

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

Drawing Herstory

An Exploration of Trauma in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* and Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's *Grass*

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Année académique 2022-2023

Master [120] en langues et lettres modernes,
orientation générale, à finalité approfondie

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to offer my thanks to my supervisor, Véronique Bragard, for constantly keeping me motivated to keep up the good work. Her feedbacks enabled this master's dissertation to evolve into the work you are about to read.

I would also like to thank my mother for doing everything in her power to make sure I could always work in the best possible environment, and my two closest friends, Kenza and Valentin, for providing a fresh perspective every time I needed one, and for always being supportive of my work despite not always understanding everything.

Thank you to Lara and Jessica for taking the time to proofread my work and for giving me precious advice. And eventually, a warm thank you to Lucie, Emma, Lena, Kim and Martin for being the emotional support that I needed.

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INTRODUCTION

The point of departure for this research project is the question of violence, the trauma that goes along with it, and the various forms it can take in literature, and specifically, in graphic novels. The corpus used in order to study that problematic is composed of two graphic novels: Thi Bui's *The Best We Could* and Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's *Grass*, respectively released in 2017 and 2018. In addition to having been published a year apart, they are relevant to study together because both stories explore the unsaid of tragic and unknown historical events, from a point of view scarcely present in history: the point of view of women. Thi Bui's work is heavily linked to pregnancy and motherhood in the exploration of her parent's past in Vietnam. By retracing her family's past, she intends to solve the trauma that has been passed on to her to prevent passing it on to her newborn. As for Gendry-Kim's work, it depicts the testimony of a victim of sexual abuse by the Imperial Japanese Army during the Japanese occupation of the Korean territory. What makes them differ, however, is the material they work with. Thi Bui focuses on unraveling her family's past, making her tied to the material she uses. Her graphic novel is an autobiography. As for Gendry-Kim, *Grass* recounts the testimony of Ok-Sun, a woman living in the House of Sharing, an institution dedicated to former victims of sexual abuse by the Japanese army. While Thi Bui dives into her past for resolving intergenerational traumas, Gendry-Kim creates a space for Ok-Sun's voice to be heard. Both authors may have different aims with their novels, however, they do address similar aspects: trauma and the violence that caused it, under the form of graphic novels.

Trauma can be described as slippery and elusive, according to Davies and Rifkind (2020: 1) or as "an emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (Balaev, 2008: 3). As for Cathy Caruth, whose research focuses on the language of trauma in her book *Unclaimed experience* (1996), trauma is defined as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, 1996: 11).

When it comes to representing trauma, two main visions exist. On the one hand, Caruth theorized trauma as something unrepresentable. According to her, trauma is more than a pathology, it is a truth unavailable and “[t]his truth is in delayed appearance and its belated address cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very action and out language” (Caruth, 1996: 4). In other words, she argues that our language cannot be used to carry the idea of trauma because our language falls short in accurately expressing the depth of that pathology, and its consequences. She would maintain that it “resists simple comprehension” (Caruth, 1996: 6).

On the other hand, Viljoen developed another view on trauma, in her book *War Comics: A Postcolonial Perspective* (2021), in which she argues that trauma is in fact representable, not directly but through visual techniques that convey the experience. Viljoen’s ‘dark’ writing counters Caruth’s idea that it is impossible to represent trauma. In Viljoen’s study of non-fiction graphic novels, she argues that “although trauma may be difficult to articulate in the usual way, we should also admit that holding onto the notion that it cannot be represented too steadfastly reifies a false binary between subject and object, body and mind” (Viljoen, 2021: 3). To put in another way, aiming to represent the facts in an accurate manner —rather than throughout a subjective approach— limits the authors in what is possible to do when it comes to representing violence and trauma. She suggests that ‘dark’ writing, which consists of focusing on the aesthetic so as to represent the ineffable, characterizes a number of comics since it is “a way not only to represent violence but also to transfer some of the ineffable experience of violence itself without merely providing a mimetic copy of it” (Viljoen, 2021: 5). For her, ‘dark’ writing must be understood as shadowy and indirect (Viljoen, 2021: 23), putting the shadows that is usually in the background at the center of the frame. As we shall see, violence can be conveyed without being represented. Following her methodology, we will here pay attention to how Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do* and Keum Suk Gendry-Kim’s *Grass* employ ‘dark’ writing, with a view to convey violence and the traumatic response that goes along with it.

Viljoen’s analysis focuses on graphic novels because the medium seems suitable to receiving and transmitting these kinds of themes. In graphic novels, trauma and memory have received a lot of attention because the medium has been used to depict stories addressing these topics, starting with *Maus* by Art Spiegelman in 1986, a graphic novel that tells the story of the author’s father at Auschwitz. In *Documenting trauma in comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories and Graphic Reportage* (2020), a book by Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind,

which studies how graphic novels are visual reflection engaged in telling a story and not only artistic work, both authors explain it is precisely with *Maus* that memory became central to the field:

for us to get the forms (comics) and the concept (trauma) the right way around here, understanding the latter as not somehow begetting the former, but itself taking shape through its interaction with comics' cultural form. The relationship between comics and trauma is far closer to that of the metaphorical chicken and egg: the two are bound in one another's genealogies, locked into a mutually constituting and continually symbiotic relationship with no clean beginning or end. (Davies & Rifkind, 2020: 9)

In other words, they state that trauma and graphic novels go hand in hand together. This is what is highlighted by Nabizadeh as well in her book *Representing memory in graphic novels* (2019).

Comics are

ideally suited to representing the plurality of lived-experience because they rely on exploratory, experimental, and unorthodox modes of representation to raise the readers' awareness of social, political, and historical issues, and ontological approaches to these concerns. (Nabizadeh, 2019: 1).

It means that graphic novels are gifted with a particular plasticity that allows them to portray such narratives, in a way that a traditional novel could not do. Memory, just like comics, is polysemiotic (Nabizadeh, 2019: 3), which means that it is composed of both words and images. In her book, Nabizadeh intends to examine contemporary comics and how they represent personal, political, social and historical memories. Her argument is that comics and graphic novels are ideally suited in order to give a voice to minorities that have been silenced. In order to address topics such as trauma, the book argues that graphic novels "generate a productive interface between private and public, and archival memories and the tensions between the are artfully represented through the mechanics of the medium in representing time and space" (Nabizadeh, 2019: 18). The author highlights that a multitude of ways exist to represent memory and trauma by marginalized voices. The modes of representation are endless, unorthodox, and divergent (Nabizadeh, 2019: 21).

As for Davies & Rifkind, they argue that since trauma is elusive and slippery (2020: 1), it is interesting to focus on how graphic novels actually documents trauma. Put differently, the question is: how is trauma addressed if the representation is impossible due to the elusive form of trauma? They exemplify how it can be done by explaining that some authors choose to materialize trauma. It can happen through the representation of a timeline, materializing the time or through the representation of a vase in the graphic novel *Billie, Me and You* (2011). This graphic novel shows a vase in good condition, then broken, then reassembled back together

and then wonders whether or not the vase is still normal, after all the events he went through (Hague, 2020: 184). This creates a parallel to a person who would have experienced traumatic events, felt broken then assembled back together and this materiality is heavily linked to plasticity of graphic novels.

This research project inscribed itself in a crisis of representation which impacts the way trauma is addressed in literature. According to Patricia Yeager, in her article “Consuming Trauma: or the Pleasure of Merely Circulating” (1997), trauma has started to be a recurrent topic in literature, making it a product that is consumable. It makes her question how do we talk about traumatic events and what do we owe them? She denounces how the economy is profiting from those stories and questions “how far should we go in invoking the ghost, how far in consuming its traumas?” (Yeager, 1997). This is a problematic Spiegelman had to face as well, while writing *Maus*. In the postmodern world, the Holocaust almost became a business that commercializes the memories from that historical event (Staub, 1995: 41). It shows in an illustration of the author at the beginning of the second book (*Maus II: And Here My Trouble Began*) in which Art is represented at his drawing table, over a mountain of dead Jewish bodies (fig.0.1). This drawing is accompanied by the following sentences: “At least fifteen foreign editions are coming out. I’ve gotten 4 serious offers to turn my book into a TV special or movie (I don’t wanna.)” (Spiegelman, 2003: 201), which emphasizes how trauma has become a consumable commodity.



Fig. 0.1: Art at his desk (p. 201)

Therefore, we shall see how both graphic novels use ‘dark’ writing so as to convey the violence experienced by the protagonists throughout the visual aspects of the medium, not making it explicit but implicit to the work, not consumable for mere enjoyment but understandable by the reader to experience the pain. Viljoen, via her concept of ‘dark’ writing, intends to suggest that there is an ethical way of representing trauma, therefore countering the risk of making it consumable. This ethical representation

may be done through the method of ‘dark’ writing which expressly includes the ineffable in the way it transmits the experience of violence and trauma and thus may help us to do this in a more complex way where content and process knowledge are both activated and made to rub up against each other in a reinvigorated understanding of the visual representational process and our involvement in it. (Viljoen, 2021: 187)

To rephrase it, Viljoen argues that her concept of ‘dark’ writing can address stories about trauma and violence ethically, because it provides the experience of that violence without addressing it directly. We shall see that *Grass* and *The Best We Could Do* develop various visual techniques through which they make the reader feel the pain and the traumas of female experiences of historical events.

The first chapter contextualizes the historical events in which the two stories take place: The Asian Pacific War and the Vietnam War. This chapter will also detail the stories told in the graphic novels. The last part of this chapter intends to explain how both graphic novels challenge the traditional narrative framework by rewriting these historical moments in focusing on herstory. By moving the frame away from what is traditionally told, both authors focus their frames on unknown stories, through familial archives for Bui or through the testimony of an unheard victim for Gendry-Kim.

The second chapter dives in the analysis of Bui’s *The Best We Could Do*, which consists of the first approach to the various elements a graphic novel can use, in the aesthetic, in order to represent the ineffable. The gutter, which refers to the blank space in between panels, will first be addressed. The gutter suggests without clearly showing, making the reader an active participant when it comes to creating meaning. In Thi Bui’s work, we shall see how she uses the gutter to express parallels, fractures, and freedom. The following part will be dedicated to the analysis of the color palette used by the author as well as the artistic styles and how it is linked to Vietnamese’s history. Eventually, the last part will focus on analyzing how the author plays with the dismantling of the pages so as to convey the violence and the traumas.

The third chapter focuses on Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's *Grass*, and just like the previous chapter, analyzes the visual elements that are used to convey the violence experienced by the characters. It explores the role of the line, which, through the thickness and the intensity of it, can evoke emotions and violence. Secondly, the focus will be on the landscapes, which feature heavily in the narrative. The landscapes take on an ambiguous role, both appeasing and frightening. They will be studied through various lenses: the title, the spatial situation, and the senses in comics. Eventually, the last part of this chapter will focus on the representation of the perpetrators — the Japanese soldiers and the Soviets— and the representation of the victims. Gendry-Kim's choice in the way she represents the perpetrators, and the victims is fraught with meaning.

CHAPTER 1: REFRAMING HISTORY

Before diving into the different visual ways to convey trauma, it will be relevant to focus on the context in which the two graphic novels are inscribed: The Vietnam War and The Second World War, with a focus on South-East Asia. This contextualization will help to situate the two stories and later, will help to show how *Grass* by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim and *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui challenge the usual narratives that can be found in the media. As the title of the chapter mentions, the medium used to tell those stories allows for an innovative frame.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

THE COLD WAR AND VIETNAM: THE CONTEXT AROUND THI BUI'S STORY

The Best We Could Do recounts the story of Thi Bui during the Vietnam War. It is relevant to understand this conflict before diving into the analysis of the graphic novel. However, it is impossible to explain the development of the Vietnam War without understanding the Cold War. As we will see, those two conflicts cannot be seen separately. George C. Herring explains in his article "The Cold war and Vietnam" how the Cold War shaped the Vietnam War:

The cold war and the American war in Vietnam cannot be disentangled. Had it not been for the cold war, the US., China, and the Soviet Union would not have intervened in what would likely have remained a localized anticolonial struggle in French Indochina. The cold war shaped the way the Vietnam war was fought and significantly affected the outcome. The war in Vietnam in turn influenced the direction taken by the cold war after 1975. (Herring, 2004: 18)

Therefore, we will first focus on the Cold War with a view to understand when, how and why it started, before diving into the Vietnam War. To help with this reminder concerning the Cold War, Stanislas Jeannesson's book *La guerre froide* (2002) will be used as the principal source of information.

A reminder of the cold war

The Cold War is not a conflict that occurred in the traditional way of the term. A traditional conflict manifests itself through physical confrontation between the main opponents. However, the particularity of the Cold War is that the two main opponents, the United States and the U.R.R.S. were never in direct opposition on the battlefield but were opposed ideologically. This is why Walter Lippman used this expression to define it (Jeannesson, 2002: 3). From 1947 until 1990, the two opponents never fought directly. Nonetheless, they initiated many armed conflicts, one of them being the Vietnam War, along with the Korean War, for example.

The two ideologies that opposed each other over more than 20 years are, on one side, capitalism and, on the other side, communism. The U.S.S.R. embodied the communist ideology and was firmly against the capitalist system since for its leader and people, it was responsible for the first World War that had just taken place. On the other hand, the United States tried to impose the capitalist system worldwide and feared the expansion of communism, especially in Europe (Jeannesson, 2002: 104). Both countries were absolutely certain that their ideology was the one that should prime over the other. The Cold War manifests itself under the form of a multitude of conflicts during which the two opponents tried to impose their way of thinking. On one side, the Westerners felt like they defended democracy and saw totalitarian regimes, such as communism, as aggressive. On the other side, the Russians claimed to embody peace and progress.

Even though the official year designated as the start of the Cold War is 1947, according to Stanislas Jeannesson, the beginning of the war can be traced back to 1917 (Jeannesson, 2002: 5). This year was defining in the implementation of the two ideologies mentioned above. In 1917, the U.S.S.R. is marked by the October Revolution, led by Lenin. On the other side of the ocean, Wilson suggested a *new diplomacy* based on capitalism with its fourteen points. In 1917, however, the Cold War was not yet material. The United States stayed away from European politics for a while and Russia was being ignored by European governments. The year 1941 is a turning point in the development of the Cold War. The world is impacted by its second World War. The U.S.S.R. and the United States of America joined forces against Nazism. As long as they were united against it, the two countries seemed to be working together. The representative of each government even met on certain occasions. For example, it happened during the

conference of Yalta or the conference of Potsdam in order to discuss what to do with Germany after the defeat. The atmosphere was said to be relatively good during those meetings.

The first materialization of the Cold War took place with the Blockade of Berlin. After the Second World War, Germany and Berlin were divided into four parts, each of them managed by either Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States or France (Jeannesson, 2002: 34). The last three nations joined their forces and kept their part of Berlin unified, however, the U.S.S.R. wanted to implement a communist regime on its part. This is in this context that the first materialization of the Cold War took place. The government of the U.S.S.R. put pressure on the other governments so that they would leave their parts of Berlin to the Soviet Union's hands. In order to do so, the Soviet Union tried to sabotage the Western Allie's supply ways (such as railway and road). To counter this, which is referred to as the Berlin Blockade, the Western Allies organised the *Berlin Airlift* in order to bring supply to West Berliners.

The Vietnam War

The Berlin Blockade consists of the first actual materialization of the Cold War in which it can be understood that two ideologies are opposed. Another materialization is The Vietnam War. This conflict took place between 1955 and 1975 (Herring, 2004: 18). This war did not start as part of the Cold War but ended up being part of it, involving a side supported by the United States and thus defending capitalistic values. The other side was led by a communist representative: Ho Chi Minh. Vietnam used to be a French colony up until 1940. Due to the Second World War, France fell over to Germany and Japan took over in Vietnam. Japan imposed its power over Vietnam until 1945, the year it was defeated. After Japan was forced to evacuate the occupied territory, the Vietnamese nationalists, led by Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of Vietnam. After WWII, the French tried to get Vietnam back, which started a conflict between Vietnam and France. This happened in 1946 and in parallel, the Cold War was slowly evolving and started to be increasingly more present.

The Viet Minh, from North Vietnam, fought against the French colonialism. It happens that those Viet Minh were not only nationalists but also bearers of communist values:

Ho Chi Minh had been a Communist operative for many years. Although Americans could find no evidence of Soviet support for the Viet Minh, they viewed the revolutionary

movement suspiciously. When Mao Tse-tung's Communists seized power in China in August 1949, they offered sanctuary and military assistance to the Viet Minh, heightening U.S. concerns. (Herring, 2004: 18).

The year 1949 is thus the year when the United States started to focus on what was happening in Indochina territories. At first, Vietnam was of no particular significance to the United States. However, it became difficult not to associate what was happening there without understanding this conflict in terms of Cold War. George Herring underlines the Americans' behaviour as an inability to see that it was just a nationalist movement and had nothing to do with the opposition of ideologies: "Unable to accept the essentially nationalist origins of the Vietnamese revolution, Americans were certain that Ho and the Viet Minh were part of a monolithic Communist bloc controlled by the Kremlin" (Herring, 2004 :18). This explains why in 1950, the United States started to assist France against the Viet Minh. In 1954, Vietnam was divided into two parts, at its 17th parallel with, on one side the communist party, and on the other, the Americans. The latest had one objective: to block the expansion of communism on the territories. In order to do so, they created an independent, non-communist government in South Vietnam. Eventually, this government was dismantled in 1963. North Vietnamese leaders fought against America with a lot of means, which led to a lot of destruction in both sides of Vietnam.

The year 1968 is considered to be a turning point in this war. In January of 1968, America had been fighting against the communist in Vietnam for a few years and the results were not what they expected. In February 1968, a cease-fire was observed by both sides to respect the Tet. The Tet is a Vietnamese holiday celebrating the new year. However, the Viet Minh, who had become stronger, did not respect the cease-fire, and attacked the American military bases in South Vietnam. The Americans reacted quite late but still succeeded in repelling the Viet Minh. Jennifer Walton, in her article "The Tet Offensive: The Turning Point of the Vietnam War" describes the events of the attack as such:

At 2:45 a.m. on January 30, 1968, a cadre of NLF guerillas successfully penetrated the outer wall of the U.S. embassy compound in Saigon. The embassy compound in Saigon. The Embassy lay under siege for six and a half hours. This was the most visible attack and provided powerful imagery for Americans watching news reports at home, but the NLF also hit five of the six largest cities in South Vietnam, including the imperial city of Hue, thirty-six of the forty-four provincial capitals, and sixty-four districts' capitals. The NLF occupied Hue for almost a month until the Marines retook the city. Street-by-street and house-by-house fighting, combined with an intensive air campaign, turned back the NLF and North Vietnamese forces. (Walton, 2004: 46)

The Tet Offensive was not a success for North Vietnamese but implied a lot of casualties. In North Vietnam, they escalated to 40,000 while for the casualties among the U.S. and South Vietnamese soldiers combined, the losses numbered about 3,5000 (Walton, 2004: 46). Regarding the civilians, almost 12,200 were killed and many were forced to flee their homes.

After 1968, the Vietnam war could still be strongly associated with the Cold War, even though the United States started to diminish the forces sent to Vietnam. China, also under a communist regime, joined Russia in helping the Viet Minh and the United States were eager to end this war they were losing:

After 1968, the cold war and the war in Vietnam remained intimately connected, but in more subtle and complex ways. By 1969, the Soviet Union and China were engaged in fighting along their long common border. Johnson's successor Richard M. Nixon sought to capitalize on the rivalry but reshaping relations with each cold war enemy and gaining an edge over both. Eager to end the Vietnam War, which he considered a distraction from more important foreign policy priorities, Nixon and his top adviser Henry A. Kissinger sought to use the leverage gained from improved relations with the Soviet Union and China to end the Vietnam War in a way that would secure the "peace with honor" they deemed necessary to maintain America's world position. (Herring, 2004: 20)

Relationships with Russia were slowly getting better, and the U.S. wanted to discuss this war. Russia played a double game and continued to supply the North of Vietnam. This led to a massive attack in 1972, another one in 1974 and a last one in 1975. This marked the end of the Vietnam War. Michael Mandelbaum explains in his article "Vietnam: The Television War" (1982) how the defeat took place:

The Vietnam War was also the first one in which the United States suffered a clear defeat. An army of half a million Americans failed to crush the attempts of the National Liberation Front and North Vietnam to overthrow the government of South Vietnam. By 1973 the American troops had gone home. In 1975 the North Vietnamese army conquered the South. (Mandelbaum, 1982: 157)

Losing the Vietnam War had a grave consequence for the United States. It is referred to as the domino effect. Losing Vietnam to the communists meant that the Indochina territories were now more prone to communist invasion. Laos and Cambodia also fell to communist rebels in the spring of 1975. However, it did not form a block of communists as it could have been expected, "old nationalist rivalries provoked the various Communist governments to fight each other" (Herring, 2004: 21).

Keum-Suk Gendry-Kim's graphic novel takes place during the Japanese occupation of Korea and during the Asian Pacific War (1941-1945 (Yoshimi, 1995)). The comfort women,¹ such as Lee Ok-Sun in *Grass*, were unrecognized victims of the Japanese occupation. So as to understand the conflict, its different aspects will be developed. The focus will be given to the Korean case since this is the country from which Lee Ok-Sun, the woman giving her testimony about being a victim of sexual slavery during the Japanese occupation of Korea, comes from. Majority of the information regarding the comfort women presented here comes from Yoshiaki Yoshimi's book *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during WWII* published in 1995. The following articles will also be used in order to complete the information: "Korean 'Comfort Women': The intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class" by Pyong Gap Min (2003), and "From Imperial Gift to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representation of 'Comfort Women'" (2000) by Chunghee Sarah Soo.

The Asian Pacific War is a conflict that pitted Japan against many countries (notable ones are China, the United States, Holland, and Britain). Korea was also involved in the conflict but is a specific case in the Asian Pacific War. As a matter of fact, Korea became a protectorate of Japan early on in the 20th century, in 1905, as part of their imperial ambition. It implies that Korea was controlled and protected by Japan. Five years later, in 1910, the Japanese officially annexed the country. Japan's colonization of Korea lasted until 1945, after the defeat of the Japanese army in the Asian Pacific War. Under Japanese control, Koreans were forced to abandon their language, their names, their religion, and their cultural narratives in order to be replaced by Japanese versions.

While Korea was under the control of Japan, the Japanese army also started conflicts with China, as part of the Sino-Japanese war. Later, Japan entered World War II. The first stage of the conflict took place between 1931 and 1937. The Japanese army started the war on the 18th of September 1931 in China by blowing up sections of tracks of the South Manchuria Railway. Manchuria is a region in the Northeast of China. In March of the following year, the

¹ The term 'comfort women' is the term that is commonly used to refer to the victims of sexual slavery during WWII by the Japanese soldiers. Later in this chapter, it will be explained why this term is problematic and a substitute will be suggested.

Japanese army and the Navy Units were dispatched up to Shanghai. The year 1932 (Soh, 2000: 64) is also the year of the first registration of the infamous comfort stations. In July of 1937, according to Yoshiaki Yoshimi, Japan began a “full-scale aggressive war against China” (Yoshimi, 1995: 49). This sums up the first part of the conflict. Concerning the sexual slavery, the comfort stations existed mainly in urban centres. At the time, those stations were mostly run by civilians and not yet by the Japanese army (Soh, 2000: 64). According to Chunghee Sarah Soh, in her article “From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the ‘Comfort Women’”, these comfort stations were mainly supplied by Japanese female employees.

The second stage of the conflict took place between 1938 and 1941. This period was marked by the invasion of Nanking, a Chinese city, in December 1937. This is when the massacre of Nanking took place, involving massive murder and rape caused by the Japanese army on the Chinese population. In 1938 and the year after, “more than one million regular army troops were deployed on the Chinese mainland” (Yoshiaki, 1995: 49). Regarding the comfort stations, the army started to build them more systematically (Soh, 2000: 64). A significant transformation occurred as the stations transitioned from civilian oversight to military supervision. At that point in time, women from the Korean colony were targeted.

The third and last stage of the conflict ran from 1941 to 1945. In December of 1941, Japan went to war against the United States, Britain, Holland, and their allies after the attack on Pearl Harbor (Soh, 2000: 64). Most of the territory of Southeast Asia and some islands in the Pacific were also threatened by the Japanese army. Comfort stations were built where the Japanese soldiers established their camps. The conflict went on until 1945, when Japan was defeated on the 8th of August. The end of the war is infamously known for the two atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In short, from 1932 up to 1945, an imperial war took place opposing Japan to many Asian countries and the United States. Korea was extremely impacted by this conflict since the country had been under Japanese ruling since 1905. Between 1937 and 1945, during what can be referred to as “the last stage of colonization” and according to Pyong Gap Min, “[t]he Japanese government mainly used Korea as a place to supply food and other war materials for Manchuria.” (Min, 2003: 943). Korean laborers were also sent to Japan and other Asian Pacific countries in order to serve the Japanese. Regarding comfort women, they were mostly Koreans and lived for a long time as unrecognized victims of the Japanese army. Due to the Japanese

occupation of Korea, it was easier for the army to supply their comfort stations with Korean women. The goal behind the installation of comfort stations was to avoid Japanese soldiers from raping any woman on the colonized territory, and therefore from catching and spreading diseases among soldiers (Yoshimi, 2000: 65). Instead of raping any women, Japanese soldiers were provided with comfort stations, where the raping was controlled and institutionalized by the government. It centred the violence inflicted by soldiers on women in one place.

