SCATTERING JOURNEYS, REGENERATIVE ENVIRONMENTS. A MATERIAL ECOCRITICAL READING OF THE DIASPORIC STORYWORLD IN SHAUN TAN'S REFUGEE GRAPHIC NOVEL *THE ARRIVAL*

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Abstract: Pushed out of time, place, and history, refugees are typically imagined as humanitarian subjects whose lives are marked by exclusion and constitutive otherness. Thought of as objects of pity, but also as disrupters of an established order, forcibly displaced people are imprinted by a logic of compassion, passivity, and aberration. Literature, however, provides an alternative site for the representation of refugeedom as an empowering experience that enables the formulation of a different sense of self as well as creative human-environmental interactions. This article will focus on the locations where such interactions take place by examining the foreign cityscape in Shaun Tan's refugee graphic novel The Arrival (2006). Unlike traditional representations of the new land as a place of loss, dispersal, and powerlessness, Tan's illustrations portray the host city as both a tangible and imagined space of diversity, where inter- and intra-specific interactions play a crucial role in the protagonist's physical and personal journey. Through a material ecocritical lens, the article examines how the matter of the book, both living and non-living, tells a story of successful adaptation and home building thanks to the protagonist's capacity to establish a sense of intimacy with the nonhuman world that surrounds him. In conclusion, the apparently unhomely city portrayed by Tan is ultimately the setting of an alter-tale, that is, an alternative narrative in which the interrelationship between the refugee and the material entities that inhabit the land of arrival opens up unexpected possibilities for the displaced to experience not much the scattering as the regenerative potential of refugeedom.

Keywords: Refugee literature; material ecocriticism; diasporic cityscape; literary ecology; *The Arrival*; Shaun Tan.

1. Introduction

Displacement has been the defining principle of our time. Counting a massive number of refugees and displaced people around the world, the highest since World War II, the 21st century is "the century of the migrant" (Nail 2015: 1), characterized by increasing mobility and social expulsion. Threatened by economic, political, and environmental instability, a growing number of people have been bound to leave their own countries, either temporarily or permanently, and face the risks and insecurities that relocation entails. However, as Thomas Nail points out, "not all migrants are alike in their movement" (*ibid.*: 2). In fact, the degree to which a migrant is deprived or dispossessed of the status of citizen varies depending on the circumstances that led them to leave their homeland. Among all the figures encompassed within the category of the displaced, the refugee is arguably one of the most problematic.[1] Defined as "someone who has been forced to flee his or her country" due to "a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group" (UNHCR 1951/2025: online), the refugee has typically been considered as a humanitarian subject, imprinted by a logic of emergency (Nyers 2006) and stigmatized as someone in need of rescue and help. Peter Nyers argues that refugees' identities are marked by constitutive otherness, compared with the citizen subject, and based on exclusion from an "ordered state of affairs" (*ibid.*: 7). Conventionally thought of as aberrations and disrupters of social and political order, forcibly displaced people have been perceived in negative terms through a series of "ontological omissions" (*ibid.*: 3) underlying their fundamental difference from full-right citizens.

Given such an unfavorable depiction of the figure of the refugee, built upon notions of lack, exclusion, and crisis, the formulation of alternative portrayals is an act of resistance and social justice that can find its most effective expression in cultural productions. If, on the one hand, displacement has "produced a rich cultural legacy" that helped establish "the framework of a national culture that has 'rootedness' at its core and displacement as its tragic antithesis" (Gatrell 2013: 138), on the other hand, contemporary refugee narratives have been deconstructing and reconceiving the discourse of the humanitarian subject by proposing alternative critical practices aimed at dismantling the problematic binary citizen/refugee. Instead of depicting the forcibly displaced as superfluous people confined into an institutionally silenced, depoliticized, and historicized category, modern cultural representations emphasize the human dimension of forced relocation, dealing with refugees as human beings living a unique psychical, existential, and physical condition (Classon Frangos and Ghose 2023). In this article, the physical aspect of displacement will be investigated, exploring the way settings are depicted in refugee narratives and the dynamic relationship between refugee characters and their literary environment. Specifically, the

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[1] The very term "refugee" poses several problems of interpretation. As a historical construction, the concept of refugee has traditionally been associated with political and ideological circumstances rather than economic or ecological ones. Yet, as Claire Gallien (2018) observes, economic and ecological migrants make up a significant portion of forcibly displaced people today, warranting both public attention and scholarly engagement.

diasporic cityscape illustrated in the graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006) by multi-award-winning Malaysian-Australian writer and illustrator Shaun Tan will be examined. Our argument will highlight how the environment serves as a crucial element that significantly influences the outcome of a migrant's adaptation process. In Tan's work, the portrayal of the diasporic space with fantastic traits challenges the traditional depiction of the new land as a place of loss, dispersal, and powerlessness. Instead, the foreign country is depicted as a stimulating environment in which diversity is cherished, human and nonhuman entities are reciprocally empowered, and home-building is possible. As this article's critical analysis will demonstrate, the host city evokes a productive, forward-looking form of nostalgia that allows the displaced protagonist to cultivate a proactive approach to his own process of adaptation.

The special focus on literary storyworlds is typical of "literary ecology", a method of reading that acknowledges the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman elements within a narrative setting (Iovino 2006; Schliephake 2016). The latter, which includes landscapes and waterscapes, natural and built environments, fundamentally affects the ways identity is shaped in that it enables cross-spatial, cross-historical, and cross-species connections. Methodologically, attention to literary ecology intersects with Material Ecocriticism, an approach that Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann describe as focused on "material forms […] that intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meaning and discourses that we can interpret as stories" (2014b: 7). Critical refugee studies, with their interest in certain racialized and politicized environments such as refugee camps and memorials (Espiritu 2014; Tran 2012), also offer a conceptual framework through which to examine the environment as a literary device that influences the formation of the refugee character. Hence, through the perspective of these paradigms that posit environments not merely as passive, inert backgrounds to humans' lives but transformative actors with "enactive power" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014b: 7), this article demonstrates that the host city in *The Arrival* is a pulsating nonhuman agent that uncovers possibilities for new forms of survival, dwelling, and biological and historical kinship. As a location where humans constantly intermingle with alien presences, it serves as a posthumanist space that expresses a culture of solidarity, sympathy, and creative democracy.

