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The Refugee Counter-Archive: Feminist Refugee Epistemology and Human Rights Aesthetics in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*

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Thi Bui's graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2018) intervenes in dominant visual and narrative regimes of refugee representation by constructing a refugee counter-archive—a feminist and affective practice of memory-making that reclaims narrative sovereignty from state, colonial, and humanitarian discourses. Drawing on feminist refugee epistemology (FRE) and developing the concept of human rights aesthetics (HRA), this article argues that Bui re-frames refugee subjectivity not through trauma, gratitude, or spectacle, but through agency, care, and everyday relational life. FRE, as theorized by the Critical Refugee Studies Collective, centers intimate modes of witnessing that foreground affect, domestic labor, and the textures of the everyday, while resisting masculinist and salvationist visualities. HRA, as articulated here, extends these commitments by identifying the visual and narrative strategies—such as non-spectacular framing, nonlinear temporality, tonal restraint, and symbolic motifs—through which Bui asserts the refugee's capacity to witness, act, and claim rights.

Through close readings of key visual sequences—particularly those involving archival ephemera (ID photos, document folders, family photographs) and gestures of care that sustain life in displacement—the article examines how *The Best We Could Do* transforms the graphic memoir into a site of refugee knowledge production and rights-claiming. The memoir's culminating concept of the "refugee reflex" encapsulates an embodied historical consciousness inherited across generations: a mode of vigilance and care that reconfigures displacement as ethical and relational rather than merely traumatic. By re-inscribing refugee life within an aesthetic of human rights grounded in the everyday, Bui envisions a futurity shaped not by victimhood or assimilation, but by memory, dignity, and the right to imagine otherwise.

Keywords: feminist refugee epistemology, human rights aesthetics, graphic memoir, refugee subjectivity, narrative sovereignty

Introduction

In an era of proliferating displacement and militarized borders, cultural narratives about refugees—circulated through literature, media, visual culture, institutional and public discourse—fall into familiar tropes: the spectacle of suffering, the trauma of loss, or the redemptive arc of gratitude. Critical refugee literature that has emerged in the recent decades, according to Hadji Bakara, is "[no] longer bound to representing the traumatic events that legitimate claims to asylum," and "works instead to participate in the creation

of diverse political futures, for refugees and citizens alike" (290). As Claire Gallien puts it, such literature:

> is not (only) a literature of despair that dwells on the moral hypocrisy of the west. Nor is it only a form of testimonial literature depicting traumatic events and an urgent intervention to respond to a fictional "crisis". In other words, its temporality reaches beyond the past, nostalgia, and trauma, but also beyond the present and its many urgencies. It is a literature where seminal experimentations with forms, genres, languages, and national literary constructions occur… (725)

These interventions shift attention toward refugee agency, epistemology, and imagination. Thi Bui's graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2018; *TBWCD* hereafter) exemplifies this shift through its formal use of the comics medium to re-frame refugee subjectivity by centering refugees as rights-bearing knowledge producers. *TBWCD* reconstructs the familial history of the Buis as deeply entangled in the broader histories of colonization, imperialism, and the Vietnam War[1]. In doing so, Bui offers a feminist retelling of history "in a way that is human and relatable and not oversimplified" (Preface). The multimodal form of the graphic narrative enables a Vietnamese-centered, multilayered exploration of war, displacement, intergenerational trauma, and memory in an affectively concrete manner. The interplay of image and text, shifting panel layouts, and recurring visual motifs allows Bui to stage nonlinear memory, render affective gaps, and highlight everyday objects, ephemera, and gestures as repositories of trauma and care.

TBWCD has received significant scholarly attention for its narrative innovation and political stakes. Critics have examined the memoir through multiple lenses, ranging from decolonization and refugee historiography to feminist life writing and affect theory. Patricia Chu foregrounds its role in deimperializing Cold War memory. Mike Classon Frangos emphasizes its feminist commitments, particularly through embodiment and maternal inheritance. Sally McWilliams highlights the memoir's emotional textures—grief, silence, longing—as registers of refugee epistemology. Stella Oh reads *TBWCD* as a graphic archive of memory that foregrounds trauma, affect, and the female body as sites of historical recovery, while Candida Rifkind situates the text within a corpus of second-generation refugee comics that visualize intergenerational displacement through multimodal temporality and critical memory. Drawing on Yến Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong's "feminist refugee epistemology" (FRE hereafter), Rifkind frames Leila Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi*—and by extension, *TBWCD*— as an "intergenerational auto/biography of refugeetude" (200; italics original). Yet while both Oh and Rifkind illuminate the memoir's aesthetic and affective politics, neither theorizes its formal strategies through an explicit lens of FRE or human rights. Building on their insights, I argue

