

Constructing Postmemory in Vietnamese American Literature

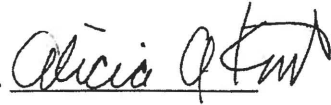
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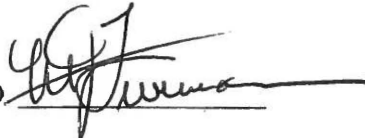
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Dedication
To My Family

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Introduction

"All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory."

—Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Just Memory: War and the Ethics of Remembrance" (144)

Isabelle Pelaud, a scholar whose expertise is in Vietnamese American literature and art, is the first scholar to publish a book-length study of Vietnamese American literature. In *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (2011), Pelaud describes the Vietnam War as “Vietnamese refugees’ tears, losses, and blood were suddenly reinserted into the historical narrative” (7). For many Vietnamese refugees, immigrating to America was a source of suffering that they generally associated with a sense of loss and longing for the families they had left behind in Vietnam. As a result of the immigrants’ experiences, of the writing of Vietnamese refugees is, as literary scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen argue, “about the problem of mourning the dead, remembering the missing” (“Speak” 8). Why is mourning the dead a challenge? Why are these memories so important to Vietnamese American writers that their works deal again and again with the past? How do their memories affect the next generations, those who did not experience the War directly, and

how can and do writers of the following generations deal with the memories of the Vietnam War and its aftermath?

In April 1975, as a result of the Fall of Saigon, evacuation via aircraft began of those South Vietnamese who supported the United States during the War. The priorities for this evacuation were primarily American citizens; however, it was a slow process due to “non-essential” Americans who were told to leave but refused to do so until their Vietnamese dependents received authorization to accompany them (Chan 65). For about one week, United States aircraft evacuated about seventy-five hundred people a day. Then North Vietnamese pilots bombed Tan Son Nhut Airport in Saigon. Since planes were not able to land in South Vietnam, the people of South Vietnam began to take the risk of attempting to evacuate by sea; these refugees came to be referred to as “the boat people,” and during the process, many people died at sea. Approximately 130,000 refugees in total were able to immigrate to the United States. Social scientists have divided the immigration pattern of refugees in America into three waves of migration. According to Pelaud, the first wave of refugees was those Vietnamese people who worked for the United States military. During this wave, many Vietnamese refugees suffered during resettlement in the United States, through which they lost their social status and identity. The second wave of refugees were the “boat people;” this wave includes the majority of refugees who escaped Vietnam between 1978 and 1980 at a time of strong anti-Chinese sentiment (Pelaud 10). The third wave happened between 1979 and 1996 under the Orderly Departure Program. People in this wave were given the choice either to resettle in the United States or to go back to Vietnam. These Vietnamese immigrants joined the ethnic enclaves created by the Vietnamese refugees

who had come to the United States in the two earlier waves after the victory of Communist forces in Vietnam in 1975 (8). Today, most 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese Americans have graduated college, and some have become published writers including Lê Thị Diem Thúy, Aimee Phan, and GB Tran, and Violet Kupersmith. Sucheng Chan, professor Emerita of Asian American Studies and Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara and the author of *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation* (2006), defines 1.5-generation as “immigrants who come at a young age who retain their ability to speak, if not always to read and write, the ancestral language as well as Asian values and norms” (xiv). According to Pelaud’s research published in 2011, the third generation of Vietnamese Americans is entering elementary school, and to these children, “the Viet Nam War and their grandparents’ experience are things they know very little or nothing about” (13). Pelaud’s statement regarding postwar generations reflects back the writers’ purpose of writing Vietnamese American literature, representing something that is not exclusively part of their life, like the Vietnam War. Her statement suggests as a reminder that situations similar to that of the young Vietnamese Americans are happening throughout the world. The Vietnam War is one of many situations that happened in the past and generated descendants who now face conflicts and situations that entail postmemory, a term that Marianne Hirsch, a professor in English and Comparative Literature, coined to describe the memories of trauma transmitted from Holocaust survivors to their children and grandchildren. Likewise the traumatic memories of survivors of the Vietnam War are passed down to the next generation. Vietnamese refugees experienced trauma twice: first during the Vietnam War and, second, during the resettlement process in America. Viet Thanh Nguyen notes that

the war “took place in the homeland and was inescapable. Civilians endured famine, rape, massacres, bombing, illness, the destruction of their farms and homes, endemic forced relocation into so-called strategic hamlets that were essentially concentration camps, poverty, and the deaths of relatives, and becoming internal or external refugees” (“Just” 145-6). As the war became famous for being the war that the United States lost, the topic of how Vietnamese endured the war was avoided in American public discussions; if it ever did arise, the focus was on embracing and remembering only the many deaths of American veterans. Sociologist and ethnic studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu notes that “public discussions and commemorations of the Vietnam War in the United States often skip over this devastating history, thereby ignoring the war’s costs borne by the Vietnamese” (“About Ghost Stories” 1700). As a result, she argues, “Without creating an opening for a Vietnamese perspective of the war, these public deliberations refuse to remember Vietnam as a historical site, Vietnamese people as genuine subjects, and the Vietnam War as having any kind of integrity of its own” (1700).

Vietnamese refugees were seen as model minorities in that they portrayed immigrants who had successfully assimilated into American culture; this portrayal advanced the depiction of the United States as a benefactor. Thus, Vietnamese in the United States became the featured evidence that the war in Vietnam was justified because Americans had helped save those Vietnamese refugees. The problem of depicting the refugees as a positive result of the forgotten war was that doing so eclipsed these refugees’ identity. As the United States tried to forget about the war, the refugees became “‘remnants of a war lost in an unknown country,’ the unwanted” (Um 836).

With these refugees rendered unwanted residue, and with their perspectives hidden in mass media reports that highlighted only the American side, the Vietnam War was being excised from American memory. Espiritu attempts to combat this erasure by refusing to view the refugees merely as subjects in need of assistance from heroic America; she thereby raises the important issue of bringing an authentic Vietnamese voice and perspective to the discussion. The voices of Vietnamese American writers are constructing, through literature, those missing elements, as their postwar-generation characters go on quests to understand the traumatic events of the past. Indeed, their narratives give voice to the silenced Vietnamese Americans; as Lê states in an interview, her narrator explicitly illustrates “who they are, what they have to say, and how they say it” (“Q&A”).

As the traumatic memories of Vietnamese are avoided in public discussion, literature has become a mechanism whereby Vietnamese Americans can acknowledge their past and heal their trauma. By investing in the narratives of Vietnamese American characters who attempt to define their identity, they allow the memories of the traumatic events that led to the struggles of Vietnamese refugees to be heard. These narratives focus on a protagonist who, in many cases, possesses a dual-identity: they are 1.5 or second-generation who “mediate not only between different generations in their families, but between American and Vietnamese ways of life and thoughts as well” (Chan xiv). Hidden underneath the successful stories of refugee assimilation are the untold stories that remain in the memories of the refugees and are passed on across generations to help “reconstruct our own identity in our cultural moment so that we can recuperate ourselves from the lost other” (Nguyen-Vo 170). The loss of family members,

being treated differently in a foreign land, being instructed by the United States Government about where to live, the sacrifice of parents who had to send their children away after the Fall of Saigon. These are the experiences that stand to be lost as time passes for refugees. These untold stories, which are not automatically delivered to the next generation, manifest in the form of postmemory when familial connections exist that can channel the previous generation's memories on to the next.

Hirsch describes postmemory as a “structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience” that allows the pain of others to be shared (*The Generation 6*). Although Hirsch originated the term in relation to the Holocaust, my project utilizes the concept as a starting point for a theoretical approach to analyze narrative representations of the generational impact of traumatic memory from the Vietnam War. While the Holocaust stands preeminent among the postmemory concept, the Vietnam War has also led people witness massive traumatic memories that have and will continue to impact postwar generations. As there is not much scholarship available yet on the impact of the Vietnam War on literature by second-generation Vietnamese Americans, my study begin the conversation about narrative representations of postmemory in three literary texts by Vietnamese Americans: one from the 1.5-generation and two from second-generation. Postmemory allows the postwar generations to realize how much sacrifice and emotional investment has been left unspoken in their lives. The connection does not always come directly from the parents, who often avoid talking about their experiences with their children, but from different stimulus for postmemory that allows protagonists to analyze the experiences of the past. As protagonists question their own reactions to the past at every step, they finally come

to understand the missing events that are critical to the imperfect recollections they once had. These selected works in my study have in common a depiction of protagonist's generational gap by analyzing the role of postmemory in the circumstances of not knowing their parents' traumatic past or the history of their other home, Vietnam, and the desire to reconnect with this past.

This thesis examines contemporary Vietnamese American literature to understand the three ways in which authors of postwar generations portray postmemory in their on-going process of defining what Khatharya Um states, their "land, history, and identity" (835). Focusing on three works—lê's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2004), Phan's *We Should Never Meet* (2004), and Tran's *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* (2010)—I argue that postmemory is central to the writings of postwar generations. First, I attempt to document the diverse narratives of Vietnamese American experiences in different genres of literature: fiction, story collection, and graphic memoir. As a result, the protagonists in the three chosen works portray the ambiguity of their positions and disinterest in Vietnamese culture yet seek to create a way of connecting that traumatic past to themselves. Second, I hope to establish a connection that is between Vietnamese American protagonists' voice and the memories of the family. Because the authors of these works have chosen to approach the traumatic past from the distanced perspective of their 1.5 and second-generation protagonists, the resulting texts highlight the process of manifesting postmemory and the consequences of failing to do so. Third and most importantly, I hope to build on the scholarship of Hirsch's postmemory and thereby to encourage further research in Vietnamese American literature. Thus this reclaiming and reconstructing of the Vietnamese identity in America

through postmemory forms a new ethnic group in America—Vietnamese American—and defines Vietnamese Americans in terms of their past, constructing them as subjects, rather than objects, of history. The lives of the characters in all three texts help to depict what has happened in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

In Chapter One, I examine *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2004), a novel written by 1.5-generation Vietnamese American writer and artist lê thi diem thúy, who moved to America when she was six years old. Even though the genre of lê's work is a novel, some scholars argue it is semi-autobiographical, and lê herself claimed it to be autobiographical in part. Since the earliest Vietnamese American literature, influence of the Vietnam War has found its authenticity of genres used by first-generation (war memoirs, exile narratives, and autobiography) through three large divisions: tales of witness, tales of education, and tales of life in America. In *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, the protagonist's parents are named after lê's and have the same jobs, and the houses and neighborhoods are all places where lê's family lived. Unlike the first-generation writers, lê used facts from her own life only as points of departure and utilized fiction throughout her novel.

The novel is about a Vietnamese refugee family in America settling down in America where the protagonist, who narrates the story, wishes to find her place and voice in a new country. While trying to understand her own identity in American, she discovers her brother, whom she thought to be alive in Vietnam, is missing. Growing in the United States, she sees objects that are depicted from the perspective of a child who constantly wonders about her parents' reaction to the past and memories of the past. The anonymous narrator depicts how she finally comes to manifest postmemory she had

been hearing and remembering from photographs when she makes a return journey to Vietnam and finally realizes the death of her brother in Vietnam. As the story first begins when the protagonist is a child, she narrates the traumatic events through the lens of her own, allowing the traumatic events remain haunting to her. The goal of postmemory to the narrator is to give the traumatic events into her own way of understanding, visualizing, and interacting with objects that triggers her curiosity leading to her comprehension of the past.

Like the protagonist in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, the characters in Aimee Phan's short story collection, *We Should Never Meet* (2004), struggle to understand how their families' past in Vietnam relate to their lives in the United States. Unlike lê, Phan is a second-generation writer who was born in California. She is now a professor of Writing and Literature at the California College of the Arts. I argue in Chapter Two that Phan's work shows what happens to the imperfect manifestation of postmemory under the circumstances of the main protagonists, three Amerasian orphans who were evacuated at infancy in Operation Babylift at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Not knowing who their parents are and questioning why they have been abandoned without a name, these orphans grapple with the failed connections that prevent them from learning who they are. The lives of Phan's Amerasian orphans in America in particular portray the frustrations of being unable to find or even seek the connections that would answer the most basic of questions about themselves, such as who their parents are and whether their parents are alive. Phan's text reveals the incomplete process of inheriting traumatic memory where the goal is to discover historical and individual circumstances surrounding the traumatic memories, which

builds on discussion of the aftermath of war producing sites of failed connection to postmemory that inscribe individual and collective memory to achieve a new narrative of history.

GB Tran is also a member of the second-generation, born in South Carolina after his parents fled Vietnam in 1975 after the Fall of Saigon. Chapter Three explores the ways Tran's graphic memoir, *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* (2011), depicts the journey that brought Tran's family to America but also his own journey to Vietnam, where he hears stories about his family's past. As Tran's self-character, GB, manifests postmemory, he realizes the reason that his family moved to America was for his and his siblings' sake. While lê uses the visual medium of photography to explore postmemory in her novel, Tran depicts postmemory through several different mediums, including drawings and photographs, some with words and graphics and some with only graphics, suggesting that some postmemory transcends language. The goal is to depict Tran's innovative methods to enable himself to his traumatic inheritances in a new form from his perspective through graphic memoir, merging generational distance and broken ties to the past.