2. The refugee graphic novel: visual representations of the unhomely

Every experience of displacement is profoundly contextual. Individual, social, cultural, historical, geographical, and political factors significantly influence the way the process of dislocation and relocation is lived. However, there has been a tendency to universalize refugees, thus removing them from the specific circumstances that caused their displacement (Classon Frangos and Ghose 2023). This detrimental tendency could be contrasted through aesthetic strategies that highlight the particularity of refugees' experiences in determined times and spaces. In terms of cultural production, genres conventions (and their creative reformulation) are a key element that might help better articulate the

representation of stateless people and consequently redefine the discourse around them. As Mike Classon Frangos and Sheila Ghose point out, refugee tales tend to "resist encapsulation within hegemonic narratives" through "modes of expression that cross the boundaries of genre and form" (*ibid.*: 6). In other words, refugee storytelling and memory are conveyed through hybrid formal strategies that challenge conventional representations of refugeedom. Within the array of genres adopted in refugee writing, comics and graphic novels occupy a prominent position for their capacity to combine the visuality, physicality, and pathos of the quest for a safe place. Intertwining text and image, these genres can manifest as graphic journalism, such as Kate Evan's *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (2017), which offers an eyewitness account from the Dunkirk and Calais Jungle refugee camps. Alternatively, they may take the form of graphic memoirs, such as Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (2017), which portrays the author's family's journey as refugees fleeing war-torn Vietnam. A wordless graphic novel illustrated through a series of sepia-toned images,[2] Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) stands out as a distinctive example among modern graphic narratives about refugees, as it moves away from traditional journalistic research and family history storytelling. Instead of providing clear time and place markers to set the scene, this retrospective narrative is crafted with a complex structure that intertwines various layers, contrasts, and overlaps, blending different time periods and historical contexts. As Inge Lanslots (2021) notes, this type of representation is closely linked to the identity issues the author discusses, which extend beyond the specific story of his protagonist to encompass forcibly displaced individuals more broadly. Looking at the form, Tan's decision to create a wordless narrative also adds to *The Arrival*'s distinctiveness within its genre. As the author mentioned in interviews about his work (Tan n.d.: online), his conceptual model was the origami technique – also employed by the protagonist at an intradiegetic level throughout the story – which relies on a universal, almost mathematical language developed around forms and symbols. On the one hand, the absence of decipherable graphemes metonymically represents the uncertainties faced by refugees in "negotiating a new system of signification" (Nabizadeh 2014: 367); on the other, as Golnar Nabizadeh notes, the disorienting effect of relying exclusively on pictures reminds the reader of their "dependence on the written word for security and authority when it comes to meaning" (*ibid.*).

The Arrival portrays a refugee's experience of escape from an unspecified homeland, threatened by a mysterious impending danger, and his consequent relocation in an unnamed foreign city pervaded by unhomely elements. After leaving his wife and young daughter back and facing a long journey by boat, the protagonist finds himself in a bewildering city of unfamiliar customs, curious animals, surprising floating objects, and languages.[3] In that unfamiliar land,

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[2] The story is the result of both the author's four-year documentary and artistic research and his own familial background. Growing up in a multicultural context with a Malaysian Chinese father and an Anglo-Australian mother, Tan draws inspiration from his family's history of geographical and cultural displacement (Tan 2011).

[3] In its dreamlike, surreal qualities and exploration of the unknown, the cityscape in *The Arrival* echoes the one depicted in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972/1974). While Tan has not explicitly acknowledged Calvino's influence on his artistic work, both authors explore themes of alienation, wonder, and discovery as central elements in their literary productions. Just as

where even the simplest aspects of ordinary life appear absurd, confronting, or confusing, he is aided by compassionate strangers, each carrying their own untold story of hardship and endurance in a world marked by incomprehensible violence and chaos. As several studies in the field of visual arts have underlined (Nabizadeh 2014; Busi Rizzi 2021; Dudek 2021), the experience of alienation, fragmentation, and bewilderment lived by the protagonist is conveyed to the readers thanks to a series of stylistic choices. As Nabizadeh points out (2014), for instance, the colors and format adopted by the illustrator, i.e., monochromatic drawings presented in a layout that borrows from both documentaries and photographic albums, evoke a nostalgic register that overlaps past and present. On a structural level, the framed sepia images, recalling the succession of cinematic sequences, give shape to "a horizontal narrative shot with lines of both epic and anecdotal dimension" (Langford 2001: 175). Looking at the graphic novel's hybrid nature, its combination of photo-realism and a wholly imaginary world reflects the main character's encounter with a new culture and his subsequent transition towards multiculturalism and hybridity. Unfamiliar objects – like floating boats, unusual utensils, and bizarre buildings – and unexpected natural phenomena – such as glowing lights suspended in midair and curious nonhuman animals joining humans in their everyday routines – create a complex world where reality and fantasy are deeply intertwined. The setting depicted by Tan is a "site of enchantment" (Bennett 2001: 4) animated by the agency of physical systems, technologies, and nonhuman living beings that give shape to an "alter-tale" (*ibid.*). The idea of "alter-tale" was first developed by philosopher Jane Bennett in her book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001), to describe the capacity to see the extraordinary in ordinary life by looking at "the marvelous vitality of bodies human and nonhuman, natural and artifactual" (*ibid.*: 4). Afterwards, Iovino and Oppermann (2012) employed the same concept to claim that every material configuration, from bodies to their places of living, tells a story, thus potentially becoming the object of critical analysis. Tan's graphic novel embodies both interpretations of the concept, figuring as "a fable of marvels" (Bennett 2001: 8) in which the narrative agents are things, nonhuman beings, places, and elemental forces that, following their relations with human actors and their worlds, produce meanings and shape reality. This disorienting combination of real and surreal elements as well as the complete absence of text fosters the readers' empathetic engagement and creative involvement, thus prompting visual intertextuality and intermediality.[4] By focusing solely on the illustrations, readers actively construct meaning, envisioning different interpretations of the scenes. From a visual viewpoint, the fragmented sequences that compose the graphic novel – created through a series of adjacent panels that "single out and combine the events of the story" (Scanu 2021) – capture the feelings of uncertainty and the desire for discovery that