[1] I use the term Vietnam War to preserve the tension it carries between US- and Vietnamese-centered narratives. As Viet Thanh Nguyen, Christina Schwenkel, and Yến Lê Espiritu (Body Counts) note, the terminology itself is ethically and politically charged as it reflects asymmetries in memory, representation, and accountability. My use of Vietnam War thus signals awareness of this debate while retaining the term's contested resonance.

that *TBWCD* transforms the graphic memoir into a site of narrative sovereignty and human rights claim-making—a refugee counter-archive that challenges dominant historical narratives and visual regimes by asserting a right to narrate and claim personhood. To this end, I employ the frameworks of FRE and what I term as "human rights aesthetics" (HRA hereafter) to interpret the memoir as an act of refugee knowledge production.

Feminist Refugee Epistemology and Human Rights Aesthetics

FRE, as theorized by the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (2022; CRSC hereafter), offers a methodological and political framework that re-centers refugee experience as a site of knowledge production. It departs from what the CRSC calls "the asymmetrical representational apparatus that renders refugees hypervisible and invisible, erasing their humanity, heterogeneity, and agency" (22), insisting on narrative and visual practices that honor the complexity of refugee lifeworlds. FRE foregrounds modes of witnessing that attend to "private grief and public commemoration," privilege "unsaid things" and "feelings and emotions," and trace "hidden political forces within the site of intimate domestic and familial interaction" (23). Rather than reiterating the spectacular or iconic imagery often constructed for Western consumption—imagery that the CRSC critiques as "masculinist" and "salvationist" (125)—FRE turns inward, toward "more private moments of grief, interiority, and reflection" (112), and toward the affective textures of everyday life. It "reconceptualizes time and space not as natural and fixed but as materially and discursively produced—*and* unsettled and remade—by refugees" (126), resisting representations that flatten refugee life into victimhood. FRE instead takes seriously the "joy and survival practices that play out in the domain of the everyday" alongside "broken trajectories" and loss (23–24).

In dialogue with FRE, I develop the concept of HRA—a representational mode that re-frames refugee subjectivity not through trauma or gratitude, but through agency, historical complexity, and human rights claim-making. It encompasses visual and narrative strategies—tonal washes, expressive linework, symbolic motifs, and non-spectacular framing—that assert the political agency of refugee subjects while resisting the "industrialization of memory" (Viet Thanh Nguyen 23) which enables US control over Vietnam War narratives. While FRE offers an epistemic orientation grounded in relational witnessing and the everyday, HRA articulates the representational logic animating these commitments. Like FRE, it resists dominant humanitarian discourses that frame refugees primarily through trauma or redemptive gratitude. As Dominic Davies and Rifkind argue, contemporary media and visual culture often reproduce a spectacular humanitarian gaze that alternates between massifying refugee bodies as indistinguishable crowds and sentimentalizing them as individualized faces of suffering. Both modes, as they note, depoliticize refugee life by transforming structural questions of justice and accountability into moral emotions such as empathy or generosity (17). HRA, by contrast, insists on the refugee's capacity to witness, act, and claim rights. It critiques not only humanitarian visuality but also strands of human rights scholarship that, despite their ethical intent, re-

inscribe the spectacle of suffering as the privileged site of recognition. For instance, Pramod K. Nayar situates the human rights graphic novel within an affective-visual framework where suffering and empathy are central to ethical recognition—a model I draw from but also question for its reliance on liberal-humanist modes of feeling and visibility, which reproduce structural hierarchies of who can be seen and felt for.

HRA foregrounds the political act of memory as forms of resistance, rights-claiming, and narrative sovereignty, a term articulated by Anishinaabe writer, film critic, and broadcaster Jesse Wente as "the idea that people, communities, and nations should control their own stories and the tools used in that storytelling" (157). I adapt this concept from its original articulation in Indigenous media critique to the context of refugee self-representation, where it names the right and capacity of marginalized subjects to tell their own stories and reclaim interpretive authority from state, colonial, or humanitarian discourses. In this sense, narrative sovereignty is both an aesthetic and political act of self-determination. Drawing from the CRSC's assertion that "refugee rights are human rights" (9), HRA re-frames the refugee as a rights-bearing and history-making figure. In *TBWCD*, Bui's practice of narrative sovereignty lies in reclaiming the refugee story through formal strategies such as non-spectacular framing, nonlinear temporality, and the rendering of caregiving, domestic labor, and archival detail (ID cards, official documents, photographs) as visual sites of meaning. These recurring elements, within what Dominic Davies and Rifkind describe as the "recursive chronotope of refugee comics" (10), form a refugee counter-archive—a visual grammar through which Bui asserts narrative sovereignty, dignity, and memory on her own terms.

