

Ambivalence and Feminist Attachment in *The Best We Could Do*

TBWCD shares many thematic concerns with *Vietnamerica*. The texts are rooted in interviews and oral histories with the parents of the authors/protagonists. These parents share similar stories of meeting and courtship. Each protagonist's father was a teacher who met his younger spouse when she was a student in high school (*Vietnamerica*) or college (*TBWCD*). Just like Tran's graphic novel, we learn of Bui's parents' upbringings and the ways they were shaped by various wars, conflicts, famines, and other forms of precarity. Both stories have cold father figures with their own complicated family histories and economic and social struggles upon arrival to the United States. Both are second-generation memoirs of growing up in the United States, though unlike Tran, who was born in South Carolina in 1976, Bui was born in Vietnam in 1975 and fled with her family by boat to refugee camps in Malaysia in 1978 before being resettled in Indiana and ultimately relocating to California. Both texts engage in documentation as an active process of situating themselves within the larger histories of their families and of Vietnam and the diaspora. As Tran's acknowledgments note, "Making this book broke my heart," perhaps reflecting his position of ignorance before uncovering this family history.

Bui's text does not take the shape of discovery in the same way that Tran's does. Tran's disinterest is challenged by his mother's openness in narrating family history. For Bui, it is the haunting presence of Vietnam and the unspoken past in her life that impels the search for answers to try to explain the emotional distance in her family. Bui parses history to try to make sense of or process the traumas that pervade her family. The fraught feeling of being from Vietnam but not recognizing it is but one source of anguish and serves as an impetus for the research project undertaken to document family history, which eventually takes shape as the book.⁴⁵ The text leaps back and forth temporally but is organized thematically through titled chapters. Interweaving Bui's position as the narrator with family histories in Vietnam and stories of each family member's lives and coming of age in the United States, each chapter is shaped by a longing for the safety of home and family relations and the sense of loss and guilt that follows from their absence. The experience of interpersonal tension pushes Bui to seek coherence in history as resolution to the difficult family relationships. Her emotional distance from her father, her distress at not having any personal memories of Vietnam, and her inability to emotionally separate from her mother all push Bui to turn to history to try to make sense of the rifts within the interpersonal dynamics, rather than her place in the United States.

Bui, like Tran, represents the lack of family history and conflict between parents and children. Both authors rely on research in addition to interviews to fill in the gaps of family and national histories, though Bui's intense longing for connection to her parents contrasts Tran's aloofness about his family relationships. The texts are stylistically and emotionally distinct. *TBWCD* has a more traditional book and comic structure with page numbers, chapter titles, and gutters. In contrast to the cacophony of colors in Tran's text, except for the blue paste-down end pages, Bui's refined black line work and paneling are filled with illustrations in multiple variations of only one color. Though the red-sepia hue is manipulated from pale to deep reddish brown, the simplicity of the single use of color in the text lends a much quieter, more somber tone.⁴⁶ The red evokes blood and birth and the tone of intimacy and longing that permeates the work. The genealogical family and the bloodlines present echo a similar rendering in Tran's work, even down to the use of the family tree to map and organize relationships. It is the affective weight, however, of Bui's rendering of family as responsibility, choice—as a fragile relationship—that re-signifies the tree's meaning in her text. The family tree is then not the site of her self-identity as Vietnamese, but rather a site of anxiety from which she theorizes the impact of trauma from generations of losses and lives under warfare: "How much of ME is my own, and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined?" The family tree is distinct from Tran's in that it is imposed over the roots of an actual tree. Interspersed with the names and images of family members, situated across the tree roots, are boxes of texts containing her worries about trauma's potential impacts on her son (Figure 2.5).

Gendered experiences of vulnerability shape the book's focus on mothers and children. *TBWCD* opens by narrating pain and fear; the full-term pregnant belly of the protagonist, Bui, fills the frame. In contrast to Tran, who is a young, childless, male bachelor, our introduction to Bui takes place in the hospital in the fearful moments before she becomes a mother. Her deep ambivalence about giving birth to her son is compounded by her loss of control over the situation and her concern about her mother's conspicuous absence from the room in the chaotic moments preceding the birth. Childbirth is not a romantic and happy experience, and Bui feels no agency in her labor, which has continued for nearly two days. As the medical team pushes for intervention via C-section and drugs, she feels defeated. Exacerbated by the long and difficult labor, and her lack of bodily autonomy, a nurse bringing a tray of surgical instruments into the room evokes an old memory: a story of rape shared by her father without regard for his adolescent daughter's presence. The text over the image of the nurse preparing instruments in her hospital room as her birth progresses is the memory of the