Calvino's cities serve as metaphors of human experiences such as desire, loss, and transformation, Tan's urban setting epitomizes the overwhelming feeling of physical and cultural displacement.

[4] See, for instance, the single-page drawing of the Great Hall (Tan 2006: 26) recalling the hall where immigrants were checked at their arrival at Ellis Island and the illustration depicting the immigrants on the ship (*ibid.*: 20), which was inspired by the painting *Coming South* by Tom Roberts (1886).

accompany a migration experience. Formally, the various frames reflect the author's narratological approach, serving as "an invitation for [the readers] to fill in those spaces with their own questions and experiences" (Martínez-Roldán and Newcomer 2011: 196). Conceptually, they symbolize the confused perception of a new reality in a migratory context, the puzzlement triggered by unfamiliar cultural practices, and the disorientation caused by a foreign language. The layout is consistent throughout the narrative, although key events – such as the dramatic family reunion (Tan 2006: 108) and the final scene where the protagonist's daughter guides a newly arrived immigrant (*ibid.*: 115) – are not fragmented, but filling the entire page.

As for the visual representation of refugees' physical traits, namely their faces, Tan's work seeks to counter their "visual dehumanization" (Bleiker *et al.* 2013: 399). Indeed, whether for humanitarian advocacy or state control, refugees have frequently been subjected to the camera's gaze, thus becoming increasingly vulnerable to surveillance, stereotyping, and fetishization. As Classon Frangos and Ghose (2023) underline, most cultural productions about forced migration struggle to figure the refugee as a person rather than a category.[5] In this regard, critical examinations of images, gaze, and the phenomenological and representational processes in visual arts – particularly from feminist, decolonial, and antiracist perspectives – have underscored the impact of visual politics, the risks of objectification, and the unequal distribution of representational power (Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi 2023). Tan's technique – characterized by precise depictions of the characters' bodies, particularly through close-ups of their faces, and meticulous detailing of their surrounding material world – effectively captures the complexity of refugees' inner lives, along with the insecurities and hardships they encounter in the external world. Instead of framing forcibly displaced individuals through narratives of fear and compassion aimed at settled or citizen audiences, Tan presents refugees as active agents with a rich inner world, experiencing a wide spectrum of emotions (Tan 2006: 107), processing painful memories (*ibid.*: 63), and thoughtfully planning their futures (*ibid.*: 76). Alongside essays exploring the role of stylistic devices in shaping the meaning of the graphic novel, critical works have been published concerning the (post)colonial insights offered by Tan's narration of cultural difference within a migratory context (Dalmaso and Madella 2016), and the relationship between material culture and the process of identity formation of a migrant (Banerjee 2016). However, besides a visual, postcolonial, and material cultural viewpoint, a new perspective of investigation can be added, which reveals that Tan's work is ultimately an eco-narrative where the reciprocal interferences of humans, nonhuman entities, and ecosystems produce a "collective of agencies" (Iovino and Oppermann 2012: 84) that positively determine the migration outcome. Adopting an ecocritical perspective sheds light on the bodily and material aspects of the experience of uprootedness lived in the foreign city, which serves as a tangible space of representation and

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[5] Refugee women and children, for instance, are often universalized in representation: the former depicted as "Madonna-like" figures (Woolley 2023: 78), engaged in domestic tasks such as preparing food in camps or shelters, while the latter symbolize a kind of "elementary humanity" (Malkki 1995: 11).

rehabilitation of the concept of refugeedom. Despite its surreal elements, Tan's narrative remains deeply rooted in real refugee experiences, highlighting an often-overlooked aspect in contemporary representations – the material and bodily integration of forced migrants into a foreign space. Hence, following an ecocritical interpretative key, the objects of the critical analysis proposed in this article are the inanimate matter and nonhuman forms of living that populate the land of arrival and the configurations of meaning they create through the interaction with the displaced protagonist.

3. Refugee narratives from a material ecocritical perspective

In a visual narrative like the one analyzed in this article, where photo-documentary realism and surrealism are used to convey the intensity of a refugee story, materiality assumes a crucial importance. Not only is it a means to establish the setting of the narrative, but it also plays an active role in the way the displaced character makes sense of and relates to the new environment. With its special focus on the dialogue between humans and the physical world they inhabit and its ethical message of solidarity and inclusivity, *The Arrival* binds the social and environmental dimensions within a framework of reciprocity. The book thematizes the relationship between humans and their "other", whether human or nonhuman, thereby striving to challenge hierarchies and redeem diversity: a goal that both contemporary refugee fiction and ecocriticism have sought to achieve. On one hand, modern literary productions about refugees, such as lê thi diem thúy's novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003) and Viet Than Nguyen's short story collection *The Refugees* (2017),[6] provide insights into stateless subjects' ongoing exposure to precarious mobility and environmental threat, revealing the overlapping, often contrasting, fields of ecology and personal wellbeing that shape the experience of forced migration. On the other, the interdisciplinary field of ecocriticism, through subcategories such as "elemental ecocriticism" (Cohen and Duckert 2015), has promoted "greater worldly intimacy [and] an ethic of nonhuman care" (*ibid*.: loc. 112), fostering a disanthropocentric and more egalitarian outlook on the world we inhabit. Foregrounding the interconnection among all life forms, humans' destructive power, the rehabilitation of diversity as a social value, the representation of nature as a subject rather than an object of exploitation, and the interest towards the landscape, Tan's text lends itself to an ecological interpretation. Literary ecology, which "looks at the way texts are situated at the

