

CLEMENT BALOUP'S *MÉMOIRES DE VIET KIEU*
EXPLORING THE VIETNAMESE DIASPORA(S)

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In his tetralogy *Mémoires de Viet Kieu*, the graphic artist Clément Baloup reconstructs past – individual and collective – (his)stories and the retrieval of the memory of a stateless (South Vietnamese) community that has been scattered across different continents. Each volume deals with a different group. The use of diverse temporal and spatial experiences to recollect a complex diasporic experience has the effect of countering the image of the emblematic victim. The focus on different diasporic groups not only highlights how the immigrants' experiences differ depending on the host country, but it also shows how this diasporic movement did not originate with the Vietnam War. It demonstrates that the centrifugal and centripetal forces that link the Vietnamese diasporic community are the direct consequences of different layers of colonialism, which extends well beyond America's *imperium*. These “bandes dessinées” (BDs) explore the opportunity of imagining a community that is not coextensive with a nation-state. Transnational narratives of the Vietnamese diaspora reveal the interplay between memory and migration by investigating the migration of memories and memories of migration as well as their ethical/moral implications.

Keywords

Diaspora; Vietnam; BD; Memory; Ethics

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Documenting the memory of a dispersed community

In his tetralogy *Mémoires de Viet Kieu*, Clément Baloup reconstructs individual and collective past (his)stories of a lost South Vietnamese community. His work ambitiously tries to collect and connect the stateless memories of a community that has been scattered across different continents (America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania) during and after the war. The loss of the war and the disappearance of South Vietnam triggered the need to stage a return to both a past and a geopolitical entity that no longer exist. South Vietnam was «a nation without its own history, culture, heritage and political agenda» (Espiritu 2005, 313). It was born out of the US Cold War policy of containment, fears of Soviet intervention in Indochina, the domino theory, and old colonial strategies. However, the focus 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» (Bui 2018, 2). Yet, the tetralogy also features non-southern experiences that preceded the conflict, showing that the Indochina Wars were just the latest tragic event in Vietnam’s long history of colonial oppression and occupation.

Each volume deals with a different diasporic group. The first, *Quitter Saigon* [*Leaving Saigon*], tells the story of four Vietnamese refugees who settled in France between 1945 and 1975, whereas the second, *Little Saigon*, recalls the experience of Vietnamese refugees in the US. The third, *Les Mariées de Taiwan* [*Taiwan Brides*], which reveals the dreadful fate of Vietnamese brides who were sold to Taiwanese men during the Nineties, has a different structure from the first two volumes: it focuses on a single story and is divided into multiple sections, each of which opens with a one-page testimony by a different Vietnamese woman. The fourth volume, *Les engages*

de Nouvelle-Calédonie [*The New Caledonia Volunteers*], narrates the story of the Vietnamese migration (1891–1939) to New Caledonia, a French overseas territory. Although this event predated the First (1945–1954) and Second Indochina (1955–1975) Wars, these conflicts had effects on the diasporic community, stimulating revolts against the French colonial power, encouraging the return to a now independent Vietnam, and prompting many diasporic Vietnamese to sever their ties with their motherland. Finally, an unnumbered volume, *Les Lính Thợ Immigré de force* [*The Lính Thợ Forced Immigrants*], co-created with the journalist Pierre Daum, deals with the sacrifice of Vietnamese immigrants who were relocated to France during World War II.

The recourse to different experiences to evoke a complex diasporic event has the effect of countering the image of the «emblematic victim» (Nguyen 2002, 122). Even though these stories share the same themes (i.e. exile, migration, hunger, resettlement, fear, trauma, violence), they cannot be reduced to a single pattern if not on a superficial level. Each experience is unique; yet, when taken together, these stories compose a complex mosaic. As Daniel Heath Justice argued:

Yet even in more exclusive contexts that insist upon singularity over multiplicity, the privileged category of the moment is always in flux — it's inevitable, as the complication of the world and its myriad relations evade these simplistic categories, and stories find their way free to disturb the status quo. (Justice 2018, 37)

Inevitably, the notion of multiplicity is inherent in kinship and calls for an approach that embraces difference. To achieve this goal, Clément Baloup focuses on the portrayal of a collective experience more than on the (re)construction of the event from a personal perspective. He authenticates his work by presenting external testimonies in it rather than engaging in self-questioning practices. The narrator's credibility is thus established by his documentary research. Given that the narrator, author and protagonist are not always the same person throughout the narrative¹, Clément Baloup's works deviate from the narrative conventions of the autobiographical graphic novel (El Rafaie 2012; Kunka 2018) and transition towards

¹ Although the author is not the protagonist of the stories included in these “bandes dessinées”, he is represented as a character listening to other people's experiences.

the modes of graphic journalism and documentary comics (Nyberg 2012; Chute 2016; Mickwitz 2016; Duncan *et al.* 2016; Schmid 2021) because the author uses a mosaic of experiences gathered through interviews².

