unreliable. Soldiers bouncing me on their knees, a tank rumbling through the streets, a crowded barge of desperate people fleeing Vietnam. (Nguyen, *The Hidden Scars All Refugees Carry*)

Vietnamerica is not alone challenging official historical discourse connected to the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees. My thesis has highlighted a collective effort by drawing upon the works of Vietnamese American scholars and writers like Andrew Lam, Viet Thanh Nguyen and Yen Le Espiritu, who together have questioned the legitimacy of American constructed history documenting the Vietnam War, while working to disrupt one-dimensional representations of Vietnamese refugees. Moreover, their work has publicly acknowledged the reverberating impact of the war in the lives of Vietnamese, actively and creatively challenging the necessity and justness of U.S. military aggression in Vietnam. Alongside his contemporaries, Tran's work continues to re-envision the legacy of the American War in Vietnam, doing his part to destabilize and eclipse America's dominant historical memory, which has proven to be characterized by significant omissions at best, and carefully orchestrated, organized forgetting at worse. Unlike his Vietnamese American contemporaries, Tran's work has the advantage of a visual-textual narrative form which facilitates the reimagining of historical realities with the immediacy and intimacy of the drawn image and the written word, producing a documentation process of vivid hybridity. Navigating the domains of visual representation and textual documentation, *Vietnamerica* registers on dual historical

fronts. The structural and formal elements of comics foreground the form's radical fragmentation, while its syntax and grammar allows time to be mapped out spatially on the page, granting the ability to overlap multiple temporalities simultaneously, lending itself to the task of reconstructing history and memory with the immediacy of the drawn image. Discussing the structural elements of comics Charles Hatfield has emphasized how its form is "seductively visual and radically fragmented." Calling attention to fundamental procedures of comics, he argues that the form has the potential to create unpredictable optical and literary experiences for readers by offering up a visual-textual blend of icons providing various sources of meaning. As Hatfield stresses, the "fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different images, shapes, and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretive options, creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable, and unfixable" (Hatfield, xiii-xiv).

Symbolically mirroring the Vietnamese refugee experience the aesthetic and structural elements of *Vietnamerica* establish a fragmented sense of uncertainty for readers. With what Chute has described as its "cross-discursivity," the fundamental formal components of comics are particularly fit to recreate refugee experiences, materializing memories in panels stitched together like patchwork. Writing about the relationship between the visual presentation and core procedures of the comics form and the processes of traumatic memory, Chute posits in her text *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*,

Images in comics appear in fragments, just as they do in actual recollection; this fragmentation, in particular, is a prominent feature of traumatic memory. The art

of crafting words and pictures together into a narrative punctuated by pause or absence, as in comics, also mimics the procedure of memory (Chute, 4).

For Vietnamese refugees, the violent process of being forcibly displaced from their homeland was an undeniably disruptive experience defined by instability. Due to the inherent structural qualities of comics, the art form presents opportunities to ethically reconstruct traumatic memory and retell stories of displacement. Taking full advantage of the cross-discursive fragmentation of comics *Vietnamerica* presents a radically fractured and sporadic narrative that at times creates a perplexing reading experience. In doing so Tran shows how the visually splintered surface of comics makes the form especially equipped to recapture, transcribe and visually project the unpredictable experiences of refugees onto the page. In this light, we see how the heterogeneous aesthetic approach in *Vietnamerica* is complimented by the fragmentation of comics. The collision of various styles contributes to the overarching sense of disorientation, and the frenetic representation of events keeps readers on unstable grounds, demanding their sustained attention. Timelines alternate as freely as Tran's stylistic approaches, ranging from detailed depictions of events, to abstract loosely drawn minimalist and impressionistic images, and even cartoon-like sketches at times, establishing a sense of erratic instability. Additionally, the non-linear, zigzagging narrative arc shuttling readers backwards and forwards in time shatters all perceptions or expectations of linearity and resolution. Multiple timelines converge and overlap simultaneously, at times within the same image, making it necessary to reread and retrace our steps. Taken together, the comic's composition establishes a kind of storytelling vertigo, becoming a defining

element of the reading experience. As readers, we almost always feel as though we are walking along unstable ground, never quite sure where the drawn images or the embodied voices within the narrative will transport us next. Here we can extrapolate a kind of dual symbolism. The sense of uncontrolled fragmentation and feelings of disorientation symbolize – perhaps incidentally – characteristics attached to experiences of displacement, which are marked by uncertainty and unpredictability. As reflected in this chapter’s epigraph from Viet Thanh Nguyen, for some, refugee memories are “fragments of a dream.” Additionally, Tran explained to me how the narrative and aesthetic structure of *Vietnamerica* was intended to produce a sense of disorientation aimed at mimicking his feelings as he gradually unraveled his family history for the first time.⁴⁵

As an amalgamation of family memories *Vietnamerica* employs these structural mechanics to center marginalized voices, piecing family narratives together to project a dynamically broken and purposefully fractured visual approach. The comic’s compelling hardcover vividly captures Tran’s visual aesthetic and storytelling approach. Before opening the comic our initial encounter comes in the form of an indistinguishable face sporadically coming together, an incomplete puzzle with an array of pieces dispersed across the front and back cover (see fig. 8). Reflecting the intimate process of retrieving and recapturing scattered family stories, Tran visualizes the process of historical reconstruction. The complex image becomes emblematic of an excavation project and act of historical recovery that took years of meticulously gathering family testimonials. These once disparate, fading stories are brought together and re-envisioned, projecting

the gradual rediscovery of a collective family identity and history, barely held together by memory. *Vietnamerica's* reliance on a plurality of voices primarily transmitted through the ancient tradition of oral storytelling is its defining feature, and the hardcover forecast's the visual testimonial nature of the narrative, beautifully symbolizing the historical approach of the comic. Pulling from various experiences recollected in the graphic family memoir, each piece captures a range of emotions taken from a different family member at a distinct moment in time. This collective but incomplete portrait mirrors the way Tran received these memories: in sporadic fragments. Some pieces remain scattered, still in the process of being recovered (or lost). In this sense, each dispersed piece embodies a historical fragment, a splintered memory emerging despite decades of invisibility. Moreover, the front and back cover projects the gradual materialization of memory with each interlocking piece representative of a barely decipherable moment documented in the comic, a glimpse at the archive of stories we are about to engage with. With this image *Vietnamerica* immediately sets a precedent, displaying how the comic's page becomes a fitting template for the inscription of unearthed testimonials.

Two of the most significant visuals in *Vietnamerica* are splash pages with several snapshots of history pieced together. The first being on the front and back hardcover, while the second is found near the center of the graphic family memoir depicting a scrabble board spelling out "in a foriegn culture threatening our own" (purposeful misspelling by G.B.) (Tran, 108-9) (see fig. 9-10). While the former image is an

incorporation of various family members, incomplete glimpses of moments spread throughout the graphic family memoir, the scrabble board image is a complex reconstruction of an archive. Each individual section recaptures a concrete family experience, representative of a complete memory carefully recovered in perfect focus. Documenting his family's attempts at integrating into the American social fabric while struggling to maintain some sense of their cultural heritage, we witness experiences with racism, socio-cultural exclusion, economic instability, and generational divides. This image also provides an important element of repetition, mirroring memories dispersed throughout the graphic family memoir. These two splash-pages exhibit the comic forms capacity to visually project the messiness of memory, and contain its oscillations between clarity and instability. Additionally, both show how the structural fragmentation of comics provide some unique storytelling advantages, particularly the ability to simultaneously project separate spaces and temporalities, facilitating the layering and visual intersection of multiple experiences on the page, establishing a communicative engagement with the past.

Analyzing the cultural and literary impact of underground comix, particularly Spiegelman's *Maus*, in her text *Disaster Drawn* Chute calls attention to the ways that he

[D]emonstrated the possibilities of comics language by showing how its most basic formal elements could forcefully portray complicated historical realities. In this underground moment, comics become legibly equipped to challenge dominant modes of storytelling and history writing through expressing simultaneity, multiple perspectives, shifting temporalities, and paradoxical spaces (Chute, 157).