An illustrative moment occurs when Bui returns to her childhood home in Saigon (178–183). As Chu notes, this episode re-orients the conventions of the "roots" narrative by foregrounding Bui's mediated and fragmented relationship to the past (496–497). Unable to remember the house, Bui reconstructs it through her father's sketch, oral anecdotes, and documentary research—assemblage that aligns with what Frangos describes as the postmemory subject's reliance on imaginative and archival modes of reconstruction (60). The panels depict Bui asking her father to draw the house, sifting through family recollections, and taking photographs, culminating in her declaration, "Lacking memories of my own, I do research" (182). Rendering her memory as partial and collaborative, Bui resists nostalgia and instantiates HRA. As a 1.5 generation refugee, Bui occupies a liminal position between memory and postmemory, between lived experience and inherited history. The term "1.5 generation" (1167), coined by Rubén G. Rumbaut, refers to individuals who migrate as young children and grow up balancing cultural and linguistic fluencies from both their country of origin and their country of resettlement; Bui migrated from Vietnam to the United States at the age of three. Marianne Hirsch defines "postmemory" (5) as the relationship of the second generation to traumatic histories they do not directly remember but inherit through mediated storytelling, affective transmission, and familial silence. Situated at the intersection of these two frameworks, Bui employs a 1.5 generation and postmemory-inflected narrative

voice and perspective that is simultaneously proximate to and distanced from the originary trauma. This positionality shapes her approach to narration and form: she is both participant and researcher, witness and archivist. Her act of illustrating and composing *TBWCD* transforms inherited trauma into a conscious act of reconstruction, enacting *a refugee counter-archival practice* that asserts her generation's interpretive authority over refugee memory.

In this way, HRA shares FRE's commitment to affect, care, and the everyday, but sharpens that focus through the formal and symbolic strategies that re-shape how refugee lives are seen, remembered, and historicized. This aesthetic intervention also resists the dominant powers' control over memory and history that Nguyen critiques, foregrounding instead what he calls "just memory"—a form of remembering rooted "in collectivity and community, in struggle and solidarity," attentive to "the weak, the subjugated, the different, the enemy, and the forgotten" (22–23). Bui's formal choices not only re-center erased refugee subjectivities but also disrupt what Nguyen calls "the American industry of memory" (128), the cultural apparatus through which the US aestheticizes and sanitizes its wars, sustaining imperial innocence. This aligns with Judith Butler's critique of the visual frame as a "received rendition of reality" that regulates affect and forecloses alternative ways of seeing (12). Rejecting tropes of rescue, pity, or triumph, Bui's HRA opens space for complex refugee personhoods—lives and losses historicized not through nationalist myth but through embodied memory, relational witnessing, and narrative sovereignty.

Comics-Medium and the Refugee Counter-Archive

Comics as Counter-Archival Practice

In *TBWCD*, Bui constructs a refugee counter-archive: a formally embedded, aesthetic, and affective practice of memory-making that challenges dominant historical narratives and visual regimes. It reclaims narrative sovereignty through the intergenerational labor of remembering, re-drawing, and re-narrating displaced histories. Naming *TBWCD* a *refugee counter-archive* signals more than an alternative mode of record-keeping; it names a feminist intervention in *how* refugee histories are remembered and visualized. The term foregrounds Bui's challenge to masculinist and state-supremacist modalities of storytelling that privilege monumental histories over the affective, domestic, and everyday labors of women and caregivers. Structuring the memoir through multiple births, Bui centers reproductive labor and maternal memory as narrative frames. The refugee counter-archive resists the institutional logics of preservation, hierarchy, and authority that have long defined the traditional archive—a space, as Jacques Derrida and Michel-Rolph Trouillot argue, shaped as much by power as by memory (qtd. in CRSC 137). Rather than reproducing what Trouillot calls the silences of official record-keeping, Bui's counter-archive is composed of ephemeral materials—ID cards, photographs, caregiving gestures, domestic objects—that might not traditionally be preserved yet

serve as dense sites of meaning. Here, "ephemeral" does not mean immaterial; these are material artifacts whose significance lies in their fragility and contingency—documents and gestures that persist precisely through their vulnerability to loss or re-interpretation. These archival fragments operate as records of experience, and as tools for re-narrating the past from the vantage point of the displaced.