The main theme is introduced by the history of his father. Baloup's choice to begin with a personal story stimulates a sense of «involvement» and «affiliation», prompting readers to imaginatively enter situations and engage with people and values that might be alien to them (El Rafeie 2012, 181). Yet, the BD soon starts to narrate the stories of other people with whom Clément Baloup has no kinship, but towards whom he feels responsible because of a shared History and ethnic ties, describing an active network of connections and mutual care, and accountability. The expansion of the “circle of we” – as the author moves from his family's history to that of his community, and hence from a personal postmemorial (Hirsch 2012) narrative to graphic journalism – might be seen as an attempt to strengthen «thick relations» (Margalit 2002, 7)³. However, the personal connection to the subject of inquiry should not be seen as an element undermining the objectivity of the «memory project» (Leavy 2007). Graphic journalism often does not seek objectivity but honesty, giving voice to the powerless and clearly explicating the journalist's point of view⁴. Furthermore, the hybrid nature of the medium allows it to imagine the journalist's (optical and emotional) perspective while inserting him into the story, and to portray the literal framing of the narrative (Chute 2016, 208). Hence, these “bandes dessinées⁵” (BDs) metanarratively show how an event and its representation create a negotiable space for intervention, as the author mixes documentary with fictive elements and imaginatively reinvents stories that he did not experience first-hand in order for the reader to easily enter them.

²This narrative solution is completely different from the one adopted by other diasporic artists, such as Thi Bui (2017), Marcelino Truong (2012; 2015), and G. B. Tran (2013).

³ According to Avishai Margalit (2002, 7), «[t]hick relations are grounded in attributes such as parent, friend, lover, fellow countryman. Thick relations are anchored in a shared past or moored in shared memory. Thin relations, on the other hand, are backed by the attribute of being human».

⁴ For a detailed discussion of this approach to journalism, see Sacco (2012) and Worden (2015).

⁵ I decided to use the French term for comics in order to avoid the co-optation of these south Vietnamese narratives into an American one.

Various artistic solutions highlight this mediation. The BDs alternate realism with expressionism. In certain instances, human bodies and colors are radically distorted to achieve an emotional effect, evoking moods and/or ideas. Whereas the BDs employ realism when reproducing iconic photographs and the witnesses' lives, visual metaphors, as well as animalistic and gothic images, are used to portray imagined and real threats. For instance, in one of the stories, Nicole's inner demons are portrayed as real ones. Using gothic tropes, the BD portrays monsters driving her insane by asking her to surrender herself to their anthropophagic and sexual will (Fig. 1). The scene resembles an infernal orgy where carnal pleasure is replaced by fear⁶. Terror is rendered through hatching and figures emerging from the darkness.

In contrast, in the following panels, hope is embodied by a crucifix looking down on the observer. The bottom-up perspective implies that salvation is the result of divine mercy. Hence, expressionism is used to move away from factual events and inhabit the traumatized psychology of the victim. Moreover, Baloup uses «vibrant, expressionist color to portray the present and black and gray to visualize the past, differentiating the artist's conversations with the Viet Kieu he interviews and their memories» (Dong 2021, 266)⁷. In the first two volumes of the tetralogy, Baloup breaks this pattern in certain instances, to show the interpenetration of past and present. This feature is abandoned in the last two volumes. This choice might be due to the fact that the third instalment deals mainly with a single story⁸, while the fourth one adopts the codes of historiography and not those of journalism⁹.

The recollection of diasporic memories is not an easy task, as it involves movement across time, space and languages that extend beyond the point of origin of the migratory waves¹⁰.

⁶ The scene hints at rape.

⁷ While my work builds on the studies of Dong (2021), Nguyen (2018) and Chevart (2017), this essay focuses on the whole tetralogy in order to examine the ambitious ethical project underlying Baloup's work.

