

Mapping Memory in Tran's Vietnamerica

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Mary Goodwin,

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Abstract: In her article "Mapping Memory in Tran's *Vietnamerica*" Mary Goodwin explores the use of maps, landscape paintings, and other topographic images in Gia-Bao Tran's graphic memoir chronicling the "postmemory" of the US-American son of wartime refugees. Tran's family immigrated to the United States in 1975 following the fall of Saigon. Tran knew nothing of his parents' hardships and struggle to escape Vietnam until he returned for relatives' funerals in his 20s. Similar to Spiegelman's *Maus*, *Vietnamerica* is a mixed-media memoir containing photographs, maps, and comics in various styles. Following Hirsch's lead in demonstrating the special historical value of photographs in *Maus*, Goodwin argues for the unique value of the maps and landscape visuals Tran uses to relate Vietnam's history and his family's experiences. The medium of the graphic novel presents its own challenges as auto/biography and historical record and topographic images introduce a complication in juxtaposing the "real" public world with the personal and individual. Thus *Vietamerica* becomes an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of perspective on a multi-dimensional history of war, exile, and personal struggles to come to terms with cultural and familial identity.

Mary GOODWIN

Mapping Memory in Tran's *Vietnamerica*

In her study on Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marianne Hirsch demonstrated how different visual elements within a graphic memoir influence the construction of memory and "postmemory" in life-writing. In highlighting Spiegelman's insertion of "real" family photographs into his graphic memoir, Hirsch pointed out that "different media – comics, photographs, narrative, and testimony – can interact with each other to produce a more permeable and multiple text" ("Family Pictures" 11). Hirsch argues that "photography is precisely the medium connecting memory and post-memory" (9) in its ability to hover "between life and death" (6-7) and that Spiegelman's narrative serves to "eradicate any clear-cut distinction between the documentary and the aesthetic" (11). I follow Hirsch's lead in examining various visual elements within a graphic narrative, in particular maps and other representations of geography, topography, and landscape, in *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* (2010), a graphic memoir by Vietnamese American author and artist Gia-Bao (GB) Tran. Tran's narrative explores the personal and cultural identity of the US-American son of wartime refugees for whom his family's past was literally a blank slate. Tran's parents and siblings immigrated to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Born and raised in the United States, Tran knew nothing of his family's history or struggle to escape Vietnam until he returned on a family visit in his 20s. Following this visit, Tran pieced together elements of his family's history from scraps of family lore and his own observations, creating in *Vietnamerica* a mosaic of the experiences of generations of his family in Vietnam's tumultuous twentieth century.

Tran's work is a spatially and temporally layered graphic memoir, with scenes from Vietnam over the century set alongside contemporary scenes of life in the United States for Vietnamese refugees and their children. In *Vietnamerica*, various comics styles, maps, photographs, and landscape paintings are assembled to construct a personal and national experience of history. Beginning with its title, Tran's *Vietnamerica* emphasizes the merging of national and personal experience in a global setting, with particular importance given to maps, borders, landscapes, geographic, and topographic features. Indeed, it is this focus on space and place, on geographic setting translated into visible history which distinguishes *Vietnamerica* from a graphic memoir such as *Maus*, which emphasizes the individual narratives of key characters over the background or setting. In *Vietnamerica*, different visual elements within a graphic narrative expand notions of personal and cultural history, of memory itself, with topographical renderings of real places as well as "mind maps," buried histories which emerge in visual renderings. Like comics, maps present challenges to readers accustomed to traditional texts; these hybrid texts are syntheses of word and image, in Spiegelman's term, "co-mix" or "words and pictures that tell a story" (*Comix* 174). In reading a graphic narrative or a map, the eye behaves differently than it does with a traditional text; settling randomly on the page, it seeks a focal point. Images and text here have a value relative only to one's own position, not an absolute importance, unlike in a text composed entirely of words where reading follows a linear order, from first word to last, first chapter to last, and so on. With a map, readers may attempt to determine where from that point plot is a route and travel the visual and metaphorical distance of a map not confined to a fixed route or trajectory as might be unavoidable in a narrative composed solely of words.