The comfort women shared some family and social background since many of them came from poor families and were unable to receive a proper education (Yoshimi, 2000: 105). The way they were rounded up may vary from one victim to another but mainly, it implied lies and forms of violence of some kind. According to some testimonies that can be found in *Comfort women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during WWII*, some women were offered jobs somewhere only to discover later that it was all a lie, and they would be trapped in a comfort station, forced to be used by Japanese soldiers. The living conditions of these women were appalling, many had to serve, or rather, were raped by a large number of soldiers. Moreover, even if the primary goal of these stations was to control the transmission of sexual diseases, comfort women suffered from those diseases and did not receive a satisfactory treatment.

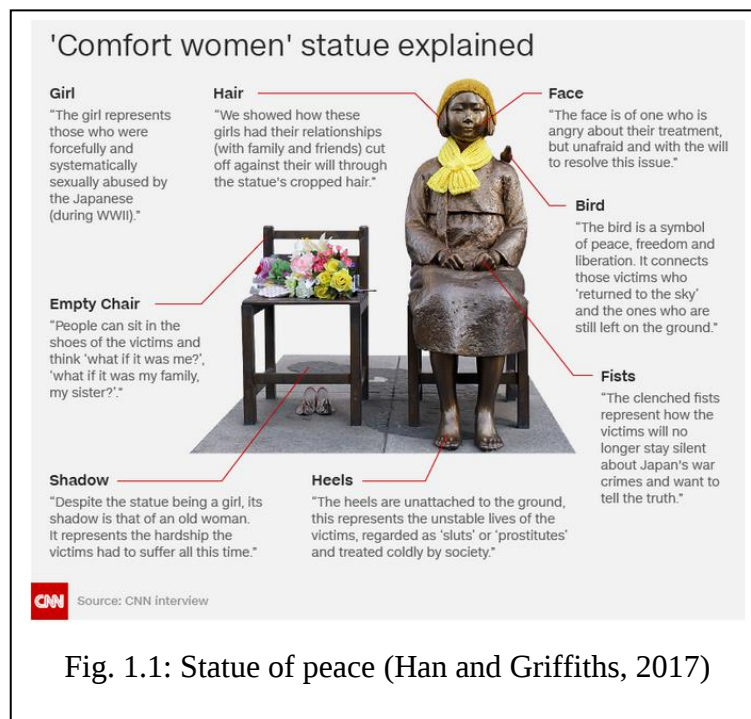
After the end of the war, the hardship that comfort women had to go through was still very present. The situation is explained by Yoshimi in the last chapter of his book (1995). There was a movement of repatriation for Japanese comfort women, for them to be sent back to the Japanese mainland. However, for comfort women coming from other countries, such as Korea, Thailand or China, the situation was different. The army did not help them go back to their homeland. It appears that they were left on their own. It should be mentioned how comfort women were regarded after the war. They suffered from social discrimination once they escaped the stations because of the role they had been forced to play during the war. Former comfort women also had to suffer the aftereffects of diseases and injuries along with psychological traumas caused by the numerous rapes and the violence they had to go through on a daily basis (Yoshimi, 1995: 193). Those consequences created barriers for former comfort women to get married or regain society. Moreover, many of them ended up sterile due to bad treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.

The condition of Japanese and Korean comfort women is little-known for different reasons. First of all, not many reports made by the Japanese army are accessible and thus, not

much information is available on the topic. The Japanese government never admitted to committing these atrocities. According to Suzanne O'Brien in her introduction to *Comfort women: Sexual slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, the governments were "[e]ager to attract or maintain Japanese development aid and investment, [this is why] the postwar governments of Asian nations colonized or occupied by Japan during the war have often been reluctant to press issues of Japan's responsibility to its victims" (O'Brien, 1995: 5). Moreover, the governments of other Asian countries from which women were taken in order to serve as sexual slaves did not recognize their position as victims: "Not only the Japanese but other Asian governments as well would just as soon forget, for different but complementary reasons, that comfort women ever existed" (O'Brien, 1995: 5). For example, and as exemplified by the translator of the book mentioned above, in October 1998 the president of South Korea, Kim Dae-Jung, accepted the apology granted by the Japanese government and promised not to bring up any issue that would be somehow related to Japan's colonization of Korea.

However, the unrecognized victims of the Asian Pacific War started legal actions in order to receive the proper apologies that they want and deserve. As pointed out in the article "Korean 'comfort women': The intersection of Colonial Power, Gender and Class", Korean women established the *Korea Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan* in November of 1990. This council implemented the Wednesday demonstration. It consisted of protests that would take place every Wednesday in front of the embassy of Japan in Seoul. It started on the 8th of January of 1992, on the day the Japanese Prime Minister visited Korea. This lasted for a total of 22 years. The demonstrators wanted only one thing: for the Japanese government to admit the organisation of sexual slavery, make an official apology, and pay due compensations.

The former victims were joined by younger generations of Koreans supporting their demands. Those demonstrations led to the erection of what is called the *Statue of peace*. The statue was placed facing the Japanese embassy as an act of protestation. It was designed by Kim Soe-Kyung and Kim Eun-Sung, made of bronze, and represents a girl with short hair in traditional clothing. She is represented with a bird on her shoulder in order to represent peace. According to a CNN article, the statue is responsible for a diplomatic incident between Japan and South-Korea. Japan refused to give a sincere apology and tried to compensate the survivors with money they did not want. The erection of the statue provoked the recall of the diplomats from South Korea. Japan also halted talks on a currency swap. The same CNN article provides an explained picture of the statue.



SYNOPSIS

NARRATING THE VIETNAM WAR IN THI BUI'S *THE BEST WE COULD DO*

In the preface of *The Best We Could Do* (2017), the author describes her work as a memory reconstruction in which she struggled to "present history in a way that is human and relatable" (Bui, 2017, preface). The graphic novel is an autobiographical work that explores the author's family history with one goal in mind: to better understand who she is in order to embrace her role as a mother and not pass the trauma on to her son. This narrative consists of an exploration of the Vietnam War from a little-known angle. Gussain and Jha's article

“Trauma, Memory, History and its Counter Narration in Thi Bui’s Graphic Memoir *The Best We Could Do*” (2021) points out how Bui ‘reconstructs’ history: “She presents the South Vietnamese viewpoint and also their suffering as victims of the war. Bui presents those personal stories which were never recorded but are strong enough to challenge the very discourse that marginalized them at the first place” (Gussain & Jha, 2021: 878). Thi Bui offers a counter point to the traditional narrative of the Vietnam War, suggesting a more personal approach and allowing for unknown actors of the war to voice their experience.

Bui’s narration is not chronological but goes back and forth between the present and the past to emphasize the implications past events have on the present. The opening chapter focuses on Bui giving birth to her first child. This consists of the premise of the author’s questioning regarding her past. Becoming a parent is for the author a turning point that makes her think about the implications. She realizes that “FAMILY is now something [she has] created and not something [she] was born into” (Bui, 21). This raises questions about her responsibility as a parent, as a mother, as a Vietnamese mother who escaped Vietnam during wartime with her own parents.

Thi’s family is the focus of the second chapter, as a starting point in her investigation. The story is constructed around the births of Bui’s brothers and sisters, dead or alive. This is the construction of the family she was born into. Stella Oh, in her article “Birthing a Graphic Archive of Memory: Re-Viewing the Refugee Experience in Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do*” (2020) mentions the struggle Bui had to “present history in a way that is human and relatable and not oversimplified” (Bui, preface). However, Oh explains that the way Bui used the births as a center point of her story moves away from usual discourse of the Vietnam War and focuses on a familial aspect. She argues that “[t]o this effect, historical events such as the First Indochina War, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Geneva Accords, the Vietnam War, and the Fall of Sài Gòn fade into the background as births and deaths of children and the separation of families take center stage. The female body becomes a site for writing and rewriting the pains of labor and delivery of children and the devastation of war on the country of Việt Nam” (Oh, 2020: 74). Bui’s presentation of this chapter makes the reader move away from the traditional narrative, as already hinted by Gussain and Jha’s article (2021) and gives it a more personal approach, “crossing the borders between the personal and the political” (Oh, 2020: 74). The focus given to motherhood in Bui’s narrative opens the possibility of the individual eye onto topics such as colonization, patriarchy and war.

In the third chapter, Thi Bui explores her childhood and the impact her parents' trauma had on her, creating parallel and playing with the options offered by graphic novels, such as the gutter for example, in order to tackle these topics, as will be shown in the following chapter of this dissertation.

Thi's father, mostly referred to as "Bô" is given space in the fourth chapter. To understand why Thi felt scared around him, she asks him questions about his childhood and discovers that Bô's stories reveal "wounds beneath wounds" (Bui, 93). She realizes that Bô was born in 1940, when Vietnam was still under French's supervision, until France surrendered to Germany. After that, the Japanese came in order to block Chinese supplied route, until they surrendered as well in 1945. That is when the nationalist movement, better known as the Viet Minh, tried to make of Vietnam an independent country. As mentioned earlier, the French tried to win back Vietnam. During all those historical events, Bô was a child who had to experience poverty due to inflation, food shortage and violence from part of the military but also due to what could be called a dysfunctional family. His father was violent with his mother, left with the Viet Minh and left Bô in the care of his grandparents. Sally McWilliams, in "Precarious Memories and Affective Relationships in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*" (2019) would use the term "cotemporality" to underline how Bô's childhood and Bui's childhood are intertwined. Her analysis "describes how the graphic memoir accomplishes this critical engagement [challenging the hetero-patriarchal dynamics of assimilation and the cultural politics of forgetting] through its formal qualities of cotemporality and generational parallelisms, the intertwining of event and insidious trauma, and the performativity of memory through the visual technologies of maps and photographs" (McWilliams, 2019: 316). Her article focuses on how, by using maps and photographs, Bui creates a new approach to the conflict, as mentioned by other authors before, and how that creates a generational trauma for the children. If Bui uses this technique of cotemporality for the father's narrative, she does the same for the mother's one in the following chapter.

Bui's mother was a beautiful woman to whom the author is often compared. Her mother's life was totally different from Thi's life or Bô's life. Mâ grew up in a privileged environment, she was able to go to an elite school in French, she did not suffer from the food shortage, etc. Bui emphasizes, through the realization of her mother, the consequences of French colonialism: Mâ is brainwashed into speaking French, does not know much of Vietnamese through school. It contrasts with Bô's storyline, who is lucky to attend a French

school. That shows the oscillation, the ambiguity and the complexity of the conflict taking place.

Even though the Vietnam War does happen in Bui's narrative, she inserts this historical event to her own personal narrative, which focuses on the individuals and the construction of the family she was born into. Her family lived through the famine, the inflation and the Tet offensive, and that is what is emphasized; the suffering of the forgotten victims.

The last few chapters deal with the family's escape from Vietnam and their settling in America. This installation is rhythmized by some difficulties due to racism, the difficulty to find a job and most importantly, to create a home for the family. The story ends the way a circle completes itself as the narration goes back to Thi Bui right after she gave birth, reflecting on her family's journey and on how to establish her own family with her Vietnamese roots without passing down her trauma.

The Best We Could Do is a graphic novel that has been studied under different angles in various articles, some of them already mentioned in the synopsis of the story. Most of them underline the counter history proposed by Thi Bui as she tells the story of the Vietnam War from an unusual point of view. She provides a familial perspective, focusing on an individual point of view with the inclusion of familial archives, such as the passport photos the family took in Malaysia in order to reach America. Gussain and Jha underlines that insertion as a way to present an alternate reality to the one "where the Vietnamese identity was reduced to voiceless, faceless, and nameless 'boat people'" (Gussain & Jha, 2021: 880). Stella Oh and Marie Drews focus on another aspect of this historical retelling. Both authors focus on the female body inside the narrative. Stella Oh's article "Birthing a Graphic Archive of Memory: Re-Viewing the Refugee Experience in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*" emphasizes the position of the female body in this narrative. By opening the story with Bui's pregnancy coming to term, it positions motherhood at the center and according to Oh, "[r]eferences to pregnancy and motherhood are intimately tied to the discursive project of nationbuilding. Maternal sensibilities of keeping the family safe in an unpredictable world engulfed by war and violence are central to the narrative." (Oh, 2020: 74). Marie Drews's article "'Something I Have Created': Breastfeeding and Motherhood trauma in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*" (2022) gives even more attention to the female body and the trauma linked to motherhood. She focuses on "the process of breastfeeding, an embodied act of cross-generational mother nurture, as the entry point from which Bui begins to expand existing narratives of the refugees experience"

(Drews, 2022: 123). She explores how breastfeeding links Bui to her own mother and the traumas that they both share, as it will be shown in the following chapter.

The election of the graphic novel form is also discussed in the articles. Gussain and Jha argues that, since the Vietnam War was a very televised conflict, choosing to tell that story under the form of the graphic novel was a way to go against the “backdrop of ‘saturation’ of images and ‘mechanical objectivity’, Bui draws what she wants to tell the world.” (Gussain and Jha, 2021: 881). They also argue that this form has the ability to show the absent, in this case, the absent of the Vietnam War narrative: the people at the margins. Stella Oh also mentions, regarding the form used by Bui, that it helps to approach history not only in terms of time but also in terms of space. The graphic novel allows for a compilation of both (Oh, 2020: 77).

KEUM SUK GENDRY-KIM’S *GRASS*

This graphic novel is the testimony of a comfort woman from Korea named Lee Ok-Sun. The entire graphic novel is in black and white with an Indian ink inspired aesthetic. This creates an effect of black and white that, according to the author in an interview, is very fitting to represent sorrow and sadness (2021). The characters alternate between being represented with cartoonist features and very realistic features. This contrasts with the sometimes very detailed and grave representations that can be found in the graphic novel. There is also a particular importance given to landscapes which will be studied later. The story starts in 1996 in China, where Lee Ok-Sun had been living for the past 55 years with her husband and her children. The story will then proceed, in the following chapters, to tell Ok-Sun’s entire story.

Before being the old woman presented in the introductory chapter, she used to be a little girl who desperately wanted to go to school in Korea in 1934. Unfortunately, she was born a girl in a poor family, so most of her days were centered around helping her mother with the chores and taking care of her siblings. In July 1937, the war broke out between China and Japan. Japanese troops invaded China quite easily. Japan had already colonized Korea in 1910. In this context, Ok-Sun is sold by her parents to an udon-shop owner in Busan with the promise that she will be sent to school. However, she realizes that she was bought to work for free in the shop and will not receive an education. The owner even tried to make her prostitute herself. In 1942, since she refused, the owner sold her to a tavern where she was just put to work once more. In the tavern, she was asked to cook and to clean along with other little girls. One day,

she was sent on an errand from which she never came back because on the way back, two Korean officers working for the Japanese army captured her. She was fifteen years old at the time.

After being captured, she was thrown on a train with other Korean girls, some older and some younger than her. The group was moved to places they were unable to recognize. They ended up in a comfort station in the middle of nowhere. At first, they had to carry out forced labor along with Korean men. The girls shared one room and, one evening, after a full day of work, despite their tiredness, some Japanese soldiers entered the room and raped the girls. From that moment on, the girls were comfort women and had to service Japanese soldiers anytime they wanted. The graphic novel describes the poor conditions the girls were living in: no condoms were used, they had to undergo many medical examinations, there was no period accommodation, they had to service many men, especially on Sundays because it was the soldiers' day off and they would take this time off to come and visit the comfort stations. Despite the medical examinations, Ok-Sun contracted syphilis, which made her genitals swollen. In order to "heal" her, she was exposed to mercury. That made her permanently infertile and took away from her the prospect of bearing her own child one day. Moreover, she was forced to service soldiers right away, despite the pain she suffered due to the disease. The graphic novel shows how Lee Ok-Sun's friend got pregnant from servicing a Japanese soldier and how she was forced to continue to service until she was eight months pregnant and then forced to work in the kitchen. After giving birth, she had had no time to see her baby as it was already taken away from her.

In 1945, Japan lost the war and Korea was liberated. Lee Ok-Sun was eighteen years old and had been servicing Japanese soldiers for the past three years. The comfort stations were deserted by the soldiers; however, no one informed the comfort women, who were left there without any explanation. Even though the Japanese army did not abuse them anymore, the former comfort women were disregarded as soon as they escaped to comfort station to reach cities. They were judged for what they had undergone during the war. Their position as victims was not recognized, and it was hard for them to go back to a normal life after the war. In order to escape poverty, Ok-Sun went to find a man who used to be nice to her at the comfort station and ended up getting married with him. However, he vanished, and she was left alone to take care of his family until one day, they discovered he remarried elsewhere and built a new life with children that Ok-Sun would never have been able to give him. She then got remarried to a

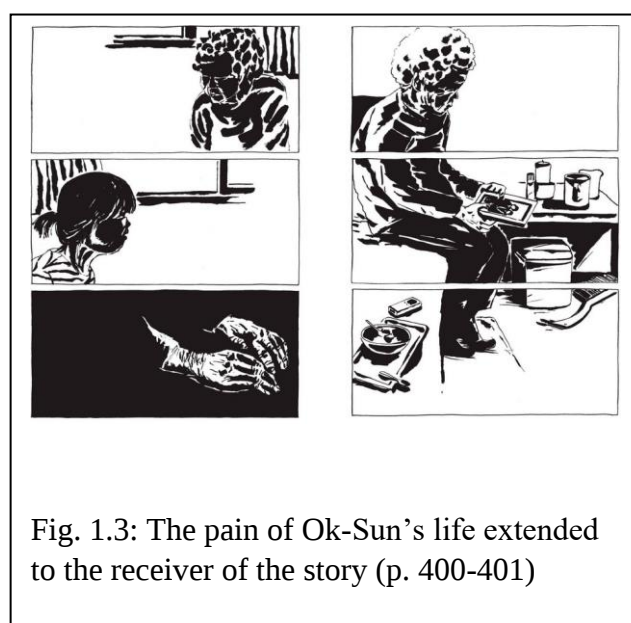
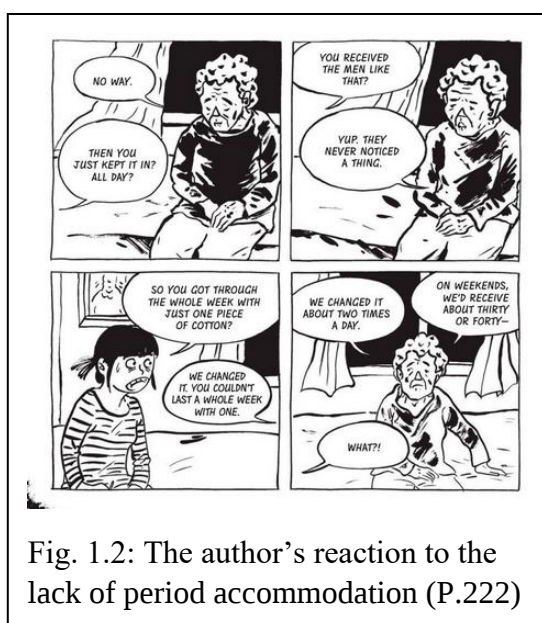
man who ended up having a gambling problem, but she decided to stay with him to take care of the little boy he had. She stayed there until 1996 and then, the reader is brought back to the initial narrative. In 1996, a Korean program helped Koreans find their long-lost family. She decided to go back to Korea with this program to restore her life and to live in the House of Sharing, an accommodation for former comfort women. Lee Ok-Sun started protesting for her rights in the Wednesday demonstrations for the Japanese president, Shinto Abe, to recognize and compensate the victims of Japanese abuse.

Ok-Sun's testimony is sometimes interrupted by the author's present life, her struggle with deadlines from her editors, her willingness to please the granny she is interviewing and her fear of being the cause of painful reminiscence for the granny. In an interview of Gendry-Kim, she mentions her way of approaching a story and the telling of a story. She explains the need for a distance in time between her and the events she talks about. She became aware of the issue concerning the comfort women, the victims of sexual slavery, in 1993 but only tackled the topic in *Grass*, some twenty years later. Since this story is not autobiographical, unlike *The Best We Could Do*, the author is not linked to the story the same way as Thi is for the Vietnam War. Through the testimony of Ok-Sun, the author confronts herself with a story of extreme violence. The author shares her concerns regarding the effect this interview has on the granny:

The first thing I see is the naked bronze torso of an elderly woman. It makes me uncomfortable. Was I just stirring up painful memories for Granny Lee by trying to tell her story as a comic when all she wanted was to put the past behind her? I know many people have come with similar agendas... (Gendry-Kim, 155).

Gendry-Kim is fully aware that the granny's life is marked by extreme violence and as the story goes on, she represents herself impacted by that brutality. It could be said that the author is at the same level as the reader, she gets to listen to the story and reacts just like the reader. On page 222, Lee Ok-Sun explains how the women had to deal with few cottons during their period. The author drew herself taken aback by this revelation and she occupies the same position as the reader while listening to the testimony for the first time (fig.1.2). Another passage of the graphic novel lets the reader know how much the author is affected by the story she listens to. The choice to present a story in black and white, as explained earlier, is to emphasize the sorrow and the sadness of the story. The author thought it was quite fitting to set the tone. When the granny is talking about her cheating husband that she found years later after he disappeared with another wife and children, the reader can understand all that pain and the

hardship she went through because the author chooses to represent the granny and herself in reverse color, the dark completely taking over them (fig.1.3). At this point in the narration, Ok-Sun is reaching the end of her testimony and the author, as well as the reader, get to see her knowing all her background story and the entirety of the difficulties that she went through. The fact that both women in this moment are represented with that same sorrow shows the impact of the testimony on listeners.



A NEW LIGHT SHED ON THE VIETNAM WAR AND ON VICTIMS OF SEXUAL SLAVERY: GRAPHIC NOVELS AND ARCHIVES

Grass and *The Best We Could Do* are two graphic novels that approach history in a different way and that shed a new light on the Vietnam War and on the Japanese occupation in Korea. Both narratives are characterized by an intimate approach to those topics. Thi Bui traces her story through familial archives. Her father and mother's testimonies are supported by pictures of their childhood in Vietnam or by passport pictures, for example. The whole narrative of *Grass* is based on Lee Ok-Sun's testimony and the way she approaches what happened to her. Scenes that represent the author listening to the granny are a way to remind the reader of that intimate aspect of the story. Even though the overall approach is not completely the same, *The Best We Could Do* being an autobiographical narration while *Grass* is the transcription of

a testimony from someone the author is completely unrelated to, both stories provide an intimate approach to those historical narratives. Moreover, those texts can be put in parallel with the concept of “herstory”. This concept rises in response to the fact that history is mainly told from men’s point of view. Heroes of many historical events are men, and women are usually ignored. Based on a play of words with the pronoun “his” present in “history”, this approach does not aim to rewrite history from women’s point of view but to highlight the presence of a gender way too forgotten:

This approach to women’s history substitutes women for men, but it does not rewrite conventional history. To be sure, it raises questions that call for answers by offering documentation about women’s activities -public and private- that happened, but were not included in conventional accounts. It insists as well that personal, subjective experience” matters as much as “public and political activities”, indeed that the former influences the latter. It demonstrates that sex and gender need to be conceptualized in historical terms, at least if some of the motives for women’s actions are to be understood. (Scott, 1983: 149)

With this in mind, *Grass* and *The Best We Could Do*, can be regarded as telling “herstory” of the Vietnam War and the Japanese occupation of Korea. *Grass* uncovers a narration that is not usually addressed and, as it has been demonstrated earlier, is usually denied by the governments involved. For *The Best We Could Do*, as mentioned by Stella Oh in her article, “*The Best We Could Do* provides visual and textual narratives of the Vietnam War that are centered on women and focused on birthing and motherhood, offering a window into individual perspectives on the larger historical context of colonization, patriarchy and war” (Oh, 2020: 77). The entrance of the story being motherhood, it underlines a feminine approach to the historical context described in the graphic novel. It can be understood that both narrations approach history from an untraditional point of view, highlighting other aspects of the conflicts, aspects the general public is not familiar with, and it will be demonstrated how they use archives in order to shed a new light on the traditional narrative, giving voices to the invisibilized victims.

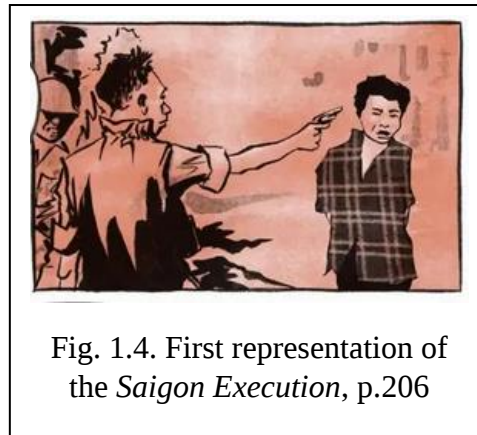
The Vietnam war is usually referred to as the Television War. This conflict was, as a matter of fact, the first to be covered on the news in the United States. Americans witnessed the war from their screens on a daily basis. This is also the first war that the Americans clearly lost. The public is used to seeing the Vietnam war from an American point of view. In his article “The Vietnam war: perceptions through literature, film, and television”, an essay that explores how the war has been treated in various narrative forms, Peter C. Rollins explains that the war

is usually presented as using the motive of corruption of innocence: “The motive provides a formula in which the protagonist leaves a healthy, civilian environment to become immersed in a war that leaves him physically wounded.” (Rollins, 1984: 422). This image of corruption of the American hero is the one that is most famous. This is what happens in *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In this well-known movie, the main character has values that are destroyed in this immoral war. The story ends with madness and violence. Francis Coppola presents “Viet Cong [as] cowboys, while the United States commanders like Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall) [as] rapacious Indians mounted on helicopters”. In this context, the Vietnamese point of view is not really considered in the narrative. Thi Bui rightly highlights that “[r]evisiting this game of war and strategy, [she] think[s] about how none of the Vietnamese people in that video [a video on the Vietnam War that her father gives her while she is doing research on the conflict] have a name or a voice. [Her] grandparents, [her] parents, [her] sisters and [herself] weren’t part of any of the pieces on the chessboard” (Bui, 185). The narrative that is known of the Vietnam War does not include the Vietnamese experience of the situation.