[6] lê thi diem thúy's 2003 novel depicts the migration experience of a young Vietnamese woman navigating the unfamiliar and disorienting landscape of San Diego, California. Through her deep connection with specific elements of the Californian environment, particularly palm trees and waterscapes, she is able to process past traumas and envision a new future for herself. A similar emphasis on the ways the environment shapes personal and cultural identities can be observed in Viet Than Nguyen's 2017 short story collection, in which the contrast between the landscapes of Vietnam and the United States serves as a metaphor for dislocation. The precariousness of refugees' lives extends to their surroundings, where dispossession and ongoing psychic and physical struggles leave them exposed to environmental hazards. For further exploration of the intersection between individual and environmental vulnerability, see Marguerite Nguyen's article "Refugee Ecologies. The Elements, Flora, and Fauna in Refugee Narratives" (2023).

intersecting lines between human communities and their natural environments"
(Schliephake 2020: 232), represents a viable mode of reading *The Arrival* not
only because it views humans in relational rather than oppositional terms with
their surroundings, but also because it sheds new light on peripheral narratives,
which shift the focus from grand ideological discourses to particular local stories.
The graphic novel in question speaks from the margins by giving voice to those
traditionally muted by society, including material entities. As illustrated above,
the author's decision to create a silent graphic novel aligns with his
understanding of the refugee condition. Lacking the means to fully partake in
the foreign context – whether in terms of language, rights, or opportunities –
refugees are often confined to a state of absence and silence, which Tan attempts
to overcome through his eloquent illustrations.

The narrative power of matter is the focus of the emerging critical framework
of "Material Ecocriticism" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014a), a paradigm that
suggests considering the matter in the text as a text to be read and interpreted
as a meaning-bearing field of agency. According to this matter-oriented
interpretative tool, which reflects the material turn in the humanities[7], that
which was considered inert materiality is actually a site of narrativity where
stories are inscribed following the interaction between nonhuman entities and
human lives. In other words, material forms, whether living or not, are
considered as "full-fledged actors" (Latour 1999: 174) and are characterized by
a "generative dynamism" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014b: 3) that influences the
existence of both human and nonhuman natures. Hence, the focus of the material
ecocritical approach is on the entanglement between human and nonhuman
entities and the meanings produced by the dialogue between two apparently
separate worlds. The "reenchantment" (*ibid.*: 12) of reality advocated by material
ecocritics, who point out the world's radical aliveness, vitality, dynamism, and
agency (Barad 2007), supports an ethics of "relation, entanglement, and wonder"
(Cohen 2014: x) that is at the core not only of the graphic novel object of this
article, but of refugee representations more broadly in that they prompt
emotional involvement from the public (Woolley 2014)

As Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi and Vinh Nguyen argue in their introduction to
The Routledge Handbook of Refugee Narratives (2023), a prominent feature of
literary productions dealing with forced displacement is the depiction of
refugees' engagement with material and immaterial things they carry around the
world, including suitcases, artifacts, memories, and personal and cultural
histories. Furthermore, being intrinsically narratives of movement, they tend to
foreground "the lifeworlds of refugees" (*ibid.*: 24), namely, the complex spaces

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[7] The reconsideration of materiality, including a deeper investigation of the nature of matter and
the place of humans in the material world, has characterized the debates in the humanities and
social sciences since the dismissal of the so-called "linguistic turn", namely, the idea that
language constructs reality (Rorty 1992). The "material turn" (Miller 1998; Latour 2005; Iovino
and Oppermann 2012; Malafouris 2013), as a strong response to certain radical currents of
postmodern and post-structuralist thought that tended to "dematerialize" the world into
linguistic and social constructions, is an approach to the interpretation of reality that considers
its bodily dimension and promotes non-binary subject-object relations. In the environmental
field, the material turn is translated into practical-theoretical strategies that aim to foreground
the impact that discursive practices have on the materiality of ecological relationships.

where their lives unfold[8]. These "refugee ecologies" (Nguyen 2023: 355), as Marguerite Nguyen termed the wide array of spatial depictions within stories of displacement – including landscapes and waterscapes, natural and built environments – require critical attention as they foreground "literary environments as also transformative actors" (*ibid.*: 356), affecting "who, where, and what we imagine the refugee and refugeehood to be" (*ibid.*).

Neo-materialist stances and critical refugee studies share the same social (and often politically oriented) enterprise. They both seek to bring to the forefront that which has long been relegated to the background. Their objects of study, whether they are material entities or forced migrants, tend to be reified, deprived of dignity, and deemed passive, inert, and incapable of self-determination. Both critical discourses are based on the logic of challenging traditional ideas on agency – a property that, according to a Cartesian viewpoint, has been traditionally and exclusively attributed to humans – with the aim of rehabilitating the outcasts of society, whether living or non-living. By making the invisible visible and igniting the amorphous abject with life, creativity, and generative force, material ecocriticism and cultural productions on refugees undo binary divisions of reality based on the opposition between subjects and objects, nature and culture, body and mind, self and other. Besides promoting a distributive vision of agency, which encompasses the society's substratum, the two critical perspectives advocate for a new politics of visibility and presence, fostering empathy towards and validation of the marginalized. Finally, both approaches acknowledge the value of diversity and emphasize relationality as the only means to steer humans away from short-sighted, individualistic, and self-destructive practices.

