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Towards a vocabulary of displacement and utopian possibilities: Reading Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* as a crossover text

Keywords

Abstract

Taking Shaun Tan's The Arrival *as a case study, this article examines how the idea of 'crossing over' goes beyond the mere mixing of characters and worlds that currently defines the 'crossover' phenomenon in the jargon of comics studies. More specifically, I probe how the term 'crossover' is connected to issues of fragmentation, dis/connection and dis/continuity, and thereby argue that it shares similarities with the concepts of dislocation and hybridity that have animated the debates of postcolonial literatures and diasporic scholarship for decades. Following that line of reasoning, then, I explore how in engaging with historical and translinear spatio-temporal relations,* The Arrival *moves between worlds and genres in order to destabilize fixed or preformatted aesthetic and cultural norms and traditions. Drawing on Françoise Král's study of*

contemporary diasporic fiction, Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory' and Graham Huggan's exploration of 'travelling theory', I show how The Arrival *visually and thematically articulates 'migratory aesthetics' and 'diasporic tropes' in order to reassess how the parameters of memory, time and place overlap and interact. In so doing, I maintain that Tan's graphic narrative presents a chorus of migrants' memories and experiences through which the personal, the collective and the historical intersperse. Finally, I conclude that in enacting the ramifications and consequences underlying the concept of 'crossing over', Tan's narrative opens up a new space that not only questions the dogmatic national container, but retains utopian possibilities as well, including how reaching out to the other helps challenge binary models such as us/them, colonizer/ colonized and nature/mankind.*

In this consideration of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006a) as a 'crossover text', it is necessary to begin with an exploration of the term 'crossover' as it is becoming an increasingly complex one. Whilst familiar to both scholars and fans of popular culture, the term conveys a number of meanings. In what follows, I will briefly examine some aspects of the crossover including its implications in regards to themes, genres, as well as audiences and will, in a few words, explore its ramifications with the spatio-temporal continuum.

In his study of metalepsis in TV series, Erwin Feyersinger defines the crossover as 'an intertextual transgression between fictional worlds that seems to be included in a larger joint world' (2011: 127).[1] This is reminiscent of how, in relation to mainstream comics, a crossover commonly implies that different fictional worlds and/or characters blend into a single narrative. The trend has enjoyed considerable popularity in superhero texts which often cast multiple costumed characters engaging in battles against evil in various titles or story-arcs, often resulting in epic-like narratives. Unsurprisingly, publishers have cashed in on this trend because this type of crossover 'compels readers to buy connecting issues of other series to completely understand the larger story', sometimes including subplots and spin-offs (Pustz 1999: 14). Likewise, Jeffrey A. Brown perceptively observes that a crossover constitutes 'a marketing strategy' that is intended 'to boost sales of inter-related series' (2001: 39).

This definition, however, is incomplete. Overlapping with the mixing of various personae and settings is the idea that a crossover text inevitably 'rais[es] questions of dis/continuity' and 'complicate[s] spatio-temporal relations' (Dony 2012). It is therefore not surprising that the idea of 'crossing over' 'finds resonance outside the realm of […] fantasy and escapist storylines, particularly in comics engaging with postcolonial notions such as dislocation, transnationalism, and cross-cultural encounters' (Dony 2012). Following that logic, then, one could use the term 'crossover' to describe works such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000–2003), Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006)

1. It is worth noting here that in music, however, a crossover star or song is one that moves from one genre (and its audience) to another. The term has often been employed with a negative connotation of 'selling out'. Most notably, Sam Cook, an African American singer best known as the 'King of Soul', was a successful crossover artist who moved from singing sacred gospel music to secular pop. In the process, however, some claimed he partially reduced the 'blackness' of his musical style for a style that was more attractive to white consumers.

2.	This list is not meant to be exhaustive. Works such as Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2000) or Derek Kirk Kim's *Same Difference and other Stories* (2004), for example, could also be included in the latter.

3.	Beckett argues that crossover literature has acquired an increasingly important status thanks, for example, to the cross-generational success of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books. For a similar line of reasoning, also see *The Crossover Novel* (2009) by Rachel Falconer.

or Jessica Alba's *La Perdida* (2001–2005), which all present protagonists torn between cultures and locations experiencing unsettlement and hybrid social realities.[2]

The crossover denomination can also relate to the generic features of a text. In other words, a crossover does not only refer to thematic transgressions occurring in the diegesis but can raise awareness on the boundaries of genres, and hence their permeability. As such, a crossover can be understood as a malleable form whose generic flexibility forbids any easy categorization. Connected to this idea of genre-blending is the fact that a crossover text can appeal to various audiences as well. To put it differently, the hybrid character of a crossover text often coincides with its heterogeneous reception capacities. In her discussion of children's literature, for example, Sandra Beckett (2009) coins the term 'crossover fiction' to refer to the increasing number of narratives that challenge the conventionally recognized age barriers within the fiction market.[3]