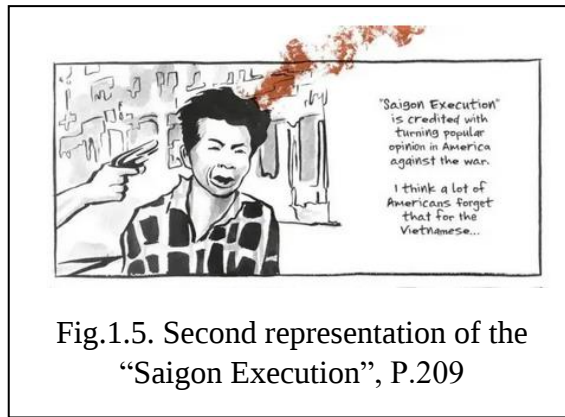
In his article “Vietnam: The Television War” (1982), Michael Mandelbaum also explains that the fact that this war was most of the time shown on TV impacted the opinion of the public: “Regular exposure to the ugly realities of battle is thought to have turned the public against the war, forcing the withdrawal of American troops and leaving the way clear for the eventual Communist victory” (Mandelbaum, 1982: 157). An event that particularly impacted that opinion and that was photographed was the famous *Saigon Execution*, it is “credited with turning popular opinion in America against the war. [Thi Bui] think[s] a lot of American forget that for the Vietnamese... the war continued, whether America was involved or not.” (Bui, 209). The war is thus mainly known from an American point of view and Thi Bui highlights what is it like for Vietnamese, what the American broadcasts never showed.

Thi Bui redrew her version of the *Saigon Execution* in her graphic novel. The original photograph is Eddie Adams, who took the picture during the Tet Offensive. He won a Pulitzer Prize for this picture in 1969, which was seen worldwide and, again, impacted the way the Vietnam War was perceived. It created an antiwar movement in the United States.

What Thi Bui highlights in this passage is how the picture actually lacks the context that surrounds it. The picture represents a Viet Cong, so a communist from North Vietnam, being shot by a liberal South Vietnamese. What the picture does not tell is how that North Vietnamese being killed is the consequences of his own actions. Earlier that day, he murdered an entire family. The first time it is represented by Bui, on page 206, the redraw is made in a realistic way (Fig. 1.4).



No addition was made to the picture, the principal features can be seen such as the South Vietnamese holding the gun, pointed right at the face of the North Vietnamese. The latter is represented with the same expression. In that sense, the picture is used in what Thierry Groensteen would describe in *Le bouquin de la bande dessinée* as a documental use (Groensteen, 2020: 570). It means that the picture is as realistic as possible. However, the famous *Saigon Execution* is represented one last time a few pages after with some modifications (Fig.1.5). In this reproduction, the focus is put on the face of the North Vietnamese. It only emphasizes the moment of his death, and it echoes the sentences that is put right next to it and already quoted before regarding how this picture turned the opinion in America against the war. What is shown by the author is the violence that impacted the perception of the war. Moreover, the author added some blood. This detail is not present in the original picture; however, it emphasizes the already existing violence of the original picture.



Saigon Execution by Eddie Adams is said to be one of the most controversial photographs from the Vietnam War. It is “[o]ne of the most influential and enduring single images from the Vietnam War -certainly the most contested- exploded into the consciousness of millions of Americans in February 1968 when they actually watched, within the comfort of their own homes, as the chief of the Saigon national police executed a manacled NFL prisoner.” (Franklin, 1994: 56). However, a single photograph should not be seen without the context surrounding it, as just explained. The pages that surround the reproductions of this infamous picture in the graphic novel are relevant to better understand the complexity of this picture and of the conflict in general (Fig. 1.6, 1.7, 1.8 & 1.9). As Thi is trying to understand the events, she gets confused by the story her father tells her and the “oversimplifications and stereotypes in American versions of the Vietnam War” (Bui, 207). The American stereotype says that the South Vietnamese are the good guys, and the North Vietnamese are the bad guys, however, Bô’s explanation is confusing for his daughter. At the beginning, the father despises the general that we see on page 205 because he is organizing searches in the city they live in. Nevertheless, a few moments later, on page 206, Bô is defending the same man: “You know, the American media broadcast that all over the world and made South Vietnam look bad -but no one talks about how that same Viet Công, just hours before, had murdered an entire family in their home!” (Bui, 206). This underlines the complexity of the conflict. In this picture, the Americans are complicit of a murder. In the American’s version of the story, they present themselves as the good guys. Nonetheless, this is only an image because this picture unravels the violence on their side as well.



This photograph is also discussed in Sally McWilliams' article "Precarious Memories and Affective Relationships in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*" (2019). This article aims to "describes how the graphic memoir accomplishes the critical engagement through its formal qualities of cotemporality and generational parallelisms, the intertwining of event and insidious trauma, and the performative memory through the visual technologies of maps and photographs" (McWilliams, 2019: 316). It means that Thi Bui creates parallels between her story and the one of her parents through the usage of maps and photographs. Resorting to using these techniques creates an effect of cotemporality. Moreover, the result that stands out is that it provokes a different kind of involvement from the part of the reader. As explained above, the vision of the Vietnam War is of a certain kind in most minds. However, as McWilliams argues, there is a change in perspective because in *The Best We Could Do* the narrative is made so that the reader is closer to the South Vietnamese point of view. Regarding the photograph of the *Saigon Execution*, McWilliams supports the point made above by describing the redrawing of the photograph as becoming a "site of contradictions about the event and this interpretation." (McWilliams, 2019: 333). It means that the picture, and more largely, these few pages of contextualization, function as a call into question regarding the preconceived ideas that the general public has around the Vietnam War. This redrawing encourages to look at this picture with a different perspective. However, the second redrawing (Fig. 1.4) is analyzed in another way than previously. McWilliams understands the additional blood and the smoke as a detail that "makes visible what is lost in the official reprint of the photograph" (McWilliams, 2019: 334). She also argues that emphasizing this wound works as a representation of a larger Vietnamese wound: the trauma created by the Vietnam War.

Thi Bui redraws another picture in her graphic novel, the famously known *Fall of Saigon*. The original picture shows a helicopter on the roof of a building with people climbing on it. This picture was taken when South Vietnam surrendered to North Vietnam, marking the end of the Vietnam War. Thi Bui redraws this picture at the beginning of the 7th chapter. As already mentioned for the previous photo, a picture on its own usually lacks contexts. This is why the following pages focus on explaining what happened following this picture. An aspect worth underlining is what Thi Bui tells us about the American perspective: "The American version of this story is one of South Vietnamese soldiers abandoning their uniforms in the street... Americans crying at their wasted efforts to save a country not worth saving. But Communist forces entered Sai Gon without a fight, and no blood was shed. Perhaps Duong Van

Minh's surrender saved my life" (Bui, 216). It underlines how the story can be different depending on the one who is telling it.

Regarding *Grass*, the author shed a new light on comfort women and more largely on unrecognized Korean victims of the Japanese military. As mentioned earlier, the graphic novel is the testimony of Lee Ok-Sun. Victims of sexual slavery have hardly been recognized as victims, they have been silenced. As Yoshiaki Yoshimi mentions in his book *Comfort Women, Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during WWII*, "until former comfort women came forward to tell their own stories in the past decade, they were largely relegated to the status of minor details, if they appeared at all" (Yoshimi, 1995: 4). This is a problem that is also underlined in the graphic novel. Ok-Sun deplores many times, during the interviews, that "Prime Minister Abe needs to apologize! Abe needs to compensate us!" (Gendry-Kim, 145). Women like Ok-Sun have a hard time finding a place to voice their story, to be listened to. The testimony proposed by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim is exactly this: a possibility to be listened to and to convey her story visually as well (fig. 1.10).



Fig. 1.10: Granny Lee Ok-Sun claiming that Shinto Abe needs to compensate the victim of sexual slavery (p.145)

Moreover, there is an actual problem when the term “comfort women” is used. This term underlines the point of view of the perpetrator. Those women had to service the Japanese soldiers for the comfort of the soldiers. This erases the position of the victim and only focuses on the perpetrator’s perspective. The opening line from *Grass* underlines that injustice:

The term “comfort women” is widely used to refer to the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery. A direct translation of the Japanese euphemism for “prostitute”, *ianfu*, the term continues to be controversial, especially among survivors and the countries from which they were taken, since it reflects only the perspective of the Japanese military and distorts the victim’s experience (Gendry-Kim, 5).

The fact that the author puts those lines at the beginning of a graphic novel, which centers on giving a voice to an unrecognized victim, highlights the author’s intention to respect the position of victim that these women should be granted. Thus, it goes against the term “comfort

women” usually used to refer to them² because the author explains how this term is problematic and justifies why she is still using it. It creates an effect of awareness regarding the problem.

In relation to the *Statue of Peace*, which was mentioned earlier, it must be mentioned that, in addition to the Japanese’s opinion over the relevance of the statue, another debate exists. Indeed, according to Lin Li in the article ““Comfort Women” Memorials at the Crossroads of Ultrationalists, Feminists, and Decolonial Critiques: Triangulating Japan, South Korea, and the United States” (2022), Japanese Ultrationalists have expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the Statue of Peace by vandalizing it or by modifying it online, always claiming that the victims of sexual slavery were willingly involved in the brothels. However, the statue has also been criticized by non-deniers of the victims of sexual slavery’s state. This statue is said to reinforce the myth of the “perfect victim” because it represents a perfect, submissive, and helpless victim (Li, 2022). The problematic is better explained by the author of the article herself:

[T]he Statue of Peace also renders invisible a critical period of time within survivors’ lives: the period between the end of World War II and 1991. Even before the unveiling of the first Statue of Peace, Joshua Pilzer has acutely observed an interesting pattern in the artistic representation of “comfort women” victims which he names the maiden/grandmother dyad. According to Pilzer, this dyad is vividly reflected in two statues at the House of Sharing, a Gwangju-based Buddhist-un nursing home opened in 1992 for Korean survivors of the “comfort women” system. One statue, Unblossomed Flower depicts a young girl “standing amid unopened lotus flowers,” which represents “stolen youth and innocence.” By striking contrast, another statue named Goddess of the Earth portrays “a naked torso of an elderly woman rising up out of the ground”. (Li, 2022: 104)

This statement emphasizes that those statues, even though they aim to honour the victims and educate people on that little-known issue, they create a dichotomy between the “perfect victim” as a child and the granny, which invisibilizes the period of time between the end of WWII and the moment when the victims started to speak up. The most logical reason for this is that during that period of time, the topic was extremely taboo, however, by making that period of time invisible, it also hides the struggles lived by the victims. Indeed, they were denied a decent life

² Since the term is highly problematic because it only gives the point of view of the perpetrator, from now on, only “victim of sexual slavery” will be used to refer to these women.

because they were wrongly associated with voluntary prostitution. *Grass* helps to shed a new light on the victims of sexual slavery by dedicating part of its narrative to the victims as middle-aged women. The chapter “Liberation and the abandoned girls” marks the beginning of this specific period of time, right after WWII and describes the struggles the victims lived through. It underlines that the girls had no money and no home they could go back to because of the shame, forcing the girls to beg in order to survive. The chapter “First marriage” is illustrated by a drawing of Ok-Sun as a middle-aged woman. It focuses on the time when she got married to a relatively nice soldiers who used to work at the comfort station she was in, being a loyal wife to him even though he ran away. After ten years of waiting for him, she realized she had been fooled by him. The last chapter that focuses on the period between the end of WWII and 1991 is titled “My son” and depicts how she ended up in an undesirable marriage, forced to marry in order to gain access to a better status but unable to marry someone who would respect her because of what she was. With those chapters, Gendry-Kim emphasizes an invisibilized period of time in which suffering did not stop, and which deserves to be remembered.

On a larger scale, Gendry-Kim also gives space for other unrecognized victims to be acknowledged. Even though the narrative of *Grass* focuses mainly on the condition of victims of sexual slavery through the testimony of Lee Ok-Sun, victims of sexual slavery were not the only victims of the Japanese military’s behavior. Many Koreans were sent on Japanese lands and put to forced labor. Some were in Hiroshima and Nagasaki when the two atomic bombs exploded. The author of *Grass* first gives space to Japanese victims having lost their mother or their brother because the military did not surrender. She also dedicates a page to the memory of the Koreans that were deported in this land and were never acknowledged: “Many Koreans who had been sent to Hiroshima and Nagasaki against their will became victims of the bombing. They suffered, without even a record of their names. Because they were Korean, they were unable to receive treatment.” (Gendry-Kim, 345). The author underlines the colonialist enterprise taken by the Japanese military by highlighting the fact that they did not have names and that they were disregarded because they were not Japanese.

It can be argued that both Thi Bui and Gendry-Kim shed a new light on the narrative they are telling. The light is given to a more personal and feminine perspective. It underlines how those two conflicts felt for victims that are not usually seen whether it is the South Vietnamese’s perspective that has been erased by the American one or the perspective of the victims of sexual slavery by the Japanese army. As mentioned by Dominic Davies in his book

Documenting trauma in trauma: Traumatic pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage, comics and graphic novels have this ability to work as footnotes for History (Sacco qtd in Davies & Rifkind, 2020: 16). *Grass* and *The Best We Could Do* intend to leave the Eurocentric aspect or the perpetrator's point of view of History in order to shed light on unrecognized victims. It gives another perspective, one that underlines the marks left on those victims.

CHAPTER 2: THI BUI'S *THE BEST WE COULD DO*: DEALING WITH TRAUMA THE VISUAL WAY

The previous chapter intended to give a general overview of the historical context in which the two graphic novels studied are set in. It also demonstrated how these two graphic novels frame the historical contexts in order to testify on behalf of the unknown victims. Following that first chapter, the second one will focus on analysing Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*, a graphic novel first published in 2017 and which is the winner of the American Book Award. In line with what had been discussed in the introduction — the idea that the medium of graphic novel can approach certain topics indirectly, which is a concept developed by Jeanne-Marie Viljoen called 'dark writing' — this chapter will focus on the various visual ways used by Bui to evoke trauma.

As mentioned earlier, Thi's goal with *The Best We Could Do* is to unveil her past and her parents' past, confront it so as to heal the trauma that has been passed on to her. This refers to the concept of postmemory, as developed by Marianne Hirsch. Postmemory was theorized in 1992 and later reworked in her book *The Generation of Postmemory: writing and visual culture after the Holocaust* (2012). Postmemory concerns what has been called the "second generation" or the "generation after", which did not experience the traumatic events themselves but are still involved because it was passed on to them due to family's connections. Hirsch highlights that this generation has been releasing memoirs, novels, etc., which reveal a certain awareness of the trauma without the actual experience of trauma itself. She explains that

[p]ostmemory describes the relationship between that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before —to experience they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among with they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch, 2012: 5)

This concept can be associated with Thi's history. As we shall see, her father's past and unresolved traumas impact how she and her siblings grew up and her mother's experience with motherhood causes stress for Thi as she is about to give birth to her first son.

This chapter is articulated in three parts. The first one engages with the gutter, an element typical of graphic novels that refers to the blank space that lies between two panels. The gutter takes the role of a gap that must be filled by the reader in order to complete the story. According to some theorists, the gutter can be used to indirectly address sensitive matters,

making it a relevant element to focus on in this research. Following this analysis of the gutter, the second part of the chapter addresses how and why Thi Bui uses a symbol linked to Vietnamese's history throughout her narrative: water. The relationship that exists between Vietnamese people and water will be developed with a view to understand why it is relevant in this graphic novel and later, the various ways in which water plays a visual role will be developed. Eventually, Bui's choice of various framings will be analysed. The part addresses how the framing of a page can help to convey meaning beyond simple words and how Bui uses this aspect to deliver the way she and her family felt ensuing the difficult events they went through.

A TRAUMATIC VOID: A STUDY OF THE GUTTER

The gutter³ is unique to graphic novels and is an important part of the specific lexicon of the medium. In *The Best We Could Do*, the gutter is used to emphasize the trauma — both personal and intergenerational — that is present in the narrative. The gutter is said to be a traumatic void because, to follow with the idea of dark writing developed in the introduction, it is a place of non-representation. This is a place that suggests difficult events and/or feelings without drawing them clearly, letting the readers fill in the gaps themselves.

First and foremost, it is primordial to understand what the gutter is. It refers to the space in between the panels and, according to McCloud in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), “[t]he gutter plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are the very heart of the comics” (McCloud, 1963: 66). It is what holds two panels together. Inside of this void, the reader's imagination can genuinely take flight. McCloud further argues that what happens is that, as the readers are looking through the panels, they are not in possession of all the information and thus the readers must draw their own conclusions. In other words, the readers must provide the missing pieces of information, and this happens in the limbo of the gutter. Therefore, the gutter can be understood as a blank space in which the reader is given space to complete the information. Kate Polak, in her book *Ethics in the gutter*, states that “the gutter

³ This part is partially based on a paper realized for the class [LGERM2826] “Comics and Decolonization”, which I took during the academic year 2021-2022 at UCLouvain.

figuratively prompts the reader to engage with what is depicted, creating connections between images and ideas as a part of the reading process” (Polak, 2017:10). The gutter can be understood as the place where the reader is given the opportunity to take on an active role in the story. Polak states that, even though the connection in between two panels is not systematic, the reader can also employ their imagination to create meaning. She goes even further than McCloud in her explanation of the gutter, moving away from the physical space that it is and focusing on a new perspective:

The “gutter” in *Ethics in the Gutter* encapsulates not only the literal gutter -the blank space between panels- but also the range of perspectives embedded in the work and the choices made by artists and writers to not say and not show. **The gutter is not only the physical space between two discrete depicted moments in the panel but is also what it implies: not everything is shown.** [personal emphasis] When two panels are conjoined by a gutter, the gutter represents a space not merely of “imaginative possibility,” as termed by McCloud, but also of material evidence of how the gaze of the reader is situated in specific ways in relation to what is shown. (Polak, 2017: 15-16)

As it can be understood, the gutter is of great interest when it comes to studying graphic novels in relation to the idea of dark writing since — even though it seems to be simply a blank space — it allows for the reader to take on a greater role and for the writer to suggest violent or dreadful events without addressing them directly. This is the place to suggest what cannot be shown.

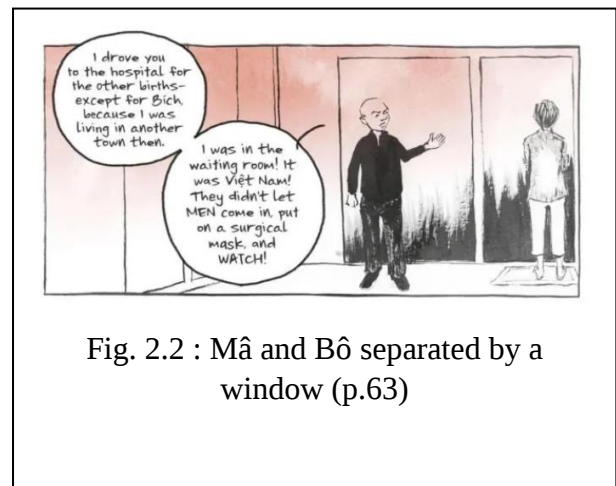
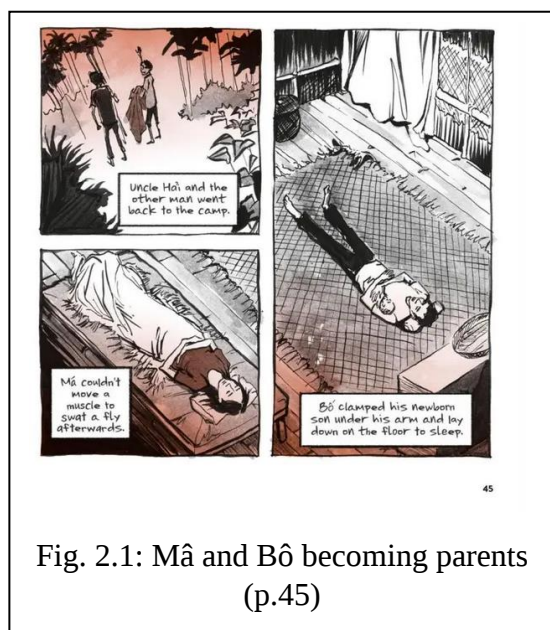
So far, it was argued that the gutter plays a defining role in Thi Bui’s work. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that some theoreticians do not completely agree with the idea of giving so much importance to that aspect of graphic novels. Jan Baetens argues that the gutter has been receiving too much importance in comics studies. According to him, even though it cannot be denied that the gutter has a certain role “1) not all gutters function as gaps; 2) gutters can have other function than the narrative-cognitive functions; and 3) some gutters-as-gaps are meant to go unnoticed” (Baetens 2020: 216). However, unlike Baetens’s conception of the gutter as an element that is given too much attention, this master’s dissertation takes an opposite course by following theories highlighting the importance of the gutter as a meaningful void between panels, such as McCloud’s or Polak’s. This is why the gutter is referred to as a traumatic void in the title; the gutter is a visual element that helps to address sensitive matters without addressing them directly and, in the case of Bui’s work, the gutter emphasizes the traumatic events that she and her family experienced.

Gussain & Jha, in their article “Trauma, Memory, History and its Counter Narration in Thi Bui’s Graphic Memoir *The Best We Could Do*” (2020), assert that the grammar of graphic novels is very suitable in order to address the concept of trauma, particularly because of the gutter. In their article, they argue that trauma, loss and absence that cannot be represented in language can be in the gutter (Gussain & Jha, 2020), an argument that supports Polak’s theory. Gussain & Jha largely focus their paper on understanding the idea of intergenerational trauma, the process of counter narration of history, and how Thi Bui uses the form of the graphic novel to do so. In answer to this article, this part will focus on exemplifying how it does so, which is a missing part from Gussain & Jha’s work. It will do so by exploring in depth how the gutter can contain the concept of trauma, intergenerational trauma, and post-memory.

A FRACTURED RELATIONSHIP: EXPLORING FAMILY DYNAMICS THROUGH THE GUTTER

First, the gutter can work to express a fracture caused by the violence experienced by the characters. This fracture can be seen in the drawing that Bui makes of her parents. The father and the mother are the two characters that the reader can expect to find close to each other, emotionally but also spatially. However, in this narrative, it can be easily understood that the parents grew apart, partially because their marriage was sort of forced out for the mother, who expected Bô to die in his youth due to tuberculosis, and partially because they did not react the same way to brutal events. Focusing on the gutter also means focusing on where the panel ends and where the other begins and wondering why the author decided to draw a void in between. It is particularly salient in the first example (Fig. 2.1). The couple just experienced becoming parents in the middle of a war. The background of those two panels is the same because they share the same room. Nonetheless, the author chose to break it into two with a gutter in the middle. It could be argued that it emphasizes how this experience is extremely different for the both of them. As the story goes on, the mother takes on stronger responsibilities towards their family when the father seems to hide away from their problems. For example, when they are at the camp after escaping Vietnam, the mother is the one taking action to get the family out. (“Once m̃a came back, order and comfort returned. She got us a place in a better tent... supplies for cooking our own food... our names registered, and identification picture taken for processing” (Bui, 266)). She is also the one accepting a devaluing job when they are in America because in that country, their diplomas are not recognized for their value. By

becoming a mother, she took on a burden that her husband seemed to have escaped. In the example mentioned above (Fig. 2.1), the gutter positioned like that provokes a break and highlights the metaphorical space that exists between them. It could be argued that the author plays with the gutter later as well. In the second excerpt (Fig. 2.2), the parents are represented inside of a single panel, however, they both stand in front of a window and are separated by the window frame. So even if they are in the same room, they still have a space that is created between them as they discuss how absent the father was for the mother when she was giving birth. It shows that they might be close spatially but that on a relationship level, they grew apart because of what happened to them.



The gutter also shows the fracture that exists between the children and the father. Thi Bui tells the reader that their relationship with their father was not easy on a relational level. He is described as unpredictable and distant with his children, a behavior that is probably the result of the relationship between him and his own father. The author uses the gutter in order to reinforce the feeling of estrangement (Fig. 2.3 & 2.4). They are in the same room, as the smoke reveals, however, the author decided to put the gutter in between them. It highlights how she experienced the situation, how it was being “left alone with Bô” (Bui, 2017, 71).



