

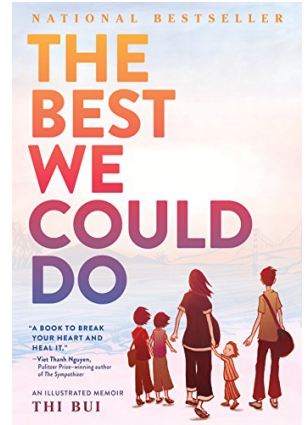


## Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*: A Teaching Guide

The UO Common Reading Program, organized by the Division of Undergraduate Studies, builds community, enriches curriculum, and engages research through the shared reading of an important book.

### About the 2018-2019 Book

A bestselling National Book Critics Circle Finalist, Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* offers an evocative memoir about the search for a better future by seeking to understand the past. The book is a marvelous visual narrative that documents the story of the Bui family escape after the fall of South Vietnam in the 1970s, and the difficulties they faced building new lives for themselves as refugees in America. Both personal and universal, the book explores questions of community and family, home and healing, identity and heritage through themes ranging from the refugee experience to parenting and generational changes.



### About the Author



**Thi Bui** is an author, illustrator, artist, and educator. Bui was born in Vietnam three months before the end of the Vietnam War and came to the United States in 1978 as part of a wave of refugees from Southeast Asia. Bui taught high school in New York City and was a founding teacher of Oakland International High School, the first public high school in California for recent immigrants and English learners. She has taught in the MFA in Comics program at California College for the Arts since 2015. *The Best We Could Do* (Abrams ComicArts, 2017) is her debut graphic novel. She is currently researching a work of graphic nonfiction about climate change in Vietnam.

### About this Guide

This guide offers the UO teaching community peer-reviewed curricular resources and activities to support students' engagement with *The Best We Could Do*. It brings forward the book's major themes and key contexts – along with suggested source materials, concrete activities, and discussion questions. It also raises the meaningful teaching challenges and opportunities that *The Best We Could Do* presents.

Are you using the book in your class, program, or student group? [Let us know!](#) Or email [commonreading@uoregon.edu](mailto:commonreading@uoregon.edu)

Do you want to know more about how to use the book in your class, program, or undecided if you are ready to use the book? Contact the UO Teaching Engagement Program at [tep@uoregon.edu](mailto:tep@uoregon.edu) or Common Reading Faculty Fellow, Julie Voelker-Morris, at [jvoelker@uoregon.edu](mailto:jvoelker@uoregon.edu).

The 2018-2019 teaching guide for *The Best We Can Do* has been developed through contributions of the following UO faculty:



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## Foundations I: Vietnamese Pronunciation Guide

If the Vietnamese language is not familiar to you, please take the time to visit the publisher's pronunciation guide (incorporated into their teaching guide linked below) to learn the appropriate pronunciation for the names that appear in *The Best We Could Do*. It would also be helpful to direct students' attention to this guide before a classroom discussion. Your Vietnamese and Vietnamese American students/classmates will likely appreciate this gesture.

Link: <http://www.abramsbooks.com/thebestwecoulddo/>

## Foundations II: Narrative Specificity

When engaging with a narrative work such as *The Best We Could Do*, students need to be aware of avoiding generalizations or reliance on prior conceptions. Students, led by faculty facilitation, should conduct critical readings of the book through historical, socio-cultural, textual (close reading, visual literacy), and careful comparative analysis. They need to practice generating arguments by interacting with the book in specific ways, in this case with specific illustrations, moments of action, characters, and narrative sequencing. Students should be encouraged to allow themselves to question and be open to questions from others rather than immediately knowing an answer. Instead, the work of reading carefully and closely encourages seeking answers through self-study, dialogue with others, and academic research.

## Foundations III: Keywords, Themes, and Contexts

A series of Big Questions motivating classroom dialogue are first offered about the *The Best We Could Do*. These questions are grounded in specific themes and contexts found in the book including:

- Refugees, Resettlement, Race
- Gender and Family Dynamics
- War, Nation, Politics
- Genre in Asian American Literature
- Stereotypes and the Politics of Representation / Form and Content
- Struggle, Freedom, Self-Determination
- Memoir and Oral History
- Graphic Novel and Visual Aesthetics
- The Title: *The Best We Could Do*

Following the list of Big Questions, specific teaching examples, texts and resources as companions to Bui's work as well as suggestions for further study are shared. Faculty are encouraged to apply and adapt these ideas. We hope that they serve as springboard for new ideas. Additional teaching tools, including articles, interviews, and discussion questions are posted in the [online resources](#) on the Common Reading website. If you have resources to add to the list, [please share them with us!](#)

## Foundations IV: Definitions

**Comics:** Sometimes called “sequential art.” Comics are images placed in deliberate sequence, usually to tell a story visually, sometimes with accompanying text.

**Cartooning:** When comics artists simplify images to their essential meanings or to specific details in order to amplify meanings.

**Content/Story:** What happens in the narrative, fictional or non-fictional

**Narrative:** The way the author tells readers about what happens. This includes the beginning and end and the structure in which it is told, that is what event comes after another. Typically, narrative has a deliberate, intentional organization.

**History, historiography (the writing of history):** This is the historical reality within the narrative. The narratives we have determine what we hear about the story: it/they provide/s a metaphorical and (in this case) literal frame for truth.

**Autobiography:** An author telling us about themselves in particular ways; it is heavily reliant on narratives of the self, and often betrays a fallible self in parallel with fallible others.

**Memoir:** A written collection of memories about public and private moments or events that took place in the author's life.

**Graphic novel:** A book length comic form that tells a complete story, whether non-fiction, fiction, or anthologized.

**Refugee:** A person in search of refuge, as in times of war, political oppression, or religious persecution.

**Immigrant:** A person who moves to settle or reside in a country of which they are not native or may not possess citizenship.

### Big Questions for Readers of *The Best We Could Do*

This section provides potential questions for class discussions or for approaches to student/faculty research and classroom engagement with the book.

**Refugees, Resettlement, Race:** How does the story of Thi Bui’s family’s survival from poverty, war, escape, and resettlement in the U.S. inform our understanding of the refugee experience in the United States. How does this narrative challenge the model minority myth that assumes Asian Americans have attained social and economic success and do not experience racism?

**Gender and Family Dynamics:** *The Best We Could Do* begins with Thi Bui giving birth. Throughout the graphic novel, gender and family dynamics are ever present with tensions between spouses, gendered expectations for girls and women, and at times gender based violence. How does Thi Bui’s representation of gender, family, class, and masculinity impact the larger narrative, and how do we as readers reconcile these representations?



**War, Nation, Politics:** The trauma of war and politics shapes Thi Bui's connection to Viet Nam as her homeland. Why did many Vietnamese people support the communist revolution but many others were against it? What were the driving forces throughout the centuries of conflict, and how does nationhood and independence for Viet Nam shape the ideals and hopes for the Vietnamese people and what are the gaps from the realities of war and trauma that we see unfold? How did war and revolution affect individual Vietnamese and their relationships with their loved ones?

**Genre in Asian American Literature:** What genre would you classify this book as and why? What does it mean to be Asian American, according to this book? To what extent should we read this book as representative as opposed to singular and why? Why does the narrator suggest that the defining inheritance of her family history is a "Refugee Reflex" (305) rather than any specific aspect of Vietnamese culture? Furthermore, why then does she go on to realize, upon reflection and as explained in the preface, that "Refugee Reflex" is an inadequate title and that *The Best We Could Do* better captured her concerns?