Temporality is likewise dealt with differently in graphic narratives and maps than in traditional texts. Comics may have a plot and timeline as found in traditional texts, but different moments may be juxtaposed in the same or proximal frames, in a flashback or flash forward. A map meanwhile seems a static text, a slice of time in a plane of space; its value is practical in its apparently objective and fixed description of borders, resources, geographic features, distances. As Phillip Muehrcke and Juliana Muehrcke point out, "It is commonly recognized that conventional maps are inherently static devices" (334). However, a map can be seen as narrative if compared to other maps of the same space across time, as borders and territory and city names change and countries and territories emerge, merge, or are destroyed, and unknown areas are explored and mapped. Seen thus as spatial and temporal narratives, maps can be used to trace and illuminate historical developments (see, e.g., Abu Baker), but as Hugo Frey and Benjamin Noys point out, maps have not always been considered worthy of cultural analysis or reliable representations of history (255). It is commonly acknowledged that "no map may be completely 'true' – it must always sacrifice truth in one dimension to show truth in another" (Muehrcke and Muehrcke 329). Further, in his *Maps and History* Jeremy Black notes that the use of maps as historical data is problematic even among historians, with geography often regarded as mere background to historical events. The value of comics as objective historical record has likewise been a matter of debate, with the presumption that the comic medium *ipso facto* connotes fiction. Spiegelman, fearing the consequences of categorizing *Maus* as fiction, requested that *The New York Times* move his work from the fiction category to non-fiction on its best-seller list, while in awarding a Special Award in Letters prize to *Maus* in 1992, the Pulitzer committee avoided the issue (see Spiegelman, *MetaMAUS* 150; Fischer and Fischer 230).

Hirsch claims a special historical value for the photographs that appear in *Maus*, writing that they "connect the two levels of Spiegelman's text, the past and the present ... and are documents both of memory (the survivor's) and of what I would like to call postmemory (that of the child of the survivor whose life is dominated by memories of what preceded his/her birth)" ("Family Pictures" 8). In my discussion of the visual elements which make up *Vietnamerica*, I suggest that the maps, landscapes, and other topographic images which appear in Tran's graphic memoir have an importance similar to that assigned by Hirsch to the family photographs in *Maus*. If not precisely situated between life and death, these images certainly occupy a place between past and present and also between objective

historical fact and creative projection; they are the collaborative product of intention and representation. As a record, the map is less personal than a photograph, having more to do with broad swathes of space, movement of populations, and national identities. Yet maps, like landscape paintings, represent a particular version of reality by individuals who select, and omit, data in producing the image.

Vietnamerica is a graphic journey from the United States to Vietnam and back again with numerous trips within Vietnam itself set within a trip Tran takes with parents to Vietnam in 2006 after the death of his grandparents. Tran's stand-in, a narrator referred to as "GB" absorbs these trips in time as his mother and other relatives recount the old days under French rule and then under the US-American occupation. The maps which appear in *Vietnamerica* incorporate factual and objective information (geography, borders, distances and so on) within a personal narrative of shifting and subjective value, in which GB makes discoveries about a past in which he had not previously shown interest. *Vietnamerica* includes maps of landscapes and topographic features in wilderness and urban settings, with blank suburban US-American neighborhoods, airports east and west, and small towns and rural scenes in Vietnam which transform over time. But these changes are not recorded chronologically as Tran's memoir veers among several levels of flashback including flashbacks within flashbacks for some of the older characters. There is a stunning map of postwar Vietnam shaped into a scar-like trench which vomits forth thousands of refugees clawing at the air and surrounding water desperate for escape. There is also a mind map of the United States that records the Vietnamese refugee's perception of his new home, a large blank open space with only a few points identified on the east and west coasts marking where family members have scattered.

Visual representations of landscape and topography in *Vietnamerica* include paintings by GB's father, Tri Huu Tran, who had been an up-and-coming artist in Vietnam before he fled at the fall of the South. Tri Huu Tran's "French impressionist-styled, romanticized Vietnamese landscapes" (24) were exhibited in a major gallery show to great enthusiasm shortly before the family fled. In *Vietnamerica*, one of Tri Huu's paintings appears during a visit to the Saigon home of the second wife of Tri Huu's father, Huu Nghiep, where it stands out as a splash of sea-green landscape and hazy palm trees against the room's cold grey walls (22-23). Other interpretations of space and the historical record in *Vietnamerica* include mind maps, which like other maps are "a means to structure and store knowledge" (Tuan, "Images" 210) and that document mental processes or flashbacks in a visual and spatial representation, often accompanying moments of crisis and decision among the characters, mostly GB's relatives. The various visual elements of *Vietnamerica* contribute to GB's "postmemory" of Vietnam and his family's experience over the decades there. Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" ("The Generation" 103). The issue of postmemory is complicated in *Vietnamerica* by GB's need to come to terms with multiple stories in reconstructing the history of his family's experience. Moreover, that narrative is intertwined not only with personal crises but also with the wartime experience of entire nations and the aftermath of those wars. The father-son relationship in *Vietnamerica* is also complicated by issues of repression and by the role of the artist in representing history. While GB cannot be said to be dominated by the traumatic past of his relatives, his father had sought to bury his past, including his own ambitions as a painter.