Fig. 2.3: Children being left alone with Bô (p. 70)

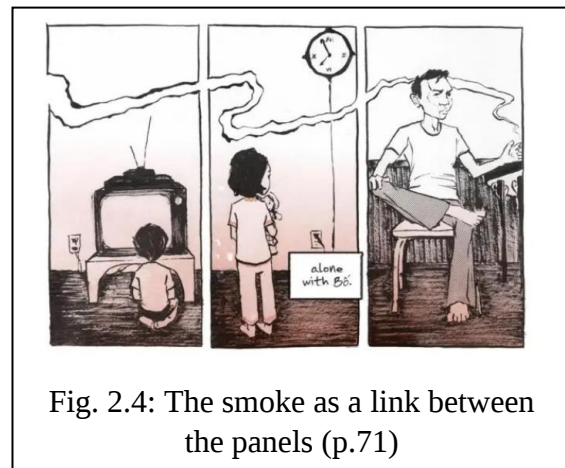


Fig. 2.4: The smoke as a link between the panels (p.71)

The gutter also helps to emphasize the idea of parallel, which shows how trauma can be passed from one generation to another. It does so by putting two panels in parallel. McCloud, in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), underlines the different types of transitions that can happen from one panel to another. Those transitions are the moment-to-moment, the action-to-action, the subject-to-subject, the scene-to-scene, the aspect-to-aspect and finally the non-sequitur. Some of those transitions do not need as much closure as others. The last one, the non-sequitur, refers to the transition from one panel to another with no evident connection. McCloud questions “this last category, [it] suggests an interesting question. Is it possible for any sequence of panels to be totally unrelated to each other? Personally, I don’t think so.” (McCloud, 1993: 73). It means that the panels are always positioned one next to the other with the goal to produce an effect. It could be argued that in the following example (Fig. 2.5), the transition is a non-sequitur one. And thus, we can wonder why the first panel is the father when he was young, facing his own father that he grew to despise and, on the next panel, a representation of the atomic bombs that were dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Panels are not position next to each other without any goal in mind. It can be argued that this juxtaposition works as a parallel. This parallel is even more flagrant because of the forms given to the panels. Both panels have an elongated form, which accompanies the smoke coming from the explosion of the right panel. Since the left panel takes the same form, the reader understands that the panels communicate, one echoing the other. The atomic bomb is an infamous event that caused casualties in Japan and left a mark on the country and its inhabitants. In making these two panels communicate, the author emphasizes the pain and the burden that Bô felt at this moment in his

life, a moment that will have an impact on his own relationship with his own children. Thi Bui not only shows how violent the Vietnam War was but also gives voice to smaller-scale and often unheard victims, such as Bô, who saw his family torn into pieces. In this figure, Bô is confronting his father, whom he does not consider as such, because he abandoned him and was extremely violent with Bô's mother. It is the explosion of the idea of a traditional family, which mimics the explosion of the atomic bomb in the following panel.



Fig. 2.5: Parallel between Bo's childhood and the atomic bomb (p.115)

Another parallel is then created between Thi Bui and her father when they are in their house (Fig. 2.6). They are represented in a similar situation, on one side, her father Bô when he was young, terrified of what is happening and on the other, herself as a kid, scared of her father because he is himself in a state of distress. In this apartment she “grew up with the terrified boy who became [her] father” (Bui, 128). He passed that fear onto her because he was unable to deal with it the way she tries to in order to prevent her own son from that fate. The choice of positioning those two panels one next to the other, in a scene-to-scene scheme, pushes the reader to produce closure so as to understand what the relation is in between the two.



Fig. 2.6: Postmemory (p.128)

PREGNANCY THROUGH THE GUTTER

Up to this point, the analysis of the gutter focused mainly on the father’s trauma and the resulting father-daughter relationship. The mother, mostly referred to as “Mâ”, is also impacted by her past and had to live through traumatic events, some of them related to birth giving, one of the common threads of the story. The first chapter of *The Best We Could Do* is dedicated to that theme with the author representing herself giving birth. As it was mentioned in the article used as a reference in the introductory chapter, childbearing is the cause of some traumas and

torments that the author experiences. Stella Oh highlighted, in “Birthing a Graphic Archive of Memory: Re-Viewing the Refugee Experience in Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do*”, that “[b]y recounting the Vietnam War through the births of babies and the responsibility of motherhood, Bui highlights the ways in which motherhood and nation are deeply interwoven and mutually constitutive.” (Oh, 2020: 74-75). Motherhood came with enormous responsibilities for Mâ. Most of her children were born in a situation of crisis in Vietnam and later, Mâ had to be able to provide for them in a country that was both unknown and hostile. Besides, Bô was not very helpful in the process of surviving and adaptation. The example previously mentioned when the family arrives on the Malaysian’s coasts, where Bô barely supplies the family with enough to eat while, as soon as Mâ returns from giving birth, underlines that she takes on a very proactive role. Motherhood for Mâ also comes with a lot of pain. Her first child, Giang Quyen died a few months after her birth, and she had a miscarriage in between Bich and Thi’s birth.

The context explained in the previous paragraph can be a key to analyzing two panels during which Mâ goes into labor for Tâm’s birth (Fig. 2.7). Her face is divided into two panels, separated by a gutter. It is relevant to wonder why Thi Bui chose to represent her mother’s face broken into two parts. In the chronological order of childbearing, Tâm is the last child of the family to arrive. Hence, Mâ had already experienced the loss of her first daughter and the miscarriage of a child. The gutter in this excerpt can be understood by the reader as the space where all those memories exist, and it underlines the metaphorical fracture that Mâ must have undergone. One could argue that in this void resides all the pain she carries with her. Besides, the panels that corner this representation of Mâ represent her family duties (“Mâ went into labor while making dinner. She finished cooking, let everyone eat and then announced “the baby is coming” (Bui, 42)). This duty might be understood as to what is inside of the gutter. It shows everything that she carries constantly in her mind, putting her family’s needs first.

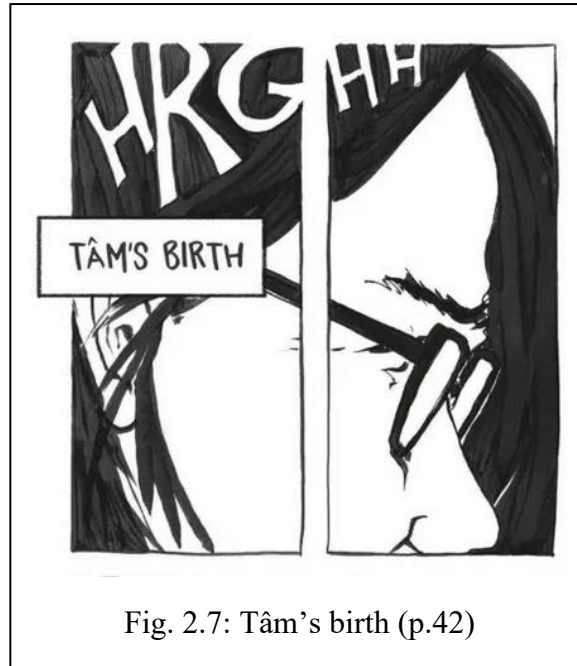


Fig. 2.7: Tâm's birth (p.42)

Marie Drews' article "'Something I Have Created': Breastfeeding and Motherhood Trauma in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*" (2022) argues that the trauma her mother lives with is passed onto her daughter as well. As part of her research, she explains the link that exists between the act of breastfeeding and the idea of trauma in the graphic novel. Marie Drews's essay focuses on the process of feeding a child as "a core facet of both her own and her mother's traumatic introductions to motherhood" (Drews 2022: 122), underlining the intergenerational aspect of this pain. Mâ lost two children, and this is a shadow that haunts Bui as she faces motherhood for the first time. Bui's son is suffering from jaundice and that makes her think about mortality ("I thought about the mortality of my infant son" (Bui, 310)). She discusses it with her mother right before breastfeeding her son, the meaningful act by which she is able to cure him. According to Drews, the fact that Bui has a hard time breastfeeding her child is connected to Mâ's trauma of having lost her first child, Giang Quyen. Drews analyses a page from the first chapter in which Bui faces her first night as a mother. She confronts the routine the nurse put in place after one birth and, according to Drews, the gutter helps to be aware of Bui's feelings:

Readers can see illustrations of the familiar (i.e. the hospital room, the medical equipment) in a sequence and via interrogating the gutters and the transition between panels, consider Thi's bewildering emotional experience among those spaces and objects. The complexities Bui faces as she begins to breast feed shift from illustrations of visible exteriors toward the internal dislocation and psychological strain of an embodied process unique to the reproductive body (Drews, 2022: 125)

The gutter here serves as a way to carve the page into different habits that make Thi feel left alone and scared. As it can be seen on the whole page (Fig. 2.8), the two last panels are darker. The very last one is the baby in his cradle, seen from Bui's eyes and the lining makes the reader understand how Bui is living the situation. Giving birth can come with a certain type of pain, as mentioned by Drews referencing Brown saying that “[b]irth trauma is not defined by a checklist of procedures and interventions that are considered traumatic but involves the realization that how a woman felt (or was made to feel) during birth can lead to lasting trauma” (Brown qtd in Drew, 2022: 130). This frightening and anxiety-provoking environment can also be felt in the onomatopoeias of the baby screaming and the one accompanying the television. They create a noisy environment in which Thi is not at ease. A deeper analysis can be made of this picture (Fig.2.8) and will be developed in the following chapter as part of a subheading centered on the lining.



Fig. 2.8: Thi right after labor (p.14)

As we have seen, Mâ lived through atrocious events, as a Vietnamese and as a mother. Those traumatic events have an impact on the relationship that she nurtures with her daughter Thi. Just like Thi's relationship with her father was analyzed through the visual element of the gutter, it is now relevant to focus on how the author decided to use that same tool to deal with the depiction of her relationship with her mother. Interestingly enough, the two of them are often represented inside the same panel but somehow separated. It emphasizes that both women are linked through this experience of birth giving and through the fear of their infant's mortality. By contrast, Bô only projected his trauma onto his children. When Bui is giving birth, Mâ is drawn on the side of the panel, and is represented as a very small figure. On the third page, even though the two women are in the same panel, we see a rupture because of the door (fig. 2.9). Thi is inside the room, stressed by the situation, and Mâ stands outside. The focus is on her as she experiences the aftermath of what she went through herself: "You forget how painful it is. I had forgotten... until I saw you on that bed, it all came back to me" (Bui, 20).



Fig. 2.9: Thi's mother outside the hospital room (p.3)

The gutter also allows for two, or more, panels to be put one next to the other. This particular visual aspect of graphic novels creates an effect for the reader, as McCloud explains. While in the hospital, Bui positions a panel of her, stressed because she needs to be given some medication in order to initiate labor, next to a representation of her mother trying not to vomit in the sink of a nearby toilet (Fig. 2.10). This transition could be referred to as a “non sequitur”. According to theorist McCloud, this happens when two panels that seem to have nothing in common are juxtaposed, even though, for him, two panels are never juxtaposed by accident (McCloud, 1993: 73). In this precise example, the transition suggests that the situation Thi is in produces a feeling of sickness for the mother. The reader does not know it yet because the narration is only at the beginning when these panels are drawn, but it works as a clue to understand that Mâ is haunted by memories. The mother and daughter are represented in a similar position, as if the first panel – the one representing Bui – and the second panel – the one representing the mother – were just a natural succession, as if they were the same person and her mother vomiting could be understood as Bui vomiting of stress the second after being given some medication.



Fig. 2.10: Bui stressed over pregnancy.
(p.5)

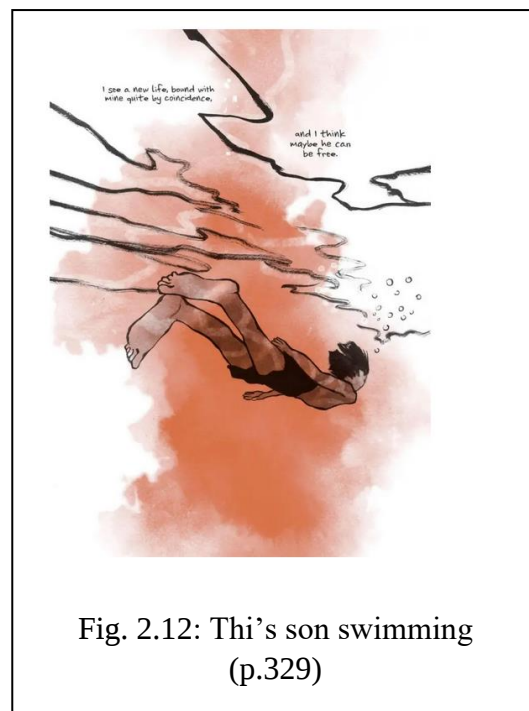
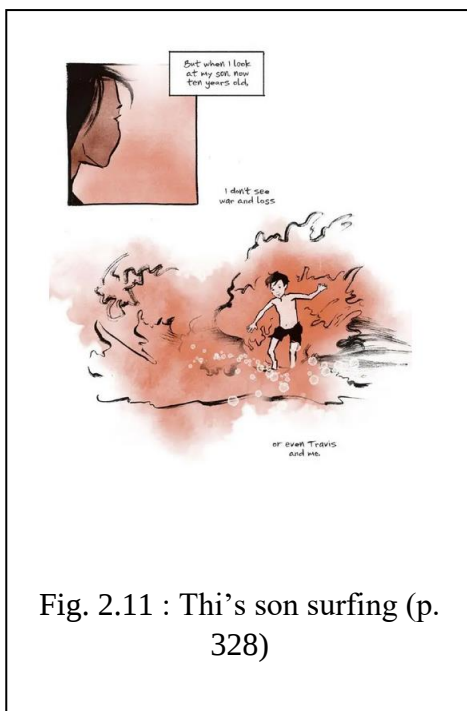
The parallel that is created by the juxtaposition is even reinforced because of the position both women are in. Turned in the same direction, with Thi calling her mother.

MOVING AWAY FROM THE FRAME: A WORD ABOUT THE ENDING

As the narration gets closer to the end, it can be noticed that the gutter tends to disappear to make way for more open and airy panels that give a feeling of liberation. As the narration goes on, the reader understands that Thi Bui is holding resentment because of what her parents did or did not do (Bui, 317). However, the ending shows that she came to a point where she feels at peace with it all. She has explored her past and her parents' past in order to make sense

of who she is and has arrived at a point where she has found peace (“At least I no longer feel the need to reclaim a HOMELAND” (Bui, 326)). The concern that she had at the beginning of the narration, about not knowing enough of Vietnam (“And if I could see Việt Nam as a real place, and not a symbol of something lost...” (Bui, 36)) seems to be resolved as she ends the story.

The feeling of peace that she feels can be observed in the last pages of the graphic novel (Fig 2.11 & 2.12). They depict the author’s son, now ten years old, casually surfing and swimming in the ocean under the watchful eye of his mother, represented on the side of the page. It can be noted that she only occupies a small corner of the page, the remaining pages is dedicated to her son and to what he is: “But when I look at my son, now ten years old, I don’t see war and loss or even Travis and me. I see a new life, bound with mine quite by coincidence and I think maybe he can be free” (Bui, 328-329). There is no more gutter, Thi’s son is not constrained in any frame, he is depicted as free.



NAVIGATING TRAUMA THROUGH WATERY SYMBOLS

Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), dedicates a whole chapter to color. In that chapter, he argues that color helps to set the tone, create an ambiance for the reader and helps convey meaning. Even though, at the very beginning of comics and graphic novels, the selection of color depended more on commercial and technological aspects, nowadays, it can be looked at as an integral part of the author's choice. McCloud explains that "[s]uddenly, it seemed possible for color to take on a central role. Color could express a dominant mood. Tones and modelling could add depth. Whole scenes could be virtually about color!" (McCloud, 1993: 190).

The principal color used by Thi Bui in *The Best We Could Do* is orange, and the artist plays with some darker or lighter tones, depending on the scenes. However, more than the color, she also plays with the artistic techniques, what McCloud refers to as "modelling" (McCloud, 1993: 190). The apparition of watery elements in Thi Bui's work can also be linked to the concept of graphiation. *Graphiation* is a term that refers to the author's style. Yarco Horsman explains the concept of graphiation in the article "The Rise of Comics Study" (2015) and defines it as:

The effect of the specific quality of the graphic line that characterizes the style of many comics artists from Hergé's *ligne claire* to the sketchiness of authors of *L'Association*. [...] 'graphiation' is at the heart of the very intimate relation readers feel towards their favourite comics authors (Horsman 2015: 151)

Bui's graphiation in this graphic novel implies numerous elements that are linked with water and will be developed in the following pages.

The technique used by Bui in her graphic novel is close to watercolor. The choice of this particular aesthetic will be discussed below. As it will be explained, this recurrence of water can conceal a deeper meaning. The way Bui incorporates references to water in the visual aspect of the graphic novel can be understood as an indirect way to address trauma linked to her Vietnamese experience. Water works as a symbol linked with her past. In order to understand how it works, it is first relevant to understand the concept of symbol and how it functions in literature. Later, the transition of the concept from traditional literature to graphic novel will be addressed. Eventually, the representation of the symbol of water will be detailed in Thi Bui's graphic novel.

To understand the concept of literary symbol, the resource used is *The Literary Symbol*, written by William York Tindal, published in 1955. He defines the literary symbol as “an analogy for something unstated, consists of an articulation of verbal elements, that, going beyond reference and the limits of the discourse, embodies and offers a complex of feeling and thought.” (Tindal, 1955: 12). He argues that the literary symbol does not always take the form of a recurrent image but can also be presented as a recurrent structure, a certain juxtaposition of elements, etc. It can take various forms.

The different symbols that can be found in a literary text can be conscious or unconscious, but they always carry meaning (Tindal, 1955: 14). However, it is not always clearly expressed to the reader. Tindal would say that “the symbol is an analogy for something undefined” (Tindal, 1955: 16). It might not make sense for every reader because in order to understand the symbol, it is crucial to have the right references.

Tindal worked with traditional texts. Nonetheless, when it comes to graphic novels, a symbol can take various forms because of the openness of the medium. Maahen Ahmed discusses in her book *Openness of comics: Generating meaning within Flexible Structure* (2016) how the “mixed structure of comics, besides providing possible visual pleasure, also contains the potential for greater reader participation in constructing and reconstructing the narrative.” (Ahmed, 2016: 4). The mixed structure she refers to allows for an openness in the interpretation. By openness, the author refers not to the complete freedom of interpretation but to the various ways a story can be understood with the elements presented. Therefore, symbols can be presented through a variety of ways in graphic novels. Ahmed makes reference to Umberto Eco’s conception of a symbol, seen as “as a communicative channel for the indefinite, open to constantly shifting responses and interpretative stances.” (Eco qtd in Ahmed 2016). She also refers to the Greek version of the word that means “recognition formed by an object broken in two and therefore a carrier of meaning through its incompleteness, corresponds to comics’ interplay of disjunction and continuity and the subsequent room to read meaning into them.” (Ahmed, 2016: 16). Through these two definitions, it is understandable that the concept of symbol works through incomplete references, broken parts spread in a story. The structure of

the graphic novel allows for various references, under different forms, to create a subtle narrative thread linked to a certain context, working as a symbol.

Before diving into the link that exists between water and Vietnamese history, it should be mentioned that water plays a significant role when it comes to birth giving, motherhood and, womanhood in general. There is an imagery regarding women and water that was developed in the Western tradition (Hayman 2012: 24). Water is a crucial element to any living species; water gives us life in a very literal way. However, for women, the amniotic liquid — in which fetuses are floating — is mainly composed of water, thus linking maternity with water. As already explained in the previous part, the story recounted by Bui is rhythmized by births: the one of her son and the ones of her brothers and sisters. The first representation of Thi's son is the baby almost swimming in that liquid (fig.2.13). The spiraling drawn around him reinforces the idea of that baby swimming toward his life.

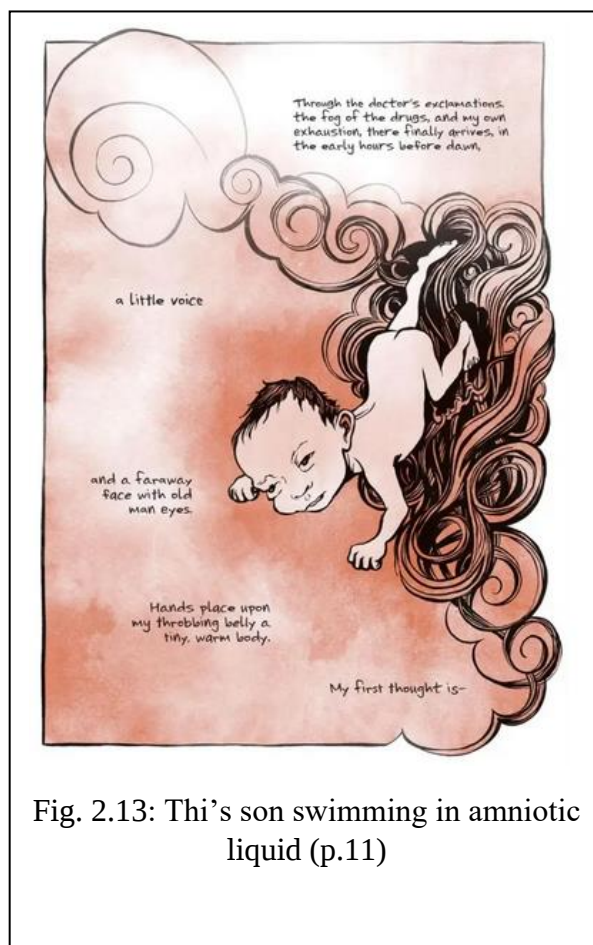


Fig. 2.13: Thi's son swimming in amniotic liquid (p.11)

The water symbol that is addressed in this part is linked to the exile of a large amount of the Vietnamese population following the victory of the communist party in Vietnam. As an enormous amount of people fled the country by boats, Vietnamese people are now commonly referred to as “boat people”. In order to recount the story of those people, which will help shed light onto the importance of the water symbol in *The Best We Could Do*, Patricia Nguyễn’s article “Salt | Water: Vietnamese Refugee Passages, Memory and Statelessness at Sea” (2017) will be used. In her article, she makes statements on the “boat people” in order to explain one of her artistic performances. In this article, she focuses on

[w]ater not only as the site for possibilities of freedom but also death; [she] argue[s] that water embodies the site and material for disrupting land-based logics of Vietnamese subject-formation. [She] further contends that performance opens up a space to theorize across borders of space and time to meditate on water as fundamental to the story of Vietnamese refugees’ passages (Nguyễn, 2017: 96)

She focuses on the importance of water, since – even though it allowed a possibility of escape from the developing communist regime in Vietnam – it was also a dangerous space that was a synonym of death. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), many boats departing from Vietnam aiming to reach Malaysian coasts were commonly pushed back into the sea. This phenomenon has for consequence that many refugees perished at sea (Nguyễn, 2017: 101). This heavy link with danger adds to the difficult situation lived by the family depicted in *The Best We Could Do*. Even though they reached the Malaysian coasts, the crossing was still a frightful process. It can be exemplified with the representation of the mother and the children while they are on the boat (Fig. 2.14). It happens that the boat, full of refugees, meets a patrol boat during the crossing which creates a climate of tension. The family is shown to be stressed. There is also another man, lying on the deck, in the middle of a panic attack because he does not want to be sent back to prison (Fig. 2.15). This journey is a defining moment for the family, but it is also full of danger and stressful moments.

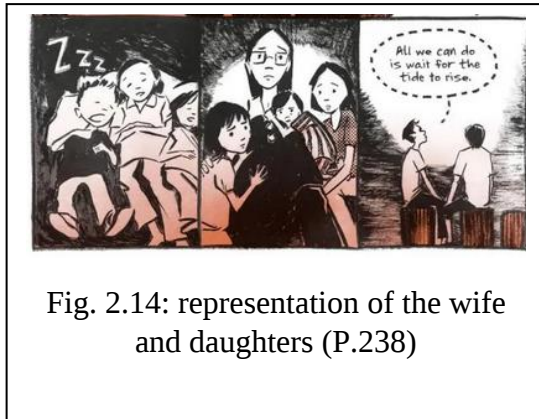


Fig. 2.14: representation of the wife and daughters (P.238)

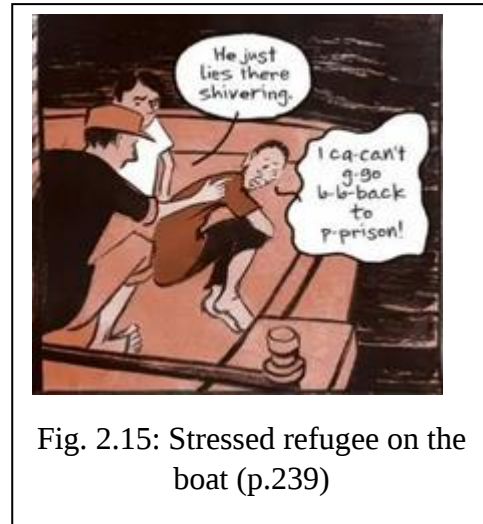


Fig. 2.15: Stressed refugee on the boat (p.239)

Patricia Nguyễn further argues that the ocean is a defining place in the construction of the identity of Vietnamese people because it plays a major role in their reconstruction overseas, and she argues that the ocean is an extremely ambiguous space:

Why does water serve as both metaphor and material through which to consider Vietnamese refugee subject formation at sea? It is as the site of the ocean, a space between nation-states, that we find the intersections of claims to the seas as economic capital and routes for natural resources, trade, travel, and expansion for competing sovereignties. Functioning both as a stateless place where refugee bodies are left to drift and as an extraterritorial space where the UNHCR and United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) govern legal agreements between nation-states, water is a critical site of analysis for *refugee passages*. [emphasis in the original text] (Nguyễn, 2017: 99).