Echoing Chute's insights, *Vietnamerica* presents historical realities from multiple perspectives, not simply embracing, but relying upon simultaneity and plurality, transforming fragmented memories into complex temporal narratives by reconstructing, weaving, and piecing together direct, concrete experiences with war. We become second, sometimes third hand witness to these historical realities. Rooted firmly in memory, Tran's graphic family memoir depends upon a different source of historical truth that addresses glaring omissions and purposeful erasure from official historical narratives. Discussing the impact of memoir as a literary form, author of *Meeting Faith: The Thai Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun* (and winner of the PEN/Beyond Margins Award for memoir) Faith Adiele articulated in an article for *YES! Magazine*, *My Life in Black and White: Why Memoir is the Ultimate Multicultural Act*, that it "democratizes storytelling." As Adiele expressed, "Official history is penned by power brokers, but the real stories are lived on the ground" (Adiele, 34). With her insights in mind, from a literary standpoint, the genre of memoir allows *Vietnamerica* to bring history down to earth. Furthermore, through the hybridity of comics, graphic memoir has the ability to visually democratize the process of storytelling. Founded upon a multiplicity of voices and fragmented experiences that allow the past to interact with the present, *Vietnamerica* continues to expand the "possibilities of comics language" by intervening with dominant historical memory through a reliance on first-hand witness accounts. This process creatively sheds light on testimonials ignored by widespread public narratives. As a graphic family memoir Tran grounds historical realities in the lived experiences and

voices of Vietnamese refugees, sharing the burden of retelling the past by positioning them as sources of knowledge and truth. A short section of the comic's penultimate chapter beautifully captures Tran's reliance upon the memory of several storytellers simultaneously, allowing disparate temporalities to intersect upon the surface of the comic's pages. In the previous chapter I discussed the way this segment becomes a critical moment where the militarized nature of the Vietnamese refugee experience comes into focus. Serving as another kind of convergence point in the graphic family memoir, this section also pulls several narrative threads together, facilitating their interaction. Dealing primarily with the initial years of his family's separation – from one another and their homeland – Tran provides a glimpse at his immediate family's integration into American society, overlaying conversations with his extended family in Vietnam in order to incorporate their experiences within the same time frame. As noted in the previous chapter, two courtroom scenes depicting his family's initial refugee resettlement process shortly after arriving in the U.S., and their citizenship hearing years later bracket these stories. In this respect, the stories contained between these two courtroom scenes make visible the experiences dismissed and ignored by the two American judges residing over their refugee processing and citizenship hearing.

We are first transported to the year 2001, dropped into a conversation between G.B. and his grandmother Thi Mot (on his mother's side) during his first trip to Vietnam. This memory begins a six-part dual page layout, rapidly transitioning between six individual experiences after the war "ended" and his parents fled Vietnam, stories

carefully threaded together to create a sporadic, time jumping narrative. Each two-page recollection mirrors the exact same panel structure, further solidifying the interconnectedness of the stories documented in the graphic family memoir while structurally symbolizing the simultaneity of their experiences (see fig. 11-12). Thi sits with her grandson looking over a handful of family photographs from America. As she holds a photo of her daughter feeding a newborn G.B. he asks whether or not she was aware that her daughter was even alive. She explains how Dzung simply disappeared one night and never returned. Very matter-of-factly Thi tells her grandson, “We didn’t even know you were born until months later. We just heard rumors that your parents fled Saigon. Escaped with the Americans in the final hours of the war.” Providing insights into the socio-political situation in Vietnam, she recalls that immediately after the North seized power there was a ban placed on all mail with the U.S., expressing to her grandson, “Hundreds of thousands of refugees were completely cut off from their families in Vietnam. They...WE were all alone. She just left Vungtau one night and never came back. All I could do was pray she was still alive” (Tran, 230-1). Thi’s words overlap her daughter’s early experiences of isolation and alienation once in America, suggesting that while they did escape persecution in Vietnam, they were subsequently cutoff from their homeland in a foreign country of refuge and confronted with new obstacles to overcome. First we see Dzung being yelled at while waiting tables, a far cry from receiving a solid living wage with her white-collar bank job back in Vietnam. Next we see her being met with bewilderment and disgust while asking another customer at a

local market if they knew where to find fish sauce. The sense of cultural difference becomes evident as the customer's basket is packed with American products like Bud Light and Doritos. Further exacerbating social hostilities, the patron mutters, "Gross!" We then catch a glimpse at the generational disconnect occurring within the family as they sit together eating dinner. A sign of the cultural distance developing between the Tran kids and their parents, they are seen complaining about eating rice again and questioning why they can't ever have hamburgers. The section closes with a depiction of Dzung studying late into the night only to awake early the next morning to repeat the day again, gesturing towards the continual economic, social and cultural impact of their displacement (see fig.11).

Again, a question from G.B. creates an opening for untold stories to emerge, acting as a transitional link in the final panel of the page. The narrative moves on to a conversation between G.B. and his mother Dzung back at home in America. A symbolic reminder of her uncomfortable experience shopping at an American grocery store, she is seen solemnly adding fish sauce to her cooking (see fig. 12). G.B. sits behind his mother asking if she was able to say goodbye before escaping Vietnam. She explains to her son, "I didn't think we'd be gone forever. Maybe just a few months, and when the new government was in place we'd all return home." She remembers suddenly scrambling to escape, simply stuffing a suitcase and fleeing that fateful night, because "being left behind meant being punished by the new regime" (Tran, 232). Paralleling her mother's uncertainty Dzung emphasizes how she barely knew of the suffering taking place in

Vietnam. All she could do was wait patiently to hear word from family and friends. Running down the list of persecutions, she laments to her son that some people simply disappeared in the night, or were denied work and forced to panhandle due to being drafted into the ARVN, with the former case corresponding to the post-war experiences of their family friend Do and the latter to her brother Vinh. Tran provides a visual witness to these tumultuous times, again recording experiences left out of dominant American recollections. Providing a direct connection to the previous memory, Dzung's section ends with Thi finally receiving her letter after months of uncertainty, providing a glimmer of hope for the future.

Once again we are carried away to another timeline, brought to a conversation between G.B. and his Uncle Vinh speeding through the streets of Vietnam on a moped. Keeping the focus on the family's inability to communicate, we see G.B. clinging to his uncle's shoulders asking about how frequently they received letters from America. Exemplifying the degree of separation experienced by South Vietnamese both in and out of Vietnam Vinh describes how initially they were lucky if letters got through every six months until mail sanctions were lifted three years later, which allowed Dzung to send monthly two-pound care packages. He recalls how they were nothing short of life savers, with his sister sending anything they could take to the market and sell, from two pounds of thread, to two pounds of aspirin. Again, a simultaneous experience overlaps Vinh's response. Returning to America we see some of the family's internal problems. Of particular importance, G.B. closes this section with the revelation that his mother learned

of her father's death through mail, documenting the persistent impact of their forced migration, specifically the strain it placed on familial bonds (Tran, 234-5). Here we are made aware of the pain rooted in absence and separation, reminding readers of an old Vietnamese saying G.B. introduced at the beginning of the comic, an aphorism his parents were unable to fulfill: "Our parents care for us as our teeth sharpen... So we care for them as theirs dull" (Tran, 24-5). Dzung's inability to care for her parents becomes yet another example of the invisible damage left in the wake of war.

The narrative is then pushed much further backwards in time, to a conversation between an adolescent G.B. and his grandmother Le Nhi (on his father's side). The two are playing a game of scrabble when he asks her if she wants to return to her homeland. Sitting in resolute calm Le Nhi responds quite plainly, "What for?" Continuing to expound on the political situation in Vietnam she remarks,

There's nothing left for me there. Why would I go back to a country rotting from corruption? Ruled by man, not law? That Vietnam is not the home I left or the country young men devoted their lives fighting to reunite. Disgusted with what Vietnam became, some just left. Others chose self-exile. Better that than speaking out against the new regime and being branded a traitor. Or worse (Tran, 236-7).