These various understandings of 'crossing over' are reminiscent of the essence of the term. Generally speaking, a crossover conveys ideas of slipperiness, movement, transformation and transgression. In addition, a crossover destabilizes essentialist and preformatted identity patterns. Thus, no matter how one attempts to define the term, one should bear in mind that a crossover text persistently explores generic, thematic and cultural changes. It inevitably deals with divisions and differences occasioned by the text's hybrid formal qualities and the multiple characters' crossings in the diegetic world. Keeping this polysemy of the term in mind, then, I would like to argue that *The Arrival* functions as a crossover text, by which I mean a malleable form that moves between worlds and (literary) genres alike and which, to varying degrees, 'engage[s] with spatio-temporal fragmentation, dis/connection, and dis/continuity' in order to transgress aesthetic, cultural, and generic norms, including the linearity of history, the traditions of colonial travel writing, and the dichotomizing of comics as image/text (Dony 2012).

Starting from this main idea, the first section of this article draws parallels between the thematic and generic border-crossings that *The Arrival* engages with. More specifically, it shows how the genre-blending character of the book is concomitant with its subject matter which illustrates the fate of in-betweeness of the migrant as well as his kaleidoscopic identity. The second and third sections are devoted to an exploration of how the physical and thematic border-crossings that permeate *The Arrival* not only aim at redefining the diasporic self beyond a personal or local ethos, but articulate the logic of 'multidirectional memory' (Rothberg 2009) to illustrate how the parameters of memory, time and place overlap and interact. In so doing, I maintain that *The Arrival* not only enacts renegotiations of nationhood and deconstructs the West's most cherished definitional strategy, which Christopher Castiglia defines as 'the mythic equation of citizenship, subjectivity, […] freedom [and territory]', but also presents a chorus of migrants' experiences through which the personal, the collective and the historical intersperse (1996: 10). Further, I show how these discursive crossings enact a critique of colonial travel writing and analyse how this critique allows a renegotiation of the

'global city' in which 'the boundaries are symptomatically blurred between the city as a "dwelling" and a "travelling" space' (Huggan 2009: 15).[4] This re-conceptualization of the global city is the focus of the last section in which I contend that *The Arrival* depicts a new eco-sensitive world order that retains utopian possibilities, including how instances of 'crossing over' and reaching out to the other help challenge binary models such as us/them, colonizer/colonized, nature/mankind.

Moving between worlds and genres

Thematically, Tan's silent graphic narrative develops a whole vocabulary of spatial and temporal displacement through which instances of 'crossing over' are reminiscent of how diasporic and post-colonial authors have engaged with the idea of dislocation.

   The Arrival indeed 'reflects on the notion of belonging and comments on the effects and consequences of exile' (Dony 2012). Tan's book depicts how a nameless protagonist leaves his country to seek refuge in an unidentified Promised Land with the hope of finding better prospects for his family, which he eventually does thanks to other migrants that welcome and help him in his endeavour. In this process, however, he 'experiences the distress of departure, bewilderment, and an over-whelming confusion in relation to space and time' (Dony 2012). In fact, the protagonist's sense of dislocation is rendered even more explicit as his new host country is characterized by surrealist elements such as flying boats and balloons, undecipherable alphabets and signs, a phantasmagorical architecture combining urban with organic structures and a strange environment replete with giant-sized animal statues. Next to facing this fantastic new world and culture, the protagonist also has to live, like most residents of the Nameless Land, with a strange animal companion that befriends him after his arrival.

   In addition to thematically addressing the effects and consequences of physical and cultural crossings, Tan's book also shows that the idea of 'crossing over' coincides with generic instability. Labelling *The Arrival* is indeed a tricky and arduous task. So far, I have referred to it as a 'graphic narrative' rather than a 'graphic novel', given that the book does not contain any text – except for the title – and can therefore be described as a silent narrative. I have deliberately avoided the formula 'graphic novel' because, as Charles Hatfield contends in his discussion of alternative comics, it is 'misleading from a literary standpoint' (2005: 162). Yet, the phrase 'graphic narrative' is as problematic and has also been contested. As American comics legend Will Eisner has pointed out, a graphic narrative describes 'any narration that employs image to transmit an idea' (quoted in Royal 2007: 11). Eisner further claims that it is a rather generic label, an all-encompassing umbrella term under which one could also locate political and animated cartoons, picture books and even films (Royal 2007: 11). The book under scrutiny has also been viewed as part of the comics medium as it meets the criteria à la Eisner, Scott McCloud, Thierry Groensteen and Ann Miller. After all, *The Arrival* uses panels

4.   Although Huggan does not examine *The Arrival* in his book-length discussion of contemporary travel writing, it is worth noting that he chose a picture of Tan's book to illustrate the cover of his monologue *Extreme Pursuits*.

5. This short description of *The Arrival* as a comics narrative interestingly matches one of the most comprehensive definitions of the medium as proposed by Ann Miller in her monograph *Reading Bande Dessinée*: 'bande dessinée produces meaning out of images which are in a sequential relationship, and which co-exist with each other spatially, with or without text' (Miller 2007: 75).

arranged in sequences and establishes close as well as distant narrative interactions between them.[5] Additionally, Tan's book also won the 2008 Best Album Award at Angoulême, Europe's most famous Comics Festival.

