

## ‘We refugees’: (Un)othering in visual narratives on displacement

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### *Abstract*

This article focuses on four contemporary visual narratives which deal with the theme of (literal or metaphorical) refuge, and its difficult circumstances and consequences. The books under discussion have been chosen for their specific visual poetics, which acquires a significant narrative function in each story. The narratives’ portrayals of displacement are evocative for at least two reasons. First, they make metaphorical links between the past and the present, appealing to cultural memory and reworking it in various ways. Second, they communicate their ethical message relying on the affective potential of the material qualities of the medium—the book, and on the emotional impact of embodied memory evoked by visual means.

Key words: refugee, displacement, (un)othering, ethical engagement, visual narratives, cultural memory, materiality, somaesthetics

My only love sprung from my only hate!  
Too early seen unknown, and known too late!  
Prodigious birth of love it is to me,  
That I must love a loathèd enemy.  
William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1, Scene 5

‘Perhaps we are the guests to the country that we thought was ours, and that we actually understand as ours...’—Krzysztof Wodiczko remarks with reference to his 2009 exhibition ‘Guests’, a project meant to awaken public discourse about the Other (2009: 0:11-0:20). Wodiczko insists on reverting the perspective, thus questioning assumptions about the status of both the natives and the newcomers. His projects make it clear that whatever the circumstances of refuge, exile, forced migration, the ‘stranger’ is usually the more vulnerable party, and their situation is often impossible to comprehend by those who have never experienced displacement. Wodiczko’s aim is to make the audience recognise the ‘strangers’ existential situation ‘emotionally and intellectually, emotionally even more and first’ (2009: 4:22-4:35).

Smyczyńska, Katarzyna. 2018. “‘We refugees’: (Un)othering in visual narratives on displacement.” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 17(1):217-236.

The artist's ethically engaged agenda (which honours Hannah Arendt's political thought) is to transform contemporary democracies through giving voice to those who are too often silenced in public discourse, whose experience tends to be misinterpreted in the light of pre-conceived notions about them. In his projects buildings and monuments become alive thanks to the human figures who, displayed on the buildings' facades, share their stories with anyone willing to listen. What matters is the value of sharing the moment and recognising a human being behind the story. The installation 'Guests' employs the narrative potential of space to appeal to the viewers' embodied memory. The tangible border between the insiders and outsiders, the fogginess of the figures looming behind the window pane make the insiders aware of the apparently unspecified sense of distance and lack of human contact with the outsiders. They may generate a sense of fear, but also bring a realisation of the inherent irrationality of this fear.

The impulse to give voice to those who happen to be less fortunate has both political and ethical significance. Those who decide to do so usually seek symbolic justice, want to let the world know about the suffering, and try to suggest ways of transforming attitudes and fostering understanding. In her memorable 1943 essay 'We refugees' Hannah Arendt enlightens her readers about the traumatic experiences of Jewish refugees during the Second World War. She writes about the alienation that comes with refugee experience and about the loss of dignity that is most painfully felt by those who have been expelled or escaped from their home country and whose very humanness becomes very fragile in a new environment (1994: 115). Even though Arendt is skeptical about the concept of assimilation, and writes with compassionate criticism about the refugees' efforts to conform to the new environment by fabricating new identities, she insists on the essential role of social ties, arguing that '[m]oral standards are much easier kept in the texture of a society. Very few individuals have the strength to conserve their own integrity if their social, political and legal status is completely confused' (1994: 116).

For Arendt a solution to the problem of displacement and its many aspects—social, legal, but also personal and emotional—is to remain honest about one's own identity. Arendt makes her readers aware of the fictitiousness of 'national loyalties' and strategically adopted identities. Only such recognition will enable humans to communicate and relate to each other on equal terms (1994: 119).