We see an image of Huu Nghiep in reference to self-exile, and symbolic of the worse case scenario, a depiction of Do thrown from the back of a truck, finally released after being imprisoned in a labor camp for years. Here we access the perspective of a South Vietnamese woman forced to seek refuge in a foreign land. With no remaining link to her homeland, and having lost virtually everything in the war Le Nhi provides one of the most poignant socio-political critiques of North Vietnamese rule. Continuing our time

travelling journey, we are transported back to Vietnam during a conversation between Tri Huu's best friend Do and G.B. In high spirits Do is seen sparking a cigarette with a smile. Responding with remarkable optimism to G.B.'s comment that nothing turned out as expected, he says that everything ended up ok and he didn't regret anything. Naturally reacting with shock, G.B. screams "WHAT?! They locked you in prison for six years!" Do continues to downplay his experiences, noting that his countrymen sacrificed everything to create a better future for the next generations, whom he believed needed the most help. Embodying his sentiments in action, we see an image of G.B.'s father helping a fellow Vietnamese refugee in America being falsely accused of beating his son. Acknowledging the specific struggles of his life-long friend Tri, for Do six years of digging ditches in a labor camp paled in comparison to being uprooted from his homeland and forced to "start a new life with strange rules and foreign customs" (Tran, 238-9). Notably, Do's perspective runs diametrically opposed to Le Nhi's previous commentary, which sharply criticized the corruption he fell victim to. Continuing the theme of separation, the section ends with a vision of alienation, showing Tri isolated, sitting alone in a dark room reading in front of the television. After this stream of collective hardships experienced by the family in the immediate aftermath of the war G.B. no longer questions. Rather, making what seems to be a statement of fact he proclaims to his father: "You guys had it really rough." In this final connecting narrative thread, we have now arrived back at his parent's home in Arizona during a conversation between G.B. and his father. Responding to his son's conclusions Tri proclaims:

You can't look at our family in a vacuum and apply your myopic contemporary western filter to them. Our family wasn't alone. We weren't a special case. Everyone suffered. Everyone had to do whatever they needed to survive. Years passed before families reunited. Before people felt like they had a future again. By then, it was too late for my generation. Our hopes and dreams lie with our children. Every decision we made...Every sacrifice we gave...Was for their future (Tran, 240-1).

His insights reinforce the converging storylines just witnessed, acting as rhetorical validation for the memories previously documented. Tri's comments acknowledge the far-reaching impact and lingering costs of war, the ways that the Vietnam War may have ended for the American government and military, but it continued to deeply impact the lives of millions of displaced Vietnamese within and outside of Vietnam separated from their families or/and their homeland. Suggesting at least a semblance of closure and finality the section ends with recreated memories of Do reuniting with his family, Le Nhi and Vinh receiving a care package from Dzung, and Huu Nghiep packing his military uniform away.

Discussing the permanent implications of war Espiritu calls attention to the ways that war may "end" within a geo-political space, but its impact reverberates through various social dimensions, particularly within peoples minds through traumatic memories and individual or collective histories. In *Body Counts* she explains how her work sought to offer "an alternative temporality – one that emphasizes the war's irreconcilability and ongoingness, in order to bring to the fore the living effects of what seems to be over and done with" (Espiritu, 174). In this sporadic twelve-page section we receive interconnected experiences in rapid succession, moving seamlessly through the

perspective of five family members and one family friend, oscillating between Vietnam and America, within “Vietnamerica” if you will. As a collective archive of the invisible effects of war, this section encapsulates and brings to life Espiritu’s insights, projecting a visual record of the continual impact the American War in Vietnam has in the lives of Vietnamese. The democratizing power of memoir becomes evident as each individual contributes a portion of the unfolding, layered historical narrative. We bear witness to fragmented memories being carefully woven together through the visual-textual language of comics, exemplifying how the form is fit to express the fluidity of time, spatially mapping out experiences while simultaneously interlacing testimonials that spanned several years upon the page. We gain intimate access to an excavation process years in the making, to pivotal moments when testimonials sporadically emerged and memories broke through the surface of daily life. We see how Tran gradually received these stories in unexpected fragments. We observe the way that a seemingly simple question allows the past to interrupt and interact with the present in the comic, altering how G.B. views his family’s history. These ruptures, interruptions and interactions reveal the enduring living effects of war and displacement. The surface of the comic’s pages captures moments when the silences that concealed traumatic memories were broken. Fighting against disappearance, the gradual piecing together of his family’s stories allows Tran to call attention to the persistence of the past, which becomes a catalyst of sorts, unearthing the unspoken words, buried memories and intentionally forgotten experiences securely locked away in his family’s vault of historical remembrances. These interwoven stories

become reminders that the past must be approached with ethical consideration and patience, embracing inclusion rather than distortion, empathy as opposed to erasure. Moreover, this section also demonstrates the power of visual testimony in the comics medium, a salient example of the way *Vietnamerica* expands our understanding of how history gets recorded, documented, and remembered. As a whole the graphic narrative presents a barrage of recollections, scattered memories and fragmented stories dispersed throughout imbuing the comic with historicity. Allowing the past to ethically and creatively intervene with and temporarily engage the present, we become (second-hand) witnesses to historical events and experiences as simultaneous occurrences. Scott McCloud's insights are pertinent here, particularly his discussion of the unique treatment of temporalities in comics, a form where "past, present, and future are visible simultaneously" (Chute, 8). This fundamentally alters our perception of what constitutes the production of history. Allowing the past, present and future to appear at once, comics promote a nuanced understanding of history, and a critical engagement and interaction with the past.

Carefully depicting the complexity of his family's journey, the living archive of stories materialized in *Vietnamerica* comes into clear focus in this chapter, exemplifying the representational possibilities of the comics form as a "counterinscription" in the service of re-imagining memory and re-visiting history (Chute, 4). The experiences of Tran's family, their fragmented and fleeting glimpses of history, stories carrying the broken trajectories of their lives find a home amidst the splintered surface of the comic's

pages, while nearly forgotten memories transmitted through the voices of multiple storytellers become the testimonial thread weaving the individual images together. This chapter becomes a rich example of how the fundamental procedures and structural elements of comics allow for the negotiation of fading memories, traumatic experiences, and historical testimonials. Memories once buried deeply amid family silences and purposely forgotten by American society have been creatively excavated by Tran, instantiated and embodied through his hand-drawn images. Furthermore, this chapter demonstrates how *Vietnamerica*, like *Maus*, materializes the process of receiving first-hand witness accounts, capturing the act of passing on oral histories via the drawn image, whether through storytelling and listening, one-on-one conversations or conducting interviews, both comics visually reproduce conventional, albeit ancient forms of constructing historical narratives through the comics medium. Moreover, *Vietnamerica* is the first graphic narrative to depict various dimension of the Vietnamese refugee experience, recording visual-verbal testimonials bearing witness to the reverberating impact of the Vietnam War from a Vietnamese perspective. In this respect, Tran's work shares similarities with *Barefoot Gen* and *Citizen 13660*, the first comics, respectively, to confront the history of the atomic bomb in Japan, and document experiences with Japanese internment in the U.S. through first-hand witness accounts. Published over half a century after Mine Okubo's *Citizen 13660*, and almost three decades after Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen*, Tran's work carries on the legacy of

these pioneering comics, becoming a radical act of remembrance challenging dominant historical narratives.