⁸ This BD is set in a dreamlike scenario and Baloup uses a somber palette and abandons any commitment towards realism to shield the reader from the harsh reality.

⁹ In this BD, Baloup uses bright watercolors and adopts a realist tone.

¹⁰ To acknowledge this multicentred nature of diasporic memories, the essay quotes from the original French version of the BDs in an attempt to avoid framing of the Vietnam War as an American narrative.



Figure 1: Baloup, Clément, Little Saigon, 2nd edition, La Boîte à bulles, 2016, p. 221.

The Vietnamese diaspora is here narrated through the visual recreation of the accounts of the witnesses. Baloup's informants do not provide a comprehensive and exhaustive narration of the events but anecdotes about them, often mixing personal, traumatic memories with mundane ones. The arrangement of the stories that compose these BDs does not follow a linear and chronological order, and «[w]hile this arrangement might seem structurally uneven, it represents the messy lives and after-lives of immigrants and refugees» (Dong 2021, 265). This polyphonic reconstruction of the past (and present) shows how collective memory draws its strength from people who remember and how, in turn, each individual story is constructed in relation to a group and the way it represents itself. Memory is made meaningful not just by the faithfulness of testimony or the authority of the narrating voice, but by its ability to circulate within a system of collective memory (Bojadzija-Dan 2011). This mosaic is well depicted by the collage of portraits that appears at the end of the second BD. Each piece features a distinct face. Some are intentionally left blank, representing those people who could or did not want to share their stories. This page symbolizes Baloup's project: the composition of the pieces of the mosaic mimics the grids used by the BD to arrange its narrative. Hence, the BD – but also the blank spaces separating the panels and experiences – infers that we should always interrogate what we know and see.

Therefore, the making of these BDs reflected an opportunity to bring together a community that was not coextensive with a nation-state. This is important because it complicates the traditional understanding of memory as an *in situ* phenomenon. Whereas place retains an important function (as a longed-for point of origin), its role must be reconfigured through the lenses of migration. Indeed, «movement is what produces memory» (Creet 2011, 10). In particular, these BDs explore how memory and migration interplay with each other, generating two different phenomena: the migration of memory and the memory of migration.

Migration, memory and community

Baloup deals with shared experiences of trauma and how people can feel united through «their lived experience of place» (Bennett 2005, 137). His BDs engage in a relational project that connects a diasporic community to a place it can no longer inhabit but that still haunts its imagination. These empathic connections are made possible by a shared experience of trauma. This memory project, then, shows how trauma is not just a personal experience but a socially constructed one (Alexander 2012).

Baloup's BDs illustrate that cultural memory can transcend the spatial limits of the nation, as the evoked memories oscillate between Vietnam and other nations; although diasporic South Vietnamese people are now spread all over the world, their identity-forming memory is still intact. In this regard, it is important to note that the preservation of the memories of this stateless community is enabled by and reliant on globalization and media technologies, making them «transnational and translational» (Bhabha 1994, 172). Baloup's BDs not only record different experiences but also facilitate their worldwide diffusion. This dissemination and the general power of images can create empathic connectivity (allyship), facilitating the entrance of these memories into public accountability¹¹. Obviously, an empathic response should not be taken for granted; rather, when we engage with a panel, we imaginatively start to inhabit the represented world. As Kate Polak stated:

there are several levels by which readers perceptually connect with the comics page, including traditional physical level (like turning or scrolling), physical-mental levels (embodied simulation and attention to point of view), as well as the imaginative levels in which readers fill in connections. (Polak 2017, 7)

Hence, we could question how the point of view created by the image communicates to the reader and how it shapes/complicates their understanding of history¹².

¹¹ These memories no longer pertain solely to the private domain but demand to be addressed by a collectivity. Thanks to mass cultural technologies, it has become increasingly possible for people to appropriate memories that are not their own (Landsberg 2004).