Viet Thanh Nguyen, also a diasporic Vietnamese American writer who arrived as a refugee as a young child, has written in several public fora about the difference between "refugee" and "immigrant" literature: for Nguyen, refugees do not have a choice for the most part, and threaten the integrity of the host nation in a way that immigrants (who presumably make a choice to migrate, make efforts towards assimilation, and may return to their place of origin should they so choose) do not. Do you agree with Nguyen's distinction? How would you read *The Best We Could Do* along the lines Nguyen suggests?

**Stereotypes and the Politics of Representation / Form and Content:** What is the relationship between form and content in this book? Think about how racial/national/gender difference is visually depicted in this book? How do the text and images work together? What kind of argument is this text making? What is its visual rhetoric?

**Struggle, Freedom, Self-Determination:** Throughout *The Best We Could Do*, being a child in a refugee family is the subject of much anxiety and introspection: as the narrator writes, "How much of ME is my own, and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined?" (324). Near the end of the book, in a flash of mutual understanding, the narrator arrives at a poignant realization about her mother: "To let her be not what I want her to be, but someone independent, self-determining, and free, means letting go of that picture of her in my head" (319). Here, it is not the parent but the child who must learn to let go of a narrative of loss: even the story of the mother's past is allowed its measure of freedom. Must history, intergenerational suffering, and familial/intimate expectations determine a life from the outset, or can outcomes be changed through conversation, reflection, and willed rewriting (however difficult)?

How would you describe the complex interplay between self-determined, colonial-determined, and state-determined freedom in the refugee narrative? How does *The Best We Could Do* handle the paradox of freedom as it is commonly played out in the United States: that it is least available to those who are most in need of its abstract promise? What are the similarities and differences between narratives of freedom in this refugee narrative and U.S. nationalist doctrines? Do these similarities and differences unexpectedly position the refugee experience at the heart of the U.S. mythos. If so, how might we reckon with this realization? How do these questions intersect with the

questions of gender and socio-economic status, especially in the narrator's accounts of her mother's and father's struggles in both Viet Nam and the United States?

**Memoir and Oral History:** Bui's preface notes that *The Best We Could Do* began as an academic "oral history" of her family before taking on its present form. In so doing, it tells their history out of chronological order, following instead an alternative logic guided by the shapes and elisions of her and her parents' memories. What are the relative virtues of this form of history-writing - an "illustrated memoir" as the subtitle suggests? What might be the difference between an oral and a written/recorded history, between a micro-history based on multiple intertwined voices rather than a history based on institutionalized 'grand narratives'? Do you think the narrator succeeds in her attempts to learn how her mother and father became the way they are?

Why do you think Bui has chosen to illustrate this history in visual terms? Can you think of other forms of media suited to this approach to history: photography, film/cinema, music, even Twitter, Snapchat, or other social media? How does Thi Bui mix in photography to discuss the history of her family? [For example, see p. 29 for an illustrated family portrait, p. 207-9 for "Saigon Execution" photo discussion, and p. 267 for their family portraits at the camp.]

**Graphic Novel and Visual Aesthetics:** Why do you think Bui choose the graphic novel to tell her story? In what ways is the graphic novel well-suited for a non-linear narrative? How do the sequential images of the graphic novel develop individual storylines, present complex stories and diverse perspectives?

**The Title: *The Best We Could Do*:** Where and how in the narrative does the title *The Best We Could Do* first appear? [For reference, answer is on p. 55 - the doctors attending the death of her mother's first born baby apologize and say that they did "the best that we could do."] What was the original context for this phrase? Does it resonate with new or different meanings throughout the book, and how? What is the effect of investing this phrase with several possible meanings? Who is the "we" in the title, and how do its several points of reference enable a reader to trace the intergenerational traumas and survivals at the heart of *The Best We Could Do*?



## Refugee, Resettlement, Race: Southeast Asian Refugee Politics

Content resource areas in this section include critical refugee studies and related laws and politics.

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### Suggested Resources:

#### Critical Refugee Studies

- [Critical Refugee Studies](#) Critical Refugee Studies is an emerging field that challenges the objectification of refugees as objects of rescue. This website documents the work of scholars engaged in reshaping the field of refugee studies. Check out the story maps and authors' work and resources.  
*Refugees have long been the objects of inquiry for fields such as sociology, history, and political science. Refugees are also often featured in the media serving as objects of suffering or agents of terrorism. The "Stories We Tell" about refugees are different from the ones featured in books or newspapers. The Critical Refugee Studies Collective believes that refugee storytelling allows for new forms of knowledge to be produced. This site enables for us to share our stories and our histories — together. ~ Critical Refugee Studies Homepage*
- ["The Hidden Scars All Refugees Carry"](#) by Viet Thanh Nguyen
- [Viet Stories Exhibition](#), *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 2018

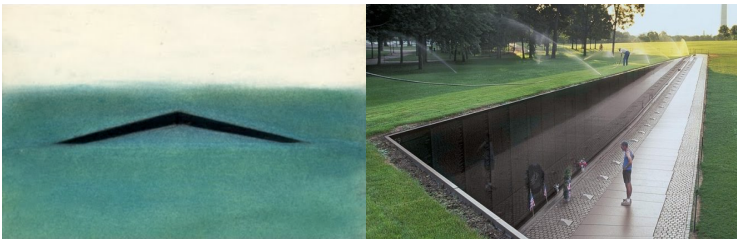
- ***The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*** (ed. Viet Thanh Nguyen), feat. contribution by Thi Bui (2018). This book brings together refugees from around the world and throws into relief the invisible commonalities between each refugee's story.
- Yogita Goyal, "Un-American: Refugees and the Vietnam War," PMLA, March 2018. [On Viet Thanh Nguyen] Link: <https://www.mlajournals.org/doi/abs/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.2.378>
- Chris Lewa, "Asia's New Boat People" - On stateless Rohingyas leaving Burma and Bangladesh (3 pp.) - <http://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/burma/lewa.pdf>
- Court Robinson, ***Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus & the International Response***. Zed Books, 1998. (With emphasis on host nations' response)

### **Laws and Policies**

- International refugee processes are overseen and monitored by the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#). Review the UN's High Commission for Refugees website. Draw connections to current refugee struggles around the globe, what are the similarities and common themes found in *The Best We Could Do*?
- Review the [Timeline of refugee policies prepared by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services](#). What is the history of refugee policies in the United States? While refugee policy has a long historical presence, it was not heightened until WWII, and then was more present in the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act.
- The [1980 Refugee Act](#) was largely in response to the influx of refugees from Southeast Asian countries following the U.S. wars in Southeast Asia. The influx of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos ignited what some scholars refer to as ***compassion fatigue***, that led to this law that limited entry and resources for refugees.

