

POSTCOLONIAL ISSUES AND COLONIAL CLOSURES:  
PORTRAYALS OF AMBIVALENCE IN SHAUN TAN'S *THE ARRIVAL*

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**Abstract**

This article aims to investigate the visual representation of the connection between immigration and the construction of an Australian identity as a nation in Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006). Based on the debate about imagined communities and the ambivalence on the narration of a nation, proposed by Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha, we will discuss how *The Arrival* creates moments for the appearance of the ambivalence of cultural difference at the same time that it also constructs a horizontal imagined community. On these terms, *The Arrival* depicts some of the liminal positionality that immigrants have to deal with when they arrive in a new place, but also constructs a cohesive and homogeneous narrative that entails the assimilation of the immigrants. In other words, this work offers a closure that can be read as an assimilation of the colonial discourse for a series post-colonial issues.

**Keywords:** *The Arrival*; Post-colonialism; Shaun Tan; Australian Literature; Immigration

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, official public policies in relation to immigration have influenced the conception of what constitutes the "Australian identity", or the hegemonic understanding of that identity. With that in mind, a large number of cultural work has been done to explore the connection between this view of "Australianness" and immigration, as discussed by Graham Huggan in his *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (2007), for example. This article will focus, therefore, on the visual representation of such connection in Shaun Tan's graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006). We will explore

the ambivalence in the (post)colonial narrative, more specifically, the way in which it embraces post-colonial tropes such as displacement, while, at the same time, reinforces colonialist assumptions about the migrant experience.

As Graham Huggan affirms, "a valuable instrument for the analysis of the ideological contradiction, particularly within the varying contexts of imperialism, has been postcolonial criticism" (26). It seems that the issue of postcolonial studies is by itself a contradiction when dealing with Australian literature, for many authors argue whether or not Australia is, in fact,

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post-colonial. Such ambivalence, argues Huggan, “suggest[s] a shared awareness that colonizer/colonized distinctions are inherently problematic in former settler colonies, like Australia, which can be considered as both European and not, colonizer and colonized at once” (29). In this regard, our analysis endeavors to scrutinize how such ambivalences are made present in a work like *The Arrival*.

Benedict Anderson claims that every community is imagined “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (06). Yet, for Anderson, the imagined communities are “always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (07). For this definition, Homi Bhabha adds that the imagined community “works like the plot of a realist novel” (“DissemiNation” 226), reinforcing the notion that the constitution of the nation is a fictional narrative. The construction of a nation, thus, comes embedded in the cohesive narrative shared by its members. It is in this conjuncture that colonial discourses erase cultural differences in searching for a cohesive narration of the nation. In a hegemonic text, counter-narratives, then, expose the ambivalences that do not allow for a cohesive narrative, debunking the essentialist construction of a national identity (Bhabha “DissemiNation” 213). Moreover, Bhabha also problematizes the historical account of sequence, which suggests that cause and effect are a time response result. Instead, he proposes working with temporalities, according to the locality of culture (“DissemiNation” 200). In other words, what Bhabha recommends is a reading of nation that questions its homogeneity, synchronicity, and puts in check the cohesive storyline that promotes the construction of a horizontal imagined community.

In this process of questioning imagined communities, cultural difference becomes an imperative site for investigation. For Bhabha, “cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as ‘knowledgeable’, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification” (“The Commitment to Theory” 50). Because “meaning is never mimetic and transparent,” cultural

identification requires that the subject of proposition and the subject of enunciation find each other in a Third Space (“The Commitment to Theory” 53). In the Third Space, culture and its symbols can be revisited, reinterpreted, rehistoricized, once culture has no fixed, essentialist meanings and unities (“The Commitment to Theory” 55). So, meanings are created in this space for articulation and negotiation, which emphasize the possibilities for different readings in already established cultural contexts. To a certain extent, horizontal imagined communities can be put into question by the constituted articulation of culture in the Third Space. By doing so, cultural difference is opened to negotiate contradictions, oppositions, and ambivalences. In this sense, this article will argue that *The Arrival* creates moments for the appearance of the Third Space at the same time that it also constructs a homogeneous imagined community.

For a long time overlooked and considered a children’s genre in Australia, Tan’s graphic novel is “without doubt, [. . .] credited with popularizing the graphic novel amongst mainstream audiences” in the country (Patrick 61). His work was valued both as a children’s picture book and as a graphic novel, appealing to audiences of different ages with wide success (61). Tan, himself a child of an immigrant parent, has said that he would “like to think that *The Arrival* sits comfortably within this playful exploration of visual language and the examination of a voiceless subject by following the journey of an illiterate immigrant (who, incidentally, is modeled after [himself] in appearance)” (Accidental graphic novelist 6). Without the recourse of speech balloons, the monochromatic narrative tells the journey of a young man who leaves his wife and child behind to try a better luck in another land. As he arrives in the new country, the protagonist relies on the help of strangers, mostly other migrants such as himself, to find a home, a job, and learn the language. As Michael Boatright argues, Tan’s pictorial work is that of an “ideal immigrant narrative, one in which the main character determinedly overcomes all obstacles to become a self-made man” (471). This discourse of the “ideal immigrant,” who will assimilate into the new culture, has also been conveyed by the official policies

put forth by the Australian state, ever since the White Australia policy of the turn of the century.