Such an inclusive way of thinking is reflected in Tan's pictorial narrative, where both matter and the refugee are given back their dignity as "affective and signaling" (Bennett 2010: 117) beings, worthy of visibility, capable of agency, and holding relational power. Manifestations of natural elements, i.e. air, fire, earth, and water, will be examined as instances of "environmental agentism" (Cohen and Duckert 2015: loc. 148). These natural substances, which humans have claimed dominion over in an imagined ecological sovereignty (Smith 2011), are not merely a passive backdrop for human events but active forces that interact with and influence human life. Likewise, nonhuman animals will be examined for their ability to foster deep interspecies connections and challenge humans to rethink their assumed superiority and independence. Just as nature, in both its elemental and animal forms, asserts itself as an active presence rather than a passive Other, refugees are brought from the margins to the center of a living system – the host city – where they gain recognition and achieve self-realization. This interrelatedness between materiality and refugeedom is

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[8]The sites of possible controversial experiences for migrants and refugees are both public and private. On a public level, the nation-state is the emblem of an ambivalent space that can serve as both a place of desire and contestation, protection and exclusion. On a private level, the home epitomizes the shelter of a safe place but also a potential site of isolation and alienation. For insightful discussions on space-related challenges faced by people with an immigrant or refugee background, see Lyndsey Stonebridge's book *Placeless People: Writing, Rights, and Refugees* (2018) and Paolo Boccagni and Sara Bonfanti's edited volume *Migration and Domestic Space: Ethnographies of Home in the Making* (2023).

epitomized by the host city. Connoted by the vitality of breathable air, fertile earth, invigorating fire, and soothing waters, and inhabited by nonhuman animals that engage in the cycle of life on egalitarian rather than hierarchical terms with humans, the diasporic city symbolizes the possibility of overcoming the trauma of living in a precarious environment and threatening conditions. From this perspective, it embodies not much the dispersal as the regenerative potential of migrancy.

4. The nonhuman in the diasporic cityscape

Space and the nonhuman entities that inhabit it have a strong impact on the way individuals make sense of the world. From the perspective of a migrant subject, the process of adaptation to a new land is influenced by the interchanges between the different agentic forces – both organic and inorganic, both human and nonhuman – circulating within the context of arrival. In *The Arrival*, for instance, a series of tropes of mutual interactions and transformation pervade the imaginative space of the graphic novel. Among them, the four elements, i.e., air, earth, water, and fire, play a crucial role within the foreign environment "in that they underscore the agency and significance of matter, tracing how it interacts […] with culture and discourse" (Alaimo 2015: loc. 6401). The elements' ability to "bond materiality and narrative" (Cohen and Duckert 2015: loc. 241) is reflected in the diasporic city, where the narrative of nature and that of refugees intermingle and give shape to the author's ethical discourse. In other words, in Tan's book, that which is typically on the background engenders and composes stories in a powerful "fusion of subjects and objects" (Morton 2015: loc. 5783).

Air, which is the fundamental source of life and a "shaping presence of aesthetic and environmental imagination" (Iovino and Oppermann 2015: loc. 6604), is clearly a preponderant force in Tan's graphic novel. In fact, it is through air that immigrants arrive at the host city using particular hot air balloons that fluctuate across the sky before gently landing on the foreign soil (Tan 2006: 31). Air connects the sky and the earth – the latter being the only hospitable element for humans – thus bringing forth life and making inhabitation possible. Air is not only used by migrants to reach their destination, but also by the city's inhabitants who use airships for their daily movements across the urban space (*ibid*.: 51). In spite of its invisibility, in Tan's storyworld air serves as an invaluable resource, an essential fuel of social life. The activity prompted by moving air is also demonstrated by the smoke coming out of tall buildings – a sign of productivity and work – and of houses' chimneys – an indication of human presence and life (*ibid*.: 32). The sound and energy evoked by this image contrasts vividly with the portrayal of the protagonist's hometown, where the atmosphere is perceptibly stagnant and oppressive (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. "The old country", source: author's website (Tan n.d.)

Finally, if on the one hand air enables human movements and activities, on the other hand it is the natural element of birds which, as a well-established metaphor for migration (Nabizadeh 2014: 374) and the embodiments of displacement in pursuit of a more suitable environment, constantly fly above the cityscape (Tan 2006: 45). Their tireless movement across space prompts a reflection on the politically charged idea of borders and reminds the readers that life, whether human or not, is not based on stasis, but rather on transformation and change.

Moving to the telluric sphere, earth is also a prominent element within the foreign urban landscape envisaged by Tan. Earth is the solid ground upon which life is built. Made of rocks and clay, and having mass and weight, it serves as a symbol of stability and enduring comfort. This sense of soundness is what the protagonist experiences when he first overlooks the city of arrival, finding himself in front of a fascinating new place (*ibid.*: 57). The curvilinear shapes make the land seem hospitable and comfortable to inhabit and the undulating surfaces evoke continuing vitality. Humans connect and bond with each other through the land, which serves as a means of enjoying life, grounding, and establishing roots (*ibid.*: 97). Traditionally, earth is the place of death and rebirth. Metaphorically speaking, the natural cycle of endings and beginnings occurring in fields mirrors the existential process that migrants undergo during their dislocation and relocation in a new country. In the fantastic environment created by Tan, earth and its products signify change and the passing of time, reflecting the protagonist's journey towards the development of a new sense of belonging. The most evoking depiction of this element can be found towards the end of the story, when the refugee family finally reunites in what is arguably the book's emotional climax. The image of the footprints left on the ground by the protagonist and his wife and daughter, coming from opposite directions and meeting near the center of the page (*ibid.*: 108), shows that land not only offers displaced people the opportunity of building a new life in physical terms, but also serves as a reminder of the distances they bridged, the progress they made, and the possibilities they have to leave their mark on the world.