Fig. 8

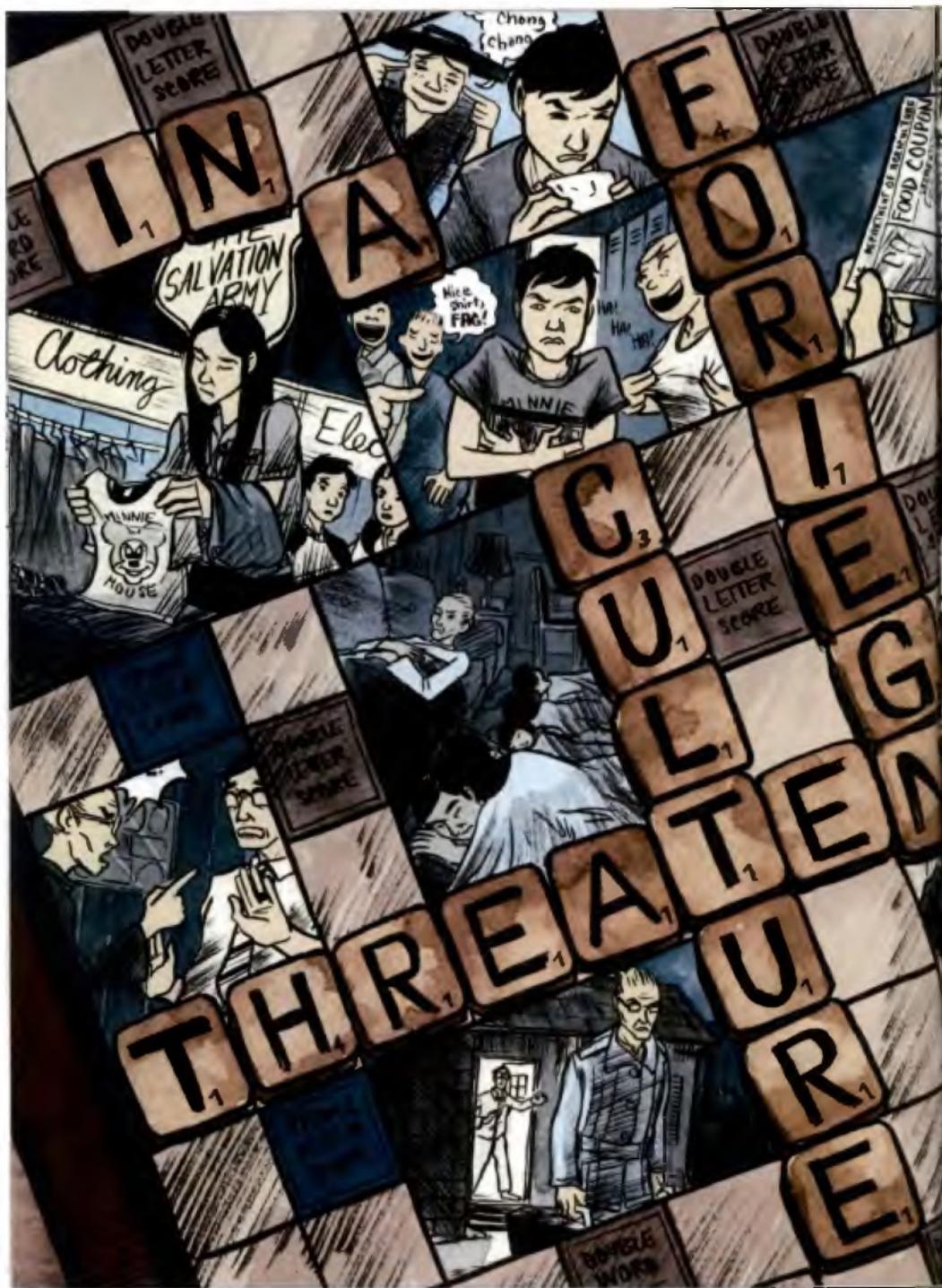


Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

Visual Testimony: *Vietnamerica* and the “Risk of Representation”

Graphic narratives, on the whole, have the potential to be powerful precisely because they intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking what I think of as the risk of representation (Chute, 5).

Threatened by erasure, and on the brink of being forgotten, the stories made visible in Tran’s graphic family memoir foreground marginalized experiences and memories discarded by official American historical discourse. Embodying Edward Said’s insights regarding Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*, and his comics journalism in general, Tran’s work focuses on “history’s victims,” centering the lives of those “banished to the fringes where they seem so despondently to loiter, without much hope or organization, except for their sheer indomitability, their mostly unspoken will to go on, and their willingness to cling to their story, to retell it, and to resist designs to sweep them away altogether” (Sacco, 5). I have discussed how *Vietnamerica* acknowledges experiences from the perspective of the victimized, but my thesis has specifically emphasized how Tran’s family testimonials move beyond the tropes of victimhood. Said’s thoughts are instructive in another way. He draws our attention to the way those who have lived through historical trauma consistently exhibit an unconquerable self-determination, an undeniable desire to continue living, motivated to preserve their stories for future transmission as a means to resist erasure. In this light *Vietnamerica* becomes a rebellious act, a subversive history forcefully asserting what demands to be remembered, what memories need to be recorded, and what histories deserve to be documented. This

monumental undertaking often falls on the next generation. Acknowledging the tremendous difficulty of retelling refugee stories, a necessary task, but undeniable burden, those involved with retracing histories traumas must address how to proceed properly with care and affective honesty. As if directed at future historians, Espiritu questions: “What stories could be told that would highlight the costs of war yet not reduce the refugees to mere victims, even if their losses have been significant?” (Espiritu, 171) My thesis has traced the ways that Tran’s graphic family memoir engages with this pivotal question, and I would argue realizes a possible, albeit partial answer to her inquiry in comic form by presenting ethically considered depictions of Vietnamese refugees while addressing what Espiritu has described as the “ongoingness” of the war by documenting how the past continues to resound in the lives of Vietnamese refugees. As though in a direct dialogue with Espiritu, Chute suggests that comics contain the “ongoing presence of the past” while never concealing or cloaking trauma. *Vietnamerica* makes her insights visible, exhibiting how comics put traumas “elements on view” and assist in making the “roiling lines of history readable.” Furthermore, Tran’s work demonstrates the advantages of graphic narrative, embracing its capacity to vividly capture simultaneity – of experience and memory – and express “trauma’s nonlinear temporal effects for terrorized witnesses” (Chute, 233-4).

Like any average American kid, we see moments of a young G.B. playing video games, indifferent towards his parents. At other times we witness an apathetic teenager unresponsive to his parent’s as they urge him to explore his Vietnamese roots. Tran

actively addresses and questions the cause of his indifference within the narrative, noting that his family's refusal to share the most basic details of their life in Vietnam contributed to his disinterest and apathy. In this revelation he calls attention to protective mechanisms developed by survivors of historical trauma, where purposeful silences and forgetting can be viewed as efforts to maintain a semblance of family peace, aimed at controlling and hiding traumas, but also to "love and protect – an attempt to shield family members from the painful grip of the past" (Espiritu, 149). In *Vietnamerica* we see the way these survival tactics may have safeguarded G.B. from a traumatic past, but inadvertently resulted in the gradual vanishing of shared histories and cultural customs between generations. Family silences leave the children of Vietnamese refugees to converse with ghosts, making the process of (re)telling histories, and unearthing the memories of their parents and generations past appear like attempts at representing the ineffable. In Tran's work we see how the comics form can provide a visual interruption, revisiting recollections that occasionally broke through family silences. *Vietnamerica* records these breaks, documenting G.B.'s journey towards rediscovering unwritten stories and unspoken experiences, allowing collective histories to surface. As Tran introspectively narrates:

My parents' first trip back together was in 1994, almost two decades after they escaped. It was then that they realized their Vietnam only existed in stories and fading memories. Born in America, I was clueless about their lives in that Vietnam. Customs and shared history were being lost within the span of a single generation. But my decades of disinterest inadvertently provided them a glimmer of hope. That someday I'd want to learn (Tran, 206-8).