Chapter 1— Constructing Postmemory of Vietnamese Refugees in lê thi diem
thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*

¶ 1.5-Generation

"Memories not only define survivors ... they are also their constant source of pain"
— Khatharya Um, "Exiled Memory" (839)

The Vietnamese American novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2004) presents the fragmented memories of a refugee family from the second wave of Vietnamese immigration wave, during which approximately 2 million people left Vietnam via boat in the late 1970s (Campi). The author of this novel, lê thi diem thúy, is a 1.5-generation Vietnamese American writer and performance artists who was born in Vietnam but who fled Vietnam in 1978 with her father at the age of six. (In an author's note in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, lê explains that she prefers to write her name in lowercase letters [159-160]. She says writing it this way feels right to her, and this format finally allowed her to break the name down, rebuild it, and reclaim it as her own.) In the interview with Deborah Kalb, lê mentions that this is her first novel and autobiographical in part; the parents have her parents' names and jobs, and the houses and neighborhoods are all places her family lived in. But she used facts from her own

life only as points of departure. lê looks into the different ways that the Vietnam War continues to affect her anonymous 1.5-generation Vietnamese American narrator's postmemories of her family. Marianne Hirsch describes postmemory as the pain of others, applying it to those descendants of survivors of massive traumatic events and to Holocaust survivors in particular. Although the Holocaust differs from the Vietnam War, both historical events constitute moments of often involuntary immigration where transcultural experiences in the first generation result in dislocated identity, a limited sense of belonging and nostalgia as well as descendants who are inescapably bound to their history due to lack of connection. Postmemory, as Hirsch explains, serves as a connection for descendants of survivors to the previous generation's memories such that the descendants "need to call that connection *memory* and this memory can be transmitted to those who were not actually there to live an event" (*The Generation* 3). Throughout the novel, the narrator retells her postmemories, for she did not experience the War directly but rather learned of them from her family, who has been impacted directly from experiences of the War. The narrator's exploration enables her to fill in the missing memories, such as the trauma of her brother's death, and to discover her repressed Vietnamese identity. lê's creation of a narrator who remains anonymous suggests the circumstance of many Vietnamese in America who watch their country becoming unwanted and unknown, thus suggesting the importance of inheriting the past through the narrator's day-to-day experiences interacting with parents whose "loss of family, home, a feeling of belonging and safety in the world 'bleed' from one generation to the next" (Hirsch, *The Generation* 34). The traditional structure of postmemory, wherein previous generations transmit their own traumatic memories to the next

generation, which then become postmemories to the following generations, is absent in this novel. As her narrative shifts back and forth between Vietnam and America through flashbacks, the narrator fills in the missing fragments of memories. The novel thus recalls Hirsch's assertion that "postmemory seeks connection. It creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall" ("Past" 664). Whereas Hirsch mostly focuses her discussion of the term postmemory on second-generation Holocaust survivors, Lê characterizes postmemory through her 1.5-generation Vietnamese American narrator, defined as those who immigrated to the United States no later than their early teenage years (Chan). (The narrator mentions that she was six years old when she left Vietnam.) Lê uses different mediums—including photographs and a return journey to Vietnam. Lê not only illustrates a Vietnamese family's experience living in America but also allows her narrator to fully understand events that have been avoided by her parents, including the actual existence of her dead brother, originally blurred by the presence of a ghost in the narrative. The final understanding derives from the narrator's own depiction of postmemory which she has woven throughout different mediums she encounters in the narrative.

The relationship between the visual medium of photographs and postmemory reveals the process of how postmemory travels across generational boundaries. To the narrator, the photograph of her grandparents becomes, as Hirsch explains the function of photographs for the next generation, a "window to the past, reinforced by the partly open door at the edge of the picture, marking both the invitation to go back and the threshold that is so difficult to cross" (*The Generation* 95). Instead, Lê allows her narrator to discover the past by herself through ekphrasis, in other words (a photograph

verbalized in words rather than the inclusion of a still photograph in the text). According to William J.T. Mitchell, ekphrasis is “a verbal representation [that] cannot represent...its object in the same way a visual representation can...Ekphrasis, then, is a curiosity” (152). The narrator responds to the photograph from a pure, childlike perspective that unaffectedly facilitates her desire to adopt postmemory. This object is a mechanism of curiosity for the narrator, who not only struggles to understand her parents’ reactions upon the arrival of the photograph but also seeks to reaffirm her family members’ narratives. As Lê’s narrator reflects on Vietnam, she describes her understanding of this photograph:

Vietnam is a black-and-white photograph of my grandparents sitting in bamboo chairs in their front courtyard. They are sitting tall and proud, surrounded by chickens and a rooster. Between their feet and the dirt of the courtyard are thin sandals. My grandfather’s broad forehead is shining. So too are my grandmother’s famous sad eyes. The animals are oblivious, pecking at the ground. This looks like a wedding portrait though it is actually a photograph my grandparents had taken late in life, for their children, especially for my mother. When I think of this portrait of my grandparents in their last years, I always envision a beginning. To or towards what, I don’t know, but always a beginning. (79)

Although Vietnam is still a limited static memory for the narrator, here she describes it in intensely lifelike detail. This photograph reminds the narrator that she had grandparents who were left behind in Vietnam. To the narrator, this photograph becomes a testimonial object, enabling the transmission of the missing prewar memories to her

and thus a connection to the past, as Hirsch describes postmemory, “not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (*The Generation 5*).

It is in this sense that the narrator envisions a beginning to her Vietnamese American identity. Through the narrator’s postmemory through the visual medium, she forms a personal investment in her grandparents; this investment allows her to perceive them as proud people and helps her to imagine vivid descriptions of their characteristics. Vietnam is “a black-and-white” remnant in the aftermath of the war, providing for the narrator what Khatharya Um describes as a “beginning” as “Year Zero” (832). In addition, the narrator’s sense of the photograph as a beginning hints at her inability to remember her family members and the photograph’s potential to help the narrator make her way towards filling those gaps left in her family story. Her grandparents’ portrait becomes a catalyst for her postmemories to start piecing back together the fragments of her parents’ associated traumatic memories and, ultimately, to define her relationship with her family members.

As each time a camera captures a moment, this photographic moment becomes important for the narrator in terms of finding her place in America. Um states, “remembering, as such, is a struggle to reconnect, reclaim, and reaffirm” (836). The narrator’s effort to be remembered through the photographs reflects her desire to reaffirm her Vietnamese identity:

In this photograph, my Ba and I hold hands and lean against the blue car. We are looking at the camera, waiting for that flash that lets us know something has happened inside the body of the camera, something that makes it *remember us, remember our faces, remember our clothes, remember the*

blurred shape of our hands captured in that second when she shivered,
waiting. (emphasis added; lê, *The Gangster* 13)

Her deep interest in photographs, in combination of the anonymity of this 1.5-generation character, further suggests the narrator's lack of a sense of her identity. For example, Mrs. Russell, the wife of the retired navy officer who sponsored six immigrants, including the narrator and her father, captures the narrator in a photograph. This photograph serves as a meaningful object with embedded memories for the narrator, who must constantly remind herself of who she is. However, she is more talented at integrating into the new environment than her parents whose struggles are described. This postmemory helps the narrator to discover her Vietnamese identity in spite of her own lack of interest in the Vietnamese American adults surrounding her. The adult refugees described in the novel attempt to form their own community within the larger American community. As their new Vietnamese American identity suggests: they can possess both parts of their dual identities. This is the case with the four uncles the narrator describes:

They [the four uncles] spent their Sunday afternoons walking around the neighborhood, looking for signs of other Vietnamese people. It took them a while but they finally found some other Vietnamese men at a pool hall.

Every Sunday after that, they would return to the pool hall. (15)

However, only the adults are able to form a Vietnamese community; there is no place for the narrator to socialize, as she is the only child in the Vietnamese community. At school, she discovers that she is the only Vietnamese student, and when she is introduced to her class, her teacher points at Vietnam on the globe. Given her isolation

as the only child in the Vietnamese community and the only Vietnamese student in her school, the narrator has no choice but to discover her own community by herself.

Because the narrator lacks direct transmission of postmemory from the adults, for they do not talk about it with her, and she has no one to socialize with, she spends quite a lot of time in Mel's office, telling the glass animals displayed in the cabinet about her journey to America on a boat. lê's representation of her characters in this novel not only allow her narrator to understand family through postmemory but also reaffirm the narrator's Vietnamese identity in the vulnerable community she lives in. While the narrator explores postmemory in her narrative, she also unconsciously strives to illustrate the experience of living in what Um calls "one body, two lives" (832). The narrator's desire to reaffirm her Vietnamese identity is poignantly captured as she examines a glass disk containing a butterfly. lê applies a child's pure, innocent perspective to the narrator, who is still young in this flashback scene. In the conversation between the narrator and her father, the butterfly trapped inside the disk becomes a metaphor for herself. The father cannot understand what the narrator is talking about when she insists that the butterfly in the glass disk is still alive. The narrator objects, "No, I heard it rustle its wings. It wants to get out!" (26). The butterfly is a representation of the narrator's repressed Vietnamese identity; like the butterfly, the narrator's Vietnamese identity is visible but out of reach, present but potentially dead. As shown through this moment and others like it, the narrator's unique way of interpreting objects is part of her efforts, whether conscious or unconscious, to reclaim her Vietnamese identity through postmemory. The narrator experiments with the butterfly glass disk, talking to it, listening to it, and when she "held the glass disk like a

telescope up to my eye and through the body of my butterfly, I saw Ma standing on a faraway beach" (32). This butterfly not only represents her repressed identity but also suggests the untold story that would create a sense of completeness in her incomplete family story, shattered during immigration.

For the narrator, who constantly wonders about her dead brother, postmemory becomes important for her to come to the painful realization of her brother's death that she doesn't know enough "that are shaped by the child's confusion and responsibility, by a desire to repair, and by the consciousness that her own existence may well be a form of compensation for unspeakable loss" (Hirsch, *The Generation* 34). In the end of the novel, the narrator completes a return journey to discover her brother's unspeakable past and to embrace her own confusing cultural legacy. Since the narrator lacks direct transmission of postmemory from her parents, she does not understand the state of her dead brother in her life. Thus, one family member that the narrator wonders about frequently is her brother. No one in her family, including her parents, talks about her brother. He is not in the novel as a living character in the same timeframe as the narrator; rather, he is present only as a ghostly presence. The brother often connects to stories from her past. For example, the narrator describes her curiosity about why her mother does not let her play in the water.

I wasn't scared. I was curious. I wondered about the swimming pool. How deep was it at its deepest point? How many people would that be, if they stood stacked, each on the shoulders of the one before, with all those beneath holding their breath for how long? (45)

As a young child, the narrator cannot understand her mother's resistance. It is only later,

back in the present, that the reader learns via the narrator's recollections that the reason why Ma did not let her swim or learn how to swim was because the narrator's brother drowned. Water becomes a symbol of that trauma for Ma, as it represents the moment she lost her son as they fled from Vietnam to the United States. Moreover, water also represents the barrier and distance that separates the mother from Vietnam, despite her wish to return home.

Associating the brother with water, *lê* makes the brother's presence more apparent in the narrator's life as he appears in a revenant form. At one point, the narrator attempts to have a conversation with her brother, imagining him to be standing before her as a ghost: "Where did you go? Why didn't you take me with you? Was it cold there? I had been waiting for him but something kept me from going to him (74). The one-way questioning and lack of answers from the brother only raise the narrator's curiosity about whether his presence in America is real or just hallucination. Along with these numerous questions, she is drawn into the water until when her mother finds her, she demands that the narrator stop immediately: "She pressed down hard on my shoulders, 'Stop! Stop!' she said, shaking me. I clutched the bag of ice and told myself I would never let go of it. I said, 'He was—' And she said, 'Stop it.' And I said, 'My brother—' And she said, 'Stop!'" (76). The mother's dramatic reaction towards the narrator reveals the depth of the trauma the loss of the brother caused for the mother. For the narrator, however, the event, the drowning of her brother, is not a trauma. She is stunned by her mother's reaction to the swimming pool event. The ghostly presence of the brother in the novel offers an opening to narratives of the traumatic experience her parents went through, which do not exist in the narrator's memories.

The successful manifestation of postmemory in the narrator helps her affirm her Vietnamese identity, where “representational conventions,” such as a photograph of grandparents, become a triggering source to stimulate the remembrance that would form an identity informed by the narrator recognizing the traumatic events as part of her, “consolidate” her past and Vietnamese identity as part of her familial past, which was not in presence in America (Hirsch, *The Generation* 47). The narratives of postmemory surrounding the photograph that was delivered “in a stiff envelope” to the mother perform the transmission of the traumatic events the narrator’s parents survived in Vietnam directly from the narrator’s parents to herself (92). The narrator views her mother consoling herself by looking at the photo before hiding it in the attic and allowing herself to dream about her parents in her imaginary world. Thus, this photograph becomes a mnemonic object spurring connection to the past, what Jutta Gsoels-Lorensen describes as “an attempt [on the mother’s part] to relink ... to a past located on the other side of the globe” (3).

The narrator is allowed to have a look inside her parents’ past as her mother flashes back to a memory of marrying the man who is later revealed to be the narrator’s father. The narrator learns that both her grandparents disapproved of this man, and she discovers why her parents ended up leaving her grandparents behind in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975. The ability of the narrator to recount her mother’s memories is evidence of the successful transmission of postmemory. One by one, the narrations come together to complete her missing memories to catch up with her parents. The narrator attempts to locate herself in the past by seeking herself, through postmemory, in her grandparents’ photograph. The narrator’s postmemory, in this case, is developed

through her curiosity, which became a stimulus of her personal investment in her grandparents' memories. She perceives them as "proud and with vivid characteristics despite the fact that her memories of her grandparents are vague is reflected through the narratives (79).