Prior to his publication of *The Arrival*, however, Tan was primarily defined as a 'picture book' artist producing texts catalogued as children's literature. *The Arrival* has often been de facto classified as such. Whilst the book may certainly appeal to younger audiences, it also develops many parallels with current societal and cultural issues which invite mature readings and questions. In an essay tellingly entitled 'Picture books: Who are they for?' Tan rejects the common assumption that picture books are synonymous with children's literature. Although acknowledging that 'the simplicity of a picture book in terms of narrative structure, visual appeal and often fable-like brevity might seem to suggest that it is indeed ideally suited to a juvenile readership', he claims that 'exploring relationships between [...] pictures and the world we experience every day' is not 'an activity that ends with childhood' (Tan 2001).

Clearly, with *The Arrival*, Tan offers a hybrid work that challenges the boundaries of graphic storytelling and defies the conventional labels 'graphic narrative', 'graphic novel', 'comics', 'children's literature' or 'picture book'. In fact, Tan intensifies the creative dialogue among these various genres in showing that the generic instability of the book ties in with its thematic concerns and formal qualities. As much as the diasporic subject's identity is characterized by in-betweeness, mobility and unfixity, so too is the book; it crosses over and in so doing, shatters the rigidity of generic and formal categories as well as stresses the inaccuracy of language and labels to capture its nature.

Postmemory and diasporic aesthetics: Cross-generational and historical perspectives

As suggested earlier, the idea of 'crossing over' shares similarities with the concepts of dislocation and hybridity that have animated the debates of postcolonial literatures and diasporic scholarship for decades. Connected to these ideas is the traversing of spatial and temporal gaps that point to the concept of 'migratory aesthetics'.

As Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord have argued, the phrase 'migratory aesthetics' 'draws attention to the ways in which aesthetic practice might be constituted by and through acts of migration' (2007: 12). Australian artist Shaun Tan did not experience exile personally. Yet born from the union of a first-generation migrant father with Malaysian and Chinese origins and a mother of Irish descent, he might be said to fall into the so-called category of 'second-generation migrant'.

Although the denomination 'second-generation migrant', according to Král, is 'rather ironic since these people may not have been outside the national frontiers of their country of birth'

(2009: 58), the phrase shows that they may feel alienated, destabilized and confronted with the idea of unsettlement. In an interview, Shaun Tan acknowledges that '*The Arrival* is something of a substitute migration for [him], wondering what it must be like for so many others, both now and in the past' (Tan 2008a). In *Sketches from a Nameless Land* (2010) – a sequel companion book to *The Arrival* documenting the evolution of the latter, offering insights on its phantasmagorical elements as well as its themes, and including notes, preliminary sketches and research materials on which the artist based his work – Tan explains how he modelled his protagonist on himself and reveals that he posed in photo-shoot settings that later inspired his drawings for *The Arrival*. In that sense, the book under consideration represents the complex affiliation that Shaun Tan has developed with the culture of his forbearers. Consciously or not, the artist is, as Král puts it in her discussion of second-generation immigrants in diasporic literature, at a 'point of juncture or maybe disjuncture' between the cultural heritage of his parents, their double consciousness and his own interstitial space for identity reinvention beyond national definitions (2009: 7).

Whilst the author's sense of loss and nostalgia may not completely account for the aesthetic practice of *The Arrival*, it nevertheless remains crucial to the understanding of the book in terms of 'second-generation memory'. Shaun Tan acknowledges that his art partially consists in 'the exploration of imaginary worlds – places I don't see in front of me, but which have strong emotional or conceptual parallels to lived experience, much like dreams' (2008b). Similarly, in another interview, he argues that 'we all find ourselves in landscapes that we don't fully understand, even if they are familiar, […] everything is philosophically challenging' (Tan 2009). In the same discussion, he claims that 'individuality needs to be endlessly negotiated, that we are always trying to figure out how we connect to the things around us' (Tan 2009). Tan's observations about his own aesthetic practice illustrate the artist's ongoing quest for an identity defined by his past and the landscape(s) around him. *The Arrival* clearly comments on this quest as it portrays the story of a 'stranger in a strange land' (Yang 2007). It is as if Shaun Tan grew up with, as Judith Tucker suggests in relation to her own artistic work, questions and 'narratives that preceded [his] birth' (2007: 65).

