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Truth and Perception in The Best We Could Do

In her graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui explores the multiple impacts of the Vietnam War through the unique storytelling method of the graphic novel. She explores her parents' and her own story as a way for her to repay and connect back to her parents. One such impact she explores is the representation and recollection of truth — both in the sense of an objective history, but also on a much more personal level. Bui tells her story of progression — from struggling to understand conflicting evidence to being able to relate to and even empathize with her parents — through themes including trauma and childbirth. In *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui refines her beliefs on the events of the Vietnam war and their personal impact on her. She compares the evidence commonly seen in American history against first hand stories inherited from her parents and relates them with her own experiences to understand how the long lasting effects of the war have impacted her perspective of her own life.

Just as in the well known phrase, "history is written by the victors", the most commonly known story of the Vietnam war is the one told from the American perspective, but Bui — knowing both sides — claims it to be incorrect. Bui finds herself confused at the inconsistencies in this official story with the one her parents told her as a kid. In a key scene in the book, Bui recalls common misconceptions and misrepresentations of her people in American propaganda: "Bad Guys: the Viet Cong (communist front in the South). The South Vietnamese: bar girls and hookers; corrupt leaders; kids looking for handouts; small, effete men; and papa-san" (207). The propaganda she mentions was very much from an American masculine point of view. It is also displayed in the style of a poster, converse to the style of the rest of her novel: containing larger titles and subtext without speech bubbles along with images arranged in a collage style all within a singular comic frame. This difference brings interest to the topic she discusses — and flies directly in the face of the entire story of regular life in South Vietnam that she has been telling prior

to this point. Her parents had been South Vietnamese at this point of the propaganda. The depiction of South Vietnamese women being "bar girls and hookers" was the complete reciprocal of her own mother carrying her in the womb during this time. Bui even states that these contradictions "troubled [her] for a long time", accompanied with multiple images of her character acting visually confused and frustrated (207). These misrepresentations are tied back into the story towards the end when she discusses the modern day misconceptions and struggles of refugees. Bui alludes to these minor struggles a little later in the scene, where a former general could be found "working behind the counter in a pizzeria" and how all of them are in "a state fallen from grace" (208). Bui makes it clear in this section that she dislikes the current misbeliefs on the objective facts of the Vietnam war.

Bui herself still has not come to a complete understanding of the situation at hand, much less the refugee experience as a whole. Simultaneously, she barely understands her own father's experience, confusing her further. Earlier on in the same scene as the propaganda, her father comments on the general in control of his town and the now famous *Saigon Execution* photo depicting the general pointing a gun at a Viet Minh fighter: "Treating their own people like criminals, no wonder people hated them!... You know, the American media broadcast that all over the world and made South Vietnam look bad, but no one talks about how that same Viet Cong, just hours before, had murdered an entire family in their home!" Bui responds once again with confusion: "Wait. Does he hate the general or is he defending him? Did he like communism or not?" (206). This scene highly contrasts her own confusion with *Saigon Execution*, drawing the powerful parallel of incomplete information both in herself and the image. Further on in the scene, she elaborates that Eddie Adams, the photographer of *Saigon Execution* was like her father: knowing "the context of the shooting. And that it was absent from the photograph itself" (208). These quotes are accompanied with her own depiction of the context behind the photograph. This missing context is a direct comparison to her own misunderstandings due to lack of information, and as an extent of that, the misunderstandings of refugees in general. As little as she understands herself and the entire refugee experience, external viewpoints know even less. Directly following, she enforces the misunderstanding of her people in general: "'Saigon Execution' is credited with turning popular opinion in

America against the war. I think a lot of Americans forget that for the Vietnamese...the war continued, whether America was involved or not" (209). Bui explains that the American public's understanding of the issue possesses significantly less information than even herself. Bui's conscious understanding that her confusion stems from a lack of information leads her to understand that this issue and history in general are not as polar as she had believed prior to hearing her father's story.

At the end of the passage, Bui finally ties her contemplations back into her own personal understanding and life. She states that "for my parents, there was a rocket that barely missed their house and killed a neighbor, best friends and students killed in combat, frequent periods of separation, the constant stress of money, the baby that died in the womb, and then my arrival, three months before South Vietnam lost the war" (209-210). The end of the section is definably distinct from the rest as it overlooks the scene as a whole. It narrows down her personal connection from the scale of countries, to neighborhoods, to family, and finally to herself. Prior to the end of the scene, she has already gone in depth on all the topics mentioned except for the lost baby and her own birth. This birth is significant in multiple ways: her physical link to the conflict — struggling there with her mother — and her own empathetic link to the situation through her own childbirth. Her empathetic link is emphasized by the structure of the book, both opening and closing with her in the process of having a child. However, now we gain a deeper understanding of her thought in the first chapter: "A wave of empathy for my mother washes over me" (22). An understanding both for her mother's pain and work in childbirth, but also her effort to just stay alive and keep her child safe through her own son. Bui having a connection point and shared experience with her mother allows for a reference point when understanding each other. With this newfound perspective, Bui is able to understand the drastic decisions, emotions, and mentalities her parents employed during life-changing times. Bui's own perspective, assessment, and understanding comes from a highly feminine source — the complete opposite to what is found in American propaganda. At this point, Bui is at rest and has formulated her own truth on the issue — one which is not nearly as polar as she initially imagined — through her own personal connection of childbirth.

Throughout *The Best We Could Do*, Bui grapples with the complex topic of her own relation to the Vietnam War and the task of understanding and repaying her parents. Inconsistencies stemming from many misrepresentations and erasures initially confuse her understanding, but over time, she moves from thinking the truth and her connection was one that was black and white, to now understanding the complexity and nuance the situation entailed. Ultimately, Bui's own childbirth demystifies the false simplicity and complex nuance surrounding the Vietnam War.

Works Cited

Bui, Thi. *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*. Abrams ComicArts, 2017.