As the narrative moves chronologically forward, postmemory helps her narrate experiences that resulted from her parents' escape from the trauma. The narrator constructs her family as victims of the war and positions her parents as a minority in America. In describing her home, the narrator observes her parents' reactions to jobs that they must take in order to survive. Her mother "worked as a seamstress, doing piecework at our kitchen table. He worked as a welder at a factory that made space heaters. Neither of them wanted to be doing it; Ma wanted to have a restaurant, and Ba wanted to have a garden" (42). The difference between what they wanted to do and what they do implies the depth of her parents' sacrifice in their efforts to escape from the traumatic events of their past. The narrator's parents cannot follow their dreams in the land of the American Dream, and the narrator depicts her family as one of many victims in the aftermath of the war. Despite their hard work, "there was nothing [they] could do about" the denial of the American Dream because they were not given an option (69). They had to make a living from their menial jobs, employed in the periphery rather than in the core economic sectors (Um 836).

Moreover, unlike the 1.5-generation narrator, the first-generation parents struggle with language as one of the barriers they face as they experience life as Vietnamese in America. The parents are uncomfortable using the foreign language, a situation that Um notes many Southeast Asian refugees face, leaving them "linguistically isolated" and

instinctively huddling within the “confines of their own families” (838). lê’s narrator reflects in particular on her father’s struggles with his new English name:

He used to walk around the house and mutter the spelling of his name in English ... he would repeat each letter of his name over and over again, in a tone more hushed and halting than then time before. Even when he was able to spell out his whole name, he couldn’t quite trust that this was he himself. Were these the letters? Was this his name? (lê, *The Gangster* 115)

The father’s struggles are indicative of his ambivalent identity in America. He feels displaced spelling and pronouncing his name in English. In this land, a land known for freedom and opportunity, his English name represents what Um calls “the ultimate dislocation” (835).

Postmemory to the narrator becomes a learning source, where she narrates her family’s experience of what it means to be dislocated in the aftermath of the Vietnam War to Vietnamese refugees in America. As lê mentioned in an interview with Deborah Kalb, her narrator becomes a source “to educate the American mainstream about Vietnamese Americans.” The narrator constructs her family as victims of the war, positioning her family as an ethnic minority needing assistance. Viet Thanh Nguyen notes that “thinking of themselves as inferior on this landscape, minorities may also be tempted to see themselves as victims,” contradicting how Vietnamese refugees in America are represented as model minorities (“Speak” 10). lê portrays her characters as desperate refugees hoping for success in the United States. What is waiting for them in the land of the American Dream is in reality a vulnerable society characterized by differentiation and marginalization casting them as beneficiaries and refugees. In lê’s

novel, for instance, the neighborhood news depicts them as strange foreigners seem dependent on the state:

NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS: A Vietnamese man and a young girl were seen wandering the aisles of the Safeway Supermarket on University Avenue between the hours of midnight and 1 a.m. According to the store manager, their behavior was “strange” but not in any way threatening. When asked to clarify, the manager explained, “Everything seemed to interest them. I mean, everything, from the TV dinners to the 10-pound bags of dog food.” ... From the random way they went through the store, it was clear they were not looking for anything in particular. They made no purchases and left shortly before 1 a.m., after the child, who was perhaps his daughter, lay down in the spice aisle while the man was absorbed with the different varieties of salt available. (lê, *The Gangster* 110)

This Vietnamese man and young girl, who readers can assume to be the father and the narrator, are fascinated by the American store’s wide range of items, most of which are unavailable in Vietnam. This neighborhood news contributes to the representation of the family as what Vietnamese American studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu describes as “docile subjects who enthusiastically and uncritically embrace and live [in] the ‘American Dream’” (“Toward” 413). The fact that Vietnamese are described as not “threatening” but still “strange” while examining items at the supermarket shows how they are referred to as the model minority and simultaneously represented as “pathetic” and “passive victims” who needed looking after (Espiritu, “Toward” 420).

The narrator also gives insight into the changes in Vietnamese family dynamics

in the aftermath of contact with American culture. Women's employment, for example, brought independence to the husband-wife relationship, rewriting the gender roles in Vietnamese family through transcultural experiences. Nazli Kibria indicates that in her ethnographic study of Vietnamese families in Philadelphia “women's employment has enhanced egalitarianism within the domestic sphere but that women's earnings have continued to be too meager to sustain their economic independence from men” (quoted in Espiritu, “Toward” 419). Kibria’s finding is conceptualized in lê’s narrative, where the narrator’s mother changes from powerless yet open to undermining that state. When the mother sneaks out to drive a car with the narrator, who is still a child, and a car accident happens, the hegemonic masculinity in Vietnamese family dynamics is shown through the father commanding the mother to get out of the car. As the mother adapts with slight changes in her Vietnamese American life, the family structure shifts from a patriarchy to a matriarchy:

When Ma first arrived in America, she had very long hair. It didn't flow to her feet but it was thick and straight and black and you could grab it by the fistful and hold it to your face. After she cut it that summer, she looked more like the women who read the news on TV. "Modern" was how she described it. She didn't want to be a seamstress anymore, working all day long, her foot pumping the pedal so the machine would spin and murmur and the needle would go jab-a-dab-dab at her fingertips. (67-68)

Her adaption to this “modern” culture shows her desire for change in her life, an effort to adapt to American culture, and a wish to change her identity and position in the family, which was dominated by the father’s physical violence: “Mother kept crying

anyway and told him not to touch her with his gangster hands. Ba clenched his hands into tight fists and punched the walls” (92). The mother’s transition from her state of poverty to her refusal to be a “seamstress” and to work all day long, even though this was the first job offered to her in the United States, shows her desire for change in her life. The mother instead chooses to work at a restaurant in order to move closer to her goal of opening her own restaurant. After the mother’s workday, the father “would stand up from the kitchen table to greet her” when she arrived home (108). Her search for Vietnamese American identity, different from her identity in Vietnam, is demonstrated by her efforts to imitate the female newsreader on TV, which brings her one step closer to becoming an American. What differs from the past to present is the fact that she is now a matriarch going to work to support her family with her income, while her husband mostly stays at home as a gardener and greets her when she arrives home from work.

At the end of the novel, the narrator returns to Vietnam, allowing her to put her parents’ memories all together. The narrator’s journey to the country for the first time in twenty-five years, referred to as the “return journey” by Hirsch, is another medium for transmitting postmemory. This journey becomes a quest to reconnect the shards she has gathered of her family stories throughout the novel. Because the shattered state of the narrator’s postmemory causes her constant pain, the narrator carefully puts the pieces back into a single whole, which finally offers insight into her complete family story. In Vietnam, the narrator realizes that twenty years ago, her brother’s body was pulled from the South China Sea (126). This information leads to the final piece needed for the reconstruction of her family story: indeed, even prior to the journey, her brother is the

“only thing [she] could not drive away ... whose body lay just beyond reach, forming the shape of a distant shore” (118). As Hirsch observes, return journeys “can have the effect of such reconnection of severed parts, and, if this indeed happens, they can release latent, repressed, or dislocated memories” (*The Generation* 211-212). The narrator’s return journey releases the dislocated memories of her dead brother, whose body actually lies back in Vietnam:

What happened next was just a feeling. Like heat or hunger or dizziness or loneliness or longing. My brother, making no sounds and casting no shadow, was walking behind me. There, again, was the familiar feeling of warmth, of his body beside my body. I could lean back, I could close my eyes and fall down a flight of stairs or off the second-floor railing, and he would be there to catch me; I was certain of it. I needed only turn around and there would be his face, his hands. I could throw my arms around his neck and then, pushing him away, holding him at arm's length, I could ask him all my questions: Where did you go? Why didn't you take me with you? Was it cold here? I had been waiting for him but something kept me from going to him.

(74)

This return journey, as a symbol of her ability to move back and forth between the two countries, not only assures completeness in postmemory but also manifests her brother’s ghostly presence: the narrator comes to realize that her brother had not been left behind in Vietnam but had in fact died when she was young. Prior to this moment, the narrator was not able to comprehend any “death” or “loss” in her family. As Janna Obadas notes, the narrator’s false understanding of her brother’s fate illustrates “the fragmented pieces

of this family's memory" (106). The narrator's ability to finally feel her brother's presence as a ghost allows the narrator to become "closely connected with aspects of memory and identity," helping her to reconstruct her family story as she recovers partially lost history and learns who she is (107). The narrator's sensation of having her brother next to her but not being fully able to successfully reconnect to him reflects her investment in the family story in America. Instead of the story travelling across the ocean with the narrator, the story itself, albeit now resigned to the past remains in Vietnam, embedded in the place itself, where the narrator travels across the distance to finally piece together the last puzzle pieces. Here, the reconciliation of her traumatic memories it happens through her actual return journey to Vietnam, enhancing the mediation of postmemories from one generation to the next.

Postmemory helps the narrator to reconnect missing fragments in order to understand the untold and repressed story of her dead brother. Accordingly, at the end of her return journey to Vietnam, the narrator is able to perceive her parents as the only family members who escaped the trauma alive: "My father remembers stroking my mother's face. My mother remembers wearing my father's coat. I remember taking off my sandals and digging my heels into the wet sand" (lê, *The Gangster* 158). Those who did not make it came "out from the darkness of the sea, wave after wave of small luminous bodies washed to shore" in the form of ghostly presence (158). These concluding reflections from the narrator indicate her acceptance of the aftermath of the traumatic events she barely remembers. Her reconciliation suggests that postmemory is important not only for second-generation immigrants but also 1.5-generation immigrants. Moreover, it suggests that this novel's objective seems to be to understand

the meaning of death and identity. Though the narrator had people who could help her connect to the past, the author does not grant her help from these sources. Lê instead lets her narrator discover her past in her own way, through the input of objects represented in ekphrasis that trigger her curiosity. It is her curiosity that leads the narrator to reflect back on the missing brother she senses in America. Because no one had told her the truth, namely that her brother had died in Vietnam, the narrator senses his presence as a ghost. During her journey to mediate postmemory, she reaffirms her Vietnamese identity by recalling memories of her dead brother.

Chapter 2— Aftermath of The Operation Babylift:

What Happens To Postmemory in Amerasians in *We Should Never Meet*

|| Second-generation

“Only with time, experience, and loss could a person realize that there isn’t simply one bad guy or one good guy—that in war, there are many sides at fault.”

—Aimee Phan, *We Should Never Meet: Stories* (96)

Amerasians, presented as both voiceless and voiced through characters in Aimee Phan’s eight-story collection, *We Should Never Meet* (2004), are the product of the Vietnam War born during the war. Amerasians are children born from American fathers and Vietnamese mothers during the Vietnam War. After the Fall of Saigon in 1975 when the evacuation to America began, these children were not easily transported out of the country due to strict rules, for instance, “if they could not provide documentation of their American citizenship, exit visas from Vietnam proved almost impossible to acquire” (Alexander). In Vietnam, Amerasians were often referred to as “half-breed” and “dust of life,” showing the unwelcoming of Amerasians, local Vietnamese community discriminating the mothers of Amerasians by calling them, “whore” and “bastard”

(Alexander). Due to these issues that caused discrimination to an Amerasian's entire family, Amerasians were often abandoned. In addition, only the orphanage and the majority of Amerasians ended up in the streets of Saigon during the war where only a small number of these children were adopted. In the United States, they were also the "forgotten children," and their resettlement in America was most commonly unsuccessful (Alexander). In Phan's short stories, Amerasian orphans are also referred to as "souvenirs" of the war, which indicates their identity as testimonial objects that do not have a voice in the narrative (Phan 132). Based on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, a term she coined to describe the memories that children of those who experienced traumatic events hold despite not directly experiencing these events, these testimonial objects carry memory traces from the past as they their very existence serves to "authenticate the past; they trigger memories and connect them indexically to a particular place and time" (Hirsch, *The Generation* 186). Yet Phan's Amerasian characters living in the United States do not have kin to share memories of Vietnam, the past, and its traumas because they are orphans. Phan presents these Amerasian characters as orphans who do not have a direct connection to trace their past and rather have failed connections to both the United States and Vietnam.

Although Phan is a second-generation Vietnamese American writer, the struggles she has chosen for her collection are not too different from those presented in early Vietnamese American literature by first generation writers, namely abandonment and identity crisis. Isabelle Pelaud in her study of Vietnamese American literature states the phenomenon, writing about abandonment and identity crisis, is due to the often-involuntary nature of immigration for Vietnamese refugees, where theme such as

memory is found prominent in refugee and their children's writing. Phan, however, adds another dimension to the theme of postmemory by developing a cast of orphans, both Amerasian and refugee, who lives in United States and does not have a direct connection to memories of their past and thus lack postmemory. These characters create scenarios to explain what happened to them after the War where they became unwanted and forgotten objects in both countries. Phan's story collection misrepresents Pelaud's point of the second-generation writing being "not exclusively bound to memories of the Viet Nam War" unlike the first-generation (Pelaud 40). Phan's work, however, follows the characteristics of the first-generation writings where she focuses on the trauma during the war that is still being continued in the present. Phan's collection is about Operation Babylift and the lack of postmemory these characters possess that has arisen in the messy aftermath of the war. It is worth noting that Phan portrays orphan characters in both Vietnam and America but chooses to portray them as voiceless objects in Vietnam and voiced people in America. The struggles orphan characters go through to find their place in America, which is intimately related to their lack of postmemory, are depicted by the voice Phan grants them in these stories.