In defining the map, geographer Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes between the "narrow" view among historians of cartography that finds "faithfulness to the earth's surface" is the most important quality of a map, and the "liberal" perspective, which "regards a map as any attempt to picture the spatial qualities of the world, actual or imagined" ("Charting" 26). In *Vietnamerica* Tran makes use of both of these definitions of maps and renderings of geography and charts his own life story in maps and landscapes of the parallel histories of the United States and Vietnam. He maps these spheres out along two axes, over space and time as he covers the past and present, war and peace, in both places. Here, "factual" and apparently static maps are embedded in the relatively fantastic and "unreal" medium of the comic strip. Ultimately, a new form of life writing emerges which results from the historical record of successive wars, internal and external immigration, resettlement, and numerous return voyages, set amid visual representations of topography and landscape that change with the sentimental, personal narratives of life experience.

The first depiction of topography in *Vietnamerica* are scenes from the perspective of passengers on a plane, as GB travels as a young adult from the United States to Vietnam with his parents in 2006 for his grandparents' funerals, while his parents remember the same trip in the opposite direction some thirty years earlier on 25 April 1975. The earlier trip is set in black against a red sky; on GB's later trip, however, the sky is empty and white. On the outer corners of the two-page image there are two small images of planes flying in opposite directions. The scene below is a continuous cityscape with a few recognizable structures like the Golden Gate Bridge which merges in a seamless cityscape into Vietnamese urban structures. Against a bland, neutral background, the skyscrapers and bridges in one sector of the frame give way to lower buildings and coconut trees in another section of the frame. There is no obvious change in color or major detail to denote the passage from one place to another; the structures all seem part of the same place, a continuous topography without differentiation (6-7). In Tran's memoir, the contrasts between West and East become more marked, culminating in the image of a tiny plane flying between Vietnam and the United States attempting to drag the two nations together, like sections of fabric (244). A pattern emerges as the same scenes are revisited and revised by GB/Tran. The same scene or map is revised over several iterations, and the images that emerge by the end have changed significantly, shaped with empathy and understanding as GB learns more about his family's history and absorbs their memories—and indeed, spatial experiences and perceptions of place.

The urban scenes in *Vietnamerica* from New York to Saigon are central to the comparisons GB makes between Vietnam and the United States. Before traveling to Vietnam with his parents, GB had been living in New York. On the phone with his mother, he dismisses his mother's cautions to bring antiseptic hand cleaner and earplugs to Vietnam; after all, he lives in New York, which is "not exactly the cleanest or quietest place on Earth" (49). But the New York outside his apartment is a silent study in blue, black, and grey, a ghost town without light or sound. This grim urban vision of empty streets stands in contrast to the brilliant and chaotic streets of Saigon which erupt into view a few pages later. GB exits the shadow of New York and re-appears in the middle of a Saigon street, his shock and awe registered in the dizzy rings of his eyes, amid the smoking bustle and flaming chaos of the Vietnamese city. Lit up in red and yellow, GB stands transfixed amid the vehicles, the clamor, and the mosquitoes. Modern, urban Vietnam is clearly not what he had expected. His "map" has already begun to shift away from what he had imagined that his ancestral home would look like from the serene heights of the airplane (50-51). Similarly, GB's parents are forced to revise the "map" of Vietnam they have carried back with them as they experience disorientation and culture shock on the same chaotic street where their son finds himself a decade later. In 1994, when GB was in high school, his parents made their first trip back since fleeing to the United States. GB is shown as a child sitting on the couch in a suburban neighborhood, playing violent video games on the television. Absorbed in his game and pleading schoolwork, he refuses to go back with them: "That doesn't sound like a fun trip to me" (182). The irony is that Vietnam itself proves much more exciting and action-packed than GB's games, which seem to represent the manufactured excitement available to children who experience life remotely. Through material and spatial contrasts between past and present, GB's parents' first return is immersed in emotional context. Passing the McDonald's restaurants and a Hilton hotel under construction, they hunt for the little house they had lived in twenty years earlier (202-03). They find their little old house stuck between two tall modern buildings and their sadness is registered in grey cross-hatched panels empty of dialogue (204). In this scene, GB's parents appear in parallel panels with older and younger versions of themselves looking at the same place, the past and present appearing simultaneously both of Vietnam and of GB's family.