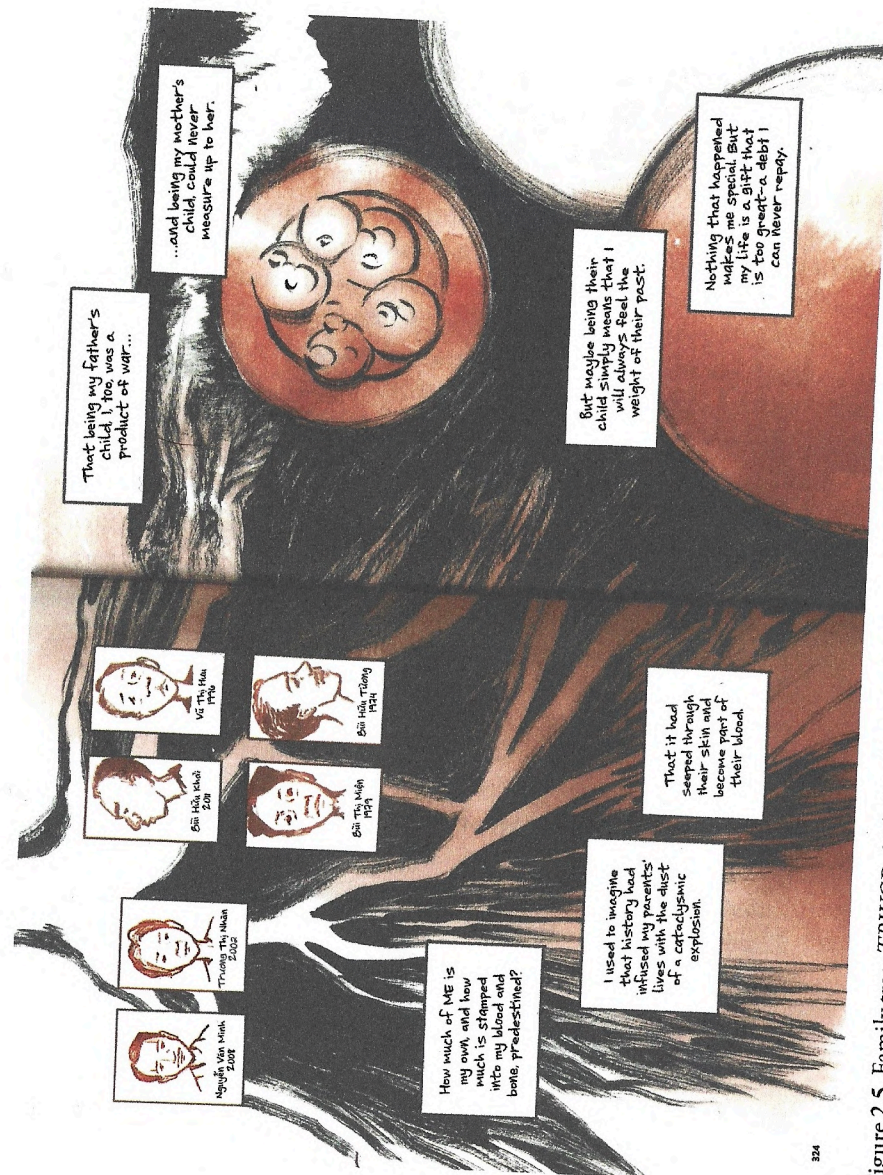


Figure 2.5 Family tree, *TBWCD*, 324–25. (From *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui, copyright © 2018 Thi Bui. Used by permission of Abrams ComicArts, an imprint of Abrams, New York. All rights reserved.)

violent act: "a pair of scissors inserted into the vagina . . . and opened up inside."⁴⁷ Six pages in, Bui has depicted childbirth, and represented parental abandonment by depicting her mother's absence from the room. Pain and fear are communicated through the affective weight of a graphic description of sexual violence. These fears simultaneously speak to concerns over the birth process and the unknowns of what is to come, in addition to the lasting impact of both parents' aloof and potentially neglectful parenting.

TBWCD is marked by vulnerability and the weight and implications of child-parent relationships. The postpartum experience is as alienating as her birth experience when she is left alone in her shared hospital room with a baby for whom she does not yet know how to care. Her husband has left to drive Bui's mother back to her hotel. Unsure how to deal with diapers and struggling with breastfeeding, she is overwhelmed and afraid. The first chapter illustrates her struggles coming into motherhood and reflecting on the weight of the responsibility she feels that "family is now something I have created—and not something I was born into."⁴⁸ Family is not just an inheritance, as Tran's graphic novel demonstrates, but more importantly a relationship and responsibility. While the graphic novel on its surface can be read for how it deploys what Leslie Bow has called "maternal connection . . . mystified as genetic inheritance" or bodily memory as an essentialized ethnic identity in the author's parallel narration of her own and her mother's life, the graphic novel does not easily lend itself to the closure usually achieved in autobiography or memoir. Bui learns family history, but it does not lead to an embrace of her individual identity or the ability to somehow overcome the circumstances of her parents' pasts in order to assert a narrative of "progressive self-betterment."⁴⁹ While the ideas of "best we could do" and a hope for a trauma-free life for her own son can easily lend themselves to narratives of generational succession—where each generation's pain and sacrifices are justified in the achievements of the next—what we find in the text is a great deal of ambivalence about the conclusions one can draw about the personal versus the historical and how to differentiate between the two.

