

RESEARCH

Black Bleeds and the Sites of a Trauma in GB Tran's *Vietnamerica*

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'The gutter' is the space between panels where panel transitions happen—readers fill in the blank space by connecting panels to make sense of the story. In GB Tran's *Vietnamerica* (2010), however, black gutters become part of black 'bleeds' (pages congruent with single panels in them) to portray the sites of a trauma. This article argues that if bleeds, as Scott McCloud claims, can depict timeless space, they could also represent the sites of a trauma where the memory of the past is intervened by the future interpretation of the memory. In *Vietnamerica*, the panels in black in a waffle-iron grid are simultaneously black gutters and a black bleed, where reinterpretation of trauma takes place as speech balloons are later imposed on the same recurrent waffle-iron grid. While Cathy Caruth's trauma theory helps read Tran's black bleeds as the sites of a trauma, the latter also extends Caruth's notion of 'traumatic awakenings' since the black bleeds as the sites of a trauma turn into the places of reconciliation and healing.

Keywords: Bleed; Cathy Caruth; GB Tran; Trauma; Vietnam War

Introduction: Black Bleeds

In the graphic memoir *Vietnamerica*, GB Tran (2010) depicts his grandparents' and parents' stories revolving around the Japanese Invasion of French Indochina and the Vietnam War. In particular, Tran's father, Tri, experienced traumatic events while he was in Vietnam. In the center of Tri's trauma is the absence of his father, Huu Nghiep, who left the family to help the cause of North Vietnam. To illustrate Tri's misunderstanding of and reconciliation with Huu Nghiep Tran uses black gutters, which are also part of black bleeds.

'The gutter' in comic books means the 'space *between* the panels' (McCloud 1993: 66, his emphasis) where 'closure' happens—the reader has to '*connect* [the moments between the panels] and *mentally construct a continuous, unified reality*'

(McCloud 1993: 67, his emphasis). For instance, if there is a panel with a man about to slay another, followed by a panel with a scream, the reader sees an invisible scene of murder in the gutter, the space between the panels (McCloud 1993: 66 and 68). 'Bleed' refers to an effect in which 'a panel runs off the edge of the *page*' and '[t]ime is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the *closed panel*, but instead *hemorrhages* and escapes into *timeless space*' (McCloud 1993: 103, his emphasis). Tran's unique use of black bleeds can be understood in view of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory on 'traumatic awakenings.' That is, Tran repurposes black bleeds to represent Tri's trauma and traumatic awakening (i.e. the sites of his trauma in Caruth's term)—Tri is awakened to his previous inability to see his father's care for him in time. Yet, Tran's black bleeds could also reread Caruth in that the black bleeds signify not only his trauma and traumatic awakening but also the places of reconciliation and healing. In the very black bleeds as the sites of Tri's trauma, Tran shows the process of Tri's reinterpretation of his trauma by filling in the black space with his new understanding of Huu Nghiep.

Tri's trauma is about Huu Nghiep's absence and Tri's consequential suffering. Huu Nghiep left home to help North Vietnam when Tri was a baby. To protect his family and himself from the South Vietnamese government, Huu Nghiep stopped contacting his wife. However, the South Vietnamese government abducted and tortured Tri while assuming that the latter knew Huu Nghiep's whereabouts. This experience seems to have negatively affected Tri's first marriage. After the Vietnam War, Tri and his family immigrated to the US to protect themselves from any political revenge. Believing that Huu Nghiep abandoned his family, Tri refused to communicate with his father for almost two decades although the latter started to contact the former after the Vietnam War. When he finally visited Huu Nghiep in Vietnam, however, Tri realized that his father could not come back home because his political enemies were after him. Learning about these stories, Tran employs black gutters and black bleeds to depict Tri's trauma and the sites of his trauma.