The contemporary crisis of the nation-state and the twentieth- and twenty-first-century mass refugee crisis prompted Giorgio Agamben to comment on the currency of Arendt's argument fifty years later. Agamben writes about the inadequacy of the term 'citizen' in a nation-state system, where 'the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterise them as rights of the citizen of a state' (1995: 116). Like Arendt, he reveals the morally unacceptable, although institutionally sanctioned gap between citizenship and humanity. Agamben illustrates his ethical agenda with a metaphor of a Moebius strip, which he sees as more adequate for contemporary European space—an acknowledgement of blurred boundaries between interior and exterior would make all people recognise themselves as refugees, or citizens being-in-exodus, and 'the European space would thus represent an unbridgeable gap between birth and nation' (1995: 118).

Even though Arendt comments specifically on the situation of the Jewish community where she herself belongs, her ethical claim has a universal appeal. Both Arendt and Agamben confer upon us a responsibility, a sense of solidarity with the oppressed. Wodiczko's work is not an isolated example of art which proposes 'a philosophical utopia of nomadic identity over and against the social utopia of nationalism as well as the end-of-ideology pragmatism of non-identity' (Léger par. 10). Contemporary literature also remains sensitive to Arendt's concerns and reworks them metaphorically. In a manner similar to Wodiczko's work, visual narratives can reorient cultural memory and engage the readers affectively. The artists are committed to challenging misconceptions about refugees generated by lack of knowledge and fear, or legitimated for political purposes. Relying on the expressive potential of their medium, they can, through their art, initiate symbolic 'unothering'.

The books under discussion: *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker*, *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey*, and *The Island* (I discuss *The Arrival* separately) have been chosen for their subject matter and the specific visual poetics through which they display ethical engagement. The visual narratives selected for analysis make metaphorical links between the past and the present, appealing to cultural memory and reworking it in various ways. Cultural memory is activated to express the emotional value of ethnic identity or national belonging, but also to allude to the significance of ties beyond national or ethnic

alliances. The books function as artistic manifestos of compassion for all those who escape poverty, war, oppression, all those who need the support of others.

The affective dimension of the works is rooted in their visual design, some elements of which appeal to the readers' embodied memory. These narrative strategies can therefore be viewed through the lens of Richard Shusterman's theory of somaesthetics. In his comment about human interaction with art Shusterman states: 'Art enchants us through its richly sensuous dimensions, perceived through the bodily senses and enjoyed through embodied feelings. Yet philosophical aesthetics largely neglects the body's role in aesthetic appreciation' (2012: 1).

Shusterman redefines the role of the body in perception and thinking, and places special emphasis on its active participation in the experience of art. He develops the basic premises of the pragmatist approach which draw attention to the essential role of the body in the process of artistic creation and reception, pointing to the significance of 'the soma—the *living, sentient, purposive* body—as the indispensable medium for all perception' (2012: 3; emphasis mine). His argument demonstrates the body's essential role in the human condition. He makes his readers aware that the body is the essential medium through which moral values and social norms have the opportunity to circulate and gain social legitimacy (2012: 31). Shusterman therefore insists on a more integrated vision of culture, body and mind. All the visual narratives selected for analysis engage the readers' imagination either through appeal to their own materiality or through the way they help the readers imagine a sense of materiality evoked by visual means. They rely on the potential of the soma in ways I will attempt to identify and examine.

#### The Arrival: *migration and beyond*

No discussion of contemporary visual narratives on displacement would be exhaustive without relating to *The Arrival* (Hodder Children's Books 2006). This highly acclaimed example of visual literature<sup>1</sup> created by the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Arrival* is a particularly interesting example of a hardly categorisable visual narrative, whose generic hybridity has been the subject of academic debates (see e.g. Dony 2012). The term 'visual literature' which I use with reference to all the works discussed in this article embraces both picturebooks