“Australia is an immigrant society,” James Jupp unequivocally asserts, at the beginning of his *From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration* (2007), emphasizing later the role of the state in the formation of what he considers to be an almost unique product of social engineering (6). The White Australia policy, in effect since the 1880s but officialized in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, established the type of racial control that would prevent races other than Anglo-Saxon from entering the country legally as far as the 1950s (9). It was imperative for the state, Jupp argues, to maintain a mostly British and Irish populational hegemony in the newly founded Commonwealth nation—a necessity arisen out of the need for “social harmony,” it was argued (10). The results of this immigrational control were seen in the 1947 Census, as it pointed that only 0.25 percent of the population was composed of non-European descendants: “Australia had become one of the ‘whitest’ countries in the world outside northwestern Europe,” Jupp concludes (10). This scenario of controlled immigration continued after World War II: from 1947 to 1971, the population almost doubled, from 7.5 million to 12.7 million, a growth mostly attributed to the arrival of immigrants (14). Although there was a relaxation of the White Australia policy (it was officially repealed only in 1973, by the Whitlam government), Anglo-Irish immigrants were still favored, both by the bureaucracy and by a program of assisted passages (11, 17). This economic favoring of immigrants from Britain and Ireland was integral to the project of social engineering enacted by the state, designed to ensure the “British character” of Australia’s population, argues Jupp (16). Other nationalities and ethnicities, however, either received little to no assistance from the government upon arriving in Australia or were downright denied entrance up until the 1970s.

The rhetoric that informed the debate about immigration in that period was one of assimilation, as it was assumed the new arrivals would need to assimilate to gain acceptance into Australian society (19-20). Jupp states that

[n]on-Europeans were also discriminated against and were popularly regarded as incapable of assimilation, even when they became Christians or spoke only English. They were *unable to become naturalized and could not bring their relatives, including their wives, into Australia.* (20, our emphasis).

To be assimilated, then, one had to conform to the arriving society, an assumption that implicated a uniform culture regulating that society, one in which the immigrant must blend in imperceptibly. After 1977, and the publication of the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council report during the Fraser government, the official terminology used in relation to immigration changed from an emphasis on assimilation to the idea of “Australia as a Multicultural Society,” the very title of the report (82).

The concept of multiculturalism varies according to the context in which it is used, in Australia it indicates an effort, from the part of the state (represented by the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs Act of 1979), to

develop an awareness of the diverse cultures within the community and an appreciation of the contributions of these cultures; to promote tolerance; to promote a cohesive Australian society; and to promote an environment that affords the members of the different cultural groups and ethnic communities the opportunity to participate fully in Australian society. (86)

The Australian version of multiculturalism, therefore, presupposed the possibility of a cohesive society, one to which arriving cultures could hopefully contribute, in the process of adapting to the new common nation. Behind this assumption of a “common nation,” one can still perceive remnants of the White Australia policy in the distinction between the Anglo-Irish tradition that composed this (allegedly original and cohesive) “Australian society” and the different cultures that would bring some diversity to the mix. As James Jupp and Michael Clyne, in their introduction to *Multiculturalism and Integration: A Harmonious Relationship* (2011), argue,

The typical multicultural situation is one where there is a dominant ethnicity, usually based on early settlers, although these might also contain Indigenous or earlier communities [. . .]. The dominant ethnicity has typically seen itself as a “founding nation” even when others have been established in the modern territory for much longer but in smaller numbers. This is obviously the situation in Australia [. . .]. (xiii-xiv)

As the authors point out, the discourse of multiculturalism in Australia serves to reinforce the hegemony of these Anglo-Irish early settlers. The members of this “founding nation” position themselves as “keepers” of the “original” culture, which in turn is perceived to be in danger of being fragmented, or of being made *uncohesive*, by the arrival of these others from different cultures. Nevertheless, the criticism on the policy of multiculturalism came forth mostly from conservative politicians, such as David Barnett and Stephen Rimmer, from the mid-1980s on, who argued that the idea was too divisive of Australian culture and opposed to government expenditures on entities dedicated to minority or immigrant issues (Jupp 103). Since then, immigration and the concept of multiculturalism have continued to be hot topics in Australian politics, and, in a post-9/11 nationalist environment, the official terminology towards the issue has changed, yet again. Nowadays, the contested term “multiculturalism” has been replaced by “integration,” which in effect works as a very close euphemism for assimilation (Jupp and Clyne xvi, Jupp 41).

