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REMEMBERING THE VIETNAM WAR IN GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1. A Few Remarks on Power, War and Comics in/and the USA.

"With great power comes great responsibility". With this motto (also known as the Peter Parker principle), popularized by *Spider-Man* comic books, writer-editor Stan Lee and writer-artist Steve Ditko made superheroes accountable for their actions and linked together the notions of power and responsibility. Even though in time this phrase has become a cliché, the accountability of the superhero had, according to the poet Gary Jackson (2010:74), the function of restoring the readers' "faith in the funny books". Indeed, as the scholar Bradford W. Wright (2001) noticed, this innovation (among others) helped the relaunch of Marvel's comics after the financial problems that the company suffered in 1957.

This catchphrase is particularly noteworthy not only because it allowed the revival of a genre, but also because it introduced an ethical dilemma about power. Indeed, the Peter Parker principle has never been more relevant than today. The interrelation of power and responsibility is particularly significant in post 9/11 America. As Andrew J. Bachevich argued,

> Today as never before in their history Americans are enthralled with military power. The global military supremacy that the United States presently enjoys — has become central to our national identity. More than America's matchless material abundance or even the effusions of its pop culture, the nation's arsenal of high-tech weaponry and the soldier who employ that arsenal have come to signify who we are and what we stand for (Bacevich, 2013[2005]:1).

The weaponization of the notion of responsibility to justify new military interventions intensified during George W. Bush presidency. In 2007, at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention he stated,

> If this story sounds familiar, it is – except for one thing. The enemy I have just described is not al Qaeda, and the attack is not 9/11, and the empire is not the radical caliphate envisioned by Osama bin Laden. Instead, what I've described is the war machine of Imperial Japan in the 1940s, its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, and its attempt to impose its empire throughout East Asia. Ultimately, the United States prevailed in World War II, and we have fought two more land wars in Asia. And many in this hall were veterans of those campaigns. Yet even the most optimistic among you probably would not have foreseen that the Japanese would transform themselves into one of America's strongest and most steadfast allies, or that the South Koreans would recover from enemy invasion to raise up one of the world's most powerful economies, or that Asia would pull itself out of poverty and hopelessness as it embraced markets and freedom. The lesson from Asia's development is that the heart's desire for liberty will not be denied (Bush, 2007: web).

In this speech the U.S. are established as the world's guarantor of freedom and its ideals are elevated to universal truths, valid for all times. America's (past and present) power is justified by its mission, which makes the U.S. responsible for the world security. It is worth mentioning that this certainty about history and the role of the US in bringing history to its predetermined path (America's evolving "Manifest Destiny") is here connected to America's military ascendency after World War II. Therefore, it is not surprising to find WWII echoes in post 9/11 presidential rhetoric. Indeed, Bush rhetoric reminds of Henry Luce's editorial, "The American Century" published on February 17, 1941. In this well-known editorial, Luce claimed, "We must undertake now to be the Good Samaritan of the entire world. It is the manifest duty of this country to undertake to feed all the people of the world who as a result of this worldwide collapse of civilization are hungry and destitute" (Luce, 1941:65). Hence, the aftermath of 9/11 revived America's global ambition and triggered a decade of costly foreign wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also revitalized the memories of past conflicts in which the U.S. had been engaged.

This process of revision of the past also affected pop culture. In response to the horrors of 9/11, comics reaffirmed nationalist values through an archeological recovery of World War II imagery. Comics dug into their past to reconstruct the meaning of the new traumatic experience. Captain America, the hero who punched Hitler in the face in 1941, was now digging through the rubble of the World Trade Center. Old comics were also evoked by one of the most critical graphic narrative about the event, Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004). Here the notions of power and responsibility are used to question America's (wrong)doing. The notion of responsibility is thus linked to the ability to respond. Equally important, America's past is not the only one to be scrutinized: Art Spiegelman also questions the *medium* he is using by problematizing the long-lasting complicity of U.S. main-stream media with the government imperialist projects.

If contemporary interventionist/revisionist graphic narratives have their roots in WWII propaganda comics, Art Spiegelman's work is indebted with Harvey Kurtzman's war comics. Indeed, in the 1950s, Kurtzman revolutionized the genre, using irony to question public euphemism (a technique also used in WWI and WWII novels and poems[1]). Like

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[1] The use of irony as an instrument to question the official rhetoric in WWI and WWII literature has been studied, among others, by Paul Fussel (1975; 1989).

Erich Maria Remarque, John Dos Passos, James Jones, Joseph Heller, and Kurt Vonnegut, Kurtzman showed that modern warfare is a slaughterhouse that annihilates guilty and innocents alike and that the military experience is a degrading one. Kurtzman's anti-war comics (as many others that would follow) do not address power solely as the ability to make war and destroy lives; but they also make a case for the power of critical thinking and its ability to challenge dangerous myths.

Even though this thesis follows different threads, a particular attention has been given to the diverse graphic recollections of the Vietnam War, as its memory is still relevant in contemporary America. It is a well-known fact that the Vietnam War divided American public opinion and that its memory has not yet coalesced into a unitarian narrative (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991; Turner, 2001[1996]; Sturken, 1997; Nguyen, 2016). Hence, the Vietnam War keeps on being evoked in public discourse (and pop culture) for different aims (Dittmar & Michaud, ed. 2000 [1990]). On the one hand, the 'Vietnam Syndrome' infected the American body politics making it hesitant to use troops abroad. Consequently, beginning with the Reagan era, one can observe an attempt to sanitize this memory. As a result, pop culture started depicting the army as a site of traditional values and virtues. The role of pop culture in the reshaping of national memory was also acknowledged by Reagan himself, who after the screening of *Rambo First Blood Part II* claimed, "Boy, after seeing 'Rambo' last night, I know what to do the next time this happens" (*Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1985: web).

This rhetoric proved successful as the military self-restraint stemmed from the Vietnam War gradually disappeared; not surprisingly, in 2003, the Bush administration was able to implement the doctrine of preventive war. On the other hand, the ghost of the Vietnam War has been evoked in time by war critics to question America's actions. Whereas WWII is traditionally memorialized as the 'good war', the Vietnam War is the 'dirty war'. Then, even though my work focuses mostly on the memory of the Vietnam War in graphic narrative, it inevitably also discusses the remembrance of WWII, as these two wars have been constructed as antithetical paradigms.

It is important to remark that, today, the Peter Parker principle does not resonate exclusively in its original American context, but globally. Second generation diasporic Vietnamese challenge the way America remembers those events. They use (graphic) narratives to recollect their family experience. As Marianne Hirsch (2012 [1997]; 2012)

and Alison Landsberg (2004) observed in their studies on "postmemory" and "prosthetic memory", graphic narratives allow the transmission across society of empathy for the traumatic experience of others. Hence, the public reconstruction of private memories aims to promote the understanding of past injustices, in turn generating solidarity, and encouraging the alliances among different marginalized groups. In this case, responsibility becomes public accountability. Here, power is not connected to the nation-state, but to the soft power of the chosen medium: these works remind the reader of the importance of storytelling in the popularization of traumatic events and in the creation of cultural memory and communities. Moreover, these graphic narratives engage with the notion of world literature as they supersede national memories, as well as situated memories. In fact, as Milan Kundera stated in a 2007 essay published in *The New Yorker*, "there are two basic contexts in which a work of art maybe placed: either in the history of its nation (we can call this the small context) or else in the supranational history of its art (the large context)" (Kundera, January 1, 2007: web).

Finally, one might consider the analysis of national mythmaking, memory, militarism, responsibly, and power via comics and graphic narratives as a trivialization of these subjects. On the contrary: not only the study of these media is at the core of an increasing number of university programs; but it is precisely this study that has opened up new theories to process literary and cultural phenomena today. I already mentioned the idea of "Postmemory" and "Prosthetic memory" rooted respectively in Marianne Hirsch's and Alison Landsberg's investigations of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*; similarly comics have prompted scholars to rediscuss narratological and semiotic taxonomies (Barbieri, 2019[1991]; Mikkonen, 2017) as this medium shows the narrative dimension of images and the visual dimension of narrative. As Marianne Hirsch (2010) discussed, advertisements, comics, visual artworks demand a new type of visual-verbal literacy that she defines as "biocular". The hybrid nature of the medium can create narrative but also impede it. Thus comics[2] is well suited for the representation of traumatic events. Even though trauma is by definition unrepresentable, it nonetheless asks to be represented and discussed. In her analysis of *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), Hirsch (2010:218)

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[2] As Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven, (2012: 175) discussed "As for any medium, such as film, it is now standard to treat comics as singular." Thus, the term comics is used as an uncountable noun and takes the singular when it refers to the medium. In contrast, comic appears as a countable noun when it refers to an individual comic strips or comic books.

comments, "Spiegelman's work is a mediation on such traumatic seeing – its wounding impact, its repetition, its resistance to narrative elaboration, its 'excessive expressivity.'" The visual language of comics provides the artist an opportunity to discuss the power of images while testing the limits of narrative and representation. Similarly, scholars are challenged to observe how the multimodality of comics affects the narration, and what images tell or refuse to tell. So, lightness does not necessarily translate into triviality. As Italo Calvino wrote in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1993[1988]),

> It is true that software cannot exercise its powers of lightness except through the weight of hardware. But it is software that gives the orders, acting on the outside world and on machines that exist only as functions of software and evolve so that they can work out ever more complex programs. The second industrial revolution, unlike the first, does not present us with such crushing images as rolling mills and molten steel, but with "bits" in a flow of information traveling along circuits in the form of electronic impulses. The iron machines still exist, but they obey the orders of weightless bits (Calvino, 1988: 12-13).

Consequently, one can consider pop culture as the electric impulses that allows the imagining of national and international identities. Pop culture is the software that makes cultural memory tangible. Indeed, memory cannot be observed in vitro, but only through cultural objects. Thus, comics can function as "memory mediators" (Assmann, 2002[1999]), preserving and promoting a certain reading of the past.

## 2. A Few Remarks on this Work.

The methods used in this thesis are principally those of literary criticism: close reading; historical contextualization; and the engagement with different critical theories (comics studies, memory studies, media studies, visual studies, American studies, and ethnic studies), therefore embracing an interdisciplinary approach. The use of close readings has the function of checking the legitimacy of textual claim and applying critical scrutiny to the content of the sources, be it primary and/or secondary. Textual claims should never be considered as self-evident or self-explanatory. If the engagement with the relevant work in field is necessary to not "reinventing the wheel" (Singer, 2018:30), close reading helps the analysis to stay close to the object of inquiry. It helps describe comics as they are and not as one would like them to be.

Historical contextualization is also used to situate the works that compose the corpus of analysis into a specific time and place to acknowledge the material and cultural change of each era. Given that past and present thematically hold together, this thesis adopts a

diachronic and philological approach to reconstruct the history of a genre, war comics. As Joseph Witek (1989:10) argued, "comic such as *Maus* and *American Splendor* did not arise ex nihilo or as high culture spawn of Roy Lichtenstein; they are the most recent and most culturally visible manifestations of a minor but long-established tradition." Then, to understand the present state of the art one must recuperate the history of medium.

This dissertation tries to include as many graphic narratives as possible in order to observe the elements of continuity, inquire the rhetorical function of these texts and start to outline an interpretative pattern. As James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (2012: 3, original emphasis) discussed, "*Narrative is somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something.*" Although there exist many theories on storytelling, this postulate in all its abstract generality provides an important input to investigate the rhetorical function of graphic narratives. While comics have gradually evolved from being mere instruments of propaganda (Bernays, 1928; Ellul, 1973[1965]; Jowett & O'Donnell, 1999; Murray, 2011; Scott, 2014) to becoming "memory projects" (Leavy, 2007), they retained their persuasive function. Indeed, according to Patricia Leavy (2007), memory projects are created when interested parties activate particular repositories of collective memory in order to bring certain aspects of the past into public eyes for political use.

It is worth remembering that the history of comics has been molded in dialogue with war. In their attempt to both mirror (even through distortion) the fear and aspiration operating within society and comment on current events, through time comics developed an uneasy symbiotic relationship with war. Indeed, conflict was one of the first subjects to be covered by this artistic form. This should not be considered surprising since comics emerged as an established medium during the late 1930s, a period characterized by great transformations for America. Whereas in those years the U.S. were still pressed by domestic economic problems, World War II would soon drag the nation out of the Great Depression making it a victorious and prosperous country. Comics witnessed and recorded the transformation of the United States into a great power that would not hesitate to use its newly acquired resources to maintain the peace it had fought to win. America would soon become a major player in global politics and economics. A dominance held also through the production (and exportation of) cultural products that promoted the "American way", a lifestyle used to justify America's current role as a defender of

freedom. Inevitably, the counterculture would promote new experimentations (in form and content) with the medium, which would lead almost two decades later to the creation of the graphic novel[3].

Even though graphic narratives have traditionally supported and reinforced conservative values, they also produced a space for the circulation of "counter-memories" (Lipsitz, 1990). Miné Okubo's (2014[1946]) *Citizen 13660* clearly provided an early example on how the medium could be used to raise awareness about social injustice. Whereas Miné Okubo denounced racial inequality within the US, contemporary Diasporic Southern Vietnamese graphic artists testify the birth of a new "global civil sphere" (Alexander, 2012). These texts ask the reader to not evaluate the event just on a local scale, but globally. The consequences of that war generated a diasporic movement, which allowed the formation of an extra-national network of stories which share a fair amount of intertextuality and similar patterns, which promote a global understanding of the event.

I have articulated the above in four chapters, conceiving the first three as instrumental to outline the complex interplay of historical, cultural and literary aspects that form the background against which diasporic memories of the Vietnam war, that form the focus of chapter four, are still being written.

**The first chapter ("Drafted Comics")** follows the development of the medium 'comics' in Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers, analyzing how mass culture helped consolidating a persuasive 'war mentality', also by using (ethnic) clichés. The chapter also reflects on the role that comics played in the creation of the myth of the 'good war'. During World War II, American intervention was justified as a defensive action aimed to protect civilization and freedom. This rhetoric was also used during the War in Korea,

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[3] According to Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey (2015), Graphic novel and comics can be differentiated on 4 different levels: form, content, publication format, production and distribution aspects. Graphic novelists tend to use a recognizable style, innovate the medium at the level of narrative by either refusing it (e.g., abstract comics) or emphasizing the role of the narrator (a marked feature in comics). Graphic novels are generally designed 'for adults' (not in a pornographic sense) and often adopts serious and realistic tones and feature (auto)biographical content. They are frequently conceived as one shot and published in book format, resembling a traditional novel (in size, cover, and numbers of pages). The distribution and publication of graphic novels often relies on the effort of small and independent publishers. Even though these different levels are useful to trace some distinctions between comics and graphic novel, they should not be interpreted as essential characteristics. One could easily provide a counter argument for each point on the list. Moreover, a neat distinction between comics and graphic novels has been rejected by both scholars (e.g. Charles Hatfield) and cartoonists (e.g. Art Spiegelman and Alan Moore).

even though dissenting voices started to emerge. **The second chapter ("Questioning the Good War Narrative")** shows how the 'god war' pattern became increasingly contested during the Vietnam War, following the questioning of the traditional "American values" promoted by the counterculture of the time. However, during the Reagan era, comics (like other pop culture artifacts) were rediscovered as a powerful medium to sanitize the controversial and divisive elements of that war. For instance, in many comics stories the veteran's sufferings were used to rehabilitate the Army image, claiming that America lost the war because of the lack of commitment and strategic errors of the previous government. **The third chapter** ("**Remembering the Vietnam War after the War on Terror**") explores how the narration (and memory) of the Vietnam War has changed after September 11, 2001. Following this traumatic event, comics would develop along two main directions: either they consolidated the project of revision started during the late 1980s, thus supporting a nationalist reading of the tragedy; or they engaged in a thoughtful analysis of the horror, also considering America's responsibility. **The fourth chapter ("Towards Ethical Forms of Remembering")** analyses some graphic memoirs written by diasporic Vietnamese graphic artists. This chapter intends to show how private memories are used to create empathy and generate solidarity towards the sufferings of others (*allyship*). By showing how war kept affecting the lives of the survivors and their descendants, these works testify that social injustice precedes the war and extends beyond American imperium. Graphic novels produced by Vietnamese American artists resonate with the works produced by other diasporic Vietnamese communities in France and Australia. This global network of memories exceeds the local and asks for a global accountability for those events. As Jeffrey C. Alexander discussed,

> Globalization refers to a process of space/time/meaning compression that it is going on. These expansions have not yet, by any means, created the basis for globality in the sense of a supra-national civil society, as the recent revival of nation-centered rhetorics and practices of national hegemony have demonstrated. Nonetheless, globalization is a new powerful social representation. It has performative force, and it has emerged for good sociological reasons. Even if sharply contested, the dream of cosmopolitan peace can never be entirely suppressed (Alexander, 2012:164-165).

So, these transnational memories have an important civic function as they raise awareness of the horrors of that war, as well as of the refugees' conditions and their lasting trauma; they provide the basis for rediscussing these themes on a global level. Even though this work traces the progressive formation of extra-national memories, these last considerations open up the opportunity for future discussions about the ethic dimension

of the new transnational trajectories of literature, that scholars have come to define as 'World Literature,' building upon Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur* (Benvenuti & Ceserani, 2012).

**CHAPTER 1: DRAFTED COMICS**

**1. (Proto)Comics as Premature Draftee**

In 1883, Joseph Pulitzer purchased the moribund *New York World*, and quickly experimented with new techniques and formats to attract a mass readership. He enlarged headlines from one-column stacked decks to full-page banners, distributed illustrations and photos across page one, added sections for women and sports, and among other innovations, he also introduced comic strips (Kaplan, 2008). He made his journal not only a vehicle of information, but also a source of entertainment. The editorial choice of introducing comic strips was inspired by how pictures pushed up the sales of books in the United States. Joseph Pulitzer assumed that visual elements could do the same for newspapers (Sabin, 2001:19).

Comics were a reaction to the development of other visual media which started to become culturally prominent in those years, increasingly occupying urban spaces. This was a period in which visual elements (e.g. adverts, posters, signs, films, photography, etc.) started to saturate the urban environment, as it became clear that images could function better as persuasive tools. As Marshall McLuhan illustrated in his book *The Mechanical Bride* (2002 [1951]), ads, comics, movie posters, and covers of magazines and books use a pervasive cluster of images to combine different meanings, which contribute to the creation of the "folklore of the industrial man". He maintains that this new form of folklore arises from "a sort of collective dream" (McLuhan, 2002 [1951]: v) where "one dream opens into another until reality and fantasy are made interchangeable" (McLuhan, 2002 [1951]:97). In McLuhan's opinion, media are constantly striving to control the "unconscious mind", but they are also "intimate revelations of the passions of the age" (McLuhan, 2002 [1951]:97).

Because of their hybrid nature that combines text and image, comics were able to adopt stylistic features originated in other media like movies and posters. As Christopher Murray (2011:7) argued, "The emerging triangulation of influences on comics (film, advertising, and propaganda) was, therefore, no accident because these were the dominant visual and rhetorical forces in America at that time". Hence, one should conceive comics as part of these cultural changes, a point of intersection between the tradition of print media and the emergence of new visual media.

In reporting war, press itself started to exploit the opportunity of displaying graphic information. As Hillary Chute (2016:11) observed,

> Hearst sent Frederic Remington to Cuba to sketch the rebellion against Spain's colonial rule. After Remington had telegraphed his boss in 1897, "Everything is quiet. There is no trouble here. There will be no war. I wish to return," Hearst is alleged to have instructed the artist, "Please remain. You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war." This famous exchange, first reported in 1901, and even referenced in Citizen Kane but never verified, has been recently debunked by Joseph Campbell; whether or not it happened, the sentiment it expresses is a valid and instructive description of the times and the importance of warfare for this emerging documentary medium.

In this early stage, comics were so entangled with this sensationalist coloring of the news that they even provided a name for this phenomenon, "yellow journalism". While in Western Europe the color "yellow" was a depreciating expression for cheap, popular, and sensationalist fiction (Kaplan, 2008), in New York City yellow had a more specific referent, Richard Felton Outcault's "Yellow Kid".

In 1895 the Yellow Kid, the first American comic character to regularly appear in a newspaper, premiered in Joseph Pulitzer's *The New York World*. The character created by Richard Felton Outcault was a prankish, bald child in a yellow nightshirt, living in a fictional urban environment named Hogan's Alley, which was also the early title of the comic strip. Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* was "a satire on urban slum life, peppered with ethnic slurs: the eponymous "kid" was a Chinese-looking urchin, and a kind of manic idiot savant" (Sabin, 2001:20). The use of the color yellow as a defining element of this popular character shows two important phenomena. First, one can see how comics language is entangled with printing technology advancements, as for the first time full-color reproductions were a possibility. Second, one can also notice how in comic strips color is socially connoted, as it may be used to create racially ambiguous characters for comedic purposes. Yet, it is important to remark that despite his "Asian" look, the Yellow Kid supposedly represented an Irish immigrant. The ethnic origins of the character became particularly relevant in the strip series in which the Yellow Kid travels around the World[4], "De land uv me ansessters ain't wot it's cracked up t' be an' I don't blame 'em fer gaw'n t' Noo Yaurk witch is sinch cumpaired wid Ireland" (Block & Outcault,

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[4] *Around the World with the Yellow Kid* was a series collaboratively written by Richard Felton Outcault and Rudolph Edgar Block. This full-page comic tableaux appeared weakly in Hearst's *American Humorist* in 1897 (from January to the end of May). It was a parody of the Grand Tour, which was narrated in many Anglo-American travel chronicles in the late eighteenth and mid nineteenth centuries. In this series, the Yellow Kid is not just a traveler narrating his impressions and experiences, but he also performs as a (war) correspondent. In an issue, the Yellow Kid even participated in the Greco-Turkish conflict (Meyer, 2019).

February 14, 1897). These lines are particularly revealing because, even though the Yellow Kid was a humorous strip, the reader can observe a concern for the immigrants' condition which goes beyond the mere reproduction of clichés. Yet, this statement has also the purpose of reinforcing the image of the U.S. as a land of opportunity.

The ethnic background for the Yellow Kid was first established by Outcault in June 1896, when he christened the unnamed vagabond and named him Mickey Dugan. However, "the attempt to categorize the Yellow Kid, to endow him with a name, and to gain control over him through the creation of a backstory, seemed to show little success. Mickey Dugan was (and still is) not remembered as Mickey Dugan but as the Yellow Kid" (Meyer, 2019: 83). Moreover, even with the knowledge of the character's ancestry, readers were still able to ascribe and project a non-Irish identity to this comic figure. This interpretation might have been fostered by the fact that in earlier episodes the character replicated stereotypical features associated with Asians. As Christina Meyer noticed in her book *Producing Mass Entertainment: The Serial Life of the Yellow Kid* (2019),

> In 'At the Circus in Hogan's Alley' (May 1895), the soon-to-be-popular Yellow Kid comic figure — not yet in his typical yellow nightgown — is endowed with highbrows and slanted eyes. In Outcault's 'The War Scare in Hogan's Alley' (March 1896), we see the Yellow Kid prominently located in the foreground of the page, and next to him two children hold up their fists; one of them is bald-headed and dressed in a long yellow shirt, while the other is dressed in a long blue shirt, has black pigtailed hair and carved eyebrows, and has fierce expression on his face. The kid in the yellow gown punches his counterpart, as if Outcault wanted to suggest that this kid punches his own mirror image from the early version.

The flatness of this character and his ambiguity (even from an ethnic/racial point of view) allowed the Yellow Kid to channel different projections and interpretations[5]. It is probably this malleability that invited readers to project their desires into the kid, ensuring his success and plurimedial proliferation[6].

Hence, color, line, and composition are not just mere visual components of art, but they bear with them social meaning and history. It is worth noting that the representations of the ethnic and racial "Other" through a stereotyped body date back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Gardner, 2010). However, as noted by Jared Gardner (2010:135), in the early years of the twentieth century "we begin to see more nuanced

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[5] The flatness and ambiguity of this character also allowed these strips to raise socially relevant concerns, while reinforcing existing (gender, racial, and ethnic) stereotypes, consolidating traditional values.

[6] This comic inspired adverts, toys, and even dance choreographies and musical compositions (Meyer, 2019).

and complex portrayals of racial and ethnic 'Others' in mainstream comics". He maintains that this perceptive subliminal complexity is mainly due to the formal properties of sequential comics, as a single-panel cartoon gag resists ambiguity, whereas juxtaposed panels ask the reader to actively engage with the text to reconstruct its meaning. Thus, comic strips open up new interpretative opportunities, as the reader may sympathize with a stereotyped character by reading its stories and adventures. Moreover, the change in the representation of minority groups was not only caused by the form *per se*, but also by the changing sociocultural context in which these strips started circulating. European immigrants played a major role in the formation of comics as cultural products. Indeed, many comics artists were of European origins.

Furthermore, immigrants did not only contribute actively to the development of the medium as creators, but they were also part of the audience that newspapers were trying to reach. This form of entertainment had also the function to secure a readership for both the newspaper and the advertisement contained in it. Therefore, comic strips became more sensitive the moment immigrants were recognized as potential consumers[7]. Of course, this does not imply that stereotyped representations suddenly disappeared, as popular culture tends to be quite conservative, yet we can see cracks in a system. Immigrants were particularly interested in those early strips because comics language was a captivating tool to educate themselves. Then, comic strips did not only function as forms of entertainment, but they were also invested with educational functions, teaching illiterate people how to read. Comics helped the naturalization process providing a sense of belonging and inclusion for different immigrant groups (Murray, 2011:11).

In 1896, a year after the first appearance of the Yellow Kid on *The New York World*, Outcault was hired away at a much higher salary by William Randolph Hearst to work for the *New York Journal*. Here he drew the Yellow Kid in a new full-page color strip[8].

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[7] We see a similar phenomenon in contemporary Disney movies. This company has become more sensitive towards Asia and Asians representation in its movies the moment it recognized the potential of the Chinese market. For example, the movie *Iron Man 3* toned down the villain Mandarin (which in his comic book version was influenced by the character of Fu Manchu), minimizing the racial stereotype, and making the character a puppet of sinister forces (Daniel, 2013). The relationship between market and representation has also been addressed in Yang et Al. (2012) *Shattered: The Asian American Comics Anthology: A Secret Identities Book*.

[8] Richard Outcault's (together with Edward Townsend) continued narrating the adventures of the Yellow Kid in the *McFadden's Row* series in Hearst's *Journal*. In the first episode of this series Outcault metanarratively acknowledges that the Yellow Kid and his friends now populated a different corner of New York, that is McFadden's Row.

Because of Outcault's failed attempt to copyright his creation, Pulitzer was able to hire George Luks to continue drawing the original version of the strip for *The New York World*[9]. Consequently, the Yellow Kid appeared simultaneously in two competing papers for about a year. As Chute observed (2016), the competition between Pulitzer and Hearst is well portrayed in a satirical cartoon created by the periodical *Vim* in 1898 (figure 1). This caricature criticizes both Pulitzer and Hearst by portraying them as the Yellow Kid, fighting over building blocks that together compose the star-spangled word "WAR". This powerful image merges two complementary phenomena. On the one hand, this image refers to the battle over the Yellow Kid. On the other hand, it shows how war becomes a commodity to be bought and sold, as the writings on Hearst's yellow nightshirt testify, "Say. This is my war. I bought and paid for it and if you don't stop bothering me about it. I will have you put off the – Earth – see!'". As Marshall McLuhan highlighted

> the headline is a primitive shout of rage, triumph, fear, or warning, and newspapers have thrived on wars ever since. And the newspapers, with two or three decks of headlines, has also become a major weapon […] the press used as a means of thrill and excitement produces a general emotional situation which leads to a crescendo, and crescendo calls for a catharsis- a blood-bath. […] Headlines mean street sales. It takes emotion to move merchandise. And wars and rumors of wars are the merchandise and also the emotion of popular press (McLuhan, 2002 [1951]:7).

Hence, it is no surprise that Pulitzer and Hearst's editorial war "led to actual war when their papers inflamed public outrage over what may be well have been accidental sinking of an American ship in Cuba" (Spiegelman, 2004: comic supplement). Indeed, the battleship *Maine* incident represents an early example of the power of the press to create propaganda. Yet as Moeller (1989: 69) discussed, "the Spanish-American War might well have been Hearst's and Pulitzer's crusade, but it was the 'people's war'. Propaganda campaign can only succeed if the time is ripe." These major daily newspapers created a war psychosis in the minds of American people by insinuating suspects about the mysterious sinking of the *Maine* in Havana harbor in 1898. Despite the lack of

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[9] Like Outcault, Luks acknowledges the existence of another Yellow Kid. However, he warns his reader that the original can only be found in Hogan's Alley, the place the kid belongs. As Christina Meyer discussed (2019:126), "Luks shifts the focus from the notion of stealing of intellectual property based on the idea of individual, genius creativity and single authorship to the lack of inventiveness of the rival newspaper — and implicitly of the artist, Outcault. Furthermore, Luks puts emphasis on the newspaper in which the Yellow Kid rose to fame and reached popularity and delineates the *World* as the legitimate owner of this product". Both *Hogan's Alley* and *McFadden's Row* rase question about authenticity and authorship. In both series the Yellow Kid is aware of his dissemination across different media and rival journals, breaking often the fourth wall.

information about the reasons behind the sinking, Hearst offered in his journal a reward for information about the responsible criminals while the paper headlines screamed for war (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1999:11). Yellow papers tended to erase the distinction between editorials and news.

As noted by Sabin (2001:20), "After 'the Yellow Kid', a fierce circulation war was initiated that used strips as weapon. Hundreds of strips made their appearance in papers all over the country, on a variety of humorous subjects, ranging from highbrow satire to dumb slapstick." The demand for cartoonists was so high that press barons had to fight to retain them. In this period, syndicates were created to supply the same strips to different newspapers all over the country. Some of the major artists that emerged in that period were Winsor McCay, Lyonel Feininger, and George Herriman. These early strips helped fixing a language and marked the entrance of this medium into the mass culture. Indeed, in this period the merchandising of comics characters started to become a popular phenomenon (Gordon, 1998; Witek, 1999).

It is of note that an artist like Art Spiegelman, who we might consider as a 'highbrow comics' creator (given his qualification for literary status[10]), decided to go back to the turn-of-the-20th-century comics strip characters to process his experience during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in his graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004). Spiegelman revives those characters to describe and deconstruct a personal and collective trauma. In his narrative, the connection between early comic strips is easily explained, as Spiegelman saw contemporary news reporting of the 9/11 event as relying on the same sensationalism that characterized the yellow journalism. In Spiegelman's work, news, images, and conspiracy theories about the falling towers saturated the media causing a new war psychosis. *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) also reproduces the front page of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* from September 11, 1901. The article

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10 In 1992, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (2003 [1986-1992) won a special Pulitzer Prize for literature. Prior to this event, for a graphic narrative to be acknowledged alongside the year's best work in literature was merely inconceivable. Indeed, comics were mainly celebrated in the journalistic field. The Pulitzer Prize honored political cartoonists like Herblock (1979) and Doug Marlette (1988) and comic artists like Garry Trudeau (1975) and Jules Feiffer (1986), who mainly published on daily press. *Maus* demonstrated how this medium (comics), once regarded as one of the lowest forms of mass entertainment, could express complex and profound ideas through the combination of words and pictures. Yet, it is important to remark that some modernists artists like Picasso and Gertrude Stein already saw the potentiality of the medium in its early stage. Similarly, recognizing comics' potential, Marshall McLuhan provocatively asked in *The Mechanical Bride*, "Will [Al] Capp be the first stripper to get a Nobel prize? Must Capp, like William Faulkner, wait for the French to discover him?" (McLuhan, 2002 [1951]:63).

talks about President William McKinley, the man who promoted U.S. first imperial interventions in Cuba, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Thus, the comic seems to draw parallels between the current presence in the Middle East and the early expansions of the U.S. imperium. This connection also "allows him to point to the history of the complicity of US media with the same imperialist project" (Cvek, 2011:90).

In "The Comic Supplement[11]", Spiegelman (2004) states, "Their distorted reporting of the Spanish-American War – America's first colonialist adventure – would have made Fox News proud." As Jenkins (2015) observed,

> His depiction of Hearst and Pulitzer links their use of cartoons as a tool in a circulation war (and their subsequent taming of the more vulgar or disruptive elements of early comics) with the ways those same papers functioned to force assimilation on the immigrant population or to 'inflame' the public behind a series of unnecessary military incursions (Jenkins, 2015:315).

The intersection between past and present was also facilitated by the coexistence of these two events (9/11 and the birth of comics) in the same (physical and ethereal) environment. Indeed, those early comic strips came to life about a hundred years before and two blocks away from what we now call "Ground Zero". Emblematically, one could even say that the explosion that destroyed the towers liberated old comics characters: "The blast that disintegrated those lower Manhattan towers also disinterred the ghosts of some Sunday Supplement stars born on nearby Park Row about a century earlier. They came back to haunt one denizen of neighborhood by all that's happened since" (Spiegelman, 2004:8).

Therefore, turn-of-the-20th-century comics strip characters seemed perfectly fitted for the new contemporary context. Old strips seemed to evoke elements of continuity with the present: McCay's attraction to architectural details (which recall Manhattan skyscrapers), The Katzenjammer Kids[12] (a pair echoing the twin towers) getting into

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[11] In the comic *In the Shadows of No Towers*, after his original ten comic strips, Art Spiegelman includes a section titled "The Comic Supplement". This section contains an essay in which Spiegelman provides a brief history and discussion of early comic strips, expanding on a few of them (*Hogan's Alley*, *Katzenjammer Kids*, *Glorious Fourth of July*, *Happy Hooligan*, *Kinder Kids*, *Upside Downs of Little Lady Lovekins and Old Man Muffaroo*, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, *Bring Up Father*, and *Krazy Kat*). Following the essay that contextualize turn-of-20th-century newspaper comics, the "Supplement" features a reprint of all the old comic previously mentioned (except for George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*), in seven separate plates. The name "Comic Supplement" is a clear reference to the original context in which these stories circulated. The Sunday Comic Weekly was (together with the Sunday Magazine and The Women's Pages) part of the Colored Supplement, the eye-catching wrapper for Pulitzer's *World*. The Comic Weekly was very big, measuring approximately eighteen by twenty-two inches (forty-six by fifty-five centimeters). Likewise, the original one-page strips for *In the Shadow of No Towers* have an unusual format, which was dictated by the fact that they were first published in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*.

[12] This strip was created by Rudolph Dirks in 1897 and it debuted in Hearst's *American Humorist*, the

trouble, Arab stereotypes present in Happy Hooligan[13], Gustave Verbeck's Upside-Down world[14], and more. Yet the revival of these characters is more than the result of a nostalgic feeling, toward an 'old day' America. Spiegelman does not refer to these comics only to point at the persistence of residual conservative values in American society, but also to exploit their subversive sub text. For example, and as hinted here above, the Yellow Kid presented a subtle combination of both (ethnic) stereotyped elements and social criticism. Similarly, analyzing *Orphan Annie[15]*, McLuhan (2002 [1951]:66) observed how this form of entertainment could keep "in play a major psychological tension in America to which the sophisticated writers are often blinded".

Spiegelman's use of early comic strips should be interpreted as an attempt to acknowledge those characters as part of the medium tradition in almost an Eliotian sense. Therefore, *In the Shadow of No Towers* plays with the intersections of two types of memory: the recollection of a personal and national traumatic experience, and the history of the medium. Even though old comic strips were originally conceived as unpretentious, ephemeral, and were not intended to last past the day they appeared in the newspaper, in Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers,* they function as unifying narrative elements. At first glance, the tale is shattered into pieces, as each page can be considered separately from the rest; similarly, the connection between panels is often "non-consequitur" (McCloud, 1993). However, the reoccurrence of familiar comics characters creates a fleeting sense of unity to a world that is literally crumbling.  Even though *In the Shadows of No Towers* presents self-contained episodes that narrate different aspect of that traumatic experience and Spiegelman's attempts to rationalize it, the turn-of-the-20th-century comics are here used as recurring elements capable of creating a sense of cohesion, generating a continuous storyline with breaks. Inter-serial references help Spiegelman structure his work and make meaning of his experience. Yet, this reconstruction is ephemeral as it is bound to comics logic and it is limited by the physical

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Sunday Supplement of the *New York Journal.*

[13] This strip was created by Frederick Burr Opper and it first appeared in the *New York Journal* in 1900.

[14] Gustave Verbeck's *The Upside-Downs of Little Lady Lovekins and Old Man Muffaroo* premiered on May 25,1902 in the *New York Herald*.

[15] This strip was created by Harold Gray and it first appeared on August 5, 1924 in the New York *Daily News*.

frame of the panel.

In fact, comics can provide both solace to a traumatized nation and trigger a (unifying) mythologizing process. However, *In the Shadow of No Towers* comics characters do not (re)produce a conservative vision of the world (or mythology); instead, they are used to undermine official representations of the event. Irony serves as a tool to create a counter-narrative of 9/11 and indict how politicians instrumentalized the attack for their own agenda. Indeed, Spiegelman (2004:2) portrays himself as being "equally terrorized" by al-Qaeda and the US government.

The contrast between a divided nation and the (ephemeral) unifying power of early comics is also highlighted on page seven. As Spiegelman (2004:7, original emphasis) argue, "The stars & stripes are symbol of unity that many people see as war banner. The detailed county-by-county map of the 2000 election – the one that put the loser in office – made it clear that we're actually a nation UNDER **TWO** FLAGS!" These parts are named by the author as "The United Blue Zone of America" and "The United Red Zone of America" (a reference to the colors of the Democratic and Republican parties respectively).

Yet those two Americas are reunited in the two strips at the bottom of the page, named "An Down Upside World" (figure 2), a reference to Gustave Verbeck's *The Upside-Downs of Little Lady Lovekins and Old Man Muffaroo*[16] (1902-1905). In these strips, Art Spiegelman, exploiting Verbeck's experiment in compression, combined two different visions of the world (his own and the right-wing position about war). The first part of these strips (narrating Art's disillusionment about Bush presidency) provides a second story (Republicans waging war) by rotating the page 180 degree. Therefore, images within comics can put together a nation that has fallen apart, shattered into pieces like the Twin Towers. However, this union is not a simplistic reconciliation, but a complicated and conflictual (narrative and visual) dialogue[17]. Even though, comics function as *fil rouge* connecting different elements, the narration does not offer any sense of closure.

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[16] In particular, *In the Shadow of No Towers* contains a reproduction of the June 6, 1905 story "The Fairy Palace" originally published on the Sunday Record-Herald (figure 3).

[17] I do not mean here union as a merger or an harmonic fusion of different positions, but merely a copresence within the same space. Nevertheless, this coerced cohabitation of opposite visions of the world within the same frame impose a dialogue between them. The reader has to fix somehow this polarity to extrapolate the meaning of the panel.

"Spiegelman uses comics to toggle between memory and history, encouraging the reader, too, to straddle the various gaps and to try to make sense" (Pines, 2013:204). Spiegelman challenges the reader to recompose the disparate parts that compose the book in order to make sense of it.

Moreover, Spiegelman (2004:10) turns into "Hapless Hooligan" (an ironic nod to Frederick Burr Opper's character *Happy Hooligan*) when asked to talk during a September 11 commemoration. Notably, this is not the first time Spiegelman alters his comic persona to look like Happy Hooligan. He already depicted himself as Opper's character in the one-page autobiographical strip, "Skeeter Grant by Skeeter Grant," which appeared in *Short Order Comix* 1 (1973). In this story, he narrates a dream he had one night back in 1969 in which he transforms into Happy Hooligan and then has to conform to comic book logic, like disappearing between panels and speaking in a visible word balloon. The choice of this character also hints the ability of comics to complicate clichés. As Gardner (2010) argued,

> Happy Hooligan, an Irish American tramp whose simian features and heavy dialect openly reference generations of cartoon representations of the Irish. And, yet, […] the effect for Opper's readers of watching Happy Hooligan every day bravely attempt to do the right thing, only to be once again beaten by the police and thrown in jail for a crime he did not commit, was to forge a deep identification with Happy and inspire contempt for those who were always ready to convict him as the hooligan his name purposes him to be. (Gardner, 2010:135-136)

Hence, we can see how comics can open opportunities for counter-narratives and re-writing. It is also important to notice that the deconstruction of certain clichés may happen even outside the authorial intention[18]. Indeed, authorial intention does not always equal

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[18] The notion of intentionality has been challenged by New Critics and Poststructuralists alike, as they separated meaning from intentions. In particular, the latter argued that the meaning a text possesses must come from inside, from language itself, or it must be imposed from outside, generated by the reader or through the functioning of different discursive practices. This approach led to the provocative proclamation of the Death of the Author. However, among philosophers and linguists (e.g., Paul Grice) the notion of authorial intention has retained its central role in the construction of linguistic meaning. Hence, it is no surprise that narrative theorists who envision narrative as a communicative practice are committed to the role of authorial agency. For example, James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (2012), who adopt a rhetorical approach, argue that "there can be no rhetoric without a rhetor" and that narrative is constructed through a feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response. David Herman's (2012) world-building approach further progress the revaluation of the notion of intentionality by eliminating the mediation of the 'implied author' (a key concept of the narrative as rhetoric approach). His narrative model is abbreviated through the acronym CAPA and it encompasses: Contexts for interpretation, Actions performed within that context, Persons (performing the act of telling as well as the act of interpreting), Ascriptions of communicative and other intentions to performers of narrative acts. The discussion of the differences among these models (rhetorical vs. CAPA) exceeds the purpose of this work, yet it is important to pinpoint the reevaluation of intentionality. This notion is important if one considers how this work

reader reception, as in the aforementioned case. Even though Opper was not concerned about anti-Irish discrimination, his works can still be interpreted as complicating certain ethnic stereotypes.

Finally, comics characters present in *In the Shadow of No Towers* help to render the recollection of the traumatic event personal. Spiegelman tries to convey what the cameras that filmed the falling towers could not witness. The personal experience is also used to counter the narrative that the media readily provided to frame the public images. It tries to undermine the myth of American innocence. Indeed, as Basu (2013:163) observed, Spiegelman "opts to voice his outrage at the co-optation of this national tragedy for the purpose of American retaliation." This appropriation is symbolized by the bald eagle, a symbol traditionally used to represent the US. In fact, this animal appears on the Great Seal of the United States which is used to authenticate documents issued by the federal government. Recalling Coleridge, Spiegelman defines 9/11 as his own "albatross" (Spiegelman, 2004:2); yet the animal represented is the US national bird. Later, on page four, the reader observes Bush riding the bald eagle.

*In the Shadow of no Towers* does not only recollect the post-traumatic experience of Art Spiegelman, but it attempts to analyze the aftermath of this event. This work deals with the return to normal life as "even anxious New Yorkers eventually run out of adrenaline and – BOOM! ...you go back to thinking you **might** live forever after all!" (Spiegelman, 2004:10, original emphasis); the Towers that once looked larger than life, "get smaller every day..." However, the work is not limited to reflections on personal and national traumas, but it also problematizes US invasion of Iraq by drawing parallelism to other atrocities, "the killer apes learned nothing from the twin towers of Auschwitz and Hiroshima... and nothing changed on 9/11. His 'president' wages his wars and wars on wages – the same old deadly business as usual" (Spiegelman, 2004:8).

The use of the early comics strips characters in his graphic novel had also the function to make them part of the comics canon. Spiegelman's retrospective reading of early (proto)comics reminds them as part of the medium tradition. Spiegelman's understanding of tradition betrays a modernist sensibility as the old gives direction to the development

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approaches comics: as instruments of propaganda, as memory projects, as memoirs, and as (historiographic) metafictions. All these genres pose question about the author. Propaganda and memory projects imply the presence of someone trying to enforce a certain reading of the past or the present. Memoirs and metafictions often make the intentional activity of the author visible.

of the new and erudition is clearly the basis for creativity. Yet, tradition is not simply inherited as it undergoes a metamorphosis. This understanding mirrors somehow what T.S. Eliot discussed in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent,"

> Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order (Eliot, 1919: web)

The presence of a modernist understanding of tradition in Spiegelman's work might be explained by the fact that the turn-of-the-century newspaper comics (that is the tradition Art Spiegelman is appropriating) were "the first and arguably most important of the new vernacular modernisms" as they diagrammed "the serial complexities of modern life and fixing the fragments of modernity on the page" (Gardner, 2012: 7). Adopting a modernist poetics[19], Spiegelman's work does not fully conform to a preestablished tradition, but he appropriates it and 'makes it new'. Spiegelman innovates comics language while showing a consciousness of the medium's past. These comics helped create a language, and, consequently, it seems natural for comics artists to exploit the reservoir of this established tradition. According to Spiegelman, these early works are the basis of comics literacy (Jenkins, 2015:309).

This example testifies that comics in their embryonic form were already in conversation with war. This conversation would later evolve into a much more complex relationship in correspondence with the coming of age of the medium during the 1930s, that is when comic strips started to be recollected in book format. It was precisely during the Great Depression that the popularity of newspaper cartoons expanded into a major industry, leading to the Golden Age of comic books. In this age, the superhero genre (one of the most recognizable and popular comics genre) was created boosting the comic books

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[19] As discussed by Harriet E. H. Earle (2017), comics oscillates back and forth between modernist and post-modernist stances. However, as Jared Gardner remarked, it is important to highlight at least a point of divergence between modernist novels and comics. In fact, the scholar argues that "Behind the modernist novel's break with linear time, traditional plotting, and other conventions of the nineteenth-century realist novel is always the prototype of the realist novel itself. Just as modernist poetry's breaking of the iamb required an iamb to break, so the experiments of the modernist novel are always a choice not to make use of available unities and coherences" (Gardner, 2012: xi). He further adds that comics creators never "had the possibility of developing tools and techniques that would allow them to efface the gaps" (that is the structural "gutters").

sales. Conventionally, the launch of 'Superman' in 1938 is considered opening this new age. Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman premiered as one of several anthology features in the comic book *Action Comic #1*. The character proved so popular that National Periodical Publication decided in 1939 to launch a self-titled *Superman* comic.

Comics could not ignore that war was in the air and it forced them to evolve[20] accordingly. Sadly, 1938 does not only mark the debut of Superman, but also the promulgation of the racial laws in Italy, and Kristallnacht, an attack on Jewish persons and property unleashed by German Nazis on the night of November 9 and 10. Whereas global, local, and even intergalactic conflicts had long been central to superhero storylines (and keep on doing so), superheroes did not hesitate to enter real wars as well, when the occasion presented itself. In this context, a new type of superhero (the nationalist superhero) and a new genre (war comics) were born. Even though some "prosocial superheroes" (Dittmer, 2013:7) actively participated (they formally, even if briefly, enlisted) to the conflict, the nationalist superhero created the condition for a closer relationship between comics (as a recently established medium) and war by helping to develop a patriotic wartime culture among civilians.

Moreover, the sales of comic books increased noticeably during World War II, as they were cheap, portable and presented inspirational, patriotic tales (Chute, 2018). World War II consolidated America's ascendance as a superpower, thanks to its economic strength, natural resources, and geographical isolation from the actual fighting. Because of these favorable conditions, America managed to expand its economy during the war. Consequently,

> Americans had money to spend for the first time in a long time. Civilians and soldiers alike prowled for escapist entertainment to help fill the hours. Movie theaters were packed, the paperback book came into popularity, big band records and sheet music flew off the shelves, and a new form of pulp magazine – the comic book – exploded into popular culture. (Fertig, 2017:1)

So, war played a fundamental role in establishing the new comic book industry. Inevitably, during World War II, the dialogue between comics and war became more

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20 I see here evolution as a response to the stimuli coming from the surrounding environment. I want to point out that any evolution occurring in this medium (e.g. the genesis of a new genre) does not override preexisting forms. Each stimulus coming from the sociocultural environment creates the conditions for the formation of a new ecological niche, a space that could host both old forms but also new ones, better fitted for occupying the new space.

intense. At the height of the war, comic books were so popular that publishers found it difficult to meet the demand; Jean-Paul Gabilliet (2005) observes that the number of new releases jumped from 22 in 1939 to 697 in 1940, 832 in 1941, 934 in 1942, 1051 in 1943, and stabilized temporarily around 1125 in 1944 and 1945. Paper rationing measures started to affect the comics industry only in 1943 when the number of pages per magazine dropped, often from sixty-eight to sixty or from fifty-two to thirty-six pages, for the same price, ten cents. War influenced the development of comics, and in turn, comics contributed in their own way to the war effort.

## 2. Smashing Thru: Captain America, Comics, and the "Good War"

*No sense being a hero if you don't look like one* - Rene Gagnon
Clint Eastwood (2006) *Flags of Our Fathers*

On the cover of *Captain America Comics #1*, which marks the title hero's debut, Steve Rogers[21] punches Hitler in the face well before the U.S. intervention in what, at the time, was mainly a European conflict (figure 4). Indeed, Captain America was printed ten months before the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941. Steve Rogers was a wartime staple before the war had even officially started for Americans. *Captain America* comics functioned as geopolitical tools, playing an important role in the promotion of an interventionist attitude.

As discussed by Dittmer (2013:2), "superheroes are co-constitutive elements of both American identity and the U.S. government's foreign policy practices" as they "serve as a crucial resource for legitimating, contesting, and reworking states' foreign policies". Indeed, Captain America's debut can be seen as a call to arms, urging the nation to unite against overseas threats. "By the spring of 1941, as the U.S. mobilization was well

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21  The origins of the fictional character Steve Rogers are first established by Joe Simon e Jack Kirby in *Captain America #1* (1941), and later revised and expanded by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in *Captain America #109* (1968), one of the first retcons of the characters' origins. Horrified by the Nazi's ideology, Rogers attempted to enlist but is rejected as 4-F due to his frail body. Overhearing the Rogers' resolution and earnest plea to fight for his country, General Chester Phillips, of the US Army, offered the young man the opportunity to become a test subject for an enhancing experiment, receiving a special serum made by Dr. Josef Reinstein (later retroactively changed to a code name for the scientist Abraham Erskine). The serum was a success and transformed Steve Rogers into a nearly perfect human being with peak strength, agility, stamina, and intelligence. A Nazi spy, who observed the experiment, murdered Dr. Erskine who died without writing the Super-Soldier formula to paper, leaving Rogers the sole beneficiary. To fight the Nazi, Rogers was given by the US government the red, white, and blue costume of Captain America.

underway, comic books had already gone to war" (Wright, 2001: 31). It is important to notice that while the first issue featured a star-spangled Captain America delivering a haymaker to Hitler's jaw in a room full of Nazis, at no point in the story Cap actually directly faced Hitler. Yet, readers did not seem to bother this inconsistency, as the comics turned out to have a huge success.

Steve Rogers was not the first[22] superhero to fight against the Axis, yet he is the most popular comics character to embody American values and ideals (like democracy, freedom, liberty, and many others) through his red, white, and blue costume, and a shield of stars and stripes. Heroes during the Great Depression served as metaphors to talk about the nation and its myths, e.g. Superman can be seen as perpetuating the "ethnic narrative" (Klotz, 2009), reminding America about its formation through consent (Sollors, 1986). In contrast, Steve Rogers is America, and not a mere metaphor standing for the nation, as he embodies American values and protects the national borders. The identification with America is evident since the first issue cover, as the title hero is front and center and the stars and stripes on his costume appear in sharp contrast to the swastikas on the arms of the Nazis.

Captain America's comics helped mythologize the war, turning Hitler into a comic book character and moralizing the war narrative. World War II presented itself as an event that could be easily described in biblical terms (good vs. evil). As Jewett and Lawrence (2004) observed,

> As a typical embodiment of the American civil religion, offering regeneration of a helpless democratic society by selfless superheroism, Captain America stands squarely within the narrative tradition that can be traced back through earlier forms of American entertainment to the biblical paradigms employed in the Indian captivity narratives. […] Jack Kirby's Captain America also fits comfortably within the Jewish *golem* tradition as an artificial creation with magical powers for the service of its master (Jewett & Lawrence, 2004: 35, original emphasis).

They maintain that this character embodies the tradition of "zealous nationalism". This idea goes back to America's (puritan) origins and attributes the nation the role of redeeming the world by destroying its enemy. Captain America combines strength with moral principle, thus symbolizing America's ambition to be the "city set upon a hill," and

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[22] Captain America as a patriotically themed superhero was preceded by *The Shield,* created by Harry Shorten and Irv Novick. It debuted for the first time on January 1940 in MLJ Magazine's (now known as Archie comics) *Pep Comics*. Even though, Captain America was published much later, on March 1941, it instantly became the most prominent and lasting character of that wave of nationalist superheroes created prior to and during World War II.

the nation's use of military crusading in order to achieve that goal.

Consequently, Captain America can be seen as the embodiment of the "Strict Father" morality (Lakoff, 1996), which is based on the conceptual metaphor of the Moral Strength[23]. According to Lakoff (1996:74), "The metaphor of Moral Strength sees the world in terms of a war of good against the evil forces, which must be fought ruthlessly. Ruthless behavior in the name of the good fight is thus seen as justified. Moreover, the metaphor entails that one cannot respect the views of one adversary: evil does not deserve respect, it deserves to be attacked". The use of conceptual metaphors is a way to inscribe a reasoning into preexisting paradigms (or prototypes) to make it seem commonsensical. In particular, the use of the strict father figure is common in conservative rhetoric.

World War II political situation offered new sources of inspiration to the comics industry by offering new characters (e.g., world leaders) and sublime scenarios (as the battlefields generated both tragic and spectacular images). Real war enemies were much more compelling characters than any previous generic villain. Their faces had already entered the public imaginary thanks to the circulation of their pictures on newspapers. Hence, they could be easily adapted in comics form. As Simon recalled,

> There never had been a truly believable villain in comics. But Adolf was live, hated by more than half of the world. What a natural foil he was, with his comical moustache, the ridiculous cowlick, his swaggering, goose-stepping minions eager to jump out of a plane if their mad little leader ordered it. (After a stiff-armed Heil Hitler salute, of course.) I could smell a winner. All that was left to do was to devise a long underwear hero to stand up to him. (Simon & Simon, 1990: 42)

This sentiment was also shared by Stan Lee who argued, "We had to have villains in our stories. And once World War II started, the Nazis gave us the greatest villains in the world to fight against. It was a slam dunk" (Kaplan, 2008: 58). Comic books participated in the war effort amplifying nationalist feelings. Indeed, "direct, emotional, and naive, comic books contributed to the widespread popular impression, which still persists, that World War II was truly a 'good war'" (Wright, 2001:44).

In the month leading up to Pearl Harbor, comic books were saturated with patriotic superheroes costumed in the American flag and bearing names like 'Uncle Sam,' 'Minute-Man,' 'The Star-Spangled Kid,' 'Miss America'" (Wright, 2001:42), 'Boy Commandos,'

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23 According to Lakoff (1996:4) "a conceptual metaphor is a conventional way of conceptualizing one domain of experience in terms of another, often unconsciously." A conceptual metaphor provides a mode of reasoning and reflects a certain vision of the world. It is part of an elaborate system of concepts that produce and reproduce values that are generally constructed as commonsensical. Yet, the very notion of "common sense" is debatable.

'The Patriot,' 'The Defender', 'Spirit of '76,' and 'Major Liberty' (Scott, 2014:54). These comics signal a change in the superhero genre. Even though the foe was still a character embodying anti-American values, the very definition of what being anti-American meant switched. While the main antagonists during the Great Depression were mainly mobs and corrupted politicians, during World War II the (anti-American) enemies were the Axis powers and their agents operating in America.

This urge towards an interventionist stance derives from the impact that the news of *Kristallnacht* (1938) had among the Jewish American communities of New York (Dittmer, 2013:9). At that time, there was a significant presence of Jews in the comic book industry as they were excluded from higher-end illustration jobs. Indeed, ethnic origins functioned as gatekeepers, preventing many second-generation Americans to get jobs in "legitimate forms of creative expression" (Fingeroth, 2007: 24). Indeed, Eisner recalled in an interview, that when comics industry started "there was new territory. It was easy to get into it, so a lot of the Jewish cartoonists who were on the periphery moved into it. Also, Jews have a long history of storytelling; very much like the Irish, only more Biblical" (Kronenberg, 2011[2004]:229).

This situation can be compared to the one that occurred in the movie industry. As Paul Buhle (2008:8) observed,

> Invisibility would of course, be a natural desire for European Jews entering the age of the Holocaust. But within American mass culture, two generation of Jews had already made their slash as comedians of practically all kinds, in movies, radio and comics. The overwhelming majority were indeed, by their own choice, most often invisible – as Jews.

Comic book industry was one of the few options to which young Jewish (and other hyphenated) artists could turn to, as this medium, still new, was considered by many to be the lowest rung on the publishing ladder. What was a tangible limitation soon became an opportunity, as comics provided Jews with the means for subtly inscribe their ethnicity into a mainstream American identity[24]. Yet a full acknowledgment of that identity would only become visible in later years. As Paul Buhle (2008) recalls,

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[24] The role played by Jews in the development of the medium is well captured in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2010[2000]), as it follows the entrance of Josef 'Joe' Kavalier and Sam Clayman into the industry. Josef's character is particularly fascinating because it allows the reader to see the differences between the U.S. and Europe in the 1930s. Josef left Prague and immigrated to the U.S. The partnership with Sam would lead to the creation of *The Escapist*, a (fictional) comic about a Nazi-buster savior. This history is reminiscent of the environment in which Jack Kirby and Joe Simon created Captain America.

But just as Los Angeles could never be as Jewish as New York, the movie could never be as Jewish as comic books, which, irrespective of actual images that were almost entirely Gentile, were produced *by* Jews for the masses. In the longer run, with the emergence first of film and then comics as accepted art forms, Jewish images would be "outed" by the intentions of the creators and with the assistance of critics and approval of the audience. Long before that, the conscious and unconscious identity of the artist had manifested itself, reached out to readers who saw in some version of comics the refracted representations of themselves (Buhle, 2008:9, original emphasis).

The use of Gentile (non-Jewish) characters should not be considered as a limit only, but also as a challenge[25]. As Sam B. Girgus (1984:3) discussed, "The History of Jews in America is to a considerable extent the history of an Idea. It is the story of how Jewish history was transformed by the idea of America and how, in turn, Jewish writers, intellectuals, artists, and public figures helped to sustain and modernize this idea." Therefore, Jewish American appropriated American myths to reshape American identity. Comics testify how Jewish culture used "symbiotic[26]" (Benozzo, 2012 :151) tactics to promote its presence into the mainstream by reinventing itself and mutating in response to the sociocultural environment.

Such a process was facilitated also by the war. Different groups are likely to close ranks when threatened from the outside, and the removal of the external threat "also eliminates one of the major obstacles to assimilation" (Steinberg, 2001:55). Indeed, on January 06, 1942 in his *State of the Union Address* Franklin Delano Roosevelt warned,

We must guard against divisions among ourselves and among all the other United Nations. We must be particularly vigilant against racial discrimination in any of its ugly forms. Hitler will try again to breed mistrust and suspicion between one individual and another, one group and another, one race and another, one Government and another (Roosevelt, 1942).

Despite the official rhetoric promoting a tolerant attitude toward ethnic and racial minorities, it is important to remark that on February 19, 1942 (a month after this speech) Roosevelt signed the Executive Order 9066, which authorized the incarceration of Japanese Americans, no matter their age, and gender, and led to the construction of

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[25] Certain elements of the comics can often offer twofold interpretations. For example, the A on Captain America's mask stands for America, yet, as stated by Simcha Weinstein (2006), it may also be a nod to the Golem, a legendary creature said to protect Jews. According to Jewish tradition, the Golem is an anthropomorphic being, magically created entirely from inanimate matter (usually clay) that can be animated by writing the Hebrew word *emet* (truth) upon its forehead. As Weinstein (2006:51, original emphasis) observed, "*Emet* is spelled with the letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *tav*. The first letter, *aleph*, is also first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the equivalent of the letter A"

[26] Whereas syncretism involves the merging or assimilation of different cultures (a process guided and shaped by the dominant one), Francesco Benozzo (2012) symbiotic model aims to invert such interpretation, revaluing the contribution of marginal cultures. Indeed, in this model marginal cultures are not passive agents being assimilated, but they are considered active players in the cultural discourse. They are able to reshape their identity in order to make it relevant in the new context.

internment camps. In this scenario, as Klotz (2009:11) observes, "the 'other' became the enemy overseas more so than the ethnic minority next door (although plenty of anti-Semitism was still present in the States), and the comic creators displayed their patriotism by helping to fight the good fight, both on the fields of war and in the pages of their medium."

Simon and Kirby's (Captain America's creators) political commitment was not well received by everybody. Some isolationists groups, such as the American First Committee[27], and Nazi sympathizers, like the German American Bund, opposed Captain America's interventionist message (Malson & Kantor, 2013: 75), and tried to harass Simon and Kirby outside the Timely headquarters in the McGraw-Hill Building. As Simons recalled "we got a lot of…threatening letters and hate mail. Some people really opposed what Cap stood for." (Simon in Wright, 2001:44). For this reason, New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia offered them protection as he appreciated their work (Evanier, 2008: 55).

This endorsement testifies that comics became fiercely patriotic not only because the public wanted this kind of product, but also because these themes were encouraged by the institutions. Franklin D. Roosevelt's Office of War Information[28] (OWI) prompted entertainment media to:

> raise American morale, encourage public cooperation and participation in the war effort, identify the menace of the Axis powers, and inform audiences about the progressive war aims pursued by the United States and its allies, all in ways that cloaked propaganda within the context of good

27 The America First Committee was the most prominent mass pressure group fighting against the foreign policy of Roosevelt's administration in the critical years of 1940-1941. The members of this organization battled a foreign policy they judged to be against the best interests of the United States. They opposed American entry into World War II, and they "continued to be a powerful, vocal, and well-organized force in the debate right down to the hour the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor" (Cole, 1953: viii). In late 1940 Charles A. Lindbergh became the spokesman of the non-interventionist America First Committee. Lindbergh never hid his pro-German sympathies, and he did not hesitate to use anti- Semitic rhetoric in his speeches. The threat that these populist and fascist (but also anti-Semitic) ideas posed to democracy has also been the subject of two important novels, Sinclair Lewis's cautionary tale *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), and Philip Roth's uchronia *The Plot Against America* (2004). In recent years prominent figures of the populist right (including Donald Trump) have revived America First's brand of rhetoric. It is worth noting that the presence of this group complicates America's narration of WWII, as there is no longer a clear-cut line separating (good and democratic) Americans and (evil and Nazi) Germans. This fascist side of America was also hinted in a 2017 Captain America storyline, *Secret Empire* (Spencer & Sorrentino, 2017), where after Steve Roger's personality has been altered by the Cosmic Cube (a *Deus ex machina* device) Captain America turns out to be a Hydra agent (the comics' version of the Nazis). Symbolically, the storyline ended with two Captains America fighting each other, thus questioning what the real America is.

28 The US Office of War Information (OWI), formed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 13, 1942 by Executive Order 9182, acted as a propaganda and censor agent requesting entertainment media to support the war effort and enhance people's understanding of the war.

entertainment as much as possible. (Wright, 2001: 35)

As OWI director Elmer Davis argued "The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized" (Koppes & Black, 1987:64). OWI did not provide guidelines to regulate the comic book industry like it did to Hollywood (Goodrum, 2016). Captain America was not directly commissioned, the product of official propagandists, but the creation of private citizens who wanted to make a political statement and respond to the concern of their time. It is particularly interesting to notice that, contrary to Nazi's modes of propaganda, the American government never took over the infrastructure of mass communication. Popular cultural producers were "'encouraged,' employed, and even enlisted, but they were never subject to the same direct pressure exerted on their counterparts in the Axis nations" (Murray, 2011:49). In the American democratic (and capitalist) system, media have always fought to defend their right to criticize the government. As it will be discussed in the second chapter, this recognition of the right to dissent would play a major role during the Vietnam War; indeed, media replayed contesting voices allowing them to enter the public debate about the conflict. Even though the government did not take over the cultural industry, OWI supervised and oversaw the content produced by the media. As Christopher Murray observed,

> One example of overt censorship came when federal agents raised objection to a Superman strip in early 1945 on the grounds of national security because the strip featured references to a cyclotron, which the FBI felt bordered too closely on the top-secret Manhattan Project, which eventually led to the development of the Atomic bomb (Murray, 2011: 69).

However, in most cases comics managed to stay under the radar, and probably, the perception of the medium as "just for kids" could have favored such attitude. Comics might have been winked at and tolerated precisely because they were oriented toward a young audience and thus deemed to be as not pervasive as Hollywood. However, during the Cold War, comics would be subjected to intense and severe scrutiny, as well.

Comics, like other media, attempted to support the war effort in different ways: uniting people under a common ideal; encouraging vigilance against enemy spies; confuting Axis propaganda; portraying negatively the enemy (both physically and morally); advertising the purchase of war bonds; and, finally, assuring the population that the Allies were fighting for a just cause (Scott, 2014:57-58). The purpose of this policy was to foster the

sense of a common goal and infuse the public with patriotic feelings. Propaganda disguised as entertainment was also a necessary means to mobilize a nation that until the attack on Pearl Harbor was reluctant to go to war. Indeed, Franklin Delano Roosevelt during his *Boston Campaign Address* (1940) had to promise, "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again. Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign war. They are going into training to form a force so strong that, by its very existence, it will keep the threat of war far away from our shores". Americans' perception of the conflict would change soon after their soil was attacked. Comics helped creating a sense of urgency, making clear that the enemy was waging war on the American way of life even during a time when the U.S. had not officially entered the war yet.

Comics do not merely mirror the official narrative produced by the nation-state, but they also have the ability to potentiality change (and eventually create or at least challenge) the nation's narration of itself, as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1996 [1986]). Comics promoted an interventionist agenda, and they did so by recurring to preexisting (foundational) myths (and also identity clichés), creating new ones, and providing a unifying rhetoric according to which the different groups should close ranks against a common external threat.

Finally, comics helped the consolidation of the US as an imagined community by exploiting the opportunities that consumerist culture created. Indeed, fiction flowed quietly into reality. Wartime comics generated myriads of fan clubs, which were both a source of extra money for the comics publishers and a way for kids to be involved in the conflict. As Fertig (2017) remarked,

> for just ten cents, young readers could show their alliance to their favorite hero by sending off for a club kit. […] Each of the clubs was essentially patriotic and called for young members to take an oath to uphold American ideals, resist divisive Axis propaganda, and do whatever they could in their communities to help win the war, whether that meant watching out for spies or enemy airplanes, collecting scrap material, or planting a victory garden (Fertig, 2017:16)

Some of the most popular fan club were: Captain America's "Sentinels of Liberty", The Shield's "G-Man Club", DC's "Junior Justice Society of America", the Eagle's "American Eagle Defenders".

Hence, comics helped unifying the nation by providing also social rites. This is particularly evident in the Sentinels of Liberty's pledge. Fans of Captain America received a membership card, a card for reciting the club's pledge, and a felt badge (Hall, 2019:190). In particular, the club's pledge was composed of three main points: "1. In God

we trust; 2. Allegiance to the flag and the Constitution of the United States of America; 3. To make myself a better citizen and defend my government forever". This rite is deeply influenced by another American foundational myth, the birth of the nation through "Consent" (Sollors, 1986). This rhetoric goes back to America's puritan origins, as "the only requirement clearly demanded for the membership in the first churches was assent to a covenant, that is an agreement to join with other members in the worship of God and obedience to His commandments" (Morgan, 1965:36), and already present in the Mayflower Compact, a social contract in which the settlers consented to follow the community's rules and regulations for the sake of order and survival.

## 3. War Comics and WWII

Comics did not enter World War II only through their popular superheroes; editors also published materials that attempted to describe and celebrate the actions of real-life heroes by creating more realistic fictional characters. As a result, a new genre was created. As Leonard Rifas (2016) argued, war comics (as a genre) grew out of the adventure comic strips as they inherited important stylistic features from the latter, such as dramatic lighting, solid black shadows, and shifting angles and perspectives (elements that already appeared, for example, in Milton Caniff's work). War comics were mainly conceived as a form of entertainment, emphasizing action and oversimplifying international politics in order to attract young readers (in fact young boys[29]). Generally, these comics "ignored or softened those truths about war that society regards as unsuitable for children, that the military regards as discouraging for enlistment or morale, or that readers find boring" (Rifas, 2016:183).

However, it is important to remark that, at the beginning, the line separating war comics from the other comic genres was not so neat. For example, the comic book series *War Comics* (one of the first of the genre), published by Dell Comics[30], and later renamed *War Stories*, featured hybrid content as it contained different genres and registers: adventure, humor, war, and spy. Similarly, Mark Fertig (2017) has covered two interesting

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[29] The paratext of these comics (mainly adverts) shows how the implied readers of these comics were young boys.

[30] Like *The Shield* and *Captain America*, it debuted in 1940 and appeared well before US intervention into the conflict. Dell Comics published four issues of *War Comics* from 1940 to 1941. In 1942, Dell Comics renamed and relaunched the series with the title *War Stories*, which lasted until 1943.

case studies, *Fight Comics* and *Rangers of Freedom Comics*[31]*,* where the transition from "super soldier" to ordinary (American) soldier occurred within the same title. As the scholar observes

> By the time America got into war, the *Fight Comics* tagline had evolved from "Two-fisted Americans in Action" to the more patriotic "Dedicated to Uncle Sam Fighting Men," and the title's original stars, adventurer Shark Brodie and the Super-American ("the soldier summoned out of the year 2350"), started ceding cover space to the comparatively normal paratrooper, Rip Carson. (Fertig, 2017:35-36)

In this regard, *Fight Comics* presents a significant progression of characters and genres*,* which emerged and changed in response to the outbreak (and evolution) of the war. One of main stories featured in the comic book involved Shark Brodie, an adventure hero, "the toughest two-fisted adventurer in the South Seas!" (according to the comics headline), who, following the tropes of the adventure genre, fought pirates, protected locals from ruthless criminals (acting as white savior), and saved damsels in distress. However, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he found himself facing Japanese soldiers and spies, and did his part to battle for the principles of America. For example, issue[32] *#19* presents the title hero fighting against Japanese soldiers, "all the eyes of America are turned toward the Pacific where the Japanese threaten the American lifeline. But Shark Brodie, courageous free-lance American soldier of fortune, throws his skill and daring into a life and death struggle with the vaunted Nipponese Navy" (1942:1). Thus, the war transformed Brodie's identity: he was no longer an adventurer, but a soldier serving the US government.

As the US entered World War II, *Fight Comics* started featuring also stories about Super-American, a cape-crusader that embodied all the conventions of the nationalist superhero: he wore a star-spangled costume and battled the Axis both in the US (fighting infiltrators) and overseas[33]. Like Captain America, this comic created a sense of urgency reminding America of its international role as the freedom champion, "War! War! War spills the blood of the nations and shatter civilization throughout battle-blasted Europe". However, this superhero did not survive 1942 as he was substituted by a more grounded hero, Rip Carson, "the Yankee's toughest sky devil". In this stories Rip Carson (the main

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[31] Both comics series were created by Fiction House. *Rangers of Freedom Comics'* name was simplified to Rangers Comics from the eight issue of the series.

[32] This issue was written by S. M. Iger and drawn by Charles A. Winter (who signed as Chuck Winter).

[33] This character was scripted by Jefferson Starr and illustrated by Dan Zolnerowich. It debuted in *Fight Comics #15* (October 1941) and last appeared in *Fight Comics #17*(February 1942).

protagonist) is a parachute trooper who fights against the Japanese.

It is interesting to notice that the majority of *Fight Comics* stories are set in the Pacific and feature dehumanized Japanese as the main villains. For example, issue[34] *#22* featured a Shark Brodie story where Japanese were introduced in the narrative through the following description, "They murder! They loot! They destroy! But, although these black heated sons of a Nippon have conquered and enslaved million, they can never subdue man's eternal fight for freedom, right and justice…and the fight against the yellow spawn of the Pacific will go on… but retribution is near" (1942:1). These lines are particularly interesting because they reveal payback fantasies. This narrative aims to reinforce the image of America as a democratic nation fighting to avenge the treacherous attack of Pearl Harbor.

Similarly, *Rangers of Freedom Comics* also testify the emergence of war comics out of other genres. The comic book featured in the first four issues a group of young men, selected by the FBI, fighting Super Brain, a grotesque evil genius with a huge and monstrous forehead[35]. Like Captain America, just two months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the lead story had "the best specimens of American youth" volunteer to fight "Super Brain," a super villain with fascist tendencies. Even though the three young men have no superpower, they are still costumed in red, white, and blue, in the fashion of nationalist superheroes. Yet, in contrast to Steve Rogers, they do not battle Hitler, but a schemer in the Fu Manchu tradition. Issue #2 retcons the story to be set in the near future of 1948 with Hitler demoted to merely an "adventurer" Super Brain is manipulating. This aspect is particularly interesting because the idea of a misguided and manipulated (but not evil) Europe might be seen as an attempt to pave the way for future reconciliation and expansion of the US in the European economic market after the war. Germany is clearly depicted as a totalitarian state governed by Nazism, but the comics also establishes that not all Germans are evil. In this (alternate) (hi)story, the Nazis conquered Europe and were now proceeding towards Washington D.C. However, the Rangers of Freedom will succeed in stopping them. The aim of this story was to stimulate public anxiety towards an imminent threat and promote appreciation for democracy at a time when it was under attack in Europe.

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[34] This issue was penciled by Art Peddy.
[35] These stories were signed by Captain Raymond Colt and penciled by Joe Doolin.

Many of the other (more realistic) stories in issue #1 dealt with fifth columnist saboteurs. These plotlines give an incredible sense of foretelling as they seem to anticipate some Cold War themes and anxieties as if (misquoting Art Spiegelman) America was just waiting for the other shoe to drop[36]. Moreover, the comic series also featured stories where American individuals were compelled to act in order to assist friends overseas as they suffered from the machination of the Axis. In the story "Don Stuart of the Far East Rangers", scripted by John Campbell, the protagonist (an unofficial adviser to the Chinese government) helped his Chinese friends against the Japanese invaders. Intervention in foreign affairs is here portrayed as a selfless (and necessary) act inspired by friendship and loyalty. This is particularly intriguing because this issue came out in a time when many American still sought to distance themselves from foreign entanglements.

America's perception of the war quickly changed after the attack on Pearl Harbor. And by issue[37] #5 the original titular "Rangers of Freedom" team would be replaced by a less super-themed group of Army Rangers. The original rangers gave up their costumes and helped a group of Marines doing a mission in the Malay Peninsula. The original members joined Captain Morgan's squad, losing their role as protagonists. Finally, it is curious to notice that the cover of issue #5 is inaccurate: it depicts the old Rangers of Freedom team and the story title blurb refers to the "Superbrain" character, but he does not appear in the issue. By issue five, the comic book acquired a more realistic and serious tone. The passage to realism is also testified by the fact that one of the original rangers is bayonetted in order to let a new hero (Captain Morgan) and tone to emerge out of the old comic series. Similarly, *War Victory Adventures* (1943) also mixed different genres: it had stories about rookies in boot camps, but also ones about Captain Cross (a doctor superhero) and (fictional) tales about the Nazi invasion of Atlantis (an allegory of America).

Moreover, World War II comics also documented changes in international relations. Indeed, prior to the American intervention, *War Comics* featured stories where Finland battled the Soviet Union to defend its freedom and independence[38] (figure 5). The battle is here described in almost biblical term as Finland determination to prevail resembles

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[36] Art Spiegelman uses this image to state that 9/11 was not an accident, but the result of Cold War policies. In a similar fashion, one can observe that World War II paves the way to the Cold War, anticipating some of the themes and fears of that era.

[37] This issue was written by Captain Raymond Colt and illustrated by Rudy Palais and Max Elkan.

[38] The story "Battle of Suomussalmi" was featured in War Comics #3 and was penciled by Tom Hickey.

that of David against Goliath, "no country however small, with assets of such resourcefulness, self-sacrifice, and determination will long be overshadowed by the brute force of its neighbor" (*War Comics #3*, 1940: 34). However, few years later the third issue of *War Heroes* would feature on its back cover a Soviet Soldier holding a rifle and a caption stating, "the world salutes the heroes of Stalingrad and their fiercely courageous defense of their homes and freedom against the Nazi invader". This change of opinion about the Russian can also be observed in the Hollywood movies of that time. As Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black (1987:186) pointed out, "The appearance of movies favorable to the Soviet Union was the most striking example of the plasticity of reality under wartime demands."

Dell Comics' *War Heroes* (1942-1944) is particularly enthralling because it offers a further change in the war comic genre: this series narrated the real lives of war soldiers, mostly American, but also from other allied countries (e.g. Canadians and Russians). The non-fictional nature of the stories told in some of these comics is sometimes explicated in the inside front cover. For example, the eighth issue of *War Heroes* stated in its Forward,

> These are the actual stories of war heroes from every branch of the U.S. Armed Services, as they were told to me personally by the men themselves and written and illustrated for newspapers over the country under the series title 'Back From Hell.' Here the stories are pictured for you in graphic realism by staff artists of this magazine.

Indeed, *War Heroes* narrated stories of real-life soldiers. For example, the first issue featured biographical accounts about General Douglas MacArthur, Lieutenant William L. Kabler, Sergeant Jose Calugas, Sgt. Thomas B. Miller, Captain Colin Kelly, and Sergeant Leslie Smitten, all known representatives of the American army. This series was officially supported by the military as acknowledged in the opening credits of the first issue.

To increase the feeling that they were dealing with real life issues, *War Heroes* editors also featured war photographs on the inside front cover, and the inside back cover of the fifth, sixth, and seventh issues. The photos portrayed military trainings, equipment, weapons, and vehicles. The photos on the seventh issue celebrated "Girl Heroes of the United Nations" and included pictures of a girl from the De Gaulle Fighting Force, Russian fighters (and a caption reminding the contribution of Russian Women on the front lines as aviators, nurses, and guerrillas), and U.S. WAFS (and a caption praising their role as flight mechanics, radio operators, and Link Trainer instructors). All these photographs

were staged to raise hope towards the future and reliance on the success of the operations. There are no pictures of the battlefields and the expression on the soldiers' face is never tense. As previously discussed, to be effective, propaganda must appeal to the appropriate emotions of the targeted consumer. Thus, the use of positive feelings becomes a way to boost the morale of a nation and persuade the public about the righteous of its actions. As previously mentioned, photographs and (proto)comics already started a dialogue on the newspaper pages, as they shared the same environment. In this period, their relationship started to bloom[39], as photographs were used to create a "paratext" (Genette, 1997[1987]) that connected comics stories to real world events.

However, it is worth remarking that, even though this comic committed to realism, it shared the same (celebratory) rhetoric of nationalist superheroes. In this case, the support towards American troops was even explicated in the forward of the first issue, which recited,

> This collection of stories of some of these modern War Heroes is by no means exhaustive – it is representative of service which has won undying gratitude of their nations and all the forces of righteousness in the world. Their achievement will be written into the record of this vast conflict. Their name will grow in brightness and in appreciation of all peoples, the free – fighting to remain free, and the enslaved – determined to become free (*War Heroes #1*, 1942:1).

Like *Captain America*, this comic series entangled "zealous nationalism" (Jewett & Lawrence, 2004) and "Strength Morality" (Lakoff, 1996) rhetoric, as America is given the role to free other countries and enlighten them. Therefore, the entrance into the conflict was described as the realization of America's Manifest Destiny. Soldiers' "sacrifice for freedom and democracy" are here described as "the march of civilization against those who would despoil" (*War Heroes #1*, 1942:1). Once again comics attempt to create consent by using pre-existing frames to make the current political situation seem natural. This historical crisis is turned into an abstract conflict (where good battles evil), creating a new myth (the Good War) by blending old concepts (America's Manifest Destiny and the closing of the Frontier) and new concerns (the Nazi and Japanese threat). This narrative aimed to promote the image of the U.S. as the leader of the so-called "Free World", emphasizing its mission to defend the cause of democracy and redeem the Old World. By using morality as a positive motivating factor, American propagandists were turning the war into a crusade. Comics used patriotic platitude, atrocities stories, and

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[39] This relationship will mature after the Vietnam War, a conflict characterized by visual recording.

glorification of the cause as rhetorical tools to demand immediate action and justify US intervention overseas.

Photographs were not the only elements used by *War Heroes* as paratext. This comics series also used recruiting posters to appeal to the readers' sense of duty, patriotism, and tradition. In addition, *War Heroes* featured also posters urging the purchase of the defense saving bonds and stamps, defined as "the best investment in the world". These posters teared at the moral and patriotic heartstrings of the viewers and seemed to leave the course of action up to them. Posters were also used to promote recruiting campaigns. One poster alluded to John Gast's painting *American Progress* (1872) (figure 7). This was certainly a callback to America's founding myths, but also a way to encourage the troops as they were destined to succeed. Thus, paratexual posters and comic stories have the same aim: remind the reader of America's past heroic achievements in both the Frontier and industry.

*War Heroes* aimed to recall the effort of both American and Allies' troops, but also the sacrifice of those who "have given their lives in service." Soldier's ultimate sacrifice is narrated, yet no graphic depiction is shown to the reader. Death is never portrayed as meaningless, as in these stories, the death of a soldier is countered by the number of enemies he killed and/or military victory. Thus, the text seems to imply that the soldier's death was not in vain, as he served the country and fought to defend democracy and freedom. The atrocities committed by the enemy (even if they are not drawn) reinforce the necessity of intervention. In fact, this rhetoric retrieves and further expands the one that originated during World War I, when the figure of the Unknown soldier was first established, therefore relying on a well-known and shared storyline. The Unknown Soldier was depicted as a martyr so that death might acquire a sacrificial (redeeming) meaning. The adoption of such rhetoric aimed to counter anti-war arguments[40], confuting the idea that war is useless or meaningless, and sugarcoating the reality of war. This

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[40] As Jay Winter discussed in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (2014[1995]), many of these commemorating sites had divisive as well as unifying effects. The creation of monuments dedicated to the Unknown Soldier aimed to make the observer contemplate the timeless and inexorable reality of death in war. Because they said so little, they allowed a divided society to let their dead rest and be mourned collectively. Indeed, the abstract representation of death allowed different interpretations and made those type of commemorative monuments sites of pilgrimage. Among the 'winners' the different meaning (and lessons) attributed to the conflict would soon be absorbed in a consensus that sought to commemorate the fallen who sacrificed their life for victory. The problem of commemorating a divisive war would also emerge during the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. However, in this case the absence of a military victory and the existence of a mass antiwar movement hindered the formation of a unitarian narration of the war.

narrative aimed to maintain the morale of the nation until the conflict would be officially over. Death is always sanitized as no blood appears in the panels.

The image of America as the world's leader is not promoted only in stories dealing with war (be it on the Atlantic or on the Pacific front), but also within tales narrating the collaboration of the US with Latin America. For example, the tale "Peril on the Pampas" featured in *War Victory Adventures* #3 can be considered a case in point. Indeed, the incipit states: "in time of war, the roll of goodwill ambassador is no easy job --- it's tougher for Robert Cabot when he arrives at his new post in South America". These narratives can be seen as a projection of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy". Indeed, the stated mission of this policy (that dates to the presidency of Herbert Hoover) was to emphasize cooperation and trade rather than military force to preserve stability in the American continent. As Karen S. Goldman discussed,

> Near the end of the 1930s, the U.S. government encountered reason to fear that the Nazi communications machine was making inroads in Latin America. Already disconcerting was the fact that in the early 1940s German interests held ownership or majority control over the telephone systems in Argentina, Ecuador, Uruguay, Paraguay, southern Chile and Mexico (Goldman, 2013:28).

To counter German propaganda, President Roosevelt in 1940 named Nelson Rockefeller, who had business holdings in Latin America, to head the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs. To achieve this aim, Hollywood producers were asked to incorporate Latin American themes in their movies to encourage and strengthen good will between the two hemispheres; Twentieth Century–Fox released *Down Argentine Way* (1940), *That Night in Rio* (1941) and *Weekend in Havana* (1941) and Disney produced *Saludos Amigos* (1942) and *The Three Caballeros* (1945). Similarly, as Fernando Purcell (2015) highlighted, Julien Bryan filmed four documentaries (*Atacama Desert*, *Housing in Chile*, *Fundo in Chile,* and *South Chile*) to promote a positive image of Chile and strengthen the ties among the two countries[41]. Hence, the story "Peril on the Pampas" featured in *War Victory Adventures* #3 is perfectly in line with the rhetoric of the time and, like these movies, the comic coded Latin America and its people as exotic, idealized and sexualized. Indeed, in this tale Argentina is embodied by the (exotic and sexualized) character of Rosita. Similarly, *Fight Comics* created the (hypersexualized) character of Senorita Rio, a Latina spy whose mission was to prevent Nazi's infiltration in South

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[41] A thorough discussion of the United States' ability to use its cultural influence (soft power) to effect its relations with Latin America can be found in the issue number 8 of *Acoma* (2015), edited by Benedetta Caladra.

America.

These examples show how bodies have a central function in the metaphorical imagining of the nation(s), constituting what Christina S. Jarvis (2004) defined as "body politics". This is particularly evident in the physical rendition of both (nationalist) superheroes and average G.I.s in war comics. Thus, these two genres do not only share, at the beginning, the same space, being published back to back on the same issue, but they also share similar codes of representation of the (male) body. In both genres, the main protagonist has a chiseled face, muscles that bulge through their uniform (or costume) and poses that highlighted the strength of the upper body. As Christina S. Jarvis argued,

> In keeping with centuries of artistic representation of heroic male body, the symbolic muscular, youthful (often white) male body of the serviceman offered a more easily interpreted image of national strength and power than its female counterpart and was more in keeping with a nation full-time engaged in waging war (Jarvis, 2004:14)

Both genres presented war as a rite of passage into manhood, a transition often marked by the maturing of the soldier's body. Yet, this physical transformation should not be considered only as a projection of America's dreams of strength[42] after a period (the Great Depression) in which such image was challenged. Military programs are portrayed as means for acquiring physical vigor. Despite the propaganda intent, these promises were legitimate: the service in the Army did improve the physical condition of many young men through exercise and a better diet. This transformation is well captured by *Wings Comics* (1940) story "How Uncle Sam trains his Warbirds" (figure 8), but also Captain America's origin story (figure 9). Yet, this rhetoric forgets to mention that war also produced negative transformations of the male physique such as wounds, amputations,

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[42] As Christina S. Jarvis demonstrated in her book *The Male Body at War* (2004), the redefinition of the notion of manhood started during the Great Depression. In this period advertising redefined the concept of masculinity as a combination of external and internal qualities: personality, vitality, and capacity of enjoying leisure time. Being a breadwinner was no longer enough as masculinity involved a determined physical appearance and a status to be acquired through hard work. Therefore, even if the muscular body had been praised and idealized since ancient times, its understanding was now rooted in the new folklore created by the mass culture. This use of the male body also diverged from the one adopted by the fascist and Nazi propaganda. Indeed, National Socialism promoted the image of a symmetrical, perfect (also in eugenics terms) body stripped of any individual identity and deprived of sensuality as the body of the individual did not belong to himself but to the nation. In contrast the representation adopted by the Americans lacked that rigid application of proportion as well as their asexuality. America exalted individuality and constructed the perfect body as something to be built and consumed. In his book *The Mechanical Bride,* Marshall McLuhan summarized this appropriation of the notion of masculinity by the new media through the catchphrase "the tough as narcissus" (McLuhan, 2002 [1951]:141).

and the reduction of one's vital body into a corpse.

War comics constructed soldiers as key figures in the definition of masculinity and national identity. They portrayed servicemen as physically fit, brave, patriotic, and adored by their sweethearts. Body (and facial hair) were the visible signs of their virility. Their implied (heteronormative and active) sexuality (which is central to the idealization of American manhood) serves an important function in many story lines. For example, in *Rangers of Freedom Comics #1* story "Don Stuart of the Far East Rangers," the daughter of Nazi falls in love with an American advisor and she lets him escape from prison. Similarly, servicemen often rescue abducted women, and the enemies (especially the Japanese) are often portrayed as sexual predators. The enemy often enslaves American soldiers, Allies, and innocence people (frequently women). The prisoners' captivity is certainly a metaphor of the personal limitation in a totalitarian State; however, the presence chains and ripped-off clothes have also sexual connotations that point towards rape, violence, and sexual perversion. Thus, war comics seem to contrast American soldiers' gallantry to the enemies' (sexual) deviation.

However, it is interesting to notice that the depiction of soldiers as ladies' men was mitigated by special comics[43] sponsored by the government and aimed at troops. Some of these comic strips preached against promiscuity and explained the importance of sexual hygiene. For example, Frank Robbins' (1943) "Your face looks so familiar" features four sailors sitting in a cafe and discussing about picking up an attractive woman and the possibility of getting a sexually transmitted disease. In the last panel, the sailor who leaves with the woman is shown sick in bed, being visited by a grim reaper-style ghost. Similarly, Posen Alvah's *Them days is gone forever* (1943) presents two Marines discussing the whereabouts and sexual behavior of a friend. The final panel shows the Marines approaching the friend's bed in the Venereal Disease ward. Gene Hazelton's *It's worth repeating* (1944) depicts the same pattern: a sailor making advances on a woman, taking her to dinner, and going to a flophouse. The final panel shows the sailor in the hospital. Somehow, in these comics the traditional gender role is reversed as the man is not the one protecting, but the one needing protection.

The valor and masculinity of the servicemen is not only depicted through their bodies,

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[43] These comics had didactical functions and dealt with practical issues (e.g., weaponry maintenance and Sexually Transmitted Disease prevention). Comics were used to address different topics making them intelligible and interesting for the soldiers, many of whom were (almost) illiterate (Murray, 2011:63).

but also through their bravery and fighting skills. Most of the fights involve close-quarter combats, which are meant to show the soldier's biceps and describe the war through chivalry codes as men could prove their worth by punching the enemy right in the face. This old fashioned and anachronistic representation of combat also aimed to foster the myth of the American soldier impenetrability in a moment in which war technologies (artillery, mines, boobytraps, bombs, tanks, etc.) threatened the wholeness of the servicemen body. Like Hollywood, comics sanitized the violence of war as soldiers (even enemies) died in close-quarter combats, bayonetted, or shot through the heart. These representations allow the corpses to be depicted as whole: no missing limbs, digit, legs or even a gruesome facial expression. Indeed, as Paul Fussell noticed (1989:270), during World War II pop culture shielded the audience from the horrors of war, "you would expect front-line soldiers to be struck and hurt, by bullets and shell fragments, but such is popular insulation from the facts that you would not expect them to be hurt, sometimes killed, by being struck by parts of their friends' bodies violently detached."

In this regard, it should be mentioned that war comics presented also wounded servicemen through clean and notably intact bodies: none of them suffered 'traumatic amputation', as it would be termed two decades later during the Vietnam War. They often smiled in the hospital and a few bandages signified the presence of wounds. War comics often featured nurses and acknowledged their tireless and effective care. For example, *Wing Comics* created the character of Jane Martin[44], a red cross nurse, who helped wounded soldiers, but (in the first issue) also refugee civilians escaping from aerial attacks. This character is particularly fascinating because it introduced the idea of America as a place of refuge. While male characters helped the Allies defend their freedom against the tyranny and totalitarianism embodied by the Axis' soldiers, female characters fostered the image of America as a sheltering nation. So, World War II comics recognized the contribution of women while they reinforced traditional gendered roles. This representation of the conflict allowed the U.S. to portray their engagement overseas as a defend and rescue mission.

Moreover, war comics depicted World War II as a transnational buddying experience where young men from different nations collaborated to defend freedom. The "Skull

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[44] The character was scripted by Fred Hawks and illustrated by Nick Cardy.

Squad" stories[45], featured in *Wing Comics,* presented the collaboration of the U.S. with Britain as they attempted to contain and roll back the expansion of the Nazis in Europe helping those who were resisting. Thus, the role that the US attributed to itself was that of a guarantor of freedom. For example, issue #6 featured the squad assisting a group of Czechoslovakians. The comic also paid homage to those who fought to defend their land, "with men like those who lie beneath the dark waters, Czechoslovakia will live again!".

The role of freedom in the official rhetoric is particularly evident in the one-shot (educational) comic (aimed at a young audience) *How Boys and Girls Can Help Win the War[46]* (1942). This issue starts with an adaptation of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" speech[47]. This presidential proclamation broke the non-interventionist attitude that had been held in the United States since World War I, foreshadowing the nation's entrance in the conflict. Roosevelt tried to harden Americans' resolve to oppose the Axis warning them that their own way of life was in peril, declaring that "at no previous time has American security been as seriously threatened from without as it is today" (Roosevelt, 1941: web). In his speech he identified four freedoms (the freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear) as the antithesis of totalitarian regimes, rights that every person everywhere had the right to enjoy.

*How Boys and Girls Can Help Win the War* attempted to visualize the four types freedom[48] and like the original speech, this adaptation portrayed an idealized image of the nation and its principles, failing to see that many Americans did not have access to those freedoms due to economic, gender, and racial inequalities. The comics encouraged youth to join organizations like the Boy Scouts, Junior Red Cross, and the Camp Fire Girls. It endorsed youth to get a good education, healthy eating, exercise, and good hygiene. It prompted them to engage in odd jobs to earn money to buy war bonds and

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[45] They were written by Ace Atkins and illustrated by Arthur Peddy.

[46] This comic was written by George J. Hecht and published by War Services Division of Parents' Institute, Inc.

[47] This speech was delivered by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on January 6, 1941, in his State of the Union address.

[48] This speech was also adapted in graphic form by the commercial illustrator Norman Rockwell. His *Four Freedoms* (1943) attempted to capture the spirit of America during the war, idealizing American values. America is depicted as a prosperous and democratic country even though many Americans still endured socioeconomic hardship domestically. These pictures portrayed what America wanted to be rather than what America really was.

stamps, and it asked children to preserve the things they have and limit waste as supplies may be better used in the war effort. Comics became didactic tools to prescribe a certain way of conduct functional to the consolidation and preservation of the American identity mythmaking. This comic is particularly significant because it showed how World War II mobilized many resources of society to fight, including all civilian-associated resources and infrastructure, converting national economies into wartime economies and giving priority to warfare over the needs of civilians. War is portrayed as a collective effort and each citizen is called to contribute according to its means and possibilities. America is portrayed as a collective body at war.

Moreover, it should be noticed that, while comics presented soldiers as part of a body (the Army), they also praised their individuality. Indeed, certain comics stories show how the recklessness of the main protagonist allows him to save the day, despite having violated official orders. For example, *Wing Comics #1* features the story of Greasemonkey Griffin[49], a mechanic dreaming of being a pilot, who steals a plane. However, during his first flight he intercepts German airplanes and manages to take them down. Similarly, in the same issue, Tom Slade becomes a member of the Phantom Falcons (a group of aviators) after having followed his instincts about a suspect[50]. The idea of personal initiative is a distinguishing feature of the Americans. These portrayals of the ace revive the images of the 'free lance' and the 'lone wolf' that emerged during WWI (Robertson, 2003). Flyers were represented as members of an exclusive fraternity, and yet each of them was dependent upon his own will. Pilots could decide for themselves whether or not engage the enemy. This image made modern warfare resemble a chivalry duel. The main distinction between these two prototypes of fighters (the free lance and the lone wolf) resides in their motivations. The free lance is motivated by duty and the love for its nation, whereas the lone wolf sought personal glory and an occasion to prove himself.