Australian artist Shaun Tan addresses comprehensively and evocatively the experience of migration, as already indicated in numerous studies (e.g. Arizpe, Colomer, Martinez-Roldan 2014; Bellorin, Silva-Diaz in Arizpe, Farrell, McAdam, 2013; Dony 2012, Sikorska 2014, Nabizadeh 2011, Banerjee 2016). Inspired by these works, I would like to emphasise those aspects of Tan's work which appear most relevant for my further discussion. *The Arrival* is an (almost) wordless visual narrative which, through its dreamlike convention appealing to audiences of all ages, draws on the collective experience of migrants across time and space. The author provides various interpretative tropes for the readers, pointing to inter pictorial allusions in his book to old photographs of migrants on Ellis Island and paintings depicting immigrant history. He also speaks about the internal impulse to give voice to local migrant communities familiar to him (Shaun Tan Net; *Sketches from a Nameless Land: The Art of The Arrival* (2010)). Alluding to the visual format of an old family album and activating its multiple connotations, the artist mobilises the affective potential of collective cultural memory.

Understood literally, or through the lens of the author's biography and the memory of mass migration across the globe, *The Arrival* remains a conceptually sophisticated, and affectively engaging reconstruction of the experience of many migrants. As Christopher Dony points out, the central idea in Shaun Tan's work, 'crossing over', is manifested not only through its storyline and visual aesthetics, but also through the defiance of established generic conventions (2012: 86). Yet the very idea of 'crossing over' can be understood very broadly. The specific arrangement of visual clues in *The Arrival* suggests that the work's meanings transcend the theme of migration. It can be seen as a study of different dimensions of otherness, rootlessness and possibilities of belonging, concomitant with Arendt's insistence on acknowledging otherness in ourselves, on turning otherness into a universal characteristic of the world. Significantly, the relative narrative unspecificity of the storyline in *The Arrival* (including the absence of text) and the crucial elements of the visual convention, characterised by Magdalena Sikorska in her analysis of Tan's work (2014: 203-205), lead her to a conclusion that the narrative focus is on the contemplation of a

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and other conceptually complex visual narratives whose generic status is more ambiguous.

difficult experience rather than the drama of human existence. Sikorska argues convincingly that *The Arrival* can be read beyond the typical migrant story. She proposes a more universal interpretative trope, according to which Tan's work emerges as a metaphorical account of any process of internal change and the difficulties with which the subsequent stages are fraught (2014: 206).

Sikorska's reading of *The Arrival* demonstrates that the motif of migration functions as a narrative frame for a universal problem that Tan so masterfully portrays: otherness residing in the eye of the beholder (2014: 207). Change that is not desired can be extremely disconcerting, but Tan suggests that it can be accommodated. Strangeness is indeed portrayed consistently as a variation on sameness—it is possible to tame it, to overcome it if we invest some effort. Many elements of the narrative suggestively speak about the possibility. We discover that 'the new world's' surreal space is in fact inviting through its eclectic character and organic characteristics. We detect similarity of the facial features of all the characters in the book, even though they represent different ethnicities and backgrounds; we also recognise the familiar behaviours of the indigenous animal creatures. Even the initially abstract writing system featured in the book resembles the one western readers usually rely on—which is because the artist invented his 'fake alphabet' cutting the shapes of Roman letters and numbers and rearranging them (Tan 2010: 31). Tan's work offers all the distressed a sense of interconnectedness beyond the boundaries of time and space.

As the narrative structure of *The Arrival* so evocatively alludes to the experience of migration, yet so clearly transcends this theme, I have discussed it separately, to expose the possibility to see Tan's work through the universal prism. The other works focus more specifically on the theme of forced migration and refuge, on the trauma of displacement and a sense of uprootedness. They seem to plead for understanding and compassion by exposing vividly the refugee's suffering: *Migrant...* reflects a Mexican child's trauma of forced migration to the USA and the homesickness for the abandoned country. *Stepping Stones...* is a visual tribute to the war victims and refugees from Syria, encapsulated through the traditional craft cultivated by a contemporary Syrian artist. *The Island* is an allegorical story about the tragic consequences of othering the newcomer, which brings to mind all kinds of (mentally) insular communities in history.