Marianne Hirsch describes this phenomenon of individuals who were influenced by the (traumatic) history and culture of a past generation as 'postmemory', a concept that she has primarily developed in relation to the Holocaust, drawing a distinction between the memory of those who directly witnessed trauma and those who came after them and can only remember the experiences of the previous generation 'by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up' (2008: 106). Yet, she also suggests that it is possible to extend the notion of postmemory to that of other people who experienced trauma, for example, as a result of exile and migration. The thematic concerns of *The Arrival*, including the journey of the protagonist and the imaginary country in which he arrives, find resonance with Hirsch's concept of postmemory. She explains that for the second generation, traumatic experiences are relayed 'so deeply […] as to *seem* to constitute memories in

their own rights', and that as a result, 'postmemory's connection to the past is […] not mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation' (Hirsch 2008: 107, original emphasis). Hirsch's notion of postmemory thus complements Král's observation about the difficulties involved when the children of migrants attempt to bridge the cognitive gap between their parents' memories of their homeland and their immigration on the one hand, and their own experiences as second-generation migrants whose status may be equally alienating on the other.

In *The Arrival*, Tan, like many second-generation authors before him, resorts to his imagination and to strategies of reinvention to express this cognitive gap. The narrative signals a sense of nostalgia as it portrays a journey that only takes place in the artist's imagination. Belonging to this post-memory generation of displaced people, the artist has no place to long for and cannot properly situate his longing. Rather, in *The Arrival*, the author reworks and reinvents, however unconsciously, both the traumatic fate of his parents as well as his own dilemmas regarding personal identity. It is in that sense, then, that the journey of the protagonist may function as a cathartic form of wandering for Tan. In other words, focusing on postmemory imagination illustrates how the artist may find solace for his inherited experience by means of migratory aesthetics. As Hirsch puts it, postmemory 'creates where it cannot recall. It mourns a loss that cannot be repaired' (1998: 422).

To claim that *The Arrival* merely functions as a mode of catharsis for the author, however, is to miss the bigger picture. One of the most interesting features of the concept of postmemory as it coincides with imagination and nostalgia is its potential for aligning itself with citations and therefore other (diasporic) traumatic pasts and histories. As Hirsch has suggested, postmemory 'strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures' (2008: 11, original emphasis). Hirsch goes on to argue that one of the strategies whereby this collective memory membrane can be engaged is through the reinvestment of 'resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression' (2008: 111). Although this claim may sound paradoxical, Hirsch explains that 'the *language* of family' (2008: 112) and its pervasiveness are 'entrenched in a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the transmission of individual and familial remembrance' (2008: 114). According to Hirsch, this is why family pictures and narratives often prevail in the aftermath of trauma and aesthetic forms of postmemory. More particularly, Hirsch contends that photography, and particularly family photography, is the medium of postmemory *par excellence* because it connects individual to collective/archival memory through a vocabulary of 'affiliation' (2008: 115).

In *The Arrival*, Tan exploits this sense of affiliation that is at the heart of the cultural work shaping postmemory by resorting to a family album motif and photorealist aesthetics. In terms of form, the cover of the book, which depicts a framed image of the protagonist encountering a strange animal is, as Yang suggests, 'made to look like old, worn leather' (2007). This design resembles an

old photographic family album which, as Yang continues, 'feels like […] a family treasure newly discovered up in the attic' (2007). Inside the book, the sense of nostalgia and recovered loss attains a new dimension with sepia-toned artwork that evokes longing and melancholia. Even the contours of the panels suggest that time has eroded the photographs or photorealist drawings as they appear borderless. Rather than employing, as Yang contends, 'pencil-thin gutters found in most graphic novels', Tan 'uses generous half-inch strips of yellowed paper' (2007). Additionally, the designs of the pages further reference the old family album motif as many of them are 'elegantly blemish[ed] with "creases and unidentifiable splotches"' (Yang 2007). In terms of content, this motif permeates the narrative. The first page of the book, for example, opens with a sequence of panels depicting various everyday familiar objects such as a teapot, a hat and a child's drawing, before culminating in the last panel with a family picture which the reader associates with the previously depicted objects. It is through this vocabulary of everyday life and family album aesthetics, then, that *The Arrival* crystallizes the personal and articulates, as Hirsch describes them, 'the tropes of familiality' in order to facilitate identification and affiliation (2008: 117). In her words, 'familiality anchors, individualizes, and reembodies the free-floating disconnected and disorganized feelings of loss and nostalgia' (Hirsch 2008: 120).

Next to the nostalgia infused by the family album aesthetics, Tan also develops other 'tropes of familiality' that pertain to diasporic/immigrant archival memory. In fact, the artist articulates a whole imagery of displacement and in so doing establishes, in the words of Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, 'points of memory' that link 'past and present, memory and postmemory, individual remembrance and collective recall' (2006: 237). Most notably in this respect is the luggage motif. Before leaving his country and family, the protagonist packs up a few belongings, including a family picture, in a single suitcase (see Figure 1). Whilst this episode may be considered anecdotal and personal for some, it finds great resonance in the psyche of displaced people since the luggage motif, as Král argues, offers an 'interesting reflection on the link between home and identity' (2009: 41). As she observes, the baggage and its transportability provide an insightful understanding of how migrant identity can be constructed beyond ideas of 'territorialisation and root identity' (Král 2009: 41). In *The Arrival*, the protagonist, once temporarily settled in his new host country, plunges into his past as he opens his suitcase. Rather than merely getting his bearings whilst opening the valise, he delves into memories of family life prior his arrival in the new land as he looks at the packed objects. This episode confirms Král's observation about how the baggage motif in diasporic fiction 'reasserts the importance of the past, of one's experience and memories, but a past which is not frozen in time or place' and can therefore be 'reconfigured' (2009: 42). In this case, the baggage symbolizes an access to memory and its transportable nature refers to the many permutations of the diasporic self, his/her ability to reinvent his/her identity in various places and times, or in other words, to enact the ramifications and consequences behind the idea of crossing over.[6]