### **Films, Videos, Art:**

- [A Village Called Versailles](#) Documents the experiences of a Vietnamese community in New Orleans impacted by Hurricane Katrina.
- [Why do We Call Asians Model Minorities](#) Gives background on the racial politics of the model minority construction.
- [NPR: Asian Americans and Poverty](#) Discusses the significance of poverty among Asian groups, particularly those who came as refugees.
- [Pass or Fail in Cambodia Town](#) PBS documentary looking at the challenges among Cambodian youth in American schools.
- [Sentenced Home](#) - documentary that follows the lives of three Cambodian Americans facing forced deportations. This was made possible after the Cambodian Repatriation Agreement in 2002, a similar law was passed with Vietnam in 2008.
- ***Khoa Do, Mother Fish (2009)***: Independent film examining the experiences of Vietnamese refugees now based in Australia. Adopts a theatrical device re-enacting a boat journey within the confines of a factory (a conceit broadly similar to Lars Von Trier's *Dogville*) with an amateur cast of former refugees.
- **Digital exhibition: 13 Artists On Immigration**. (June 19, 2018). Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/19/t-magazine/immigration-art.html>



**The Vietnam Memorial**, 1981. Washington DC. Link: [Maya Lin's original competition submission](#)

- **[A Strong Clear Vision](#)** (1994): PBS Documentary on the controversial design and creation of *Vietnam War Memorial* in Washington DC, one of the most famous monuments in the US. Maya Lin, then a 20-year-old year old Chinese-American student submitted the winning design of a monolithic black line, cut into the landscape. Veterans, who wanted a realistic figurative representation of the soldiers, were also offended that an Asian American was selected to commemorate this event. A great resource to begin a discussion around forms of visual language that aim to connect personal and collective trauma. [View Trailer](#)

### **Classroom Activities:**

**Activity A:** In small groups ask students to brainstorm popular constructions and assumptions about Asian Americans in the U.S. Then ask them to recall their own education and memory of the Vietnam War. Next, ask them to point out particular points in the book *The Best We Could Do* that challenge those popular constructions. What do students think the impact of those popular images/constructions of Asian Americans are on Vietnamese refugees and other Southeast Asian refugees given the narrative and representations of their examples?

Note: The following resource may be helpful for pre-empting the issue of 'positive' stereotypes? NPR article on the harms of so-called 'positive' stereotyping:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/02/17/586181350/strong-black-woman-smart-asian-man-the-downside-to-positive-stereotypes>]

**Activity B:** Listen to the [The Refugee Playlist](#) on Spotify. The playlist description notes, "In a world that welcomes refugees, we get world-changing music from artists like these." In what ways do the artists or songs on this list exemplify "world-changing music?" Or how does this list suggest songs that "welcome refugees?" Are there any problems with choices of songs or artists on this list? Create your own list of artists and songs that exemplify the goals of this list. Share samples of the music with the rest of the class.

[The Refugee Playlist](#) further encourages listeners to participate in the International Rescue Mission (<https://www.rescue.org/article/how-help-refugees-united-states-12-ways-stand-welcome>). Ask students to learn more about this organization, their mission, and goals. How might the class, individually or as a group, become involved in this work? Or how might students define why they would not participate in the work of this organization?





Danh Vo: *Take My Breath Away*, exhibition at [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum](https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/resource-unit/danh-vo-take-my-breath-away#section-top). New York.

**Activity C:** The work of Danish-Vietnamese artist [Danh Vo](https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/resource-unit/danh-vo-take-my-breath-away#section-top) (b. 1975, Bà Rịa, Vietnam) examines the individual self as plural and changing, shaped by larger power structures as well as private desires. Vo has noted that, “things that you know so well that are so familiar to you [can be made] unfamiliar with very, very simple information.” Vo makes familiar objects appear strange by presenting them in new contexts, combinations, or situations. In doing so, he asks the viewers to consider shared as well as individual meanings of objects and the ways in which we layer and make associations among objects. For Vo, information gained from these new presentations can rupture understandings of history, identity, knowledge, and politics. Link to learn more: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6A-GKr1vRE0>

**Activity C1:** Review the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum’s overview of Vo’s oeuvre exhibition. Link: <https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/resource-unit/danh-vo-take-my-breath-away#section-top>. Select one or more of the topical works and discuss them in class. Ask students to create their own sculptural work through recontextualizing, recombining, or resituating everyday objects from their own lives or backgrounds (or ones that you bring to class). What does this reworking of objects help students understand about their own positionality? How does it help them understand Vo’s approach to art and his positionality? How does it help them understand the variety of positions, locations, attitudes, and attributes taken by the people depicted in *The Best We Could Do*?



**Activity C2:** Vo’s work, *We the People* (above), examines the state of freedom in the U.S. ‘We the People’ consists of about 250 1:1 scale pieces of the Statue of Liberty. It has been recreated using the same fabrication techniques and copper material as the original statue created by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi in 1886. Vo asks viewers to consider what freedom may be. Ask students to listen to Vo’s insight and view images of ‘We the People.’ Then, lead discussion of the work based on some of the questions in the “Big

Ideas” section of this teaching guide. Finally, ask students to create a work(s) that represents the concept of freedom to them. Link to Danh Vo Interview: A Question of Freedom, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ELmm-jNkLs>. Guggenheim link about ‘We the People’: <https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/topic/we-the-people-detail>



### Visual Representation and Identity

Content resource areas in this section include visual literacy, comics literacy, character rendering and representation.

Bui’s drawings are eloquent yet rendered with minimal brushstrokes. People and faces are sparse and in shorthand; counterintuitively, less details allow greater empathy with the character and immediacy in our engagement with the story. This ‘masking’ technique in comics uses simplistic shorthand rendering of characters often against detailed backgrounds to engage the reader in the story. Bui’s prose contains a similar sparseness in his compact phrasing, emphasizing the idea and story through the directness of its delivery.

#### Resources:

- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994.
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus*. <https://www.amazon.com/Complete-Maus-Art-Spiegelman/dp/0679406417>



### Resources on How to Read "Sequential Art," a.k.a A Graphic Novel:

- Duke, "Visual Literacy" short reading ([https://www.mnsu.edu/success/tutoring/comics\\_duke.pdf](https://www.mnsu.edu/success/tutoring/comics_duke.pdf))
- McCloud, Scott, *Understanding Comics*, Chapters 1-3 (New York: William Morrow/HarperCollins ; Paw Prints; 2008], ©1993)
- Smart Smiley, Jesse, "Anatomy of a Comic," <https://jesssmartsmiley.wordpress.com/2013/06/12/anatomy-of-a-comic-page/>
- **Anatomy of a Comic:**
  - **Panel:** A panel in a comic book is one of the individual pieces of artwork that make up a single page in a comic book or graphic novel. When placed together on a single page, individual panels tell a story, or a portion of a story, in sequential order.
  - **Caption:** Captions are used in comics and graphic novels to narrate the story or to share characters' thoughts. Often, captions are presented in box or consistent, separate shape that distinguishes them from the rest of the panel. Captions are not speech balloons or bubbles.
  - **Onomatopoeia:** Sound effects. Sometimes represented in unique text styles
  - **Speech Bubble:** Speech bubbles are a graphic convention used most commonly in comics and graphic novels to represent speech of a specific character.
  - **Emanata:** Lines to indicate shock/surprise
  - **Gutter** - The space between panels on a page of comics. Gutters account for time, space, and rhythm of moments in sequential art/comics. Readers of comics make closure of these moments suggested through the "pause" of each gutter.
  - **Closure** – Connections readers makes to fill in information between panels or other content. Such connections are based on reader experience and imagination.
  - **Splash:** A full-page image.
  - **Spread:** A single image that continues across more than one page.
  - **Page:** The entire single page of a comic or graphic novel.

### Discussion questions:

- Describe Bui's drawing style, such as quality of line, identify different types of mark making, lines, and brushstrokes; ie does it look like a pen drawing, does it look like ink and brush work, is the style loose or controlled, is it hyperrealistic, so forth?
- How do her aesthetics choices and drawing style convey specific people with individual experiences?
- Discuss the difference between caricature and character?
- How does Bui create a complex and nuanced portrayal of Asian-Americans and refugees?