Masculinity is also reinforced by the men fusing with the (war) machines which acquire a phallic dimension. Like the male body, machines required strength, agility, stamina, and endurance. In this regard, it is worth noticing that whereas the machine acquired manly attributes, the soldiers acquired machine-like attributes: discipline and order. The military success is often described as dependent on technological advancement

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[49] This story was written by Jay Ryder and illustrated by George Tuska.
[50] The Phantom Falcons were created by Kit Gleason and illustrated by R. A. Burley.

and the industrial apparatus. For example, *Wings Comics #2* stated, "As the new World War is being fought… with all its fury and ferocity the airplane plays a more important part day by day. The planes below give evidence that U.S.A. is not asleep with regard to the technical development of pursuit aircraft" (Wing Comics #2, 1940:42). Then, it is not surprising that many spy stories featured in war comics narrated Nazis' attempt to sabotage American industrial facilities. The comics show how World War II was a total war that mobilized any sector of U.S. society. The war machine and the industrial apparatus were clearly linked, and technology development was portrayed as a key asset. War comics often show how each side was trying to improve the flow of communication intelligence and the production of more deadly and efficient weapons. For example, in *Wings Comics #16* Captain Wings attempts to save a scientist so that his creations would not fall into the Nazi's hands and be used for evil purposes. Even though, at first glance, these plot lines seem to mix science fiction with war accounts, one should remember the role that technology played in the outcome of the war (e.g., the enigma machine and the Manhattan Project).

So, it is no surprise that many war comics were aviation themed. One of the first was *Wings Comics*[51] which followed the adventure of everyday military airmen, focusing on the depiction of aerial combat. As Fertig (2017:35, original emphasis) observed, "*Wings*' release in the summer of 1940 also coincided with the Battle of Britain, when the skies over the English Channel and North Sea captured the world's attention and became ground zero in the fight against Hitler." The creators of this title paid particular attention to details (including the use of air force jargon) to appeal to readers. Other titles that were published during World War II were: *Air Fighters* (1941-1945)*, Captain Aero* (1942-1943)*, Captain Flight* (1944-1947)*, Flight Comics* (1940-1954)*, Sky Blazers* (1940), *True Aviation Comics digest* (1942)*,* and *True Aviation picture stories* (1943-1945). Will Eisner's The Blackhawks from Quality's *Military Comics* (later changed to *Modern Comics* after the war) is also a case in point. It presented an international aviation team that served the Allied cause, but not an individual nation. This comics book was extremely popular during and after the war. It was one of the few comic books to survive continuous publication from the 1940s to the 1960s (first with Quality, and later with DC). A possible explanation for this emphasis on aviation might be the fear of aerial attacks after Pearl

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[51] It was published by Fiction House. It debuted in 1940 and lasted beyond the end of the Korean War

Harbor.

The focus on the aerial maneuvers of the pilots often effaced the consequences of the bombing on civilians as the actions mainly involved planes shooting at each other. The mass scale horror that war produced is often edulcorated as the conflict is depicted as being limited to a small group of people and factions. As Linda Robertson discussed in *The Dream of Civilized Warfare* (2003), the image of the flying ace offered the opportunity to imagine the war as a man-to-man combat, rather than the mechanized slaughter it really was[52]. The scholar pointed out that,

> The air war came to symbolize the older, chivalric conception of the warrior as the embodiment of all that was best in civilization —constraint under pressure, fairness to one's enemies, skilled combat, and a willingness to sacrifice one's life […] the role of the combat pilot wedded air wars with the image of civilized violence undertaken in the name of civilization, a connection between the mode of warfare and its purpose which was lost with the advent of brutal, mechanized warfare on the ground (Robertson, 2003: xviii)

Then, it seems natural that pilots were described as possessing quickness, grace under pressure, and intelligent reaction to danger. These attributes made the ace resemble either a knight or a hunter and, in turn, the plane became a steed. These metaphors allowed the public to picture war in traditional terms: the weapon was a decisive asset, but what mattered the most was the individual's skill to bend technology to his own will.

As previously discussed, many war comics had also educational functions, as they not only suggested behavioral strategies to soldiers and civilians, but also proffered information on war technologies. Indeed, some of the stories featured in war comics included a couple of panels at the bottom of the page which had an expanded illustration and description of an item from the story. These pictures were explanatory diagrams giving information about the functioning of military equipment, artillery, aircraft, and fighting vehicles. In addition, some of these diagrams also depicted aircraft's projected path and military strategy. Once again, these didactic drawing were often used to explain and show US technological advancements and compare them to the one accomplished by the enemy. These comics aimed to reassure the readers about the inevitable military success: the U.S. Army was equipped with the mightiest weapons ever built. As Paul Fussel observed in *Wartime* (1989:13), "A panacea was the natural thing for the audience at home to believe in, since for years it had been lulled into comfort by the conviction

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[52] Even though this image originated during WWI, one can observe the endurance of its legacy in WWII.

that the war could be won by shrewd Yankee technological expedients, like, for example, bombing from costly airplanes flying at safe altitudes." These depictions affirmed a faith in technology while glossing over the limits of the war machines and the blunders, errors, accidents caused by humans as war tested the soldiers' psychological stability and their capacity to perform their duties.

Finally, but equally important, the paratext of war comics mixed war propaganda and advertising. In the comics series *True Aviation Picture-Stories* these connections are made more evident. For example, on the eighth issue an advertisement uses war to sponsor its product, "Because Baby Ruth helps provide so many of the essential foods necessary for strenuous activity, millions are sent to Uncle Sam's fighters everywhere. Because their needs come FIRST, you may not always find Baby Ruth at your store, but shortages are only temporary." As Christopher Murray (2011) observed,

> although there was no product available to the public, the advertising campaign continued uninterrupted, keeping the brand name in the public's consciousness and ensuring a viable postwar market. Naturally, these posters and advertisements did more than promote the absent brands; they reminded the public of the luxuries that the war had deprived them of and made them dream of the return of these luxuries once victory had been assured, therefore potentially strengthening resolve for the war effort (Murray, 2011: 82).

War propaganda and commercials are then connected by their unique promotion of the American way of life, at once selling products (in fact a status system), and (political and moral) self-righteousness. The stress on the adherence to the American way of life seems to foreshadow the incipient Cold War. Indeed, the United States, like the Soviet Union, soon recognized the importance of culture in the battle for the 'hearts and minds' of their citizens (and those living in nonaligned states) and they did not hesitate to use soft power: goods, (cultural) products and brands became ambassadors of America both at home and abroad. Comics were also part of this.

Moreover, World War II comics did not only depict the ongoing conflict, but they were also physically "drafted" overseas. As Mike Benton (1992) observed, nearly two-thirds of all men in World War II training camps read comics, and "by 1944, one out of every four magazine the government shipped overseas was a comic book." Interestingly, the Marines stationed on Midway Island needed their fix so badly that the Navy classified comics as 'essential supplies' (Hirsch, 2014). These data are not surprising, as many World War II soldiers belonged to the first generation who grew up with comic books. Indeed, as Fertig (2017) remarked, a 12-year-old kid who had bought the first issue of

Superman in 1938 was 18 and in uniform when the Allies landed at Normandy. Unintentionally, "American soldiers aided the success of comics, spreading them around the world. Like Coca-Cola, chocolate, chewing gum, and nylon stockings, comics followed American troops wherever they went" (Murray, 2011:17). This "draft" experience would be reflected in war comics as well. For example, *Fight Comics # 20* featured a two-page illustration presenting the drawing of hyper sexualized pin-up girls. The image contained a dedication, "reserved 'specially for you Army guys, Gobs, and leathernecks!'", and a sexually ambiguous sentence, "these pages fill it up boys!"

War had also a direct impact on the comics industry, as many artists participated in the war effort. Captain America creators were drafted: Simon joined the Coast Guard in 1943, and Kirby was conscripted into the 11th Infantry, and saw active service in Europe. Other cartoonists who served in the war included Sam Glanzman, Jack Davis, Wally Wood (who managed to enlist despite being underage during World War II), Bill Everett, Carl Burgos, and Will Eisner (Conroy, 2009: 62).

## 4. Gender, Race and Ethnicity in WWII Comics

As hitherto discussed, WWII comics did not only feature conservative ideas, but they also offered different groups the opportunity to insert their identity into mainstream culture. Hyphenated Americans were not the only group to profit from the war to inscribe their identity into mainstream comics culture. With so many men overseas, women had to step into many of the roles formerly occupied by men. Comics were no exception, and this "influx of talent led to the arrival of a passel of newly empower female superheroes who assumed their rightful places in the pages of comic books" (Fertig, 2017:16). Even though strong female heroines had already appeared in comic book stories, World War II favored the emergence of female artists. Early female characters like Wonder Woman, (the Canadian) Nelvana, and Black Cat were all created by men[53]. For example, Wonder Woman, the most iconic and long-lasting superheroine, was created in 1941 by Dr. William Moulton Marston, a psychologist who anticipated the importance of gender representation in comics. Indeed, in an article for *The American Scholar* appeared in

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[53] Nelvana was created by Adrian Dingle in 1941. Her stories first appeared in Triumph-Adventure Comics. Black Cat first story was written by Alfred Harvey and drawn by Al Gabriele. Her stories first appeared in *Pocket Comics*. After its demise, the character was featured in the anthology *Speed Comics*. It was during this run that the character was illustrated by Jill Elgin, a woman cartoonist.

1943, he commented about the idea that led him to the creation of Wonder Woman, "It's smart to be strong. It's big to be generous, but it's sissified, according to exclusive male rules, to be tender, loving affectionate, and alluring. 'Aw, that's girl stuff!' snorts our young comics reader, 'Who wants to be a girl?' And that's the point: not even girl want to be girl so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength" (Robbins, 1996:7). Like their male counterparts, Wonder Woman, Nelvana and Black Cat battled the Axis. Miss Fury is probably the first superheroine to be drawn by a woman, Tarpe Mills.

Although superheroines kept on being sexualized[54], they were no longer damsels in distress. They were given more complex personalities, and some of them were part of the patriotic wave that characterized the war period. As Trina Robbins observed,

> Wacs and Waves battled the Axis on land and sea and in the air, and so did their comic book sisters. Wearing red, white, and blue costumes that might have been designed by Betsy Ross, patriotic superheroines fought Germans and Japanese on land, on sea, in the air, and on the pages of America's comics. In their civilian life most of them were mild-mannered secretaries or girl reporters. Many of them were drawn by women artists like Nina Albright, Jill Elgin, and Pauline Loth, who had stepped in to fill the position left vacant when male artists went off to war (Robbins, 1996:37)

Some of the characters that were created in this period were Miss Fury, Pat Patriot[55], Miss Victory, Miss America (who had her own title), Pat Parker (War Nurse), the Girl Commandos, Black Venus, Lady Satan, but also the already mentioned Jane Martin and Senorita Rio. Like their male counterpart, these superheroines fought for the freedom of enslaved nations. Some of these superheroines were given non-American national origins. For example, *Girl Commandos*[56]*,* like their male counterpart[57], featured a sort of transnational alliance as its members had different nationality: Ellen and Pat were British, Penny was American, Tanya was Russian, and Mei Ling was Chinese. Moreover, gender provided the writers the opportunity to explore different declinations of the notion of patriotism and complicate the 'nation as family' metaphor. As Mike Madrid observed in his discussion about Pat Patriot,

> Pat Patriot's career was not as long as Captain America's. Her adventures were over by the middle of 1942. But 'America's Joan of Arc' also provided something to readers that some of the bellicose

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[54] However, it is worth mentioning a notable exception, *Girl Commandos,* as this comic defied some of the convention of the genre featuring an overweight co-protagonist (Ellen) and a non-stereotyped Chinese superheroine, Mei Ling.

[55] It was written by Charles Biro and Bob Wood and illustrated by Frank Borth and Reed Crandall

[56] *Girl Commandos* were penciled by Barbara Hall.

[57] *Boy Commandos* were created in 1942 by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. The squad featured André Chavard from France; Alfie Twidgett from England, Jan Haasan from the Netherlands, and 'Brooklyn' from the United States. This elite commando of orphaned children fought on all fronts of the Second World War.

male super-patriots might have overlooked - a sense of comfort during bad times. One story closes with the heroine making a radio broadcast: "And so, the words of Pat Patriot ring out over the country, bringing assurance to thousands of worried persons as she fights for peace and democracy…" (Madrid, 2013:23)

So, one can observe a small transition from the "The Strict Father Model" to the "The Nurturant Parent Model" (Lakoff, 1995) as morality is no longer exclusively equated to strength, but also empathy and nurturance. Many heroines involved in WWII stories were nurses, even though they also acted as pilot, reporters, and even spies. For example, Jane Martin "The modern Florence Nightingale" was a compassionate healer, but she did not hesitate to contribute to the war effort, fighting the enemy and delivering supplies, weapons, and medical knowledge to those in need. This comic is particularly enthralling because it shows a progressive emancipation of the main heroine. Whereas in early stories Jane Martin's aviator fiancé Tom arrives at the last minute to rescue her, he would later disappear leaving Jane completely in charge of her story and destiny.

Likewise, the figure of Florence Nightingale is also evoked in *Wonder Woman #1* (1942). Indeed, one of the stories featured in the first issue reminds the reader that Florence Nightingale was a "wise and beautiful English girl, who like Wonder Woman, gave up the right of her happy and protected home to save the lives of suffering humanity". Like Jane Martin, Wonder Woman is not merely a fighter, but also a nurturing figure. Before entering World War II, and taking the identity of Wonder Woman, Diana lived among the Amazons and decided to join the conflict only after meeting and restoring the health of a wounded American soldier, Steve Trevor. Wherefore, one can observe a gendered variation on the patriotic theme, as women did not only have to defend freedom by any means, but they also had to provide shelter.

Moreover, it is important to remark that the portrayal of strong female women did not seek to defy traditional gender roles. Even though, these superheroines were busy battling the Axis, they did not give up their femininity, symbolized by their manicured nails, shaped eyebrows, and makeup. Whereas male characters were defined by their strength, gallantry, and bravery, female characters were also defined by their beauty. As Christina S. Jarvis argued,

> Whether featuring women war workers, superheroes, or housewives, World War II imagery suggested that women could have muscles, strength, and heroism as long as they as their muscles were smaller than their male counterparts and no gender boundaries had been crossed permanently. Thus the general trend toward constructing the U.S. as a masculine nation did not entail eschewing images of women; instead, typically 'masculine' values were granted to female figures on a temporary basis as America reconstructed its wartime self-representations (Jarvis, 2004:55).

Moreover, having female characters battling and defeating the Axis can be seen as a way to portray the enemy as an emasculated figure who despite its threatening appearance does not stand a chance against the U.S. and its mission (be it the defense of universal freedom or the retaliation against a treacherous aggression).

It is noteworthy to remark that the exact number of female artists that worked in the comic industry during the 1940s remains unknown. As Trina Robbins remarked in her book *Babes in Arms* (2017) the identity of many comics artists was concealed by pseudonyms. Moreover, the low reputation of medium might have prompted (female) artists or the magazine editors to not mention their contribution to preserve their reputation. Reconstruing Jill Elgin career and pondering about the absence of any form of recognition of her work, Trina Robbins speculates that the artist "didn't want to sully her reputation if it had been known that she contributed to such questionable field" (Robbins, 2017:11). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the contribution of many women to the field, like Ruth Atkinson, Ann Brewster, Nina Albright, Jill Elgin, Pauline Loth, Barbara Hall, Lily Renée, Fran Hopper, and Regina Levander who illustrated intrepid and valiant wartime superheroine and war comics[58].

Like their male counterpart, these superheroines did not only battle the Axis, but they also reinforced pre-existing myths and stereotypes. For example, Pat Patriot originally started out as Patricia Patrios. Her name would have probably made the reader infer that she came from an immigrant family. Yet, this heroine fully embraced American democratic ideas by battling the Axis and defending freedom. Then, like Wonder Woman, this comic reiterates the immigrant narrative, as these superheroines' adherence to American ideals through an act of "consent" (Sollors, 1986) overwrites their ancestry. However, it is important to notice that whereas these comics did offer women and ethnic identities the means to claim a role in the battle against the Axis and American society, they also reproduced racial and ethnic stereotypes about the enemy. Thus, one might infer that their inclusion happened at the expense of the racial enemy. Indeed, the Japanese were drawn as buck-toothed monsters with coke bottle eyeglasses and a lemon-yellow skin.

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[58] This list could be expanded to include artists that worked with other genres, among whom Lillian Chestney Zuckerberg, Olive Bailey, Dolores Carroll, Lucy Feller, Tarpe Mills, Claire Moe, Ramona Patenaude, Marcia Snyder, Serene Summerfield, and Priscilla Ward.

Ethnic Americans and women[59] managed to use this medium to subtly complicate the U.S. mythmaking of the nation. However, racial groups did not benefit from such opportunity, as they continued to be represented through stereotypes. Hence, confirming the fact that ethnicity and race never played the same role in American society[60] (Steinberg, 2001; Takaki, 1994). While ethnic groups could aspire to become part of the mainstream culture through either Anglo-conformity or the melting pot, the racial Other was excluded from said process. This is particularly evident if one takes into consideration the history of naturalization in the U.S. For example, Asians "were excluded from both immigration and naturalized citizenship on grounds of 'racial unassimilability' from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century" (Ngai, 2007:2522). This shows also the difference between the terms "immigrant" and "alien". While the former refers to the Other as someone external, coming from outside the national borders, the latter refers to the Other as someone born and living within the national border, but whose traits and otherness are deemed permanent, passed from generation to generation. Through this distinctions America created ethnic heroes and racial villains.

Were we to reconstruct World War II history only through mainstream comics of the time we would certainly have a partial and biased narrative of the event. Comics featured mainly (if not almost exclusively) white heroes. Racial minorities were often absent from the narrative and when present they often occupied marginal (and stereotyped) roles functioning as sidekick or comic relief. A few notable examples are the characters of Steamboat in *Captain Marvel*, Ebony in *The Spirit*, Whitewash Jones in *The Young Allies*, Chop Chop in *The Blackhawk*, and Gargantua T. Potts[61] in the *Tex Thompson* series from

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[59] In this regard, it is interesting to notice that at the end of the war the number of women hired in the industry diminished. WWII presented a unique occasion for superheroines to shine while fighting the enemies of democracy. During the Korean war, they were no longer fighting on foreign battlefields as female characters were merely involved in romantic relationship with handsome G.I.s, as in *True War Time Romances* (1952-1955) or *G.I. Sweethearts* (1953-1955). Their absence from Vietnam is not surprising given the opposition to war in those years.

[60] Race is generally associated with biology and linked with physical characteristics (e.g. skin color, hairs, eyes shape, etc.), whereas ethnicity is associated with cultural expressions. Yet it is important to remark that under many circumstances it is not easy to draw a narrow line separating these two concepts.

[61] He is Tex Thompson's valet, but he leaves the series to join the French Army as a cook. Tex Thompson's story "The Kidnapping" featured in *Action Comics # 25* marks the last on-panel appearance of Gargantua T. Potts. He is briefly mentioned in the opening caption of issue #26, where it is explained that he has joined the French Foreign Legion. He will not make an appearance in the series after this. The *Tex Thompson* series was created by Ken Fitch and Bernard Baily. Tex Thompson was a blonde-haired boy from Texas who abandoned a possible future as an oil baron to pursue a more adventurous lifestyle with his friend, Bob

*Action Comics*. Even though they are positive character and embody the values of friendship and loyalty, they are no equal to their white counterpart and their caricatural depiction shows no respect towards the racial Other.

The (thoughtful and non-caricatural) presence of racial minorities would have probably undermined the narration of America as a united and harmonic nation. Despite the government's call for unity during the conflict, racism was still dominant in American society, and segregation was still in place. War did not make racial hatred disappear. Accordingly, the presence of non-white characters is rare. African Americans are the only group to be (scarcely) represented (Latinos, Asians, and Natives are not generally featured). Chinese allies are presented as sidekicks, as they were the most important ally in the Pacific theater.

The American self was predominantly drawn as white; characters' ethnicity was hinted, but never clearly addressed or thoroughly problematized. One of the few exceptions was a Canadian comic book series, lasted only three issues, titled *Jewish War Heroes* (1944). This comic published by the Canadian Jewish Congress aimed to recognize and remind the Jewish contribution to the fight. In this comic, Jews were not depicted as victims but fighters struggling to defend their freedom. The first page of issue #1 stated,

> Jews everywhere have declared war on Hitler, war to the death, without reserve and without compromise. They know and the whole world knows that Hitlerism is the enemy of all civilization. Men cannot live free and decent lives if Hitler remains on earth and if his ideas remain. Jews and all civilized mankind are fighting this war to destroy Hitler and his evil way.

The comic celebrated the gestures and sacrifices of various Jewish warriors. Even though they had different nationalities, and fought on different war fronts, they were all focused on a moral battle against the Axis. The first issue narrated the stories of Yank Levy, Brigadier Frederick Hermann Kisch, Captain Israel Fisanovitch, Flying Officer Alfred Brenner, Sgt. Meyer Levin, General Morrice Abraham Cohen. This comic established Nazism as a global threat to democracy, appropriating and reinforcing a rhetoric present also in more commercial comics. The message of this comic and its moral zeal was straightforward: benign powers must cooperate to triumph over the enemy and redeem a disordered world. Thus, the fight against the Axis was turned once again into a moral

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Daley. In issue #33 (1941), answering to America's patriotic call to action, Tex Thompson quitted his racket-busting job and joined the war effort. After a group of saboteurs blew up the ship he was on, he assumed the identity of *Mr. America*. He dyed his hair and started wearing a red, white, and blue costume.

crusade. Moreover, many of the stories featured in *Jewish War Heroes* narrated the personal experience of Jewish immigrants and second generations Jews in Army. The military service was here presented as an agent of integration. The connection between the Army and upward mobility was explicated in the third issue of the comic, where the life of Colonel David Arnold Croll was described as "a typical Horatio Alger story". Indeed, David Arnold Croll was first introduced as a poor six-year-old boy who just arrived in Canada. However, at the end of the story, military service allowed him to become a better man and improve his social status, "Through his own efforts he became a Captain with the Oxford Riffles in 1942, later a Major, at the time of his retirement he was a Colonel. The voters of Toronto-Spadina elected him to the House of Commons". Even though this comic was produced in Canada, one can observe the pervasiveness of the American 'war rhetoric'.

In contrast, African Americans were not generally recognized, even though they also served their country. When present, they often embodied stereotypes from minstrel show: thick lips, kinky hair, broad noises, heavy dialect, and naivety. As Fertig (2017:24) observed, African Americans were depicted as "jungle savages, manservants, boogeymen, mammies, or more regularly than anything else comic relief. And of course, it was not just a matter of their inferior role as characters, but also the degrading manner in which they were drawn." Thus, the racial Other was not depicted and seen as he or she would have liked to. These stereotypes might have been internalized by the subject of these depictions, creating a "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 2005 [1903]). For this reason, some African American students protested racist depictions in comics (Hirsch, 2014; Goodrum, 2017; Fertig, 2017), arguing that someone could have mistakenly considered those portraits realistic.

As previously mentioned, the government tried to encourage racial and ethnic tolerance, believing that victory demanded cooperation. As Hirsch (2014:475) remarked, "This was a call for public rather than private tolerance, a demand for unity in the public spheres of war production and military service." Thus, visible ethnic groups started to appear in comics, but mainly as sidekicks. This decision was influenced by the fact that "A racial war at home threatened not only American-style liberal democracy, but also the country's ability to wage and win a global war" (Hirsch, 2014:476). The government and media attempted to present a pluralistic and unified image of the nation to meet the

demands of a total war and a full-scale mobilization.

Comics were sensitive to this call for national unit and often presented the 'melting pot' as part of the national mythos. These stories aimed to contrast American pluralism, multiculturalism, and democracy to Nazi ideology and 'master race' rhetoric. For example, *Green Lama* #2[62] (1945:13) rhetorically asked its readers, "does it matter whether He was Protestant, Catholic or Jew… Negro or White? He fought American. He died American. He *was* American […] if Smith, Kelly, Cohen, Svoboda is good enough to die for us, he's good enough to live with us…As an equal. Be American!" This promises of equal opportunities are deeply rooted in the "American Dream" myth. However, this myth would acquire a new meaning during World War II as many African Americans saw their enrolment in the military as an opportunity to bring an end to discrimination: the 'four freedoms' were incompatible with segregation. African Americans sought a double victory that granted freedom abroad and at home. However, it is worth noticing that despite the hopes raised by the war propaganda, past racist practices were still part of American culture, especially in the South where integrationist policies were often actively opposed. Inevitably, WWII comics often reflected the contradiction of their time as they balanced the hope for a future racial inclusivity and the maintenance of the current status quo (paying attention to not alienate the white audience).

In this regard, Paul Hirsch (2014) observed a pretty peculiar case of a more inclusive depiction of African Americans. Indeed, he recalled that "Gaines's[63] staff duly crafted a story including the 99th Pursuit Squadron, nicknamed the Red Tails and perhaps best known as the Tuskegee Airmen. The story, 'The 99th Squadron,' appeared in the winter 1945 [1944] issue of *Comic Cavalcade*" (Hirsch, 2014:478). This story is exceptionally

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[62] The story was written by Ken Crossen and penciled by Mac Raboy and published by Spark Publications.

[63] Maxwell Charles Gaines (born Ginzberg) was the co-publisher of All-American Publications, a company that he shared with his partner Jack Liebowitz. The company produced among other titles *All-American Comics* and possessed the rights to properties such as Wonder Woman, the Flash, and Green Lantern. After selling his share of All-American Publications in 1944, Gaines started up his own comic company named Educational Comics, which published stories from the Bible, translating them into graphic form. After Max Gaines' death in 1947, his son William Gaines took over the company and began publishing more mature content, delving into the genres of horror, suspense, war, science-fiction, and more. This change was visible also in the name of the company, which shifted from Educational Comics to Entertaining Comics. In 1948, Gaines hired Albert Feldstein and together they started to innovate comics, creating new trends. In 1949, Gaines hired Harvey Kurtzman as an artist. He would later be promoted to write and editor of the war titles, as well as *MAD* in its early years.

important because the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron was the first African American fighter squadron, and it provided support for Allies operations in North Africa and Italy.

Even though, this issue attempted to acknowledge African American service in the Army, it failed to give them full recognition. Indeed, the main protagonist of the story was not African American, but a white pilot, Hop Harrigan. Black and white pilots were never portrayed in the same panel. Even though the story was supposedly centered on the 99<sup>th</sup> Squadron, black pilots were only featured in three out of the fifty-three panels that compose this issue. Moreover, black pilots did not speak. So, this comics issue performs a form of disremembering, that echoes with the one experienced by the protagonist of Ralph Ellison (1952) *Invisible Man.* Indeed, according to Nguyen (2016:63) definition, "disremembering is not simply the failure to remember. Disremembering is the unethical and paradoxical mode of forgetting at the same time as remembering, or, from the perspective of the other who is disremembered, of being simultaneously seen and not seen." This condition affects in particular the racial Other as he or she is made visible only to be a target for racist depictions. In this case, the presence of Africans Americans is just a form of tokenism that betrays a patronizing attitude, as black people are not even entitled to be protagonist of their own stories.

Moreover, the story "The 99<sup>th</sup> Squadron" attempted also to compare and contrast Nazi's racism to America's more tolerant attitude towards minorities. Hop Harrigan show a Luftwaffe general, Fritz Schlange, a film portraying the bravery and skills of the 99<sup>th</sup> Squadron. The Nazi is horrified to learn that the pilots are African Americans, "Donnervetter! Those – *those* are the pilots who shot down my men?" Outraged, Hop answered "So much for your 'superior race' nonsense." This episode clearly echoes Jesse Owens victory at 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics. This allusion allows the author to stress not only America's military strength and superior technology, but also its success as an inclusive democracy. Of course, this depiction is just a projection of America's liberal values and not a faithful rendition of the reality: the Jim Crow system of segregation was in place also in the military.

However, if one looks at these episodes closely, one might observe how America's democratic values were undermined by subjacent racism. Indeed, Roosevelt never publicly acknowledged Owens's triumphs or the triumphs of any of the 18 African Americans who competed at the Berlin Olympics. Similarly, in the "The 99<sup>th</sup> Squadron"

story, African Americans are merely tokens deprived of any real agency. This lack of recognition and representation of African American is also visible in Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Superman* #10. In this issue Superman outperform Dukalians (a not so veiled reference to Nazi Germans) in a Olympic competition, like Jesse Owens did in Berlin. However, this narrative is stripped of any racial element and implication. As Christopher Murray (2011:169) observed, "the war was effectively Whitewashed, and representations of African Americans in the military, or even on the home front, were carefully handled and frequently censored." Likewise, Christina S. Jarvis (2004:148) remarked that, "Under the guidance of the OWI, the American media helped the military maintain the perception that America's fighting manhood was still racially coded as white". Thus, depiction of African Americans as sidekick was a means to sideline their contribution and diminish their manhood as they were denied the opportunity to prove themselves in combat. This is particularly important because the description of war as a rite of passage into manhood granted white soldiers their full rights as men and citizens (as they were conquered on the battlefield). However, it is important to remark that World War II would function as a catalyst for civil rights movement. Indeed, in 1942, African American James G. Thompson wrote a letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier* titled, "Should I Sacrifice to Live Half American?" questioning if he should fight for a country that discriminated against him[64].

Similarly, Chinese Allies were depicted as sidekicks needing support "to make any progress in the fight against the Japanese" (Yizheng, 2016:48). These narratives reinforced the white savior trope, but at the same time they gave a message of unity and cooperation among the Allied forces. The story "The Flying Tigers" in *War Heroes*[65] (1942) narrated the fights of the Allies in the Pacific and presented Japanese as the main villain. This story reinforced the image of the Allies as righteous and helped promoting a sympathetic vision of the Chinese. Similarly, the story "Chennault and His Flying Tigers" in *True Aviation (Digest and Picture-Stories)* (1943) presented Americans as China's saviors. Consequently, readers could hardly have seen Chinese people as equal to the heroic American soldiers. These depictions clearly betrayed patronizing attitudes as they presented Chinese people as childlike figures requiring guidance from foreigners. Hence, these comics reenact orientalist tropes well established in Western culture. In a similar

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[64] African Americans would raise the same question during the Vietnam War.
[65] This story was written by Worth Carnahan and illustrated by Bob Jenney.

racist vein, a 1942 Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates* strip titled "How to Spot a Jap[66]" tried to educate the audience on how to set apart a Japanese from a Chinese based on presumed physical traits[67]. This comic strip attempted to provide insides into the Japanese character, explaining its essentialized nature, and revealing that the U.S. misinterpreted and underestimated the enemy: America was not able to foresee the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Moreover, it is important to recall that while comics promoted ethnic tolerance for home minorities and allies, they also endorsed ethnic stereotypes about the enemy. Japanese people were depicted as treacherous monsters with fangs and talon-like fingernails who did not fight face-to-face, but waited for the best moment to hit the main hero in the back (a clear allusion to the unannounced attack on Pearl Harbor). Remarkably, some of these racist depictions were also adopted by the Chinese American artist Chu Hing. As Yang and Liew (2014) speculate in their graphic novel *The Shadow Hero*,

> Before America and China formed a wartime alliance, Chinese immigrants were the targets of the same stereotypes: the impossibly slanted eyes, the buckteeth, the menacing Fu Manchu grins, the inexplicably pointed ears. Perhaps Chu was expressing the anger that Chinese immigrants felt when they read about Japanese military's atrocities in their homeland. Or perhaps Chu hoped that by directing the surrounding culture's stereotypes toward someone other than his own community, he could […] gain acceptance (Yang & Liew, 2014:157-158)

Similarly, it is interesting to notice that one of the few comics depiction of Germans as fanged monsters was created by the Japanese American artist Bob Fujitani for the cover of *Pep Comics* #34.

The degrading representation of the enemy reveals how war is always ethnocentric as the official rhetoric attempts to create a clear-cut distinction between 'us' and 'them'. The dehumanization of the enemy is in fact needed to justify the use of brutal force; the enemy is demonic (having animal-like features) and America's ideals are pure, no matter what it might take to pursue them. The violence is thus justified as a means to dispose the foe. The distinction between good (America) and evil (Axis) helped defining the role of both sides in the conflict, but it also attempted to foreshadow the inevitable outcome (good will prevail) galvanizing the spirits of the Allies. These narratives attempted to justify the

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[66] The strip originated in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, but was then circulated as part of the *Pocket Guide to China* booklet published by U.S. government.

[67] Interestingly, the representation of the Japanese would later change. A 1960 Caniff's *Steve Canyon* strip titled "Tokyo, May 1960" portrayed Japanese as sympathetic and kind characters and stripped of any rancor, whereas Chinese and Koreans are represented in a negative light.

fight in moral terms, casting America as the defender of freedom against evil aggressors, whose monstrosity was confirmed by their physical traits.

Race discourses shaped World War II on both sides. Nazism and fascism's scientific racism led to the persecution and murder of different minorities, among which the Jews. However, the Allies' struggle against Japan also exposed racist legislation and practices: thousands of Japanese Americans were confined in internment camps; and, as Paul Fussel (1989:117) recalled, "Among the Allies the Japanese were also known as 'jackals' or 'monkey-men' or 'sub-humans,' the term of course used by Germans for Russians, Poles, and assorted Slavs, amply justifying their vivisection". So, the war comics' depiction of the Japanese as ape-like monsters is in line with the official rhetoric.

Before the attack on Pearl Harbor, comics featured German Nazis far more frequently than Japanese enemies (Wright, 2001:41-42). Something that should not be considered surprising given the ethnic origins of many artists and publishers. Indeed, many of them were Jews and wanted to denounce Nazis atrocities and advocate for a US intervention in the conflict, especially on the European front. They were particularly sensitive about what was happening to the Jewish communities around Europe, e.g. the coercion of wearing the yellow Star of David, the first gassing experiments, etc. As Simcha Weinstein (2006:50) pointed out, "At the beginning of the war, the U.S. media rarely reported or even knew about these horrific events, but words of Jewish sufferings at the hand of the Nazis tricked down to Kirby, Simon, and other Diaspora Jews in the form of letters from relatives trapped in the old country."

At first, Japanese were not considered an immediate threat to the United States. As Overy (1995:23) notices,

> The Allies were never in any doubt that Japan and Italy were the lesser threat to their way of life. They were united in a moral revulsion at everything that the new German Reich stood for. As a moral crusade the war aims were reduced to one single ambition, to rid the world of Hitler. Even before the war and the Holocaust, Roosevelt regarded Hitler as "pure, unadulterated evil." More than any contemporary leader, Hitler was personified as the dark force that threatened to take civilization by storm and drag it into the abyss. (Overy, 1995:23)

Even though, in reality, World War II was never a conflict between good and evil, this simplistic narration helped America (and the Allies) to strengthen domestic and international consensus about their actions. A consensus created by stimulating people's emotions to support the nation greatest of efforts and explain the national commitment to unconditional surrender (which would lead to the search for atomic weapons).

The perception of the Japanese changed soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, which galvanized American public opinion against Japan and prompted the U.S. to declare war to the Axis[68]. It is important to notice that in comics Germans and Japanese were portrayed differently. Granted that Japanese and Germans have different physical traits, in the comics, Nazis still look more or less like the Americans, even though they are not drawn to be either attractive or sympathetic. As Paul Fussell observed,

> For the war to be prosecuted at all, the enemy of course had to be severely dehumanized and demeaned, and in different ways, depending on different presumed national characteristics. One way to classify the Axis enemy was to arrange it by nationalities along a scale running from courage down to cowardice. The Japanese were at the brave end, the Italians at the pusillanimous, and the Germans were in the middle. This symmetrical arrangement also implied a scale of animalism, with the Japanese accorded the most feral qualities and the Italians the most human, including a love for music, ice-cream, and ostentatious dress (Fussell, 1989:116).

This classification system also oriented war comics' depiction of the enemy. This is particularly evident in the caricature of the Axis leaders, or as *Young Allies* renamed them "the unholy trio". World War II comics ridiculed Hitler's mustache and small stature, Mussolini's chin and arrogant postures, but cartoonists reserved their worst caricatured features for Hirohito and Tojo who were drawn as animal-like monsters.

Italian fascists were not often featured as villains in war comics or superhero adventures. This noticeable absence might be due by the fact that the public did not consider Italians as a real threat to the American Way: they did not have advanced technology to compete with the U.S. (like Germany) and they did not threaten the American soil through an aerial attack (like Japan). This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that they were easily defeated by the main hero. Surprisingly, many stories that featured Italian fascists were not set in Italy or even Europe, but in Africa. For example, *Marvel Mystery Comics* #21 (1941) presented Ka-Zar successfully preventing the expansion of Italian colonies Africa[69]. Similarly, *Blue Ribbon Comics* # 10 presented Loop Logan exposing and stopping Italian spies from getting the British defense plans for Egypt. The heroes of both stories contain the fascist expansion in Africa to defend

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[68] As Ferrell (1955) observed, Pearl Harbor has been subject to revisionists theory since the very end of the conflict. The revisionists claimed that in 1941 Roosevelt purposely exposed the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor and provoked the Japanese into striking it in order to make the US participate to the conflict and join the Allies' side. However, Ferrell (1995:219) argued that revisionists "have nonetheless found no clear-cut documentary evidence of such a conspiracy."

[69] This story was written and penciled by Ben Thompson.

British interests in the colonies[70]. Then, one can notice a double standard in the treatment of colonialism. Whereas the Italian invasion of Africa is (rightfully) condemned, British colonialism is condoned. *Young Allies* #9 (1943) carefully distinguished Italians from fascists. Indeed, in this issue two members of the Young Allies discuss: "Shuddup! Hey, How come all these Nazis? I thought Italy belonged to the Italians!" "It does! To the people! But the phoney leaders turned it to the Nazis" (*Young Allies* #9, 1943:14). Mussolini is not presented as a frightening figure, but a grotesque one, an arrogant leader with no real power. *Young Allies* shows his powerlessness by depicting him as fat old man. His flaccid physique is clearly compared to the ripped torso of Toro, one of the members of Young Allies. Italians are clearly depicted as misguided, but redeemable characters. Unusually, the role of the Young Allies in this story is not to stop fascists, but exposing[71] their misdeeds, "People of Italy! While your sons, husbands, and brothers die on the battlefield, while you sacrifice and starve for the 'glory' of fascism, your leader robs you and your country of every cent against the day he can escape to enjoy his pillaged fortune! Italians! What are you going to do about it???" (*Young Allies* #9, 1943:26) So, Italians are considered to be able to take control of their own destiny and regain their freedom by expelling the dictator. It is worth noticing that this story appeared in the same period (fall 1943) in which Marshal Pietro Badoglio, Italian head of government, announced the armistice between Italy and the Allies (on September 3, 1943).

Nazis were often presented as war profiters, spies, saboteurs, masterminds, and evil scientists. Consequently, the heroes were often engaged in the defense of national borders from the aggression of Nazi's paratroopers or U-boat. Physically, Nazi officers were often portrayed as monocle-wearing, crew-cutted, and arrogant. The troops were formed by mindless thugs. Nazis were often depicted to brutalize their captive, implying abusive power and sadism. This imagery is visible (among other comics) in *Hit Comics* #23 (1942) and *Blue Beetle* #29 (1940) covers (figure 10). These depictions have also the effect of eroticizing the body of the prisoner. Even though they occasionally assumed animalistic features (e.g. a pig-like nose in *Exciting Comics* #39 and *Young Allies* #9) Nazi were generally portrayed as humans. In some case, depiction of Nazi troops as robot-

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[70] Loop Logan's story "The Suez Canal Mission" was written Joe Blair and illustrated by Frank Volp. The *Blue Ribbon Comics* were published by MLJ (later Archie Comics).

[71] The idea of revelation is also fostered visually as Mussolini is presented half naked, a clear allusion to Hans Christian Andersen's tale "The Emperor's New Clothes".

like entities who mindlessly followed orders aimed to place the responsibility of their gestures to the harsh military training and the leaders' insanity and exalt by contrast the individuality of the American hero who consented to the nation's liberal values. The U.S. hero consciously abided to the national values, which are here presented as universal.

In contrast, Japanese are not only literally yellow, but they present stereotyped physical traits usually associated with Asians. As Robert G. Lee (1999) observes,

> Yellowface marks the Asian body as unmistakably Oriental; it sharply defines the Oriental in a racial opposition to whiteness. Yellowface exaggerates "racial" features that have been designed "Oriental," such as "slanted" eyes, overbite, and mustard-yellow skin color. Only the racialized Oriental is yellow; Asians are not. Asia is not a biological fact but a geographical designation. Asians come in the broadest range of skin color and hue. (Lee, 1999:2)

He also argues that the construction of the racial Other originates in the "realm of popular culture, where struggles over who is or who can become a 'real American' take place and where the categories, representations, distinctions, and markers of race are defined" (Lee, 1999:5). Indeed, whereas race does not exist from a biological point of view, as demonstrated, among others, by Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza (1996), yet we should recognize its importance as a sociocultural construct, a byproduct of racism. Then, popular culture becomes a place where dominant and subaltern identities are both questioned and defined through practices of both inclusion and exclusion.

The rendering of Asians as "brute hordes and sinister villains" with small and slanted eyes, weak and effeminate traits can be traced back to the last decades of the nineteenth century. As Elaine H. Kim (1982:3) remarks, "Caricature of Asians have been part of American popular culture for generations. The power-hungry despot, the helpless heathen, the sensuous dragon lady, the comical loyal servant, and the pudgy, desexed detective who talks about Confucius are all part of the standard American image of the Asian." She adds that these images were shared by both Anglo-American writers of some literary merit (e.g. Jack London, John Steinbeck, Frank Norris, etc.), although Asians were not the focus of their work, and pulp novel writers (e.g. Wallace Irwin, Peter B. Kyne, Rex Beach, etc.). Those stereotypes were also adopted by political cartoons appearing in nineteenth-century publications, such as *The Wasp*, which often "featured throngs of new Overseas Chinese disembarking from sailing vessels or masses of Chinatown residents crammed into limited quarters" (Chiu, 2018:99, original emphasis). Minstrel shows also helped popularizing those kinds of images, facilitating their entrance into popular culture (Lee, 1999).

Generally, propaganda does not produce new images, but perpetuate and reinforce worn-out clichés. As Bernays (1928:22) pointed out, "the manipulators of patriotic opinion made use of the mental clichés and the emotional habits of the public to produce mass reactions against the alleged atrocities, the terror and the tyranny of the enemy." Politicians tend to use clichés and images that stand for a whole group of ideas or experiences. Cultural stereotypes are rhetorically effective because they are generally perceived as commonsensical reasoning. As Lakoff (1996) discussed,

> most of our thought is unconscious – not unconscious in the Freudian sense of being repressed, but unconscious simply in that we are not aware of it. We think and talk too fast a rate and at too deep a level to have a conscious awareness and control over everything we thin and say. We are even less conscious of the components of thoughts – concepts. When we think, we use an elaborate system of concepts, but we are not usually aware of just what those concepts are like and how they fit together into a system (Lakoff, 1996:4).

So, clichés belong to an unconscious system of concepts we use to conceptualize a domain of experience. Stereotypes are cognitive constructions used for making snap judgment without critical thought, and they are usually based on myths or individual well-known examples. Then, stereotypes are effective tools to talk to people's emotions, inducing certain kind of reasoning and set of reactions. As Bernays (1928:50-51) pointed out, "By playing upon an old cliché, or manipulating a new one, the propagandist can sometimes swing a whole mass of group emotions."

Consequently , the emotional response to (racial) stereotypes was used as a justification for the hero's violent (re)action. As A. Dale Tussig[72] (1971:19) observed "The three-fold combination of the villain's established evil character, the fact that he attacked first, and his use of dirty and immoral tactics, not only justifies the hero's fighting back, but his complete and total subjugation or annihilation of the villain". Accordingly, the use of cliché to portray the Axis as the absolute evil[73] aimed to shield America from

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[72] Even though A. Dale Tussig essay refers to Popeye, a comic strip character created in 1929, one can observe that this pattern is compatible to the one used to describe the Axis aggression and the Allies reaction.

[73] This depiction of the Axis as absolute evil will be reinforced by the news about the Holocaust. *Captain America* #46 (1945) cover alluded to the existence of incineration chambers. The cover features Captain America saving (presumably) a Jew from being burnt alive in an incineration chamber. *Impact #1*(1955) published by EC Comics would be the first comic book story to narrate in an explicit manner the horror of the Holocaust. Neal Adams, Rafael Medoff and Craig Yoe's collection *We Spoke Out: Comic Books and The Holocaust* (2018) identifies some earlier stories that relate to the Holocaust; however, these tales do not mention it by name or refer to Jews as the victims. For example, the story "The Tattooed Heart" featured in *Beware! Terror Tales #4* (1951), drawn by Harry Harrison and published by Fawcett Comics, and "Escape from Maidenek featured in *Stamps Comics #4*(1952), drawn by Vince Napoli and Published by Youthful Magazines, show concentration camps prisoners, yet their ethnicity is never explicated. The reader is left

being accountable for its own wrongdoing, like the firestorm on the city of Dresden and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Indeed, it is only when the enemy is seen as person with a moral identity that implicit or explicit (international) laws are developed for how wars should be fought. Moreover, the recognition of the enemy as a person might also be influenced by the willingness to normalize relations in the aftermath of war. This might explain why the Italians and Germans were depicted in more nuanced way. America was preparing for the reconstruction of Europe and the new world order that would be established after the conflict.

## 5. Japanese Internment Camps and the Emergence of a Counternarrative

As briefly mentioned before, Roosevelt racial politics during World War II was contradictory. On the one hand he advocated for the unity of the nation, invoking racial tolerance. On the other hand, in early 1942, shortly after Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, he signed the Executive Order 9066, which authorized the forced relocation and incarceration in internment camps of people of Japanese descent. Consequently, 110,000 ethnic Japanese were displaced from the western United States into hastily erected centers, located in deserted areas of Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah and Wyoming (Girst, 2015). Many Americans, including Roosevelt himself, feared that the utmost menace to national security would come from "alien" sleeper agents who supposedly waited to attack on orders from the Axis powers (Branca-Santos, 2001), a fear also reflected in many war comics, as they featured stories about saboteurs and spies.

The justification provided by the government for the removal was "military necessity" (Dundes Renteln, 1995). As a result, this resolution confuted the myth of America's formation through consent, as ascriptive characteristics of ones' birth were turned into "requisites of national competence" (Li, 1998:3). Indeed, the majority (almost two-thirds) of the internees were *Nisei*, second generation Japanese American, citizens raised and born in the United States. According to Alison Dundes Renteln (1995), the reasons behind Japanese American incarceration were war hysteria, economic motives (Caucasian farmers resented the competition of the new immigrants), and race prejudice. Because of the Executive Order 9066, almost all internees lost their homes, jobs, businesses, or farms.

Moreover, Executive Order 9066 should not be considered as an isolated event driven

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to infer who these prisoners are and why they are detained and (mass) killed by the Nazis.

by the emotional response to Pearl Harbor, but as part of a long history of legislated Asian exclusion that began with *People v. Hall* (1854), which established that Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants had no rights to testify against white citizens. This history of exclusion was also marked by the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the Gentlemen Agreement (1908) which barred Japanese immigration, the Immigrant Act (1917) which restricted the immigration of 'undesirables' from other countries, and Japanese Internment (1942-1945). Hence, "Barred from immigration and naturalization, the Oriental personified the historical tension between America's universalist promise of democratic consent and its race-, gender-, and culture-specific practice of citizenship" (Li, 1998: 5-6).

The type of racism directed towards Japanese Americans was significantly different from that experienced by Americans of European descent. Indeed, while Italian Americans were distinguished from fascists and German Americans from Nazis, there was no nomenclature to separate Japanese Americans from the enemy (Dundes Renteln, 1995). As Hirasuna (2005:15) observes, "Although Executive Order 9066 left the door open to exclude Italians and German aliens as well, this idea was scratched in favor of reviewing such cases on an individual basis." Most of the Italian and German immigrants who were subjected to the various restrictions were foreign or naturalized citizens, whereas many of the Japanese affected were American citizens. The Italians (and Italian Americans) and Germans (and Germans Americans) who were arrested were individuals deemed dangerous to American security by federal agencies because of their political affiliations. On Columbus Day, October 12, 1942 Attorney General Biddle declared in a speech at New York's Carnegie Hall that Italian aliens in the United States would no longer be classified as "enemies" (Fox, 1988:434). Similarly, most of the restrictions on Germans were removed although they remained technically classified as "enemy" (Fox, 1988:435). Ultimately, only the Japanese (Americans) were interned *en masse* for the entire duration of the conflict.

People of Japanese ancestry were stripped of their rights to due process and were accused by wartime authorities to be disloyal until proven loyal. Indeed, "No act of sabotage, subversion, or fifth column (enemy sympathizer) activity was committed by a Japanese American (a point conceded by the government even in early 1942) before or during World War II" (Hirasuna, 2005:19), yet this fear became a pretext for

imprisonment. They were vulnerable to an unjust political authority that deprived them of many of their liberties without cause. "Most of them remained behind barbed wire for nearly three years, imprisoned in the tar-paper covered barracks of ten huge camps especially set up for the purpose" (Girst, 2015:9). As Dundes Renteln (1995:620) points out, "The fact that the Japanese Americans were portrayed as animals in much of the World War II propaganda may have helped convince the American public that inhumane treatment was acceptable".

However, it should be noted that the War Relocation Authority wanted to maintain a sense of normalcy, and for this reason,

> Doctors, farmers and teachers continued their professional work wherever possible, with most Japanese Americans adhering to the situation forced upon them in the spirit of *shikataganai* ("it cannot be helped") and *gaman* ("enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity") (Girst, 2015:33).

Consequently, despite the hardships of camp life, the creation of art was possible, often by using materials readily available. Different artists used sketches, drawing, and paintings to document what was going on. For example, Miné Okubo combined words and pictures to create an interesting documentary. She decided to use this combination of text and images to record her experience in Tanforan and Topaz internment camps, since "Cameras and photographs were not permitted in the camps" (Okubo, 2014[1946]: xxvi). In an interview Okubo recalled,

> Being an artist, I decided to record my whole camp experience. I had many, many friends on the outside and I thought this would be a good way to repay them for their kindness in sending letters and food packages and telling us that we were not forgotten. I was interested in people and life, so the camp gave me an opportunity to study the human race from cradle to grave and to see what happens to people when they are reduced to one status and one condition. I was all over the camp sketching everything from the very first day. There were untold hardships and sadness everywhere and humor because everything was so insane (Okubo, 2008:47)

These drawing were originally conceived to be gifts to friends living behind the barbed wire, a way to recognize their kindness in that time of hardship. However, these drawing would be noticed by *Fortune* magazine, becoming an instrument of denunciation.

At the time of her internment, Okubo was already an established artist and muralist. Ironically, before being incarcerated, she was even commissioned to do several mosaic murals for the new Oakland Serviceman's Center and for Fort Ord by the Federal Arts Project for the Army, but things precipitated soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor and she (like many other Japanese Americans) was forced to evacuate her home. Because of

Roosevelt's Executive Order, Okubo and her brother were sent to Tanforan Assembly Center, San Bruno, California, and then to Central Utah Relocation Camp in Topaz, where they stayed from 1942 to 1944.

In 1944, *Fortune* magazine, who hired her as an illustrator, was able to relocate Okubo, a California citizen, to New York City, allowing her to leave the camp behind. She was originally hired to illustrate a special issue on Japan, but when *Fortune* magazine people saw the vast collection of drawings she had sketched since the evacuation, they decided to publish a an article titled "Issei, Nisei, Kibei". This article critiqued the policies of the War Relocation Authority (WRA), and in particular the idea of "protective custody". As Heather Fryer (2005:83) discussed, "The government's official explanation for removing its Japanese citizens from the mainstream was twofold: to protect the West Coast from the handful of Japanese presumed to be saboteurs, and to shield the loyal majority of Japanese Americans from retaliation from hostile whites."

Okubo lived in Manhattan, with her studio near Greenwich Village, until her death on February 10, 2001. As Girst (2015:64) reminds, "As *Fortune*, together with *Life* and *Time* magazines belonged to media mogul Henry Luce, the article on Japanese internment consciously positioned itself against the constant 'yellow peril' drum roll of William Randolph Hearst's newspaper and radio empire." In this regard, it is important to remark that Henry Luce's support for the Japanese American cause was not dictated by pacifist or anti-war feeling. His 1941 editorial "The American Century" vehemently supported the U.S. entrance into the war and exhorted the reshaping of the world according to the American model. However, Luce loathed Franklin Roosevelt and its policies. Thus, Luce's denunciation of the violation of Japanese American civil rights might have not been dictated solely by humanitarian concerns. Nonetheless, "Issei, Nisei, Kibei" is important piece of journalism, describing the Japanese incarceration as "the broken promise of democracy" (Fortune, 1944:13).

*Fortune* denounced that the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were severely stretched if not breached when US citizens were put in prison. Then, a counter-narrative of World War II started to appear, as the morality of US actions started to be questioned. *Fortune* confronted injustice while it happened, and Okubo's drawings of camp life helped to visualize such event. A selection of her drawings would later be recollected in a book titled *Citizen 13660*, and first published in 1946, a time when anything Japanese was still

unpopular.

Okubo's art was extremely subversive as she exposed the reality behind the official rhetoric of the internment. By simply drawing and documenting the life in the camps, she defied government agencies that sought to control the images of the camps. As Heather Fryer highlighted,

> Photographic equipment was forbidden, printed material was censored, and the OWI staged and edited its images to make the camps appear consistent with American values and Allied war aims. Just as Japanese bodies were isolated from the American body politic, Japanese voices were cut off from American political discourse and replaced with government propaganda. Miné Okubo continued to speak for herself throughout her internment, and she challenged readers to see it from her complex perspective when the war was over (Fryer, 2005: 84)

Okubo's illustrated memoir is a counterhegemonic narrative also because it rejects the official portrayal of Japanese American internee as compliant, invisible, and silenced figures. Her narrative attempts to provide a critical perspective on the event without expressing either bitterness or anger. As Vivian Fumiko Chin (2008: 70) observed, "Okubo declines to state how she feels and upholds an even, unemotional tone in the writing throughout the book." A glimpse of her emotions only appears through the images that complement the text; however, her feelings rarely make her lose her composure. She (like the other Japanese portrayed in this memoir) always maintain her dignity despite the hardship of the camp life. Therefore, this autobiography is not just a recording of a recent past, but a self-conscious narrative that constructs and emphasizes subjecthood and agency. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that each panel is signed "Miné". Whereas her family name was reduced to a number (13660) by authorities, her first name is used to reclaim both her identity and role as a witness and victim of racial prejudice.

*Citizen 13660* is particularly interesting because it is the first inside-the-camp documentary of the Japanese evacuation and internment. This graphic narrative has an important civil function: it questions America's past policies and it asks the readers how to prevent these events from repeating themselves. As Okubo stated in an interview,

> I believe an apology and some forms of reparation are due in order to prevent this from happening to others. Textbooks and history studies on this subject should be taught to children when young in grade and high schools. Many generations do not know that this ever happened in the United States (Okubo, 2008:47-48).

This quote is particularly interesting because it touches two important themes. First, it anticipates the problem of formal apologies and compensation. Indeed, it was only in 1988 that President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, which offered a formal

apology and paid $20,000 to each survivor. However, despite these measures being enforced, many Japanese Americans never felt a sense of closure. The memory of the camps is still object of debate and cultural productions.

Second, it reveals the ability of graphic narratives to make private memories enter public accountability. The images that construct the narration have the power of making the viewer a direct witness of the event, experiencing it in the form of "prosthetic memory". As Alison Landsberg discussed,

> Prosthetic memories are neither purely individual are neither purely individual nor entirely collective but emerges at the interface of individual and collective experience. They are privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person's own archive of experience. Just as prosthetic memories blur the boundary between individual and collective memory, they also complicate the distinction between memory and history (Landsberg, 2004:19).

While *Citizen 13660* may not be considered a comic book or a graphic novel (the drawings were originally conceived to be part of an art exhibition); each page has a single panel, and the text is captioned at the bottom of the page (there is no speech balloon). Yet this graphic narrative can be rightfully considered an important precursor of some contemporary documentary comics. Indeed, her camp drawings were both a social commentary and a documentary. She used drawings to write her autobiography (an important genre of contemporary graphic novels). Pictures provided a powerful tool to emotionally engage the reader. The personal elements of the narration are reinforced by both her appearance in almost every panel and the use of the first-person narration. In certain panels her character seems to observe the observer, be it the camp guard or the reader. Therefore, by creating a visual form of direct address; she acknowledges the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual "you". Thus, she asks the viewers to enter some kind of imaginary relationship with the illustrated figure, evoking an emotional reaction, a technique often used by propaganda posters, e.g. James Montgomery Flagg's Uncle Sam (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996:122).

The title of the book, *Citizen 13660*, refers to Okubo family number, "I was interviewed. The woman in charge asked me many questions and filled in several printed forms as I answered. As a result of the interview, my family name was reduced to No. 13660" (Okubo, 2014[1946]:19). Poignantly, the number that symbolizes the dehumanization of Japanese American is juxtaposed to the world "citizen". This juxtaposition testifies the violation of Japanese Americans' liberties, the limits (and

inconsistencies) of the America Dream, but also the endurance of Japanese Americans. The internees reclaim their identity as U.S. citizens despite their conditions of deprivation.

Small visual details testify the internees attempts to reconstruct normalcy in a degrading realty. The use of tags to reclaim private spaces (where there was none) becomes a subversive gesture, an act of resistance. In her memoir Okubo recalls that,

> On the barracks in the center field and on the stalls, ingenious family name plates and interesting signs were displayed with great pride. All signs in Japanese were ordered removed, but many fancy names, such as Inner Sanctum, Stall Inn, and Sea Biscuit, lent a touch of humor to the situation. To discourage visitors, I nailed a quarantine sign on my door (Okubo, 2014[1946]:83)

The attempts to create a personal space are particularly relevant since one of the most distinguishing traits of this experience was the lack of privacy.

Despite the authorities' attempts to control the internees' everyday life, the latter defied the camps' rules to survive, "Although cooking was not permitted in the barracks and stalls, blown fuses often left us in the darkness, guiltily pondering whether it was our hot plate or our neighbor's that did the trick" (Okubo, 2014[1946]:67). Okubo's defiance of authority is also depicted in two eloquent pictures. One shows Okubo sticking her tongue out at the man doing the twice-daily roll call. The other portrays Okubo in the act of spying a Caucasian policeman who is spying on Japanese men playing cards in a barrack. This representation is particularly evocative because, as Stella Oh (2008:145) discussed, "To gaze implies more than just looking at someone or something; it represents a relationship of power in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze." Thus, through this gesture Okubo questions the authority of the policeman.

Moreover, the graphic memoir portrays Japanese Americans in the act of building furniture, creating objects, gardening, cleaning, playing games and sports, dancing, knitting, and even gambling in order to show the internees' resolve to convert unhospitable spaces into habitable homes. So, the Japanese sayings *shikata ganai* (it cannot be helped) and *gaman suru* (just endure it) used to describe the camps experience do not necessarily imply complicit resignation. In contrast, they testify Japanese (Americans) resilience.

The graphic narrative also rejects the myth of "protective custody". Indeed, Okubo reports that in April 1943 a military policeman fatally shot a Japanese internee named Wakasa. As Heather Fryer reconstructed,

The sentry testified before the WRA and the War Department's joint board of inquiry that he ordered Wakasa to halt three times, but Wakasa would not obey. The board of inquiry, composed of WRA and War Department officials, ruled that the MP had followed procedure, but the county coroner's report showed that Wakasa was shot in the front and fell backward, which proved he had been facing the guard tower and not running from it (Fryer, 2008:89).

In her narrative, Okubo does not portray the shooting, but she depicts the collective grief of the internees who gather to mourn the poor victim. Women are shown in the act of collecting flowers for the memorial service. However, Okubo remarks how, even thoug the official rhetoric justified the existence of internment camps as forms of preventive custody, the internees are the one who can truly take care of their own protection. Grief fueled protests and the administration was forced to make some concessions, "The anti-administration leaders again started to howl and the rest of the residents shouted for protection against soldiers with guns. As a result, the guards were later removed to the rim of the outer project area and firearms were banned" (Okubo, 2014[1946]:180)

Despite Japanese Americans' lives being reduced to numbered tags, this graphic narrative depicts the happiness, sorrow, melancholy, humor, pathos, and discomfort of the internees, emphasizing their humanity. This depiction of the Japanese as fragile, vulnerable, but resilient people is in neat contrast to the fanged monsters popularized by the entertainment industry of that time. Indeed, the 1943 black-and-white 15-chapter theatrical serial *Batman* (produced by Rudolph C. Flothow and directed by Lambert Hillyer for Columbia Pictures) even justified the internment of Japanese Americans on the base of their presumed alien essence. Indeed, when Batman and Robin entered Little Tokyo, the narrator claimed, "This was part of a foreign land, transplanted bodily to America and known as Little Tokyo. Since a wise government rounded up the shifty-eyed Japs, it has become virtually a ghost street" (Flothow & Hillyer, 1943).

Hence, it is not surprising that Okubo's graphic narrative indicts media and their racist depiction of Japanese people. In an early panel Okubo depicts herself reading a newspaper. Numerous headlines are drawn behind her: "Aliens-Citizens," "A Jap is a Jap," "Can't Trust Them," "Sabotage," "Bank Freeze Jap," "Stab in the Back," "We Don't Want Japs," "Dangerous Criminals." Therefore, as Kimberley L. Phillips (2008:107) argued, in an era when media served to "define enemies and allies, inculcate pro-war sentiments, and promote values associated with American citizenship, Okubo produced reminders that comic-book art could also be subversive and critical of racial prejudice transmitted through mass culture."

The camp experience had detrimental effects on the Japanese American community. Like other immigrant groups, Japanese Americans used to feel the need to negotiate and mediate among multiple cultural identities. However, Executive Order 9066 clearly stated that they were not allowed to express their hybrid identity. It forced them to either completely embrace Japanese culture by returning to Japan or completely embrace America by rejecting their connections to Japanese culture. This fragmentation of Japanese American families has been poignantly captured by John Okada's novel *No-No Boy* (1957). This novel indicted the contradiction of the American Dream and raised a series of unanswered questioned: are the *Issei* (first generation) rooting for a Japanese victory fanatics or victims of racism in search of some temporary comfort? Is the *Issei* wish to be recognized as American citizens legitimate? Are the *Nisei* (second generation) fighting alongside the U.S. heroes or self-hating martyrs? Is America a democratic society or a racist one? Is the American Dream (in Japanese) just a mere illusion?

The fragmentation of the community across the "loyalty" line has also been addressed in *Citizen 13660.* As Okubo illustrates in her memoir, the community was confused about what to answer to question 28, which read, "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America an foreswear any form of alliance or obedience to the Japanese Emperor or any other foreign power or organization?" (Okubo, 2014[1946]:175). *Issei* faced two types of problems. First, there was a linguistic problem: the registration forms were long and complicated. Second, if the *Issei* renounced their Japanese citizenship they would have become stateless persons. *Nissei* resented these question as it doubted their loyalty. Yet, many *Nissei* volunteered to be part of a Japanese American combat unit. As Okubo recalled, "105 young men were accepted for service in the Japanese American Combat Team, out of the many -including aliens- who volunteered" (Okubo, 2014[1946]:178).

The graphic narrative constructs Japanese American identity as inherently hybrid: they play baseball, but they also prepare *mochi* to celebrate the New Year. The preparation of *Mochi* is a celebratory ritual closely associated with the internees' Japanese heritage and homeland (figure 11). In her drawing, Okubo illustrates the intense activity required to prepare these rice cakes. This ritual is important not only because it indicates that the internees maintained the habits they had prior to the interment, but also because it reveals that Japanese sought to preserve their cultural heritage despite the governments' questions

over their loyalty. Similarly, *Citizen 13660* can be considered a cultural hybrid work. As Kimberley L. Phillips noticed,

> While the visual vocabulary of Okubo's Citizen 13660 drew on the long tradition of a transpacific comic-book tradition loosely termed manga, she also gave the genre of comic books in the United States a new and challenging aesthetic through her use of social commentary that fused Japanese immigrant print culture—art and text—with the radical political dissent of 1930s public art in the Americas (Phillips, 2008:100).

Indeed, whereas some of the themes explored by the memoir are in line with the concerns of social realism, which attempted to draw attention to the real socio-political conditions of the lower class as a way to critique the power structures behind those realities, the drawing style is reminiscent of manga[74]. Indeed, in her graphic memoir, Okubo turned to her Japanese heritage after having experimented "with abstract images, as is evident from some of her cubist-inspired pencil drawings" (La Duke, 1987:45). Her drawings of camp life were based on the simplification of forms to basic lines and shapes.

Like John Okada's novel *No-No Boy* (1957), Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660* (2014[1946]) shows the contradictions and absurdities of the internment camps. In an interview she recalled,

> I just kept a record of everything, objective and humorous, without saying much so that they could see it all. Humor is the only thing that mellows life, shows life as the circus it is. After being uprooted, everything seemed ridiculous, insane, and stupid. There we were in an unfinished camp, with snow and cold. The evacuees helped sheetrock the walls for warmth and build the barbed wire fence to fence themselves in. We had to sing 'God Bless America' many times with a flag. Guards all out with shot guns, you are not going to walk out. I mean… what could you do? So many crazy things happened in the camp. So the joke and the humor I saw in the camp was not in a joyful sense, but ridiculous and insane (Gesensway & Roseman, 1987:71)

Wherefore, this graphic narrative uses irony to expose the conditions in which Japanese internees were forced to live. For example, a panel shows a huge sign on a hill stating, "Enjoy Acme Beer. South San Francisco the Industrial City" (Okubo, 2014[1946]:82). The irony is created by the situation since the evacuees are thirsty. The internees are clearly not the intended audience of the advertisement. The sign accentuates their imprisonment, as they cannot comply to what is being advertised. Similarly, "the center had a canteen, but on most days there was nothing to buy" (Okubo, 2014[1946]:84).

The graphic narrative illustrates how Japanese American were barred from the

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[74] Manga are comics and graphic novels originated from Japan. Like American comics, this artistic form developed and defined its language at the end of the 19th century. Regarding spatial variation of comics as an art form, one can distinguish three main models or traditions: the American model, the European model, and the Japanese model (Beatens & Frey, 2015:22).

promises of capitalism and were forced to create their own economic system based on survival tactics: they recuperated anything that could be reused. Likewise, Okubo uses irony to expose the official euphemism about the Japanese experience. She recalls that one of the instructions given to the evacuees was "bring work clothes suited to pioneer life". However, the Promised Land was just an unhospitable desert with tiny barracks and a barbed wire to delimit its frontiers. An early panel shows Okubo walking past two soldiers with rifles as she enters a Civil Control Station at Pilgrim to register her brother and herself as a family unit of two. Ironically, the place is named after the Pilgrim Fathers who came to America to escape political and religious persecution. It thus becomes clear that the camps are just a negation of America's founding myths. This sense of inversion is also reinforced by the fact that the travel she accomplished was from the West Coast (Berkeley, California) into the interior (Topaz camp situated in Utah) and finally to the East Coast, New York, where she starts a new life.

The graphic narrative concludes with Okubo resuming a normal life by leaving the internment camp. However, the path to liberation involved a wide range of different feelings, testifying that the internees had internalized their camp experience. In the last pages of her graphic memoir Okubo states,

> I was now *free*. I looked at the crowd at the gate. Only the very old or very young were left. Here I was, alone, with no family responsibilities, and yet fear had chained me to the camp. I thought, 'My God! How do they expect those poor people to leave the one place they called home.' I swallowed a lump in my throat as I waved goodbye to them (Okubo, 2014[1946]:209)

This passage shows how the internment made Japanese Americans extremely vulnerable. The stigma followed them even when they left the camps. These lines also illustrated not only the factual deprivation caused by the camp life, but also the long-lasting psychological damage perpetuated over the course of the incarceration.

Finally, it is interesting to remark that Okubo's work is not the only one to experiment with words, pictures and comics language to create a complex portrait of the Japanese American experience. Kango Takamura, a former photograph interned in Santa Fe and Manzanar, began to draw since cameras were prohibited in the camps. During his experience in the camps, he created cartoonlike sketches in watercolor and captioned them in Japanese and English. Like Miné Okubo *Citizen 13660*, Takamura's drawing underscored the irony of the internment. For example, his *Our Guard in the Watchtower Became a Spring Baseball Fan at Santa Fe* (1942) drawing shows Japanese American

playing baseball (a quintessentially American activity) and a guard "cheers on the man at bat, his 'official' enemy" (Kuramitsu, 1995:624).

Taro Yashima (the pseudonym of Atsushi Iwamatsu) wrote and draw *The New Sun* (2008[1943]) and *Horizon is Calling* (1947). In these memoirs he narrated his life in Japan and denounced the oppressiveness of the militarist government and the inhumane nature of his imprisonment. Japanese government incarcerated him for his participation in anti-militarist groups in the 1930s. Taro Yashima migrated to the United States in 1939. To contrast Japanese militarism, he assisted the U.S. war effort. *The New Sun* (1943) was "the only book published by one legally designed as a pariah, an 'enemy alien'" (Chan et Al. 1991:244). Stylistically, Yashima's art was influenced by Japanese narrative scrolls, haiku, and Henri Matisse. Moreover, its use of a first-person narrative and self-portrayal in sketches in *The New Sun* anticipates some of the features that Okubo would develop in *Citizen 13660.*

It is also worth mentioning that the *manga* language would also be used by Japanese artist Fumio Fujiki and Tokio Tobita, inmates at the Sugamo Prison in northwest Tokyo after World War II. Their sketches, titled *Sugamo Life* (1948-1949), depicted the daily life and interactions between Japanese Prisoners of War and American guards. So, it is interesting to see how on both sides of the Pacific comics become an instrument of denunciation and memory recollection.

Thus, we can see how graphic narratives opened opportunities for new stories and rewriting of mainstream American accounts of WWII already in real time. Hence, comics (like other cultural products) reveal the demand for a less monolithic, and more inclusive America, incorporating battles over identity politics and political correctness. As discussed by Leavy (2007:115) "dominant and resistive forms are mutually dependent in so far as each dominant narrative creates a space for what it has concealed." Then, one must interrogate how the language of comics creates relationship in *praesentia* and *absentia* (from a structural and narrative point of view) and start speculating about unrealized narrative possibilities. Minorities have appropriated the medium to question the cliché and superficial treatment of World War II. The moralization of World War II mythologized and distorted its perception, divorcing it from reality. As hitherto discussed, comics have been used to document Japanese interment, and problematize the lack of recognition of minorities' contribution to the war effort.

### 6. A(n almost) Forgotten War

The Korean War did not leave a long-lasting mark in cultural memory, and it is usually described as the "Forgotten War". This (partial) oblivion might be attributed to the fact that this war did not represent either a victory or a loss, but a 'tie'. As discussed by Stefano Rosso (2003), the Korean War did not inspire as many novels or movies as the Second World War or the Vietnam War did. In sharp contrast to other media, in the 1950s, comic book publishers created a noticeable number of titles addressing the American military involvement in Korea. As Leonard Rifas (2015:619) observed, "thousands of stories about the Korean War appeared in the hundreds of issues of the dozens of (mostly short-lived) US war comic book titles." However, most of these comics did not challenge or question preexisting heroic narratives, and the majority of "war comics in the early 50s were still typically jingoistic saber-rattlers, with blue-eyed blond-haired US farm boys fighting racist caricature of North Korean and Chinese soldiers" (Conroy, 2009:130). Indeed, war representations are usually premediated through the images of conflicts that occurred before.

Ziff-Davis' *G.I. Joe* series[75] (1951-1957) can be used as an archetypal example to show the patterns through which 1950s war comics narrated the conflict in Korea. These comics tried to reaffirm the values of patriotism and duty, embodied by white masculine men fighting the Red (racialized) menace overseas, recirculating the same anti-Asian stereotypes used against Japanese during World War II. In these comics, Koreans are depicted as infamous, cowards, not masculine, speaking broken English, and having buckteeth.

In these comics, American soldiers show toughness, fighting spirit, technological and physical superiority. The Army becomes a *de facto* ambassador of capitalist America, as troops are often portrayed in the act of offering goods to local population. These narratives aimed to show the privation that Communist society produced. Militaries are presented as good-hearted men willing to help Korean by saving their women, orphans, and helping local farmers improve their crops providing knowledge and assistance. These comics show how conflict resolution can be achieved also through non-combative means. In

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[75] Ziff-Davis Publishing Company used to number its first issues "10". When the series became popular, it reset the numbering system starting from 6, so there are two issues for each number from 10 to 14, and no issues numbered 1 through 5.

these cases, the troops do not seek to prevail using superior and coercive force, but they make emotional and intellectual appeals to sway supporters of the other side, 'winning the hearts and minds' of the Koreans.

*G.I. Joe* comics present war as a rite of passage making the soldiers enter 'manhood.' For example, *G.I. Joe #13* (1951:43) shows the transformative experience of a group of rookies that becomes more mature and self-conscious thanks to their combat experience, "war makes men hard. The baptism of fire under grueling battle conditions toughens even the gentlest soldiers. Sometimes hardened veterans forget that only a little while ago, they, too were green and unsure of themselves." Similarly, issue *#17* tells the story of a soldier dying while turning twenty-one-years-old. His death does not convey a tragic sense of history, but a rewarding sense of fulfillment, thus echoing the old phrase *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.* By making the ultimate sacrifice the young soldier finally turns into a man. Death is here described as having a purpose, a means to achieve personal and national goals: entering manhood while making the Communist threat roll back. Therefore, this comic embraces and propagates forms of public euphemisms[76].

War does not only make the privates virile, but it also fosters the process of Americanization. Korean kids are often nurtured or even adopted[77] by members of the Army, and even though they initially manifest diffidence towards the US troops they are later shown smiling and playing baseball (the quintessence of Americanness). Similarly, the story "Get one for Anzio!" featured in *G.I. Joe 15#* narrates the like of the fictional character of Anzio[78] Baker, an Italian kid adopted by an American soldier during World

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[76] In his book *Wartime,* Paul Fussell (1989:22) described public euphemism as an "optimistic and wholesome view of catastrophic occurrences - a fine way to encourage a moralistic, nationalistic, and bellicose politics".

[77] In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the war also produced thousands of Amerasians orphans, abandoned by their Korean mothers and the American soldiers who fathered them. These babies were ostracized in their home country and faced a wide range of hardships. As we will discuss in the following chapter, this problem will reemerge during the Vietnam War and will be addressed by Will Eisner's memoir *Last Day in Vietnam* (2000). In 1949, Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Pearl S. Buck created Welcome House to provide shelter to mixed-race children of Asian descent whom child welfare officials classified unadoptable. As Elena Lamberti discussed (2020: 297), "As early as 1966, she speaks of 'stateless children,' who are an 'entirely new group of people' and a growing one since the Korean War. Because in Asia children 'belong to the father,' children born from American fathers 'are being sort of wasted'". For this reason, Pearl S. Buck would later transform Welcome House into an adoption agency. Within a decade, Welcome House arranged transnational adoptions for mixed-race Korean children.

[78] The name Anzio is highly symbolic because it is reminiscent of the battle of Battle of Anzio in Italy, that took place from January 22, 1944 to June 5, 1944. With the battle of Anzio, Allies aimed open the way to the capture of Rome as they failed to break through the German Gustav Line. The battle resulted in a tactical stalemate. On May 25, the Germans retreated their men from Anzio and on 5 June, the Allies marched into

War II. Anzio grows up in America and when the Korean War breaks out, he decides to serve as a G.I., even though he is not a US citizen. The story shows Anzio longing to become American. This wish will be (ironically) granted only in the moment of his death. The official documents about Anzio's naturalization arrives too late. Yet, this episode is not told using tragic tones. Even in this case, death is given a purpose: Anzio's sacrifice is described as a payback for what he received. This story makes also evident how World War II provided schemata through which interpret what was happening in Korea. Moreover, this story also symbolizes the connection between military service and citizenship and declares that the America is a nation made of different people. Similarly, *Fightin' Marines* (1951-1953) featured soldiers of different ethnic origins (e.g. Private Richards, Sgt. Mike O'Leary, Marine Corporal Steve Rizzo) serving in the U.S. Army. Thus, war is here presented as an agent of assimilation. It should be remarked that this narrative did not originate within the comic, but it mirrored the rhetoric adopted in official commemorations. Indeed, in "1954, the first year Armistice Day was formally commemorated as Veterans Day, the federal government organized an unprecedented series of mass naturalization ceremonies" (Piehler, 1995:138). However, 1950 comics do not mention the contribution of racial minorities to the war effort. The only one featured are South Koreans. Their presence serves to justify U.S. actions overseas. Koreans are depicted as needing American guidance and tutelage. Similarly, women are rarely featured, and when they do, they usually occupy traditional gender roles (nurses, love interests, troublemakers, eye candy, damsels in distress or spies). Consequently, one can observe an involution of the role of women in war comics in the 1950s. As previously discussed, they had a more prominent and less stereotyped role during World War II.

Even though, the examples hitherto provided described the death of a soldier, such depictions were rare. The main cast of characters were never killed off, and gory images were never shown to the reader. These comics never built up a sense of fear or suspense as the reader knew that "good soldiers always win" (*G.I. Joe #12*, 1951:42). This sense of security is also reinforced by the gamification of the conflict, "the game's the same, whether it's war, poker or baseball: the object is to win" (*G.I. Joe #21*, 1953). The game metaphor was also emphasized by the presence of precise goals to achieve (and even prizes), "Every man in the army wants to better himself, and the only way this can be

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Rome unopposed.

done is by the addition of chevrons" (*G.I. Joe #17*, 1952:35). The *G.I. Joe* series also visualizes the fights as athletic gesture. Indeed, in these comics a soldier's survival depends on his skill in knifing, bayoneting, hitting, punching, or otherwise overpowering the Korean soldiers in close-quarters, hand-to-hand combat.

The gamification of the conflict allows the representation of the army as a team. Soldiers are often depicted as lighthearted, cheerfully optimistic and hopeful toward the future and the result of their mission. They usually have a Pollyannish attitude towards adversities, as hardship frequently provides opportunities for jokes. Despite their mature and sexualized bodies, the stories set in the military camps remind the reader that the soldiers are simply boys (often recurring to gender stereotypes): the privates are frequently involved in pranks and fights in order to prove their masculinity. Jokes are here used to generate laughter and are not described as means to humiliate the weak by making his life miserable. The pranks featured in these comics are innocent and never turn into petty harassment or forms of sadism. In contrast, (anti)war literature often features episodes of hazing where the weak is targeted by the strong. In these comics the presence of pranks do not seek to denounce an abuse, but to remind that "All wars are boyish, and are fought by boys", as Herman Melville wrote in "The March into Virginia" (1861). However, *G.I. Joe* comics does not denounce the sacrifice innocence of many young soldiers but exalt the enthusiasm of their youth. After all, war needs innocence and stamina, as frightened, cynical, debilitated, mature soldier cannot perform their duty. So, it is no wonder that these characters are boys pretending to be grown-ups.

The 'boys will be boys' attitude is also supported by the paratext of these comics, which often features self-defense and bodybuilding advertisements. These images stressed the necessity of knowing how to fight in order to prove one's manhood, but they also reflected the young reader's fear of being beaten up by bullies. This parallelism is illuminated also by a *G.I. Joe #24* (1953) wordless tale titled "You're Never Alone". In this story, the reader sees the juxtaposition of the images of a Korean sniper with the pictures of an (American) bully (figure 12). Indeed, in this tale, the representation of a hand-to-hand fight between an American G.I. and a Korean soldier is interspersed with flashback of the former's past. The American private recalls his fight against a bully while battling the Communist enemy. Like in World War II comics, these oversimplifications of politics aim to moralize the conflict by drawing a clear-cut division between good and

bad guys. However, one can also see a small variation in the pattern, whereas Nazis (and 'Japs') were the ultimate source of all evil, Koreans are here depicted as dangerous and destructive bullies. This narrative testifies also the existence and persistence of the conception of 'the enemy,' first at home and later at war. Conflict becomes a schemata through which interpret reality.

Frequently, the setting for these stories feels generic as writers and artists do not mention identifiable historical events of the Korean War, and they do not provide details about the culture, politics and geography of Korea. Only US regional differences are briefly mentioned, especially when the stories digress on a soldier's background. The variety of accents displayed in these comics serve to reinforce the image of the nation as a united entity despite its differences. Even though these comics draw this attention toward (regional) diversity, the soldiers are always exclusively white. Information about a private's life is usually disclosed through the letters sent by family members. This narrative expedient has the rhetorical function of reminding the reader that these soldiers are the sons of the nation, sacrificing their lives for America's best interest.

Other Korean War comics showed similar patterns: hand-to-hand combat, anti-Asian stereotypes, privates as hunks and ladies' men, gamification of the war, death as honorable, and support missions to local population. *Captain Jet* (1952-1953) and *Captain Steve Savage* (1951-1955) presented action packed storylines focused on the completion of military mission by the title protagonist. *Exciting War* (1952-1953) repeated all the cliché of the genre, but also personalized the conflict motivating military actions as paybacks to the 'reds' for killing friends and siblings. In this series, Korean civilians often welcome and help American soldiers. This narrative choice aims to legitimize US intervention on foreign soil and describe America as a benevolent force. After a combat with the Koreans the American G.I. always succeeds in saving the day.

Fawcett's *Battle Stories* reiterated the same tropes showing American soldiers winning battles by outsmarting the enemy, "More and more, as the war goes on, the reds are learning that in the Yanks they face not only dodged courage and devotion to duty, but a further quality called **Yankee savvy**! Yankee savvy, of course, is merely the old American custom of doing everything just a shade better and a thought quicker than the next guy!" (*Battle Stories #4*,1952:26, original emphasis). *Battle Stories* also used plenty of clichés of the genre: it depicted hand-to-hand combat as a game (e.g. by drawing visual

comparison to football) and turned the war experience into a coming of age stories.

Interestingly, *Fighting Fronts #2* tale "Warpath!" features a Native American soldier as protagonist. This choice has the effect to make the war narrative close to the western, thus linking the current war to the myth of the Frontier. This is particularly relevant because it anticipates the rhetoric that will be used during the Vietnam War, when the myth of the Frontier was revitalized to make sense of the current event. As technology was not able to provide a significant advantage in a guerrilla, the American G.I. has to (re)turn to the wilderness often appropriating features of Native American culture[79] (such as the stereotypical feathers).

Stanley Morse's *Battle Cry #1* (1952) tale "Live to Die" portrays death as a redeeming feature. Private Madison escapes an assault by leaving behind part of his comrades. His sense of guilt will later prompt the protagonist to sacrifice his life to free American prisoners and vindicate a friend who died during the previous assault. Once again death is given a purpose. Korean War comics highlighted also America's technological superiority, "America is the land of **machinery**! We know how to invent, and we know how to produce" (*Battle Cry #3*, 1952, original emphasis). The importance of weapons is also highlighted in *Our Army at War* tale "I, the Gun[80]" where the US colt 45 automatic pistol is personified. In this story the gun is both the protagonist and the narrator, "I am the US colt 45 automatic pistol. I am made for one purpose—face the enemy. This is the story of my lifespan. A span of 8 bullets" (*Our Army at War #7*, 1953:18). Despite the importance located to weaponry, these comics remind also the reader that equipment does not make the soldier, but camaraderie, "A man must have friends. He cannot live by himself… especially in the **army**! There they become more than friends… they become comrades… they become someone you might lay down your life for… they become **buddies**!" (*Battle Cry #4*, 1952:23, original emphasis). This is particularly evident in the two issues comics *Buddies of the U.S. Army* (1952), which followed the story of two soldiers fighting over the affection of women while reconciling and buddying up when time asked them to fight commies. War becomes a bonding experience, but also a way to grow up and become more mature as soldiers learn how to work out their differences in order to achieve common goals (survival and victory). Similarly, the story "Enemy

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[79] This form of cultural appropriation is visible also in some popular movies like *Rambo*.
[80] This story was written by David Kahn and illustrated by Mort Drucker.

Breakthrough" featured in *Fightin' Marines #3* (1951:1, original emphasis) stressed the importance of cooperation,

> The men of company B of the fifth marine battalion were hard-bitten veterans of the toughest fighting in Korea, griping about condition was part of their everyday life… but when the chips were down, and a communist breakthrough threatened a vital united nation position, every man forgot his personal problems and worked together as part of the greatest fighting unit the world has ever seem… the **United States Marines!**

Whereas, camaraderie is praised as a fundamental skill and it narratively functions as a way to humanize soldiers, individual qualities are also celebrated. For example, *Our Army at War #18* (1953) story "One Man Army" recurs to the homonymous trope, portraying a heavily armed and well-trained combatant able to face numerous enemies alone. *Battle Cry* also foreshadows some themes that would be prominent in anti-war comics, but never expand on them. Some of the G.I.s are morally ambiguous (e.g. suckers). However, these characters are usually killed off by the end of the story. Hence, vices are acknowledged, but limited to the individual. Then, this comic seems to rhetorically anticipate some of the critical aspects about war to either edulcorate or counter them. The bad guy always dies. Thus, war assumes a moralizing function. As Rocco Versaci (2008) discussed, comics produced during the Korean War were subversive mainly in the fact that they existed in a time when other media did not engage with the conflict. In order to understand the reactionary and fogy nature of these comics, one should keep in mind that the 1950s were an age of great conservativism, and probably publishers feared to be blacklisted because of the potential subversive content in anti-war comics stories.

## 7. (EC) War comics and Censorship in the Fifties

The year 1954 was particularly troublesome for comics. In this time, there was a (misguided) interest in the effects of mass culture on society, influenced often by a climate of suspicion. The mass culture debate (that constitutes an ongoing thread in American cultural discourse) triggered a desire to resolve the perceived problems of the new media, which were considered corrupting agents. Like other entertainment media (e.g. Hollywood suffered from the investigative activities of Wisconsin's senator Joseph McCarthy[81]), comics were subject to intensive scrutiny. Dr. Frederic Wertham's *Seduction*

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[81] It might be worth reminding that "three members of the press who attacked Senator Joseph McCarthy nationally before he was censured by his colleagues were Walt Kelly, Herblock, and Harvey Kurtzman. All were cartoonists and all were censored" (Daniels, 1971:84).

*of the Innocent* (1954) sparked a wave of public indignation and hysteria, ferociously attacking comics and portraying them as the source of juvenile delinquency.

Wertham's mass culture critique was not triggered by anti-Communist Cold War sentiments, but it was part of a call for collective social reforms. Wertham's ideas were rooted in reformist psychiatry and progressivist liberal political traditions. Despite Wertham's and McCarthy's ideas being on the opposite sides of the political spectrum (McCarthy tried to purge the country of elitist modes of thinking that he associated with communism and the New Deal; comics crusaders were elitists interested in protecting literacy and virtue), they both shared an anxiety toward mass culture and used similar means to advance their causes. As Bart Beaty observed,

> Because the questions [about mass media] remained fairly limited and the binary opposition between high and low cultures was such a constant in the discourse across political lines, it should not be entirely surprising that a considerable degree of overlap existed, causing Marxist and conservative critiques to resemble one another and sociological and literary interpretation of culture to use the same set of assumptions (Beaty, 2005:48).

Even though Wertham had a unique political (and methodological) stance in the 1950s cultural debates (e.g. his progressive goals, his position on the civil rights movement[82], and his statements about social reforms), his concerns stroke close to the heart of the postwar mass cultural critiques, which looked at the new media with suspect. 1950s American intellectuals feared that mass society could be converted into totalitarianism as they believed that mass culture could be easily and effectively used as a propaganda tool[83]. They thought that mass culture created atomized individuals with uniform tastes and alienated people from their true selves, thus enabling the formation of the 'totalitarian man.' Wertham like other crusaders against mass culture undermined the medium credibility and seriously damaged the comic books industry. The pressure created by these public figures forced many companies to either revise the content of their titles or shut

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[82] He argued against segregation and played an important role in the landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, known as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), in which the Court ruled that American state laws establishing racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

[83] For example, Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) expressed concerns about the interconnections of mass culture, mass society and the perils of conformity. Indeed, she saw totalitarian movements as "mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals" (Arendt, 1951:316). However, Edward Bernays' *Propaganda* (1927) and Jacques Ellul's *Propaganda* (1973[1965]) remind that also democracy needs consensus to function, "this is inevitable, as democracy depends on public opinion and competition between political parties. In order to come to power, parties make propaganda to gain voters" (Ellul, 1973 [1965]: 232). Yet the relationship between democracy and propaganda is not exempt from contradictions. For example, one can observe that even in democracies the instruments of propaganda are retained by small groups of interests.

down their publications[84].

In his book, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), Wertham, drawing from postwar mass culture critique and his own idiosyncratic conception of socially based psychiatric practice, argued that comic books brutalized children. In his opinion, youngsters were left unprotected to the depiction of explicit images of crime, delinquency, and sexual deviation in comic books. He claimed that teenagers were victim of adults' (postwar) culture that preyed on and corrupted them. Even though comics were not considered the main reason behind juvenile delinquency, but a mere promoting element, "he concluded that action to control that factor was justified on the basis that it did not make any sense to refuse to treat a contributing factor even if it was not the only important factor (Beaty, 2005:136).

According to Wertham, comics indoctrinated youth with corrosive values, and, during his testimony at the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency in 1954, he went as far as stating that "Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic-book industry. They get children much younger. They teach them race hatred at the age of 4 before they can read" (Horn, 1998:880). In Wertham's opinion, comics also encouraged boys' passivity and female domination (subverting traditional gender roles); in particular he saw Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman as exemplar of fascism, homoerotism, and sadomasochism respectively. For example, he argued that Wonder Woman was a frightening castrating figure,

> Superwoman (Wonder Woman) is always a horror type. She is physically very powerful, tortures men, has her own female following, is the cruel, "phallic" woman. While she is a frightening figure for boys, she is an undesirable ideal for girls, being the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to want to be (Wertham, 1954:54).

Hence, his ideas displayed a commitment to conservative or even reactionary gender roles. At the time, homosexuality was still considered a disease. So, he hunted down any trace of non-normative relationship in comics. Affection between people of the same sex was deemed suspicious. For example, he argued that *Batman* had homoerotic[85] subtext,

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[84] It is important to remind that Marshall McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride* (2002 [1951]), published in those years, had a less "apocalyptic" (Eco, 2001[1964]) approach towards media. McLuhan was one of the first scholars to consider mass culture as a phenomenon worth of scholarly attention. In his book, he made mass culture dialogue with literary and philosophical texts. Even though he recognized and shared some of the concerns about the dangerous aspects of the new media, he exhorted, "Why not use the new commercial education as a means to enlightening its intended prey? Why not assist the public to observe consciously the drama which is intended to operate upon it unconsciously?" (McLuhan, 2002 [1951]: v).
[85] Even though this interpretation was a bit of a stretch, the live action series from the late 1960s referenced

the Batman type of story helps to fixate homoerotic tendencies by suggesting the form of an adolescent-with-adult or Ganymede-Zeus type of love-relationship. […] They constantly rescue each other from violent attacks by an unending number of enemies. The feeling is conveyed that we men must stick together because there are so many villainous creatures who have to be exterminated. […] Sometimes Batman ends up in bed injured and young Robin is shown sitting next to him. At home they lead an idyllic life. […] It is like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together. Sometimes they are shown on a couch, Bruce reclining and Dick sitting next to him, jacket off, collar open, and his hand on his friend's arm. […] In these stories there are practically no decent, attractive, successful women. A typical female character is the Catwoman, who is vicious and uses a whip. The atmosphere is homosexual and anti-feminine. If the girl is good-looking she is undoubtedly the villainess. If she is after Bruce Wayne, she will have no chance against Dick (Wertham, 1954: 237-239).

Nevertheless, he also had concerns about ethnic and racial representations, stating that comics taught race hatred to children by frequently displaying foreign-born and dark-skinned villains, whereas the hero was always a white muscular man. Hence, Wertham ideas should not be dismissed as the simple result of bigotry, but they should be regarded as attempts to indict what he considered to be rotten within American culture to improve society at large. Wertham had certainly understood the power of persuasion of images and texts (which can work on a subliminal level); however, his efforts to improve society were limited by his own prejudice and (postwar) conservative mentality. Whereas as McLuhan (2002 [1951]:v) suggested to "study the action of the whirlpool [a metaphor indicating the new media environment]" and co-operate with it, Wertham suggested to censor the medium, labeling it as dangerous.

Comics' use of violence and sexualization was deemed to corrupt children's integrity and provided an empirical proof of the publishers' immorality. Editors were accused to venally trying to make profit by selling sensational and shocking material to teenagers. During the 1954 Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearing, Bill Gaines, the publisher of *EC Comics* and *MAD* tried to defend the medium stating, "some may not like [comics]. That is a matter of personal taste. It would be just as difficult to explain the harmless thrill of a horror story to a Dr. Wertham as it would be to explain the sublimity of love to a frigid old maid" (Horn, 1998:883). He refuted the idea that comics contained subliminal messages, as the meaning of the stories was "spelled out carefully in caption" (Horn, 1998: 885).

In 1957, *MAD* magazine #34 spoofed Dr. Wertham's book and produced a parody article titled, "Is Baseball Ruining Our Children?" The mock article quotes Dr. Werthless'

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it through its camp aesthetics.

(an obvious pun on the name of the famous psychiatrist) research as an authoritative source for condemning baseball. *MAD* tries to refute Wertham's thesis, arguing that comic books did not cause delinquency just because imprisoned juvenile criminals read them (if that was the case one could draw similar conclusions about baseball). It maintained that Wertham's data only attested the popularity of the medium. *MAD* apologetic intention are explicit from the heading, "We are here at *MAD* all for fighting juvenile delinquency. But we are for fighting this problem intelligently and scientifically. We just can't take seriously those pseudo-experts who come forward from time to time with articles proclaiming cure-alls for this vast and complicated problem." The use of the tabloid format to indict Wertham's ideas might also be due to the fact that his book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) was written in a sensationalist style. As Les Daniels (1971:85) argued, Wertham "rarely offered concrete proof concerning the allegedly deleterious effect of comic books. Instead, he juxtaposed the concept of the comic book with unpleasant incidents or attitudes to suggest relationships between the two which were largely theoretical." The cause-and-effect relationship offered by Wertham was not bound to scientific evidence and showed a narrow vision of the medium and art in general.