¹² In this regard, it is worth pointing out that while the current scholarship (Cohn and Paczynski 2013; Cohn and Kutas 2017; Calabrese *et al.* 2021) features some promising investigations into the cognitive aspects

The ability of images to move an international audience is addressed in the prologue to the first volume. The first sequence, opening with the second reprint of the BD¹³, attempts to write the private histories that follow into the broader history of the country, symbolized by a series of iconic photographs. The first image is an adaptation of Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl*. Baloup reappropriates this image by drawing it using a palette of shades of blue and grey, but he also acknowledges its international reception and power in creating international indignation. A caption at the bottom of the panel states the following: «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»¹⁴ (Baloup 2016a, 3). Clément Baloup uses Ut's photograph to exploit its «power to shock» (Sontag 2008), enraging and disturbing the viewer. This image is particularly powerful because it shows the devastating effects of war through the body of a child. Here, the image is used to attract the reader's attention and enhance their knowledge of the conflict as the comic uses the tool of 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, which is presented as a visual, sequential narrative. However, the caption reminds the reader that this photograph is not located in a neutral environment but in a highly charged one: the War Remnants Museum. This is a government-operated museum, and the Socialist Vietnamese state uses it as an instrument of propaganda¹⁵. Ironically, the museum's transformation into a tourist attraction implies a retelling of the history of Vietnam and, since its main source of income comes from those who lost the war, certain aspects of that story must be silenced and/or changed to make it more

of visual and comics literacy, there are still gaps in our knowledge about the reception and impact of graphic narratives.

¹³ The first edition counted sixty-four pages, the second one ninety-six, and the third one 110. For a complete discussion of the differences between these three editions, see Nguyen (2018).

¹⁴ «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».

¹⁵ The Communist Party built the War Remnants Museum at the former site of a French villa in April 1975. It served to display documentation of the atrocities committed by the American and South Vietnamese governments. The museum's name underwent several changes, testifying to the evolution of the political relations between the US and Vietnam (Schwenkel 2009, 164).

palatable (Schwenkel 2009). 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* (Diasporic Vietnamese), to whom Baloup's work is dedicated, is a symbol/reminder of such contradictions. As Andrew Lam explained, «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» (Lam 2005, 12).

Globalization turns war memories into commodities that can be bought by tourists. Indeed, the BD depicts foreign visitors commenting on Ut's photograph and comparing it to Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Moreover, photographs (and other images) complicate the presumed distance between the audience's involvement and that of the victims, especially in the modern era, when wars have also become «living-room» experiences (Hallin 1989). Consequently, the representation of traumatic experiences through images raises ethical concerns: viewers must recognize the difference between their condition and the victim's suffering (without adopting a patronizing or voyeuristic stance), while they must also acknowledge the victim's humanity. At the same time, an ethical representation should avoid the framing of suffering as «entertainment» at all costs (Butler 2016).

Being aware of the «ethics of seeing» (Sontag 2008; 2004)¹⁶, Baloup's BD resists these appropriations of war images by complicating their embedded narrative through sequentiality and the medium's hybrid nature. The prologue summarizes the main events that led to the Vietnamese diaspora by reproducing photographs representing the French colonial era, the Japanese invasion, the US military intervention, the fall of South Vietnam, the exodus by boat of millions of Vietnamese and their relocation to new countries. These fast sequences of images mimic the way photographic reportages of wars recollect conflicts. In contrast, the interviews that constitute the core of the first instalment of the tetralogy, *Quitter Saigon*, have a unique pace as they

¹⁶ As Sontag (2004; 2008) demonstrated, photographs teach us a new visual code, raising questions about the ethical pertinence of an image, asking the viewer what is worth looking at and what one has the right to observe, and being aware of the relentless contemporary diffusion of vulgar and appalling images.

play with a rhythm, accelerating and slowing down the story. The visual narration regularly pauses to focus on marginal (sometimes even lyrical) elements that do not make the story progress. This stasis is often obtained through images imitating the style and/or content of (post)impressionist paintings (Fig. 2).