The CRSC offers a framework for understanding such practices. In *Departures*, they theorize the "refugee archive" as a disruption of the institutional archive's structures of exclusion and containment. Unlike state-sanctioned collections that "revivify the power of those in the archive and silence those who are absent from it," refugee archives are made by refugees themselves, decentering privilege, authority, and access (137). As Ma Vang writes, they capture a "history on the run," preserving the material, spiritual, and emotional dimensions of forced displacement without flattening loss into legibility (qtd. in CRSC 137). Bui's memoir embodies refugee epistemology by reclaiming narrative authority through memory's affective and embodied forms. Ann Cvetkovich's notion of an "archive of feelings" is equally instructive for understanding how personal and political affect converge in refugee narratives. For Cvetkovich, the archive includes "repositories of feelings and emotions" not only in content but also in production and reception (*An Archive* 7). Bui's memoir participates in this re-definition of the archive through the grammar of comics. In doing so, she not only narrates refugee memory but visualizes how memory itself is shaped, silenced, or sanctioned.

Across *TBWCD*'s panels and page layouts, the act of looking becomes interpretive and affective. The gutter space, as Hillary Chute observes, is "where readers project causality from frame to frame" (*Disaster Drawn* 16), which is what makes comics so powerful for representing the unseen or the unspoken. Chute further notes that comics "literalizes on the page the work of framing and making, and also what framing excludes" (17). Unlike dominant framing mechanisms that regulate perception and memory, the comics form invites multiplicity, simultaneity, and ambiguity. As Butler argues, such framing mechanisms operate by "selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality" (*Frames of War* xiii) and "regulating affective and ethical dispositions" (1). Through a feminist re-imagining of the graphic memoir, Bui mobilizes its visual-verbal grammar to resist the frames that sustain US-centric cultural memory of the Vietnam War. As Harriet Earle notes, this memory has undergone "an intricate and ongoing process of US-centric mythogenesis, in which the US military appears victorious" (88). Bui's formal choices, such as her manipulation of layout, tone, and perspective, offer not just counter-narratives but counter-framings that disrupt these hegemonic constructions.

The Vietnam War and its aftermath shape Bui's family's sense of belonging and subjectivity. She maps this entangled history by juxtaposing panels depicting familial experiences with larger geopolitical events. For instance, Bich's (Bui's sister) birth is positioned alongside the Tet Offensive (fig. 1). The large panel that depicts "the fighting [that] raged on outside" (49) conveys how the war's spectacular violence overwhelms private life and obscures the vulnerability of the displaced. The scale difference between

the child's cry ("WAA!") and the explosion ("BOOM") starkly visualizes this dynamic: the intimate sound of distress is drowned out by the machinery of war. Yet, the panel resists flattening the family into passive victims. Hang's (Bui's mother) face, drawn in soft lines, is turned towards the baby she cradles, offering a moment of relational care amidst chaos. In the background, Nam (Bui's father) and Bui's grandfather are shown from behind and hunched around a radio. Their bodies are indistinct, not because they are erased, but because their presence is part of a quiet, persistent survival. The panel does not center them as heroic figures or helpless victims but simply marks them as living, listening, holding on. This is what FRE in Bui offers: a way of seeing refugee life as active, relational, and sustained through care. This moment also exemplifies HRA as it registers affect not through graphic trauma but through visual dissonance, tonal restraint, and embodied witnessing.