By contrast, Amerasian orphans in stories taking place in Vietnam become voiceless, and instead the voices of adults take their place depicting their memories of the past, also exemplifying connections that never be found in the lives of Amerasian orphans. Having orphans rescued from the devastated land during the war, adult characters in Phan's stories fantasize of their rescue to be the best choice for orphans but in so doing treat these children as objects. In "Miss Lien," a young, pregnant Vietnamese woman who has left her family to work abroad and send her meager savings

home, identifies her own child as “it”, describing “it” as something she desperately wants to be rid of for good. Though the nature of her pregnancy is unclear, Lien expresses deep shame knowing that the child’s father is an American veteran. When the nurse tells Lien that the baby looks strong like her, she refuses the fact by saying “No it doesn’t” (14). Identifying her baby as “it” contributes to the ambiguity of the baby, who remains unnamed and ungendered. The narrator describes memories of the past as she narrates Lien’s memories during the war, the power of voice given to the adult over the baby, “it”. In the end, when Lien “pulled at the bell hard” and “turned and ran” from the baby’s basket as it sits on the orphanage steps, Phan narrates this action as an unavoidable one—Lien already had to leave her home to make a living for her family; the baby would have been a burden (22). Lien expresses the fantasized belief that upon her baby’s delivery to Catholic nuns, her child would be safe and thus, this “child would not have to suffer” (23).

As the Amerasian orphans in America cannot depict their lives in Vietnam due to the lack of postmemory, Phan includes stories of adult characters that were part of Operation Babylift. The condition of the orphanage in the story “The Delta” set in Vietnam is described to be so poor that the children are in danger of infections and epidemics of measles and chicken pox, and the pungent air overwhelms the characters (60). Phuong, who works at an orphanage, describes the hopelessness for the babies, as “their only chance was international adoption in America or Australia. They could never have a life here” suggesting the evacuation of children to America is depicted to be owing to circumstances (64). In the story “Bound” Bridget, an American who works at the orphanage, fantasizes about adopting an orphan, Huan, despite having a daughter

back in America.. Bridget fantasizes that the two children would along:

Chelsea would finally meet her younger brother. Bridget would take her daughter's hand and place it into Huan's, forging their connection. Chelsea would teach Huan to speak English, and they would protect and support each other like siblings should. She'd finally understand why her mother had to stay away for so long. (208)

Bridget's fantasy allows her to justify both her adoption of a Vietnamese child and her abandonment of her American daughter to come to Vietnam.

Such fantasies, like those of Lien and of Bridget, allowed orphans to be rescued to America and definitely saved the lives of the innocent, but in return this action raises an important question: was this rescue meant to just save the lives of orphans or also to ease their lives in a new home, America? In "Gates of Saigon", Hoa, a woman assisting the U.S. Embassy's evacuation of children at a Saigon orphanage in Vietnam, raises awareness of the necessity of Operation Babylift. When Hoa is offered the chance to leave Vietnam with other staff members in the embassy, she refuses to evacuate and instead decides to stay and wait for her husband and older son, who are imprisoned by the North Vietnamese. The awareness she raises is the main objective of Operation Babylift, which is to evacuate the children; she is mostly concerned about the aftermath of sending them out of their homeland. She worries that American adoptees will not know what they are getting or doing from their fantasies of rescuing orphans, stating, "Maybe they think it's fashionable to purchase a souvenir of the war, but after the excitement is over, they will tire of the child, and what then? No one wants to raise a baby who isn't their own, especially if it's not even their own race" (132). Her concern

offers glimpses into the lives of orphan characters, Kim and Vinh, who fail to adapt to their foster parents and struggle their lives in America because the adults did not know how to raise a child who is not just foreign, but a refugee who has experienced the traumas of war and evacuation.

Kim's life in the United States is different from what adults have fantasized and shows the paradox of rescuing orphans. The fantasies adults supposed to provide better chances for orphans by evacuating orphans to America are explained by one of orphans who are not Amerasian, Mai. She claims the purpose of her evacuation being the result of Operation Babylift where her parents have sent her to America because of Amerasian orphans with fantasies of children being adopted by better family: "Our parents saw pictures of you full of food and in rich people's arms. They thought we'd get that, too. But we came too late. We weren't babies anymore, so nobody wanted us. It was not different from Vietnam" (242). Struggling to find her ethnic identity, Kim has lived quite unexpectedly by what the rescuers fantasized. Mai claims Kim's life to be luckier than hers because Kim came to the United States as part of Operation Babylift, was adopted by an American family given in a priority choice, and did not go through witnessing the loss of her mother, which could have resulted in trauma like Mai's. Defining rescue, the adults must have thought of rescuing the orphans in Vietnam as saving their lives to offer them a better shelter and place to start their second life in America. In Phan's portrayal, however, the lives of these rescued orphans face difficulties that the rescuers did not anticipate. Kim, for example, is assigned to several foster homes since a young age but one of her foster parents sexually abuses her, which made her a person who did not "like to be touched" (45). Also, "the adults who were

supposed to look after her and instead screwed everything up. Especially the social worker” (45). Since then, she chooses exile with no distinct ethnic identity being a protagonist against the country that adopted her through an argument between the shop woman and herself over Kim asking to lend her four-hundred dollars. Kim self tagged the shop woman being a “stranger”, which suggests Kim’s denial of self-identifying herself as Vietnamese (50). When Kim is returned to an orphanage, she is classified under the ambiguous title of “foreign child” instead of a more specific ethnic identity. This ambiguous title leads Kim to not fully understanding whom she really is and how to act accordingly. Phan’s portrayal, which shows Kim’s inability to transmit postmemory as destroying Kim, shows how cruel one’s life can be by being rescued to America as a voiceless object, being assigned to foster homes with unwanted attention, being not identified to any of the ethnicities, where in the end she choose exile to be assigned to another foster home.

Phan’s testimonial objects, which are her orphan characters, are shaped by her attempt to represent the effects of their struggles in America. By shifting the setting of her stories between Vietnam and the United States, Phan’s shaping of struggles becomes more evident as she exemplifies what Hirsch noted in her work of “persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma” (Hirsch, *The Generation* 34). Phan detaches those people who have witnessed trauma, who are the adult characters fantasizing these orphans’ rescue. Orphans in stories set in Vietnam are represented as testimonial objects and correlate to Hirsch’s claim of how testimonial objects become a means to transmit postmemory. Hirsch describes testimonial objects as sources that “enable us to consider crucial questions about the past, about how the past comes down

to us in the present” (Hirsch “Testimonial” 353). As testimonial objects Phan’s orphan require readers to think about the lives of orphans in America from Operation Babylift. Phan’s story collection alternates between America and Vietnam as settings.

Instead of Amerasian characters discovering their family’s traumatic past, they themselves become a medium of postmemory stimulating the surrounding people’s memories of the war. The Amerasian characters in this story serve as testimonial objects that can speak and share their voice in the narrative for other characters to recall memories of the past. For example, in the story “We Should Never Meet”, Kim makes the others around her recall America’s involvement in the Vietnam War by, for instance, people asking Kim about her American father: “Don’t you want to know about your American father? You look so much like him. Maybe he’s looking for you. Maybe he wants you. Maybe he’s rich” (52). Despite Kim’s father being American, there still exists a feeling of abandonment through indefinite ethnic identity and she chose exile against help she could receive from the American government. She and gang members acknowledge and come to the conclusion that their “parents were gone. And there was nothing they could do to change that” (52). This realization suggests the incapability of Amerasians to generate postmemory for their own benefit, to retrieve and understand the past. Although they are orphans who are allowed to speak in the story, they themselves cannot serve to understand themselves, being the source to provide who they sincerely are. They instead are being testimonial objects, serving a stimulus to trigger traumatic past who view them. The middle-aged Vietnamese woman who owns the Mekong Gift and Collectibles shop presents such an object of postmemory to Kim. The woman, who remains unnamed, successfully identifies Kim as Vietnamese. When Kim asks how the

woman knows, the woman replies, “I can tell [...]. The way you walk and carry yourself. It’s obvious” (Phan 39). This is the first time in the story where a person identifies Kim as Vietnamese. The object the woman offers Kim is a jade bracelet, and she reports that Vietnamese tradition says, “the longer you wore the bracelet, the darker and more vivid the color became, indicating the wearer’s maturity. It was a common gift between family members” (39). To Kim, the woman’s behavior, giving a gift that is given between kin, creates a secure feeling, and through her Kim identifies as Vietnamese, which is a feeling she has never experienced before.

Because Kim identifies herself as Vietnamese, however, does not mean people around her will view her as Vietnamese as well. As an Amerasian, of mixed race, Kim is “practically a stranger” to the woman in the store (Phan 49). When the woman rejects Kim’s claim of Vietnamese identity Kim struggles with rejection for the second time. The first time occurs when she believes she is rescued out of Vietnam because she was “denied so much from” Vietnam based on the looks of her undistinguishable mixed race (52). Kim’s uncertain ethnic identity contributes to the ambiguity that is mistakenly seen by the others: “Lots of people mistook her for Hispanic, sometimes even white” but never as Vietnamese (Phan 27). Although she is not able to fully connect to her culture through the jade bracelet, her existence, being testimonial object herself, serves as catalyst to memories of the traumatic past for those who witnessed the war. This rejection from Vietnamese and American society, therefore, cannot help Amerasians find their identity to understand their mistaken feeling of abandonment.

Absence of postmemory in orphans causes misunderstanding of their parents’ intentions for sending them to America. Orphans in Phan’s story collection are struggles

derived from their mistaken thoughts about how they ended up being separated from their family, a situation they solely understand as abandonment. The mistaken understanding of their rescue to America is not thought of as rescue, but rather imagined misconceptions that their families gave them up because they did not want the children. Struggles orphans face are due to the lack of connections they have to their homeland and family, they have no way to learn why they are in America and for what purposes. In a scene in the story “Gates of Saigon” Phan depicts the situation of how mothers as having no other choice but to give up their children to rescue them through adoption:

As Bridget pushed open the gate, someone let out a scream above the crowd noise. She turned around. The woman was pressing the baby against the rusty bars of the gate. Please, the woman cried in English. Bridget shook her head. The baby squirmed, its face burning red against the yellowed newspaper it was wrapped in. Please, please. (Phan 176)

This scene shows how the mothers of the Vietnamese orphans did not abandon their children but rather were forced by the surrounding circumstances and their fantasies of rescue to give them up. The orphans lament that they were not kept in their homeland, as it is not easy for a child to learn “what abandonment, rejection, or bitterness [feels] like” when a child is denied a family, a sense of home and security (205). The irony of the parents’ fantasies hits readers with the knowledge that though Hoa has most likely given up any chance of escaping the war-ravaged South Vietnam, she has done so out of loyalty to and faith in her husband and son. She would not have belonged in America, despite the physical security it would likely bring. Phan reinforces that our true homes lie at our roots: with our families—and physical security is certainly secondary to

emotional security.

In relation to lacking postmemory, struggles of understanding their identity is described through voices that are given to three orphans in the titular story "We Should Never Meet." Mai, who is not Amerasian, is a refugee orphan who lost her mother at a young age during an incident where Vietnamese people fled by boat. Kim and Vinh, on the other hand, are Amerasian orphans who immigrated to United States through Operation Baby Lift and do not have any knowledge about their Vietnamese birth parents. Both Kim and Vinh are not assigned to foster homes because foster parents have rejected them, or in Kim's case, she is removed from her foster home after her foster father sexually abused her. Struggling to find a secure place of belonging, they have formed their own gang to rob other Vietnamese Americans, their own kin and neighbors. Kim and Vinh believed their family has abandoned them because they were unwanted. This feeling of abandonment is caused from lack of postmemory that can give a solid ethnic identity to Amerasians and to understand that they have not been abandoned. When orphans came to America and their foster homes were pre-assigned, their American rescuers fantasized happiness for these orphans in America. Kim and Vinh, however, do not have the freedom to choose their own foster parents but instead the U.S. Government issued their families. Selected randomly, orphans were almost forced into a house, a family, without knowing either their birth parents or their foster parents, creating chaos at first. As demonstrated by the story "Miss Lien," Lien's act of leaving behind her child to the Catholic nuns was an unintended abandonment. Leaving her child was unavoidable, however, for the orphans who do not have any access to witness the past believes it to be intended abandonment. This recurring idea of struggles

from the feeling of abandonment initiates the orphans' identity crisis, which develops through the missing connection between themselves and a source to transmit postmemory in them.