The increase in asylum seekers and refugees since the 1990s has also impacted the debate around immigration in Australian politics and society. Up until 1975, the majority of asylum seekers were of European descent, fleeing civil disorder or ethnic persecution in the communist regimes (Jupp 176). That scenario has changed, however, and between 1972 and 2000, a large proportion of the 400,000 refugees arrived in Australia “[were] not Christians or Jews, nor [were] they escaping from communism” (177). As Jupp argues, this increase in numbers “began to alarm public opinion and the Immigration Department. Most of the asylum seekers were Muslims and this sparked off a hostile reaction based on public belief in the link between that religion

and terrorism” (189). The opening of mandatory detention centers in isolated places, such as Woomera in 1999, and the transfer of undocumented asylum seekers to other sovereign territories, such as Papua New Guinea and Nauru, at Australian expense, were some of the repercussions of this shift in policy. The 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington only exacerbated those fears and the xenophobic rhetoric related to Muslim asylum seekers, particularly in a political scenario still coming to terms with the 1 million votes (about 9% of the total, nationwide) cast to the then rising nationalist and conservative party One Nation, led by Pauline Hanson, in 1998 (197).

This merry-go-round of terminologies and policies is emblematic of how unresolved the issue remains in Australian culture and, as our analysis will show, of its inevitable surfacing in cultural productions such as the one investigated in this article. Shaun Tan, for example, has commented on the tumultuous nature of the topic and its relation to his work. He claims

new immigrants are so often represented in the media, especially here in Australia, as somewhat anonymous and often dehumanized by a negative political debate. [He] wondered if that same anonymity could be used positively to generate empathy rather than prejudice by simply narrowing the focus to intimate details of a migrant’s life. (“Accidental” 6)

Having grown up in the outer suburbs of Perth, in Western Australia, as a child of a mixed race family, with a Malaysian Chinese father and an Anglo-Australian mother, the author credits some of the inspiration for his work to this diverse background: “there is something interesting about living in such isolated place, with parents of very different backgrounds, within a country with a brief but intense history of cultural displacement,” the author states (7). The ambivalence towards this history of cultural displacement, as a place that can be both welcoming and stigmatizing at the same time to its newcomers, is particularly relevant to the narrative of Tan’s *The Arrival*, as further analyses will show.

Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* depicts the process of an immigrant since his departure from his hometown,

through the difficulties of adapting himself into a different culture until he is settled into this new place. Both the place of arrival and departure have no names and no particular reference to a specific place, be it fictional or real. The characters do not have any names either, as if trying to stablish an idea of a supposed “universality”<sup>1</sup>. However, as noted previously, the topic of migration is closely related to the contemporary history of Australia. In this sense, it is possible to argue that at the same time that the story tries a universal approach to the topic of migration, it is also representative of the specific construction of immigration as integral to an Australian identity. In a way, this ambivalence of universal/local approach is closely related to this contradiction in Australian literature. As Graham Huggan argues,

The expectation remains, broadly speaking, that Australian literature should be identifiably Australian, but not necessarily in ways that the writers themselves, even those with conspicuously cultural-nationalist sentiment, would be likely to recognize or endorse. (7)

Huggan discusses how both “external market forces and [...] internal producers and commentators” have shaped what is now called Australian literature (6). At the same time that such literature should reach local markets, writers also search for an internationalization of their works. Taking these arguments on Australian literature into consideration, it is not only the theme of migration depicted in the graphic novel that is related to the construction of an Australian identity, but the form that this same theme is depicted is also representative of the construction of an Australian literature.

One characteristic that can be considered unique in Tan’s work is the lack of dialogues—or any kind of recognizable verbal language for that matter—in the entire story, with the clear exception of the title, *The Arrival*. The tension between verbal language and images is one of the characteristics of comics, working in the construction of meaning, as argued by many comics scholars (Charles Hatfield and Scott McCloud, for instance). Nevertheless, this work is considered a graphic novel, inserted in the genre of comics,

particularly for its use of frames in order to depict time and space. As Will Eisner once tried to define, comics can be considered a sequential art. In McCloud’s terms, “when part of a *sequence* [...], the art of the *image* is transformed into something more: *the art of comics*” (5, author’s emphasis). In Hatfield’s *Alternative Comics*, he presents comics as a series of tensions “in which various ways of reading—various interpretive options and potentialities—must be played against each other” (36). Still for Hatfield, four tensions are fundamental to comics: words vs. image, single image vs. image-in-series, sequence vs. surface, and text as experience vs. text as object. Thus, out of the four tensions explored by Hatfield, only one takes into consideration the meaning-making between image and words while the others emphasize the juxtaposition of frames and/or the techniques and styles used to construct the story.