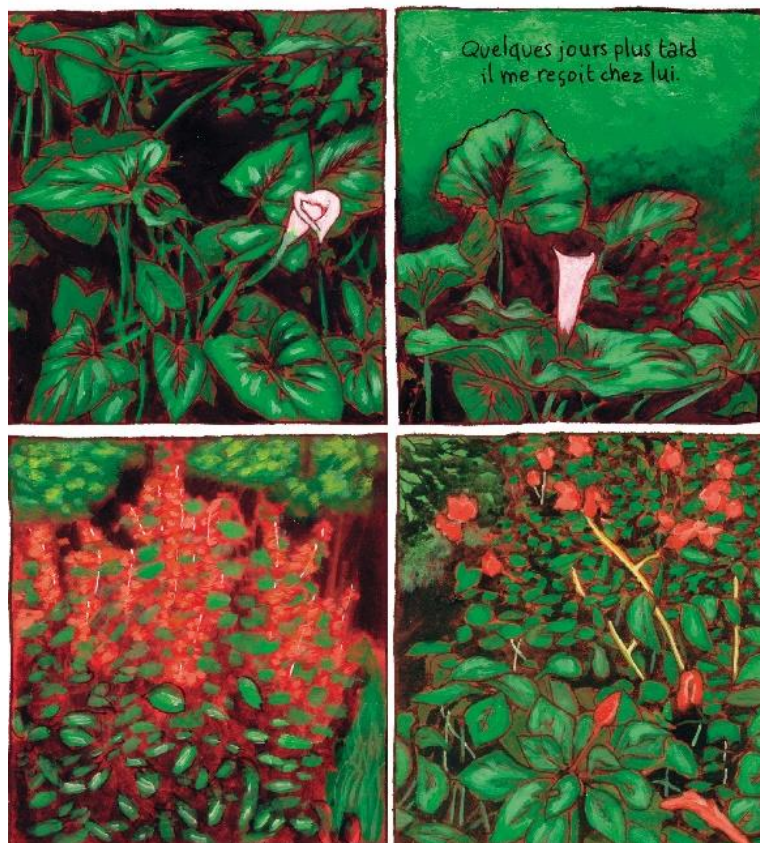


Figure 2: Baloup, *Clément*, *Quitter Saïgon*, 3rd edition, *La Boîte à bulles*, 2016, p. 23.

Baloup's panels sometimes «resemble impressionist paintings, using textured brushstrokes to represent shadows and shades» (Chevant 2017, 8). Yet, the remediation of (post)impressionism is not limited to pictorial techniques but also concerns subjects, such as exotic gardens (cf. Monet) or bathing women (cf. Degas, Renoir, Cézanne). The normal passing of time is, instead, rendered through the engagement with realism. Expressionism is linked to emotional turmoil and psychological investigations. Obviously, strong feelings disrupt the flow of time, imposing a subjective dimension on it¹⁷. This contrast between fastness and slowness

¹⁷ Needless to say, these reflections on the subjectivity of time indirectly evoke the works of Proust and Bergson.

betrays an underlying criticism of the superficial media coverage of traumatic events, as it often forgets to represent those whose lives were destroyed by History¹⁸. Pictures also represent trivial aspects of daily life in war zones (e.g. shrimp peeling, children playing with bullet cartridges found in 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 of the war and its aftermath, but fragments of memories linked together by Vietnamese people's reimagining of a lost country. For Vietnamese people, the fall of Saigon did not mark the end of the war as it generated diasporic movements and tore their society apart. The BD acknowledges the presence of (at least) two memories of this event by using two different toponyms to refer to the same place: Ho Chi Minh City and Saigon. Indeed, every memory calls forth a counter-memory. At times, the division spread even across family members and/or had to be «accommodated within a single individual» (Tai 2001, 190).

This duality is also present in the recollected stories. The first volume features the story of Mr. Nguyen, a survivor of Vietnamese re-education 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 South Vietnamese government. The BD describes the intense political indoctrination enforced by the guards through sleep deprivation, re-education classes and starvation. When Mr. Nguyen regained his (limited and regulated) freedom, he decided to escape from Vietnam with his wife.

Poignantly, this memory is juxtaposed with that of André, a man who fled Vietnam to escape the repressive policies enacted by the South Vietnamese government. In his story, the police brutalized students who celebrated a (failed) coup attempt against President Ngô Đình Diệm. Thus, the BD shows how the South Vietnamese government repressed all forms of opposition to the regime. After half

¹⁸ This technique can also be observed in Joe Sacco's comics (Chute 2016).

of his class was arrested, André's parents decided to send him out of the country. By displaying these two memories next to each other, Baloup engages in what Nguyen (2016) defines as the «ethics of recognition»: he portrays the wrongdoing of each side (which both repressed dissent) and avoids assimilating these experiences into a narrative that can be easily consumed by the reader as there is no clear-cut line separating good from evil.

