

# Unfinished Processes: Acting out Trauma and Working through Postmemory

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in English

Department of English and Humanities  
BRAC University  
April 2020

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## **Declaration**

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

**Student's Full Name & Signature:**

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## **Approval**

The thesis titled “Unfinished Processes: Acting out Trauma and Working through Postmemory” submitted by Jahin Kaiissar (16203004) of Spring, 2020 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English on April 10, 2020.

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## Abstract

This thesis expands on the concepts of trauma and postmemory portrayed in the graphic memoirs *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui. Both memoirs constitute an intimately evocative family story, suspended on the unyielding frame of history, the way the intricately patterned webs of a dreamcatcher are suspended on its solid outer hoop. Unlike the good dreams sliding down the webs and feathers of a dreamcatcher, only the nightmarish trauma slides down the blood-stained frame of history. The enduring effects of trauma on the survivors of war and their children link the past and the present. Survivors of trauma deal with the lifelong effects of their traumatic experiences, leading them to act out their trauma. When the survivors' traumatic memories are passed down to their children in the form of postmemories, the second generation attempt to work through their postmemories. Spiegelman and Bui, second generation writers and cartoonists, reconstruct their parents' memories and present devastating historical events in the postmodern space of graphic memoirs to work through their postmemories and understand their lives shaped by memories that are not their own. This thesis includes textual and visual analysis of both graphic memoirs to understand the effects of trauma on the survivor generation, the transmission of traumatic memories from the survivors to their children, and the effects of postmemory on the second generation.

**Keywords:** trauma; traumatic memory; postmemory; acting out; working through; postmodern

## **Acknowledgement**

It has been difficult not to get too jaded over the course of writing this thesis. However, with the unconditional support and guidance of many people, I was able to dream up, map out, write, and revise this thesis. First and foremost, I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Abu Sayeed Mohammad Noman. This thesis would not have been possible without his insightful feedback and invaluable suggestions. I would also like to acknowledge all the faculties in the Department of English and Humanities for inspiring me to be not only a better thinker and a writer but also a better person. Furthermore, I struggle to find the right words to express my appreciation towards my amazing friends, both near and far, who motivated me with their infinite pep talks and who was always there for me at my most insecure moments. Last but not least, a heartfelt thanks goes to my family – my parents, Md Kaiissar Mannoor and Mst. Dilara Begum, and my brother, Akeel Ryan Mannoor – for their unwavering love.

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Above all, dear sir, I had in mind  
A marvelous book that would have  
Revealed innumerable secrets,  
Alleviated pain and fear,  
Dissolved doubts, given to many people  
The boon of tears and laughter.  
You'll find the outline in my drawer,  
In back, with the unfinished business.  
I haven't had time to see it through. Too bad.  
It would have been a fundamental work.

– Primo Levi, “Unfinished Business,” *Collected Poems*

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis fruitfully offers insight into the various effects of trauma and postmemory portrayed in the medium of graphic memoirs. Over the past two decades, the intersection between the trauma theory and the field of memory studies in the humanities has refined Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory. Postmemory, commonly misunderstood as a synonym of inter- or transgenerational trauma, is a multifaceted concept – emerging as a structure of familial (biological) or affiliative (cultural) transmission of traumatic memories, a desire to reconnect with the unknown past, and an ethics of representation. In order to understand how postmemory emerges, it is necessary to first understand the prolonged effects of trauma on the original traumatized victims. Thus, this thesis is an exploration into the effects of trauma on survivors of war, the transmission of traumatic memories from the survivor generation to their children, and the effects of postmemory on the second generation. The following generative questions animate this thesis: How do survivors of war grapple with or 'act out' their trauma? Are they able to 'work through' it? How do they implicitly or explicitly transmit their traumatic memories to their children? Are the children able to 'work through' their postmemories?<sup>1</sup>

One of the many micro-consequences of war is trauma which is the psychological or emotional response to a single experience or a series of experiences that are perceived as particularly disturbing or distressing. The first generation survivors of war may learn to adapt to their trauma but if the trauma is too intense, they may act out or repeat the trauma in their daily lives. This repeating or reliving of trauma often takes the form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. If the survivors suffer from such symptoms, it becomes

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<sup>1</sup> The psychoanalytic notions of "acting out" and "working through" are discussed in detail in Chapter 2. In short, acting out refers to repeating trauma after the original traumatic event has passed and working through refers to fully acknowledging and understanding the trauma and coming to terms with it.

inevitable that their traumatic memories will reverberate down the future generations because memory can traverse the inviolable boundary of time and space. The second generation may implicitly inherit traumatic memories from the first generation throughout their childhood and/or may actively seek out more information about their families' painful pasts later in their own lives. Either way, the second generation and their identities often depend on the memories, that is, the experiences and discourses of the previous generation. When these memories are traumatically intense, overwhelming, and even unimaginable, they become incorporated into the second generation's own beings and transform into the second generation's postmemories. The second generation who did not directly experience war may feel inexorably dominated and burdened by their parents' pasts. The result is that the previous generation of parents and the new generation of their children have incompatible world views and are unable to connect with each other. Therefore, the children feel the need to reconstruct their inherited past and work through their postmemories to generate a sense of catharsis. In order to work through their postmemories, the second generation often rely on creative means such as writing and illustrating. This thesis, thus, analyzes graphic novels as the product of the second generation's attempt at postmemorial working through.

Graphic novels also referred to as graphic narratives – long narratives in comic book format – fall under the category of comics and often have a stigma attached to them as being juvenile reading involving the combination of childish images and subpar texts.<sup>2</sup> While traditional comic books with superheroes may be associated with the realm of popular culture and excluded from academic discourse, graphic novels have gradually developed into a legitimate form of literature.<sup>3</sup> The expression “graphic novel” gained popularity after the

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<sup>2</sup> The term “comics” is a medium that usually involves the combination of texts and images. Examples of comics include newspaper comic strips, comic books, webcomics, graphic novels, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Various scholars have asserted that graphic novels count as a form of literature. In *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, Will Eisner states that comics “is entitled to be regarded as literature because the images are employed as a language” (5). In *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Charles Hatfield claims that “the graphic novel in particular has become comics’ passport to recognition as a form of literature” (ix).

publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* in 1978 which received many accolades from the literary community.<sup>4</sup> The graphic novel as both a literary and artistic genre rose to further prominence when *Maus* by Art Spiegelman became the first graphic novel to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Along with Spiegelman's *Maus*, other critically acclaimed works such as Frank Miller's *The Dark Night Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* led to the rise in the cultural status of graphic novel. These graphic novels are recognized as paradigmatic and even canonical. Moreover, *Palestine* by Joe Sacco, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, and *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel also helped to popularize the medium. Unlike traditional novels, graphic novels allow for the commingling of verbal and visual narrative tracks to provide sensorial access to readers.<sup>5</sup> Hence, graphic novels can portray certain aspects of reality that conventional novels sometimes cannot. For instance, graphic novels, specifically graphic memoirs, are often used as a medium for portraying and illustrating salient social, political, cultural, and historical issues. By navigating a socially and politically sensitive subject and offering a crash course in history, a family saga, and a personal narrative, graphic memoirs provide a postmodern way of reflecting universal struggles such as strained familial ties and the search for identity.<sup>6</sup>

Free at last from long decades of stigmatization and strict censorship, graphic memoirs are now used by authors to explore various sensitive and grim subjects such as dysfunctional family dynamics, immigrant life, war, etc. This thesis consists of textual and visual analysis of two graphic memoirs written by children of survivors of war. The chosen graphic memoirs are *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui.<sup>7</sup> Both texts capture the effects of war trauma on survivors and their children by placing a non-

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<sup>4</sup> Although Will Eisner helped to popularize the term "graphic novel," the term was first introduced to the public by critic Richard Kyle in his 1964 newsletter (Chute 453).

<sup>5</sup> Exceptions of wordless graphic novels exist such as Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of the term "postmodern," see Chapter 2 of this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> *Maus* comprises of two volumes: *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* and *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*.

fictional story in a dreamlike comic space. Spiegelman and Bui, a son of Holocaust survivors and a daughter of Vietnamese immigrants respectively, yearn to reconnect with the past. Their heightened consciousness of their parents' pasts dominates their lives. Thus, they create their graphic memoirs to reconstruct their parents' memories, without appropriating them, and to work through their own postmemories. By using trauma theory and the concept of postmemory, this thesis aims to show how their parents' post-trauma experiences and how their own postmemorial experiences are represented through the language and images in the postmodern space of graphic memoirs. The thesis also explores how the first generation's stories can be narrativized and integrated into a completely different present and how they open up the possibility of a form of postmemorial working through.

Excluding the introduction and conclusion chapters, this thesis is divided into four major chapters, arranged to commune with each other. Chapter 2, Theoretical Framework, describes the theoretical approaches that are employed in this thesis. This chapter provides a clear overview of the compelling relationship between the dynamics of trauma, traumatic memory, postmemory, and the ethics of representation in the postmodern context. Chapter 3, Trauma's Effects on the First Generation, focuses intently on the survivors of war and how they act out their trauma. This chapter draws extensively on Freudian and Caruthian notions of trauma and on the symptoms of PTSD as stated by Judith Herman. Chapter 4, Generational Transmission, rigorously engages with the question of how the traumatic memories of the first generation are transmitted to the second generation. Finally, Chapter 5, Postmemorial Outcome, examines the effects of postmemory. Specifically, it investigates the result of the second generation's attempt to work through their postmemories. It also attempts to make the strong case that the authors of the chosen graphic memoirs manage to avoid appropriating their parents' experiences and memories.

## 1.1 Overview of Chosen Texts

*Maus* by Art Spiegelman is a two-volume memoir that chronicles the experiences of Vladek and Anja Spiegelman, two Holocaust survivors who relocate to Queens, New York after the war. Artie, their cartoonist son, interviews and records his irascible father in an attempt to get a glimpse of Vladek's life leading up to and during the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> It must be noted that Spiegelman uses anthropomorphic characters, depicting Jews as mice, Poles as pigs, Nazis as cats, etc. The memoir shows and tells the story of Vladek's courtship and marriage to the wealthy Anja, his rise in business in the Jewish community of Sosnowiec, his conscription into the Polish Army, his experience as a prisoner of war, his ingenious strategies to hide with Anja to avoid being sent to the camps, and his experience in Auschwitz. The memoir also portrays Artie's present-day interactions with his aging father. By intertwining the past and present and using self-reflexivity, the memoir concurrently chronicles Vladek's past in war-torn Poland, his post-war life in the United States, and his present relationship with his son.