The black bleed in **Figure 1** signifies Tri's trauma while three separate time periods are juxtaposed and portrayed in different styles. In the first style—or *ligne claire* as Earle (2014) views, the left-side page of **Figure 1** illustrates when Tri was dating his soon-to-be bride in bright colors. At the top of the right-side page in **Figure 1**,



Figure 1: Tran, GB (2010) *Vietnamerica* (London: Villard, 88 and 89) © Gia-Bao Tran.

there are panels on Tri's first wedding and newlywed life in a second style with more detailed contours and a color scheme similar to the first one. These panels turn out to be his flashback while he is in a prison cell. In the left corner of the top of the same page, the white background from the left-side page could signify that Tri's flashback to his happy memories with his first wife *bleeds* into his (un)conscious while he is tortured in the cell. Thus, the happy memories before Tri's first wedding invade the black bleed, which depicts the cell with crosshatching and dark color scheme in a third style. At the same time, in the form of the three vertical black lines, the black bleed illustrating Tri's incarceration also invades his wedding scene in the first panel of the right-side page in **Figure 1**. Stemming from the scene of the prison cell and significantly dividing Tri's first wife in the wedding scene, the black bleed foreshadows that his first wife would leave him sometime after this torturous moment.

Similarly, Tran uses black bleeds to represent Tri's trauma elsewhere. After **Figure 1** comes another figure of Tri's first wife divided by a horizontal black line. Like the vertical black lines in **Figure 1**, this horizontal black line is part of the black bleed page, which depicts Tri's return after being released from the incarceration. In the next page, there is a small single panel with Tri alone in the middle of a black

bleed page, which continues to the next black bleed page with no images or words. Juxtaposed with his first wife divided by the aforementioned horizontal black line, this black bleed with Tri in the single panel could signify Tri's trauma caused by the torture in **Figure 1** and the breakup with his first wife. Significantly, this break up seems to be the aftermath of the torture: Later, in a black bleed page, a panel with the window in the prison cell similar to the one in **Figure 1** comes with a description that his first wife did not understand his actions; this panel suggests that stemming from his experience in the cell, Tri's incomprehensible actions eventually led to the break up.

Additionally, Tran uses black bleeds to signify trauma in nine consecutive pages of black bleeds, which come right after the scenes depicting the traumatic process of Tri's family leaving Vietnam after the war. Among the nine pages of black bleeds, the six pages are completely black as if visualizing the scope and depth of trauma that Tri and his family experienced during that time.

In this fashion, Tran extends the conventional function of gutters by using them as bleeds to signify Tri's trauma. Some might view what I call black bleeds in *Vietnamerica* as black gutters (see Earle 2013). Yet, Tran's use of crosshatching in **Figures 1** and **2** emphasizes the black gutters as the extension of the black bleed pages. Tran's unconventional black bleeds have not received any scholarly attention. In her article, *Traumatic Analepsis and Ligne Claire in GB Tran's Vietnamerica*, Harriet E H Earle (2014) briefly mentions Tran's use of 'dark coloration and black gutters' for Tri's first flashback in **Figure 2**, but she does not discuss further how Tran uses black gutters like black bleeds.

Tri's 'Traumatic Awakening' and 'Sites of His Trauma'

In addition to Tri's trauma, the black bleeds I discuss below can signify his traumatic awakening to his previous failure to see Huu Nghiep's care for him in time considering the general definition of trauma. Trauma 'is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena' (Caruth 1996: 91). With no contact with Huu Nghiep for over fifty years,



Figure 2: Tran, GB (2010) *Vietnamerica* (London: Villard, 24 and 200) © Gia-Bao Tran.

Tri could not fully understand his own predicaments, which were aggravated, if not caused, by his father's absence. With this limited understanding, Tri must have pieced together some information available to him throughout time, for which experience graphic narratives are great media. Being 'by definition fragmented narratives,' as Brandy Ball Blake (2010) claims, graphic narratives have '[s]everal features' that 'enable them to replicate [traumatic] symptoms.' That is, '[i]solated pictures, divided by a gutter, tell a fragmented story, and the audience has to put that story together and fill in the blanks' (Blake 2010). In this vein, the space between isolated panels (gutters) can signify the informational gap in understanding traumatic events as if the gutters were blanks for the audience to fill in. In *Vietnamerica*, this informational gap, which is represented in the black bleeds in **Figures 2–3**, caused Tri to misunderstand Huu Nghiep and delay their reunion for about two decades.