However, the acknowledgement of the evil committed by each side does not equal amnesia or being blind to the ideological differences between the parties at war. *Little Saigon* (2016), the second instalment of the tetralogy, tells the story of YẾN, a woman who was imprisoned for trying to escape the country five years after the end of the war. She wanted to reunite with her sister, who had migrated to the US during the war, but she only managed to achieve her dream after the relationship between the US and Vietnam 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 US. There, they faced difficulties, but they were free. Thus, at the end of her story, YẾN makes the following observation:

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 sera libre. (Baloup 2016b, 177)¹⁹

Baloup's BDs show the connection between the local and the global, and they advocate for social justice on an international scale. They show an awareness that globalization can be a source of social inequalities. Whereas the first volume features "successful refugee experiences", giving the reader a reassuring image, the other volumes also deal with the memories of less "successful" situations.

The stories featured in the second and third volumes clearly illustrate how gender, class and race serve as a gatekeeper of one's possibility of success. The nation where diasporic Vietnamese citizens chose to relocate determined the characteristics

¹⁹ «Well, despite all the everyday difficulties and the deep disappointment, when I see her ever 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 be free».

of these enclaves, but also the way in which these people remembered their traumatic past. Even though memory gives continuity to the dislocation caused by migration, it is always linked to the present and subject to negotiation. Being a social phenomenon, memory is not fixed and has to adapt to new contexts whenever it migrates from its original habitat. In *Little Saigon*, Baloup argues that Vietnamese Americans are more reticent about the conflict than the community living in France. This might be explained by the fact that American society is equally trying to heal from the wounds left by that war, an aspect that is also addressed in the BD. Nicole's second husband was a US Navy marine who suffered from schizophrenia. During one of his crises, he pointed a gun at Nicole, thinking that she was a Communist spy. She convinced him to put the gun down and spare her life. He eventually committed suicide by shooting himself in the forehead. The scene is rendered through a close-up that makes it difficult for the viewer to clearly see who is holding the gun (Fig. 3). The composition of this image seems to restage a famous scene from the movie *Deer Hunter* (1979) and Eddie Adams's *Saigon Execution*. Like the subject of the original photograph, Nicole's husband is both a victim and a victimizer. This visual parallelism highlights that this conflict still haunts the American psyche.



Figure 3: Baloup, Clément, *Little Saigon*, 2nd edition, *La Boîte à bulles*, 2016, p. 243.

The BD also shows that, in America, the diasporic Vietnamese community embraced conservative values and old generations support the Republican Party. This endorsement is mainly due to the community's resentment against Communism. However, the BD mocks this attitude by showing George W. Bush using the derogative term «niacoué»²⁰ to address his audience (Baloup 2016b, 143). Furthermore, it illustrates the friction between older generations and LGBT Vietnamese American youth. This is particularly interesting because queers 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» (Bui 2018, 117). In *Little Saigon*, the gay character of Antoine criticizes the older generation for refusing to accept the queer community, arguing that the elders have a narrow and exclusive definition of community.

The American setting allows for the discussion of the lacerating experience of war from a pan-ethnic perspective. Owing to the American «racial formation» (Omi and Winant 2015) and its prolonged history of racism, the Vietnamese American experience is entangled with that of other diasporic Asian communities. The visit to ethnic enclaves (e.g. 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 tourists. Anh describes Little Saigon and Japantown as commercial centres, that is, «non-places» (Augé 1995 [1992]) where people can transit to different cultures without any real commitment. However, places still exist outside these «non-places» and tend to reconstitute themselves inside them. These enclaves also preserve important memory sites, like the “Japanese American National Museum”, which contains archival material about the Japanese American Internment. This pan-ethnic perspective allows Baloup to enlarge the field and observe how the Vietnam War affected neighbouring countries like Laos and Cambodia. The BD recollects the presence of these ethnic groups in the US as they too had to escape because they had supported the Americans. However, the BD illustrates how these groups were not

²⁰ “Gook”.

able to live the American Dream because poverty cast them at the margins of society and many young people joined criminal gangs.

Les Mariées de Taïwan [*Taiwan Brides*] (2016c) tells the stories of Vietnamese women who married Taiwanese men to financially support their families. This bride migration is interrelated with the diasporic waves triggered by the war in the previous decade. These stories about marriage migration are reminiscent of Nguyen Du's early nineteenth-century poem *Truyen Kieu* [*The Tale of Kieu*]. It 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 plot devised by a brothel owner to force Kieu into prostitution. As Viet Thanh Nguyen observed, «[t]he Tale of Kieu became the classic of Vietnamese literature because [...] Kieu's plight was read as a political allegory for Vietnam itself» (Nguyen 2002, 121).