*The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui recounts the story of Thi's parents growing up in Vietnam, getting married, raising a family in the midst of the Vietnam War, fleeing the war-torn country by boat, and immigrating to the United States. While Thi's mother grew up in a privileged household in the relative safety of South Vietnam, her father grew up impoverished in the embattled North Vietnam. Despite their completely different childhood lifestyles, they both face various struggles in their homeland. The memoir depicts Thi interviewing her parents, traveling back to her homeland, researching the history of the Vietnam War, and learning about her parents' lives before, during, and after the war.

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<sup>8</sup> To differentiate between the author and the narrator/character in *Maus*, this thesis uses "Spiegelman" to refer to the author and "Artie" to refer to the narrator/character. Similarly, for *The Best We Could Do*, this thesis uses "Bui" to refer to the author and "Thi" to refer to the narrator/character.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This thesis is methodologically positioned at the intersection of trauma theory and memory studies. It explores the effects of trauma and postmemory by seeking to understand how survivors of war act out their trauma and how or if the second generation work through their postmemories. It also argues that literature, specifically graphic memoirs, can serve as postmemorial works that contribute to nuanced portraits of traumatic memories that have been passed down across generations. This chapter is divided into three sections, each diving into the three broad surveys of literary trauma theory, the concepts of traumatic memory and postmemory, and the postmodern notion of presenting the unrepresentable.

### 2.1 *History of Literary Trauma Theory*

Since literary trauma theory owes its theoretical roots to psychoanalytic theory, discussion of the Freudian notion of trauma is necessary. In response to the devastating impact of World War I, Sigmund Freud developed his theory of trauma in his controversial essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” In the essay, he provides an explanation of what he calls “traumatic neurosis.” Freud states that the condition of traumatic neurosis may arise when shell-shocked veterans return from battlefronts or when non-military people survive “accidents involving a risk to life” (Freud, “Beyond” 6). Within these examples, he identifies what he calls repetition compulsion – the human tendency to repeat or relive trauma – and revises his earlier theory of instincts known as the death drive. This notion of repetition compulsion refers to the constant reliving of the trauma in the psyche, often involving dreams. Therefore, he suggests that trauma repeats in the unconscious and states that “I am not aware, however, that patients suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with not thinking of it” (Freud, “Beyond” 7). Furthermore, in his earlier works such as *Project for a*

*Scientific Psychology* and *Studies on Hysteria*, he identifies the subjects of trauma as having a fractured sense of time. He finds that “a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by deferred action” (Freud, *Project* 356). This notion of “deferred action” or “Nachträglichkeit” posits that the actual traumatic experience constitutes two stages: the traumatic experience from the distant past and the moment in which the repressed memories of the traumatic event is triggered in the present. Thus, he focuses on the unconscious effects of trauma.

Commenting on Freud’s psychoanalytic conceptualization of trauma, Cathy Caruth uses a psychoanalytic poststructural approach in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* to apply literary criticism to trauma theory. Unlike Freud who was principally concerned with the role of the unconscious in the aftermath of a traumatic event, Caruth was more focused on the aporetic nature of trauma and the linguistic limitations of translating trauma. According to her, trauma is an inherently unrepresentable event. Since the memory of a traumatic event is inaccessible in its entirety, it cannot be represented in narrative. Although the traumatic memory can replay in the sufferer’s mind, it remains as a visual that cannot be translated into words. Moreover, Caruth considers trauma to be beyond the limits of understanding during the original event of the trauma. She reinforces Freud’s notion of “deferred action” by proposing that trauma occurs later when the original traumatic event is re-enacted repeatedly in the psyche of the sufferer. Thus, she discusses the “belated experience” of trauma and “its endless impact on a life” (Caruth 7).

Since there is a continuity between the Freudian and Caruthian psychoanalytic concepts of trauma and trauma in contemporary psychiatry, this thesis considers post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a significant component of literary trauma theory. Since PTSD, as first defined by the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) is an official psychiatric condition, it was probably never meant to be a



concept, a theory of the effects of trauma. However, it is considered as a theory in this thesis to understand the implication of trauma on first generation survivors. According to the revised version of DSM-III, PTSD is induced by a “psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience” (247).<sup>9</sup> In her influential work *Trauma and Recovery*, psychiatrist Judith Herman suggests that symptoms of PTSD fall into three main categories: hyperarousal which involves “persistent expectation of danger”; intrusion which “reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment” and occurs in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, and intrusive memories; and constriction which refers to a “numbing response of surrender” (Herman 35). While there are controversies over the definition of PTSD and its symptoms, the concept of PTSD undoubtedly reinforces Freud’s notion of deferred action and Caruth’s idea of belatedness by claiming that there is a temporal-causal relationship between the traumatic event and symptoms. It must be noted that PTSD patients are often seen as both a victim and a survivor who “act out” symptoms. Furthermore, they are often encouraged to speak out and “work through” their trauma. In the literary trauma theory, a distinction is often made between these concepts of “acting out” and “working through,” terms based on Freud’s psychoanalytic notions of trauma and further developed by critics like Dominick LaCapra.<sup>10</sup> In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra states that acting out is similar to Freud’s notion of repetitive compulsion since it refers to a “tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the past, with no distance from it” (LaCapra 142-143). Thus, a traumatized person who acts out their trauma has not yet come to terms with the traumatic experience and the emotions

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<sup>9</sup> The definitions and characteristics of PTSD in the third edition, the revised third edition, the fourth edition, and the fifth edition of the DSM vary slightly. For instance, the DSM-IV (1994), includes a criterion that requires that a traumatized individual feels intense fear, horror, or hopelessness immediately after the event. The more recent DSM-V (2013) removes this criterion altogether. Despite these differences, all editions include the same basic symptoms that support Freudian and Caruthian notions of trauma.

<sup>10</sup> Although the terms “acting out” and “working through” are originally used by Freud and LaCapra to refer to the effects of trauma, they can also be applied to refer to the effects of postmemory.

involved in it. On the other hand, LaCapra postulates that working through is “a kind of countervailing force,” such that the person attempts to “gain critical distance on a problem and to distinguish between past, present, and future” (143). From an ethical standpoint, this means “coming to terms with the trauma, including its details” (144). According to LaCapra, acting out and working through are closely intertwined since they “may never be totally separate from the other, and the two may always mark or be implicated in each other” (150). In addition, he further explains that a process of pure working through can never be completed because it is not possible to “utterly transcend the past” (148).

## *2.2 Traumatic Memory and Postmemory*

Trauma and its effects cannot be studied without understanding its relation to memory because trauma and memory are inextricably connected. Memory studies is a broad multidisciplinary field which can contribute to literary studies in various ways. Endel Tulving provides a list of 256 types of memories including autobiographical memory, collective memory, cultural memory, and more (Tulving 50). Although all of these terms are applicable to memory studies, discussion of it all is not necessary within the scope of this thesis. Among the multiplicity of memory types, this thesis focuses on traumatic memory and postmemory. Both Freudian and Caruthian views of trauma consider traumatic memory as a memory of events that, because of their distressing and overwhelming nature, continue to haunt the victim long after its entry into the psyche. When eyewitness survivors of a traumatic event such as war implicitly or explicitly transfer their traumatic memories to their children, the second generation attempts to learn to live with those memories that are not their own. Scholars have proposed various terms that account for the experiences of the second generation who have been affected by events to which they have no direct connection. Ellen Fine proposes the phrase ‘absent memory’; Henri Raczymow talks of a ‘memory shot through with holes’ also known as ‘*mémoire trouée*’; and Froma Zeitlin suggests the term

‘vicarious witnessing’ (Hirsch, *Generation 3*). Notwithstanding the existence of all of these terms, this thesis focuses on the term ‘postmemory’ because it is the most suitable theoretical frame predicated on an unbridgeable gap between the parents’ memories and the children’s yearning to access the inaccessible past.

The term “postmemory” was coined by Marianne Hirsch to describe the transmission of traumatic memories from the scarred victims of a historical atrocity such as the Holocaust to the generation after. Hirsch defines postmemory as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch, *Generation 5*). She offers a contentious assertion that postmemory is not strictly applicable to only the “familial” second generation but it also includes a wider “affiliative” group such as friends, peers, and contemporaries. This means that postmemory can be a form of collective memory instead of private or personal memory. However, this thesis only focuses on familial postmemory deriving from personal traumatic memories. Familial postmemory forms when the residue of the survivors’ traumatic memories that they could not metabolize or work through in their lifetimes passes onto their children. After inheriting their parents’ traumatic memories, the second generation become bearers of traumatic legacy, haunted and burdened by the wartime experiences of their parents. Moreover, Hirsch posits that “postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (Hirsch, *Generation 5*). Therefore, the term “post” in this case does not mean after memory. Rather, it refers to extending the temporal confines of historical atrocities, providing them with a contemporary significance for the children of survivors.

According to Hirsch, the children of Holocaust survivors live with the simultaneous presence and absence of Holocaust memory in their daily lives. She writes, “The fullness of

postmemory is no easier a form of connection than the absence it also generates. Full or empty, postmemory seeks connection. It creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall. It mourns a loss that cannot be repaired” (Hirsch, “Past Lives” 664).