The ocean is an ambiguous space because it does not belong to any country, it is stateless. Thus, it resonates extremely well with the position that the refugees must take. In the case of Vietnam, the inhabitants left a country that has nothing to do with them anymore, to reach a country that is completely unknown to them and in which they will not easily fit. Thi Bui reflects on the state of the Vietnam her family escaped: “I understand so enough of Việt Nam’s history now to know that the ground beneath my parents’ feet had always been shifting... so that by the time I was born, Việt Nam was not my country at all. I was only a small part of it” (Bui, 326). Through that quote it can be understood that what she knows of Vietnam does not exist anymore. Moreover, their arrival in America is depicted through various moments of uncertainty and a poor welcome that reminds the family of their statelessness. That can be understood when the author’s sister, during her first days at their new school in the United

States, does not understand the concept of a gym class (“G-Y-M what class is that?” (Bui, 287)) or when Bô and Thi are walking on the street and Bui is reflecting on their insertion in America (“And as though this induction into Americanhood needed any more nudging.... There were reasons to not want to be anything OTHER” (Bui, 67)) as someone is spitting in Bô’s face. This underlines the racism they experienced and the fact that they do not belong in Vietnam anymore but are not yet part of the United States. It creates this parallel with the ocean being a stateless place; the refugees such as Thi’s family are stateless people.

Since crossing this ocean equals to starting a new life overseas for the refugees, it symbolically plays the same role as the amniotic liquid birthing the baby into its new life. The ocean births the refugees over the new life that they aim to reconstruct, making it a positive space. However, one could argue that, in that particular context, the ocean is both a place that is associated with positive aspects and negative aspects, underlining the ambiguity of that element. That ambiguity can be seen in a scene involving Bô’s childhood. Bô has been impacted by water during his childhood, reinforcing the link that the family has with that element. The village he was living in with his grandparents was attacked by the French, who considered the village as communist. The village had many watering places, and they served to protect the family. The grandmother and grandson used a pond in order to cover themselves from French soldiers’ vision. Later, Bô’s grandmother asked her nephew to carry Bô to the dugout, he is then carried underwater to reach the dugout where he is left alone. While he is alone, he is scared and that can be seen in the visual elements that accompany the story (fig. 2.16). The pages turn extremely dark all of a sudden along with the onomatopoeia that are used (“Ratatattat” (Bui, 122)) in order to mimic the sound of the tommy gun. The same idea is again showcased when the family is on the boat in order to escape Vietnam. The environment is quite anxiety-provoking and black becomes the predominant color. The passengers are also stressed because of the danger of the sea. However, reaching the Malaysian coast is a sign of freedom and of new beginnings for the refugees. Water can create a frightening mood which obviously impacts the little boy that Bô was as well as his children while they are reaching the Malaysian coast but can also create a safe space.



Fig. 2.16: Bô stressed underwater (p.122)

WATER AS A SYMBOL IN *THE BEST WE COULD DO*

Even though the reader might not be aware of the context, the paratextual elements are already a hint for the reader. From the front page to the back cover (Fig. 2.17 & 2.18), water takes an important place, visually speaking. Both elements represent the family in front of the beach in that watercolor style that seems to punctuate the whole graphic novel. The back cover is the beach on its own. The thank-you page (Fig. 2.19) is also a representation of a boat on the ocean, echoing the nickname given to Vietnamese people. Moreover, before the story even starts, Thi Bui represents herself as a child inside of a wave. As it will be discussed in depth in the following chapter, the lining has a certain significance in graphic novels. In this representation of herself, as it can be observed in the image (Fig. 2.20), she is sitting in a dark wave drawn with a certain offhandedness and messiness, that could echo the general feeling that she had at the beginning of her exploratory journey. The dark color also helps the reader to understand that this wave does not evoke a happy place whatsoever, it is somber and haunting

for the little girl. With all those paratextual elements, the water symbol already takes a certain amount of importance.

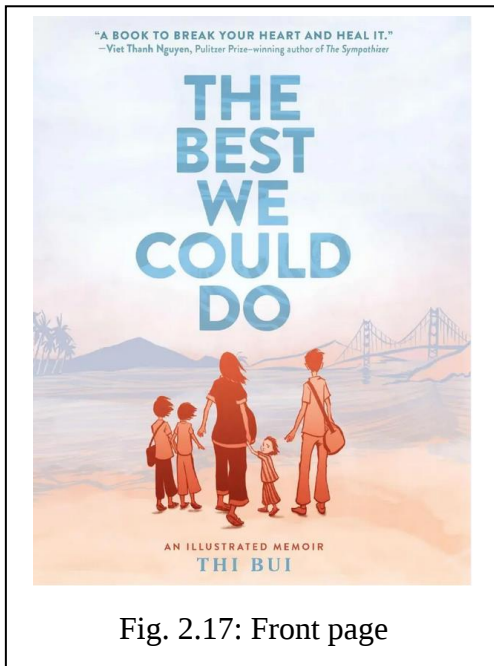


Fig. 2.17: Front page

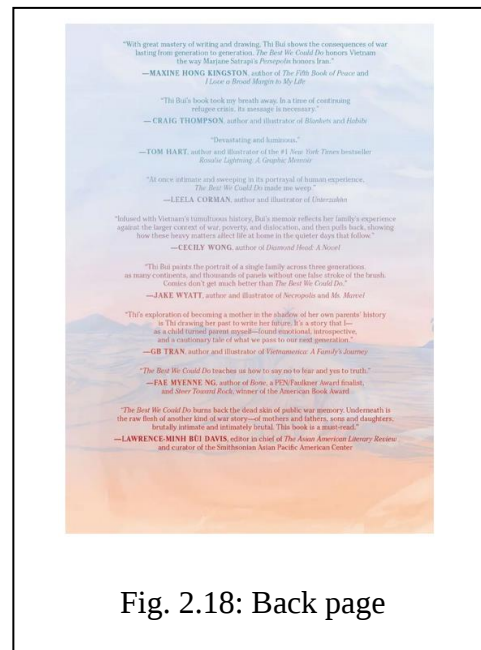


Fig. 2.18: Back page

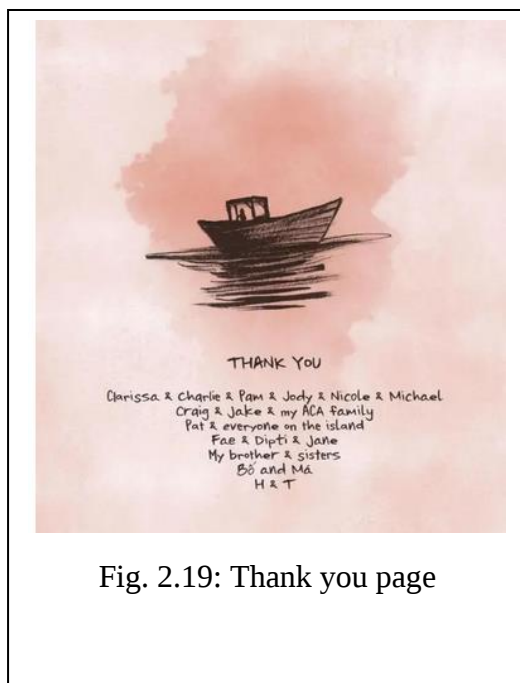


Fig. 2.19: Thank you page

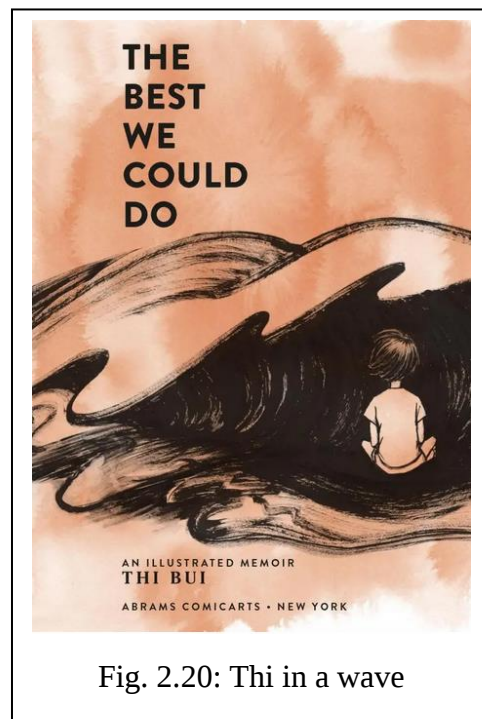


Fig. 2.20: Thi in a wave

Following on the analysis of this symbol, one way to understand the watercolor technique used by the author is to have in mind the idea of journey. In the second chapter, “Rewind, Reverse”, Thi Bui traces back her past to her teenage years in San Diego. In this chapter, she addresses the different questions that haunt her, looking back at her family, parents and siblings and she reflects on her position inside that family: “I have figured out, more or less, how to raise my little family.... But it’s being both a parent and a child, without acting like a child, that eludes me” (Bui, 29). Following this questioning, she explains that she needs to trace back the journey way further. In order to do that, she points out once more to Vietnamese history with water and the ocean, representing a boat with her father on a raging sea. This image is accompanied by the following caption: “I keep looking towards the past... tracing our journey in reverse... over the ocean.... Through the war seeking an origin story that will set everything.” (Bui, 39-41). In order to trace back the journey, she has to go back to Vietnam, literally and figuratively, and to cross the ocean in reverse. It can be stated that this is the reason why the watercolor technique is the one she used for all her graphic novel. This whole novel is about her journey dealing with her traumatic past. Consequently, the watercolor is a constant reminder of this journey, heavily linked to the specific history of Vietnam.

An element that further supports the importance of water when it comes to understanding her past is a representation of herself and her mother, having a conversation at a table. In this extract (Fig. 2.21), Bui is interrogating her mother about her parents’ time in Vietnam (“I ask them endless questions about their lives... the war... and the country that once was HOME” (Bui, 37)) and even though the caption has nothing to do with the crossing of the ocean, the background that Bui draws behind the two of them is not the walls of the house they are in, but the ocean with a boat on them, once more echoing the importance of the journey that can be understood with the watercolor technique used throughout the graphic novel.

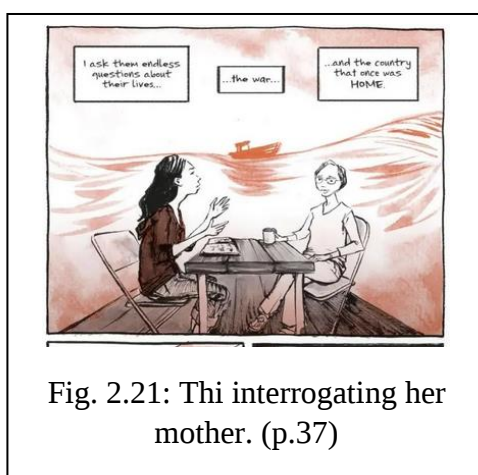


Fig. 2.21: Thi interrogating her mother. (p.37)

Another important moment in the graphic novel, that helps understand the symbol of water along the narrative, takes place when the family is settled in their little apartment in California. This chapter previously showed how the children are impacted by Bô, who seems to haunt the apartment with his cigarettes. The extract that is of interest in this part starts with a representation of Bô practicing leaving his body at night. Bui's father is represented on a splash page (Fig. 2.22), sleeping on the top but with his metaphorical body represented inside a raging sea, echoing the first representation of Bui mentioned above (Fig. 2.20). This representation of the father drawn in the sea creates the impression, for the reader, that Bô is drowning in his haunting past. On the other hand, his daughter "practiced being brave" (Bui, 85). In her own dream, the author represents the child version of herself dreaming of being free (fig. 2.23 & 2.24). For her, being free seems to equate to being able to manage swimming in the apartment that haunts her and her siblings. This can be understood in the few pages representing her father in the raging sea and her swimming peacefully in the apartment. Those pages represent the child she used to be, being brave enough to go get some water to drink when her siblings were too afraid of crossing the apartment at night because they felt the shadow of their father's wounds all over the room. In other words, as it was explained in the part concerning the gutter, the appartement is an anxiety-provoking place for the children because of Bô's unaddressed traumas, which were thus passed onto the children. Bui's dream is to feel free, and this representation of her being free is being able to swim quietly through this apartment. This representation of Thi is to be understood in opposition to her father sleeping, his metaphorical body represented inside a stormy sea.

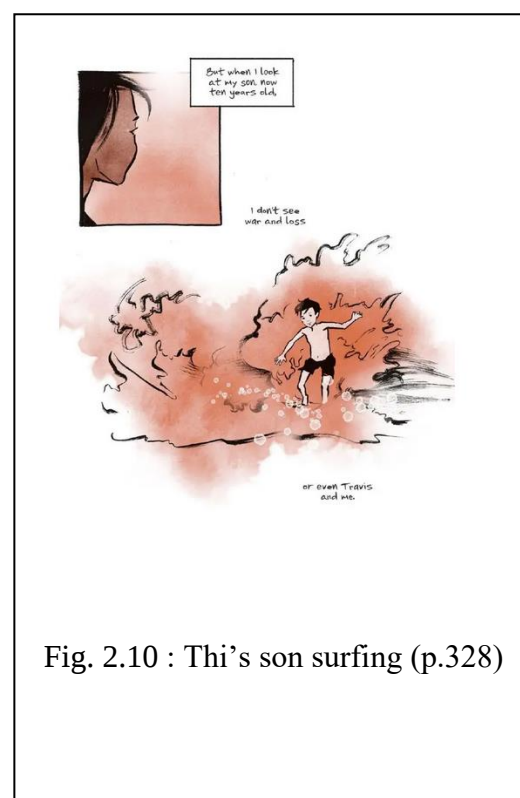
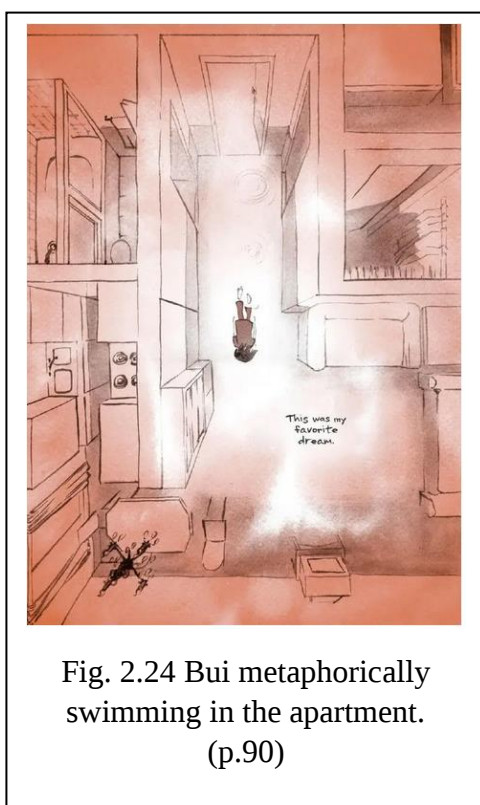


Fig. 2.22: Bô practicing leaving his body (p.85)



Fig. 2.23: Thi practicing being brave. (p.89)

It should now be considered that what the author is trying to do in this graphic novel is to face her own struggles regarding her history, so that she will not pass them onto her son. Up to this point, it was demonstrated that the ocean is an important symbol for Vietnamese people, and it can be argued that Thi Bui uses this reference to water by using watercolor in order to echo the metaphorical journey she is taking so as to heal her own trauma. In opposition to the first representation of Thi inside of a wave as a paratextual elements and the representation of herself dreaming of swimming inside her apartment, being free, her son is represented on the last page of the story as free as he could be (Fig. 2.11). In this drawing, Thi's son is represented surfing and swimming in the ocean under the watchful eyes of his mother. She has reached the end of her healing journey, and she reflects on what she sees when she looks at her son: "But when I look at my son, now ten years old, I don't see war or loss or even Travis and me. I see a new life, bound with mine quite by coincidence, and I think maybe he can be free" (Bui, 328-329). This caption resonates with the one present on Fig. 2.24 previously analyzed. In both representations, the idea of freedom is put forward. While Thi used to dream of being free inside this metaphorical water, her son achieved this freedom because Thi did not pass her pain to her son.



DISMANTLING THE PAGES

THEORY ON PANEL ORGANIZATION

The last visual element that will be analyzed as part of this chapter in order to approach trauma is the overall layout of a page, that is to say, the construction given to the various panels that compose one page of a graphic novel. To understand how it works, this section will first go back to McCloud's definition of a graphic novel, which should help to understand the importance of the layout concerning the topic of trauma. Following that definition, Duncan & Smith's theory concerning the layout found in *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel* will be developed.

McCloud, in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, dedicates a few pages of his introduction to the building of a definition for the term "comics". The first definition that he suggests is the following: "Juxtaposed sequential static images" (McCloud, 1993: 8). Those four words accentuate a relevant aspect: juxtaposition. There is an importance given to the how

and why panels are situated next to each other. Later, McCloud adds to his definition another subtlety: “in deliberate sequence” (8). This stresses the freedom the author of a graphic novel is given when creating their novel and in organizing their panels.

The freedom mentioned above, concerning free will when it comes to organizing panels, plays a role in conveying a meaning that goes beyond the one conveyed by the text itself. The page setup, or layout, refers to the overall organization of a page and is of importance: “As scholar Thierry Groensteen explains, a creator might conceive a story as unfolding in a continuous ribbon, but the page demands that the creator exhibit an awareness of effective layout to aid the reader’s progression through the story” (Duncan & Smith, 2017: 20). The layout translates a general meaning and helps the reader to better understand the feeling that the author wants to convey.

THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE REFUGEE REFLEX

The traditional layout, typically composed of panels of more or less the same size, situated one after the other, can be found in numerous comics and graphic novels. Usually, Thi Bui proposes pages that are one version of that traditional layout (Fig. 2.25). She usually varies the size and the placing a little but always keeps a somewhat traditional layout. However, at some point in the story, Bui decides to exacerbate that traditional layout by positioning each panel next to the other, in an extremely neat way (Fig. 2.26).



Moreover, each panel is the exact same size and “when it comes to the frames, size matters [...] In fact, one of the crucial differences between the motion picture and comics media is the ability comics has to alter the size of its frame” (Duncan & Smith, 2017: 11). This excerpt takes place when the family is settled in its new apartment but, unfortunately, a fire started in the apartment downstairs. It represents Thi, as a fourteen-year-old, responding to the fire in automatic mode. On this page, the fact that the size is exactly the same for each panel mechanizes the process, supporting this idea of reflex. Bui’s decision to use that sort of layout contrasts with the rest of her graphic novel, and it can be argued that it intends to convey the automation of the act she is doing. There is no thinking, only doing. This particular layout and the content work hand in hand to support the idea of refugee reflex. In addition, those panels are positioned over what seems to be a representation of the explosion, with smoke on the top of the page and cars probably in the parking lot situated in front of the apartment. By superposing Thi’s reaction over the depiction of the incident, it reinforces the idea of reflex, showing that the outside world becomes secondary in her mind, she is not aware of her environment anymore and passes in automatic mode.

FROM BLANK SPACE TO DARK FRAME

In a previous part of this chapter, the meaning the gutter can take, a blank space in between two panels, has been developed. Thi Bui also draws pages where the opposite of the gutter can be found: dark lines and no void. This layout is discussed by Duncan & Smith:

A part of page layout involves how frames are constructed. Barbara Postema outlines variations that creators use to construct panels. The first type involves panels framed by lines with blank spaces separating them [...] A variation of this involves no spaces, just lines separating one panel from its neighbor. (Duncan & Smith, 2017: 21)

It is relevant to point out that this variation in the layout of a comic page is a choice made by the author. Just like the gutter was analyzed before, we will now focus on the opposite, when the author chose to lay out the drawings without any gutter.

It can be argued that Bui plays with the page layout in order to emphasize a stressful and anxiety-provoking atmosphere. As argued by Duncan & Smith,

[p]anels outlined in this typical fashion [with a gutter in between] can communicate a common setting and, when in sequence with other panels, the steady progression of the

story. A thick or jagged line can connote an unusual setting or, in the context of the story, a decisive moment of action or reaction. (Duncan & Smith, 2017: 11)

The authors underline that doing this layout, without any space between the panels, equals moving away from the traditional way of presenting a page and thus, it carries a certain meaning. In *The Best We Could Do*, this presentation can be found in extremely stressful situations. For example, it happens when the family is escaping Vietnam on a boat (Fig. 2.27). The layout suddenly becomes dark and somber. There is no more void at the intersection of the panels, which, in addition to the dark color that is used and the abrupt lining, gives an overall feeling of heaviness. It translates the traumatic experience that the family, and more broadly, a great number of Vietnamese, are experiencing, as previously discussed. The whole experience on the boat is presented that way and it culminates in the dark double pages where Bô is represented looking at the stars during the night. The somber tones take over this part of the graphic novel because of the absence of blank spaces lying between panels, which helps the color black take over the rest.

This same layout happens again later in the novel when the author's son is suffering from jaundice. The baby is a few days old and shows symptoms of the disease. Thi found herself helpless toward the situation. The only thing she is able to do in order to help him get over this sickness is to breastfeed him ("Photography will help, but the more fluids he passes through him, the more toxins he can flush out. It needs to be mother's milk or formula" (Bui, 309)). Thi and her husband Travis enter an exhausting routine of going back and forth to the hospital in order to breastfeed the little boy a few times a day, forcing the parents to rent a room nearby so that they can get as much rest as possible, despite waking up every now and then. As it can be observed in the image (Fig.28), in between panels, only a black stroke separates the panels. This shows the horrendous moments the parents are living, their exhaustion because of the lack of sleep ("He set the alarm clock so we would sleep in ninety minutes intervals..." (Bui, 311)). Moreover, Thi experiences a lot of pain because of postoperative consequences: the stitches she has around her vagina.



THE BREAKING POINT

When referring to the traditional form of a panel, Duncan and Smith mention the usual rectangular shape that is presented to the reader. As a matter of fact, this specific shape is the most common in Thi Bui's graphic novel. In addition, Duncan and Smith accentuate that "[i]n the West, people are trained to read in a Z-pattern, starting at the top left of the page, proceeding left to right, then down and left to the next tier, and so forth" (Duncan & Smith, 2017: 21). Consequently, when it happens that the panels are presented under a different form, it carries meaning.

In Vietnamese history, a breaking point happened when the communist party took over the liberal side of the country, in 1975. This day is called Liberation Day. Bui draws the moment the parents hear on the radio about the defeat of the South. As it can be seen (Fig. 2.29), the center of the page shows the radio through which the parents are given the news. All over, the various panels are drawn with the radio as the point of departure and break into the panels. This layout transcribes the feeling that the parents are experiencing at that moment. If that historical

moment works as a breaking point for Vietnamese history, the layout gives the same idea of breaking out into pieces. Moreover, right under the radio is the word “crackle”, which refers to the succession of short sharp noises coming out of this type of device. This layout conveys the same idea of a succession of representations (Ma’s scared face, Bô completely disheartened, a sniper, the children concerned by their parents’ reaction), in a rapid way. This rapid succession of noises and of images conveys the velocity with which the events must have taken turns and how rapidly the parents must have responded to such news. De facto, the succession of images shows the parents’ first reaction and only a few frames after, they are represented packing pieces of clothing in a suitcase.



Fig. 2.29: Breaking point (p.215)

It could also be argued that this presentation, in addition to conveying the family’s feelings, also unsettles the reader, who is not used to not reading a page from the top left to the bottom right. Bui’s choice to draw that moment under this specific form allows for a representation of the parents’ reaction and for the reader to be distraught the same way. Some theoreticians such as McCloud, who has already been mentioned, center their understanding of comics and graphic novels on a purely visual basis. McCloud argues that this medium can convey various senses but only through the sense of sight. However, Ian Hague in *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels* goes further into the exploration of senses. Hague’s research focuses on the way in which comics form affects the

readers. In his book, he argues that comics are multisensorial, and they can resolve to tackle other senses such as hearing or touch. One chapter does focus on the sense of sight and dives in more deeply than other theorists. Where McCloud centered his work on analyzing the various techniques used by the authors of comics in order to convey emotions and create reactions, Hague goes further and explores the reader's input. He argues that:

[w]hen we first encounter a page in a comic, it is usually the case that the surface will have the most powerful impact. We naturally take in the whole page (or spread) before moving on to consider the sequential elements that convey the narrative. When we do move on, accommodation takes us from focusing on the broader spread to the tighter focus on the more specific details (panels, word balloons, etc.) adjusting the curvature of the eye to ensure that we are able to see each element clearly as required. (Hague, 2018: 47)

This comment applies to the “breaking point” page that is currently analyzed. When the reader first encounters this page, there are many elements, and the reader must focus on accommodating to the entire page before focusing on every single element (the non-rectangular frames) that always depicts a different moment in the reaction to the breaking news. The reader must adjust to and slowly digest the whole information. One might argue that it can echo how the parents, and on a broader scale the whole liberal Vietnamese population, felt: astounded by the impactful news and forced to adjust and digest it. Moreover, once the reader adjusted to the diverse elements of a page, Ian Hague points out a noteworthy aspect of reading: “[o]ur eyes tend to move over the page of a comic in a particular way and following a generally linear path. This path may follow a reading convention like top-left to bottom-right, or it may be directed by other visual cues upon the page (e.g., arrows, numbers etc.) but it is characterized by a direct motion” (Hague, 2018: 48). The traditional way of reading in *The Best We Could Do* is the one mentioned by Hague in this quote, from top-left to right-bottom since this is the one that we encounter most of the time along the reading process. However, when it comes to this specific page, the layout seems to disrupt the usual way of reading because the top-left represents the action taken by the parents ensuing their reactions to the infamous news they just heard. This layout positions the reader in an uncomfortable position since the beginning seems unclear. This provokes an overwhelming feeling since the reader is being taken aback by uncertainty and once again, experiences a sensation that might be close to the one experienced by the protagonists of the story.