Retrieving the past, imagining the future

The last volume of the tetralogy, titled *Les engagés de Nouvelle-Calédonie* [*The New Caledonia Volunteers*] (2020), narrates the memories of Vietnamese immigrants who resettled in 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 in New Caledonia's mines. Poverty was the main cause of this flux to New Caledonia, which Vietnamese people symbolically named Tân Thế Giới²¹. 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 in Indochina. However, the working conditions were particularly harsh and resembled slavery. Rebellions against the colonial power were sedated through violence and bloody suppressions. As Baloup shows in his BD, the tensions between Vietnamese workers and the colonial employers escalated after Hô Chi Minh declared independence on 2 September 1945. All around the island, Vietnamese laborers

²¹ "New World".

started to strike, inspired by Communist values. In their eyes, Vietnam's independence symbolized the possibility of overthrowing, or at least challenging, the colonial power and regaining their rights. During a strike, one protestor was killed by a military police officer, leading Vietnamese workers to raise the red flag with the golden star, which was the same flag that appeared in the uprising of 23 November 1940 against French rule in South Vietnam.

The BD also shows the dilemma that the immigrant community living in New Caledonia faced after the independence of Vietnam: 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 persecution by the Communist regime that had recently took power in North Vietnam. Many second-generation Vietnamese also decided not to leave the country they had grown up in to move to a place they had no ties to or memories of. 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 BD 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 managed to preserve their cultural heritage.

All stories featured in *Les engagés de Nouvelle-Calédonie* (2020) are introduced by a quote from official documents narrating the poor conditions and the racial bigotry that Vietnamese people had to endure. For example, the first story, *Mauvaise fille*²², opens with the citation of a letter to the governor of New Caledonia, written in 1933 by the police commissioner of Nouméa.

Les Indochinois sont en majeure partie de faible constitution, et d'un rendement passable pour les employer. Ils sont d'un caractère intrigant, vindicatif, et peu expansif ; la majorité d'entre eux sont menteurs, joueurs ou buveurs, quelques-uns voleurs et batailleurs, mais craignent néanmoins l'autorité et ils se soumettent assez docilement à nos lois et costumes. (Baloup 2020, 8)²³

²² "Bad Daughter".

²³ The majority of the Indochinese have a delicate constitution, and their productivity is hardly satisfactory for the employers. Their character is scheming, vengeful and reserved; the majority are liars, gamblers and drunks, and some are thieves and quarrelsome, however, they fear authority and they easily submit to our laws and costumes.

The BD counters official colonial history by contrasting the narrative presented in the paratext with the content of each story. Hence, The BD reminds the reader that the meaning of the past is controversial and must be negotiated among the different groups that compose our societies. In the BD, this negotiation process is symbolized by the contrast between text and paratext.

The focus on this diasporic group not only emphasises the fact that the immigrants' experiences differ depending on the host country, but it also shows how the Vietnamese diasporic movement did not originate with the Vietnam War. The BD demonstrates that the centrifugal and centripetal forces that link the Vietnamese diasporic community are the direct consequences of different layers of colonialism, which extends well beyond America's *imperium*, going back to the Chinese, French and Japanese colonization/occupation of the territory. Baloup's memory project, then, seems to come full circle, probing the argument that was embedded in the photographic exhibition depicted in the first volume.

Finally, the BD not only denounces colonial violence and exploitation but also shows the gradual hybridization of the colonies. Hybridity is an important concept because it prevents the construction of essentialized hierarchies; it presents a liminal space that exceeds barriers and boundaries. 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 the "métis". Thus, culture is not presented as a static and essentialized entity but as a dynamic one. The marginal and hybrid individual is the key figure of modernity: they represent the contacts between cultures. They complicate our understanding of identities as constructed by an encounter between the "self" and the "other".

Transnational identities and the moral and ethical challenges of memory

Transnational narratives of the Vietnamese diaspora claim a discursive space in which the assumptions of national sovereignty no longer set the frame against which

to read cultural texts. In Baloup's BDs, this «global mélange» (Pieterse 2009) is embodied by different forms of intercultural osmosis and hybridity. One of the most visible manifestations of this phenomenon is the “métis”. André (one of the informants of *Quitter Saigon*) recalls that, as a boy, 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»²⁴ (Baloup 2016, 44). However, the reactions to these features were mixed: Vietnamese women admired his hair, other children mocked him and the Japanese soldiers occupying Saigon tried to capture him because they thought he was French.