The books' visual poetics plays a key role in understanding their power to tell the stories in an emotionally engaging way. *Migrant...* was published in its bilingual Spanish-English version in the USA, just as *Stepping Stones...* appeared in its English and Arabic version in Canada. In both cases the texts, authored by writers who did not create the art for the books, refer to the illustrations, yet arguably they can be read independently from the images, as personalised accounts of children-refugees, their memories of life before their exile, the trauma of the journey, and their feelings after the arrival. They function primarily as the narrative frame for the material art, which seems to carry the most affective weight in each book. The narratives end at a point when the refugees finally reach their destination, homesick and vulnerable. Their future remains unknown, although a sense of hope is conveyed in the narratives more or less tentatively. In *The Island* by Armin Greder, the interanimation of text and image constructs a macabre vision of what comes next, when the refugee already finds himself on a foreign land, among the grotesquely insular community.

*Bridging past and present traumas through the materiality of the book:*

Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker

*Migrant...* (Abrams Books 2014), translated into English by Emmy Smith Ready, is a bi-lingual American version of the Mexican *Migrar* published by Ediciones Tecolote in 2011. In 2015 two languages, German and Spanish, appeared in the German Edition Orient edition. The book's text was written by José Manuel Mateo; the illustrations were created by Javier Martínez Pedro. The text introduces the reader to the grim reality of uprootedness through a story of a family's forced migration to the USA. The readers follow their perilous journey reading the text, the subsequent chunks of which appear one under another, and looking at the images, which unfold in a leporello, forming one image in which all the scenes are blended. The use of the leporello format allows the artist to convey effectively the idea of the journey, but its meanings extend beyond this most straightforward narrative function. I will attempt to highlight the significance of the accordion-fold and other elements of the book's materiality, all of which have affective qualities and are evidence of the political engagement of the artists.

The engagement reveals itself in all the elements of narration—not only in the emotionally charged text and the illustrations, but also in the material elements of the design. The first-person narration of a child protagonist, mostly devoid of sentimentality, represents the feelings of the boy only too aware of what he has been through and what he can expect. Although the story is told from the perspective of a single character, he becomes a metonymic representation of the collective trauma. The book's consistent employment of dark colours seems to suggest an affinity between the past and the future; the downward navigation of the leporello metaphorically speaks about descending to an unknown, hell-like space. The fact that the direction constructed by the material form of the book reverses the real geographical location of Mexico and the USA becomes a profoundly ironic gesture.

The artist's choice of form and fabric is laden with meaning. The book's visual elements and material form—the dominance of black in the paintings, the black ribbon attached to the cover, and the leporello unfolding towards the ground—articulates intensely and vividly the dramatic circumstances of forced migration. The accordion-fold and the aesthetic convention chosen by the artist allude to the form of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican codices, which were often single long sheets folded like a concertina. The note in the book informs the readers that the illustrations were painted on local amate paper. This choice is significant not only because the artist comes from Xalitla, a Mexican village where the traditional paper is still made, but also because amate was used by the Aztec royal authorities and priests for sacred and political purposes. As Rosaura Citlalli López Binnquist explains, after the Conquest, indigenous paper, especially bark paper lost its value as a tribute item. One reason was that the Spanish preferred European paper; the other was that bark paper was associated with indigenous religion and was therefore banned for its alleged connections with magic and witchcraft. As the Spaniards' plan was to convert the indigineous masses to Catholicism, they burned the codices, which contained most of the native history as well as cultural and natural knowledge (López Binnquist: 2003).

The artist consciously activates the cultural memory of Mexico's pre-colonial past, so that the book indirectly becomes a form of memory of cultural genocide. The material elements—the amate paper and the folklore-inspired art spread on the leporello—thus acquire symbolic

(perhaps also political) functions in the book. They suggestively associate the painful history of colonisation with the contemporary lot of the descendants of Mesoamericans. It becomes even clearer because of the supposed visual analogies between Martínez Pedro's art and Diego Riviera's murals ('Migrant', Kirkus review)—if purposeful, they indicate shared political sympathies.