If we consider that "fire moves through metamorphosis", as Anne Harris points out (2015: loc. 660), it is reasonable to claim that it is an element that symbolically evokes the refugee experience. Both destructive and creative and traditionally personified in the Phoenix, dying in the flames and reborn from the ashes, fire represents the end of a past life and the possibility of new beginnings.

In Tan's evocative illustrations, fire is an element that recurs both in the past and the present of migrants. However, if in their former world fire was a source of violence, pain, and destruction, as the numerous flashbacks that interrupt the narrative demonstrate, in the new world it is connected with the comfort of light, heat, and productive energy. A case in point is represented by the luminous entities – made of light or fire – that surround the migrants as soon as they set foot on the hostland, as a sign of welcome and protection (Tan 2006: 37).The other instances in which fire appears in the graphic novel are related to moments of commensality, when a local family use curious tools to cook food during a dinner with the protagonist. These characters, refugees themselves, reached the host country after escaping the violence that plagued their homeland (*ibid.*: 64) – a violence depicted through giant weapons spitting fire at desperately fleeing people. Interestingly, the conical shape of these deadly guns mirrors that of the cooking tools used in the diasporic context, symbolizing that both destruction and nourishment are potential outcomes of the same human hand. In the host land, fire conveys the warmth of human presence and the fundamentally human practice of sharing, both on a material and an emotional level. This is confirmed by the image portraying the protagonist and another elderly refugee – who had just recounted his story of escape, suffering, and rebirth – under an almost blinding stream of light (see Fig. 2), suggesting that life and hope are ignited by feelings of mutual recognition and disposition to care.

Figure 2. "Parklands", source: author's website (Tan: n.d.)

Tan's refugee narrative is also built around water. A trope in migrant and refugee fiction, the aquatic element often serves as a means of communication and connection between two different worlds. Water "reworks boundaries as much as it bounds; it territorializes as much as it deterritorializes" (Duckert 2017: 55), thus enabling contacts and contamination. Its fluid qualities epitomize hybridity and exchange, and its generative and transformative power aligns it with the origins of life. As Gaston Bachelard contends, water represents "the maternal voice" (2006: 116) which brings us back to the primordial stages of our being and reveals our innermost self. The British postmodern author John Fowles refers to the sea as "our evolutionary amniotic fluid, the element in which we too were once enwombed" (1998: 282), positing it as a site of regression to a state of innocence. As "the most receptive of the elements" (Stroud 2006: ix), water signifies reflection and evokes imagination and desire. For this reason, in a migrant's imaginary, water and dreams are woven together in that water serves

as a conduit between a past and a future state, both in literal and figurative terms. On a literal level, in Tan's storyworld, the maritime environment functions as the protagonist's means of escape from his imperiled homeland, offering both salvation and a chance for renewal. On a metaphorical level, water enables the refugee's symbolic crossing towards a new version of himself. Confirming the transformational power wielded by aquatic entities, Astrida Neimanis argues that water is both "that which we are and which facilitates our becoming" (2017: 111). In other words, water not only stores our identity, being our main constitutive element as well as our originating source, but it also embodies the potential for transitioning from one state to another, for "becom[ing] difference" (*ibid.*: 108). In *The Arrival*, water is both a place for being and becoming. On the one hand, the sea that skirts the host city is depicted as a place of calm and quietness, a stable and comforting presence for both foreigners and locals to feel safe and nurtured. On the other hand, the sea is engaged in a dynamic relation with the city's inhabitants favoring a close correspondence between the different beings that circulate within it (Tan 2006: 70). Together with airboats, boats are another means of transport frequently used across the foreign city. Enabling the circulation of humans, nonhuman animals, and artifacts in an ongoing cycle of connections and exchanges, they can be interpreted as carriers of an ideology of cooperation and co-presence.

Natural elements are not the only creative principle around which the graphic novel is built. Nonhuman animals also serve as tropes of mutual interactions and transformation that pervade the imaginative texture of the book. As Elizabeth Lawrence underlines, the human need for metaphorical expression and identification "finds its greatest fulfillment through reference to the animal kingdom" (1993: 301). As the metaphysical role that animals played in primal societies demonstrates, humans find their place in the world by measuring themselves with other species, with which they engage not just on a material level, but also intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. This is particularly evident in *The Arrival*, where each character is consistently accompanied by their own beloved nonhuman animal companion (see Fig. 3).

Figure 3. "Street life", source: author's website (Tan: n.d.)

The ongoing dialogue between species, engaged in a horizontal rather than hierarchical relationship, is emblematized by the giant statue situated at the entrance of the city (see Fig. 4).[9]

Figure 4. "The new country", source: author's website (Tan: n.d.)

The two men, shaking their hands while standing on boats filled with items recalling the journey, such as a piece of luggage, some food, and containers, have their fellow nonhuman animals with them as to demonstrate that, in that place, acceptance, care, and companionship serve as the guiding principles of life. This architectural element that dominates the cityscape suggests that a general sense of biophilia, i.e., "the innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes" (Wilson 1984: 1), is felt among the city's inhabitants and manifested in the deep relationship that people and nonhuman animals establish through a universal form of understanding. Aware of their shared place in the biosphere, both human and nonhuman animals in Tan's story coexist by sharing spaces (Tan 2006: 58), experiences (*ibid.*: 73), and desires (*ibid.*: 94), forging a bond based on their equal right to be. This biophilic stance, which translates into respect and fascination for "other human beings, other living creatures and elements of landscape" (Gadgil 1993: 375), derives from humans' awareness that they are members of a "community of beings" (*ibid.*: 371) built on exchange and reciprocity. Considered as "the quintessential Other" (Lawrence 1993: 334), nonhuman animals help humans measure themselves as individuals, as members of a society, and as a species. In other words, nonhuman living companions trigger human altruism and helping behavior, promote emotional bonding, and facilitate spiritual and physical healing. The protagonist's traumatic encounter with the nonhuman animals' realm within the new land demonstrates that the initial contact with the Other tends to engender fear, diffidence, and even aggressivity (see Fig. 5)

[9] This visual reference, reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty, along with the evocation of Ellis Island, commented on above, reinforces the idea that New York may have been the city Shaun Tan envisioned when designing the host city – a place symbolizing hope, freedom, and better opportunities.