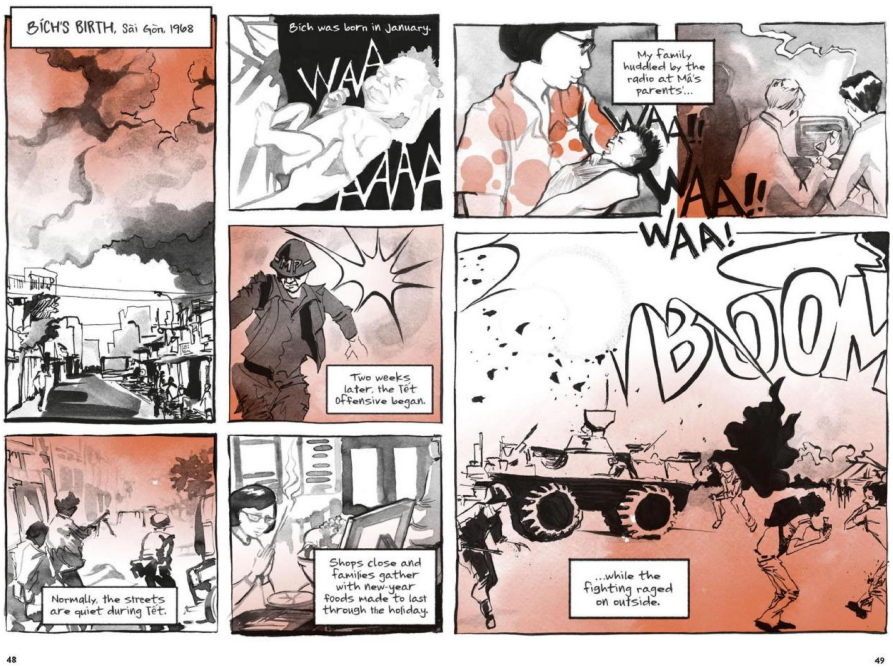

Fig. 1: Tet Offensive (*TBWCD* 48-49).

The layout, layering domestic and military time, resists linear narration and collapses personal and political histories into a shared visual space. As an archival fragment, the panel preserves what dominant accounts would render invisible: that life continues even amidst rupture.

Through such visual and narrative strategies, Bui builds a refugee counter-archive grounded in the everyday and attuned to affect. In her hands, the graphic memoir becomes not merely illustrative but archival—re-constituting memory panel by panel, fragment by fragment. The following sections examine three key components of this counter-archive: (1) archival ephemera; (2) gestures of care; and (3) the "refugee reflex."

Archival Ephemera: ID Photos, Document Folders, and Photographs

In *TBWCD*, documents and photographs function not as stable records of identity or state recognition but as fragments of an affective, precarious archive. Scattered across the memoir, ID photos, official documents, and paper folders index displacement, surveillance, and fractured memory. These are, as Shalini Deepa Srinivasan writes of "biographical objects" in Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde*, "invested with emotional and cultural values" and capable of "perform[ing] history and space" by marking the body and the world as entwined sites of memory and loss (56, 61). Bui frames them with white space, enlarging them across panels, or layering them with handwriting to signal their double function: remnants of institutional power and materials for refugee self-narration. Drawing on Janet Hoskins, Srinivasan observes that such objects are memory containers that "hold certain things inside," indexing both presence and loss (59).

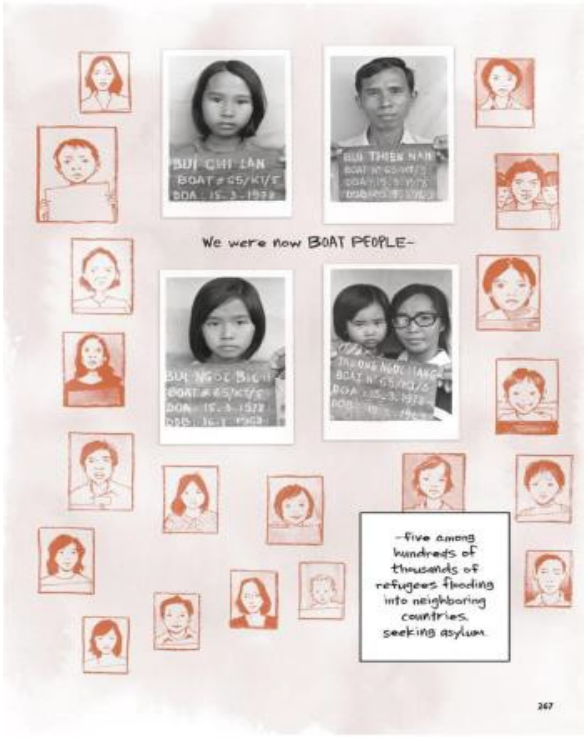

Fig. 2: The ID Photos taken at Pulau Besar Camp (*TBWCD* 267).

Bui's ID photographs thus function not only as bureaucratic artifacts but also as embodied signs of survival, anchoring refugee life in visual form. The page declaring "we were now BOAT PEOPLE" (fig. 2), accompanied by official UNHCR photos of Bui's family, crystallizes this tension. As Frangos notes, the refugee identity is codified through the bureaucratic asylum process (61). Bui juxtaposes her family's scanned photos with hand-drawn portraits of anonymous refugees, revealing how refugee subjectivity is constructed through multiple gazes. These ID photos—unillustrated and documentary against the