6. Interestingly, *Sketches*, the sequel companion book to *The Arrival*, was released in a suitcase deluxe collector's edition that confirms the importance of the luggage motif and its implications regarding travel and migration.

Figure 1: 'The Suitcase' (pencil on paper) in Tan, S. The Arrival, *Melbourne: Lothian Books.*

Figure 2: 'Harbour' (pencil on paper) in Tan, S. The Arrival, *Melbourne: Lothian Books.*

Another powerful visual trope functioning as a site of diasporic postmemory in *The Arrival* is that of the ship. The protagonist's voyages, as well as the numerous flying boats distilled in the landscapes of the Nameless Land, echo a long-standing history of (forced) immigration (see Figure 2). As Paul Gilroy has explained in his discussion of Black Atlantic culture, the ship functions as a chronotope encompassing the affiliations between the black communities that were and are still affected by the legacy of slavery and its resulting diaspora (1993). Gilroy's view of the ship as a symbol reflecting spatio-temporal relations can also be extended to other dislocated communities. In Tan's book, the steamboat on which the protagonist travels is reminiscent of the vessels used to transport nineteenth and twentieth century waves of migrations towards the United States and Australia. In *Sketches*, the sequel companion book to *The Arrival*, the artist explains that much of the latter book was inspired by his reading of the archives of the Ellis Island Museum located on a site which, for a long time, functioned as the gateway for immigrants seeking refuge in the United States. The ways in which the boat conjures up images of dislocated people in *The Arrival* is also most noticeable in Tan's direct reference to a famous 1886 painting by Tom Roberts entitled *Coming South* which records the voyage conditions of poor immigrants of the nineteenth century. Through this visual citation and the use of recurrent boat imagery, Tan thus bears witness to the pasts of other migrants and articulates the ship as a fluid spatio-temporal signifier engaging with a variety of dislocated people from different historical periods.

The various examples that I have discussed so far – including the aesthetics of the family album, the luggage motif, as well as the ship imagery – not only deploy a vocabulary of diasporic affiliation, they also illustrate how postmemory disrupts both time and place to engage with a multiplicity of migrant's voices and diasporic perspectives. These recurring themes and motifs constitute 'points of memory' which can produce new insights that 'pierce and traverse temporal, spatial and experiential divides' (Hirsch and Spitzer 2006: 246). As Hirsch and Spitzer further argue, points of postmemory resonate with manifold histories; they 'multiply' and 'can convey the overlay of different temporalities and interpretive frames' and therefore 'mitigat[e] straightforward readings or any lure of authenticity' (2006: 246). In other words, these points articulate migratory aesthetics literally crossing over periods and locations, thereby reflecting transnational or supranational cultures of diasporic postmemory.

The ambiguity of silence

The ability of diasporic postmemory to signal the interspersing of temporality and spatiality through a vocabulary of affiliation, citation and displacement echoes some of the various meanings behind the idea of 'crossing over'. In his discussion of travel writing, Huggan argues that these instances of crossing over constitute 'a metaphorisation of migration' (2007: 131). According to

Huggan, this metaphor serves various purposes including 'insist[ing] on the homology between experiences of dislocation and the destabilisation of essentialist ideologies and fixed paradigms and patterns of thoughts' (2007: 131). In this section, I would like to explore how the various instances of crossing over that permeate *The Arrival*, which are concomitant with diasporic inter-textuality, challenge the western tradition of linear history that is the legacy of the Enlightenment as well as stress the instability of identity in relation to home. In order to do so, I maintain that Shaun Tan defies the common juxtaposition of image and text that is characteristic of a vast production of comics.

I have argued elsewhere that 'braiding' (see Groensteen [1999] 2009: 22) constitutes one of the visual strategies specific to comics that enables Tan to build points of postmemory that echo other traumatic and diasporic experiences (see Dony 2012). In effect, Tan uses similar grid structures in order to articulate distant references between pages and thereby establish 'iconic solidarity' between their subject matter and atmospheres (Groensteen [1999] 2009: 18). I have claimed that these trans-linear relations, on the one hand, 'attest […] to the mobility of migrants and diasporic subjects, their fluid identities, and their ability to call into question the myth of harmonization generally associated with globalization', and on the other, 'convey […] manifold migratory histories and pasts that artic-ulate cultures in transition and transnationalism' (Dony 2012). In addition, it is interesting to observe that these instances of braiding encourage the reader to 'cross over' between the pages of the book and literally move through space and time. I will deliberately leave this reflection here. However, it is important to keep these insights in mind when probing the absence of words in *The Arrival* – or more specifically the lack of dialogue and 'récitatif' (Groensteen [1999] 2009: 67) – because word-lessness, in my view, destabilizes western rational modes of thinking that are centred monolithic categories and binary oppositions.