The graphic novel's wide circulation in public library community reading campaigns—including the Seattle Reads campaign in 2019, among others—frame the book in relation to multiethnic community history. These readings often characterize ethnic literature within universal frames of coming of age or neoliberal narratives of multiculturalism. Sally McWilliams comments on these events and the framing of the “best we could do” as a rendering of the Vietnamese refugee experience as one of economic triumphalism. McWilliams challenges this reading by emphasizing the text's oppositional qualities and the ways it challenges assimilationist narratives through its performance of postmemory.⁵⁰ While the family can be an orienting device to challenge the telos of assimilation, the U.S.

nation-state, and the "end of war," families are not unproblematic sites free from their own hierarchies and power dynamics. In my analysis of Bui's graphic novel, I focus on the problematics of the family itself to show how ambivalent attachment might afford us a method of orienting toward the family in ways that are also attentive to the violences of family dynamics. Read in this way, these texts do not correct history but are themselves acts of negotiation with the tensions of the power dynamics of history as well as the authors' own families of origin or the processing of experiences of racism and familial neglect.

The title, *The Best We Could Do*, registers the ambivalence that permeates the novel's telling of personal and family history. Using ambiguity and "ambivalence as a continuous political and affective reality," this final section focuses on the tensions and moments of contradiction in the graphic novel to decouple Bui's feelings of indebtedness and longing from nationalisms and dominant identity formations and to foreground the ever-shifting and complex nature of affiliation, kinship, and belonging.⁵¹ McWilliams's astute reading of the trauma of assimilation positions Bui's text as a critique of Tran's lack of attention to gender. Centering a "feminist intervention," McWilliams reads Bui's text through the "contemporality" and "parallelisms" that evoke the intersubjectivity between Bui and her mother.⁵² She reads the "slow death" of assimilation for the first and the second generation together, connecting the parental loss of power with the precarious living situation the family finds themselves in because of poverty and racial discrimination. Whether we take up traditional arguments about the role of women as cultural reproducers or search for more nuanced explanations of Tran's versus Bui's methods of uncovering family history and the resulting identities forged in the process, we cannot overlook the significance of gender in shaping the disparate narratives. The graphic novel reveals that neither racial/ethnic nor gender affiliations serve as easy correctives for the disconnection in the family. While McWilliams uses parallel experiences as a device to link mother and daughter, I argue that gender does not produce natural alliances that enable Bui to overcome her existential crises.

While Leslie Bow argues that Asian American women's literature is often the site of accusations of betrayal to family and nation where women's sexuality is managed, Bui's text diverges from this canon in her continual search for connection with her family. The text challenges the linear development narrative where migrant parents sacrifice for the progressive betterment of their children by showing the freedoms and opportunities that both sets of parents had in Vietnam relative to their lives in the United States. These opportunities were taken from them specifically because of U.S. escalation and involvement in the war. The graphic novel charts the disconnect resulting from an inability to forge connection on the basis of gender because of constant comparison and feelings of

falling short. It is not only national and class differences that divide Bui from her parents and her parents from each other but also the fact that the constraints on Bui's choices in the United States challenge a progressive narrative of achievement that shapes the immigrant/refugee family.

I read the comparison as the manifestation of ambivalence in parent-child relationships in the following examples: disappointment, comparison with predeceased siblings, and emotional distance. Ambivalence, as the "simultaneous 'coexistence of [two or more powerful] contradictory emotions or attitudes toward a person or thing,' can be destabilizing and with proper attention open avenues for seeing, sensing and understanding differently."⁵³ Attention to ambivalence enables us to move past the naming of the violence or "trauma of assimilation"⁵⁴ to the processing of this violence. This ambivalence is heightened when Bui becomes a mother herself. Fear and ambivalence about motherhood serve as an entry point to the other complex emotions that emerge because of the constant destabilization of her family due to the historical events they lived through.