memoir's otherwise drawn texture—bear the weight of both the state's gaze, which registers the refugee as data for regulation, and the humanitarian gaze, which frames refugee suffering as a site of empathy and rescue. As McWilliams argues, they act as instruments of surveillance that recode Vietnamese bodies as racialized, displaced subjects "in transit" (335), caught between the state's classificatory gaze and the humanitarian gaze that renders refugees legible through suffering. Bui's composition interrupts both. By placing the ID photos beside drawn portraits, she transforms these bureaucratic images into dialogic sites of recognition and self-narration. This formal juxtaposition foregrounds the instability of the "documentary," revealing how images that purport to record truth are shaped by power, and reclaims the visual field for the refugee's own look. The photos thus become fragments of a refugee counter-archive that assert presence, agency, and complexity. They illustrate both HRA and FRE, resisting the surveillance of the state, the sentimentality of humanitarianism, and the flattening of Vietnamese refugee life into a political spectacle.

Fig. 3. Important Documents Folder (*TBWCD* 297).

A similarly resonant object is the brown folder labeled "IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS" (fig. 3), introduced as "our most important possession," containing birth certificates, green cards, report cards, and a class photo (297). The layout emphasizes not just the folder's materiality and ordinariness but also its gravity: it is unassuming, yet it carries the

bureaucratic and affective traces of a life built amid displacement. Bui isolates the folder visually, outlines it in stark black and brown ink, and surrounds it with neatly arranged diagrams of its contents. These formal choices elevate it beyond a functional container. As Oh argues, this folder serves as a site of "knowledge production" (84)—a hybrid archive blending state documentation with familial labor and the everyday efforts of belonging. The inclusion of a "Citizen of the Month" certificate alongside green cards and notarized birth records collapses the hierarchy between institutional recognition and affective self-making. From an FRE perspective, the folder foregrounds the everyday work of archiving refugee life. It does not monumentalize trauma or seek empathy through spectacle but stages a quiet assertion of memory, dignity, and the right to exist. Its framing affirms Bui's broader HRA: resisting the abstraction of refugee life under the state's bureaucratic gaze and asserting a self-documenting gaze that restores intimacy, care, and agency through the labor of record-keeping. This minor archive asserts that collecting and preserving lived details (report cards, awards, school photos) are themselves acts of survival and self-determination, making the folder a site of narrative sovereignty.

Fig. 4. Hand drawn image of Hang as a young girl (*TBWCD* 135).

The final image in this sequence—a hand-drawn reproduction of a family photograph of Bui's mother, Hang (Má), as a young girl (fig. 4)—offers another dimension to Bui's counter-archive. Unlike the scanned ID photos, this image is mediated through Bui's drawing and situated within a scene of memory and affect: a young Bui holding a photograph of her mother, gazing at a life and a history she can access only through imagination. As Martin notes, such moments are animated by what Marianne Hirsch calls *postmemory*, a mediated and affective relationship to the past "through an imaginative investment and creation" (Hirsch 22). Bui does not simply reproduce the photograph; she illustrates both the image and the act of remembering it, foregrounding the child's desire to understand her mother as a person with a history. This rendering instantiates HRA by insisting that refugee subjectivity is not exhausted by displacement. Hang appears in the photograph not as a victim or refugee but as "someone [Thi Bui] wanted to be as a little girl… a princess in a home far more beautiful than mine… in a country more ancient and romantic than the one I knew" (135). Bui stages this encounter without sentimentality, holding the dissonance between memory and postmemory, recognition and estrangement, loss and beauty. She also undercuts the dominant stereotype of refugees as figures always in crisis, offering instead a portrait of Hang that foregrounds joy and aspiration by refusing to collapse refugee identity into suffering. When reading the memoir from an FRE perspective, it becomes clear that this moment reclaims the refugee through the right to complexity rather than trauma or legal legibility. Bui's re-drawing transforms the photo into an intergenerational act of recognition: a 1.5 generation engagement with the past that affirms Hang's dignity while revealing Bui's own layered subjectivity. In presenting the photograph as a site of layered memory and intergenerational witnessing, Bui insists that recognition must also account for care, aspiration, and relational depth, thus representing both FRE's insistence on the everyday and personal, and HRA's politics of narrative sovereignty.