Many definitions of comics have focused on the hybrid character of the medium – that is, the mixing of images and text and how meaning can emerge from their interaction. However, recent scholarship on comics has called into question, and sometimes even rejected, this 'classical idea […] [of] dichotomizing comics as image and text' (Thomas 2010: 158). Groensteen, for example, has argued that silent comics have existed since the nineteenth century and that the lack of text in comics does not hamper narration but can contribute to the reinforcement of specific narrative elements such as atmosphere or humour, as well as encourage the accentuation of thematic and generic concerns (*9eme Art*, 1997–1998). In *The Arrival*, the absence of text confers a deliberately ambiguous meaning that contradicts the rigidity of language and its definitions. The names and identities of the characters are never established, nor is the name of the new country where the protagonist arrives. In these ways, the silence of *The Arrival* stresses the inability of language to convey the ever-changing definitions of identities and cultures that characterize diasporic communi-ties and migrant subjects.

The absence of text in *The Arrival* thus challenges the production of knowledge and representation that was characteristic, for example, of colonial travel writing. As Král has observed, one of the reasons for colonization was the desire by Europeans for knowledge of other lands and their will to therefore embark on scientific expeditions to remote places. In this context, Král argues that language, thanks to the log books of explorers or notes written by missionaries, provided the first accounts of new settlements as well as the first misrepresentations of indigenous populations. Thus, language not only justified the enterprise of colonization; it attested to the occupation of the land by the colonizers as they often renamed native places. Language also allowed settlers to impose fixed meanings on people, nations and cultures. In *The Arrival*, however, the mystery of the Nameless Land, as Tan argues, 'is preserved by the absence of explanation' (2006b). So too is the reality of the migrant experience. In other words, the silence of the book functions as a reminder of the divisive dangers of language, its oversimplified categorizations, as well as its inaccuracy to describe the hybrid character of diasporic subjects.

Additionally, the silent nature of *The Arrival* recalls, perhaps paradoxically, the fact that dislocated people are often relegated to marginal positions in the host- and sometimes home-country and cannot easily express themselves outside of these margins. This does not mean, however, that migrants and diasporic subjects are disinclined to talk. Rather, Shaun Tan's graphic narrative seems to insist on the potentiality of the migrant to narrate differently through the use of silence. First, the absence of words in *The Arrival* reflects how migration can be experienced as trauma and how the latter can impose a barrier between the imaginable and the expressible. Silence reflects the bewilderment of migrants struggling to express themselves in a new territory as well as points to the impossibility of expressing the painful experience of dislocation. The protagonist, for example, faces incomprehension and puzzlement upon his arrival in the Nameless Land. He also remains speechless as he attempts to find accommodation, work and eventually becomes 'lost in translation' by the indecipherable alphabets and signs of his new environment. Additionally, the main character remains silent as he meets other migrants and tries to understand what they went through to safely arrive to the new Promised Land. Through darker coloured flashbacks than the sepia-toned artwork utilized in most of the narrative, these episodes convey the stories of other migrants from diverse ethnicities and classes as well as their reasons for 'crossing over' (see Figure 3). These reasons are as diverse as political oppression, totalitarianism, civil war and inhumane work conditions. It is within this line of reasoning, then, that the absence of words in *The Arrival* conforms to Cathy Caruth's claim that trauma exceeds experience and 'brings us to the limits of our understanding' (1995: 4). Second, Tan uses silence and a fortiori visual literacy to engage with a multiplicity of experiences and voices which challenge, or at least complicate, the authoritative monolithic voice of the white male explorer that is characteristic of colonial travel writing. Finally, Tan's choice to avoid English in *The Arrival* also reveals that the artist is aware of the limitations of the English language 'as an apt

Figure 3: 'The Story of the Giants' (pencil on paper) in Tan, S. The Arrival, *Melbourne: Lothian Books.*

7. It should be noted here that although I have characterized Tan's book as a silent narrative, *The Arrival*'s fictive reality is, perhaps paradoxically, quite noisy. First, one can observe many signs, advertisements and notes pervading the landscapes of the Nameless Land. The fact that the language in these contexts is not an identifiable one certainly enables any reader to put himself or herself into the subject position of the immigrant – and in so doing, Tan manages to erase borders and boundaries. Second, from a purely economic perspective, the use of the imaginary language within the frames, combined with a lack of written dialogue, has meant that *The Arrival* could burst through into any marketplace – and it has. Finally, the protagonist does learn to communicate in the language well enough to enable his understanding of the other immigrants' stories and to enable him to begin teaching it to his daughter who later rejoins him with her mother. Following this line of reasoning, some might argue that *The Arrival* functions as only a 'semi-silent' narrative.