Just as Wodiczko makes an interventionist gesture through his transformations of public space, by making it alive and encouraging the audience to interact with it, so the authors of *Migrant...* encourage their readers to interact with the book's materiality. It is a very potent, straightforward metaphor: the form of the book imitates the real thing—the codex, and thus evokes specific elements of the nation's collective memory, linking it with the trauma of refuge. It is not only the text and the visual convention of the illustrations that speak to us. The readers must interact with the book's materiality, experience its physicality: they can touch the book's paper, spread and fold back the accordion-fold, tie and untie the ribbon. By activating the readers' different senses—visual, but also tactile, kinesthetic, even olfactory (amate paper has a special smell)—the artists try to evoke affective engagement and initiate an active interrogation of the commonplaceness of violence and abuse towards those who are poor and homeless.

*Material symbolism of vernacular art: Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey*

'We all came here from somewhere'  
Benjamin Zephaniah, *We refugees*

Published in 2016 by Orca Book Publishers in Canada, the book originated as a cooperative project of the Canadian children's writer Margriet Ruurs and the Syrian artist Nizar Ali Badr. Impressed by his art, Ruurs had asked the artist for permission to write a text that would accompany his pebble compositions documenting the plight of Syrian war refugees. The text is the first-person narration of a child protagonist, present in the book in two language versions: English and Arabic. The book has a definitive ethical purpose—to spread knowledge about the war in Syria, to honour the resilience of Syrian people, and to collect funds for resettlement organisations in North America.

Framed in the linear plot proposed by the Canadian writer, Nizar Ali Badr's art to some degree changes its character. His numerous artworks originally did not form a linear story, and were preserved only in the form of photographs. Images of war and suffering observed and documented by the artist through the medium of pebble-stones from the Syrian coast are exceptional works which metaphorically encapsulate the qualities of the people they portray: they make the impression of being fleeting and fragile, and yet also solid and resilient.

Badr's art, a continuation of a craft practised in the artist's family for generations, captures the trauma of war through straightforward scenes. Pebble-stones of different shapes, colours, and texture are arranged with great care and attention to detail in order to convey human and animal shapes. The compositions are emotional through their directness and simplicity: they portray individuals and groups as they run with their arms raised, tread overburdened with their meagre possessions, drown in the sea during their escape. Badr calls his art a 'museum' ('Syrian artist...': par. 6). Indeed he brings in the cultural heritage of his community and passes it on as a legacy to next generations.

Perhaps the reason why the material art of Nizar Ali Badr is so evocative is the awareness of its relation with the land and its people. It is literally rooted in the vernacular, and symbolically and materially saturated with the history of the land. The artist explains that the stones come from Mount Zaphon, which is 'known in Ugaritic texts to be the dwelling of Baal, god of the mountain, storm, and rain worshipped by ancient Syrian cultures' ('Syrian Artist...': par. 1). He states that his modest life allows him to be more connected to nature; he feels he is guided by his ancestors. But another reason may be the specificity of the material medium: the sense of silence emanating from the pebble-stones and their symbolic affinity with the human world, owing to which they prove so apt to commemorate both human drama and human spirit. The stone figures of the refugees do not resemble *Migrant's* miniature human pawns scattered on the enormous, mostly hostile space. Badr's art expressively points to their humanity. The artist explains that with time, as his attachments to the stones grew, he heard them cry: 'The stones screamed so loudly that all resounded... the cries of the needy, the oppressed and the fugitives' (par. 10). Badr treats stones as entities that are symbolically (and materially) integrated with the world of humans:

[...] when I create a stone sculpture, I know for certain that there is nothing here for it to be kept. It will, without any doubt, soon be destroyed, just like the Buddhist sand mandalas. As such, my work possesses an inherent ephemeral character, which requires an ability to detach from material objects and understand the temporary nature of everything in life. (par. 4)

The sense of unity between all the elements of the universe, the sense of interconnectedness examined with special reference to stones has become the subject of academic inquiry. Jeffrey Cohen's book *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* challenges the dualism of western thinking; perhaps in accordance with eastern philosophical thought, it emphasises the unity between animate and inanimate elements of the universe and questions the divide between nature and culture (2015: 7). Cohen challenges a number of preconceived ideas about stones' supposed inanimateness, permanence, and lack of agency. He writes:

The ecological project of thinking beyond anthropocentricity requires enlarged temporal and geographical scales. [...] While the project of this book is disanthropocentric, assuming a world irreducible to its human relations and not existing for any particular purpose, its methods stress alliance, continuity, and mutual participation over elemental solitariness and human exceptionalism.