### Activities:

**Activity A:** Visually analyze a single panel. Discuss how the artist's rendering help us identify and empathize with specific characters; how does it specify place or evoke an emotion? Visually analyze the composition of an entire page layout. Discuss the design elements and the visual transition from panel to panel; what aesthetics decisions were made? How does it contextualize the information being presented in the narrative? Discuss the foreground/background or figure/ground visual or interior/exterior

relationship and transition. How does it shape the character's narrative and identity, and our understanding of their stories?

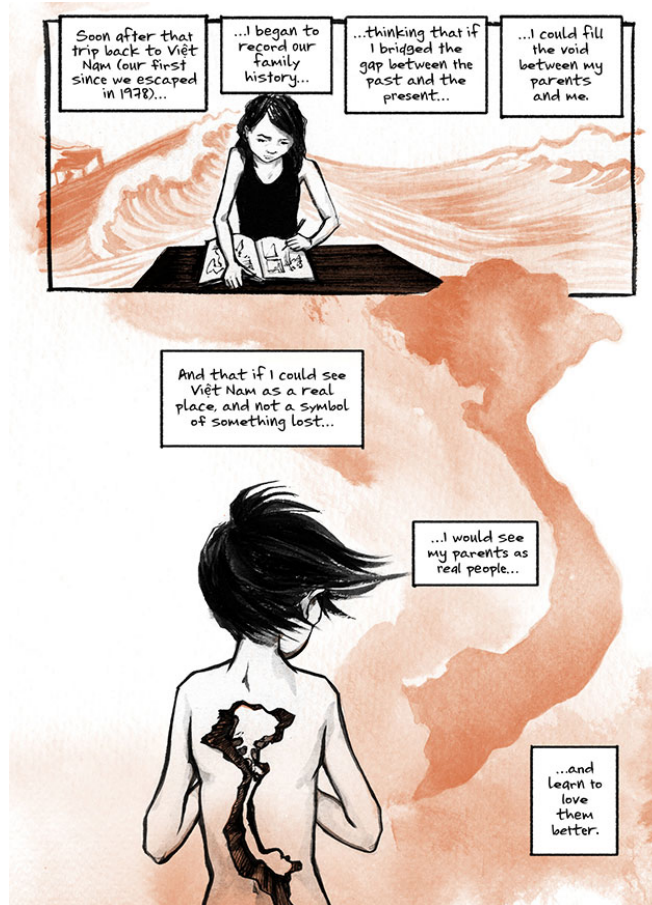
Note: the comic drawing style could be discussed in comparison/contrast to an observational or representational drawing, or compare/contrast the sequential art form to moving images in video and film.

**Activity B:** Remove words from one page/section/chapter of *The Best We Could Do* (the instructor could choose a part that best resonates with their thematic concerns). Fill in the blanks with your own words, given what you understand of the plot thus far: what have your words added? What has been lost in removing the narrator's/characters'/other words and replacing them with your own? How does the absence of text change the quality of your attention to the images and other formal elements of the comic?

**Activity C:** Closure (definition above) happens in transitions between panels. McCloud (see resource list) notes that, "closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. And since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangement of elements—then, in a very real sense, comics is closure!" (See McCloud, p. 67 – resource listed above). Have students discuss how they provided closure at significant moments throughout the narrative.

McCloud also identifies six types of panel transitions (pp. 70-74 and [https://mediawiki.middlebury.edu/wiki/MIDDMedia/Closure\\_in\\_comics](https://mediawiki.middlebury.edu/wiki/MIDDMedia/Closure_in_comics)). Introduce students to these types of closures. Then, ask students to find these types of closures within *The Best We Could Do*. Thi Bui applies at least 5 of the closures throughout the book. Examples include:

- Moment-to-moment: Bui, p. 22 and the first two panels on p. 42,
  - Action-to-action: Bui, p. iii and p. 2,
  - Subject-to-subject: Bui, p. 24 between panels 4 and 5,
  - Scene-to-scene: Bui, p. 30,
  - Aspect-to-aspect: Bui, p. 39,
  - Non-sequitur: ?
-



### Memory, Time, Place

Content resource areas in this section include location/dislocation, physical/psychological, interior/exterior, stability/confusion.

Bui's compositional structure of a panel or page layout has a fluid interplay between the figure and ground relationship, interior and exterior landscapes, and changing viewpoints. Different mood and tone is achieved with contrast (light and dark), line or brushstroke, and color. The palette is monochromatic, black and white, and a red-sepia tone.

### Discussion Questions:

- Why did Bui choose a monochromatic palette? Why did she choose the red/sepia color? What mood or tone is evoked with the minimal palette?
- The narrative spans several decades, how does the artist communicate the passing of time and memory?
- Bui does not reproduce American photographer Eddie Adams' "Saigon Execution," a Pulitzer-winning photograph oft said to have changed public opinion in the US against the war in Vietnam. Instead, she only provides a rough sketch of it, adding that it did not deserve a Pulitzer Prize because it elided the complex circumstances and contexts that led to the moment, painting the

Vietnamese North and South as a simple opposition (p. 206-210). Take a moment to reread these four pages and consider: Do you agree with this assessment? If you were in Bui’s position, would you do the same? Why? Can you invent a way to responsibly do justice to the circumstances that led to that photo—in the format of a graphic novel? Link to view and read more about “Saigon Execution”: <http://100photos.time.com/photos/eddie-adams-saigon-execution>

- Bui does elect to reproduce the photographic portraits of her family taken when they were living in the refugee camp in Malaysia (267). Unlike with “Saigon Execution,” this authorial decision is not discussed. What is the effect of including these photo portraits? How do these photographs contrast with the “Saigon Execution” photograph discussed above?

### **Classroom Activities:**

**Activity A:** Students can create a collage using found or personal images (this can be made as a digital collage or with cut images and glue) that merge an exterior and interior landscape to tell a family story or historical event through the perspective of a specific character. As a set-up to the activity, highlight examples/pages from *The Best We Could Do* that depict an interior and exterior space. Visually analyze how time and space is portrayed; and often brought together in a panel or page layout, discuss how this is done. Discuss how interior and exterior landscapes can function as a depiction of an interior/exterior mindscape or psychological states.

**Activity B:** Identify and discuss the various line quality, mark making, and brushwork of Bui’s drawings. Throughout the book, does a particular characteristic of line or brush style repeat itself in specific contexts? Describe the use of color in Bui’s drawings. How do the visual or formal characteristics of the drawings (such as color, composition, line quality, contrast light/dark) communicate mood, time, emotions or psychological states? How do the drawings portray place or location? What are some of the visual devices used by Bui to convey the past and the present? Describe Bui’s drawing style and its merits in communicating a story or character. Following this discussion, have students attempt to change the time, mood, or psychological states through copying and changing a panel’s color, line, shape, or other element of design. How do students’ changes in panel elements further help in understanding Bui’s style selections?