In these layered cityscapes we see the living connection between a picture of a place and its emotional resonance, despite attempts by both GB and his father to dismiss or resist it. At the beginning of his trip back, Tri Huu tells his old friend Do, "I didn't come here to be nostalgic ... It's in the past. What do I care?" (53). A few pages later, however, Tri Huu is overcome with nostalgia and enthusiastically shows GB around to the places he knew as a child. This time, it is GB's turn to echo his father's earlier lack of interest: "It's in the past. What do I care?" (65). These parallel responses show a relationship between the past and present by means of the medium of place. Initially, both GB and his father resist the pull of the past dismissing it as irrelevant to their current lives. However, as they become immersed in scenes and places once significant, the past begins to exert an irresistible force on them and they respond by attempting to reconstruct memories, but while for Tri Huu this means memory of real experience, for GB it is the postmemory of his family's experiences. Similarly, in the scenes depicting his family's history in rural Vietnam, Tran washes these panels in emotional context. An early scene of Langson, a village in northern Vietnam where Tri Huu Tran's family lived during the French occupation, is depicted in shaggy, unfinished-looking sketches as remote and mountainous: "Langson's isolation and ruggedness made it a perfect base of operations for the Vietminh. And no matter how much the French bombed, its beauty survived" (32). In a later depiction of Langson Tran depicts his father's family's migration from Langson to the southern seaside village of Vungtau on a road overwritten with the suffering of displaced persons (124-25). On the top two-thirds of the two-page image, the physical effort of these internal refugees is detailed, with bare feet over rocky roads. The lower third of the spread shows the splendid, empty beach area of Vungtau that awaits the refugees, now only three tiny figures standing in a corner of the landscape, looking out to sea. This layered scene of countryside as the backdrop to human travail is the visualization of GB's (and Tran's) developing postmemory, images which gradually emerge from blank spaces and unfinished sketches into a narrative of effort and struggle: Space over time, inscribed with stories and what Rocio Davis calls "a heightened degree of subjectivity, the interweaving of story and its attendant feelings" (3).

Two other depictions of topography which reflect historical developments and the human position in the midst of these developments include a scene illustrating the banishment of intellectuals to remote areas of Vietnam following the North's victory over the South. Against looming black mountains and the forbidding reaches of the far north, tiny trucks can be seen that apparently are carrying away Tri Huu's friend Do and others of the intellectual class, with a small box of text stating "the new regime's biggest threat – doctors, officers, politicians, and scholars – people like Do – were considered dangerous. The smarter you were, the farther away they took you" (145). Another significant landscape appears later as the war ends: a sea of cross-hatches stretching across two pages forms a dark seaside town, with dark indistinct structures and no lights or human figures in view. In a corner at the bottom left, there is one small balloon stating, "The Vietnam war is finished," in tiny text (223-24). In both examples, darkness overwhelms a featureless scene, seeming to imply that although these moments will have enormous consequences, everyone is yet in the dark as to what is happening. The war's-end scene is reminiscent of Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, another landscape painting in which the great moment – a boy falling from the sky – is depicted as a small and insignificant fleck in the background irrelevant to the daily lives of ordinary people. One of the most striking maps in the memoir is of post-war Vietnam depicted as a trench dug in the outline of the country and from out of the southern reaches of this scar-like hole innumerable people are desperate to escape, clawing toward boats on one side and reaching for Cambodia on the other (158). North of Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand are blank spaces in fading lines, mere names etched in military stencil. Vietnam itself is not named: it is just a trench-scar dug in the shape of the country, a site of war teem-

ing with terrified people. The map derives its visceral power from its graphic fusion of human experience with geographical materiality.