(2015: 9)

Even if some readers remain sceptical about the agency of stones attributed to them by Cohen, many will intuitively ascribe a symbolic and emotional value to sea pebbles. The emotional power of the stone art symbolically confirms Cohen's argument, and also brings to mind Shusterman's concept of intersomatic memory, which he identifies to characterise human contact with non-human agents. Shusterman argues that people develop particular reactions to objects which are then incorporated in their muscle memory. As emotions have an embodied character, somatic memories acquire an affective dimension (2012: 97-98). The pebble-stone art appeals to our memories of physical contact with stones, their smooth texture, and the tenderness it evokes can become part of the process of interpreting the book's message.

Beyond the aspect of the expressive power of the medium there is also the value of artistic expression, characterised by simplicity, authenticity and reflexiveness. The visual detail plays a key role: the tenderness of embraces, heads hung low, shoulders hunched with weariness. The art speaks about the tragedy yet what prevails is the

humanistic message of togetherness and hope informed by the artist's wisdom. Whereas in *Migrant...* a sense of indignation is discernible, Nizar Ali Badr's art makes an impression of being more contemplative and subdued. His art honours the sufferers and reflects the memory of a shared past. It is essentially compassionate, but the modesty of artistic means and representations makes it subtle. It does not infect the viewer with the sense of trauma, and—through the inclusion of the more optimistic imagery—it expresses hope in the possibility of sharing one's life meaningfully with others even after the traumatic experience.

*The Island as a picturebook allegory of 'othering'*

Armin Greder, the author of *The Island*—the only picturebook in this selection<sup>2</sup>—was born in Switzerland and emigrated to Australia as an adult. Like Shaun Tan, Greder has been appreciated as a visual artist and awarded with the most prestigious prizes for children's illustrations and children's literature: Bologna Ragazzi Award in 1996 and a Biennale of Illustrations Bratislava Golden Apple in 2003. In 2004 he was nominated for the Hans Christian Andersen Award. *The Island*, the first book for which the artist also wrote the text, was first published in 2002 in Germany, and only five years later in Australia by the publisher Allen & Unwin. The author comments on *The Island's* publication history:

I wrote 'The Island' sometime in the nineties in Australia (in English, the language I am most comfortable with when it comes to writing). It was considered unpublishable, because back then a picture book was a children's book and my story was not a children's story. Europe had less qualms about this, and the success of the book over there, together with a relaxing of the distinction between children's and real literature eventually made it publishable in Australia as well.

(Interview with Armin Greder, 'Playing by the book')

*The Island's* dystopian plot can be read as a metonymy of the fate of the nomad, who is too often confronted with insularity, bigotry, egoism, and

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<sup>2</sup> I refer specifically to the three books that I have selected for closer analysis; my classification of the books in question relies on the definition provided by Margaret Meek, who emphasises the aspect of the interanimation of image and word in picturebooks. See Meek 1992.

the irrational fear of the Other.<sup>3</sup> The titular island may be a metaphorical motif standing for the prejudiced attitudes of its inhabitants, and can be read through this universal lens, although it also resonates with the Australian history of migrations and the national memory of the twentieth-century refugee arrivals.

The book's expressive potential is enormous, not only due to the affective power of the illustrations, but also through the ironic discrepancy between the verbal and the visual message. The story is told via the third person narration, reflecting the attitudes of the islanders towards the newcomer. We never learn the refugee's perspective from the text, as he is deprived of a voice in the verbal narration; the (silenced) perspective is present there nevertheless, transferred on the visual narration. The irony lies in the narrative dissonance between the understated tone in the text, reflecting the official discourse that rationalises prejudice and legitimates communal fears, and the highly affective illustrations, where the hierarchy of power is explicit.