Mothering Disappointment

Bui is unable to separate her sense of self from her mother. She is distressed when she realizes that she introduced herself to her child as Mệ, "Con ơi, Mệ nè."⁵⁵ The guilt she feels is immediate, as she remembers that Mệ of the northern dialect was the address she and her siblings denied her own mother in choosing to call her Má, in southern dialect.⁵⁶ McWilliams reads this moment as an example of slippage that acknowledges violence that disavows her mother's "pre-French colonial history of identity."⁵⁷ Without attributing too much agency to Bui in perpetuating the violent erasure of her mother's identity, another reading is possible. As the child of parents who were refugees from the North who ended up in the South because of multiple displacements in the war, Bui and her siblings were born in the South. Thus their "choices" to pick up on local dialects, substituting Má for Mệ, may be a matter of surroundings. Bui's own slippage into the position of mother is constructed from her life experiences, as to be a mother is to be Mệ. Her inability to separate herself from her mother is also borne from Bui's awe of her mother's beauty, as she sees herself as a lesser version in comparison—"She looks like you, but not as pretty."⁵⁸ It is driven by her desire to be cared for by her absent mother, who was doing double duty performing underpaid waged labor, jobs that Bui's father (Bố), Nam, refused to take, before coming home to cook and clean, and her desire for solace and comfort in her mother as a counter to her scary and aloof father. The confusion may also follow from Bui's experience as a parentified child, having to mother herself and her younger

brother, Tam, in those early days when the older sisters were away at school and the youngest were left to their own devices by their emotionally absent father.

Throughout the graphic novel, Bui constantly negotiates what it means to be a mother and child and laments the lack of clear guidance on what each role means. On page 29, two rectangular panels, one below the other, take up the page. The narrative text reads, "These are the people I come from," followed by an illustration of her mother and father. The second panel illustrates and names the children, Bui and her siblings. The third section is divided into two panels, a small one of Bui and her small family that states, "I have figured out, more or less, how to raise my little family . . ." The next panel, measuring twice as wide, continues with a close-up of the faces of Bui, her husband Travis, and her son: the narrative continues, "But it's being both a parent and a child, without acting like a child, that eludes me." In this panel, Bui's speech bubble reads, "We're such assholes! We're the lame second generation."

Nothing on this page explains what makes Bui and presumably her siblings the "lame second generation." There is no illustration of what this refers to or what behaviors or actions would warrant being called "assholes." It is on the following page that the calculus is laid out for us: "My parents escaped Viet Nam on a boat so their children could grow up in freedom. You'd think I'd be more grateful. I am now older than my parents were when they made that incredible journey. But I fear that around them, I will always be a child . . . and they a symbol to me—two sides of a chasm, full of meaning and resentment."⁵⁹ But what is the relationship between parental sacrifice and Bui's feelings of immaturity? Do not most parents ostensibly work and make sacrifices for their children to have more, to have better lives than they had? Her sense of failure as a child is compounded with the knowledge of parental grief over lost children and her own ungrateful attitude toward her parents: "Have our parents ever looked at us and felt slightly . . . disappointed?"⁶⁰ The text articulates the prosaic feeling of indebtedness occupied by the second generation, the children of refugees and immigrants who had to overcome so much to survive. Bui reveals how her identity is tied up in her mother's. Comparison for Bui becomes a source of grief as she wrestles with the fact that for Hạng/Má, family meant the imposition of a particular way of life and dependency that derailed her own personal dreams. Her mother's desires to become a doctor and travel the world are interrupted by unplanned pregnancy, which is followed by a wedding and marriage to Nam until their divorce two decades later. Noting the difficulty of talking to her mother about the past, she reflects on her mother's relative ease sharing information with Travis, Bui's husband. Unable to detach herself from her mother, Bui experiences pain at the realization that the best years of her mother's life were not her years as a mother, but were instead her young, carefree high school and early college days.

Bui's position as the debt-bound daughter and the recipient of the "gift of freedom" is structurally produced through the immigrant family.⁶¹ She is a product of the refugee/immigrant family as a capitalist enterprise and as subject of liberal freedom rather than solely a holdover of "Vietnamese culture." Assimilation, just like the power structure and dynamics of the Vietnamese family in the United States, is but one of the many forces that form their life experiences. Read in the context of the capitalist ideals that structure resettlement, assimilation, and national incorporation in the United States, the grief that Bui experiences cannot be reduced to the aftermath of the war, but is itself an American experience. The imbalance in the home is the result of a combination of PTSD from the war and the gendered and racialized contours of economic opportunity in the United States: "For my parents, already fully formed in another time and place to which they could never go back . . . home became the holding pen for frustrations and unexorcised demons that had nowhere to go in America's finest city."⁶²

Nam's refusal to take a low-wage job building circuit boards at the company where Hạng's sister works, a job that he is overqualified for as a former teacher, results in an alternative configuration to the traditional division of labor in which mothers perform the domestic tasks of reproduction. Nam remarks, "That sounds terrible," to which Hạng replies, "FINE. Then I'll take it." While Nam may be physically at home with the two youngest children, his neglectful parenting means that Hạng is not relieved from the tasks of care for the family—she simply performs double and triple duty. Ten-year-old Bui's drawing of her mother reflects this reality: "I remember her mostly in work clothes, frowning and rushing to get dinner for six on the table."⁶³ She does the domestic labor of feeding and caring for the family while taking lunchtime and evening courses.