Campaigners against comics already existed in the 1940s, but it was only in 1954 that this polemic gained momentum and reached the U.S. Senate and the medium started to be officially investigated by a subcommittee on juvenile delinquency that lead to the creation of the Comic Code (Goodrum, 2016). Indeed, as Beaty (2005:113) argued, "Most historians of the comic book trace the birth of anti-comic-book concern to a single influential 8 May 1940s editorial in the *Chicago Daily News*, 'A National Disgrace,' written by Sterling North and widely reprinted." Sterling North deemed comics to be poisonous mushrooms acting as violence stimulants. He criticized comics for their portrayal of superhuman derring-do, titillating women, gunfire, and vigilantism. According to Sterling North parents were to blame because they did not control what their children were reading. He argued that "the antidote to the 'comic' magazine poison can be found in any library or good bookstore" (Hadju, 2008:41). Similarly, the Catholic Church in America equaled comics to fascism and paganism. The continuity between old and new anti-comics sentiments is reinforced by Sterling North's positive review of Wertham's book[86].

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[86] In turn, Wertham had quoted Sterling's studies three times in his book.

However, World War II momentarily discarded (and suspended) the arguments against comic books as the medium featured patriotic tales, becoming a symbol and advocate of the American way. It was difficult to attack comics in this period as the medium was mobilized in the war effort. Anti-comics sentiments resurfaced soon after the war, and over "the course of 1948, the debate over comic books coalesced on the issue of juvenile delinquency" (Hadju, 2008:93). In this year comics started to be scrutinized by official institutions and some comics titles were 'outlawed,' because they were considered objectionable material. This climate led concerned parents to convince their children to burn all their comic books.

In a 1950 letter addressed to the Senator Estes Kefauver, Milton Caniff eloquently tried to defend the medium he worked on, as an artist, refuting Werthams' ideas,

> Practitioners of the inexact science of psychiatry have long served as apologists for the present parental generation by attributing every childhood ill from measles to shyness to the reading of comic books. It follows that parents might find it difficult to counter the skill of the professional story tellers in catering to their children's escapist instincts, but fathers and mothers of other generations guided their youngsters during out-of-school hours because there were no radio, television, or comic-book outlets to which the sometimes irksome task could be surrendered (United States Congress Senate, 1951: 132).

In the same letter, he also tried to show the potential and similarity that this new media shared with other forms of popular culture,

> However, any critic of these media must not forget that all the popular figures are heroes—that right triumphs. It is the good guy they seek to emulate. This is also true in the most vivid of the comic books. Children are natural critics, no lobby can reach them. They will follow only the line of behavior which is their natural tendency. The portrayal of the blackness of evil makes virtue white by contrast, and, as in all folk tales, the desire to emulate the St. George of the moment slaying the current dragon, is a healthy and desirable instinct to arouse (United States Congress Senate, 1951: 132).

Despite the artist's passionate letter, comics kept on being used as escape goats. They were considered as capable of contaminating youth with unwanted influences. This debate over comics lasted till the creation of an organism of self-regulation. Then, in the 1950s comics were perceived as an old problem that darkened in time, a peril from within, (mentally, physically, and morally) injuring boys and girls and growing out of control. Wertham was not the first anti-comics crusader, nevertheless he was the first psychologist (supposedly a man of science) whose main concern was social progress, and not aesthetics or faith, to publicly condemn the medium, and his status granted him a certain authority and credibility.

Fearing a legislation against comics and a direct government intervention, publishers

grouped together to create a system of self-regulation, known as the Comics Code Authority (CCA), somehow similar to the Hays Code. This organization established a set of restrictions, which all subscribing publishers were expected to follow. Comics that complied to the rules were permitted to display the Comics Code Authority seal on their covers. In contrast, those without the seal could have been easily boycotted or denied distribution. In light of this new rules, "Styles and contents were changed, characters and titles were dropped, and a number of major companies disappeared without a trace" (Daniels, 1971:83).

While the Comics Code was designed to protect the business, it also damaged the image of the medium alienating potential readers, creating a negative tautological loop. By eliminating controversial issues (divorce, sex, religion, criticism towards authorities, crime, sadistic torture, etc.), removing genres (mainly horror and crime), and censoring language, creative teams and editors removed what made comics attractive for an adult readership, limiting the medium's ability to comment on society. This solution had also the effect to reinforce the idea that the medium was just for children, thus unwillingly validating the fears of the crusaders against comics. Indeed, anti-comics campaigners felt entitled in their demand for censorship as they claimed to be defending children's morality from the obscenity contained in the medium. A concern that was also shared by the Government institutions, for example, on January 1, 1960, J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, wrote:

> The morals of America are besieged. today by an unprincipled force which will spare no home. or community in its quest for illicit profits. I am speaking of the unquestionably base individuals who spread obscene literature across our land through the means of films, decks of playing cards, photographs, "comic" books, salacious magazines, paperbacked books and other pornographic products. These forms of obscenity indeed threaten the morality of our Nation and its richest treasure-- our young people. While our schools, churches and youth organizations conscientiously strive to improve the morals and thinking of our juvenile citizens, forces of evil are working on the other side of the fence to contaminate all that we hold decent. The most disgusting part of this assault is that our youth is subjected to lurid exhibitions of obscenity in many of the places where they seek clean entertainment (Hoover, 1960: web).

Therefore, in order to fully understand the reasons behind the publishers' decision to self-censor their products, one should also consider the climate of suspicion of that time and the pressure that entertainment media were subjected to in the 1950s.

Gaines' EC publications were one of the most renowned victims of these repressive forces. Comics published by this publisher were unique in their socially conscious and progressive ideas as they included stories about racial equality, anti-war advocacy, nuclear

disarmament, gender roles, anticipating some of the themes that would be prominent during the 1960s and 1970s thanks to the Civil Rights Movement and the counterculture. Indeed, as Art Spiegelman (2011[1993]:191) discussed, "Harvey [Kurtzman]'s *Mad* was more important than pot and LSD in shaping the generation that protested the Vietnam War."

Comics matured in 1950s EC pages as they gave artists and writers the possibilities to extend the limits of the medium in multiple directions. EC also addressed adult readers providing both a form of entertainment and a thought-provoking medium, capable of commenting on society and trigger indignation. Some of the stories depicted domestic or romantic situation gradually degenerating. The depiction of 'decadence' was used as a rhetorical tool to comment on society and show how the American family diverged from the images advertised in commercial magazines. EC comics experimented with different genres (science fiction, horror, crime, suspense, and war), but each of them was used to cast doubts about America's (self) righteousness. In 1954, censorship pressures triggered EC publishers to concentrate on the humor magazine *MAD*. Its transformation from comic book format to magazine allowed its publishers to keep on displaying abrasive contents in its pages; in contrast, all its other comic lines ceased being published by 1956. Censorship justified its attack against comics claiming that children are pure beings, whose innocence must be protected from the predatory intention of popular culture producers. Consequently, censorship defined comics as childish and 'only for kids.' In contrast, magazines are expected to appeal adult buyers and this marketing ploy (or ruse to circumvent the newly established CCA) allowed *MAD* to maintain its satirical content and give a perceptive insight of Cold War American culture.

Comics produced by EC were particularly innovative as they offered a first counternarrative of the Korean War while American troops were still fighting. For example, the tale "Yellow[87]," that appeared on the first issue of *Shock SuspenStories* (1952), presented the story of lieutenant Henderson, who was sentenced to face the firing squad for his cowardice. Indeed, while on mission, lieutenant Henderson neglected his duty and deserted his men while under fire. For this reason, the young man is sentenced to death. His father (a colonel) pays him a visit before the execution. During this

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[87] This story was co-written by Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein and illustrated by Jack Davis.

encounter, the father states to feel ashamed for the boy's action and pusillanimity. During the confrontation between father and son, the story does not only oppose fearlessness to cowardice, but it also contrasts (reckless) heroism to the (legitimate) desire to live, "You wanted to be proud of me! that's all you ever wanted! You didn't care how I felt! All you thought about was your own pompous self! […] Sure I'm a coward! Sob… I was scared stiff! I ran! You bet I ran! And I'm scared now, too! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!" After this confrontation the colonel tricks his son. He tells his boy that the rifles are loaded with blanks and that he will later smuggle the body out. This lie aims to make his son go to his death like a 'man,' facing the firing squad while it shoots[88]. In this story, antiwar stances are entwined with intergenerational conflicts, foreshadowing once again themes of the anti-war movement of the Vietnam era. It was this type of stories that troubled Wertham and concerned parents as they questioned authority. In this tales evil was perpetrated by the same figure children have been taught to admire and respect.

The second issue of *Shock SuspenStories* (1952) also criticized war in a tale (ironically) titled "Patriots![89]". This story indicts the patriotic rhetoric behind military parades, where the attention is always placed on the repetition of conventional gestures, rather than the suffering of the soldiers it supposedly celebrates. Parades are presented as a commodity to be consumed by an audience rather than a way to honor the real men who fought risking (and sacrificing) their lives on the battleground. Indeed, the tale narrates the story of a mob that, whipped up by anti-Communist sentiments, beats to death a man, because he did not lift his hat to the flag during a military parade. The reader later finds out that the dead man was a blind veteran who did not raise his hat because of his disability. This story reveals the hypocrisy behind patriotic celebrations as they usually essentialize war and idolize the military corps while neglecting the suffering inflicted upon the individual soldier. The presence of the blind veteran destabilizes the dominant triumphal war narrative confronting it with the reality and the aftermath of conflicts. Disabilities (and gruesome death) tend to be elided from official reports and recollection of the conflict, as they destabilize the image of the nation as a whole body. Consequently, the reader is left to wonder who (or what) the parade truly celebrates. As Qiana Whitted (2019) highlighted, this story shows the cruelty and indifference of everyday people, but

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[88] This stratagem is reminiscent of the one thought by Scarpia to kill Mario in Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*.

[89] This story was co-written by Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein and illustrated by Jack Kamen.

also how a culture of containment can suddenly trigger a flash point of deadly mob violence. This type of educational tale belongs to what Qiana Whitted defines as preachies. In fact, EC often used the sentimental invocation of shame to indict wrong social behavior.

On April 1954, *MAD #10* featured a parody of the jingoistic comic series *G.I. Joe* titled "G.I. Shmoe!" As previously discussed, the Ziff-Davis' *G.I. Joe* series (1951-1957) portrayed a group of average soldiers fighting in Korea. In these comics, privates were eroticized as muscular hunks and women usually fell for them, as they were fascinated with uniforms. The ladies' feeling tended to be always reciprocated. In MAD's parody, the scenario is reversed as men are blinded by their infatuations and love incapacitates soldiers from recognizing a series of women, trying to seduce them to infiltrate the base, as enemies. They fail to identify the foes in disguise, even though their treacherous nature is hinted by their outfit: they all wear a hat with a red star. At the end of the story the privates are saved by the WACS (Women Army Corps). Therefore, this parody emasculates the image of the American soldier through irony.

Even though *MAD* and *Shock SuspenStories* presented outstanding innovation to the war genre, *Two-Fisted Tales* (1950-1955) and *Frontline Combat* (1951-1954) truly revolutionized it by going beyond the gun-ho representation of combat. Kurtzman did not want war to look captivating; in contrast he intended to show the tragedy of war. As Kurtzman himself stated,

> I thought of doing a war book, the business of what to say about war was very important to me and was uppermost in my mind, because I did then feel very strongly about not wanting to say anything glamorous about war. The only stuff that had been done was glamorous war comics, and I'm sure you've seen comics that came out during war (and they're still coming out), the American soldier killing little buck-toothed yellow men (Kurtzman, 2006: 24).

He hoped to show the futility of war and one of the techniques he used to achieve such aim was the recognition of the enemy as a human being. For example, the tale "Enemy Assault" featured in *Frontline Combat* #1 (1951) shows an American soldier searching refuge in a trench; here he ends up trapped with a Korean. They both point their weapons at each other and start having a conversation. The small talk between these two characters makes the reader aware that the two had common experiences. Indeed, this face-to-face encounter leads the American G.I. to wonder,

> I was ridiculous! Here I was in the middle of war, comparing photographs of babies with an enemy soldier! Just a while back, I must have watched him… one of the hundreds of tiny automatans [sic]

advancing across the field… but he wasn't an automatan [sic]! He was a living breathing **human being** with a **wife** and **children** and **hopes** and **plans just like me! Why should he want to kill me? Or me, him!** …For a while, I had forgotten the war existed! But it was there! (Kurtzman, *Frontline Combat #1*, 1951:14, original emphasis).

Once again, the recognition of the foe as a human being shows how conflicts are always racialized, as the enemy is continuously constructed as an essentialized other. Expanding on Paul Fussell's (1975; 1989) works, one can observe that war rhetoric is always ethnocentric as it constructs the national character ('We') against a reified external threat ('They'), a binary opposition that is spatial ('We' are all here on this side whereas 'the enemies' are over there), sensorial ('We' are visible; they are invisible), aesthetic ('Our' appearance is natural; 'Their' bizarre), essentialist ('We' are individuals with names and personal identities; 'They' are a horde, a collective entity), normative ('We' are normal; 'They' are grotesque), and moral ('We' are good, 'They' are not).

This polarizing view is not surprising at all if one considers that soldiers lived in the "other" land, and consequently the enemy often acquired monstrous features. After all, these soldiers encountered men whose way of thinking and living was totally different from their own. For this reason, the speculation about (and later recognition of) the humanity of enemy is particularly unsettling. Children's photographs created the opportunity to build up familiar association of normality and domesticity, casting doubts about (and adding nuances to) the antithetical construction of the enemy as a stock character. Oppositions are no longer absolute, and the Other is now brought closer to the Self. It is worth noticing that the epiphanic encounter with the Other (who is no longer the enemy, but a human being) is a *leitmotiv* of antiwar literature and movies. For example, a similar scene can be observed, among other works, in Dos Passos's novel *Three Soldiers*[90] (1921), Erich Maria Remarque's novel[91] *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), King Vidor's movie *The Big Parade* (1925), and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948).

However, in "Enemy Assault", this epiphany does not lead soldiers to take pacifists

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[90] In Dos Passos novel, Chrisfield's hatred for the enemy "suddenly ebbed out of him" (Dos Passos, 2007[1921]:104) when he came across the corpse of a German soldier who committed suicide by shooting himself in the face. A similar scene is featured in Harvey Kurtzman story "Corpse on the Imjin" (*Two-Fisted Tales #25*, 1952). In the comic a solitary GI observes a North Korean corpse as it floats down the river and speculates on how the dead soldier met his fate.

[91] Like in Kurtzman's story "Enemy Assault", in Remarque's novel, photographs function as catalysts for the protagonist's epiphany. The Other is no longer the monster depicted by propaganda, but a human being with a family and affects.

stances. The American soldier never forgets the existence of 'the two sides' and their endless and necessary state of war (as they both legitimize each other through the construction of essentialist confrontations), "**I had to choose sides! I had to! You can't fight a war by comparing baby shots!**" (Kurtzman, *Frontline Combat #1*, 1951:15, original emphasis). As the Korean soldier lays dead with his children's photograph on his belly the reader is left to question the actions of the American soldiers. This narrative solution is a clear point of departure from antiwar literature, where the discovery of the enemy's humanity leads the main character towards an ethical choice (usually desertion). Indeed, even though the lies narrated by public euphemism are revealed, the soldier's logic (to kill or be killed[92]) prevails. The story "Air Burst!" (Kurtzman, *Frontline Combat #4*, 1952) also shows North Koreans privates repeating the same actions as their American rivals: fighting, creating traps, taking care of their friends, and trying to survive. Similarly, in "Corpse on the Imjin!" (Kurtzman, *Two Fisted Tales #25*, 1950) an American soldier muses about the corpses of unknown soldiers floating down the Imjin River. He ponders how they may have died, leading to realization that hand-to-hand combat has become obsolete, and with it disappeared the possibility of individual achievement. Ironically, while the soldier has this existential epiphany, he is suddenly attacked by an enemy. As a result of the fight, the Korean soldier is drowned by the American G.I. and becomes the next corpse floating down the river. This conclusion seems to reject any rationalization of the conflict. The instinct of survival prevents the American soldier to realize that the enemy is a human like him. His guilty only surfaces after the killing.

The tale "Contact!" featured in *Frontline Combat #2* (Kurtzman, 1951) deconstructs another national myth, the 'American way,' while presenting the dark side of American military superiority.  Whereas war has been often motivated as a way to defend the national lifestyle and values, here the 'American way' is hinted to be responsible for war. The war machine is depicted as an extension of the capitalist production system. The tale undermines American righteousness by playing with the polysemy of the word "good". The reader is left to wonder whether America is defending its virtue or its production,

> Americans aren't Superman, Weems! An American is a man just like an Asiatic is a man! But

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[92] In *All Quiet on the Western Front,* Paul Bäumer accepts this logic after having killed Gérard Duval. Paul felt remorse for involuntarily killing a man out of survival instinct. However, his comrades remind him that he took no pleasure from his killing and he had no choice; it had to kill to survive. In contrast, in the comic, the "kill or be killed" logic precedes the act of killing.

America is a way of life! We can produce! We can turn out bullets by the billions for war, and we can turn out automobiles and washing machines for peace! Get it, Weems? And as long as we believe in **good** we can't go wrong! The tanks lurch forward over the debris of broken stones and men! Overhead the planes roar through the sky, seeking new targets! Machines against men! Steel against flesh! And remember, if we believe in **good** we **can't go wrong**! (Kurtzman, *Frontline Combat #2,* 1951:28, original emphasis).

Similar considerations are also present in "War Machines!" (*Frontline Combat #5,* 1952). In this story, war is depicted as an engine getting its pieces broken, repaired and substituted in order to keep it being operative and effective. Men are deprived of any agency; they simply fill functions efficiently: they are just tools to maintain the (war) machine well oiled. The idea that war diminishes men's agency to mere role service is also conveyed through the narrative and visual solutions adopted by the comic. This argument is reminiscent of Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* (1921) as in both works war is just an element of capitalist society that reduces men into servomechanisms. However, in Kurtzman's work, the molding of the soldiers took a step forward. Whereas, in Dos Passos' novel the characters retain their names, in the comic they are anonymous and replaceable pieces of an engine, namely war. The reader observes the presence of tanks, planes, explosions, and men marching and fighting, but no dialogue is present. Textual coherence is created through the presence of a narrator 'voicing over' the image showed, and the fact that the pictures belong to the same semantic field, war. The narrator's voice is particularly important as it attempts to displace the fascination with war and the machines, by drawing attention to the nameless men in the pictures. The reader is left to wonder if these unknown soldiers can be replaced or repaired, knowing that the answer changes depending on whether the stress is placed on either the human or the function, "and so you see, although every day, we replace the old machines with bigger and better machines. We have yet to find a substitute for the most ingenious mechanism of all… **man!**" (Kurtzman, *Frontline Combat #5*, 1952:21, original emphasis). So, the comics reflects on how steel machines cannot prevent people from dying, as men have to do the fighting, and of course many of them are going to get killed.

"Big if" shows a soldier sitting and wondering what might have happened 'if' various events had gone differently, "Yaaah… what's the use of saying 'if'! there wouldn't have been if's, **if** the old man hadn't decided we should go on reconnaissance this morning…" (Kurtzman, *Frontline Combat* #5, 1952:27, original emphasis). As Rocco Versaci (2008:169) observed, this tale "raised questions about the waste of war during a time

when such questions were not openly encouraged. It would take another war – the Vietnam War- to make criticism and protest of our nation policies and leaders a viable form of public discourse."

In *Frontline Combat*, death is often portrayed as meaningless since any life is expendable for the success of the mission, "everyman counts on the big job, but no men is bigger than the job" (Kurtzman, *Frontline Combat #3*, 1951:8). In "Tin Can" (Kurtzman, *Frontline Combat #3,* 1951) the tragic death of a soldier is not caused by the enemy, but bad luck and his fellow comrades. In this tale, the marines decide to leave behind one of their own in order to secure the safety of the ship. Death is no longer heroic as it does not prove the late soldier's bravery or redeem him from its past. He is just a mere casualty. The worthlessness of war is also depicted in the *Two-Fisted Tales* story 'Dying City' when a Korean old man questions his grandson, "Did you see our city, broken and ruined? Did you see the destroyed homes and factories? What does the future mean when everything you love is dead, my son? **What is left? What good is your revolution?**" (Kurtzman, *Two-Fisted Tales* #22:15, original emphasis).

*Two-Fisted Tales* story 'Kill' depicts an American soldier obsessed with his knife and the desire to use it on the enemy, "yeah, Duckbutt! I'm sharpening my knife an' I'm gonna use it, too! When I get a hold of my first Chinese" (Kurtzman, *Two-Fisted Tales* #23, 1951:20). A Korean soldier on the opposite side shares an analogous fixation with his machine gun. At the end of the tale, both soldiers kill each other. Ironically, the corpses of the two enemies now lay together, side by side. The first and last panel contains the moral message of the story, "Thou shalt not kill". The tale is an invitation to cherish people's life and for this reason the main characters are punished for their desire to make war. Finally, the story presents in memorable terms a sense that war is equal to outright bestiality and madness. The enemy of both parties is in reality war. Similarly, the tale 'War Story' (*Two-Fisted Tales #19,* 1951) present a sadistic American soldier during the Korean War. He wishes to kill the enemy, but by mistake he ends up killing his own twin brother. The tale conveys a pacifist message through a clear 'we-are-all-brothers' symbolism. The tale 'Enemy Contact' reflects on the contradiction of war, while soldiers kill, military doctors try to save lives, "isn't it strange! While one instinct makes man move heaven and hearth to save a life…makes man give his all to his fellow man… another less noble instinct makes man a cold, brutal, dispassionate monster" (Kurtzman,

*Two-Fisted Tales #22,* 1951:8).

Kurtzman did not only indict war by displacing the image and myth of the chivalrous American knights, who trooped through most war comics of the 1950s, by showing edgy and ambivalent G.I.s, he also portrayed devastating (human and material) loss, meaningless (and almost Pyrrhic) victory, and sympathetic enemies who felt pain when hurt. Remarkably, his criticism of war did not appear exclusively in the text, but also in the paratext. For example, *Frontline Combat #12* featured a parody of a recruitment poster. Moreover, stories like "Bunker!" (Kurtzman, *Two-Fisted Tales #34,* 1953), "Perimeter!" (Kurtzman, *Frontline Combat #11*, 1953) and "In Gratitude…" (Gains & Feldstein, *Shock Suspenstory #11*, 1953) also discussed the racial tensions exiting in the U.S. Army (and American society) and how bigotry impeded the acknowledgement of the heroic actions accomplished by African American soldiers, anticipating themes that would be explored in the 1960s and 1970s.

Considered the revolutionary and subversive nature of the EC comics, it is no surprise that these titles got cancelled by censorship. However, as David Hadju (2008: 196) remarks, at first, the radical and innovative content of these war comics got unnoticed, "parents no doubt watched their children reading *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat* and figured that the kids were being spoon-feed jingoism, unaware of the books' diet on cynicism toward the American military and sensitivity to the impartial cruelty of war." Censorship shaped the development of the medium by influencing the directions it could (not) take.

In an attempt to rehabilitate Wertham's image and confute some (widely) shared scholarly opinion that held the Comic Code responsible for the delayed maturity of the medium, Bart Beaty claims that

> The myth of quality that is attached to EC comics, despite their repetitive 'ironic' endings, has helped to structure the image of Wertham as a destroyer of the medium's potential. This represents a simpleminded reading of history that ignores the central fact that the Comics Code – which, in any case, Wertham did not advocate – did not destroy the medium's potential: comic book publishers did (Beaty, 2005: 205).

He maintains that the comics books industry was victim of its own refusal to grow up, and that the 'adult age' arrived as publishers adopted age-appropriate labels and restriction on the ability of children to purchase materials deemed inappropriate[93]. He also

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[93] As hitherto discussed, the detractors of comics justified censorship because the medium, in their (wrong)

adds that "In the 1960s artists such as Robert Crumb took exactly this route. Crumb's publisher, Apex Novelties, labeled *Zap #1*, 'Fair Warning: For Adult Intellectuals Only'" (Beaty, 2005:206).

However, I believe that this argument does not take into consideration a series of fundamental aspects. First, the emergence of 'adult' material in (Crumb's) comics was made possible by the sociocultural changes occurring in American society during the 1960s (namely the counterculture) which triggered a process of questioning and redefinition of the national identity. Second, Crumb's (and other 1960s underground artists') works were (also) a reaction to the Comic Code restrictions. Third, mainstream comics production involves a major number of workers and a defiance of the institutions might have caused people to lose their jobs. In contrast, underground comix circulated in a narrow environment outside the mainstream and the people involved in the production and distribution where limited. Self-regulation in the 1950s was enacted in the name of self-preservation on the assumption that government restriction would be worst. This is proven also by Will Eisner's comment on his decision to suspend the production of *The Spirit* and shift his attention to producing commercial art for military clients. Even though Eisner ended the series in 1952, well before the publication of Wertham's Seduction of the Innocent, he argues that the uproar against comics in 1945-1955 reinforced that his decision to end The Spirit was a good one,

> When Dr. Wertham came out with his book [and] he started plugging it on TV and in the papers, everywhere, I felt like I was hearing the voice of every comic-book hater I had ever met, and I knew that I could no longer function in that atmosphere. I was certain that I had made the right decision to get out, and I got out just in time, although I was equipped to survive, because I had a good head for business. I knew I was smart to get out when I did, because the walls were starting to fall down (Hadju, 2008 :229).

Finally, even though EC comics, as Bart Beaty suggests, might not have been the high-quality pinnacle of comic art that they have been reputed to be[94], I believe that EC

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perception, targeted a young audience that could be easily manipulated. Publishers succumbed to the pressions of the censors, confirming *de facto* their thesis. Censorship causes the infantilization of the medium (as anything potentially controversial was cancelled). *Mad* escaped censorship by becoming a magazine, a product explicitly aimed at adults. Thus, as Bart Beaty suggests, a change in the label might have helped the industry. However, it is important to remark that *Mad*'s transition into a magazine was not painless and many editors would have not had the means to do the same. In Japan, Manga are labeled according to their content and intended audience. Yet American and Japanese (comics) cultures are very different.

[94] Yet some stories like Bernie Krigstein's "Master Race" published in *Impact #1* (1955) deserve all they praise they received.

innovations should not be dismissed too rapidly. As Qiana Whitted argues in her book *EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest* (2019: 20),

> scholars need to apply critical scrutiny to the actual content of these stories and refuse to treat even the most sincere celebration of the company's genius as self-evident. Ultimately the field is better served by the clear articulation of the measures by which even the self-stylized proselytizing of the preachies can be deemed useful and worthy of all this attention. EC's visual and verbal formulas for riveting genre comics were born out of the struggle to creatively reconcile mass appeal to social conscience with a reputation for carefree entertainment.

It is important to highlight that the final moral of EC comics, that Bart Beaty labels as "repetitive 'ironic' endings," had the courage to question national myths and official narratives. In these comics, the irony of situation arises from the collision between the innocence of the narratives produced by the faith in the 'American way' and the awareness of the uncanny reality hidden behind that glamourous facade. As Art Spiegelman (2011[1993]:192) argued, "Harv[ey Kurtzman] didn't change the culture only by creating a new mode of satire. At the height of the Korean War he edited, wrote, and drew war comics – not jingoistic trash but thoroughly researched narratives with great moral purpose." Indeed, one can wonder whether it was more immoral Kurtzman's depiction of the hard truth or the enthusiastic representation of war that used to circulate in the majority of mainstream comics.

In particular, EC war comics were poised on the boundary between the realistic and ironic modes of representation in order to capture the personal and cultural consequences of the conflict. Irony in these stories is used to show the futility of war. After all, the war against the (inhuman) enemy ends up being a transforming and dehumanizing experience for the American G.I., as well. Moreover, EC comics did not feature only provocative stories, but they also employed talented people like Harvey Kurtzman, and the art quality was as good as the writing. Despite its quality, EC couldn't stand a chance against the demonization of the medium and Gaines was forced to kill off its comic line, the final issue of *Tales from the Crypt* appeared in February/March 1955.

## 8. Reimagining WWII after the conflict: a legacy

> *You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end*
> Tim O'Brien, *How to Tell a True War Story*

This overview of the early war comics allows us to introduce some of the themes that

will recur in this discussion. Indeed, comics function as rhetorical tools that create affective responses and open spaces for ethical judgment and inquiry. As hitherto discussed, World War II was rhetorically constructed as the "good war" by the government propaganda, which comic books during the Golden Age helped to spread and reinforce. They were used to mobilize people playing on the affective responses generated by pictures. As Sara Pesce (2009: 229) discussed,

> The collective memory of an historical event is transmitted by a system of representations that are socially accepted and perpetuated in time. These representations ultimately allow memory to survive. In the case of World War II, this system is fed by living testimonies, fictional narratives, and by the preservation of materials and contents that are regarded as worthy of being remembered.

Comics, like cinema, participated in the construction and consolidation of the imaginary of the war. These codifications made the cultural memory of the event accessible to those who had no direct experience of the war, and media helped to fix a certain reading of the (recent) past. Because of this process comics became what Aleida Assmann (2002[1999]) called "memory mediators." It is worth reminding that the notion of 'memory mediators' can include objects that are documentary in nature (like texts, images or places), but also artifacts that belong to the realm of invention and imagination. Mass media influenced collective imagination of the war thanks to their widespread distribution. World War II stories keep circulating in 1950s war comics alongside tales about the Korean War. The same title often featured stories about the conflicts. This choice had the effect to consolidate the image of Second World War as the 'good war' and present the new military engagement in Korea as continuation of the previous war. From the previous conflict, the U.S. inherited the responsibility to defend the freed world and 'export democracy'. The only thing that changed was the enemy. America was no longer battling the Axis, but the commies.

However, after World War II, comics were also used to produce thought-provoking narrations of the conflict, providing the reader a narrative that goes beyond the trope "good vs. evil". For example, Simon and Kirby (1954) *Foxhole #1* shows a wounded soldier in its cover (figure 13). The image is based on Joseph Hirsch's "High Visibility Wrap" painting that appeared in the 1945 book *Men Without Guns*. Even the text featured in the cover is full of irony, "Dear mom the war is like a picnic!.. Today we spent a day at the beach!", probably a subtle way to indict the censorship during the war. Fortunately, this issue escaped the restriction of the Comic Code, which started to be effective on that

same year. The cover exposed the horror wars and the lies of public euphemism. The wounded body of the soldiers became a space for contestation. However, it is important to remark that even though the comic expose the horror of war, it never indicts the cause[95]. Once again, the most powerful revision of World War II mythos came from Harvey Kurtzman.

Indeed, in Harvey Kurtzman's series *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tale* Japanese are portrayed as human beings who suffer loss and mourn their dead like the Americans. The humanization of the enemy tries to elicit sympathy on the reader and make the killing of this character more shocking for the audience. The enemy is shown to feel fear and pain. This image of violence makes the reader question with whom its sympathies lies, the victim or the perpetrator. Moreover, these comics give enough narrative space to each death so that the reader might understand the real costs of war. The act of killing is never romanticized or glorified, but it assumes a tragic dimension.  As previously, discussed this narrative technique was also used in the narration of the Korean War.

Even though, World War II provided schemata (good vs. evil) to frame subsequent conflicts. Kurtzman evoked this past war to problematize the meaning of American patriotism. The new war experiences (Korea) encouraged and stimulated the development of the first counternarratives of the conflict. These new experiences forced Americans to acknowledge both the virtuous and the violent sides of their characters triggering a revision of the nation's history. These new narratives showed the contradicting nature of war. On one hand, they portrayed America's liberal commitment to individual rights and to a just world; on the other hand, they also showed America's resolve to kill both enemy combatants and civilians at will. Comics were not the only medium to display counter-narratives of the Second World War in correspondence to the emergence of the new conflict. Similarly, American novelists (e.g. Vonnegut, Heller) revised the 'good war' narrative while America was engaged in new military missions overseas. These works were so groundbreaking that they did not only revised the past, but also encouraged discussions on the new wars through their indictment of America's violence and

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[95] My statement is based on the stories I managed to retrieve from collected editions of Kirby and Simon works. Unfortunately, I have not been able to recuperate the whole series. *Foxhole* was published by Mainline Publications, a short-lived 1950s comic book publisher established and owned by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon. The premature death of this small publisher can be attributed to the effects of Wertham crusade against the medium.

aggressivity.

Some of the reasons behind the (late) emergence of counternarratives of the so called 'good war' after the end of the conflict have been explained by John Steinbeck, who in his book *Once There Was a War* (2007[1958]), wrote,

> That they were not reported was partly a matter of orders, partly traditional, and largely because there was a huge and gassy thing called the War Effort. Anything which interfered with or ran counter to the War Effort was automatically bad. To a large extent judgment about this was in the hands of the correspondent himself, but if he forgot himself and broke any of the rules, there were the Censors, the Military Command, the Newspapers, and finally, most strong of all in discipline, there were the war-minded civilians, the Noncombatant Commandos of the Stork Club, of Time Magazine and The New Yorker, to jerk a correspondent into line or suggest that he be removed from the area as a danger to the War Effort (Steinbeck, 2000 [1958]).

He keeps on maintaining that often war correspondents were not pushed into these rules of conduct, but they abode to them in the interest of the War Effort. Therefore, one can speculate that comic artists could have possibly taken a similar decision to protect what they considered to be the best interest of the nation. Criticizing the war and showing gruesome images might have been considered 'unpatriotic'.

Kurtman's revision of the 'good war' aimed to expose the insanity of war and its destructive power. This message is clearly capture by the *Two-Fisted Tales* story "Search" where an Italian American soldier ends up killing his own brother who was fighting on the opposite side. The protagonist had left Italy to improve his social status, leaving behind his family who paid for his journey to the New World. He had a brother, but the family could not afford the costs of the departure of two of its members. Years later, a malevolent destiny would make both brothers reencounter on the battlefield. The protagonist throws a grenade to hit the enemy line not knowing that his brother is there. Here, war is clearly represented as a fratricide event. Even though Harvey Kurtzman vividly captured the atrocities committed by the Axis (the killing of Jews, partisans, political opponents, and the 'infamous' attack on Peral Harbor), he also scrutinized America's actions. Of course, this ethical inquiry of one's moral conduct at war does not aim to provide an apology to the enemy's action. Nazi and Imperial Japan ideologies are still indicted as pure evil. However, these comics separates men from ideologies in an attempt to give a complex portrait of war. *Frontline Combat #5* (1952) tale "442nd Team Combat" exalted the contribution of Japanese American to the conflict. This story aimed to prove that the adherence to the values of freedom and democracy is not dictated by ancestry but consent. However, this story omits to provide detail about the presence of

internment camps on the American soil. Kurtzman's innovations to war comics can only be appreciated if one can take in consideration the history of the medium and how it dealt with controversial aspects of the conflict (like the bombing of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Dresden), able to disrupt the image of the U.S. as an agent of good.

World War II American comics portrayed bomb and other weapons as extensions of male masculinity. Fawcett Publications' *Special Edition Comics* #1 (1941) portrayed Captain Marvel riding a giant bomb[96] (figure 14). The sexual association is blatantly obvious, as the shape and positioning of the bomb makes it a phallic symbol. The image of the main hero riding a missile will also be adopted by *Superman* #18 (1942), *National Comics* #30 (1943), and *Captain Marvel Jr.* #19 (1944). These images linked together sexual conquest and military strength. The size of the bomb symbolized its destructive potential and the ability of the nation to strike back. Codes of masculinity are used to portray patriotism. As Christopher Murray (2011:106-107) argued, it is "probable that these sexual boasts were a form of therapy for a nation that felt psychologically castrated by Pearl Harbor and the string of military disaster that followed." Images of virility could have also functioned as instruments to appeal men of service age and motivate them to take actions against the enemy.

Similarly, propaganda posters also used images to link sex, power, and violence together. "Give Us More of These" (1941), "Man the Guns: Join the Navy" (1942), "Keep 'em Fighting" (1942), Keep 'em Coming" (1942), "Get Hot – Keep Moving" (1942), and "Pour it On!" (1942) are clear examples of this entanglement between war and sex, a connection manifested through both text and pictures. Indeed, the words used in these propaganda posters bear ambiguous sexual connotations. Similarly, many of these posters portray muscular soldiers gleaming with sweat lifting and putting in huge shells into cannons. Then, in these posters victory seems associated with potency. This image would be also adapted in *National Comics* #32 cover, in this issue Uncle Sam is portrayed with his bare chest while stirring a shell into a cannon. In this version of the character, created by Eisner, Uncle Sam has not the features of an old man, on contrast, he is portrayed as virile. This rejuvenation can be explained by the desire to represent the

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[96] This image is so iconic that Stanley Kubrick referenced it in his movie *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). The movie ends with this scene showing the metaphorical correlation of (military) strength and sexual potency. These themes would also be reprised (with a different tone) in his 1987 movie *Full Metal Jacket*.

nation as youthful. As Murray (2011:104) discussed, "As far as propaganda and popular culture were concerned, all American men were gruff, powerful built, and heterosexual, fighting for what now might be called 'family values.'" Different depictions of the soldiers were considered as un-American and damaging to the morale and image of the nation.

It is useful to notice that the Japanese (the embodiments of the 'Asian Other') were often depicted as feminine or monstrous figures often trying to stab Allies forces. This attempt might be seen as a way to portray the enemy as 'infamous'. Yet, it might also be seen as a way to hint at non-normative gender orientation (Goodrum, 2016). This sexual imagery is evoked in both fictional and non-fictional representation of the conflict. Similarly, Nazis are often portrayed in the act of torturing (male and female) prisoners in ripped clothes, suggesting rape (and homosexuality). These predatory behaviors are set in contrast to American family model. Moreover, superheroes are often shown in the act of destroying the enemy's weapons, thus suggesting a metaphorical castration of the foe. So, one can notice not only the desire to win the conflict, but also the impulse to humiliate and chasten the enemy. This is particularly evident in relation to the Japanese enemy. As previously discussed, whereas hatred toward Nazis and fascists was primarily directed to political leaders (distinguishing Nazis from Germans and fascists from Italians), the prejudice against Japanese was oriented toward the whole population. The term "Japs" did not allow to distinguish Japanese civilians from their leaders.

America wanted Japan's "unconditional surrender," a fight to the finish that would lead toward the destruction of Japanese culture and society. Indeed, on August 6, 1945 Americans dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, killing 70,000 people, injuring 51, 000 and destroying more than 70,000 buildings; three days after another bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, killing nearly 40,000 and injuring 25,000 (Brogan, 2001:585). On August 14, 1945 the Japanese Government surrendered. This resolution ended the World War II at a stroke, but it also foreshadowed that a great arms race was on the way. The Soviet Union would soon try (and managed to) equip itself with bombs of its own. The rulers of the US and the Soviet Union were determined to not let their country be blackmailed by the opponent and scientists of both sides were encouraged to produce such weapons of horror.

After the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japanese mainland, America started to

exert its influence and the Japanese adopted the ways of their conquerors. As Hugh Brogan (2001) discussed,

> He [General MacArthur] comported himself very much as a new Shogun (the Mikado Hirohito had kept his title but been shorn of his divinity and political power) and at his command the Japanese set about turning themselves into democrats and rebuilding their shattered country. They were startling successful in both respects, to the gratification of the Americans. Reconciliation was hastened by the triumph of the communists in China in 1949, an event equally displeasing to the Japanese and the United States, and by the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. A formal peace treaty was negotiated, and signed in September 1951, at the same time as one committing the Americans to undertake the defense of Japan against any foe, since the Japanese were forbidden to have any armed force themselves (Brogan, 2001:589-590).

Consequently, Japan was forced to change, Americanizing its traditions and culture.

Even though the fight against Japan was supposedly justified by the aggressive, ferocious, and fanatical nature of the enemy, the end of the war against Japan problematizes the heroic and righteous narrative of the Second World War as it entails the incineration of men, women, and children. The use of the atomic bombs raised ethical question that undermines the moral values through which World War II has been modelized as the 'good war'. Is there any principle that separates a just war from an unjust one? Can a State's action be considered moral if it recurs to unjust means to protect itself? Is there a clear-cut line separating necessary and unnecessary use of force and violence? Should the ends be separated from the means used to achieve them?

During World War II, these questions were not asked, contradictions were unnoticed. Americans' faith in the cause legitimated the use of the Atomic bomb. After all, according to Truman, "the Japanese broke the rules of international warfare, the United States could not be held accountable for its own retaliatory actions" (Moeller, 1989:164). Americans believed they had total license. "If the cause was just – and most Americans believed that it was – then, […] the means were just, or at least unjust[97]." (Moeller, 1989:165).

Using euphemism as a rhetorical tool, America created a triumphal narrative of the war in order to avoid addressing any controversial issue. As John W. Dower (1995) observed,

> The triumphal American narrative offers an entirely understandable view of World War II – emphasizing the enormity of German and Japanese behavior, eulogizing American 'valor and sacrificial service' […], and applauding the bombs for forcing Japan's surrender and saving American lives (Dower, 1995:1126).

This narrative presents the real desire of American leaders to end the war as soon as

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[97] Here adjective unjust is not referred to the cause, but the means. The use of the atomic bomb was considered a necessary evil to secure the achievements of a just cause.

possible and to avoid further American causalities. A military invasion would have entailed the death of more soldiers. However, this narrative consciously avoids talking about the alternatives to using the bombs on civilian targets: Japan would have probably capitulated by the end of 1945 (Dower, 1995). So, we can see how the nature of history and memory is narrative, the product of an act of selection. Only some features of an event are preserved, the others are (consciously or unconsciously) forgotten. Peoples involved in the construction of memory projects are granted the right to decide what would be available to others. Of course, this activity of selection always serves present aims as it provides simplified political and moral frames through which interpret an event making it the result of necessity.

Harvey Kurtzman's story "Atom Bomb", collected in the comics anthology *Two-Fisted Tales* (#33, 1953), does not present a heroic narrative, like many other comics, but addresses the atrocities of war, providing a vivid visual description of the destruction of Nagasaki (figure 15). In this regard, it is interesting to notice Kurtzman's choice to place the (implied American) reader in the shoes of Japanese civilians and subtly cast America as the aggressor, the unseen "enemy". Americans are never shown, their presence can only be perceived thanks to the indexical nature of the devastation they left behind (somebody must have caused such annihilation). The first panel depicts the moment of the impact, showing fire and destruction. Subsequently, then the narration follows the memories of a fictional elderly woman, Tagawa.

In order to elicit a sympathetic response toward Japanese sufferings, Kurtzman depicts Japanese people as human beings, representing them in a domestic environment. The family values implied in these images echo with those used by American advertising. Cliché about the patriarchal family are here appropriated in order humanize the former enemy and advocate for pacificism. Even though Japanese people and Americans were fighting on opposite fronts they shared similar fears. Indeed, the reader can witness Tagawa's preoccupation for the future of his son who was soon going to join the Emperor's army, "that was how we all felt inside! We were staying safe in Japan while Toshio was going to war to be killed!" (*Two-Fisted Tales* #33, 1953: 27).

Ironically, Toshio would survive the combat, but more than half of his family would not. Toshio would not die during the conflict but in a camp in Siberia after the war. The causes of his death are not clarified, and the reader is left to wonder whether he died

because of the working condition or (more probably) the pain caused by the news regarding the destiny of his family: his wife and two of his three children are dead. This narrative solution aims to show how World War Two was a total war as the distinction between combatants and civilians faded away. The Allies and the Axis were both committed to destroy the other contender's resources by any means so that they would not be able to continue to wage war.

The panel showing Tagawa's family eating at the table has also the function to recall an idyllic moment that can no longer come back. Several panels are devoted to the destruction of the Japanese city of Nagasaki. The reader observes the material devastation of the building but also the obliteration of Tagawa's daughter-in-law and grandson. Another grandchild disappeared and her faith remains unknown to her family members, even though the text hints that she might have died because of radiations. Only Kuni, Tagawa's youngest grandson, survived.

Despite the images of destruction, the story ends on a positive note, showing Nagasaki reconstruction. The last panel showing Kuni coming back home from school and the caption states,

> On August 9, 1945, the A-bomb killed 29,193 people and destroyed 18,409 homes! But **hope** was not destroyed in Nagasaki! And life nurtured by hope blooms again! Plants, buildings, children grow in Nagasaki, for there is **hope** in Nagasaki! There is **hope** in the whole world! (Kurtzman, Two-Fisted Tales #33, 1953: 31, original emphasis).

However, it is important to notice how this pacifist and hopeful remark about the future does not address how the reconstruction was instrumental for the Americanization of Japan. It also omits to comment on the atrocities committed by the Japanese Army during the war (to which Toshio belonged).

Even though Korea triggered a process of historical revision, these counter-narratives did not completely erase the perception of World War II as the 'good war', a reading of the past reinforced by both the military victory and the Holocaust, which casted the Nazis as the ultimate form of evil.

## CHAPTER 2:  QUESTIONING THE GOOD WAR NARRATIVE

### 1. Where Have All the Good Men Gone?

> Manchester England England
> Across the Atlantic Sea
> And I'm a genius genius
> I believe in God
> And I believe that God
> Believes in Claude
> That's me that's me
>
> — George Berger
> Miloš Forman (1979) *Hair*

Captain America (a character originated from the "good war") fought alongside Allied forces in Europe and Asia during World War II, haunted down Communist infiltrators in the 50s, and recently helped clearing the debris at the ruins of the World Trade Center, but he was scantly engaged in Vietnam. As Shawn Gillen observes (2009:105), "Marvell will not publish Captain America's most notable engagement in Vietnam until fifteen years after the fall of Saigon in *The 'Nam* 41 (February 1990). This campy fantasy superhero intervention in the war, however, was unpopular with both *'Nam* and Captain America fans." So, readers and fans are left to speculate about this absence. Captain America comics never properly tackled the Vietnam War, even though they existed contemporaneously. Indeed, he debuted in Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's 1964 *The Avengers #4*, as Captain America comic had not been printed regularly since 1949. The newly returned *Captain America* series of the 1960s devoted most of its time struggling to deal with Steve Rogers' newly formed identity, and his tales have not had the chance to retrospectively address the Vietnam War.

As discussed in the first chapter, Captain America is the symbol of the nation, gallantly fighting its enemies to preserve American values and principles (assumed to be universal). He was a character born out of the 'good war' who reappeared into a period marked by an entirely different conflict (the 'dirty war'). As Norman Mailer wrote in *The Armies of the Night*

All wars were bad which undertook daily operations which burned and bombed large numbers of women and children; all wars were bad which relocated populations (for the root of a rich peasant lore was then destroyed); all wars were bad which had no line of battle or discernible climax (an advanced notion which supposes that **wars may be in part good because they are sometimes the only way to define critical conditions rather than blur them**); certainly all wars were bad which took some of the bravest young men of a nation and sent them into combat with outrageous superiority and outrageous arguments: such conditions of combat had to excite a secret passion for hunting other humans. Certainly any war was a bad war which required an inability to reason as the

price of retaining one's patriotism; finally any war which offered no prospect of improving itself as a war – so complex and compromised were its roots – was a bad war. **A good war, like anything else which is good, offers the possibility that further effort will produce a determinable effect upon chaos, evil, or waste. By every conservative measure (reserving to Conservatism the right to approve of wars) the war in Vietnam was an extraordinarily bad war.** (Mailer, 2018[1968]:190-191, emphasis mine).

Thus, according to Mailer, the Vietnam War was inherently "bad" because of its entanglement with the chaos it supposedly aimed to suppress. The Vietnam War was irrational and unstructured, a quagmire America was not able to escape. In contrast, World War II was narrated through a straightforward problem-solution paradigm: it presented clear enemies (Hitler, Mussolini, Tojo and Hirohito), a goal (the defeat of Nazis, fascists, and Imperial Japan) and it was followed (according to the official rhetoric) by the restauration of peace. Therefore, in this new contest, the creatives behind Captain America were still figuring out what the character should represent for a new generation of readers. For this reason, during the Vietnam era, Captain America's stories never dealt properly with Vietnam at all. There were just hints at the conflict, but not a real engagement. This choice might be seen as a form of nostalgia toward a more (presumedly) 'morally defined' past in contrast to the current ambiguous present, as the Vietnam War questioned America's values. Media showed the brutality of the conflict with no filter. Unlike World War II, censorship was unsuccessful.

Whereas Steve Roger's stories in the 1960s and 1970s revolved around his adventures in the US, this does not imply that these comics were totally depleted of contemporary political concerns. Storylines like the original *Secret Empire* (Lee & Kirby, 1973-1975) confronted Watergate-type scandals and raised questions about the morality of the US government. Traumatized by the revelation of American government's corruption, Steve Rogers resigned from being a staple of the nation, and assumed the identity of Nomad. It is interesting to notice that even this new identity is rooted in national lore: he now embodied 'dissent' and 'the errand into the wilderness,' that is foundational myths that demanded respect for private conscience.

Similarly, in 1969, the Falcon was introduced in *Captain America #117*, showing mainstream publishers' willingness to reconfigure their comic books to make black heroism possible (the Falcon and Captain America shared the title[98]). Whereas in the 1940s, the Spirit's assistant, Ebony White, and Captain Marvel's sidekick, Steamboat,

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[98] This story was written by Stan Lee and illustrated by Gene Colan.

functioned as mere comic relief characters, the Falcon performed as a role model. As Michael Goodrum (2016) highlighted, during the 1960s, Marvel argued for a liberal agenda on points of inclusion, however it never encouraged a complete change of the system. This new sensitivity was clearly dictated by the Civil Rights Movement and the emerging counterculture. Black Panther was first introduced in 1966's *Fantastic Four* #52[99], where he sporadically appeared before officially joining the Avengers, in *The Avengers* #52 (1968)[100]. It was not until 1972's *Luke Cage* that a black hero was given an ongoing series as the title protagonist[101]. It should be mentioned that, outside of the superhero genre hitherto covered, Dell western series *Lobo* (1965-1966) was the first series with a Black title character. Attempts to include non-stereotyped black characters precede the late 1960s, however they were all short lived. As Blair Davis (2019) discussed, black superheroes did not begin with Stan Lee in the pages of the *Fantastic Four* #52, as the Lion Man character, appeared on *All-Negro Comics #1* (1947), is clearly a precursor of the more famous Black Panther (Cat-themed superheroes were common in the 1940s). This comic is particularly important because it was created by a black author (Orrin C. Evans) for a black audience. As the author explicitly stated in the forward, "All-Negro Comics will not only give Negro artists an opportunity gainfully to use their talents, but it will glorify Negro historical achievement." However, despite these positive intentions, this character and the comic that contained it did not survive its first issue, testifying that time was not ripe for a black hero to enter mainstream pop culture. It would be only in the late 1960s that black superheroes could rightfully claim a space in the mainstream (the Falcon, Black Panther, and Luke Cage keep on being published even today).

Even though Captain America was not engaged in Vietnam, not every hero stayed away from that conflict. Indeed, Iron Man's origin story goes back to the earliest days of the Vietnam War, as he debuted in the pages of Marvel's *Tales of Suspense #39* in March 1963[102]. In this origin story, the millionaire industrialist Tony Stark gets himself injured by a booby-trap in the jungles of Vietnam, while showing his high tech "transistor-powered" weapons to the U.S. army. He is subsequently taken by Wong-Chu, the

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[99] This issue was written by Stan Lee and illustrated by Jack Kirby.
[100] This issue was written by Roy Thomas and illustrated by John Buscema.
[101] This issue was written by Archie Goodwin and illustrated by George Tuska.
[102] It was written by Larry Lieber and Stan Lee and penciled by Gene Colan, Don Heck, and Steve Ditko.

Vietnamese "red guerrilla tyrant", who constrains Stark to develop weapons for the Communist cause. Instead, Stark creates an armor suit, which functions as both a weapon and a life support machine (because the trap left a shrapnel near his heart), that he uses to defeat the Vietnamese enemies and free the other prisoners. The message of this story is straightforward: there is no obstacle that can hinder or prevent the military success of the talented, benevolent, and technologically superior American. Iron Man is literally the embodiment of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's phrase 'arsenal of democracy,' representing American faith in technology. As Loren Baritz argued in his book *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did,*

> The memory of World War II concluding in a mushroom cloud was relatively fresh throughout the 1950s. It was unthinkable that America's military could ever fail to establish its supremacy on the battlefield, that the industrial, scientific, and technological strength of the nation would ever be insufficient for the purpose of war. **It was almost as if Americans were technology** (Baritz, 1998[1985]:45, emphasis mine).

Then, unlike Captain America who represents American idealism, Iron Man represents U.S. capitalism and militaristic intervention.

The body of the protagonist reveals the comic's position on different themes: the military, individualism, and economics. Tony Stark is a rich and successful (white) playboy and symbolizes the meritocracy of capitalism. He achieves great things thanks to his intellect. Following the conventions of the genre, (war) technology represents an extension of the (male) body often assuming phallic connotations. Machines were believed to be able to win the war. Thus, the display of technology pervaded all accounts of the Vietnam War. As Susan Jeffords (1989) discussed,

> What is significant here is not only the intense fascination with technology that pervades Vietnam representation, but also the way that technology is described. [...] Divorced from the consequences of their use by the metaphoric rhetoric of 'insects' and 'golden flashes' these weapons ceased to be seen as instruments of war and became instead objects for display. [...] Technology as display produces not simply continuity but apparent stability out of the transience of death and its enactments, suggesting that the spectacle of warfare and its displaced spectacle of death are 'pure' moments in themselves that do not need to be contextualized or interpreted, simply witnessed, in order to be controlled (Jeffords, 1989: 9-10)

So, the focus on technology is a way to diverge the viewer's attention from the human costs and material consequences of war while securing the images of explosions and destruction as spectacles. Similarly, Tony Stark's body (now mediated by technology) becomes its own source of spectacle. Iron Man epitomized the overdetermined power of American weaponry, capable of destroying enemy villages.

Nevertheless, in the comic, technology is a source of both strength and weakness. Tony Stark found his injured heart needed the power of the additional transistors in his armor in order to keep beating. This means he has become prisoner of his Iron Man identity. Tony Stark develops a symbiotic relationship with his invention[103]. The technology is designed for his survival, and in turn, he is designed for the perpetuation of the war technological spectacle. Remarkably, this depiction echoes with Susan Jeffords' observations about the Vietnam War representation,

> Technology does not 'stand in for' the (male) body but *is* that body, because the body has ceased to have a meaning as a whole and has instead become a fragmented collection of disconnected parts that achieve the illusion of coherence only through their display as spectacle, a point at which the narrative of war stops and signification proclaims itself as self-sufficient and powerful (Jeffords, 1989: 14)

However, the comic also shows the limits of the (American) (war) machine. Iron Man's technology is not always infallible, as he occasionally (but not permanently) gets defeated. This fallibility might be influenced by the situation in Vietnam, as the American technological superiority did not provide the U.S. Army with a significant and decisive advantage. The jungle, the lack of knowledge of Vietnam geography and culture, the guerrilla fights undermined America's offensive power.

*The Invincible Iron Man #47* (Thomas & Windsor-Smith, 1972) revisited the title hero origin story, which was "updated for new circumstances, providing a means of escaping from an unsavoury past or just bringing it in line with contemporary development" (Goodrum, 2016:191). Indeed, in this issue Tony Stark comments and questions his past actions and believes, "For the first time ever, you knew the meaning of **true power! Perhaps -- too much power**?" (*The Invincible Iron Man #47,* 1972:14, original emphasis). However, this questioning also testifies the existence of a tormented conscience that interrogates itself about the meaning of 'good,' "and I find myself pondering **every** action I ever **made**. But maybe that's all to the **good**. When a man stops pondering his actions – ceases to weigh and judge his every motive – maybe that's when he's really in trouble." (*The Invincible Iron Man #47,* 1972:19, original emphasis). Iron Man is not trying to forget his past, but he's trying to confront it in order to make sense of it. He is aware of the contradictions of war, and that, to save lives, a hero might be forced to kill. Iron Man's questioning of his own actions does not lead him to lose faith

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[103] This interrelation seems to foreshadow the posthuman turn of Iron Man stories in recent years.

in the system, as his fight against Firebrand, a radical anticapitalistic villain (and former protester), testifies. After all Iron Man represents the conservative values of the upper-class. So, the responsibility for violent act is never explicitly attributed to the machines or the system, but individuals, "it was you Gilbert, who spurred Kevin into the fight, though his mind wasn't able enough to handle it" (Friedrich & Tuska, *The Invincible Iron Man* #48:5).

Tony Stark returned to Vietnam in 1974 (Friedrich & Tuska *The Invincible Iron Man* # 68) when the US had already withdrawn the conflict, to save a friend of his, Marty, a M.I.A. (Missing in Action). In this issue Iron Man recalls once again his origin story. He compares the current situation to the one he saw in the 1960s, "The village I fought to 'save', winds up in my former 'enemies' control – and destroyed by my previous 'allies'! I used to feel proud of my support of the war – but things like this – first hand – really fog up one's thinking." In this issue he also withdraws his consent from the conflict, "I'm sure of this – it's no longer Tony Stark's war! And Iron Man's out to save a life from this Jungle." This sequence has two aims, on one hand, it shows a loss of belief in the American war aims, but, on the other hand, it embraces the conservative depiction of the G.I. as a victim. The rescue mission provides Iron Man a symbolical redemption from the material disaster of war. It is also interesting to notice that in this issue the Vietnam jungle is represented as impenetrable, whereas the environment depicted in 1963 was clear and posed no threat to the superhero.

One year later, issue *#78* shows Stark remembering an intervention in the Vietnam War by Iron Man that has never been revealed before[104]. In this tale, present day Stark looks back on his former endorsement of the war with reservations,

> **Stark industries**, one of the world's foremost **munition** manufacturers, has given way to **Stark International** – whose business is **peace**, pure and simple, and a **betterment** of men through technology! And what about **you**, Tony Stark? Once you were **do or die** for America and **mom's apple pie**! You didn't do much **soul-searching** back then, did you? As **Iron Man** you beat the **commies** for democracy without ever **questioning** just whose democracy were you **serving** – or just **what** those you served intended to **do** with the world once you'd **saved it** for them! **Viet Nam** raised **all** those questions, didn't it, Tony? (The Invincible *Iron Man #78,* 1975:2, original emphasis).

Iron Man experience in Vietnam is depicted as a traumatic journey: from the initial proud entry into the war to the grief over the death of a companion. Stark suffered from shock and disorientation when he witnessed the killing of innocent civilians. He even feels

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[104] It was written by Bill Mantlo and illustrated by George Tuska.

remorse for being a weapon producer. Stark no longer fights against external threat, but an internalized one. Stark's monologue at the mirror symbolizes a fractured identity, that paralleled the division occurring within society. Like the nation, Iron Man was still trying to find answers to the 'big' question "Why?", which he engraves as an epitaph on a stone. This transformation mirrors the journey of the soldier in many (anti)war narratives, as the double trauma experienced by servicemen/veteran is a leitmotif of antiwar rhetoric. Soldiers must adapt to a new world that subverts the basic civil rules of democratic societies (killing is no longer a crime); however, when he has to return to the (civil) world, he has to recuperate and relearn the old rules. However, this reawakening of old moral imperatives triggers a process of revision of one's action. A close look at the mirror makes the soldiers reconsider their action and deal with the horror of war and the sense of guilt for what they did while on the frontline. Even though Tony is tormented by his sense of guilt, his morality is never questioned. He might have been misguided, but his intentions were good. In the 1970s, the poor Tony Stark did not even seem to be in full control of the Stark Industries, which were often under siege by malevolent forces (frequently other tycoons). Hence, he was portrayed as a victim of the same capitalist forces he belonged to. The character's lack of control is also symbolized by his alcoholism. So, Tony Stark is a complex figure: a genius, a lady's man, a millionaire, but also a man who is not fully in charge of his actions.

Despite Iron Man's origins dates back to the Vietnam War, the character that better exemplified the trauma produced by that conflict is Frank Castle (a.k.a. the Punisher), a Vietnam veteran, who becomes a serial killer of criminals after the Mafia-related deaths of his family. This character made his first appearance in *The Amazing Spider-Man #129* on February 1974, a year after the last U.S. combat troops left South Vietnam[105]. This character is particularly fascinating because of his antihero persona, that makes him exist outside a clear-cut division between good and bad, calling into question's American morality.

When first introduced, Frank Castle attempts to kill Spider-Man as the villain Jackal convinced him that the superhero was a criminal. The Punisher is unable to distinguish friends from foes and he is easily manipulated by the villain. This storyline is repeated in

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[105] This issue was written by Gerry Conway and illustrated by Ross Andru.

*The Amazing Spider-Man #134* as Tarantula convinces Frank that Spider-Man is a criminal[106]. In both cases, Peter Parker manages to make the Punisher reason and realize that he has been deceived by the real villain. Frank Castle brings (his) war home. He lives by the values and principles that shaped his experience "In-Country." In his view America is at war with itself and his mission to protect the country and its citizen has not ended. In *Marvel Preview* #2 (Conway & DeZuniga, 1975), he states, "I've heard people call me crazy, and maybe they are right. I can't judge something like that. I only know there's a war going on in this country -- between citizen and criminal -- and the citizens are losing -- just as my family lost -- just as I lost so long ago".

This issue establishes the core of Castle's origin story. He was a highly decorated Marine visiting his family on leave, only to watch them all being gunned down by the mobs after they inadvertently stumbled upon a mafia execution. Driven mad by the accident, he began a one-man war on the mafia, embracing the name given him by the newspapers, the Punisher. Castle does not trust juridical institutions and decides to right wrongs on his own, like a lone ranger. The Punisher is deeply entrenched with the Vietnam War as he bears the signs of PTSD and shares that conflict's moral ambiguity. His refusal to abide to the U.S. law is dictated by his sense of betrayal. America was not able to protect both its soldiers from the enemy and its citizens from the criminals threatening its cities. Therefore, the fight against the crime is certainly a personal vendetta, but also a way to redeem a lost war. This personal war against the mobs allows him to win this time. This fantasy of restorative justice and of a long-delayed victory can also be observed in many movies, such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and the sequels to *Rambo: First Blood*. Indeed, in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), when the protagonist is recruited to lead a covert mission in Vietnam, he has only one question for Colonel Trautman, "Do we get to win this time?"

The (male) bonds forged during his service in Vietnam helps the Punisher in his missions against the mobs. For example, Reiss 'the Mechanic' was Frank's ordinance man in Vietnam. He had a special genius for devising weapons and explosives. These skills developed during the war would make Reiss an important asset to the Punisher's arsenal. Brought together by the war, the soldiers became a cohesive and supporting unit.

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[106] This issue was written by Gerry Conway and illustrated by Ross Andru.

Their bond resisted the end of the war and overrode any other affiliation or institutional law. Thus, in *The Punisher* male bonding[107] becomes a substitute for the family ties (disrupted by the mobs). The endurance of their bond also highlights the permeance of war in their psyches. As the Mechanic confesses war gave them a purpose and sense of belonging, "Guys like us, Captain, we were trained for one thing only... killin'. What good are we to anybody without a war?" (Goodwin & DeZuniga, *Marvel Super Action* #1, 1976). However, for the Punisher the war has not come to an end, as the Vietcong has been substituted by street level villains. Indeed, Frank Castle, thinking about Reiss' question, admits, "At the time, I didn't have a good answer for the Mechanic. I suppose I don't really have one for him even now... but I do have a war". In *The Punisher* stories, the bringing of the war home is also highlighted by the presence of a war journal where Frank Castle reports all his missions. Following a common trope in Vietnam war narratives, the stories involving the Punisher do not ask the reader/viewer to evaluate the protagonist action according to the goodness of his goals, but his performance at war, the unfamous "body counts". The Punisher clearly uses these criteria to justify and evaluate his doing in his fight against crime lords. The body count is applied to the criminals, as Frank tracks them down and kills one mob after another.

The Vietnam background of the character resurfaces also in *The Amazing Spider-Man #175* (Wein & Andru, 1977), when Frank Castle realizes that the Hitman (the antagonist of this story) is Lt. Burt Kenyon, a former comrade who saved his life during the war. The Punisher tells Spider-Man that Lt. Kenyon was discharged from service for becoming mentally unfitted. Thus, building on a well-established cinematographic trope, the comic shows how the Vietnam War produced mentally wounded veterans. However, this portrayal of PTSD is very superficial. As Patrick Hagopian discussed,

> Such representations, a simplistic and negative version of the emerging psychiatric knowledge about Vietnam veterans' psychological difficulties, suggested that veterans were 'walking time bombs,' 'depraved fiends,' and 'psychopathic killers' plotting evil or ready to respond to provocation with explosions of violence. Lazy script writers who needed to establish the motivation of some deranged criminal found a ready-made 'bad guy' in the stereotype of the drug-abusing, psychopathic Vietnam

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[107] The comic reiterates the same conflict between private and public (Rosso, 2003) and the trope of the remasculinization of America (Jeffords, 1989) that characterize many Vietnam narratives. The male bond forged by the Army allows the Punisher to reconstruct a new identity, which does not include the private sphere and feminine (represented by his wife and children). The killing of his family liberates Frank's destructive potential, reinforcing the traditional gendered narrative of war. Therefore, the Punisher's mission to eradicate evil by killing is a way to reestablish his own masculinity. Men go to war to protect their community.

veteran, prone to flashbacks in which he would return to combat mode […] In the late 1970s, feature films were replete with images of psychologically disturbed veterans unable to readjust to civilian society (Hagopian, 2009:66-67).

This story avoids engaging thoroughly with sensitive and thorny topics, such as the difficulties to return to 'normal lives' after the war, the veterans' right to access medical care and treatments, and the difficulties that veterans' wives, partners and families faced[108]. This superficial treatment of the veterans and their suffering allows the comic to not address the political and moral implicatures of the American War in Vietnam. The focus on individuals shields the nation from being accountable for what happened to its soldiers before and after the conflict. However, it is important to remark that the mid-1970's image of Vietnam veterans as 'psychos' gradually gave space to the more complex and sympathetic portrayals in the 1980's (a process of revision that climaxes with the Reagan era). This shift reflects the changes in American society which became more and more sensitive to the trauma suffered by the veterans and perceived them with more sympathy. Veterans were seen in a more heroic way, as they started being portrayed as traumatized victims of unhinged militarism. Thus, following the changes occurring in the public opinion, Frank Castle transitions from being a mentally unstable antagonist of Spider-Man to being an anti-hero with his own personal moral code[109]. Frank's brutality is channeled exclusively towards evil characters. He never harms Spider-Man, Captain America or Daredevil when they try to stop him from killing. Even though the act of killing is one of the defining lines that separate heroes from anti-heroes, Spider-Man, Captain America and Daredevil are all shown to feel "negative empathy[110]" (Ercolino, 2018) towards Frank Castle. For example, in *Captain America* #241 (Barr & Spinger, 1980), the title hero states, "We're… very much alike, the Punisher and I… each of us are fighting a very personal war. but he's got to be stopped. If we should meet again…" Through these lines Captain America (the embodiment of the nation) reduces the presumed human and moral distance between himself and the Punisher. At first glance,

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[108] As we will discuss in the third chapter, these issues will be addressed by Garry Trudeau in his series *Doonesbury* in 2004.

[109] As similar character evolution can be seen in the *Rambo* franchise. When first introduced the character (portrayed by Sylvester Stallone) is a confused misfit, but he progressively evolves into a determined leader that abides only to his own personal moral code.

[110] According to Stefano Ercolino (2018:252, original emphasis), "*negative empathy, a form of high-level empathy, can be defined as a potentially regressive aesthetic experience, consisting in a cathartic identification with negative characters, which can be either open to agency—indifferently leading either to pro- or antisocial behavior—or limited to the inner life of the empathizing subject.*"

Captain America and the Punisher are two antithetical characters, but their experiences resonate with each other, giving a complex spectrum of the American war experiences. Similarly, the character development of Frank Castle through seriality, the plot trajectories that explores his multiple psychological traumas contributes to the potential reader's identification and development of negative empathy, which allows him or her to feel a connection with the evil character, while maintaining a distance between empathizing subject and empathized object. By triggering the reader's empathy and focusing the narrative on the suffering of a particular individual, the comic avoids addressing U.S. government responsibilities.

The unwillingness to dig into the morality of U.S. conduct at war is clearly visible in *Giant-Size Spider-Man #4* (Conway & Andru, 1975). In this comic, the Punisher is after some kidnappers who abducted innocent people to use them as test subjects for an experimental and lethal gas. With the help of Spider-Man, Frank Castle infiltrate the camp where the test subjects were held and liberates them. In this issue, the Punisher condemns the use of biochemical weapons stating, "It's part of an experiment. Spider-Man. **Our** government doesn't believe in testing biological weapons on **human beings**… but **other governments** have somewhat less moral… point of view" (*Giant-Size Spider-Man #4,* 1975:10, original emphasis) However, this statement is neglectful of the Americans' use of napalm and Agent Orange. The latter is responsible for a wide range of adverse effects in human beings, equally damaging Vietnamese people and American G.I.s who got exposed. Many U.S. servicemen who suffered prolonged exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam later developed cancers and other health disorders. In 1979 U.S. veterans brought a class-action lawsuit against herbicide makers that produced Agent Orange for the U.S. military.

Finally, it is important to remark that DC superheroes stayed out of the Vietnam War. This editorial decision might have been influenced by the fact that DC's most famous titles (Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman) had been heavily scrutinized by Dr. Wertham a decade before. Fearing the consequence of censorship, editors probably decided to make their superheroes[111] stay under the radar. In the Vietnam War era, TV revamped a camp version of *Batman* (1966-1968) starring Adam West, which provided American audience a form of escapism. DC's superhero(es) absence did not go unnoticed,

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[111] In contrast, during World War II, they had been engaged in the war propaganda effort.

as *MAD magazine* #105 (1966) commented on it. As Will Brooker discuss,

> The parody in Mad Magazine, which might have been expected to take up and expand upon any critical readings in circulation, makes no comment about Batman's escapism or lack of topicality: almost the contrary, in fact. In one panel we see Batman spluttering at Robin, who wants to goof off and chase girls, that even if they dealt successfully with crime in Gotham there would still be the international conflict to occupy them. 'What's wrong with you kids today? Your date will have to wait until evil and injustice have been erased from Gotham City! And after that, we've got problems in Asia!' The implication seems to be that Batman would go to Nam of his own free will, if only the problems on his doorstep could be cleared up; rather than condemning or even gently mocking the show's old-fashioned values, this parody seems to accept Batman as an entirely contemporary superhero with a political conscience (Brooker, 2013[2001]:231).

Interestingly, in the TV series, the only reference to the Vietnam War is an invitation to buy war bonds[112]. However, it is worth reminding that this camp fantasy is not just a form of escapism, as it subverts the conventions of the genre. It shows a different type of hero that does not correspond to the hypermasculine idealized (super)soldier usually featured in comics. Similarly, war narratives often rely on the macho type to foster the myth of war as a rite of passage into manhood.

Whereas, DC's superheroes stayed out of Vietnam, DC published in 1966 one of the first Vietnam War title, "Captain Hunter" that appeared in the pages of *Our Fighting Forces* #99 (1966)[113]. Phil Hunter was a former Green Beret searching for his POW twin brother. This comic recycled World War II orientalist cliché: the Viet Cong were either portrayed as slant-eyed sadists or yellow-skinned clowns, thus echoing their buck-toothed Japanese counterparts from the 1940s, a parallelism reinforced by the fact that *Our Fighting Forces* also featured stories set during previous conflicts (World War II and Korea). Similarly, Lu Lin, Captain Hunter's mysterious female guide and potential love interest, is portrayed through orientalist tropes as the protagonist describes her as a "Oriental kewpie doll" throughout the series. Her presence has a symbolic function, that is reminding the readers of the American mission to win the "hearts and minds of the population. Lu Lin protects Phil Hunter and fights against her own brother who joined the Vietcong, reenacting the conflict between descent and consent, which is at the base of America's ethnic formation[114]. The adventures of Phil Hunter lasted from issue #99

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[112] This type of advertisement is reminiscent of World War II comics which invited young kids to participate in the war effort by buying war bonds.

[113] This story was written by Robert Kanigher and penciled by Irv Novick.

[114] As we already started to point out, the contrast between descent and consent is a recurring theme in war comics, and American culture at large. The reiteration of this paradigm in multiple narratives from different historical periods testify the sedimentation of this trope into public consciousness, providing a frame through which American are compelled to interpret reality.

(April, 1966) until issue #106 (January/February, 1967). The comic ended with Phil's reunion with his brother Nick.

## 2. Narrating Vietnam in Comics Form: "The Dirty War"

In the beginning, the understanding of the Vietnam War was deeply influence by the experience of World War II. In this regard, *Tod Holton: Super Green Beret* (1967) presented simplistic stories, unquestioning patriotism, and racist depictions of the Vietnamese. However, by the time America entered the Vietnam War, civilians started to gradually have reservations about US engagement in overseas conflicts, and comics would reflect this. The Vietnam War was the first war to be fully televised, and the impact of the small screen on American conscience was huge. Public euphemism was no longer protected by a unitarian narration created by the government. Media showed divergent accounts about what was going on. The proliferation of narratives was made possible by the fact that the American government never had a control over the infrastructure of mass communication. The fact that American television system is private and competitive allowed the public to see directly what was going on and react. This new sentiment might explain why *Tod Holton: Super Green Beret* (1967) lasted only two issues. While speculating on the reasons why this series only ran for two issues, it should also be taken into consideration the fact that Lighting Comics (Milson) was an incredibly short-lived publisher (existing for just few months in 1967), who produced only two (notoriously bad) comics: *Tod Holton: Super Green Beret* and *Fatman: The Human Flying Saucer* (that lasted just three issues).

*Tod Holton: Super Green Beret* (1967) tried to use a combination of the Captain America and Captain Marvel[115] formulae. In this series, the protagonist (a kid named Tod Holton) was given a magical green beret[116] by his uncle Roger Wilson, who saved a

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[115] Like in Captain Marvel, a magician bestows superpowers to a 'pure in heart' teenager. Holton's clothes (red shirt and blue trousers) remind those of the teenager Billy Batson (Captain Marvel's real persona). This similarity might be due to fact that the writer of *Tod Holton: Super Green Beret* was Otto Binder, who collaborated in the creation of Fawcett's Marvel family.

[116] This headgear had already been turned into an almost magical object by John Fitzgerald Kennedy who in a 1962 speech described it as "a symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction in the fight for freedom" (Taylor, 2003:37). Kennedy envisioned the Green Berets as a special force able to integrate military and political tactics, inaugurating a new approach to warfare. The main aim of this force was training the soldiers for guerilla situations. The hat was considered a symbol of the 'elite' nature of the Green Berets, however the elite status was merely formal, as the roads to promotion remained linked to conventional battle forces (Baritz, 1998[1985]). Even though the military establishment did not oppose

Vietnamese monk from a wild boar. Out of gratitude, the monk (a mystic monitoring evil across the Third World) turned Wilson's green beret into a magical object that glowed. However, its true powers would only be transferred to a young and noble boy. When Roger returned to America, he decided to give the beret to his nephew. When Tod wears the beret, he turns into a grown-up man with magical abilities. A captain by rank, the hero's physical powers are only slightly greater than those of a well-developed human being. Although he can battle a lion and lift gigantic rocks, he can be hurt by poison, fire, bullets, and other obstacles. His greatest asset is his ability to teleport by saluting.

Technically speaking, this might have been 'a good comic' during World War II, but it was a serious miscalculation from the editors to create such story during the conflict in Vietnam. Indeed, as hitherto discussed, most superheroes stayed away from that conflict. For the age group that bought comics, enlistment was a concrete and real possibility. In the late 1960s the Vietnam War was truly out of favor, and it generated conflicting narratives. Antiwar protesters and concerned American citizens started to question whether the United States had any right to fight in Vietnam. Images from the conflict raised doubts about the worthiness of the dictatorial South Vietnamese government, e.g. how could American government support a regime that oppressed non-violent protests led by monks? The photo of the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk circulated around the world challenging the government's representation of its allies and strengthening the anti-war position. Moreover, unlike Germany and Japan in World War II, Vietnam was not seen as posing a real and direct threat to the US (or its allies).

The premediation of Second World War narrative is also made metanarratively explicit by the comic itself. While doing his history homework, Tod ponders, "Gosh, all these events of World War II took place before I was born! World War II is past and done with, but our G.I.s are still fighting today…somewhere else!" (*Tod Holton: Super Green Beret* #1:25) Therefore, this series tries to establish a connection and a continuity between these two conflicts. However, the creators of *Tod Holton: Super Green Beret* (1967) did not understand that heroic stories of that type no longer worked, as the social context was completely different from the one in which patriotic (and nationalistic) superheroes originated (the 1940s). Another reason why this superpowered hero did not work might be due to the fact that his abilities could have ended much of the war in a short time,

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Kennedy's request, the Pentagon was not enthusiast about this new special force.

unlike the militaries in real life. Superheroes into a real-life war also risk insulting the soldiers. Moreover, there might have been a clash between this narrative and the images shown on television. As said, the Vietnam War was the first conflict to be fully televised. Those images were particularly shocking for the American spectators because they showed explicit violence in a quantity and with an immediacy lacking in the coverage of World War II and the Korean War. The (tele)visual elements were so pervasive that this conflict was defined the "living-room war" (Hallin, 1986).

In contrast, Archie Goodwin's *Blazing Combat* (1965-1966) intercepted these changes occurring in American society and incorporated them in its narration of the war. This comic book did not emphasize blood and gore; instead, the stories had a humane approach and supported narratives against the war in Vietnam. Building on the tradition of Harvey Kurtzman's war comics, *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat*, Goodwin's stories offered emotional insights into the thoughts of individual soldiers and civilians to emphasize the insanity and horror of war. For example, "Holding Action" (Goodwin, 1965), set on the last day of the Korean War, narrates the story of a scared young soldier named Stewart, who is turned by the gore of battle into a gung-ho. Reluctant to abandon his trench even after the war had officially ended, he is escorted over his protests into a medical vehicle. However, it is unclear whether the trauma is temporary or permanent. This story is particularly powerful as it shows in a gritty and realistic way the destabilizing effects of war on soldiers' psyche.

While most stories were set during World War II, other historical conflicts were represented. Interestingly, the most innovative tales commented on the contemporary Vietnam War. The story 'Viet-Cong' represented South Vietnamese in a non-patronizing way: Americans are portrayed as allies and not white saviors. They are shown as resolute and committed to the victory by any necessary means, "the mornings work: two prisoners. The South Vietnamese interrogate them the only way they know… **by torture!**" (Goodwin, 1965:6, original emphasis). The attitude of the American G.I. toward such use of violence is both condemning and understanding, "I can't order captain Thanh not to do this. I can only advise! Most of Thanh's men had relatives killed by the Viet Cong… I suppose you can't blame them…" (Goodwin, 1965:6, original emphasis). The South Vietnamese reminds the American soldiers that they must adapt to the new context as this is not a conventional war, but a guerrilla. Interestingly, *Blazing Combat* also shows the

count of the bodies of killed enemy soldiers as a common practice to determine the victory or loss after a guerrilla assault. Through this depiction, the comic shows how war cannot be inscribed in a good versus bad narrative as it encompasses a lot of gray areas and moral ambiguities.

*Blazing Combat'*s tale 'Conflict' shows episodes of racism in the Army as Remick, a white soldier, refuses to be saved by a fellow black comrade, "Don't touch me… keep those… black hands… off…" (Goodwin, 1966:5). The private goes as far as insulting the black doctor who saved his life, "get me… to doctor… ignorant nigger... nearly killed me". However, when a fellow soldier enquires the black doctor about his feeling towards this lack of recognition and ingratitude, the medical practitioner shows a superior attitude and states that he abided to his moral code, "Man, I don't go after a man cause he's black, white or **purple**… I go out cause he's **wounded**" (Goodwin, 1966:11, original emphasis). This political stance is particularly interesting if one considers that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin) was enacted only two year before this issue got published. Race relations in the army had also been discussed by activists like Martin Luther King Jr. Indeed, in his speech *Beyond Vietnam* (1967: web) he questioned the government hypocrisy, "we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools".

Probably, the most controversial tales was 'Landscape.' This story, written by Archie Goodwin and drawn by Joe Orlando, narrated the Vietnam War from a Vietnamese peasant's point of view, "A flight of Jet-bombers sweep northward to bomb strategic bridges and supply depots… crews intent upon their mission...they do not notice the rice field below or the old man working on it… to them they are both part of the… landscape!" (Goodwin, 1965:5). These lines echo with of Loren Baritz's observation about war technologies,

> It [technology] also permitted us not to get our hands too dirty. The B-52 crew never saw the result of pushing the button. The artillery's squad job was to get the numbers of the coordinates right and push the button. Only the grunts, the walking warriors, had to look death in the face. And they, despite the American faith in our mighty machinery, determined the outcome. Everyone knew this except the air force, the navy, and the men who plan our wars. In summary, our national myth showed us that we were good, our technology made us strong, and our bureaucracy gave us standard operating procedures (Baritz, 1998[1985]: 54).

Thus, adopting the (bottom-up) viewpoint of a peasant, the comics subverts the official (optic) rhetoric built around the (top-down) perspective of the war machine, embodied by the helicopter. The comic shows how the spectacle of war determined the (ethic) codes of conduct. Indeed, as the writer (and former platoon commander) Philip Caputo (2017[1977]: 229) highlighted, "Ethics seemed to be a matter of distance and technology. You could never go wrong if you killed people at long range with sophisticated weapons." This story also shows how many different nations (France, Japan, America, Hanoi, and Saigon) had claimed to free the land and its people, but in reality, their effort to control the territory ended up bringing destruction. The massage of this tale is clear, war does not free people, it starves and kills them.  Of course, Goodwin's approach to war had consequences. As Conroy (2009:148) observes "wholesale and retail resistance to *Blazing Combat* resulted in poor sales and the magazine folded just four issues." During this time, comics were still influenced by the Comic Code Authority, a *de facto* censor for the US comic book industry.

Another anti-war comic that was published two years after the end of the First Indochina War was a peculiar one titled *Never Again* (1956-1957), which ran just two issues. This comic portrayed soldiers as pawn and showed the futility of conflict. The comic book opens with the image of the Unknown Soldier in his World War I attire. This retrospective image aims to sardonically show how 'the war to end all wars' never achieved its aim and many wars followed, "the next war may be the end of mankind! Are they right this time? Can we learn something from the past? Let us see what other generations have done" (1956:3). Hence, the comic book concludes that the cry 'Never Again' that is repeated after each conflict always remains tragically unheard.

Even though anti-war stances acquired a new prominence during this period, these positions were not shared by all Americans. There was also a sector of the public that was in favor of escalating the conflict, unleashing an unrestricted military intervention, and invading North Vietnam. They had no doubts about the moral cause of the conflict: defending democracy from oppressive Communist ideology. They justified the use of violence as a necessary means to achieve a quick victory. As Hagopian (2009: 28) discussed, "In a 1970 poll, while almost a third of the public favored an immediate withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam, almost a quarter favored a strong stand." This conservatism is well captured in Charlton's *Fightin' Marines* # 77 (1967) story "The

War Criminals[117]". This tale rejects the portrayal of American troops as war criminals. This position is initially shared by the main character, Talbot Cleeves, a writer who embodies the counter-culture values through his opposition to war. He condemns soldiers for killing an unarmed Vietnamese. Yet, the comic visually reveal that the Vietcong was in reality hiding a grenade, implying that false perceptions are responsible for the rumors about war atrocities. At the end of the story, after witnessing Vietcong atrocities, Talbot starts empathizing with the G.I.s.

This conservative and pro-war position was also shared by Dell's *Jungle War Stories* (1962-1964), which portrayed American soldiers as 'defenders,' "Our job in Viet Nam is to supply, and instruct in ways of halting the red guerilla's terror. In camps like this American and Vietnamese share the same food problems and dangers" (*Jungle War Stories* #2, :1). Soldiers tries to 'win the hearts and minds' of the local population by helping them. After his initial mistrust, the head of a Vietnamese village states "we were fools. You showed us that as you fed our hungry, buried our dead and saved our children from their horrors, Yankee" (*Jungle War Stories* #2:17). It is interesting to notice that, even though the nationalist superheroes no longer worked narratively, 'realistic' war comics still did the trick.

Dell's *Jungle War Stories* presented the same tropes present in World War II and Korean War comics. The Asian enemy is depicted as not manly, "The typical Viet Cong guerrilla is a scrawny, unkept 100-pounder who barely comes up to the average GI shoulder," and his character as mischievous, "he is cruel, cunning and tough […] he is deadly, elusive as a smoke wisp. He has been aptly called dangerous as a 'scorpion in a haystack'" (*Jungle War Stories* #2:35). The enemy is portrayed as particularly tough and cruel, and posing for the first time a real threat to the American soldiers, "Reminiscent of the brutal war in North Korea is the 'human wave' technique practiced by the Viet Cong. Accompanied by the wild blow of bugles, the North Vietnamese Communists attack in overwhelming numbers" (*Jungle War Stories#4:1*)

These comics recur also to colonial imagery, as the American G.I.s bring technologies to far less advanced populations. This is particularly evident in the story 'Mission: Strangle' where the American G.I.s encounter the Montagnard, which are portrayed as

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[117] This story was written by Joe Gill and penciled by Bill Montes.

benevolent savages. Interestingly, South Vietnamese are the protagonists of the tale 'The Year of the Cat'. In this story, they are not depicted as weak allies needing protection, but they are portrayed as capable to defend their own villages from the attacks of the enemy. This narrative aims to frame the US intervention in the conflict as a support mission, an attempt to protect an ally. It also tries to rehabilitate the image of the South Vietnamese which was severely damaged by the media. Similarly, the story 'More Deadly Than the Male' shows a South Vietnamese woman getting her revenge against the Vietcong. This tale is particularly noteworthy because, in contrast to the convention of the genre, the protagonist is a young (dragon[118]) lady. This narrative has the effect of emasculating the enemies who are tricked and defeated by a determined woman.

Dell's commitment to conservative values might be considered a way to escape censorship. This company did not participate to the formation of the Comic Code; however, the depiction of war still followed its prescription, as gory images were never shown. These considerations might also apply to other two comic titles published by Dell, *Guerilla War[119]* (1965-1966) and *Tales of the Green Beret* (1986[1966]). In particular, in Robin Moore and Joe Kubert's *Tales of the Green Beret* (1986[1966], original emphasis), pro-war, propagandistic and patronizing stances are clearly explicated from the very beginning as the comics states, "**Green Beret** are on patrol in every far corner of the world protecting people… Defending liberty… wherever duty calls. From leech infested jungles to the high-snow countries of the world. The **Green Beret** adapts. He can survive **anywhere** under **any** condition." This triumphalist tone is reinforced by the revival and intersection of two mythos: World War II and the Frontier. This combination is made possible thanks to the figure of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, a World War II hero and the proponent of the "New Frontier". Then, the emergence of America as a leading power is indirectly depicted as the realization of its Manifest Destiny. In this regard, it is worth noticing that *Tales of the Green Beret* (1986[1966]) do not only depict America's fight in Vietnam, but also its interference in Latin America and Berlin, thus showing how the US

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[118] The Dragon Lady is a stereotyped image of Asian women originated on the action-adventure comic strip *Terry and the Pirates* created by the cartoonist Milton Caniff, who depicted them as strong, deceitful, domineering, and mysterious. Whereas this story challenges certain conventions of the genre, it also reinforces racial stereotypes. Thus, the presence of empowered women is not the result of a liberal concern, but the repetition of worn-out clichés.

[119] It is worth noting that this series was originally *Jungle War Stories*, which was discussed in previous paragraphs.

are involved in a process of containment of the red threat[120]. The comics describes America's vocation through the words used by Kennedy in his address to the nation on October 22, 1962, "our goal is not victory of the might, but the vindication of the right -- not peace at the expense of freedom, here in this hemisphere, and we hope, around the world. God willing, that goal will be achieved." Moreover, the story set in Latin America revives also the "immigrant narrative" and the conflict between "descent" and "consent" through the soldier Lopez who escorts Chris Tower in his adventure around San Marco[121]. Similarly, the story arc set in Berlin provides the occasion to remind the reader about Roosevelt's four freedom speech. Accordingly, these example shows how American involvement around the world is here normalized as the consequence and continuation of the Second World Conflict.

Even though Robin Moore is credited as one of the authors of the comic, the text was ghostwritten by Jerry Capp (Schelly, 2011). This might be seen as an attempt to capitalize on the success of Moore's novel *The Green Berets* (1965). As John Hellman (1986: 53) noted, this book was a success with 1,200,000 copies printed in only two months and "it reportedly induced so many enlistments of young men hoping to become Green Berets that the Selective Service was able to suspend draft calls during the first four months of 1966". Similarly, the most notorious offspring of Moore's novel, the 1968 John Wayne film of the same title, was a success. As Alasdair Spark discussed,

> The *Green Berets* was a controversial film, provoking demonstrations and pickets on its release. Contrary to what many imagine, it was a success, bringing in (for an outlay of $6,000,000) $8,700,000 in the first six months. Apart from notoriety, its success does indicate the desire of the American public for familiar action-adventure entertainment about an unfamiliar war. In the confusing situation of Vietnam, this was only possible by focusing on a microcosm of the war — an embattled elite unit, special men carrying out daring missions, which promised to bring the end of the war materially closer. The ordinary infantry soldiers lacked this special appeal. Their war did not so easily lend itself to popular images of traditional heroics, somehow making their courage seem less satisfying. Guerrilla warfare and American tactics were such that most opportunities for heroism

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[120] This characterization is also present in Moore's earlier novel *The Green Berets* (1965), where Vietnamese enemy is "part of a global red menace rather than an indigenous force" (Neilson, 1984:104).

[121] Even though the assimilation of different ethnic group is a convention of the war comics genre, it is important to remark that this model is in neat contrast to the "Teutonist exclusivism" (Slotkin, 1998:526) of Moore's novel *The Green Berets* (1965). Like the Hollywood movie adaptation of Moore's book, the comic adopts a more 'liberal' politics, including different ethnic groups (even though as tokens). In contrast, Moore's novel emphasizes the Nordic racial traits of its characters and even their Nazi association. In the novel, Major Fritz Scharne was born in Germany and he had been a member of the Hitler Youth. In 1939, at the age of fifteen, he left Germany and went to Milwaukee. In the novel, the Green Beret DePorta is of Filipino descent, and yet one can still trace patronizing (if not racist) attitudes towards what Moore defines as "Asiatics".

took place not in attack, but in defense - in ambush, or under siege. Individual acts of courage, in defense or on "baiting" patrols, seemed in themselves to do little to bring victory (Spark, 1984:37)

Thus, the novel, the movie, and the comic all share the same confidence in the victory of the American Special forces. Moore praised the superiority of the Green Berets, their military skills, and the sense of fulfillment gained from victory. Moreover, the parallelism between the book and the comic is reinforced by the cartoonish and surreal tone of Moore's novel. Indeed, Moore introduced his protagonist in the following manner,

> Sven Kornie was the ideal Special Forces officer. Special Forces was his life; fighting, especially unorthodox warfare, was what he lived for. He had no career to sacrifice; he had no desire to rise from operational to supervisory levels. And not the least of his assets, he was unmarried and had no attachments to anyone or anything in the world beyond Special Forces (Moore, 2007 [1965] :25)

The excess of Moore's propagandistic rhetoric has been well captured by Philip Beidler, who in *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (2007 [1982]) discussed how Moore's description of the war resembled a superhero fantasy, as smiles, handshakes, the triumph of the mission, and caricatures of the wild hindered altogether the seriousness of the narration. The scholar argued that

> In attempting to accredit a contemporary warrior mythos, Moore would also wind up exposing it as a source of savage, surreal grotesquerie. His Vietnam would turn out to be a combination of cartoon-characters super-heroism with some nasty little drama of the absurd, country-wide guerrilla theater with live ammunition, a new revelation in strange foreign place of an old familiar, eternally innocent brand of righteous American overreaching (Beidler, 2007[1982]:35).

Like World War II comics, Moore's *Green Berets* enforced a Manichean vision of the world where Good (freedom and democracy, embodied by America) battled Evil (tyranny and Communism). Robin Moore eliminated the moral ambiguity of that war creating a simplistic narrative where the Green Berets are always the good guys, and justice always triumphs. Moore's novel was published at a time when public opinion about the Vietnam War was still positive and real-life Green Berets were being celebrated in the media[122]. However, by the time the strip was adapted for comic book format (two years after its first publication as a strip on September 20, 1965), the public opinion about the war no longer supported the continuation of the story. Moreover, even though the aesthetic (end ethic) values of these works might be objected, it is important to remark their cultural (and political) impact, as these jingoistic tales had a continuing popularity and they

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[122] The extraordinary success of Sgt. Barry Saddler's "Ballad of the Green Berets" (1966) suggests that public opinion was in favor of the war. Soon after its release, "The Ballad of the Green Berets" (that Saddler composed to homage his comrades on service) reached number 1 status on the Billboard Top 100 chart in late February and stayed there for five weeks, selling more than nine million records. The lyrics (written with Robin Moore) aimed to inspire bravery, strength, and patriotism.

provided a template for future revisionist projects, whose function is justifying new interventions. As Kurt Vonnegut (1991[1969]:14) wrote, "You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them." Moreover, the diffusion of the same jingoistic template across different media has also the power to fix a certain reading of the events. Media can shape the way we remember past wars, forging a collective memory. Indeed, as Marita Sturken (1997) observed, many veterans testified that they could not recall where certain memory came from.

The Vietnam War was truly divisive, and it generated frictions between media and government, soldiers, and policymakers; resentments and recriminations continued also after the war. This might help explain way a mainstream publisher like DC decided to set Sgt. Rock military adventures during World War II, a less controversial war that allowed the narration of stories of wartime perseverance, loyalty and triumph over tyranny. Even though during Joe Kubert's run as an editor of DC war comics (1968-1973), he ended each story with a stamp that said, "Make War No More", the World War II setting seems to encourage the reader to infer that under certain circumstances war might be a necessary evil, a reading enforced by the presence of a clear evil enemy (Nazism) and the haunting memory of the Holocaust[123]. Hence, World War II narratively aimed to reestablish a heroic narrative at a time when the image of the nation was severed. The Second World War served as a distraction from ongoing battles, presenting reassuring images of victory and clear lines of morality.

In this regard, it is important to remark that whereas (war) comics generally returned to World War II to find a non-problematic setting for their patriotic and jingoistic narratives, novelists used Vietnam to retrospectively question and revisit the good war narrative embedded in World War II accounts. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) are clear cases in point. One of the most significant parallelism between the two wars in Vonnegut's novels is the familial connection between Billy and his son Robert, "a sergeant in the Green Berets — in Vietnam" (1991[1969]:61). The fact that many men who fought in Vietnam were sons of World War II veterans symbolizes the cyclical nature of wars, as one conflict generated

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[123] This point will be further expanded in the third chapter while discussing Joe Kubert's work.

the other. In Vonnegut novel the generative relation between wars is rendered literally, as Robert's conception on Billy and Valencia's honeymoon is linked to Billy's recounts of his war experience. After a sexual intercourse, Valencia asks Billy to tell her his war stories, and while he complies to his wife request, "in a tiny cavity of her great body she was assembling the materials for a Green Beret" (Vonnegut,1991[1969]:121). Thus, these parallelisms allow the author to comment on the inhumanity of both wars simultaneously. Similarly, Pynchon re-wrote World War II through Vietnam's hazy and shattered lenses. For example, the rampant drug use among members of the military is an obvious anachronism that points to the current war. However, the comics' nostalgic return to an anachronistic portrait of World War II should not be considered the effect of a presumed infantilism of the medium, because, as hitherto discussed, artists (e.g. Kurtzman and Goodwin) who tried to complexify the "good war narrative" got censored.