The ironic juxtaposition of the text and the illustrations discloses the irrationality of the natives' excuses and accusations: when the islanders talk about how they might 'starve to death' if they accept anyone who arrives, the image depicts a tin full of fish, and connotes the closeness of the sea and its infinite resources. When they accuse the man of savage habits, we can see him incarcerated in the goat pen, eating the leftovers intended for the pigs. The use of irony can already be detected on the cover, in the discrepancy between the title announcing an island as the focus of the story, and the actual absence of an island in the cover illustration. Rather tellingly, the cover image features the ominous charcoal-drawn fortress spreading on most of the cover surface, even more threatening and insurmountable because of the worm's eye view used to depict it. Another significant example occurs in a scene where the text simply and neutrally states: 'Then one morning the man appeared in town', but the illustration shows a beastly-looking, Munchesque image of one of the village women—a grotesque embodiment of the fear the newcomer generates in the villagers.

The book's affective power relies on several visual means, one of which is the narrative use of perspective in the examples discussed

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<sup>3</sup> The politics of 'othering' in *The Island* and in two other Australian picturebooks is analysed in Hillel 2010: 91-103.

above, and in other scenes when the readers 'become the subject' and adopt the perspective of the newcomer. They are coerced to glance at the sea from the perspective of the person on a raft, and later they are virtually confronted with the hostile crowd equipped in rakes eyeing up the viewer. The artist also uses the narrative potential of size and scale—the newcomer is much shorter in comparison with the inhabitants of the island, whom we sometimes see in close-up, so that their already obese bodies loom as even more grotesque and repulsive.

In relation to other visual strategies that potentially affect the reader, Shusterman's concept of somaesthetics again turns out to be relevant. The use of charcoal in Greder's condemnatory portrayal of human cruelty brings to mind the poignancy and repulsive realism of Francisco Goya's 'The Disasters of War' and points to the ethical and political message behind Goya's prints. The dominance of black and cadaverous colour used to portray human bodies, and the roughness of the objects' texture are likely to evoke revulsion. The anti-aesthetic convention and the colour palette are clearly inspired by Lucian Freud and Egon Schiele, perhaps also by the Flemish artist Adriaen Brouwer's paintings of common people. The islanders' obesity, rough facial features, and gesturing are metaphorical visualisations of their psyche; they are defined through the physical contrast between themselves and the refugee, whose fragile physique, nakedness and the realistically depicted human shape visually define him as the vulnerable party. Greder creates a repulsive world which can no longer be deemed human.

The most blatant depictions of the irrationality of the native attitudes are featured in scenes where their fear and paranoia are projected on the newcomer: they imagine him in the context of invasion, violence, devilish features. Naturalistic detail is used ironically to represent the community's materialised guilty conscience. The nakedness of the refugee is a powerful symbol of his own emaciation and of the community's refusal in acknowledging his humanity by not providing him with clothes. The fact that he is white—like them—and otherwise very similar, only skinnier, visually challenges the narrator's words signalling his difference. The strategy of the visual reversal of the verbal discourse—portraying the refugee realistically and the residents as grotesque figures—is another ironic gesture of the artist.

The allegorical convention used to tell the story, its narrative unspecificity, its visually implied past setting, and the contrast between

the understated tone in the text and the vividness of the visual convention indicates that the artist tells us a cautionary tale which may bring to mind the passion narratives in Gospel accounts. The artist's choices turn the book into an ethically and politically engaged manifesto, a story about undeserved suffering, but also about the mechanisms that generate evil. Greder features the newcomer as a representative of all martyrs and innocent victims of prejudice, all those who have become ostracised, objectified, and condemned by their environments. The fact that the man emerges from water and is ultimately thrown back to it in the rather shocking ending is symbolic. The refugee appears alongside with the image of fish, the islanders' regular food. As the prejudice against the man grows, the miniature images of the fish continue appearing on the subsequent illustrations, first in a can, then on someone's plate, and finally in the form of leftovers. Ironically again, the apparently respectable members in the community, the priest and the school teacher, do not bother to intervene and stop moral panic among the villagers—and perhaps their compliance actually stokes it up. Even if not read through the universal prism, the allegory is a perfect embodiment of Agamben's bitter observation that our humanity is apparently not enough to secure us in a new environment; a stranger who aspires to become part of the long-established community and disrupts the status quo is bound to be treated as an inferior being. Deconstructing the scapegoating mechanisms in his radical vision, Greder in fact calls for the 'unothering' of all the othered.