Tri's awakening to his misunderstanding of Huu Nghiep could be understood as the sites of his trauma through Caruth's reading of 'a dream told by Freud' (Caruth 1996: 92). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud analyzes a father's dream in which the father saw his dead son burning and saying, 'Father, don't you see I'm



Figure 3: Tran, GB (2010) *Vietnamerica* (London: Villard, 193) © Gia-Bao Tran.

burning?' (Caruth 1996: 99; Freud 1961). In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth rereads Freud's and Jacques Lacan's readings of the father's dream. For Freud, the father's 'dream keeps the father asleep,' whereas for Lacan it awakens the father to his son's death (Caruth 1996: 99). In Lacan's analysis, the

dead son complains about the father's sleep ('Father, don't you see I'm burning?'); and 'the dreamer [the father] confronts the reality of [his son's] death from which he cannot turn away' (Caruth 1996: 99). Caruth sees the father's bond to the child and his regret that he did not see the child's death in time (Caruth 1996: 100). For her, 'To awaken is thus precisely to awaken only to one's repetition of a previous failure to see in time' (Caruth 1996: 100). In other words, '[t]he force of the trauma' is not only the son's death but the father's inability to see his child's death early enough (Caruth 1996: 100). Thus, '*[a]wakening ... is itself the site of a trauma*' (Caruth 1996: 100, her emphasis). For Tri, awakening to the fact that he did not see his father's good intentions in time becomes the sites of his trauma.

Tran's use of black bleeds for the sites of Tri's trauma illuminates Petar Ramadanovic's view of the time of trauma as *future* since reinterpretation of trauma happens later in the black bleeds. Based on his reading of Maria Torok's *The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse*, Ramadanovic claims, 'repetition compulsion is constituted not in the past but in the future' in that 'the past will take place in the form of future restoration because it provides only a substitute, which sets the mechanism that keeps the repetition compulsion going on and on' (Ramadanovic 2014: 4). That is, through reenactments, flashbacks, or dreams, trauma survivors with repetition compulsion revisit their traumatic events, which are not petrified but more malleable incidents depending on the survivors' interpretations in the future. Since bleeds, as McCloud claims, can depict 'timeless space,' they could represent the sites of a trauma where time is fluid in that the memory of the past is interrupted and invaded by the present interpretation of the memory. If 'trauma connotes a disruption of the continuity between the present and the past' (Ramadanovic 2014: 2), then figuring out the missing panels, which are simultaneously the black gutters and black bleed in **Figure 1**, could be reinterpretation of trauma, which happens in the future.

Tran portrays this process of reinterpretation of trauma – Tri's misunderstanding of Huu Nghiep and his realization of this misunderstanding – as the sites of Tri's trauma, i.e. his 'traumatic awakening' in Caruth's terms (Caruth 1996: 91). The left-side page of **Figure 2** is introduced when Tran and Tri visit Huu Nghiep's house in

Vietnam and find Tri's painting there. This left-side page explains Tri's background as an artist in Vietnam and flashes back further to his childhood memory of Huu Nghiep's absence. In the left-side page of **Figure 2** on the third row of panels, Huu Nghiep's absence during Tri's childhood is embodied as a shadowy man standing next to or biking behind Tri's younger self. When Tri finally met and talked with Huu Nghiep more than twenty years after the Vietnam War, he saw his painting at Huu Nghiep's house and learned that his father picked up his belongings while searching in vain for Tri and his family after they had left for the US. Later on, after Huu Nghiep's death, Tran asks Tri how Tri's painting got to Huu Nghiep's house. Despite knowing the answer, Tri's silence could signify his traumatic awakening in regards to the painting: the painting is a token of Huu Nghiep's care for him and a reminder that Tri had not seen his father's desire to be reunited with his family in time and delayed their reunion by ignoring his letters for almost two decades. Indeed, his father's absence was to protect his family and himself from the South Vietnamese government, and Huu Nghiep tried to find them after the war. Tri's silence about his painting in Huu Nghiep's house thus could suggest Tri's awakening to his own failure to see the truth about his father in time.