While other orphans like Kim are not able to recall and connect to the past due to the lack of postmemory, Mai is able to do so partially. Even though Mai has partial postmemory, she is still portrayed as being unhappy because she too is an orphan like the others. Remembering the pain and suffering she and her mother have gone through during the boat escape destroys Mai. Phan portrays Mai differently from other Amerasian orphans and allows her to project postmemory of her mother by her "imaginative investment", Hirsch describes this being some forms of postmemory, "actually mediated not by recall, but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" where Mai abuses her imagination creating the mother through her desired characteristics. (Hirsch, *The Generation* 5). Even though Mai has never left America since her escape from Vietnam, she can still project postmemory because she still has fragmented memories of her mother. Kim finds Mai's ability to imagine her mother fascinating:

This was a nightly ritual when they used to live together. Kim was fascinated that Mai had known her mother. Mai would say what she could, trying hard to recall, but she'd been so young...*I believe she was beautiful. She looked like what I hope to look like when I grow up. Long, shiny black hair, small shoulders, golden skin, thin, elegant hands. She could have been more than what became of her. She should have lived longer, pursued a higher education than grade school level, seen her daughter grow up, lived*

in a country that didn't expect suffering, experienced a comfortable bed, clean food, and a day off. Because she never had any of these things, I will take them for her. I will live the way she should have. (Phan 171)

This postmemory of Mai's mother destroys her for being able to recall memories of her mother by facing her reality. It destroys Mai in two ways. First, as Mai tries to remember her mother, she invests in characteristics of her desire, acknowledging her appearance. "Mai didn't like people looking at her. She excelled in academics, not appearance," suggesting Mai was not confident with her appearance finding herself ugly (146). Second, creating herself being the most unfortunate child by contrasting her appearance to Kim, who always gets praised to be pretty, because when "this Vietnamese grandma called Mai pretty," Mai takes this situation to the point that "Mai was sure the old lady said that to every child, even the ugly ones" (167-8). Through Mai, Phan offers how destruction of Mai caused her to seek after the characteristics she cannot possess, applying them to postmemory of her mother, portraying someone she desires to be a perfect woman.

Mai's act of projecting a false history of her life can also be an example of her use of postmemory in her personal statement that is, to assure her stories meet the admission committee's expectations when they read stories written by the orphans from the Vietnam War. Even though Mai, in the story "Emancipation", was able to manifest postmemory of her mother through her imagination and slight memories of her mother, Mai is still an orphan with no biologically related family in America. Like most orphans, Mai "arrived in America with no family, no money and no home" (Phan 145). Upon her arrival to America, she "was labeled [as] an unaccompanied minor and put in a foster

home. [She has] been in one since then” (145). Based on her label of “an unaccompanied minor,” she is categorized as a refugee orphan. Years later the expectations of college admission committees require her to write a personal statement that is conventional to those refugee orphans:

Remembering all the sympathies people had projected on her all her life, Mai wrote of her longing for her dead mother and native land and her resolution to return to Vietnam one day and help her former countrymen. Though difficult at first to exaggerate her emotions in such a way, Mai was soon swept up in the embellishments. Perhaps she really did think this, Mai considered as she admired the finished printout. Mrs. Ward was thrilled after reading it, almost crying, pushing away any doubts Mai had about its integrity. (147)

Mai’s attempt to define herself in the writing process of a personal statement for college admission is a challenge, especially when it comes to producing the statement that is expected from Ivy League schools. As college admission committees favor essays on “triumphing over adversity and learning important values from a life lesson,” Mai has no problem selecting essay topics where she discusses being an orphan “at five years old, living in foster homes all her life” (146). Her first draft, however, is not satisfying because she believes she is not writing the personal statement those admission committees are seeking to read. She realizes that “she was allowed a childhood, unlike her former foster brothers and sisters” with foster parents who raised her. The personal statement she is expected to write is expected to be worse than her actual lived experience (147). At first, “Mai didn’t know what a genuine safe home felt like,” but

after she was granted a childhood with a single foster family, she felt guilt at having a childhood and living a life different from the lives of the other Amerasian orphans who came here as part of Operation Babylift (149).

Deficiency of postmemory manifested in orphan characters result in struggles that in turn damage in them. Orphan characters in America, who lack postmemory, are portrayed to have no family connections. As Carmela Ciuraru suggests in her book review of *We Should Never Meet*, the “displacement and subsequent bureaucracy of the foster care system did little to help these children cope with feelings of rejection and alienation, and perpetually being outsiders, no matter where they are.” Because they lack postmemory to give better understanding to their feelings of abandonment, this feeling in turn leads to a sense of ambiguous ethnic identity. Phan conceptualizes her stories as representatives of the experiences of Operation Babylift and what can be understood from Phan’s eight stories is that there is no winner in the Vietnam War. As Michele Janette argues in her article about Vietnamese American literature, and without “winners, there are only victims” (278), suggesting that Phan’s Operation Babylift characters are victims. Phan’s orphan characters become victims in her stories, both in Vietnam and America, to show that it was not the fault of one but the fault of both. In the story, “Visitors,” Phan’s male characters becomes examples of the victimization of the Vietnam War. Vinh explains to Bac that his parents passed away in Vietnam and Bac says his wife and son died during the war as well. But the two characters claim different group to be responsible for their victimization: Bac accuses the North Vietnamese Communists and Vinh accuses the Americans (Phan 94). Based on the conversation between Bac and Vinh, their misunderstanding of the war supports

Janette's statement that this war "is understood as having no winner" (278). Janette's point is evident among all of the Operation Babylift characters in Phan's story collection as their narratives suggest that the Vietnam War has led to the loss of people whom they loved the most and thus involved them all in what Janette calls a shared "victimhood" (278).

The victims of the war are presented in the last story "Motherland" as Phan questions the need of Operation Babylift. Even in Huan's return journey to Vietnam, lack of postmemory in orphans make these orphaned characters realize their place in Vietnam and the reasons why they were sent to America. Phan lets her orphan characters, Mai and Huan, visit Vietnam as a return journey that was originally planned by Huan's ex-girlfriend and his mother as "a belated quest to discover his roots, visit the Saigon orphanage he once lived in" (216). Although this return journey is an example of what Hirsch describes as "the effect of such a reconnection of severed parts," Huan is unable to trigger memories from objects and places he visits (211-212). At The Children of Mary's Adoption Center, Huan discovers his identification picture with his full name, Huan Anh Cung, on a sheet of paper. This identification picture is important, as it correlates with Hirsch's theory about postmemory:

They have a memory of their own that they bring to us from the past; that that memory tells us something about ourselves, about what or how we and those who preceded us once were; that they carry not only information about the past but enable us to reach its emotional register. (52)

Huan, however, finds the experience a strange one, as he does not remember anything; when he finds the photo, he makes a "gaunt, confused face," which suggests his inability

to remember his past, depicting him as a victim of the failure of postmemory (227). The other victims are presented through Huan's realization of other Amerasians like himself who were left behind and made to hate their existence in Vietnam, for "they had to bear the brunt of a country's devastation and poverty" (226). From Huan's return journey, he does not get what he expected to but sees victims as the result of the war including himself.

The structure of Phan's story collection and its subject follow her characters' circumstances, reflecting back on a what-if scenario: What happens if an orphan from a traumatic event can now express her emotions and thoughts? Phan's choice of creating her orphans in both situations—one silenced and one given voice—gives an important insight to readers who have not thought of the aftermath of the Vietnam War. When orphans are silenced, adults' fantasies of having them rescued from the war are innocuously depicted. When orphans are given voice, however, their stories identify adults' innocuous rescue as being harmful. Phan's orphan characters are, in a sense, torn apart from decisions made by fantasies of Operation Babylift, and this disjuncture creates an enormous effect of passing down the pain that has been left out from the War. For them, living in America was another form of war between themselves and the two countries—America and Vietnam—resulting from the lack of postmemory in them. Since orphans lack connections to transmit postmemory to them, they are unable to identify who they are in terms of ethnic identity. Some choose self exile, living as an orphan with no ethnicity, some become rebellious against the two countries, and some choose to follow their given ethnic identity rather than them choosing their own. These characters' actions suggest their attempt to search for a connection is impossible, for

they do know no any of their kindred who can help them successfully manifest postmemory. Highlighting narratives of Amerasian orphans in America and mothers in Vietnam builds up the conversation of those untold, hidden, avoided discussions in public where these traumatic events are brought up, looking back, remembering them, identifying these events as part of the Vietnam War.

**Chapter 3—Reflecting Postmemory in Vietnamese American Graphic Memoir in
*Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey***

I Second-generation

"A man without history is a tree without roots."

— GB Tran. *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* (278)

Gia-Bao Tran is a second-generation Vietnamese American cartoonist born in South Carolina in 1976. His first graphic memoir, *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* (2010), is guided by the author Tran's portrayal of himself as GB, a character who narrates family stories that took place before his birth as well as his own travels to Vietnam. In his memoir, Tran represents himself struggling through a hyphenated ethnic identity (he is a Vietnamese American man), and his narrative heavily reflects on how it is to be Vietnamese in Vietnam rather than in America. In the beginning, the narrative reflects GB's American identity overpowering his Vietnamese identity. Unlike the Amerasians in the previous chapter, GB is in a better situation to learn about his Vietnamese identity because he is exposed to connections that allow him to explore his past through postmemory. It is worth noting that although his parents raised GB in

America, they avoided any discussion of their family history. GB notes later in the story that after high school, his family members were separated across the American continent. Tran attributes GB's lack of exposure to postmemories to these circumstances. It is only in the later chapters, during his travels to Vietnam, that GB is able to hear the narratives of his family's past. As postmemory takes form in his narrative, GB learns about Vietnamese traditions, which heavily emphasize the importance of family. The purpose of Tran's memoir, then, becomes to discern the truth behind his parents' choice to leave Vietnam.

Publications by postwar generations, like Tran's, differ from that of the first generation of Vietnamese Americans, who sought acceptance in America (Pelaud 38). Tran's work, on the other hand, transpires mostly in Vietnam. Within the text, Tran's efforts to represent his traumatic inheritance through GB gives structure to history of his family and Vietnamese culture that creates the possibility for beneficial interactions with the traumatic past. Tran, in his postmemory narrative, depicts the process of representing the cross-generational impact of traumatic memory, which requires Tran's imaginative means to bridge past and present. Tran reanimates and guides GB through his family saga to correct GB's misunderstandings and rectify GB's struggles with being a hyphenated Vietnamese American who has never been familiarized with Vietnamese culture. As GB comes to understand the various levels of sacrifice his parents and family members have made, he also learns to appreciate his own place in Vietnamese culture.

Before GB manifests postmemory, his place both in the United States and in Vietnam poses a conundrum-identity. Those with hyphenated identities are often expected to be aware of both of their identities, but in reality, this is not always the case.

GB, an individual who does not have postmemory as a result of not being exposed to his parents' memories and not having contact with his other relatives, initially shows what turns out to be a false confidence in his hyphenated identity. When he discusses his plans to visit Vietnam, he states that he believes that his visit to Vietnam should cause no detrimental effect for his sense of self. GB unconsciously identifies himself as a New Yorker, and he notes that New York is "not exactly the cleanest or quietest place on Earth"; his implied belief is that there can be no place worse than New York (49). GB, however, experiences chaos in defining himself in Vietnam, where Tran shows GB being treated as a foreigner who clearly lacks knowledge of Vietnamese culture. In Vietnam, local Vietnamese at the market mistake GB for a tourist because of his pronunciation of *pho*, a Vietnamese rice noodle soup, and the way he looks—his mother explains to him that his baldness is odd, as "only monks and soccer stars do that. It's bad luck for everyone else" (51). GB's experience of being treated as a foreigner, despite his family's deep roots in Vietnam, suggests his need to discover this culture because he was not born there and is unaware of the culture. Tran illustrates Vietnam to be extremely crowded and busy, and GB finds this place stranger than he expected. Tran represents his facial expression as overwhelmed, with eyes drawn as crazed circles, his eyebrows in a state of confusion, and his mouth open aghast with shock, and the circumstances causing his state of being chaotically surround him—steaming hot weather, loud noise, and dirtiness—as illustrated in figure 1. This chaos indicates that GB must learn about Vietnamese culture if he is to make sense of his family's saga in his memoir.

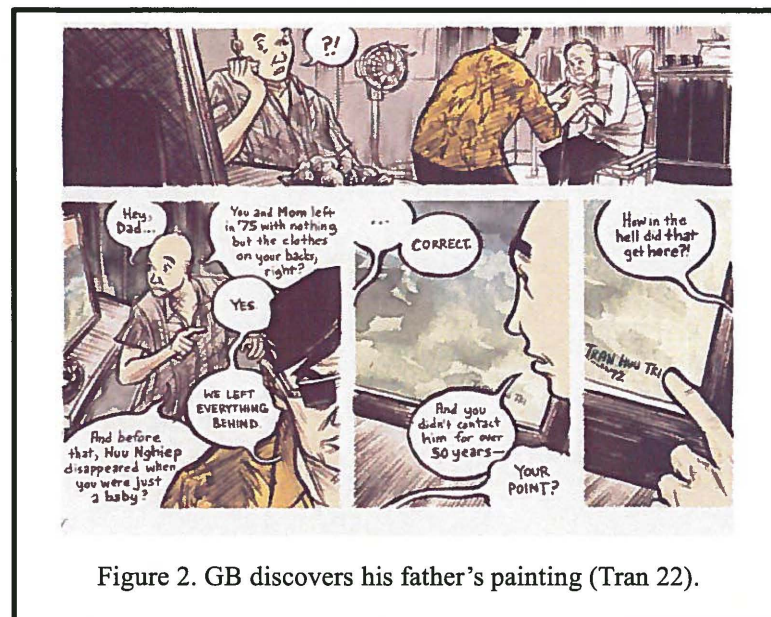
At this stage, GB is characterized by his lack of postmemory; this absence influences the distance between himself and his family in Vietnam. GB's unfamiliarity is

illustrated in the way he thinks of his grandmother, who he calls “mom’s mom” because he does not think of his maternal grandmother as “Grandma,” for he only met her once prior to his second trip (10). Tran’s construction of his second-generation Vietnamese American character illustrates the missing connections—the missing “customs and history” that were “lost within the span of a single generation”; these missing connections in turn imply the significance of GB learning about his parents’ lives in the past (207). GB says, “Born in America, I was clueless about their lives in that Vietnam ... But my decades of disinterest inadvertently provided them a glimmer of hope. That someday I’d want to learn” (207).