*Conclusion: The importance of being human*

The works discussed above engage themselves with the theme of otherness focusing on displacement and a hope to belong. All manifest the deep ethical concern of the authors. The stories rejuvenate the past in order to negotiate cultural memory and to suggest ethical solutions. As Jan Assmann explains,

Every culture formulates something that might be called a connective structure. [...] Both the normative and the narrative elements of these—mixing instruction with storytelling—create a basis of belonging, of identity, so that the individual can then talk of 'we'. What binds him to this plural is the connective structure of common knowledge and characteristics—first through adherence to the same laws and values, and second through the memory of a shared past. (2011: 2-3)

The authors' choices are evidence of their reliance on cultural memory's connective potential and of their effort to emphasise the symbolic value of ethnic or national bonds in the liminal circumstances of displacement. Their works reveal how certain cultural memory tropes associated with a community's distant past can be used by the artists on behalf of the least fortunate—how the collective memory of a national trauma or that of nation-formative myths can be activated to protest against injustice and to mourn the victims, and how it can function as a springboard for the future and a source of hope. The books are narratives of remembering in another sense, too, as artistic forms of commemorating the suffering of the refugees. Their voices become authenticated by the books' conceptual frames and by the personal experience of the artists, who either witnessed or experienced migration (also in the circumstances of war). For these reasons the works can perhaps be associated with some of the well-known twentieth-century testimonies of writers who experienced war and oppression. Expounding his ethics of memory, Paul Connerton proposes to see the testimonies as political and therapeutic acts, whose authors' primary goal was to 'denounce the injustice which they had survived or escaped' and to show the way of 'triumphing over that experience, of turning it into a motivation for living and working' (2011: 33).

The visual poetics of the books discussed above is a form of artistic appeal to our humanity. In her memoirs Antonina Żabińska writes about acts of compassion and generosity she experienced as a refugee during the Second World War, emphasising that humane gestures and benevolence of strangers prove invaluable in extreme conditions. She writes with gratefulness and admiration that the time of the war, which utterly demoralised so many, bred far more noble and pure feelings (2010: 260-61). Her hope is echoed in the books discussed above, which tell us stories of displacement; they protest, warn, and mourn, but above all communicate vividly that we share more than we do not.

Crossing geographical and mental borders necessitates a reflection, present in all the books (although in *The Island* through the grim moral of the dystopian tale), on the possibility of connectedness beyond ethnic and national allegiances. These allegiances are naturally very real and dear to those who have a strong sense of ethnic or national belonging, however contingent it may in fact be (Assmann, 2011: 117). They become particularly vital for those in exile. But there must be hope also

for those numerous individuals whose identities are more ambivalent, who do not have a definitive notion of what their ethnic roots are, or which of their multiple ancestries they should privilege or adopt as their own. Let me therefore finish with a quote from the author of *The Arrival*, who writes unusually aptly about the possibility for mutual understanding and possibilities of belonging beyond the political rigidity and ideological contentiousness of the concepts of ‘assimilation’ or ‘multiculturalism’:

true meaning does not come from names or labels, or even objects and actions themselves, but from whatever personal memories, associations and emotions we ascribe to them. Worn smooth by years of familiarity, these sentiments eventually become strong enough to displace any need for further explanation; they become their own truth, an invented reality. Perhaps this is what ‘belonging’ is, beyond the need to understand, comprehend or conform to a place: it’s the attachment of sincere feeling and meaning to an essentially mysterious world. (2010: 48)

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