vehicle to convey the substance of the [diasporic] experience' (Král 2009: 127). Similarly to Ngugi wa Thiong'o who argues in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) that English, being the language of the colonizer in most of Africa, cannot, as Král puts it, 'bear the burden of collective memory' (2009: 126), *The Arrival* conveys the idea that English, or any other language for that matter, is not apt to convey the plural and multifaceted character of the diasporic experience.[7]

Transforming utopia: A new eco-sensitive world order

The mechanisms of perception exposed in the structural and formal aspects of *The Arrival* that I have explored so far can be linked to the idea of the global city, which is, as Huggan argues, 'a transnational space characterized by an almost constant flow of […] people' (2009: 38), a 'cosmopolitan environment' that 'carr[ies] within [it] an entire vocabulary of […] displacement' (2009: 39). In this sense, the unspecified country of *The Arrival* is inhabited by various migrants who, in having crossed over and in bringing with them their various histories and localities, articulate the city as a fluid space which is constantly renegotiated. Moreover, the landscapes of this new city are strewn with flocks of birds as well as floating balloons that convey how movement and acts of 'crossing over' destabilize a fixed understanding of the city (see Figure 4). The fantasy universe of *The Arrival* thus promotes strangeness and mobility rather than ethnic, racial or cultural filiation and thereby fosters utopian possibilities. In discussing the social implications of contemporary children's literature, Bradford et al. have pointed to another of Tan's texts, *The Lost Thing* (2000), arguing that 'the advocacy of difference' and 'the refusal of closure' that the narrative highlights propose a 'transformed world order, one which reaches beyond a fear of the unknown to embrace new ways of being' (Bradford et al. 2008: 3). The same interpretation applies to *The Arrival* which resists dominant ideologies centred on statis and uniformity. Tan depicts the city as a new world order, a utopian location where spatio-temporal change is the norm rather than the exception. It is through these many instances of crossing over that *The Arrival* produces a transformative strategy that enables Tan to reconfigure the interplay between individuals and their environment.

In contrast to many fantasy and science fiction texts, Tan's utopian new world order is not retrofuturistic. By this, I mean that *The Arrival* is not concerned with exploring a utopian world by means of past images predicting the future via the machine, technological automation or household robotics. Rather, Tan's new world order reasserts the importance of the relationship between humans and nature and condemns the absolute domestication of the environment. In fact, the artist offers an eco-sensitive depiction of the city challenging the settler's perception of the newly found territory as an unoccupied and untamed space. In many instances of colonial travel writing, the newly found territory was depicted as a free exotic space in which nature, including fauna and flora, needed taming. This perception of the land as an unowned space obviously justified settlement. But more importantly,

Figure 4: 'The place of Nests' (pencil on paper) in Tan, S. The Arrival, *Melbourne: Lothian Books.*

8. Following this logic, Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling have argued that comics' assemblages are 'indelibly linked to the experience of the metropolis' (2010: 8).

it allowed colonizers to accommodate the landscape with clearly defined agricultural and urban zones which participated in the arbitrary division and categorization of the land, and often, in the destruction of natural resources. In *The Arrival*, however, many landscapes portray natural and urban elements harmoniously coexisting. Volatile and curved free-floating semi-organic structures, for example, are preferred to rigid and square concrete buildings aligned in the grid format characteristic of many cities built in the new worlds (see Figure 5). In contrast to many comics narratives set in the city exploring urban architecture and life via the assemblage of panels articulated in sequence within the page or even the book,[8] Tan depicts the landscapes of his imaginary city in full splash pages to highlight the complexity of his new world. In these pictures, the protagonist as well as the reader is faced with a meandering and circuitous environment which, as Tan argues, 'has developed in an organic fashion, rather than to be centrally planned or too organized' (2008a). Not only does this tortuous environment resonate with the unfixed and kaleidoscopic identity of displaced people, it also shows reverence to how natural and urban elements can form symbiotic relationships.

Next to this non-domestication of nature, which challenges the concept of property central to colonialism, Tan articulates a transformative utopian relationship between animals and humans. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have argued in their discussion of postcolonial ecocriticism (2010), settlers often domesticated the cattle of the newly found territory, or sometimes even destroyed them in favour of imported ones. Admittedly, *The Arrival* offers a sharp contrast to this attitude of domination towards animals. The landscapes of Tan's imaginary city are replete with giant animal statues often resembling birds carrying eggs and bowls of food (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). The food that these statues carry almost glorifies the nurturing capabilities of animals. Equally rich in meaning as well are their bird-like appearances. Similar to migrating birds, displaced people bring with them the fruits of their cultures and traditions to the new world in which they arrive. Following this pattern, every character in *The Arrival* is – or eventually becomes – involved in a mutually beneficial relationship with a strange animal that seeks out the first contact. The relationship between animals and humans is not one revolving around notions of domination and/or violence. For example, the protagonist is confronted with an indigenous creature which he has to accept and live with as he settles down in his new apartment. They progressively develop a relationship based on collaboration rather than tameness. Most notably, the whimsical creature helps the protagonist to find food the first day after his arrival. Interestingly, it is also thanks to his pet playing with other creatures that the protagonist meets other migrants that help him. The pet of the protagonist also carries a symbolic meaning in itself as it appears to be a kind of crossbreed, a sort of biological mutation between a frog and a dog, which may be read as an analogy of the in-between fate of the migrant. More important, however, are the utopian possibilities emerging from the interaction between animals and humans. Fears of the other are here abandoned. One the one hand, the migrants arriving in the new territory do not perceive the animals as violent and threatening. On the other, animals welcome them with