Figure 5. "An unexpected flatmate", source: author's website (Tan: n.d.)

After an impulsive reaction of rejection, though, the man and the curious creature that lives in his house become close friends, sharing every moment of their daily life. The creature, which recalls a tadpole, becomes a caring companion that guides the refugee through the different stages of his acculturation in the hostland. Every morning, the tadpole wakes the man and pushes him to go out and make acquaintances, search for a job, and overcome weaknesses and fears. Thanks to his relationship with his nonhuman friend, the protagonist learns the importance of trust, sharing, and reciprocal protection. Tan's ethical message suggests that what fundamentally unites the man and the tadpole is a state of innocence – to be interpreted etymologically as "not harming" – related to their otherness. As a foreigner and a nonhuman entity, respectively, they accept difference as integral to existence and simply let the other be, as Iovino (2006) would put it. Acknowledging the Other, they build a relationship based on harmony, balance, and respect.

The foreign city is not only home to actual nonhuman animals; it is also populated by animal-like artificial figures scattered across the landscape. Among them, for instance, there stands a towering bird-like statue that protects an egg, symbolizing themes of life, birth, and hope (Tan 2006: 32). Additionally, a series of owl statues, notably nocturnal animals, watch over the town, seemingly safeguarding the community during times of darkness (*ibid.*: 71). These artificial elements contribute to creating an environment where the sphere of nature – encompassing the landscape, humans, and nonhuman animals – and the sphere of culture – including buildings and human-made artifacts – blend together harmoniously. Clearly, birds hold a special place in the graphic novel's imaginary setting. As previously mentioned, they emblematize migration, and more generally, freedom of movement, transcendence of borders, and faith in a better future. They constantly fly around the city and bond with the people sharing with them the need to build a safe place for themselves and their family. A sequence of frames, for instance, represents both the protagonist and a bird engaging in the preparation of their nest, both literally and metaphorically (*ibid.*: 100). On the one hand, the man writes to his family that he managed to settle down in the new land and is now ready to welcome them; on the other hand, the mother bird arranges the nest that will receive her baby birds very soon. After writing the letter, the man puts a bird-shaped origami in the envelope, thus imbuing his gesture with the material and symbolic significance of leaving one's home. When the

protagonist's family finally arrive, a flock of birds swirls around the cabin that is carrying them, as a sign that their journey has come to an end and the land where they have just arrived is the right place where to build a new home.

5. Diasporic home-building

The examination of natural elements and nonhuman animals within Tan's imaginary city has revealed that stories, memories, and meanings are materially carved onto physical locations. Places and natural entities intra-act, to use Barad's expression (2007), with a flow of bodies, discourses, and imagination to the extent that the lively matter of the city becomes a template for the stories of the migrants and refugees who circulate within it. In other words, the foreign cityscape, where human and nonhuman forces coalesce, emerges from the junction of material, social, and cognitive elements, carrying the potential to direct semiotic processes and trigger signs, interpretations, and subsequent behaviors. In such a combination of agencies involving locations, matter, and displaced people, the protagonist develops a form of nostalgia that, rather than anchoring him to the past life, guides him through the building of a homely environment around himself. A clear example of this appears in the scenes where the man observes a family picture he brought from home (Tan 2006: 16; 43; 104). Rather than being paralyzed by the sorrow of separation or trapped in a sense of homelessness, he draws strength from this memento of his past, using it as motivation to build a secure home in a new place. Nostalgia, as a "bittersweet longing for former times and spaces" (Niemeyer 2014: 1) caused by a "composite feeling of loss [and] lack" (Pickering and Keightley 2006: 921), is undoubtedly regressive. Svetlana Boym defines this negative emotion as "restorative nostalgia" since it aims at "reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time" (2001: 49). However, there exists an alternative form of nostalgia, which is progressive and future oriented. Boym calls it "reflective nostalgia" as it arises from flexibility, i.e., the meditation on and acceptance of the passing of time and change of place, rather than stasis. According to Boym, even though the reflective nostalgic cherishes shattered fragments of memory, they do not pretend to build a mythical place called home. On the contrary, they acknowledge that the past is not merely that which does not exist anymore but a productive force that opens up multiple potentialities, thus bringing vitality to the present. This productive form of nostalgia is an essential requisite for "home-building", that is, "*the building of the feeling of being 'at home'*" (Hage 1997: 2, italics original).

As Ghassam Hage argues, a homely affective structure has to be built with specific affective blocks fostered by four key feelings: security, familiarity, community, and a sense of possibility and hope. As the graphic novel at hand shows, the protagonist experiences none of those feelings at first. During the initial phase of his stay in the foreign city, he feels deeply unsafe and is frightened by what he perceives as threatening otherness. Secondly, coming from a completely different milieu, he lacks the geographical knowledge and know-how to inhabit the new space, thus failing to have spatial and practical control.