Postmemory helps GB connect with the Vietnamese side of his dual identity, suggesting the need for inheriting postmemory. At his grandparents’ memorial service, GB learns that Vietnamese wear white to mourn the dead, and he is exposed to a legendary story about a tree: “local Vietnamese claim that the very tree Buddha meditated under” has been cared for 2,500 years, implying the significance of paying respect to ancestors and elders in the family (9). Postmemory allows GB to show that the concept of family in Vietnamese culture parallels the legendary story about the tree. His family follows the old Vietnamese proverb, “Our parents care for us as our teeth sharpen... So we care for them as their teeth dull” (9). His journey highlights the Confucian principle in Vietnamese families that children ought to respect their parents and see to their parents’ well being as their parents age. With this cultural feature in mind, GB wonders why his parents failed to follow the proverb; he wonders, “Whether they wanted to or not. Or whether their parents deserved it” (25).

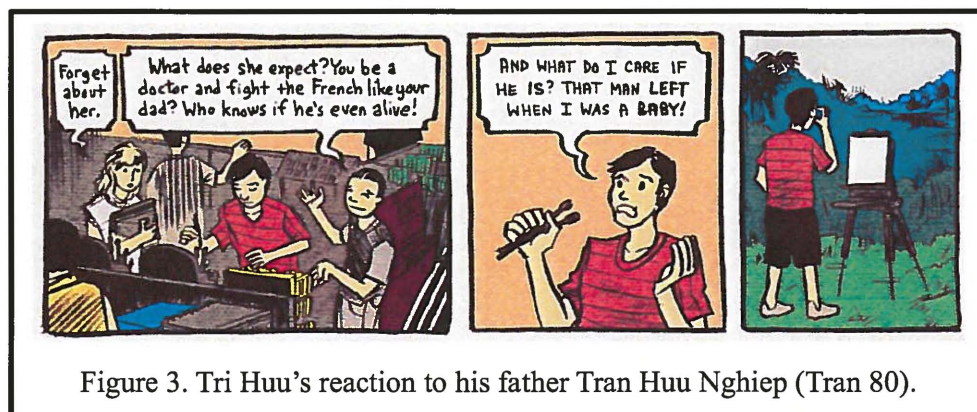
For a second-generation like GB, obscure objects become catalysts for

postmemory. Ultimately, GB latches on to the painting of Tri Huu, GB's father, as an object to trigger his own interest and curiosity in learning about his father's past (figure 2). As Marianne Hirsch notes, members of the second-generation who have "disconnected and disorganized feelings of loss and nostalgia ... come to attach themselves to more concrete and seemingly authentic images and objects" (*The Generation* 42). When GB encounters the painting at his paternal grandfather's house, GB narrates, "Dad was a painter. He doesn't talk about it. He never went to school for art, just devoted every second of his free time to it" (Tran 22). GB's original disconnect from his parents is transformed into interest through his attachment to his father's painting, which serves the purpose of a testimonial object that can, as Hirsch explains, "carry memory traces from the past" (*The Generation* 178). GB narrates his father's past through the literary mechanism of flashbacks. Tran's postmemory narrative provides background stories of his father's childhood, which obviously occurred before GB was born. In this flashback, GB sees that Tri Huu is disconnected from his father, who left him during his infancy, and his mother, who opposed his studies in a non-medical field.



By learning about his father's childhood, GB comes to understand the emotional detachment he sees in Tri Huu's family visit in Vietnam. GB learns that Tri Huu's father had been actively involved in Vietminh, an organization that led the struggle for Vietnamese independence from French rule in the 1940s and 50s. Tri Huu sees his father, Tran Huu Nghiep, as a reckless and careless father whose priority is only Vietminh and not his family. Tran Huu Nghiep is the one who led Tri Huu's visit to a prison camp, where Tri Huu suffered harsh circumstances due to Tran Huu Nghiep's involvement in Vietminh. Tri Huu expresses his hatred for his father when he states, "What do I care if he is? That man left when I was a baby!" (80). Tri Huu is illustrated in cool colors, mostly in black, white, and blue (figure 3). In addition to underlining Tri Huu's disconnect, these colors also mirror GB's pleasure with finally being able to wear black, the color of the overall mood that matches the emotions he feels in Tri Huu's second wife's house as well as at the memorial service. As GB states, he is glad to wear

black in his paternal grandfather's home, "Because I've found the coldest house in all of Saigon" (16). GB concludes in this scene that Tri Huu's "parents deserved it," to not receive the care traditionally given from children (25). As illustrated through Tran's reaction to his father's childhood, GB's misunderstanding deepens because GB only gets to see what is being transmitted from his father; GB does not get to hear from Tran Huu Nghiep's perspective, partly because he does not exist in the present day. Tran Huu Nghiep can be viewed in a different perspective, perhaps from the reader's perspective: he might be seen as one of the nationalists who sacrificed their lives to seek freedom against colonization. This suggests the limitations of postmemory, as the second generation only hears memories from family members who are alive or are available to share their story.



GB depicts his mother's situation as one where she was forced to leave Vietnam despite her desire to stay. The object that GB connects with in this case is a set of photographs he goes through at the home of Thi Mot, GB's maternal grandmother. GB takes on the role of describing the situation of his mother by narrating his interpretation of events that happened at the time these photographs were taken. While GB goes

through the box of photographs with his maternal grandmother, the narrative follows GB's own imaginative take on the separation caused by his parents' immigration to America. As a consequence of the war, family members were torn apart in Vietnam and America. Thi Mot tells Tran how she thought she had lost her daughter forever, as she did not know if her daughter was alive or dead. Hirsch builds her concept of postmemory on a limited range of representational mediums, stating that "autobiographical readings' of works by second-generation writers and visual artists" rely on photography (Hirsch, *The Generation* 4). As photographs are used here, it gives the impact of the family's experiences on Tran because he has never experienced nor witnessed the traumatic events the family has experienced both temporally and geographically distanced from the setting of them. By engaging through photographs, Tran's memory of the past "would diminish distance, bridge separation" in terms of time and space (Hirsch, *The Generation* 38). Tran's postmemory narrative, depicting family experience results in photographs that begins with the grandmother's testimony but ends with Tran's imaginative investment of those traumatic events. GB's narrative, which reveals GB's interpretation of his postmemory, rebuilds the missing bridge between his earlier misinterpretations of his parents and the reality of what happened. He learns that his mother's situation was sudden and unexpected; she was forced to leave Saigon and could not say good-bye to her family.

Tran's graphic memoir demonstrates Hirsch's point that postmemory is also projected through investing the missing parts with imagination. Tran uses three writing styles—cursive, capitalized, printed—all handwritten, to distinguish stories from his mother and father from his own. As is apparent in figure 4, cursive writing is used when

Tran's mother is telling him about events that happened in the past. In figure 5, Tran's father narrates in capitalized handwriting. Tran's own handwritings used in regular printed style where it is easily distinguishable from his parents', also proving that not all of his graphic memoir is based on actual memories he gets from his mother but also his own imaginary thought to fill out events that would make more sense to himself as a recipient of postmemory.

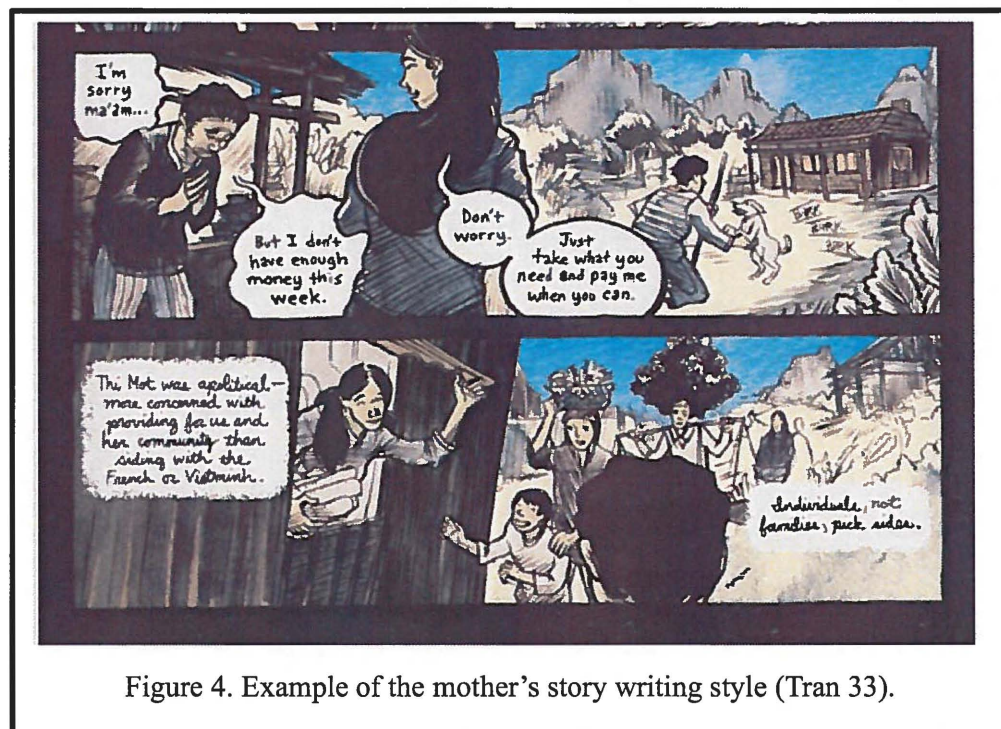


Figure 4. Example of the mother's story writing style (Tran 33).

Tran uses the genre of graphic memoir to express his impression of his family from postmemory. During GB's visit to Vietnam for memorial services, which was involuntary, GB sees the importance of family in Vietnamese culture through what he observes in his mother's family. When Tran is illustrating his first impression of the two sides of his family, he uses various mechanisms of the graphic memoir to show how he

formed connections to Vietnam such as the use of a wide range of colors. Tran illustrates GB being overwhelmed when he is introduced to his mother's family, which indicates the unfamiliarity between this family and himself. GB is situated on a blank white canvas, reflecting his lack of knowledge regarding Vietnam, and his emotional state is expressed through warm colors, such as yellow and brown, to illustrate his first impression of his mother's family, whose family members have a strong bond. GB learns from his uncle, Vinh, that even though memorial services are "sad circumstances," it is rather a "joyous" day because it is unusual for all of the family members to reunite from all over the world, especially those who have not visited since the fall of Saigon over 30 years ago (Tran 14). Through this experience, GB understands how much family means in Vietnamese culture, especially after the Vietnam War, which separated family members.

In Tran's narrative, letters become important testimonial objects that enact postmemory. As Hirsch suggests, letters are objects that embody "the very process of its [postmemory's] transmission" ("Testimonial" 355). Family members in GB's mother's family mention letters several times, and his mother describes letters as the only way to stay up to date on family news. GB's mother explains that during the Vietnam War, letters were "the only way to communicate back then. No e-mail. No phone. Just letters"(150). For GB's mother, letters were the only mechanism to know that her daughter was alive, Sending out news meant connecting with her family, which helped to close the space between them. When the war was finished, as the word used to describe the state of war instead of ended suggests that there is no conclusion for the war, people left the country, failed to escape, or chose self-exile due to Do's concern for

his family's safety. In Do's case, his decision of forgetting about home was an act of self-exile in labor camp, protecting his family from further danger as his wife waits for him to come back home. GB's mother describes Do's situation as follows:

He was sent to a labor camp deep in Northern Vietnam. He doesn't talk about it much and we don't ask. He does say there was plenty of exercise. Nice amenities. A lot of downtime. Plenty of privacy. And food for everyone. But prisoners weren't allowed to write letters. So to Do's wife, one day he just disappeared into the night and never came home. (Tran 149)

The fact that Do was barred from sending letters suggested to his family that he was dead, as he was not able to tell anyone about his survival. Do chose self-exile in labor camp where instead of him being anxious about his future, believing it to be a right thing to do; his action that GB finds difficult to understand.

An object like a postcard a resource of memories that derives from his mother's past and translate into Tran's own postmemory. Unlike other letters illustrated in the memoir, one postcard grabs GB's attention while GB and his mother reorganize things in each box in the storage room for the annual preparation for the Tet (New Year's) celebration. The postcard is not narrated in detail until later, when GB talks to his uncle Vinh and discovers two levels of sacrifice between separated family members. The first level of sacrifice is between GB's mother and her family in Vietnam, where her circumstances at the time did not allow her to make any choices; Tri Huu asked her almost immediately to leave. s The second level is her sacrifice made for her family in America, as she was not alone and had children to take care of even though some of them were not even biologically related to her. But she still managed to prevent herself

from revealing her nostalgia in front of her family.