Instead of attempting to resolve or make sense of Bui's feelings, I read the circularity, the movement back and forth in time, as part of the processing of her experiences of subjection as the daughter of immigrants and her grief over the familial relationships that are desired but do not yet exist. Similar to Tran, Bui's narration of parental and global history is punctuated by returns to the present. In *TBWCD*, each parent's story is interspersed with commentary about the emotional distance and difficulty of their relationships. For example, in the chapter that begins Nam's story, "Me and BỐ, we're okay now. To stop being scared of him, I grew up and went away."⁶⁴ The chapter concludes with Bui arguing that the fear that permeated the household flowed from BỐ's own traumatic upbringing as a multiply orphaned and abused child.

Drawing from Clare Hemmings's theory of a feminist politics of ambivalence and Sara Ahmed's theory of feminist attachment, I read *TBWCD* as an example

of the psychic and emotional processing of gendered and racialized subjection of migrant subjects. In her discussion of the fraught anarchist figure Emma Goldman, Hemmings explains that various actors have claimed Goldman as a feminist and anti-racist figure in the face of Goldman's contradictory statements and silences on these issues. Approaching the archive through ambivalence, Hemmings shifts from "a search for lost sources" toward "how we might read these archival gaps and half-grasped traces creatively. The shift is a slight but important one. It frames the ambivalent histories we inherit as ones that were *always likely to have been lost*."⁶⁵ Turning away from a historiography that attempts to fill in the gaps, to affirmatively prove whether or not Goldman was a feminist or a woman hater, toward an ambivalent reading of Goldman, Hemmings identifies what is always true about histories and archives: they are always already incomplete and always already mediated.

In each chapter, the details of Hàng's and Nam's lives are compiled as an attempt toward a cohesive narrative that may make sense of their lives in the present. Reading for ambivalence in *TBWCD* means paying attention to Bui's desperate hope that learning history could somehow teach her how to love, appreciate, and understand her parents. How does the issue become one of Bui's own insufficient love in the face of Má's abandonment and Bó's disavowal of the eldest daughter, Bích, in Bui's childhood? Looking at the tensions reveals the underlying desires for connection and intimacy. But while Bui can retrace history, she can never get to the thing she truly wants because the explanations, motivations, and feelings are fleeting and "always likely to have been lost." A creative reading of the gaps might allow us to see what Bui hopes for but does not have, except through the production of the text itself: intimacy, a deep understanding of her parents as people, of their lived experiences, past hopes, desires, disappointments. Rather than foreclosing a future possibility of knowing them as they are now, the text performs, imagines, and produces the intimacy that is sought after.

Rather than attempting to reconcile Goldman's position retroactively with theories from the present, Hemmings focuses on ambivalence and tensions in Goldman's writing and thinking, which "helps us to engage past politics and theory as complex or contradictory, and to foreground the importance of current complexity, despite our desire to have resolved both past and present paradoxes."⁶⁶ This opens a space "to disrupt the relationship between past and present, to challenge a critical certainty that there is a singular story that we can tell about how we got to where we (think we) are now."⁶⁷ Hemmings centers herself as reader/researcher to "interrupt[t] the neat narratives of self, theory, and politics [she] ha[s] a vested interest in" by paying attention to her own affective responses to the things in the archive that provoke aversions and avoidance.⁶⁸

Bui's interest in her family history is an explicit attempt to situate herself within her family's history in order to achieve a sense of belonging in light of dominant feelings of disconnect and aloofness. Reading the tensions, desires, and silences through ambivalence challenges the foregone conclusions as she writes her family historiography. For example, as the fifth of six children, she lives in the ghostly shadows of two older siblings who passed away before she was born: one as an infant and the other stillborn. As a mother now, Bui asks: "How does one recover from the loss of a child? How do the others compare to the memory of the lost one?"⁶⁹ Bui's reaction to the fact of her deceased older siblings and the lives they did not get to live leads her to the conclusion of her indebtedness and a sense of her own ingratitude.