Finally, it is important to mention that the division between pro-war and anti-war stances was visible also in comic strips. Milton Caniff's *Steve Canyon* portrayed U.S. military intervention in Vietnam as being part of an assistance mission and not an invasion. The protagonist was often involved in rescue mission that involved damsels in distress and captive Americans. *Steve Canyon* recycled the same formula used in Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates* during World War II. However, during the Vietnam War, these jingoistic tales would not meet the favor of young readers. The entanglement between Steve Canyon and the military is also testified by the fact that this character was chosen to inform soldiers about the benefits available to them after their service.

In contrast, Jules Feiffer, Doug Marlette, Fischetti, and Garry Trudeau (among others) fiercely criticized the Vietnam War and Nixon's presidency. Trudeau's *Doonesbury* probably features one of the most compelling criticism about the war, as it illustrates a private treaty between quarterback B.D. (who embodies America's conservativism) and a Viet Cong terrorist named Phred. Trudeau comments on the war via an infantilization of its portrait. Through this apparent trivialization of the topic Trudeau suggests that there is no heroism in war, and conflicts are just the results of the failures of international diplomacy. B.D. does not join the military out of noble and gallant intentions, he just wants to avoid working on his term paper. While on patrol he gets lost in the jungle. There, he befriends Phred, a Vietcong who has also lost his way. While talking to each other they both recognize their humanity. The dialogue and situations they are both involved are

often surreal, yet the strip allows the possibility for intercultural dialogue, decentering America's self-centered narrative and giving Vietnamese people a voice. Indeed, Phred questions the reasons behind U.S. intervention and their legitimacy,

> B.D., how is it that you Yanks ever got involved here?... We were just minding our own business, having a little civil war, when **BAM**, F-100s! How do you suppose you would have liked it if during your civil war, 540,000 Viet Cong suddenly occupied Pennsylvania and New York?[…] Can you imagine me giving chewing gum and chocolates to the children of Gettysburg? (Trudeau, 1973[1971-1973]:102, original emphasis)

It is worth noticing that, despite their cultural and political differences, B.D. and Phred are able to communicate with each other and even share a beer. Thus, the comics do not focus on battles, heroism, and gore, but on the possibility for reconciliation showing that war is an infantile answer to problems.

### 3. "Living Dreams of Visions": Underground Comix and Iconoclasm

During the Vietnam War younger generations started to question their parents and the nation's values. This tension was also reflected in the highly iconoclastic (and politicized) comics that emerged in these years, the 'underground comix.' They were small press or self-published comic books that tried to defy both stylistic conventions and content restrictions. Indeed, as the 'x' in the name suggests, comix differed from mainstream comics in their use of unfettered language, depiction of sexual intercourse, sadistic and masochist behaviors, use of drugs for recreational purposes, and unrestricted display of violence, that is contents that at that time were severely forbidden to mainstream publications by the Comics Code Authority. Underground artist Spain Rodriguez saw 'comix' as a means to get his revenge against the Comic Code Authority which killed off his favorite EC comics (Danky & Kitchen, 2009:24). Hence, this new type of comics was born out of the need of expressing 'adult' content and addressed a readership that grew up with this medium.

This evolution of the medium was also foreshadowed by Harvey Kurtzman in *MAD #16*, which was published the same month in which the Comic Code appeared (October 1954). This issue commented on the witch hunt against comic books featuring a mock tabloid cover page showing two 'photographs,' rendered in Kurtzman's sketchy style. The first 'photograph' presented three different comic book artists (each representing a different genre: crime, science fiction, and lampoon) being dragged away in a "Comic-Book Raid" (as the heading of the caption states) after claims that comics contribute to

crime. The second 'photograph' illustrated a comic book publisher secretly peddling a comic book to a kid in a crowded street corner. The headline under this picture read "Comics Go Underground". Interestingly, the term 'underground' in relation to comics was used by *MAD* a full decade before it was devised to indicate the 'new' genre (and artistic experience).

So, it should be no surprise that comix looked more like the 1950s EC comics than anything produced in mainstream comics during the late 1960s and 1970s. Harvey Kurzman's art and his critical view over American society had a deep influence on 1960s underground artists. As Mark James Estren argued (1993:38), "It's not hard to see why the [underground] cartoonists remember Kurtzman so favorably. The early Mad comics were a forum for crazy plotting and crazier drawing, where artists like Wally Wood, Bill Elder, Jack Davis, and Kurtzman let their imaginations and their drawing tools run wild." Even Kurtzman himself seemed aware of the parallelisms existing between his work and the new generation of (comix) artists,

> I'm tortured by the same devils. I can talk about them [the cartoonists] to a certain extent because I identify with them. By profession I regard myself as a professional *noodge*, a troublemaker. I'm sure I'm driven by my own frustrations, and [...] I think that troublemakers are necessary. You have to keep *noodging*, pointing out the bad things. Although I certainly don't believe in the violence that I think is so fashionable today, I certainly subscribe to change – and to serious thinking (Estren, 1993:39, original emphasis).

It is notable to observe that the differences delineated by Harvey Kurtzman between his work and the ones produced by the underground artists represents also, what I believe to be, one of the limits of this movement. Indeed, the focus on iconoclasm and the desire to break taboos made the political message of these comix less successful in making comments of the current situation as in many cases satire became a repetitive and rote gesture. For example, Robert Crumb's work denounced the hypocrisy of American society by showing the perversion hidden behind its puritan façade. The major themes of Crumb's stream of consciousness fantasies are aberrant sexuality (including incest), self-loathing, and rebellion. Crumb often framed his fantasies in contrast to authority and American culture (embodied by the flag, Mickey Mouse, the police officer, among other symbols). However, his hallucinogen inspired stream of consciousness frequently contained provocatively misogynistic and racist[124] content often walking on the thin line

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[124] He deeply identified with African American blues culture and sprinkled his comics with minstrel figures.

that separates social satire from transgressive trash. Antagonizing middle America's values Crumb crafted autobiographical narratives and sustained self-reflection wallowed in vulgarity. He used his art to reclaim the right of an artist to represent whatever he or she liked despite the society's notion of decency and political correctness.

*Zap Comix* #4 (1969) can be used as a case in point. It featured Crumb's controversial story "Joe Blow," which depicted a family enjoying incestuous relations. Crumb's drawings style creates an inviting and reassuring cartoon world which mimics and parodies 1950s and 1960s comics (and adverts) which used to portray idyllic family scenes. The story focuses on a generic middle-class nuclear family: Joe, Lois, Joe Jr., and "Sis" Blow; however, as the peculiar family name suggests, the averageness of the family hides morbid, transgressive, and taboo sexual themes. The contrast between form and content is here used to point the finger at American media's prudish relation with sex. It revendicated the right of the artist to portray any subject. Yet, these revendications never evolved into a lager argument about society nor attempted to shape it. Thus, Crumb's comix are a natural product of drug-fueled 1960s rebellion. However, the lack of a clear political statement behind his satire allowed the cooptation of some of his strips, which were reprinted (without Crumb's knowledge or permission) in a neo-Nazi newspaper called *Race and Reality* (Reynold, 1994:35). In contrast, some underground women artists like Trina Robbins had a more militant attitude, aligning their work with the feminist intellectualism that emerged in the late 1960s.

Comix did not differ from mainstream comics only for their contents and styles, but also for their means of distribution and copyright issues. As James Danky and Denis Kitchen (2009) argued,

> As a new bastard art form, underground comix found no natural or even pragmatic support outside the counterculture. Existing periodical distributors would have nothing to do with comix publishers, not only because much of the product was deemed pornographic, but also because of its anarchist nature (and not just content): There were no regular publishing schedules. So the Print Mint, Kitchen Sink Press (aka Krupp Comics Works), Last Gaps, and Ripp Off Press (sometimes jokingly called, collectively, the 'Big Four') carved a new distribution system based on head shops, flea markets, and hippie street-hawkers – retailers working the outermost fingers of American capitalism (Danky & Kitchen, 2009:18).

This system of direct distribution allowed artists to retain their copyright and be paid royalties, like many literary writers. Unlike mainstream comics, comix were retailed on a nonreturnable basis and were treated more like traditional books with indeterminate shelf lives. Bestselling titles used to be reprinted again and again, whereas less successful

comix were not. Indeed, comix availability was limited as they were produced in the tens of thousands or less. Comix profited also from the technological advances of their time which made possible short runs at low production prices. Technology allowed comix to stay under the radar by circulating outside official distribution channels, bypassing *de facto* Comic Code censorship. In many cases, artists were responsible for the creation of the whole book and there was no clear-cut division of labor between writer and artist.

However, it is important to remark that 'underground' publications have existed in one form or another since the origins of the medium, such as the Tijuana Bibles (eight-page pornographic comic books sold from approximately 1930 to 1960), which can be seen a precondition and antecedent to the 1960s and 1970s underground movement. Even though non-mainstream comics have always existed, it was only during the Vietnam War that these products acquired a new cultural prominence. Indeed, underground press shared many counterculture political positions: opposition to drug prohibition, requests for sexual liberation, advocacy for minority groups, mistrust toward the government, disapproval toward the Vietnam War and resistance to the drafting. Artists engaged with controversial materials in order to show their audacity to disrobe government institutions. Comix used irreverence to provoke laughter, and nihilism to promote anti-authoritarian arguments. They also placed attention to the underdogs.

The underground movement was a reaction to the political repression of the 1950s and 1960s. It advocated for sexual liberation, supported the protest movement and the use of psychedelic drugs often recurring to iconoclastic forms. Nevertheless, the underground reflected also the rites and customs of American youth often drawing inspiration from other media: music, television, comics, and movies. As Mark James Estren (1993) argued,

> The underground comix exists in a world which has absorbed the television influence to much better advantage. Most of the creators of the underground comix have grown up in a television world, and have not been forced to change print-and-radio minds to accommodate the new influence. Thus, the underground cartoonists create works with a highly visual orientation, sometimes without coherent storylines (Estren, 1993:23).

This consciousness about the power of the visual elements made underground artists aware of the limits and opportunities offered by the print medium. For this reason, they tended to create cartoons (images that can stand on their own) and not illustrations.

With a postmodern sensibility they mixed popular art and avant-garde (underground comix appropriated stylistic features originated from larger art movements, such as Surrealism, Expressionism, Abstractionism, and even Superrealism). Like Pop Art, comix

promoted a re-figuration of art, advocating for a return to the human figure (even though through aloofness and distortion). Comix featured a startling variety of draftsmanship and styles, creating a continuum that goes from amateurish to expert. This movement had the merit to broaden the public's horizons, showing that comics were more than a medium for kids. These comics were not just mere modes to defy conventions, but also unrestricted forms of self-expression. It was in this context that the first autobiographical comics emerged, a genre still in vogue today among graphic novelists. Perhaps the most famous connection between underground comix and graphic novels is Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which had its roots in *Funny Aminals* [*sic*] #1 (1972).

In 1971, underground artists Greg Irons and Tom Veitch published *The Legion of Charlies*. This grotesque comic book puts together two events, the Tate-LaBianca murders by Charlie Manson 'family,' and the My Lai massacre, using juxtaposed and parallel images which create two "potentially separate horizontal narratives" (Huxley, 1988:105) (figure 16). In the prologue, the page is divided in two halves: the upper half portrays the My Lai massacre which took place on March 16, 1968, whereas the lower one represents the Sharon Tate murder on August 8, 1969. Each narrative can be read separately, however the composition suggests an interconnection between these two events: the first and last page of the prologue enclose the two narratives in a black pentagon, and the two (narrative) halves are symmetrical. The panels in the upper part are carefully recreated in the lower one: the characters perform the same actions, shots and angles are identical, and figures composition is very similar. Likewise, dialogues echo each other as characters speak almost the same lines; whereas private Rusty states, "we got orders from **upstairs** to kill everything that **moves**," Charlie utters, "God has annointed [*sic*] me his angel of **Death**! follow me, my sisters!" (Veitch & Irons, 2007 [1971]:256, original emphasis). The reactions of the Hollywood stars and the Vietnamese to their respective aggressors resonate with each other, as well; the Vietnamese beg US soldiers, "**NO!** Please American Soldiers! We have done nothing! Leave us alone to tend our children and our crops," and movie stars aggressively ask, "W-Who are you? What do you want? **Get out of this house**!"

The juxtaposition of the My Lai massacre and the Tate-LaBianca murders by Manson's followers did not originate with Greg Irons and Tom Veitch's comic. An issue of *Life* published on December 19, 1969 indirectly draw a similar parallelism. The cover showed

the face of Charlie Manson and the story "The Monstrous Manson 'Family'" testified the presence of monsters within America. Elsewhere in the same issue, *Life* reprinted forty-eight letters from readers reacting to the images of the My Lai massacre, appeared on the previous issue published on December 12, 1969. The inference of this juxtaposition is that both actions are the symptoms of a potential madness and moral corruption of American society. As Richard Slotkin (1998:586) pointed out, "Mylai (sic!) represents the upsurge of an evil so 'mysterious' that it may well be limitlessly pervasive and may represent (as the Violence Commission debates suggested) a demonic potential inherent in our civilization, a 'madness' to which the home front is not immune." Thus, My Lai became the central trope of a 'counter-myth' that inverted the moral value of the 'good war narrative,' showing a disillusionment towards American values and their presumed universalism.

This darker-than-dark comix uses irony to show America's double standards. At the end of the prologue, Charles Manson and his 'family' are sentenced to death for the crimes they committed, "Charlie, for the unspeakable **murders** of America's movie stars, and for the heinous corruption of our daughters, it is my proud duty to pull this switch and send you to your maker! May you roast in hell forever!" (Veitch & Irons, 2007 [1971]: 260, original emphasis). In contrast, US soldiers get chevrons for killing the enemy, "Rusty, although you thoughtlessly snuffed the lives of 400 gook women and children, the **U.S.** Army wants to apologize for making you a scapegoat and wishes to award you this silver star for bravery above and beyond and below! Good shootin' kid!".

In this comix, soldiers and civilians demonstrate vulnerability to the manipulation of language, the misleading ideas of rectitude and selflessness generated by strong words and the power of persuasive speech created by both Charlie and the Government. The focus on enemy overseas is deemed to prevent people from being consciously aware of the obvious problems in their own society, where they are being actively manipulated and controlled. Echoing 'Newspeak' rhetoric, the comix makes Charlie utter, "Paranoia is love…Murder is love… **Charlie** is love" (Veitch & Irons, 2007 [1971]:255, original emphasis). This motto highlights how propaganda can make people accept two mutually opposing beliefs as simultaneously correct.

This comix compares Manson's family and the US military to question the trope of

America's loss of innocence[125]. The violence displayed by both agents seems to be part of the American character. Disturbingly, the soldiers do not only transform into Manson disciples, but they also try to cannibalize Nixon. In turn, Nixon attempt to do the same and seeks to feed on the (former) soldiers in order to increase his power. Cannibalism is here portrayed as a way to absorb the adversary potency. Even though Manson's family and Nixon disappear at the end of the story, the final panel prophetically warns the reader about their future return in other forms, "and another chapter of American history slams shut! But do not cry… our boys will return and eat another president, another hero, another saint… for in truth, they are but an allegory of the **death** which will eat us **all**!" (Veitch & Irons, 2007 [1971]:282, original emphasis)

It is worth mentioning that *The Legion of Charlies* (1971) is an almost unique experiment within the underground field. As Huxley (1988:107) observed, "Despite the fact that the very fabric of the underground was anti-establishment, anti-violence, mainly pro-drug and thus implicitly opposed to the war, there is minimal reaction to it in its comics." The scholar attributes this aspect to two elements: violence in underground comics is generally removed from a contemporary setting into fantasy and/or nostalgia (often towards EC horror comics), and the expectation that comics should be humorous or satirical. For example, Greg Irons' (1970) "Raw-Wars comics," published in *Hydrogen Bomb and Biochemical Warfare Funnies,* shows how war always leads to gruesome and grotesque death. The comics is clearly a parody of the war comics genres. Indeed, the caption in the first panel mimic the moralistic incipit usually featured in war comics. Irons uses irony to make fun of the intended audience of these comics: the story is ironically dedicated to "red-blooded virile men only," a clear nod to the fact that these comics addressed a young readership and presented war as a heroic adventure and soldiers as modeled to be admired and emulated. However, despite the heroic premises, the soldiers inevitably end up dead because of an explosion that tear his body up. This scene is reiterated other two times. Despite, the potential abrasiveness of these pictures and the dark humor entrenched in them, they are never used to advance a constructive criticism. They shock the audience, but do not make a political point. Indeed, the response to gruesome can be multiple: they can disgust people and turn them against war, but they

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[125] As Sturken (1997) observes, America's losing its innocence at a precise moment is a well-worn trope. A concept reiterated during various traumatic events, such as Pearl Harbor, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, etc.

can also anesthetize their consciousness. As Marshall McLuhan (2002 [1951]:29) sardonically commented in his analysis of the comic *Crime Does Not Pay*, "How much armchair violence is necessary to the good life?" Disasters and violence have often embedded in them attractive and luring elements that keep the spectator watching. As Susan Sontag (2004: 77) observed,

> there is a mounting level of acceptable violence and sadism in mass culture: films, television, comics, computer games. Imagery that would have had an audience cringing and recoiling in disgust forty years ago is watched without so much as a blink by every teenager in the multiplex. Indeed, mayhem is entertaining rather than shocking to many people in most modern cultures. But not all violence is watched with equal detachment. Some disasters are more apt subjects of irony than others.

Then, if emotions are not channeled into action, they can easily turn into moral or emotional apathy. Moreover, these images do not simply ridicule war, but also soldiers and their sufferings, the explosion of a bomb makes the soldier's genitalia fly in the air. These pictures aim to provoke discomfort and serious thought as well as amusement in their audience. Yet, the observer may reach out to this image just for mere laughter. Indeed, underground comix have often used sexual and violent content for comedic purpose. Indeed, the viewer is often a consumer of violence as spectacle. Moreover, the viewer may potentially experience sympathy, but the distance between him and the character depicted might even make him feel impotent or even not accountable for the scene portrayed.

Similarly, Gilbert Shelton's "Smiling Death and His Merciless Mayhem Patrol" (1969) featured in *Radical American Komiks* satirizes a famous Marvel war comic, "Sergeant Fury and His Howling Commandos." Created by Jack Kirby, this series follows the adventures of Nick Fury, a successful sergeant from Brooklyn who has the total trust of his men because he is the 'best' and thus capable to lead his team toward victory. In contrast, Sergeant Death is a gun-ho who leads his men towards certain death. This comic contains some criticism towards America's preventive warfare. When the General hears that red Chinese are developing new weapons, he sends Death to stop them. Death agrees as Chinese have "**no respect** for **human life**" (original emphasis). For this reason, the general states, "this is no time for **sentimentation** [sic] Death! A very **delicate situation** exists! The **sensible** solution would be to annihilate their entire country before they can do anybody any harm." At the end of their discussion, they complain because "lily-livered European **allies**" prevent them to lash out their full military power. This episode criticizes

America's double standards (or 'exceptionalism') and it does so by using a *reductio ad absurdum*, thus showing how American imperialism and warfare would inevitably lead to a ridiculous and absurd conclusion. Hence, the glorification of war (present in many comics) is here turned into an occasion for laughter. At the same time this tale seems much more focused on criticizing Kirby's Sergeant Fury, the epitome of American military power and masculinity (often portrayed in ripped shirt), rather than war itself. This inability to produce a deep understanding of the conflict is reinforced by the fact that Death is saved by a weird character like Wonder Wart-Hog, a porcine parody of Superman.

Similarly, works like Filbert Surgeon *Jesus Meets the Armed Services* (1970), Fred Schrier *Uncle Sam takes LSD* (1970), Ted Richard *Dopin' Dan*[126] (1973) are incapable of going beyond the mere critique of war as 'evil'. Their arguments feature only a satirical pars *destruens,* but they lack a *pars construens* that allows their criticism to be incisive. They indict America's hypocrisy and its readiness to wage war despite many influential (political) group profess their faith to God, yet this epiphany is never exploited to produce a change. In contrast, this representation of war might in certain cases glorify it. Explosions do not only cause shock, but they have also the potential to mesmerize the reader. Violence can easily turn into an experience that excites thoughts and emotions beyond ordinary experience. The grotesque, the readers are exposed to, takes them beyond themselves, thus making an image created out of protest into and experience of the sublime. This glorifying reading of war is helped by the fact that underground artists used the same language to talk about sex and sexual liberation. Consequently, rather than a political statement, their treatment of war seems just an attempt to go against prohibition by showing how the medium could address any subject (even those deemed taboo). Thus, this lack of a clear political statement that redirects the shock caused by violence towards a civic engagement ends up unintentionally confirming some of the criticisms moved by comics censors. Yet, these works are more focused on attacking middle America values and certitudes that make an actual political claim. As we already started to see this lack of a defined political position allowed the cooptation of underground art by conservative groups.

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[126] This comix features another parody of Sergeant Rock, "Sgt Jock and Kilo Co."

## 4. Panthers in the Jungle

In 1967, the social activist Julian Bond and the cartoonist T.G. Lewis self-published a political comic book, simply named *Vietnam*, that reflected the African American stance on the war. Whereas racial tensions in World War II (and Korean War) comics can be recollected by interrogating absences in the main(stream) narrative, here the meaning and implication of the "color line" (Du Bois, 2005[1903]) are directly problematized, testifying the emergence of a new form of activism in American society. As the Black Power activist Kathleen Cleaver remembers,

> Young leaders like Bobby Seal and Huey Newton spoke to blacks in tones inflected with the fire of burning ghettos, which appealed directly to each of us infuriated by the racist mobs who beat peaceful black demonstrators, by the murders of civil rights leaders, and by seeing our friends and classmates shipped off to die in Viet Nam. Black Power! ignited a passionate impulse to act in the hearts of black youth everywhere; it hit a psychic fault line, shattering familiar boundaries of black submission and white authority and triggering an explosion of black pride, freedom, and love (Cleaver, 2007:51).

Similarly, Samuel W. Black (2006:25) recalls "Black media outlets grew in these years and presented unique African American perspectives on the Vietnam War. Newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Muhammad Speaks*, and magazines like *Ebony*, propagated African American opinions, providing a platform for previously unheard voices."

In this regard, it is important to remark that, unlike the previous (American) wars, Vietnam was the first 20th century conflict fought without court-mandated segregation (*Plessy v. Ferguson*). Similarly, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 gave African Americans the opportunity to see differently their Vietnam service. For the first time in U.S. history, African Americans were engaged in overseas conflicts at a time when laws and presidential orders provided them greater rights as citizens. However, although civil rights legislation had passed *de jure*, *de facto* the social and political conditions of black people in the United States remained largely unchanged. The introduction of these new laws did not have immediate effects on society, and this discrepancy triggered the formation of the Civil Rights Movement.

This black and white nineteen-page comic book, in a basic layout of four panels per page, questioned the reason why black people should had fought abroad for a white man's war while civil rights were still denied at home, "we should fight for free election in Mississippi and Alabama, not in Viet Nam" (Bond & Lewis, 1967:4). This argument

echoed Malcom X famous speech "The Ballot or the Bullet," where he stated,

> The same government that you go abroad to fight for and die for is the government that is in a conspiracy to deprive you of your voting rights, deprive you of your economic opportunities, deprive you of decent housing, deprive you of decent education. You don't need to go to the employer alone, it is the government itself, the government of America, that is responsible for the oppression and the exploitation and degradation of black people in this country. And you should drop it in their lap. This government has failed the Negro. This so-called democracy has failed the Negro (Malcom X, 1964: web).

Thus, Julian Bond and T.G. Lewis's comic intercepts and participate to the political changes occurring in American society and actively enters the current debate, trying to make its reader woke about those 'hot' topics. The comic becomes a powerful tool for political activism. In this case, the medium does not just serve the changes occurring within society, but it proactively tries to provoke them. Thus, the comic shows that pop culture and art in general serve particular (political) interests and this situation raises questions about the artists' responsibility as he or she is forced to decide whose interests his or her art is serving.

Black activists made people aware of the deception of the American government and provided models for protests. It is worth reminding that at the same time the Black Panthers Party was founded, America started sending advisers in South Vietnam. Then, following the example of black leaders, antiwar activists started organizing large scale demonstrations. Understanding the power of the new visual culture (and mass media), black activists used the means offered by commercial culture to "enlightening its intended prey" (McLuhan, 2002 [1951]: v). They used it to construct a mythology of power for people who felt vulnerable, helpless, weak, and victimized. The intended viewers and readers of these images were not those in power, but the oppressed, as these images tried to convey empowering messages. Exploiting the ontological difference between pictures and photographs, these drawing aimed to show an imagined reality, that is the future black leaders hoped to create.

The comic does not only appropriate the discourses of black civil rights leaders, but it also incorporates the visual language of protest posters, which had a huge impact in the mobilization of oppressed black people. As Colette Gaiter discussed,

> Compared to the new millennium/post 9/11 climate of forced consensus in media messages and images, protest graphics of the 1960s and '70s are shocking in their directness. In revisiting them it is important to remember the conditions that made protest necessary. Institutionalized discrimination and injustice motivated political activism in a range of marginalized constituencies. Blacks and other minorities, as well as students, women, the disabled, and gays and lesbians organized successful

legal challenges and protests. These groups were responsible for massive shifts in how Americans thought about race, sexuality, and gender difference. The fact that we now take these changes for granted is a paradox. Activists and revolutionaries like the Black Panthers worked to make ideas that were once believed to be extreme - like equal opportunities for all Americans - seem like the natural order of things. Representing those changes in images was a fundamental part of the strategy to make previously radical ideas seem normal and universal (Gaiter, 2007:95).

The contrast of scale for dramatic purpose, the focalization on black struggles, the composition of panels (that mimics posters) used by Lewis in this comic reminds of the works of Emory Douglas, the Revolutionary Artist of the Black Panther Party and its Minister of Culture. This possible influence seems to be backed up by the fact that, following the party's credo of 'each one teach one,' Emory Douglas mentored and inspired dozens of artists to make revolutionary art, capable of inspiring the black community. The visual history of the Black Liberation Movement should not be considered as the work of isolated individuals, but as the collective effort of different artists to create favorable conditions for the empowerment of oppressed people. Like Douglas' works, this comic frames the black liberation struggles as being historically linked to global anti-colonialist struggles. Even though, one can observe some influences of Douglas' art, Lewis style has distinguishing features, as his heavy use of hatching (figure 17). Finally, it is important to point out that Lewis' (poster inspired) style is unique as it is completely different from the one used by the action-packed mainstream comics and their robust and dynamic anatomies, but also LSD inspired underground comix and their grotesque rendition of the human body. This comic does not seek to entertain, but to prompt action and its style reflects this purpose through its commitment to realism and the dramatic use of hatching.

It is worth remarking that this political pamphlet in comic forms was written in response to Julian Bond's expulsion from the Georgia House of Representatives for opposing the war in Vietnam. This comic book questioned U.S. foreign and domestic policy advocating for a fierce opposition to the war while denouncing the racial inequities in the armed forces (and society at large). The same year, at the podium in Riverside Church (New York City), on April 4, one year to the day before his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered an analogous argument,

it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East

Harlem. So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would hardly live on the same block in Chicago. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor (King, 1967: web).

Like what happened during World War II, comics language is here used as a means of propaganda, a tool to mobilize people thanks to the emotional power embedded in its visual language. The symbiotic relationship of words and pictures enhances Julian Bond's rhetoric, providing a visual reference to validate his ideological points and elicit emotional responses from the viewers. In this regard, it is of note that each panel is carefully conceived as a separate unit (as if it were a poster) with its own expressive force. Hence, this comic pamphlet shows how images and text are connected, but in no way dependent on each other. Like propaganda posters many panels feature a character ('represented participant') trying to establish a virtual eye contact with the 'interactive participants', thus 'demanding' the viewer to enter in some kind of relation (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). This aspect is particularly important because it tries to make the viewer accountable for what is happening in the scene. The pictures ask the spectator to be an active agent of political transformation and not a mere bystander or passive recorder of a scene. Trying to elicit an emotional response, the comics ends with a close up to an eye and a caption that asks the reader, "what do you think?" It is worth remarking that this direct questioning of the reader as a witness of the scene portrayed in the panel is reminiscent of the technique used by Miné Okubo in her graphic memoir *Citizen 13660* (2014[1946]).

The comic advances this argument by showing how different African American activists agreed on the opposition to the war despite their political divergencies. Visually, the portrait of many African American political leaders (Malcom X, Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Stokely Carmichael, etc.) is used with a testimonial function. The viewer witnesses how their ideas managed to create consensus within the black community. The panels progression shows how people started to increasingly participate in manifestations and rallies, as characters featured in the panels progressively increase to the point of saturating the space delimited by the frame. As clearly highlighted in the comics, many African Americans started to question the reasons why they should have served a country that prevented them from getting access to the freedom and equality promised in its constitution. Indeed, in those years, anti-war movements and third world liberation

struggles were connected with the Civil Rights movement, which emerged as the organizing center for a cross-race mobilization of Asians, Blacks, Chicanos, and Native Americans. Minorities started to question the monocultural American education and the melting pot myth. In particular, Asian Americans could not ignore that the racial Other that America was fighting looked like them, and the Vietnam War would have a deep impact on the process of formation of a panethnic Asian American identity.

White, male, and middle-class subjectivity had been constructed as the unmarked American identity, the yardstick for all other experiences, and the Vietnam War helped decenter such narrative. Whereas the antiwar movement highlighted the existence of a political fracture in the American society during the late 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement demonstrated that America had always been divided across the 'color line,' a division that was also present in the U.S. Army. One of the most evident manifestation of this gap between whites and other visible minorities was the disproportionate use of black troops in dangerous zones, "why are we always first citizens on the battlefield and second class citizens at home? (Bond & Lewis, 1967:4). Indeed, the comic (which functions as a political pamphlet rather than a form of entertainment) reports that "one out of every ten young men in America is a negro. But two out of every five men killed in the war in Vietnam is a negro" (Bond & Lewis, 1967:5). As Samuel W. Black (2006:27) recalls, "Over 7,000 African Americans died in Vietnam-12.5% of the total deaths-yet African Americans comprised only 11% of the U.S. population in the late 1960s, an alarming statistic even then, creating cause for concern that these service men were being used as fodder for the war effort." Therefore, this comic uses the high number of black casualties of war to indict the government public euphemism that attributes this imbalance to African American bravery rather than the racism present in the Army (and American society at large). As Loren Baritz discussed,

> The Vietnam draft was an ideal model of discriminatory social policy. It kept the middle class from creating political pressure on the war administrations. So the draft was biased by level of income. The higher the income, the less chance of being drafted, importantly but not exclusively because of educational deferments. Poor young Americans, white as well as black and Hispanic, were twice as likely to be drafted and twice as likely to be assigned to combat as wealthier draft-aged youth. The draft rejected many blacks, but it was more likely to accept poor men than richer men with the same qualifications, or the same lack of qualifications. As result, poor black Americans were swept into the fighting war in disproportionate numbers. Economic class, even more than race, except people of color were more likely to be poor, was what determined who fought and who died (Baritz, 1998[1985] :284).

Moreover, the comic reiterates Martin Luther King jr. denunciations of the hypocrisy

and contradiction of American institutions who asked blacks to enlist while their rights were still denied at home. However, despite these similarities, Bond's points diverge from the one adopted by King (especially those regarding the 'Viet Cong'). Whereas King avoided overt political comments on Ho Chi Minh and Communist agenda, the comic draws parallelisms between African Americans' struggles for the recognition of their civil rights and the Vietnamese resistance against capitalism (and indirectly white America). This strategy was common among many radical anti-war activists. For example, in 1968, in a debate with Fred Hallstead, presidential candidate for the Socialist Worker Party, Jerry Rubin stated,

> I'm interested in Detroit, Newark, campus disruptions, everyone smoking pot, people learning to speak out and be different. The capitalist – money – bureaucratic – imperialist – middleclass – boring – exploitative – military – world structure is crumbling. The world laughs at America's clumsy, bully attempt to defeat peasant warriors called Vietcong in a never-never land called Vietnam. And in America we are all learning how to become Vietcong. (Rubin, 1968: web)

Similarly, Kathleen Cleaver pointed out the connections of the Black Power Movement with socialism, as well as contemporary events including the Cuban Revolution and the decolonization of the Third World,

> For those who believed revolutionary change was essential. The guerrilla battles convulsing Viet Nam, the armed struggle percolating in parts of South America and Africa, and the victory of Cuba's revolution all fueled our confidence that the worldwide conflagration was catching fire at home. The Vietnamese men and women tackling America's military behemoth inspired our profound admiration. Continually pinpointing the United States as the monstrous enemy of all people fighting imperialism, Che Guevara had called for the creation of 'two, three… many Vietnams'" (Cleaver, 2007: 57).

Likewise, in the comic, the identification with North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front (the 'Viet Cong') is used to signal the activists' disagreement with U.S. war culture, but it also indicated their estrangement from the traditional American values. Consequently, the Vietcong becomes a symbol of disruption and liberation. By adopting this rhetorical strategy, Bond brings the war home and questions the nation's morality; unsurprisingly, Vietnam becomes just a mirror to look deep into America's soul and investigate its racial policy. As Martin Luther King Jr. (1967: web) observed "the war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deep malady within the American spirit." However, this (self-centered) sublimation of the conflict into the morality field ends up disenfranchising the Vietnamese from any agency over their own destiny, as the 'cure' for this (supposed) 'malady' resides in America's consciousness.

At the same time, Julian Bond's *Vietnam* (1967) reduces the complexity of the

racial/ethnic and political tensions underlying the Vietnam War to black/white binary system. In this comic book African Americans and Asians are constructed as almost interchangeable, the Other in relation to the hegemonic (white) American culture. This identification also reveals how the significance of the battle exceeds the historical event itself: this analogy between the Viet Cong and militant blacks is a gesture of resistance against white supremacy. As Sylvia Shin Huey Chong (2011:65) observed,

> for many blacks who opposed the Vietnam War there was a sense of identification with the Vietnamese that went beyond mere altruism or sympathy. The violence against the Vietnamese was felt to be a direct extension of the violence against black in the U.S., with both forms of violence betraying the same vein of racism in American society.

Moreover, the analogy between black people and North Vietnamese has the effect of militarizing the right to vote. Indeed, the ballot is indicated as a means to stop the conflict, "Men you vote for help make this war possible. Will you vote for them again?" So, the comics encouraged black people to get involved in voter registration drives and other forms of community organizing in order to change the system. This militarization of the right to vote echoes with a speech delivered by Malcom X in 1964, "The Ballot or the Bullet," where he discussed the emergence of a new, global sensibility in the fight for racial justice, "We intend to expand [the freedom struggle] from the level of civil rights to the level of human rights." The comics goes as far as comparing those who call the National Liberation Front members 'Viet Cong' to the Ku Klux Klan. Indeed, the comics points out that the term Vietcong is charged of orientalist connotations.

However, it is important to notice that Julian Bond's parallelism between African American and the National Liberation Front inevitably reduces the complexity of the war in Vietnam to a racial conflict, similar to the one existing in American society. This rhetorical strategy inevitably silences the voice of the Southern Vietnamese, who are here described as mere puppets of the U.S. government. Similarly, Uncle Ho is constructed as an icon (a flat character), a virtuous and smiling hero, separated from the real (round character) Ho Chi Minh, and contrasted to its American counterpart, 'Uncle Sam.' This essentialization of the conflict prevents any deep understanding of it. Indeed, the North Vietnamese becomes an object of sympathy or pity, themselves victims and adversaries of the American imperialism. However, this narrative shields the North Vietnamese from being held accountable for the atrocities they committed against other Vietnamese (e.g., Southern Vietnamese and the Montagnard). The Vietnam War was also a civil war and

not just a fight against (neo)colonial powers or capitalism. Consequently, within the African American interpretation of the conflict, the oblivion of the Southern Vietnamese experience raises ethical questions about the nature of memory. It becomes clear that not all groups share the same amount of visibility.

The comics also indicts American (presumed) hypocrisy. In the comics, Bond and Lewis rhetorically question American mythos: how could a nation born fighting British tyranny and colonialism act against Vietnam independence and its right to self-determination? To achieve this aim, the comics recurs to the trope of European nations as decadent and oppressive entities in contrast to America's (self-appointed) righteousness, "in 1860, when the United States were fighting a war to free the slaves, the French were fighting a war to make slaves of the people who live in Vietnam. The Vietnamese people wanted to run their own country but could not defeat the strong French armies." (Bond & Lewis, 1967:6) This mythical past is also evoked through the reference to Frontier myth, which is projected over the situation in Vietnam, "we hid behind trees and bushes when we fought the British for independence. We asked for help from any country that would give it to us (France, Spain, Holland did give us troops and aids). We tarred and feathered and killed our enemies, and took their land. The people of Vietnam are fighting their own war for independence" (Bond &Lewis, 1967:17).

In this regard, it is important to remark how Bond's antiwar argument is both naïve and neglectful. In the attempt to bring the North Vietnamese experience close to the American one, he forgets to acknowledge the inherent violence of the Frontier expansion: Americans built their independence at the expense of the Natives. When Britain excluded its former colony from trade with the commonwealth, the newly formed nation had to seek open fields and resources westward, but the transformation and appropriation of the 'virgin' wilderness was not a peaceful process. Finally, one can observe how Bond fosters his argument at the detriment of other minority/racial groups, that are either silenced or neglected. This is also evident in Bond's depiction of World War II. While Bond recalls how Ho Chi Minh and the U.S. fought together against a common enemy during the 1940s, the ethical questions that that victory embeds are never problematized. Japan's defeat is visually symbolized by a mushroom cloud. However, the consequences of this act are never questioned.

## 5. A Divisive "Ghostly" War

*All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory*
Viet Than Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*

As said, World War II tends to be represented as "the good war" while the Vietnam War was generally described as "the dirty war", a syndrome[127], a quagmire (and later a stinging loss in need of healing). However, this definition has been subject to revisionist projects since the 80's. In particular, Reagan's attempt to revise the Vietnam War was part of a strategy that aimed to revive the nation's pride and sense of purpose. He transformed the Vietnam War into the "noble cause" in fact reversing the disillusionment that this war produced, so that Americans would not feel reluctant to use military force abroad. Reagan's aim was to overcome the "Vietnam syndrome" to make America hold the line against Communism[128]. The Vietnam War did not only signal a military failure, but it also reshaped the image of American technology (the possession of superior weapons did not grant America a victory) and global power, American manhood (the figure of soldier that come out the war was emasculated), and altered the image of the veterans (unlike World War II there was no parade to celebrate their return home). A singular narrative of the war has not yet coalesced, however "two particular elements within the often opposing narratives are uncontested – the divisive effect of the war on American society and the marginalization of Vietnam veterans" (Sturken, 1997:45). Hence, the examination of these conflicting memories provides insights into how American society recollects and engages nationalism.

Popular culture corroborated those divisions in its narratives highlighting the transformative and corrosive aspects of war. It either tried to represent the morally tainted

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[127] The Vietnam war has been described as a moral disease by Martin Luther King. The 'syndrome' metaphor has also been often coopted by conservatives to describe a presumed paralysis, a lack of commitment towards victory.

[128] It is worth remarking that Reagan fight against Communism did not start during his presidency. On October 20, 1947, members of the House Un-American Activities Committee began an investigation into alleged Communist influences in Hollywood and film industry. This investigation was a consequence of the paranoia triggered by Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy. Fearing a Communist conspiracy, the committee subpoenaed more than 40 actors, directors, writers and studio executives. And while a conspicuous number of celebrities (including Lauren Bacall, Humphrey Bogart and Gene Kelly) signed a petition declaring the committee as un-American, some of those subpoenaed cooperated fully with the committee, confirming its fears about the presence of disruptive influences in Hollywood. One of these 'friendly witnesses' was Ronald Reagan, who denounced the presence of a small number of Communists within the Screen Actors Guild.

aspects of US involvement in Vietnam or it sought to rewrite the war as an American victory. The continuous recollection of the Vietnam War is also testified by the uninterrupted publication of comics dealing with this national trauma. In every decade there is at least one title published. So, we might speculate about the motives for this continuous process of retelling. One of the possible reasons behind this phenomenon may lay in the public use of history that appropriates (private and public) memories to foster a unitarian narrative of the past in the form of collective memory[129]. Indeed, memory is regularly subject to revision by groups who seek to replace, supplement, or revise dominant representations of the past as a way of asserting their own identity. Collective memory and national identity are intertwined and mutually reliant.  As John R. Gillis argued,

> National memory is shared by people who have never seen or heard of one another, yet who regard themselves as having a common history. They are bound together as much by forgetting as by remembering, for modern memory was born at a moment when Americans and Europeans launched a massive effort to reject the past and construct a radically new future. […] Modern memory was born not just from the sense of a break with the past, but from an intense awareness of the conflicting representations of the past and the effort of each group to make its version the basis of national identity. […] If the conflicts of the present seemed intractable, the past offered a screen on which desires for unity and continuity, that is, identity, could be projected (Gillis,1994:9)

Then, comics can be seen as tools that attempt to draw new (mass) audiences into a process of reaffirmation or renegotiation of the official story and national identity. As memory projects, comics can engage with new narratives through different processes: incorporation, distortion, resistance, negotiation, recuperation (Rigney, 2010).  This (re)circulation of Vietnam related memories is an attempt to change (or at least challenge) the Western perception of the war. The Vietnam War has been subject to a mythologizing process that tried to remodel our understanding of the past and "correct any perceived divergence from the dominant ethical framework" (Hope, 2014: 64). Thus, mythmaking is an answer to the need for (national) reconciliation. However, this reconstruction does

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[129] It is important to remark that the academic focus on memory started precisely in this period. As Kerwin Lee Klein (2000:127) discussed, "outside of experimental psychology and clinical psychoanalysis, few academics paid much attention to memory until the great swell of popular interest in autobiographical literature, family genealogy, and museums that marked the seventies". Consequently, in the 80s memory studies would flourish in the departments of literature, history, and anthropology.  These works aimed to study cultural memory, trauma and divisive events in relation with mass society and new technologies, which function as "memory mediators" (Assman, 2002[1999]). These studies were fueled by the debates on both the Holocaust (as witnesses voices became louder) and the PTSD (as the Vietnam War and its aftermath made the public opinion aware of this disease). Discourses about (and by) Holocaust survivors and Vietnam veterans demonstrated the existence of people overwhelmed by the weight of the past and its traumatic recollection.

not necessarily imply a denial of previous events, but it deals with a research for some "good" deed. Therefore, comics attempt to find a closure through reenactment.

This attempt to find a closure through reenactment is particularly evident in 1980s and 1990s comics dealing with the Vietnam War. In these years, the experience of this conflict started to undergo a process of mythmaking that simultaneously reenacted two experiences: the Frontier myth, and America's loss of its (presumed) innocence. As John Hellmann (1986: ix) discussed, "the narrative structures of myth articulate silent patterns that we see in our past and hold as our present value and purpose. A myth is our explanation of history that can also serve as a compelling idea for the future." Through its simplification process (that often involves the oblivion of a consistent number of data) myth attempts to give order and purpose to history. Therefore, what I would like to argue is that comics may be used as rhetorical tools to heal the nation of the trauma caused by the Vietnam War through a recuperative (but also mythologizing) historiography. These (pop) cultural memory projects are part of a reconstructive national process. A process that also turns memory into a spectacle and commodity, as in a consumer society even war related objects are merchandized. This tendency can be clearly observed in two (quite conservative) comic books published in the late 1980s: Doug Murray's *The 'Nam* and Lomax's *Vietnam Journal*, which featured both realistic and revisionist elements. In these comics, war is represented as a transformative experience for the soldiers, who must endure, adapt and battle in a wild, alien, and almost primordial environment. This condition clearly evokes the memory of the Frontier, yet these texts are not mere thoughtless reiteration of the western but works that tries to explore and reimagine its meaning in relation to the recent past.

The revisionist project of *The 'Nam* is particularly self-evident in issue #7, which narrates the personal story of private Duong, a Vietnamese soldier who deserted the Viet Cong to join the American Army. Duong's account begins during the Japanese invasion of Vietnam, and France's decision to collaborate with the Nazis. This situation triggers Duong's desire to fight to liberate his country from the invaders, battling the Japanese first, and then the French. After World War II, he decides to adhere to the Communist-led Viet Minh nationalists to fight the French who wanted to retain their colonies overseas. His patriotic feelings would also make him join the Viet Cong battle against the South Vietnamese government, which he perceived "as bad as the French" one. However, after

his experience on the front, he concludes that "there seemed no justice anywhere. Even my comrades were oppressing the people" (*The 'Nam#7*:15*)*. For this reason, he decides to fight along the US army, as he recognized that "Americans wanted to help". This narrative tries to hide the neocolonial intentions behind US intervention in Vietnam: it portrays America as the sole defender of freedom, while presenting (European) colonialism, Nazism, and Communism as the only and true oppressors of Vietnam (and its people). This rhetoric aimed to reinforce the belief in the American virtue in contrast to the colonial past of the European nations. As John Hellman (1986:51) observed, in Vietnam "the American could renew his virtue where the European had proved only his vices; and the Asian people America historically saw as the appointed beneficiaries of its destiny."

In this regard, it is important to remark that the notion of America as the world 'redeemer' did not originate during the Vietnam War, but it dates back to the puritan origins of the nation, when Americans perceived themselves as having a guidance role for the whole world: they saw themselves as fated to build 'a City upon the Hill' and destined to lead the Forces of Light (civilization) against Darkness (savage landscape), that is the same vision of the world and a sense of mission described by John Winthrop's *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630). Conquering wilderness was central to colonial and pioneer narratives of progress and *The 'Nam* seems to rhetorically project this old pattern in the new war context, by contrasting systematically the regulated camp life to the madness of the jungle. Fighting the Viet Cong often implies the subjugation of the nature as the wilderness hides the enemy from the American soldiers' eyes. Frequently grunts in the jungles do not see the enemy, they just shoot bullets in a certain direction hoping to hit something. The battle against the enemy is no longer depicted as a hand-to-hand confrontation with the enemy, but as long frustrating chase after an elusive enemy seldom seen even when he is there.

Hence, these 'mythical resonances' attempts to construct the conflict in Vietnam as an extension of the 'Frontier' of the free world. The contrast between French colonialism and the American rescue mission tries to provide a symbolic resolution to the inherent contradiction of American warfare rhetoric (exporting civilization while waging war), at the same time as it reinforces America's (political) exceptionalism. The indictment of French colonialism is a way to paint out America's own (neo)colonial ambitions. In this

regard, it is useful to remind that the US presence in Asia preceded the Vietnam War, and even the Civil War, and it found in Thomas Hart Benton one of its first advocates. This expansionist drive was entwined with the myth of the 'western pilgrims finishing the great circle'. As pointed out by Hellman (1986:5), "the new country America, positioned between Europe and the Orient, appeared destined to expand westward to the Pacific before completing in Asia the progress that had begun there thousands of years earlier." Consequently, the expansion in the Pacific and the distancing from the European colonialism are complementary parts of the same nation-building rhetoric known as 'Manifest Destiny'.

*The 'Nam* did not only reuse the myth of the Frontier, but it also presented soldiers as American heroes, motivated by a desire to 'do good.' In issue #7, America's virtuous intensions are exemplified through two panels, one showing soldiers handing candies to children (an image that goes back to World War II) and the other displaying a female member of the army motherly nurturing Vietnamese children (figure 18). It should be stressed that these images are clearly charged with colonial symbolism. In fact, according to the American national mythos, the pioneers used to trade/offer small objects with the natives in exchange of their land. Similarly, soldiers give goods to the local population to win their hearts and minds. However, it is important to remark that (like in WWII and Korea) these objects are more than just mere items, they are symbols of the 'American way of life.' In this regard, the comics shows a clear-cut distinction between American opulence (or capitalism) and the indigence of the Vietnamese (caused by both war and Communism, which seem undistinguishable). Issue #11 uses Vietnamese children to rhetorically question the morality of the Viet Cong, as they turn their own sons and daughters into unaware soldiers by making them carry around grenades, "What kind of country is this? How can they do that kind of thing to their own kids?" (*The 'Nam #13*:8). However, it is essential to remark that these observations are not motivated (only) by humanitarian concerns about the militarization of the civilians, but they also betray patronizing impulses. The message is clear: the Vietnamese are not able to take care of their own future (the children) and need and external force to guide them and secure a better tomorrow.

Indeed, the comics does not shield the viewer from seeing American soldiers shooting at elders, women, but also children. The murder of civilians is rhetorically justified by the

guerrilla nature of the conflict, and thus the inability of the soldiers to distinguish non-combatants from the Viet Cong as anybody could turn into an enemy[130]. *The 'Nam* clearly shows how in Communist-controlled areas, civilians provided food, shelter and information to the Viet Cong, hided weapons and helped the wounded without departing from their civilian status. Then, as shown in issue #43, soldiers had to suspend their moral judgment and shoot anything suspect to stay alive. The guerrilla nature of the conflict turned the grunts into 'survivors' rather than warriors. In this regard, *The 'Nam* does an incredible job in reconstructing the fear of humans entrapped in a fate they cannot comprehend or control. The grunts find themselves swallowed up and left with no direction as the wilderness is friendly only to the enemy.

This portrayal of the grunts signals a departure from the western hero as the Green Beret is no longer a chaste 'saint' with a gun, but a character embodying the virtues and wickedness of both civilization and savagery. The soldiers are agents of 'progress', but to save their lives they must quickly adapt to the new 'wild' environment which challenges them both psychologically and physically. This primitiveness of the environment seems to justify the state of exception in which the soldiers must operate. The conflict in Vietnam is presented as a war of anger and frustration, as the grunts do not have close combat fights with the enemy, instead they had to survive invisible threats (snippers, mines, and booby traps). Violence, corruption, and sexual encounters with prostitutes are here normalized as part of the exotic war 'set'. For example, in the first issues of *The 'Nam*, the reader, who enters the war experience through a 'greenie's' (Ed Marks) point of view, is expected to suspend its critical judgement as the new setting is governed by different set of rules. Indeed, when Ed is approached by a prostitute, a fellow comrade states, "Don't worry, Ed. She's like part of the furniture. The bar supplies them. Relax. Enjoy yourself. You're not in the world now." (*The 'Nam #3*, :13). Even though this issue reiterates a leitmotif of (anti)war literature the already mention 'double trauma of the soldier' who must first adapt to a hostile environment where civil laws are not applied, and after his return home he must re-adapt to a civil life and recognize the horror accomplished, this character development results truncated. The comic acknowledges PTSD, but it never advocates for an amend for the nation or individual actions.

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[130] This rhetoric bears resemblance to the one used by Nazis against the partisan guerrilla to justify the killing of civilians.

Significantly, the characters that are more readily capable of adapting to the guerrilla are those that walk through the narrow lines that separates civilization from wilderness. These characters are lawless and ruthless. In their attempt to pursue their moral goals they often adopt behaviors that place them beyond institutional and social restraints. These self-reliant soldiers become self-appointed vigilantes. This type of character is epitomized by Frank Castiglione (who in *The 'Nam* has not yet adopted the Punisher persona) who is constructed as a one-man-army fighting his own personal crusade against Communists, but also corrupt members of the army. However, it is important to remark that the corrupt generals (the outlaws) and the vigilantes (western hero) are not the only type of character depicted into this reworking of the Vietnam War memory. The comic also features 'good hearted' characters, which assume the role of the 'errand into the wilderness,' providing a moral compass to the audience.

Even though, by nature of things, American troops often encountered prostitutes, thieves, pimps, and beggars, the comic never fully acknowledges the existence of an alternative Vietnam or even the presence of another set of Vietnamese characters, thus letting the reader infer that the whole population was like that. Similarly, Southern Vietnamese officials are portrayed as vicious, corrupt, incompetent, and not trustworthy. Indeed, in issue #64 a Southern Vietnamese soldier comments, "you sneer at me, but corruption is a way of life in our culture. In a great land I would be free to be a great man." Southern Vietnamese cannot be trusted because they tend to be easily bribed and are not committed to winning war. Their actions are not dictated by either heroism or patriotism, but mere survival tactics and ephemeral hedonism. This (perceived) attitude of the Southern Vietnamese Army accentuates the feeling of alienation of the American troops as they are trapped in foreign and dangerous land to fight a war to defend an ally who is not intentioned to win. In contrast, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese are depicted as a dangerous and ruthless threat that hides in the jungle. Yet, moral decadency (and savagery) seems a quality equally shared by both Southern Vietnamese allies and the (Northerner) Vietnamese enemy. This homogenization of opposite forces at conflict is possible thanks to the Orientalist lenses through which the soldiers interpret the conflict.

At the same time, politicians, bureaucracy, military hierarchies, and the strategies they elaborate are often portrayed as completely detached from the grunts' necessities and the reality of war, thus unable to secure the victory or any progress on the ground. Their

incompetence puts the privates' lives at risk, making them pawns of geopolitical strategies. However, *The 'Nam* never questions the cause of the conflict. In contrast, it makes a clear case for the lack of commitment towards success as the war had been fought defensively. According to this rhetoric, the Vietnam War was not a military defeat, but rather a political withdrawal. In issue #45 one of the characters claims, "we could end the war just as fast by getting rid of our officers and letting the professionals run the war. They idiots think they can run a war according to the rules. Didn't Korea teach **them** anything?" (*The 'Nam #45*: 17, original emphasis)

The soldier's alienation from the 'world' is also reinforced in the issues that deals with different privates' homecoming. *The 'Nam* uses these stories to criticize the lack of institutional recognition for the grunts' sacrifices. The treatment of US soldiers by both society and anti-war demonstrators is here depicted as unfair and ungrateful. *The 'Nam* explicitly indicts media for igniting such cold welcoming of the troops, while advocating about the existence of another reality, different from the one showed on the small screen, "I saw it on the TV… there were college students in Wisconsin trying to do… I don't know what. Something about a representative for Dow Chemicals and them trying to stop Dow from making Napalm. Napalm! How many times did Napalm save our butts!" (*The 'Nam*#15:8). Therefore, *The 'Nam* attempts to explain its audience 'the big picture' and honor the sacrifice of individual soldiers who fought (and lost their lives) in order to protect America (and the World) from the (geo)political aspiration of its enemies. However, a full description of such 'big picture' is never offered to the readers. Indeed, an analysis of the enemies' intentions would also call into question America's own aspirations in the area.

Similarly, the use of (technical and military) jargon is a device that invites the reader to realize how his/her own experience 'in the world' diverges from the one experienced by the troops. Violence and immoral actions are here justified by war contingencies. The comics attempts to show how stress, fears, naivety, prejudices, and the soldier's individual psychological profile play an important role in determining one's conduct. This portrayal aims to show the soldiers as human being with flows, yet the rightfulness of the cause is never questioned. Whenever, the morality of the soldier's actions might be morally flawed and patronizing, the North Vietnamese are portrayed as the worst option between the two factions at war (interestingly, *tertium non datur*). Americans are portrayed as giving the

local population the opportunity to choose sides, whereas the Viet Cong are portrayed as compulsorily (and despotically) enforcing their own worldview to the population.

The commitment to realism and the focalization on the difficulties faced by the soldier allows the writers to avoid any political commentary about the reasons behind US involvement an repress any larger critique towards war. Characters are constructed as real people that suffer diseases ('jungle rot', malaria, and dysentery), psychological traumas, and loss (often of their comrades), and not as carboard figures, John-Wayne-like[131] characters or near-superheroes. There is no heroic (or posed) representation of the conflict, as firefights are depicted as chaotic and fearsome melees. In this series, a soldier's valor is not determined only by his willingness to jump right into the battle and lead his squadron towards victory (like Sgt. Fury in his homonymous comics[132]). In contrast, a soldier's gallantry is often shown through more intimate and humble gestures, such as the decision to 'stay in country' so that his draftee little brother would not be sent over.

The faithfulness to realism can be also observed through the narrative organization of the comic series. In particular, *The 'Nam* tries to mimic the natural flow of time: when a month went by in the real world, a month passed in the comic. Because of this commitment to an accurate rendition of the conflict, characters would generally arrive in Vietnam, do their twelve months, and then return home. The cast of characters tends to change quite frequently as soldiers die, go missing, are relocated to other areas, or sent back to the 'world' because they are incapacitated by severe injuries. So, the reader witnesses the transformations occurring within the same military unit over time. Hence, this narrative seems to fall into the category of the "collective novel" created by Susan Jeffords (1989). The scholar argued that,

> Collective novel creates the appearance of a whole as if these disparate pieces all fit together as a unit. This is a structural tactic of Vietnam narrative: to create the illusion of a collective experience (in a war in which soldiers fought only for a year [the Marines for thirteen months] and rotated in and out of units), as if there was a common bond behind the varied incidents recounted in these

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[131] The movie *Green Berets* is referenced in the comic book as a bad portrayal of the Vietnam War as its jingoistic and optimistic message hided the soldiers' suffering in that place that resembled hell. Mocking attitudes towards the jingoistic characters portrayed by John Wayne in Western and war movies can be observed in Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977)*,* Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers* (1979) and Stanley Kubrick*'s Full Metal Jacket* (1987).

[132] This comic series is also referenced in the issue *# 23* of *The 'Nam.* Aeder is shown reading a copy of *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos*. This reference is particularly significant as it is meant to metanarratively show the divergence existing between the real war experience and the one usually portrayed in comics. A distance highlighted also by Aeder's death.

narratives (Jeffords, 1989:25).

In *The 'Nam*, war is never turned into a romantic fantasy, even though only few slightly gory images of wounded or dead bodies are shown (this should not be surprising since the Comic Code Authority seal of approval is still visible on the cover). In contrast to Korean War comics, a soldier's death is not moralized. The passing away of a grunt is here portrayed as the fulfillment of a tragic destiny. The depiction of a soldier oscillates between the hero and the victim figure. This particular attention to the soldiers can be seen as part of a much larger cultural attempt to rehabilitate the figure of the Vietnam War veteran. The mental and physical wounds of the soldiers become metaphors of the collective trauma experienced by the nation. So, those bodies represent the places where national healing can occur. The "therapeutic discourse of wounds and healing" (Hagopian, 2009:19) functions as a means to unite left and right in mutual sympathy for the veterans and those who died. This rhetoric tried to extend the healing process to the nation to overcome the "Vietnam syndrome." As a result, the figure of the veteran is rhetorically used to bring together all Americans, whether they supported or opposed the war. "Emotions and ethnocentrism are key to the memory industry as it turns wars and experiences into sacred objects and soldiers into untouchable mascots of memory" (Nguyen, 2016:13). However, as Marita Sturken (1997) observes, veterans who suffer PTSD, are homeless, or have committed suicide are often forgotten and absent from public forms of commemorations.

*The 'Nam* recirculates also well-established tropes of the genre such as male bonding, foreign femme fatales, gambling rooms, the repressed love for a 'good' woman, interconnection of sex and violence, and the confrontation with the enemy. War is here constructed as prevalent male environment. Women actively fought in World War II comics, during Korea they were featured in romance comics where the female protagonist (usually a nurse or a secretary) felt in love with the handsome and hypermasculine G.I., yet in Vietnam stories they are scarcely represented. *The 'Nam* issues #49-51 present a classical love story between a soldier and a nurse; however, the comic makes clear that in Vietnam there is no place for romantic love. Thinking Dove died, the nurse leaves the camp.  Then, women as bearers of love are placed outside war. This exclusion of a gendered alternative to war has the effect of reinforcing the centrality of male bonding. As Susan Jeffords (1989:72-73) discussed,

At a time when other arenas for masculine bonding in the American culture are being 'invaded' (by

the integration of professional sports, the enactment of the title IX, requiring all-male school to become co-educational, all-male clubs to accept women as members, the racial and gendered integration of traditionally male professions, and so on) war can be seen as the last 'pure' theater for the masculine bond.

Like the *Punisher* comics, *The 'Nam* reinforces the gendered construction of war by eliminating female characters and depicting Vietnam as an all-male space. Women are mere tokens to avoid any homoerotic interpretation of the male bond depicted in war narratives.

Moreover, in contrast to previous representations, the cast of characters is both racially and ethnically diverse. The comics address the presence of forms of mistrusts among different racial groups fighting in the same unit. These tensions are usually portrayed as detrimental to the success of the mission and the safety of the soldiers themselves. For example, on issue # 38, a black Lt. (Meachum, a.k.a 'Pig') reproach a fellow black soldier for his attitude, "This ain't a white man's war or a black man's war! It's **our** war! We are all in this together" (*The 'Nam #38:26).*   Notably, the first character to confront the presence of racism in the army is a lazy blowhard who cannot fight. Racial themes are reprised in issue #45. In this comic book the black protagonist comments on how, in contrast to the previous conflicts, the war in Vietnam has promoted racial equality. This argument is made particularly poignant through the recollection of the past experiences of his ancestors in the army. Thus, this tale has also the effect to construct a soldier's entrance into the conflict as an attempt to emulate his (biological, but also moral) father and honor his mythic heritage. However, the comics also highlight how, in contrast to the past, African American are now able to advance their career in the military as Jim Tarver manages to become First Sergeant. In this issue racism is treated as an almost isolated occurrence (the act of few soldiers) and not an institutionalized phenomenon. Therefore, the army is depicted as a promoter of racial equality, a thesis confirmed by the fact that 'in the world' African Americans were still fighting for their civil rights. Thus, one can observe how this comic narratively attempts to counter the arguments used by black activists in the 1960s to contest the war, and which were captured in comic form by Julian Bond and T.G. Lewis. Issue #54 refutes once again the idea that Vietnam War is a white men's war. This story does not only feature a black protagonist but also his revolt against his immediate family that does not understand his service and sacrifices for the country. The black community is depicted as unsupportive. In contrast, several issues attempt to establish the Army as a family, "his brothers were there to watch his back always." Hence,

this narrative seems to reiterate another foundational myth of the U.S., the tension between descent and consent, which is here resolved through male bonding. It is worth remarking that this issue does not only reiterate an old trope of the genre, the importance of male bonding (which is stronger than any other affiliation), but it also constructs the soldier as a martyr, quoting the book of Job to ask the reader why the righteous suffer.

*The 'Nam* seems to invite to a return to an uncomplicated patriotism, thus reaffirming those beliefs that the Vietnam War questioned and disrupted. Indeed, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate casted doubts on the credibility of American nationalism and the faith in the 'American way of life.' America started to mistrust its leaders as they turned out to be both fallible and dishonest. During this time, America uncovered the racism and sexism operating in many spheres of society. It discovered that its technological superiority could not secure a victory against an agrarian society. Accordingly, *The 'Nam* conservative and revisionist stances seem to answer to a quest for moral righteousness, adopting a rhetoric that smother divisive elements while advocating for a united nation committed to democracy (at home and abroad). It is important to remind that the idea that only by working together could Americans hope to win the enemy dates to the previous war(s) (comics), namely World War II and Korea. As discussed in the first chapter, World War II comics advocated for racial tolerance and Korea War comics presented the army as a naturalization agent.

It is important to remark that when *The 'Nam* was published MIA (United States servicemen who were reported as Missing In Action) and U.S. POWs (Prisoners Of War) were at the center of the political discourse. This concern for the POWs and MIA is manifested both in the text and paratext of *The 'Nam*. From issue #58 onward the cover features the POW/MIA flag. Issue #59 features also two Americans held captive by the North Vietnamese. This issue seems to reiterate the 'captivity narrative' as one soldiers submit to the Vietnamese while the other fights to survive and maintain his moral integrity by not betraying his country. As Slotkin (1973:145) observed, "Captivity psychologically left only two responses open to the puritans, passive submission or violent retribution." Once again, we can see how the Frontier myth functions as drop back through which filter and cope with the Vietnam trauma.

The comics reflect also on the suffering of the soldiers who had returned home from the war. Indeed, many of them had to cope with PTSD and disability. The comics seems

to indict how American society is not capable to validate those heroes' achievement and recognize their sacrifices for the nation. Then, the veteran becomes a neglected and alienated figure living at the margins of society. Yet the comics shows how the bonds created during the war helped the soldier to cope with the difficulties they encounter during their everyday life once they were back in "the world". Moreover, it is worth noticing that, even though *The 'Nam* may have conservative sympathies, it also acknowledge the existence of Vietnam Veterans who opposed the war once they returned home, "You didn't go to college to avoid the draft, you didn't run to Canada and you didn't have a rich influential daddy to pay off the draft board so they would 'lose' your number. You paid the price. Say anything you want." (*The 'Nam* #77:20) Although the comic acknowledges the existence of pacifist positions within the veterans, the comic points the fingers at those liberals who criticized the war and the soldiers, arguing that many of them were privileged for having the possibility to be deferred. In contrast, many soldiers had no option as they belonged to poorest classes.

Interestingly, *The 'Nam* does not only feature soldiers but also journalists, thus the comics indirectly questions the role of the press in framing the news. Visually, TV screens and camera lenses functions as panels within panels that limit what the observer can see. Indeed, the press is generally held responsible for the disaffection of the American public opinion toward the Vietnam War cause; at the time, media raised questions about the ethical conduct of the nation. These negative feelings towards the war led to a cold national welcoming of the soldiers that served in Vietnam. Ironically, as issue #4 clearly shows, the photographers were able to move in and out of the conflict zone thanks to the military escorting them. Consequently, the media's portrayal of the troops seems to the soldiers an act of betrayal. However, the figure of the journalist is redeemed by Ed Marks who at the end of the series return to Vietnam as a reporter. He is respected by the soldiers as he shared their experience. He is praised for his empathic and not judgmental attitude. Ed Marks is haunted by the ghost of the past (probably PTSD symptoms) which soon fades into forms of re-memory, as his new job as a war reporter requires him to re-experience his trauma.

*The 'Nam* # 24 narrates the Tet Offensive, and in this recollection Adams' *Saigon Execution* serves as a point of refence to ground the narrative into real and well documented events. The photograph is reproduced through "a double-frame image – two

images presented one inside the other. The camera lens serves as an inner frame for the restaging of Adam's photograph reflected in vivid color" (Earle, 2017:140). This visual solution allows the reader to see the photographer performing his shooting of the event. The agency of the American photographer is called into question. His choice enters public accountability, as he is considered responsible for the framing the scene. The reflection on the limited vision and understanding of the spectator is reinforced by the fact that the reproduction of the original photo is incomplete. The eye of the camera mainly focuses on the shooter, the image of the victim is cropped. This stylistic choice does not only seek to represent the patronizing view of the photographer, but it also seems to invite a parallelism between Eddie Adams and the General Nguyen. They are both shooting, and their actions are synchronized. Adams's photo was awarded the Pulitzer Prize precisely because of its composition and the timing, as it fixed the exact moment in which the persecutor pulled the trigger. The photograph was praised because it immortalized an impending death, functioning as a "Memento Mori" (Sontag, 2008 [1977]).

The presence of the photographer inside the panel questions his agency. He is not presented as mere spectator or witness of a violent act; he participates to the scene. He urges the shooting of the scene, "holly --! Suu, Keep shooting! Just Keep shooting!" As Susan Sontag (2008 [1977]:11-12) observed, "photography is essentially an act of non-intervention […] the photographer has the choice between photograph and a life, to choose the photograph. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene". Comics problematize in a more evident way the artist's manipulation of the point of view. Images like texts are never neutral as they both frame and script an event. By pointing the camera towards a certain subject, the photographer limits the possibilities of what can be seen. While photos seem to portray "objective" reality, comics do not try to hide their staged nature. As noted by Will Eisner (2005[1985]:90) in his seminal work *Comics and Sequential Art,* "functioning as a stage, the panel controls the viewpoint of the reader; the panel's outline becomes the perimeter of the reader's vision and establishes the perspective from which the site of the action is viewed. This manipulation enables the artist to clarify activity, orient the reader and stimulate emotion."

The comic uses Eddie Adam's photograph to indict journalism as it is held responsible for the U.S. military loss. This inference seems to be supported by the fact that after the

panel representing the double shooting is followed by a panel featuring a Vietcong who states, "You win, running dogs! But only the battle! Only the battle!" the comic seems to point that photograph (among others) helped eroding the consensus over the American military engagement. Even though the comic adopts a conservative point of view, it is true that the press has the power to decide what is of public interest. The news they cover are inevitably framed by the cultural context in which the journalist work (e.g. pre-existing narratives, stereotypes, etc.), the market (e.g. stories must be compelling for the reader-consumer), and structural context (e.g. editors, publishers, etc.). By providing the first coverage of an event, journalist shape how an event is narrated and fixed into memory. Like memory, media also create narratives through selection. Media appropriate certain frame to make their stories convincing and help them resonate with the public, often by recurring to simplistic narratives (good vs. evil). Even though, they are perceived as "objective" narratives, newspapers respond to the same need of comics: narrate and entertain. War photograph are both informative and spectacular. Like comics, Hollywood movies often remediate war images both to create a realistic effect, but also to capitalize on the cinematic qualities of those photos.

Therefore, we can see how photographs are not merely representations of reality, but they also respond to carefully conceived agendas. The rhetorical function of photographs is also confirmed by Hamilton's (1989) observations about Adam's (1968) *Saigon's Execution*. According to him, Adam's photograph was successful because it resonated with the news of the height of the Tet Offensive. An earlier similar photograph was discarded by the press. Then, momentum is important to make images circulate, be effective, and resonate with the public. In addition to Adam's well known photographs, other photos[133] contributed to frame the memory of the American (as well as of the international) audience; among them, it is worth remembering Malcom Browne (1963) "Burning Monk", Eddie Adams' (1968) "Saigon Execution," Haeberle (1969) "Massacre at My Lai", Nick Ut's (1972) "Napalm Girl", and Hubert van Es' (1975) photograph portraying the fall of Saigon. In certain cases, media used these photos to validate their arguments without checking information about the context in which they were produced. For example, the men evacuating in Hubert van Es's photograph are usually interpreted

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[133] As it will be discussed in the third chapter, some of these photographs will be featured in post 9/11 graphic novels recollecting the event.

as a symbol of America's military defeat, however, they are not Americans, but Southern Vietnamese. This saturation of media coverage helped turning the narration of the war into an "iconic event". According to Patricia Leavy (2007) an event becomes iconic when it goes through three steps: extensive media coverage, political appropriation, and remediation in popular culture. The adaptation and manipulation of photographs also signals the passage of comics from being an instrument of propaganda to becoming a memory project. As Patricia Leavy (2007) discussed, memory projects are created when interested parties activate particular repositories of collective memory in order to bring certain aspects of the past into public eyes for political use.

Issue #75 tackles with one of the most controversial aspects of the war, the My Lai massacre. As Richard Slotkin discussed (1989:587) pointed out,

> The Maylai massacre was both aberrant and typical: aberrant, in that it was rare for that many American troops to massacre so many civilians 'point blank,' in one time and place; but typical in that 'the normal pattern' of the war of attrition simply spread the same kind of violence 'over a larger area [and] a longer period of time.' The power of Mylai as symbol derived not only from the cleverness with which the media framed and the antiwar movement exploited the tale but from its appropriateness as a metaphor for what had gone wrong with the war. it resonated not only with the sympathies and sentiments of civilians but withe feelings of normally compassionate officers and soldiers, who were haunted by the killing of civilians.

Even though the comics acknowledges this event, it tries to circumscribe it and minimize its historical relevancy. In its reconstruction of the event, *The 'Nam* indicts Calley's actions, but also the hypocrisy surrounding war rhetoric, "Why is My Lai a **war crime**, and Nagasaki **isn't**?" The comics recognizes that Calley did not respect Geneva Conventions, but it also questions why the U.S did not punish his actions more severely in order to separate war criminals from the soldiers that were simply doing their work, "Ironically Vietnam Veterans and the military demanded the harshest penalty for Calley while the peace activists send up a cry for compassion, saying Calley is a scapegoat for the military elite."

In its final issues, *The 'Nam* features also Vietnamese civilians fleeing their country as the war is close to end. Their presence in the narrative is particularly important as they rehabilitate America's image. As Yến Lê Espiritu observed,

> Having lost the Vietnam War, the United States had no "liberated" country or people to showcase, and, as such, the Vietnam War appears to offer an antidote to the "rescue and liberation" myths and memories. Yet, in the absence of a liberated Vietnam and people, the U.S. government, academy, and mainstream media have produced a substitute: the freed and reformed Vietnamese refugees (Espiritu, 2014:1)

Indeed, America is able to restore its image by projecting another myth that constructs America as "the nation of refuge," by casting the figure of the Vietnamese refugee as the purported grateful beneficiary of the U.S. "gift of freedom.

Don Lomax's *Vietnam Journal* (2002[1988]) follows a similar agenda. The comic book clearly attempts to encourage America's reconciliation with the only war it has lost. The memory project is already evident from the dedication, "to those we left behind." Scott 'Journal' Neithammer is the protagonist and narrator of the series. He arrives in Vietnam expecting to write a story about body counts and Communist insurgents, but he very quickly realizes that "the real story was in the bush with the slime, the stink, the constant fear and frustration of fighting a war that 'the powers that be' would not let us win" (Lomax, 2002[1988]:3). It is notable how even in this case the attitude towards journalists is ambivalent. Journal is not depicted as an antagonist to the troops, but one of them. He gains the soldier's respect by accompanying them on the field, and not by making interviews with Generals. However, the comics indicts the behavior of those journalists who put soldiers' lives at risk for gaining popularity, "facing death in wartime was part of a soldier's job. Dying for a juicy 15-second spot on the TV wasn't" (Lomax, 2002[1988]:82) Like Ed Marks, Journal' Neithammer strongly identifies with the soldiers (even holding weapons).

Thematically *Vietnam Journal* exploits similar narrative tropes and adopts the same arguments of *The 'Nam*. As Murray's comics, Don Lomax's *Vietnam Journal* justifies the act of killing as a consequence of the guerrilla and the soldiers' inability to distinguish friends from foes, "you think he's just a kid? You're wrong. There are no kids left in this goddam war!" (Lomax, 2002[1988]:6). At the same time, it also reiterates the Frontier myth more explicitly, "Montagnard are like the American Indians in the U.S." Shady and morally ambiguous characters seem the more suited to survive in this hostile environment outside civilization. The comics questions whether ruthless characters like Rhein were the product of the system or they were already crazy and bloodthirsty before being drafted. Hence, it is worth noticing that Rhein's brutality and violence are linked to his sexual impotency. His inability to have a sexual intercourse with a prostitute is a symbol of America's failed attempt to penetrate Vietnam. This reading seems to be supported by the fact that some issues before female Viet Cong were illustrated as nymphs. The implication of this depiction might transform the extension of American Manifest Destiny

to Asia into an act of hubris, thus casting the soldiers as tragic heroes. Indeed, the good deed of the American spirit is never questioned and characters like Journal and Teed are there to remind the reader about the possibility of redemption. Even though Journal and Teed are the good Americans, Rhein's brutality is never fully condemned because it secures the other characters' chance to survive, hence inferring that a certain dose of violence must be condoned because of the harsh situations in which soldiers must operate.

The comics also indicts the lack of institutional determination in the management of the war, "same old story. Too few people, spread too thin," and the lack of effective equipment, which the soldiers ironically calls "Mattel toys." The comics also indicts the antiwar movement, and it does so by showing their violent manifestation, "the crowd was one of the ugliest I had ever seen! The sight of that many combat troops at one time cause them to explode." In this episode, a brick thrown by a protester ends up killing a soldier who just returned from the conflict. The comics invite the reader to see the irony of the situation as protesters holds signs stating the famous motto "Make Love Not War." The major distinctions between Murrays and Lomax work is the use of raw emotions, gritty language, and violence. Indeed, Lomax managed to represent visceral and disturbing images (but not glorifying), because he published his work without the Comic Code seal of approval. Therefore, it can be easily noted that Lomax's work coopted the underground use of violence to promote conservative stances. Indeed, whereas the depiction of violence might be used to provoke an emotional response against it, one should also consider that violence has also alluring elements that keeps people watching it. In this regard, it is also important to remark that the use of obscenity and graphic images is also one of the characterizing elements of Vietnam War novels. As Stefano Rosso (2003:96) highlighted the use of obscenity allowed soldiers to signal how their condition was different from the one depicted by the bureaucracy and military establishment, which used euphemism to edulcorate reality. Similarly, Tim O'Brien (1991[1990]:68) stated that "As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil." However, in comics, this kind of language was rare, testifying the impact of censorship on war narratives and on the expressive development of the medium.

The revisionist project of Ledwell's *In-country Nam* (1986) can be observed also through the visual elements. In this mission focused narrative, human figures emerge out

of the shadows of the jungle. The Vietnamese people seem in tune with the jungle, which seems to have luring, degrading and corrupting effects on men. The landscape is here depicted as both exotic and deadly. In this scenario American soldiers can barely manage to survive. This comic recurs to orientalist features (lettering) and recuperates Asian caricature from world war II, when Japanese were portrayed as inhuman foes with extremely slanted eyes and sharp teeth.

Doug Murray returns on the Vietnam subject in 1990 when he publishes *Hearts and Minds – A Vietnam Love Story*. This graphic novel traced the Vietnam War through three lives in transition and a love triangle. The American soldier and his Viet Cong counterpart love the same woman.  The colonial message of this allegorical fantasy is not very subtle as the woman clearly represents Vietnam itself. Symbolically, the Vietnamese woman prefers the natural appeal of the Green Beret (who is capable of supporting her needs and give her shelter) to that of her own former husband who abandoned her during the conflict and placed her life at risk. Indeed, she was forced to become a prostitute until the American soldier saved her from her pimp. This love triangle becomes a tragedy once the former husband returns to claim his wife. The Viet Cong shoots the American soldier, and the Vietnamese woman commits suicide to avoid a reunion with her former husband. Therefore, we can see how this comic is trying to re-write the conflict in a patronizing way, enforcing the myth of the (white)American savior, transforming military loss in an almost victory (after all the American soldier manages to win the woman's heart), while portraying the good intensions of the Green Berets.

It is of note that in this revisionist climate, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons used the Vietnam War as a setting for their pioneering graphic novel, *Watchmen* (1987), which thoroughly questioned superheroes actions (as unambiguously on the side of good), their legitimacy and relation to democratic society, asking the reader whether we trust any person to have moral authority over another. This comic depicts an alternate (dystopic) universe in which the Watergate scandal never occurred, and Dr. Manhattan (a man with superhuman powers) secured the United States victory in Vietnam. Nixon is now in his sixth term in office thanks to a constitutional amendment.  This comic aims to make the reader aware that a free society can easily collapse into authoritarianism. The story is not concerned with the real Vietnam War, but its symbolic status in American history, a moment in which official narratives and the power in office started to be questioned. After

all the leitmotif of the graphic novel is a quote (appearing as a graffiti in the first chapter) from the Roman poet Juvenal's *Satires* "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" here translated as "Who watches the watchmen."

## 6. Will Eisner's Return to War Subjects

War scenarios already appeared in Eisner's early production, *The Spirit.* For example, *The Spirit* (1941) story, "The tale of the Dictator's Reform" featured Hitler coming to America to learn why they resisted his 'superior race' theory. By entering in contact with peace loving Americans and started appreciating their love for freedom he changes his ideas and wants to reform Germany with a promise to dismantle dictatorship. Yet, to impede these changes the lieutenants kill him and replace him with a double. As Christopher Murray (2011:199) observed, "this story amounted to a scathing attack on the cult of personality that lies at the heart of dictatorship." This mocking attitude toward the cult of personality is reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940). However, as Nicola Paladin (2017:381) maintained, in this comic World War II never played a pivotal role in the narration, as it was simply used to explain the social-cultural context in which the main protagonist operated. The focus was always on the main characters and their struggles.

Following the trends of the time, Will Eisner comic production would also be influenced by the war propaganda. Indeed, while America debated and prepared for war, and in response to the arousal of nationalist fervor, in 1941 Eisner created *Uncle Sam,* a patriotic superhero. As previously discussed, war provoked the emergence of a new superhero paradigm. Remarkably, Eisner experimented with both superhero subgenres: the nationalist superhero (e.g. Uncle Sam) and the prosocial superhero (e.g. *The Spirit*). However, it is important to remark the ideological differences that separate Simon and Kirby's *Captain America* from Eisner's *Uncle Sam*. As previously mentioned, Captain America embodies "zealous nationalism" (Jewett & Lawrence, 2004), in contrast, Eisner's *Uncle Sam* seems to personify what Jewett and Lawrence (2004:8) define as "prophetic realism," as it seeks to "redeem the world for coexistence by impartial justice that claims no favored status for individual nation."

*Uncle Sam* did not show any crusading tendency that inspired destructive conflicts. Eisner's character preferred less violent solutions through the submission to American

law. As Travis L. Cox (2016) remarks,

> This use of non lethal justice is significant, because it was consistent with his concern for democracy. Uncle Sam did not simply beat foes, as did other superheroes. Indeed, many issues ended with the enemy being handed over to the police or military so that they could go through the democratic process of justice – further emphasizing the character's principles (Cox, 2016:98)

In the comics, Uncle Sam did not seek out fights and he intervened only when a threat forced him to action. Eisner did not make Uncle Sam a fighter, but a familiar figure who showed up in times of need to provide support to the nation. War was not in his lifeblood, as he would rather mind his own business and spend his time doing other activities, e.g. fishing or walking through the forest. Uncle Sam is not characterized as an offensive force, but a defensive one.

His stories offer the opportunities to have a look at different realities that compose the nation, e.g. Midwestern towns, industrial factories, forests, military bases, and large urban areas. These different scenarios served to both create a connection between Uncle Sam and the people who lived in those areas and promote the image of the nation as a united entity. Indeed, propaganda serves a unifying element, giving people an objective to achieve and creating a common imagery. It is important to remark that both war and nations are cultural artifacts that need to be sold. As Anderson (1996 [1986]:6, original emphasis) discussed, nations are "*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know the most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the image of their communion." It is important to remark that the union depicted by Eisner was not free from harshness. As Travis L. Cox (2016:101) observed, the story line of the first issue used "a stylized location akin to *The Grapes of Wrath*, with poor Americans traveling during the Dust Bowl toward the hope of California." Thus, he argues that

> Readers familiar with Steinbeck's popular novel (which was published the previous year) would have immediately recognized this scenic choice and likely empathized with the difficulties these Americans were facing. However, while this setting choice presented an obstacle to overcome, more importantly it also represented an America that was open and free, allowing citizens to move where they pleased. (Cox, 2016:101)

The role of Uncle Sam as a unifying element is also reinforced by his dialogue with other important American figures, such as George Washington and Teddy Roosevelt. It is also important to remark that even though Uncle Sam was the main superheroes, his stories presented also average people without superpowers, emphasizing the role they could have against threats to the nations. Uncle Sam did not only defend the nation, but he also helped

to bring together American people. These comics recognized the role that each citizen played, independently from their social status. Indeed, during his run, Uncle Sam defended the nation in conjunction with US military forces, politicians, scientists, reporters, and fishermen. Even youngster contribution to the cause was welcomed. Like Captain America, Uncle Sam also shared its adventures with a young sidekick (Buddy). Comic artists created these sidekicks in order to give young readers a character with whom they could identify. Finally, it is important to remark that the use of Uncle Sam as a national symbol did not originate with Eisner's comics. Indeed, as Matthews (1908) observed, the origins of Uncle Sam character can be traced back to the war of 1812. Yet, its image was standardized only during World War I (Capozzola, 2008), when James Montgomery Flagg created the well-known recruitment poster.

Leslie's *Illustrated Weekly Newspaper* editors "planned to urge Americans to expand the country's military force, in case world events dragged them into the ongoing tragedy that Americans at that point still referred to as the European War" (Capozzola, 2008:3). The thirty-nine-year-old Flagg was assigned this task. Under a tight deadline and short on ideas; Flagg used his own reflection and a 1914 British military recruiting poster portraying Lord Kitchener, Britain's secretary of war and chief of its military recruitment, to create the iconic image of Uncle Sam. The picture first appeared on the cover of the July 16, 1916, issue of Leslie's under the heading "What Are You Doing for Preparedness?" This image reappeared later in the spring of 1917, on a U.S. Army recruiting poster, with its famous caption "I Want YOU." Uncle Sam's image had reassuring functions. As Capozzola pointed out this image was at the same time authoritative and familiar,

> Perhaps Americans found that their Uncle Sam, like all good uncles, helped them out: by turning the vast machinery of war mobilization into a family relation, he gave political power a personal face and made sense of the government's presence in everyday life. [..] And, like many uncles, he is very badly dressed. His formal attire conveys the solemnity of war's occasion, and his furrowed brow and piercing stare show his seriousness, but his silly hat and ill-fitting suit suggest that Uncle Sam doesn't usually do this. He reassures viewers that war is not in America's lifeblood; the nation, like its uncle, would rather be doing something else.

Hence, both reiterations of the Uncle Sam character (poster and comics) tried to reassure the audience about the brevity of the conflict by affirming America's intervention overseas as an exceptional phenomenon. In both cases, Uncle Sam becomes more than a character, a personification of the nation, a symbol of unity; his body becomes a unifying

metaphor projecting a certain image of the nation. However, it is important to point out that this abstraction inevitably reduces diversity, as the different components of the nation are summed up in a single, standardized image. A process reminiscent of the old motto, *E pluribus unum.* Will Eisner did not contribute only to the superhero genre, but also war comics, creating Blackhawk character, originally featured in *Military Comics* (1941). The story first issue is set in 1939 Warsaw, Poland. The Nazis led by Captain von Tepp are massing to rout the Polish Air Force, the only obstacle to their victory over Poland. During the Nazi attack, the brother and the sister of the protagonist are killed. Thus, the protagonist, as the only survivor, decides to become The Blackhawk, vowing to hunt down von Tepp and revenge his siblings.

Yet, the contribution of this artist to the war effort was not limited to his (super) heroic production, as Eisner was later enlisted to create comics for the Pentagon on war related issues. Eisner revolutionized army's training manuals, using comics as a tool (Conroy, 2009:62). In an interview Eisner recalled

> When I was drafted, kicking and screaming all the way, into the service in 1941—late '41, early '42 [...] I stopped at the Hollabird Depot in Baltimore, where a mimeographed sheet called *Army Motors* was being distributed. Together with the people there, because I had nothing to do, I helped develop its format. I began doing cartoons—and we began fashioning a magazine that had the ability to talk to the G.I.'s in their language. So, I began to use comics as a teaching tool [...] Preventive maintenance required voluntary cooperation on the part of the readers—the G.I.s. The military was faced with the problem of getting voluntary performance from its troops, so I proposed that one teaching tool that would be very viable would be comics—and they allowed me to try it. Meanwhile, the *Army Motors* idea became popular and the magazine became an enormously successful publication—I did a comic strip in it called *Joe Dope*, which I created (Yronwode, 2011 [1978])

The US Army employs sophisticated weapons, and thus it is faced with the task of communicating the maintenance of that technology to its soldiers, a widely diverse audience. So, one of the solutions that the Army came up with was to create a magazine in comic book format to teach soldiers how to maintain the equipment they used on the battlefield. During World War II. *Army Motors* was a magazine focused on military vehicle maintenance and was discontinued after World War II. The competence matured by Eisner during World War II will prompt the Army to hire the artist when the Korean War broke out in 1950. Eisner, who had since returned to civilian life, signed a contract for a new magazine, *P.S., The Preventative Maintenance Monthly*. This magazine aimed to teach unprepared soldiers how to effectively maintain the equipment needed for that conflict.

According to Eisner, comics can be effective means of communicating technical

information. In *Comics and Sequential Art*, he wrote: "A purely 'technical' comic, in which the procedure to be learned is shown from the reader's point of view, gives instruction in procedures, process, and task performance generally associated with such things as assemblies of devices or their repair. The performance of such tasks are [sic], in themselves, sequential in nature and the success of this art form as a teaching tool lies in the fact that the reader can easily relate to the experience demonstrated" (Eisner, 2005[1985]: 153).

However, this potentiality of the medium was not immediately fully understood or appreciated by everybody. Indeed, Eisner had to made annual negotiations to get his contract renewed, as each year the creation of Army manuals was put out to bid. Some of the members of the committee involved in the evaluation process considered the intellectual approach of the academia preferable. Yet, "After tests were conducted that overwhelmingly showed that soldiers better understood technical material when it was presented in Will's graphic approach, opposition grudgingly disappeared" (Eisner, 2010:8). When *P.S., The Preventative Maintenance Monthly* was up and running, the Pentagon sent Eisner on several missions to help him gather material for *P.S.* The government wanted him to go into the field where US Army stationed in order to get a feel of soldiers' lives. This was also a way for the author of *P.S., The Preventative Maintenance Monthly* to check the troops' reaction to the material he produced. Eisner used to spend "six weeks at a time annually" (Eisner, 2010:9). Eisner made his first visit to Korea in 1954, just after the war. For the first time, he witnessed war's destructive effects on the land, the military, and civilians. Thirteen years later, in 1967, the Government sent Eisner to Vietnam to observe another dirty conflict.

As Ann Eisner (2010:9) recalls many resented her husband's involvement in the Vietnam War, and yet she argues that even though he shared many antiwar stances, and considered the conflict a mistake, he wanted to support American soldiers, recognizing that many of them had been drafted into the conflict against their will. Therefore, he saw comics as a tool to help the troops remain safe by instructing them to best maintain and repair their equipment. Eisner's work did not hesitate to subtly question the official war rhetoric using irony and clichés.

One of the main characters of *Army Motors* and *P.S., The Preventative Maintenance Monthly* was Joe Dope, a screw-up soldier. Eisner used the names of his characters to

introduce some key element of their personality. In these two comics, names usually described either the characters' military specialty or their personality. Each character's peculiarity was often reinforced by the presence of a caption with a limerick. For example, the sixth issue of *P.S., The Preventative Maintenance Monthly* presents the following limerick about Joe Dope*,* "The gas pump was/ merrily clinking/ The big tank was/ thirstily drinking/ The fumes rolled/ down hill/ And gave Joe a thrill/ When he lit/ his cigar/ without thinking." The comedic effect of these lines was reinforced by being placed in a section titled *Joe's Dope Sheet* (even the title alludes through consonance to the disastrous situation in which the main character is)*.* Then*,* the psychological characterization and the grotesque physical representation of this character allowed Eisner to covertly comment on war through irony. Yet, he never criticizes soldiers, as even an incompetent character like Joe Dope is depicted as sympathetic. Joe Dope (mis)adventures grow on the reader who start feeling affection toward the character. As previously discussed, the serial nature of comics tends to make its characters familiar, and because of this intimacy with the reader new opportunities to rewrite mainstream narratives are born. The undermining massage of these comics did not go unnoticed. As Campbell (2010:12) recalls, Joe Dope "is very much at the grotesque end of Eisner's gallery of types, and this would cause problems with the brass later on." After his return home from Vietnam, Eisner illustrated the comics *The M-16A1 Rifle: Operation and Preventative Maintenance* that became part of the rifle's cleaning kit.

Eisner left his position as artistic director of *P.S., The Preventative Maintenance Monthly* in 1971. He decided to go back to the comics industry and experiment with longer stories. In 1978, he published *A Contract with God,* a seminal work that helped popularize the term graphic novel (which appears on the cover as a subtitle). It was the first of many long comics for Eisner. He decided to use the term graphic novel to refer to his new production in order to avoid the disdain that would have come with the term "comic book". As Eisner recalled in an interview,

> I was sitting there on the telephone talking to this guy, and I said, "I have this new thing for you, something very new." And he said, "What is it?" And I looked at it and realized that if I said, "A comic book," he would hang up. He was a very busy guy, and this was a top-level publishing house. So I called it a graphic novel, and he said, "Oh, that's interesting. Bring it up!" I brought it to him. He looked at it, looked at me over his granny glasses, and said, "You know, it's still a comic. We can't publish that kind of stuff." (Robinson, 2000:187)

Eisner's production had come a long way from his early superhero comics, as his new work narrated the struggle of average people, offering reflection on human condition, and

the tragedy of history. The recurring themes of his graphic novel production were immigrants (mainly Jewish ones), overcoming poverty, and discrimination. In many of his long stories, he recorded the social transformations that occurred in America during and after the Great Depression. For example, *Dropsie Avenue: The Neighborhood* (1995) traces the social changes of this avenue over four centuries recollecting the arrival of new poor immigrant groups and the departure of older residents. The different waves of new immigrants (Dutch, English, Irish, Jews, Italians, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans) created a complex portrait of the urban environment, which evolved in response to their arrival. The residents change, but their lives reenact the same cycle: life, death, and transformation.

However, it is important to remark that Will Eisner's graphic novel production did not put an end to his dialogue with war. Eisner tangentially touched upon his military service in his semi-autobiographical comic *To the Heart of the Storm* (1991). This graphic novel narrates the story of his parents' respective journeys to America and his own childhood. Those memories are framed as flashbacks while the soldier narrator travels via troop train to his first duty station. War would also be a central theme in his graphic novel *Last Day in Vietnam: A Memory (2000)*, where Eisner tells the stories of soldiers he met during his career as a cartoonist working for the army. Indeed, Eisner arrived in Vietnam during the autumn of 1967 to visit field units and pick up maintenance stories from automotive and armament shops. During his stay, he was escorted by the military in jeep or helicopter, an experience that allowed him to witness and document the life in that small community. In the first story "Last Day in Vietnam," the reader can have a glance of Eisner's own experience in Vietnam (interestingly, he is never portrayed as a character or addressed directly by his name). The first panel presents a soldier breaking the fourth wall and welcoming Eisner/the reader, "Welcome to **Bearcat…** sir! I'm your escort today!" The reader enters the war through a field trip on a helicopter. Through the helicopter's doors the reader can observe the unfamiliar landscape, rice paddies, the jungle, the camps and tiny soldiers and a dog walking hidden behind tall grass. When the three soldiers are picked up by their helicopter, they are mute, and their expression is blank. The three soldiers would later get off from the helicopter without saying a word as they return to the battlefield, returning to their previous activity. Their actions are portrayed as mechanical, part of a routine they must perform as their duty.

Eisner's story focuses on soldiers' "in transit" experience as they are called to adapt and survive the new environment coping with the forces that govern their destiny. This is particularly evident in "Last Day in Vietnam" as the officer does not want to remain in the camps during an attack in his last day of service, "Listen Man! I'm not about to spend the night here…I'm rotating! This is my last day!". This graphic novel is particularly unique as the narrative is not merely centered around the daily hostilities of war and military assaults, but it takes time to portray soldiers as people with passions, fears and desire to survive. The anatomical accuracy and the study of the soldiers' facial expressions and bodily reactions to the events help the reader to get an insight into their humanity. Indeed, we witness the officers' fear about being trapped in the conflict in his last day, his desperation while trying a way to survive, and his relief when he manages to catch the helicopter that will bring him home.