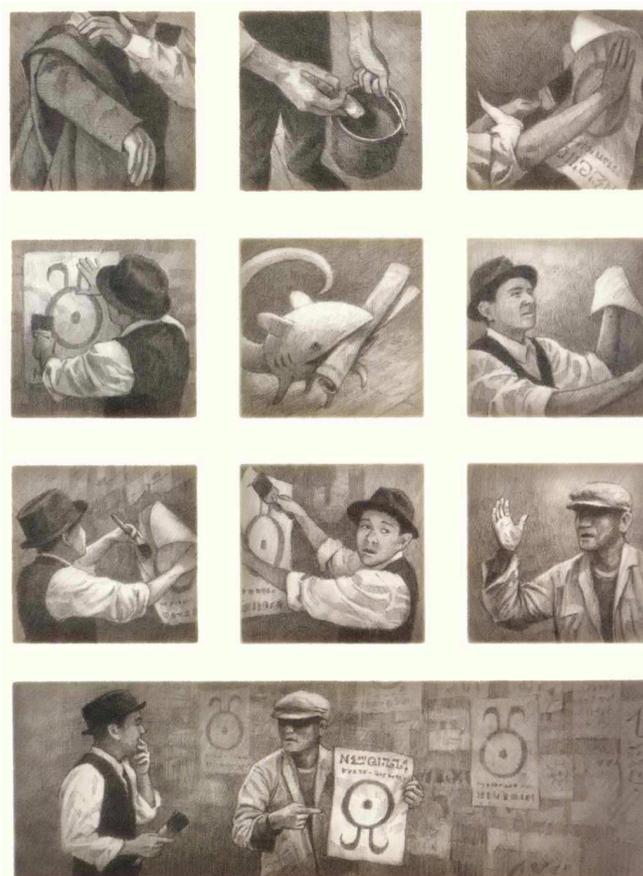


Fig.1

In *The Arrival*, the representation of the diegetic verbal language is done through pictorial signs that are as alien to the character as they are to the reader. The

signs in the streets, the maps, and the instructions about how to do ordinary actions from the daily routine, such as taking public transportation, are incomprehensible to the newcomer for they are portrayed by uncohesive and cryptic signs and symbols. In this sense, the reader follows the perspective of the immigrant when he arrives in this new place, going through some of the adversities he has to face. The feeling of displacement is, thus, portrayed to the reader through the impossibility of understanding what is happening around the protagonist, by his dependence on others for help. Many scenes can be representative of this conflict, such as the one in which he has trouble reading the map or the one in which he uses a dictionary to ask for food (in this dictionary the cryptic signs that represent the verbal language–signifier–have their meanings in the form of pictures–signified—for example, the meaning of the sign “bread” is the picture of a bread). One such scene is when the protagonist finds his first job. As is recurrent for a migrant, the search for a job opportunity is imperative for securing financial independence in a new place. Fig. 1 portrays how language can become an obstacle in this process. The close-up images in the top three frames reinforce his willingness to work hard after getting his first job: he rolls up his sleeves, takes the bucket of glue and immediately starts his task.

The detail of him stripping down his suit, a marker of middle-class status, to roll up his sleeves and expose his arms, a movement more akin to laborers of the working classes, can be seen as representative of the protagonist’s will to perform a task that perhaps in his old land would be considered as below his social rank. For five frames the narrative follows him in this activity of gluing posters on the walls until the moment he is interrupted by his boss. The boss is clearly discontent and the protagonist’s expression in the fifth frame shows that he does not understand why. The bottom frame is the largest in this page, while all the others are of the same size, giving strength to its importance. It is in this last frame that we, as readers, and the protagonist discover that he has been gluing the posters upside down. Language is an important part of any cultural context and literacy in it is crucial in the process of understanding and becoming part of this context. In

this scene, he fails not only in keeping his first job, but also in being a part of this culture. In other words, even if the protagonist is willing to give up his previous status to assimilate the culture and tradition of the new land, his problems with the unfamiliar language do not allow him to seamlessly leave his cultural and historical background behind in favour of the new context. In this sense, the ambivalence of cultural differences becomes present once both the act of taking off his jacket and the problems with language reinforce how assimilation is not an easy and homogeneous process, highlighting the impossibility of constructing a cohesive narrative of the migrant.

The official multicultural policy, orchestrated by the Australian government since the 1970s, also placed great concern on immigrants of “non-English speaking background,” as Jupp and Clyne point out (42). Despite having been a multilingual continent prior to the arrival of the first European colonizers and of having, currently, about a quarter of its population born in non-English speaking countries or descendants of such peoples, English remains the national language in a largely monolingual environment (53). For that reason, the efforts (and budget) of the Immigration Department in those days were allocated in most part to the teaching of English to adults recently arrived in the country. According to Jupp and Clyne,

Language has been a key issue in all Australian policies towards settlement of migrants and their families. *Assimilation* policy and public attitudes required them to learn English very quickly and to stop using their first language, especially in the public domain. [...] provision for English as a second language instruction has been an essential part of any *integration* policy in Australia, before and after its proclamation as a *multicultural* society as an act of *inclusive nationalism* and part of a social justice agenda. (56, our emphasis)

The perceived necessity of linguistic adaptation is seen, therefore, throughout the history of official policies towards newcomers in Australia. In *The Arrival*, as our analysis has indicated, the struggle to adapt to the new land is pervaded by linguistic

concerns, which corroborates the assumptions of the multicultural policies towards migrants in Australia. As the protagonist begins to conquer those linguistic obstacles, as he starts to learn the foreign language, his difficulties lessen considerably until he is seen as “integrated” into the new community. But until then, the lack of a common language is presented as crucial in the challenge of facing the strange and unfamiliar world of the new land. Ironically, the importance of verbal language is stressed in a work that is absent of it.