A creative reading that holds the tensions means the possibility for a relationship other than just debt. By holding Bui's desires and investments—the longing for demonstrations of parental affection—at the forefront, we are able to see that this narrative of melancholic attachment to their lost children is her explanation for the lack of stability and warmth she experienced growing up. Whether it is a projection or reality, what her deceased siblings come to symbolize for her within the context of her family system can never approximate what they and their losses mean and meant to her parents. In both graphic novels, the protagonists contrast their lives with their parents by comparing what they were doing or had accomplished at the same age. Rather than attempting to understand her parents by looking backward from her vantage in the present toward the past, if we situate Bui's investment in an ungraspable piece of evidence as a solution to her family's current state, we can make visible and disrupt the narrative of family harmony or parental love that informs her search and research. Her longing for the past iterations of her parents is the block to her relating with them as they are, imperfectly in the present.

I read this ambivalent approach as a contingent positioning in line with Sara Ahmed's concept of feminist attachment. Ahmed theorizes feminist attachment in response to Wendy Brown's model of feminism as one that lets go of the objects of feminism such as gender or sex. In this discussion of feminism as a response to or orientation against the injustices perpetuated through ideologies of gender and sexuality, Ahmed reads Brown's approach to feminism as a turning toward hope by letting go of sex and gender.

In contrast, Ahmed argues that "feminism can fly not by letting its objects go, or by releasing them into the air, but by keeping them close, or even by getting closer to them."⁷⁰ Ahmed goes on to explain:

It is by turning to the objects of feminism, that we keep hope in feminism alive. Such a "turning towards" does not hold the objects of feminist cri-

tique in place; rather it is the condition of possibility for their movement. The hope we install in feminism is not about transforming feminism into a lost object: to preserve our attachment to the objects of feminism is to allow "feminism" to move, to be shaped by the contact between those bodies that gather under its name. Keeping the objects of feminism alive means allowing them to acquire new shapes and forms as we reach for what is possible. To let the objects of feminism go would be to allow those objects to become encrypted, as relics of a past that we assume is behind us. As present attachments, the objects of feminism move, as we move. To stay open to feminism is both to critique the world, which we face in the present, and to encounter the objects of feminism anew, as that hope for the "not yet," in the here and the now.⁷¹

In other words, feminism does not achieve its political aims by releasing the objects of its critique, but rather by maintaining attachments to them with the knowledge that they shift, move, and transform. This transformation constitutes the very hope of feminism: to prevent things from becoming solidified in the past, with the future preordained.

By engaging a feminist attachment toward the family, moreover, we hold the family close while critiquing the family. The turning toward the family allows the movement necessary for it to become more than we imagined. Who we are in the past might have led us to where we are today, but it does not have to determine where we go from here. As an ambivalent attachment, Bui's longing and desire for family can create space for a reading of family history that is not only reducible to war and trauma and that does not absolve her parents of neglect or abuse on the basis of their own experiences of PTSD from war and racism.

In this final section, I examine the tension between past and present family dynamics and the emotional distance in the family through the lens of feminist ambivalence to examine how ambivalence is necessary for moving toward the goal of displacing kinship. First by reading the gendered dynamic of parental control and then by reading the emotional distance as a learned family dynamic, not easily attributed or reduced to the war, I suggest that *TBWCD* offers a representation of the family not as an idealized vision but as a site of unresolved conflict where multiple overlapping structures and ideologies coalesce.

The second chapter troubles the representation of Bui's family as a happy multigenerational family. While all the siblings live in the same town, with her mother living in an accessory dwelling in the backyard and the rest of the family only blocks away, Bui contrasts the seeming closeness by focusing on the emotional distance in the family. Against the image of the domestic stability of her life in the present in California manifest as life with a baby, a husband, and a

mortgage, Bui illustrates that the supposedly natural process of separation from her family was never an easy matter. Beginning with her own story in 1999, Bui illustrates how her cohabitation with her boyfriend was registered as a nonevent to her mother. She lived with her boyfriend, and in her words, "and my mother didn't disown me."⁷² Her mother slowly softened to the reality of each of her daughters dating and living with men. Working in reverse chronological order, she then illustrates how her mother had treated her older siblings' attempts at romantic separation. From 1993 to 1995, Hàng/Má remained in denial about Lan's living situation, hanging up on her sister's boyfriend every time he picked up the phone. The oldest child, Bích, got the worst of it. In 1987, Má read Bích's diary and found out that she had been consorting with boys and doing "dirty things." The fights and lies continued until her sister ran away from home.⁷³ In her distress over her missing daughter, their "mother went to bed and took a whole bottle of pills."⁷⁴ At this point the conflicts had already driven Lan to move out, and the two youngest children, Bui and her brother, Tam, were left to deal with her father's angry, seething response.