War is portrayed as an ironic and tragic event. In "Periphery", reporters drink at sidewalk cafés and discuss the war as if they were "reporting a football match," debating about the best political and military action the government should take. They can discuss those actions so nonchalantly because they are 'objective' recorders not directly involved in the event. However, this assumption starts to be challenged as soon as the focus starts to steadily turn toward a reporter isolated from the rest of group. This character is drinking. This unknown figure gradually acquires more importance as he is staged on the foreground. In the final panel, the man collapses after drinking too much, and the Vietnamese guide informs the reader that the reporter found his boy "blown to shred" and "it was his war now!" So, the comics reminds us how an event assumes different meaning to different people. It also indirectly indicts the 'objective' narration of war that turns dead soldiers into anonymous figures, a process that makes it easier to deal with the loss and tragic events while distancing oneself from them and not being held accountable.

This sense of ironic tragedy is also present in "A Purple Heart for George". In this story, a drunk soldier named George rails about being a coward in a monologue with a battle of spirit. The alcohol helps him find some courage pushing him to write a letter asking to be transferred from the world of clerks to the real combat. Yet his colleagues tear the letter every week as they know that George doesn't even remember what he does while drunk. However, one day the new clerk forgets to check the mail on time and George is shipped by accident to the combat zone. He ends up dead in the conflict but

receives a medal for his heroism. In Eisner's work, the reception of the "purple heart" is not praised as the fulfillment of one's duty, but as an ironic moment as George finally managed to prove its worth by making the ultimate sacrifice, a martyrdom that is not the result of a choice, but the consequence of a tragic destiny.

Eisner storytelling is particularly poignant as he puts the human at the center of this narrative. In contrast to other war comics, the conflict is never glorified and there is no moral lesson to learn out of it. Even though his attitude towards soldiers is sympathetic, it never turns into an apology for their action: his characters are complex, and their vices (and often also naivety) are what grounds them. This complexity prevents any easy moral judgment of the situation, as characters might perform contradictory behaviors. For example, in "Hard Duty" the protagonist takes care of children in an orphanage after the army removed him from the action because he loved killing and was good at it. At the same time, the administrator of the orphanage recognizes how the protagonist is one of the few people who have concerns about the well-being of those kids and the final panel shows him playing with them.

The comic informs the reader that these kids were Amerasian[134], "children of local girls and your soldier" (Eisner, 2000:66). Even though it does not condemn or judge the moral conduct of the soldiers, this story is particularly thought-provoking because it reflects on the material consequences of war on the local population highlighting an often-neglected part of history. Indeed, Amerasians grew up as the relics of an unpopular war, connecting two worlds but fitting into neither of them. Most of them never met their fathers, and many among them were abandoned by their mothers at the gates of orphanages or discarded in trash cans. They were taunted, pummeled, and mocked by schoolmates because they had "features that gave them the face of the enemy — round blue eyes and light skin, or dark skin and tight curly hair if their soldier-dads were African-Americans" (Lamb, 2009: web). Their destiny was to become waifs and beggars, living in the streets and parks of South Vietnam's cities, sustained by a single dream: to get to America and find their fathers.

Finally, it is striking to notice how in this graphic novel the Vietnamese are almost absent. This is particularly revealing as it shows how communities tend to commemorate

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[134] In the first chapter, while dealing with the memory of the Korean War, we already discussed how war produced Eurasian children, the offspring of American soldiers with local women. As in the Korean War, Pearl S. Buck helped raising awareness about these children through her associations.

just those who are considered kin, be it by blood, affiliation, identification, sympathy, and empathy. As Avishai Margalit (2002) argued, we naturally feel a bond with those we feel near, and this affinity gives the 'communities of memory' their power. He maintains that a

> community of memory is a community based not only on actual thick relations to the living but also on thick relations to the dead. It is a community that deals with life and death, where the element of commemoration verging on revivification is stronger than in a community based merely on communication. It is a community that is concerned with the issue of survival through memory (Margalit, 2002:69).

This loyalty towards one's group inevitably leads towards forms of justification of its members actions by understanding their fragility. However, this complexity is usually not recognized in the enemy. Therefore, this project makes also evident the connection between remembrance and representation. Indeed, post conflict war comics make it evident how war are not only fought on the battlefield but also through memory and pop culture, as those media might influence what voices are heard and what voices are silenced or disremembered.

## 7. Of Mice and…: Beyond Good and Evil

As Jay Winter remarked (2007:384), memory became "a subject of increasing attention in the 1980s and 1990s, when posttraumatic stress disorder became the umbrella term for those (as it were) stuck in the past." He maintained that "The memory boom […] arrived in part because of our belated but real acceptance that among us, within our families, there are men and women overwhelmed by traumatic recollection.". However, the memory of the recent Vietnam War was not the only one to be debated (and re-written) in those years. In 1985 there was a short lived (but extensively covered) controversy over Reagan's visit to the Bitburg cemetery in West Germany (the resting place of young SS men killed during World War II). In this occasion Reagan stated that "German soldiers buried in the Bitburg cemetery were victim of the Nazis as surely as the victims in the concentration camps" (Novick, 2000:227). This visit polarized American public opinion, testifying that the Holocaust had entered America's public consciousness. As Peter Novick (2000:207) discussed, "Since the 1970s, the Holocaust has come to be presented — come to be thought of — as not just a Jewish memory but an American memory." Similarly, Jay Winter, commenting the construction of the Holocaust Memorial Museum (in 1993), argued that

> The Redemptive elements in the story surround it on the Mall. They tell us of the wider struggle for tolerance, for freedom of religion, for freedom from persecution; they locate the Holocaust within the American narrative, itself configured as universal. Here we have arrived at the right-hand side of the hyphen 'Jewish-American' (Winter, 2007:371)

Accordingly, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*[135] came out in a time when American society started to publicly discuss the horror of the Holocaust (Landsberg, 2004; Baetens & Frey, 2015). His use of personal/familial memories can be interpreted as a choice to avoid the cooptation of his parents' Holocaust experience into either the 'good war' narrative or the 'immigrant narrative'. Indeed, in *MetaMaus* Spiegelman recalls,

> In 1985, somebody showed me an interview with Steven Spielberg that indicated he was producing a feature-length animated cartoon about Jewish mice escaping the anti-Semitic pogroms of Russia to set up a new life in America. I believed that Don Bluth, the director, has seen the *Maus* chapters in *RAW* and I just imagined the story conference that led to *An American Tail:* 'Okay. The Holocaust is kind of a bummer, you know, but maybe if we do a *Fiddler on the Roof* thing with cuter mice, we could make a go of it.' I was terrified their movie would come out before my book was finished. Fred Jordan of Grove Press tried to console me, saying, 'Why are you so upset? All they stole is your high concept and, frankly, your high concept stinks.' But the confusion could have left me being perceived as somehow creating a kind of twisted and gnarled version of a Spielberg production rather than what I'm quite sure was the case: *An American Tail* was a sanitized reworking launched from the *Maus* concept. And just a few years ago my friend, Aline Kominsky, told me her mother praised me: 'That Art Spiegelberg, he's such a talented boy! Not only did he do *Maus*, but he did *E.T.* (Spiegelman, 2011:78)

By making America the center of the narration, Spielberg reinforced the image of the U.S. as place of refuge. In this regard, it is important to remark that America started to publicly discuss the Holocaust only in the 1970s, a time when US morality and righteousness were questioned. Even though, Spiegelman's narration of Jewish persecution during World War II (through the experience of his father) did not produce a counter-narrative that aimed to disrupt the official narration of the event, it intended to supply a new perspective linking history to (his) story. His narration is more about families than about nations.

This comic had the merit to reveal that the linkage between different generations is very central to the concept of memory, as traumatic experiences may be passed to us by older generations. So, it should not be surprising the fact that this work played a pivotal role in the elaboration of the concepts of "postmemory" (Hirsch, 2012) and "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg, 2004). Despite the differences existing between these two notions, they both refer to the possibility of transmitting traumas to people who did not experience

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[135] The first volume of *Maus* was published in 1986 and the second volume in 1991. However, preliminary concepts that would be developed in *Maus* (e.g. the cat-mouse metaphor) already appeared in *Funny Aminals* [sic] #1 (1972) and some of the chapters as a work in progress already started appearing in RAW magazine in 1980.

the event directly. Hence, this comic did not only enter the current debate about the Holocaust, but it also offered new perspectives through which analyze trauma and memory and their interconnection with media. This work is also particularly fascinating because it shows the interrelation between comics and memory. Indeed, it is important to notice how comics gave Spiegelman not only a medium through which narrate his parents' sufferings during World War II, but also a language through which reflect and problematize the legacy that this event generated. This graphic novel contributed to the growing popularity of autobiographical comics that deal with traumatic events on national and/or global scale.

In the comic, Vladek (Art Spiegelman's father) is often portrayed while repairing and recycling objects. For example, in a scene Vladek bends down beside a trash can to recuperate some piece of wire. This behavior can be interpreted as a consequence of the camps economy, but as Landsberg (2004) observed, this action may also be seen as

> an allegory for what the text itself perform. The recirculation of the wire becomes a metaphor for the recirculation of the Holocaust through a different medium – the comic book – indicating that when one puts into a different medium new insights, new possibilities, emerge. More broadly, the recirculation of the wire allegorizes the potential usefulness of the Holocaust in America as a way of thinking about the recirculation of "waste" for productive ends. (Landsberg, 2004: 116)

Similarly, the creation of Maus can be interpreted as an act of repair and recycle of a found object, Vladek's memory. Indeed, Art Spiegelman has no firsthand experience of the Holocaust, thus his memory can only exist through an act of repair and (re)construction. Indeed, having no direct experience, Art can only rely on his father's memory (Vladek burned his wife notebook after she committed suicide, thus eliminating the possibility of knowing Anja's version of the events), and external sources.

However, Vladek's story and official History do not always provide overlapping narratives. On some occasions Art Spiegelman needs to repair such inconsistencies. For examples, when he tells his father, "I just read about the camp orchestra that played as you marched out the gate," Vladek replies "An orchestra... No, I remember only marching, not any orchestras" (Spiegelman, 2003 [1986-1991]:214). The visual solution adopted by Art Spiegelman was to draw a line of prisoners standing between Vladek and the Orchestra (figure 19). Thus, the prisoners functioned as an optic obstacle as they limited Vladek's vision, while providing an explanation for Vladek's oblivion of such detail. As Polak argued (2017:29), graphic narratives use

point of view and focalization as methods of drawing attentions to the textual mediation between reader and event. While the events depicted are often "true," the reader is aware of the fictional nature of the piece as well, and these dual elements suggest to the reader that the story at issue is not the "whole" story, instead highlighting elements that have been obscured through focus on the real "story."

Therefore, comics can make the author's "careful manipulation of point of view" and the reader's "affective and ethical negotiation" evident. Thus, making the frame a subject to be inquired from both ethical and aesthetic perspectives. Yet, subjectivity and Art's limited point of view do not hinder his archival work. As Charles Hatfield (2005) argued,

> Rhetorically, *Maus*'s emphasis on what Art does not know (such as scenic details, Jewish liturgical tradition, or how to choose among conflicting accounts) reinforces the image of Spiegelman as a painstaking researcher. By showing himself finding out about these things, he authenticates his history all the more (Hatfield, 2005:141).

In both *Maus* and (especially) *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman has extensively detailed the research and creative process behind his work to validate his story as an authentic Holocaust account. *MetaMaus* provides the reader the possibility to listen to Vladek's recorded testimony and dialogues with his son, which were the basis for the narrative of his book. Moreover, comics has the ability to involve the reader in this reconstructive process. Indeed, comics is a participatory medium, or cool medium (McLuhan, 2017[1964]) that requires its readers to make sense of the blank space (gutter) that separates each panel (McCloud, 1993). Comics does not aim to reconstruct a "truthful" and "objective" narration of the past, but it attempts to produce emotional responses, actively engaging the reader into the narration. Indeed, as Jill Bennett (2005:36) argued, "Images have the capacity to address the spectators' own bodily memory to touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion."

Using a postmodern poetics (Hutcheon, 1988; 1999), Spiegelman demonstrated how comics can create connections between past and present, facts and fiction, highbrow and lowbrow culture. Maus showed how comics have the (potential) inner ability to "make chronological and coherent the incomprehensible, the juxtaposing of past and present insists that the past and present are always present – one doesn't displace the other the way it happens in film" (Spiegelman, 2011:165). Spiegelman used these inner characteristics of comics language to problematize the notion of representability/ irrepresentability, absence and presence, past and present in relation to the Holocaust.

Furthermore, Spiegelman used comics to inquire the ethics of memory. Indeed, one of

Spiegelman's main preoccupation when creating Maus was to avoid kitsch representations of the Holocaust and the maudlin sentimentalizing notion of suffering (Spiegelman, 2011). He successfully achieved this aim by playing with the reader's expectation. For example, the worn-out cat and mouse metaphor to represent respectively (German) persecutors and persecuted (Jews), in almost a Tom & Jerry-like situation, is destabilized, as Spiegelman (2011) explained,

> The cats are actually the most lovable of the animals in the Maus zoo. Right? If you're given a choice of, "would you rather be a cat, a mouse, or a pig?" lots of people would say, "Oh, cats sound good." That of course has the advantage of making the reader, in this particular case complicit with murderers. Even in the way that they're drawn, the cats have the most human of the faces (Spiegelman, 2011:128)

The cat and mouse metaphor is used to talk about the racial dehumanization process in abstract terms. An abstraction used to question the reader's identification with the characters. Yet, in this play with the reader the text never portrays Jews as mere victims. Indeed, on a few occasions, the comics reminds the reader that Jews may also (re)produce racist stereotypes. Indeed, Vladek calls Africans American "shvartsers," an attitude "widely shared by his survivor friends" as Art noticed. Maus creator would later comment "look, suffering doesn't make you better, it just makes you suffer!" (Spiegelman, 2011:36). The mouse metaphor does not only stand for the Jew, but for the degrading process through which the enemy, as a life that can be wasted, or *homo sacer*, according to Giorgio Agamben's (2005[1995]) definition, is constructed. Indeed, In *MetaMaus* Spiegelman explains,

> Dehumanization is just basic to the whole killing process to the whole killing project — America demonized the Japanese during World War II (it's what primed us from dropping the bomb on Hiroshima) and the Abu Ghraib torture phots suggest that the beat goes on. The ideas of Jews as toxic, as disease carriers, as dangerous subhuman creatures, was a necessary prerequisite for killing my family (Spiegelman, 2011:115).

So, Spiegelman consciously avoids any simplistic reduction of the event to a good versus bad narrative. While the moral representation of World War II preceded any news regarding the Holocaust, the horror committed by the Nazis reinforced that narrative. However, Spiegelman tries to prevent this simplistic reductionism by rendering ethnic identities as masks that can be easily worn by anybody. The graphic novel reinforces this idea by also showing episodes of racial passing. Thus, reminding the reader that this type of discrimination may affect other groups as well.

*Maus* had certainly the merit to show the potential of the medium as a memory

mediator. Yet, it is important to remark that this graphic novel managed to trigger a public debate about the Holocaust because, when it came out, American society was ready to face this topic. Previously, comics hinted at the Holocaust, but they did not manage to spark any public discussion. For example, in 1945 Captain America comics already alluded to the existence of crematory furnace in the concentration camps. Yet this reference did not produce any debates. Similarly, Bernard Krigstein "Master Race" featured in *Impact #1* (1955) published by EC did not make the public recognize comic as a high form of art. As discussed in the first chapter, the artistic and narrative quality of its comics did not save EC from censorship. On the contrary, Spiegelman's work successfully ignited a conversation on the ethics and aesthetics of holocaust representation, which Spiegelman (2011) summarized in three main questions: "why comics?" "why the Holocaust?" "why mice?"

One of the reasons behind the use of comics as a tool to reconstruct memory projects is their ability to reconstruct the past avoiding the linearity and teleology generally associated with history. The past and the present may coexist within the same page. Sometime present reconstruction and readings interacts with images of the past re-signifying them. For example, Spiegelman appropriate and adapt Margaret Bourke-White's portrait of Buchenwald survivors, drawing his father inside the picture. This insertion is reinforced by the presence of an arrow. Hence, comics do not only create interpretative schemata (good vs. evil), but also incorporate, emulate and recirculate images originated from other media, e.g. press photography and documentary footage. As previously discussed, 1940s war comics featured posed photographs of Allied soldiers and pictures of the equipment to promote an interventionist attitude and depict the army as successful. However, in *Maus'* case[136], they are not used as mere paratext, but they are incorporated into the narrative to be questioned. They become what Hirsch (2012:61) defines as "points of memory", that are "points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal remembrance and cultural recall." This change of functions is triggered by the passage of time. As the original context of production of these images becomes more evanescent, their significance results blurred, opening spaces for their reinterpretations. New viewers reinterpret those images according to the needs

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[136] A similar appropriation and manipulation of photographs can be seen in Doug Murray's *The 'Nam*. However, in *The 'Nam,* photographs are not used to link private and public histories.

of the present. Thus, this transition mirrors the movement from memory to postmemory, as what was once public is relocated into present through an act of projection. In *Alternative Comics* (2005), Charles Hatfield has an insightful discussion of Vladek's staged camp souvenir photograph[137] that appears two pages before the end of *Maus*. The scholar argues that:

> This photo brings a non-metaphorical Vladek into the context of metaphor, finally overturning Siegelman's substitution of animal faces for human ones. Beyond functioning as privileged testimony to Vladek's 'real' existence — a sign that someone, somewhere, really posed for this photo, and may have really lived this story — the photo works ironically on a number of levels, and actually destabilizes rather than affirms *Maus*'s documentary realism. […] we are told that this photograph represents a *carefully constructed* evocation of Nazi camps. It's a souvenir, after all, paid for and posed by Vladek […] This is not a documentary photo, then, but a message intended for its beloved Anja, whom he wants to reassure. It is less a depiction of the reality of the camps than a gift, to remind his wife that Vladek has survived and remains the sturdy, handsome man she has known. […] For Spiegelman's characters, as in real life, photographs testify — they serve as documents, mementos, and declarations of feeling — yet the inescapable animal metaphor belies their seeming authenticity. Even more, the reproductions of actual photographs, and in particular the crucially positioned photo of Vladek, unravel Spiegelman's artifice (Hatfield, 2005: 146-149).

As Charles Hatfield remarked, Spiegelman's use of photographs reveals their intersubjective nature. 'Truths' are often the product of negotiations as different interpretation of reality must be reconciled. Indeed, these photographs do not represent uncomplicated assertion of truth, but mainly how father and son cooperate to create meaning (also trough imagination). Hence, this graphic novel uses the photographic medium to challenge ideas of authenticity in autobiographical comic[138].

Therefore, representations of the past may diverge among different groups, and some of them might be excluded from more comprehensive cultural narratives, provoking a social impoverishment. This will be also relevant in chapter four discussion on Vietnamese American counter-memories. Then, we can see how *Maus* provided a narrative model to be exploited inspiring the production of other biographical graphic novels. As hitherto discussed, comics can make those (counter) memories visible, yet in order to achieve this goal they must also intercept a social demand for this kind of

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[137] This photograph is incorporated in the narrative structure of the text. Unlike the adaptation of Margaret Bourke-White's shot, this a real photograph, a postwar souvenir that shows us Vladek in human disguise and not his mouse persona.

[138] As it will be discussed in chapter 4, diasporic Vietnamese graphic artists also incorporate photographic images in their work. Like in Spiegelman's graphic novel, this use reinforces the diaristic quality of the narrative, it creates an emotional impact, but it also raises questions about authenticity and storytelling. The metanarrative nature of this comics reminds the reader that photography does not speak the truth because of its indexical nature, but it needs to be interpreted and contextualized. The interpretation of (iconic and/or personal) shots is often the result of mediations among different narratives.

narratives. This need for recognition unveils two import characteristics of the relation between comics and memory. First, comics are rhetorical tools that needs momentum in order to successfully disseminate their memory projects. Second, memories can become commodities to be sold and consumed. Like other media, comics have the potential to create images that will stick with future generations. Graphic narratives present "memory as vis" (Assmann, 2002[1999]), exploiting its functional nature, as meaningful elements are selected in order to produce a coherent story. Despite not being necessarily historically accurate, comics are able to (re)create images that resonate with cultural memory. As we already started to see, comics provide schemata (e.g. good vs. evil) through which one can interpret an event, but also supply interpretative and representational models for future experiences. Maus can function as a clear example also of these phenomena. Yet it is important to remark that these characteristics do not belong exclusively to documentary and autobiographical graphic novel, but also mainstream comics. As Murray observed (2011:237), "superheroes have continually revisited the war, using it as a myth of origin, a point of return, and departure, to which the essential values and mythic core of the genre are inextricably bound".

Comics (like movies) have the potential of creating a global collective memory. Indeed, they have the power to bring viewers into a past they have not lived, making memory a transportable commodity. They can create "imagined communities" through the dissemination of memories of the past, enabling the consumer to inhabit a particular experience, a phenomenon described by Landsberg (2004) as "prosthetic memory." Yet, the memory project behind these mass cultural products can diverge significantly. *Maus* used comics language to produce a counter-memory (by supplying a new perspective that aims to investigate the relation between personal and global histories) and spark a discussion about the Holocaust. As hitherto discussed, *Maus* did not only focus on a personal story of oppression, but it also engaged with themes like history, time, subjectivity, and fragmentation, creating a self-reflexive metanarrative. In contrast, the various reiterations of Captain America's origin story generated prosthetic memories for nationalistic purposes. These reiterations do not produce a counter-memory but a mythology, a conservative system of values that serve to legitimize the present and sell the American way. As Lipsitz (1990:217) argued, "Because myths emphasize the eternal and the cyclical, it speaks more to reconciliation with existing power realities than to

challenges against them. […] myth can explain the past and order the present, but it does so only by accepting the inevitability of the status quo."

Therefore, the formulation of comics as a rhetorical tool and "memory as vis" opens up opportunities to inquire the ethics of memory. Memories are not objective or plain depictions of the past. In contrast, they are subjective and highly selective reconstructions. Versions of the past change with every recall, in agreement with the needs and interests of the person or group commemorating in the present. So, we might speculate about the intentions and effect of these "memory projects," question the point of view adopted, search for neglected narratives, analyze how "iconic events" (Leavy, 2007) are transformed into commodities, and examine how in certain cases these memories have been eroded, emptied of the history that constructed them, leading towards the production of kitsch narratives. In the latter case we are no longer dealing with a story that has relevance in the creation of collective memory. Overexposure and recursion may reduce the social meaning of an event, reducing it to a mere worn-out cliché or plot device. Thus far, we have seen how comics can perform different functions. They can recycle earlier form of remembrance, provide cultural frame that can be used to interpret new events, create myths, draw attention to neglected stories, but also open up opportunities for counter-narratives and rewriting.

Finally, the connection between *Maus* and Vietnam is not limited to the fact that these memories received public and scholar attention in the same years. As previously discussed, Vietnam provided the opportunity to retrospectively question and revisit the World War II accounts. This claim might also hold true (to a certain extent) for Spiegelman's *Maus*. Even though the comic never references Vietnam's explicitly (like Vonnegut) or implicitly (like Pynchon), Vietnam and Korean Wars indirectly influenced Spiegelman artistic production. In *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman recognizes the influence that Harvey Kurtzman had on him through both his *MAD* and non-*MAD* comics,

> Kurtzman's non-*Mad* work - the war comics that he wrote, edited and sometimes drew in the early '50s, *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales* - were well-researched stories of war that came from, if not an antiwar position exactly, perhaps a humanistic tradition. They were in sharp contrast to the propaganda pin-ups of the other war comics that were coming out during the Korean War, like Stan Lee's Combat Kelly, where we'd get a grizzled GI tossing a grenade while snarling, 'Here, ya yellow-skinned Commie monkey! This one's from my Aunt Tillie!' Kurtzman GIs were scared children in uniform who are about to get killed in something too big for them to understand. The stories were somehow profound, historically accurate and they undoubtedly informed the making of Maus (Spiegelman, 2011:190).

EC's influence was not limited to Kurtzman's work, but also Krigstein comic "Master Race" which narrated the Holocaust in a realistic way. This comic was singular because it visualized death camps in 1955, before the Eichmann Trial (1961), which brought for the first time the Nazi genocide of European Jew into the public sphere on an international level.

Moreover, Spiegelman's artistic career shows his extended and pivotal role in the artistic movement from which not only *Maus* but also other of contemporary comics are indebted, the underground comix. As previously discussed, Maus has it roots on a comic created by Spiegelman for *Funny Aminals*, an underground comix which so the collaboration of Robert Crumb and Justin Green. Indeed, Art Spiegelman recalls,

> Actually, it all started with me trying to draw black folks. In 1971, when I was twenty-three, I was part of an extended community of underground comix artists centered in San Francisco, that had come together in the late '60s in the wake of R. Crumb's *Zap Comix*. A cartoonist pal, Justin Green, was put in charge of getting together a comic book called *Funny Aminals* […] I could draw Ku Klux Kats and an underground railroad and some story about racism in America. That seemed really exciting for a couple of days until I realized it could be received as one more example of the trope that Crumb had consistently mined with Angelfood McSpade and other willful racist caricatures: the return of the repressed […] After my self-excoriating doubts settled in, I realized that this cat-mouse metaphor of oppression could actually apply to my more immediate experience. This development took me by surprise - my own childhood was not a subject for me (Spiegelman, 2011:112-113).

The undergrounds remained tremendously influential even after their gradual disappearance. According to Roger Sabin (2005:174), the slow decline of the underground was due to many factors: lawsuits for obscenity (e.g. Disney suited *Air Pirate Funnies* for representing Mickey Mouse smoking a joint and engaging in sexual activities), the sky-rocketing paper costs, and the promulgation of anti-paraphernalia laws in 1973, which shutdown the headshops in many states. Consequently, without a network of distribution underground, comics were short lived, and this led to experimentations to make the underground enter the mainstream. Art Spiegelman himself tried to keep the underground spirit alive, first through his co-editorship of the comix anthology magazine *Arcade* (with Bill Griffith), and later through his avant-garde graphic anthology *Raw* (with his wife Françoise Mouly), where the first chapters of *Maus* originally appeared in serial form. Then, to fully understand and appreciate *Maus* one must acknowledge its roots in underground comix, from which it inherited its confessional poetics. Ergo, *Maus* (like in *The Shadow of No Towers*) stems from a profound understanding of comics tradition and conventions which allows Spiegelman to confidently reinvent the medium. However, as Joseph Witek discussed,

while comics such as American Splendor, Maus, and Comanche Moon would not exist had there been no underground comix, they are not themselves undergrounds, and their difference lies in their attitude towards mainstream America; such writers as Jackson, Spiegelman, and Pekar now actively court a general reading audience. As the words 'underground' and 'counterculture' suggest, the comix set themselves up in opposition to the dominant culture of the 1960s and 1970s, and much of their energy comes from their persistent efforts to offend the sensibilities of bourgeois America. […] Sill, the adversarial stance of the undergrounds imposed its own limitations. Works of Art which set out to offend most of the public are, if successful, reduced to preaching to the converted, and the unrestrained satire of the undergrounds did at times descend to sophomoric in-group smugness (Witek, 1989:52).

This change of sensibility is also visible in Art Spiegelman work, and specifically in the differences that separate his 1972 "Maus" from his 1986-1991 *Maus*. Spiegelman reworked on his approach to the Holocaust eliminating all the humorous elements and cultural jokes that hindered the seriousness of the story, e.g. in the 1972 story the narrator was named Mickey, a clear reference to Disney and American pop culture at large. As already discuss, the final version of *Maus* does not constructs the Holocaust as an American experience, but as a personal one. The elimination of inner jokes allowed the comic to become more profound, grounding the narrative into a specific experience. This new 'less is more' approach can also be observed in the evolution of Spiegelman rendition of the cats and mice, which became more stylized.

Moreover, the comparison of these two works shows how the mouse and cat metaphor has evolved in time. As Joseph Witek (1989:109) pointed out,

The central difference Between "Maus" and *Maus* is that the first version is an allegory, thinly disguised at best, while the second is an animal comic book. The distinction makes all the difference. That is, though anthropomorphized animal cartoons and comics undoubtedly trace their formal origins to beast fables and folktales, the 'funny animal' genre of comics has developed its own distinctive, peculiar conventions and metaphysics.

Whereas "Maus" draws from the animal fable tradition where animals were given stereotyped psychological traits, Maus uses the comics 'funny animals' tradition to present psychological complex characters. In comics, animal like features are mere vestiges. Pluto and Goofy have both dog traits, but only the former is a real dog. This is important because even though the cat-mouse figurative representation is a racial/ethnic metaphor, mice (Jews) are not essentialized. Hence, Vladek is not an emblematic Jew, but Art's father. His experience cannot comprehend the Holocaust experience in its totality, and yet the personal can illuminate new aspects of this complex event. This interrelation between History and family dynamics will be also central in the configuration of the diasporic Vietnamese community. This attention to family dynamics helps to give the

reader a different perspective on war, moving away from the combat focused narrative that characterized previous comics.

## CHAPTER 3: REMEMBERING THE VIETNAM WAR AFTER THE WAR ON TERROR

### 1. Remembering World War II and Vietnam after 9/11: Reviving and Contesting the "Dream"

As hitherto discussed, initially, World War II provided schemata (good vs. evil) to frame following conflicts. Yet, the reiteration of the 'good war' narrative would turn to be unsuccessful during the subsequent wars in Korea and Vietnam, as these conflicts problematized the meaning of American patriotism. Because of these wars (especially Vietnam), the history of America itself became subject of cultural debate. For this reason, a decade after the Vietnam War, different authors recurred to another myth (the Frontier[139]) to reconcile the ambiguities that American society was not able to solve through analytical thought. The Reagan era (pop culture) narratives about the Vietnam War abridged reality, yet these oversimplifications were their strength as they provided patterns through which explaining what happened while projecting the nation toward reconciliation. Indeed, 1980s and 1990s comics attempted to use the soldiers' physical and psychological sufferings as means to redefine the meaning of that conflict.

Even though these new wars triggered a process of historical revision of the previous one, these counter-narratives did not completely erase the perception of World War II as the 'good war', a reading of the past reinforced by both the military victory and the Holocaust (it might not be a case that America started to openly debate the Shoah in the 1970s), which casted the Nazis as the ultimate form of evil. The government and the mass media managed to narratively construct US involvement overseas as a fight against the morally repugnant ideologies of Nazism, Fascism, and militarism. US military intervention overseas was justified: it was the response to a sudden attack, happened without a declaration of war and without explicit warning. For these reasons, as Piehler (1995: 127-128) highlighted, "In contrast to the aftermath of the First World War, no significant revisionist school emerged questioning the wisdom of America's entering the

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[139] As previously discussed, the Frontier myth provided an interpretive frame to discuss the Vietnam War. However, as we will see in this chapter different authors will appropriate it to illuminate different aspects of the war. Each author also attributes a different meaning to it; the Frontier is either reconstructed as a (colonial) adventure, an encounter with the wilderness or as a genocide. Each interpretation of the Frontier aims to validate a different reading of the American G.I.s experience in Vietnam: were they bringing civilization? Were they misguided and misdirected heroes? Were they victim of Vietnam's wilderness? Were they murderers? Was the American War in Vietnam a genocide?

war in Europe. Revisionism was only a minor undercurrent—a few old isolationists and, later, neo-isolationists."

Considering the moral values imbedded in World War II narratives, it should not be surprising that images of that conflict would be evoked during the more recent "War on Terror." After the destruction of the World Trade Center, the use of World War II narratives had not only reassuring and nostalgic functions, but they also served to rally the nation. Following 9/11, zealous nationalism and the depiction of America as a force of good had been revived to make significance of the 9/11 narrative and the threat of the new terrorism. Indeed, in his *"Address on Terrorism Before a Joint Meeting of Congress"* George W. Bush (2001) affirmed, "By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism." Therefore, he moralized the and created clear-cut lines separating America from its enemies: "us" vs. "them," "freedom" vs. "terror," and "civilization" vs. "barbarism." He casted America's world leadership as the fulfilment of the nation's civilizing mission against the forces of evil, revitalizing a rhetoric that goes back to America's puritan's origins, but also World War II propaganda.

As Wright (2006) observed, newspapers recounting the attack on the Twin Towers created parallelisms with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. They described the terrorist attack as an "infamy," indirectly recalling Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Infamy speech". This speech was an exposition on the relations between Japan and America and a reflection on the unsuccessful effort to find a peaceful solution. Delivered the day after the Pearl Harbor attack, this statement aimed to show America's determination face to a collective trauma. Similarly, 9/11 asked Americans to recuperate their nationalism in order to confront once again a foreign force threatening its soil. Capitalizing on the emotional momentum, a photograph of New York firefighters raising the flag in the debris of the Twin Towers was staged to remind Rosenthal's icon photo portraying American soldiers raising a star-spangled banner on Mount Suribachi on the island of Iwa Jima (Murray, 2011; Wright, 2001).

Comics did not remain unresponsive to such patriotic call. As Will Eisner (2002:1) remembered in his "speech on 9/11" held at the Library of Congress Exhibition, "it is rather a chance to help celebrate a patriotic rising not often seen in America. What we witnessed in the aftermath of the bombing of the towers was a self-organized voluntary

patriotic response by members of a medium often regarded as minor in the world of art and literature, which we call comics." Indeed, whereas many citizens, unable to join any kind of military activity, gradually returned to their normal (but alert) lives and daily routines, comics creators produced a declaration of American patriotism, showing their outrage and raising funds for the relief of 9/11 victims.

*The Amazing Spider-Man #36* (October 2001) was the first comic book to deal with the events of 9/11 and it came out approximately three weeks after the event itself[140]. This comic attempted to represent the frustration that many Americans felt after the attack and their attempt to cope with their traumatic experience. This issue tried to make sense of the attacks in relation to previous events in American history. As Spider-Man silently observes a sorrowful Captain America standing among the debris of Ground Zero, he notes that only Steve Rogers (the World War II hero) might be familiar with the events of 9/11 because he "experienced" that before, clearly referencing the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Interestingly, comics published after *The Amazing Spider-Man #36* tried to honor 'real life' superheroes: the men and women of the New York Police Departments, the Red Cross, and firefighters. Four anthologies released after the event tried to help raising funds for the Red Cross (*Heroes*, *A Moment of Silence*, *9/11 Emergency Relief*; *9/11* volume 1 and 2), and they all featured firefighters or other heroic person on the cover.

In November 2002, DC paid homage to '9/11 heroes' by featuring a poster portraying Superman with a star-spangled shield on the background and the bald eagle standing on the hero's arm, an image taken from *Superman* #14 (1941). Therefore, this image sought to generate a restorative nostalgia that aims at returning to a mythical image of the nation. As Christopher Murray (2011:254) discussed, the resurgence of imagery from the 1940 was meant to help "Americans come to terms with these attacks by placing them in the context of an earlier, simpler conflict." The scholar also maintained that the "9/11 attacks also gave Captain America a new lease on life, a new purpose in a country where *patriotism* now ceased to be a dirty word."

Indeed, following the events of 9/11, John Ney Rieber and John Cassaday wrote the first five issues of their relaunch of *Captain America* (a prequel to their original planned

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[140] This issue was written by Michael J. Straczynski and illustrated by John Romita Jr.

storyline for the *Marvel Knights* imprint) to include and deal with the terrorists that threatened the American way of life. As Wright (2001:290) observed, "Captain America had stayed out of Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, but writer John Ney Rieber and Artist John Cassaday plunged the super-patriot of World War II into the fight against terrorism." In 2001, Cassaday commented during an interview,

> Captain America is a creature born of propaganda. He's the perfect venue for what's going on right now. If I were doing any number of comic books, I couldn't be in the same position as I am with Captain America. Before the disaster struck, I thought of propaganda as the perfect word for what I was planning on doing specifically for covers on Captain America. […] To be doing *Captain America* #1 as America is entering a war is something that my mind maybe can't get around. Surreal is the word. It's almost too close in a sense. I want people to feel patriotic. I want people to look at Captain America as a hero. I want him to be someone to look up to, which he was meant to be from the beginning. Captain America was created because of a war. He's OUR soldier. I'm hoping this can be a shining moment for him. (Brownstein, 2001: web).

Accordingly, Rieber and Cassaday's *Captain America* (2002) is a (pop) cultural product that attempts to recuperate the lost world of traditional patriotic values, which had been contested since the Vietnam War. Indeed, in the interview, Cassaday acknowledges the role played by comics in the resurgence of patriotic feeling and he attributes propaganda the function to "inspire and unite" the nation, but he also recognizes its negative aspects. He concedes that propaganda "can also be used to point fingers and make generalizations."

To stray from this unconstructive use of propaganda, *Captain America*'s (2002) authors draw a clear-cut line between terrorists and Muslims. In the first issue Captain America prevents a crime against an American born Muslim on the streets of Manhattan. The star-spangled hero provides an occasion for reconciliation between the parties involved (as the offender was trying to retaliate for the terrorist attacks), convincing the wrongdoer to recognize and apologize for his mistake, the American Muslim was not responsible for the terrorist attacks. It is worth reminding that the attempt to distinguish between ideology and ethnic (or in this case religious) identity is not without antecedents. As previously discussed, during World War II comics artists took care to distinguish Germans from Nazis and Italians from fascists. This kind of distinctions are important as they might pave the way for a future reconciliation and facilitate the cooptation of the conquered areas under a new hegemonic force or ideology. This concession toward the enemy might not be guided solely by humanitarian concerns, but also forward political thinking.

The call to arms is clear from the cover of the first issue of *Captain America* (2002). Indeed, this image restaged a vivid color propaganda poster from 1942 (figure 20). This picture featured a representation of Uncle Sam, along with U.S. air and land forces, carrying a billowing American flag over his shoulder and a caption that tried to inspire civilians to buy war bonds. *Captain America* #1 (2002) cover has the same structure: on the top of the page there is a representation of US aviation forces, on the bottom there is a depiction of the infantry counterattacking the enemy, the American flag is at the center of the composition, and Uncle Sam is replaced by Captain America in his star-spangled costume (thus creating a visual redundancy).

*Captain America* (2002) opens with the story "Enemy" which presents Steve Rogers (Captain America's civilian identity) sifting through the debris of the World Trade Center, looking for survivors. In this story, (American) innocents were attacked by a foreign entity that caused damage and deaths. Remarkably, the superhero is not introduced in his star-spangled costume, but as a civilian wearing a pair of sneakers, jeans and a t-shirt. The message is clear: no superhero could have saved America from this unexpected event, and now it was time for ordinary men to step in and do their part. Heroism has multiple manifestations. These panels depicting Steve Rogers' rescue and recovery effort were meant to be an homage to the firefighters, real-life heroes who spent their last moments attempting to save the lives of everyone still trapped in the burning Twin Towers.

The aftermath of the terrorist attack would later prompt the superhero to intervene, defend the innocents, and prevent possible future attacks by chasing after the enemy. However, the confrontation between Captain America and the (fictive) terrorist al-Tariq complicates the notions of good (Americans) and evil (terrorists). Indeed, al-Tariq argues that America is not innocent, as terrorism is a byproduct of the Cold War and the suffering that America's foreign policy and power projection inflicted overseas. In al-Tariq's mind, America was being punished for asserting its control over imperial periphery. Then, this dialogue seems to reject America's false perception (fostered by the President of the United Stated and the media) that a new political world exploded forth on 9/11 from a previously empty void. As Andrew John Bacevich (2008:5) argued,

> The impulses that have landed us in a war of no exits and no deadlines come from within. Foreign policy has for decades, provided an outward manifestation of American domestic ambitions, urges, and fears. In our own time, it has become an expression of domestic dysfunction – an attempt to manage or defer coming to terms with contradictions besetting the American way of life. Those contradictions have found their ultimate expression in the perpetual state of war afflicting the United

States today.

Similarly, Rieber and Cassaday's Captain America seems to concede that "the light **we see** cast shadows that we don't - -where **monsters** like **al-Tariq** can plant the seeds of hate," (*issue #3*: 15) maintaining that there was "a time when it was easy to feel pride in 'this' country. When 'this' country celebrated the victories of its loyal soldiers. When 'this' country was my country right or wrong - and most of the time it was right. But times have changed haven't they. The battles are less clear, the wars less noble, the cause less right, even in the shadow of 9/11" (*issue #11*:20)

However, Captain's America faith in the 'Dream' is never undermined, because, even though "politics **can** be flawed", the "**country** is good" (*issue #11*:21, original emphasis). Therefore, this adamant belief in the 'Dream' makes Captain America reassert his own pride in the country. Captain America does not stand for the government, but the American people. Like in the late 80s revisionist comics about the Vietnam War, the lone ranger archetype and the myth of errand into the wilderness provides redeeming schemata through which solve and sanitize the moral ambiguity of the nation. Consistently, Captain America personality reminds the reader of America's good 'deeds,' benign intentions, and determination to win a struggle waged on behalf of freedom.

Moreover, Captain America claims that Americans should not be held accountable for the mistakes committed by the government, "**My** people never knew. We know **now**. And those days are over - - we have **learned** from our mistakes" (*issue #6*: 18-19, original emphasis). He tells his opponent that the American people have changed and learned, arguing that the public was now able to demand that atrocities should not be committed in their name. While punching the enemy, he concludes that "We, the people - - We all have the freedom and the power to fight - - For peace" (*issue #6*: 18). Hence, America can be redeemed as its wrongdoing might be attributed to an excess of zeal. In contrast, the enemy has no redeeming quality, as his actions are those of a psychopath. Whereas the comics acknowledges that American military and political intervention abroad has often caused damage to civilians (symbolically the final confrontation with the enemy takes place in Dresden), creating a pool of potential extremists, (Captain) America is portrayed as the indispensable hero, who carries both responsibilities and prerogatives. Indeed, in the final page of the "New Deal" story arc, Captain America comments, "They'**ll always** be with us. The **Genghis Khans**. The **Caligulas**. The **Hitlers**. The

**monsters**. With their **blood hunger** and their **murderous toys**… And their lies. But we can **stem** the tide of blood. **Defy** the shadow. Defend the **dream**" (*issue #6*: 21, original emphasis)

So, the faith in the 'dream' and the American way of life is never challenged. On the contrary they have redeeming functions for the nation, but also the entire world. The American understanding of the word freedom is never fully and thoroughly investigated. American values and beliefs are constructed as universal and the nation serves the providentially assigned purpose of exporting them. Hence, the comic avoids admitting how the depiction of America as freedom's chief agent is problematic, a sign of hubris and sanctimony. *Captain America* (2002) does not question the sanctity of what Bacevich (2008) calls the Jeffersonian "civic theology" (the passion for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness), thus the comic skips over the interrelationship between the preservation of the American way and the extension of the American imperium.

Considering this call on patriotism, the post-9/11 resurgence of World War II narratives is not at all surprising. Even though the modes of narrating war have changed in time, the moral lessons embedded in World War II narrative has almost remained unchallenged. An example of this type of revival is Garth Ennis[141]' (2001) *War Stories*. Even though this series presents divergences from 1940s narratives of the conflict (it is less jingoistic, and the body of the American soldier is no longer unviolated as the reader can now see wounded bodies), *War Stories* (2001) still reiterates somehow old narrative schemes of heroism, which prevent any questioning of the soldiers' actions and/or the national political agenda. The comic tries to remember forgotten[142] heroes and their campaigns. Characters might be sometimes flawed, yet these traits make them human and sympathetic to the reader. Even though they diverge from the traditional gallant heroes, these soldiers' actions are never questioned. Moreover, US Military corps are predominantly (if not exclusively) white. A choice that probably aims to avoid addressing

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[141] In this regard, it is interesting to notice that Ennis comic *The Boys* (2019[2006-2012]) has a critical stance on 9/11. Similarly, his Punisher run represents the Vietnam War as a morally ambiguous conflict, even though it never engages in a thorough discussion on the political responsibilities of that conflict. This discrepancy in the portrayal of war testifies how World War II has been memorialized as the good war. The revitalization of this conflict can be interpreted as an emotive (patriotic) response to September 11, whereas *The Boys* (which debuted in 2006) represent a detached and more critical commentary on what happened. The comic criticized how the terrorist attack has been used to legitimize the limitation of liberties of American citizens.

[142] The comic argues that soldiers fighting in Italy did not get the same acknowledgment as their peers fighting in Normandy during the D-Day.

the racism present in the US Army (and society) during that conflict. Using a white cast of character is a way to show the nation as harmonic and committed to the cause, reinforcing national myths of unity. The presence of racial minorities would cast doubts about American ideals, since it would have unveiled how, during World War II, many American did not benefit from the equality of opportunity promised by the American Dream. The representation of war is whitewashed, and the contribution of minorities is (consciously) neglected. So, the series reenacts *de facto* the racial segregation present in the US Army during World War II.

Therefore, these comics show a "premediation[143]" and "remediation[144]" (Erll, 2008) interplay. World War II has provided comics with a schema for new experiences, but it also constructed a canon that keeps on circulating through different medias. This (re)militarization of the nation through symbols linked to World War II additionally signals the presence of a repressed memory. Indeed, discourses about a more recent conflict like the Vietnam War were almost avoided, since this war was a failed military campaign, but also a moment in which domestic unity started to disintegrate. Indeed, as hitherto discussed, the Vietnam War questioned American myths as the US entered the war with certain expectations about its destiny, but they soon turned out into something different, a quagmire and an impasse that put to test the morality of the nation.

It is interesting to notice that, after the 2003 Iraq invasion (the first stage of the second Gulf War), comics started to revise once again World War II narratives complicating and challenging its embedded values and morality. For example, Chuck Dixon's *Team Zero* (2006) presented WWII soldiers as unheroic showing episodes of racism, rape, and shooting of innocents. In this series, World War II has been revised through the tropes of Cold War narratives as it presents spies, unmotivated violence, and the use of curse words (1940's comics did not feature such language, but war comics in the late 1980s did). Thus, comics invite reflections upon the functional nature of memory, as they make evident how the reconstruction of the past serves present needs.

However, the depiction of morally ambiguous characters was not the only way in which comics questioned America's own doing. In March 2003, just before the United

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[143] The term 'premediation' refers to the media production of schemata for future experiences and their representation.

[144] The term 'remediation' refers to the fact that iconic events are usually reiterated across different media.

States launched missile attacks against Iraq, Marvel published *411*, a comic that tried to promote a different solution for the impending conflict, advocating for pacificism in a time of patriotic furor. From a propagandist perspective, this comic is particularly noteworthy because it touched themes that the earlier comics did not, as it showed that "all characters (even enemies of the United States) as members of humanity" and it underscored that "people feel the same in all cultures, and that all should be willing to sacrifice anything that they have to for the concept of peaceful coexistence" (Scott, 2007:341). Indeed, *Marvel's 411* (2003) promoted the use of nonviolence, evoking the tradition of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. In one story, the comics tell the true story of Jeanette Rankin, the first woman elected to the House of Representative and a committed pacifist, who voted against the US entrance into both conflicts. As Cord Scott (2014:233) observed, this story "is a rare example of how the comics can present alternative forms of conflict resolution to their readers." An attempt clearly stated by the authors in their forward, "these stories are neither anti-American nor anti-Iraqi, not anti-French nor anti-Israeli. *411* is pro-human. It is a tribute to peacemakers, to people who turn the other cheek in the face of violence – people who refuse to lose sight of the fact that their enemies are part of their own community." Therefore, this comic book does not only recognize the humanity of the enemy, but it also encourages the creation of spaces for intercultural dialogue. This message is also amplified by the essay written by Dr. Arun Gandhi in which non-violence is depicted as a positive attitude that must be cultivated "with the same zeal and devotion that one display in one's effort to improve one's material standing in life." At the same time, the essay points the finger to America's own responsibility in the attack, as they did not come out of the blue.

The initial militarization of comics through the reiteration of World War II imagery, the subsequent normalization, and the later emergence of counter-narratives in response to the Iraq invasion signal the presence of a traumatized nation trying to uncover, know, and critique the present through narratives that rationalize the past. Indeed, as anticipated in chapter one, works like Art Spiegelman's (2004) *In Shadow of No Towers (2004:2)* clearly show that (old) comics can become a medium to "figure out" what one "actually saw," while engaging with the meaning of the event. Yet, it is important to remark that Spielman's critical stance about 9/11 was not initially welcomed by American editors. As he recalls in the preface of his work,

> The climate of discourse in America shifted dramatically just as I concluded the series. What was once unsayable now began to appear outside the marginalized alternative press and late-night cable comedy shows. A profile of me in the Arts section of the *New York Times* in the fall of 2003 even included the very panel of me feeling 'equally terrorized' by al-Qaeda and by my own government that had made some editors visibly shudder two years earlier.

Moreover, the existence of both patriotic and critical responses to America's new military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq testify the existence of a divided public opinion. As Spiegelman illustrated, Bush's election and the start of the 'War on Terror' polarized America's public opinion into two factions. This division is clearly visible also in mainstream comics; whereas some of them "sought to deal with adolescent fantasies of hunting down and killing those responsible" (Scott, 2007:338), other comics questioned the validity of the War on Terror (Lund, 2017:254).

Indeed, 9/11 led to a reconfiguration of many values, perspectives and strategies in the US political and cultural fabric. As Bragard et al (2011:4) discussed,

> In the public sphere, for example, U.S. foreign policy became harsher and national security more stringent, regional and individual perceptions by those in both in East and West radically changed, while reconsiderations of American and Muslim cultures and identities surfaced on a global level. In more private and domestic spheres, terror shook the definition of the self and radically altered relationships among individuals, leaving behind not only grief and incomprehension but a range of other complex feelings as well such as fear depression and alienation from family and community.

This political division has also been allegorized in Marvel's *Civil War* (2006-2007). This story, created by Mark Millar and illustrated by Steve McNiven, shares key resemblances to political events and debates that took place in America after 9/11. In the small town of Stamford, some superheroes and villains cause a blast that kills 600 civilians, many of them children. Reacting to the event, the government introduces the Superhero Registration Act (SRA), which mandates that superheroes should register their special abilities and their secret identities with the authorities, forcing them to be part of a centrally controlled security organization overseen by the U.S. government. Inevitably, the enactment of this new law ends up dividing the 'superhero community' into two factions: one (guided by Iron Man, the pragmatic hero) supports the government decision, the other (guided by Captain America, the WWII champion) defies the rules. The plot is clearly an allegory of the discussions that followed 9/11, when national safety was rhetorically held in contrast to individual liberties[145]. To live after 9/11 meant to be

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[145] Two months after the attacks of 9/11, the Bush administration authorized the indefinite detention of noncitizens suspected of terrorist activities and their subsequent trials by a military commission, an unusual extension of power, justified by what Giorgio Agamben (2003) defined as "state of exception". In an effort

confronted with a division of popular opinion, and the comics invited the reader to pick a side. The narration does not seem to favor one choice at the detriment of the other, as the presentation of either party is equable, as the feud is not between heroes and villains, but two respectable heroic factions.

Taking into consideration the division that emerged in America after 9/11, it is not surprising that, after 9/11, some comics wished to repress, and exorcize the memory of the Vietnam War, a conflict in which the ideals of patriotism, heroism, and sacrifice (invoked in the name of freedom) got challenged by the reality exposed by the media, as they revealed how American (war) culture is implicated in racism, masculinism, imperialism, and class oppression. The revision of the past is an instrument to redefine the present, especially in moments of national trauma, since "memory is valorized where identity is problematized" (Kansteiner, 2002:184). Vietnam War memory is not evoked here as a mere historical event to be reckoned with, but as a symbolic, selective, and ideologically informed imaginative construction. Indeed, its recall aims to address contemporary events and articulate interpretations of the prevalent opinions and emotions.

The Vietnam War has become a symbol of national division, a haunting presence in American consciousness, and a contested site of cultural and ideological ambiguities. For these reasons, the terms and meaning of contemporary reengagement with the memories of the Vietnam War are still being renegotiated. As Jan Assmann (1995:130) discussed,

> No memory can preserve the past. What remains is only that 'which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference.' Cultural memory works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation. True, it is fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge, but every contemporary context relates to these differently, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation.

This is particularly important because, like all (pop)cultural artifacts, comics are (re)producers of ideology for both domestic and international consumption. However, as Melani McAllister (2003:97) observed, "Cultural texts do not inject ideologies into their

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audiences, but they do figure in the process of constructing frameworks that help policy make sense in a given moment." Therefore, ideology emerges through the convergence of different narratives into a perceived common sense.

Nevertheless, it is important to remark that World War II and the Vietnam War are (somehow) inadequate models to represent and re-mediate this traumatic event, not only because trauma proverbially exceeds experience and "cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge" (Caruth, 1995: 153), often enforcing a barrier between the imaginable and the expressible; but also for the nature of the terrorism itself, as it makes the attacks unpredictable and the enemy not easily targetable. As Will Eisner (2002:1 WEE 70 32) commented, "The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1940 was easier for us to deal with. We would join the military; we could endure rationing and anticipate in the making of weaponry. We knew what our enemy looked like and where he was. In those days we were allowed to racially profile and stereotype the enemy."

However, World War II and the Vietnam War keeps on being reevoked, as their memory keeps on haunting American conscience. For example, in *Civil War* (2006-2007), a comic set in post 9/11 America, the story features a confrontation between Captain America (the WWII hero) and Frank Castle (the Vietnam War hero). Despite them being on the same side, the star-spangled hero disapproves the Punisher's ruthless methods and punches him in the face. Their antithetic nature is meant to be appreciated in contrast to one another. However, when Patriot wonders why Castle didn't fight back, Peter Parker observes, "Cap's probably the reason he went to **Vietnam**. Same guy, different **war**" (*Civil War*, issue #6:14, original emphasis). These lines reflect on how many Vietnam veterans entered the conflict in an attempt to emulate the gestures of World War II heroes, as Tim O'Brien recalled in his autobiographical account, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (2006 [1973]:21)*, "then we were our fathers, taking on the Japs and Krauts." In the post 9/11 America, the contrast between World War II and the Vietnam War assumes a clear meaning: it aims to show how the division that surfaced in American society after the attack on the World Trade Center did not originate in that moment, but it had its roots in America's warfare history, a past rich in moral ambiguity and contradictory/contrasting characters.

Moreover, one can also see points of connection between the ways in which the traumatic experiences of the Vietnam War and 9/11 have been processed. Indeed, some

9/11 commentators have argued about the need for critical works as a counternarratives to the accepted version of events. One of these critical voices was Ann Cvetkovich (2002: 472) who argued that a critical

> approach is especially urgent for the task of building cultural memory around September 11 and resisting the momentum of the culture industry, which is eager to tell a story that glorifies heroes and stresses national unity. In the United States, September 11 has already joined the pantheon of great national traumas, and I fear that its many and heterogeneous meanings (including the fact that it is a national trauma) will be displaced by a more singular and celebratory story.

Indeed, the media's domestication of the attacks through the repetition of personal traumatic stories had led to an evacuation of their larger political dimensions. This process of domestication of the trauma bears resemblances to the way in which, after the conflict, Vietnam War veterans' personal accounts have been used in order to elicit emotions and create consensus and unify a divided nation, rather than engage the public opinion into a debate about America's foreign policy. As Fritz Breithaupt (2003:67) remarked, "the media's staging of trauma does not so much record the human suffering that has taken place but instead serves as the central axis of organizing the diverse information material in such a way to bring about the said response in the audience." Indeed, personal emotionally charged memories cannot be easily contested and for this reason they can be exploited to create consensus around the way in which a certain event is remembered.

This rhetorical technique is particularly evident in Garry Trudeau's comic strip *Doonesbury*[146]. In a strip of the series appeared on April 21, 2004, and set during the first battle for Fallujah[147], B.D.'s Humvee is torn apart by an RPG, and he lays severely wounded on the battlefield while teammate Ray desperately struggles to keep him conscious. Like many real-life U.S. soldiers who have lost limbs in Iraq and Afghanistan, B.D. was evacuated to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany before being transferred to Washington's Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where he underwent a painful healing and rebuilding process. The strip's creator, Garry Trudeau, justified this

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[146] It is interesting to remark that the collection of *Doonesbury* strips dealing with D.B. hospitalization, *The Long Road Home: One Step at a Time* (2012)*,* contains a forward written by Senator John McCain. The collection also advertises VA medical centers. Therefore, B.D.'s story has also didactic functions as it teaches soldiers and their family how to recognize PTSD symptoms, but it also sensitizes the readership so that it becomes aware of the pain veterans suffer.

[147] The fact that B.D. is fighting in Fallujah is particularly interesting because of the controversial nature of the fights that took place in that area. On one hand, conservatives described the battle for the city as a decisive recapture operation to contain the insurgency. On the other hand, members of the left reported the battle as a war crime because U.S. military used white phosphorous and attacked civilians.

narrative choice explaining that he wanted to show and honor the sacrifices made by American servicemen, in his words, "a task any writer should approach with great humility, but it's worth doing. We're at war, and can't lose sight of the hardships war inflicts on individual lives" (*The Guardian*, 2004: web). Therefore, the focus on the soldier's suffering was visibly a way to create consent towards the cause, as he clearly illustrated in another interview "Stories are what connects us to our countrymen, […] And it is important for (soldiers) to know that the stories aren't being told in their expense, but in their honor." (Sanders, 2010:web)

This story was also particularly shocking for long time readers because they saw for the first time the removal of B.D.'s helmet (in 36 years, he had never been seen without it) as well as his loss of a limb. His reaction to the amputation was a thundering and anguished, "Son of a bitch!", an exclamation that caused the strip to be rejected by some newspapers. After successfully going through physical therapy, B.D. learned to walk with the aid of a high-tech prosthetic 'C-Leg'. The permanent loss of the helmet represents B.D.'s vulnerability as he is no longer able to hide behind a different persona. His behavior constantly altered slightly as his helmet changed in accordance with role he was playing (the footballer, the coach, the soldier, the cop). Now, for better or worse, he was just B.D., a human suffering from physical and psychological trauma. On a strip appeared on July 31, 2004 B.D. overtly comments on the loss of his helmet, "Oh, yeah… My helmet…What the hell was **that** all about?" Therefore, the loss of the helmet symbolizes the identity crisis the character is facing, as what was once important was now meaningless. Indeed, as Leone (2017:243) agued, traumatic experiences can be explained as a disruption of "narrative identity". In his words, "Narrative identity describes an individual's internalized and evolving life story that includes a coherent past and an imagined future as well as providing a level of unity, purpose, and meaning." So, comic language can help the author to visualize the invisible wounds that characterize traumatic experiences.

Although B.D. improved his physical condition, his mental state started changing soon before being discharged and deteriorated after his return home. Indeed, he was suffering from nightmares and became extremely touchy, "It's hard to explain. You weren't there. My brain prefers to unleash it at night" (March, 28, 2005) Indeed, Veterans returning from combat zones may easily recover from physical wounds, however, they might still bear

psychological injuries (PTSD) that continuously haunt their psyche, undermining their ability to maintain meaningful relationships with their significant others and reconstruct their identity in the new (non-combat) environment, "nights are so bad now, I'd rather sleep with my weapon than my wife! How messed up is that?" (April 01, 2005) Therefore, violence and trauma enter the bedroom occupying the traditional site of physical intimacy. War is brought back home. The violence to the man's body and the effects of trauma after war does not exclusively affect the survivor, but also those close to him. In a strip, B.D.'s daughter, Sam, reveals that her father has hit her mother during a night terror, "I'm afraid sometimes he's going to hit me, like he hit my mom during a nightmare." Moreover, B.D.'s alcohol consumption further complicates the situation. Realizing the seriousness of his problems, he entered therapy in January 2006. B.D. Unable to deal with B.D.'s symptoms, the psychologist simply moves him along the chain of care. These scenes with the psychologist show how inadequate treatment can be detrimental for the patient. Moreover, the comic strips also deal with the economical, personal, and affective challenges that the veterans' families must face. Indeed, Trudeau's strips show B.D.'s wife struggling to get disability benefits and paying the bills.

Through B.D.'s experience, Trudeau attempts to portray combat trauma not as a mere private phenomenon, but a disease with social and political implication. Strip after strip, Trudeau makes us empathize with the suffering of the veterans who endured the biggest burdens of citizenship, as they simply honored their commitment to American citizens by fulfilling the promise that comes from serving the United States armed forces during wartime. Therefore, the comics advocates for a civic rather than individual dealing with the problem. As Leone (2017:254) observed, "The establishment of a supportive community defines the therapeutic message of Trudeau's comics." B.D received help from the counselor Elias, a Vietnam veteran, showing how soldiers from previous conflicts help those who serve during the current conflict. Similarly, Trudeau shows how citizens and soldiers are often unable to speak the same language when it comes to sharing the wounds of war. An incommunicability also symbolized by the aphasia that a young veteran suffers.

Elias being a Vietnam veteran is also a nod to B.D.'s first military tour. Yet, this reference is also meant to show how Trudeau narrated the two conflicts differently. His 70s strips humanized the Vietnamese enemy, provided an unrealistic portrait of the war,

and naively asked why we all couldn't get along. Yet the satirical content embedded in these early depictions of war inevitably exposed soldiers to the ridicule. Indeed, one of the most controversial aspect of the counterculture was its unfair treatment of the troops. Therefore, these contemporary depictions are an attempt to 'make things right' by providing the reader with a more respectful portrait of the soldiers. Even though Doonesbury criticizes Bush's political agenda, the reader is invited to empathize with the soldiers. The comic strips seem to invite a distinction between the support of the soldiers and the support of the war[148]. Whereas the comic strips acknowledge the divisiveness of Bush's policy, the wounded body of the soldier functions as an element through which reconstruct the lost national unity.

Interestingly, *Vietnam Journal* collections were re-issued by iBooks in 2002, and in 2004 Don Lomax published *Gulf War Journal*, featuring the further adventures of "Journal" Neithammer, the character he created in the 1980s to recollect the Vietnam War. The interrelationship between the Vietnam and the US invasion of the Middle East can also be observed in recent adaptation of Vietnam era comics. For example, *Iron Man* (2005) retconned the title hero's origin story setting it during the Gulf War (1990-1991). In the first issue of the "Extremis" story arc created by Warren Ellis and Edi Granov, Tony Stark first became Iron Man in the deserts of Afghanistan as opposed to the jungles of Vietnam. Similarly, the 2008 movie adaptation of Iron Man origin story is set during the contemporary War in Afghanistan, which started in 2001, a solution probably driven by the necessity of keeping Tony Stark from being over 80. Likewise, Netflix adaptation of *The Punisher* (2017-2019) also moved the war timetable up to the more recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, yet the Vietnam's origins of the characters are alluded throughout the series. For example, Curtis (one of Frank Castle's war 'buddies') enters the war to follow the footsteps of his father who was a Vietnam War veteran.

Post 9/11 comics shows how World War II and Vietnam War narrative transcended their indexical nature to become symbols. For this reason, these reconstructions acquire

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[148] However, this differentiation is rejected by comic artist Ted Rall. In his opinion such idea is hypocritical since soldiers should be held accountable for their actions, "When you join Bush's army, and now Obama's, you know there's a better than even chance you'll be asked to 'kill Arabs'" (Rall, 2009: web). He also added that "the United States military has not fought against an actual enemy since World War II. Since then, without exception, it has been the tool of aggressive, economically motivated expansionism. Until that changes, every act of "heroism" by an American soldier on a foreign battlefield will be an act committed in the service of a bad cause. There is no ethical basis, not even 'watching your brother's back,' that can justify that".

cathartic functions, as they move away from historical reflection and political engagement.  At the same time, the revival of the Vietnam War memory has been used by anti-war activists to question America's imperialism and warfare. As previously discussed, this war shattered the myth of America's unique innocence[149]. Hence, comics (like other pop culture artifacts) reveal an intricate range of assumptions and attitudes, a polyvalent network of signification that goes beyond simple commemoration. Indeed, these cultural representations touch on issues of consensus, community, and memory, but also kitsch and mass-produced art. Moreover, it is worth remembering that these "memory projects[150]" (Leavy, 2007) in comic form are also objects of consumption, images to be bought, and inevitably internalized by the audience. As Nguyen (2016:15) observed, "memories are not simply images we experience as individuals, but are mass-produced fantasies we share with one another. Memories are not only collected or collective, they are also corporate and capitalist. Memories are signs and products of power, and in turn, they service power." Therefore, when looking at mass-produced art forms (like comics) dealing with historical subjects, one should question the motives behind each representation and appreciate the wide spectrum of memory projects (in graphic form), from those who endorse the official narrative of the powerful to those that tries to subvert it. Even though many artists are complicit with power, some others offer alternative interpretation of the event and question ethnocentric representations of the events.

## 2. 'Remembering One's Own': Zimmerman & Vansant's (2009) *The Vietnam War*

> *Because I never knew you*
> *nor did you me*
> *I come*
> Duong Tuong, "At the Vietnam Wall"

As hitherto discussed, while World War II narratives had been revived to galvanize the nation toward the new military adventure, the haunting presence of the Vietnam experience had been evoked by its opponents to contest US military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq. Then, it is no chance that Zimmerman and Vansant's *The Vietnam*

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[149] Howard Zinn et al. (2008) graphic narrative questions such innocence showing America's expansionist projects throughout its history.

[150] As already discussed in the previous chapter, comics function as memory projects serving different cultural and political agendas. This particular use has become even more prominent after September 11 and the subsequent Iraq and Afghanistan invasions, as these events polarized America's public opinion.

*War: A Graphic History* begins with a quote from Senator Edward Kennedy, "Iraq is George Bush's **Vietnam**" (2009: 3, original emphasis). Indeed, the Vietnam War is a conflict that has kept on being evoked in political debate and news even after its end. On this regard, Robert J. McMahon (2002:160) notices how "the persistent conceptualization of the Vietnam War as a haunting, tragic event for the United States has become a staple […], a phenomenon that shows no signs of ebbing." This haunting presence of the past is mainly due to the divisive narratives that this war generated. Indeed, "one of the paradoxes of collective remembrance may be that consensus ("we all recollect the same way") is ultimately the road to amnesia and that it is ironically a lack of unanimity that keeps some memory sites alive" (Rigney, 2010: 346).

Therefore, the recirculation of images of the Vietnam War testifies an ongoing struggle within American society over the meaning of that conflict. Those who oppose the deployment of American forces overseas tend to invoke the 'Vietnam trauma' in order to warn against the possibility of being drawn in a Vietnam-like 'quagmire,' as once committed, military forces may not be easily disengaged. In contrast, those who are in favor of US intervention abroad recall 'Vietnam' in order to galvanize the spirits of the public asking for determination to prevail, often describing the lack of esteem and resoluteness as the causes for the military loss. This contrasting rhetorical appropriation of the Vietnam War and the presupposed lesson(s) that America should have learnt from it are well captured by the three quotes that opens Zimmerman and Vansant's 'graphic history.' The first citation reports a sentence uttered by President George Herbert Walker Bush in his speech to the nation on the beginning of the bombing of Iraq, on January 16, 1991, "I've told the **American people**… that this will not be another **Vietnam.**" This speech is particularly compelling because Bush used the traumatic memory of the Vietnam War to urge the nation to use unrestricted force to achieve its aims, "Our troops will have the best possible support in the entire world, and they will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their back. I'm hopeful that this fighting will not go on for long and that casualties will be held to an absolute minimum". In contrast, the second and third quotes featured in the first page show how Vietnam has been evoked during the Bosnian War (1992-1995) and Iraq War (2003-2011) to support non-interventionist and antiwar arguments, "a lot of **people** have warned President Clinton that Bosnia will turn into another **Vietnam**,"; and the already mentioned, "Iraq is George Bush's **Vietnam**." These

quotes make evident how this war suffers from an identity crisis, and the comic indirectly asks the reader how the Vietnam War (a divisive defeat) should be remembered.

It is worth noticing that these quotes are embedded in a drawing representing the Vietnam Women's Memorial created by Glenna Goodacre. This statue was built in honor of the women of the United States who served in the Vietnam War, most of whom were nurses. It depicts three uniformed women with a wounded soldier. One of the nurses sits on a stack of sandbags, workings as the life support for a wounded soldier lying across her lap. A second woman is standing and looks up in the sky, in search of either a medevac helicopter or help from God. The third one is kneeling. She stares at an empty helmet and her posture betrays her despair and frustration for the horror of war. This rendition of the statue is emotionally charged and romanticized by the presence of a drizzle. Exploiting clichés, drops of rain fall like tears and sweater on the body of the three women, thus turning those iconic figures into almost sentient beings. It transforms this statue from something to be passively looked at into an emotional object.

The second panel gives a complete (yet smaller) overview of the statue. Poignantly, the pathos of the conflict is evoked through still figures, as emotions arouse from the static and harmonic composition of the statue, yet this configuration is very distant from the dynamic and chaotic reality of war. This difference between representation and reality reveals memory's mechanism, as those statues do not seek historical accuracy, but suits the needs of the livings. Heroic representations of the past (as the one embraced by the comic) serve to justify present military engagement, wars for which citizens are willing to fight or at least pay taxes.

Memory sites have the main function of allowing the citizens to affirm their identities as being one with the nation by performing rituals. This need is well captured in the third panel, which portrays visitors paying homage to the Memorial Wall, a simple black granite wall, polished to a high finish, engraved with the names of the servicemen who died in the conflict, and situated in the peaceful Constitution Gardens in Washington, D.C. Even though, at first Maya Lin's (the 'Wall's creator) bleak concept did not receive the favors of many visitors, as they expected a more grandiose monument in the vein of the other buildings present in the Mall, the Wall has become an important site of memory for the veterans.

Bearing in mind the very controversial nature of the conflict, Maya Lin did not create a heroic or celebratory monument, but she imagined two stark black walls rising from the earth and growing in height until they met like a "wound that is closed and healing." However, Zimmerman and Vansant (2009) argue that this process of healing is not completed yet, and for this reason the memory of this conflict is still relevant in contemporary society,

> The shooting officially stopped on January 27, 1973, with the signing of the **Paris Peace Accords**. But the war **truly ended** only for 58,249 men and women. They are the ones whose names are etched in polished black granite panels of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, known simply as the **Wall**. For the rest of America, the Vietnam War remained an open wound for decades. For some, it still has not healed (Zimmerman & Vansant, 2009:5, original emphasis)

Hence, this 'graphic history' shows how the Vietnam War has become a "figure of memory," an event "whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, observance)" (Assmann, 1995:129), and, as Costello (2011:30) observes, "figures of memory become cultural battlegrounds for competing visions of national identity, redefining the present by constructing a memory of the past." For this reason, as Marita Sturken (1997) discussed, the wall was easily appropriated for a variety of interpretations,

> To the veterans, the memorial makes amends for their treatment since the war; to the families and friends of those who died, it officially recognize their sorrow and validates a grief that was not previously sanctioned; to others, it is either a profound antiwar statement or an opportunity to recast the history of the narrative of the war in terms of honor and sacrifice (Sturken, 1997:75).

Moreover, it is important to remind that Vietnam Veterans Memorial is not just dedicated to those who perished in the conflict, but to all those who fought for their country. Indeed, the inscriptions on the Wall reads "In honor of the men and women of the armed forces of the United States who served in the Vietnam War. The names of those who gave their lives and of those who remain missing are inscribed in the order they were taken from us."

The choice to start the narration from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a way to put the soldiers, their suffering, and ultimate sacrifice at the center of this recollection. The dead seem to cry for commemoration, but their voice cannot be heard, as only the survivors can speak for them. For this reason, the Wall has become a "**pilgrimage site**" where those affected by the conflict leave mementos and letters. The legitimate need to commemorate the dead extends only to the "thick" (Margalit, 2002) relations of family,

friends, and countrymen. This sense of affinity gives memory its power, stimulating emotions and identification. This rhetoric allows private love to turn into a public manifestation of patriotism. A letter addressed to one's lost son becomes a symbol of loyalty and devotion to the country, and in turn, deceased soldiers become the sons of the nation, and martyrs to be honored. For this reason, the comic features an excerpt of Mrs. Eleanor Wimbish's letter to her late son, William R. Stocks, "I came to this black wall again to see and touch your name, and as I do I wonder if anyone ever stops to realize that next to your name, on this black wall, is your mother's heart."

The osmosis between private and public memory is reinforced by the fact that this quote is embedded in a full-page image portraying Frederick Hart's statue, Three Soldiers. This statue was meant to represent the diversity and unity (*E pluribus unum*) of the US military through the inclusion of a Caucasian, African American, and Latino character, whose service branch is intentionally left ambiguous. Therefore, in the fourth panel of this 'graphic history,' the indexical nature of Mrs. Eleanor Wimbish's letter is fused with the symbolic meaning of the statue in order to convey a simple and clear message: honor your country as these men did. So, the comic seems to draw attention away from the individual man and redirect it toward the timeless, valiant private, exploiting what Ryan Watson (2007:4) defines as the myth of the "universal soldier," a figure endowed with the grandeur of heroism. This universal soldier is iconized, allowing for a synthetic historical narrative that erases complexity in order to inspire self-sacrifice. As Benedict Anderson's remarked (1996 [1986]:14), "it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love". Thanks to this 'love' individual bodies becomes interchangeable components of an imagined community. Thus, death is no longer a private matter, but it becomes subject of public commemoration, a sacrifice for a collective cause.

However, it is important to remark a substantial difference between the statue situated in Washington D.C. and its graphic rendition in Zimmerman and Vansant's 'graphic history.' The monument portrays three young men wearing the uniform and carrying the equipment of war. Together, they face the Wall. The statue opposes the innocence of their youth to the weapons of war to highlight the poignancy of their sacrifice. In contrast, the drawing portrays mature male body, and it is consistent with the history of the genre (war comics). As hitherto described, military service has often been constructed as a

performative act of patriotic masculinity, as the soldier and the public (vicariously) participate in the fantasy of national strength. The muscular body of the soldier symbolizes the nation's ability to overcome an enemy by using physical violence. Yet, this image of national potency had been undermined by the military defeat. In this regard, it might be necessary to point out that the 'erection' of Frederick Hart's statue was meant to serve as a counterpoint to the supposedly femininity of Maya Lin's Wall. Indeed, Lin argued "In a world of phallic memorials that rise upward it certainly does. I didn't set out to conquer the earth, or overpower it the way Western man usually does" (Hess, 1983:121). In contrast, Frederick Hart's classical take aimed to provide emotional comfort to the veterans and their families while reestablishing their honor. The statue was meant to represent the wordless bonds forged in combat, and of course such representation was gendered and coded in the cliché of war. Therefore, the comic's use of mature bodies attempts to restore the image of masculine national strength and consolidate Frederick Hart's message.

By opening the narration at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the comic aims to proclaim and redeem the honor of the soldiers' service and sacrifice for the nation. As Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz (1991) discussed, when memory of a lost war is politically controversial and morally questionable, then the nation attempts to find ways to make the defeat honorable and redeem those who fought for their country. One of the ways in which this aim can be achieved is by honoring the individual sacrifice rather than the national defeat. This point is underlined even by the memorial's name, as it is titled to the Vietnam veterans, not the Vietnam War. Similarly, the comic attempts to pay tribute to those who fought (and perished) in the war and it complains that prior to the building of the memorial, veterans' suffering had not been rightfully acknowledged by the American people, "at first, when the war ended, a **collective amnesia** appeared to take hold of Americans. For years, it seemed nobody wanted to remember anything about the war" (Zimmerman & Vansant, 2009:134, original emphasis). Indeed, Vietnam veterans were stigmatized or, at best ignored on their return home, and it was only in 1979 that a group of people organized to collect private contribution for the construction of the memorial. Like late 80s comics about the Vietnam War, Zimmerman & Vansant's 'graphic history' wants to upgrade the veterans' status, creating a positive image of the soldiers, as they simply carried out the government policy, legitimately developed by elected leaders.

Like the memorial, this comic focuses on the soldier's suffering to begin a healing process, consecrating the veterans as symbol of national unity. The images of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are reprised at the end of Zimmerman and Vansant's 'graphic history' as the authors describes and comments its construction and reception by the public. The last panel shows a hand caressing the names engraved in the granite wall, a rite that is frequently repeated by visitors at the memorial, and it is often followed by the tracing of the names in a piece of paper, which is then folded up and taken home. Through this gesture, "the marks of the dead left in stone thus become treasured signatures for the living" (Griswold, 1989:709). Probably, the text is asking its readers to pay a similar homage to the victims and align their sentiments with the scene portrayed.

The comic seems to share some of the pedagogic function of the monument[151] it describes. Indeed, Zimmerman and Vansant exploit the emotional power of the monument to educate the American citizens of the present by encouraging them to observe and live by the virtues of the past while making them aware of the mistakes committed by the government (as they tried to beat unconventional fighters with conventional tactics) and the public opinion (who did not fully recognize the soldiers' sacrifice). The narrative structure of the comic follows a linear development, having a beginning, middle, and end. Sections are in chronological order and causality links them in a coherent story. Therefore, this 'graphic history' presents analogies with the memorial, which also feature a chronological story. The names etched in the black granite are ordered according to the day in which each soldier perished. Every single death is part of an integrated whole, as each panel is part of a coherent and cohesive story. This correlation between the memorial and the comic is also reinforced by the fact that the 'V shape' of the monument makes it resemble a book. As Charles L. Griswold (1986) observed,

> The list of names both ends and begins at the center of the monument, suggesting that the monument is both open and closed: open physically, at a very wide angle, like a weak "V" for "victory" (a "V" lying on its side, instead of with its arms pointing upwards); but closed in substance-the war is over. This simultaneous openness and closure becomes [sic] all the more interesting when we realize that the VVM iconically represents a book. The pages are covered with writing, and the book is open partway through. The closure just mentioned is the closure not of the book but of a chapter in it. The openness indicates that further chapters have yet to be written, and read. It is important that the back of the monument is to the earth, for the suggestion that the Vietnam War is a chapter in the book of American history, and that further chapters remain in book, would be lost if the wall were above ground, backed by thin air (Griswold, 1986:708)

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[151] The word "monument" derives from the Latin *monēre*, which means "to remind," but also "to warn," "advise," and "teach."

It is important to highlight that the comic does not only provide the reader with a chronological account of the war, registering the events under the year in which they happened, but it also imposes a narrative and interpretative structure, giving the events a particular meaning. This graphic narrative does not seek objectivity, as the interpretative mediation of the authors is fairly evident. It clearly shows how historical reconstruction are affected by the historians' perspective of the world (and it might even respond to the demand of propaganda).

The comic explicitly comments on the failed policies and the hubris that doomed America's efforts to prevent the Communists' occupation of South Vietnam, "Johnson sought a military strategy that was limited to using just enough force to convince North Vietnam to leave South Vietnam alone" (Zimmerman & Vansant, 2009:16). In the authors' opinion, Johnson's 'limited war' strategy, exemplified by the operation Rolling Thunder, was deemed to be unsuccessful because of its naivety, "the Johnson administration established no-bombing 'sanctuaries' throughout North Vietnam, including a buffer zone along the North Vietnam-China border. Once Hanoi learned about these sanctuaries, it moved the bulk of its military, strategic bases, and industries into them" (Zimmerman & Vansant, 2009:18). They argue that this drive towards low-cost solutions was mainly due to Johnson's desire to realize his domestic programs, "He referred to Vietnam as 'that bitch of a war' that drained money from 'the woman I love'… the Great Society Program" (Zimmerman & Vansant, 2009:15). Whereas they praise his keen sense of domestic issues, launching "the most sweeping social reform program since Franklin Roosevelt's 'New Deal'" (Zimmerman & Vansant, 2009:10), they indict his lack of vision and resolution on foreign policy.

This political commentary is particularly engaging because it makes Zimmerman and Vansant's work diverge from other war comics. Indeed, this 'graphic history' avoids thinking of war solely as combat. It shows how wars are not just the result of the grunts' actions, as the reader observes how events are also molded in war rooms and boardrooms located far from the battlefield. At the same time, this mode of recollection exempts individual soldier from any implication in any misconduct. It helps reestablish the image of the 'good grunts' as those boys were simply following orders.

It is also interesting to observe that, differently from previous comics recollecting the Vietnam War, this 'graphic history' mainly focuses on the presidency of Lyndon B.

Johnson. In contrast, earlier representation of the conflict emphasized the figures of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and/or Richard Nixon. Kennedy represented the pursuit of visionary goals, embodied in the 'New Frontier.' His presidency symbolized both continuity and discontinuity with World War II, the 'Dream' and its disenchantment. His assassination became an omen of the impending military defeat and America's impossibility to realize its goals. Thus, misquoting Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Vietnam made it clear that America's "count of enchanted objects had diminished by one." (Fitzgerald, 1999[1925]:60). In contrast, Nixon represented the contradictions of that war, 'the peace with honor,' America's decision to expand the conflict while withdrawing from it, and ultimately the corruption of US institution (the Watergate). Therefore, the comic's decision to not fully engage with these presidencies is as a symptom of the nation's failure to reach an agreement on the war purposes and consequences. Indeed, the decision to focus on Johnson's presidency prevents the reader from understanding the complexity of the Vietnam War; it was not just a conflict to prevent the spread of Communism, but also an anticolonial struggle, and a civil war.

Another distinctive feature of this 'graphic history' is the absence of a main (male) protagonist who helps the reader understand the war's identity (and eventual moral). The narration is not focused on (individual) military actions, even though few are described, e.g. the two-boat patrol led by James E. Williams. Soldiers seems to be deprived of any agency over their destiny as the most important decisions are taken in Washington D.C. The soldiers are depicted as part of an integrated body. Individuality is homogenized. In contrast to the convention of war comics, this graphic history does not present the reader with thrilling adventures, buddying experiences, suspense, and face-to-face interactions with the enemy. Dialogues are almost absent, and the panels are connected through the presence of a third person narrator, which functions as a voice over to the images shown. This narrative solution mimics the way in which documentaries are usually constructed.

It is worth noticing that in comics the presence of the narrator can be considered a marked feature. This strong presence is here highlighted by the heavy use of captions and bold words, which aim to guide the reader's interpretation of each panel. The authors use these graphic and narrative solutions to make the narrator's voice loud and overwrite the anti-war rhetoric embedded in those images. Therefore, one can witness a tension between words and pictures, which translates into a friction between the authors' narrative

and the source (archival) material adapted (mainly iconic photographs and television footage). This conflict also reveals how cultural memory exists in two modes (Assmann, 1995): the mode of potentiality of the archive (texts, images, and rules of conduct), and the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance. This graphic novel puts together fragments of historical materials with new, contemporary interpretations and trajectories. Moreover, this tension between text and image and the (visual and spatial) dominance of words over pictures intend to raise a skeptical attitude in the reader and question the authority and objectivity of the anti-war rhetoric, which was mainly based on photographic evidence. Therefore, in this revisionist project, images functions as mere supplements to the text. The authors use the text to exerts control over pictures by surveilling their meaning and containing the emergence of any undesired message.

This friction between text and image is clearly visible in the adaptation of Eddie Adams' photograph 'Saigon Execution'. This adaptation frames Adams' shot inside a television screen, which reminds the observer of both the existence of a footage filming the execution and the role played by media in covering the event. This graphic narrative indicts the media coverage of the Vietnam War and the presumed conflictual attitude of the press during the conflict, maintaining that their representation of the events put disproportionate responsibility for the horrors of the war upon the US soldier who fought in Vietnam. So, this graphic narrative adapts Adam's photograph to criticize its embedded narrative, recognizing and exploiting the "subjunctive" (Zelizer, 2010) value of photograph, that is their ability to foster different interpretations. Whereas documentaries and tv reportages claim a degree of indexicality through the visual elements, this graphic novel unveils how the representation of the real is often a subjective experience, an incomplete and uncertain recollection of an event. Commenting on the power of media, Zimmerman and Vansant claimed,

> part of this controversy arose from the nature of the medium itself. Where it was most effective was in its ability to show vividly the immediate cost of war. Where television coverage was weak, particularly during the Tet offensive, was in analysis that could counterbalance or put into perspective the dramatic footage being aired. There were many reasons for this, not the least of which was logistic. Just getting the raw, unprocessed film footage from Saigon to network offices in New York, and getting it aired in a timely fashion, was daunting (Zimmerman & Vansant, 2009:89)

The explanatory mode of this graphic novel offers the authors the opportunity to present their narrative as factual, as well as to challenge the antiwar recollection of the event through (meta)historiographic interrogations and commentary. Indeed, captions often provides details about technical terminology (e.g. domino theory), historical background (e.g. operation Rolling Thunder) and information about key historical figures (e.g. Senator J. William Fulbright). The comic features different conflicting perspectives on the war and acknowledges the presence of an antiwar branch in the institutions, which progressively acquired more prominence after the Tet offensive. Yet, the comic attempts to rehabilitate the narration of that battle.

As in *The 'Nam* (1986-1993), Adams' photograph is used as an iconic representation of the conflict. Yet, both adaptations fail to reflect on the role of the characters depicted in the photograph. The racial implication of this shot is ignored, as it enacts what Sylvia Shin Chong (2012) described as "the oriental obscene." Indeed, the Vietnamese are portrayed as either violators or as violated and mangled bodies. The choice of portraying the violence of the war exclusively through the Asian body is a way to distance oneself from the mass violence of war. A method to not take responsibility for America's military action. It also shows that violence on Asian bodies is more tolerated than the wounds on the body of (Caucasian) US soldiers, an aesthetic choice that has its roots in World War II representations of the conflict (Moeller, 1989).

It is not surprising that the comic never portrays wounded American soldiers, as this is an attempt to give the reader the false impression that America wins even when it loses. It can also be interpreted as an attempt to restore American masculinity. The wholeness of the body becomes a metaphor of the nation's invulnerability. Yet, this reconstruction is far from reality, as returning soldiers often suffered from physical injuries, psychological traumas, sense of alienation, employment problems, and drug abuse. The comic consciously avoids any negative characterization of the Vietnam veteran as it might undermine its recognition as a hero. These soldiers are meant to represent a healing nation. Therefore, the comic escapes the portrayal of the Vietnam veteran as a victimized, demasculinized, angry and lonely character, a representation that was common in many movies that came soon after the conflict, such as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1975), Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Ted Post's *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978), and De Palma's *Casualties of War* (1989), among many

others. In contrast, it strengthens the image of the soldier without perpetrating the opposite excess, as it avoids creating Rambo-like characters.

Zimmerman and Vansant's graphic history also criticizes the draft lottery which forced many young men to join the conflict in Vietnam. Indeed, they underline how the selection criteria were not always fair, "local draft boards had great **discretion** over the granting of exemptions and deferments, and numerous charges of favoritism and **racism** were levied during the Vietnam War" (Zimmerman & Vansant, 2009:25, original emphasis). Hence, the comic makes the reader infer that the problems that America faced in Vietnam mirrored those occurring within its borders. Remarkably, the only deaths that this 'graphic history' comments on are the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Thus, the comic infers that American society was as violent as the conflict in Vietnam.

Moreover, this graphic history glosses over many controversial aspects of the conflict. For example, whereas it acknowledges the use of herbicides, named after the color coding on their barrel (Agents Purple, Pink, Blue, and the infamous Orange), for defoliant purposes, as they allowed American troops to deny the enemy the protection of the jungle, the text barely mentions the long-term consequences of these substances on people and the ecosystem. Indeed, these herbicides containing harmful dioxin compound settled into the soil and waterways of Vietnam, entering into animal and human tissue either by direct contact through the skin or lungs or by contaminations in the food chain. These poisons raised the numbers of infant mortality, congenital malformation, miscarriage, and premature birth among exposed persons. While the text carefully illustrates the effects of TCDD (the active chemical in Agent Orange) on plants, it also avoids any description of the damages it caused to people. The comics seems also to construct the US government (and the troops) as non-fully accountable for the aftermaths of those sprays, as it claims that American forces discontinued its use after 1970, when dioxin's toxicity was discovered. Yet, this discussion evades the fact that the legality of herbicide use, as well as other chemicals such as tear gas, was unclear under the Geneva Protocol, and one can contend whether their use was legitimate also during that time. It is significant that, in the comic, only the companies which produced the herbicides seem to be considered liable for the consequences of the dioxin contained in their products. Indeed, the comic remarks that chemical companies established "a $180 million trust fund for some victims in 1984."

However, it also forgets to mention that this amount was meant as compensation only for thousands of Vietnam veterans who were harmed by the exposition to such substances (Blumenthal, 1984).

Vietnamese people and their suffering are of course neglected, as this acknowledgment would render the US potentially liable for their actions. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the comic never addresses the use of napalm, as its discussion would inevitably evoke in the mind of the reader one of the most memorable photographs of that conflict, Nick Ut's 'Napalm Girl' (1972). Indeed, this photograph is considered to have had a decisive impact on the public opinion towards the Vietnam War. As Susan Sontag (2008[1977]:17) argued, "a naked South Vietnamese child just sprayed by American napalm, running down a highway toward the camera, her arms open, screaming with pain—probably did more to increase the public revulsion against the war than a hundred hours of televised barbarities." Therefore, this comic book, like all memory projects, is essentially amnesiac, as it effaces as much historical details from its recollection as it includes in its narrative. This comic must forget certain aspects of the conflict to foster its own agenda. Hence, one can easily see how this graphic novel attempts to deal with this national trauma, sanitizing its most controversial aspects. Indeed, this narration is mainly focused on "remembering one's own" (Nguyen, 2016) suffering. The enemy and Southern Vietnamese anguishes are almost forgotten. The narration of the event is reduced to an argument over the morality of the conflict and the media's role in destabilizing the morale of the nation. Media are here accused to have undermined America's success because of their "tendency toward sensationalism" and "antiwar bias" (Zimmerman & Vansant, 2009:89). Indeed, the authors comment iconic images of the antiwar protests maintaining that "the north Vietnamese leaders soon discovered that though they suffered a crushing defeat on the battlefield, they had achieved a strategic victory on the **political front**. America's will to continue the war had been broken" (Zimmerman & Vansant, 2009:86, original emphasis).

Therefore, the comic seems to indict anybody, but the army for this loss. It was the liberal media that turned the people against the war. It was the protesters, the college students, who soured the country, "the twin forces of the **Vietnam War** and the **Civil Rights Movement** created a perfect storm over the American political landscape […] **debate and rhetoric**, once impassioned but reasoned, became increasingly **polarized**

**and acrimonious**—and, in places across the country, overwhelmed by **violence**" (Zimmerman & Vansant, 2009:97, original emphasis). It was Johnson's policy that tied the military's hands behind its back.

In this historical reconstruction of the Vietnam War, Zimmerman and Vansant held the soldiers accountable for their actions only on one occasion, during their discussion of the My Lai Massacre. What happened at My Lai remains controversial even today, as American soldiers from a platoon commanded by William Laws Calley Jr. in Captain Ernest Lou Medina's Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment of the 11th Infantry Brigade, Americal Division murdered about four hundred South Vietnamese civilians, most of whom were women and children. Some soldiers even raped[152] some of the women before killing them. As Richard Slotkin remarked,

> More than any other single event, the revelation [of the My Lay massacre] transformed the terms of ideological and political debate on the war, lending authority to the idea that American society was in the grip of 'madness' whose sources might be endemic to our national character (Slotkin, 1999[1992]:581).

Yet, the comic establishes such atrocities as circumscribed to this event, "the brigade had a notorious reputation for **poor discipline** and weak leadership, and some units were described as being little more than organized bands of **thugs**" (Zimmerman &Vansant, 2009:90, original emphasis). His selective reconstruction of the events reduces the question of responsibility for the killing of innocent civilians to a question of personalities. The notion of insanity shields the Army from any liability as 'normal' American soldiers would have never acted in this way.

The comic avoids looking for the reasons behind such gesture so that it can establish it as an unforeseen event. Even though the exact reason cannot be reconstructed, one can try to formulate some hypothesis. The narrator of Tim O'Brien[153]'s *In the Lake of the Woods* (1995) seems to attempt such effort, in a footnote,

> I know what happened that day. I know how it happened. I know why. It was the sunlight. It was the wickedness that soaks into your blood and slowly heats up and begins to boil. Frustration, partly. Rage, partly. The enemy was invisible. They were ghosts. They killed us with land mines and booby

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[152] The theme of rape will recur in this chapter as many authors depict it to investigate the morality of the conflict. The 1980s Don Lomax's *Vietnam Journal* depiction of an attempted rape is certainly an antecedent. Yet it is important to remark that each graphic narrative provides its own perspective by adopting different points of views and stances. Zimmerman and Vansant (2009) minimize rape as a sporadic occurrence during war. Don Lomax adopts the point of view of the rapist, Aaron and Stewart describe the victim's resentment, and Eve Gilbert questions the responsibility of the bystander.

[153] O'Brien discussed the Mylai massacre also in the chapter 13 (titled "My Lai in May") of his book *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973) and in short story titled "The Vietnam in Me" published on the *New York Times* on October 2, 1994.

traps; they disappeared into the night, or into tunnels, or into the deep misted-over paddies and bamboo and elephant grass. But it went beyond that. Something more mysterious. The smell of incense, maybe. The unknown, the unknowable. The blank faces. The overwhelming otherness. This is not to justify what occurred on March 16, 1968, for in my view such justifications are both futile and outrageous. Rather, it's to bear witness to the mystery of evil. (O'Brien, 1995[1994]: 199)

Thus, the comic erase such 'mystery' to describe the event as extraordinary, eschewing digging into what Hannah Arendt described as 'the banality of evil.' It also does not address the racist attitudes of many soldiers towards the Vietnamese (which translated into the belief that their lives were negligible), the bitterness and frustration they felt for losing comrades; but it also fails to situate the massacre in the context of U.S. policies pursed during the war, which featured search and destroy missions, the counting of dead bodies, and free fire zones.

Moreover, Zimmerman and Vansant's euphemistical recollection of the event (defined as an "incident") glosses over many questions that this atrocity raised: were the soldiers merely following orders[154]? If so, were those orders legitimate? Should the killings at My Lai be prosecuted as war crimes? Was the subsequent court-martial of Calley justified, or did the U.S. Army turn him into a scapegoat after the event entered the public domain? Interestingly, many of these questions were raised (even though not fully addressed) by *The 'Nam* (1986-1993), to which Zimmerman and Vansant also contributed. Then, it is curious notice that this new memory project fosters a much more conservative rhetoric than the one published in the late 1980s.

Like *The 'Nam*, Zimmerman and Vansant's (2009:3) *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History* shows that the morality of the Army is promptly redeemed by its willingness and readiness to punish those judged guilty, "Two investigations were launched. One was conducted by the Army Criminal Investigation Division. The second was a board of inquiry headed by Lt. General William Peers." Hence, it is noteworthy that Ronald L. Ridenhour is here constructed through the image of errand into the wilderness, as he sets the nation back to the right path by writing letters to the political and military leaders in order to report the information he had gleaned from other veterans about what happened at My Lai.