Gestures of Care: Affective Archives of the Everyday

In *TBWCD*, Bui constructs her refugee counter-archive through quiet, sustaining gestures that form the texture of everyday life in displacement. These gestures—steering a boat, pointing out familiar faces, cooking a meal, holding a gaze—are rendered with visual precision and emotional weight. They exemplify FRE's investment in domestic, embodied, and affective knowledge, treating care as political rather than sentimental. This is illustrated vividly during the family's boat escape, a liminal journey marked by danger and uncertainty. The sequence (233–255) departs from the memoir's typical page design: gutters are rendered as thick black bars rather than open white space. This formal choice flattens temporality and intensifies affect, suggesting not forward movement but suspended time—a manifestation of what Jesper Bjarnesen and Henrik Vigh describe as the simultaneous experience of displacement and emplacement. Within this disorienting visual grammar, Bui's father, Nam (Bố), learning to pilot the boat that carries his family and members of their community from Vietnam to Malaysia, becomes a site of care and

narrative anchoring. He takes control of the vessel, navigates through the night, and receives a quiet acknowledgement: "You're a quick study, Nam" (240). It is a moment of calm resolve rather than heroism.

Bui places the boat sequence *after* the chapters depicting Nam's life in the US, reversing chronology to re-frame his care and competence. This structural choice challenges the expectation that refugee stories must progress toward redemption or assimilation. Earlier, Nam is shown struggling to fulfill his roles as father and provider amid the dislocations of exile. The non-recognition of his teaching credentials and racial violence in the US forces him into housebound isolation and depression. Rather than presenting his domestic withdrawal as emasculation, Bui situates it within systemic racism that renders refugee men powerless. Nam's alienation forms *a counter-archive of failure*—not moral or personal failure, but a refusal to conform to the model of the "grateful refugee" or "model minority." Seen in this light, the placement of the boat scenes after Nam's US struggles re-frames him as an agentic figure whose care was once active and political, before being eroded by displacement. Through this temporal reversal, Bui refuses to let racism define Nam's subjectivity and retroactively restores Nam's agency and dignity. Yet this restoration is ambiguous: the everyday that embodies care and agency aboard the boat becomes, in the US, a site of both endurance and depletion under systemic racism.

Nam's gesture also resists the "crisis model" of refugee representation that Yên Lê Espiritu critiques, where refugees are constructed as immobilized, tragic figures, recognizable only through pain (411). Instead, his action embodies what Bjarnesen and Vigh describe as a "position of relational worth" (13), a form of emplacement grounded in care and capability. Nam's presence, rendered in still frames amid the chaos of flight, insists that dignity is conferred through small acts of attentiveness and competence. He is not heroic in the conventional sense, but his navigation becomes a form of relational care which insists that survival is collective, not individual. This aesthetic and narrative approach exemplifies HRA. In this sense, Nam's steering is not only a means of escape but an act of witnessing, responsibility, and visual resistance to dehumanizing frames. His care is political, and his agency is seen in his capacity to act meaningfully in precarious conditions. This is underscored in the full-page spread across pages 248–249, where Nam steadies his seasick body by fixing his eyes on the Belt of Orion. The composition, rendered in deep black and copper hues, offers a moment of pause amid the temporal compression of the journey. Nam's profile is drawn with calm attentiveness; the stars above, glowing against the night sea, represent not only a navigational tool but a visual metaphor for resolve. The absence of text amplifies its affective resonance. In this quiet scene, care is not verbalized but felt. This moment illustrates both FRE and HRA. It affirms that the refugee's subjectivity is constituted not merely through survival or trauma, but through the capacity to orient oneself in relation to others. Nam is rendered as a complex, desiring subject whose care for others constitutes a form of political and ethical life. Thus, the visual grammar of Bui's narrative insists that rights are not granted by the

state but are enacted daily in acts of care, resolve, and relational attentiveness. By embedding such gestures in a visual field shaped by loss, temporality, and migration, Bui re-frames refugee life not as a rupture to be overcome, but as a terrain of endurance, presence, and claim-making. Through Nam's steady hand on the motor and eyes on the stars, we glimpse the aesthetic of human rights rooted in the everyday.