Additionally, Hirsch believes that children who inherit their parents’ traumatic memories “risk having [their] own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by [their] ancestors” (Hirsch, *Generation 5*). Dominated by the traumatic memories of their parents, the second generation feel implicated in the historical event that they never witnessed. This creates a sense of alienation between the parents and their children and between the children and their parents’ history. Hirsch, who studies postmemory mainly in the context of the Holocaust, provides examples of the strained relationship between the survivors of Holocaust and their children by referring to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* as works of postmemory.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Hirsch posits that postmemory is intimately connected to visual materials from the past such as photographs: “Photographs, ghostly revenants, are very particular instruments of remembrance, since they are perched at the edge between memory and postmemory, and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting” (Hirsch, *Family* 22). Photographs serve as affective sites or props of postmemory because they have the unique ability “to hover between life and death, to capture only that which no longer exists, to suggest both the desire and the necessity and, at the same time, the difficulty, the impossibility, of mourning” (Hirsch, *Family* 20). Hirsch also states that images of children allow for self-projection and sensation of understanding a traumatic past that is, in reality, unfathomable. According to her, “images of children readily lend themselves to universalization. Less individualized, less marked by the particularities of identity, children

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<sup>11</sup> Although Hirsch explores postmemory exclusively within the context of the Holocaust, the concept of postmemory can be aptly applied to any catastrophic event that necessitates remembrance.

invite multiple projections and identifications” (Hirsch, *Generation* 142).

### 2.3 *The Postmodern: Presenting the Unpresentable*

In his book *Prisms*, Theodor Adorno famously remarks that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34). Although this oft-cited phrase was later revised several times, it still brings to attention trauma’s ineffable reality and raises the question of whether it is ethical to capture traumatic memory in language. In the wake of a horrendous event such as the Holocaust or the Vietnam War, linguistic diffidence seems inevitable. Nonetheless, the human impulse to communicate, to bear witness to pain and suffering, perseveres. As Adorno’s says in his less quoted but powerful statement: “The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth” (Adorno, *Negative* 17-18). However, serious ethical issue arises when a person who never experienced the traumatic event firsthand attempts to capture the pain of the original trauma victims. When children of survivors narrativize their parents’ traumatic memories, disorientation appears to be inevitable in either end of its transmission. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how the second generation can narrate their parents’ stories which resist narrativization. Since this thesis explores the interplay between trauma, traumatic memory, and postmemory in the postmodern medium of graphic memoirs, it is necessary to understand what the postmodern is and why *Maus* and *The Best We Could Do* can be classified as postmodern works.

Invoking a term like postmodern can be problematic considering the large number of definitions already available. However, this thesis provides yet another effort to understand and examine the postmodern and particularly its relationship to representation. In his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard claims that the postmodern takes place in the “withdrawal of the real” (Lyotard 79). According to him, the postmodern appears within the modern and is characterized by an “incredulity toward

metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv). In addition, while the modern is obsessed with reducing everything to a neat, clear narrative and defining everything so as to mean something, the postmodern embraces ambiguity, uncertainty, and instability because it is aware that despite its efforts to represent the reality or historical past, it can never do so accurately. Lyotard also states:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (81)

Thus, the postmodern involves acknowledging the impossibility of presenting the unrepresentable. Furthermore, unlike modern works that focus on solving epistemological problems, postmodern works accept that specters and unconscious forces constitute the reality and that presenting history and securing identities may not be possible.

Considering Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern, it can be said that Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Bui’s *The Best We Could Do* are postmodern works. Although both Spiegelman and Bui maintain that their works are nonfiction, it is true that their graphic memoirs obfuscate the boundary between the real and the imaginary, emphasizing the wide range of narrative possibilities in a postmodern context.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, both of their decisions to frame their own stories as well as their parents’ stories as graphic memoirs give rise to questions of permissibility, legitimacy, and ethicality in representing traumatic events. Their representational and stylistic choices such as the inclusion of actual photographs of their

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<sup>12</sup> The *New York Times* originally placed *Maus* on the “fiction” side of its bestseller lists, but Spiegelman requested that it be moved to the “nonfiction” side (Doherty 69). Bui also states on the cover of her graphic novel that her work is “an illustrated memoir.” Thus, both authors consider their work to be nonfiction.

family members partake a postmodern aesthetic and shed light on the very nature of testimony and witnessing. Specifically, in *Maus*, the use of anthropomorphic characters invites debate on the distinction between fact and fiction. Therefore, *Maus* and *The Best We Could Do* are postmodern works because they show skepticism towards the possibility of representing historical reality. This notion of authentic representation versus historical reality within both texts is further discussed in a section of Chapter 5.

### Chapter 3: Trauma's Effects on the First Generation

Studies on postmemory in literature tend to focus on the second generation's postmemory instead of the first generation's trauma or traumatic memory, and the second generation's story-retelling instead of the first generation's storytelling. Therefore, in order to avoid repeating already established critical discourse, this section focuses on the psychological implication of war on the first generation survivors. The effects of trauma on the first generation must be analyzed to better understand how their traumatic memories transform into the postmemories of the second generation later on.

Trauma's paradoxical nature results from its inaccessibility and persistent return. Although the original traumatic event remains out of reach, its haunting aftereffects reverberate with force. For the first generation survivors in *Maus* and *The Best We Could Do*, the past often manifests itself in involuntary and unconscious ways. The traces of their trauma from war remains with them in the form of traumatic memory. Underlying the concept of traumatic memory is the notion that the traumatized individual's mind is filled with past recollections too painful to acknowledge consciously. These recollections remain submerged in the unconscious, but seep out and manifest themselves as psychological symptoms of PTSD. This chapter focuses on the first generation survivors' acting out of different symptoms of PTSD: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction (as stated by Herman).<sup>13</sup> All of these symptoms of PTSD can be seen as neurotic defense mechanisms through which the survivors repeat traumatic events. These resonances of repetition demonstrate the variety of ways in which the traumatic past confronts the first generation.

In *Maus*, Spiegelman demonstrates the long-term effects of trauma on Vladek by

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<sup>13</sup> Although the understanding of PTSD symptoms will be used as a means to explore the characters' post-war behaviors, this thesis is not claiming that the characters and the real people they represent actually suffer from PTSD since it is never directly stated so in the texts.



juxtaposing the shrewd and courageous Vladek of the past with the pedantic and neurotic Vladek of the present. When Artie and his wife Françoise discuss how frightful Vladek's life must have been during the Holocaust, Françoise whispers, "I'd rather kill myself than live through all that" to which Artie replies, "Uh-huh, but in some ways he didn't survive" (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 90). Since Vladek continues to be haunted by the specters of his harrowing past, it can be said that in some ways, he is dead. During the war, Vladek relies on his sharp intellect and pragmatism to navigate and survive perilous circumstances. He saves cigarettes to exchange them for food while a prisoner of war, barter for food on the black market in Sosnowiec, and trades a bar of chocolate and a day's ration of bread for a lice-free shirt to ensure he received soup only given to prisoners who pass the shirt inspection in Dachau. However, his resourcefulness during the Holocaust transforms into materialism after the war, causing Mala, his second wife, to resentfully remark that "he's more attached to things than people!" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 93). Thus, even after the Holocaust, Vladek continues to live as if the war never ended.

Vladek's acting out in response to trauma is particularly evident whenever he refuses to waste food, money, and even trash. For example, when Vladek offers fruitcake to Artie who refuses, Vladek explains, "Ever since Hitler I don't like to throw out even a crumb" (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 78). Although the war has ended decades ago, he continues to live as if the war is still going on. In this case, it can be said that Vladek is showing a symptom of hyperarousal since he is always in a heightened state of anxiety. In another instance, when Artie lights a cigarette, Vladek admonishes him for using a wood match by stating "these wood matches I have to buy! The paper matches I can have free from the lobby of the Pines Hotel" (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 20). Furthermore, in one scene, Vladek pauses a story he is telling Artie to pick up a piece of telephone wire from the ground near a trash can (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 116). These instances demonstrate Vladek's obsession with material

accumulation since he hoards useless things as if it was during the early days of the Holocaust when he would scrounge for food, clothes, and other necessities to survive. Vladek's manifestation of hyperarousal is also shown through his obsessive behavior, such as his insistence on recalculating his bank balance when Artie makes the slightest mistake. Moreover, when Artie offers to count the pills that Vladek accidentally spills, Vladek obstinately says "No! You don't know counting pills...I'm an expert for this" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 30). In addition to his fixation with counting pills, Vladek also obsessively separates the long nails in his shed from the short ones. His insistence to complete even the most mundane daily tasks has been ingrained in him since the war days when he was forced to become resourceful. When Artie explains to his wife that Vladek does not know how to relax, Françoise states "maybe Auschwitz made him like that" (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 22). Therefore, Vladek suffers from hyperarousal and compulsive repetition of his traumatic past.

Similarly, Anja, Vladek's wife, survives the war but continues to suffer from unspecified mental and emotional malaise for the remainder of her life. Although Anja rarely appears in the memoir (except in the text-within-the-text "Prisoner on the Hell Planet"), it is implied that she continues to be haunted by her past long after the war. According to Vladek, Anja was prone to depression. He hints that she struggled with postpartum depression shortly after giving birth to her first child Richieu. Furthermore, during the outbreak of war, she expresses increasing feelings of hopelessness and grief, especially upon hearing the news of Richieu's death. Unlike Vladek who manages to cope with trauma's haunting nature by acting out, Anja eventually succumbs to trauma by committing suicide. One of the panels in "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" states the possible reasons that caused her to commit suicide. Among these reasons are "menopausal depression" and "Hitler did it" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 103). The latter reason elucidates the long-term effects of the Holocaust on Anja's mental health. It can be assumed that she has been suicidal for quite some time and her suicidal

ideation can be seen as a symptom of constriction since constriction involves feelings of hopelessness and surrender.

In *The Best We Could Do*, Thi's parents are also haunted by their traumatic pasts and show instances of acting out their trauma. As a survivor of violent political turmoil in Vietnam, Thi's father, Bó, is at first portrayed as an aloof, apathetic, and emotionally unavailable stay-at-home parent. His emotional detachment from his children is revealed to be a consequence of the trauma he suffered while living in and fleeing from Vietnam during its most unstable and atrocious period. His emotional distance from the rest of the family can be considered as a PTSD symptom of constriction. After immigrating to the United States, Bó's focus of living shifts from pursuing a meaningful life of fulfillment and happiness to an impoverished one marked by withdrawal from normal familial interactions and concern with mere survival. His pervasive response affects every aspect of his life, especially his relationships with his family. For example, although Bó sometimes plays with Thi and her younger brother, he often lashes out at them. Moreover, he spends most of the time chain-smoking and obsessing over astral projection and the supernatural. This daily routine is interrupted when an anonymous caller makes an inappropriate sexual remark to young Thi. Bó seems certain that the caller is the "PERVERT across the street" and that "he's probably watching ... through the window" (Bui 75). This instance serves as an example of hyperarousal since it demonstrates that Bó is constantly living in survival mode. Just like the past when he was in constant fear as he lived with his violent father and dealt with the atrocious war, he continues to be afraid of his children going through similar traumatic situations in the present.