Among the Vietnamese topographies in Tran's memoir is a group of landscape paintings painted by GB's father, Tri Huu Tran, which highlight historical changes in the country. Tri Huu and his mother Le Nhi had been abandoned by his father, Huu Nghiep, a Vietminh fighter first against the French and then against the US-Americans and who at his death was honored as a revolutionary hero by the communists. Tri Huu had not kept in touch with Huu Nghiep's second wife who lives alone following her husband's death in a stylish, but cold apartment in Saigon. However, she has preserved some of Tri Huu's paintings from 1972 which stand out in their lush blues and greens and rough palm trees against the gray walls (16). Tri Huu's landscapes, described as "French-impressionist inspired," are the artist's interpretation of reality, romantic images of a Vietnam past and its colonial legacy which creates a vivid contrast, visually and narratively, in the cold, sterile abode of a Communist hero. The inclusion of Tri Huu's landscape paintings also highlights the historical changes in Vietnam and its French occupation period. As Harriet Earle points out, Tran uses a "ligne claire" comics style to depict the "French" period of Tri Huu Tran's life, when he was married to a Frenchwoman and had two children with her, Lisa and Manny, half siblings to GB (<<http://doi.org/10.5334/cg.at>>). The French wife later left him and the children and Tri Huu married Dzung Chung Tran who would become the mother of GB. In *Vietnamerica* there are also references to Hergé's *Les Aventures de Tintin* drawn in ligne claire style, which, like Tri Huu's French impressionist-inspired watercolors, allude to the impact of the French colonial presence on Vietnamese history.

Vietnamese artistic identity is not the only identity reflected in the various visual elements in *Vietnamerica*. In the depiction of historical and personal changes, and movement in space over time, art and history interact and reinforce each other in this memoir as gauges of human experience. The different modes of art represented in *Vietnamerica*: from the maps and cityscapes to the Ligne Claire flashbacks and landscape paintings, from the Communist-inspired poster art of big bold workers with eyes raised to the future to the photographs of Tran's own family members, visual style is both part of GB's family's own history and legacy and of the history of Vietnam itself. Tri Huu's paintings capture a kind of sunlit morning in Vietnam, a paradise untouched by the greater world, by war or suffering. The first time Tri Huu's paintings appear in the narrative, however, they are shown in black and white, early efforts from the days when he was living in seaside Vungtau and teaching French (130). Later, when his work is displayed at a gallery in Vietnam, the paintings appear in the graphic memoir as a wall of colorful images of Vungtau, which had been a kind of timeless paradise during the war years: "Because of its large American presence and strong defenses, Vungtau was unscathed during the war" (211). Finally, miraculously having survived the devastation of the war, one painting appears as a colorful contrast to the sterile, grey walls of his father's home. In the changing representation of these paintings and their precarious preservation we also are aware of the individual and subjective element in the perception of landscape.

The maps and landscapes of Vietnam in *Vietnamerica* are different from those of the United States where GB was born and raised and presumably knows much better than Vietnam. Indeed, the U.S. scenes are the least interesting elements of the work, both aesthetically and narratively, even in Tran's renderings of major US-American centers like New York City. The suburban U.S. neighborhood where GB's family lives has rows of identical and unremarkable houses against a blank sky: cookie-cutter regularity in a space empty of individuality or color. New York City is a dreary ghost town shaded grey and blue, also hardly inhabited (139). There is irony in this depiction of the United States, the land of immigrants and diversity, as a place lacking in "color," sound, flavor, human presence. Although a son born in the United States, GB does not seem to have powerful memories of his life there. By contrast, GB's Vietnam is alive with color and sound and human drama. Furthermore, in the most important contrast to the depictions of Vietnam, the images of the United States, unlike those of Vietnam, do not change over the space of the graphic memoir. The bland uniformity of U.S. neighborhoods and the empty blankness of public spaces like hospitals and airports remain the same from start to finish, while the Vietnamese "landscapes" grow increasingly complex over the course of the narrative. Further, the family's journey to the United States is told in several temporal layers starting from the beginning when Tri Huu Tran immigrates with his children Lisa and Manny and his second wife Dzung Chung Tran, a moment that GB does not witness as he is not yet born. The first map we see of the United States is from the point of view of GB's traditional Vietnamese parents in which the places are marked where GB and his siblings live after growing up and scattering across the country: California, New York, and Florida are the "Federation of Free States" where GB and his siblings live, the "Parent's Republic of Vietnam" is Arizona, and the rest of the United States is blacked out as "The Great Generational Divide." The oceans beyond U.S. borders are the "Sea of Cultural Loss" (97). Leaving Vietnam and making the long roundabout journey to the United States is told in a series of slices of scenes glimpsed from airplane doors: first the Philippines, then Guam, then San Diego, and finally South Carolina and a courtroom where they are welcomed as refugee residents (227). Each slice of the journey away from Vietnam is a reminder of how fragmented and incoherent the experience must have been for fleeing refugees; the perspective at each stopping point is that of a prisoner, looking out from behind bars at a severely restricted view, an ironic contradiction to the text in those slices ("You're safe now!" "Freedom." "Liberty" 227-28). The deadening uniformity of US-American suburban life rises up before the immigrants with its empty yellow sky and identical row houses along an empty yellow road. Under various stresses in the new place, GB's parents begin to bicker endlessly; their quarrels revisit "the same crap OVER and OVER again!" (139) from GB's point of view, a reminder of the "same crap over and over again" which constitutes these featureless neighborhoods. As the memoir deepens, the contrast between Vietnam and the United States grows more pronounced. In the beginning, we see GB on a plane traveling to Vietnam perceiving the ground beneath as a seamless