**Activity C:** Review films, books, music and installations by artist [Trinh T. Minh-ha](#). Most especially look at Minh-ha’s work *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015). Link: <http://www.asianfilmvault.com/2017/12/forgetting-vietnam-2015-by-trinh-t-minh.html>

From Minh-ha’s website: “Shot in Hi-8 video in 1995 and in HD and SD in 2012, [the final version of] images unfold spatially as a dialogue between the two elements—land and water—that underlie the formation of the term “country” (đất nước). Carrying the histories of both visual technology and

Vietnam’s political reality, these images are also meant to feature the encounter between the ancient as related to the solid earth, and the new as related to the liquid changes in a time of rapid globalization. In conversation with these two parts is a third space, that of historical and cultural re-memory – or what local inhabitants, immigrants and veterans remember of yesterday’s stories to comment on today’s events.” Consider the following questions after watching the film:

- In what ways do Vietnamese women’s daily lives, which have endured war, revolution, and globalization, act as a mainstay of Vietnamese society?
- In what ways do Vietnamese women’s forms of, such as mobile and street vending that have been outlawed in recent years, represent persistence and resistance?
- What other forms of persistence, resistance, even defiance, are captured in the film?
- How do the metaphors of Vietnamese cultural and geographic stories assist in understanding the country’s history as well as contemporary political situation?
- What aspects of the film are connected to readings and discussions of *The Best We Could Do*?



## Memoir and Oral History: Voice, Narrative, Historiography

Content resource areas in this section include multiple perspectives, memory, postmemory, storytelling, documentary.

In its reflections on eliciting, interpreting, and revising the oral histories of a family, *The Best We Could Do* demonstrates the intersections between personal and historical narratives by presenting its story in a non-linear and non-chronological way. It also has “no single story” (211), weaving multiple versions and

perspectives together, sometimes even allowing them to contradict one another. As Bui writes about her father's stories, each version has "a different shape but the same ending" (100).

### **Resources:**

#### *An Other War Memorial: Memories of the American War in Vietnam*

Project by University of Southern California (USC) students in a class by Viet Thanh Nguyen  
Public (and digital) scholarship memorializing the oral histories (written/transcribed and video interviews) of a diverse range of people involved in the American War in Vietnam  
Eschews US- and white-centric perspectives; deliberately showcases Vietnamese and other under-represented perspectives, eg. anti-war protestors, veterans of color  
Link: <http://anotherwarmemorial.com> - click on "About" in top right corner to learn more

Useful short guides on how to conduct oral histories for possible activities/assignments modeled on *An Other War Memorial* (above)

Link: <http://www.library.ucla.edu/destination/center-oral-history-research/resources/conducting-oral-histories-family-members>

Link: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/libraries/bancroft-library/oral-history-center/oral-history-tips>

A list of films that deal with oral history across historical and national contexts

- Link: <https://suzannesnider.com/list-oral-history-and-film>
- Rea Tajiri, *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* (1991 film). Independent avant-garde film examining intergenerational effects of the Japanese internment camps. [Cannot find a streaming link online]
- Matt Huynh, *The Boat*. Interactive, animated webcomic adapted from short story by Nam Le  
Link: <https://www.sbs.com.au/theboat/>
- Matt Huynh, *The Vietnam War: 1945-1975*.

Large-scale murals commissioned and exhibited by New York Historical Society:

Link to general info: <http://www.matthuynh.com/the-vietnam-war/>

Link to closer view of murals online as slideshow, video, etc.:

<https://vietnamwar.nyhistory.org/murals/>

Crystal Parikh, *Writing Human Rights: The Political Imaginaries of Writers of Color*, University of Minnesota Press, 2017

Rocío G. Davis, "The Asian American Family Portrait Documentary: Multiplying Discourses" in *Relative Histories: Mediating History in Asian American Family Memoirs*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2011, 116-139

Davis, "Layering history: graphic embodiment and emotions in GB Tran's *Vietnamerica*," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 19.2 (2015): 252-267. Link to abstract:  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13642529.2014.973708>



Alexandra Kurmann and Tess Do, “Children on the Boat: The Recuperative Work of Postmemory in Short Fiction of the Vietnamese Diaspora,” *Comparative Literature* 70.2 (June 2018): 218-234.

Treats French, Canadian, and Australian writers of Vietnamese diaspora of the ‘1.5 generation’: born in Vietnam, raised abroad. Does not specifically discuss the US Vietnamese diaspora, but there are certainly several commonalities in regard to historical and cultural background, refugee experience. The term “postmemory” comes from Marianne Hirsch; see below.

Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”

Oft-cited scholar of memory studies examines intergenerational trauma through photographs.

Full text (PDF): [http://urokiistorii.ru/sites/all/files/hirsch\\_generation\\_of\\_postmemory.pdf](http://urokiistorii.ru/sites/all/files/hirsch_generation_of_postmemory.pdf)

Discussion Questions (See also the ‘Big Questions’ listed near the beginning of this guide)

- When visiting their early childhood home in Vietnam as an adult, the narrator finds herself “documenting in lieu of remembering” (180). By the end of your reading of *TBWCD*, do you have a sense of the difference between “documenting” and “remembering”? Do either of these terms adequately capture the achievements of *TBWCD*, to your mind?
- The narrator’s father provides a humorously under-stated assessment of Walter Cronkite (American broadcast journalist during the Vietnam War) and his approach to narrating Vietnam for an American audience: “The narration is only okay... but what I thought was neat was seeing footage of our old neighborhood” (183). The narrator goes on to deplore the over-blown and US-centric caricatures of Vietnam in Cronkite’s account (184-5), yet she—like her father—is also compelled to use what she has, in part because she lacks memories of her own. The flawed histories that precede her then become the basis for a crucial historical revision.
- Have you ever felt the urge to rewrite an unsatisfactory account of someone/somewhere/something important to you? How would you begin, and what would your goals be? For what audience would your rewriting be done?

Activities/Assignments

**Activity A:** What would you do if you had to adapt *The Best We Could Do* into a fictional film, documentary, photo-essay, or a genre other than a memoir? Take a moment to visit some of the links listed above, e.g. Huynh’s interactive animated webcomic and murals, the USC project *An Other Memorial*, or the sites on how to ‘do’ oral history. Which artistic or discursive (formal) strategies seem particularly well-suited to the preoccupations and goals of *The Best We Could Do*? Can you think of any other art-forms that would work well for Bui’s purposes?

**Activity B:** Rewrite/reimagine one crucial scene from the perspective of its other characters. If possible, create a storyboard—keeping in mind the elements of a comics page. How would the narrative change dependent on point of view? Would you integrate the several perspectives, or would you keep them apart? [Instructor may wish to pre-select a scene most resonant with their thematic focus; this can be as short/long as time allows.]

As you read, keep your eyes open for contradictions both *within* one character’s narrative and *across* different characters’ narratives (often located at different points in the book). Indeed, characters



sometimes openly correct each other's version of events. In literary studies, such 'unreliable' narration is understood as a common device indicating a deeper complexity or tension at work. What do these contradictions suggest about the nature of traumatic experience, familial intimacy, and the many stories we tell about ourselves? Link the narrative contradiction you have identified to one theme of *The Best We Could Do* (e.g. family, gender, memory) and explain how it deepens your understanding of that theme.

**Activity C:** Take a moment to read a short guide to oral history (above) as well as the short reading on "Visual Literacy." Which techniques of oral history are shown in the form of the graphic novel? How do formal elements such as frame, line, and color help to guide our approach to the stories being told?