If Nam's gesture of steering the boat marks a quiet assertion of responsibility within precarity, Hang's actions in the Malaysian refugee camp demonstrate how care work, relational presence, and domestic labor can become foundational acts of emplacement. On pages 265–66, Hang returns to her family from the camp hospital. The emotional texture of this reunion is clear: the children run to her, calling "Má!" with evident joy, and she responds with outstretched arms and a steady voice, "My girls!" (265). The affective arc of these pages establishes Hang as a figure of comfort and grounding. The visual composition reinforces this: where previous panels are fragmented and mobile, the panel in which Hang stands barefoot and visibly pregnant, with her arms extended and her daughters clustered around her, offers a moment of affective cohesion. Visually, this is represented through the organization of the family's new space constituting a larger tent, cooking supplies, and a domestic arrangement that implies safety and continuity. These panels do not dramatize Hang's actions, but they recognize them as restoring affective balance in a displaced setting—she secures food, shelter, and warmth, not just for survival, but for a life in process. Her resourcefulness in enlarging the family's living space and making the children feel safe marks her as an active agent of care and survival. From an FRE perspective, it foregrounds the often-unseen labor of mothers and caregivers in contexts of displacement. Her gestures of securing cooking supplies, preparing food, and gathering her children are not framed as heroic, but they are indispensable. The tenderness with which Bui draws these scenes —the calm tone, soft palette, unhurried sequencing—refuses the crisis-driven portrayal of refugee life as chaos or despair. Instead, these pages assert that care is a form of knowledge and survival that cannot be separated from the conditions of displacement. Hang's presence also disrupts humanitarian visualities that frame refugee women as helpless or in need of rescue. She appears capable and composed, navigating institutions and domestic space alike. Her being barefoot—a state that might invite pity—signals quiet strength rather than vulnerability. This rendering aligns with HRA, centering refugee dignity and personhood without spectacle. By depicting Hang's labor as foundational to the family's stability, Bui expands the idea of human rights beyond legal recognition to encompass the capacity to care, create meaning, and sustain belonging. Hang's gestures, like Nam's, become part of Bui's affective refugee counter-archive.

Conclusion: The Refugee Reflex as Embodied Historical Consciousness and Futurity

Bui narrates a childhood moment during a house fire that crystallizes what she terms her "refugee reflex." When the fire breaks out in the apartment building, the fourteen-year-old Bui does not panic. Instead, "a switch flipped in [her] brain" (303), and she moves into action: grabbing the "IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS" folder, helping a neighbor, and evacuating calmly and efficiently. Rendered in a series of quiet, deliberate panels, this moment captures the affective and historical sensibility that will, by the memoir's end, evolve into a vision of care and refugee futurity. Bui writes, "This—not any particular piece of Vietnamese culture—is my inheritance: the inexplicable need and extraordinary ability to RUN when the shit hits the fan" (305). Her closing declaration resists cultural essentialism and instead locates her inheritance in an embodied historical consciousness—an instinct honed through displacement, precarity, and relational survival. At this stage, the refugee reflex functions as a form of embodied vigilance, attuned to danger and survival, grounding the intergenerational transmission of care that the memoir later re-imagines through the 1.5 generation's perspective.

These panels visually and narratively instantiate the core commitments of FRE and HRA. Bui's reflexive actions are not heroic, nor are they dramatized through spectacle. Instead, they are rendered with restraint and precision. The panel layout emphasizes clarity and control, guiding the reader through the narrator's focused response. By framing the child's instinctive retrieval of the document folder, Bui recasts survival as not only a physical act, but a historically embedded and affectively charged one. The gesture becomes both a material and symbolic preservation of self, family, and memory, an instinct encoded through generations of dislocation. The splash panel on page 305 literalizes this inheritance. The room, awash in smoke, is overlaid with the soft, almost surreal image of a paper boat floating through it—a recurring motif in the memoir. This symbolic convergence of domestic space, water, and flight evokes the layered histories of migration that shape Bui's life. By juxtaposing images of fire and flood, home and departure, Bui collapses time into a single frame, visually asserting what she earlier calls "an inexplicable need to run." The refugee reflex, however, is not a singular event but a mode of being that registers the cumulative weight of intergenerational trauma, embodied resilience, and affective inheritance.

In the final pages of the memoir (328-329), the refugee reflex comes full circle. The closing scene centers on Bui's son wading freely in the ocean, transforming a reflex once defined by vigilance into one shaped by memory and care. Mediated through the 1.5 generation's gaze, the sea that once signified peril becomes a space of openness and continuity. This generational shift signals that the inheritance of displacement is not fixed in trauma but re-oriented towards care, connection, and freedom. The refugee reflex becomes an embodied awareness—an attunement to vulnerability and love that anchors, rather than unsettles, future life. Through this gesture towards futurity, Bui fulfills

the memoir's ethical arc and extends the horizon of HRA by establishing that the refugee is neither abject nor triumphant, but always becoming—historically situated, relationally grounded, and aesthetically re-imagined. In this way, *TBWCD* constructs a visual and affective grammar through which refugee life becomes a site of knowledge, care, and rights. Across its archive of everyday gestures—the retrieval of a folder, the gaze fixed on the stars, the calm presence of a mother, the turn toward the future—Bui assembles a counter-archive of refugee life as a sustained insistence on narrative sovereignty that asserts the right to act, remember, remain, and imagine.

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