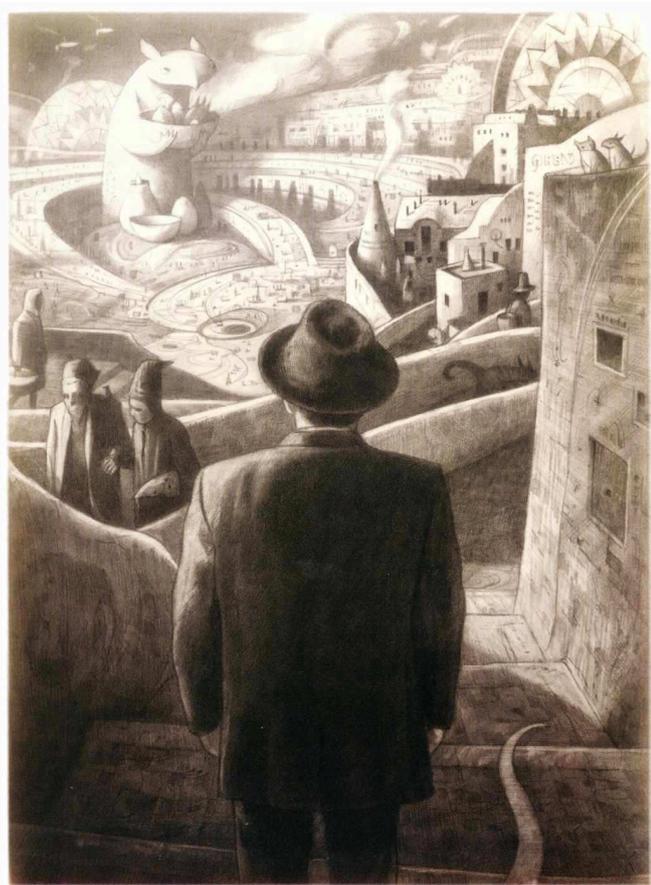


Fig.2

The unknown faced by the protagonist is reinforced by the fantastic depiction of the new place. Animals, transportations, technologies, vegetables are very specific from this fictional land. The reader learns about this place along with the protagonist. Ordinary features from daily life receive a surrealistic turn, transforming something that is supposedly familiar in this new uncanny element. Differently from the initial depiction of the departure land, the place of arrival is brighter, more modern, sophisticated, and organized

while the former is darker, outdated, constructed as haunted, with a continuous feeling of fear and despair. For instance, in Fig.2, the perspective depicted in the frame is that of the protagonist, as if the reader is seeing through his eyes. In this perspective, the light is focusing on the landscape, the protagonist is walking out of the shadow, symbolically leaving the darkness behind him. The scene is composed by some buildings with curvilinear shapes, people and animals are part of the ambience, and smoke is coming out of a chimney. All these elements create the idea of movement, of a living and breathing place. The position of the protagonist in the frame suggests he is walking into this gracious and fascinating new place. The landscape is composed entirely of unknown sights and elements; however, the brightness and liveliness seem to attract this new immigrant. On the other hand, in Fig.3, from the first chapter of the book, a composition formed by similar elements contrasts that perspective. This page portrays the place of departure: the protagonist’s hometown. It is noteworthy that this homeland only appears in the first chapter. From the second chapter on, the book focuses on the arrival moment and on the new place. In this frame, the characters are smaller in relation to the setting; the buildings are dark; the shadows are all over the frame and the characters cannot escape the shadows. In the sky, monstrous creatures surround the place. The buildings reproduce an oppressive structure, creating the feeling that the characters are being observed. Even though the characters have their backs to the reader, it is possible to infer that this is a scene of terror, fear, despair, and lack of hope. Comparing these two passages, it seems that the known land for the protagonist is a place of powerlessness while the site of hope and power is located in the unknown territory.



Fig.3

The size of the characters in the frame is another feature that reinforces the potential for agency—or the lack of it—in each scene. In the new land, the portrayal of the protagonist occupies more than half of the frame. He is positioned up, looking down, in relation to the place—he is even on the top of the stairs. He is in an upright posture; his body language does not indicate a fear of the unknown. In this sense, he is ready to conquer the place, to face the unknown, to be a part of it. Contrarily, in the scene in the departure place, the two characters are depicted occupying less than one third of the frame. They are the smallest elements in the scene; the buildings, the empty street, the monsters in the sky, and the shadows are more imposing than the two figures. They are in a lower position in relation to the setting, looking up to the monstrous scenario. The size of the characters, then, supports the claim that the darkness, powerless, fearful, and hopeless position belong to the past, to an old place, to an old life. For the protagonist, the hope rests in facing the present,

the new place, the new life, and, comparing these two frames, he does so from a powerful position.