Tran depicts this site of Tri's trauma as the missing panels (i.e. panels in black) in **Figure 2**, which are part of the black gutters and black bleeds where the process of reconciliation and healing is also represented. In **Figure 2**, in the two waffle-iron grids in which 'all the panels are identical in size and shape' (Groensteen 2013: 138), the black gutters become part of the missing panels that eventually belong to the black bleeds. These black gutters and black bleeds portray the lack of information for Tri, which caused his misunderstanding of Huu Nghiep. In the right-side page of **Figure 2**, Tran shows the *fill-in-the-gutters* (missing panels) process for Tri to reinterpret his own trauma. The left-side page in **Figure 2** comes after the scene with Tri's silence about his painting at Huu Nghiep's house. Here, Tran portrays Tri's story of how he 'became a rising star in Vietnam's art scene' (Tran 2010: 24), but had to leave all his paintings behind right after the Vietnam War. Later in the graphic memoir comes the right-side page in **Figure 2**, preceded by panels in which Huu Nghiep tells

Tri why the former could not come back to his family until the war ended and how he found some of Tri's possessions at Tri's house after the war.

If the black bleeds (or the black backgrounds as some might call them) could represent the sites of Tri's trauma in regards to his painting and his father, the missing panels (panels in black) with crosshatching in the middle signify the missing information about his painting after Tri left for the US. Once Tri finds his painting by chance at Huu Nghiep's house while receiving his old coat and Huu Nghiep's canteen, the black bleed including the missing panels is interrupted by the speech balloons as in the right-side page of **Figure 2**: To Tri's question, 'Is there anything else you want to give me?', Huu Nghiep answers, '...', 'No' (Tran 2010: 200). Speechless with surprise to see that Huu Nghiep continued to care for his family and even saved his painting from loss, Tri seems to ask the question not only to get his painting but also to break his silence and hide his sense of guilt for misunderstanding his father. Simultaneously, Huu Nghiep's holding onto Tri's painting reaffirms his love for Tri. As if they were palimpsests or dubbing, these speech balloons for the words of Tri and Huu Nghiep are thus imposed on the right-side page of **Figure 2**, almost the identical page of which appears earlier in *Vietnamerica* as in the left-side page of **Figure 2**. In this fashion, Tran visualizes the process of reconciliation between Tri and Huu Nghiep while literally *filling in the gutters* with the speech balloons.

Similarly, Huu Nghiep's flashbacks *fill in* the black gutter and black bleed between the panel of Huu Nghiep's younger self and that of Tri in **Figure 3**. In **Figure 3**, which precedes the right-side page in **Figure 2**, the panels in the first two rows are flashbacks of Huu Nghiep, whose memory had not been known, but is now revealed to Tri: Huu Nghiep kept track of how Tri and the family were doing, but could not contact them because they were watched by his political enemy. Thus, the bright, uninterrupted space between Tri and Huu Nghiep in the last panel in **Figure 3** implies that the chasms between Huu Nghiep and Tri, represented in the black gutter and black bleed in the penultimate row, are bridged. This black gutter and black bleed between the antepenultimate and penultimate panels also signifies the information missing to Tri since Huu Nghiep left home until this moment. In

contrast to the chasms represented in the black gutter and black bleed, the brighter color of the last panel signifies reconciliation between Huu Nghiep and Tri.

To Tell 'What It Means Not to See'

While Caruth's trauma theory could help read Tran's unconventional use of black bleeds, his black bleeds could also reread Caruth's trauma theory: although Caruth's '[a]wakening ... is itself the site of a trauma' (Caruth 1996: 100, her emphasis), Tri's awakening becomes not only the sites of his trauma but also those of reconciliation and working through the trauma. Tran depicts the sites of Tri's trauma as missing panels, which are part of black gutters and black bleeds. As observed earlier, the black bleeds in **Figure 2** with the missing panels could mean the lack of information about Huu Nghiep's good intentions for his family. When Tri realizes his misunderstanding of Huu Nghiep, these black bleeds become the sites of Tri's trauma. Here, while literally *filling in the gutters* with the speech balloons, Tran visualizes the process of reconciliation between Tri and Huu Nghiep. In **Figure 3**, the black gutter and black bleed between the panel with Huu Nghiep's younger self and the one with Tri symbolizes the breach between them, which is bridged in the next panel where Huu Nghiep and Tri are in the same, bright, unseparated panel. Here is also the site of Tri's trauma where Tri is awakened to his previous inability to see Huu Nghiep's love for him in time. Thus, Tran turns the sites of trauma into those of healing and reconciliation, thereby extending Caruth's notion of 'the site of a trauma.'