The sense of community is also absent, as the main character does not recognize the locals as his own people and vice versa. Although the host city appears as a welcoming place, as suggested by the statue of the two men shaking hands and bowing to each other situated at the city's entrance, the refugee lacks familiar connections there that could help bridge the gap between his previous and current life. Due to the absence of a shared language and symbolic system, the protagonist's ability to communicate effectively is also severely limited. This is evident, for example, in the scenes where he cannot interpret any of the signs scattered throughout the city, feeling completely lost (Tan 2006: 37). Unable to ask for directions, he awkwardly sketches images on a piece of paper as his only means of communication (*ibid.*: 38). Finally, due to the peculiar materiality surrounding him, the protagonist initially perceives the foreign space as unhomely and, as a result, struggles to find his way forward. A case in point is represented by the many jobs that the man fails to obtain (*ibid.*: 78) and the one he loses for his inability to properly perform the required tasks (*ibid.*: 80). However, although the difficulties of home-building are considerable, when the main character is confronted with the diasporic reality – which he perceives as profoundly unfamiliar due to unaccustomed natural presences, material culture, and habits, he does not rely on regressive nostalgic feelings. On the contrary, he implements resilient settlement strategies by embracing the uncanny[10] as a means to envision new possibilities. Some illustrative examples are the tender relationship he establishes with the tadpole that lives with him, his willingness to find a job even though he cannot understand the local language, and his ability to make sense of the alien environment that surrounds him. The refugee protagonist learns to embrace alienation as part of the process towards a new life, thus realizing that the sense of familiarity is elicited by a fruitful dialogue between place and perception, matter and mind, ecological and existential processes of engagement.

The protagonist's enactment of a positive form of nostalgia is enabled by the close relationships he establishes with both the human and nonhuman inhabitants of the hostland. The living and non-living beings that facilitate the protagonist's process of adaptation enact what Hage calls "intimations" (1997: 4), that is, signs or fragments of meaning that trigger images of a past home. These "imagined metonymies" (*ibid.*: 6) include artifacts, environments, and encounters that prompt homely feelings and memories of a safe, happy past. A case in point is the joyful dinner the protagonist shares with a local family (Tan 2006: 73), evoking memories of the cherished moments he once spent with his wife and daughter during mealtimes. However, rather than succumbing to paralyzing homesickness and regressive nostalgia, the man starts working hard to establish a new life in that foreign place and create the conditions for his family to eventually join him. As Hage underlines, not all intimations of homeliness are retrospective. In fact, certain nostalgic feelings can become propellants for looking at the new possibilities the present has to offer, thus

[10] In his essay, "The uncanny" (1919/1925), Sigmund Freud explains that the uncanny is "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (368-369). According to his definition, the feeling of unease and even terror is raised by familiar people, situations, and places, including the home.

serving as a mode for feeling at home. Insights offered by diaspora studies (Braziel and Mannur 2003) show that to feel at home is fundamentally a mental state elicited by a "sense of intimacy" (Boym 2001) with the surrounding world. Consequently, in spite of being a site of complexity and strangeness, the bewildering cosmos of the diasporic city induces the displaced protagonist to actively engage in the construction of a new home, transforming longing into belonging. The bond between people and land, locals and foreigners, humans and nonhuman elements makes the foreign city a place where the refugee can finally experience security, familiarity, community, and a sense of possibility and hope. As a consequence, his desire for the homeland is replaced by a "homing desire" (Brah 2005: 32), which is less focused on the ideology of return as on the idea of home-making, i.e., (re)constituting a new physical and psychical concept of home. Ultimately, the diasporic land, as a space of interaction and mutual recognition between human and nonhuman forces, becomes the site where the migrant's journey of home-building unfolds, and the gap of alienation is successfully bridged.

6. Conclusion

The movement of individuals engenders a process of transformation not only within the structural circumstances that underpin migration systems – at the political and institutional level – but also within the places and people that are bound up in migratory experiences. Places of origins, of passage, and of destination of migrants are altered as a result of the flows of people that affect them and vice versa. As the material ecocritical analysis of *The Arrival* proposed in this article has demonstrated, the foreign city portrayed by Tan serves as a text conveying the signs and meanings originated from the interaction among human, nonhuman, and material forces. Its apparently unhomely features, manifested through objects, bodies, and assemblages that are alien to the protagonist, tell the story of fruitful material, social, and cognitive exchanges that make the diasporic city a "homeplace" (hooks 1990). Indeed, in spite of its fundamental diversity with respect to the protagonist's idea of home, it turns out to be a "space of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality" (*ibid*.: 42), a place where to feel validated and safe. The foreign urban environment is also a site of resistance to practices of social exclusion, in which the refugee protagonist can find the warmth and comfort of shelter and recover his dignity, integrity of being, and faith in the human and nonhuman Other. There, the displaced man strives to be recognized as a subject, rather than an object, reclaiming the validation denied to him in his country of origin. The hardships of forced displacement – including violence, precariousness, and practical challenges – are not overlooked in the narrative, as evidenced by various digressions into some citizens' backgrounds as refugees. However, instead of depicting the foreign land as a "dystopic location, [its] borders as places of wilderness and violence where characters undergo unheroic and painful self-transformations" (Gallien 2018: 724), Tan's ideological operation aims to highlight the agency and creative potential of the forcibly displaced. The

protagonist's active engagement with his surroundings results in the implementation of "homing devices" (Myers 2009: 79), i.e., strategies that exploit nostalgia intimations to construct a new idea of home as a place of contiguous relationships and negotiated habitation. The negotiations that take place in Tan's book are between the human refugee and the polymorphous and polyphonic world where he landed. In that space, he experiences the vitality of matter, the powerful agency of nonhuman entities, and the vibrant multiplicity of reality, which enable him to establish a material and emotional bond with the living and non-living surroundings. Hence, *The Arrival* is ultimately an "alter-tale" (Bennett 2001: 8), that is, an alternative narrative that proposes a different experience of the world by foregrounding the capacity of physical forces, human and nonhuman entities, and places to produce meanings and shape reality through their reciprocal sensory, psychic, and affective engagement. Tan's counter-story does not romanticize the experience of forced displacement but presents it as a reprocessing of habits, objects, personal and collective histories through the interplay between two "worlds" – matter and discourse – that have long been perceived as dichotomic. By showing the possibility of implementing resilient settlement strategies through a relationship of intimacy with the nonhuman realm, *The Arrival* can be included among those cultural representations that open up unknown worlds of discovery and self-discovery, highlighting not much the scattering as the regenerative potential of refugeedom.

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