The accompanying image shows a young G.B. storing the Vietnam War history book his father gave him as a graduation present, packing it away alongside his comics and video games. This is followed by a depiction of him rummaging through boxes full of countless toy soldiers, military tanks, helicopters and airplanes to the point that he is completely surrounded. Forecasting his decision to finally visit Vietnam a young G.B. is essentially unpacking the war – the source of historical trauma – that so deeply altered the trajectory of his family’s lives. Additionally, this visual gestures towards the structural composition of a comic, which presents readers with boxes of moments, time momentarily suspended in enclosed panels, experiences encapsulated in fragmented frames. In sections like this we recognize *Vietnamerica* is also about G.B.’s journey towards reconnecting with his familial and cultural roots. Here Espiritu’s work facilitates a nuanced understanding of why stories are left unspoken, and histories deeply buried. In particular, her discussion of the threat traumatic memories pose in the lives of refugees provides a partial explanation for silences that pervade the homes of refugee families. More importantly, she emphasizes how the silences surrounding refugee homes not only trace the “lingering costs of the Vietnam War” through what she calls the “out-of-sight injuries,” but they also present the opportunity for healing. For Tran’s parents, this healing comes in the form of that “glimmer of hope” that their son would one day seek to explore his family’s history. These fading stories remain ever present beneath the surface, traumas capable of rupturing the temporary peace in their daily lives, making silence and concealment a necessary survival mechanism. By acknowledging survivors

of war speak even when no words are uttered, Espiritu calls attention to “occasional moments when ‘the past broke through,’ and the fractured images, stories, and affects that get transmitted therein” which she argues constitutes the “indirect, quiet, or even wordless ways that subjugated histories get told” (Espiritu, 180). By carving out the necessary cultural space for these subterranean histories to be told *Vietnamerica* can be viewed as a visual commemoration and a monument of memory, at once a celebration and mourning. His family’s stories bring historical apparitions into the light, physically upon the page, allowing interwoven narratives to act as an interruption, rupturing historical languages of silence prevalent in Vietnamese refugee home life and amidst the wider U.S. social and cultural landscape. Viewed in this manner *Vietnamerica* displays how comics can be deployed in the service of materializing subjugated testimonials, a poignant example of the art forms capacity to creatively and ethically translate, instantiate and transmit memory. Taken together, these qualities make it possible to register the traumatic and mundane experiences of Tran’s family, establishing a powerful alternative historical narrative, a renegade visual testimony taking what Chute has described in text *Graphic Women* as the “risk of representation” (or “risk-taking self representation”), overcoming the tropes of unrepresentability and unspeakability that have been so closely associated with trauma in the past (Chute, 3, 26).

My reading of *Vietnamerica* has acknowledged the ways that comics provide a cultural space for people of color to speak for themselves, revealing the mediums potential to act as a disruption to dominant historical narratives, challenging for claims to

truth and authenticity. Grounding my examination of G.B. Tran's graphic family memoir within the growing field of comics studies, I have followed the lead of scholars like Joseph Witek, Charles Hatfield and Hilary Chute, recognizing his work as a continuation of the comics medium's transformation into a form uniquely fit to capture historical realities, document violent encounters with war, and provide the critical perspective of first (or second) hand witnesses. This contextualization locates his comic amidst a growing tradition in graphic narrative, exemplified by Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Keiji Nakazawa's *I Saw It*, and Mine Okubo's *Citizen 13660*. With the growing interest and popularity of graphic novels, combined with the accessibility of the comics form, *Vietnamerica* enters the aforementioned "industries of memory" with the potential to begin evening the playing field of public remembrances. The sheer number of comics publications that have some element of history signals a growing demand, a public interest and investment in a visual documentary and testimonial form that works outside the confines of official institutions and state sanctioned knowledge production models.

In order to flesh out the importance of his family's stories I have provided an overview of the ways that the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees have been represented and remembered by official American discourse. Laying out an interpretive framework I have read *Vietnamerica* through the lens of Vietnamese American scholars and writers, drawing from the critical work of Andrew Lam, Viet Thanh Nguyen and Yen Le Espiritu, whose collective insights have exposed an unbalanced recollection of events exhibiting trends of distortion and erasure. Mapping their insights over my analysis of

stories recorded in Tran's graphic family memoir that provide multi-dimensional representations of Vietnamese refugees, and decenter America's version of events, I have explored the way his comic complicates dominant historical discourse. Facilitating an engagement between Espiritu's critical refugee studies and *Vietnamerica*, I pinpointed the hidden realities beneath the surface of Tran's reimagining of the transnational pathway his family traversed after escaping Vietnam. This allowed for an acknowledgment of the way the lives of individual members of the Tran family become historical convergence points of sorts, evidence of the intersections between American imperialism, militarism, war and the Vietnamese diaspora.

Lastly, I focused on how comics present unique storytelling advantages facilitated by the forms fundamental fragmentation. Specifically, I highlighted the ways comics represent the simultaneity of memory, exhibiting how the form can depict multiple temporalities and the paradoxical spaces of our life stories concurrently on the page. These inherent features allow for an ethically considered recreation of refugee experiences of displacement. Furthermore, I discussed the way Tran uses the fractured comics surface to immerse readers with a multiplicity of voices converging into a single narrative, in effect drawing upon the strengths of memoir as a democratizing storytelling modality, projecting stories that circumnavigate dominant modes of historical production. Collectively, these examples display how *Vietnamerica* does the critical work of combatting official U.S. history regarding the Vietnam War and its impact upon the Vietnamese population. Tran's family testimonials take part in repairing the historical

damage accomplished by the strategic forgetting and organized memory-loss perpetuated by the U.S. government – aided by research from American social scientists, mainstream media outlets and popular culture creations – resulting in a complex historical narrative that transformed a failed use of imperial military aggression into a triumphant humanitarian intervention. Depicting Vietnamese refugees solely as desperate, helpless and stateless peoples this historical treatment has succeeded in producing inaccurate representations. Taken together, these public memories manufactured an atmosphere of designed erasure, constituting a massive misinformation campaign that has severely misled American society. Addressing these historical blind spots the stories rediscovered in *Vietnamerica* fill in various gaps of representation, intercepting the visual distortions created by misleading narratives and creatively challenging the orchestrated amnesia championed by a vast network of American institutions and apparatuses that refuse to fully remember a war that devastated the lives of millions by consistently ignoring the role U.S. imperial violence played in creating the massive displacement of the Vietnamese population.

According to official discourse the Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975 with the Fall of Saigon. Tran's comic does critical historical work by visualizing the reverberating impact of the war in the lives of Vietnamese refugees, remembered through experiences of displacement and passed on to the next generation through memories – both spoken and unspoken – scars and unhealed wounds. War lives on for Vietnamese refugees, whether through untold stories or flickering images in the media threatening to

rupture guarded memories, triggering recollections of traumatic experiences. Memories of a traumatic past are persistent, lying dangerously dormant beneath the surface of a semblance of peace in daily life, ever ready, with explosive potential, to emerge and remind us of what has been lost. *Vietnamerica* reveals the ghost stories and unspoken memories that took years to surface, due to various factors, from the desire to keep trauma within, or powerfully persuasive historical constructions aimed at erasure. Yet, *Vietnamerica* is about so much more than what has been lost. As a family archive it is intimately invested in documenting what was discovered amidst the chaos of a forced migration and war, determined to show the ways his family lived full lives in Vietnam and America. As a visual testimony of these diverse realities Tran's work acknowledges the endlessness or ongoingness of the Vietnam War in the lives of Vietnamese refugees, while never narrowing his family's identity down to their experiences of displacement.

Vietnamerica's retrieval of personal histories and intimate family testimonials reveal that their lives were never defined by the war, that they remained self-determined and were always more than helpless victims caught in the onslaught of violent historical events. Examples of how they continued to live their lives despite their circumstances fill the graphic family memoir, and the everyday, mundane activities of human life create a balance, ensuring that tragedy, loss and alienation are never overrepresented. Moving beyond the paradigms of resistance, often viewed as a stance "against" rather than "for" something, *Vietnamerica* is also a nuanced and carefully crafted response, an act of witnessing and documenting guiding a storytelling endeavor aimed at historical recovery.

Tran's work asserts his family's self-determination, exhibiting Said's insights and instantiating the "sheer indomitability," "mostly unspoken will to go on" and undeniable "willingness to cling to their story, to retell it" embodied by their collective testimonials. In the simplest sense, it becomes a commemorative artifact, an act of remembrance documenting lives left out of dominant historical narratives, in the process redefining associations American society has attached to the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees.