continuation from one place to the other. Later, however, two distinct "sides" – possibly land forms, or body parts, or pieces of fabric—are dragged together by an airplane, suggesting the strain and force needed to make the two sides meet, thus forming "Vietnamerica" (244). On each side are features of the family's experience in both places, with the sepia-toned left section engraved with the youthful experiences of Tri Huu and his family and the blue-toned right section containing "threads" of their life in the United States, two sections, which on the page are separated by a hazy sea of blue-white.

In addition to the maps of geography and landscapes, *Vietnamerica* contains numerous mind maps, a geography of memory used to diagram and organize information rather than space. On these mind maps, in turn, is imprinted the memory of actual geography, places, destinations. The mind maps in *Vietnamerica* are projected on different media – those of Tri Huu, GB's father – are mapped on smoke, while those of GB himself are mapped on his body, emphasizing the visceral connection between real and metaphorical space, and between place and history. GB's father "produces" numerous memory maps in his cigarette smoke, in particular when he tries to compartmentalize what he remembers or wants to remember of the traumatic past. In one example, he relates the history of Vietnam after the U.S. soldiers left, in which his grandfather has a stroke during a protest against the draconian rule imposed by the victorious Communists (56, 58). Later, after settling in Phoenix, GB's father is digging a hole in the family's backyard while another memory map swirls from his cigarette in which his complicated relationship to his past as an artist is highlighted. Although it is implied that Tri Huu has attempted to "bury" the past, including his career as an artist, it will not be suppressed. GB carries on his father's interests in his own illustrations and in his passion for comics, for example; these comic books are not "trash" to be thrown away (142). The medium of "smoke" of Tri Huu's memory maps is much less "solid" than that of GB's memory maps in which the experience of his family and their Vietnamese identity is actually written on his body. In his first trip to Vietnam, he tries a lot of unfamiliar food that upsets his digestive system; these various strange items are "mapped" as they wreak havoc in his stomach, the land of "Vietnamania" (63). A few pages later there appears a "map" of an upside-down figure – perhaps GB, or perhaps his father Tri Huu, perhaps even an outline of Vietnam itself – which shows family history diagrammed over the body with scenes from his father's own life, while a hazy image of another parent, perhaps Tri Huu's own father, stands in the background (66). This "body map" image follows the scenes in which Tri Huu, on his trip back, resists "nostalgia" until the irresistible force of place and memory drag him back in time to childhood. GB resists similarly the past but over the course of the narrative is made aware of how the past is not past: Vietnam's history and his family's experiences and memories are indeed imprinted on his body and embodied in his consciousness.

In conclusion, while visual and verbal collage including meticulously detailed family documents have been used by other graphic memoirists like Alison Bechdel and Marjane Satrapi to expand the expressive possibilities of life writing, in *Vietnamerica* the various visual elements, including landscape paintings and maps, offer new perspectives on the main auto/biographical narrative, demonstrating that the visual experience of place is a powerful gauge of memory, and, for later generations, a gauge of deepening immersion in the experience of postmemory. As Yi-Fu Tuan says of images and mental maps, "The fact that we never simply see what is before us differs only in degree from the fact that we can see 'in the mind's eye' what we have never actually seen" ("Images" 212). Events in *Vietnamerica* are related non-synchronously rather than in a linear fashion, with flashbacks revisited throughout the narrative by different characters. These memories are themselves embellished and extended with flashbacks-within-flashbacks. The various maps and landscapes reflect this development as well, with different iterations of place in different periods changing in subtle ways according to the experiences of the characters imagining these places. This visual evolution demonstrates the difference Pierre Nora notes between memory and history: "Memory is life... it remains in permanent evolution ... only accommodates those facts that suit it; history is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (8).

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