After having considered the My Lai case to be an isolated incident and objected the way in which the media had rushed their judgment about the (political and moral)

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[154] However, as the Nuremberg trials established, the plea of superior orders does not shield soldiers from being held accountable for their actions and it is not enough to escape punishment.

meaning of the Tet Offensive, exaggerating the event, the comic reports Vietcong atrocities against Americans soldiers. Indeed, the graphic narrative exploits "the fate of approximately 2,500 American servicemen missing in action (MIA)" to rehabilitate the image of the nation by representing the soldiers and veterans as neglected victims[155]. The comic stresses the importance of private organization and government-sponsored searches. It asserts that through the years these quests managed to find and return the remains of some MIAs, but not all of them. However, no credible evidence was ever provided to corroborate the claim that American POW/MIAs continued to languish in Vietnam after the signing of the peace accords. The possibility that American servicemen remained imprisoned in Southeast Asia had been exploited by different Presidents (e.g. Nixon, Ford, and Carter) to achieve different aims, but it was Reagan who transformed this narrative into a myth. As Mark Taylor (2003:142) discussed,

> Reagan continued to use the emotional pull of the notional prisoners' plight throughout his presidency to emphasise the inhumanity of the Vietnamese and to persuade Americans that they and the POWs were the war's true victims […] Thus, during Reagan's presidency, the image of the Vietnam veteran was assimilated into a version of history which accorded dual status, as a warrior who had been deprived of a victory he could have won and as a victim who symbolised the various betrayals the nation had suffered in Vietnam. Such image helped to justify more aggressive foreign policies and enabled Reagan to demonize those 'scheming bureaucrats and liberals' who might oppose them (Taylor, 2003:142).

Thus, the persistence of the MIA/POWs myth testifies the power of Reagan's rhetoric but also the renewed desire to justify US intervention overseas. Like in the Reagan era, the current sanitization of the Vietnam War might be seen as part of an organized process of forgetting which aims to reinforce America's image as a benevolent force. The comic recasts the past to orient the reader towards the future (military commitments). In 2009, that future might have been the current military commitment in the Middle East.

As hitherto discussed, post-conflict comics concerning the Vietnam War have tended to be focused on the American experience, as if the conflict was just a battle for the "soul" of the nation, paraphrasing an expression used by Martin Luther King. Yet, this political rhetoric prevents a full engagement in a moral account of the cause of the war. Similarly, the conduct of the US military in Vietnam is not investigated by these narratives. The

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[155] Mike Grell's *John Sable, Freelance* #12-13 (1984) featured a two-part story, titled "MIA," where the homonymous protagonist goes to Vietnam with a group of veterans (one is a former Southern Vietnamese general) to find evidence of a MIA soldier. At the end of the story Sable find the corpse of the soldier. This event makes Sable wonder what happened to other POW/MIA soldiers.

roles Vietnamese people played in the conflict (collaborators, victims, enemies, and/or simply people on whose land the conflict occurred) are often neglected. Laotian and Cambodian "casualties" are usually forgotten. These sufferings are consciously overlooked to describe the Vietnam veterans as the main victims of the conflict. Yet, as Marita Sturken discussed (1997:63), soldiers who committed suicide or died from complications derived from their exposure to Agent Orange are generally neglected from public recollection as they would undermine the promotion of a new heroic narrative of the war.

Similarly, and in contrast to *The 'Nam*, *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History* does not mention the existence of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), a non-profit organization founded in 1967 to oppose the United States policy and participation in the Vietnam War. One of the possible reasons behind this lack of acknowledgment might be the awareness that this group undermines the perception of the veterans as a whole body and questions the message of this memory project, pointing out the immorality of the conflict. The military engagement in Vietnam is here described as noble in intention (or at least a necessary evil) and the treatment of American prisoners by North Vietnamese as the major injustice of that war. The presence of U.S. soldiers being held captive even after the war helps Americans to cast themselves as the real victims of that conflict. Even though *The 'Nam* and *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History* share a similar (conservative) rhetoric, it is important to observe a key difference concerning the way in which contrasting voices are dealt with. *The 'Nam,* being printed by a major publisher (Marvel), had to incorporate different stances on the war in order not to alienate potential readers, letting them to choose what to believe. In contrast, *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History* either directly calls out certain interpretation of the events deemed to be biased or it censors them, eliminating any controversial issues from its historical reconstruction. Finally, this revisionist account about the Vietnam War might be seen as an attempt to show that Americans have recovered from their 'Vietnam syndrome', restored their confidence, repaired their self-esteem and faith in their mission, and they are now ready to embrace the future and engage in new military missions.

### 3. 'We Win Even When We Lose': Joe Kubert's *Dong Xoai Vietnam 1965*

Thirty-five years after the end of the Vietnam War, Joe Kubert returned to narrate the conflict. As aforementioned, his first comic about the Vietnam War was *Tales of the Green Beret*[156] (1986[1966]). The strip's writing was credited to Robin Moore himself, although it was ghostwritten by Jerry Capp. It was warmly received by the Chicago Tribune Syndicate and debuted on September 20th, 1965. After two years as the artist, Joe Kubert decided to leave the strip, which would be later adapted for comic book format, but by that time public opinion no longer supported such jingoistic story. Kubert had prerogatives over the script, but the frequent discussions with Jerry Capp made him walk away. Some of these tensions were about the jingoistic slant of the storyline,

> During our initial discussions, it was agreed that we would kick it with this whole idea of Robin Moore's book… But if we expected any longevity in this strip… it would have to be similar to Terry and the Pirates, a romantic adventure kind of thing, apolitical as much as possible. Keep it away from the politics, with the current thing going, especially with Vietnam. Little by little Jerry [Capp] tried to turn it into a political treatise (Schelly, 2011:167)

However, it is important to remark that at the heart of the debate was not the patriotic value system underlying the comic, but the form in which those morals are presented to the readership. Indeed, other Kubert's works, like *Sgt. Rock* (set during World War II), still featured all the clichés of the genre: hypermasculine soldiers buddying up and saving the day by protecting democracy and American ideals from evil foreign threats. For example, issue *#196* of *Our Army at War* (1968:1, original emphasis) features Sgt. Rock having a moment of despair and dejection, "I've – I've **had it!** Enough of **killin'** – enough of **death! No more!** I – I can't take it - - **I can't!** I'm only made of … **flesh and blood!!**" however, an hallucinatory vision of past conflicts (e.g. he sees Washington losing his men at Valley Forge) reminds him that war might be a necessary evil in order to secure future peace and prosperity, "**we are** in **this** war because a crazy guy with a little mustache figured he's God… and everybody else is good enough **only** to be his **slaves**…" (1968:11, original emphasis). His renewed faith in the just cause of the war is symbolized by the presence of an American flag on the background of the last panel. The comic makes clear that the soldiers were not there because they enjoyed it, but because they were called upon

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[156] This work has already been discussed in the second chapter together with Moore's homonymous novel. As already discussed, this comic was meant to be an adaptation of Robin Moore bestseller The Green Berets (1965), which would also be adapted in 1968 into a movie of the same name starring John Wayne.

to serve the nation[157]. Therefore, what makes Kubert's later works differ from *The Green Berets* (1965) is merely the lack of direct references to the current political situation, as the jingoistic rhetoric is still there. Indeed, *The Green Berets* (1965) commented on present political affairs by mythologizing the conflict (and the soldiers) through the figure of the late President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the World War II hero. This is particularly notable because this rhetoric echoed with the early perception of the conflict and the experience of many soldiers. Several young men joined the army to emulate World War II veterans and become heroes. As Philip Caputo (2017 [1977]: xiv) argued in his memoir *A Rumor of War*, "War is always attractive to young men who know nothing about it, but we had also been seduced into uniform by Kennedy's challenge to 'ask what you can do for your country' and by the missionary idealism he had awakened in us."

In order to gather authentic material for *The Green Berets* (1965) Kubert visited the Special Warfare Center in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where Robin Moore received his training. There he was loaded with stacks of reference drawings and photographs. After this experience he would return to his studio in Dover, New Jersey, where he started working on the 'Vietcong Cowboy' storyline. In the promotional material that was created for the launch of the strip Joe Kubert was credited saying,

> Now that I have seen the men themselves, I recognize most of them from the book Robin wrote. I seemed to be meeting old friends. Now I can draw these people; they are no longer vague or fictional characters. They are reals. And their eyes! That's what got me. I'll remember those eyes whenever I draw a Green Beret soldier. I am proud to be the man who [will] draw these Americans. I shall do the best to give readers a sense of the special qualities of these proud and tough Americans who do us such honor (Schelly, 2011:210)

Joe Kubert's graphic novel *Dong Xoai Vietnam 1965* (2010) was certainly inspired by this experience. Indeed, because of his contribution to the strip *The Green Berets* (1965), Joe Kubert was chosen to illustrate a Veterans' Day series for *The Chicago Tribune* and *New York News Syndicates*. The series included a dramatic rendering of some episodes of the battle of Dong Xaoi. Decades later, Kubert was contacted by Colonel Bill Stokes, one of the survivors of that battle, who sought to obtain one of the artist's illustrations from the articles. In particular, he wanted a copy of a drawing portraying two of his comrades carrying him to safety (he was wounded). This action took place in the course

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[157] This is particularly interesting because this issue came out in the same year in which the perception of the Vietnam War started to change.

of a Vietcong assault to their military compound during the battle of Dong Xaoi. The original art had been lost so Kubert agreed to redraw the illustration,

> One of the illustrations he had was one I'd done forty years ago. It was an old newspaper print -- rough and smudged. This guy knows nothing about cartooning, nothing about comic books, and doesn't know me from Adam. He saw my name on the drawing and contacted me to ask if I had a clean copy of it. This was a drawing I'd done forty years ago! God knows what'd happened to it. I said if he sent me the picture, I'd be more than happy to redraw it.

After a conversation with Stokes and having seen a comprehensive 30-page dissertation (which is included as back material in the graphic novel) on what the members of Detachment A-342 had gone through (including pictures, illustrations, and photographs), Kubert decided he wanted to create a graphic novel documenting their experiences.

Therefore, Dong *Xoai Vietnam 1965* (2010) tells the story of a detachment of Special Forces soldiers on a simple assistance and observation mission into the village of Dong Xoai. It focuses on a group of twelve Green Berets, who "had formed friendships, having trained together for this mission at Ft. Bragg in North Carolina" (Kubert, 2010:2). Not all of them were rookies; "Five of them served previous tours in Viet Nam." The mission of this company of elite soldiers was "to train the Civilian Irregular Defense Forces and act as advisors to the Vietnamese Special Forces" and "check on infiltration routes of the Viet Cong and train them [the Montagnards] for active defense patrolling". The training gets all too real when the soldiers find that the village is in the marching lines of the Northern Vietnamese Army. Suddenly, the situation turns dangerous, and the grunts must stand shoulder-to-shoulder to resist the impending attack of the enemy. Yet the US soldiers manage to gain the upper hand over the enemy, "the V.C. did what any normal person would do in the face of the screaming charge led by 2nd Lt. Kelly. They ran!" (Kubert, 2010:23)

After this encounter with the enemy, the Green Berets meet the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Southern Vietnamese officers are here presented as vicious, corrupt, and incompetent. The US soldiers are frustrated by their attitude and lack of commitment toward the fight against the enemy. However, even though the allies are depicted as morally ambiguous, the cause of the mission is never questioned. The US soldier must step into the conflict to defend the local population. The Montagnards are portrayed as benevolent savages that welcomes the protection offered by American soldiers. Using a worn-out cliché, the generosity of the Green Berets is here symbolized by their kindness towards kids, "the new A-team is greeted warmly by the Montagnards… especially by

the children… who scramble for candy and chewing gum" (Kubert, 2010:11). The comic takes time describing the soldiers' efforts to win the 'hearts and minds' of the local population, a practice that echoes with the words uttered by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 (the same year in which the graphic novel is set) in his "Remarks at a Dinner Meeting of the Texas Electric Cooperatives, Inc.",

> So we must be ready to fight in Viet-Nam, but the ultimate victory will depend upon the hearts and the minds of the people who actually live out there. By helping to bring them hope and electricity you are also striking a very important blow for the cause of freedom throughout the world (Johnson, 1965: web).

Montagnards are portrayed as both benevolent and barbaric savages, exploiting the ambivalence of well-established colonial imageries. The graphic novel presents the Montagnard in the act of welcoming US troops. The indigenous population and the soldiers exchange tokens of friendships, "Du Krang, chief of the Montagnards, gave Lt. Kelly a bracelet. A protection from harm. Kelly gave the chief an episcopal medallion he removed from his dogtag chain… to serve a similar purpose." (Kubert, 2010:38). Yet, the customs of the Montagnard are depicted as brutal and cruel as they live in a primitive state and their actions are dictated by superstition. The comic details how the death of ten villagers who suffered from cholera triggered a witch hunt, "It was judged by the village that it must be the work of a witch. A man was blamed. His deformed arms proved (of course) that he was the witch" (Kubert, 2010:31). So, the comic opposes the civilized humanity of the American G.I.s to the humanity still out in the nature (visceral and almost animal) of the Montagnard. This depiction stigmatizes those men who have not left the natural state yet. By portraying the Montagnards as primitive and uncivilized, Americans' geopolitical actions are constructed as the opposite: modern and bearer of civilization. The fact that the Montagnards go around half naked, cannot talk (good English), and engage in violent actions dictated by superstition justifies the US paternalistic intervention. The Montagnards are not capable of taking care of themselves, "after a while, the team felt a responsibility to these people that went beyond minimal requirements" (Kubert, 2010:39). This duty towards the local population is symbolized by the image of a soldier giving a (bad tasting) medicine to a young kid (figure 21). This picture might be considered as an allegory of the scope of US intervention in Vietnam, where unpleasant resolutions (war) had to be taken to let the country recover from its disease (Communism). This imagery is not particularly surprising if one recalls Philip Caputo's (1996 [1977]:66), description of the early stage of the conflict in his memoir *A*

*Rumor of War* "it was a peculiar period in Vietnam, with something of the romantic flavor of Kipling's colonial wars." The comic does not only avoids discussing how U.S. policy in the war was legitimized by racist and neocolonialist prejudices that made the life of Vietnamese people less valuable[158], but it also (re)produces stereotyped images and marginalizes the Vietnamese by erasing their historical memory. The comic does not deal with the history of that country prior to 1965. Thus, the reader might ignore that the war Americans soldiers were fighting had its roots in French colonialism.

It was during this historical period (1965), in which Kubert's story is set, that U.S became more than a mere "adviser" in the war: on August 2-4, 1964, two supposed incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin lead Johnson to seek congressional approval for direct U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and on March 8, 1965 the First Marines land in Danang. Therefore, the colonial imagery serves as a justification for the necessity of a (white) (American) savior. Even though the village has its own chief, it still needs the guidance of U.S. soldiers. The graphic novel exploits "orientalist" (Said, 1978) cliché in order to construct the Vietnamese character(s) as inherently violent and not fully masculine. This essentialized archetype is projected over the racial Other regardless of the distinctions separating each group of Vietnamese (the Vietcong, the ARVN, and the Montagnards). The Vietcong is the small stature invisible enemy that group in hordes, places traps and hides in the jungle, waiting for the best occasion to attack the US military bases. The Montagnards are represented as childlike savages. The ARVN are described as unreliable allies, not fully committed to the cause, as they are still being engaged in amenities during the conflict, "this is one crazy war, sir. He had a checkered tablecloth. Silverware. The works. Only thing missin' was the Chinese waiter" (Kubert, 2010:25). These mannerisms set the ARVN officers apart from the Green Berets. The American soldiers conduct a much more spartan life and embody the macho type who does not need such superficial comforts as they are just focused on completing the mission. The Americans G.I.s exhibit physical strength and superior technology. Following the conventions of the genre, weapons are extensions of the soldiers' masculinity.

The first encounter with the Vietcong anticipates the impending conflict with the enemy. The battle of Dong Xoai represents one of the first defeat of the American army.

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[158] These prejudices might have justified search and destroy mission, the use of napalm and defoliants, the condoning of rape and torture, the bombing of hospitals and civilian areas.

The comics shows how the battle was ultimately lost because of incompetence, poor planning, restraints, and lack of sufficient equipment, "again and again the V.C. came on. Not enough men or ammunition for the defenders to stop them. The enemy continued to gain momentum with each advancing step." (Kurtzman, 2010:127). Thus, this battle seems to foreshadow the outcome the whole war. And yet, the graphic novel treats this event as something to be glorified. The comic exalts the sacrifice and camaraderie of the soldiers as they watch each other's back in the mayhem of war. Therefore, the Green Berets redeem the defeat as they perform acts of humanity in the midst of horror and violence, risking their life in order to protect their wounded buddies. Poignantly, the graphic novel honors the participants without referencing the cause of the conflict. Indeed, it avoids commenting on US geopolitical agenda. The comic ends with the portrait of Americans soldiers regaining control over the area. The message is clear, even though America was initially defeated, everything was now set back to normal because the troops used overwhelming force to take the land back again. Hence, the comic turns defeat into a victory to commemorate the combatants that took part to conflict.

Like in Zimmerman & Vansant's (2009) *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History,* the soldiers' experiences are at the center of this revisionist project. The triumphalist tone of the comic is evident in the closing lines of the graphic novel, which, according to the convention of the genre, usually contain the moral lesson the reader should learn out of the story,

> called in times of war, these are tried and tested in steel and fire. Battles are won and lost… countries are broken and rise again… the bravery of soldiers in war never flags or falters. Each man's responsibility is for the man who stands beside him. It is stronger bond than any political philosophy. It is a pledge to his fellow soldier… fused in blood (Kubert, 2010:166).

In contrast to Zimmerman & Vansant's (2009) *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History*, this historical reconstruction is designed to draw attention to the individual and away from the nation and its cause. The comic makes no statement about the war, adopting political silence as a rhetoric tool to rehabilitate the figure of the soldier. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the comic focuses on a battle that took place in 1965, an historical moment in which America had not questioned the morality of the conflict yet. Indeed, in America, antiwar stances became prominent only after the images of the Tet Offensive were broadcasted on TV (Hallin, 1986). Therefore, this date allows the author to not discuss in his memory project political division and military defeat, concealing the

nation ambivalence towards the war and its moral ambiguity. Victories can be celebrated unquestioningly. Military loss must be explained, and every explanation is subject to a continuous process of contention, as different groups may provide different interpretation of the event and its aftermath.

Therefore, Kubert's graphic novel seems to sanitize the memory of the Vietnam War by providing it a purpose and turning loss into victory. This is particularly striking because the Vietnam War has been often described as meaningless and futile. For example, in *Going After Cacciato* Tim O'Brien wrote:

> They did not know even the simple things: a sense of victory, or satisfaction, or necessary sacrifice. They did not know the feeling of taking a place and keeping it, securing a village and calling it a victory. No sense of order or momentum. No front, no rear, no trenches laid out in neat parallels. No Patton rushing for the Rhine, no beachheads to storm and win and hold for the duration. They did not have targets. They did not have a cause. They did not know if it was a war of ideology or economics or hegemony or spite [...] They did not know the terms of war, its architecture, the rules of fair play. When they took prisoners, which was rare they did not know the questions to ask, whether to release a suspect or beat on him. They did not know how to feel [...] They did not know good from evil (O'Brien, 1988 [1978]: 255-256)

In contrast, the comic never questions the purpose of the war and the soldiers are portrayed as self-confident and hopeful about the success of the mission. Even though this optimism may be justified by the dates in which the story is set, this representation goes against the way in which the Vietnam War has been traditionally described and remembered. This heroic narration willingly neglects to discuss some controversial aspects about the conflict that already started to surface in those years, such as the racial inequality 'both in-country' and 'in the world'. A Latino character (Matinez) is featured in the graphic novel, however, his inclusion into the narrative can be seen as form of tokenism. In the graphic novel race relations are transcended and the comic seems to infer that people of different ethnicity and color saw each other and considered each other as buddies and brothers. However, as already discussed, the Vietnam War happened in a time of racial turmoil in US and many accounts of the veterans of color make it clear that they did not share perceptions that racial harmony prevailed during their service in Vietnam (Sturken, 1997:113). People of color were often assigned to the most dangerous missions (Sturken, 1997; Chong, 2012).

Even though the comic makes no direct political commentary on past events, the reader can still observe how this recollection is influenced by the current political situation. The graphic novel features an interrogation scene which is kept off page. It also depicts the

soldiers as being uncomfortable with the possibility of torture happening during harsh interrogations, "catching that spy is only another indication of how closely Dong Xoai has been monitored by the V.C., and no matter what – we will handle this deal with the cards we've been dealt – like we always do" (Kubert, 2010:79). The comic refutes the idea that any of the men featured in the story was involved in such action, "There have been many accusations of maltreatment of prisoners during the Vietnamese conflict. Both the South and the North shared the guilt. In 1965, the U.S. personnel were in a position of advisors and had no direct involvement in the questioning process" (Kubert, 2010:78). The graphic novel attributes the responsibility for the interrogation to the ARVN, making the US soldiers not accountable for what happened to the prisoners. Indeed, Keane simply washes his hands off, giving the prisoner into the hands of the Southern Vietnamese, "you let us know as soon as possible if you do get any new information, Capt. Con" (Kubert, 2010: 89). The comics avoids acknowledging the existence of torture by the hand of U.S. soldiers and the fact that "it is estimated that as many as 80 percent of those tortured in the Vietnam War were either innocent people in the wrong place at the wrong time or just low-level Viet Cong without useful information" (Clarke, 2012:48). One of the reasons why the comic willingly avoids recognizing and portraying such atrocities might be the fact that they would also call into question present day American policy. As Alan W. Clarke discussed (2012:24), "There is a direct line from past American practices to Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo". The scholar further maintains that the existence of "manuals make clear that much of the torture and torture training that went on in Vietnam, Latin America, Iran, and the Philippines was the result of deliberate U.S. policy" (2012:22). Therefore, one can see how past events may cast shadows over the present, and thus one can understand why some comics published after the War on Terror attempt to sanitize this controversial memory.

Even though the book is overloaded with jingoistic stances, Kubert's graphic novel cannot be dismissed simply as a revisionist and triumphal imagining of the conflict, as *Dong Xoai Vietnam 1965* (2010) is a work of great artistic merit. Indeed, in this work Kubert kept on experimenting with drawing techniques he already used and developed for his graphic novel *Yossel: April 19, 1943*[159] (2003). In both works, he did not use ink,

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[159] *Yossel: April 19, 1943* (2003) narrates the life of the young eponymous protagonist in the Warsaw ghetto. In this graphic novel Kubert speculates about what might have happened to his family if they had not escaped from Poland to the U.S. before the outbreak of World War II. The graphic novel presents the

but a sketch-pencil drawing technique that aimed to amplify the sense of movement of the characters while giving the reader a sense of incompleteness. In *Dong Xoai Vietnam 1965* (2010), he also adds gouache for the white highlights, adding definition to the figures. He also uses the white paint for the weapon's fire, as it helps to make it stand out from the rest of the picture. Building upon Eisner's style, this graphic novel use neither speech balloons nor panels to frame the pictures. He eschews the use of panels and grids to adopt borderless drawings loosely arranged on the page. Yet, differently from Eisner's work, words are not integrated into the image, but they are separated through captions. Moreover, the digital lettering has a pencil halo around it, making the graphic novel seem rushed and unpolished.

Kubert did not use standard panel-to-panel storytelling. In contrast, he adopted a series of illustrations, one to three on a page, surrounded by captions that either contain factual narration or pieces of dialogue from the characters. The captions containing dialogues are usually placed next to the speaker and feature the character's name, a colon, and the line uttered. This solution was mainly due to Kubert's new drawing style as it broke the visual conventions of the genre in which Kubert worked during most of his career. Whereas, pencil drawings and sketchy lines adds dynamism to the composition, they do not allow individual details to emerge, hindering the recognition of the characters (thus the necessity to have nearby caption with their name). Drafting marks are still visible in the final version of the work giving a sense of incompleteness. This new style suggests a sense of immediacy giving the impression that these drawings are the work of a reporter at this event, an artist that has no time to complete and polish his work due to the rapidity of the events. In the most conceited moments of the battle, Kubert draws heads without faces and bodies without many details. Helmets and caps often obscure the faces of both the enemy and the Green Berets. The graphic novel also shows scenes of the battle from the Green Berets' back. This schematic style almost denies any sense of individuality to the characters. Detailed facial expressions are present only during relatively peaceful moments. This alternance between almost anonymous face and detailed portrait of the Green Berets is used to emphasize the tension between the individual experience of a private and the sublimation of the event into a morality tale. Thus, the individual is turned into the universal soldier. Cinematic techniques (establishing shot, full shot, close-up,

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drawings as if they were Yossel's sketches and rough line work.

extreme close, the 'American shot,' and bird's eye shot) allow Kubert to focus on both individual characters and the battlefield.  The comic also exploits different camera angles: eye level, low angle, and high angle. The combination of these techniques attempts to describe the importance of the event and its scale on the territory while honoring the individual soldier and praising a collective effort.

This is particularly interesting if one takes into consideration the process of identification that images can trigger. As McCloud (1993:36, original emphasis) argued, "When you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face – you see it as the face of **another**. But when you enter the world of the **cartoon** – you see **yourself**." He continued by stating that "the cartoon is a **vacuum** into which our **identity** and **awareness** are **pulled**... an **empty shell** that we inhabit which **enables** us to travel into **another realm**. We don't just **observe** the cartoon, we **become** it!" However, this narrative solution does not completely work in this context. Kubert's sketchy style has the effect of distancing the reader from the characters. Indeed, for a war story to work, the reader needs to be able to distinguish the characters at play, namely separate friends from foes. On the other hand, these graphic renditions help the reader to visualize the conflict as a chaotic event, a mayhem in which action and destruction function as means of narrative continuity.

Even though the graphic novel is based on the experience of real soldiers, the story ends up losing much of its personal content. In the beginning the comic attempts to describe the feeling that these soldiers had, and it also tries to establish the relationship these soldiers had with one another. These soldiers were together through all their training. They knew each other well before they arrived in Vietnam and they were almost like family, "Hey, when we get back stateside, what say we let Martinez make us another tacado at his house? What say, Marty? Love them tacos" (Kubert, 2010:3). However, these plot points are never further explored as the Green Berets compartmentalize their experiences as soon as they arrive 'in country' so that they can provide leadership or obey orders accordingly to what the situation requires them to do. However, the comic manages to convey their bond through the depiction of teamwork and solidarity. Words of affection are substituted by practical actions of support. Individuality is tempered by the needs of self-control and obedience to the rules. Their strength is in their cooperation, there is no space in the comic for an American superman.

Even though the story is inspired by real life events, the author decided to fictionalize them and change the name of the people involved in the battle. This choice was mainly due to the decision of the survivors to not be featured in the book. As Kubert recalled in an interview,

> When Bill had contacted the guys that were survivors, I think there were maybe two or three guys left out of the original twelve, they felt uncomfortable with some of the dialogue that I put down and preferred not to have their names used, which I certainly respected. So for that reason the book is called 'a novel based on a true event'. But as far as I am concerned, I tried to follow as faithfully as I could, that whole story is absolutely true (Lorah, 2010: web).

They also did not want to be represented as heroes. Indeed, Bill Stokes told Joe Kubert: "I want you to do the story, but we were not heroes. Please don't make this a comic book story with superheroes." This request might also have prompted Kubert to abandon all the features and conventions associated with the superhero genre and experiment with new drawing techniques and forms of storytelling, mixing the report formula with personal accounts, a way of writing that reminds of the "New Journalists' vigorous combination of fictional techniques with the detailed combination of reports" (Taylor, 2003:19). As Norman Mailer (2018[1968]: 262) argued the novel might be used to "replace history at precisely that point where experience is sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential or supernatural to expose the fact the historian in pursuing the experience would be obliged to quit the clearly demarcated limits of historic inquiry." Driven by a similar ambition, Kubert fictionalized a report to create a narrative that is true in intention even if imaginary in detail. However, Kubert's graphic novel makes it difficult for his readers to suspend their disbelief and forget their knowledge about the conflict. The Tet Offensive smashed the myth of the Green Beret as a self-reliant, brave, expert, and victorious soldier that the comic is trying to sell. Even though the comic covers a period in which the majority of Americans were in favor of intervention, a contemporary reader cannot ignore the fact that the narrative feels like a heavy handed and out of date form of propaganda that uses real events to perpetuate old clichés and narrative tropes: the soldiers' innocence, America fighting in defense of the oppressed (the Montagnards), male bonding, and U.S. technological superiority (epitomized by the helicopter). This graphic novel shows how archival evidence can be manipulated to foster a certain reading of the events. The historical simplifications make the war seem a Vietnamese responsibility. Americans are just there to assist the local population and government against the externally directed Communist threat. There is no

mention about the colonial past or discussion regarding the Vietnamese right to self-determination. Thus, the comic fails to situate the America military presence in Vietnam in its political and historical context. The focus on a single battle reduces the complexity of the war to soldiering practices. The American experience in Vietnam is portrayed as something that occurred in a specific time, not as something that was actively done. The limited historical focus erases the French colonial past and America's imperialist ambition. It also precludes any discussion about the context, the causes, the ideals, the practices, the goals, and consequences of that conflict. War is reduced to a buddy narrative and the reader is expected to identify with the soldiers, sympathize with their losses and cheer for their victory. The rehabilitation of the soldiers' image is fostered by two simple narratives: soldiers are goodhearted because they help the local population and servicemen are brave (they kill they enemy and save their comrades).

Finally, it is worth noticing the influence of photography on Kubert's work. Indeed, the graphic novel adapts many shots featured in the 30-page dissertation included at the end of the story as back information. This correspondence testifies the need to validate the accuracy of this account while blurring the lines of fiction and non-fiction. As already discussed, photographs function as "points of memory" (Hirsch, 2012) reminding the reader that something happened. The adaptation of photographs also helps the author to give his story a 'human face' and create and emotional connection between the reader and event. The reenactment of these archival material allows those images to be rewritten to reestablish a heroic narrative of the conflict, rebuilding the Green Beret as heroes. Whereas Zimmerman and Vansant use the sufferings of the soldiers to rehabilitate their image by portraying them as victims, Kubert goes back to a John-Wayne-like representation of the conflict to restore the Vietnam veterans into paradigms of manhood. This graphic novel seems to foster the idea that something of value can be derived from this history. Indeed, the final dissertation includes a representation of the Special Forces conventions and reunions, implying that bonds forged in Vietnam lasted even after the end of the conflict.

## 4. Remembering the Other: Jason Aaron and Cameron Stewart's *The Other Side*

As hitherto discussed, Zimmerman and Vansant's (2009) and Kubert's (2010) graphic narratives reenacted the conflict to sanitize its controversial aspects and rehabilitate its

image through the soldiers' experience. Both works can be described as non-fiction as they mimic the documentary and report genres. In contrast, Jason Aaron and Cameron Stewart's *The Other Side* (2017 [2006]) use fiction in order to describe America's traumatic experience in Vietnam and engage with its haunting presence. This five-issue comic tells the parallel stories of an American soldier, Bill Everette, and his North Vietnamese counterpart, Vo Binh Dai, as they join their respective armies. The narration of the conflict does not only feature a realistic portrayal of the war but also daydream nightmares, borrowing the codes of horror to make the argument that war is hell. The hallucinations that the two protagonists suffer show how the dreadfulness of war progressively wears upon the soldiers' soul and sanity.

The comic opens with a bleed[160] splash[161] page showing "19-year-old Marine Private Jon J. Faulkner" earning "his one and only PURPLE HEART" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017[2006]) for being blown off by a mortar (figure 22). The image crystalizes the impending death of the soldier. His eyes are wide with shock and his iris reflects the explosion as they see beyond his death. His face is freckled with splatters of gore. The blast illuminates his face at the same time as it wipes out its traits. As Zelizer (2010:63) observed, about-to-die images engage the public emotionally and their "reliance on affect draws from the positioning of an overly emotive (fearing, trembling, dreading) body in some kind of threatening situation, forcing a viewer's powerful emotional response as means of generating meaning, and possibly action." Hence, the viewer of this image is asked to decide where he or she stands. The comic seems to inquire the meaning of the conflict even before introducing its main characters. War and its devastating effects are positioned at the center of this narrative. War is not glorified as spectacle, but it is constructed as a human tragedy.

Even though this image can trigger a wide range of feelings (moral indignation, responsibility, empathy, compassion, but also shame, voyeurism and even indifference),

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[160] Bleeds are images that run outside the border of the panel and they are a powerful dramatic tool in comics. As Scott McCloud (1993:103) discussed, by using bleeds "time is no longer contained by the familiar lines of the closed panel, but instead hemorrhages and escapes into timeless space". Expanding on this definition Harriette Earle (2017) notices how the removal of frames from the page edges eliminates any sense of constriction and demands the reader's complete attention. Indeed, this technique removes the reader's ability to control the timescale of the narrative, which is usually regulated by the gutters and panel borders.

[161] A splash is a large, often full-page illustration which opens and introduces a story. It aims to capture the reader's attention, and can be used to establish time, place, and mood.

the captions make sure to channel the viewers emotions towards grief. The text constructs death as meaningless and futile. The passing of the soldier seems to be set in contrast to the ordinary life of his peers living in America. The captions date the death of the poor soldier by referencing the pleasant events occurring 'in the world.' The young tragically died on the same day in which "Jim Hendrix opened his show in Stockholm, Sweden with 'Killing Floor'" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). Hendrix's song uses the killing floor (the area of a slaughterhouse where animals are killed) as an allegory for a toxic relationship that the voice of the lyrics cannot escape. The lines of this song, alluded in the opening of the comic, acquire a darker meaning in the context of war. The toxic relationship described in the lyrics is alluded to depict the soldier's experience at war as an abusive one, a form of violence the private cannot quit. Yet in this case, the metaphorical death on the killing floor becomes literal as the soldier is being blown up.

The comic uses these allusions not only to give a temporal refence but also to show the irony of war. As Paul Fussel (2013[1977]: 8) argued, "Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends". The young man's expectations are betrayed by war. The irony of the situation is created by contrast between the soldier's hope toward the future and the dark reality in which he is trapped. The comic comments on his tragic death using a blunt and graphic language, "the poor bastard probably dreamed of marrying his high school sweetheart and opening the first drive through-burger joint in Bumfuck, Missouri… but instead he died face down his own shit and the mud of the Que Son Valley" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). Even though the official rhetoric exploits chivalry values to encourage the recruitment of soldiers, there is no honor in combat. The comic depicts how servicemen's death are never heroic, but grotesque.

The private wears a camouflage military helmet with a quote from a John Donne poem, "Death Be Not Proud". The allusion to this sonnet is particularly meaningful because it introduces some of the themes explored by the comic. Indeed, the voice of the poem warns the reader against the power of death as it is merely an illusion. Death is just an agent of other forces (fate, chance, kings, and desperate men) and overall a rite of passage. Similarly, the soldier is just a pawn moved by other forces. Faulkner's death is not portrayed as noble: he is just one of the damned being dragged to hell. The comic

seems to ask the reader why those men had to endure such tortures and horror, which seem to anticipate the punishments in the afterlife. It rhetorically asks the reader what was all thar for. This sense of tragedy is also reinforced by the fact the words "Death Be Not Proud" did not perform their apotropaic function. This line warns the (comic) reader that death might not be the true enemy of the soldier, but war. As the poem argues, Death should not be feared because is just 'one short sleep'. Similarly, the comic presents war as a much more powerful and fearful force than death.

In the following panels, the body of the soldier (filthy with blood, mud, and feces) is zipped up in a bag. Two marines lift Faulkner's body and carry it to a helicopter. The private finally returns home (even though as a corpse). At his funeral only few family members are present. His casket is draped with an American flag. Yet, his death is clearly vain as the war machine demands a substitute, "the next day, I got a letter from MY UNCLE. Seems L.B.J. was hopin' I could PICK UP where the Private Faulkner had LEFT OFF" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006], original emphasis). The scene moves from the Midwest (where Faulkner's funeral is being held) to the South (where Everette receives his letter). This geographical displacement clearly shows how the draft involved all American citizens, but also that poor (rural) recruits were joining the military (and dying) at slightly higher rates. In 1969 a draft lottery was created to address the perceived inequities in the draft system as it existed previously.

It is interesting to notice that this comic does not feature a heroic young man committed to the cause, but an unsuccessful 'draft dodger' who did everything he could think of to avoid being called to perform his duty for Uncle Sam and his war in Vietnam. Bill Everette recalls his unsuccessful attempts to be deferred, "then the night before my physical, I got stinkin' ass drunk and puked on myself. I even told their doctor I was QUEER as all get-out and would fuck every boy's ass I could get my hands on. But they still took me" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). The comic also depicts the reactions of Bill Everette's parents to the letter. The couple stand on the porch of their home, a wooden farmhouse which reminds the architectural style known as Carpenter Gothic. They both say goodbye to their son. However, their reaction is very different: whereas the mother is desperate, the father is proud, "Keep **the Lord** first, boy. He'll help ya kill those **commie bastards** an' make us all proud" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006], original emphasis). Thus, the scene seems to reinforce (gendered) traditional values and faith in American

ideals. However, the scene resemblance to Grant Wood's painting American Gothic (1930) might be interpreted as a satirical commentary on American culture. Indeed, as the story unfolds the reader can see how down-to-earth qualities of resilience, fortitude and pride embedded in this rural image are not enough to overcome the hardship of the conflict. The war will put to the test the righteousness of those (American) values.

Aaron and Stewart's graphic narrative denies the reader the identification with a consistent point of view; rather it creates a dual perspective. After having introduced Bill Everette's character in the first two pages, the comic sets up the story of its other protagonist, Vo Bin Dai, a North Vietnamese soldier. The composition of Vo Bin Dai story mirrors that of its American counterpart: page four features four wide panels as page two, and page five has same layout as page three. This treatment establishes the characters as equal, sharing the same amount of space on the page. However, because the story has two different narrators, the comic use two sets of fonts to make them easily distinguishable from one another.

Even though the 'origin stories' of these two characters share formal features, it is important to point out a few narrative differences. Vo Bin Dai is not forced by his government to join a war in a foreign country; his homeland is already burning. He is not called to substitute a fallen compatriot he never knew. In contrast, he feels pressure to vindicate his brothers and sisters. His "country is a graveyard" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]), a wasteland. He does not want to quit and he prays his ancestors to die honorably, "at the altar of my ancestors I pray that my own death in the war for liberation might exemplify a soldier's dauntless heart…That I will fight until the last breath, then drop my wasted body on the battlefield like trash" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). Both his parents accept his recruitment as a contingent necessity. His mother embraces the possibility of his son dying and his father gives him a "gold watch he took off the body of a French soldier after the victory at DIEN BIEN PHU".

Thus, even though they perform the same role (as servicemen), the psychology, and expectations of these two characters could not be more different. Whereas Billy Everette, a scrawny scared kid from rural Alabama is expected to fight for his country against the evil forces of Communism (a fight he wants no part of), Vo Binh Dai steps forward (willingly and proudly) to join the People's Army of Vietnam. He envisages his death and embraces that probability just to get a chance to fight what he sees as an unjust incursion.

He is fighting for his country's right to self-determining its policy and to pursue freedom from (neo)colonial forces.

After this brief introduction of the two protagonists, the focus returns on the American boy. The reader observes Billy Everette's boot camp training. These segments are reminiscent of the dynamic between recruit Leonard Lawrence (Gomer Pyle) and Gunnery Sergeant Hartman in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). These allusions are particularly relevant for a couple of reasons. First, Jason Aaron is the cousin of Gustav Hasford[162]. Thus, this reference is an homage to his late cousin. Second, this choice testifies how the Vietnam War has been appropriated by both history and media. It shows how (pop cultural) fictionalized accounts have entered the public sphere and shaped the way in which the event is recollected. Indeed, it is through mass culture that a new mass audience (who might have not experienced the conflict) enters in contact with certain (re)interpretations of the past, which aim to either reinforce an official narrative or unsettle it. As Alison Landsberg argued in *Prosthetic Memory* (2004: 26), "Made possible by advanced capitalism and an emergent commodified mass culture capable of widely disseminating images and narratives about the past, these memories are not 'natural' or 'authentic' and yet they organize and energize the bodies and subjectivities that take them on". This form of recollection shows how memory and historical knowledge are always mediated through narrative and representation.

However, it is important to observe how Aaron and Stewart do not let these allusions get too familiar. Bill Everette is no J. T. Davis (Joker), a wisecracking (but also vicious[163]) young recruit with a double personality (symbolized by the peace pin on his jacket and the words 'born to kill' on his helmet). In contrast, Aaron and Stewart's American protagonist seems to share some of the characteristics of Leonard Lawrence (Gomer Pyle), being the chief object of the drill instructor psychological conditioning. Yet, Bill Everette does not share the flaws of its screen counterpart: he is not slobby or infantile and he does not cause the entire platoon to be punished for his gluttony. In the comics, the psychological and physical abuse that Billy Everette endures do not climax in his emergence as a 'motivated Marine'. Even if the drill instructor pushes Bill Everette

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[162] The screenplay of *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) was written by Stanley Kubrick, Michael Herr, and Gustav Hasford, and it was based on Hasford's novel *The Short-Timers* (1979).

[163] He relishes Pyle's beating more severely than anyone else.

extremely hard, the young recruit has not been 'born-again-hard' (a sexual pun that recurs in both the comic and the movie). He rebels against the sergeant, but he is not able to overpower him.

Like *Full Metal Jacket* and *The Short-Timers*, the comic makes clear that the boot camp experience fosters a "subversive re-reading of civil identity and discourse" (Győri, 2001: 155): the recruits are distanced from their social environment, they are given a new appearance (the symbolic haircut), they are trapped into mechanisms of inhibition, and they suffer the effects of hierarchy. Through this abusive experience[164] recruits are reborn as "maggots". As Zsolt Győri discussed,

> In everyday speech the word 'maggot' is used in an extremely derogatory sense, while in a rhetorical mode of address it designates a representative of a 'subhuman species' - someone who does not have a proper name and is not 'entitled' to have one. The word 'maggot' is thus a sign that signifies the vanishing of the original signifier, resulting in defacement and the loss of selfhood (Győri,2001:155).

Therefore, the drill instructor breaks the young recruits' will and identity in order to transform them into killing machines. The sergeant shouts profanity, hurls insults at the recruits' manhood and makes insinuations about their sexuality. These cruelties aim to condition the recruits in believing that coded racism, physical abuse, and psychological hazing went hand in hand with becoming men.

The pedagogy of the boot camp does not only produce ruptures in the recruits individuality in order to promote the formation of a united Corps, but it also reinforces the group identity through the targeting of an external enemy whose life can be 'wasted'. The process of othering is explicated in the comic. The essentialization of the enemy serves as a justification for the soldier's use of violence, "they're **animals**, that's what I heard. Filthy fucking animals" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). Significantly, the Other is constructed as a reified evil entity even in its absence. The comic shows how the Vietnamese share similar opinions about the Americans, "some say that long noses are **cannibals**. That they mutilate our dead for food" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). Thus, the 'Gook' and the 'Americans' are responsive if not responsible for each other. Yet, these two groups are unwilling to recognize the atrocities committed by their own side: they both kill civilians out of madness.

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[164] Even though, the 'moulding' of soldiers has also been described in WWI narratives, e.g. Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*, the Vietnam narrative focuses on the obscene elements of the training which aims to control the sexual sphere of the soldiers.

*The Other Side* (2017) debunks the ethnocentric narratives of war showing the inhumanity of each side and exposing the double standards of their (official) rhetoric. This hypocrisy is visualized early in the story through the use of two panels, one embedded into the other. The bigger scene is set in the boot camp barracks where some American recruits spend their time telling stories about the brutality of the enemy. In that same scene, a smaller panel shows Bill Everette sitting on the toilet with his legs and arms full of contusions. The reader is aware that those bruises are not the consequence of the enemy aggression (he is still at Parris Island, South Carolina), but Bill's own countrymen. Those contusions might well be the result of either harsh training or hazing practices. Thus, this scene contests one of the founding myth of the war machine, the military *esprit de corps*. This representation casts shadows on the notions of comradeship and community. The soldier is no longer represented as part of an integrated group, but as an alienated individual. Notably, the same contradictions and hypocrisies can be observed on the other front. In this case, the panel shows the massacre of civilians at the hand of the Vietnamese Army. The caption states, "Of Uncle Ho and the struggle of civilization against barbarism". The situation is particularly ironic for two reasons: the contrast between the official rhetoric (featured in the caption) and the reality of war (represented through the image); the use of colonial rhetoric to justify atrocity committed in the name of anti-imperialism.

Aaron and Stewart's *The Other Side* shows how the boot camp experience does not only attempt to rearticulate the discourses of family and education, but also those of religion. The comic illustrates how the abuses of power and religion are intertwined as they both serves to motivate men and reinforce their unquestioning obedience to authority. For example, when Bill Everette seeks advices from the chaplain about his hallucination, the member of the Christian clergy states, "Uh huh.  Well Private Everette, as your **chaplain**… allow me to offer you some spiritual advice. Stow this crackpot bullshit and get your ass, squared away, most Ricky-Tick. Jesus don't abide a crybaby son… and neither does the marine corps" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). Even though, the comic indicts religious institutions as corrupt and compliant with power, both protagonists have intimate moments of faith and question God's actions and its very existence. Thus, the comic seems to imply that real faith and spiritual meaning cannot be found in organized religious institutions, as they might use religion as an effective instrument for political

ends. This contrast between private and public manifestation of faith is evident in the dialogue between Everette and the chaplain. Their dialogue starts in latter's office, but it culminates in the jungle. While the conversation between the two men goes on through several captions, the panels change setting, and the reader observes Vo Binh Dai praying in silence in front of a Buddha statue.

The comic shows how the hardship and constant abuse the recruits must endure in the boot camp unbalance their mind. Like Gomer Pyle, Bill Everette starts being obsessed with his rifle and losing his mind. He begins to hear voices. His riffle urges him to kill his superiors and commit suicide. Bill Everette cannot escape this toxic love and hate relationship with war, his country, and the armaments. Whereas weapons have been traditionally portrayed as extension of male masculinity, in this comic they seem to play an oppositional and autonomous role, emasculating the young soldiers. Indeed, the riffle tells Bill Everett: "I want to fuck your brains out […] put me in your mouth" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). This dialogue not only alludes to Gomer Pyle's death[165] in *Full Metal Jacket*, but it also exploits sexual imagery to describe violence and aggression. Interestingly, in a male dominated world, many of these sexual references have homosexual undertones. Moreover, even though sexual images abound, love is absent throughout the comic book. Indeed, during a nightmare a dead soldier haunts his consciousness asking him, "I was young, and the young love to travel. Except for gook whores, I was still a virgin. I died for a nameless hill […] WHY DID I DIE?" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]).

The correlation of sex and war is also evoked by a young Vietnamese woman, whose disfigured face is a reminder of the atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers. In a dialogue with Vo Binh Dai, the woman recalls, "I was but 12 when I was touched. Every day, I sold them as they passed through our village. 'G.I., you buy, one coke, you buy!' And then one day, this big G.I., he decides he wants **more** than just Coca-Cola. What the Americans cannot **fuck** they **kill**. What they cannot **kill** they **scar**. What they have yet to **scar**... they **fuck**." (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006], original emphasis). Through her figure the comic addresses how rape is a means to exert control over the racial other. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010 [1988]: 59) argued, "rape perpetrated by the conquerors is a

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[165] In the movie, Pyle shoots the drill instructor in the chest, and then he puts the riffle in his mouth and pulls the trigger.

metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition". Female suffering becomes a way to foster a male coming of age narrative. This brief dialogue also debunks the myth of American benevolence towards Vietnamese (kids) showing the soldiers' inability to 'win the hearts and minds' of the local population as the woman decides to join the North Vietnamese Army in retaliation for the (psychological and physical) abuses she suffered. Therefore, the comics avoids any elegiac or self-congratulatory depiction of U.S. missions in Vietnam. It highlights the connection between rituals of love and hate. Rape is part of the inherent violence triggered by the war machine. The comic questions Americans' doing and address the racism underlying those actions.

*The Other Side* recognizes sexuality as part of the rites of manhood. However, Aaron and Stewart's series take care to show how sexual acts do not always entail desires of submission. Indeed, one of the panels of the comic shows Bill Everette fantasizing over pornographic photographs. Given the traditional association between war and sex, the deprivation and loneliness distinctive of the soldier's experience, the relatively young age, and the need for affection, those fantasies serve as a refuge, a relief valve. Yet, Everette's daydream erotic desires do not translate into violent acts of domination. No sexual act is ever consumed. Yet gore enters this fantasy, showing how war has substituted sexual impulses in the formation of the male protagonist. War equates with the loss of some moral virginity. Indeed, war narratives have often been represented as (male) coming of age stories: a young man goes to war, suffers and in the end emerges as a sort of hero. However, in this comic, sex is not a symbol of potency, but of experience.

This contrast between innocence and experience is also symbolized by the presence of allusions to William Blake's poem, 'The Tyger'. Indeed, Vo Binh Dai acquires a renewed resoluteness after his encounter with a group of four tigers (displaced in a 'fearful symmetry') while walking in the jungle. This encounter is not the only reference to Blake's work as a leech offers pieces of infernal wisdom, quoting proverbs from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Where man is not, nature is barren," "A dead body revenges not injuries," and "The cut worm forgives the pl--". The last quote is interrupted by the soldier trampling on the leech. The soldier's action is of course ironic, but also provides an epiphanic metaphor for his condition: the servicemen is just a victim of fate. These quotes reveal the contradictions of war. They place the soldier as the one who must make sense of nature. Yet, in this context the reader does not know whether the leech is

referencing the environment (the man is subjugating the jungle through fie) or the nature of men. These quotes also denounce the complicity of the victims in their own oppression. Poignantly, the worm (or the soldier[166]) does not desist from retribution because of a deliberate act of renunciation, but out of the realization of his vulnerability. These lines show both pity and contempt for the passive victim. Suicide and desertion are sometimes suggested as possible way out, but they are never adopted as solutions.

*The Other Side* presents an archetypal hell descent narrative like Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. The 'war is hell' metaphor is also reinforced through allusions to Dante's *Inferno*. Indeed, the guide who leads North Vietnamese soldiers through the jungle states, "this is the road to heartache and pain. This is the road to ruin desecration and the perversion of all that is holy. This is the road to war" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). The comic book uses the codes of horror to depict the genuine dreadfulness of war. *The Other Side* does not glorify combat. War is never once depicted as anything other than ruthless and bloody, with men from both sides being disemboweled by gunfire and explosives. The act of killing transfigures the soldiers. Their faces assume the physiognomic traits of zombies. This visual metaphor attempts to picture the corruption of men's souls.

The comic also reflects on how the horror of the conflict raises existential questions. For example, Bill Everette asks his comrades: "What do you think about… about God?" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). One of them cynically replies: "Ain't no God, moron. No Santa Claus nor tooth fairy neither." Another one reassuringly states, "Oh, there's sure 'nuff a God. He just don't come 'round the bad bush is all". The last one resolves to a practical suggestion, "Trust me, Everette, the only thing worth believing in out here is the saving grace of the superior firepower". Accordingly, the comic seems to suggest that in that living hell there could be no God as soldiers lost their soul as soon as they killed. Bill Everette's eyes had turned red soon after he killed Vo Binh Dai. His overall appearance started resembling that of a zombie, like the ones that used to torment his psyche. He became one of the faces of war. Even though he acted in self-defense, he is still anguished by the action he committed, "I'm looking for somethin' that'll tell me WHY he had to DIE. And why I had to be the one to KILL him" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). The

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[166] The analogy between the worm and the soldier is reinforced by the fact that the recruits in the boot camp were called 'maggots' by the drill instructor.

comics represent war as a dirty and dehumanizing job. However, even though the main protagonist seems to develop sentiments of regret toward the horrors he did during the conflict, such feelings never turn into an apology.

The comic uses visual metaphors to show how war is literally dragging Everette down into a tunnel of despair and horror, as the reader sees zombies haunting the protagonist. In this moment of hopelessness, Everette directly questions once again God, quoting the words of Jesus during the crucifixion (which were already a quote of Psalm 22:1), "Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?" (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). Put to almost death by war, he felt deserted by God. Whereas, the crucifixion is used as a pattern of all suffering, the sacrifice of the soldiers has no redeeming functions. The voice of God has been substituted by that of the rifle. Yet the weapon (the embodiment of war) provides aberrant answers to Bill's existential questions, "kill someone, kill yourself, be a m--," "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori," and the sarcastic "ever get the feelin' you've been cheated?" The comic makes explicit how the rifle is not serving the soldier, but the opposite. Thus, the weapon is no portrayed as the extension of manhood, but as an emasculating force. War is still a rite of initiation (as Bill Everette has a more mature look at the end of the comics), yet a de-formative one. Indeed, the comic illustrates how war leaves soldiers to pick up the pieces of their lives once they go back home. Something in them is lost forever. Thus, war is not depicted as a heroic experience, but as an abusive one.

War is a mayhem. Therefore, Bill Everette and Vo Bin Dai recur to deities (and other folkloric figures) to make sense of their reality. Using a modernist poetics, myth, and allusions function as organizing principles in a shattered world. As T.S. Eliot (1923: web) argued, the "mythical method" is "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." Thus, the comic uses myth and allusions to create parallels between contemporaneity and antiquity. However, the use of mythological allusions has also the effect of making the clash between America and Vietnam feel almost inevitable. Thus, soldiers are not held accountable for their actions. This essentialist treatment of the Vietnam War as somehow destined precludes analysis and assessments. Vo Binh Dai sees himself as a mystic warrior on an enlightened quest, "stronger than fire. Stronger than fear. Stronger than HELL. When through wisdom one perceives, 'All sankharas are sufferings…' then one is detached as to misery and such is the path to PURITY" (Aaron

& Stewart, 2017 [2006], original emphasis). He dreams of having an encounter with a god of war who warns him: "our fight is not finished yet. There is still war to be made." In this hallucination the god of war is engaged in a fight against a dragon, a clear allegory of America's firepower, as the image of the dragon is juxtaposed to that of the helicopter. Similarly, Everette is haunted by a huge mass of zombie grunts and demonic figures. The use of myth may also have a shielding function. It is difficult for the two protagonists to fully acknowledge that they are taking part in murderous proceedings with no justification. Their experience in the conflict is too grossly farcical, perverse, painful, and irrational to be qualified as part of a real-life experience. Seeing warfare in mythical terms provides a psychic escape for the participants. They can perform their duties without engaging in a too close questioning of their actions. Allusions to classical myths casts the Vietnam War as a predetermined and inevitable event. The predictability of classical myth makes the soldiers not liable for their actions, as they become tragic heroes and victims of a cruel destiny. Moreover, the inscription of those myths inside the realm of dreams, nightmares, and hallucinations does not allow the narrative to engage with reflections that go beyond the personal experience of the soldier.

However, this comic should not be simply discharged as another attempt to rehabilitate the image of the U.S. by reinforcing the myths (of American imperialism, technological superiority, and the soldiers' masculinity) that the Vietnam War challenged through the image of the veteran. As hitherto discussed, since the late 1980s comics that narrated the war in Vietnam had tried to rewrite the past and eliminate any diverges to "dominant ethical framework" (Hope, 2014:64). As James William Gibson (1989:21) argued, pop culture posited a "mythical representation of the Vietnam War" in order to regenerate a society "weakened and troubled by mysterious military failure and a world it can no longer control." Jason Aaron and Cameron Stewart complicate this mythical (re)construction through meta-narrative reflections about role of comics and mythopoesis. Like in Doug Murray's *The 'Nam*, the reader observes one of the secondary characters in the act of reading comics. However, in this case this expedient is used to indict the role that comics played as instruments of propaganda. Indeed, after having seen the cover of D.C. 's G.I. Combat, Bill Everette states, "I used to **love** these things. **Now**, though, man, now they're just part of the **lie**. Domino theories, Communist insurgents, the glory of killing and dying… that's all **bullshit** they made up to sell comic books." Whereas

*The 'Nam* argued that the superhero genre was unfit to represent the complexity of war, Aaron and Stewart' comic criticizes the modes of representation and the conservative and jingoistic values embedded in certain comics. It is worth noticing that *The Other Side* do not only allude to classical myth, Vietnam War movies and jingoistic comics, but also EC war comics. This latter allusion is not surprising if one considers that Kurtzman's comics were among the first and the most effective in using an antiwar rhetoric. Like in Kurtzman's work the enemy is rendered as a human being driven by similar impulses to his American counterpart. Faulkner's death is a reference to both Kurtzman's *Frontline Combat* story "O.P." and Doc Jay's death in *Full Metal Jacket*.

Moreover, Aaron and Stewart play with the characteristics of both classical and modern myths (generated by mass culture and contemporary modes of productions) in order to make sense of the event, but also criticize the complicity of mass cultural products with conservative values. However, this contrast aims also to show how the medium has managed to go beyond some of the limits observed by Umberto Eco (1964), namely the oneiric space and temporal stasis. Indeed, the dream world presented in this comic does not seek to enable deferred endings[167]. The underground and the graphic novel made the distinctions between classical and modern myths less stable.

The comments on modern myths produced by the mass culture is not limited to comics. *The Other Side* shows kids trying to sell goods to the soldiers, "**G.I.** one coka you buy, **you buy!** twenny p, you buy!". This scene does not only allude to the movie *Hamburger Hill* (1987), but it also attempts to show the correlation among capitalist society, the war machine, neocolonialism, and mass culture. War can be seen as a way to export the 'American Way' and in turn mass culture can function as a propaganda tool. The commercial nature of war is underlined by the fact that the soldier's interactions with the local population is of economic nature: kids selling goods or prostitutes. This interaction also shows how the Vietnamese are forced by the contingent situation to assimilate the colonizers' culture. Coca Cola is clearly an icon of American (cultural) imperialism. The invasion of Vietnam does not only involve military action, but also the cultural apparatus.

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[167] In his essay about comics, Umberto Eco (2001 [1964]) observes that comics characters are often archetypes locked in a timeless space, which preserve it from being consumed by the audience. Their narrative structure tends to be circular as the ending of each story restore the initial situation. This circularity prevents a real closure and maturation of the characters. However, the experimentations of the underground allowed the birth of new narrative modes.

Indeed, cultural artifacts can function as propaganda tool motivating the soldiers, but also exporting models and values, and also shape the way in which events are recalled in public discourses.

The awareness that mass culture contributed to the 'big lie' is explicated in the end of the comic. While Bill Everette's father drives his son home, the reader observes a drive-in sign advertising the screening of Audie Murphy's movie *To Hell and Back* (1955). Yet, Bill's experience could not be more different than the one portrayed in the movie. Whereas Audie Murphy's film concludes with the Honor ceremony shortly after the war ends, Bill Everette is left to deal with his traumatic experience in Vietnam as his tormented by Vo Binh Dai's ghost. The lack of medals[168] signifies the absence of recognition by the American public opinion of the Vietnam veteran's suffering, but it might also hint to the fact that there is no honor in war. Once again, the 'dirty war' is constructed against the memory of the 'good war'. Yet this contrast has the effect of questioning the modes of recollection of World War II, as its jingoistic portrayal is revealed as mere propaganda. War is a dehumanizing experience.

Jingoistic pop cultural artifacts are also present in Bill Everette's room: a toy soldier lies on the ground and a Norman Rockwell Boy Scout poster emerges from the shadows looking at the protagonist. Like Grant Wood's American Gothic, Rockwell's artwork embraces a particular vision of the American Dream, one that advocates a strong nostalgia for the good old days. The poster reproduces the painting *We, Too, Have a Job to Do* (1942) which depicts a Boy Scout in full uniform standing and saluting in front of a waving American flag. The painting was created to encourage Scouts to participate in the war effort during World War II. Thus, the inclusion of this image seems to suggest a national nostalgia towards a recent past in which America's hegemony was generally unthreatened. Yet those values are questioned by Bill Everette's state of confusion and alienation. Those pop cultural images are reminiscent of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg billboard in Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Like in Fitzgerald's novel, those artifacts stare at and present American society as a moral wasteland.

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[168] The symbolic nature of medals and their role in the official war rhetoric as motivator factors has been thoroughly described by Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), a novel set during the American Civil War. Thus, one can see the endurance of a certain war rhetoric through time, but also the limits of the antiwar rhetoric which seems unable to impede the re-occurrence of certain events or at least provoke a long-lasting change in the way war is triumphally presented by institutions.

The closing lines of the comic are particularly ambiguous as they leave the reader the responsibility to make sense of the conflict and try to get a moral lesson (if there is one) out of the story. The last panel shows Bill Everette in his room staring at Vo Binh Dai's ghost. The captions states, "welcome to the rest of your life Private Everette. This is what it's like BEYOND the wire. You're a walkin' point without air support from here on out. And ain't no goin' back. NOT EVER. THERE IT IS. Welcome to the OTHER SIDE." (Aaron & Stewart, 2017 [2006]). Thus, the reader is called to interpret the many conflicting sides a war creates. Indeed, the title is not just a reference to the opposing army. It also suggests: the way each of its protagonists is transformed, and loses his humanity; the narrow lines that separate the living from the dead, sanity from insanity; the opposition between innocence and experience; the inability of a soldier to communicate his experience to those who stayed in 'the world'. The comic illustrates how the incommunicability between the veteran and the civilians can take different forms. Whereas Bill's mother is torn by the sufferings and horror his son went through and her inability to reach out to him, her husband shows no interest about his sons' physical and psychological integrity; his main concern seems to be about the military failure, "welcome home, son. But tell me… what the hell went **wrong** over there?" These two reactions show how military defeat can trigger two different interpretations about the way the nation should deal with the loss and the lessons one should get out of it. The horror of war may prompt a commitment to not let these atrocities ever happen again. Yet, loss can also trigger the revision of one's own military strategies.

The comic's focus on individual sufferings and the descent to hell narrative suggests that the enemy is within man himself. War licenses the emergence of men's darkest and sadistic side. The Other Side indicts war as dehumanizing experience. However, this approach prevents any broader consideration about the geopolitical situation that caused that very war and the government responsibility. The binary depiction of the conflict (Americans vs. North Vietnamese) effaces all the other actors in the conflict (civilians, Southern Vietnamese, but also Cambodians, Laotians, etc.). It also neglects to mention how the war did not end with the retreat of U.S. Army. Hence, this narrative focused on the veterans' sufferings shields the nation from being fully accountable for its actions. Indeed, the comic fails to show how the war was unjust not only because it lacked a just cause, but also because the (American) conduct of war was reprehensible as

noncombatants were used as targets. The body count and the free fire zones encouraged the killing of civilians. As Fred Turner (2001[1996]:27) discussed,

> Since a primary measure of an officer's success in Vietnam was the number of the enemy unit killed. Soldiers at every level, from grunts in the field to generals in Saigon, came to inflate enemy casualty figures. Under pressures from their leaders, combat troops became less than picky about what constituted an enemy corpse. Unarmed women and children were often added to the list, since, according to a common saying at the time, 'If it's dead and Vietnamese, it's VC'.

Similarly, the testimony of Michael Clodfelter (a former artilleryman with the 101st Airborne Division) collected by John Clark Pratt in his book *Vietnam Voices* (1999 [1984]) shows how the body count turned the moral order upside down:

> Killing the enemy was not the problem; it was identifying him. Killing him was easy once you found him and identified him. In fact, sometimes it was much easier to do the killing first and the identifying afterwards. Where no answers were possible, no questions were necessary…Killing them all and you know for damn sure you're killing the enemy […] We had been out several days and all we had to show for our sweat and exertion were robes of mud and waves of frustration. It had been month now since any 'Hard Core' glory had come the way of the Second Squad and the body count itch was making life miserable for all the corpse counters all the way up to battalion C.O. Finally, the First Squad scored, wasting an unarmed strangler, and the body count competition intensified. Tate, who had been in on the kill, taunted us so unmercifully on our lack of scalps that several members of the Second Squad, their 'Hard Core' honor at stake, resolved to count coup and even the score even if it required wasting a slopehead who became VC only after he was dead (Pratt, 1999[1984]:649-652).

This unproportioned use of violence questioned the (old) idea that America's (military) power derived from its moral rectitude. U.S. citizens who watched the war from their TV screens became aware that America could no longer claim any moral superiority. The late 1960s also challenged the vision of America as "one nation, under God, indivisible" as people watched race riots, campus takeovers, and antiwar marches. Indeed, the Tet Offensive, the assassination of Martin Luther King and Kennedy, the Democratic National Convention in Chicago destabilized the faith in the 'American way of life'. Thus, it quite revealing that this revisionist graphic narrative tries to erase the excruciating self-examination that the war triggered and demanded.

## 5. Toward an Ethical Form of Remembering: Harvey Pekar's *Unsung Hero* (2003) and Eve Gilbert's (2019) *Winter Warrior*

Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* narrates the daily life of its author, reversing the idea that comics are a form of escapism. It shows the ordinary life of an average man (who loses his glasses, breaks up with his lover, etc.), mixing humor and philosophical reflections. In 2003 this series hosted an issue titled *Unsung Hero,* which narrates the

story of Robert McNeill who recollects his time as a G.I. in Vietnam. Even though Pekar is represented in the narrative, he never intervenes in McNeill's narration to either ask explanation or contest any account. McNeill reconstruction of the event present some contradictions, which makes the reader empathize with him by recognizing his humanity. The comic does not shy away from representing the unheroic elements of his protagonist, yet it also exalts the heroic actions that lead McNeill to receive a medal. He did not join the Army out of patriotic feelings, but contingent material needs. He was a poor black with low education. He enrolled to get money to support his children (he got pregnant two women at the same time, due to his lack of a sexual education). In the boot camp, he is victim of abuses. The fear of being killed dominates his experience in Vietnam, leading him to contemplate the idea of getting a non-vital injury or passing as mad to escape the war zones. However, those thoughts are never translated into action. When the opportunity comes, he even proves himself as a hero. However, the comics' message should not be reduced to an 'ordinary people can accomplish heroic action' tale. The comic uses irony to deconstruct any gallant reading of the events. Race also plays an important role in the narrative, as the comic shows the frictions between black and white soldiers, especially after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Even though McNeill is aware of the color line separating American citizens, he fails to see the ethnic/racial implicatures of the conflict in Vietnam, enforcing orientalist stereotypes by portraying Vietnamese (and Asians) as Mama-san, Papa-san, prostitutes, and Vietcong. Yet, McNeill seems to acknowledge that his understanding of Vietnam and its inhabitant is due to his ignorance about the culture of that land. Differently, from other comics, *Unsung Hero* recognize the Vietnamese right to oppose the American occupation of their country, "You couldn't blame them. Someone comes to your country and destroys your home, sometimes just for the fun of it" (Pekar, 2003:20). Thus, the comic makes some concession to the Other, its cause, and suffering.

Like Harvey Pekar's *Unsung Hero*, Eve Gilbert's *Winter Warrior: A Vietnam Vet's Anti-War Odyssey* is based on the author's interview with a Vietnam veteran, Scott Camil. The very first panels of the comic seem to address the reason why the memory of the Vietnam War is still relevant today, "Iraq is Arabic for Vietnam" (Gilbert, 2019:4). As antiwar activist Scott Camil maintains: "I consider **WAR** to be ORGANIZED **MURDER!!!** And what's even **MORE SINFUL** to me is that you are allowed to

**PROFIT** from **WAR**! **9/11** comes up and kids are supposed to prove their patriotism by putting their lives on the line". He indicts both corporations for triggering wars, inevitably sending young people to die, and the education system for making younger generations passive towards injustice and inequality, "I think what **happened** was so **many people** started **standing up** for their **rights** that they quit teaching **civics** in **school**. They cut the **money** from **public education** & the **rich** people who **run** the **fucking show**, their kids go to **college**" (Gilbert, 2019:5, original emphasis). Hence, the graphic novel recollects the past to raise civic awareness, asking its reader to be woke. The comic illuminates how the Vietnam War has become entrenched with other struggles. As previously discussed, in the 1960s and 1970s 'Vietnam' became a master metaphor by which other economic, social, and cultural transformations occurring within American society were understood. In those years, minorities and war protestors felt they were battling alongside the Vietnamese people in a fight for their liberation. Different marginalized groups united and performed acts of resistance against the government and its policy. Thus, the graphic novel argues that the knowledge of the past can provide models and tools of resistance to the power that be.

The comic challenges the hegemony of a national ideology that incorporates chauvinism and racism. It does so by using different possible combinations of words and pictures to create a space for resistance. Comics language allows the author to meta-narratively include both the official narrative and counternarratives thanks to the medium's hybrid nature. Words can subvert the meaning of images and, in turn, pictures can subvert the meaning of the text, asking the reader to think things through. For example, the last panel on page 6 features a TV screen broadcasting a map of the world divided in two areas and a text stating "be afraid… the red menace is coming!!!" (Gilbert, 2019:6). However, a smaller caption warns the reader that TV is a "mind manipulator". This image confronts the media complicity in manufacturing the social consensus that allowed the government to fight the war in its own terms. As Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1994 [1988]: xiv) argued, "it was very rare for news and commentary to find their way into the media if they failed to conform to the framework of established dogma (postulating benevolent U.S. aims, the United States responding to aggression and terror, etc.)".

This is particularly meaningful because previous comics (e.g. *The 'Nam, Vietnam Journal, The Vietnam War: A Graphic History*) portrayed the journalists (and the media) as either allies who shared the grunts' suffering by being on the frontline (and functioning as vital mediators who can reduce the distance between the 'World' and 'In-Country' experiences) or (more often) as pessimists with adversarial attitudes towards the cause (and thus indirectly responsible for the military defeat, as they undermined the morale of the nation). Those comics seem to suggest that the U.S. could have won if it had not lost the motivation to persist; and media coverage is assumed to have played a central role in undermining the political will to prevail.  It is often argued that television had a decisive impact:  people saw dreadful images on the screen night after night, and this constant display of gore turned the audience against the war. However, it is important to remark that the coverage of 'inconvenient' facts (capable of undermining the official rhetoric) only increased in response to the growth of critical constituency in the parliament.

As Daniel Hallin (1986) observed TV coverage was very sanitized and was mostly encouraging in the early part of the conflict, mainly because journalists were reliant on official sources (the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department were central nodes of news activities). Indeed, as Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1994 [1988]: 22) discussed, "the media may feel obligated to carry extremely dubious story and mute criticism in order not to offend their sources and disturb a close relationship. It is very difficult to call authorities on whom one depends for daily news liars, even if they tell whoppers." Moreover, the media were particularly concerned about upsetting the audience (and advertisers) with the showing of graphic (or critical) content. Criticism expanded only when the political elite was no longer capable of producing a unitarian and coherent narrative of the conflict.

This war comic is particularly interesting because it not only shows that opposition to the war existed, but that it was also able to challenge the national institutions. Bond and T.G. Lewis's *Vietnam* (1967) is certainly an antecedent, but it is worth noting that the main concern of this pamphlet in comics form was limited to the social and political conditions of back people in the United States, as it merely asked why black people had to fight abroad while their rights were denied at home. Yet, it is important to remark that *Vietnam* (1967) and *Winter Warrior: A Vietnam Vet's Anti-War Odyssey* (2019) are unique experiments. War comics narrating the conflict in Vietnam rarely featured the antiwar

movement and when they included it in their narrative it was either contested (*The 'Nam, Vietnam Journal* and *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History*) or shown as powerless (*The Other Side*), not being able to stop the war, and mistaken in its attitude towards the soldiers, as it did not recognize that the privates were just victims of the draft system.

Instead, this comic presents the journey that led Scott Camil to join the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). It shows that soldiers, too, can replace the ideology of the bootcamp and engage in a critical revision of their experience in Vietnam. Indeed, Camil's recognition of his complicity and entrapment in a policy of massacre and destruction prompted him to become a political activist, testifying that progress in consciousness is possible. In this comic, soldiers are no longer constructed as emasculated victims, but as agents and shapers of their own destiny. The comic depicts how opposition to the war and the draft did not only exist in the form of student demonstrations and teach-ins, but that soldiers also opposed the conflict. As Michael Klein (2000[1990]:35) argued,

> at Christmas 1968 30,000 troops at Long Binh demonstrated their opposition to the war by giving a peace salute to General Creighton Adams. […] from 1966 to 1973 191,840 young men refused to respond to draft notices, […] 503,926 U.S. soldiers deserted the armed service, and that by 1970 over 200 officially verified fraggings were taking place per year.

Thus, Gilbert's recovery of Scott Camil's personal story aims to reconstruct the war experience through a thorough analysis of its moral ambiguities. Camil's personal biography is used as an exemplum, providing the reader a model of resistance towards hegemonic ideologies. Therefore, the personal becomes political and the private dimension shifts into a broader public accountability.

The graphic novel seems to infer that America and the world can only progress if the citizens acquire a sense of social memory. Even though US involvement in Vietnam ended by 1973, the activities of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) did not. The organization remains committed to the struggle for peace and social and economic justice for all people. The comic argues that an everlasting commitment to peace is necessary to prevent another generation from being put through a similar tragedy. The message of the comic is clear: if a lesson can be learned out of the war experience is a commitment to peace, thus echoing the slogan 'Never Again' which was widely used by the public in the years after the First World War. Camil's fighting abilities are no longer used on the battlefield but on the political ground. Thus, the comic becomes a space where dissident culture can survive and prosper.

The activism that Camil advocates for is not just protest, but an active engagement in the lives of suffering people. Plagued by guilt over the death of his comrades and the persons he killed, Camil's political commitment is driven by humanitarian concerns and desires of atonement. The comic invites the reader to have a skeptical stance about power notwithstanding the propaganda and its practices of manufactured consent. Sharing his experience, he hopes to provide people with means of resistance. Peace is presented as a common value that people should pursue despite their political orientation.

After a brief explanation on why Vietnam memories are still relevant today, the comic presents Camil's biography. It carefully describes the social, ideological, economic, and cultural conditions that prompted him to join the army. He came from a poor Jewish working-class family living in Hialeah, Florida. It shows how Camil's upbringing, surroundings, and milieu were full of violence and abuse,

> My **stepfather** was in the **John Birch Society**… his job was to make **tapes** about the **communist conspiracy**. He was a **cop**… and a **bully**. He **beat** me, my **mother** and my **sister** all the time. People did not like us because we were **Jewish**. In **Junior High**, I started getting **jumped** after school (Gilbert, 2019:7, original emphasis)

Scott Camil is clearly portrayed as a victim, bullied both at home and at school. However, these experiences are not the only ones that make the protagonist feel unsafe and vulnerable. TV and the education system instilled in the young man the fear of Communism, "In school we had **air raids drills** and we would **hide** under our **desks**." These experiences of violence seem to foreshadow the boot camp training. As Scott Camil would later realize, during his experience in college after the war, "to **control** a person you have to **break** them down with **fear** and **violence** and then **rebuild** them as **a new person!**" (Gilbert, 2019:42, original emphasis). The breaking of the soldier is necessary to promote a new set of values,

> all your life, you're **taught** that it's **WRONG** to **KILL**… they have to **break you down**. They have to turn you into the kind of **person** who **isn't** going to have **empathy**. The whole thing is about trying to **make** you **fuck up**. If they can't succeed in **breaking you down** because you **succeeded** in everything you did, they have **to make it so** you **don't succeed!** (Gilbert, 2019:10, original emphasis).

The process of indoctrination here described bears clear resemblances to the one depicted by Gustav Hasford's novel *The Short-Timers* (1979), Stanley Kubrick's movie *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Jason Aaron and Cameron Stewart's comic *The Other Side* (2017 [2006]) and some of the testimonies recollected by Toshio Whelchel in his book *From Pearl*

*Harbor to Saigon: Japanese American Soldiers and the Vietnam War* (1999), as well as many post WWI narratives. The drill instructor uses both marching sons to encourage the use of violence against the enemy and insults at the recruits' manhood to diminish and degrade them, forcing them to obedience. As Leo Cawley (2000 [1990]: 77) argued, "Any monk or marine can tell you that the most effective way an institution can dominate a young person's inner life is for it to dominate his (or her) sexuality. The recruits are abused with a weird litany of images of sex, aggression, and dismemberment".

The comic deconstructs the indoctrination system by using two narrative times. While images show the events in chronological order ("as they happened"), the captions feature the retrospective comment of Scott Camil who now has a different perspective and awareness about what he committed to when he enrolled in the army. He now knows the atrocities he would witness and perpetrate. This narrative solution makes evident how knowledge is linked to experience in a twisted way. A relationship also acknowledged by Scott Camil at the end of the graphic novel, "I like the **strength** that the marine corps gave me, the **life & death experiences**. It's made me a **better person**, but at the **expense** of **innocent people**. It just **sucks** that in country as **rich** as the **U.S.A.**, in order to **improve** you have to do something **shitty**!" (Gilbert, 2019:92, original emphasis). This rhetoric turns Camil into an Adamic figure as his experience in Vietnam provides him the necessary insight to distinguish good from evil, a lesson he learns at the cost of his innocence. Yet knowledge is portrayed as an important feature because it has both liberating and redeeming function, "it's **sinful** to have this kind of **knowledge** and **experience** without people learning from it".

The comics shows how the behavior of the soldiers have been shaped by both positive (medals, promise of recognition, etc.) and negative (abuse) reinforcements. The education system of the boot camp makes the soldier internalize a simple massage: your life is cheap and expendable and killing is fun. Medals are not only tokens that aim to recognize and honor the action and sacrifices of the G.I.s, but they also help turn the war into a game in the mind of the soldiers. The 'war is a game' metaphor helps the G.I. endure harsh conditions, "Whew! They only got my Leg! And Now I'm getting a Medal! I'm gonna get a Purple Heart!" (Gilbert, 2019:20). This powerful conceptual metaphor has also the function of equating the killing of Vietnamese (soldiers and civilians) to scoring a game, "When I looked down my rifle and squeezed, and their heads split open like a watermelon,

I felt good inside, like I'd just rolled a strike or sank an Eightball" (Gilbert, 2019:16). It is interesting to notice that Scott Camil unintentionally uses a well-known visual metaphor in war comics by comparing the killing of the Vietnamese to a bowling strike. Indeed, *Bomber Comics #4* (1944) cover featured a kid striking three bowling pins which featured the portrait of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito. This is particularly relevant because it shows how war comics used the same metaphors and values used by the military. The gamification of war was also a feature of 1950s *G.I. Joe* series.

Once more, sexuality and war are deeply connected, as the soldier who cannot perform his duty is defeated by the challenges of manhood, thus invalidating his own masculinity, "I was the only guy who raised hand. How was I gonna get medals & prove I was a fucking man if I didn't go to Vietnam" (Gilbert, 2019:11). However, the comic seems to question such cliché-like narrative. *Winter Warrior: a Vietnam Vet's Anti-War Odyssey* shows that the dual purposes of serving the nation and affirming one's own masculinity proved deceiving. Camil soon learns that many young boys never get the chance to mature into anything other than a corpse, "He's really DEAD! These people want to KILL me… I can't make mistakes here or I'm really dead, too!" (Gilbert, 2019:14). Yet, quitting is never considered as a viable option because of the bonds and comradeship he established with his unit, "I was wounded & shook up but I still felt it was cowardice to leave…" (Gilbert, 2019:33).

The comic shows how the military wartime morality diverges from the civilian moral system, which soldiers learned before enlisting and that is still in place on the home front. The comics shows this contrast by explicating how war subverts moral and religious values, "don't kill unless it's for the government!" "love your enemies except those the government hates" (Gilbert, 2019:23). Aggressive (and murderous) behaviors are generally condemned by society, but because a soldier's duty is comprised of immoral acts, the civilian moral code is no longer applicable. The killing of other becomes morally upright if it implies one's own survival. However, the comic seems to rejects the idea of an "ethics of killing in war" (McMahan, 2004) established by the *jus ad bellum* (governing the resort to war) and *jus in bellum* (governing the conduct of war) juridical principles, "the rules of war are really bullshit. Once you start murdering people to solve your problems, there are no laws" (Gilbert, 2019:23). According to Camil laws regulating warfare have no other purpose than make the nation not countable for the atrocity

committed by the soldiers. Providing the example of Lt. Calley, he maintains that "they **make believe** there are **rules**, so if a **May Lai** or an **Abu Ghraib** happens, the government can say: 'Hey, they did it **on their own!'"** (Gilbert, 2019:23, original emphasis)

The construction of a new moral system based on the concept of defense is undermined by the correlation of pleasure with violence. Whereas in Tim O'Brien's *The things They Carried* (1990), "pleasure in war is no longer a reward for good behavior or a by product of moral living," but "an emotional response to perceived benefits, such as increased safety and control" (Bonney, 2016:2), Camil's account shows also a sadistic component to the soldier's action, "my radio operator shot a Vietnamese, cut off his head, cut off his sex organs, put them in his mouth and brought it back to the lieutenant" (Gilbert, 2019:25). There is no witnessing "to the mystery of evil" (O'Brien, 1995:199), but a participation to an almost rational execution that testifies, to a very extreme, the banality of evil.

Camil is not a psychotic who needs to confess his crimes. These atrocities are not recollected as the result of a troubled psyche, but as the consequence of precise political and military strategies. The body count and the free fire zones gave the soldiers the license to kill anything that moved. Since the United States were not able to measure their progress through territory conquest, the Army used body counts to show that the America was winning the war. Their theory was that eventually, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army would lose after the attrition warfare. The necessity to increase the numbers did not discourage the killing of civilians, "most of the time, I would say 70% of the people my unit killed were women & children… and they were unarmed" (Gilbert, 2019:24). The images of the massacre are really powerful as the reader can observe destruction and senseless death. Two rifles points at a Vietnamese woman trying to protect her infant children.

The morality of the actions of US soldiers are questioned through the display of the killing of civilians, which should have been considered devoid of responsibility for their country's war. The image of a group rape of a Vietnamese woman is extremely graphic and disturbing. A white and a black soldier take turn in abusing and mutilating her body. Rape does not only testify a desire to achieve overt political ends, the subjugation of the (gendered, racial) Other, but also the proclivities of the attackers. Rape is both a political

tool and a sexual act. The comic clearly highlights how rape cannot be dismissed as private crime, the act of an occasional soldier. Indeed, Camil states that these actions were common practice, "**Raping** of women was a **common thing**… when women were **searched** they would be **stripped naked** and a kind of **game** would be made of it" (Gilbert, 2019:24, original emphasis). These were clearly performed with the intent of humiliating the enemy. As Dorothy Q. Thomas and Regan E. Ralph (1994:89) argued, "soldiers do rape women precisely because the violation of their 'protected' status has the effect of shaming them and their community". The will to degrade Vietnamese women is explicated by the intensity of the abuses they must endure, "they slashed her tits. They shoved things up her vagina - first an entrenching tool, then a tree limb" (Gilbert, 2019:25). The comic graphically depicts how rape is not just a crime against the honor of the victim, but also a violation of her physical and psychological integrity. Even though wartime rape is clearly an abuse of power and a violation of international humanitarian laws, it did not get the treatment of other abuses. Thus, these images attempt to ensure the soldiers accountability. Camil's role as a bystander to those atrocities does not shield him from his responsibilities, "I never **raped** anybody, but if I **saw** you raping a woman, I ain't gonna **interfere**!" (Gilbert, 2019:24, original emphasis). The only moment Camil felt responsible for those actions is when he delivered a mercy shot to stop the woman's suffering. As Susan Jeffords discussed rape was a means to reinforce the masculine bond of the soldiers, whether they performed as viewers or active participants. Indeed, she argues that "raping and watching other rape leaves no position for any other action within the bond; if you challenge the rape, question the display, you risk being rejected by the collective" (Jeffords, 1989:69).

It is interesting to notice that the comic portrays soldiers as both victims and victimizers. They were victims of a misguided government who used them as pawns to extend its imperial power during the Cold War. This condition is symbolized by two hands playing chess. Yet, the pawns are not devoid of their own responsibilities as the reader can clearly observe that one of the pawns has a riffle. What differs between the pawns and the hand maneuvering them is the scale of responsibility. Camil's misguided beliefs are not used to justify his conduct, but to indict to government insanity and use of propaganda. His sense of frustration is due to the realization that his tour in Vietnam was for nothing.

Interestingly, the narration does not end with Camil's return home, but it follows his attempts to readjust into civilian life, not without difficulties, "we are supposed to fall in line and be regular dudes again but you can't take those experiences out of a person" (Gilbet, 2019:34). The comic shows how Scott Camil did not only suffer from the lack of recognition of society for his sacrifices, but he was also angry about the attitude of the hippies, who lacked empathy towards his anguish. The comic contrasts morality with counterculture beliefs. Indeed, whereas, in previous conflicts, wartime violence was condoned by the public, during the Vietnam War, the counterculture rejected the military moral system (Bonney, 2016).

*Winter Warrior: A Vietnam Vet's Anti-War Odyssey* (2019) does not present antiwar values as something granted or innate, as the reader observes the journey that led the main character to embrace this political position, "things were starting to **come together**… now I was starting to think that **we** were the **bad guys**" (Gilbert, 2019:46, original emphasis). The comic seems to provide a small variation on the well-established trope representing war as an arena of maturation and education where soldiers become men. In this graphic novel, in fact, war does certainly provide experience, but knowledge is only acquired after the conflict. Camil's growth is accomplished only through his re-education and encounter with people and groups that make him question his granitic beliefs in the U.S. political system and American values, "I had a guy in my class from **Egypt**. He is the one who told me about **Vietnam**, that we were the **aggressors**" (Gilbert, 2019:42, original emphasis). Yet these encounters do not cause a sudden change, as Camil's response to those revelations oscillates between acceptance and denial, "I **hated** these **motherfuckers**, these **commie sympathizers**, even **after** my professor told me the **stuff** in the **book** about **Vietnam** was **true**!" (Gilbert, 2029:43, original emphasis). His attendance to the 'Winter Soldier Investigation,' a media event sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), turned into an epiphanic moment, a turning point in Camil's life. There, he realized that "We were **used** & **lied to** by our **government** & all our **sacrifices** were for **nothing**!" (Gilbert, 2019:47, original emphasis). Interestingly, the panel that contains such revelation features a photograph of Scott Camil. The presence of this shot is a way to reinforce the testimonial value of the comic.

The 'Winter Soldier Investigation' was an important historical event because it challenged the morality and conduct of the war by showing the direct relationship between military policies and war crimes in Vietnam,

> we were **soldiers all** the **way**! The **indoctrination** & training make you that way! They **dehumanize** you so much, the **enemy** is no longer a **man** - it's a target! I kept trying to **justify** it, but I **knew** I **wasn't right**… I had to **admit** what I did was **wrong** & try to **stop** other people from **making** the **same mistake** (Gilbert, 2019:46, original emphasis).

The Vietnam Veterans Against the War organized such investigation to denounce the contradictions and double standards present in Lt. William Calley's trial for the My Lai Massacre. The U.S. had established the principle of culpability with the Nuremberg trials of the Nazis, yet the outcome of the My Lai trial shows the lack of U.S. accountability for the massacre. In the end, out of the twenty-five soldiers charged with committing war crimes and/or related acts, First Lieutenant William Calley was the only participant who was tried and found guilty by Court Martial. However, following the Nuremberg Principles, if Calley was responsible, so should have been his superiors up the chain of command. Despite Calley being eventually court-martialed at Fort Benning, Georgia, convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison, President Richard Nixon intervened on his behalf, pardoning him, and placing him under house arrest at his apartment on base.

As hitherto discussed, World War II has been usually 'militarized' by comics (and pop culture at large) to project a positive image of the nation and reassert the consensus towards institutions discredited by the Vietnam War. The attack on Pearl Harbor and the horrors of the holocaust helped Americans to cast their involvement in that war as justified and moral. Ultimately, this graphic novel does not evoke the World War II to redeem the actions of the soldiers but expose their evil. The military strategies which featured search and destroy missions, free fire zones and the body count (as an index of success) are here described as genocidal in intention. Thus, the American G.I.s are equated to the Nazis, "I grew up as a **Jewish person** & was told the story of my family who were **killed** in **concentration camps**… now I find out that **I** was the **fucking Nazi**!" (Gilbert, 2019:46, original emphasis).

Similarly, the Frontier is not evoked to edulcorate the controversial aspects of the conflict by giving it a mythical frame (and interpretative grid) through which dominate the experience and make sense of it. The conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation of the Natives were 'justified as means to achieve the creation of an ever-expanding

economy and a dynamic 'progressive' civilization. The Frontier myth allowed Americans to link the notion of progress to violent actions, through an act of temporary regression to a primitive condition, what Richard Slotkin (1973;1992) defined as "regeneration through violence". Comics rarely alluded to the ambiguities of the settlement of the Frontier and when they did the controversial aspects of that myth (as well as the unpleasant truths about Vietnam) were easily turned into abstract moral struggles without political shading. Comics generally depoliticize conflicts (be it Vietnam or another war) by turning them into rites of passage, personal trials or ways to prove one's manhood and bravery. In contrast, Gilbert's comic does not address only the mythic representation of the Frontier, but also its political reality, "We did to the Vietnamese same as they did to the Indians! Nowadays, they use chemical warfare… back then they'd put smallpox on a blanket" (Gilbert, 2019:46). The comics also reflects on how the interpretative grids of the Frontier myth popularized by pop culture entered the consciousness of the soldiers. A soldier of Native heritage recalls, "since I was **small,** I was **exposed** (to this culture) when I watched **TV** and it was **calvary** against the **Indians**… I would **cheer** for the **cavalry**! That's how **bad** it was"

The Winter Soldier Investigation opened Camil's eyes and prompted him to be an active and aware citizen. He spent his time traveling around the country to make people informed about what was really happening in Vietnam. The Vietnam Veterans Against the War started lobbying in the congress, but their voice remained almost unheard. Yet, it is unclear whether the institutional lack of response to their requests was due to carelessness or ignorance about what was truly going on in Vietnam. As Camil recalls, "We knew in 'Nam that when congressmen came, they would get a tour by an asshole whose job it was to take them on a tour to not see anything important". (Gilbert, 2019:54).

The comic reenacts some of the most impactful and graphic manifestations organized by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (figure 23). For example, it shows the march in Gainesville where the group dressed as rifle-carrying soldiers. There, some of the veterans carried a coffin draped in an American flag and a sign that read "The Impossible Dream - No More War." People panicked after smoke bombs were ignited and VVAW members pretended to stab civilians (actors) in the crowd who had packets of blood hidden under their clothing. Then a second squad passed out leaflets to the crowd informing them that if they lived in Vietnam, this could really be happening to them, their friends, and their

family, "All in the name of the American people" (Gilbert, 2019:57). Yet, the most meaningful moment of the protest was when the veterans decided to throw away their medals, "the final step- it was like cutting the umbilical cord between me and the government". The comic shows that these protests were so impactful that the U.S. government decided to sabotage them (discrediting their public image) using FBI informants. Yet the accusation against Camil dropped by the time U.S. involvement in Vietnam ended.

The comic ends with a message of peace, showing how antiwar groups are still relevant today. The Vietnam Veterans Against the War have Been present in various conflict areas such as Guatemala and Israel. Camil stresses the importance of his commitment to peace as the U.S. government is still recruiting soldier to waste in other useless wars. The Epilogue shows how the war in Vietnam did not end with the retreat of U.S. troops. Southern Vietnamese lost and ARVN were sent to re-education camps. As the convention of the genre dictates, the final lines of the war comic contain a moral message, "They say that Vietnam won the war- but not all Vietnamese won. Of course, in war there are no victors…" (Gilbert, 2019:96). Therefore, the comic seems to pursue an ethical representation of the conflict by showing the humanity and inhumanity of each side and blurring the lines that separate victims from victimizers. This recognition[169] is important in order to atone for atrocities committed and reconcile with the offended party. This desire for reconciliation was manifested early in the comic, on page twenty-one, a panel featured Camil praying over a Vietnamese memorial.

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[169] The desire of atonement is an important innovation also in relation to the Vietnam War literature. Even though *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) by Ron Kovic presents similarities to Camil's story, showing the author's tour in Vietnam, his becoming paralyzed, and his starting of new life as a peace activist, it never thoroughly engages with Vietnamese suffering.

## CHAPTER 4: TOWARDS ETHICAL FORMS OF REMEMBERING

**1. Decentering War Narratives: From National Revendication to Diasporic Accounts**

Absence and forgetting are relevant elements in the formation of memory. As Astrid Erll (2011:8) observed, "remembering and forgetting are two sides – or different processes – of the same coin, that is, memory. Forgetting is the very condition for remembering." For this reason, memory is often subject to revision by groups who seek to replace, supplement, or revise dominant representations of the past to insert their own narrative and identity into the main one. As Toni Morrison provocatively remarked in her speech "A Humanist View" held at Portland State University on May 30, 1975, "No one can blame the conqueror for writing history the way he sees it, and certainly not for digesting human events and discovering their patterns according to his own point of view. But it must be admitted that conventional history supports and complements a very grave and almost pristine ignorance" (Morrison, 1975: web). She maintains that official history tends to focus on "large distinctions", the "rice in bulk", at the expense of local and personal stories, that are strategically omitted and would require a "grain-by-grain" approach. She further discusses that, "If such [official] history continues to be the major informer of our sensibilities, we will remain functionally unintelligent. Because, after all, it is the ability to make distinctions—and the smaller the distinctions made, the higher the intellect that makes them— by which we judge intellect" (Morrison, 1975: web). The challenge to rewrite official history, reclaim forgotten (hi)stories, and resist assimilation and accommodation has been taken up by numerous artists. Multiethnic American literature and postcolonial literature denounced ethno-racial violence, systems of oppression, acts of *de jure* exclusion, forced relocation, slavery, colonial brutality, First World and Third World inequalities, and genocides, but also attempted to produce a non-stereotyped portrayal of peripherical communities. As Homi Bhabha argued,

> They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the 'rationalizations' of modernity (Bhabha, 1994: 171).

In multiethnic American literature, this intense work of revision of U.S. history can be observed, to name a few, in the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, the aforementioned Toni Morrison, Carlos Bulosan, Maxine Hong Kingston, John Okada,

and Junot Díaz. Even though these authors wrote in different periods, they all show how in the twentieth century memory, history, and literature started to intermingle in new ways.

The Other has the potential to challenge the way he or she is perceived (or perceives him/herself) by using remembrance, imagination, and storytelling as forms of resistance. In comics, World War II origins of Captain America have been recently revised to acknowledge the contribution of African Americans to the cause, but also problematize the contradiction of the race relations of that time. The seven-issue series *Truth: Red, White, and Black* (2003) created by Robert Morales and drawn by Kyle Baker raises questions about racism in America and the treatment of African American soldiers during World War II. Ironically, as discussed in the first chapter, during the 40s, superheroes fought for American ideals of liberty and equality abroad, but they did not oppose racism within the United States. In contrast, the recent *Truth: Red, White, and Black* investigates the exploitation of racial minorities for scientific research, as in the Tuskegee[170] syphilis trials.

The series is settled in 1942 and it narrates the story of a regiment of black soldiers who are forced to act as test subjects in a program attempting to re-create the lost formula earlier used to turn Steve Rogers into Captain America. After losing the secrets of the Super Soldier Serum with the death of Dr. Erskine, the United States Army did not give up its project to create enhanced humans, like Steve Rogers. Col. Walker Price and Dr. Wilfred Nagel forcibly recruited Isaiah Bradley and 300 other African American soldiers to serve as test subjects to recreate the serum. To maintain the operation a secret, the soldier's families were sent letters informing them of the formers' deaths. Of the 300 African American soldiers, only a few survived the transformative and gruesome process. The experiments lead to mutation and death. As Nama (2011) discussed,

> *Truth* boldly signaled the danger of choosing to believe only what makes us feel best about our national political history. Indeed, *Truth* admonished the reader to incorporate the experiences and histories of black folk that paint a different picture of the cost and quest for freedom and democracy in America (Nama, 2011: 118).