CHAPTER 3: VISUAL TECHNIQUES TO CONVEY SORROW AND PAIN IN GRASS

Victims of sexual slavery experience events of extreme violence marking them for life. In Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's representation of Ok-Sun's testimony, the violent events are not represented directly, but conveyed through various visual elements. The first element that will be analyzed in this chapter is the lining, and its implication with color as well. In other words, we will explore how the various types of lines and the forms that it creates convey ideas and emotions. The line is the first element studied in this chapter because it is an element that Gendry-Kim uses frequently in a very unique way. That singular use has for consequence that it is an element that might be considered non-systematically in other parts of the analysis. Therefore, it is relevant to have it clear before diving into the second part of the analysis, which focuses on the staggering number of landscapes that participate in the construction of the graphic novel. Due to the ambiguity of said landscapes, the various representations of scenery in the novel create an effect on the reader, making them both at ease and tensed, playing with the lines as well as the sound, or rather, the lack thereof. Eventually, the representation of the perpetrators as well as the one of the victims will be analyzed. Through the way in which Gendry-Kim chose to represent the Japanese soldiers, she questions their individuality and their gaze. By contrast, through her representation of the victims, mainly Ok-Sun, the author reasserts the respect that former victims of sexual slavery during the Asian Pacific War should be receiving and elevates their voice at the center of her work.

LINES AND COLORS

THE LINE IN GRAPHIC NOVELS

Among the various visual aspects that the author of a graphic novel can play with, the line can be considered a major element. In a written text, the writing is usually typed through a text-processing software on a computer, making it mechanical, deprived of a personal input in the form letters can take. By contrast, in a graphic novel, the tracing of the author is authentic. It works as a defining feature of the genre. In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, McCloud wonders if emotions can be made visible and concludes — after exploring several artistic movements, such as impressionism with Munch and Van Gogh — that in the end, “**ALL** lines carry with them an **EXPRESSIVE POTENTIAL** [emphasis in the original]” (McCloud 1993: 124). In other words, McCloud argues that lines can convey sweetness, anger, violence, etc. depending on how they are traced and the type of brush that is used.

In the exploration of the line, Eszter Szép goes further in her book *Comics and the body: Drawing, Reading and Vulnerability*, released in 2020. Her argument focuses on the relationship between the readers of a graphic novel and the author/artist, with the body being at the center. Her focal point is the idea of vulnerability, which she defines as “a shared quality based on the simple fact that we all have bodies, and the experience of vulnerability is inherently related to the needs shared by all bodies.” (Szép 2020: 8). Vulnerability, keeping with her approach to the concept, is a shared quality for human beings that enables new modes of interaction (Szép, 2020: 3). In her analysis, she underlines that there is a strong interaction between the three bodies when it comes to graphic novels, the body of: the drawer, the reader and the object depicted. In order to support that interaction, the connection is established and enabled by the drawn line (Szép, 5):

The starting point of my approach to comics is its foundation in drawing. The academic study of comics has had a strong focus on comics as narrative structures and how certain topics, such as gender, race, heroes and memories, are represented in the medium, but there is still a paucity of research on drawing in comics (Szép, 31-32).

With this, she explains why she wants to focus on the line since it works as a primordial element when it comes to studying graphic novels and moreover, it seems that there was a research gap. She aims to question how the line can contribute to authenticity, thus merging with the research object McCloud had as well. Szép also explores the idea of thinking and drawing as closely related, explaining Elizabeth A. Pegram’s theory:

The presumption that drawing and thinking are more closely related than, say, painting and thinking, is rooted in the practice of making preparatory sketches and quickly recording ideas that are later reworked and the lines finalized (Szép, 40)

It means that painting usually implies that an artist goes over the sketch already done and thus, the gesture in the sketch is more authentic than the gesture of the final painting. Sketches, which are always drawn, are usually closer to the original thinking of the artist. Each artist tends to draw the line in their own specific style. As pointed out by Szép, learning how to write starts with a standardized approach, one learns how to recognize and how to read standardized characters. Nonetheless, as one masters the art of writing, the handwriting becomes personalized, and it becomes a person’s own. It works the same way when it comes to drawing since “the medium of both drawing and writing is the line” (Szép, 48).

The process of drawing a line is more than a mechanical act, which differentiates the medium of comics from traditional novel. Szép argues that the line drawn “is not simply the product of one’s moving hand but is interwoven with thoughts and experiences” (Szép, 59),

underlining the idea that a line drawn is a deliberate act. Lines are depicted with the goal to convey meaning of some sort. One specific element of graphic novels is that it always redraws the body, which explains the emphasis that is given to it by Szép in her book. She argues that “[c]omics offers a perfect medium for autobiographers to express the complexities of identity, subjectivity, or their relationship to their bodies, as the medium builds on the visualization of these questions with a simultaneous visualization of the drawer’s attitudes towards them” (Szép, 79). Through the drawing of the character on the page — even though it is important to note that *Grass* is not an autobiography but a biography, for which the author dedicated hours to listening to Ok-Sun in order to tell her story as rightly as she could — the author can use the line to represent various aspects of her person, or the person she is drawing in the case of Gendry-Kim’s work. It explains why the line will be of interest in the analysis of *Grass* since the author uses the line for various purposes: to give an overall mood, to depict places from her past and to represent violence.

The meaning of the lining should be taken into consideration along with the use of black and white in the narrative, which participates in the artist’s representation of suffering. The author chose to draw the story using only black and white, playing with the contrast between those two colors. As already mentioned in the first chapter, the author makes the sorrowfulness of the story more palpable by only using those two shades. In *Grass*, what makes a panel darker or whiter is, among other things, the thickness of the lines.

THE LINE IN GRASS

The line first takes its importance in the background. The background, or the landscape, is not the first element that comes to mind when talking about graphic novels, since the characters are often at the center of panels: the main character is central, drawn over and over again and yet, without the background, they would be floating in the middle of nothing. As Thierry Groensteen — theoretician of *bande dessinée*, notably known for his revue *Neuvième Art* — argues,

the landscape/background provides the action with a context, or, to put it another way, coordinates. First of all, it provides information about whether the scene takes place indoors or outdoors. The indoor/outdoor dichotomy is undoubtedly less important in comics than in film, where it has very concrete implications for the shooting conditions,

but it still makes a major contribution to differentiating one scene from another [personal translation]⁴ (Groensteen 2020: 539)

It underlines the practical role given to the background, which distinguishes scenes taking place outside from scenes taking place inside, giving a general idea of what is happening in the story. The word “context” has its importance in the quotation because Groensteen links it with the idea of knowing where the action takes place, however, it can also be understood as a broader idea of context, one that shows the general feeling of a scene. The background of the panels plays a significant role in *Grass*, especially because of the lining that Gendry-Kim produces, which, as it will be demonstrated, helps convey the mood of an entire moment.

The first two panels of interest (fig. 3.1 & 3.2) depict a tracing that conveys a particular energy. Regarding the first one (fig. 3.1), it depicts a moment happening at the beginning of the story, while Ok-Sun is still with her parents and siblings. Her family is experiencing some financial difficulties and the only solution that the parents can think of is to sell their daughter to a childless couple.

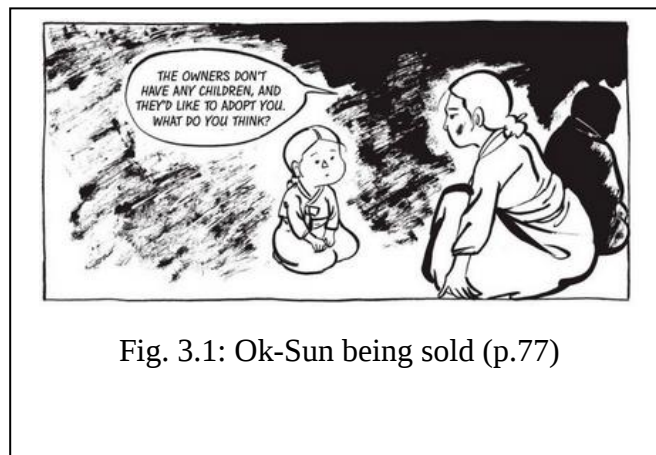
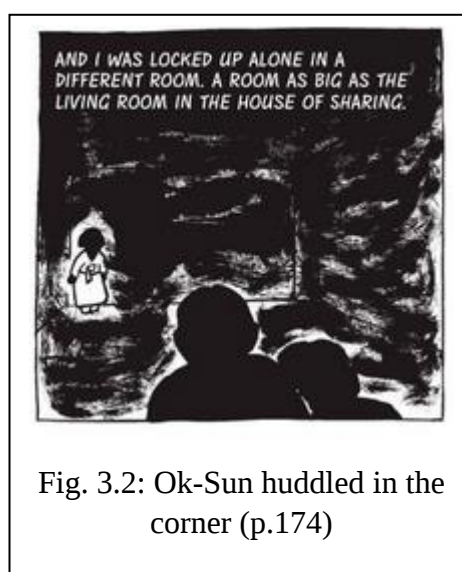


Fig. 3.1: Ok-Sun being sold (p.77)

For Ok-Sun, who dedicated most of her childhood helping her family around (“No matter how hard she [Ok-Sun’s mother] worked, even the days we had porridge were rare. I tried to help by taking care of the little ones... by going to the market and doing laundry... by running

⁴ “[le] décor fournit à l’action un contexte ou, pour le dire autrement, des coordonnées. Il renseigne tout d’abord sur le point de savoir si la scène se déroule dans un espace intérieur ou extérieur. La dichotomie intérieur/extérieur est sans doute moins prégnante dans la bande dessinée qu’au cinéma, où elle a des implications très concrètes sur les conditions de tournage, mais elle contribue tout de même fortement à différencier les scènes les unes des autres.”

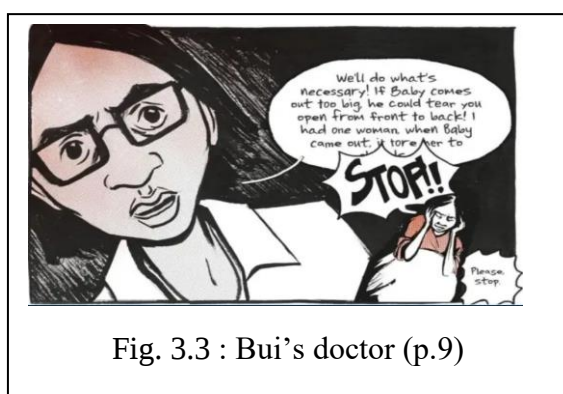
errands and even foraging” (Gendry-Kim, 46)) in the hope of one day, being sent to school, her lifelong dream. The news that she might be sold to an unknown man takes her by surprise. The scene represented in the first figure is the exact moment when her mother notifies the little girl that she might be adopted (“The owners don’t have children, and they’d like to adopt you. What do you think?” (Gendry-Kim, 77)). The two women are supposedly seated inside, although the background is not very clear. Indeed, the background is made of harsh and savage lines that convey the emotions felt by the little girl. The news comes as a shock for her, who expected to earn the right to go to school more than anything else. The figure of the father in the background, in black, a color used to express sorrow, emphasizes the seriousness and the vehemence of the moment for Ok-Sun. The same lining can be found in the second figure (fig. 3.2), which depicts a scene after the girls have been kidnapped by the soldiers. After a long journey by train, Ok-Sun and the other young girls who have been captured so as to be forced into sexual slavery arrive at an unknown place, in the middle of nowhere.



The panel depicts Ok-Sun, separated from the other girls and placed alone in a room, which she describes as quite large, since it was “as big as the living room in the House of Sharing” (Gendry-Kim, 174) and that situation engenders a feeling of fear. The tracing gets messy, and the only perceivable figure is the frightened little girl in the corner. Her position —huddled in that small space when the room is so large — portrays her fear and that same fear can be felt in the tracing. The brush used, with undefined and quick movements, makes it look like the line was violent and abrupt.

Moreover, in *Grass*, playing with the lines also means playing with black and white. In the two particular cases that were just analyzed, the brush used is thick, therefore, with only one line, it takes a lot of space on the panel. The second figure is completely dark, except for the figure of Ok-Sun, which makes her fear palpable by the reader. As for the first figure, the author plays with her very limited color palette, emphasizing the dark through the lines on one side and letting the other side almost empty of lines, and therefore, of colors. Her dad is on the dark side, it goes with the idea that this decision is strongly affecting him because he mostly disagrees with it. By contrast, Ok-Sun is on the almost blank side, which emphasizes the shock she feels because everything, even color seems to disappear around her.

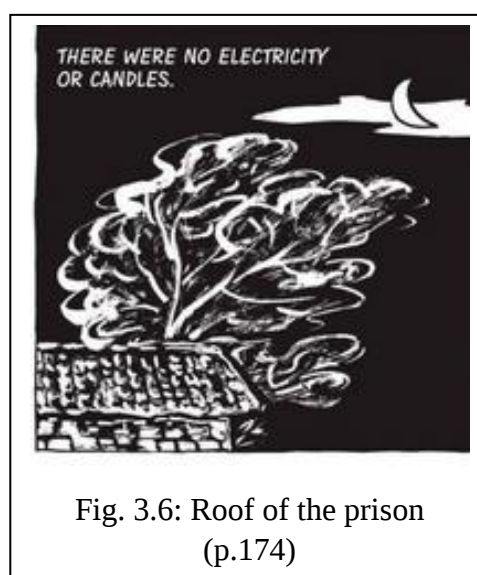
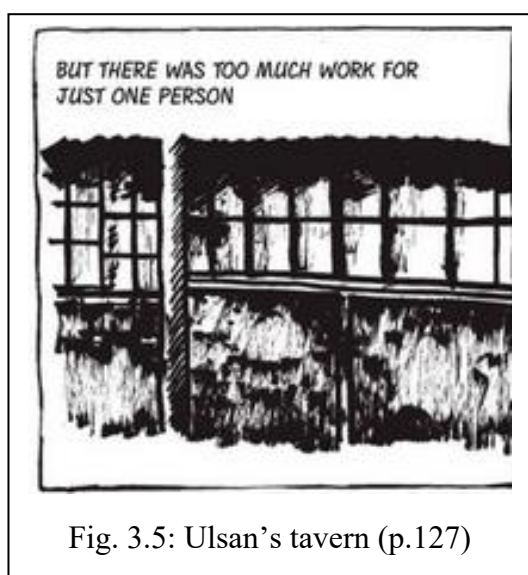
If Gendry-Kim plays with the lining through the entire graphic novel, Thi Bui resorts to using it sporadically so as to emphasize the violence of some moments as well. It happens in *The Best We Could Do*, when Thi is about to give birth; the lines used to draw the background plays a similar role as in *Grass*. When Thi's doctor appears to tell her that the medical staff needs to induce the process of giving birth, the tone employed is grave and authoritarian and this decision goes against the soon-to-be mother's wishes, who wanted to deliver her baby naturally.



In the panel (fig. 3.3), the background behind the doctor is composed of black and decisive strokes, conveying the roughness of the moments and the anxiety it provokes. The same strokes are drawn again sometimes later in the same chapter when Thi is left alone with her child in the room (fig. 3.4). Thi looks over at her son who starts crying and, years later when depicting that moment, she decided to use the same dark and decisive stroke. In both figures, it makes the scene extremely dark, underlining a feeling of fear and anxiety from the mother.

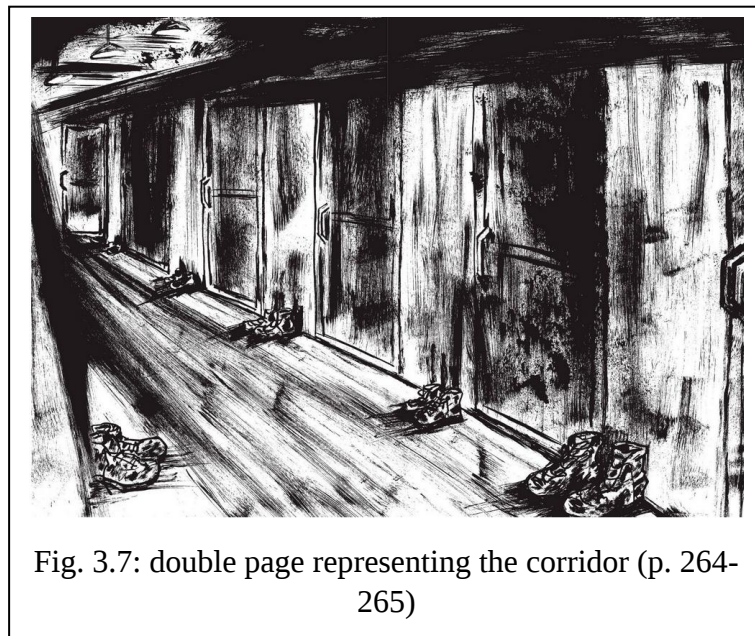
If the background can convey a particular mood, the lining employed by the author to represent impactful places in the life of Ok-Sun can also convey the violence experienced by the victims of sexual slavery. Some panels are dedicated to representing the places Ok-Sun visited and via the line, it does more than just anchoring granny's story in the reader's mind. It allows the author to convey how those places are associated with deep trauma. According to Balaev, places are of extreme importance when it comes to dealing with trauma since "the primacy of place in the representations of trauma anchors the individual experience within a larger cultural context, and, in fact, organizes the memory and meaning of trauma" (Balaev, 2008: 3).

In figures 3.5 & 3.6, Gendry-Kim proposes the representation of two places where the victims of sexual slavery endured some violence. First, the ulsan's tavern (fig. 3.5) is the place Ok-Sun is sent to after the udon-shop owner gets rid of her because he is not satisfied with her. In that tavern, she was put to work, forced to comply with chores while being undernourished. The brothel is represented with the same harsh and dark lining, which makes it impossible to see what is happening inside. The second building represented (fig. 3.6) is a "building that felt like a prison" (Gendry-Kim, 174) in which the kidnapped girls are forced to stay.



Only the roof of the place can be observed, with a tree that towers over that same roof. The tree is drawn with an almost smooth lining, which mimics the way the smoke of a candle moves after being blown out, underlining the fact that the place was plunged into darkness and therefore, is scary for the little girls. In both panels, the dominant colour is black, which emphasizes the idea of opacity. By keeping the places opaque, preventing the reader from

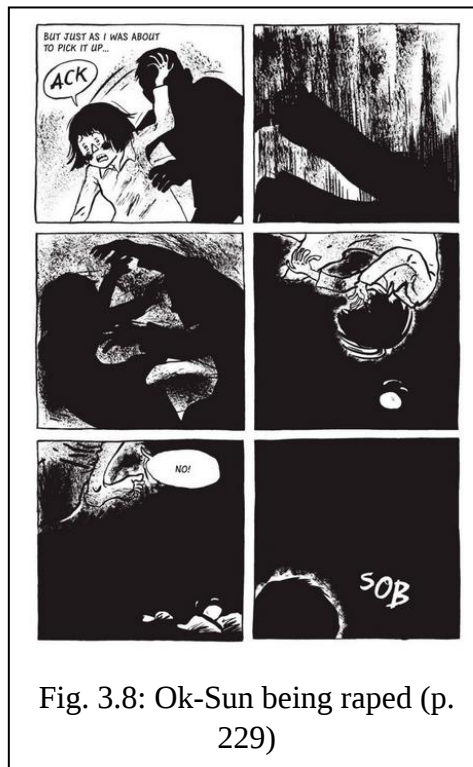
seeing what is happening inside, the author underlines the taboos that the victims of sexual slavery are still associated with.



Gendry-Kim provides the reader with the representation of the comfort station from the inside. Through the line, this representation conveys toughness and violence. On fig.3.7 is the drawing of the corridor where all the doors to the victims of sexual slavery were. What is shown are the doors, not what happened behind them. However, various elements on the pages let the reader understand what the girls went through, such as the shoes left in front of each door — it is common usage in Asian households to remove the shoes before entering a place, and therefore, the military boots reveal the presence of the soldiers inside.

The corridor seems to narrow down into a small and huddled place, where one would feel trapped, just like the girls are. The lining reinforces this idea of imprisonment, first because the strokes are made violently and rudely, conveying the brutality associated with this place. Second, because the strokes are straight, starting on the top of the page to the bottom, which mimics jail bars. Moreover, the brush used to draw those lines seems to be a digital equivalent to charcoal, a technique that goes hand-in-hand with dirtiness, since it leaves a lot of traces. The artist here evokes that by being raped, the victims felt “so dirty” (Gendry-Kim, 206). The marks also convey brutality because of their resemblance with blood.

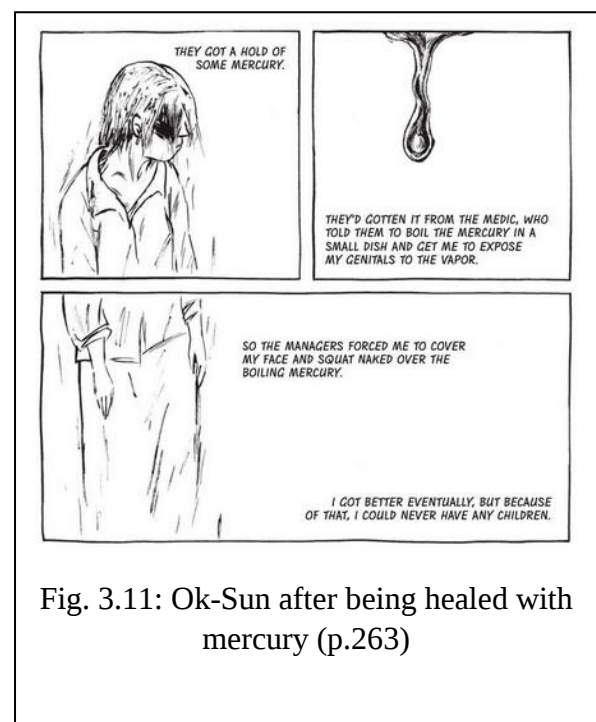
In her use of the lines, Gendry-Kim succeeds in conveying violence, physical and mental. The physical violence is shown in the moment when the young girl (fig. 3.8) is walking on the field behind the Yanji Comfort Station.



There, she meets a man who seems to complete an act of kindness by giving her a hardboiled egg. However, as she wants to pick it up, putting herself in a vulnerable position since her back is to him, the man surprises her and the following panels fade into dark lining, and slowly, due to the thickness of the lines, they cannot be distinguished anymore, turning the panels completely dark. The black panels cause opacity once again, not showing what is happening but leaving the reader to assume that she is being raped once more. In the second panel, when the lines are still distinguishable, they depart from the top of the page to go to the bottom, which indicates that Ok-Sun is being dragged to the floor. That physical violence can also be seen when Ok-Sun is being assaulted by a soldier on the street while she is running an errand. The lines are abrupt and decisive. They are made of single but defined pencil strokes, which accompany the movement of the soldier's arm who is punching her in her genitals (fig.3. 9).



Ok-Sun also suffers from a form of violence that is not physical but mental. After being sold to the udon-shop owner, he convinces her to cut her hair by lying that if she does, she will be granted the opportunity to go to school. Despite being reluctant to the idea at first, she complies and lets the man cut her long hair. However, her hair is a symbol of the relationship that she had with her father, since, before she left for the udon-shop, she and her father shared a bonding moment when he was brushing her hair.



When the man cuts her braid (fig. 3.10), Gendry-Kim draws Ok-Sun with only a few strokes that outline her silhouette and principal face features, such as her eyes, however, they seem emptied, and deprived of life. The same happens in her representation after she receives the mercury treatment to heal sexually transmitted disease (fig.3.11). Mercury, used in this context, is known to cause various health problems, such as infertility. In that representation, it can be noted that her body is cut in two by the gutter, which emphasizes how broken she is because of everything that happened to her. Regarding the lines, the drawing resembles the one when her braid is cut since the lines are very thin, almost undefined. By doing that, Gendry-Kim underlines that the girl is emptied from liveliness because in both representations, something important to her identity, something that is part of who she is, is taken away from her — her relationship with her father and the possibility of one day having a child.

AMBIGUOUS LANDSCAPES

Gendry-Kim draws numerous landscapes that are scattered around the narration. The importance of landscapes/background has already been explained via Groensteen earlier, but is also supported by McCloud, who asserts that “[b]ackground can be another valuable tool for indicating visual ideas... particularly the world of emotions” (McCloud, 1993: 132). McCloud supports the idea that the landscape is relevant when it comes to dark writing, since it works as a visual, aesthetic aspect, which can be used in order to convey emotions and, in the case of *Grass*, it can be argued that the landscapes can create visual parallels with Ok-Sun’s life. Balaev also discusses landscapes in “Trends in literary trauma theory” (2008), in which she supports McCloud’s idea that the landscape can play a role in conveying extreme emotional states through various tools such as landscape imagery (Balaev, 2008: 12). According to her, the role of place is important to “portray trauma’s effects through metaphoric and material means” (Balaev, 2008: 2) since, for her the portrayal of place repetitively sets the context in which the trauma happened and situates the self. Eventually, she says that:

Place, therefore, becomes central to representations of trauma in the novel because the physical place of suffering and remembrance of loss becomes an identifiable source for the author to explicate the multiple meanings of the event (Balaev, 2008: 14)

With Balaev's input, the enormous presence of landscape in *Grass* is of the utmost importance, even if at first glance, they seem to appear without any recurrent pattern. The landscapes are ambiguous because they are misleadingly calm and appeasing. In a way, they seem to give some rest for the reader who is discovering a testimony heavy in its themes. However, the landscapes are mainly cold, depicting unknown and dangerous places where Ok-Sun had to survive. Those landscapes seem to parallel her life, underlining that her life was deprived of happiness and was dangerous. Moreover, the lines used in some of the landscapes are messy (fig. 3.12) or picky (fig. 3.13), which helps convey how lost Ok-Sun felt during her life and how the situation she ended up in was dangerous for her.