Discussing Satrapi's *Persepolis* Chute points out that graphic narratives establish "...an expanded *idiom of witness*, a manner of testifying that sets a visual language in motion with and against the verbal in order to embody individual and collective experience, to put contingent selves and histories into form" (Chute, 3). Her insights suggest that the powerful interaction and (at times) incongruence between the visual and verbal elements of comics establishes a new testimonial modality. While she employs the term "contingent," my thesis has argued that this hybridity can aid in illustrating marginalized histories and selves, granting visibility to individuals that exist on the fringes of our social consciousness, constantly looking for opportunities to disrupt and destabilize hegemonic discourse and orthodox forms of historical documentation. I see *Vietnamerica* as a salient example of the capacity comics have to become a template, a cultural space and a critical site where the form's visual-verbal language becomes a means to materialize, substantiate, and affectively project representations of and histories from people of color. Expanding how we document what Chute describes as "contingent selves and histories" *Vietnamerica* provides a platform for fading testimonials. In this

capacity, the comics form provides another means through which discarded communities can express historical autonomy. The language of comics, with its ever-expanding hybrid lexicon creates a form of testifying that ensures those threatened by erasure are never forgotten, inscribing stories that infiltrate the pages of official historical documentation. Considering the ways that the American War in Vietnam has been recorded and remembered, the historical significance of collecting stories to create a graphic family memoir that acts as a visual-verbal witness to and documentation of the Vietnam War and its aftermath cannot be understated. We cannot have a full sense of history without taking into consideration and including stories from the ground level. When gathered these concrete individual and collective experiences color the fabric of our historical memory, establishing a deeper, richer, and more nuanced vision of our past.

In *Vietnamerica* we witness the meticulous piecing together of stories and experiences from various family members to create an intricate graphic family memoir. Memory becomes the key testimonial force that instantiates the veracity of his family's journey. Without the documentation of memory, *Vietnamerica* would not have been possible. Essentially, readers are interacting with a comic that has interwoven a vast collection of memories together, including G.B.'s own memories of receiving the stories of family members, and recollections of past experiences visiting Vietnam. While examining Tran's graphic family memoir countless questions emerged. Does it matter that memory can be an instable, unpredictable and ongoing process of reconstruction? How do memories attain a degree of veracity? How do traumatic memories, which are

in stable, become a “vital transmission of knowledge [?]” (Chute, 230-1) In what ways do comics assist in making memories real for those who did not experience them? In many ways all of human history must confront these pertinent inquiries, and to a certain extent, must become comfortable and ultimately embrace the occasional instability of memory. Once we can accept this reality, it is paramount to recognize the importance of allowing people to tell their own stories and then move forward with our scrutiny and critical analysis of the history that develops. For *Vietnamerica* visual and rhetorical control are key. It is precisely the power of historical autonomy, the ability to write ones own historical narrative that imbues Tran’s comic with an undeniable degree of authority. Except this kind of authority is not dependent upon the hegemonic memory of state powers, and exists beyond government-controlled apparatuses. Rather, the veracity of these recorded stories lies in the strength, authenticity and truth of testimonials.

I see *Vietnamerica* engaged in an expansive social, cultural, political and historical conversation concerning the Vietnamese refugee experience and how we understand the construction of history. Tran materializes the act of storytelling and in doing so his work is a movement towards historical reclamation, an archival project of sorts, excavating and gathering the fragmented stories of his family in order to ensure their continued preservation. His work carries broken, fragmented and fading histories, allowing the comic form to become a conduit for their vital transmission. As a whole his comic reminds us to always attempt to re-tell the stories of those that cannot speak, to be adamant in the pursuit to document lives pushed into a position of silence, purposefully

forgotten and shuttled to the margins of historical discourse in America. By (re)presenting history from an intimately personal vantage point, where the lived experiences of his family take center stage, while the direct violence of war – the chemical warfare, village massacres, relentless bombings – is moved to the periphery, he provides a creative strategy, a radical storytelling modality – or *idiom of witness* as Chute describes – capable of critically questioning empire, colonization, militarization and war. By re-telling his family's stories he grants unique insights into the lingering impact of war and the human costs of colonization and occupation, while also positioning his family members as autonomous agents actively making decisions on how they will live their lives amidst the destructive wake of U.S. empire making. As a result, his family members become fully realized historical representatives, rather than the faceless, shadowy figures too often misrepresented through Hollywood movie productions and literature, or helpless refugees reinforced and concretized in the collective social imagination of America through the hyper-visibility of the now iconic photographs of Vietnamese pain and suffering. Reclaiming historical agency from these dominant American remembrances, *Vietnamerica* returns control over their stories, allowing his family to become producers of history, rather than powerless victims upon which history is being made. Seizing autonomy, Tran's graphic family memoir is simultaneously a daringly defiant act of remembrance and resistance.

¹ The definitional boundaries and historical antecedents of the comics form continue to be a source of debate among comic scholars. A number of definitions have been posited, but for my purposes, the definitional parameters of the comics form is not my immediate

concern. I use “comics” as a kind of umbrella term, in a very general, inclusive sense, in order to encapsulate the many permutations of the form, whether comic and cartoon strips, or comic books and graphic narratives in particular. The combination of words and images to produce a narrative suffices as a guiding definition, or in the simplest sense, comics as visual storytelling. This allows for a wider range of works to be included in comics theory, while avoiding the demarcation of comics for the academy and comics for the popular. My primary focus is on book length works of comic art. There are various descriptive titles given to each of the growing genres of book length comics, including graphic novels, graphic autobiographies, graphic family memoirs, graphic narrative or comics journalism for example, all of which I will employ throughout this work. Lynda Barry’s self-described “Autobifictionagraphy” reveals that while comic scholars and enthusiasts may argue over labels, comic creators resist categorization. It’s important to take Scott McCloud’s insights into account whenever considered the defining characteristics of comics. He notes, “Our attempts to define comics are an on-going process which won’t end anytime soon” (McCloud, 23). We would be best served to acknowledge that the form is continually evolving, and thus our definitional parameters must also remain dynamic in order to adjust to this fluctuation. Furthermore, Derek Parker Royal’s discussion on how the academic privileging of “exceptional talents” among comics scholars leads to the exclusion of the large majority of comics from “scholarly consideration” and sustained attention, provides insights into the wider social and cultural impact of the way that academic labels begin to strictly demarcate comics worthy of examination and those met with disregard and dismissed for supposed lack of literary sophistication.

² Scott McCloud notes that the First Amendment protected comics from federal censorship, yet the industry still took action and systematically stifled the integrity and creative possibilities of the medium, establishing a self-censoring board, in the Comics Code Authority.

³ It is worth noting that while extensive animosity was being aimed at the comics medium for its apparent vulgarity and detrimental influence upon American youth, the issue of clear racist overtones among many comic creations dating back to the late 19th century was barely addressed. Indeed, while the Comics Code Authority explicitly banned negative depictions of ethnic or racial groups, Wertham has noted that he purposefully deemphasized his critique and analysis of race and racism in comics in an effort to avoid marginalizing key supporters. Sexual or violent thematic material was condemned, but destructive racialized imagery was permitted, despite the code, and continued to appear on comics stamped with the comics code approval. Oddly enough, the idea that comics fostered “racial hatred” was a charge brought against comics. In an atmosphere rooted in racial hatred, violence and segregation, this accusation, however accurate, seems to be disingenuous. This only reflects the dominant social and political environment where

racism and discrimination can be seen at the foundational core of American society, and was projected into the values and culture of the United States. The Code remained until the early 2000s.

⁴ Charles Hatfield explains that the origins of underground comix can be traced – in part – back to Robert Crumb’s *Zap Comix* No.1, printed and sold in early 1968. While Crumb’s *Zap Comix* is not necessarily the “first” publication from underground comix, Hatfield notes, “it was the first underground title by a lone cartoonist to be published in what was recognizably the traditional comic book format” (Hatfield, 11).

⁵ Among other issues, the group specifically targeted the rapid growth of materialism and consumer culture. With the publication of the anthology *Wimmen’s Comix*, edited by Patricia Moodian, women cartoonists established a platform for the exploration and critique of patriarchy, while articulating feminist perspectives amidst a male dominated comix culture. As with any form of social or cultural resistance, the movement had its shortcomings. Most notably, the work produced during this vibrant cultural explosion failed to meaningfully address arguably the most pressing and explosive issue in the United States at the time: racism and race relations.