The protagonist's is not the only journey towards this new land described by the narrative. As the story unfolds, the protagonist discovers, along with the reader, that he is not alone in his status as immigrant. The woman that helps him figure out how to navigate the transportation system in the new town, in Chapter III, is the first to share her story: she reveals this by presenting her own foreign visa—an artifact indicating that she too is an outsider. For the first time in the story, a flashback, characterized by different, more obscure aesthetics, with colors and framing reminiscent of old photographs, is presented as a narrative technique. The flashback portrays the woman in a much younger age, being abducted from home, forbidden to study (a book she was carrying is depicted locked in a drawer) and taken into forced labor. She is seen as one among many, working tirelessly feeding a furnace, an image evocative of child labor amidst the Industrial Revolution. She eventually breaks free from captivity, steals the book back, and escapes that place on board a train. Symbolically, the book represents education and the smoke from the furnaces, then a sign of oppression, is replaced by the smoke from the train, in the opposite page, indicating the type of “positive” progress that takes her to the new land.

On his next encounter, still in Chapter III, as the protagonist continues to unravel the unfamiliarity of the new land, he meets a man and his son, who teach him the mechanics of the local food, such as how to eat and purchase certain vegetables and fruits. To communicate they use gestures and point to places where one could get the different kinds of food and, in the midst of this dialogue, a misunderstanding leads the protagonist to draw a picture of his homeland in a notebook, signaling the contents of the menacing drawing as the reason for his vacillating attitude. The stranger, then, reading into the protagonist the status of fellow immigrant, is lead to share his own tale of displacement. In this new flashback, preceded by a series of close-ups of the stranger's face, each frame gets closer to his face and expression, culminating in the close-up of one of his eyes, which reflects the burning fires evidenced by his memories in the following pages (Fig.4 and Fig.5).



Fig.4

civilized sophistication. Instead, the action of the gigantic figures chasing down the miniscule creatures on the streets resembles a primitive hunt for vermin—a visual analogue to the discourse of ethnic cleansing that often compares the persecuted people to common house pests, such as mice (Jews in Germany during WWII) or cockroaches (Tutsis in Rwanda during the 1992 genocide), for example. Although the narrative does allude to the visual metaphor of vermin being wiped out, it does not condone it, in our opinion; for, in the image, the ones dehumanized are actually the persecutors instead of the persecuted. The size of the creatures and the concealment of their faces under cyclopic helmets render them monstrous—a subversive flipping of the old prejudiced metaphor. In the stranger’s flashback, the concept of ethnic cleansing is further materialized through the literality of the immense vacuum cleaners, sucking the runaway people as they attempt to flee. The position of the colossal figures in the frame indicate the systematic way in which such actions were carried out, a sweeping of street by street, with the periscopic vision of the “cleaners” careful not to leave anyone out. In this scene, there seems to be little hope for those fleeing: for the city in the darkness is being consumed by flames whose smoke occupies the whole upper part of the frame, while the light means being in the spotlight, i.e. the aim, of the oppressive figures. Nevertheless, the stranger and a woman manage to escape by hiding in a manhole, just as a huge boot passes by them. The rich architecture of the city transforms into a cold and empty labyrinth, the flashback narrates, and they eventually manage to smuggle themselves out. In the two final pages of this flashback, the contrast of the old place and the new is evident both by the setting—ruins and rubble as opposed to a city full of life and people—as by the color scheme. The former land is engulfed in dark tones, the only glimpse of light is seen through the clouds as they sail away, whereas the shore in which they arrive is portrayed in a full frame whose warm colors, in juxtaposition with the grey scale of the previous images, signify the welcoming feeling related to the new land.



Fig.5

The images in the stranger’s flashback convey the idea of genocide. The fire shown in his eye, in the frame of the preceding page, is seen here as burning entire sections of a city as well as coming from the backpacks of the monstrous figures purging the land. The burning place seems urbanized, with stylish edifices resembling cathedrals and castles, but the scenery is not one of

The final flashback of the narrative, in Chapter IV, tells the story of an old man whom the protagonist

meets as he tries to cope with the grueling routine of his new job at a factory, a repetitive work reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. The old man's flashback puts him in a much younger age, as his regiment is leaving a medium size village or town. He looks excited and the troops are showered by flowers thrown by people from the windows. The sequence of pages that follows the regiment after they depart for war is revealing of the use of space to convey the passing of time in comics. The first page is composed of a series of small frames of equal size, four rows with three images each: all portraying the legs of a soldier and the terrain he is walking on. The first row depicts walking at a slow pace, on a paved lane, bricks, and sand. The second introduces a rougher terrain; some climbing is involved. The third row brings new elements; they walk through water and get muddied—the final frame of this row portrays the hand of a dead body as an obstacle the legs have to walk through. In the final row the legs become blurred: they are running frantically, it seems. As the reader moves through the first set of frames to the last, the colors get darker and the distinctiveness of the lines gets weaker. The following page, a full frame, maintains that feeling of blurriness: several soldiers are depicted with bayonets in hand, running towards battle, amid a cloud of smoke. The opposing page, another full frame, ominously suggests the fates of those soldiers: in a mostly dark field, several skulls, bones, and other body parts can be devised. In sum, the sequence of pages and frames suggests first the distance travelled, then the turmoil of battle, then death. The flashback narrative then returns to the figure of the old man/young soldier, first portraying only his lower body and revealing he has lost a leg during the war. In a sequence of frames similar to the previous ones before battle—four rows, of three frames each—he is seen stumbling back into town, with crutches, falling down and getting up. The final page of the flashback, a full frame, portrays him alone facing the ruins of what was once his hometown.