Fig. 3.12: messy landscape (p. 275)



Fig. 3.13: picky landscape (p. 227)

Already from the title, the author draws the reader's attention to the many landscapes they are about to encounter. Most landscapes are composed of vegetation of all types, such as trees or mountains, but a recurrent type of vegetation that comes back, and which is already present on the front cover is grass. "Grass" is a word that can be used to refer to an unwanted plant that grows in gardens or fields, even though in English, the word "weed" is most commonly used to refer to the plant. The French title (*Les mauvaises herbes*) and the Italian title (*La malerbe*) are more closely attached to the concept of weeds, therefore reinforcing the wild aspect of the landscape. Weeds is a type of greenery most people want to get rid of in their gardens and, by knowing that, it creates a parallel with the victims of sexual slavery's situation.

As explained in the first chapter of this research project, many Korean women have been brutally exploited and then reduced to silence by the Japanese government as well as the Korean government, who denied the girls justice by turning a blind eye on the issue. Moreover, a social hierarchy was implemented by the Japanese government, which disregarded the Korean population. It is argued by Pyong Gap Min that

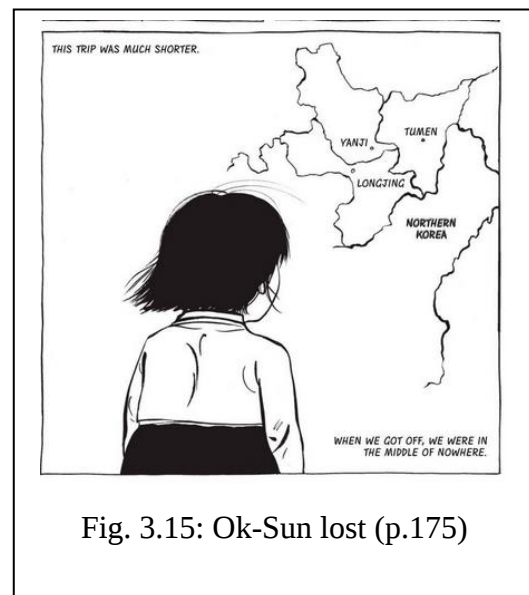
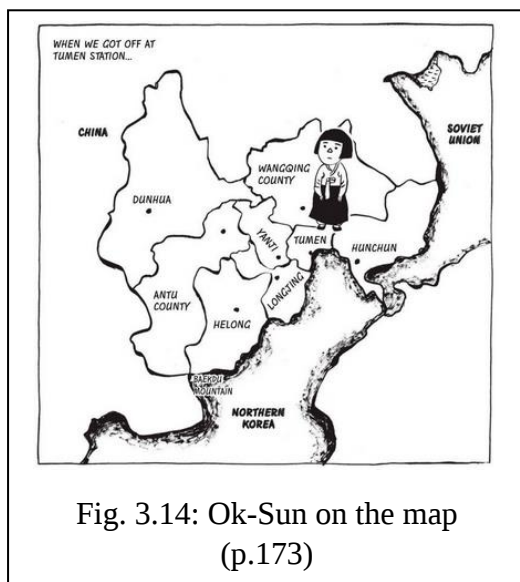
[t]he government considered the Korean people —whether men or women— mainly as instruments to be expended for its war purpose (Yun 1997); They believed that Korean young women could be used effectively for their war efforts by meeting the sexual desires of their soldiers. The Japanese soldiers who used military brothels committed extreme forms of abuse and humiliation against Korean comfort women, but the Japanese military authorities did not try to discourage their soldiers from treating Korean sexual slaves inhumanly. This was probably because the Japanese authorities who established military sexual slavery had a high level of prejudice against Koreans. (Min, 2003: 66-67)

Korean citizens, and women in particular, were disregarded because of their nationality, and therefore, Japanese soldiers did not consider them as human beings. According to Soh (2000), who explored the concept of intersectionality — a concept that is usually used to refer to African American women experiencing both sexism and racism in the American society— if Koreans were disregarded because of their ethnicity, Korean women were even more discriminated because of their gender and thus, regarded as worthless, just as grass is.

Eventually, as weeds always grow back, the victims of sexual slavery fight for their rights until the end. As it was mentioned in the first chapter, demonstrations were implemented in order for the victims of sexual slavery to claim their rights. Throughout the narration, even though Gendry-Kim depicted horrendous moments of Ok-Sun's life, she also pointed out some moments of resilience, which can be seen in her ability to laugh about some of the life experiences she went through. When she explains to Gendry-Kim that she “graduated from Homi University” (Gendry-Kim, 103), she then proceeds to playfully explain that the term “homi” refers to fieldwork and since she worked a lot in the fields during her childhood — rather than going to school like she dreamed of— she jokingly says she went to Homi University. Despite the fact that she has never known happiness “from the moment [she] came out of [her] mother's womb” (Gendry-Kim, 436), she displays resilience, proving herself to be strong. The parallel with grass works as a metaphor in order to explain how, just like grass “springs up again, though knocked down by the wind, trampled and crushed under foot.” (Gendry-Kim, 475), former victims have been able to rebuild themselves slowly but surely after the traumatic events they went through and how they still continue to fight for their rights.

MAPPING THE TRAUMA

Tree and mountain landscapes also remind the reader of the lack of geographical clue on where the girls were situated. At the beginning of the graphic novel, the reader has some indications on where the story takes place. The reader knows that Ok-Sun grew up in Busan, a harbor city situation in south of the Korean peninsula. However, as she got kidnapped by the Korean soldiers, Ok-Sun lost track of where she and the girls were. When she is put on a train with other girls, they are relatively lost over where they are (“The train kept going and going. We thought it meant that China was far away, but later we found out we’d entered China as soon as we crossed the Tumen River. When we got off at Tumen Station... It was already dark.” (Gendry-Kim, 172-173)).



At that moment, Ok-Sun is drawn inside of a map, situated approximately where the girls were at that moment (fig.3.14). A few pages later, after the journey resumes, she says that “[t]his trip was much shorter. When we got off, we were in the middle of nowhere.” (Gendry-Kim, 175) and the author represents the young victim of sexual slavery contemplating the map from away, not knowing where she really was at that time (fig.3.15)

Carolyn Kyler focuses on the use of maps in her article “Mapping a life: Reading and Looking at Contemporary Graphic Memoir” (2010). She argues that graphic novels work the

same way as maps do, combining words and images and expecting the reader of the map to find closure. She then explains that

[m]any graphic memoirists go beyond the map of the page and provide actual maps within the pages, helping the reader to visualize the places, times, and transformations of the narratives. *Maus* included maps of Poland, maps of Auschwitz and Birkenau, diagrams of hiding places and of crematorium, even a map of 1944 (Kyler, 2010: 11)

If in *Maus*, maps work in order to situate the reader and make them better understand the story, in *Grass*, Gendry-Kim purposely represents Ok-Sun lost in front of a map, therefore placing the reader in a similar position as the little girl who did not know where she was, even though, at the time of writing, it is possible to retrieve the information on where the comfort station was located.

Via the landscapes, Gendry-Kim emphasizes the feeling of being lost. The girls are trapped in an unknown place and when they talk about maybe trying to escape, they quickly realize that there is no way out for them. As Ok-Sun says: “We had no choice but to work till we dropped dead. There was no way out.” (Gendry-Kim, 190). This particular quotation is inscribed on a representation of Ok-Sun and two other girls, contemplating the horizons and the freedom they cannot reach because of the barbed wire. The various landscapes dispersed around the narrative can be understood as a reminder that the girls are trapped, without any possibility of escape. After a thirteen-year-old victim succeeded in escaping one day, the security was even reinforced:

The whole base was turned upside down. The comfort station was in chaos. They never found her. After that, they watched us even more closely. There were more beating than before Mija eonni and I had planned to run but... we were all so terrified that no one dared try. (Gendry-Kim, 322-324)

This voice-over ends on a page dedicated to what looks like a desolate and frightfully wild mountain (fig.3.16), with a messy and savage lining. The strokes are brusque and not defined, as well as thick, turning most of the panel dark. It emphasizes the fact that for Ok-Sun and the other victims, the situation is extremely worrisome and that they mostly feel lost.



SILENT LANDSCAPES

The ambiguous aspect of the landscapes drawn in *Grass* is also linked to the concept of sounds in comics. If one could think that those landscapes offer the reader a well-deserved break from the testimony, so as to take some time to digest and to slow down, one could argue that, on the contrary, the landscapes are deceptive and create a heavy silence used by the author to hide the violence and the pain she cannot visually represent.

In order to understand how sound works in comics, Ian Hague's *Comics and the senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels* will be used as the main resource. This book discusses the idea that a graphic novel can play with all human senses, not just the sense of sight, the only sense usually considered when it comes to graphic novels. In his third chapter, Hague focuses on hearing, a challenging sense to study in the medium because theorists, such as McCloud (1993: 25), look at comics as a silent medium. Even though graphic novels use onomatopoeia to create sounds, it usually reaches the reader through the eyes more than through the ears. Other ways to produce the idea of sounds in this medium is through

speech balloons and narration boxes, the last one working as a type of spoken voice-over in the mind of the reader. In his analysis, Hague looks at five types of sound that can be perceived while reading graphic novels: sounds of comics, sounds in comics, sounds with comics, sounds as comics and, sounds around comics. The first category focuses on the sounds that the graphic novel as an object makes, such as the cracking of the spine. The second category refers to the sounds that are “part of the diegesis” (Hague, 2014: 73), such as the sounds produced by accompanied electronic devices that are joint to the story. The third category can be mixed with the second since it is composed of sounds that are electronically produced as well, however differ because produced by external devices. The fourth category explores the idea that a sound or a set of sounds can be a comic, therefore challenging the idea of what a comic is or, as Hague puts it “[c]an a sound (or set of sounds) be a comic?” (Hague, 2014: 81). The last category centers on the sounds that are seen by Hague as adding information to the visual part of the graphic novel, making the medium multisensory.

With this theory in mind, one could argue that in *Grass*, Gendry-Kim plays with the second category: sounds in comics. Even though she does not resort to using electronic devices, her graphic novel creates a number of sounds: Via Ok-Sun’s voice recounting her testimony in a sort of voice-over over Gendry-Kim’s drawings or via the numerous dialogues. These sounds are put in tension with very silent moments, mostly found when landscapes are drawn. In the diegesis, the silent landscapes usually happen after shocking events, therefore conveying a type of violence or pain via the silences.

For instance, when Ok-Sun’s mother first talks to her about being adopted by the udon-shop owner, the little girl is at first skeptical. However, when she learns that she will be sent to school if she agrees to go, she is represented as happier than ever, bursting into the house (fig.3.17). Ok-Sun is, for a moment, a happy child, moving quickly around the house and in these circumstances, the sentences that appear in the speech balloon (“Papa! I’m finally gonna go to school! Okhui! Okja! I’m gonna go to school” (Gendry-Kim, 79)) can be read with the screaming voice of a little girl with the exclamation points only emphasizing this idea.



Fig. 3.17: Ok-Sun happy (p.79)

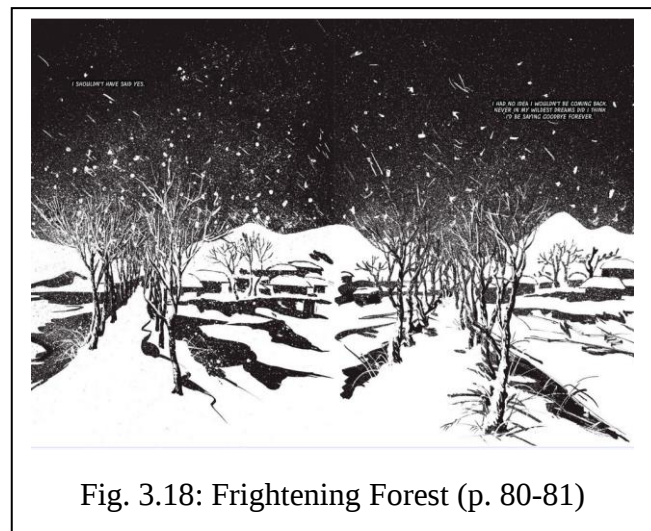
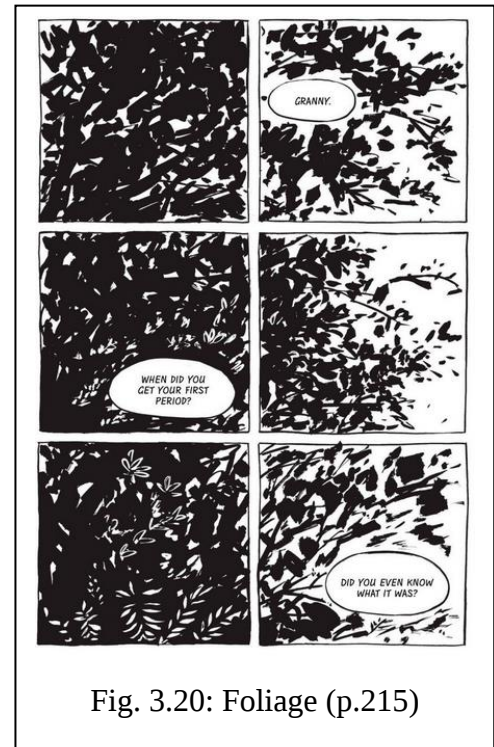
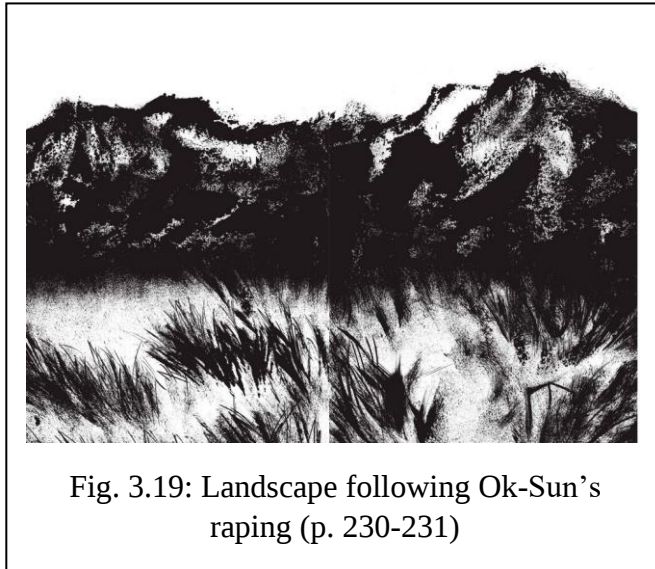


Fig. 3.18: Frightening Forest (p. 80-81)

However, the following double page changes the mood quite unexpectedly, turning completely silent and representing a snowy, frightening forest with trees with no leaves on them, which makes it a very desolate place (fig.3.18). The only sound that can be heard is the voice-over that says “I shouldn’t have said yes. I had no idea I wouldn’t be coming back. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that I’d be saying goodbye forever.” (Gendry-Kim, 80-81), which is read in the first person singular, so read by Ok-Sun as an old lady who has only known misfortunes during her lifetime. The joyful Ok-sun screaming because she is going to school is quickly replaced with the voice of an old woman full of regrets related to that decision, provoking an abrupt silence. This silent landscape is used by Gendry-Kim to mimic the sorrow and the pain that this situation provoked in Ok-Sun.

The artist uses this technique to convey violence without showing it. For example, when Ok-Sun is about to be raped while she is hanging her menstrual rag for it to dry, and one man traps her by falsely gifting her hardboiled egg (fig.3.8). The scene unfolds by following the same process: Ok-Sun is represented in a sort of field, lost in the middle of nowhere when she sees the man. She goes toward him to catch the boiled egg and he makes her fall onto the floor. Gendry-Kim uses onomatopoeias as “ACK” (Gendry-Kim, 229) —which is a sign that she squeals as he is about to rape her — and “SOB” (229), letting the reader know the consequences of what happened. The following pages (fig.3.19) portray a field circled by mountains with no

more speech balloon or onomatopoeia, which conveys a deafening silence, used to mention what is happening without addressing it directly in a visual way.



When Gendry-Kim, in one of her interviews, confronts Ok-Sun with a question about the first time she got her period, a sensitive topic, the author chose to draw six panels — composing one page— of foliage (fig.3.20), spreading her questions among them: “Granny. When did you get your first period? Did you even know what it was?” (Gendry-Kim, 215). This question forced Ok-Sun to confront a time she thought she would die, since she was never explained what periods were. Her first thought was that she had had to service too many soldiers and the result was a mortal disease, which forced her to confront her own death. Facing a thought like that comes with brutality and in order to avoid it, it could be argued that Gendry-Kim uses the flowers to address it, underlining that the concept of trauma is expressed in indirect ways.

FACELESS PERPETRATORS AND THE VOICE OF THE VICTIMS

In the transcription of Ok-Sun's drawing, Gendry-Kim was confronted with the question of representation: how to represent the perpetrators, the victims and the act of violence inflicted on the latter? In the case of a non-fiction graphic novel such as *Grass*, the narrative is linked to the concept of historiography. It means that the process of writing and representing one's story — whether it is an autobiographical work or, in the case studied in this chapter, the representation of a testimony — is usually linked to historical facts and truth, along with a personal approach. As Robert Braun explains in his article "The Holocaust and Problems of Representation" (1994),

in conveying "historical reality" historical representation employs narrative form as a mode of emplotment, thereby weakening the direct connection between factual statements and the means of representation. The "transferentiality" of categories such as "experience" in historical representation, which point to the ambivalence of the relationship between historians' frameworks of analysis and the objects of their study, make the direct relationship between representation and "reality" even more problematic (Braun, 1994: 172)

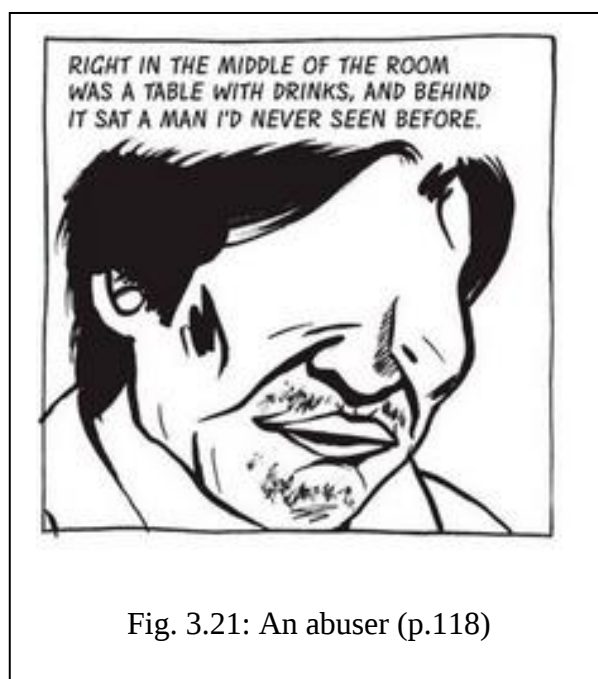
In other words, the technique used to recount historical facts involves, one way or another, methods of storytelling, and thus, it poses the question of how to represent those historical facts and truth without reproducing the violence and without negating the victim. This problem became central in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. The author represented himself, sitting at his desk with the mask of a mouse instead of an actual mouse face. By doing so, Spiegelman really questioned the animal metaphor he installed in his representation of history and showed the reader the importance of questioning his position. Moreover, and as developed by Chute, the visual aspects of graphic novels are not only illustrations of the written text but have the role to convey actual meaning (Chute, 2006: 769), which leads the reader to question themselves on the reasons why something or someone is represented the way it is.

FACELESS PERPETRATORS

The perpetrators in *Grass* are the Japanese soldiers who coerced young girls into sexual slavery from a very young age. What is central to the artist's approach is that it never gives them individuality. In almost every representation of the soldiers, their faces are hidden, or simply not drawn at all. More precisely, if the rapists' face is drawn, their eyes are always

occulted or deliberately not drawn. Emmanuel Levinas's approach to the concept of evil can help us understand that choice better. Levinas, a French philosopher whose field of study focuses on the topic of ethics, develops in his theory the idea that the face is of the utmost importance because it is linked to the notion of humanity: "[t]he face is a living presence, it is expression [...] The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already speech" (Levinas, 2006: 61) [personal translation]⁵. Speaking is a capacity related to human beings. It explains the link that, for Levinas, exists between the face and humanity. He goes even further by saying that the eye is not only something that does not "glows, but speaks" (Levinas, 2006: 62) [personal translation]⁶.

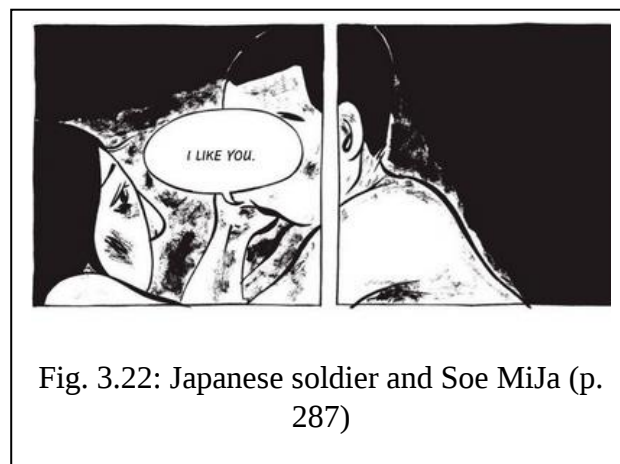
One of the first representations of a perpetrator is the first man who tried to have intercourse with Ok-Sun. It happened when she was exploited in the udon-shop in Busan, the owner asked her to go into the back room where a man was waiting for her and expected her to give herself to him (fig.3.21).



⁵ “[l]e visage est une présence vivante, il est expression [...] Le visage parle. La manifestation du visage est déjà un discours”

⁶ “qui luit, mais qui parle”

Most of the usual faces' features are present, such as the mouth and the nose, however, the eyes are missing. It takes away his individuality. Moreover, if Levinas underlines that it is through the face that one is able to create relationships since “[t]he other brings the self into being by entering into a relationship with it and questioning it. The infinite comes to me through the concrete face” (Bailhache, 1994) [personal translation]⁷. By taking away their faces, Gendry-Kim takes away the possibility of even creating any relationship with the rapists. It is even clearer in how Soe Mija, Ok-Sun’s friend and ally during their misfortune, is represented with one of the soldiers (fig.3.22). As she is forced to service that soldier, who always asks for her when he goes to the comfort station, he is represented on top of her, his face hidden by the words “I like you” (Gendry-Kim, 287). Those particular words covering his eyes and most of his face, making him faceless, underlines what is articulated by Levinas that through the face, relations are possible.



⁷ “autrui fait naître le moi à l’être en rentrant en relation avec lui et en l’interrogeant. L’infini vient au moi par le concret du visage”

It is worth noting that, once Ok-Sun leaves China, where she established herself after the liberation, and reunites with her family in South-Korea, her siblings are also deprived of faces (fig.3.23).



As they reunite, all of them are filled with positive emotions, they share a meal and start discussing what happened. Ok-Sun's sister starts explaining that their mother prayed for her every day after she was sold and that is the reason why she came back alive from the numerous years of misfortune she experienced. However, Ok-Sun does not agree and explains that everything that happened to her during her lifetime finds its origin in the moment her mother sold her to the udon-shop owner. Before that debate, her siblings had a face but right after, their faces are missing, which underlines that by not hearing what she has to say, by not believing her, they participate in silencing her and the other victims of sexual slavery, even though this silencing happens on a smaller-scale level than the one implemented by the Japanese and Korean governments.

Moreover, this absence of face is accompanied by a focus on the military uniform, which represents a sense of belonging to a larger group. In the field of psychology, theories have been developed on that particular feeling of belonging to a group, which legitimizes violent behavior:

According to control theory, violence results from a lack of supervision or physical, social or psychological constraints. The group provides anonymity and de-individuation conducive to a reduction in control and a temporary suspension of norms opposed to

violence. As the intensity of de-individuation is theoretically a function of the size of the group itself, we can expect a greater propensity to violence when groups are denser. Similarly, we can assume that the greater the de-individuation, the more intense the violence expressed. (Laurent, 2006) [personal translation]⁸

In other words, it means that being part of a group makes one anonymous, it becomes harder to single that person out, taking away their individuality. When someone encounters themselves in an anonymous state, they are more likely to display violent behavior. This phenomenon is explained by the fact that the process of deindividualization contributes to a reduced sense of responsibility.

By taking the soldiers' faces away, Gendry-Kim emphasizes the uniform that makes them belong to a large group where violence is legitimized. In the representation of the soldiers before they enter the comfort stations (fig.3.24), their faces only consist of a white, empty circle, which makes them all the same, all wearing that same uniform that seems to allow them to commit violence.