This contradiction is also problematized by Jonathan Tsuei and Jerry Ma's (2012)

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[170] The Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the African American Male was a clinical study conducted between 1932 and 1972 by the United States Public Health Service. The purpose of this research was to investigate the natural history of untreated syphilis; the African American men who were experimented were only told they were receiving free health care from the Federal government of the United States.

*9066*, and Lee and Sunico's (2012) *Heroes without a Country*. These short stories in comic form complicate World War II nationalist superheroes tropes by using a protagonist of Japanese descent. In these comics, the Japanese American experience in the internment camps is evoked through references and juxtapositions. Thus, they undermine the national narration of World War II as "the good war," reminding America of past injustices. These comics problematize the myth of American formation through "consent" (Sollors, 1986), recalling how America doubted and questioned the loyalty of its citizens because of racial prejudices, that casted people of Japanese descent as enemy aliens. Jonathan Tsuei and Jerry Ma's (2012) *9066* captures how the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 changed the perception of Japanese Americans. Even though, prior to the "date which will live in infamy" (Roosevelt, 1941: web), the protagonist performed heroic actions, executive order 9066 (which gives the title to the story) will rule that he must be imprisoned because of his ethnic origins. Despite superhero stories arguing that the hero's mantle can be passed on different people by their adherence to universal values of truth and justice, the comic reflects on how these 'universal' notions are ethnically connoted in U.S. society. When imprisoned, *9066*'s nameless protagonist comments, "I thought that it didn't matter who we were when our masks where off. I thought I proved where my loyalties lie when I consistently put myself in harm's way. The truth is it's not what you do that matters, but what you look like. I was a hero once. Now I'm just another Jap" (Tsuei & Ma, 2012:27-28). This anonymity mirrors how Japanese Americans, who were considered enemy aliens, were reduced to numbers (which substituted family names) in official registers, becoming to the law parts of an undistinguishable mass. It is worth noticing that like in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) the protagonist/narrator is nameless and (somehow) invisible, testifying a conflict between self-perception and the projection of others, a contrast that W.E.B. DuBois (2005 [1903]) described as "double consciousness". Paradoxically, second generations were called to serve their nation even though the rights of their ethnic community were denied. Lee and Sunico's (2012) *Heroes without a Country* dramatizes this contradiction by having its Japanese American protagonist saving a Jew from the tortures of Nazi generals. This short comic does not attempt to establish an easy parallelism between the Holocaust and Japanese internment; in contrast it questions the myth of racial unity during World War II and the good war narrative. The United States were not immune to racism. By having a Japanese American

saving a Jewish superhero, the comic shows interethnic solidarity and a commitment to a universal social justice.

The experience of the internment camps has been also elaborated in contemporary graphic narratives. Among others, the actor and activist George Takei recently decided to recount his childhood within American concentration camps during World War II in a graphic memoir, somehow retrieving Mine Okubo's legacy as an artist and a witness. *They Called Us Enemy* (2020 [2019]) is Takei's firsthand account of those years behind barbed wire. He narrates his growing up under legalized racism, and the effects that this experience had on his future. The graphic novel unites past and present to show the irony of history. In his adulthood, Takei shook his hands with Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of the man who signed executive order 9066, which deprived Japanese American of their civil rights and properties. Now a celebrity, in 2017, he was invited to give a speech at F.D.R. Museum and Presidential Library. The images of the Roosevelt Museum are juxtaposed to pictures portraying Rohwer War Relocation Center in Arkansas. This contrast aims to emphasize Roosevelt's (and America's) responsibility.

The narration of the camps experience is filtered by Takei's understanding as a child. This choice accentuates the injustice of the executive order 9066. Children are not able to understand what is happening and why it is happening. The story mixes serious events with mundane ones. Like John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), the comics shows how U.S. questionnaires to determine internees' loyalty to America tore the community,

> My father was raised in America but had been born in Japan. Like all Asian immigrants, he was forbidden from applying for U.S. citizenship. Question 27 asked him to serve in combat for a country that had rejected and then imprisoned him because of his ethnicity. He was 40 years old with a wife and three young children. Question 28 asked him to discard his entire Japanese heritage - relatives, memories, and the place of his birth - for a country that would not have him. Answering 'yes' would make him stateless. For my mother question 27 was absurd. But question 28 caused her great frustration. She was an American born citizen, and all her children were Americans. She was married to a man her country rejected and now called an enemy alien. Her country took everything her family had. Put them behind fences in this hot Arkansas swamp. Now she was expected to put family second to a nation that had rejected them (Takei, 2020 [2019]:116).

The comic shows how Japanese Americans answered in various ways, and it homages them all. Each answer was as heroic as the other. There were Nissei who answered "yes-yes". They found those questions outrageous, but swallowed their pride and served the military, fighting in Europe. Others refused and become principled objectors. They did not want to wear the uniforms of their captors. For this reason, they would be transferred to Leavenworth federal penitentiary, Kansas. There was also a group that had no other

option than answer "no-no" because of their family ties: first generation did not want to become stateless and some second-generation Japanese Americans did not want to leave their parents behind in the camps. As discussed in the first chapter, members of the same family often answered differently. Thus, the questionnaire severed family ties and separated members of the community. The responses given set each member on different paths. Yet, those answers were not the result of informed decisions or dictated by individual aspirations (and as Okubo pointed out in her graphic narrative many did not even have the ability to decipher correctly the questionnaire), but the outcome of survival tactics and government coercion. Because of their negative answers, Takei family was relocated in Tule Lake, a maximum-security camp for disloyal Japanese. After the war, America planned to send Japanese Americans back to Japan because of their renunciation of U.S. citizenship. However, San Francisco lawyer Wayne Collins and his Japanese American associate Theodor 'Ted' Tamba managed to have a mitigation hearing for the internees, since their renunciation was not an act of free will, but it was forced upon them by the detention condition.

Like Miné Okubo, George Takei shows the resilience of Japanese (Americans), as they try to build a sense of normalcy. They even celebrate Christmas and one of the internees dress up as Santa Claus. This scene also offers a moment humor. George is enthusiast about the presence of Santa Claus in the camp, however he soon realizes that the man he saw is not the real one, but just an internee impersonating him. Other humorous moments involve George learning swearing from older people and asking explanation about their meaning. For example, one kid leaving in the camp convinces George to say 'Sakana Beach' in front of a guard. The guards are enraged. George is surprised by that reaction and would ask his father why they got angry. His father soon realizes that to American ears that phrase sounds like 'son of a bitch'. These trivial moments have the function of humanizing the internees and are offered as a form or resistance.

This graphic novel does not only recollect a past event, but it also stresses its importance in the present by linking it to the current events and political debates about immigration and citizenship. The graphic novel shows that on June 26, 2018 the *Korematsu[171] v. United States* had been officially recognized as an injustice; the Supreme

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[171] Korematsu argued that Executive Order 9066 was unconstitutional and that it violated the Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Court established that its ruling had no place in law under U.S. constitution. However, the comic reminds the reader that on the same day that *Korematsu v. United States* was overruled, President Donald Trump banned immigration from Muslim countries, *Trump v. Hawaii*. This juxtaposition implies that both exclusion orders are rooted in dangerous stereotypes about a particular (racial, ethnic and/or religious) group that is deemed to be unable to assimilate and desires to harm the United States. The comic reminds America that many American citizens were immigrants. Takei's family, like many others, came to the U.S. to find better opportunities. He also reminds that the myth of the U.S. as an immigrant nation is rooted in American cultural mythos. Indeed, the Tv series that made him famous (Star Trek) can be seen as a variation on the theme,

> I am a veteran of the starship enterprise. I soared through the galaxy with … a crew made up of people from all over the world. Our mission was to explore strange new worlds… to seek out new life and civilizations…to boldly go where no one as gone before. I am the grandson of immigrants from japan to America. Boldly going to a strange new world, seeking new opportunities (Takei, 2020 [2019]: 11).

Therefore, *They Called Us Enemy* questions what constitutes American identity, a recurring issue in U.S. literature. Whereas this question has its roots in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's (1782) *Letters from an American Farmer*, the answers provided by the two authors could not diverge more. While de Crèvecoeur[172] offers a constructive and assimilationist definition of Americanness (which can be summarized through the motto *E pluribus unum*), Takei challenges this notion through a deconstructive approach. In Takei's graphic novel, hyphenated identities interrogate the totality presumed to inhere beneath the signifier "American". As the scholar David Palumbo-Liu (1999:1) argued, Asian American identities should be read as

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[172] Crèvecoeur wrote after the revolution and his work functioned as propaganda for the new nation, legitimizing and defending the newly formed American identity. Even though the comparison between these two works might seem hazardous to many, it is worth remarking that the formation through consent model (Sollors, 1986) propagandized by this work can still be observed in contemporary cultural products. Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008) is a clear example of the endurance of this myth. The movie follows the story of Walt Kowalski, a Korean War veteran alienated from his family. Walt's young neighbor, Thao, attempts stealing Walt's prized 1972 Ford Gran Torino as part of a coerced initiation into a Hmong gang. Walt thwarts the theft. As a penance Thao start working for Walt, who develops a fatherly relationship with the boy and his family. This relationship would prompt Walt to sacrifice himself to protect the Hmong community (and their American Dream) from the Hmong gang. The movie reiterates the white savior trope, but also the contrast between descent (the gang) and consent (represented by Walt and the promises of America). Hence, Clint Eastwood's movie clearly shows the legacy of the immigrant narrative, which construct the American identity as the result of a mere act of consent and obedience to certain principles. However, as discussed in the first chapter, the Japanese Interment experience questions the truthfulness of this myth, showing that racial minorities were never allowed to become 'Americans' as the color of their skin functioned as a gatekeeper.

persistent reconfigurations and transgressions of the Asian/American 'split,' designated here by a solidus that signals those instances in which a liaison between 'Asian' and 'American,' a *sliding over* between two seemingly separate terms, is constituted. As in the construction 'and/or,' where the solidus at once instantiates a choice between two terms, their simultaneous and equal status, and an element of undecidability, that is, as it at once implies *both* exclusion and inclusion, "Asian/American" marks both the distinction installed between 'Asian' and 'American' *and* a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement.

This definition allows an opening of the notion of (ethnic and national) identity, which is no longer constructed as a monolithic entity, but a dialogic one. Hyphenated identities are here presented as the result of a long history of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, which often involves wars and their effects on migration and domestic policies.

The comics hitherto described seek to denounce human rights violations against racial minorities and call upon America to take responsibility for its policies. These graphic narratives primarily address experiences within the boundaries of the nation state and adopt a domestic perspective. In contrast, diasporic (Southern) Vietnamese graphic narratives advocate for the necessity of a transnational diasporic perspective. Graphic novels produced by Vietnamese American artists resonate with the works produced by other diasporic Vietnamese communities in France and Australia. This global network of memories exceeds the local and asks for a global accountability for those events. Collectively, these graphic narratives show that the Vietnam was part of a continuum of international (colonial) interventions, invasions, and conquest. Contemporary Diasporic Southern Vietnamese graphic artists also testify the birth of a new "global civil sphere" (Alexander, 2012), as they ask the reader to evaluate the event not just on a local scale, but globally. The consequences of that war generated a diasporic movement, which allowed the formation of an extra-national network of stories which share a fair amount of intertextuality and similar patterns, which promote a global understanding of the event. These new transnational trajectories mirror what scholars, building upon Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur*. have come to define as 'World Literature' (Benvenuti & Ceserani, 2012).

## 2. Diasporic Memories of the Vietnam War

As hitherto discussed, comics and memory are entangled with the moulding and creation of the nation state identity. However, comics can also provide an opportunity to create transnational memory projects that are not nation centered. Indeed, the diasporic Vietnamese recollection of the Vietnam War shows how national borders are porous: Vietnamese American graphic novels can be compared and read in contrast to the

Vietnamese French *BDs*[173] on the same subject. Diasporic Southern Vietnamese graphic artists engage with the reconstruction of (individual and collective) past (his)stories, the retrieval of a lost (Southern Vietnamese) community, and the quest for origins. They are often engaged in a healing process that looks both to the past and the future. Yet, their look at the past is not nostalgic. They are simply figuring out how to deal with the trauma that has been passed on to them by their parents. For them, the Vietnam War has been inherited in the form of "postmemory" (Hirsch, 2012).

The loss of the war and the disappearance of South Vietnam triggered a need to stage a return to both a past and a geopolitical entity that no longer exist. As Long T. Bui (2018:18) observed, "For many in the Vietnamese diaspora, their homeland is not some simply idyllic place of ancestral ethnic origin. The Vietnam many remember is South Vietnam, a spatial geopolitical construct born out of the Cold War, one that formally existed only for a short 20 years." Indeed, the war created South Vietnamese subjectivities. As Yến Lê Espiritu (2005:313) discussed, South Vietnam was "a nation without its own history, culture, heritage and political agenda". It was born out of the U.S. Cold War policy of containment, fears of Soviet intervention in Indochina, the domino theory, and old colonial strategies. After the defeat of French colonials and the signing of the Geneva Peace Accords in 1954, Vietnam was temporarily partitioned in two halves along the seventeenth parallel. The northern part of Vietnam, which was almost entirely controlled by the Việt Minh became the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. The southern part of Vietnam, where the Việt Minh controlled relatively small and remote areas, became the Republic of Vietnam (also known as South Vietnam). This division was meant to maintain the peace until national election were held in 1956. However, supported by the U.S. and fearing the probable victory of Ho Chi Minh, Ngô Đình Diệm (a renegade politician and former French colonial bureaucrat) declared the Republic of Vietnam an independent state. John Fitzgerald Kennedy would later overthrow Diệm to have a more controllable local administration. Diệm's dictatorial rules alienated part of the population and his brutal repression of protests led by Buddhist monks during the summer of 1963 convinced many American officials that the time had come for Diem to go. Thus, this civil war is entrenched with America's (neo)colonial

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[173] BD(s) is the acronym of Bande(s) Dessinée(s). This term refers to Franco-Belgian comics, that is, comics originally written in the French language and created for readership in France and Belgium.

strategies. South Vietnam as a geopolitical entity collapsed a few years after Nixon's "Vietnamization" of the conflict and the withdraw of American troops and it officially disappeared with the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

It is important to remark that the death of South Vietnam as a geopolitical entity raises questions about the way this lost country should be remembered, as this ghost nation still plays an important role in the diasporic Vietnamese imagery. They are not only refugees who left their homeland and migrated overseas, but 'stateless' individuals. These exiles hold onto the memory of a lost country that cannot be retrieved. While the older generations strive to preserve their fading memories as they have to adapt to new sociopolitical contexts, younger generations interrogate the elders to learn something about their past. Therefore, the transgenerational transmission of memory is entangled with the survival of a community, as there is no longer a state to promote a certain reading of the events, nor to confirm a national identity.

In contrast, both (North) Vietnamese and the Americans are capable to promote actively their "memory project" (Leavy, 2007), even though with different means, intentions, perspectives, and worldwide diffusion (Nguyen, 2016). Because Southern Vietnamese lost the war and many of them became exiled in foreign lands, their biographies were pushed at the margins of history. Then, as Long T. Bui (2018:2) discussed, "Focusing on the South Vietnamese side helps to truly 'Vietnamize' the legacy of war, exposing a critical perspective that had been repressed within Vietnam's Communist national imagery and reprogrammed through the 'Americanization' of the war's memory in popular Hollywood films."

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam describes the conflict as an 'American War,' neglecting the role played by Southern Vietnamese. As Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001:190) discussed,

> Whereas many overseas Vietnamese mark April 30 as the Day of Shame (Ngay Quoc Han), in counterpoint to the Vietnamese state's celebration of victory and reunification, those who remain in Vietnam but fought against Communism do not have the luxury of publicly holding their own rites of remembrance.

This amnesia allows Communist Vietnam to skip over the pain Southern Vietnamese had to endure during and after the war: the loss of loved ones, the reeducation camps, the pirates (as they became 'boat people'), thirst and starvation over the high sea, and refugee camps. After the war, the Southern Vietnamese community has been scattered into four

different continents (America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania). The displacement of these people was forced, as many of them had to flee the country because they feared for their lives and those of their family members. As Isabelle Thuy Pelaud (2011:9) discussed,

> The United States received the largest number of refugees at the end of the Viet Nam War, followed by France, Australia, and Canada. Smaller numbers went to Germany, England, Japan, and later northern European countries. Most of the 700,000 Vietnamese who came to the United States as refugees did so because they feared retaliation by the communists due to their past affiliation with the Republic of Viet Nam in the south and its American allies.

Thousands of persons who did not manage to leave the country were imprisoned in 'reeducation camps' where their human rights were constantly violated. Moreover, even those who did not end up incarcerated suffered from malnutrition, unemployment, and an oppressive government that limited individuals' freedom.

The suppression of Southern Vietnamese memories flattens the war narrative. Indeed, this reductionist account eclipses the way in which this conflict shattered families and questioned their loyalties. As Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001:190) observed,

> southern forgetting is not merely a case of individual memory collapsing under the weight of state suppression. Practically every southern family has members who fought on different sides of the Vietnam War and whose sufferings are therefore blamed on different agents. Every memory calls forth a countermemory: stories of imprisonment under the South Vietnamese regime are countered by narratives of experience in reeducation camps under the new Communist one. Anecdotes celebrating heroic deeds in guerrilla bases are met with tales of tragic death on the high seas while trying to escape the country

Hence, Southern Vietnamese memories must be recuperated to have a complete vision of that event and recognize the political contradictions (past and present) of countries involved in the conflict.

Similarly, America used pop culture to depoliticize the war and the soldiers' conduct, casting the conflict as rite of passage, and portraying the G.I.s as 'lost boys.' Revisionist and prowar pop cultural artifacts described Vietnam as a place where violence was indigenous and thus its inhabitants needed a foreign tutelage. Antiwar rhetoric presented Vietnam as the place where America moral ambiguity was finally revealed. However, it is important to remark that both reconstructions (whether they advanced antiwar war or revisionist stances) are often neglectful towards the (North and South) Vietnamese. The difference between North and South is not investigated, and they are both portrayed as the racial Other (the 'gook') whose main function is to reinforce American subjectivity.

As hitherto described, comics generally portrayed Vietnamese as background characters whether they performed the role of allies, enemies, or people to be protected,

Moreover, it is worth noticing that even when they were casted as coprotagonist they were never fully in charge of their own destiny as their fate was entangled with the kismet of a (white) American soldier. For example, in Jason Aaron and Cameron Stewart's *The Other Side* (2007) Vo Binh Dai's story is subordinated to Bill Everette's metaphorical descent to hell. Indeed, it is Vo Binh Dai's death that triggers Bill's loss of his soul. Thus, Vo Binh Dai's character development is merely used to create momentum. His death can be interpreted as a plot device that aims to show how war corrupted America's youth. This treatment is reminiscent of the old comic trope of female characters 'fridging[174]'. In both cases, a character is killed for the sake of causing emotional trauma to the protagonist and set him into a new spiritual journey. Yet, one can observe how the use of this trope has the effect of devaluing the life of the dead character in the process.

This American-centered perspective has also been observed by the journalist and writer Andrew Lam who argued,

> The three-sided war where North and South fought against one another with the Americans as allies to the South turned into a much simpler version in America. In the movies—in the popular imagination—the narrative often told is that of an American protagonist in a foreign land, under siege, fighting all faceless Vietnamese (Lam, 2005:31).

This simplified narrative often aimed to hide any racial, geographical, historical, and political implication of the war and its aftermath. As Michele Janette discussed,

> Despite having entered the war claiming to support the South Vietnamese, America in general tended to erase the South Vietnam government and its supporters from its conceptions of Vietnam. The dominant image of the Vietnamese has been the Vietcong, the "enemy." Postwar Vietnamese refugees thus faced not only the difficulties inherent in losing one's home and entering a new culture but also the further obstacle of being frequently perceived not as refugeed allies but as invasive enemies (Janette, 2011: xix).

Furthermore, personal Southern Vietnamese narratives also attempt to contrast the soldiering of war memories. As hitherto discussed, comics and pop culture have often focused mainly on U.S. military experience as if the soldiers' actions had no consequence on the daily life of Vietnamese people. America's morale (in prowar comics) and morality (in antiwar comics) were the focus of the narrative and Vietnamese biographies had no place in these accounts. In contrast, Vietnamese diasporic artists use family experiences to reclaim and challenge the memory of the conflict as the American reconstruction of the

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[174] 'Fridging' is the practice of killing off or hurting character to motivate or torture a main (male) character. The term comes from Green Lantern #54 (1994) in which the hero's partner is killed and stuffed in a refrigerator for the protagonist to find.

event tended to be self-centered and narcissistic. American pop culture depicted its soldiers as both innocent victims and ruthless gun-ho, filling in both roles of heroes and villains. However, in diasporic Vietnamese narratives, war is evoked to better understand the community dynamics and explore familial stories. As Catherine H. Nguyen (2018:183) discussed, "the graphic memoirs place emphasis not on the Vietnam War as the narrative event but rather on second-generation diasporic subject coming to learn about others' personal unique experiences of war and its aftermath in the many elsewhere where Vietnamese diasporic subjects find themselves".

Moreover, the formation of a small though growing body of works dealing with the memories of Vietnam War (from a diasporic Vietnamese perspective) helps illustrating the complexity and diversity of the refugee experience. Refugees often belonged to different social classes and ethnic groups, and their exodus occurred through different waves: the first ranges from 1975 to 1978; the second from 1978 to 1980; the third from 1980 to 1995 (Pelaud, 2011:10). Even though this division is done by approximation, it helps to see how each wave was characterized by the predominance of a different group. The first wave was mainly composed by people who were more likely to have experienced the war directly (e.g. ARVN soldiers and their family). It also included educated and wealthy people, who thanks to their status already had contact with French and American culture and language (an element that facilitated their inclusion). The second wave is associated with the "boat people". After the war, many Vietnamese kept escaping the country often risking their life in the process. They fled by boat and attempted to find refuge near the coast of Malaysia and Thailand. Many of them (but not all) were ethnic Chinese. Indeed, this minority (who largely lived in the south) was pressured to leave due to increasing tensions between Vietnam and China, which ultimately resulted in the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979. The third wave include anyone who tried to leave Vietnam from 1980 to 1995. However, in this period hosting countries implemented rules to reduce the persistent flow of boat people. Western countries often commissioned South Asian officers to decide whether the asylum seekers were economic immigrant or political refugee. However, as Andrew Lam recalls,

> The screening process Hong Kong uses to determine which Vietnamese fit political refugee status is controversial and has been condemned by Amnesty International and the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights. Many interpreters are Chinese immigrants from Vietnam who can't speak Vietnamese very well. The people aren't allowed to tell their stories. The process has declared that fewer than 8 percent of the boat people are eligible for political asylum, a number that has stayed

consistent for months, suggestive of a quota (Lam, 2005: 80).

It is interesting to notice that these procedures show the limits of international institutions such as the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission on Refugees) as the criteria that separate economic immigrants and political refugees are highly arbitrary. In addition to these groups, starting in December 1987, 40,000 Amerasians and their relatives could enter the U.S. through the Amerasian Homecoming Act. Their presence questions American presumed (and self-appointed) benevolence as for twelve years those children (sons and daughters of American soldiers) were left behind condemned to live as outcasts[175].

The recollection of the (his)stories of Southern Vietnamese people aims to give visibility to this group and the sufferings it had to endure. Books (even those written in comic form) allows Southern Vietnamese experience not to be "a footnote in the public consciousness" (Lam, 2005: 31). These works aim to build an archive in the face of historical amnesia and raise awareness about the refugees' conditions. Second generations attempt to recuperate the story of their family to understand a past war and the reasons behind their current precarious lives. Thus, these narratives complicate the 'model minority myth' which describes Asian communities as assimilated, hardworking, and obedient (a cliché built upon a misconception of the Confucian family values). Their relative success is often used to hide America's liability for the exodus, the war, the escalation of the conflict, and the bombing of Laos and Cambodia. Moreover, the model minority myth avoids addressing the discriminations suffered by the Vietnamese community.

Southern Vietnamese narratives also act against the appropriation of the refugee experience by political leaders. For example, in a speech to Veterans of Foreign Wars on August 22, 2007, President George W. Bush claimed: "One unmistakable legacy of Vietnam is that the price of America's withdraw was paid by millions of innocent citizens whose agonies would add to our vocabulary new terms like 'boat people,' 're-education camps,' and 'killing fields'". Therefore, as Isabelle Thuy Pelaud observed,

> Vietnamese refugees' tears, losses, and blood were suddenly reinserted into the historical narrative, not to learn from these experiences but to request more funds to continue a war in Iraq. This revisionist national rhetoric appropriates human rights violations to allow America to shed itself of

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[175] As previously discussed, Pearl S. Buck used her foundation to help those children.

national responsibility and guilt, and rationalizes conquest and war (Pelaud, 2011: 7).

In this regard, it is important to notice that the relocation of Vietnamese refugees in the U.S. helped promote the image of a magnanimous America capable of rehabilitating and repositioning its role in the conflict. Indeed, the presence of persecuted refugees was used to confirm America's claim that U.S. intervention was to protect freedom and democracy. This rhetoric that casted America as the guarantor of life, liberty, and happiness aimed to hide the elements of continuity of this war to older U.S. colonial strategies, used in the Philippines, Samoa, Virgin Islands and Hawaii. Even though Vietnam was not a U.S. colony in the formal sense, it is essential to see this event in relation to U.S. colonial history. As Yến Lê Espiritu argued,

> After World War II, colonialism and militarism converged in the Pacific. Willfully aborting the decolonization movement in Micronesia, American military leaders turned the region's islands into a Pacific "base network" that would support U.S. military deployment in allied Asian nations as part of the containment of communism (Espiritu, 2014:28).

These (neo)colonial relations would become more evident with the collapse of Saigon. Indeed, as Yến Lê Espiritu observed, refugees were often moved from one U.S. military base to another and the first receiving centers were located in U.S. former and current colonial territories (e.g. Philippines and Guam). Thus, this experience indirectly testifies the reach of the U.S. empire in the Asia-Pacific region.

Vietnamese diasporic communities are not only linked by their attachment to a former home, but also by their experience of war, loss, and exile. Younger generations question their parents and other family members about the past, yet those memories are linked to a place transformed by time and violence. Southern Vietnam no longer exists as a geopolitical entity and it can only be inhabited through remembrance. Consequently, Southern Vietnamese must perform acts of memory that allow them to move both in time and space. South Vietnam can only be inhabited through acts of imagination by younger generations. As Hirsch and Miller (2011: 12) argue, "the experience of return to an earlier generation's lived places is mediated by story, song, image, and history. But now it is also mediated by the parallel reality of the digital." In particular, the memory of the Vietnam War has been shaped by photojournalism and Hollywood movies, as they created a shared imagery of the war; however, those memories are also remediated, contested, and appropriated by comics through their traditional form or and the digital one. These comics

are not just "memory projects[176]" (Leavy, 2007), but heritage projects as they aim to preserve oral histories so that future generations of Southern Vietnamese may not be condemned to a future without a past. Indeed, these comics allow the recording of the experiences of those who lived through the events that formed and eventually put an end to the Republic of Vietnam.

In Southern Vietnamese comics dealing with the war there is no fantasy of return to contemporary Vietnam; instead, they do attempt to go back to a specific spatial, temporal, and geopolitical reality. As said, these heritage projects should not be seen as the mere products of nostalgia; instead, they actively engage with a more complex and articulated process of healing and understanding of the past. The project behind these narratives situates the narrator's family experience into a larger historical frame. Ordinary stories, object, and family pictures are juxtaposed to "iconic" photographs. This coexistence in the same environment of private and public images serves to reveal the political dimensions of the private. Family history is used as a synecdoche for the community. Missing and contradictory personal stories promote archival research. As Long T. Bui observed,

> Oral history is broadly considered a valid historical methodology, but can be viewed as biased and sometimes unreliable due to its subjective nature. Amnesia, fear of political censorship, post-traumatic stress, selective or colored experiences based on nostalgia, and language barriers are some of the impediments to procuring an objective or complete account of the past from the word of interviewees (Bui, 2018:44).

However, it is important to remark that even though oral histories may have fallacies as far as accuracy and fidelity to the past are concerned, they are key sources of information, especially when other traces of the past are scarce: many refugees left their homes with nothing more than clothes on their backs. This exodus has been mainly recorded by immigration officers who had to deal with Southern Vietnamese applications to the refugee status. Thus, many personal stories have inevitably been buried inside impersonal certificates and tedious paperwork, documents that (differently from comics and other works of art) are unable to capture both trauma and the mundane of everyday experience. As Michele Janette (2011: xix) observed, many Vietnamese narratives function as "tales

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[176] As discussed in the introduction "memory projects" are created when interested parties activate particular repositories of collective memory to bring certain aspects of the past into public eyes for political use. However, diasporic Vietnamese memory projects acquire a new function allowing the preservation of a stateless community.

of witness," that is "works based in personal experience and driven by the need to inform, to educate, to correct the record and claim a spot in the American psyche. This is largely a corrective literature, a deliberate intervention into dominant American culture".

As Spiegelman's *Maus* demonstrated, comics offer a viable means to investigate and interrogate historical reconstructions of the past through metanarrative elements. As previously discussed, comics can engage with history through narrative modes that recall what Linda Hutcheon (1996) defined as "historiographic metafiction". Indeed, these works are situated within historical discourses without surrendering their autonomy as fiction. As Linda Barry illustrated in her graphic narrative *One Hundred Demons* (2002), comics often mix fiction and non-fiction to create what she calls "autobifictionalography". Indeed, every account uses fictionality as a mode to construct a coherent story about the self in relation with others, as well as with History. For this reason, it is imperative to remind that to "write history (personal and public) as a reflexive comic book is not to say history is a fiction; it is, instead, to suggest that all accounts of that history are necessarily 'narrativized' accounts'" (Hutcheon, 1999:12). Indeed, memory cannot be studied as a subject *per se* or observed *in vitro*, but only through its effects and cultural artifacts.

In *Alternative Comics,* Charles Hatfield noticed how the emergence of autobiography in contemporary graphic narratives and their centrality in the current cultural panorama have raised critical issues about the genre,

> Autobiography, especially, has been central to alternative comics - whether in picaresque shaggy-dog stories or in disarmingly, sometimes harrowingly, frank uprootings of the psyche - and this has raised knotty questions about truth and fictiveness, realism and fantasy, and the relation between author and audience (Hatfield, 2005:x)

In particular, diasporic Vietnamese graphic narratives are interesting because they show how authenticity (a key element of the autobiographical pact) does not always equate with direct witnessing. The authors here analyzed reconstruct the Vietnam War through the stories of older generations. In these cases, authenticity is given by the interviewee 'authority' and the authors' extensive historical research.

Being (post)memory projects, these works attempt to transmit and educate the reader about the (hi)stories of the diasporic Vietnamese community. The trauma of war has been passed down to authors by their parents. The reconstruction of the past is here described as a necessary activity that allows the authors to make sense of the present. The diasporic

identity of their community is a direct consequence of the war. Therefore, their experiences show how even though that war is long gone, it has not completely ended. The war that divided a country (physically and ideologically) keeps on claiming the dispersed member of the Vietnamese community.

These graphic memoirs are not only important as historical documents; they also help exploring the meaning of family, generational identity, and war. Family trees are often reconstructed within the narrative to signal how communities change in response to conflicts. These heritage projects attempt to restore connections suspended by time, place, and politics. The Cold War generated dispossessed people forced to live 'elsewhere' and created biographies that challenge national boundaries; the refugees had to change language and place and involuntarily became people in constant flux. As Andrew Lam discussed refugeehood challenges the idea of national borders as refugees are called to transcend their national ties,

> if the Vietnamese refugee left Vietnam under the shadow of history, he also, into the blink of an eye, became the first global villager by default. The trauma of his leaving, the effort he makes in claiming and creating a new place for himself in a quickly shifting world, his ability to negotiate himself in an age of open systems and melting borders makes him the primary character in the contemporary global novel. My sense of home these days seems to have less to do with geography than imagination and memories. Home is portable if one is in commune with one's soul. I no longer see my identity as a fixed thing but something open-ended. What lies before me then is a vision of continents overlapping and of crisscrossing traditions. Call it a new American frontier if you will, but one chased by a particular transpacific sensibility (Lam, 2005:16).

Andrew Lam's words echoes with the contemporary notion of global citizenship as his identity is here described as transcending geography or political borders. He considers his rights and responsibilities to derive from his membership to humanity. However, it is vital to remark that this transnational identity does not override national or more local identities and concerns, because, even though human rights may be universal, each appeal to justice comes from a particular place with its own historical, social, and cultural context. In turn, attention to local appeals can provide the ground for the formation transnational /transethnic alliances based on empathy and the recognition of a common struggle. As George Lipsitz argued,

> Certainly, alliances of this type produce strength in numbers. We are more powerful with allies than we would be alone. These alliances demonstrate solidarity in the present in order to reap its benefits in the future; if we are there for other people's struggles today, there is a greater likelihood that they will be there for us tomorrow. This solidarity also enables us to avoid the dangers of disidentification and disunity. By standing up for someone else we establish ourselves as people with empathy for the suffering of others. Common experiences in struggle also make it harder to play off aggrieved groups against one another (Lipsitz, 2001:301).

Hence, by playing with the interconnectedness of the local and the global, art can both help the imagining and narration of transnational identities and advocate for a global recognition of injustices, encouraging an allyship among oppressed communities. Expanding on Edward Said ideas, Andrew Lam maintains that

> if one wishes to transcend his provincial and national limits, one should not reject attachments to the past but work through them. Irretrievable, the past must be mourned and remembered and assimilated. To truly grieve the loss of a nation and the robbed history of a banished people, that old umbilical cord must be unearthed and, through the task of art, through the act of imagination, be woven into a new living tapestry (Lam, 2005:16).

Thus, the metanarrative possibilities offered by comics as a medium help exploring the meaning of the past, questioning its silences, and making it relevant for the present.

Finally, these graphic narratives engage with the notions of justice, ethics, and repair. Even though, the notion of healing is addressed in both diasporic and non-diasporic recollections of the war, one can observe a different (ethical) modality through which diasporic Vietnamese graphic narratives attempt to achieve this aim. Indeed, Southern Vietnamese authors seem to adopt what Nguyen (2016) defined as the "ethics of recognition" as they engage with the remembrance of the humanity and inhumanity of their community, as well as the humanity and inhumanity of the Other.

## 3. Reconstructing a Fragmented Past in G.B. Tran's *Vietnamerica*

G.B. (Gia-Bao) Tran's *Vietnamerica* (2010) reconstructs the Vietnam War as a civil war that tore apart a country, but also families. Yet, the graphic novel shows how family ties were already put to a test by the colonial experience. Indeed, the graphic novel's timeline covers the First Indochina War (1945-1954) between French imperialists and Vietnamese nationalists and the Second Indochina War (1955-1975), also known as the Vietnam War in the West, which involved the United States, backed by the South Vietnamese government, against North Vietnamese Communists. The comics deals with the legacy of these wars and their ramification into the life of ordinary people. The decision to include the First Indochina War in this reconstruction has the effect of situating the American war in Vietnam as part of a larger colonial history, decentering the role of the U.S. while putting Vietnamese families at the center of the narrative. Familial dynamics are here used as a synecdoche for the history of the country. Thus, it is no coincidence that, after a prologue that depicts both Tran's father leaving Saigon airport in 1975 and Tran's first visit to Vietnam 30 years later, the narration opens with a quote

attributed to Confucius, "A man without history is a tree without roots".

Confucius's quote introduces the family tree metaphor, a recurring image in the graphic novel. However, the meaning and implication of family trees are here complicated by both war and the experience of exile. The first panel introduces G.B. Tran's first visit to Vietnam with his parents in 2006. The composition of the page guides the reader's attention toward an enormous tree. The scene uses a 'low angle shot' frame, a camera shot often exploited in movies to emphasize power dynamics between characters, signaling superiority or eliciting feelings of fear, dread, but also creating an emotive appeal and pointing towards an ideal dimension. The salience of the tree is reinforced by the fact that the following two panels (showing G.B. and his father at the foot of the tree) use a high angle shot. This compositional choice gives a sense of vulnerability. The natural world is clearly a symbol of belonging to a place of origins that had to be abandoned. Thus, the tree is used as metaphor for the Vietnamese diasporic community symbolizing conflicting ideas and experiences: ancestry and family ties, but also erasure, migration, and alienation. As Tri Huu Tran explains:

> there is a legend about this tree. Local Vietnamese claim that the very tree Buddha meditated under is its ancestor. Monks carried a cutting of its root all the way from India, replanted it here, and built this temple around it. 2,500 years later their disciples take care of it. Generation after generation have sat in its shade in pursuit of enlightenment (Tran, 2010:9).

Then, it is worth noticing that the arboreal images presented in the comic are not static but dynamic as plant cuttings can be placed in a new soil and propagate. The image of the tree is reiterated throughout the graphic novel. For example, G.B.'s maternal side of the family is represented through a family tree diagram. The main protagonists of the story are also introduced in the paratext of the graphic novel in a similar fashion. This diagram positions G.B. as the youngest member of the family tree, but it also gives him the responsibility to understand and inherit the history of Vietnamese people. This duty has been physically passed down to him by his ancestors. A network of lines connects three different generations. This representation aims also to guide the reader through the narrative and remind him or her of the ties that link each character to one another. This visual map is particularly important as it helps the reader navigate through a fragmented narrative.

Blossom flower are portrayed during Tri Huu Tran and Dzung Chung Tran (G.B. parents') marriage, symbolizing the expansion of the family through the creation of a new

branch. Tree images also appear in Dzung's dream, "I had that dream again last night… it was clearer this time. I could hear its leaves rustle and feel its rough bark" (Tran, 2010:49). Nature is here used as point of intersection among childhood memories, the territory and family. However, during her return to Langson she found out that the tree has been destroyed. Dzung's return home is depicted as relatively happy until she finds out that the courtyard has been cleared out. Her brother Vinh asks her: "Don't you remember? That's where the family tree stood" (Tran, 2010:61). In the last panel Dzung face is cut in two halves: one portraying her adult self and the other her face as a kid. This portrayal is particularly evocative as the graphic novel is not only asking the reader to think about transplanted (diasporic) trees, but also those obliterated by the war. If trees are (metaphorically) linked to the (reproductive) prospering of a nation, its disappearance might point to the ways in which war undermined such instance to occur (e.g. poisoning of the land and water, destruction of Vietnam's resources, fetal loss associated with exposure to chemicals, killings, forced relocation, etc.). On a personal level, this disappearance also testifies Dzung's loss of her ancestral home, the life she could not live, the affects she had to abandon, and her realization that the world from her childhood has irrevocably changed and cannot be inhabited, except in memory.

The tree image appears also in a full-page image representing the family's happy moments in Vungtau. The tree is in the center of the page and foreground panels show moments of conviviality. Eloquently, the tree crown hides gruesome images of violence and destruction. Yet, the tree is not immune to war as flames burn some of the leaves. Thus, this image exploits the ambivalence of the tree as a symbol of the family unity and Vietnam's ecological[177] space. Thus, as Jeffrey Santa Ana (2018:161) observed, the American War in Vietnam had both human and ecological costs, "the fighting destroyed millions of acres of farmland, wrecked Vietnam's industrial facilities, and devastated many villages and cities". As previously discussed, to subjugate the country (and its wilderness) Americans did not hesitate to use napalm and herbicides. like the infamous Agent Orange.

Confucius' quote does not only introduce one of the main themes (and one of the most

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[177] The term ecological is not used here as a synonym of environmental. In contrast, it is used to refer to the interactions among different organisms and their biophysical environment, which encompasses both biotic and abiotic components. War did not simply destroy the natural environment, but also the rural economy connected to it.

evocative image) of the graphic novel, but it also allows the reader to appreciate the fragmented and circular structure of the book as the citation is often reiterated. Indeed, at the end of the graphic novel the reader comes to know that those lines were written by G.B. Tran's father on the front page of a history book about the Vietnam War that he gave his son as a high school graduation gift. Tri Huu Tran gave his son this book to teach him the history of his family and country as G.B. was born in the U.S. after those traumatic events took place. This present is of central importance because it triggered Tran's curiosity to travel to Vietnam and know more about his family past. As the comic reveals, prior to this moment G.B grew up without any concern about the family history, a disinterest matched with the family silences, "My family's unwillingness to share the most basic facts was as much to blame as my decades of disinterest and insensitivity" (Tran, 2010:98). Indeed, he ignored that his two older siblings (Lisa and Manny) have a different mother, and that his father was previously married to a French woman.

The book about the Vietnam War and G.B.'s grandparents funerals function as catalysts for the narration. The reoccurrence of Confucius' quote at the beginning and end of the graphic novel does not only states the centrality of family, but it also shows how war memories cannot be recollected through a linear narrative. As Andrew J. Kunka observed,

> The story is framed by the separate funerals of Gia-Bao's grandparents, which result in flashbacks on each parent's past as well as his grandparents' own stories. The narrative contains frequent time shift and movements between these different narrative levels. Occasionally, these time shifts will be cued by changes in lettering styles or color schemes (Kunka, 2018:117)

This narrative fragmentation serves many purposes. First, it shows how linear time (with a beginning, a middle, and an end) is not capable of portraying trauma. As Jenny Edkins (2003:59) argued, trauma "refuses to take its place in history as done and finished with. It demands the acknowledgment of a different temporality where the past is produced by - or even takes place in - the present". This copresence of past and present is already evident in the prologue. The fist panel shows a small plane flying away from Saigon airport, leaving war behind. Two speech balloons link this image to the present as Dzung Chung Tran asks his son, "You know what your father was doing at your age?" (Tran, 2010:1). This rhetorical question would soon receive an answer, "He… WE left Vietnam". The next two pages juxtapose images of the Truong family leaving Saigon on April 25, 1975 to their return to Vietnam for the funeral of G.B.'s grandmother, 30 years later. Thus, the present revitalizes the past creating a space of dialogue. This projection of shadows,

ghosts, and archival images does not only attempt redefining historical events according to a new perspective, but it also tries to understand the present through new lenses. Commemoration of the past does not only imply a 'look back' but also a 'look forward' in the hope of a better future, "year passed before families reunited. Before people felt like they had a future again. By then, it was too late for my **generation**. Our hopes and dreams lie with our children. Every decision we made… every sacrifice we gave… was for the future" (Tran 2010:241, original emphasis).

Second, the lack of a linear plot helps portraying memory as a movement that tries to connect what has gone missing: affects, cultural ties, and material objects. Memory recall and the subsequent re-accessing of events and information from the past (which has been previously encoded and stored in the brain) is symbolized by Dzung's retrieval of a pearl neckless she thought lost, "there wasn't any time. That last night in Vietnam, we just stuffed things into a suitcase" (Tran, 2010:155). Yet, as the re-discovery of this artifact testifies, memories are not stored in our brains like books on library shelves, but they are chaotically stored in disparate boxes. Yet, once a piece of memory is retrieved, the brain can evoke more complex memories linked together by associations and neural networks. It is worth noticing that the box image does not only depict the re-discovery and retrieval of old (thought to be lost) memories through a 'madeleine moment', but it also portrays the functional nature of memory as objects can be willingly hidden inside boxes. This duplicity of memory (which relies on both remembering and forgetting) is also visualized by Tri Huu Tran digging in the garden while his wife is looking for the Tet altar in old boxes (the same hiding the neckless) she brought from Vietnam. Yet, the reader does not know whether he is exhuming or burying old memories (symbolized as a smoke emanating from his cigarette). This duplicity is reinforced by the contrast of words and pictures: while the text asks "can't he just throw all his trash away". Thus, presence and absence seem to have the same importance, being two sides of the same coin. Significantly, absences can also take the form of silences as the author had to work through the reticence of the family to piece together the war experience.

Even though the recollection of family (hi)stories serves a vital function in the narrative, the author admits that his parents' experience cannot be fully retrieved and that his own postmemory reconstruction does not provide a total recall of the events. Gaps in knowledge are also testified by the presence of blank pages. The graphic novel's

reconstructive effort is also well captured by the nature of the medium itself, as it invites the reader to re-compose the narrative and make sense of it. Indeed, comics is a "cool medium" (McLuhan, 1964) that uses "closures" (McCloud, 1993) and "implicatures" (Cohn, 2019) to demand the reader a high degree of effort to fill in both the details that the cartoonist may have intended to portray and the gaps in the narrative. The effort the reader is required to make mirrors the one accomplished by the author in his reconstruction of the past.

Moreover, as Jill Benett (2005:7) argued, "trauma-related art is best understood as *transactive* rather than *communicative*. It often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the 'secret' of personal experience." Similarly, G.B. (and the reader) can only tentatively try to understand the past, but not possess it or unveil all its secrets. Thus, the author must piece together elements of his family history (as narrated by his parents and siblings) and his own observation during his two travels to Vietnam at adult age. The relevance of the past in the present is testified by the intergenerational transmission of that traumatic experience, a process that G.B. Tran has also tried to capture in graphic form. The bleed on page 26 shows how Vietnam history and memory are imprinted in G.B. body and consciousness as his auto portrait is graphically depicted as the intersection of his mother and father portrait. However, unlike Art Spiegelman, G.B. does not represent the past as a haunting presence, but as a family secret to be uncovered.

Third, the non-linearity of this graphic novel might also be interpreted as an invitation to not judge the story and the characters portrayed in the narrative according to contemporary Western standards. Indeed, Tri Huu Tran tells his son: "You can't look at our family in a vacuum and apply your myopic contemporary western filter to them" (Tran 2010:240). So, the task to recompose the narrative that the reader is challenged to accomplish may also allude to Tran's effort to reconcile traumatic memories while bridging his Vietnamese heritage to his American upbringing. Interestingly, the uncovering of secrets, family silences, and intergenerational cultural gaps resonate with some classic Asian American novels like Maxine Hong Kingston's (1976) *The Woman Warrior.*

Furthermore, the lack of linearity might be used to capture and link together the rupture of war and the disruption of postwar life. Past and present are clearly linked, but the use of non-linearity as a form of telling might be seen as a way to impede any easy cause-

consequence reading of the events. Decisions were often sudden, and things did not always go as planned. War is here depicted as a mayhem as families are required to navigate into the maelstrom, but they have no time to observe and rationalize the whirlpool. The use of a linear and unified story might have limited the representation of the war to a restricted time period. However, the war lives as a continuing trauma in the mind of those who experienced the event, and it is visible in present through the geographical dispersion of the Vietnamese community (a tangible consequence of the war). In the middle of this memoir there is powerful image that depicts Vietnam as a hemorrhaging wound within Indochina. The land is eviscerated and resembles a grave from which thousands of people are trying to escape not to be dragged into that hole forever. Yet this disruption does not end with the official conclusion of war and the refugee relocation in America, as the reader sees how the members of Tran's family are now scattered into different corners of the U.S. As G.B. Tran recalls,

> Mom and Dad fled Vietnam to keep the family together. If they hadn't, Dad would have ended up in a labor camp, Mom denied work and forced to struggle in poverty, and my sisters and brother reduced to street beggars. Who knows if I would have ever been born? But in America, I doubt they imagined this fate for their kids: me and my siblings growing apart and scattered across the country. Getting us all together in one place is no small feat. The last time that happened, I was still in high school in Arizona. Before our grandmother Le Nhi had cancer (Tran, 2010: 56-57).

The separation of Tran's family is symbolized by a map of the U.S. The red area indicates the state where the parents live (Arizona) whereas the yellow show where the four siblings live (New York, Florida, and California). The area dividing these States is brown and renamed "the Great Generational Divide" and the Ocean separating the U.S. from Vietnam is given the name "Sea of Cultural Loss". This image clearly shows how maps are not an objective representation of a territory, as they are influenced by the creator's vision of the world highlighting certain aspects while hiding others. This appropriation of the map is functional to the (re)discussion and (re)definition of Southern Vietnamese identity as an imagined community; maps can be used to represent both the unity of a geopolitical entity and diasporic movements. The comic's appropriation of geographical tools aims to show how borders are not the only things to be affected by war, but also people.

Moreover, the fragmentation of the narrative allows G.B. Tran to juxtapose the lives of those who remained in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and those who fled. This juxtaposition helps the reader to visualize these two separate experiences as part of

the same narrative, two branches of the same tree. This correlation is fostered by the fact that, after the end of war, Southern Vietnamese identity (in Vietnam and abroad) has been threatened by external forces and subject to 'reeducation' attempts. Relocated to the U.S., G.B.'s family struggled to adapt to a foreign country with a different language, culture, mores, and traditions, "We were all overwhelmed with trying to start over from nothing. The simplest things were suddenly impossible to do. In a foreign culture threatening our own" (Tran, 2010:113). These last lines also appear on a Scrabble board (a game the Tran children often play) illustrated on a two-page spread (figure 24). Whereas the tiles compose the phrase "In a foriegn culture threatening our own," the grid of squares visualize the hardship the family had to go through. A group of tiles composing the word 'home' are left out of the board. The exclusion of those four tiles captures their exiled condition, as refugees are forced to live without a true sense of home. Indeed, refugeehood is not just a legally determined state of migration, but a condition of permanent coerced relocation and dislocation. The images featured in the grid of the Scrabble board also explore the polysemy of the world threatening. As Andrew J. Kunka (2018:118) discussed, "The threat, then, is multi-leveled: it can be the threatening of losing their own cultural identity in a new, dominant culture; the threat of inherent racism that sees them as inferior; and the threat of being seen as Vietnamese enemy." Meaningfully, the word 'foreign' is misspelled, testifying the difficulties the family had in adapting to a new culture and mastering its codes.

Yet, Tran's family was not the only one that underwent a process of reeducation. Indeed, the comic briefly discusses Tran Huu Do's experience in the reeducation camps in northern Vietnam. Yet, this experience is reconstructed through silences, as G.B.'s mother confesses, "He was sent to a labor camp deep in northern Vietnam. He doesn't talk about it much and we don't ask" (Tran, 2010:148). Do's experience is narrated through irony and forms of euphemisms that mimic (but also mock) official rhetoric. Whereas the captions state "He does say there was plenty of exercise. Nice amenities. A lot of downtime. Plenty of privacy. And food for everyone" (Tran, 2010:148); the images display a different reality, one made of starvation, abuse, and torture. The dissonance between text and image invites the reader to look for answers rather than rely on institutionalized accounts of the past. Hence, once again, understatement and irony demonstrate to be powerful tools to deconstruct public euphemism. The comic also

discusses how families often ignored what happened to the abducted men as the government never gave them any information about the prisoner's conditions.

Finally, narrative fragmentation and circularity (the reoccurrence of symbols, catch-phrases, and pieces of popular wisdom) symbolizes the centripetal and centrifugal forces at play in the refugee experience. Whereas hunger, fear, and the search for better opportunities made the community spread around the world, cultural and family bonds tie them despite hardship. Thus, the refugee experience is not only determined by forms of dispersed fragmentation, but it is also described as a condition that brings people together in chaotic times, "her elaborate memorial service gathered family from all over the Vietnam, and as far as the U.S., to the small beach community of Vungtau" (Tran, 2010:11).

Moreover, it is important to remark that the fragmentation is not only narrative, but also visual. *Vietnamerica* is a mosaic of different artistic style, where each tile narrates a piece of the family history. As Harriet Earle (2014) observed, the panels representing Tri Huu Tran's early life (from his adolescence to the meeting with his first wife) are drawn in a style reminiscent of *ligne claire*. As Charles Hatfield (2005:60) observed, this style "privileges smooth, continuous linework, simplified contours and bright, solid colors, while avoiding frayed lines, exploded forms and expressionistic rendering". The use of this style is particularly interesting because it belongs to Franco-Belgian *BD* tradition, and it is associated with the cartoonist Hergé, the creator of the series *The Adventures of Tintin*. The reference to the Belgian cartoonist is also explicated early in the comic, as a panel on page 38 clearly shows a young Tri Huu Tran receiving a copy of *Le Lotus Bleu*[178](1938) from his grandparents. The use of this style is a clear reference to the impact that French colonial experience had on Tri Huu Tran's life: he was a teacher of French, he sent an application (later rejected) to migrate to France, he was married to a French woman. French domination also 'colonized' Tri's imagination as he painted "French-impressionist inspired" canvas. French culture became in Tri's mind the yardstick for anything valuable, "who'd pick **New York** over **Paris**? Eat a cheeseburger instead of a French **croissant**?" (Tran, 2010:172, original emphasis). Yet, the presence of French

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[178] This book is the 5th volume of the Tintin series. It tells the adventures of Tintin and his dog Snowy in China in the midst of the 1931 Japanese invasion. Even though this album continues to perpetuate certain Orientalist assumptions, it represents Hergé's first serious attempt to depict the Other in less than pejorative terms. It is also the first Tintin's adventure to be set in Asia.

language and cultural artifacts should not be considered a form of nostalgia towards the old colonial empire as irony is often used to problematize that experience. The French period is full of contradictions. The comic depicts French soldiers as both murderous and benevolent. Thus, this multifaceted representation of the colonial period avoids any reduction of the experience into a good vs. evil archetype. The French colonial ties are not just the symbol of past oppression, as they also offer means of survival: Tri Huu Tran's siblings manage to get French scholarships and escape a country at war. However, at the same time, that war was a direct consequence of the decolonization process. Indeed, the Vietnam War (or the American War, according to the Vietnamese) is also known as the Second Indochina War. The United States supported France during the first Indochina war, which resulted in the partition of the country in two halves and the retreat of the French out of Indochina (1954). The United States would later support the South Vietnamese government in opposition to the National Liberation Front and the Communist-allied North Vietnamese Army. Therefore, the latter can be seen as a continuation of the former.

The Vietnamese culture presented in this graphic novel is not essentialized but hybrid, being deeply influenced by the French colonial past. This cultural hybridity is also testified by the presence of code switching (to French) in the narrative as Tri often says "ils n'oublie rien, ils n'apprennent rien". This French saying is used to show Tri's disillusionment about the ideals that motivated each side of the conflict, as all parties involved were neglectful towards civilians' sufferings; any presumed 'liberator' did not hesitate using brutality to enforce their vision, yet violence can only trigger other violence.

In contrast, the flashback of Tri's imprisonment and interrogation by the ARVN (who were trying to get information about the hiding of his father) uses crosshatching, dark coloration, and black gutters. A similar style is used to narrate Huu Nghiep's joining the Việt Minh and Do's experience in the reeducation camp in northern Vietnam. It is worth mentioning that the echoes in Tri and Do's experiences are not only stylistics. When liberated from their captivity their respective guardians utter the same sentence: "Now go and be a good Vietnamese citizen". This parallelism helps the author to show the humanity and inhumanity of each side, a necessary step if one wants to build the opportunity for reconciliation. The comics also use Communist-inspired poster art to

narrate the ideology that persuaded many young Vietnamese to join Ho Chi Minh's cause. However, these images glorifying the Việt Minh and their ability to resist foreign oppressors (the French, the Japanese, and the Americans) are here contested by the use of captions that interrupt the visual unity of the bleed, "it quickly became clear their 'peace' wasn't for the people, but only those in power. But they forgot nothing and learned nothing" (Tran, 2010:186).

The comic also features a *collage* of photographs representing G.B.'s parents and siblings in South Vietnam. As Marianne Hirsch discussed,

> They [photographs] not only refer to their subjects and bring them back in their full appearance; they also symbolize the sense of family, safety, and continuity that has been hopelessly severed […] Whether they are family pictures of a destroyed world, or records of the process of its destruction, photographic images are fragmentary remnants that shape the cultural work of postmemory. The work that they have been mobilized to do for the postgeneration, in particular, ranges from the indexical to the symbolic. […] Unlike public images or images of atrocity, however, family photos, and the familial aspects of postmemory would tend to diminish distance, bridge separation, and facilitate identification and affiliation. When we look at photographic images from a lost past world, especially one that has been annihilated by force, we look not only for information or confirmation, but for an intimate material and affective connection that would transmit the affective quality of the events (Hirsch, 2012:37-38).

These photographs are emotionally charged because they recorded a world that can no longer be inhabited. They are powerful because they talk about war without showing explicit violence. They fix a world before it got annihilated. War is evoked through the broken connection to the place and time referenced by the picture.

Fragmentation is not only narrative and visual; the war has left indelible marks upon the family and (Southern) Vietnamese consciousness. This event shook the foundation of Vietnamese society up to its 'roots' and its smaller unit (the family). The war changed (Southern) Vietnamese collective identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways and tested the meaning of family bonds. Families had to adapt according to the rapid changes occurring within a society at war. The graphic novel shows how war provoked the estrangement of family members. Whereas Tri Huu Tran's father (Huu Nghiep) joined the Việt Minh, serving as a military doctor, his mother (Le Nhi), who was left alone with the responsibility of raising three kids, started dating a French colonel in order to make sure her children survived the occupation. As Long Bui (2016:125) observed, "Survival mechanisms take on gendered performative hues as men serve the nation while women are compelled to do what they have to do for the family". This reconstruction of Le Nhi's decision is not judgmental but understanding. As Tri Huu Tran explains to his son,

"families did what they needed to survive. Two is stronger than one, and raising children is a lot easier with a mother and a father" (Tran, 2010:59).

Le Nhi's relationship with the colonel would result in a son named Thanh. It is worthwhile to remark that the existence of biracial children in Vietnam is a byproduct of a prolonged and intense colonial (and neocolonial) presence. As previously discussed, this phenomenon would have been unimaginable in other wars, where interactions with local population were minimal. The continued contact with the French colonialists (and later the Americans) would make the Vietnamese forge different alliances. Yet, the comic reminds the reader that "individuals, not families, pick sides" (Tran, 2010:33). Except for Huu Nghiep, who firmly believed in the values of the revolution, the other characters' alliances are mainly dictated by contingencies and opportunities. Thus, the presence of extended families should be considered a direct consequence of survival tactics. The refugee experience is not only defined by pain, but it is also complicated by personal aspirations as Vietnamese people strived to improve their conditions in face of death and poverty. The comic does not shy away from showing the brutality of the Communist regime, but also the inhumanity of French and American (neo)colonial rules, "of course, no one thought life would improve just because one occupier was replaced by another" (Tran, 2010:30). The graphic novel makes clear that civilians always had the short end of the stick.

Family duties and obligations were disrupted by the conflict: fathers at war could not take care of their children, and, in turn, exiled children were not able to look after their old parents. Thus, the expectation of the old Vietnamese saying, "Our parents care for us as our teeth sharpen… so we care for them as theirs dull" (Tran, 2010:199) were inevitably failed. Huu Nghiep is mainly defined by his absence: he is often depicted as a shadowy man standing next to Tri Huu Tran during the kid's most important accomplishments. The absence of this father figure is also stressed during Tri's visit to his father tomb, located in what G.B. Tran defines as "a Vietnamese Arlington". Here, Tri Huu Tran tells his son that war heroes "belong to the country, whether they like it or not" (Tran, 2010:15). The Communist Vietnamese government refused to comply to Huu Nghiep request to be buried near the place he was born. The comic shows how war and political ideology alienated family members so much that even bodies could not be reclaimed. It is worthwhile to notice that Tri Huu Tran would only meet and talk to his

father more than twenty years after the end of the war. During this encounter Tri learnt that his father hoped to reconnect with his family once the war ended. During their brief reunion Huu Nghiep asks his son: "why did you leave? Why did you abandon your family? I could have taken care of all of you" (Tran, 2010:196). However, those statements were just wishful thinking as history followed a different path.

Interestingly, the comic shows Huu Nghiep as a sympathetic character fighting for a noble ideal: independence from (neo)colonial invaders. However, the graphic novel uses irony to show how those goals did not match reality as the values proclaimed by Communist propaganda turned into instruments of oppression. In a conversation with Do, Tri shows his contempt for his father (and the Communists victors): "So the revered hero of the revolution preferred self-exile to facing the corrupt new government he gave his life for" (Tran, 2010:19). Thus, this narrative shows how wars have no clear winner nor loser. Even though Huu Nghiep won the war, he lost his family, and the new regime did not live up to his ideals. Thus, in this account of the conflict, no one is the absolute victor, and no one is simply a victim: anyone is made accountable for his/her own action.

Interestingly, at a superficial level, this narrative has the involuntary effect of reinforcing the faith in the American Dream. Indeed, this portrait of survival, escape, and reinvention can also be seen as the realization of the "immigrant narrative" (Sollors, 1986) as the second generation manages to realize its parents' (and grandparents') aspirations of success and freedom. However, in contrast to that model, there is no tension between the notions of descent and consent, but rather misunderstanding among generations and cultures, "We tell you these things but you'll never understand" (Tran, 2010:112); and yet, G.B. is entrusted with the history of the family, "your name is very significant in Vietnamese. It means 'a precious treasure passed down from generation to generation'" (Tran, 2010:99).

In U.S. culture Asian Americans are often depicted as diligently spreading the values of the American Dream. This belief is propagated through the myth of the model minority which casts Asian Americans as a quiescent hardworking, apolitical, de-racialized ethnic minority embodying upward mobility values. Yet, this narrative is indirectly questioned as the reader sees the difficulties that the Vietnamese community had to endure before they could integrate in a new culture. America is both a site of refuge and a site of (cultural) threat. For example, during a police interrogation Tri Huu Tran has to defend a

Vietnamese immigrant like himself from the accusation of beating his son, "this man was not beating his son! The red marks aren't from a belt or stick. They're from rubbing balm! It's an old Vietnamese medical treatment used for everything from headaches to the common cold" (Tran, 2010:238). Similarly, when the immigration officer congratulates Tran's family for becoming U.S. citizens, they do not look happy. The officer sees their experience as the realization of upward mobility. Thus, in his point of view, the process of naturalization acquires the function of reminding America of its rites and myths, "you've been waiting for this day for over five years? Bet they've flown by, getting to live the American dream and all. Let me be the first to officially congratulate you … your journey has ended!" Yet the sorrow of most family members testifies the struggle and pain they had to go through. The narrative has shown the reader what the family lost during their relocation to the U.S. The circularity and fragmentation of the narrative make the comment "your journey has ended!" ironic as the reader has progressively become aware through the story that displacement and trauma never truly end.

The American Dream is not the only myth to be challenged as the image of America as Vietnam's savior is here undercut. Indeed, the comic shows how the route towards freedom is (ironically) linked to the American imperialism and colonialism. Even though, as Yến Lê Espiritu (2014) observed, America used the "good refuge" narrative to turn the Vietnam War into a 'good war' (an ultimately moral and necessary conflict) as Southern Vietnamese were given freedom twice (as America intervened in the war and rescued them after the defeat), the route these immigrants took to escape, and the first receiving centers testify the reach of America (neo)colonial empire. Indeed, G.B.'s family did not directly land in San Diego, instead they had to transit first in U.S. former and current colonial territories (the Philippines first and then Guam), "Welcome to Guam. If you'll all please follow me to refugee processing" (Tran, 2010:227). As Yến Lê Espiritu observed,

> The Vietnamese refugees were not supposed to linger on Guam; they were to be processed almost immediately and then sent on to the continental United States. However, some U.S. states initially refused to accept the refugees or postponed the arrival date, in part because of a lack of planning and proper facilities but also because of adverse reactions by the public and strong opposition by state officials to the influx of refugees. […] In short, the refugee situation on Guam bespoke the intertwined histories of U.S. military colonialism on Guam and its war in Vietnam: it was the militarization of the colonized island and its indigenous inhabitants that turned Guam into an "ideal" dumping ground for the unwanted Vietnamese refugees, the discards of U.S. war in Vietnam. Moreover, the refugee presence bore witness not only to the tenacity but also to the limits of U.S. empire, critically juxtaposing "the United States' nineteenth-century imperial project with its failed Cold War objectives in Southeast Asia (Espiritu, 2014:32).

Hence, this brief reference complicates America's narrative of the war as it becomes clear that U.S. soldiers did not die attempting to preserve freedom in a far-away country. America's involvement was certainly not a selfless contribution, and the comic indirectly questions the image of the U.S. as a nation of innocents, able to promote democracy and freedom through rescue and liberation missions. As discussed in the previous chapter, this rhetoric was recuperated in 2003 by President Bush who claimed, "In the trenches of World War I, through a two-front war in the 1940s, the difficult battles of Korea and Vietnam, and in missions of rescue and liberation on nearly every continent, Americans have amply displayed our willingness to sacrifice for liberty" (Bush,2003: web). Hence, the comic questions the image of the U.S. benevolent and magnanimous agent and it resists the portrayal of Southern Vietnamese subjectivities as passive victims needing to be saved. Indeed, America used Southern Vietnamese refugee experience and the model minority myth to sanitize the memory of the war and coopt Southern Vietnamese into the "immigrant narrative".

Usually, biographical narration reinforces the role of the individual, and therefore it is in line with neoliberal values. However, this graphic novel does not present a typical coming of age story where the protagonist rediscovers his cultural roots by 'going native' or a generational conflict where the main character embraces the culture of the hosting country. In contrast, the graphic novel presents a collective history where G.B.'s experience is just one of the tiles in the family mosaic. The diaspora experience connects and separates people through time and space. The polyphony of voices avoids the creation of a monolithic history where a single experience is used to create a template, a reductive image of the refugee experience. As Alaina Kaus observed,

> The memoir is grounded in a self-conscious acknowledgement that no narrative may claim full knowledge. However, this acknowledgement that all narratives offer only partial truths suggests not that gaining knowledge is impossible but that it remains in process, ever in construction and ever in reconstruction. It relies on the necessity of acknowledging as many viewpoints as possible and never settling on fixed conclusions. (Kaus, 2016:17)

The resistance to neoliberal values can be observed also in the circularity of the narrative. Indeed, in America the narrative is "a forward arc" that "encourages self-invention" (Lam, :34), a redemption for the newcomer who can experience a rebirth thanks to the ever-expanding opportunities the country has to offer. In contrast, the traumatic experience of a diasporic community is circular as it demands a loyalty to the past, private memories, and sorrows.

Moreover, G.B. as a character functions as a cultural mediator facilitating the comprehension of the events as his discovery of his family past helps the reader re-discuss his knowledge and assumptions about the Vietnam war. G.B. is caught between two worlds and his identity is defined by generation, class, and race. However, this narration does not present an exotic tour into otherness as G.B. does not master either world. The reader can clearly see G.B. making cultural unsensitive remarks and actions, "Why didn't you tell me the Vietnamese mourn in white instead of black?" (Tran, 2010). Yet, these flows are what make the character sympathetic as the reader uncovers with him some of the family secrets and cultural norms.

Finally, the graphic novel does not only debunk American myths and America's cooptation of Southern Vietnamese experience into the immigrant narrative, but it also shows the contradiction of contemporary Vietnam. Indeed, G.B.'s parents are shocked to find their country in a dramatic course of change as they see the construction of McDonald's, Hilton hotels and Italian restaurants. Vietnam is now a society embracing capitalism and yet still under socialist rule. This hybrid economic system does not just point to the contradiction of capital, but also to the ironies of history and culture; even though foreign colonial powers no longer dominate the area, Vietnam's improved conditions rely on U.S. and Southern Vietnamese capital. Indeed, G.B. parents used to send medicines back to Vietnam so that the selling of these goods could financially sustain those who could not escape. As Andrew Lam highlighted in his book *Perfume Dreams* (2005),

> Here then perhaps is the final irony of that bitter war: since the start of the Vietnamese Diaspora, when the war ended in 1975, Vietnam, having defeated imperialistic America, fell susceptible to America's charms and seduction. In their postwar poverty and suffering, Vietnamese yearned for a new beginning in America […] Vietnamese nationals living abroad, especially those in America, whose successes and wealth serve as a mirror against which the entire nation, mired still in poverty and political oppression, reflects on its own lost potential (Lam, 2005:12).

These observations make the reader wonder who actually won (if anyone) the war in the long run, as it becomes clear that America and Vietnam destinies keep being bound together even after the end of the conflict, thus the title of G.B.'s graphic novel, *Vietnamerica*.

## 4. Trauma, Motherhood, and Reconciliation in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*

In Thi Bui's graphic novel, motherhood prompts the author/narrator to seek answers about the past of her parents to reconcile with it and move on, breaking the

intergenerational transmission of the traumatic experience. Like G.B. Tran's *Vietnamerica*, Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* does not only attempt to reclaim and (re)learn a past conflict, but it offers a means for patching together fragmented piece of knowledge. This historical research does not just look retrospectively into the past, but it is projected toward the future, as well. Indeed, through this graphic novel Thi Bui seems willing to investigate what the Vietnam War legacy means for her (and her newborn child's) uncertain future. This pensive attitude clearly echoes with the uncertain futures of the previous generation who had to flee Vietnam, but it also shows how these two experiences diverge. Unlike her mother, Thi Bui does not give birth to her child in a refugee camp, but in a comfortable hospital.

Motherhood plays an in important role in the graphic novel as it creates a connection between Thi Bui and her own mother, but it also generates empathy in the reader, who is introduced to a very intimate scene from the beginning. The comics also reflects on the affective implicatures of the word "Mẹ" (Mother). In the final chapter, Thi Bui accidentally call herself "Mẹ" while holding her baby at the hospital, "Con ơi, Mẹ nè. (child, it's mother)" (Bui, 2017: 314). This allows her to slip herself "into her [mother's] shoes just for a moment". The bond with her mother soon assumes a bodily dimension, as she recalls, "I could hear echoes of my mother's voice speaking to me in my own childhood…but I could feel the voice coming from my own throat" (Bui, 2017: 314). This epiphany provokes a moment of self-recognition which leads to a discovery of the self in relation. Indeed, the author confesses, "Writing about my mother is harder for me - maybe because my image of her is too tied up with my opinion of myself" (Bui, 2017:131). The personal significance of the world "Mẹ" is further expanded in the following panels, which show a young Thi Bui and her siblings staying beside their mother Hang. Two captions explain the affective differences between the two diatopic variants of the Vietnamese word for mother, "when my mother spoke to her children she called herself 'Mẹ,' the term used in the North - a weighty, serious, more elegant world for 'Mother.' We preferred the Southern word 'Má,' a jolly, bright sound we insisted fit her better" (Bui, 2017:316). In this regard it is worth noticing that language has the power to project a representation of one's identity that goes beyond the mere content of a linguistic act. As Rosina Lippi-Green discussed,

> Human beings choose among thousands of points of variation available to them not because the human mind is sloppy, or language is imprecise: just the opposite. We exploit linguistic variation

available to us in order to send a complex series of messages about ourselves and the way we position in the world. We perceive variation in the speech of others and we use it to structure our knowledge about that person (Lippi-Green, 2012:38-39)

Therefore, in this passage, Thi Bui and her mother are negotiating the meaning of motherhood and its symbolic representation through language. This discussion is also reprised by the frame superimposed on this panel, which represents Thi Bui working on her drafting table and pondering, "I wonder now how I would feel if my son did something like that to me". A third panel embedded in the previous one visualizes such speculation; Thi Bui asks her son to call her "Mama", yet he replies "No! You're Mommy." This episode soon turns into a reflection about parenthood and the expectations of both parents and children, "being a child, even a grown-up one seems to me to be a lifetime pass for selfishness. We hang resentment onto the things our parents did to us, or the things they DIDN'T do for us… and in my case - call them by the wrong name" (Bui, 2017:317). The symbolic function of language in mediating one's position inside and across different identities is also addressed when Hang decides not to use French (the colonizers' language) outside school. Even though Hang had the privilege to attend a prestigious French school in Vietnam, the moment she learns about the history of her country and the abuses perpetrated by the old colonizers, she develops nationalist feelings and consciously decides to speak Vietnamese outside classes. She learns by herself how to read and write in Vietnamese.

Intergenerational dialogue is here depicted as a reciprocal attempt to understand one another. At the end of the graphic novel, Thi Bui learns that she must offer her mother the opportunity to "reposition[179]" (Winslade & Monk, 2008) herself, "To let her be not what I want her to be, but someone independent, self-determining, and free, means letting go of that picture of her in my head". This is particularly meaningful because, in the comic, Hang only exists in the words and pictures Thi Bui uses to describe her. Metanarrative elements make evident that Hang's depiction is influenced by Thi Bui understanding and prejudices. In fact, the graphic novel reflects on how those judgments changed over time. During her childhood, looking at her mother's photographs, and mesmerized by the exotic

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[179] According to John Winslade and Gerald Monk (2008), positioning is a relational term. In their opinion, "when individuals make un utterance, they call into place a form of relation through their very choice of words. They set things up in a certain way and thus implicitly call the other person (s) in the conversation into position in a relation of some kind. Conversation, including mediation conversations, can be seen as ongoing negotiations of these positions" (Winslade & Monk, 2008: 21).

environment depicted in them, Thi Bui dreamt to be like Hang, "In those photos, Má looked like someone I wanted to be as a little girl... a princess in a home far more beautiful than mine...in a country more ancient and romantic than the one I knew. It was an affirmation and an escape" (Bui, 2017:135). As Marianne Hirsch discussed,

> Photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life. Since looking operates through projection and since the photographic image is the positive development of a negative, the plentitude that constitutes the fulfillment of desire, photographs can more easily show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently it is not (Hirsch, 2012[1997]:8)

Yet the reproduction of photographs in a narrative context creates opportunities for contestation. The graphic novel shows how growing up Thi Bui "revised those notions with skepticism" (Bui, 2017:136). Her school education made her aware of her mother's class privilege; Hang was the daughter of a civil engineer working for the French and later the South Vietnamese government. However, Thi Bui's new critical (but also judgmental) attitude has the involuntary effect of making Hang uncomfortable to talk about her past.

The comic does not only describe family silences (a recurring trope in Asian American literature), but it also tries to investigate the reasons behind such reticence. In this memoir, silence has a pragmatic function, shielding one's (positive and negative[180]) face. It aims to protect one's children from knowing potential harmful truths, but it is also used to defend one's reputation. For example, after learning some of the family secrets, Thi Bui confesses, "I understand why it was easier for her to not tell me these things directly, and I did want to know. But it still wasn't EASY for me to swallow that my mother had been at her happiest without us" (Bui, 2017:191). Moreover, the comic also hints that Hang's wedding was rushed to cover up her pregnancy outside marriage, "I must not be the only person who noticed... that their wedding and the birth of their first child was not quite nine months apart. But this is something Má doesn't feel comfortable talking about." (Bui, 2017:193). Thus, oblivion is complementary to memory and they both involve a process of selection.

These episodes lead to ethical questions about trauma and its representation, especially

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[180] Re-elaborating Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness theory, Yule (1996:61) defines negative face as a person's "need to be independent, to have freedom of action, and not to be imposed by others. The word 'negative' here doesn't mean 'bad', it's just the opposite pole from 'positive'". In contrast, the scholar argues that "a person positive face is the need to be accepted, even liked, by others, to be treated as a member of the same group". Thus, he concludes that "negative face is the need to be independent and positive face is the need to be connected".

when the events narrated feature the private life of others. The ethical dimension of the graphic novel is validated by the presence of panels picturing Thi Bui's parents reading pieces of the work she is composing. One panel even features her father providing her historical sources to consult to better understand the past. When the versions of the story of the two parents diverge, Thi Bui's offers both parents the opportunity to reposition themselves in the narrative. For example, when Thi Bui and her mother discuss Nam's absence from the hospital during the birth of his children, he replies, "Your mother's always saying things to make me look bad!" (Bui, 2017:62). The graphic novel present both versions of the event as Thi Bui cannot resolve to determine whose right, "Was Bố so terrible? It's hard to remember" (Bui, 2017:64). The construction of the graphic novel as an intergenerational dialogue allows the presence of multiple perspective and the possibility for characters to move across different discursive spaces and contest master narratives.

Indeed, the ability to reposition oneself inside a narrative is not only used in relation to family dynamics, but also History. This is important because, as hitherto discussed, (Southern) Vietnamese experience is often neglected by western (and nationalist) accounts of the event. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2013 [1988]) discussed, subalterns usually cannot represent themselves; they are spoken of and written about. Historiography tends to be written by the conquerors through colonialist or nationalist lenses. Thus. the subalterns inevitably become objects of history, not subjects acting within it. As Viet Thanh Nguyen pointed out,

> The creation of the Vietnamese as a subaltern in Americans history served the interests of the United States during the war. The facelessness of the enemy and their lack of voice-as well as the lack of voice of America's South Vietnamese allies-created a void for American discourse to dominate (Nguyen, 2002:111).

Then, adopting a postcolonial poetics, Thi bui's graphic narrative reverts that power structure by giving voice and agency to people located at the margins of history and the periphery of the old French colonial empire. During her historiographical research, Thi Bui is puzzled by "the oversimplifications and stereotypes in American versions of the Vietnam War" (Bui, 2017:207). She observes that in these accounts, American G.I.s are always the "good guys", the Việt Cộng are the "bad guys", and (Southern) Vietnamese are stereotypically portrayed as bar girls, hookers, Papa-san, corrupt leaders, kids looking for handouts, and small effete men. Moreover, she also rejects the Việt Minh's representation of Southerners as being contaminated by "Capitalist filth" (Bui, 2017:220).

Like G.B. Tran's *Vietnamerica*, Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* must patch together different narratives of the past because of the author's lack of direct witnessing to most of the events (as she belongs to the 1.5 generation). This 'methodological' problem is also addressed by the comic itself. While watching a Cronkite reportage about Vietnam, Thi Bui comments, "I know this is caricature…but lacking memories of my own I've come to depend on other people's stories" (Bui, 2017:184). As Marianne Hirsch (2012:5) discussed, "Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but imaginative investment, projection, and creation." Interestingly, this metanarrative reflection about her re-elaboration of her (and her parents) trauma leads Thi Bui to wonder whether this intergenerational transmission of 'sorrow' has epigenetic connotations,

> How much of ME is my own, and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined? I used to imagine that history had infused my parents' lives with the dust of a cataclysmic explosion. That it had seeped through my skin and become part of their blood. That being my father's child, I, too, was a product of war… and being my mother's child, could never measure up to her […] what has worried me since having my own child was whether I would pass along some gene for sorrow or unintentionally inflict damage I could never undo (Bui, 2017:327)

These apprehensions have a correlative in Toni Morrison's (1987) notion of "rememory", a bodily form of re-membering[181] that one cannot escape. Even though the concepts of "rememory" and "postmemory" both imply the possibility of inhabiting an event that one did not experience, on the basis of traces of someone else's memory, rememories exist also in the bodily form of scars (as the one on Sethe's back, in Morrison's *Beloved*), which function as permanent reminders of the endurance of violence (and slavery). As Marianne Hirsch discussed

> Rememory is neither memory nor forgetting, but memory combined with (the threat of) repetition; it is neither noun nor verb, but both combined. Rememory is Morrison's attempt to re-conceive the memory of slavery, finding a way to re-member, and to do so differently, what an entire culture has been trying to repress (Hirsch, 1994: 94).

However, in *The Best We Could Do*, the fears that trauma might transform into an inescapable experience are exorcised at the end of the graphic novel. Thi Bui watches her son playing by the ocean and realizes, "When I look at my son now ten years old, I don't see war and loss or even Travis and me. I see a new life, bound with mine quite by coincidence, and I think maybe he can be free" (Bui, 2007:328-329). Therefore, whereas rememory imply an immersive (and unhealthy) relation with the past, postmemory

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[181] The used of bodily metaphors to describe memory has been described, among others, by Aleida Assmann (2002).

projects retain a certain critical distance that allows the authors to engage with the notion of reconciliation. This distance with the past is amplified by the self-reflexivity of the narration and the hybrid nature of the medium. In Thi Bui's graphic novel the scar on the back assumes the form of a tattoo representing Vietnam (figure 25). This representation does not only references Toni Morisson's *Beloved* (1987*)*, but also Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976). In Kingston's adaptation of Fa Mu Lan's story, the heroine's parents carve a long list of grievances into Mu Lan's back so that the scars will spell out their desire for revenge. Through this symbolism Kingston acknowledges the power of words, which can be used as weapons. She also claims to herself the power (as an author) to alter traditional tale[182] and bending reality. Therefore, the tattoo on the back does not only symbolize grief, but also empowerment. It is meaningful that in Thi Bui's work the tattoo does not feature words, but an image.

The self-reflexivity of graphic memoirs has also the function of giving the reader the experience of complex characters. The combination of words and pictures attempts to undo the objectification of Thi Bui's mother by taking her out of flatness and placing her into fluidity. This is particularly relevant because Hang's actions throughout the graphic novel defy dominant cultural understandings of the notions of womanhood and refugee identity. As Sally McWilliams (2019:327) discussed, Hang "refutes the one-dimensional portrait of the grateful female refugee bound by U.S. modernity's catalog of racialized women's bodies." In America, Hang becomes the breadwinner as her husband is the one staying at home to take care of their children. However, the freedom and empowerment granted by the relocation to the U.S. are countered by the stigma associated with being a woman of color and the difficulties the family faced in making ends meet, "We received food stamps and assistance for family with children at first… but we got off welfare as soon as Má could support us with her job. On $ 3.35 an hour and countless sacrifices" (Bui, 2017:297). Moreover, as Pelaud discussed (2011:25), "For women who came from

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[182] Kingston's retelling of Mulan story includes alterations to the original legend. This story is rewritten to accommodate her personal experiences as a child living between two cultures. Kingston combined several legends to produce a heroine with whom she could identify. The carving of words on the heroine's back is not present in her original legend, but it comes from the legend of Yue Fei. These alterations of the original tale have been harshly criticized by the writer Frank Chin, in his essay, eloquently titled, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake" (1991). He considered these alterations an attempt to please white American readers. However, a close reading of *The Woman Warrior* shows that the author's re-writing of traditional Chinese folklore has empowering functions. It states the author's power to mold reality. Words empowers both Fa Mu Lan and Kinston.

the elite class, work was not always considered a source of empowerment, as certain feminists have assumed, but rather as a crude reminder of loss of status and diminished lifestyle".

Hang's privileged upbringing has the effect of shielding her from becoming an "emblematic victim". As Viet Thanh Nguyen argued,

> The 'emblematic victim' is the way in which the victimized body politic manifests itself in American discourse, which makes no difference between representative and represented; that is, the fact that one of the oppressed speak is taken to mean that the oppressed in general have spoken, hence the emblematic quality of the individual speaker (Nguyen, 2002:112)

In her historical reconstruction, Thi Bui juxtaposes and compares her mother's and her father's respective childhoods. The comparison of these two experiences remind the reader that the colonized subaltern subject is heterogeneous. Hang's social class allowed her to live her youth without many worries, as war and colonialism only tangentially touched her. She would learn about the mistreatments her father had to endure because of an abusive French colonial only in her adulthood,

> My mother didn't find out until much later that her father had once suffered a nervous breakdown because of a Frenchman. Under French rule, he always had to report to a French superior, even if he had the higher degree and more experience. This particular Frenchman tormented him to the point where he went mad…tearing his clothes, talking to no one, and writing all over the walls of his room. He was put in a sanitorium for six months. My mother guesses this was why, afterward, he was transferred to Cambodia, away from his boss (Bui, 2017:149).

Thus, during her time in Vietnam, her social class functioned as a nurturing sanctuary. In contrast, Nam's past hides "wounds beneath wounds" (Bui, 2017:93); Nam suffered hunger, witnessed domestic violence (his father and grandfather beat their respective wives), had to hide to escape the French retaliation against his village, and finally he had to endure the abandonment of both his parents. Things improved for him only when his grandparents decided to move to a French controlled city. There, Nam recalls,

> I went from going barefoot to wearing sandals. Trousers, chemise. Eating bread and butter. Ham, chocolate, ice cream. Seeing cars. Riding a bicycle. At first, I went to public school. Then, when I was eight, my grandfather enrolled me in a French school. "Henri Riviere was an elite school, reserved for the French and wealthy Vietnamese. I came from the countryside, and suddenly I was allowed to spend every day in this beautiful place. I studied literature. I read French book. It was, compared to my earlier life, a PARADISE (Bui, 2017:153-154).

Therefore, Nam confronts and embraces the contradiction of the French colonial experience. He suffered the brutality of colonial rules, but he also benefitted economically from access to French education and the infrastructures created by the former colonizer.

Like Hang, education made him develop nationalist feelings. The reading of Sartre,

Camus, but also romance novels stimulated Hang's and Nam's ability to imagine another Vietnam. This ethnic awakening would initially prompt Nam to consider joining the Communists (like his father[183] did), however when he witnessed the privations people living in the north of the country faced, he changed his mind. There, he also realized that Communist propaganda called for 'sacrifices' to achieve its goals. These sacrifices involved the (physical) elimination of landowners (even small ones) and anyone 'compromised' with the previous colonial government. Thus, Nam soon realized that his grandmother and grandfather were included in what Communist propaganda described as necessary sacrifices, making him question the righteousness of the Communist cause. Indeed, they were regarded with suspect because they benefited from the French colonial system. The comic shows how this mistrust would extend to every Southern Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, independently of their previous affiliations. As Thi Bui recalls, "My father explained to me that there was a word for our kind - NGỤY. It meant 'false, lying, deceitful' - but it could be applied to anyone in the South. It meant constant monitoring, distrust, and the ever-present feeling that our family could, at any moment, be separated, our safety jeopardized" (Bui, 2017:221). Thus, the family decided to burn any object and book that might trigger the neighbor monitor's suspects. The constant surveillance by Communist officers convinced the family to leave as soon as an opportunity presented to them.

Once relocated in the U.S., Thi Bui's father Nam was the one resenting the most the loss of status, even though he did not come from the elite class. During his time in Vietnam, he worked hard to become a teacher to raise his status and more importantly escape the draft. In America, he was upset by the fact that his degree was not recognized and the only jobs available to him were full time and minimum wage ones. In contrast, Hang resolved to take the job offered, swallowing her pride to secure the family economic survival. Thus, he becomes the one staying at home with the children. Even though Nam would later attempt to improve his condition by trying "his hand at graphic design" while his wife was taking courses in mechanical drafting, he is often presented in the graphic novel as a depressed and emasculated[184] figure mopping around the house. Therefore, the

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[183] Unlike G.B. Tran's grandfather, Thi Bui's grandfather did not join the Communists out of noble ideals (not matched by reality), but out of opportunism.

[184] The emasculation of Asian men is a common trope in Asian American literature. The perception of Asian men as belonging to a "Third Sex" (Lee, 1999) is based on "Orientalist" (Said, 1978) stereotypes routed in

graphic novel shows how trauma does not affect people equally, as one can easily observe different levels of resilience and vulnerability.

Despite the promises of progress promoted by the American Dream, Nam is paralyzed and weakened by the resettlement to the U.S. As Sally McWilliams argued,

> The narrative illustrates how the racialized body of Nam and his depressive mental state are not a result of the refugee's individual failure to fit into the assigned role, but rather how they act as signifiers of modernity's own tenuousness that can hold itself in place only through the insistence on erasing that which constructs the racialized male refugee body and its inappropriateness for U.S. society, namely, the colonial and imperial violence that produces the dislocated subject (McWilliams, 2019:325)

Consequently, this representation of Thi Bui's father debunks the portrayal of Asians as the successful model minority[185]. As hitherto discussed, this myth aims to both reinforce the idea of America as the land of opportunity and cast those deemed unsuccessful as lacking will, skills or resources. The achievement of the Asian American community (which comprises nationalities very disparate in history and culture) are usually ascribed to a presumed common heritage and Confucian values. As Stephen Steinberg discussed,

> In demystifying and explaining Asian success, we come again to a simple truth: that what is inherited is not genes, and not culture, but class advantage and disadvantage. If not for the extraordinary selectivity of the Asian immigrant population, there would be no commentaries in the popular press and the social science literature extolling Confucian values and 'the pantheon of ancestors' who supposedly inspire the current generation of Asian youth. After all, no such claims are made about the Asian youth who inhabit the slums of Manila, Hong Kong, and Bombay or, for that matter, San Francisco and New York (Steinberg, 2001:275)

Therefore, the model minority myth aims to veil more pressing and controversial issues, such as racial discrimination and class oppression. The graphic novel shows how the American Dream is barred to Nam by both American racism and his Vietnam nightmares. Whereas school attempts to Americanize his children by making them "pledge alliance to the flag… one nation, under GOD, indivisible" (Bui, 2017:67), Nam is greeted as a "stupid GOOK". In one panel, Nam is walking with a young Thi Bui when a white man approaches him, utters a racial slur and spits on his face. Even though the kid is shocked

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the fact that at the end of the nineteenth century Asians in America were often employed in the home (as domestic workers) and/or were allowed to open small businesses often associated with 'women's work', e.g. laundries, restaurants, and tailor shops (Lee, 1999; Kim, 1982; Ty, 2010). The depiction of Asians as a docile, passive, accommodating, unemotional, and domestic figures is a form of "racist love" (Chin & Chan, 1972). According to Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan (1972:65) "Each racial stereotype comes in two models […] For Fu Manchu and the Yellow Peril, there is Charlie Chan and his Number One Son. The unacceptable model is unacceptable because he cannot be controlled by whites. The acceptable model is acceptable because he is tractable. There is racist hate and racist love.

[185] As previously discussed, this theme is also addressed by G.B. Tran's *Vietnamerica*.

by what happened, Nam does not comment the scene and silently wipes his face. It is worth noticing that even after the witnessing of (neo)colonial and Communist violence in Vietnam, the racial tensions in the U.S. have still the power to heighten Nam's vulnerability. In America, fear is transformed into shame. So, it becomes clear that the Americanization process was not just the product of volition. As the adult Thi Bui of the present remarked in the caption, "there were reasons to not want to be anything OTHER" (Bui, 2017:67). Assimilation is thus coercively promoted through the promises of agency, acceptance, and the possibility of being able to represent oneself. This need for self-representation is also reinforced by the fact that the only "real" photographs reproduced in the Graphic novel and picturing Thi Bui's family are those taken by an immigration office.

The memoir makes clear that Nam is not a quiescent immigrant, but a traumatized individual. Indeed, this portrait of a vulnerable man clearly contrast with the heroic image of the man who undertook a hazardous journey, guided a boat, and used stars as compass to secure a better life to his children. Nonetheless, in the United States, Nam becomes paranoid and fretful. His anxieties make him unable to take care of his children. They are unintentionally frightened by him, "Bố told us scary stories - not to entertain us, but educate us" (Bui, 2017:73). As Andrew Lam discussed in *Perfume Dreams,* Vietnamese parents narrated frightening tales to make their children ready for any eventuality,

> Back home they accepted that noble deeds are rarely rewarded with happily-ever afters, that broken love is the norm, and that those who do good can be and often are punished. These stories are concerned with their young listeners' spiritual growth, not with convincing them that they live in a benevolent universe. Considering how the country has been war-ridden for thousands of years and how disasters have a way of destroying hope, Vietnamese tales have evolved to prepare the next generation for cataclysm and grief (Lam, 2005:10).

The intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories also (re)produces and project fears on younger generations who did not witness the event or were too young to remember it. Remarkably, Nam does not only transmit his fears, but also his dreams. He "slept alone in his bed at night and practiced leaving his body" (Thi Bui, 2017:85). The corresponding splash page shows Nam as a young boy in the midst of the churning waters of the Pacific Ocean. Meanwhile, trying to be brave, Thi Bui attempts to face the demons inhabiting the house. As soon as she closed her eyes the demons disappeared, "If I could close my eyes, I could sleep. And if I could sleep, I could dream. Though my world was small, I would sometimes dream of being free in it" (Thi Bui, 2017:88-89). The panel

visualizes this wish of freedom through the image of a young Thi Bui floating above the interior architecture of the apartment, her small world. Even if father and daughter share extracorporeal dreams of escape, their fantasies points towards opposing point in space and time. Whereas Thi's dreams are projected towards the present and outside the physical space of her American house, Nam's dreams are projected towards the past and Vietnam. Nam's fears can be considered a form of PTSD. This is particularly noteworthy because this disease is rarely addressed in war comics, and when it appears it is generally attributed to the soldiers.

The anxiety transmitted by their parents has the effect of making the 1.5 and second generations alert about the dangers of the world. When an old neighbor couple involuntarily causes an explosion by letting a lit cigarette fall near their oxygen tank, the children know how to act. They are present-minded and act rationally securing their life and important documents. As Thi Bui states, "This - not any particular piece of Vietnamese culture - is my inheritance: the inexplicable need and extraordinary ability to RUN when the shit hits the fan. My refugee reflex" (Bui, 2017:305). A similar experience can be observed in Art Spiegelman *In The Shadow of No Towers* (2004); when the Twin Towers are destroyed during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Spiegelman assumes his Maus persona. While his senses are on alert, as he and his wife desperately try to find their daughter Nadja, who attended a school near the World Trade Center, Vladek's accounts about Auschwitz resurface on Art's mind, "I remember my father trying to describe what the smoke like… the closest he got was telling me it was … 'indescribable.' That's exactly what the air in Lower Manhattan smelled like after Sept. 11!" (Spiegelman, 2014). Nevertheless, these projections never turn into forms of appropriation. Both Art Spiegelman and Thi Bui feels a sense of guilt and inadequacy towards the weight of their parents' history. In *Maus*, during a visit to shrink, Art Spiegelman admits that, "no matter what I accomplish, it doesn't seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz" (Spiegelman, 2003 [1986-1992]:204). Similarly, when describing her family tree, Thi Bui comments, "We're such ASSHOLES! We're the lame second generation" (Bui, 2017: 29)

However, it is helpful to remark a fundamental difference between the two works. When Spiegelman confesses to his shrink (who happens to be a Holocaust survivor, like Vladek) his sense of guilt and inadequacy towards the representation of the Holocaust, he

reverts to a child-like state. The statures of Art Spiegelman and the psychiatrist are visibly asymmetrical. In contrast, in *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui is not the only one to revert to her child persona, but also her father Nam. Even though early in the comic Thi Bui states, "I am now older than my parents were when they made that incredible journey. But I feel around them I will be always a child … and they a symbol to me - two sides of a chasm, full of meaning and resentment" (Bui, 2017: 30), in a later panel she shows a younger self having a conversation with her father, portrayed as boy of the same age. By reverting both character to their child persona, Thi Bui attempts to establish a common ground through which they can engage in a symmetrical relationship and create a reciprocity of listening. She is aware that her anxieties as a child were just the projection of her father's fears, and to vanquish them, she has to understand what her father went through as child, "Afraid of my father craving safety and comfort. I had no idea that the terror I felt was only the long shadows of his own" (Bui, 2017:129). This symmetrical conversation allows the acknowledgment of two different types of traumas: the one suffered by the first generation and the one experienced by their children. When Nam saw Thi Bui's panels about her childhood with him he expresses regret and sorrow, "Mm. You know how it was for me. And why later I wouldn't be… normal" (Bui, 2017:130).