The contrast of representation between the old and the new lands in these flashbacks is specifically relevant to this investigation. The inclusion of other migrant stories as such creates a pattern for the narrative in which the old place is systematically depicted

as inhospitable and the new one is presented as welcoming and nurturing. In all three flashback stories, at least one full-page frame depicts the characters as powerless in the face of oppression in their native lands (Fig.6). Going back to the argument presented earlier in this article, that size matters in the visual narrative, in the fellow migrants' stories one can perceive the recurrence of that configuration. The insignificance of the characters in relation to their environment is evidenced by the composition in each frame and the three selected images are emblematic of the lack of personhood experienced through their flashbacks. The chimney sweeper seems a replaceable clog in a machine of laborers. The scared couple fleeing genocide looks walled in by the cold totalitarian state. The war veteran feels disoriented as he faces the futility of his sacrifice in the now extinct landscape. Their smallness is, therefore, symbolic of their lack of agency.

On the other hand, the act of telling their own stories gives them the power of being in control of their narratives. Despite the lack of a common language and the need for negotiations in order to communicate with each other, they share their experiences, making meaning from others' historical backgrounds. The act of telling and listening to the stories is indicative of Bhabha's Third Space, where cultural differences are articulated, revisited and rehistoricized. In the Third Space of *The Arrival*, the monstrous creatures are the persecutors; a book is constructed as opposed to forced labor; and the idea of nation as previously known is questioned and eventually destroyed. The stories are, then, constructed through pictorial depiction of shared storytelling between different immigrants, with different languages and different backgrounds.

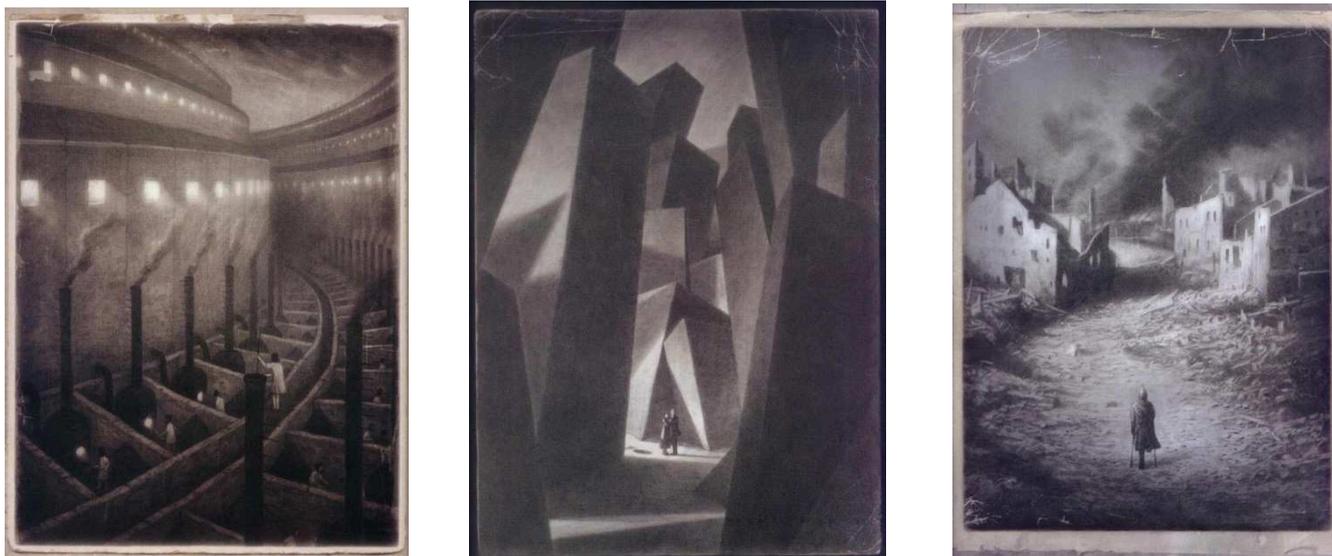


Fig.6

As the series of flashbacks indicates, although the story is namely about *The Arrival*, the departure is frequently a site for debate. The work is continuously comparing past and present, the new and the old place, as we have already seen in different passages. In the protagonist's tale, this contrast can be further perceived in the scenes of the family together in the kitchen. In the first chapter, as the protagonist is preparing to leave his native land, the first full page frame suggests the emotions involved in his parting: the main character and his wife are standing in the kitchen, with downcast eyes, suggestive of the gloomy and sorrowful mood of the scene (fig.7). The luggage, representing the departure, is on the table, and over it, they are holding hands. Still on the table, there are two cups, a kettle with some hot beverage, and a paper that is probably the ticket. The presence of their child is marked only by three drawings affixed on the wall. On the shelf, an origami bird, some bottles, and a clock are among the few possessions. The furniture is composed solely by the table, three chairs and a stove. The disruption of the familiar order is suggested not only by the body language of the characters, but also by the empty chairs while the characters stand over the luggage.