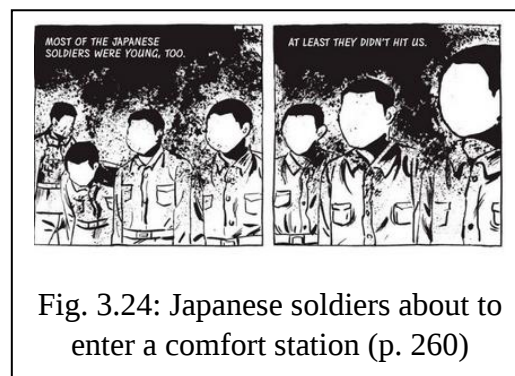
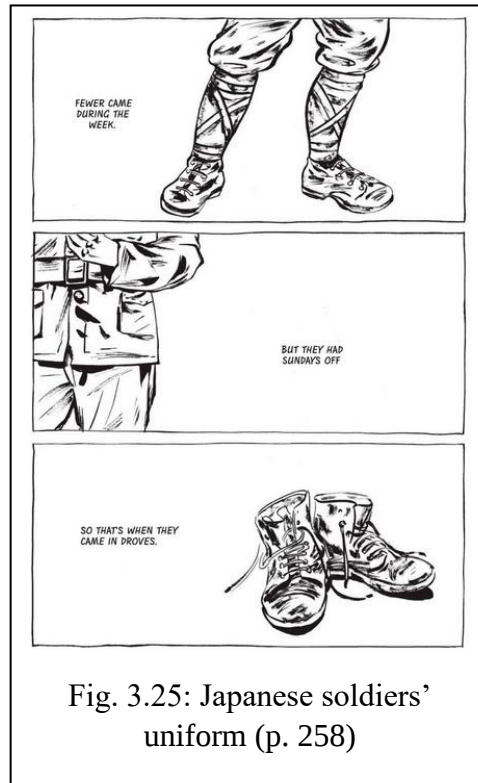


Fig. 3.24: Japanese soldiers about to enter a comfort station (p. 260)

It is even more striking on fig. 3.25, which displays a page divided in three panels, each explaining that some soldiers came during the week, but most of them came on Sunday since it was their day off. To represent the soldiers, Gendry-Kim chose to focus first on their boots and then on their uniforms, both elements embodying their position as part of a larger group.

⁸ Selon la théorie du contrôle, la violence résulte d'une absence de surveillance ou de contraintes physiques, sociales ou psychologiques. Le groupe apporte un anonymat et une désindividuation propices à une baisse du contrôle et à une suspension temporaire des normes opposées à la violence. L'intensité de la désindividuation étant théoriquement fonction de la taille du groupe lui-même, on doit s'attendre à une plus grande propension à la violence lorsque les groupes sont plus denses. De même, on peut supposer que plus la désindividuation est importante, plus la violence exprimée est intense



This focus on the uniform happens again with other perpetrators: the Soviets. The Soviet soldiers arrive in China after the Japanese defeat; however, they continue inflicting violence on women, raping them as they entered the city (fig.3.26). In the author's depiction of these men, the focus is again given to their military boots, emphasizing the group they belong to. On the following page, the shape that composed them seems to dissolve, making it harder to distinguish one soldier in particular (fig.3.27). By doing that, Gendry-Kim reinforces the process of deindividualization experienced by the soldiers, which made them more prone to display violent behavior.

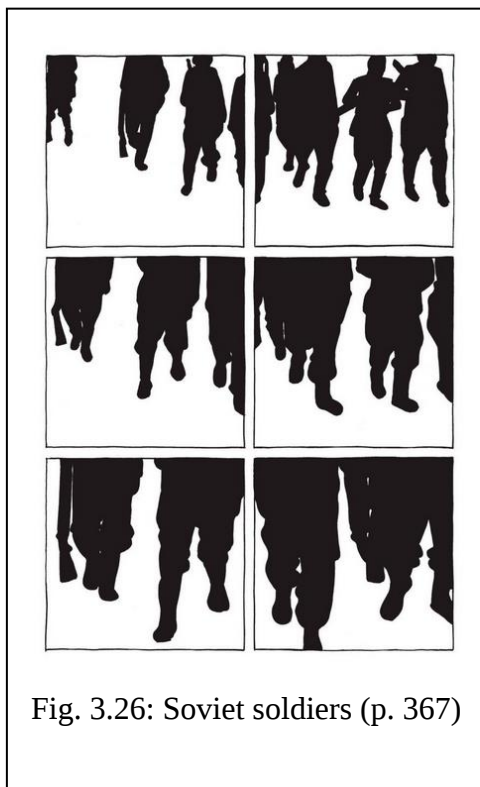


Fig. 3.26: Soviet soldiers (p. 367)

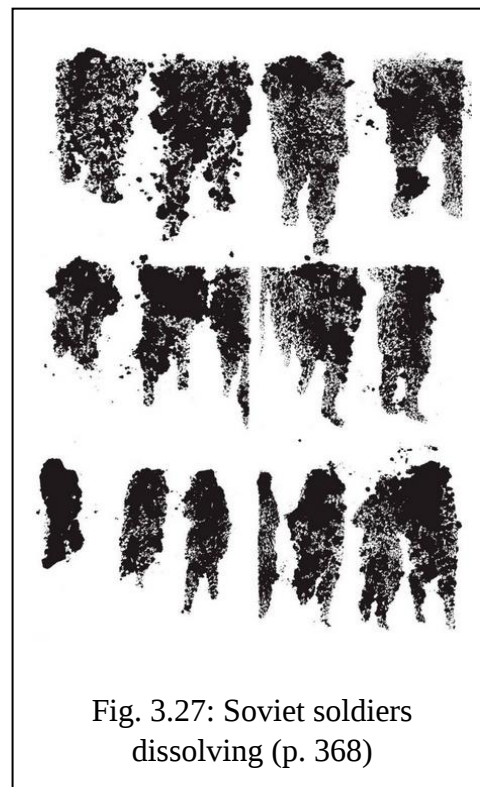
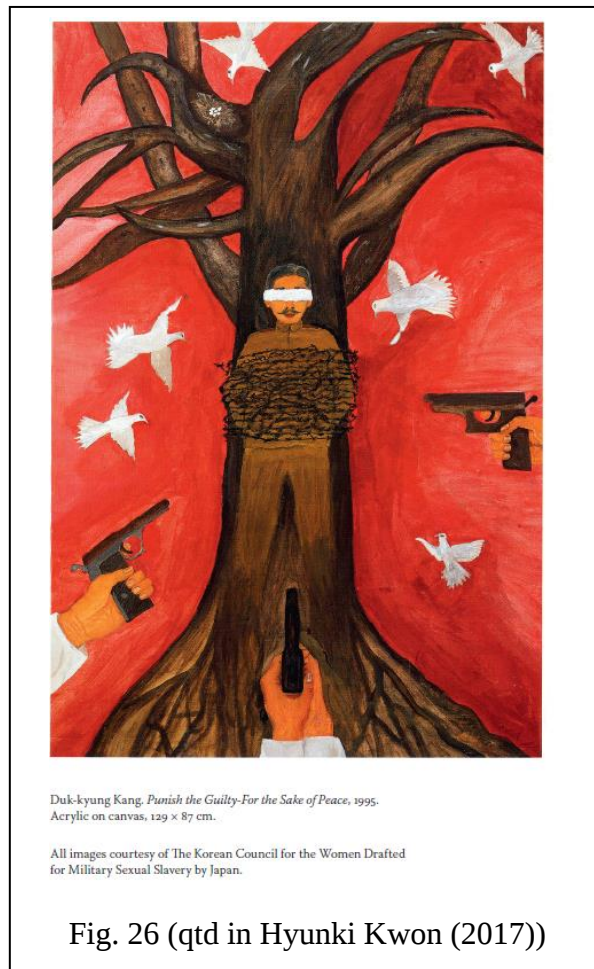


Fig. 3.27: Soviet soldiers dissolving (p. 368)

An engaging aside that must be mentioned is that a former victim of sexual slavery like Ok-Sun, who ended up living in the House of Sharing alongside her started doing art so as to express herself. Her name is Duk-kyung Kang, she was born in 1929 and died in 1997. After the war, she became a human right activist. According to the article “The painting of Korean Comfort Women Duk-Kyung: Postcolonial and Decolonial Aesthetic for Colonized Bodies” by Hyunji Kwon (2017), the painter presented in 1995 the painting titled *Punish the Guilty — For the Sake of Peace* (fig. 3.26), which shows a “blindfolded and barbewired-tied Japanese Imperial Army soldier [who] is depicted with multiple comfort women holding guns, providing a rather surprising and complex — routinely objectified in moral and sexual terms — become anticolonial nationalist figure after Korean liberation” (Kwon, 2017: 571). Following the same idea as Gendry-Kim, the eyes of the Japanese soldiers are missing because they are hidden by a red scarf. It can also be noted that

[t]he implication of impending violence, death, and punishment is offset by the absence of faces and whole-body figures of the perpetrators along with the presence of doves and a nest filled with eggs at the top-left corner. In this tension between conflict and peace, as well as external violence and internal reconciliation, Kang descriptively draws the contour of the contrasting but reversed entities of the colonizers and the colonized with the possibility to blend the agencies of both parties. (Kwon, 2017: 572)

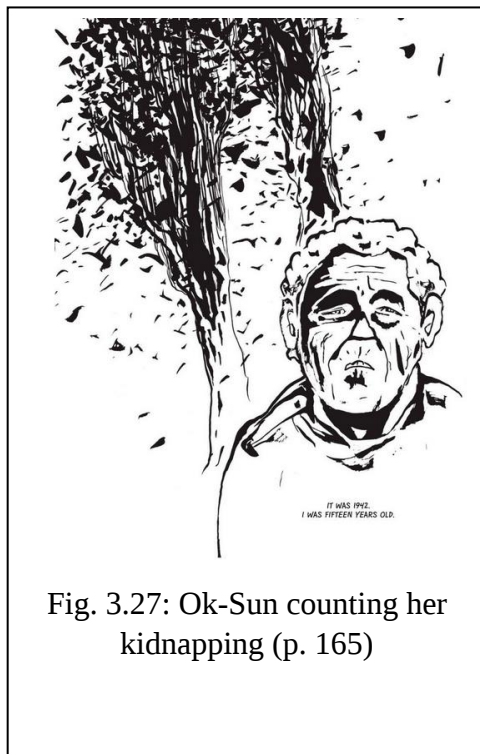
By depriving the soldier of eyes, the painter turns the narrative upside down. The soldiers, who looked at the girls, imposing their male gaze over them, which consequently leads to an objectification of the girls, are denied that ability. They are now the one being looked at. During the war, the victims have been denied their identity —Korean girls were forced to drop their name to take on a Japanese name— and by taking the Japanese soldiers' face, which according to Levinas is what makes someone a person, the narrative is changed. The Japanese are now the one deprived of their identity and their individualized self.



To sum up this part, via the non-representation of the face and the focus on the military uniforms, Gendry-Kim —and the Korean former victim as well as painter Duk-kyung also addressing this issue— provokes a deindividualization of those soldiers, pointing out that as they are part of a larger group, their level of responsibility is diminished. Furthermore, that deindividualization through the drawing can lead to a detachment with the violence that was committed, to not make the victims re-experience that violence again in the representation, which is a matter that will be discussed in the following part.

Gendry-Kim's representations of Ok-Sun take a completely opposite approach than the one used for the representation of the perpetrators, since Ok-Sun's gaze confronts the reader throughout the narration. According to Levinas's thinking, it is through the eyes that a relationship is made possible between two individuals. Gendry-Kim makes the relation between the reader and Ok-Sun possible. By emphasizing Ok-Sun's gaze, the author forces the reader to be confronted with the victim's testimony and therefore, it creates a space where the victims can voice what happened to them and where they will be heard.

Ok-Sun's eyes look directly into the reader's as she recounts the moment when she was kidnapped by two soldiers as she was running errands for the owner of the tavern she worked at (fig. 3.27).



She is represented as old, facing the reader saying “It was 1942. I was fifteen years old” (Gendry-Kim, 165), which makes it look like Ok-Sun is directly addressing the reader, without Gendry-Kim as an intermediate. It happens again when Ok-Sun explains that, at the first camp they stayed at, they were almost starving — “Even though we’d been there for a while, it was still hard to stomach the food they gave us. We got steamed kaoliang and millet with kimchi, radish leaves and cabbage. But everything was practically rotten” (Gendry-Kim, 224). This is

stated in the graphic novel in parallel with a representation of Ok-Sun looking directly at the reader (fig.28). In both cases, a link is clearly established with the reader so as to confront them with Ok-Sun's testimony.

Even though Gendry-Kim's intentions are to create a space for Ok-Sun to tell her story, she is concerned that making Ok-Sun go over the story will only make her reexperience events of extreme violence which marked her for the rest of her life ("Was I just stirring up painful memories for granny Lee by trying to tell her story as a comic when all she wanted was to put the past behind her? I know many people have come to her with similar agendas..." (Gendry-Kim, 155)). This is an issue that has already been discussed by Patricia Yeager in her article "Consuming Trauma; or, the Pleasures of Merely Circulating" (1997) in which she states that

we inhabit an academic world that is busy consuming trauma — busy eating, swallowing, perusing, consuming, exchanging, circulating, creating professional connections — through its stories about the dead. We are obsessed with stories that must be passed on, that must not be passed over. But aren't we also drawn to these stories from within an elite culture driven by its own economics: by the pain and pleasures of needing to publish, by salaries and promotions that are themselves driven by the acts of publication, by, among other forces, the pleasure of merely circulating? (Yeager, 1997: 228)

In other words, she argues that the danger with those stories, in which violence is at the center, is that they merely become something that is produced and consumed in order to make benefits and thus, are the intention of the authors —and by extension, the publishers', etc. — praiseworthy. The danger of working with topics such as war, rape or death, is to not represent it rightly, but to make it become a simple product of consumption. Yeager wonders "how does one write an ethnography of violence "without its becoming a pornography of violence"?" (Yeager, 1997: 240).

Despite her concerns over that matter, it can be argued that Gendry-Kim creates a space for Ok-Sun to voice her testimony without it becoming a marketing product, making the reader understand the forms of violence that Ok-Sun experienced without facing that violence directly, emphasizing the suffering without the shame felt by the victims. It can be exemplified by the representation of the first time she was raped. It happens in the chapter titled "Chastity", which discusses the moment through various visual elements without representing the act clearly. The chapter starts with a landscape with a bird diving on its prey (fig. 3.29), which creates a parallel of the Japanese soldiers about to enter the comfort stations to rape the girls, symbolized by the

prey. Ok-Sun then describes that “just like that in front of all my friends... [she] was raped like an animal.” (Gendry-Kim, 2000) and the panels turn to black (fig. 3.30).



Fig. 3.29: bird diving on its prey
(p. 197)

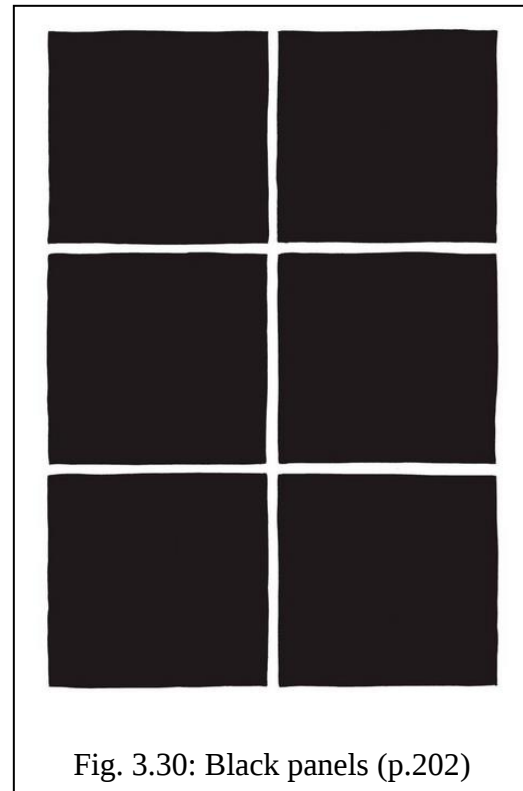


Fig. 3.30: Black panels (p.202)

The gutter creates a fragmentation that is typical of traumatic events, as developed by Hillary Chute, a comic theorist who mentions in her book *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* that traumatic memories are “more fragmentary and condensed than regular memory” (Chute, 2010: 114). During five pages, the gutter helps to fragment the memory of that moment. By doing that on so many pages, it also conveys an idea of elongated time, letting the reader know that the moment felt like forever for Ok-Sun. Moreover, those black panels can be understood as a representation of the process of dissociation which happens when someone is confronted with extreme violence. According to the article “Betrayal trauma theory of dissociative experiences: Stroop and directed forgetting findings” by Giesbrecht, Timo and Merckelback (2009), dissociation is a phenomenon that takes place when the possibility of physical escape is nonexistent. This process is defined as “a disruption in the usually integrated function of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment” (*American Psychiatric Association*, 2000, 519 qtd in Giesbrecht and Harald, 2009). It means that victims of abuse, in order to protect themselves from what is happening unconsciously disconnect with reality. In the case of *Grass*, this idea is conveyed via the black panels.

Black panels already convey the event experienced by the victim, however, the author decided to represent Ok-Sun, nonetheless. Her face is drawn in the middle of the six black panels (fig. 3.31) with splashes of blood in the gutter. The traces used in order to represent her face are messy and is if with traces of dirt, which conveyed the feeling of dirtiness that she felt due to the rape (“I bled so much, I felt so dirty [...] My mother, my father, my brothers, my sisters, my home. I couldn’t go back to them now. Not ever” (Gendry-Kim, 206-207)).



Fig. 3.31: Rape (p. 201)

Following that scene, Gendry-Kim makes a focus on Ok-Sun’s hands and face, playing with timelines and colors, going back and forth between the present-time Ok-Sun and the past-time Ok-Sun (fig. 3.23). The past time is symbolized by the color black, reminiscing the reader of the previous dark panels and, by contrast, white is the color representing the present time.



Fig. 3.32: Ok-Sun being impacted by her past (p. 207)



Fig. 3.33: Ok-Sun's hands (p.206)

In order to understand those two pages, the concept of somatization must be understood. According to Richard Mayou, for over sixty years, many somatic syndromes have found their sources in mental disorders and other internalized pains (1993). It means that internal pain can cause external damages to the body so as to make the pain visible. In the first figure mentioned above, Ok-Sun is represented in the present time but completely darkened inside, which reminds the reader of the black panels used to address the rape. It underlines the fact that despite all the years gone by, she is still marked by that memory, and it is still all over her even though it cannot be visible from the outside. As for the representation of the hands, the first panels have a dark background, which shows Ok-Sun's hand as she was being raped. Her hands are shaking from the fear and the pain caused by that violation. The lines on the hands could also be understood as scars, which emphasize the internal suffering by making it visible on the outside. In both figures, Gendry-Kim makes the psychological pain palpable in the way she draws Ok-Sun and her hands.

CONCLUSION

The Best We Could Do and *Grass* are two graphic novels dealing with heavy themes, filled with strong emotions and violence. It can be argued that both authors had profoundly dissimilar goals while writing and drawing their novels. Thi Bui's started this journey overseas back to her Vietnamese roots in an effort to face the trauma passed on to her from her parents. Her objective is motivated by the birth of her first son, and the fear of only reproducing the pattern she experienced with her own parents and therefore, impacting her child with unresolved traumas from a past he is not a part of. By contrast, Gendry-Kim is not directly involved in Ok-Sun's story. Her aim is mostly to create a space where the victims of sexual slavery will be heard and able to tell their stories, which have been mostly erased. Due to their different objectives, the style of each graphic novel is extremely different. Bui, with a view to shed light on her past, explores her memories in a style that could almost be qualified as journalistic. She dives into her past with the idea to confront it, exploring it as clearly as possible. In sharp contrast, Gendry-Kim explores a topic that is still unknown and full of things left unsaid, which is something that can be felt in her drawing style. She keeps a distance, making the artwork opaque. The author experiments with the medium as a means to convey the taboos and the unsaid. Where Thi Bui wants to unveil her past, Gendry-Kim's *Grass* is composed of a lot of unspoken. Despite their differences in styles and objectives, they are still relevant to study together via the concept of 'dark' writing, as developed by Viljoen. The objective of this research project was to study how both graphic novels make use of the concept when it comes to representing violence and trauma.

This master's dissertation explores, in its first chapter, the historical contexts in which both stories take place — The Vietnam War and the Second World War in Asia, with the invasions of the Japanese imperial army of other Asian countries such as Korea and China. This contextualization follows the traditional narrative that is most famously known, which means it focuses on the American point of view of the Vietnam War and on the military aspects of the Japanese invasion, without considering victims that are left in the background of their narratives. However, the chapter proceeds to show how the graphic novels — by providing a new and unique framing on what is usually in the background — change the story that is usually told, putting the unknown and unheard victims at the center of their narration. In both stories,

the victims happen to be women. History is mainly known to be masculine, with women pushed to the margins. Nevertheless, Bui and Gendry-Kim give a place for those victims to be heard, to reappropriate history so as to fit their own experience, which could be referred to as herstory. Bui does that by using well-known archives, such as the pictures of the *Saigon Execution* or the *Fall of Saigon*, which are largely known from an outside perspective, such as the American one, to explore what those pictures meant for Vietnamese people. Moreover, this reframing takes place as part of a profoundly feminine experience: motherhood. Gendry-Kim focuses on herstory via the unknown experience of the victims of sexual slavery, framing parts of their lives that are still unknown — what happened in the comfort stations or their adult age, after the Japanese defeat.

The second chapter focuses on the analysis of the visual elements present in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* that convey the experience of the Vietnamese immigrant because of the Vietnam War. Bui first makes use of the gutter — the limbo in between two panels where the reader is given the space to interact with the story. Via that blank space, the author can address the fracture that the family experienced because of the events they went through, such as pregnancy and motherhood, without actually facing it directly. She also makes the readers experience part of the Vietnamese experience by immersing them into it through the water symbols she uses. Because of what they went through, the Vietnamese people who immigrated are now associated with the nickname of boat people. Through the visual styles and the metaphor she makes along her narrative, Bui immerses the reader in the violent experience lived by the Vietnamese people, such as the crossing of the ocean, which caused the death of many Vietnamese people. Finally, she also challenges the framing of the page so as to convey the shock felt by the characters. By dismantling and rearranging the pages and the panels, she is able to mimics the emotions felt by Bui's family along their journey, which makes the reader feel it and experience it with the characters.

The third chapter concentrates on Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's *Grass*. The author makes the readers feel and understand the pain and sorrow felt by Ok-Sun during her lifetime. The lines, and to some extent, the colors help in conveying such feelings. By tracing lines in certain ways and using certain brushes — and therefore, making a panel darker or whiter — the author conveys the messiness, the abruptness, and the violence of the moments. Gendry-Kim also resorts to drawing numerous landscapes which are ambiguous in their calm yet frightening nature, because of the heavy silence they carry with them. The landscapes convey many

emotions, such as the feeling experienced by the victims of being degraded by the Japanese army — which can already be understood via the title of the book — and the sense of loss they must have felt as they were sequestered in unknown places. Eventually, she challenges the representation of the perpetrators, taking away their faces and, that way, emphasizing the group effect. By doing that, the author underlines the mass violence the victims of sexual slavery such as Ok-Sun had to go through. In sharp contrast, the victims often confront the reader by looking them directly in the eye, therefore creating a space where Ok-Sun can tell her story and be heard. Moreover, Gendry-Kim addresses a topic that is still replete with cultural prohibitions and that is still vivid in the minds of the victims. Yet, the author manages to tell Ok-Sun's story without reproducing the shame, by suggesting visually the violence and the pain it marked Ok-Sun with forever.

As it has been demonstrated, both authors resort to using 'dark' writing to address violence and trauma in their work. In other words, it means that they tackle such topics, which are said to be unrepresentable, not via a direct confrontation, but through visual aspects so as to make it understandable for the reader and in a way the reader will be able to experience the scale of violence, and that is possible through the medium of the graphic novel, which is malleable enough to experiment with 'dark' writing. Thi Bui and Gendry-Kim used some similar techniques to do so, such as the use of the line or the gutter. In both, the line, and to some extent, the color, was used in order to convey a feeling of anxiety, of distress, or of violence. As for the gutter, and even if both authors use it with some difference in frequency, their goal is completely different. Gendry-Kim uses the gutter in some scenes to convey the idea of elongated time when Ok-Sun is being raped, making it seem as if the moment lasts forever. As for Thi Bui, she uses the gutter to emphasize the fractures experienced by her family as well as the parallels that exist between Thi and her father, pointing out the idea of post-memory, the passing of traumas from one generation to another. Both graphic novels make use of conventional elements of graphic novels, such as the lines, the color, the overall style, and the framing with the aim of immersing the reader in the characters' experiences.

However, and despite the fact that they use some similar, visual elements — which are conventional to the medium — both graphic novels also demonstrate their own techniques to convey violence and its consequences. Thi Bui, by using the reference to water, plays with the medium in a way that is very personal to her own story and that could not be repeated in other contexts. Gendry-Kim, as part of her experimental style and the story she is writing, develops

various techniques that keep her at a distance from the violence, yet she still makes the pain and the violence understandable. The pain and the sorrow are palpable via the way she uses the landscapes or via her representation of the victims and the perpetrators, something that is unique to the story she tells because of its opacity. It confirms that graphic novels are particularly suitable when it comes to addressing such trauma, because of the particular plasticity of the medium (Nabizadeh 2019, 1). Moreover, it also makes Viljoen's 'dark' writing relevant in analyzing trauma and violence in graphic novels. *War Comics: A postcolonial experience* was released in 2021 and the concept of 'dark' writing seems very broad, since even though some elements might be more conventional, others are unique to the story that is told. As mentioned by Viljoen, 'dark' writing is applicable "in studying representations of violence through graphic narratives to show that they extend the capacity for expressing what was previously thought of as unrepresentable or as confined in the inadequacy of logical narrative structure" (Viljoen 2021, 161).

Outside of the study of 'dark' writing, it should also be mentioned that both *The Best We Could Do* and *Grass* contribute to female comics, by documenting the unheard voices of women and their experience of history. It allows for the liberation and the empowerment of women, who can therefore regain control over the way history is told.

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