Thi's mother, Má, also suffers from symptoms of PTSD. She seems to actively stay away from places or situations that remind her of her traumatic past. When Thi is in labor, Má is seen waiting in the hallway unable to watch her daughter give birth. Má returns to the

room several hours later, pretending that everything is fine, even though she still appears to be shaken by the event. It can be assumed that her daughter giving birth may have reminded her of the pain of losing two of her children in the past. Such an involuntary and unwished-for memory recall can be seen as a symptom of intrusion which describes the way in which painful memories of a nightmarish event that is long past invades the present. Similarly, later on, when Bui describes the death of her mother's first child, she states "I don't know how long Má went over the reasons in her head. Maybe she never stopped" (Bui 55). These sentences are split between two panels. In the first panel, Thi's mother is depicted as a young woman looking towards a river as the breeze blows her hair. The next panel portrays the aged present-day Má whose face has hardened into an expression of uncertainty, as if she is still thinking about the death of her first child (see fig. 9).<sup>14</sup> Perhaps these panels are meant to show how Má's memory recall disrupts her experience of time and space, transposing her from the actual here and now to the transfixed then and there. Moreover, Má also appears to suffer from the symptom of constriction. For example, Thi states that for Má, "I love you" sticks in the throat" (Bui 38). Má's tendency to avoid such an endearing term shows that there is an emotional dissociation between her and her children and she prefers not to show her open and vulnerable side to her children.

In order for the survivors to negotiate their way through the various symptoms of PTSD that characterize their lives and to re-engage with life in the present, they must work through their traumatic experience. However, in *Maus* and *The Best We Could Do*, the first generation acts out their trauma, but they do not attempt to actively work through it. They remain stuck in the stage of acting out and are unable to overcome their trauma. It can be argued that they work through or at least attempt to work through their trauma by sharing

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<sup>14</sup> The figures mentioned in this thesis appear in the appendices after the final chapter. Please note that Appendix A includes figures (fig. 1-8) from *Maus* and Appendix B includes figures (fig. 9-14) from *The Best We Could Do*.

their stories with their children and thus exteriorizing their repressed traumatic memories to attain some sort of closure. However, as it will be stated in the next chapter, the first generation prefer to remain silent about their past.<sup>15</sup> Thus, this thesis argues that the first generation's inability to work through causes them to pass on the torch to their children. This means that the second generation, who inherits the traumatic memories of their parents, attempt to do what their parents could not do: work through the traumatic memories of their parents which have turned into their own postmemories.

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<sup>15</sup> Anja may be considered as an exception to partaking in the discourse of silence since she attempts to bear witness and work through her trauma by writing her diaries. However, since she commits suicide and since Vladek destroys her diaries, the question of whether she would have agreed to share her story to her son remains unanswered.

## Chapter 4: Generational Transmission

The first generation's memories of trauma pass onto the second generation as postmemories. Although postmemory is an ambiguous and malleable concept, it has several salient features. In the case of familial postmemory, the traumatic memories of the survivors are transmitted to their children through the presence or absence of stories, images, and material traces; the children strongly identify with their parents while remaining cognizant of the unbridgeable gap between them; the children attempt to understand the past through imagination, creativity, and aesthetic structure to gain agency over their "transferred" memories; and, finally, the children assume the morally imperative position of a witness to work through the traumatic memories they have implicitly or explicitly inherited. Keeping these features in mind, it is important to first understand how the second generation inherits their parents' traumatic memories. In order to discuss how the generational transmission takes place, this chapter is divided into three sections.

Before providing a chapter outline, it should be mentioned that unlike Artie in *Maus* who was born after the traumatic events that devastated his parents, Thi in *The Best We Could Do* was born amidst the national turmoil in Vietnam. Although her presence during the traumatic event is minimal, she is still considered a survivor. This complicates Hirsch's concept of postmemory since Thi is in a liminal position of simultaneously being a survivor of the traumatic event and a child of the second generation. However, since she was too young to understand the extremity of the situation in which she was living in and since she lacks full knowledge of her parents' traumatic pasts, this thesis asserts that she is a subject of postmemory.

In this chapter, the first section, The Pervading Presence of the Past, scrutinizes the verbal components of generational transmission and how the relationship between the past

and the present are represented visually in the texts. Spiegelman and Bui use their postmemorial texts to engage their traumatic inheritance and highlight the immense impact of past events rather than just reconstructing the events themselves. On the textual level, this process of representing the impact of their parents' traumatic memories requires imaginative means to bridge past and present. Therefore, this section examines how Spiegelman and Bui depict the psychological torment of bearing the trace of an unimaginable suffering and its lasting effect throughout generations, persisting into the present day. Throughout their graphic memoirs, they emphasize how their parents' past invades their present in their writings as well as their drawings.

The second section, *Familial Memorabilia: Photographs*, discusses how Artie and Thi inherit the traumatic memories of their parents through photographs. Since photographs are considered to be material connections to a lost past, they serve as a particularly powerful visual component of generational transmission and as a medium of postmemory. Photographs offer a glimpse of the unimaginable past and allow the second generation to affirm the past's existence. Spiegelman and Bui integrate photographs in their graphic memoirs to show how the photos play a facilitative role in transmitting their parents' traumatic memories. The photographs are also integral to their understanding of their parents' pasts because they provide a space of identification for them and other viewers.

The third section, *The Presence of Absence*, focuses mainly on silence resulting from the lack of verbal transmissions as well as the lack of physical keepsakes from the past. As Hirsch states, postmemory is marked not only by the presence of traumatic memories in the second generation's lives but also by the absence. Traumatic memory is not always coherently articulated and transmitted. The absence of words and remnants of the past capture certain emotions and sensations that result from horror, sadness, remorse, or a sense of irreparable loss. Thus, the untold stories, the silences, contaminate the survivors' daily lives.

This causes the children of survivors to grow up in the atmosphere of secrets. Therefore, this section shows that traumatic memories can be transmitted nonverbally and even without awareness of the process itself.

#### 4.1 *The Pervading Presence of the Past*

In *Maus*, Spiegelman simultaneously presents the reader with a historical atrocity and its consequences decades later by setting his father's tale against his own strained relationship with the man. The emotional and communication barrier between the father and the son is foregrounded in the two-page prologue which shows a ten-year-old Artie roller-skating with friends, falling, lagging behind, and being mocked by them. A sniffling Artie goes to his father, in search of solace, but only receives an unsympathetic response "If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week . . . then you could see what it is, friends" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 5). Here, Vladek imposes his own Holocaust experiences on Artie and trivializes Artie's suffering by bringing up a situation that Artie has never experienced and will probably never experience. This incident suggests that Artie's childhood has been indelibly shaped by the troubled history of his father. Although Vladek only intends to offer his son a piece of cautionary advice from his own life, he is completely unaware that his tragic experiences in Europe under the Third Reich are inconceivable to a young boy living in New York City in 1958. The persistence of Holocaust memories in Artie's childhood is also discussed when adult Artie admits to his wife Françoise "I did have nightmares about S.S. men coming into my class and dragging all us Jewish kids away . . . I'd fantasize Zyklon B coming out of our shower instead of water" (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 16). His nightmares and disturbing fantasies reveal a child whose everyday life is haunted by events that precede his birth.

Even after Artie becomes a grown-up, the Holocaust past continues to pour into the



present. At one point, Vladek recounts how he and other prisoners of war were ordered to clean a filthy stable. This story is interrupted when Artie accidentally drops cigarette ashes on the carpet and Vladek reprimands him by saying “You want it should be like a stable here?” (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 52). This proves that Vladek continues to bring up his traumatic past in the present. The connection between the past and the present is also emphasized in a page inundated with the tragic events experienced by Artie’s parents and the other Jews in Auschwitz – Vladek’s congestive heart failure, the death of 100,000 Hungarian Jews who were gassed in Auschwitz, and Anja’s suicide. At the same time, Artie’s own present-day experiences listed on the same page – the upcoming birth of his daughter and his success with *Maus* – provide a drastic difference between his successful present and his parents’ tragic past. By juxtaposing the events of the Holocaust with the more familiar time frame of the present, Artie demonstrates the profound influence that his parents’ tragic past has on his prosperous contemporary life.

In *Maus*, the pervasiveness of traumatic Holocaust memory is not only written in words. It is also drawn. From the very first chapter, markers of the past can be found in the present. As he pedals his exercise bike, Vladek’s serial number that is tattooed on his forearm is made visible (see fig. 1). In another image, as Artie is listening to his father’s narrative, his legs appear in the image of Vladek hiding in the trenches (see fig. 2). These visual techniques constantly allude to how despite being irreclaimable and absent, the past maintains its power in the present. Furthermore, in Chapter Two of *Maus II* titled “Auschwitz (Times Flies),” a greatly despondent Artie hunches over at his drawing board which stands metaphorically atop a mound of dead bodies (see fig. 3). The window provides a glimpse of a Nazi guard tower. On the bottom of a page is a speech bubble from a hidden figure that says “Alright Mr. Spiegelman . . . We’re ready to shoot!” (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 41). Whether this unseen figure is a reporter in the present day or a Nazi executioner in the past is not disclosed. Either way,

by using the combination of past and present settings in the panel, Spiegelman shows how the past invades the present. Similarly, another panel illustrates Artie, his wife, and his father driving to the supermarket as Vladek tells Artie the story of some prisoners' revolt in Auschwitz. When Vladek reveals that the men who revolted and the four girls who supplied ammunition to them were killed, the panel depicts the bodies of the four Jewish girls hanging from trees (see fig. 4). By illustrating how time and space are impossibly out of sync, Spiegelman manages to animate memory.