**Activity D:** Instructors of history, cultural anthropology, sociology, and area studies may also wish to consider an oral history project based in Oregon as modeled on USC's *An Other War Memorial* (see above for this and other relevant resources) - the issues examined would depend on the instructor's focus in the class as a whole. A creative modification may involve students interviewing each other on their reading experience of *The Best We Could Do*, lending a metacognitive layer to thinking about how history is written and received, while also mobilizing the basic methods of oral history. Students could also construct their own respective family histories through the same methodologies.

**Activity E:** For engagement with *The Best We Could Do* beyond the first year context (e.g. senior seminar on the history of race in the U.S.), students could read the Kurmann and Do article listed in this section with an eye to similarities and differences between the US and other host-country contexts, thus activating potential connections to what they have learned in the class.

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### **Family, Gender, Family Violence:**

Content resource areas in this section include intergenerational tensions, gendered expectations, and family structure as common themes in Asian American literature.

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#### Suggested Readings:

- “The Vietnamese Double Gender Revolt: Globalizing Marriage Options in the Twenty-first Century” by Hung Cam Thai in *Vietnamese Americans: Diaspora & Dimensions* (Volume 29, Number 1, 2003)
- “Vietnamese American Women's Health: A Community's Perspective and Report” By Tu-Uyen Ngoc Nguyen, Marjorie Kagawa-Singer, Sora Park Tanjasiriand Mary Anne Foo in *Vietnamese Americans: Diaspora & Dimensions* (Volume 29, Number 1, 2003)
- “Asian American Immigrant Families and Intimate Harm” by erin Khuê Ninh, in *Kalfou*, Volume 1(2), 2014
- *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (NYU 2011) by erin Khuê Ninh

#### Suggested Video and Film:

- *Daughter From Danang*. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AU\\_VUe2HX0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AU_VUe2HX0)

#### Discussion Questions

- When the narrator’s mother leaves her alone with her new baby, she realizes that family is “now something I have created—and not just something I was born into” (21). How do the changing

frames, points of view, and narrowing focus suggest the narrator's state of mind and changing relationship to family? How is she positioned alongside her new baby?

#### Activity/Assignment

**Activity A:** Bui offers something of a family portrait (p. 29): its layout conveys a strict hierarchy, beginning with the first generation of her parents at the top of the page and ending with the “lame second generation” (p. 29)—herself, her husband, and her son.

Draw or otherwise design or create a group portrait for your family or a community of people important to you (such as your residential community, a group of high school friends, your out-of-school band, extended step- and adoptive family, a close-knit group at work). Would you follow this generational model in this alternative kinship/community, and why?

**Activity B:** Many readers have reported using *The Best We Could Do* as a vehicle for communicating with their parents about unspoken familial pasts. Elsewhere, Bui has characterized the parent-child relation as a translation and mutual accommodation of change and growth; indeed, she has often said that writing the book brought her closer to her parents. Do you have a close relationship in your life (not necessarily parental or familial) that is under-explored? To what extent might a book like *The Best We Could Do* be a helpful go-between for developing this relationship and extending a conversation? Learn more at: <https://medium.com/the-baton/a-conversation-with-thi-bui-author-of-the-best-we-could-do-on-vietnamese-identity-and-bursting-92689349f113>. Write a letter to this person extending an invitation to learn more about this relationship or the individuals in it.

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## War, Violence, and Trauma

Content resource areas in this section include hauntings, demons, Viet Nam history and politics.

### Resources:

*Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* by Hillary Shute. Harvard University Press. 2016. Shute traces how comics inherited graphic print traditions and innovations from the seventeenth century and later, pointing out that at every turn new forms of visual-verbal representation have arisen in response to the turmoil of war. Note: Consider that where the artistic vision becomes really strong, the story becomes stronger.

### Suggested Sources on Viet Nam History and Politics

- Chong, Denise. (1999). *The girl in the picture: The story of Kim Phuc, the photograph, and the Vietnam War*. New York: Penguin.
- Goscha, Christopher. (2016). *Vietnam: A New History*. Basic Books. This is considered the best history of Vietnam available.
- *Journey from the Fall* (film, 2007). This is the only movie about the Vietnamese boat people.
- Kidder, Tracy. (2005). *My detachment: A memoir*. New York: Random House.
- *Land of Sorrows* (1973). This is about the Tet Offensive, made in South Vietnam, with war viewed from critical perspectives of ordinary city people:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmEcsIMR08g&feature=share>
- Nguyen, Kien. (2001). *The unwanted: A memoir of childhood*. New York: Little, Brown.

- Như Tăng, Trương, Chanoff, David, & Đoàn, Văn Toại. (1985/1986). *A Viet Cong memoir: An inside account of the Vietnam War and its aftermath*. New York: Vintage.
- Pham, Andrew X. (1999). *Catfish and mandala: A two-wheeled voyage through the landscape and memory of Vietnam*. New York, NY: Picador.
- *When Will October Come?* (1970) made in North Vietnam, supporting war but hinting at the suffering of people. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npCV5ghEV1Y>



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## Language and Multilingualism

Content resources areas in this area include bi- and multi-lingualism and flexibility, power and access, inheritance and learning, literary dubbing.

Several light touches in Bui's text open up questions of authenticity, mother tongues, intimacies, inheritances, and colonial pedagogy, prompting readers to consider language as a vehicle for the broader issues of historical trauma and collective memory. Multilingualism and heritage language acquisition/loss are often central to immigrant and refugee experiences in the US and elsewhere. Moreover, the French colonial school system significantly altered the linguistic terrain of Vietnam, compelling many Vietnamese subjects to learn French for social betterment or mere survival: indeed, both the narrator's parents are fluent speakers of French by the time they flee Vietnam. If French is the colonial tongue of Vietnam, then English is the refugee's neo-colonial tongue, without which work and survival would be next to impossible in the United States. The small movements between languages is thus a particularly delicate—yet deliberately political—narrative technique in TBWCD.

## Resources



- UCLA Language Materials Project. A short history of the Vietnamese language. Link: <http://www.lmp.ucla.edu/Profile.aspx?LangID=82&menu=004>
- Thi Bui on Vietnamese identity and telling her parents' stories. Bui discusses retaining the diacritics in Vietnamese names for herself and people like her. *Medium*. March 29, 2018. Link: <https://medium.com/the-baton/a-conversation-with-thi-bui-author-of-the-best-we-could-do-on-vietnamese-identity-and-bursting-92689349f113>
- Chi Vu, "The 1.5 Generation Vietnamese-American Writer as Post-Colonial Translator," *Kunapipi* 32.1 (2010): 130-146. Link to full text (PDF): <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1260&context=kunapipi>
- Ben Tran, "The Literary Dubbing of Confession", *PMLA*, March 2018. Link (must access via UO Library): <https://www.mlajournals.org/doi/abs/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.2.428>. Examines "literary dubbing" (a process of 'translation' in the writing process from characters' speech and thoughts in the plot's implied language to the language of the implied reader) via readings of Viet Thanh Nguyen's writing. For Tran, this is not an act of erasure, but a restorative act for Vietnamese people previously thought voiceless or error-ridden within an implicitly English-language frame. An English-language readership may not even notice this seemingly seamless linguistic transition (akin to "dubbing"); nevertheless, Tran calls attention to it as an active and strategic decision made by authors to build narrative voice.

A similar thing takes place in *The Best We Could Do*. We often cannot tell when the characters are speaking English or Vietnamese to each other, and can only guess based on the context. For example, it seems unlikely that the narrators' parents were speaking English to each other when they first met in Vietnam even though the text 'dubs' them into English. At the same time, Bui takes care to retain the diacritics in character names and addresses, and declines to translate French dialog in parts. See "Discussion Questions" below for questions related to Tran reading.

- Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Dislocation is My Location," *PMLA*, March 2018. Link (must access via UO Library): <https://www.mlajournals.org/doi/abs/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.2.428>. Nguyen reflects on language, code-switching, resistance to being an ethnic writer, and loss of place; despite being published in an academic journal, the writing is in a relatively accessible and personal register.

### Discussion Questions

- The narrator's two parents have considerably different relationships to the colonial French language as well as the Vietnamese language of their birth. Compare and contrast their two attitudes: see especially 146, 149. What is the effect of so clearly detailing the differences between them? What are the similarities and differences between the narrator and her parents as they relate to the Vietnamese language?
- Discussion question re. Tran's article (linked above): Do you agree with Tran's argument that "literary dubbing" may be a strategy to restore the voices of a minority within a majority language? Why and why not? What is the effect of having different translational strategies for the different languages of the familiar self, colonialism, adopted home, and imagined reader? Is it important what gets 'dubbed over' and what doesn't?
- As you read, consider where and how non-English text appear, either in Vietnamese, French, or Bahasa Melayu (the official language of Malaysia), with attention to whether they are translated.

Whose non-English speech is registered by words in the text—in Vietnamese or even French, and where in the narrative do they do so? Is there a narrative logic for these attributions?

For example: Upon arriving in Malaysia on their difficult boat journey, the narrator's family is warmly greeted by a man with whom they are mysteriously able to communicate. Their linguistic differences are represented only typographically (with conversation being placed in brackets: < >) and with a sudden shift into pidgin English (p. 257): we do not know what language they are speaking, or indeed if they are speaking at all. Shortly after, the girls encounter a smiling young boy whose words are registered in his untranslated Bahasa Melayu (the official language of Malaysia): "Apa nama? Boleh cakap bahasa Melayu?" (261) ['What is your name? Can you speak Malay?' - my translation.] In Bui's text, these words are vividly remembered and realized, yet untranslated into English either fluent or pidgin; the girls do not understand him, but are delighted when the kind boy presents two boxes of sweetened chrysanthemum tea to them. These two moments of kind hospitality in Malaysia—presented in a surprisingly complex interlace of comprehension and incomprehension, implied translation and untranslatedness—stand in contrast to the harsher receptions to come in the U.S., where English is the fluent norm adopted by the text, interrupted only by character names and, most significantly, the narrator speaking to her newborn child for the first time in a quiet, intimate, and translated Vietnamese (p. 314-315) bearing a great deal of emotional weight for the narrative.

- Consider the above textual questions in conjunction with recent reports of harassment and even arrests of people who speak Spanish in public in the U.S. Are you bilingual or multilingual? Have you had difficult experiences speaking a non-English language in public in the U.S.? Talk with your classmates: do your experiences vary depending on the languages you speak and know? (In the US, not all 'foreign languages' are equal - just as not all foreigners are equal.) What are the possible futures of multilingualism in the United States? [Consider too more concrete policies, such as Eugene's evolving bilingual English-Spanish signage for the EMX bus.]

**Activities:**

Have you ever seen any Vietnamese writing in Eugene, Portland, or other parts of Oregon with which you are familiar? Make a map of where you encounter such writing. Is there a specific pattern to where this writing typically appears? And if you have not seen any, do a little research online (Google etc.) to find out why this may be the case.

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**Depression and Mental Health: Intergenerational Suffering, Oppression, State Violence**

Content resource areas in this section include trans-generational trauma, racism and oppression, mental health, and stereotype threat.

A few moments in *The Best We Could Do* bravely depict moments of violence, terror, and anxiety on the part of its characters, and may invoke unpredictable reactions from readers of the novel. The following resources have been compiled for instructors who may wish to mediate difficult questions of how depression and mental health are bound up with intergenerational trauma and state violence through a supplementary reading or research-based findings. For example, you may want to apply such resources related to tricky plot points surrounding the father's terror, anxiety, abusive behavior, and the "refugee reflex" passed onto his children.

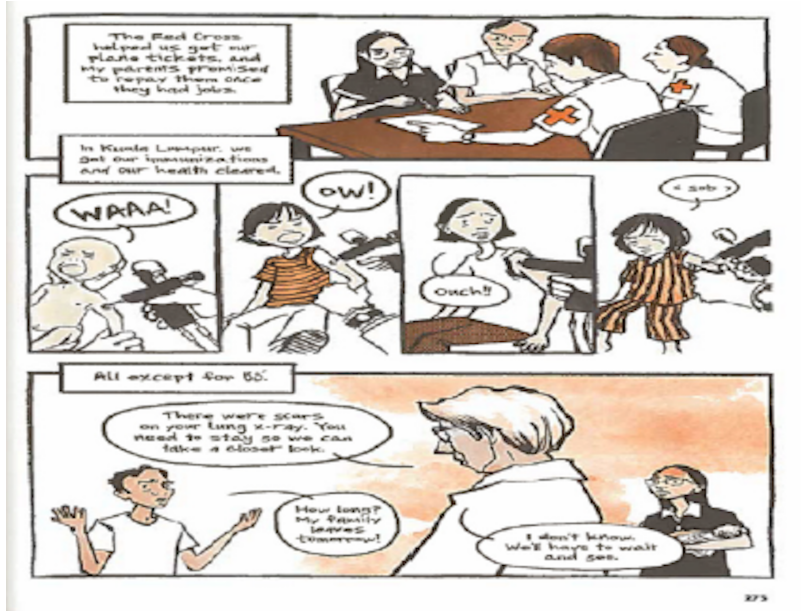
This complex and interdisciplinary topic would also be an excellent research project for motivated junior and senior undergraduate students in related disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, neuroscience, or literature.

## Resources

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). Ecological systems theory. *Annals of Child Development*, 6, 187-249.
- Bui, T. (2017). *The best we could do: An illustrated memoir*. New York: NY: Abrams ComicArts.
- Chronister, K. M., McWhirter, B. T., & Kerewsky, S. D. (2004). Prevention from an ecological framework. In R. K. Conyne & E. P. Cook (Eds.), *Ecological counseling: An innovative approach to conceptualizing personenvironment interaction* (pp. 315-338). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association Press.
- Gayle Y. Iwamasa, "Recommendations for the Treatment of Asian-American/Pacific Islander Populations". General overview of common issues culturally specific to Asian-American and Pacific Islander populations: examines issues such as trans-generational trauma, racism and oppression, and stereotype threat as non-biological determinants of mental health  
Link: <http://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/ethnicity-health/asian-american/psychological-treatment.aspx>
- Shervin Assari, "Social Determinants of Depression: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status" - <http://www.mdpi.com/2076-3425/7/12/156> (focus on white, Af-Am)
- David Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*, Duke 2019. Links depression and mental health issues to structural processes of racialization. Interdisciplinary approach: dual perspectives of literary theorist and clinical psychotherapist.
- Eng's and Han's older work, widely cited and offering the same concept/approach: "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia."  
Link (full PDF): <https://vanderbilt.edu/olli/class-materials/ADialogueOnRacialMelancholia.pdf>
- Video: *New Year Baby*. Socheata Poouv, <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newyearbaby/>
- For a contemporary turn: Stephanie deGooyer, "Why Trump's Denaturalization Task Force Matters" (*The Nation* article). Argues that the U.S. state has historically used fear as an anti-immigrant weapon; frames affects like anxiety and fear as outcomes of state violence. In the process, this source also provides a mini-history of U.S. immigration policy. Link: <https://www.thenation.com/article/trumps-denaturalization-task-force-matters/>