Similarly, the story of Abel recalls that many “métis” left Vietnam after the First Indochina War because of what might have happened to them without the tutelage of the French. After all, they were the enemy's “progeny.” Aware of the situation, the French government allowed these children to be relocated to France. They were placed in special centers named CAFI, Centres d'accueil des Français d'Indochine²⁵, together with Vietnamese who had strong personal ties to France. These centers perpetuated colonial violence as the people in charge of security were old colonizers. Despite the hardship of the new context, many of these Vietnamese managed to regain a sense of normalcy.

Symbols of cultural hybridism also resurface through details. In the first story of *Quitter Saigon*, Baloup wears a bright t-shirt with “Marseille” written on it. This is where Baloup decided to settle but it is also the port city through which people from the (former) colonies arrived in France. Thus, Baloup's BDs visualizes the two types of movements: the first is the journey of the colonial powers to conquer a foreign exotic land; the second is the «voyage in» (Said 1994), that is, the arrival of immigrants and exiles in (former) colonial centers and empires. However, this movement is not merely geographical as it entails a desire to rewrite the history of the colonial relations between France and Vietnam. This desire is particularly evident in Pierre Daum and

²⁴ “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”.

²⁵ Welcome centers for the French citizens of Indochina.

Baloup's BD *Les Lính Thổ Immigré de force* [*The Lính Thổ forced migrants*] (2017), which narrates the arrival of the first Vietnamese immigrants in France during World War II. People from the colonies were coercively brought to France to cultivate paddy fields. As Baloup states at the beginning of this BD, this historical occurrence is largely ignored by the French public. It was only on 4 October 2004 that the institutions acknowledged it through the creation of a memorial in the village of Salin-de-Giraud, in the Camargue delta. This lack of knowledge explains why Baloup decides to start his BD by remediating an old photograph of Indochinese laborers planting rice in the Camargue in 1942, which serves as evidence on which he builds his narrative²⁶. Interestingly, a yellow filter is used for the panels set in Vietnam before the forced relocation.

Hybridity is also present the artist's visual style. Baloup incorporates the European tradition (e.g. French impressionists and fauvists but also the Italian illustrator Lorenzo Mattotti) in traditional Vietnamese art (McKinney 2013). This exchange opens a new window on the global *mélange*, testifying to the presence of crossover (artistic) culture. Whereas Baloup appropriates the codes of late nineteenth — and twentieth — 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 restaurants²⁷. Hence, Baloup's BDs acknowledge the presence of different forms of globalization to indicate the unevenness, asymmetry and inequality of global relations.

However, the “métis” and the notion of hybridity can also be interpreted as challenges to fixed interpretations of communities, demanding a further expansion of “the circle of we” and public accountability, encouraging the formation of what

²⁶ This photograph was also the element that sparked Daum's interest in this neglected history. Unlike in previous BDs, the validation of the narrative is not attributed to Baloup's field research (represented through his presence as a character interviewing witnesses and sketching what he saw was a constant element) but to Daum.

²⁷ This process implies the homologation of cultures due to globalization. As the homonymous restaurant shows, a formula can be extended to different realities with little variation.

Alexander (2012) defined as a «global civic sphere». Baloup's BDs ask the reader to evaluate the event not just on a local scale, but globally. The diasporic movement allowed for the formation of an extranational network of stories, which share a fair amount of similarities. These new transnational trajectories mirror what scholars – building upon Goethe's idea of "Weltliteratur" – have come to define as «World Literature» (Benvenuti and Ceserani 2012). In this scenario, World Literature is not just the consequence of globalization but also an ethical/moral challenge. The task of Baloup's BDs is to conceptualize, in non-reductive ways, the multilayered and transnational dimension of the Vietnamese diaspora, involving different points of view without favouring any and acknowledging the sufferings of different factions. Whereas Baloup seems aware that he cannot bear the burden of giving a comprehensive narrative of the diaspora, he nonetheless acknowledges the value of varied, decentered approaches and encompasses experiences/points of view that might diverge from his own.

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