Unlike *Maus*, *The Best We Could Do* does not depict any moment of direct verbal transmission of traumatic memories from the first generation to the second generation. However, the memoir does show the presence of the past in the present visually. For instance, early on in the memoir, Bui adds a panel that illustrates herself and her siblings. In the background of the panel are the shadows of Quyên and Thảo, two of Thi's siblings (see fig. 10). It is later revealed that these two siblings have long passed away. Although Quyên died shortly after birth and Thảo was stillborn, their shadows in the panel are those of adults. By including her deceased siblings along with her living siblings in the panel, Bui highlights how the siblings she has never met remain as inextricable shadows in her life. Furthermore, like Spiegelman, Bui manipulates temporality in her graphic memoir. When Thi asks Má questions about the past, the background of the panel depicts a red-orange colored boat on waves of the same color (see fig. 11). Here, Bui visually merges the past and the present. Her etchings beautifully depict the ferocity of war's effects: the splashes of sepia-toned watercolor across the page indicate that the past is bleeding into the present.

Moreover, in Chapter 4 of the memoir, Bui shows how she began conversing with her father about his past. The first page of the chapter illustrates BỐ and Thi at four different eras in their lives – child Thi gazing at adult BỐ as he smokes, child Thi gazing at child BỐ as he smokes, child BỐ smoking while sitting with child Thi, and present-day aged BỐ smoking

while sitting with present-day Thi (see fig. 12). Thus, Thi's childhood self, Bó's childhood self, and their present selves appear on a single page. These panels represent how Thi's childhood and adulthood are largely shaped by Bó's traumatic childhood. After learning about her father's past, Thi begins to understand why her father is the way he is and states "I grew up with the terrified boy who became my father" (Bui 128). This page depicts two long frames – one with child Bó as he follows his grandfather to leave for the safety of Hải Phòng and one with Thi as she stands in front of her aloof father who has the same expression of unease as his younger self in the previous frame. Thi states "Afraid of my father, craving safety and comfort . . . I had no idea that the terror I felt was only the long shadow of his own" (Bui 129). Here, it becomes evident that Bó's past destabilizes Thi's childhood.

#### 4.2 *Familial Memorabilia: Photographs*

Family keepsakes such as photographs are instrumental in conceptualizing memory. As mentioned in Chapter 2, photographs serve as a crucial aspect of the postmemory experience since the second generation rely on images to materialize memory and to witness the events even though they were not at the site of the trauma. Spiegelman and Bui make the authorial decision to include photographs in their memoirs in order to add authenticity to their work. While the photographs in their work disrupt the visual flow of the rest of the narrative, they also reinforce the notion that Spiegelman/Artie and Bui/Thi have grown up in the shadow of their parents' pasts.<sup>16</sup>

In *Maus I*, there is a four-page comic called "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" which describes the story of Anja's suicide. This short comic within the graphic memoir starts with a photograph captioned "Trojan Lake, N.Y. 1958" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 100) (see fig. 5). In the photograph, young Spiegelman smiles broadly as he squats next to his standing mother

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<sup>16</sup> Here, Spiegelman/Artie and Bui/Thi are used because the photographs are transmitted both to the authors in real life and the characters in the memoirs.

who stares absentmindedly into space. It can be assumed that the picture is taken by the unseen father, Vladek. This family photo accentuates the relational distance between Spiegelman and his father since Vladek is nowhere to be seen. Furthermore, the next frame depicts the destruction of the family when it states “In 1968, when I was 20, my mother killed herself. She left no note” (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 100). This shows that the photograph depicts the time before the rupture of the family. The fact that Spiegelman includes the photograph of his mother also emphasizes the absence of Artie’s mother in the graphic memoir. It demonstrates that Artie in the present-day listens to his overbearing and over-present father’s stories about the past, but he is never able to listen to his mother’s stories. In a way, Anja’s silence and absence in the novel are just as central to Spiegelman/Artie’s postmemory as Vladek’s voice and presence.

In the second volume of *Maus*, the dedication page includes a photo of Artie’s dead brother Richieu (see fig. 6). Throughout the memoir, Artie often ruminates over his ghost brother who died during the war. Richieu’s presence which has been immortalized in “a large, blurry photograph hanging in [his] parents’ bedroom,” serves as a constant reminder of Artie’s own inadequacies (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 15). Artie feels that he has become the replacement child who can never live up to his perfect brother. He even admits to his wife “The photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble . . . It was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn’t compete” (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 15). The photo on the dedication page is presumably the same photo that is hung in his parents’ room. This photo serves as a reminder of the magnitude of his parents’ loss and his own shortcomings and ineptitudes under the gaze of that loss. In addition, the photo of Richieu serves as a material connection or physical memory to those who did not survive. As Marianne Hirsch noted, the Holocaust pictures of children are especially effective in producing identification since children are a site of a universal fantasy of prewar innocence (Hirsch, *Generation* 142). Thus,

this photograph provides an eerie shadow ground in signaling the ways the traumatic past always intrudes on the present. The power of the photograph is amplified by the dedication above the photo “For Richieu” and below the photo “And for Nadja.” This dedication is significant because it is for two children – Richieu, Spiegelman’s brother who died during the war, and Nadja, Spiegelman’s daughter, who may inherit her father’s postmemory in the future.

The final photograph in the second volume of *Maus* shows Vladek looking healthy in his concentration camp uniform (see fig. 7). Vladek comments on the photo: “I passed once a photo place what had a camp uniform – a new and clean one – to make souvenir photos” (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 134). The photo falsifies the filthy conditions of the concentration camp with a cleansed image of healthy-looking Vladek wearing a neat and fitted uniform. Although camp prisoners are expected to look dirty and emaciated, the photo subverts the expectation by showing Vladek who is too clean, healthy, and plump to be a Holocaust survivor. Thus, for Spiegelman/Artie and the readers, the photo is simultaneously real and contrived. Spiegelman may have included the photo in the novel to demonstrate the inability of the photo to effectively communicate trauma since trauma is not one-dimensional. However, it should be noted that for Vladek, this photo may have a completely different meaning. For him, the photo most likely serves as a testament to his perseverance, endurance, and survival. This means that the photo induces different effects for Spiegelman/Artie and Vladek.

Unlike Spiegelman who scatters the three photos of his family in different parts of his memoir, Bui includes four little ID pictures of her family on a single page within *The Best We Could Do* (see fig. 13). These photos were taken when Bui and her family were living in the refugee camp in Malaysia. There is a photo of her oldest sister Lan, a photo of her second oldest sister Bích, a photo of Bó, and a photo of pregnant Má holding Bui. All of them are

unsmiling and are holding up a mini chalkboard that states classificatory information – names, boat number, date of arrival, and dates of birth. These photos of family members displaced from their homeland represent the loss of safety and comfort. By integrating these photos in the novel, Bui manages to heighten the reality and humanize herself and her family. The photographs make palatable the memory of war and authenticate the story of Bui and her family by showing that the characters in the graphic memoir are real people.

### 4.3 *The Presence of Absence*

Postmemory does not only depend on the verbal (oral testimony) or tangible (photographs, diaries, cultural objects, etc.) transmission of traumatic memories. It can be just as powerfully shaped by the absence of speech and keepsakes, by the silences and the lack of physical remnants of the past. In both *Maus* and *The Best We Could Do*, the second generation live with the simultaneous presence and absence of their parents' traumatic memories. This section focuses on the absence, that is, the silence or lack that constitutes testimony. First generation survivors adopt the act of silencing in order to protect their children from the heart-rending truth. However, their silence and suppression of traumatic memories have a considerable impact on the second generation since the absence of memories creates an insatiable thirst to fill in the missing pieces of the past. Thus, silence does not hinder the process of transmission. Rather, silence itself is a content of transmission. Although their parents' traumatic experiences are lost to them, the awareness of the lacking memories serves as the foundation for Spiegelman and Bui's postmemories. Since there is the inherent danger that memories will become prey to the forces of forgetting if the first generation remain silent, Spiegelman and Bui embark on a quest to recover their parents' memories and bridge the void between their parents and themselves.

In *Maus*, Artie states that "Samuel Beckett once said: 'Every word is like an

unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.’ On the other hand, he SAID it” (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 45). This contradiction between the simultaneous urge to speak and the urge to silence characterizes the first generation’s conflicting desire to both suppress and address their trauma. As seen in the prologue, Artie hears vague snippets of his father’s memory while growing up. However, he never learns the full story until he decides to draw and write about it as an adult. Vladek initially refuses to tell Artie stories about his life during the Holocaust by saying “It would take many books, my life, and no one wants anyway to hear such stories” (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 12). Due to Artie’s curiosity regarding the Holocaust and his incessant prodding, Vladek gives in rather quickly and shares his narrative, perhaps to become closer to his son or to remember and document the past. However, throughout much of the graphic memoir, Vladek appears to prefer complaining about his rocky second marriage with Mala instead of talking about his past. At one point, Vladek admits to Artie, “All such things of the war, I tried to put out from my mind once for all . . . Until you rebuild me all this from your questions” (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 98). For Vladek, remembering the past seems more than analogous to re-living it since he is reminded of the person he was before the war, the struggle of surviving, and the loss of his beloved first wife and son. Furthermore, along with an initial reluctance to talk about his past, the literal burning of Anja’s wartime diaries indicates the compulsion to silence on the part of Vladek. In burning his wife’s written accounts, Vladek denies her an opportunity to tell her own narrative. The initial silence of Vladek at the beginning of the novel and the absence of Anja’s voice throughout the novel demonstrate that the gap between the first and second generation cannot be fully filled. Although Artie recognizes the impossibility of fully understanding his father’s story and acknowledges that the recuperation of his mother’s memories is impossible, he still attempts to patch the holes and fix memory in place. To some extent, his self-awareness of the futility of memory reconstruction marks his novel as postmemorial.

Likewise, in *The Best We Could Do*, traumatic memories permeate sometimes through its unsharability. For example, Má's traumatic memories actively resist language, leading to silence. When Thi tries to interview her mother in search of the unknown past, the search is met with resistance since Má changes the subject to that night's dinner menu. Má's silence, her avoidance of past, suggests that she is not ready to share her traumatic memories. Nonetheless, Thi attempts to hear her mother's story. By limiting Thi's access to her memories through silence, Má unwittingly feeds Thi's desire to explore and understand her trauma. Moreover, Thi mentions later on that "Má talked more freely about herself to my husband, Travis, in English, than to me" (Bui 136). Má's reluctance to discuss the past with Thi reflects, perhaps, her concern that the traumatic memories of her past might somehow harm her daughter. On the other hand, her willingness to talk to Travis about her past shows that Má does not mind sharing her narrative with people outside of her immediate family circle. Thi later states "I understand why it was easier for her to not tell me these things directly, and I DID want to know" (Bui 191). In addition, although Bó is not portrayed as being reluctant to discuss the past, he refuses to return to Vietnam and states that "he had no parents," when in fact he does (Bui 35). This refusal is a form of absence, the absence of the longing to work through the trauma of the past. This shows that Thi's postmemory is partially woven from her mother's silence and her father's refusal to face the past.