⁶ While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment comics gained widespread acceptance and greater respectability beyond the domain of the popular, it is clear that since the turn of the 21st century they have been enjoying a long overdue amount of sustained critical attention from the world of academia. A handful of academic publications emerged in the second half of the 20th century, sparking a slow but steady critical attention marking the establishment of a canon of comics theory if you will. Nevertheless, it was not until the early 1990s and the turn of the 21st century that comics theory really began to take off, spearheaded by Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* in 1993, and *Reinventing Comics* in 2000. Included among the earliest examples of scholarly publications concerning comics are works like Witek’s *Comic Books as History*.

⁷ Working within the superhero genre *The Dark Knight Returns* reimagined a darker, edgier depiction of D.C. comic’s icon Batman, while *Watchmen* subverted the superhero genre, presenting a commentary on mechanisms of power, delivering a poignant socio-political critique of the modern world at the cusp of the 21st century. Likely due to widely recognizable genre and superhero tropes, both experienced immediate success on the direct market, an economic arena *Maus* did not rely heavily on for its success.

⁸ The initial emergence of the term “graphic novel” can be credited to American comics pioneer Will Eisner, who employed the term “in an effort to attract a new audience to his book length projects, beginning with *A Contract with God* (1978)” (Hatfield, 29). Eisner’s goal was to expand the commercial possibilities of the comics medium by

branching out beyond the typical specialized market domain of comic shops and head shops, with the hopes of gaining access to bookstores and ultimately the book trade industry. Despite Eisner's efforts to re-categorize comics under the moniker of the "graphic novel," it was not until the late 1980's that major breakthroughs would open up an avenue into the economically coveted book trade industry.

⁹ It is worth noting that *Maus* did not receive the Pulitzer Prize in the category of "History", "Biography or Autobiography", or even "General Nonfiction", all of which Spiegelman's work could easily have been categorized in. Rather, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in the category of "Special Citations/Special Awards and Citations." This provides insight into how literary elites have had trouble categorizing these newly emerging cultural products that straddle the intersecting worlds of images and words. (<http://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-year/1992>)

¹⁰ In early 2003 Art Spiegelman and Chris Oliveros were able to get the book-industry committee that determines subject headings to introduce a graphic novel category. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/11/magazine/not-funnies.html>)

¹¹ Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of Two Towers* and Chris Ware's *Building Stories* are among the most creative examples of comics expanding the aesthetic and narrative possibilities of the form that also fall under the title graphic novel, yet do not neatly fit within this categorization due to their innovative and experimental formats.

¹² The visual amplification of marginalized voices made possible through graphic narratives in autobiographical, biographical, or memoir form becomes an example of what Gillian Whitlock has called "autographics." See Gillian Whitlock, "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of Comics," *Modern Fiction Studies* (Winter 2006)

¹³ Viet Thanh Nguyen has called attention to the ways that labels like the "Vietnam War" or "American War in Vietnam" also conceals and ignores the impact the war had upon surrounding areas, Laos and Cambodia in particular. He asserts that both descriptors are misnomers. In order to acknowledge the ways people on both sides of the war in America and Vietnam have come to understand the war, in this paper I will use both names interchangeably to describe the war.

¹⁴ No consensus has been reached concerning what constitutes the most ancient antecedents of the comics form visualizing history. If we follow Scott McCloud's historiography of the comics form, then the pictorial manuscripts discovered from the ancient worlds of Mesoamerica are the first comics produced in human history. He specifically pinpoints the *Zouche-Nuttall Codex*, one of the few known Mexican codices that date back to pre-colombian times. It is believed that they were created between

1200-1521, C.E. by the Mixtecos, indigenous Mesoamerican peoples that once inhabited the region now recognized as Oaxaca, Mexico. Originally painted on deerskin, the codex documents history from the Mixtec region, recording the life of the Mixtec ruler, Eight Deer Jaguar-Claw. Depending on the definitional boundaries, we can look further into history for an earlier example. Trajan's Column is another ancient example of pictorial historical documentation in a recognizable comic form, revealing a deep lineage of storytelling. Completed in 113, C.E., the column was a commemoration of emperor Trajan of Rome's victory in the Dacian Wars fought between 101-106 C.E. A sprawling monument National Geographic has described as an "ancient comic strip," the column, meant to be read from bottom to top, is a 126-foot spiraling marble pillar comprised of 155 scenes containing 2,662 figures carved into the structure. It is worth noting that scholars have questioned the historical veracity of the column, noting that its depictions are "like a T.V. series" and more "inspired by" than "based on".

(<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/trajan-column/index.html>,

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/trajan-column/article.html>)

We can certainly question the historical accuracy of the ancient Mixtec Codices as well. Whether or not these examples can be unequivocally categorized as comics is up for debate. Both do employ comic conventions recognized by comics scholars, specifically sequential art and visual storytelling, but neither utilizes words in tandem to produce a narrative.

¹⁵ In Witek's landmark text, and arguably the first extended academic inquiry into the comics form, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Johnson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar*, he emphasizes that the most concrete examples include the short-lived Entertaining Comics (E.C., formally known as Educational Comics) war comics publications *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*, under the editorial guidance of comics pioneer Harvey Kurtzman (Witek, 15). Witek also highlights a handful of publishers employing comic books as history, including the Gilberton Company in the 1950s. As the title suggests, he analyzes the historical works of Jack Johnson (*Comanche Moon* and *Los Tejanos*), Art Spiegelman (*Maus: A Survivor's Tale*) and Harvey Pekar (*American Splendor*), situating each as the earliest examples of comics dealing with historical subject matter. Perhaps most importantly, his work unapologetically situated the comics medium as an art form deserving of sustained scholarly attention.

¹⁶ Chute acknowledges that while Japanese manga and U.S. comics traditions developed independently, by the 1970s "these spaces of the popular were expanded globally, and really reinvented...to address the disturbing legacies of war" (Chute, 145).

¹⁷ *Maus* and *I Saw It* laid the groundwork for comics moving into the 21st century. In just under two decades several preeminent comic publications in the genres of biography, autobiography and memoir have been published, including Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, groundbreaking works of comic art (and history) that have garnered critical acclaim. The former has been adapted into a Broadway play, while the latter was transformed into an animated feature film. Bechdel's work provided visibility for LGBTQ+ youth by documenting her experiences growing up in rural Pennsylvania, where she had to conceal her sexual identity. A family archive of sorts, she recreates select moments of her father's tragic closeted life as a gay man, while also documenting her own coming out story. More in line with my interests, Satrapi's *Persepolis* bears witness to the Islamic Revolution, from a child's perspective, documenting her experiences during and immediately following the revolution. Working in different capacities, both of these works of comic art are producing alternatives to dominant historical narratives.

¹⁸ Just one year later Shigeru Mizuki published *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths* (*Soin Gyokusai Seyo!*), a fictionalization of his experiences with war, which he explains in the manga's afterword, is a book of "90 percent fact." It was only recently published and translated in English by Drawn & Quarterly in 2011. His work further supports Chute's argument that a distinct genre in comics globally concerned with addressing war began to crystalize in the 1970s. (<http://www.tcj.com/reviews/onward-towards-our-noble-deaths/>)

¹⁹ Rarely discussed by comic scholars, we could also look to 1957 for antecedents of comics as history, when the Fellowship of Reconciliation published *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*, a short comic book focusing on the life of a black man living in Montgomery under Jim Crow laws, the events of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the roles played by Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. Additionally, the comic discusses the methods of nonviolence and its connection to Mahatma Gandhi.

²⁰ Given my liberal extension of the category "comic," following the flexible description of comics put forth by Derek Parker Royal in his introduction to a special issue of *MELUS*, *Introduction: Coloring America: Multi-Ethnic Engagements with Graphic Narrative*, I categorize her work as a graphic narrative.

²¹ It is worth noting that anti-war protests during the Vietnam War coincide with the Civil Rights Movement, with the two overlapping at times, most evident in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s final years when he directly recognized the war in Vietnam, poverty, capitalism and racism as simultaneous, intersecting sources of human oppression and exploitation. Chute's discussion focuses on WWII, the Cold War and the Vietnam War in particular, never explicitly taking into account the potential influence social justice demands from the Civil Rights Movement may have had on the comics form. The history of the contributions of black cartoonist during the Civil Rights Movement and other cartoonists of color during the latter half of the 20th century has been tragically overlooked in comics studies. For examples of scholars working to recover these contributions see Sheena

Howard's work and Adilifu Nama's *Super Black: American Popular Culture and Black Superheroes* in particular.