Black bleeds are not only for Tri's trauma and his reconciliation with Huu Nghiep. Tran also uses black bleeds to portray his own awakening similar to Tri's. Tran's repetition of presenting Tri's painting throughout *Vietnamerica* could suggest that it is this painting as a token of Huu Nghiep's care for Tri, which Tri has not seen in time, that 'commands' Tran 'to awaken and to live... as the seeing of another' failure of seeing in Caruth's terms (Caruth 1996: 105). Caruth points out that after reading the father's dream told in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the same event—a death of one's own child—happened to Freud and Lacan in their real lives. Lacan in particular experienced 'a revelation-like *opening* of his own eyes by another' or 'awakening' rather than 'seeing-too-late, a not-seeing of the traumatized child' (Caruth 1996: 110, her

emphasis). Similarly, as Tri did not see in time what Huu Nghiep had been through, consequently misunderstood him, and delayed their reunion, Tran realizes that he did not see in time (yet, not too late) what his own family had been through and how insensitive he was to them. Tran juxtaposes the following images in the two facing pages: in the left-side page, he questions his grandmother, Le Nhi, whether his mother was pregnant with his sister, Lisa, before her marriage, not knowing Lisa was his half-sister; in the right-side page, Tran recalls moments when he complained to Dzung, his mother, about his Vietnamese name and traditional Vietnamese clothes, and made fun of her accent. Then, in the last panel of the same page, Lisa's comment in a speech balloon is dubbed on the panel of flashback and the black bleed to indicate his own awakening: 'You weren't Mom's only kid giving her shit' (Tran 2010: 99). After these pages comes a panel in a non-chronological order where Tran is in high school and refuses to visit Vietnam with his parents. The way Tran portrays himself in this panel reveals his awakening that he seems to have unwittingly lost the last chance to meet Huu Nghiep by making an excuse for his disinterest in his family history: Tran's words, 'I got a lot of studying to do' (Tran 2010: 181) are ironically placed in a panel on a black bleed page where he is playing a video game. When he depicts his grandmother's death Le Nhi's suggestion in the black bleed that Tran ask his parents about their Vietnam stories because 'they won't be alive forever to answer [his] questions' (Tran 2010: 115) echoes his awakening in retrospect.

Le Nhi's suggestion that Tran ask his parents about their stories also returns later when Tran draws his parents' visit to Dzung's family in Vietnam and writes about how his parents did not know much about their own parents: 'Neither Mom or Dad had a chance to [*care for their parents as their teeth dull as in an old Vietnamese saying*]. And Huu Nghiep and Thi Mot [Dzung's mother] wouldn't be alive forever to answer their questions. So there's a lot about them they don't know' (Tran 2010: 201, my emphasis). Significantly, this voice describes the panels for the time before the deaths of Huu Nghiep and Thi Mot, but non-chronologically comes after readers learn about their deaths. Le Nhi's suggestion is thus recalled in Tran's mind to awaken him, as Caruth might have pointed out, to '*survive to tell ... what it means not to see*' (Caruth 1996: 105, her emphasis). While the tragedy of his father's family highlights

the misunderstanding (i.e. what they did not see then), the scenes of Tran's disinterest and ignorance are repeated as if they were the sites of Tran's trauma, which Tran seems to try to come to terms with by revisiting them. As the repeated images and words gain new meanings as they reappear, they become 'a departure and a difference' as Caruth claims in regards to the awakening in the father's dream in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Caruth 1996: 106). Therefore, it makes sense that while *Vietnamerica* begins with Tran and his family's arrival in Vietnam, Tran non-chronologically puts his mother's invitation to visit Vietnam at the end of the graphic memoir, which becomes *a departure and a difference*. Tran first rejects this invitation. Unpacking in his new apartment, however, Tran looks at Tri's note on a book that Tri gave to him as a gift: 'To my son, Gia-Bao Tran. 'A MAN WITHOUT HISTORY IS A TREE WITHOUT ROOTS.' –Confucius' (Tran 2010: 278). His response in the last page of the book, 'Can I still go to Vietnam with you?' (Tran 2010: 279) becomes a voice which seems to invite us readers as well to be awakened to see 'what it means not to see.'

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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