While the second generation yearn for open discussion about their parents' pasts, the parents withhold their pasts. This creates a tense undercurrent in the relationship between the first and second generation which ultimately causes the second generation to more actively search for the unknown past. Thus, it can be said that silence and lack of testimony allow for Artie and Thi to inherit their parents' memories. For both Spiegelman and Bui, the *raison d'être* for creating their postmemorial works is partially derived from the presence of absence.



## Chapter 5: Postmemorial Outcome

Since the previous chapter dealt with how the first generation's traumatic memories were transmitted to the second generation, leading to the emergence of the latter's postmemories, this chapter focuses on the effects of the second generation's postmemories. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section, Crises of Identity, discusses how Artie and Thi struggle to construct their own identity that is separate from their postmemories and their parents' pasts. In order to create their own identity, they attempt to understand the causes of their own precarious lives. The second section – Authority, Authenticity, Appropriation – is perhaps the most polemical section. Spiegelman's *Maus* and Bui's *The Best We Could Do* are definitional of the process of postmemory since both authors are second generation subjects seeking to identify their connection to the events that destabilized their parents. However, they risk over-identifying and appropriating their parents' memories. This section repudiates one of the most clearly articulated limits of postmemory by focusing on how Spiegelman and Bui navigate between authority and authenticity to avoid appropriating their parents' experiences and memories. The third section, Postmemorial Working Through, discusses whether or not Spiegelman and Bui are successful in working through their postmemories and attaining catharsis from writing their graphic memoirs.<sup>17</sup>

### 5.1 Crises of Identity

Postmemory, like memory, has an identity-forming function. *Maus* and *The Best We*

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<sup>17</sup> When talking about the first generation in Chapter 3, it was mentioned that the survivors acted out their trauma but failed to work through it. Thus, one may wonder why this chapter only talks about the second generation's working through without talking about their acting out. The answer is rather simple: the second generation cannot act out their postmemories because they were not at the original site of their parents' trauma. They cannot repeat or relive their parents' trauma and traumatic memories which have turned into their own postmemories. However, since their parents are unable to work through their trauma, the children bear the responsibility to work through the traumatic memories-turned-postmemories. This is why this thesis focuses on the parents' acting out of trauma and their children's working through of postmemory. As LaCapra stated, acting out and working through "may always mark or be implicated in each other" (LaCapra 150). Thus, the two processes are always linked and in this case, the parents' acting out of trauma is linked to their children's working through of postmemories.

*Could Do* explore whether identity can be created by individuals or if it is determined by their parents. Artie and Thi struggle to create their own identity separate from their postmemories and their parents' monstrous past that have loomed over their whole life. Thus, they try to come to terms with their parents' pasts and create their own sense of identity by immersing themselves in the act of listening to and writing about their parents' stories. Although Artie and Thi were not there for all or most of the traumatic events that their parents lived through, they nonetheless use their distance from those events as the basis for which they try to create their identity – Artie as a Jew, a son, and a father and Bui as a Vietnamese-American, a refugee, a daughter, and a mother.

Throughout *Maus*, it becomes evident that Artie's identity has been shaped by verbal transmissions of traumatic memories, by family keepsakes such as photographs, and by silence and absence – of his brother, an “ideal kid” towards whom he feels a sense of sibling rivalry; and of his mother, whose diaries could have at least satisfied his need to attain a maternal point-of-view. Due to these factors, Artie feels oppressed by his parents' pasts which he did not witness. He fails to understand, their traumatic past that is, paradoxically, distant and present at the same time. In order to bridge the distance between himself and his parents, Artie desires to construct his own Jewish identity. This is evident when he states “I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through” (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 16). Since Artie cannot relate to what his parents have gone through during the Holocaust, he feels guilty and wishes that he was with his parents at the original site of the trauma.

It is important to note that in *Maus*, identity is closely tied to the animal allegory. The anthropomorphic signifiers of race and ethnicity – Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs, etc. – contribute to the nuanced understanding of Artie and other characters' identities. For example, during the war, Vladek wears a pig mask in order to hide

his Jewish identity and disguise himself as a Pole. Thus, Vladek wears a mask to survive. However, Artie or rather Spiegelman's proxy wears a mask to connect with his Jewish identity. The proxy brings himself into the novel by wearing a mouse mask with noticeable ties which imply that underneath the mask is a human face. Therefore, Spiegelman tries to hide his author identity by acting as Artie the character. By portraying himself as a human pretending to be a mouse, Spiegelman suggests that he feels dissociated from his Jewish identity. In addition, Artie's lack of "Jewishness" can be seen in his lack of involvement in his mother's funeral ritual and in his marriage to a Frenchwoman. Furthermore, his unstable identity as a son of his father is also shown in the second-to-last frame of *Maus II* when Vladek refers to Artie as Richieu. This instance shows how Artie fails to establish an identity separate from the one imposed on him by his father. Moreover, Spiegelman/Artie struggles to come to terms with his future identity as a father.<sup>18</sup> At one point, while still wearing the mouse mask, he is swarmed by an intrusive press. As the panels progress, he shrinks to the size of a child mouse under the pressure of public success and criticism as well as the imminent birth of his daughter. As little Spiegelman/Artie climbs down from his chair, he states "I can't believe I'm gonna be a father . . . My father's ghost still hangs over me" (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 43). This scene raises the question of how Spiegelman/Artie can fulfill the role of a father when he has not yet come to terms with his own relationship with the now-deceased Vladek and Vladek's past. Thus, Spiegelman/Artie's shaken sense of identity as a Jew, a son of a Holocaust survivor, and a future father is portrayed in the memoir and is never fully resolved.

Likewise, in *The Best We Could Do*, Thi's identity is largely defined by her parents' past due to the stories, photographs, and silence that she inherits. Thi is a woman who was

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<sup>18</sup> Spiegelman/Artie is used here because the author brings himself into the memoir by wearing the mask of the character.

forced to flee her homeland as a child, whose childhood is largely influenced by her parents' post-trauma behaviors, and whose adulthood is shaped by her parents' traumatic memories. She is a mother unsure of what motherhood means to her, a daughter of parents who did their best to protect her both during and after the national turmoil, and a Vietnamese-American trying to figure out what role her homeland plays in her identity formation. At the beginning of the memoir, Thi gives birth to her son and realizes that her sense of identity as a mother is closely tied to her relationship with her parents. By becoming a parent herself, she is forced to look at her own parents, specifically her mother, differently. She connects her experience of giving birth with Má's experience of giving birth six times, which happened under very different conditions. Thi feels reluctant and even guilty about using anesthesia because when Má gave birth to her children, it was usually unmedicated. Moreover, Thi believes that there is a cultural gap between herself and her parents due to her inability to understand the Vietnamese history and culture in which her parents grew up. When Thi and her family arrive in the United States, Thi and her siblings feel a strong pressure to abandon the Vietnamese culture and embrace the American culture. For instance, when Bích, Thi's sister, eats cereal directly from the box, her cousin yells at her, "Don't be such a REFUGEE!" (Bui 285). Due to such instances, Thi and her siblings gradually learn to cultivate their new identities as Americans. However, a part of their refugee identity remains deeply embedded in them. One night, when the family hears a loud noise of something crashing downstairs, they instinctively rush to a bedroom to hide. When this noise is later followed by an explosion, Thi grabs her important documents (birth certificate, green card, and social security card) and runs. This shows that Thi's "refugee reflex," her instinct to flee at any sign of danger, is built into her very being (Bui 305). Since her family and her younger self had to flee from the war-torn Sài Gòn, Thi inherits the ability to escape and this ability becomes an important part of her refugee identity.

As an adult, Thi realizes that she wants to get in touch with her Vietnamese roots. On one page, she is perched at a desk, drawing what appears to be the graphic memoir as red-orange waves in the backdrop crash behind her. The waves bleed into the rest of the page, forming the geographic shape of Vietnam. Facing towards this Vietnam with her back to the reader, Thi appears to be touching the edges of a huge Vietnam-shaped hole where her chest is supposed to be (see fig. 14). This drawing represents how Vietnam's history and her family's history have been embedded in her. Thus, her parents' pasts and all the pains and sufferings associated with their pasts have become part of Thi's identity. In order to fill in the Vietnam-shaped hole, Thi yearns to understand what her parents were like and how they lived before she was born. This leads her to work on her graphic memoir. Unlike Artie who never resolves his identity crisis in the course of the novel, Thi comes to terms with some aspects of her identity. For example, near the end of the memoir, she states "I no longer feel the need to reclaim a HOMELAND" (Bui 326). This shows that she has accepted her identity as a Vietnamese-American. Hence, while Artie seeks to create an autonomous identity that is not rooted in the family tree and fails to do so, Thi accepts that her identity is simultaneously autonomous and rooted in her ancestral home and familial past.

## 5.2 Authority, Authenticity, Appropriation

Writing beyond the scope of their experiences, Spiegelman and Bui use their "imaginative investment," as stated by Hirsch, to not only search for their identity but to also reclaim and reconstruct their parents' pasts (Hirsch, *Generation 5*). However, their struggle to do so stems from their generational detachment from their parents' fragmented memories that are not easily reducible to a neat and clear narrative. It is pertinent to point out that one of the reasons that Spiegelman and Bui's graphic memoirs can be considered as postmemorial is because they represent a mediated space between the parents and children. The parents share their stories with the children who then attempt to creatively understand or come to terms

with those stories and work through their postmemories. The children's yearning to bridge the gap between their parents and themselves, without appropriating the latter's experiences and memories, is a driving force of postmemorial work. This notion of appropriation raises the question put forth earlier in this thesis about the ethicality of presenting the unrepresentable. By trying to write and draw their parents' stories, Spiegelman and Bui risk appropriating their parents' traumatic experiences and memories. In order to avoid appropriation, both authors attempt to balance the authenticity and authority in their work through their various representational and aesthetic choices.