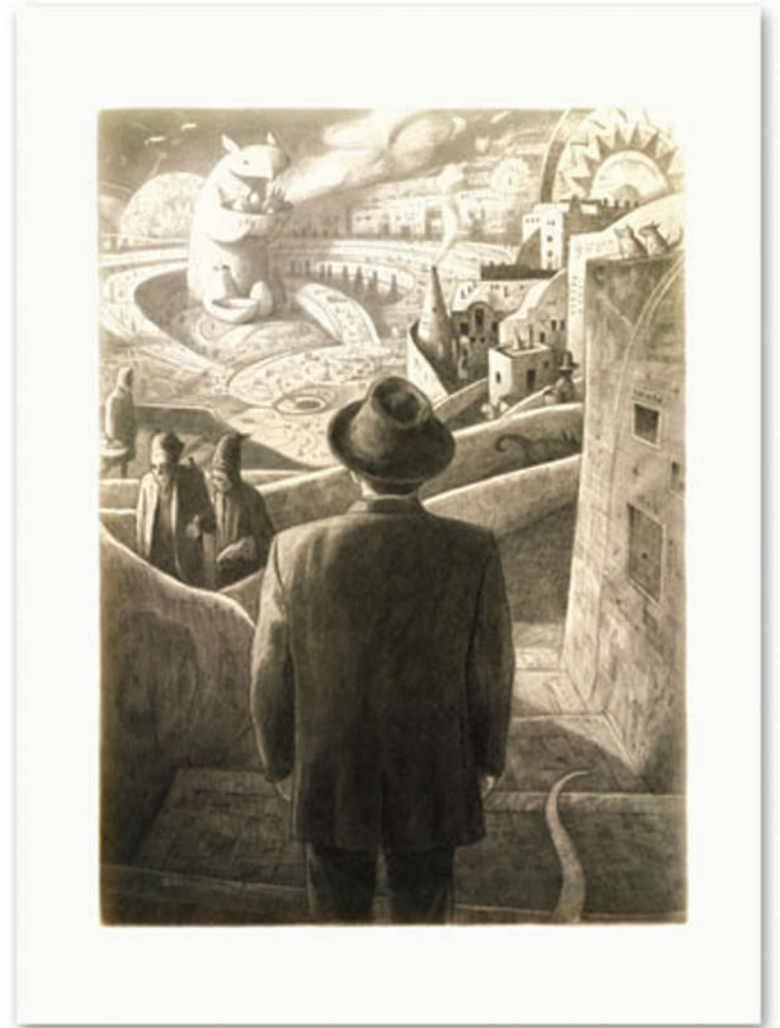*Figure 5: 'The City' (pencil on paper) in Tan, S.* The Arrival, *Melbourne: Lothian Books.*

Figure 6: 'The Market' (pencil on paper) in Tan, S. The Arrival, *Melbourne: Lothian Books.*

generosity. It is in that sense, then, that *The Arrival* proposes a positive outcome to migration as it depicts the importance of a mutual crossover. This reciprocal reaching out to the other may, in its turn, open up new perspectives which challenge binary models such as us/them, colonizer/colonized, as well as nature/mankind.

Conclusion

In *The Arrival*, the idea of crossing over goes beyond the mere mixing of characters and worlds that currently defines the crossover phenomenon in the jargon of comics studies and popular culture. I have shown that Tan's book engages with a multiplicity of experiences and voices, movements and traditions by reassessing the parameters of postmemory, time and space, all of which can be considered to be passages or instances of crossing over. I have also argued that *The Arrival* aesthetically and thematically participates in the transformation of (colonial) travel writing and retains utopian possibilities which challenge the dogmatic national container and crosses cultural and historical barriers, as well as generic and narrative traditions. Drawing on postcolonial criticism, comics scholarship, as well as diasporic studies, my article has followed a somewhat meandering trajectory, but one that stresses the ambiguity of the term crossover, one that coincides with the slipperiness it conveys and its inherent potentiality for traversing temporal and spatial gaps via which the personal, the collective and the historical intersperse, one that illustrates the importance of a cross-disciplinary perspective capable of highlighting the unfixity and instability which characterize the very idea of crossing over.

Acknowledgements

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Suggested citation

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