**Activities:**

**Some Notes on p. 275 from *The Best We Could Do*:**



Page 275 of *The Best We Could Do* is compelling because it is deceptive in a way that makes it a good tool for training interventionists and therapists – or this could be transposed to asking students to read literary text and subtext. The following examples and activities are drawn from the work of Shoshana Kerewsky (@kerewsky@uoregon.edu)

On the surface of the narrative on p. 275, there is straightforward exposition (e.g. the text or what happens in the scene). In Panel 1, we see the family interact with the Red Cross and obtains tickets. In the second panel section the children are immunized. And in Panel 3, Bó gets stressful medical news. There is a reasonable amount of words to read and the graphic illustration style is primarily outlines, with just a couple of exceptions. Readers may move through the page quickly and without reflection, especially because it ends on an alarming note that hastens the reader on to the next page. It may appear to be simply a transitional page that moves the story along. However, there is a great deal of additional information on this page.

This page can be used to illustrate several constructs and competencies used in direct service provision. Before further observations on this page, it's important to remind students that we are not "analyzing" or "diagnosing" the author or her family—rather, we are practicing applying techniques for understanding people and developing hypotheses using the memoir as an extended case example. Here are a few that jump out at me (Shoshana Kerewsky). They lead naturalistically into each other, suggesting a lesson plan that demonstrates a holistic approach to a brief encounter with or observation of a client family.

**Technique 1: Family kinetics** -- This refers to the placement and other aspects of family members in a role-played "sculpture" or a drawing. Kinetic Family Drawing is a projective assessment technique in which the person draws their family doing something. The drawing is examined and in some cases scored, and it may be used as the basis for a discussion about the person's perception of self and family in

relationship to each other. In non-clinical classes, students could draw and discuss a scene of their own family. These kinetic observations may help us explore a family's interactions.

**Kinetic Family Drawing Activity:** Page 275 could serve as an introduction to Kinetic Family Drawing administration and interpretation. To highlight the non-verbal information, you may want to make a copy of the page with the dialogue removed for the students. Then ask students to make observations about the proximity and locations of the figures as they are depicted in relationship to one another. Some examples that may be found include:

- In panel 1, Má and Bó are united. They are in proximity and engaged in the same task, in which they are united. This observation of a client's drawing of Bui's parents might lead to a discussion of how she perceives their general quality of interaction and engagement. Do they always present a united front? Only in the face of officials? Do they seem to have equal parental power and authority? Má is signing a document. Is this simply a moment in time, or is Má the parent who takes care of business? In a client drawing, we might ask if Bó can read and write.
- In panel 2, the 4 children are superficially engaged in the same activity. However, a closer look shows that although each finds the vaccination painful and responds verbally and physically, they are not equally affected. Moving from left to right, the response moves from more to less intense, with Thi apparently showing the most minimal response—her mouth is closed, and her speech balloon has no exclamation points, is in the smallest lettering, and is depicted as a non-verbal <sob> bracketed in carets to show action rather than language. The spectrum of responses is not associated with the children's ages. We might ask a client, do you see yourself as the most stoical? The most fatalistic or resigned? What does it mean to have the least response—is it a point of pride? An expression of helplessness? In this panel, the children are separated from each other. Does this reflect this experience in particular, or is it a more general representation of an aspect of their relationships? Where are their parents? We might ask the client to draw the scene again, including all family members who were present.
- Panel 3 returns to Má and Bó, again without most of the children. Does this represent an appropriate and well-functioning executive subsystem? Má and Bó are now physically and possibly emotionally divided, and Má is "out of the picture" as Bó receives bad medical news.

**Technique 2: The exosystem (ecological model)** – Briefly: family observations are characterized in Bronfenbrenner's (see resource list) ecological model of person-in-context as "microsystemic." On p. 275 of *The Best We Could Do*, the presence of medical personnel and issues alerts us to the importance of evaluating a person's or family's exosystem. The parents are a microsystem and the Red Cross representatives are another microsystem. They interact in ways that affect Thi, which is referred to as her "mesosystem." The Red Cross personnel also act as agents of the exosystem, which is the term for distal systems that act on a person, but which that person cannot influence directly. In this case, this includes:

- Access to migration opportunities, plane tickets, and immunizations
- Standards related to public health
- Potentially, standards for quarantine.

**Exosystem Activity A: 10 minutes. One Page. One level of Ecology.**

Building on the above context, ask students questions such as, “What do you see on this page (TBWCD, p. 275) that is exosystemic?” or “Identify what types of information are characterized as exosystemic.” (Reminder: these are factors that act on the person, but that the person cannot influence directly. Examples may include laws, policies, access to services, funding, or the media.) Ask them to annotate a copy of the page related to what they observe.

Now, the group can discuss their observations. For example, compare panel 1, where things are going smoothly, to panel 3, which introduces a significant obstacle. In panel 1, Má and Bõ are united, as we have noted, and are placed parallel to the Red Cross workers, who are about the same size as the parents and in a similar, parallel posture. In panel 3, Má and Bõ are separated by the doctor, whose focus is on Bõ, and who is in the foreground and therefore much larger. Many practicing professionals do not adequately assess client factors such as access to services, economic constraints, or laws and policies. An ecological examination of the page highlights the magnitude of these features of a client’s life and reminds us to ask about them.

Here is one way the page might look upon annotation:

**\* Red Cross personnel are a microsystem—they are agents of the exosystem!**

Access to plane tickets & future money

Access to Red Cross/ refugee personnel\* & services

U.S. immigration policies/laws?

U.S. entry health and disease policies/laws?

Notice how the artist shows **harmony** and **conflict** between the family and Red Cross microsystems

Literacy implies educational policies/laws in Viet Nam?

Literacy implies access to education?

Access to immunizations

Refugee camp health policies/laws?

Policies/laws associated with family separation

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**Exosystem Activity B:** Students may wish to role-play this professional-client encounter from this page in *The Best We Could Do*, first as depicted, then integrating professional intervention skills that increase rapport, check for understanding, and describe possible courses of action in a less frightening and less-distant manner.

**Exosystem Activity C:** Following the Activity A examining the exosystem represented on p. 275 of *The Best We Could Do*, students can identify their own risk and resilience factors in their personal exosystems. This set of observations could lead into a discussion about students' or clients' relationship to authority figures and legal gatekeepers. You can create an assignment associating this content to current, local practices such as U.S. TB prevalence in U.S.- and non-U.S.-born cases or current Oregon pertussis cases

**Technique 3: Collateral accounts** -- Collateral accounts are the stories told by other people who have relationships with the client. They are used to help contextualize the client's story, provide additional information, and sometimes to highlight different perspectives and interpretations. Collaterals in therapy may include parents, siblings, romantic partners, case workers, teachers, or others.

In *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui tells this story. She is the "index person" because collateral accounts would be focused on her. Students may speculate what the collaterals might say. Ask students to create responses visual or narrative based responses to the following prompts:

- How might one of Thi's sisters tell the story? What would she affirm or disconfirm about Thi's account?
- What would Má or Bố say? What would their focus be? Would they depict the situation similarly or differently?
- How would the Red Cross personnel or doctor convey the story?