²¹ See Chute, 154.

²³ With the creation of weapons of mass destruction, and the use of the atomic bomb on two Japanese cities, the social milieu of the time was justifiably fraught with nuclear anxieties. Global society was grappling with the implications of nuclear weapons, especially the devastating realization that we may have set in motion an apocalyptic path towards mutual destruction. Simply put, complete annihilation of our species was now a real possibility, and that truth demanded new forms of representing reality. This environment dramatically influenced and shaped comics, from the underground to the popular.

²⁴ Vietnamese American scholars have analyzed the way the Vietnam War has been memorialized in the United States. In particular, the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial stands as a clear example of the ways the United States have positioned the war in Vietnam as an "American tragedy" as opposed to a "Vietnamese tragedy."

²⁵ Since confirmation of the My Lai incident, historians have come to a census that this was no extraordinary anomaly, but the search and destroy military practice of overkill and complete annihilation that guided all military operations during the Vietnam War. In other words, this was no exception, but the rule.

²⁶ Privileging alternative histories like individual testimonials also falls in line with the imperatives of Ethnic Studies and its various sub-disciplines, from Asian American Studies to Africana Studies and Latino/a Studies.

²⁷ Subsequently, by questioning the legitimacy of American military intervention in Vietnam, the stories of Tran's family challenge the position of the United States as a global power, exposing imperial violence perpetrated on its behalf by providing yet another historical example of the devastation left in the wake of America's military aggression. In this sense, one could argue that *Vietnamerica* also becomes a powerful cultural act of anti-imperialist resistance.

²⁸ Personal correspondence with G.B. Tran: August 30, 2015.

²⁹ Noam Chomsky provides a nuanced discussion of the "Vietnam Syndrome" in his text, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*. He writes: "Great efforts were made after the 1960s to try to reverse and overcome this malady. One aspect of the malady actually got a technical name. It was called the 'Vietnam Syndrome.' The

Vietnam Syndrome, a term that began to come up around 1970 has actually been defined on occasion. The Reaganite intellectual Norman Podhoretz defined it as ‘the sickly inhibitions against the use of military force.’ There were these sickly inhibitions against violence on the part of a large part of the public. People just didn’t understand why we should go around torturing people and killing people and carpet bombing them. Its very dangerous for a population to be overcome by these sickly inhibitions, as Goebbels understood, because then there’s a limit on foreign adventures” (Chomsky, 33-34).

³⁰ Refugees from other regions of Southeast Asia, including Cambodia and Laos were included in this massive influx into the United States. See Espiritu and Freeman.

³¹ Espiritu refers to a Gallup poll taken in 1975. James M. Freeman notes that public opinion polls showed that fifty-four percent of Americans opposed Vietnamese refugees coming into the U.S., with only thirty-six percent in favor. These sentiments went beyond ordinary citizens, as elected officials also expressed disapproval, including Governor Brown of California (Freeman, 43).

³² During the Cold War era, “refugeeness” and the socio-legal object of the refugee became central to the development of the United States as a global power. It’s during this time period that “refugeeness” becomes an ideological construct sharply defining and determining the “difference between the supposed uncivilized East and the civilized West” (Espiritu, 8). Within this context, to be labeled a refugee produced a racializing effect, demarcating white populations in the Western world from their darker skinned counterparts in the Global South. For Vietnamese refugees in the United States the racialized dimension of their socio-legal status complicated matters further as they soon discovered they would have to navigate already established identifications, placing them in impossible positions. Recognized as model minorities, inassimilable foreigners threatening the American body politic (particularly its racial composition), and impoverished, destitute refugees (questioning the legitimacy of the nation-state), the daily lives of Vietnamese refugees in America forced them to constantly grapple with and confront these socially and historically constructed perceptions.

³³ In my discussion of the influence the Vietnam War had on underground comix creators during the 1960s and 1970s, this symbolic figure emerges, playing an important role shaping understandings of the war’s social impact. See discussion from Chapter 1.

³⁴ See Oxfam’s global inequality report.

(https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp-reward-work-not-wealth-220118-summ-en.pdf)

(<https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2018/jan/22/inequality-gap-widens-as-42-people-hold-same-wealth-as-37bn-poorest>)

³⁵ See Zinn, 271.

³⁶ It is worth noting, Tran's Uncle Vinh's experiences run contrary to Howard Zinn's historical discussion of the Vietnam War. Zinn emphasizes the ways that the Northern Vietnamese forces were able to gain the trust and support of the Vietnamese people on an unprecedented scale. He notes that they made simple, practical promises and delivered, like taking land back from elites, corrupt landlords and officials and returning it to Vietnamese farmers, essentially redistributing power by providing the most basic of human needs (Zinn, 478-9). Vinh's experiences are examples that provide a glimpse at the small segments of Vietnamese society that were neither swayed by the South nor the North during the war, but simply wanted to live their lives in peace.

³⁷ Tran gives extended treatment to his grandfather, whom he never met, Huu Nghiep's life story. He visualizes his social activism at the head of nationalist rallies while attending Saigon's top schools. Documenting that he eventually earned a medical degree studying abroad in France, only to return home to a rural life in order to assist his fellow countrymen living in poverty and without access to medical care. He continues to explain that after returning home, during the Japanese invasion his grandfather rallied to Ho Chi Minh's cause, noting that as a Vietminh operative much of his work was done covertly, undermining the Japanese occupation. Tran explains that Huu's activities would eventually gain the attention of the Japanese occupation forcing him to leave his family in Mytho during the fall of 1946. He would never see his wife Le Nhi again. Given G.B.'s father's apathy towards Huu Nghiep, his inability to forgive him for abandoning the family to dedicate his life to the communist cause, the inclusion of his grandfather's story is a critical act of historical recovery, and an extended gesture of incredible empathy.

³⁸ Although much more intense, and rooted in a tragic history of absence, Tri Huu's indifference to his father's story parallels G.B.'s disinterest towards his family's history and homeland.

³⁹ While several colleges now have Ethnic Studies departments, the first and only college of Ethnic Studies in the U.S. was established here at San Francisco State University in 1969, after a six-month student and faculty strike.

⁴⁰ For a thorough description of the multiple waves of migration out of Southeast Asia see James M. Freeman's *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans 1975-1995*, as well as *The Waves of War: Immigrants, Refugees, and New Americans from Southeast Asia* by Carl L. Bankston III and Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo.

⁴¹ See Scott McCloud's discussion in particular, from *Understanding Comics*.

⁴² Tran addresses the reality of an internal displaced population throughout *Vietnamerica*. He calls attention to the realities faced by South Vietnamese that were unable to leave Vietnam, documenting how they had zero correspondence from loved ones for months after the Fall of Saigon when the North Vietnamese government banned all communication with the U.S. Tran's grandmother talks about this uneasy feeling, not knowing whether her daughter was alive and safe. Additionally, the repercussions for not openly standing with the North Vietnamese during the war were swift. Tran's father's childhood friend Do was an example of what happened to some South Vietnamese immediately after the North took control of the country, sent to "reeducation camps" for months or years for some.

⁴³ As Espiritu explains, "Like Clark and Anderson AFBs, Camp Pendleton emerged out of a history of conquest: it is located in the traditional territory of the Juaneno, Luiseno, and Kumeyaay tribes, which had been 'discovered' by Spanish padres and voyagers who traveled to Southern California in the late eighteenth century"(Espiritu, 33).

⁴⁴ The judges assumption plays right into what Espiritu describes as the "ethnic assimilation" narrative, which positions Vietnamese as the "good refugee" openly embracing the "American Dream" (Espiritu, 5-6). Furthermore, this reflects the false assumption that American society openly embraces foreign refugees or immigrants.

⁴⁵ Personal correspondence with G.B. Tran: August 30, 2015.

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