On the same page, her mother's suicide attempt was followed by her father's proclamation of Bích's disavowal in the family: "You don't have a sister named Bích anymore. She is dead to us."⁷⁵ What is missing from this series of transgressions by the daughters in the family is any discussion of Tam's eventual coming of age and dating. The gendered element of control over daughters is a critically overlooked part of Bui's subjection, which is only reduced to being the child of refugees from the Vietnam War. How else may this be read?

The regulation of female sexuality in immigrant contexts has been examined as a means for racialized groups to assert cultural superiority against dominant structures of power, reversing a binary that disparages minority cultures against dominant ones.⁷⁶ The gendered control evidenced prior reveals that Hàng was the primary disciplinarian in each instance of daughterly transgression. Leslie Bow argues that the female body and feminine sexuality are vehicles for mediating "familial-as-national" conflicts.⁷⁷ Gender issues are a matter of negotiating and managing national and ethnic identities. The pull between connection to family as a microcosm for the country left behind and for male romantic partners as a sign of Americanization reveals the sexualized contours of citizenship and belonging.

erin Khuê Ninh has argued, a daughter's subjection serves an economic purpose. *TBWCD*, however, does not illustrate an immigrant daughter's upbringing that was marked by micromanagement of time and behavior, like the canonical Asian American texts examined by Ninh. Thus, the economic explanation for Hàng's seemingly excessive control over her daughters should be read through the prism of Hàng's own life and opportunities, which had been curtailed be-

cause of sex and relationships with men. While the moment is treated as a dramatic and traumatic event that is not to be spoken of, its disciplinary effects are clear in Bui's expectation of a blowup from her mother, who objected to Bui living with her boyfriend. The goals of daughterly control have been achieved; as Ninh argues, "these gendered practices produce a relationship to power, articulated through sexuality, specific to women. Training a young girl to be properly circumspect about her sexuality, power seeks to produce in her not only the correct mind-set and courses of action, but a specifically docile female body."⁷⁸ Her obedience is limited, as she cohabitates with her boyfriend before marriage. But the self-aware and self-regulating daughter desirous of parental affection has been produced. Gendered subjection as a source of grief, indebtedness, and emotional distance is ignored in discussions of intergenerational trauma.

After Má's suicide attempt, no one called an ambulance, and fortunately Má woke up. The unspokenness of the suicide attempt stokes rage for Bui nearly thirty years later when her mother brings it up: "I don't know if I ever told you but—."⁷⁹ This traumatic experience is introduced early on in order to offer broader context for the emotional disconnect and distance in the family. We read anger, silence, and the child's fear of parental loss and abandonment all wrapped together in Bui's explosive response: "I was there! How do you think I could forget something like that?!" It is tempting to blame the emotional distance on cultural clash or the traumatic impacts of the Vietnam War. Bui, however, demonstrates how the distance felt in the family is not something that can solely be attributed to either of those, but rather that distance is something both her parents had learned and experienced in relationship to their own mothers and fathers.

Even in the face of evidence that the emotional gulf could not be cited as a direct effect of the war, the desire for intimacy and closeness drives the historiographic impulse that emerges for Bui. This is informed by the presumption that knowledge will enable better relationships. They all live near one another, but as Bui narrates, "Proximity and closeness are not the same."⁸⁰ For example, we learn that Hàng's upper-middle-class upbringing was marked by formality, emotional distance, and respect. Her mother advises her not to breastfeed her first daughter, Quynh, who was allergic to formula—"Má's mother, a well-to-do woman, told her not to breast feed," as the speech bubble from grandmother's mouth reads, "I didn't and I had seven children!"⁸¹ Quynh later dies as a result of her inability to feed. Earlier in the book, she reflects that she does not know how to interact with elders, never having grown up with grandparents around: "Má's parents came to the US when I was twelve. They lived two hours away with their eldest son, Hai. . . . From that relationship, I learned to pour tea and give presents—but nothing about how to be close to my parents."⁸² The emotional

distance here can only be partially blamed on the past and the war, the years that passed between when Bui saw her grandparents as a young child until her early teenage years. It is never clarified why she does not see her grandparents more. For some, two hours' distance is not an unreasonably far gulf, but for Bui and her mother, it is an insurmountable obstacle to their intimacy.