GB becomes a mechanism to trigger forgotten memories in his family, which in turn become his own postmemories. GB learns that his mother discretely invested her time and money in sending packages and letters to her family, supporting and taking care of her parents through the postal service instead of being available to her parents in person. Vinh explains how he understood GB's mother's situation in America from the context of her letters: "some things—some people—she never wrote about" (235). She may have excluded some information on purpose to lessen the burden of his family in Vietnam, for they would worry about her. These exclusions were how Vinh knew she had problems in her life in America. Regardless of how harsh the conditions in Vietnam were, Vinh sacrificed for his sister, who was away from her parents and felt bad for not following the Vietnamese proverb of caring for one's parents as they age. Most of the time, Vinh sent her "upbeat" letters; however, for he could not leave out "certain news," such as their father's death, the only time Vinh sent letters that would make his sister in grieve (235). As shown in figure 4, Dzung Chung (GB's mother) takes this postcard from GB and places it in a box with so much care that it is apparent that it means a lot to her. Although Dzung Chung does not tell GB what this postcard means to her, Tran's illustration shows the second level of sacrifice, the sacrifice she made for her family in America. Tran embeds this sacrifice later in the narrative when he illustrates the arrival of the postcard and Dzung Chung's reaction to it.

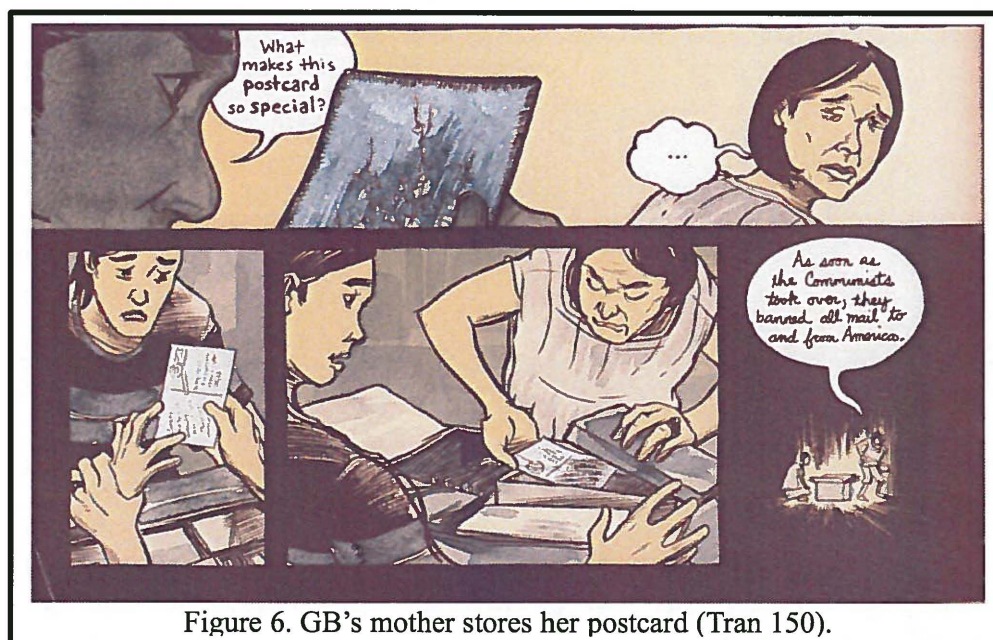


Figure 6. GB's mother stores her postcard (Tran 150).

As postmemory manifests in his narrative, Tran only allows GB to explore the events that reflect his parents' struggles in America, although Tran does not permit GB to express his own emotional state. Tran depicts his own discovery of the memories that have been buried underneath the traumatic past through Tran. Do, Tri Huu's friend, states that after the war ended, "the Vietnamese suffering really began," suggesting that the struggles occurred not only in the Vietnamese War but also in adjusting to America shows that there was no definite conclusion to the ending of the war (55). Tran depicts the consequences of the Vietnam War as severe, and its aftermath continuously affects his family, including himself. When sharing the struggles of GB's family's transition to America, GB's mother notes, "Your father was already busy going through a difficult transition" (107). Tri Huu first landed in the Philippines; from there he went to Guam for refugee processing, then to San Diego to reside in the temporary camps, and finally

to South Carolina, where he was assigned a home. Tri Huu did not get to choose the place he lived; instead the immigration department randomly assigned where he would live and insisted that he would “love South Carolina. Green hills and trees everywhere. Just like Vietnam” (107). GB’s family, however, experience South Carolina differently from what the immigration department implied, and the family was overwhelmed at first. Though Tran does not share much of his narrator’s thoughts, Tran narrates postmemories of his family’s negative experiences from the beginning of their lives in the United States up to the moment when GB’s sister Lisa goes to college in the image of Scrabble, a board game the family used to play, as shown in figure 7. In Tran’s illustration of struggles in the form of the board game, the Scrabble words spell out the sentence, “In a foreign culture threatening our own home” (Tran 108-109). Tran’s translation of family’s experiences into Scrabble determinedly gives those experiences shape, making it understandable in terms his own postmemory.

The traumatic events narrated from the perspective of GB with the help of his postmemory in Tran’s memoir only scratch the surface of his awareness of the events that happened. As the memories Tran narrates are not his own, he does not allow GB to speak in depth about his emotional response. GB delivers what his mother reveals as the truth of moving to America despite her sacrifice of leaving everything behind: his parents’ sacrificed a great deal for their children, so he would “NEVER have to know what it’s like. What it’s like to struggle to stay alive everyday” (151-152). In figure 7, Tran depicts some of their struggles adjusting to America: Getting a driver’s license was difficult, the family was not able to get croissants anymore, and Lisa was placed a few grade levels lower due to the language barrier. This illustration depicts the struggles of

GB's parents rather than those of Lisa and Manny, GB's older siblings, as the focus is to illustrate parents' sacrifice for their children. It is implied from the drawing that GB's family did not own a house big enough to support all of the family members. His mother had to buy cheap things including clothes, she had to use Food Stamps for grocery shopping, and she had to work as a waitress to make a living. Lisa and Manny acclimated to the American culture better than his parents; Lisa and Manny started eating fast foods, playing video games, and wearing American clothes, which GB's father views with an unsatisfied face.

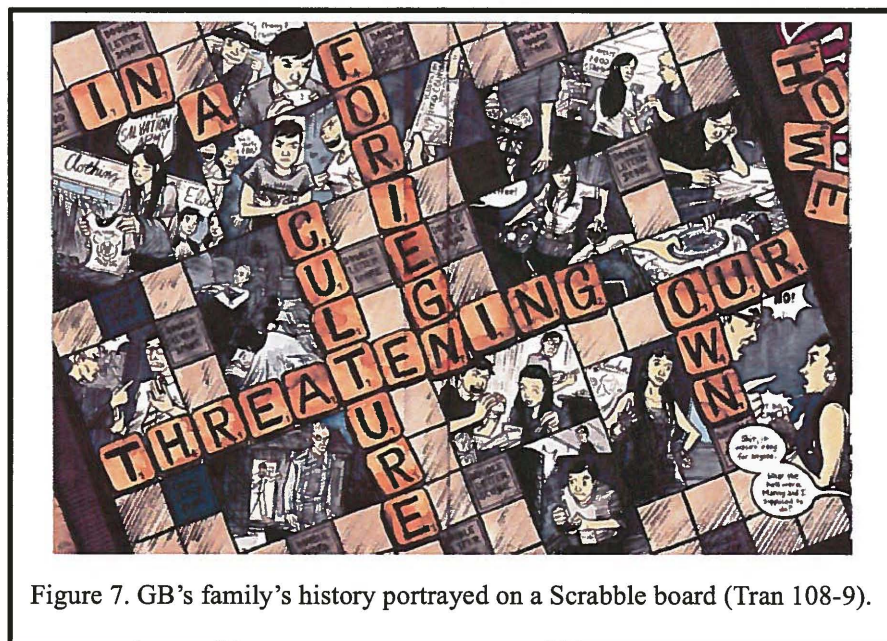


Figure 7. GB's family's history portrayed on a Scrabble board (Tran 108-9).

Tran's postmemory is his depiction of the devastation of the war, a devastation that he did not experience first hand but that he has come to realize through postmemory as shown in figure 8. Tran's illustration explicitly shows how the Vietnamese people were eager and desperate to escape—Vietnam is metaphorically represented as a prison created by a deep chasm, with a high cliff separating the victims from their only two

escapes: the ocean and the nearest country, Cambodia. Ships and boats are leaving the country, and the expressions on the faces of the people still trapped in the country are desperate. Instead of Tran using GB to narrate lines spoken by his family members, he draws this image, a mechanism that is much simpler, yet it provides a powerful impact in terms of his depiction of understanding histories of his family by taking the advantage of the genre. The image demands a moment of pause, an effect that is created by a single page where this image communicates the horrors in Vietnam graphically with text, suggesting that these horrors are beyond language. This image is different from figure 7, where Tran depicts his family's struggle in America by using the Scrabble board, which, by the very nature of the board game, emphasizes language, using words that convey his depiction to a certain point where he is still able to do so. Tran also uses black pages to indicate what Hidle describes as the "continuous processes of remembering", which leaves out GB's emotional take on the events being narrated (415). Hidle asserts that the effect of the black pages is to explain "those memories that cannot be articulated in a legible language, whether verbal or visual [and it] represents the unspeakable, the unseen, the unknowable" (415). In addition, the black pages also represent the second-generation's awareness of the traumatic events. In many moments along the time frame of the narrative, GB is flashing back to the past, juxtaposing his interpretation of the trauma with the reality; this discrepancy suggests that the black pages also represent GB's effort to understand the importance of the family. They are inserted in lieu of Tran heavily investing in describing GB's emotions about the traumatic events. Tran finally leaves an impression of GB's state of understanding embedded in the last graphic illustration at the end of each story; these final illustrations also stimulate reader's

curiosity, making readers question the meaning the illustration holds for the next story. In figure 11, for example, instead of Tran having GB directly narrate his understanding of the situation, Tran graphically illustrates a plane connecting the two time frames—past and present. Hidle claims that “the image of the plane” transforms in the illustration “from a symbol of destruction to an emblem of possible connection of overcoming the divisions of time and space” (411). Through this illustration of merging two time frames into one Tran seems to indicate the role of postmemory: He realizes he is culturally and linguistically Vietnamese in America. Based on Tran’s last narrative in New York, GB at first refuses to visit Vietnam with his parents a third time. GB, however, finds his high school graduation gift from his father—a book about the Vietnam War—and flips open the book cover, where he finds his father’s note saying, “To my son, Gia-Bao Tran. ‘A man without history is a tree without roots’” (278). Reading this inscription triggers GB to call his parents to ask if he can still join them on their trip to Vietnam. As this last story suggests, this moment is also the starting point of the publication of this graphic memoir. Tran’s work tries “to build a single history from a collective memory” based on his postmemories from “all the cousins, aunts, uncles, and family and friends who shared their stories and helped me puzzle together my family’s past before it was too late” (281). In Tran’s acknowledgement, he indicates the involvement of postmemories in his narratives and GB’s understanding of the family saga; more concretely, Tran steps into his portrayal of himself in this conclusion and extends the importance of family in Vietnamese culture from the different levels of commitment caused by the war.

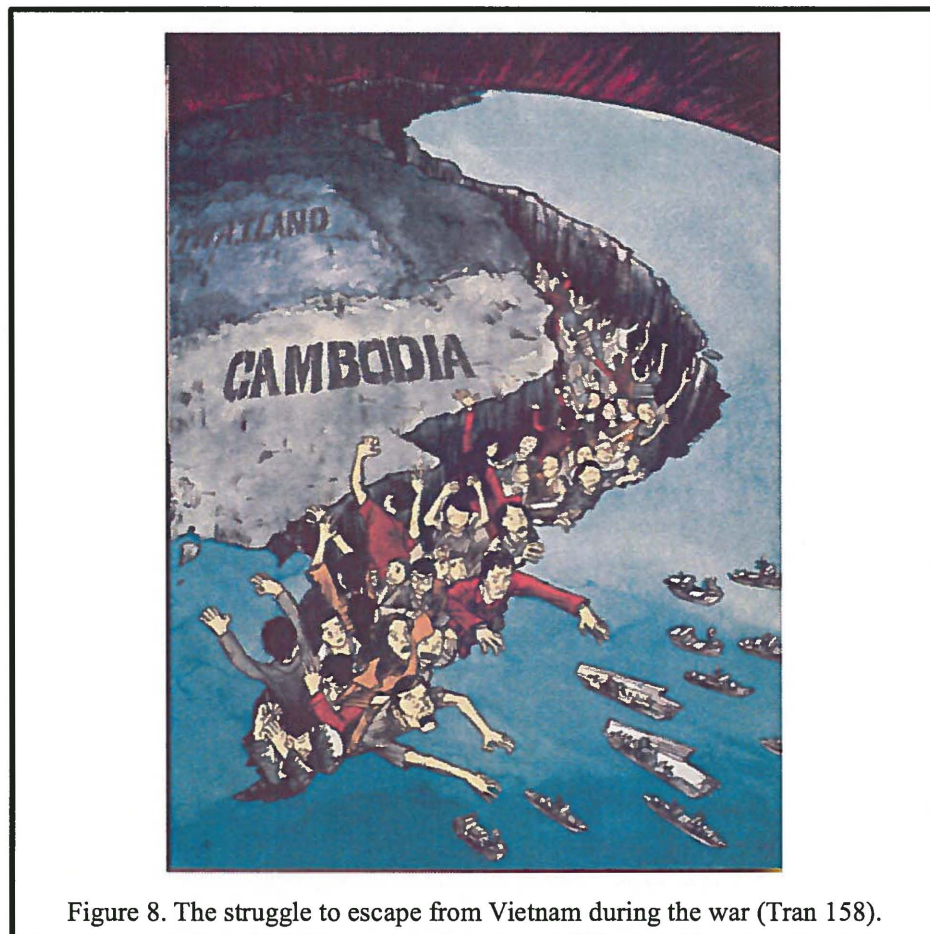


Figure 8. The struggle to escape from Vietnam during the war (Tran 158).