In *Maus*, Artie directs and controls the course of his father's storytelling, interrupting Vladek whenever he digresses from the story and demanding that the story be conveyed in strict chronological order. For instance, Artie interrupts Vladek's story about Tosha taking the children with her in 1943, "Wait! Please, Dad, if you don't keep your story chronological, I'll never get it straight...Tell me more about 1941 and 1942" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 82). Furthermore, when Vladek's account about the timeline of his imprisonment in Auschwitz does not match his previous account, Artie attempts to correct the timeline. However, Vladek resists Artie's insistence on maintaining sequential coherence by saying "In Auschwitz we didn't wear watches" (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 68). Regardless of Vladek's resistance, Spiegelman includes a timeline of 1944 in a diagram that is cut off by a speech bubble. Spiegelman's authorial decision to include an incomplete diagram attests to his awareness that creating an authentic timeline is impossible. In addition, although Vladek provides the oral account from which the main narrative of the graphic memoir is written and drawn, not every depicted scene is derived from situations he experienced firsthand. There are several scenes in the main narrative that Vladek did not directly experience or witness such as Richieu's death and the assumed fate of Vladek's friend Mandelbaum. Therefore, as the postmemorial subject, Spiegelman relies on circumstantial evidence and draws conclusions

on his own about what happened in the past because he understands that what is important is not whether the events of the past actually took place. The past did exist – independently of his ability to know and understand it. Furthermore, in one scene, Artie asks Vladek to draw the layout of the bunker where he hid. At this moment, Vladek figuratively supersedes Spiegelman as the artist-narrator of the text. However, the fact that Vladek's original drawing is not included in the text demonstrates that Spiegelman has the ultimate authority. Moreover, when Vladek tells Artie: "But this what I just told you – about Lucia and so – I don't want you should write this in your book," Artie promises to keep Vladek's testimony private (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 23). Nonetheless, Spiegelman breaks this promise by turning his father's personal memory into a public text. Spiegelman believes that the promise had to be violated because the story about Lucia added authenticity to the text. Thus, by breaking his promise to his father, Spiegelman proclaims his authority over the text.

Although Spiegelman risks falsifying or distorting Vladek's story and, in doing so, undermining him, he manages to avoid doing so. When Artie asks about the orchestra that reportedly played as the prisoners marched out the Auschwitz gates, Vladek asserts that there was no orchestra: "No. At the gate I heard only guards shouting" (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 54). This scene shows that memory is fallible since it lacks the accuracy and coherency of historiography. In the course of remembering, Vladek alters or forgets historical facts. However, this does not preclude the ability of Spiegelman's postmemory to add to, describe, or imagine the 'objective' facts of the tragic past. Thus, Spiegelman makes a compromise between both accounts by visually interweaving personal memory and documented history in the same space. He includes a frame illustrating prisoners marching out of the gates — one with the orchestra and one without (see fig. 8). Instead of attempting to resolve the contradictions between personal memory and historical fact, Spiegelman foregrounds them through this compromise. If Spiegelman removes the orchestra entirely, he would disparage

other survivors' narratives and experiences, but if he affirms the presence of the orchestra, he would undercut Vladek's experience and memory. Therefore, although Vladek retains the natural authority over his own past memories, Spiegelman possesses the narrative control and authority to mediate Vladek's narrative as he understands it. This instance demonstrates the fallibility of the memory and the power of the author-narrator to act as an authenticator.

Like Spiegelman, Bui draws conclusions on her own about what happened in the past. Bui uses her narrative authority to combine personal subjectivity and historical objectivity, creating a space where the sincerity of emotional subjectivity intersects with and impacts the truth value of recorded history to portray an authentic account. When BỐ tells Thi about living under the corrupt South Vietnamese government, he mentions that a general ordered soldiers to give him a haircut. This same general appears in the photo commonly known as "Saigon Execution," which shows him executing a Việt Cộng prisoner by shooting him in the head. This photo, which serves as evidence of South Vietnamese war crimes, won a Pulitzer Prize. However, BỐ tells Thi that the man the general executed had actually murdered an entire family. Although BỐ does not like the general due to their encounter, he defends the general. The fact that Bui declares BỐ as being contradictory shows that she is trying to simultaneously strengthen the narrative's claims to authenticity and add her own authorial perspective of the convoluted past. Furthermore, just like how Artie asks Vladek to draw a diagram in *Maus*, Thi asks BỐ to draw the little house that he used to live in with his grandparents. At this moment, BỐ figuratively supplants Bui as the artist-narrator of the text, but Bui ultimately uses her authority to include her own modified version of BỐ's drawing in the text. Thus, BỐ's story is no longer the same. It has changed and has become a new story belonging to Bui. The fact that both Spiegelman and Bui use their own drawings instead of inserting their parents' drawings which could have served as authenticating artifacts shows that they wanted to assert their authority over the texts. They wanted to show that the texts



are not just their parents' stories, but also their own authentic perspectives of those stories.

Postmemory retains the story of the first generation, but from the standpoint of the second generation's consciousness. The effort to recall the parents' past, then, is creative; it is a process of mediation and imagination carried out with sincere motives. Spiegelman and Bui do not have an appropriative attitude when representing their parents' traumatic memories. Instead of adopting their parents' experiences and memories as their own, Spiegelman and Bui combine the ontological difference between their parents' personal reality and the historical reality. They do not appropriate their parents' experiences or improperly over-identify with them, but they respond to their parents' experiences and memories through their creative processes. Their texts are postmemorial because they present imagined reconstruction of their parents' stories which can be considered as affective authenticity. Postmemory is not about telling the parents' stories but is about telling how the children imagine their parents' stories. Although the rhetoric of transmission can lead to a slippery slope of appropriation of trauma and memory, Spiegelman and Bui do not appropriate their parents' experiences since they try to understand and empathize with their parents' memories instead of internalizing them as their own.<sup>19</sup>

### 5.3 *Postmemorial Working Through*

Although Spiegelman and Bui employ literary and imaginary approach to work through their postmemories, their postmemorial working through remains an unfinished process full of loose ends. As LaCapra stated, working through cannot be fully achieved since it is impossible to "transcend the past" (LaCapra 148). Therefore, the creation of graphic memoirs cannot be expected to complete the process of working through postmemories, if

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<sup>19</sup> This conclusion is indebted to Hirsch's theorization of a non-appropriative identification based on Kaja Silverman's concept of the heteropathic process of identification. This concept refers to "aligning the 'not-me' with the 'me' without interiorizing it" (Hirsch, *Generation* 85).

such resolution is even possible. However, working through should enable the individual to distinguish between the experience that overwhelmed him or her and his or her present life.

For Spiegelman/Artie, the closer he gets to the source of his search for a resolution of his postmemory, the more he feels dissatisfied.<sup>20</sup> This is evident when Artie, bombarded by reporters after his success with the first volume of *Maus*, regresses to his childlike proportion and cries out, “I want . . . ABSOLUTION. No . . . No . . . I want . . . I want . . . my MOMMY!” (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 42). However, he is aware that these goals can never reach fruition. Moreover, writing and drawing seem to provide minimal relief for Spiegelman/Artie. When confronted by a reporter’s questioning, “Could you tell our audience if drawing MAUS was cathartic? Do you feel better now?” (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 42), Spiegelman, still wearing a mask and in the form of a child, offers no answer. Instead, he continues to cry loudly. In addition, the next scene shows Spiegelman/Artie visiting his shrink Pavel, implying that Spiegelman/Artie seeks some sort of emotional relief. These instances suggest that writing the graphic memoir has not allowed Spiegelman/Artie to work through his postmemory. Thus, despite the interviews with his father and his writing and drawing, Spiegelman/Artie is unable to fully resolve his postmemory.

The lack of closure in the ending of the graphic memoir also indicates that Spiegelman gave up on working through his postmemory. On the final page of *Maus II*, Vladek tells Artie about Anja and his reunion and states that “More I don’t need to tell you. We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after” (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 136). Shortly after, when Vladek tells Artie to turn off the tape recorder and gets ready to sleep, he mistakenly calls Artie by his brother’s name. This misrecognition suggests for one last time that Vladek and Artie’s present continues to be held captive by the former’s traumatic past.

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<sup>20</sup> Spiegelman is again wearing the mask of the character here.

Underneath this panel, Spiegelman depicts a tombstone, inscribed with his parents' names and their dates of birth and death. Below the tombstone is Spiegelman's printed signature with the dates 1978-1991, the years he worked on the *Maus* volumes. The dates on the tombstone remind the readers that there was no "happy ever after" since Anja committed suicide and Vladek remained haunted by his past until he died. Furthermore, Spiegelman's reason for adding his signature and the years he began and completed *Maus* can be analyzed in two different ways. On one hand, he may be claiming that he is ready to move on. Since he spent thirteen years to work through his postmemory, he must have found some sort of catharsis and relief. On the other hand, it can be assumed that he simply gave up trying to work through his postmemory because even though he spent thirteen years to attain closure, at the end of the day, he failed. This second reason is more likely considering the fact that Spiegelman adds the panel of his father mistaking Artie for Richieu in the last page. Although unlikely, perhaps Spiegelman do attain some kind of fulfillment from creating his graphic memoir. Either way, the answer to the question of whether his postmemorial working through is successful or not remains elusive but leans more towards no.