On the facing page, she turns to her father: "My father always said he had no parents."⁸³ We learn of Nam's refusal to go to Vietnam to visit with the surprisingly large family remaining there. Multiply abandoned and abused by parents and stepparents, Nam's disinterest in the nostalgia of family complicates the idea of family history as a site of self-discovery, healing, and reconciliation. This nevertheless does not stop Bui from concluding that learning family history would help bridge the emotional distance between herself and her parents. After her first return trip to Vietnam in her twenties, she started recording family history, "thinking that if I bridged the gap between the past and the present . . . I could fill the void between my parents and me . . . And that if I could see Viet Nam as a real place, and not a symbol of something lost . . . I would see my parents as real people . . . and learn to love them better."⁸⁴ The resentment, loneliness, and distance she experiences in her family are thus attributed to the war, and she believes that tracing her parents' origin stories would "set everything right."⁸⁵

We learn that like Tran's father, Bui's father had been estranged from his father because of absence, abuse, and complicated histories of alliance and alignment with Communism and anti-Communism. In her father's story of growing up in the countryside as a child who was abandoned several times by his father, Nam disavows him: "you are not my papa."⁸⁶ The image is juxtaposed with a panel illustrating the atomic bomb and the narration, "That august the US dropped two atomic bombs on Japan." Tying together family with global history gives her insights into the material ways that history shaped the opportunities for her father: "I had never, before researching the background of my father's stories, imagined that these horrible events were connected to my family's history."⁸⁷ Nam's mother, abused and abandoned by his father, marries a Chinese nationalist soldier: "Lost and presumed dead to her first husband and son, she actually SURVIVED and raised three other children in southern China."⁸⁸ The interweaving of history offers context but not explanation. It does not explain Nam's father's abuse and misogyny. His choices to abandon his son and abuse his wives cannot be simply reduced to the "traumas of war," even if the war is the context in which these actions occur.

Even as Bui illustrates parental transgressions and the ways they shaped her, she is unable to let go of filial expectations and has internalized that she does not love her parents enough, that she is an asshole, and that she has a responsibility to them.⁸⁹ Reading Bui's attachment to family not as pathological, but rather

through a feminist lens, opens up the possibility to uphold what is ultimately desired but remains inaccessible in the text: the intimacy of relationships and relationality not premised on a predetermined script.

Conclusion: "Every Casualty in the War Is
Someone's Grandmother, Grandfather,
Mother, Father, Sister, Child, Lover"

The United States was able to rearticulate the failed war in Vietnam as necessary and victorious through "resettlement," which was articulated as an act of saving refugees from the conditions of Communism. The cultural productions tied up in rearticulating Americans as saviors of refugees, and the self-evidence of the United States as the land of freedom and opportunity, foreclosed critiques of the United States' military intervention and its role in producing violence, displacement, and destruction. Family is a site of temporal, spatial, and affective connections that can reveal the situated and interconnected nature of social life, experience, and history for the children of refugees.

The United States and other "rescuers" are able to recoup and rearticulate violence as benevolence and humanitarianism because the stories and experiences of those displaced by war, imperialist conquest, and racist capitalism are dehistoricized and decontextualized. My analysis focused on the ambivalence of family narratives as a means of accessing historical frames. Families are affectively charged sites of social relations and intimacies that are revealed in the shifting subjective positions of both protagonists as they make sense of the transience of their parents' social locations and identities and their own in the process of narrativizing the family history. Reading with a feminist ambivalence the ways Tran and Bui illustrate their discomfort in positioning themselves as witnesses to their parents' lives before them and as they step into roles as child, mother or partner, the transience of their movements from geographical and social locations demonstrates the difficulty, but necessity, of constructing a relational practice of kinship that opens possibilities for relationships yet to be. In the next chapter, I focus on addressing the narrative of trauma as an intersubjective everyday experience that is lived in the family.

3

"Like a Fucked Family"

Intergenerational and Queer Vietnamese Traumas

We must contest romanticized notions of privacy and family as outside of capitalist relations of exploitation and domination—or as generations of feminist scholarship has taught us—as free of gendered labor and value.

—DAVID L. ENG, *THE FEELING OF KINSHIP*

I have thus found myself turning to art, rather than science or psychology, for complex affective stories about what racism . . . feels like.

—ANN CVETKOVICH, *DEPRESSION: A PUBLIC FEELING*

The previous chapter's examination of second-generation graphic novels theorized how ambivalent attachments might open opportunities for the kind of turning toward the family that may displace hegemonic conceptions of kinship. Building from feminist ambivalence as a mode of attachment that turns toward the family without fixing it to counter the disorienting effects of assimilation, this chapter theorizes a concept of intergenerational trauma rooted in a relational practice that makes visible assimilation's material and affective violence. The search for original trauma located in the war overshadows the quotidian violence of subjection for racialized others.

At the intersection of the material and the affective, this chapter examines musician Thao Nguyen's documentary film, interviews, and album *Temple* (2020) and Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (hereafter *On Earth*) (2019) to situate the family as a complex affective domain of belonging and rejection, of violence and love, and as a material site inseparable from the relations of capitalism constituted through "gendered labor and value."¹ On the surface, both sets of texts by queer Vietnamese American artists appear to offer narratives of belonging and inclusion via coming to terms with their sexuality and racialization as Vietnamese. The predictability of the coming-out narratives in the texts