Hence, the title of the graphic novel (*The Best We Could*) might refer to the strains faced by both first and second generations. The first generation tried its best to escape war and grant their children better opportunities. The relocation to a new world destabilized them as they had to adapt to different cultural norms, "In Việt Nam, they would be considered very old in their seventies. In America, where people their age run marathons or at least live independently, my parents are stuck in limbo between two sets of expectations… and I feel **guilty**" (Bui, 2017: 33, original emphasis). Similarly, the second generation had to reconcile two worlds and different cultural expectations while dealing with the heritage of the war. As Thi Bui remarked in her graphic novel,

> Have our parents ever looked at us and felt slightly… disappointed? Such high hopes. So much possibility, to fall short. And though my parents took us far away from the site of their grief… certain shadows stretched far, casting a grey stillness over our childhood…hinting at the darkness we did not understand but could always FEEL." (Bui, 2017:58-59)

Whereas the memoir portrays second generations as achieving their parents' dreams of a better life, it also shows their struggles in taking care of their family, as Thi Bui would comment "proximity and closeness are not the same" (Bui,2017:31). Different cultural

expectations cause intergenerational conflicts. When Bích (Thi Bui's older sister) decided to leave the house and live with a boy before marriage, Nam disowned her and Hang attempted suicide by taking "a whole bottle of pills" (Bui, 2017:27). When Lan (the elder sister) did the same, Hang went through a period of denial. By the time it was Thi's turn, Hang was not enthusiastic, but she did not disown her daughter, and as the author commented, "For an immigrant kid, that's living the dream" (Bui, 2017:24). Nam's reactions to Lan and Thi's decision to abandon the house are probably absent because he and Hang separated when Thi Bui was nineteen.

Like G.B.'s *Vietnamerica,* Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* rejects a linear narrative to show the long-lasting impact of the war, explore the insidious nature of trauma, and prevent the cooptation of the Vietnamese diaspora into the (neo)liberal ideology of assimilation. Her memoir does not oppose the notions of "descent" and "consent" (Sollors, 1986); instead, it attempts to bridge her tribulations with those of her parents. As Thi Bui stated in an interview, [Writing this book] was a very sneaky way to spend quality time with my parents on my own terms […] It's a process to get your parents to understand who you are. And as you get older, and as you become a parent yourself, it's easier to understand their shortcomings as well" (Bui, 2018: web). Therefore, this graphic novel can be approached as an "empathetic exercise of seeing and apprehending" (McWilliams, 2019:318).

The comic does not only reconstruct an intimate family history, but it also connects personal stories to Vietnam's and the World's history. The lived experience of her parents is used to complement the information found on books and other archival material,

> that August, the U.S dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. I had never before researching the background of my father's stories, imagined that these horrible events were connected to my family history… or that they ushered in a brief but hopeful moment in Việt Nam's history. The fall of Japan left a power vacuum in Indochina (Bui, 2017:116).

In turn, historical sources allow her to enter her parents' account through imagination. When her father recalls the Southern Vietnamese police's abuses and their violent research methods, his story intersects with History through his encounter with General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, whose effigy is inscribed into public consciousness by Eddie Adam's photograph *Saigon Execution* (1968). In the depiction of this encounter, Thi Bui makes the General wear the same clothes of the photograph. Even though Nam resents the General's conduct during his patrolling of the city of Sài Gòn, "treating their own people

like criminals, no wonder people hated them!" (Bui, 2017:206), he later defends the decisions taken by the General during the Tet offensive and criticizes America's depiction of the event, "You know the American media broadcast that [Adams' photograph] all over the world and made South Việt Nam look bad - but no one talks about how that same Việt Cộng, just hours before, had murdered an entire family in their home!" (Bui, 2017:206). Thi Bui is confused by the contradiction in her father story as he alleges each side as being equally evil. Even though it is often difficult to position where Nam is ideologically standing, his reliability as an informant is never questioned. In contrast, the incongruities in his narrative are important precisely because they unflatten reality, showing how a 'good guys versus bad guys narrative' is unable to portray the complexity of war.

The popularity of Eddie Adams photograph is both confirmed and reinforced by the fact that it is often remediated by comics reconstructing the Vietnam War[186]. However, the very process of remediation of images that have become "iconic" (Leavy, 2007) within American (and world) culture becomes a way to problematize their construction and perception as *objective.* Comics is a tool that appropriates these pictures and their embedded narratives to subvert them by framing these shots into a broader (set of) image(s). The framing of iconic photos into a sequential graphic narrative opens new interpretative opportunities. As hitherto discussed, Thi Bui's comic uses this photograph to show the osmosis between personal and public images. The inclusion of this shot in the narrative adds an indexical reference to Nam's story, validating his role as witness.

Moreover, as in Doug Murray's *The 'Nam*[187] (1986-1993), Adams' photograph is here used to question the role of the photographer. As Layli Maria Miron discussed,

> She [Thi Bui] reproduces "Saigon Execution" in her typical gestural style, thus rendering it part of her own story and also revealing the mark of the author's hand—in contrast to the original film medium, which conceals any trace of the US photographer who shot the image […] Bui replicates the photo a second time, now zooming in on the face of the soldier who grimaces as blood, which she paints orange, explodes from his head. This close-up version erases the context even further, problematizing the way the limited information in the photo turned "popular opinion in America against the war." Beyond pointing out the soldier's crimes, Bui shows us what else is "absent from the photograph (Miron, 2020:57)

So, in both *The 'Nam* and *The Best We Could Do*, the framing of this shot inside a panel

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[186] As previously discussed, this photograph already appeared in Doug Murray's *The 'Nam* # 24 (1986), Zimmerman and Vansant's *The Vietnam War: A Graphic History* (2009) and it will be featured also in Marcelino Truong's memoirs. Each of these reiterations has adapted this photograph to foster its own agenda, exploiting what Barbie Zelizer (2010) defined as the subjunctive nature of photographs.

[187] This adaptation of Eddie Adams' photograph has been discussed in the second chapter.

aims to show that photographs have the great power of orienting (in fact manipulating) the viewer. As Susan Sontag clearly pointed out, "photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe" (Sontag, 2008[1977]: 3). Indeed, today more than in the past, we know too well that photographs do not depict the world as it is, but they construct it through the lenses (and epistemology) of the photographer. However, even if both comics address the manipulative nature of photographs, the claims they make could not be more different. Whereas *The 'Nam* indicts the role played by media in demoralizing the nation, casting doubts about U.S. military success in Vietnam, and questioning the morality of American interventions overseas, *The Best We Could Do* tries to highlight how reductive the version of history crystalized in that shot is. The photograph fixes a moment in Vietnam's long history of violence, which continued even after the U.S. withdrawal from the conflict. America violation of Vietnam is not unique, but part of a sequence of wars.

The social and historical context also helped framing that picture, giving it a meaning that was not conceived by the author, an interpretation Adams felt responsible for. In a Eulogy appeared on Time, the photographer wrote:

> The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them, but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths. What the photograph didn't say was, "What would you do if you were the general at that time and place on that hot day, and you caught the so-called bad guy after he blew away one, two or three American soldiers?" General Loan was what you would call a real warrior, admired by his troops. I'm not saying what he did was right, but you have to put yourself in his position. The photograph also doesn't say that the general devoted much of his time trying to get hospitals built in Vietnam for war casualties. This picture really messed up his life. He never blamed me. He told me if I hadn't taken the picture, someone else would have, but I've felt bad for him and his family for a long time. I had kept in contact with him; the last time we spoke was about six months ago, when he was very ill. I sent flowers when I heard that he had died and wrote, 'I'm sorry. There are tears in my eyes.' (Adams, 2001: web)

The comic deconstructs the reading usually associated with Adam's photograph by acknowledging the photographer sense of guilt and the destiny of the general. Thi Bui shows how the cooptation of the notion of 'victim' into a 'good versus evil narrative' has the effect of foreclosing the possibility of elaborating a description of the event that addresses the ambiguities of war. Thus, this historical research has the merit to attempt to recognize both the humanity and inhumanity of each side. The dialogical form of the story reminds the reader that reconciliation can only occur by letting each party the opportunity to reposition themselves inside the main narrative, so that a new one can emerge. As the graphic novel testifies, no unitarian narrative of the event has emerged yet. April 30, 1975

is remembered among the victors as the "Liberation Day" whereas diasporic Vietnamese communities remember it as "the day we lost our country" (Bui, 2017:211). The comic seems to advocate for a reconciliation be it with one's family or past. However, reconciliation is here linked to an act of historical rediscovery and questioning of the modes of representation.

## 5. Matt Huynh's Web Comics *The Boat* and *Ma*

In Thi Bui graphic novel past and present are connected and contrasted through water images. This natural element is used to represent the act of giving birth, as the viewer sees Thi Bui's baby swimming in the amniotic fluid, but also the fear of refugees who fled Vietnam by boat. During their escape, many Vietnamese (renamed 'boat people') suffered from diseases, thirst, and starvation, and they also had to face storms and elude pirates. Their conditions were extremely precarious as those boats were not designed to navigate open waters. Thus, water represents both the future and the past life one had to abandon to survive. The use of this element to represent Vietnamese subjectivity is not an innovation of the author, but it builds on an established trope. The affective use of this metaphor is encouraged by the fact that the Vietnamese word for water, *nước* (in its Romanized transliteration), also means homeland, country, and nation. As the Vietnamese scholar Huýnh Sanh Thong has poetically explained in his essay "Live by water, die for water," collected in one the first Vietnamese American anthologies, *Watermarks* (1998),

> The world for 'water' and the world for 'a homeland, a country, a nation' are spelled the same way in the romanized script and are pronounced the same way: *nước* […] Water, as the most precious resource of the homeland for growing crops (in particular, rice) has come to stand for the homeland itself […] The nation's fateful course, marked by ups and downs, is figuratively rendered as a 'tide of water' (vận nước) with its ebb and flow. The highest virtue demanded of a Vietnamese is that he or she 'love the nước' (yêu nước). The worst opprobrium that can attach to any individual is that he or she has 'sold out the nước' (bán nước). To say in English that a man has "lost his country" is not the same as to say in Vietnamese that he has 'lost the nước' (mất nước). If the English phrase sounds almost abstract, the Vietnamese expression evokes an ordeal by thirst, the despair of fish out of water. (Huỳnh, 1998: vi–vii)

Therefore, eloquently, the removal from water is associated with the dislocation from one's home country, but also from the very source of life. As Patricia Nguyễn (2017:100) discussed, "Water is central in the oral histories of Vietnamese boat people because of its historical and cultural meanings, and because it defines those material conditions faced at sea, including typhoons, drowning, pirates, and tidal waves." The ability of water to transport the refugees across the ocean is matched by its power to capsize a boat. Whereas

water is life, an excess of this element means death. Many of the Vietnamese who tried to migrate by boat drowned or died of dehydration (the salt of the sea makes water undrinkable). The water metaphor also allows the author to resist a chronological description of the events. Indeed, this narration seem to mimic the movement of sea swash, that is a turbulent layer of water that washes up on the beach after an incoming wave has broken. Swash generally involves of two phases: uprush (onshore flow) and backwash (offshore flow). Similarly, the narration skillfully oscillates between past and present, demonstrating the importance of the former in the configuration of (contemporary) Vietnamese American identity. Even though water has a symbolic and ambivalent value in many traditions, representing both life and death, in Vietnamese diasporic culture, it came to represent both the connection and separation from one's country. In Vietnamese, the term water is a homonym of the word for homeland, but it is also representative of the refugees' journey, as they were named 'boat people'. Hence, it exemplifies the centripetal and centrifugal forces that characterizes diasporic experience.

Given the cultural importance of this natural element in Vietnamese culture, water images become a common trope in diasporic Vietnamese graphic narratives. This is particularly true in the web comics created by Matt Huynh, a Vietnamese Australian artist based in New York City. His graphic novel *Ma* (2013) is prefaced with a page describing the meaning of the word "Ma" in four different languages: English, Japanese, Sanskrit, and Vietnamese. In English, Ma is an informal world for "mother." *Ma* tells the story of a young married couple forced to flee their homeland because of the escalation of the Vietnam War. In Palau Bidong's (Malaysia) refugee camps, they learn to raise two boys and await news from home and of their uncertain future. In the story the young mother takes care of the children alone while her husband is at the hospital. In Japanese the word Ma means "interval". This in-between space represents both the young couple's moving from childhood to adulthood, as they progressively learn how to raise their children, and the camps a point of transit. They are stuck on an island waiting to be relocated. In Sanskrit, Ma means "Water". As hitherto discussed, this element is highly evocative. It might refer to Vietnam, the struggles and the dangers the family had to face, and the ocean separating the camps from past and future homes. As Matt Huynh discussed in an interview about his novel,

'Water' was the means by which my parents as boat people were carried to Bidong Island, and it's

quite literally what encompasses and traps them. It is physically the body between their past and future lives, from moving on or back. As it appears in a rare cola bottle, it's celebrated. As it appears in a makeshift shower, it's negotiated, immersed in and battering their bodies. As it settles under sunset, it is surrendered to (Leong, 2013: web).

Finally, Ma in Vietnamese means "ghost". Thus, memory is here presented as haunting presence.

The graphic novel portrays the intimate moments of this interminable wait. Vietnamese families are stuck on an island waiting for the permissions to migrate to Australia. The ocean meeting with the horizon is a constant background setting. The monotony of the scene gives the reader a sense of stillness. The lines that give life to the characters are often in a visual continuity with the ocean. The prominence of water is also reinforced by the artistic style used by Huynh. He mixes calligraphic Eastern sumi-e ink (the East Asian art of monochromatic ink painting[188]) and popular Western comic books tradition. Indeed, commenting his work Huynh stated, "My comics are capital 'R' Romantic in its humility before nature, in both its direct medium (pulp, mineral, water for paper and ink) an effort towards a transcendent sense of nature of both a fatalistic and environmental awareness" (Leong, 2013: web).

Like *Ma*, Matt Huynh's adaptation (2015) of Le Nam's short story "The Boat" (2008) is visually dominated by the water element. Remarkably, the use of (verbal and visual) intertextuality and adaptation show how "post-war Vietnamese youth who draw on the memories of their family to create artwork (and thus new imaginings of war) do not rely on specific memories or cultural myths but on an aesthetic germane to the postmemory generation itself" (Bui, 2016:124).

"The Boat" is the final entry of Le Nam's homonymous collection of short stories. The subject of these collected stories is very diverse. The first one deals with a second-generation Vietnamese facing a writer block and interrogating himself about questions of cultural authenticity, authorial ownership and voice appropriation, representation of trauma, and the selling out of the earlier generation's experience. The other stories feature a Columbian drug cartel, an aging New York painter, a Hiroshima survivor, an American being caught up in revolutionary protests in Tehran, white Australians fearing Asians bringing in their capital and buying/saving local activities. The last story narrates the story

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[188] Ink painting varies the ink density to modulate tonality and shading. These variations are achieved through differential grinding of the ink stick in water and by varying the ink load and pressure within a single brushstroke.

of a Mai a Vietnamese who is trying to flee from 'home.' Mai is on a boat and has not arrived yet in a 'host' nation. The common thread of this stories is their global network, each story exceeds the local environment of its setting. In "The Boat" case, the transnational dimension is created by the travel from the home country to the host nation. However, even though not explicated, other international circumstance set Vietnamese emigration into motion: French colonialism, Chinese, Japanese, and American imperialism. The convergence of these historical events created the conditions for the emergence of cosmopolitan individuals, however, in this case, cosmopolitanism does not originate from a deliberate act of choice, but survival tactics and desperation. Therefore, Vietnamese refugees can be considered as embodiment of what Peter Nyers (2003) defined as "abject cosmopolitanism."

Matt Huynh's adaptation of Le Nam's "The Boat" is part of a project launched in recognition of the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon and 40 years of Vietnamese resettlement in Australia (figure 26). It exploits the opportunities offered by the internet to transfer the immigrant experience from a postmemory transmission to a prosthetic one as the viewer is engaged in an immersive experience thanks to web comics' enhanced multimodality. Even though, comics is already a multimodal medium as it uses words and pictures to convey meaning, the digital format allows the incorporation of other modes, complexifying the understanding of the composition and requiring multiple literacies. Then, web comics break away from certain convention of the traditional comic book (as a material object bound to paper) and explore the opportunities offered by a digital device screen, displaying multiple contents simultaneously. The web allows the reader to view, share, and interact with the content. It uses loop animation and movement synchronized with the reader's navigation to create a complex (if not disorienting) experience.

Multimodality requires the reader's senses to be alert. During the portrayal of the storm, panels move, confusing the reader and allowing him/her to imaginatively experience the disorientation felt by the people on the boat. The viewer does not just imagine the wind screaming or people clawing as the audio immerse him or her into that experience. Therefore, the audio and the animation make the reader/observer share the same position of the characters of the story. Yet, it is necessary to remark that this animation never takes over the storytelling. Panels, gutters and 'their filling the gap' nature are still intact. As Ezra Claytan Daniels' "Digital Comics Manifesto" pointed out

A comic created and/or consumed on a digital device has the potential to venture far beyond what is typically considered a comic today, so it becomes important, if the intent is to create something that identifies as a COMIC, for the work to maintain certain qualities. What sets comics apart from prose is the visual element. What sets comics apart from cinema is the reader's control over elements of TIME. In comics, an intellectual contribution is required from the reader to translate the passage of time within and between panels, and to imagine the movements and sounds of the world, both being representative of time. It almost always feels jarring when a comic incorporates passive video, voice-acting, or literal sound effects, even within the superficial confines of a comic style panel. This is because temporal control, which the reader previously wielded to navigate the work at their own pace and fill in the details of the world, is suddenly yanked away. The collaboration is unbalanced, and the work becomes something different than comics (Daniels, 2015: web).

Hence, the digital support is used to implement the narrative without altering the functioning of the gutters, which make comics a participatory medium. In contrast, Viet Thanh Nguyen and Matt Huynh's *The Ark* (2018) is an animation (a hot medium) since the audience has no control over the narrative, images flow following the narrative time imposed by Nguyen's voice over. Even though *The Ark* and *The Boat* exploits the potentiality of the web to narrate the hope and despair of refugees fleeing their home country, these works belong to two different genres.

Images are a vital component of these narrative project thanks to their ability to generate a basic level of automatic empathetic responses. As David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese (2007) argued,

Underlying such responses is the process of embodied simulation that enables the direct experiential understanding of the intentional and emotional contents of images. This basic level of reaction to images becomes essential to any understanding of their effectiveness as art. Historical and cultural or contextual factors do not contradict the importance of considering the neural processes that arise in the empathetic understanding of visual works of art (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007: 202).

Therefore, images (even those that contain no overt emotional component) can trigger a sense of bodily resonance and the beholders might find themselves automatically simulating the emotional expression, the movement or even the implied movement within the representation thanks to mirror and canonical neurons. This bodily resonance is also implemented by the style used by the author as the gesture that created the picture is quite visible.

Matt Huynh's adaptation is an interactive graphic novel combining brushwork, animation, text, sound, and archival material (documentary footage). Like the source material, it tells the story of 16-year-old Mai, who fled Vietnam alone on a boat after the Fall of Saigon. Her parents decided to send her abroad to secure a better future. Her mother remained in Vietnam to look after her husband who just return from the re-education camps. He came back home, but he was now blind and probably deaf. The

couple sent Mai to her Uncle, who helped her to be shipped on an overcrowded boat. The travel by sea is physically and mentally exhausting. She starts getting affectionate to a young child who reminds her of her father. However, during the travel, the boy gets sick and dies. Mai helps the boy's mother to throw the corpse into the sea as far as possible so that no one would perceive the presence of the boat. The comics ends with a documentary footage that provides the story an historical background; in turn these immigrants are no longer conceived as sheer numbers, but people. Their exodus is a human tragedy. Even though the narrative is fictionalized, the archival images remind the viewer that those events really occurred and mirror the experience of many Vietnamese people who migrated to Australia (and other continents).

Accordingly, Matt Huynh's web comics might be considered a form of visual activism. As Nicholas Mirzoeff argued,

> At the heart of imagination is the image. Visual culture has to respond day to day in its effort to understand change in a world too enormous to see but vital to imagine. At one level, it serves as a form of academic "first responder" connecting present-day situations to longer histories. It seeks to understand the total visual noise all around us every day as the new everyday condition. And it learns how to learn about how the visual imagination, visual thought, and visualizing combine to make worlds that we live in and seek to change (Mirzoeff, 2015:285).

This ambitious project has an historical antecedent in Julian Bond and T.G. Lewis's *Vietnam*. Indeed, as previously discussed, this graphic narrative was envisioned as a means to promote dissent towards a cause deemed unjust. However, it is important to remark a crucial difference in these two works. Whereas, Bond and Lewis's comic is mainly concerned about internal U.S. politics, Huynh addresses the international management of refugees, raising awareness about stateless human beings. Indeed, by being suspended between nations on a boat at sea, these displaced and stateless individuals challenge the idea of nation, as its borders are no longer firm and defined. Indeed, refugee stories extend beyond the narratives of national geopolitics. The (post) memories of refugee families are profoundly shaped by their home countries, host countries, but also the centers and camps through which they have been processed.

So, these comics engage in a global advocacy for refugees and other oppressed people. They adopt cliché images and well-known *topoi* (the boat, the travel, the sea, etc.) to address the universality of the phenomenon and its endurance through time. The experience of his parents resonates with the life of contemporary immigrants fleeing troubles in countries like Afghanistan, Iran and Sri Lanka. Thus, the (web) comics use

empathic responses to create a sense of urgency for social change. In an interview Huynh explained,

> These stories were obviously something I long carried, but the very recent demonization of asylum seekers and boat people in Australian politics and media ignited an urgent need to tell the story today with a hope that simple, direct connection to an asylum seeker was a warm voice and worthy reminder to have in today's debates. I am part of a generation with the nebulous benefit of an acute personal awareness of our parents' recent history, who are now of an age and ability to speak to immediate developments in refugee policy for the welfare of the next (Leong, 2013: web).

*Ma* and *The Boat* never address the role of the hosting country but focus on the refugees' incertitude about their future and the long wait before their relocation. By erasing the role of the rescuer, these comics put the refuge experience at the center, avoiding their representation as mere passive recipients of western generosity. Even though western nations depict themselves as places of refuge, we all sadly know that refugees are too often the targets of racial profiling, surveillance, and detention. Hence, a narrative focused on the immigrant journey and the difficulties faced by these people aims to rehumanize immigrants and raise question about their rights as human beings since they have no longer a state that protects them. As Giorgio Agamben (1995:116) discussed,

> In the nation-state system, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterize them as rights of the citizens of a state. This is implicit, if one thinks about it, in the ambiguity of the very title of the Declaration of 1789, *Declaration des droits de l' homme e du citoyen*, in which it is unclear whether the two terms name two realities, or whether instead they form a hendiadys, in which the second term is, in reality, already contained in the first.

Therefore, according to Agamben, the guiding concept to solve this juridical problem would no longer be the *ius* of the citizen, but rather the *refugium* of the individual.

In both Huynh's web comics, the past is reevoked to teach a lesson in the present. In this regard, it is worth reminding that on September 27, 2013, the same year that *Ma* (2013) was published, a boat full of asylum seekers capsized and sank near the coast of Java, Indonesia while trying to reach Australia. A fierce debate on how to stop migration followed. Similarly, when Le Nam's story "The Boat" was published, millions of Syrians had been made homeless by their country's civil war. In 2008, the image of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, whose body washed ashore on a Turkish beach, quickly went viral, prompting international responses. "The Boat" uses a similar rhetoric. It focuses on the personal story of (fictive) refugee to raise awareness about the condition of all refugees. Indeed, whereas sheer numbers (even if horrific) usually generate apathy, the identifiability of the victim triggers an emotional response. Likewise, when Huynh's

adaptation of the boat came out, the European Union saw an increasing number of Syrian people seeking refuge. This crisis revealed the inconsistent reception and uneven distribution of asylum seekers among European nations. Therefore, these three narratives share a clear political stance, making the suffering of the refugee visible and act on the present. Indeed, private memories are used to create empathy towards the sufferings of others (*allyship*). Consequently, according to this rhetoric, the refugee becomes a test of our capacities to extend universal human compassion and solidarity beyond the limits of the nation, accepting that asylum rights must be granted to people who no longer belong to a nation state, because outside of civic laws only natural laws (the survival of the fittest) can exist. Hence, the formation of a (legal) global citizenship becomes even a more an urgent necessity.

## 6. Interrogating Images of the Past: Historiographic Metafiction in Marcelino Truong's Work

Marcelino Truong's graphic narratives *Une si jolie petite guerre* (2012) and *Give Peace a Chance. Londres 1963-75* (2015) challenge the way the Vietnam War is remembered within Western countries (especially by the anti-war movement) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, as they are both prone to neglect Southern Vietnamese suffering (Nguyen, 2016). This war is either remembered as a fight against capitalist and imperialist forces, or as a battle for freedom. Instead, Truong's memoirs problematize the images through which the official narration of the Vietnam War (as a two-sided conflict) has been constructed. Indeed, Truong's graphic memoirs reconstruct a family story to produce a counter-memory of the war. As Lipsitz argued,

> Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story. (Lipsitz, 1990:213)

Therefore, Truong's recollection aims to reframe and refocus dominant narratives. Thus, the personal becomes political. Nation states can influence the way we remember events through the production of cultural artifacts. Indeed, both (North) Vietnamese and the Americans are capable to promote actively their memory projects, even though with different means, intentions, perspectives, and worldwide diffusion. Official narratives are often reconstructed through the reiteration of key images and events, which inevitably

conceal individual memories and experiences. Therefore, Truong graphic novels are memory projects acting against the reduction of the event to a series of visual and verbal clichés. Comics as a medium allows the reader to be introduced to experiences, points of view that are not replayed by other media. The hybrid nature of the medium allows the co-presence of different narratives, combing private and public memories on the same page. The reader can observe private and intimate moments and the effects of History on domestic dynamics. Indeed, Truong's graphic narratives are attempts to find a reason for events that made no sense to a six-year-old boy (himself) growing up in the 1960s. This effort is evident thanks to the presence of (at least) two narrative times: whereas the panels portray the narrator's experience as a witness through a linear narrative, the captions often contain retrospective comments about the events showed.

As in the graphic narratives hitherto described, the familiar dimension of the narration encourages the emergence of a polyphony of perspectives and understandings about the war. In G.B. Tran's and Thi Bui's graphic narratives gender, social class, political ideologies, and the variables created by their intersections are responsible for the proliferation of different points of view. In Marcelino Truong's graphic narratives, age, ethnicity, and one's location in time and space also play a crucial role in shaping the understanding of the conflict by adding new layers of meaning. At the beginning of the narration, Marco (the authors' persona as a kid) is a six-year-old boy with a limited comprehension of the conflict. He lives in Washington D.C. with his family, while his father (Truong Buu Khánh) works for the Vietnamese ambassy, promoting Vietnam's culture and overseeing Vietnamese students studying in the U.S. This lack of knowledge about war should not be attributed solely to his American upbringing, but also his young age. When the family returns to Vietnam in 1961, Marco is still unable to fully grasp the meaning (and range) of the events he is witnessing. As discussed by Charles Hatfield (2005:111-114), autobiographical comics authenticate themselves through self-doubt and self-deprecation, as the author establishes its honesty by making its flaws evident. Hence, to supplement the narrative, the BD must recur to other sources. Thus, intertextuality is used to create an historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon,1988) that is a narrative that interrogates both history and fiction as human constructs.

The cultural transmission of memory often relies on objects that function as "points of memory", that are "points of intersection between past and present, memory and

postmemory, personal remembrance and cultural recall" (Hirsch 2012:61). These graphic narratives show how the nature of memory is narrative and not merely archival, as objects of the past must be 'reactivated' to be able to tell something in the present. Therefore, their inclusion signals the presence of an historiographic research, making evident the process of construction of the story. The narrative of the Vietnam War embedded into iconic photos, postcards, drawing, propaganda posters is here contested or reinforced through the framing of these images into a sequential narrative. This framing also makes the subjective nature of memory visible, since comics do not hide their mediated and manipulative nature (Chute, 2016): the observer's experience is limited by what is shown and the author's hand is physically present in the narration.

The questioning of images belonging to the archive makes Truong's recollection also an historiographical research. Yet it is necessary to specify that this exploration of the past does not attempt to build an analytical and factual narration, but it dialogically engages with conflicting narratives. Indeed, there is no single authoritative History offered, instead several visual and verbal histories are presented and put into question. As Mickwitz (2016:26) argued, "the subjective qualities of drawing, and the overt display of their principle of construction, work as a rebuttal and caveat that to some degree preempt essentialist notions of both truth and transparency". Therefore, the representation of events in comics is explicitly portrayed as the result of negotiation, partial perspective, and subjectivity. These graphic memoirs attempt to understand (in the present) past experiences and their relations to History. This process is complicated by the combination and interrelation of the private and the public. Indeed, Truong's memories are inevitably mediated by other external sources, as he belongs to the 1.5 generation. Hence, he must collect information from family members and historical accounts. This research activity is often explicated as the reader partakes the author's conversations with his father, sees his mother's letters, his childhood drawing, and the book and newspapers consulted by the author. In *Une si jolie petite guerre* (2012) Truong reproduces the personal letters that his mother used to send to her relatives in France to reconstruct the events of his infancy. The inclusion of letters into the panels reminds the reader of the visual nature of writing. Even though text and images are often seen as antithetic entities, this solution shows points of contacts between these two narratives modes. In the second BD, personal memories are mixed with his father's ones, letters from his siblings and friends, historical

books, and media coverage of the events.

*Une si jolie petite guerre* also recirculates children's drawings of the war. Yet, the difference in age between Marco and his brother Dominique produces two different depictions of the conflict. Marco's understanding of war is limited to a concrete description of an Aircraft carrier. In contrast, Dominique, the older brother, in addition to his material rendering of war through the depiction of missiles, makes his mother write a comment on the war for him, "Are you cacahuette?" [are you nuts?]. As Walker et al. (2003) observed, eight-years-old children are already capable of understanding the consequences of war and they are more likely than younger children to associate negative emotions with war.

The use of these drawings raises also questions about the capacity of this medium to record and recall traumatic events. Their reproduction and their recirculation within a graphic narrative allows these images to become archival material, thus acquiring testimony function. In this case, drawings functions as substitutes of photographs. They document what the camera did not or could not see. This is particularly significant if we consider the fact that the Vietnam War was the first conflict to be fully televised, earning the name "living-room war" (Hallin, 1986). Therefore, the use of drawing to recollect the event is a way to enter a private dimension of History. The use of drawing serves to add anecdotes and commentary to the main narrative of the event, but also show an accumulation of information. Text can be added to images to complexify the narration and create a more intimate experience than photographic captions. The hand of the author literally creates what the reader can sees as there is no "off-camera" reality outside the panel (Peeters, 2003 [1998]). Personal accounts are used to refute any claim to universal truth, but this does not imply that no truth exists. The use of these childhood drawings raises questions about the retrospective appropriation of the past. Indeed, those images acquire new meaning in the present and through their framing in a new context. Sequentiality inevitably complicates the narrative as new meanings are added through inferences. The adaptation of this drawing highlight the mechanism of mediation that constitute this narrative mode as the viewer secondary witnessing is influenced by the primary witness' understanding of the conflict. While this firsthand witnessing creates a sense of shared experience with the reader, it also points out the limits of this historical recall.

In Truong's graphic narratives, the historical recall of the events is not only hindered by Marco's limited knowledge as a kid, but also the public and political use of history. Both BDs show how different groups appropriated the meaning of the events to foster their own agendas. Indeed, in the second volume, Marco is a young adult fully capable of understanding the conflict and questioning the narratives produced by media. The appropriation and attribution of different meanings to the conflict in Vietnam is visible from the beginning of the first graphic narrative. Indeed, the BD pictures a formal gathering organized by the ambassy where Truong Buu Khánh attempts to explain Americans the geopolitical situation of Vietnam, stating "France colonized us, but we emancipated ourselves" (Truong, 2012:19). Using juxtapositions, the graphic narrative shows how Americans appropriated that conflict. The mirroring panel on the previous page featured a cropped (and summarized) version of John Fitzgerald Kennedy's inaugural address in which he announced that "We shall, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty" (Truong, 2012:18). Thus, through this simple combination of images *Une si jolie petite guerre* (2012) illustrates the presence of different interpretations of the war. Whereas Khánh saw the conflict as a fight for the self-determination of his country, American interpreted the war in Vietnam as an extension of the Cold War. Frictions in U.S. and USSR diplomatic relations already surfaced in Berlin and Cuba; however, it would be in Vietnam where these superpowers would test the limits of their power and the extension of their global influence.

In this scene, private and public memories share the same space in the graphic narrative showing an interconnectedness. However, the graphic narrative's use of color symbolizes their separation into different planes; whereas the private sphere of the characters is represented on a red background, public history and political speeches are set on blue one. Even though Khánh's diplomatic activities depends on the decisions taken in Washington D.C. and Saigon, he has no ability to shape or influence them. Then, the differential use of color represents an asymmetry in power relations. This differential use of color becomes more prominent in the second volume, *Give Peace a Chance. Londres 1963-75* (2015). Whereas this book uses full color for all the European scenes, the Vietnam sections are in a sort of sepia tone, mimicking the palette of many iconic Vietnam War photographs. In both cases color distinguishes the factual historical reconstruction of events from direct testimonies. Yet, the firsthand witness does not seek to supplant

historical research, but supplement and challenge it, by introducing new perspectives and details. As Marcelino Truong discussed in an interview with Hilli Levin (2017: web) "Although I greatly enjoy reading the works of journalists and academics, being an academic myself through my training, I must say that firsthand witnesses have a blunt way of putting things that provide many shortcuts to understanding history." Therefore, Marcelino Truong's narrative adopts the "grain-by-grain" approach theorized by Toni Morrison (1975). Marginal and personal experiences are used to interrogate and validate History, which is no longer constructed as monolithic, but dialogic.

In the first chapter of the graphic narrative, Truong family seems untouched by the conflict. They live the American Dream, here represented by toys, jingles, and other pop cultural artifacts. Remarkably, the presence of these trivial objects does not only aim to represent a nostalgic and idyllic moment preceding the horror of war that Truong's family would witness, but it also infers that the 'American way' is dependent on the U.S. belligerent power. In the first chapter of *Une petite si jolie guerre*, images of war are only forecasted in Marco's and his brother's role-playing games with their American neighbors. At first glance, these war games might seem innocent, however they show how American pop culture has been used to remediate the current conflict through schemata used to interpret previous wars. Symbolically, the American kids ask Marco and Dominique to pretend to be Indians and Koreans fighting American G.I.s. Similarly, in a previous dialogue, the American kids confuse Marco and his brother as Japanese and Mexican, respectively. These exchanges illustrate how war is always ethnocentric. Marco and Dominique become for the first time self-conscious about their otherness as the neighbors play war games against the so-called "Commies" and "Gooks". These derogative terms illustrate the underlying racism in American society, which is unable to distinguish friends from foes, Southern Vietnamese from Northern Vietnamese, Communists from Catholics. This passage also highlights the endurance of the Frontier myth as a justification of U.S. military interventions. The Frontier myth is not evoked only by the text, but also images: one of the kids wears a Coonskin cap, a hat associated with American frontiersmen and popularized in the 1950s by Disney's *Davy Crockett* (1955).

In contrast, Marco and Dominique fantasized about war in terms of gallant fights by wearing capes, gladiators' helmets, and other paraphernalia. These images do not only

show how war narratives are culturally determined, but it also foreshadows how these tropes (chivalry combats and the Frontier myth[189]) are inadequate to portray the real conflict occurring in Vietnam. In 1961 Truong's family is called back to Saigon, where Khánh becomes President Ngo Dinh Diêm's personal interpreter. In Saigon, Marco witnesses real war, even though indirectly; what he experiences there is completely different from the fights he enacted during the roleplays with his brother. In "How to Tell a True War Story," Tim O'Brien (1990: 77) argues,

> War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat […] You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference - a powerful, implacable beauty- and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly.

However, in Marcelino Truong's graphic narrative real war is never depicted as alluring. His narration deals with a different reality of war which involve having to abandon one's home, job, country, and not knowing what happened to people you cherished, because you had to leave them behind. Airplanes are depicted in the narrative, but the camera angle adopted is not aerial. It does not focus on the destructive power of the war machine. In contrast, a ground level angle is used to show the fear felt by civilians who tried to find a refuge wherever they could, even under a table. Indeed, in a panel, the world is framed and reduced to the claustrophobic space under a dining-room table, where the author's mother, panic-stricken by the noises of the war raging outside their apartment, swears in front of her children. Fighter planes are shooting outside their windows. On that day, members of the Southern Vietnamese Army attempted a *coup d'état* against Diêm. Yet, the kids seem unaware of the danger. The only thing they remark as unusual is their mother's use of curse words, "Hi Hi! Maman a dit merde" [Hahahaha! Mum said 'shit'] (Truong 2012:103). The triviality of these observations testifies the innocence of the children, but it also attempts to play down the dramatic impact of the scene. Indeed, the BD does not seek to provoke the emotional (nor sentimental) response of the reader to the horrors of war, but an analytical and inquisitive attitude. Truong resists the portrayal

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[189] As previously discussed, the use of the Frontier myth as a template for Vietnam narratives is a common trope in American literature, movies, and comics. However, in this case it is worth pointing out that this myth is recirculated in a French BD, showing the power of America's memory industry and the dissemination of the Frontier myth in Europe.

of war as a spectacle to be consumed by the audience. He does not portray gory explosions or shootings. In contrast, he mainly focuses on small and marginal details that shows how war impacted the daily life of Vietnamese citizens. War is sometimes described in metaphorical (and often humorous) ways. For example, in a panel Marco and Dominique channel a violent world through fights to the death between captured cockroaches and crickets and they rename two goldfishes fishes fighting in a bowl "Kennedy" and "Khrouchtchev" [Khrushchev, in the English transliteration]. Moreover, building upon worn-out clichés, Marco and Dominique construct war as male activity; their sister Mireille prefers to play with her hula-hoop and is often shocked by her brothers' fascination with war. However, the BD shows that, in Vietnam, women also played a pivotal role in combats, fighting on both sides.

There are only a few gruesome images of the Vietnam War, depicting civilians being killed by both sides. These images do not seek to glorify war, but they show Truong's family relative privilege. Khánh's job as a translator for the government granted his family the possibility to be relatively shielded from the horrors of war. Even though war was raging outside their home, Troung's family (like many other members of the élite) was still able to enjoy some mundane moments of conviviality. The war deepened the class divide existing in Vietnamese society. Similarly, the comic shows the difference between poor rural areas and the westernized Saigon, where international schools, sword-and-sandal (or peplum) movies (e.g. *Ben-Hur*) and French songs (like Dalida's) saturated the environment. This split also explains why peasants were more prone to further the Communist cause. However, the BD points out that people living in rural areas always had the short end of the stick, being threatened equally by both Communists and Saigon's regime. *Une si jolie petite guerre* reveals the atrocities committed by Communists, but it also questions the southern government's decision to use napalm against the enemy. Like the other comics hitherto discussed, Truong's BDs also discuss how members of the same family were often fighting on opposite sides, remarking that, despite U.S. intervention, the Vietnam War was also (if not mainly) a civil war that torn a country and families apart. This theme is also reiterated through a quote from Pierre Corneille's *Horace* (actus primus, scena III), "Nous ne sommes qu'un sang et qu'un peuple en deux villes…Pourquoi nous déchirer par des guerres civiles" [we are but one blood, and one people in two towns… why should we tear ourselves by civil wars] (Truong, 2015 :160)

As the conflict between North and South intensified, so did the instability within Marco's family; the war also put to test the psyche of Yvette (Marco's mother), worsening her bipolar disorder depression. Even though this disease is believed to have genetics origins, periods of high stress and traumatic events can increase the risk of developing this mental disorder. During her stay in Vietnam, Yvette was worried about what might have happened to her (*métis* [mixed race child]) children if the Communist had won. Yvette was French and represented the colonial past that the Communists tried to eradicate. In the narrative, Yvette's family history is entrenched with French colonial past. Her brother-in-law was a lieutenant in Algeria. This reference reminds the reader that the Vietnam war (also known as the Second Indochina War) has its roots in the decolonization of Indochina. Similarly, multilingual dialogues (characters often codeswitch their language, using French, English, and Vietnamese) emphasize how this war was not simply a conflict between America and Vietnam, but part of a global (hi)story. Language is vital because it shapes what we know and how we know. Accordingly, a multilingual narrative attempts to keep open a wide range of interpretations and points of views about the conflict. Even though these narratives have not the same value, each of them must be taken into consideration and questioned to reconstruct the past. Even though Khánh has a granitic faith in South Vietnam's righteousness, he invites his son to form his own opinion on the topic by reading many different sources.

At the end of the first graphic novel, the worsening of Yvette's mental conditions convinced her husband that it was better for their family to leave Vietnam. While Khánh started his new job as a translator in the U.K., the Americans secretly helped the military overthrow Diêm. After the portrait of their departure, the BDs briefly summarizes the main events that followed: the Buddhists protests, Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency, Nixon's Vietnamization of the conflict, the fall of Saigon, and the corruption of the new Socialist regime. Even though Khánh acknowledges the mistakes made by the Southern Vietnamese government, he revendicates their right to oppose Communism as an ideology. He resents U.S. intervention and argues that even if the South would have lost anyway, it was their fight. The U.S. intervention only prolonged the conflict and caused a huge number of casualties. Throughout the BD, Marcelino nuances each side, not hiding controversial aspects of the war. Even though Khánh concedes that the use of Agent Orange was wrong, he remains a patriot until the end. The United States

are condemned for their use of an excessive amount of military power; yet the BD acknowledges that Americans recurred to an unproportioned use of war technology to spare their troops. The National Liberation Front soldiers are shown as fierce enemies with a cause, "sanctified martyrdom". At the same time, the BD rejects the depiction of Southern Vietnamese as the puppets of U.S. imperialism. It also discusses that the Communists were not the only representative of the Vietnamese people, as there were a lot of different political factions who got silenced.

The second volume *Give Peace a Chance. Londres 1963-1975* expands on these issues providing more context. It starts with Khánh's decision to quit his job in the ambassy and show his increasing disillusionment about the future of Vietnam, "Moi qui rêvais d'une vraie démocratie pour le Vietnam avec une majorité, une opposition, des élections… Au lieu de ça, nous avons au Sud un régime militaire et au Nord une dictature stalinienne… Yvette ne supportera pas un retour au Vietnam en guerre…" [I who dreamt of a true democracy for Vietnam with a majority, an opposition, and elections… instead, we have a military regime in the South and a Stalinist dictatorship in the North… Yvette will not stand a return to a Vietnam at war] (Truong, 2015:44). Even though Truong's family left Vietnam, news about the conflict kept haunting them. This interconnection of experiences is also evident even in the cover. It shows the four Truong kids crossing a London street in 1972, with a napalm explosion in the background. Napalm was never dropped on London, yet this image testifies how what was happening in Vietnam shaped European culture in those years, inspiring the counterculture. In *Give Peace a Chance. Londres 1963-1975,* the title of every chapter quotes a song from the Vietnam era. The BD's title "*Give Peace a Chance"* is also a reference to a well-known antiwar hit by John Lennon. Similarly, the BD cover alludes to The Beatles' *Abbey Road*. It is noteworthy to remark that the editors of the English version of this BD decided to change the title. As Marcelino Truong confessed in an interview with Paul Semel (2017: web),

> My publishers at Arsenal Pulp Press in Vancouver warned me that there was a risk that The Beatles' record company would pounce on us for using the title of such a well-known antiwar hit by John Lennon, and being a disciplined kind of guy, I immediately understood their request. I also liked the idea of having a new title for the English language version. My editor is the one who came up with the fine idea of Saigon Calling. A great idea, which I welcomed at once, having really racked my brains in search of an alternate title. Saigon Calling really conveys the sense of an S.O.S. signal sent by us non-Communist Vietnamese to the Western world. A message of distress; a call for help, which was not heard.

In *Give Peace a Chance,* there is a tension between the author's biographical proximity

to the Vietnam War, and his being geographically half a world away. The memoir is split into two main narratives, that is Marco's actual autobiographical experience and the historical montage used to explains the context of the author's life. These two threads are intertwined, Marco feels the urge to know what is happening in Vietnam to understand who he is even though he and his family relocated in Europe. Therefore, this graphic narrative illustrates how war memories cannot be evaded. This statement is not only valid for the conflict in Vietnam, but any war. Marco's grandparents reveal him (in his adulthood) that his mother's disorders started during World War II. The comic shows that, in August 1945, Germans forced Yvette and her family (together with many others) to evacuate Saint Malo. During their march, they witness the Allies' use of napalm on Cézembre island. It was during this conflict that Yvette witnessed for the first time the power of destruction of Napalm. This re-evocation does not only aim to explain the reasons behind Yvette's mental disorders, but it also raises ethical questions: why is the Southern Vietnamese government's use of napalm against the Communist condemned? Why is the Ally's use of this chemical compound during World War II condoned? The intent of the comic is not apologetic towards Southern Vietnamese government actions, as the BD shows Vietnamese kids disfigured by napalm, yet it aims to reflect on the double standard through which the two wars have been narrated. Truong's graphic narratives also question the fallacies in Southern Vietnamese government rhetoric. How could South Vietnam consider itself just if it used the same amount of violence than its enemies? Likewise, the BD uses irony to deconstruct Communist propaganda, showing that its promise of freedom was false from the very beginning. The graphic novel criticizes western leftists' blindness towards the atrocities committed by the NLF and the Khmer Rouge in Vietnam and Cambodia, respectively. Western left supported the fight against U.S. imperialism, but it was never interested in what happened in those areas after the Communists took power. The comic shows how these regimes violated the human rights of their political adversaries.

News from Vietnam entered the daily life of Truong's family thanks to the radio, TV, and letters from friends and family members who remained in their home country. In a scene, Tin, a friend of Marco and Dominique, informs them about a terrorist attack to a restaurant, where he and his family were dining. The Communists used a Claymore, a directional anti-personnel mine developed by the United States Armed Forces. The BD

discusses that, unlike a conventional land mine, the Claymore is fired by remote and shoots a pattern of metal balls into the kill zone like a shotgun. The graphic narrative shows how this weapon created a carnage, killing and hurting anyone in the restaurant.

Thus, these images refute the simplistic narrative of the war adopted by the counterculture and pacifists. Marcelino Truong denounces that the Communists were wolves in sheep's clothing. Truong's is unable to fully participate in an anti-war movement he and his family believed to be fundamentally misguided. He and his siblings partake in the hedonist manifestations of the movement: smoking pod, rebelling against their parents, and demanding more freedom; however, they do not share its stances on the Vietnam War. Yet, the criticisms towards the counterculture should not be read as a pro-war stance, but a denunciation of the bias of 70's leftists. Indeed, Marcelino Truong asks the reader whether one needs to take sides to manifest its opposition to war and why the Communist violence was so easily condoned by the left. Truong disapproves war and he shows how the escalation of the conflict deteriorated Vietnamese society. Refuges escaped towards the cities, and there they tried to survive by any means necessary, including prostitution and criminal activities. The BD does not shy away from describing the huge number of casualties that the war produced. Yet it resists the reduction of the conflict into a David vs. Goliath narrative, so dear to the war protestors.

The counterculture depicted non-Communist Vietnamese as nasty, reactionary, and fascist torturers, whereas Communists were described as heroic rebels and romantic revolutionaries. In *Une si jolie petite guerre,* Marcelino Truong argues that the images of war (and the war of images) were asymmetrical. In the South, foreign reporters could freely travel all over the country. In contrast, in Hanoi, Communists only allowed progressive journalists, committed or at least favorable to their cause. Thus, there are almost no photographs of the atrocities perpetrated by Communists. In *Une si jolie petite guerre,* a South Vietnamese Airborne officer speaking to an American reporter states,

> Vous avez vu ? C'est moche hein, la guerre contre-insurrectionnelle ! Bon, dans deux heures vous serez sous la douche… Puis vous fumez votre herbe, vous vous tapez votre petite pute vietnamienne et vous la trouvez bandante, finalement, cette guerre… Et la prochaine fois, vous ferez les photos que vous n'avez pas osé faire aujourd'hui. Et nous vous laisserons les faire. Et vos photos nous ferons beaucoup de tort. Mais c'est ce qui nous distingue de ceux d'en face. [Did you see? The war against insurrection ain't pretty. But in two hours you'll take a shower, smoke some weed, pick up a pretty little Vietnamese whore and you'll finally find this war arousing... And next time, you take the pictures you didn't dare to take today. We'll let you do it. Your photos will hurt our cause. But that's the difference between us and the other side] (Truong, 2012: 96)

These themes are reprised in *Give Peace a chance.* Here Truong examines the appropriation of the conflict by British and French counterculture (Marco moved to his grandparents' home in France during his last year of college), but also French neofascists. Whereas Truong shows some sort of understanding for the French Communist argumentation and their well-doing intentions, he questions the righteousness of the presumed liberator (Uncle Ho). Similarly, he cast doubts on Ordre Nouveau support of the Southern Vietnamese cause, pointing out their nostalgia towards the old colonial empire.

The comic appropriates propaganda posters to counter their arguments and show their bias. These graphic novels use visual framing as a rhetorical instrument to make indirect commentary. Indeed, in one panel portraying Truong's dialogue with a French progressist, the reader can observe at least three type of opinion conveyed within the same panel: the propaganda poster exalting Mao (image placed on the background), the French scholar's understanding of the conflict in Indochina (recreated through speech balloon on the foreground), and the author's critical attitude (using captions). Therefore, composition is used to convey meaning. Figuratively, the speech balloons invade the physical space of the poster reproduction, symbolizing the way images are used to project opinions.

The power of images is also addressed in *Give Peace a Chance* through the reproduction of Eddie Adams' photograph *Saigon Execution*. Truong graphically shows the antiwar movement ideological appropriation of the conflict by reiterating Adams' shot several times (figure 27). The first time he adapts the photograph of the shooting in graphic form, changing the point of view; the observer can now see Adams aiming at the scene. The second reiteration is a replica of Adam's photograph. The third one introduces the photograph on a protester's sign. This last reiteration shows the antiwar movement's cooptation of the picture, as in the poster's sign the image of the general is juxtaposed to a swastika. The oscillation between drawing and photographs of the shooting seems to signal the gap between event and representation, and thus between reality and truth claims embedded in the shot. Reality is here depicted through drawings, a solution that attempts to raise question about photographic representation and its referent. On contrast, drawings are used to stress "the subjective as a constitutive factor in the production of the real" (Mickwitz, 2016:56). Captions are used to contextualize the photograph and explain the reason that prompted the general to summarily execute a Vietcong.

Therefore, Marcelino Truong BDs seems to encourage the emergence of a new way to discuss and analyze Vietnamese wars of independence and its colonial past. Truong does not promote revisionism, but rather a more balanced and less politicized view of Vietnamese history. The oppositional cultural practice embedded in these graphic memoirs is particularly relevant if we consider that the transmission of these memories is entangled with the survival of a community, as there is no longer a state to promote a certain reading of the events. Indeed, *Give Peace a Chance* portrays the opulent Memorial that the Vietnamese erected to honor the sacrifice of NLF and Vietcong soldiers. In contrast, *Une si jolie guerre* shows how the new government profaned the burial site of Southern Vietnamese soldiers. Thus, the BDs assume a memorial function, honoring the sacrifice and history of those men that history and politics made invisible and silent.

### 7. Clément Baloup's *Mémoires de Viet Kieu* : A Collective Memory Project

In his tetralogy, diasporic Southern Vietnamese graphic artist Clément Baloup engages with the reconstruction of (individual and collective) past (his)stories, and the retrieval of the memory of a lost (Southern Vietnamese) community. His work ambitiously tries to collect and connect the stateless memory of a community that has been scattered into different continents (America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania) during and after the war. Each volume deals with a different diasporic group. The first one recollects four immigrant stories of Vietnamese refugees who settled to France between 1945 and 1975. The second volume remembers the experience of Vietnamese refugees in the U.S. The third one shows the dreadful fate of Vietnamese brides who were sold to Taiwanese men during the 1990s. The fourth one shows the story of the Vietnamese migration (from 1891-1939) to New Caledonia[190], a French overseas territory. Even though, this event predates the First (1945-1954) and Second Indochina (1955-1975) Wars, these conflicts would have effects on the diasporic community, inspiring revolts against the French colonial power, encouraging the return to a now independent Vietnam or prompting many diasporic Vietnamese to severe their ties with their motherland. An unnumbered volume of the series (cocreated with Pierre Daum) deals with the sacrifice of Vietnamese immigrants

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[190] New Caledonia (Nouvelle-Calédonie in French) is a former French colony and currently a unique collectivity in the southwestern Pacific Ocean. Under the Nouméa Accord of 1998, New Caledonia has limited autonomy within the French legal system. It sends three representatives to the French parliament, and yet, the French president is the head of state.

who were relocated in France during World War II.

The use of different experiences to recollect a complex diasporic experience has the effect of countering the image of the "emblematic victim" (Nguyen, 2002:122). Even though these stories share common themes (exile, migration, hunger, resettlement, fear, trauma, violence), they cannot be reduced to a single pattern if not on a very superficial level. Each experience is unique; yet together they compose a complex mosaic. Clément Baloup focuses on portraying a collective experience more than (re)constructing a personal story about the event. He authenticates his work by featuring external testimonies rather than engaging with self-questioning practices. The narrator's credibility is established by his documentary research. Therefore, Clément Baloup's works deviate from the narrative conventions of the autobiographical graphic novel and transition toward the modes of graphic journalism. Even though, this genre deals with the experiences of others (through research, imagining, visualizing, and materializing), with whom the author has no genealogical[191] relations, graphic journalism is always (like graphic memoirs) self-conscious. As Hillary L. Chute (2016:208) observed, "In its most fundamental procedures, comics calls attention to itself as a medium that is engaged in the work of literally framing events and experiences, and as such is a figure for the mediating work of journalism itself." Indeed, the duality of the medium allows comics to picture the journalist's (optical) perspective while inserting him inside the narrative. Similarly, the combination of visual and textual elements allows the presence of multiple viewpoints. This mediation is also reinforced by the presence of literary allusions. Some of the characters reference lines from Oscar Wilde, William Shakespeare, and Howard Phillips Lovecraft's works.

The Vietnam War and its aftermath are here narrated through the visual recreation of testimony of witnesses of the First and Second Indochina Wars and Vietnamese diaspora. Baluop's informants do not provide a comprehensive and exhaustive narration of the events, but anecdotes about them. Each informant remembers different salient moments, often mixing personal traumatic memories with mondain ones. The arrangement of the stories that compose these BDs do not follow a linear and chronological order. This polyphonic reconstruction of the past (and present) shows how collective memory draws

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[191] Even though the first story of *Quitter Saigon* features Baloup's father, all the other testimonies are not related to the author.

its strength from a body of people who remembers; and how, in turn, each individual story is constructed in relation to a group and the way it represents itself. After all, nations, as Benedict Anderson (1996[1986]) illustrated, are nothing more than imagined communities, uniting people who may have never met each other. Therefore, these BDs explore the opportunity of creating/imagining a community that is not coextensive with a nation-state. Transnational diasporic Vietnamese narratives (like other postcolonial texts) claim a discursive space in which the assumptions of national sovereignty no longer set the frame against which to read cultural texts. These narratives are created within the discursive space that Homi Bhabha (1994:1) described as the "moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion". In Baloup''s BDs, this "global mélange" (Pieterse, 2009) is embodied by different forms of intercultural osmosis and hybridity. One of the most visible manifestation of this phenomenon is the *métis*. André (one of the informants of *Quitter Saigon*) recalls that as a kid he attracted people's attention because of his blond hair. This physical trait is a symbol of atavistic French heritage, "Enfant, j'étais blond avec les yeux verts-bleus. Mes parents sont vietnamiens, bruns aux yeux noirs, mais comme j'ai un grand-père français, les gènes ont dû ressortir." [As a child, I was blond with blue-green eyes. My parents are Vietnamese, dark haired with black eyes, but since my grandfather is French, some genes must have come out] (Baloup,2016:44). However, the reactions towards these features were mixed. Vietnamese women admired his hair, other kids mocked him, and Japanese soldiers occupying Saigon tried to capture him because they thought he was French. Similarly, the story of Abel recollects that many *métis* left Vietnam after the First Indochina War because they feared what might have happened to them without the tutelage of the French. After all, they were the progeny of the enemy. Aware of the situation, the French government allowed these kids to be relocated in France. They were placed in special centers named CAFI, *Centres d'accueil des Français d'Indochine* [Welcoming centers for French citizens of Indochina]. These centers perpetuated colonial violence as the people in charge of the security were old colonizers. Despite the hardship of the new context many of these *métis* managed to rebuild a sense of normalcy.

Symbols of cultural hybridism can also be noticed through details. In the first story of *Quitter Saigon,* Baloup wears a bright t-shirt with the logo "Marseille" on it. This city is

where Baloup decided to live, but also the port through which people from the (former) colonies arrived in France. Thus, Baloup's BDs visualizes the two types of movements described by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993): the first one is the voyage accomplished by the colonial powers to conquer a foreign exotic land. The second is the "voyage in" (Said, 1994 [1993]), the arrival of immigrant and exiles in (former) colonial centers and empires. However, as Said remarked, this movement is not merely geographical as it entails "The conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories" (Said,1994 [1993]:216). This desire to rewrite the history of the colonial relations between France and Vietnam is particularly evident in Pierre Daum and Baloups' BD *Les Lính Thợ Immigré de force [The Lính Thợ forced migrants]* (2017) which narrates the arrival of the first Vietnamese immigrants in France during WWII. People from the colonies were coercively brought to France to cultivate paddy fields. As Baloup states in the beginning of this BD, this historical occurrence is largely ignored by the French public. It was only on October 4, 2004 that the institutions recognized this event through the creation of a memorial situated at Salin-de-Giraud, Camargue.

Interestingly, hybridity is not only visible in the narrative, but also in the visual style adopted by the artist. As Mark McKinney (2013) discussed, Baloup incorporates European tradition (French impressionists and fauvists, but also the Italian cartoonist Lorenzo Mattotti) to traditional Vietnamese art. This exchange opens a different window on the global mélange, testifying the presence of a crossover (artistic) culture. Indeed, whereas Baloup appropriates the codes of late 19th and 20th century European painters, many of these artists were inspired by Eastern art forms (e.g. Paul Gauguin). This type of mutual influence is not the only form through which globalization is represented in Baloup's work. His BDs also visualize the presence of ethnic enclaves in Western cities and the McDonaldization of culture through the presence of ethnic restaurants. Hence, Baloup's BDs acknowledge the presence of difference forms of globalization to indicate the unevenness, asymmetry, and inequality in global relations.

In his book *Empathic Vision,* Jill Bennett (2005:137) discusses how "a certain sense of being at home is made possible through the polythetic investigation that unite places — or, more specifically, that unite people by the virtue of their lived experience of place". Baluop's BDs intercept these transnational sensibilities, as they engage in a relational

project that connects a diasporic community to a place it can longer inhabit, but still haunts its imagery. These empathic connections are possible thanks to a shared experience of trauma. Therefore, this memory project shows how trauma is not just a personal experience, but a socially constructed one. As Jefferey C. Alexander discussed,

> 'Experiencing trauma' can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences. Insofar as traumas are so experienced, and thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will become significantly revised. This identity revision means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self. Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity's earlier life (Alexander, 2012:26).

Thus, memory as a socially constructed entity has the function of creating solidarity in the present. Baloup's memory project has the merit of illustrating that cultural memory can transcend the spatial limits of the nation as the memories here recollected oscillate between Vietnam and elsewhere; despite Diasporic Southern Vietnamese people being now spread all over the world, their identity-forming memory is still intact. As Homi K. Bhabha noticed in *The Location of Culture,*

> Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the 'middle passage' of slavery and indenture, the 'voyage out' of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. Culture is translational because such spatial histories of displacement - now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of 'global' media technologies - make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*, a rather complex issue (1994: 172).

In this regard, it is important to remark that the preservation of the memories of this stateless community is enabled by and reliant on globalization and media technologies. Baloup's BDs (as the other comics hitherto described) do not only record different experiences, but they also facilitate their worldwide diffusion. This dissemination and the power of images can create an empathic connectivity (allyship), facilitating the entrance of this memories into public accountability. As previously discussed, Alison Landsberg's *Prosthetic Memory* (2004) has demonstrated that, thanks to mass cultural technologies, it has become increasingly possible for people to take on memories that are not their own, to which they have no familial, ethnic, or national affiliations.

The ability of images to move an international audience is addressed in the prologue

of the first volume. The opening sequence, introduced with the second reprint[192] of the BD, attempts to inscribe the private histories that follows within the larger history of the country, symbolized by a series of iconic photographs. The first image is an adaptation of Nick Ut's photograph "Napalm Girl" (figure 28). In this (in)famous picture, a naked young girl, along with other children, runs on a road, screaming toward the camera in agony after being severely burnt on her back by a South Vietnamese napalm attack. Baloup reappropriates this image by drawing it in a palette of blues and greys, but he also acknowledges its international reception and the power it had in creating international indignation towards that war. A caption at the bottom of the panel states, "S'il y a bien une image internationalement connue de la guerre du Vietnam, c'est celle des enfants qui courent pour échapper au napalm qui brûle leur village [If there is an internationally recognized image of the Vietnam War, it is the one representing children running away from the Napalm that burnt their village] (Baloup, 2016a:3). Whereas Marcelino Truong and Thi Bui reappropriated Eddie Adam's shot to contest its embedded narrative, Clément Baloup uses Ut's photograph to exploit its power to shock, enrage and disturb the viewer. Indeed, this image is particularly powerful because it shows the devastating effects of war through the body of what is generally considered the most innocent victim of a conflict, a (nine-year-old) child. The BD reminds the reader that Ut managed to capture a terrifying image which came to symbolize the horrors of the Vietnam War, resulting in a barrage of antiwar protests around the world. This image is here used to catch the reader's attention and expand his or her knowledge of the conflict as the comic uses juxtaposition to introduce less known, but equally important events and experiences, adding different layers of complexity to the narrative of the conflict.

Ut's photograph is introduced as part of a museum exhibition, presented as a visual sequential narrative. However, the caption reminds the reader that this photograph is not located in a neutral environment, but a highly charged one, the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This museum is government-operated, and the Socialist Vietnamese State uses it as an instrument of propaganda. The War Remnants Museum was established by the Communist Party at the former site of a French villa shortly after the end of the war in April 1975. It served as a place to display documentation of the atrocities committed by the American and South Vietnamese governments. The name of

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[192] The first edition counted 64 pages, the second 96, and the third one 110.

the museum has eloquently gone through several changes, testifying the evolution of America and Vietnam's political relations. When first established in 1975 the museum was named Exhibition House for U.S. and Puppet Crimes. The name was changed in 1990 to the Exhibition House for Crimes of War and Aggression, and just before diplomatic relations with America resumed in 1995, the Exhibition House was renamed the War Remnants Museum (Schwenkel, 2009:164).

Ironically, the transformation of the museum into a tourist attraction implies a retelling of the history of Vietnam and since profit comes from those who lost the war, certain aspects of that story must be silenced and/or changed to make it more palatable. So, the paradoxes of this site of memory reflect those of contemporary Vietnam: a society under socialist rule that is progressively embracing capitalism and globalization. Similarly, the identity of the Việt Kiều (Diaporic Vietnamese), to whom Baloup's work is dedicated, is a symbol/reminder of such contradictions. As Andrew Lam discussed,

> Viet Kieu: Vietnamese nationals living abroad, especially those in America, whose successes and wealth serve as a mirror against which the entire nation, mired still in poverty and political oppression, reflects on its own lost potential. Uncle Ho Chi Minh once preached freedom and independence to his compatriots (though he meant independence and freedom from colonization and imperialism, not for the individual) to spur them to battle against the French and American and South Vietnamese. Today it is the Viet Kieu, those persecuted by Uncle Ho's followers and forced to flee people like me - who exude that much - coveted independence and freedom (Lam, 2005:12).

Globalization turns war memories into commodities that can be bought by tourists. This concern is well captured in the comic as it features foreign visitors commenting Ut's photograph and comparing it to Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. However, Baloup's BD resists these appropriations of war images by complicating their embedded narrative through sequentiality and the hybrid nature of the medium. The prologue summarizes the main events that led to the Vietnamese diaspora through the reproduction of photographs representing the French colonial era, Japanese invasion, U.S. military intervention, the fall of South Vietnam, the exodus by boat of millions of Vietnamese, and their relocation in new countries. These fast sequence of images mimics the way war photographic reportages recollect conflicts. In contrast, the interviews that constitute the core of the first installment of the tetralogy, *Quitter Saigon* [Leaving Saigon], display a unique pace as they play with rhythm: accelerating and slowing down the story. The visual narration often pauses to focus on marginal (sometimes even lyrical) elements that do not make the story progress. This contrast between fastness and slowness betrays an underlying

criticism towards the superficial media coverage of traumatic events, as it often forgets to represent those who had their lives destroyed by history. Pictures also represent trivial aspects of daily life in war zone (the peeling of shrimps, kids playing with cartridges they found on the street, etc.) to remind the reader that these are the stories of ordinary men and women whose lives have crossed the path of History.

The first volume does not present an exhaustive biographical account about the war and its aftermath, but fragments of memories linked together by their reimagining of a lost country. This format has the effect of making the comic resemble an informal conversation, where the participants share confidences. Similarly, the text seems to resist a voyeuristic gaze through the contextualization of this images. Private memories are here used to raise awareness about the horrors of war and about what happened after the conflict officially ended. For Vietnamese people, the fall of Saigon did not mark the end of the war as it generated diasporic movements and tore a society apart. The comic acknowledges the presence of (at least) two memories of the event by using two different toponyms to refer to the same place, Ho Chi Minh City and Saigon. As As Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001:190) discussed,

> Every memory calls forth a countermemory: stories of imprisonment under the South Vietnamese regime are countered by narratives of experience in reeducation camps under the new Communist one. Anecdotes celebrating heroic deeds in guerrilla bases are met with tales of tragic death on the high seas while trying to escape the country. Some extended families have members who bear the scars of torture and others who have been accused of inflicting torture on prisoners. Satisfaction at the outcome of the War Against the Americans (as its supporters call it) clashes with nostalgia for the prosperity and freedom of the pre-Communist era as others remember it. Sometimes the division of war is not spread across a large extended family but has to be accommodated within a single individual.

This duality is also present in the stories recollected. The first volume features the story of Mr. Nguyen, a survivor of Vietnamese reeducation camps. He was imprisoned soon after the fall of Saigon because the new government accused him of having served the interests of the Americans by implementing the transport system of Saigon while working as an architect for the Southern Vietnamese government. The comics details the intensive political indoctrination enforced by the guards through sleep deprivation, classes, and starvation. Prisoners were forced to write a confession of their alleged past misdeeds, no matter how trivial their 'crimes' might have been. The letters were structured in two parts: the description of the crime and a critical analysis in which the prisoners should have shown regret and abjured previously held beliefs. These confessions were publicly read

and subject to scrutiny by the guards and the other prisoners, who were invited to criticize the flows of their peers' letters. In reeducation camps, living conditions were inhumane; prisoners were assigned to do hard work such as clearing the jungle, constructing barracks for new camps, cutting trees without the necessary working equipment. Hard work is enforced by the guards as an instrument of atonement. Prisoners trying to escape were executed and the photos of these atrocities were shown to the other captives to dissuade them from trying to evade the camps. When Mr. Nguyen regained his (limited and regulated) freedom, he decided to escape Vietnam with his wife. Poignantly, this memory is juxtaposed to that of André, a man who fled Vietnam to escape the repressive policies enacted by the Southern Vietnamese government. In his story, the police brutalized students who celebrated a (failed) coup attempt against President Ngô Đình Diệm. Thus, the comic shows how the Southern Vietnamese government repressed any form of opposition to the regime. After half of his class got arrested, André's parents decided to make him leave the country. By showcasing these two memories next to each other, Baloup engages with an ethical form of remembering: he portrays the wrongdoing of each side (as they both repressed dissent) and does not assimilate these experiences into a narrative that can be easily consumed by the reader as there is no clear-cut line separating good and evil.

However, it is necessary to remark that the acknowledgement of the evil committed by each side does not equal to forgetting or being blind to the ideologic differences between the parties at war. *Little Saigon*, the second installment of the tetralogy *Mémoire de Viet Kieu*, narrates the story of Yến, a woman who was imprisoned for trying to escape the country, five years after the end of the war. She hoped to be able to be reunited with her sister who migrated to U.S. during the war. She would be able to achieve her dream only after U.S. and Vietnam relation improved. This story also acknowledges the mistreatment of ethnic minorities by the Communists and the cultural shock that Yến and her daughter experienced when they arrived in the U.S. In America they faced difficulties, but at least they were free. Indeed, at the end of her story, Yến comments,

> Alors, malgré toutes les difficultés du quotidien et les désillusions profondes, quand je la vois de plus en plus belle et épanouie, je me dis que j'ai fait le bon choix. Elle ne risquera jamais d'être privée de liberté comme je l'ai été pour avoir voulu chercher un avenir meilleur. Elle n'errera pas, fugitive, dans la nuit parce que l'état aura décidé qu'elle était une traitre. Elle sera libre. [Well, despite all the daily difficulties and the deep disillusionment, when I see her more and more beautiful and happy, I tell myself that I made the right decision. She will not risk being deprived of her freedom, like I was, for desiring a better future. She will not errand, fugitive, in the night because

the State decided she was a traitor. She will be free] (Baloup, 2016b: 177).

Baloup's BDs show how globalization and diaspora (two sides of the same coin) created people whose displaced lives challenge the idea of borders. The comics attempt to demonstrate that events that happened in a remote place may have global consequences/resonance. These BDs engage with the osmosis of the local and the global, and advocate for social justice on an international scale. These comics show an awareness that globalization can be a source of social inequalities. Whereas the first volume features 'successful refugee experiences,' giving a reassuring image to the reader, the other volumes also deal with the memories of less 'lucky' individuals.

The stories featured in the second and third volume clearly illustrate how gender, class, and race functioned as a gatekeeper to one's possibilities of success. The nation where diasporic Vietnamese chose to relocate determined the characteristic of these enclaves. In *Little Saigon* (2016), Baloup argues that Vietnamese Americans are more reticent to talk about the conflict than the community living in France. This might be easily explained by the fact that, as hitherto discussed, American society (at large) is also trying to heal from the wounds left by that war. This is aspect is also addressed in the comics. Nicole's second husband was a U.S. Navy marine who suffered from schizophrenia. During a crisis he pointed his gun at Nicole thinking she was a Communist spy. She convinced him to put away his gun and spare her life. However, he would later kill himself.

The comics also show that, in America, diasporic Vietnamese community embraced conservative values. The BD *Little Saigon* shows the support of old generations to the Republican party. This endorsement is mainly due to the community resentments towards Communism. As Long T. Bui pointed out,

> Anti-communism embodies first generation's enduring belief that the war is not done, an act of refusal by the war generation to fall off the public radar and slip quietly into the national landscape as another minority or group of immigrants in America. In doing so, anti-communism keeps them and their history alive by producing a kind of 'preservation discourse' that maintains their cultural integrity and authority at all costs (Bui, 2018:105-106)

However, the comic mocks this attitude showing George W. Bush using the derogative term "niacoué" [gook] to address his audience (Baluop, 2016b:143). It also illustrates the frictions of older generations with the LGBT Vietnamese American youth. The old members of the community demonstrated to be impermeable to the cultural changes happening in San Francisco. This is particularly interesting because queers appropriated

the diaspora discourses to further their own agenda. As Long T. Bui (2018:117) discussed, LGBT activists connected "the queer diaspora of LGBT expunged from the home with the refugees exiled from the homeland; queers without a community or familial home are akin to stateless people". In the BD *Little Saigon*, the (gay) character of Antoine criticizes and mocks the older generation for its lack of acceptance of the queer community, arguing that the elders have a narrow and exclusive definition of community.

The American setting also allows the surfacing and discussion of the war lacerating experience through a panethnic perspective. Because of the American "racial formation" (Omi & Winant, 2015 [1986]) and its prolonged history of racism, Vietnamese American experience is entangled with that of other Diasporic Asian communities. The visit to ethnic enclaves (Japantown, Chinatown, Little Saigon, etc.) reveals to be an ethnic tour through which one experiences exotic otherness. These places are not only an expression of the culture of diasporic communities, but also commodities to be consumed by the tourists. Anh describes Little Saigon and Japantown as commercial centers, that is "nonplaces" (Augé, 1995[1992]) where people can transit different cultures without any true commitment. However, places still exist outside nonplaces and tend to reconstitute themselves inside them. These enclaves also preserve important memory sites as the "Japanese American National Museum" that contains archival materials about the Japanese American Internment. This panethic perspective also allows Baloup to enlarge the field and observe how the Vietnam War effected neighbor countries like Laos and Cambodia. The comic recollects the presence of these ethnic groups in the U.S. as they also had to escape because of their support to the Americans. However, the BD illustrates how these groups did not live the American Dream as poverty casted them at the margins of society and many young people joined criminal gangs.

Baloup's BDs illustrates how poor Vietnamese women are more likely to become victims of (psychological and physical) abuses. For example, the story of Anh centers on her experience in the refugee camps, where she was raped by a fellow refugee. As Yến Lê Espiritu discussed

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registered a total of 839,228 refugees from Vietnam in numerous refugee camps throughout East and Southeast Asia. For a large number of these second-wave refugee migrants, their stay in Asia was *not* temporary; they had remained stranded in asylum centers or, in rare cases, settled in these first-asylum countries. And yet, most accounts on Vietnamese refugees have continued to privilege settlement in the West. For the first-wave refugees, their camp stay was brief; all were processed and resettled in the United States or other Western countries in a matter of months.

In contrast, the vast majority of the second-wave escapees languished in overcrowded camps, waiting uncertainly, sometimes indefinitely, to be reviewed and then resettled or repatriated. (Espiritu, 2014:50)

Anh's story highlights the suffering of "protracted refugees" (Espiritu, 2014) who were warehoused for years in refugee camps. Their prospects for resettlement were stuck in a limbo as they patiently waited their documents to be processed. This protracted uncertainty had the effect of making alone women vulnerable. They were trapped in a camp where they had no means to reject the unsolicited attentions of men. They internalized a sense of guilt for those gazes which in Anh's story turn into rape. This feeling made Anh silent even though international organizations were interested in collecting testimonies about the abuses happening in the camps. Through the American official surveilling the camp, Anh learns the story of many Thai pirates' rape victims and she starts associating beauty with a curse. It would be only in America that she learns to appreciate her beauty as something she could use at her own advantage.

*Les Mariées de Taïwan* [The Brides of Taiwan] narrates the stories of Vietnamese women who decides to marry Taiwanese men to financially support their poor families. Marriage agencies promoting this type of relations often illuded young Vietnamese women promising them a brighter future. However, reality will be harsher than what they expected, as they must endure numerous abuses to provide their families an income. Only in a few cases, these marriages turn into happy (or at least non abusive) relations. In some of the stories, agencies recur to intimidations to convince young Vietnamese women to marry older men. Women are dissuaded to divorce since they would have to return the family of their husbands the amount of money they paid the agency to 'buy' the girl.

The structure of this BD is different from the previous ones: it focuses on a single story divided into multiple sections. Each part is introduced by one-page testimony of a different Vietnamese woman. Linh the main protagonist attempts suicide after the physical abuses perpetrated by her husband. Her failed attempt would convince her to divorce, a decision she is able to make thanks to the support of other Vietnamese women living in Taiwan. The graphic narrative advocates for women's rights reminding the reader that this phenomenon is a consequence of the globalization and unbalance of power. Taiwanese men started 'hunting' Vietnamese women the moment Taiwanese women became more independent. Taiwan feels the pression to modernize the country to meet international standards. This modernization has produced the recognition of various

human rights. Yet, it also pushed wealthy men to search for women with more 'traditional' values so that their patriarchal power would not be challenged. It is interesting to notice that in this BD the abusive husband, his family and the old lady who arrange the marriage are portrayed as anthropomorphic animals, moved by primary instinct.

These stories are reminiscent of Nguyen Du's early-nineteenth-century poem *Truyen Kieu*[193] (The tale of Kieu), which tells the story of a young woman, Kieu, who gives up her lover (Kim) and agrees to a marriage of convenience to save her father. In reality, the marriage is a ploy by a brothel owner to force Kieu into prostitution. She would eventually escape but she still endures tribulation and becomes the lover of three different men before finding a way to be finally reunited with her family and earlier lover. However, her reunion with her former lover can only turn into a platonic marriage (as Kieu is no longer immaculate) so that she can satisfy her obligations to him while atoning for her loss of virtue. She denies herself to Kim and keep their union platonic because she feels to have been sullied as a woman. Kim reluctantly accepts his wife decision to not consume their marriage, "Their wishes all came true since fate so willed/ and of two lovers marriage made two friends" (Nguyen Du, lines 3225-3226). In this way, Kieu fulfills her obligations to her father, lover, and society. She sacrificed her virtue in the name of filial piety and she later gives up carnal love for platonic love. Indeed she states to her lover, "that to her man a bride should bring the scent/ of a close bud, the shape of a full moon./ It's priceless, chastity - by nuptial torch,/ am I to blush for what I'll offer you?" (Nguyen Du, lines 3093-3096). As Viet Thanh Nguyen discusses,

> despite all her travails, Kieu is seen as keeping the most important aspect of her chastity—the spiritual one of submissive duty. The Tale of Kieu became the classic of Vietnamese literature because it presented a sophisticated interpretation of chastity that took into account the contingency of circumstance and also because Kieu's plight was read as a political allegory for Vietnam itself. The poem is not only a literary classic but also a popular classic that is transmitted orally as well. It has survived in the diaspora partially because of its ability to symbolize the nation's purity through the notion of feminine chastity—that is, through the idealized woman's body (Nguyen, 2002:121).

Then, Baloup's non-judgmental attitude towards his informants mirrors that of Kieu's lover. Indeed, in the poem he states, "a woman's chastity means many things. / For there are times of ease and times of stress:/ in crisis must one rigid rule apply?/ True daughter you upheld a woman's role: /what dust or dirt could ever sully you?" (Nguyen Du, lines

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[193] I used *The Tale of Kieu: A bilingual edition of Nguyen Du's Truyen Kieu* (1987) as a reference. This Vietnamese classic has been translated into English by Huynh Sanh Thong.

3116 -3120). However, even though these works show some parallelisms, it is crucial to observe that Baloup's BD is less idealized as the reader observe a grittier reality as the return home is often impossible.

The last volume of the tetralogy *Les engagés de Nouvelle-Calédonie* (2020) recollects the memories of Vietnamese immigrants who resettled to New Caledonia between 1891 and 1939. In this period France recruited people living in the protectorate of Tonkin (the northern region of Vietnam) as indentured laborers to work on New Caledonia's mines. In this period, there were approximately 3.300 "*tonkinois*" on the island (Baloup, 2000:63, original emphasis). Poverty was the main cause of this flux to New Caledonia, which Vietnamese people symbolically named Tân Thê Giói [New World]. Many young Vietnamese accepted to leave their country because the French offered them the opportunity to earn more money than they would be able to make in Indochina. However, the working conditions were particularly harsh, resembling slavery. The BD shows how many of the workers (especially women) were physically burned out after a day of work in the mines. Rebellions against the colonial power were sedated through violence and blood. The tensions between Vietnamese workers and the colonial employers escalated after Hô Chi Minh's declaration of independence on September 2, 1945. All around the islands, Vietnamese laborers started to strike, inspired by Communist values. Vietnam's independence symbolized in their eyes the possibility of overthrowing or at least challenge the colonial power and regain their rights. During a strike, a protestor got killed by a military police officer causing Vietnamese workers to rise the red flag with golden star, that is the same flag that appeared in the southern uprising of November 23, 1940, against French rule in southern Vietnam. The BD also shows the dilemma that the immigrant community living in New Caledonia faced after Vietnam's independence: they had to choose whether they wanted to leave the island or settle there permanently. Whereas many decided to return to their homes in the Tonkin region, Catholics opted to stay in New Caledonia fearing being persecuted by the Communist regime recently installed in north Vietnam. Many second generations also decided to not leave the country they grew up for a place they had no ties nor memories. Some of the people who went back to Vietnam would eventually return to New Caledonia after witnessing war and the atrocities committed by the Communists. The comics ends with the depiction of the efforts of the exiles to build a new future in their new home. In New Caledonia, they

strived and succeeded in preserving their cultural heritage.

Each story that composes *Les engagés de Nouvelle-Calédonie* (2020) is introduced by a quote from official documents narrating the poor conditions and the racial bigotry Vietnamese people had to endure. For example, the first story "Mauvaise fille" [Bad daughter] is introduced by a citation of a letter written in 1933 by the police commissioner of Nouméa to the governor of New Caledonia,

> Les indochinois sont en majeure partie de faible constitution, et d'un rendement passable pour les employer. Ils sont d'un caractère intriguant, vindicatif, and peu expansif ; la majorité d'entre eux sont menteur, joueurs ou buveurs, quelqu'uns voleurs et batailleurs, mais craignent néanmoins l'autorité et il se soumettent assez docilement à nos lois et costumes. Les femmes sont de mœurs légères, mais ne se livrent pas qu'à leurs compatriotes, ce qui provoque très souvent entre eux des bagarres où il est très difficile de discerner la vérité, vu leurs instincts hypocrites. [The majority of Indochinese has a delicate constitution, and their productivity is just merely satisfactory to the employers. Their character is scheming, vindicative, and reserved; the majority among them are liars, gamblers, and drunks, some are thieves and quarrelsome, however, they fear authority and they easily submit to our laws and costumes. Women have loose morals, but they only betray their compatriots, and this frequently causes fights among them, where it is difficult to discern the truth, considering their hypocritical nature] (Baloup, 2020: 8).

These quotes are particularly interesting because they contrast the official version of history produced by the colonial power with the voices of subjects who had been traditionally excluded from such narratives. The BD reminds the reader that meaning of the past is controversial and must be negotiated among the different groups that compose our societies. This negotiation process is symbolized by the contrast between text and paratext.

The BD does not only denounce colonial violence and exploitation, but it also shows the gradual hybridization of the colonies. Hybridity is an important concept because it prevents the construction of hierarchies based on primordial polarities opposing (former) colonizers to their subjects; it presents a liminal space that exceeds barriers and boundaries. It challenges the idea of (national) culture as a homogeneous artifact authenticated by an originary past and preserved by tradition. In contrast, culture is here presented as contradictory force since it originates from ambivalent spaces. Cultures can be appropriated, translated, re-historicized and read anew. The BD shows Vietnamese immigrants founding their own enclaves in New Caledonia to preserve their cultural heritage, but it also features interethnic relationships and the birth of *métis*. Thus, culture is not presented as a static and essentialized entity, but a dynamic one. As Homi Bhabha (1994:2) discussed, "The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of

tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'". Thus, the marginal and hybrid individual is the key figure of modernity, he or she represents the contacts among cultures. He or she complicates our understanding of identities as constructed by an encounter between the 'self' and the 'other'. Different cultures can come together, conflict, adjust to each other, and even interpenetrate. So, the *métis* remind the reader the con-fusion of modernity which is also characterized by the negotiation of identities, which must read according to the problematics of the present.

# CONCLUSION

These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
            Shantih    shantih    shantih

T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*

## 1. An ending…

This project described the evolution of war representation in comics arguing that the medium progressively evolved from being an instrument of propaganda to becoming a memory mediator, a change often testified by the different function of photographs in comics. Whereas propaganda comics replayed them to create a sense of realism, graphic narratives evolving into memory mediators appropriated famous photographs to re-contextualize them and/or oppose their embedded message. As discussed in the first chapter, early war comics presented a clear-cut vision of the world, reassuring its readership that good (embodied by American G.I.s) would always prevail. They turned war into a moral crusade galvanizing the nation against a foreign threat menacing its soil, freedom, and lifestyle. During World War II, comics consolidated the myth of the 'good war', presenting American intervention as a defensive action aimed to protect civilization and freedom. This rhetoric was also used during the War in Korea, even though dissenting voices started to emerge.

This study also showed how comics responded to the changes occurring within U.S. society and the second chapter proved that American counterculture functioned as a turning point that allowed a new language to emerge. Even though, these experiments would not survive the decade, as their abrasive language would be easily coopted by conservative discourses, the confessional mode of telling developed in the 1960s has remained crucial because it has set the bases for a new political use of comics. Confessional forms of graphic storytelling gave a voice to those without a voice, it gave a name to what had no name yet, making visible what official narratives excluded or attempted to exclude, if not forget. The public use of history started to be challenged by personal narratives, further complicating our understanding of history.

Therefore, one should not dismiss this confessional turn as a form of solipsism. As diasporic Vietnamese graphic narratives testify, the local and the global are often intermingled within the personal. Hence, these narratives move away from a national(istic) portrayal of war and identities, testifying the formation of a transnational

imaginary. To better understand the works of Vietnamese American authors, in chapter four, this project contrasted them to the narratives produced by Vietnamese French and Vietnamese Australian artists. The notion of diaspora involves a constant revision of time and space, as it involves the historical dispersion of a group into different geographical areas. It encompasses images of (physical) disconnection, and dreams of reattachment. Thus, diaspora reveals that identities are dynamic in character, steadily experiencing transformations. Hybridization became a key concept while analyzing those identities shaped by globalization. However, these narratives did not blindly endorse globalization, as they also discussed the imbalances of power relations that comes with it. Moreover, these experiences often raised ethical questions about the juridical status of stateless refugees, showing the limits of national states, as they are not always capable to respond to the needs of people banished from one country to another. The war experiences of the (Southern) Vietnamese community are used to question the way one remembers. If memory involves forgetting, whose memories tend to be discarded more often? Do commemorations testify an asymmetry in power relations? Can pop culture rewrite a loss into a victory? Can comics (a disposable medium) promote an alternative reading of history, remembering those forgotten by the official narratives of both winner and losers? Can comics promote an unflattening of war narratives embracing what Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016) defined as "ethics of recognition"? As discussed in chapter four, diasporic Vietnamese graphic narratives explored these themes using the opportunities offered by this hybrid medium to meta-narratively inquire the formation and consolidation of (hi)stories. Therefore, this work attempted to rediscuss old literary *topoi* like war, propaganda, gender, ethnicity, and their representations by intersecting them with contemporary debates about postmemory, prosthetic memory, and world literature.

However, this analysis would be incomplete if it omitted the conservative and revisionist reading of the event. The second chapter showed how during the Reagan era, comics (like other pop culture artifacts) were rediscovered as a powerful medium to sanitize the controversial and divisive elements of the Vietnam War. Many comics stories used veterans' sufferings to rehabilitate the image of the US army, claiming that America lost the war because of its lack of commitment and the strategic errors committed by the government in charge during the war years. Similarly, the third chapter illustrates how, after September 11, 2001, many comics consolidated the project of revision started during

the late 1980s, supporting a nationalist reading of that tragedy. This revisionist projects aimed to justify the current involvement of US troops overseas. Thus, given this patriotic resurgence, only a few comics engaged in a thoughtful analysis of the horror produced by war and described America as accountable for that ecological and human disaster.

Comics as a medium has been chosen for its ability to represent modernity, being a point of intersection between traditional print media and the (relatively) 'new' visual culture. The combination of words and text allows the unflattening of reality by offering new ways of incorporating and reevaluating different points of view. Whereas text describes, images present things, create nonlinear narratives and complicate the act of reading; by so doing, they challenge the reader to experience storytelling also through the depth of its trans-media dimension, as they are not mere illustration accompanying a text. As Nick Sousanis (2015:59) discussed in *Unflattening*,

> In relying on text as the primary means of formulating understanding, what stands outside its linear structure is dismissed, labeled irrational - no more conceivable than the notion of 'upwards' to a flatlander. The visual provides expression where words fail. What have we been missing? And what can be made visible when we work in a form that is not only about, but *is* the thing itself.

So, comics can provide a terrain where to validate previously held assumptions, or to formulate new interpretative paradigms. As shown in chapter 2, the notions of prosthetic memory and post memory are rooted in the observation of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. In a similar fashion, diasporic Vietnamese experience can be used to rediscuss the notion of global citizenship, public accountability, refugeehood, and world literature. Accordingly, the analysis of what has been perceived for a long a time as a minor literary form invites a rethinking of literary epistemology. Taking up the challenge presented by Italo Calvino in his seminal work *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*,

> Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification. The images of lightness that I seek should not fade away like dreams dissolved by the realities of present and future… (Calvino, 1993[1988]: 11).

Thus, comics, as many other artifacts belonging to pop culture, may provide the reader a privileged point of view from where observe past, present and their interconnections. Its ability to be easily consumed by the reader does not diminish its power to convey complexity. Indeed, complex meaning do not always have to be expressed in a complicated and inaccessible fashion. In comics visual and verbal intermingle creating

the opportunities for the integration of different modes, symbols, and signs, creating different layers of meaning. Thus, the acknowledgement of this multiplicity can open new ways of thinking, inviting a dialogic approach to reality. Panels can overlay, overlap, fork into different paths, be nested one within another showing the significance of relation.

This latter concept guided this historical reconstruction. The encounter with the Other (that Édouard Glissant defined as the poetics of relation) has been a constant feature. In this discussion, the notion of Otherness has been discussed in relation to different groups: the internal minorities whose memories got often ignored by official reconstructions of war, the government who abandoned its citizens and soldiers in a hopeless war, the (invisible) enemy, the older generations who are unable to understand the youth, and finally, the refugee as an entity that defies borders and fixed identities. Yet, the recognition of difference does not entail a closure. The comics analyzed in this work show an ongoing dialogue about the meaning of the Vietnam War. Second generation Vietnamese questions their parents about their past. Similarly, as observed in the third chapter, America is still rationalizing what happened in Vietnam. Thus, thanks to their hybrid nature, comics are well suited to capture and convey the (co)presence of different narratives in all their entangled complexities. The contrastive comparison of contemporary American and diasporic Vietnamese narratives helps illuminates aspects of the past that otherwise would be ignored.

## 2.… And a new beginning

Comics as a medium allows the reader to experience multiple narratives through its hybrid nature. As Nick Sousanis (2015:62) discussed, comics can be conceived as,

> A connected space, not reliant on a chain-like sequence linearly proceeding from point to point… rather associations that stretch web-like across the page braiding fragments into a cohesive whole. Each element is thus: one with everything. This spatial interplay of sequential and simultaneous - imbues comics with a dual nature- both tree like, hierarchical and rhizomatic, interwoven in a single form.

Similarly, each section of this work constitutes a fragment of a cohesive whole, as each section highlights a specific historical moment in the evolution of the medium and its representation of war. Together, they form a complex mosaic covering almost a century of graphic narratives accomplishments, explorations, and challenges. However, like

comic panels, each section invites reflections about the road not taken. Like memory, stories too involve an act of selection. Then, it is important to remark that each selection limits the multiplicity of possible stories that can be narrated. Yet, the dual nature of comics allows the medium to recuperate some previously 'lost' narratives. As Jason Shiga's *Meanwhile* (2010) has demonstrated, each panel can lead to a different narrative; in fact, panels can be graphically conceived as multiple roads taking to a variety of forks challenging the reader who must choose the direction to follow. I like to think that the chapters of my study can be approached following a similar logic, in turn suggesting a variety of strings.

I wish this project to be a nod connected to previous works on the topic, but also generative of new discussions, which might develop in new narratives, or future projects. Each section can be individually or collectively expanded towards new directions (the road not taken during the writing of this project). For example, in this work, I discussed that war has been traditionally (and progressively) constructed as a male space. Whereas World War II comics offered women the opportunity of being represented in combat roles, in following conflicts their role became marginal, acting as mere love interests, nurses and secretaries. In particular, in Vietnam war narratives their main role is simply confirming the heterosexuality of the soldiers. These comics promoted traditional gender roles, reinforcing patriarchal structures and enacting what Susan Jeffords (1989) defined as "the remasculinization of America". However, recent war narratives like Maximilian Uriarte's *Battle Born. Lapis Lazuli* (2020) complicates gendered narratives of war, as this graphic novel features a lesbian soldier fighting in Afghanistan. So, this comic challenges the representation of war as the place where male bonding is forged.

Similarly, another thread that can be further expanded is the intersection of (war) comics in/and the digital age. This work showed how internet allowed Matt Huynh to spread the memory of the Vietnamese Diaspora. This memory was rhetorically revived to create a sense urgency about refugeehood. Past images of Vietnamese asylum seekers echoed with the present. Today, like in the past, different ethnic groups flee their home countries to find a better future elsewhere. However, this progressive use of the medium is not the only possible. In a similar vein to the conservative comics analyzed in the third chapter, Philip B. Feherenbacher published a satirical cartoon about his experience in Vietnam on his Facebook page "In-Country". The popularity of the page is testified by

the fact that it grew to 5,000 likes in a year and a half. These cartoons became so popular that they even got published by Amazon. Unlike Matt Huynh's web comics, these cartoons are not engaged in a thorough political discussion about the war and its moral ambiguity. They do not seek to make that war enter public accountability, comment on contemporary politics nor promote the idea of global citizenship. In contrast, they simply aim to honor the sacrifice of many American G.I.s. They rewrite the past to contrast the negative image of the veterans that emerged in the 1970s. Indeed, they complain about the unfair treatment soldiers received when they returned home. Therefore, Philip B. Feherenbacher does not use the potentiality of the web to raise global awareness and advocate about human rights, but he uses it to connect with a small community of veterans dispersed throughout the U.S. Once again, comics reveal a tension between the local and the global. However, in this case the potentiality of the global are used to serve the interests of the local.

Finally, another thread to be discussed in future projects is the relation of memory, comics, and the consumer culture which often generates sentimental kitsch narratives, which reduce war experiences into clichés. One of the most critical voices against this use of the past is Art Spiegelman, who fiercely expressed his contrariety to sentimental representations of the Shoah, that he labeled 'Holokitsch'. Through this neologism, Spiegelman indicted the banal and manipulative uses of the Holocaust has been put in popular culture. Holokitsch reduces a crime to a plot device to convey melodrama. Interestingly, the Vietnam War also produced its dose of kitsch narratives.

The popularity of this genre is testified by the fact that these narratives have even been (re)produced outside U.S. national borders. For example, the Japanese artist Motofumi Kobayashi set his manga *Cat Shit One* (1998-2005) in the Vietnam War. Motofumi Kobayashi's work is noteworthy because, like diasporic Vietnamese narratives, it testifies that media can (re)produce memories on a global scale. This potentiality is important because it validates the questions about the responsibility of the medium posed at the beginning of this work. It also illustrates how graphic narratives can exceed national borders in terms of influences, diffusion, and audience response. These developments are in line with what scholars have defined as global literature, but they also raise ethical questions about memory and its mass consumption. Therefore, it would also be challenging to explore these new threads in comics by shifting the focus from the

producer to the consumer.

Because of its interrelation with war, comics has become an important, sometimes even an uncanny, tool to re-vision and rediscuss history. Being part of pop/mass media discourses, it can easily enter the public sphere, promoting official narratives, revisionist projects, dissenting voices; however, it can also raise civic awareness about past and present injustices, giving a space to neglected (hi)stories. Hence, an ethical and critical questioning of this medium is fundamental to understand both past and the present. Even though the medium might seem at first glance ephemeral, the use of critical tools to analyze it may sharpen our understanding of the contemporary, where heaviness and lightness intermingle. Therefore, I would like this project to contribute to the debate about the power of the medium, memory, contemporary warfare, ethics, and global citizenship inside and outside the academia, addressing at the same time both scholars and comics fans. Critical practices must be put to the service of our societies with the hope of producing some (beneficial) change, even if not immediately visible in the short run.

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