The last chapter of the narrative brings a very similar scene, though marked by a distinct mood than the previous one. In this later image, the kitchen is much more alive, filled with decorations, machines, the child is seated at the table with the family, and, on the floor,

their pet is part of the scene; they are smiling, happily (fig.8). The characters have food on their plates. On the shelf, a family picture, plants, and another origami from a different animal. On the wall, many pictures made by the child are hung. Following the same pattern as the rest of the depictions of the new land, this kitchen is also more alive than the dark, dingy, old kitchen, a feature evidenced by the color scheme that portrays the new room in much more inviting light. The protagonist is giving some money to his daughter and asking her to buy something, indicating their change of fortunes: once destitute, they can now even afford to pamper their child. At the end of the protagonist's narrative, this entire ensemble represents the good fortune of this migrant family. Again, in this comparison, the life in the new country is full of joy, while the old one is sad and depressed. Migration, it appears, has solved all the problems of this family. The protagonist, who migrated ahead of them, was able to secure employment and learn the ways of the country before sending word for the rest of his family to follow him into the new life. Now, together, they can resume their family life; they can all sit at the table, with no worries. The fact that the setting is in a kitchen, with the family having a meal around the table, is also very representative of the traditional nuclear family. The immigrant was able to bring his family into this new, fantastic, surrealistic place. He overcame the problems imposed over him in the new land, ensuring a happy ending for him and his family.



Fig.7



Fig.8

In a way, the protagonist is the cohesive immigrant; he adds to the supposedly cohesive multiculturalism of a community formed by people from different heritages, which can be related to the aforementioned policies of the Australian state. The stories related in the narrative corroborate this notion of cohesiveness in the new land. Each immigrant now contributes to the new society and helps to form a diverse community of peoples, with different origins, that, nevertheless, compose the unity of this new society. The promised land, in *The Arrival*, really lives up to that promise: all the characters find a safe haven in the arriving place. Even though the attempt at a cohesive depiction of the migrant experience is not enough to prevent the surfacing of cultural differences in some moments—in the portrayal of the historical background of some characters and in the troubles with language, for instance, the impossibility for a coherent imagined community leaks from their stories—the main narrative reinforces the construction of a homogeneous imagined community.

The optimistic picture portrayed of the new land is one that welcomes these people, where one, if willing to work hard, will find employment, support, and, eventually, a new community. When relating the story of *The Arrival* with the politics and policies from Australian immigration processes, as mentioned in the beginning of this article, the fact that he is able to bring his family into this new land also suggests that he is—from an official perspective—the “preferred” type of migrant, the one who will, in fact, assimilate. He is, in other words, the “perfect” migrant, the one who will add to the idea of cohesive society which he is coming into. Shaun Tan has stated that often new immigrants are represented in pejorative terms, a type of characterization that the author set out to deconstruct through his own approach at an anonymous tale of a migrant’s life (“Accidental” 6). The nameless portrayal of a migrant in *The Arrival*, however, rings deceptively optimistic: in this narrative, composed of several stories of migration besides the protagonist’s, the difficulties are surmountable and the migrants count on each other to conquer a new space that, in turn, sanctions their presence. Racism and prejudice, for example, are only perceived in the “before” stories, as is serious

financial difficulty or social inequality. The new land seems to have only rewards to offer to newcomers, a misleading narrative when it comes to the actual stories of a number of migrants in the world. The migrants' stories in *The Arrival*, for example, do not feature forced confinement in isolated camps or even the denial of temporary visa status, both common elements in tales of asylum seekers and refugees in current day Australia.

It is possible to affirm that *The Arrival* proposes the discussion of some post-colonial issues dealt by immigrants when they arrive in a new place, such as trying to understand the complexities of cultural differences and negotiating meanings in a space in which the subject of proposition and the subject of enunciation are not necessarily sharing the same symbols and signs. Nevertheless, in order to overcome the immigrant feelings of displacement and the liminality imposed by the immigrant position, *The Arrival* ends up creating a horizontal imagined community, formed by comradeship, to use Anderson's terms. In opposition to the construction of a homogeneous community, Bhabha argues that to allow cultural difference to take place, the narrative must be always incomplete, open, and in continuous articulation: "Designations of cultural difference interpellate forms of identity which, because of their continual implication in other symbolic systems are always 'incomplete' or open to a cultural translation" (233). Instead of a possible openness, the enforced closure of the story hereby analyzed is representative of the assimilation of the protagonist by the homogeneous narrative of the nation that, now, he considers himself a part of. In this sense, the solution brought by the story to the problems faced by the immigrants has a colonialist outcome—colonial in terms of an imperialist and hegemonic perspective rather than the historical use of the term. The cohesive narrative of the protagonist constructs the idea of an also cohesive society. By enforcing a closure to the situation of the immigrant, *The Arrival* depicts a family that would be the "perfect" immigrants by the lenses of the colonialists, reinforcing the colonialist discourse of a cohesive multiculturalism.

## Note

1. We are putting "universal" between quotes precisely to emphasize our criticism on the idea that such universality exists and to highlight the hegemonic discourses that constitute such notions of universality.

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