In *The Best We Could Do*, Bui appears to be more successful in her postmemorial working through than Spiegelman. She is able to accept that fact that "maybe being [her parents'] child simply means [she] will always feel the weight of their past" (Bui 325). Moreover, by the end of the graphic memoir, she is able to look ahead and to some extent move on since she now sees her son as "a new life, bound with [hers] quite by coincidence, and [she] think[s] maybe he can be free" (Bui 329). Therefore, after hearing her parents' stories and writing about it, she decides to use her knowledge of her parents' pasts to better understand how she can turn the traumatic memories she inherited into something positive for the next generation. Thus, unlike Spiegelman, Bui ends her memoir on a more hopeful note that shows the possibility of a successful transition to a peaceful future. However, her

inability to completely work through postmemory is shown when she raises a question about the possibility of a third generation postmemory. Thi hopes that she will not “pass along some gene for sorrow or unintentionally inflict damage [she] could never undo” (Bui 327). This shows that although she has, to some extent, come to terms with her postmemory, she acknowledges the fact that there is still the possibility that her postmemory will pass on to her son, creating a kind of post-postmemory. Thus, Spiegelman and Bui undergo the process of working through their postmemories as they double back into their parents’ pasts. While Spiegelman and Bui are unable to fully work through their postmemories, Bui attains some form of closure. However, for both of them, pure working through remains an unachievable task because they are permanently bound to their parents and their parents’ pasts. Thus, postmemory can be assuaged, but it can never be expunged.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

At the outset, this thesis sought to understand the effects of trauma on survivors of war by relying on the psychoanalytic explanation of trauma and the unconscious mind as explicated by Freud and Caruth and on the psychological symptoms of trauma by using PTSD as a theoretical framework. The study progressed with the linking of trauma and traumatic memory to the many different features of postmemory evident within the chosen texts. These features include the various modes of transmissions such as verbal transmission, visual transmission, and transmission of silence as well as the effects of those transmissions on the second generation's search for selfhood and the yearning to work through.

*Maus* and *The Best We Could Do* repeatedly demonstrate how the first generation's traumatic memories of the magnitude represented can never be fully resolved. The first generation's present continues to be haunted by the traumatic events of the past. Their repetition or reliving of the trauma manifests in the form of various PTSD symptoms. Although they act out their trauma, they fail to work through it. This failure causes the responsibility of working through to pass onto their children who seek to come to terms with their parents' pasts. For the children of survivors, fragments of their parents' traumatic memories that have been passed down constitute the foundation for their postmemory. Despite their difference in experience and approach, Spiegelman/Artie and Bui/Thi are subjects of postmemory because even though they have never directly experienced the pain and suffering of the previous generation, the memories of these experiences have been so deeply and affectively transmitted to them through stories, photographs, silences, etc. Therefore, they create the graphic memoirs to work through their postmemories, more specifically, to come to terms with their own identities and to understand their parents' pasts without appropriating the latter's memories.

In order to bridge the epistemological, temporal, and spatial distance between their parents and themselves, Spiegelman and Bui use their imagination to add to their parents' memories when they lack information. This allows their graphic memoirs to offer a fascinating forum for examining the ethics of representation. Moreover, Spiegelman and Bui's writings and drawings are characterized both by the acknowledgment of the inability to fully comprehend the traumatic events and the exploration of the narrative's therapeutic potential for working through postmemory. Postmemorial work is thus a space in which the writers, children of survivors in this case, explore their own imagination of their parents' traumatic memories while trying to come to terms with the constant presence of the past. It must be noted that familial postmemory is not a direct transmission of experiential baggage from one generation to the next. It is the process through which the stories of the first generation are heard. In hearing these stories with sympathy and empathy, Spiegelman and Bui integrate them into their creative works without compromising the integrity of their parents' experiences and memories in the process. Thus, Spiegelman and Bui feel the need to engage with the traumatic memories of their parents which have turned into their very own postmemories. They attempt to work through their postmemories by creating their graphic memoirs. However, even after creating their oeuvres, they are never able to fully work through because their affective connection to the convoluted pasts of their parents remains, inextricable as a shadow.

Here, it is necessary to return to the epigraph to this thesis. The title of this thesis "Unfinished Processes" is inspired by the poem in the epigraph called "Unfinished Business," written by Holocaust survivor Primo Levi. In the poem, the poetic persona feels the responsibility to write and bear witness in order to achieve emotional relief for himself and his "people." However, he is aware that this task is eternally out of reach, and therefore he understands that his working through to alleviate "pain and fear" or trauma would always

remain incomplete. This poem can be connected not just to the first generation survivors like Levi and the parents in *Maus* and *The Best We Could* who were unable to work through their trauma but also to the second generation members like Spiegelman and Bui who were unable to work through their postmemories. To recapitulate, through the analysis of the chosen texts, this thesis has found that both trauma and postmemory defy closure. Both the processes of acting out and working through remain unfinished.

*Maus* and *The Best We Could Do* provide valuable opportunity to explore the concepts of trauma and familial postmemory. Since both trauma and memory studies are continuously expanding multidisciplinary fields, further careful and comprehensive analysis of first, second, and even third generation literature as well as literature dealing with affiliative postmemory is required to understand the effects and mechanisms of trauma and postmemory.

## Appendix A: *Maus*



Fig. 1. Vlodek's serial number tattooed on his forearm.



Fig. 2. Artie's legs overlapping the frame that depicts the past.



Time flies...



Fig. 3. Time flies.



Fig. 4. Four Jewish girls hanged.



Fig. 5. Photo of young Spiegelman with his mother Anja.

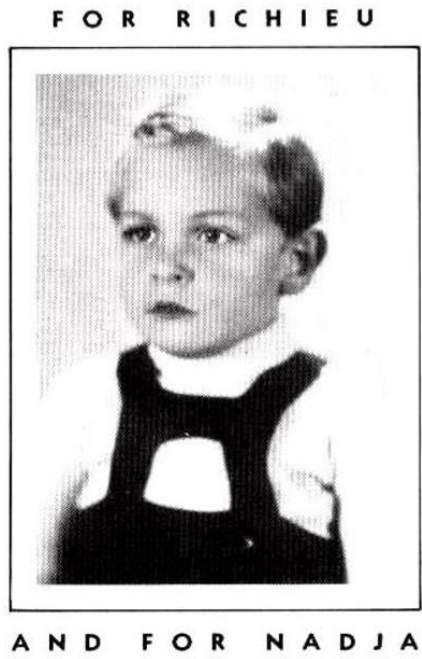


Fig. 6. Richieu's photo in the dedication page of *Maus II*.



Fig. 7. Vladek's souvenir photo.



Fig. 8. One frame with the orchestra and one without.

Appendix B: *The Best We Could Do*



Fig. 9. Mã in the past and the present.



Fig. 10. Thi and her siblings, dead and alive.



Fig. 11. Thi interviewing Má.



Fig. 12. Thi and Bô at four different periods in their lives.

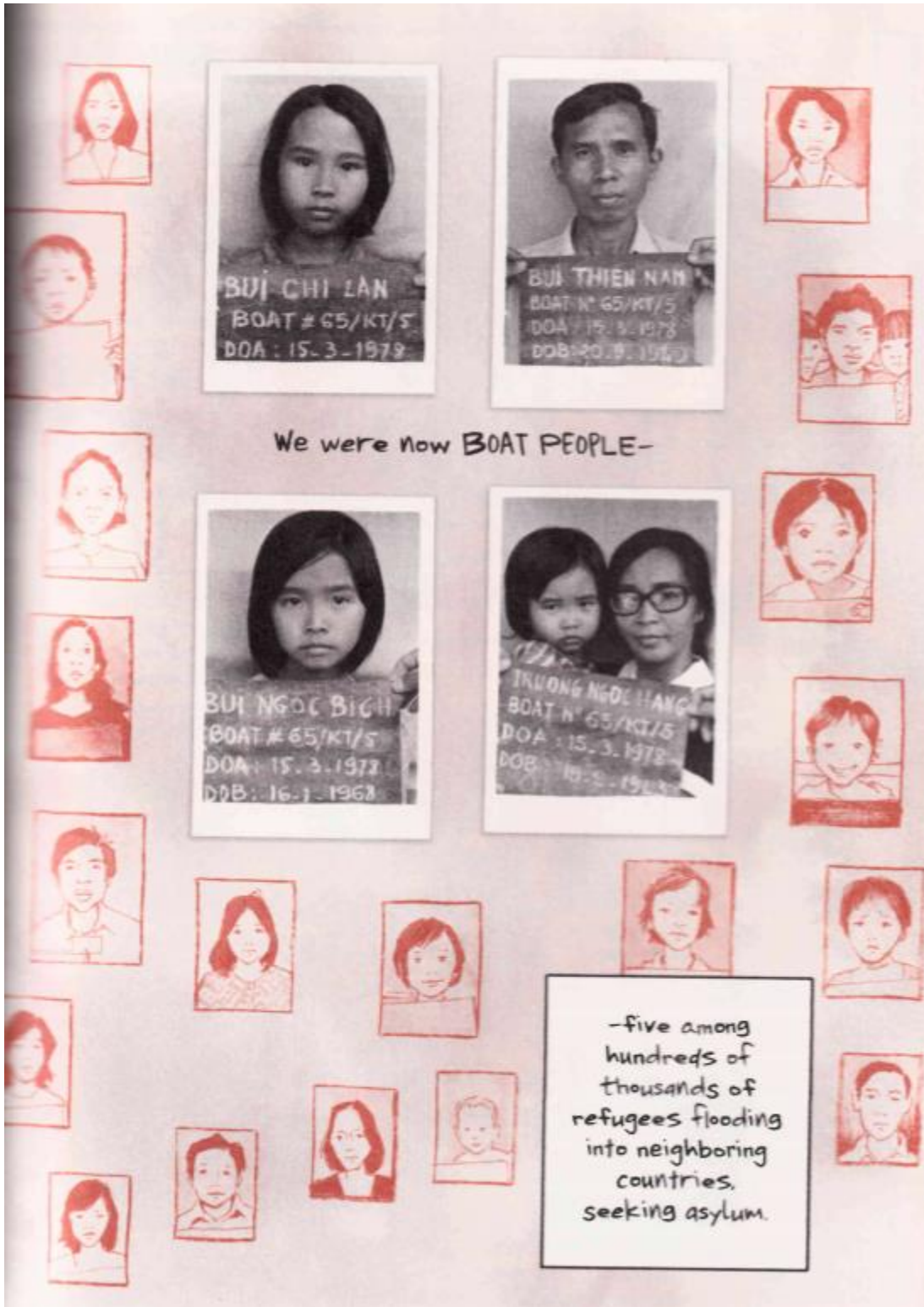


Fig. 13. ID pictures of Bui and her family taken at the refugee camp in Malaysia.





Fig. 14. Thi with a Vietnam-shaped hole where her chest is supposed to be.

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