Tran's postmemory is communicated through this genre using different mediums including art, photographs, and narrations. Tran not only uses colors and graphic illustrations to describe the difficulties his parents faced in Vietnam and America, but also includes actual photographs of his parents (see figure 9). As Hirsch argues, photographic images from a traumatic past "have shaped our conception of the event and its transmission" and authenticate that past's existence (*The Generation* 37). In this case, the photographs in figure 9 allow Tran to use the genre to show how GB reacts to the past by offering the feeling of "having-been-there" at the time these photographs of his parents were taken. Their inclusion gives an effect of what Hirsch calls "de-

realization,” understanding the different life of his parents in Vietnam, where his inherited traumatic memory is visually presented in his graphic memoir despite of his temporal and geographical separation from his parents’ experiences in set in Vietnam (*The Generation 37*). Tran’s use of actual photographs lead his reader from the present into an engagement with the past bridging the temporal distance and imagining the story told by his mother, which sets up a stark contrast between the before and after of his parents’ life in Vietnam.

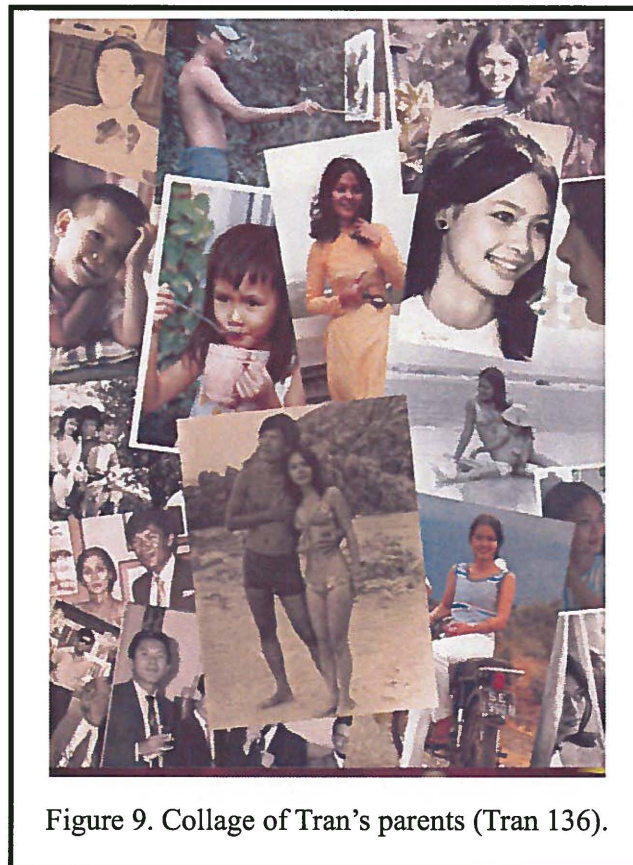
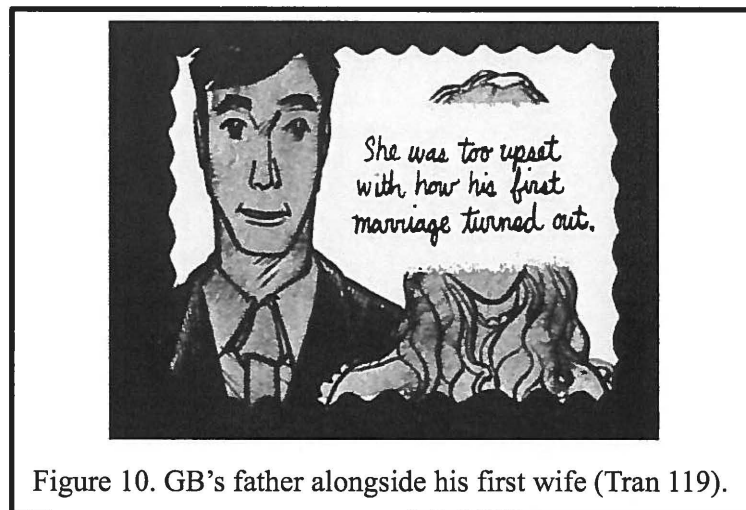


Figure 9. Collage of Tran’s parents (Tran 136).

Tran’s use of postmemory in his narrative creates a family saga. Tran fills “the emptiness through our performative practices of desire” for parts of connections he is

missing to complete his narrative, as Hirsch describes one use of postmemory (*The Generation 247*). Thus, as shown in figure 10, Tran uses his graphic memoir to connect the missing points in Tri Huu's life, especially in his married life, as GB does not get to hear much of Tri Huu's first wife. In the graphic memoir GB's mother tells her son the story of the beginning of her marriage in 1973; this story also includes the failure of Tri Huu's first marriage. Tran uses a black and white drawing to indicate that it takes place in the past. It is also interesting to note that Tran decides not to illustrate the face of Tri Huu's first wife, which Tran first did earlier in the graphic memoir but when his mother is explaining Tri Huu's first marriage, the face is missing as shown in figure 10. Tran includes the first wife in his narrative only to illustrate Tri Huu's married life from the one perspective, that of his mother.



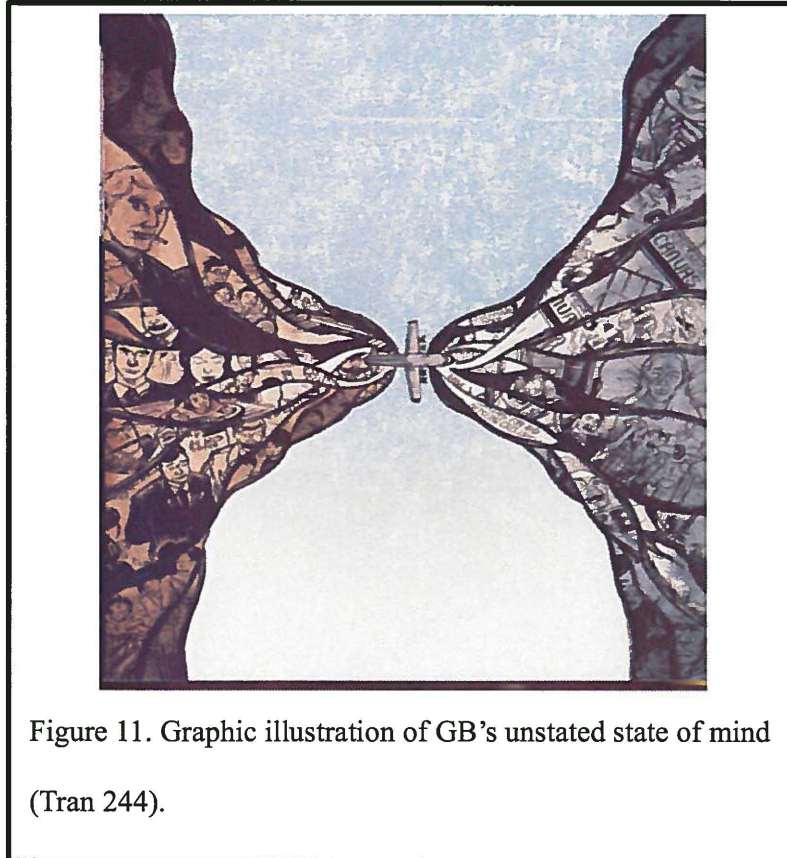


Figure 11. Graphic illustration of GB's unstated state of mind (Tran 244).

Tran's postmemory allows his self-character GB not only to face the unknown, foreign culture of Vietnam, but also make this culture accessible to him as a pathway to grasp a notion of his ethnic identity as a Vietnamese American. Tran uses different mediums to illustrate the process of postmemory transmission, as GB discovers the sacrifices his parents made and the struggles they went through. Although postmemory is depicted in Tran's narrative, Tran prevents GB from illustrating his continuous manifestation of postmemory by adding black pages. As different family members share stories with GB, the memoir portrays the struggles of family members both during the war and after. Tran uses the genre to represent his family's past experience by re-

illustrate it in a form appropriate to his perspective, using graphic illustrations that are beyond his ability to translate into words. Hidle asserts, “history cannot always be told in a linear fashion, just as wars do not always end when the last bomb is dropped” (416). This statement correlates to Tran’s depiction of his family’s struggles in various stories he heard from his family’s memories to how he retells postmemory. Tran’s choice of genre, the graphic memoir, allows him to portray his family saga in a way that is powerful and appropriate to the narratives he chooses to talk about. Tran’s addition of black pages advises awareness of the aftermath of the war: the war does not end on a linear timeline. Rather, the war is an ongoing set of processes wherein generation after generation in his family tree must learn and remember the past regardless of hyphenation between two nationalities.

Conclusion

This project consisted of tracing how postmemory is depicted in different genres of Vietnamese American literature, using Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. Focusing on three texts by 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese American writers, I examined how each work called attention to traumatic events of each character's family. As I wrote each chapter, I found the potential of narrative to show postmemory but also the different strategies these writers used to depict the impact of the Vietnam War and resettlement in the United States on those who do not experience these traumatic events first hand.

I discovered a connection of the effect of having postmemory in postwar generations. Firstly, metaphorically speaking, postmemory acts as a needle and thread that weaves the missing connections between generational boundaries and shows that disparate memories can be woven into a single narrative, where the person who manifests postmemory continuously weaves the missing parts through one's imagination. Secondly, postmemory allows members of the 1.5 and second-generation to understand Vietnamese culture as well as to understand one is not American, but Vietnamese American. Characters in these narratives discover they are seen as Vietnamese in America even though they have not been raised in Vietnam. The realizations of postwar generations include the struggles their family have gone through

and that their family's sacrifice that was meant for their children. For those that lack a connection to family members who struggled in Vietnam, the transmission of memories fails to occur, postmemory does not form and the relationship between Vietnamese and American parts of their identity remains hidden and a source of struggle for the next generation.

Chapter 1, "Constructing Postmemory of Vietnamese Refugees in lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*" examines the two mediums used to manifest postmemory: photographs and a return journey to Vietnam. Although the narrator is from the 1.5 generation and has some memory of Vietnam as a child, the novel examines the formation of narrator's postmemory to fill in the missing pieces of the past. The narrator moved to America at such young age where she could not relate to the circumstances happening around her, particularly her inability to understand her brother's death in Vietnam. Family photographs from Vietnam and the narrator's return journey to Vietnam become the main connections that facilitate the narrator's understanding that her brother is buried in Vietnam near her old house. These two items also become the way the narrator understands her family's struggles coming to the United States and her own identity as a Vietnamese American. The stories that lê tells are significant in terms of what is publicly disregarded when the topic is about the Vietnam War. The constant struggles of the narrator's parents, both linguistically and culturally, also becomes a constant source of pain that derives from the trauma of the Vietnam War, suggesting that there is no ending to the War for its refugees.

Chapter 2, "Aftermath of The Operation Babylift: What Happens To Postmemory in Amerasians in *We Should Never Meet*," challenges the assumed

connection to Vietnam. This short story collection depicts the lack of postmemory among Vietnamese orphans brought to the United States as children because their family background in most cases is unknown. Although these characters are part of the 1.5-generation since they were born in Vietnam, their circumstances as orphans do not allow any formation of connections that would help these orphans understand who they are, where they are from, and why are they in America. Phan's story collection suggests that there was no possible way for these orphaned refugee children to find a connection, and even if they attempt to find it, they lack the necessary information to forge such a tie. In this case, memories of the past do not migrate across generations. Taken as a whole, *We Should Never Meet*, suggests the need for familial connections that would complete the quest of discovering the missing stories in their lives. Phan's focus on Amerisians further suggests that the war cannot be forgotten and that it continuously creates pain in people's lives. Phan's focus on the lack of postmemory thus turns Vietnamese American literature into a political voice.

Chapter 3, "Reflecting Postmemory in Graphic Memoir in GB Tran's *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey*", turns to the ways an American-born protagonist whose parents are Vietnamese refugees in America, utilizes the graphic memoir to bear witness to his traumatic inheritance. GB Tran depicts the process of postmemory formation. Tran includes the struggles of his family both in America as well as Vietnam and portrays how he encounters these memories, eventually coming to understand how they relate to him and his identity as a Vietnamese American. Tran's use of a graphic memoir allows him to use different media to depict these struggles, using drawings, photographs, and text, and at times only visual images to portray events that transcend

language.

These three works grow out of the struggle to understand what it means to be a Vietnamese American in America as well as in Vietnam and what it means to be the children of Vietnamese refugees. Each text shows the importance of family in transmitting traumatic memories of the Vietnam War, a war that, each text suggests, has not ended. This study has considered how contemporary Vietnamese American writers use narrative to work through postmemory to reconcile their traumatic, cultural histories and reaffirm their identities. This thesis develops out of my interest in Asian American literature and particularly the novel, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*.

“Postmemory” is an important new trend in literary studies. I suggest that postmemory is a particularly important theme in literature by postwar generation Vietnamese American writers. As these are only three examples of literature written by postwar generation Vietnamese American writers, many additional possibilities remain for exploring postmemory in the writings of second generation Vietnamese Americans and perhaps in the future third-generation as they begin publishing in the coming years.

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