MIGRATION AS A VISUAL LANGUAGE OF MEMORY

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Abstract

This article examines migration as a visual language of memory through a comparative analysis of Shaun Tan's The Arrival (2006) and Thi Bui's The Best We Could Do (2017). Both works employ graphic storytelling to convey the often-inexpressible experiences of displacement, generational trauma, and cultural transmission through visual forms that represent memory. In The Arrival, Tan employs wordless images, allegorical landscapes, and surreal symbolism to make the migrant experience universal, highlighting the emotional aspects of feeling estranged and finding a sense of belonging. In contrast, Bui's memoir combines documentary-style panels, family portraits, and shifting timelines to portray the intergenerational echoes of the Vietnam War and refugee escape. These works demonstrate how visual language navigates the balance between personal and collective memory, creating spaces where silence, fragmentation, and imagination serve as tools of remembrance. By placing migration stories within visual memory practices, the article argues that these works show how graphic literature can reshape archives of trauma and resilience, revealing the intimate and transnational layers of migration.

Key-words: *migration, displacement, graphic representation, universality, lived history.*

1. Defining Migration and Its Centrality in Human History

Migration, seen as the movement of people from one place to another, often crossing geographical, political, or cultural borders, is one of the most enduring and transformative features of human history. It arises from a multiplicity of causes: economic necessity, environmental change, war and persecution, colonial displacement, or the search for better prospects and safety. Throughout its history, migration has shaped human societies, cultures, languages, and identities. From early human dispersals, through nomadic and settled patterns, to large twentieth- and twenty-first-century flows of refugees and labor migrants, this phenomenon is a kind of thread running through human history and human story, I would argue.

The term originates from the Latin word "*migrationem* (nominative *migratio*), "a removal, change of abode, migration," noun of action from past-

participle stem of *migrare,* which means "to move from one place to another," ("Origin and history") and represents the change of the usual place of residence for various causes during a particular period. There is no universally accepted definition of migration ("Fundamentals of migration"); however, the concept involves two essential aspects: i.e., change of residence, and the crossing of a pre-defined administrative boundary. According to the U.N.'s definition, "Migration is the movement of people away from their usual place of residence to a new place of residence, either across an international border or within a State". (ibid.) Other attempts to define the concept focus on the same aspects. Thus, according to Shryock and Siegel, "migration is a form of geographic or spatial mobility involving a change of usual residence between two clearly defined geographic units" (1973: 579). Bogue describes migration as a movement of people and as an instrument of cultural diffusion and social integration, its result being a more meaningful distribution of population. It represents, as Bogue states, "a necessary element of normal population adjustment and equilibrium." (1959: 487)

According to various discourses related to migration, there are three major components of population change: birth, death, and migration (see Raftery and Ševčíková, 2023; Bogue, 1959; Shryock and Siegel, 1973), and among these, migration poses the greatest difficulty in terms of conceptualization and measurement. "These three phenomena," Bogue contends, "are known as the "components of population change," for they are the mechanisms by which a population grows or declines in size. A community or nation can gain population only through the fertility of its inhabitants or by migration, and it can lose population only through deaths among its residents or by migration. As a component of population change, migration occupies a central place in demographic analysis." (1959: 486)

However, the importance of migration cannot be limited to geography, politics, economics, or society. Its significance for human development and evolution is much more complex. From the perspective of cultural exchange and hybridity, migrant flows promote the blending of languages, religions, food traditions, and aesthetic forms, creating new fragmented identities and cultural constructs. Regarding memory and its mechanisms, migration often involves rupture – leaving home, facing estrangement, adapting to new environments – and thus becomes embedded in both collective and individual memory.

People arrive in new lands carrying their past, and so the space between departure and arrival becomes a fertile ground for nostalgia, negotiation, and adaptation. For many migrants, the journey is traumatic – displacement, loss, exclusion, and dislocation are all alienating factors involved in the process. Simultaneously, however, migration is also about building new homes and surviving amidst upheaval; it is a story of belonging and otherness, raising questions such as: "*Who belongs where?*", "*What makes a home?*", "*What is the relationship between a migrant and the host society?*". Migration, thus, challenges fixed ideas of identity and belonging, prompting a reexamination of nationhood, diaspora, and diaspora memory.

In view of all these dynamics, migration can be and needs to be addressed not only as a sociological and demographic phenomenon, but also as a deep human

one, involving memory, imagination, identity, and belonging. The act of moving and settling engenders layers of narrative: departure (leaving), transit (journey), arrival (settlement), adaptation, and sometimes return or new mobility.

2. The Importance of the Visual Medium in Rendering Migratory Stories

In the age of visual communication, with graphic novels, comics, image-rich media, photography, film, and social media, the visual medium has emerged as a powerful way to render stories, sometimes stories of migration and memory, as the ones this article has chosen for analysis, i.e., *The Arrival* (2006) by Shaun Tan and *The Best We Could Do* (2017) by Thi Bui. Migration experiences often involve feelings of disorientation, silence, language barriers, non-verbal forms of alienation, and aesthetic estrangement (strange food, strange streets, strange scripts). Visual media can suggestively evoke the implicitly felt experiences, the in-between, the "what it is like" to arrive in a strange land, perhaps without proficiency in the language of the host society. As Ashwini Rajpoot comments in her analysis of *The Arrival*, "the immigrant's lack of knowledge of the language of the new world he enters is best laid out through a complete absence of language itself."

Visual representations can also externalize internal emotional states, memories, flashbacks, layering of time, and spectral presence of the past, in ways that prose alone might find difficult. Graphic memoirs, for example, use space, colour, and panel layout to evoke emotions. The visual form offers a new language in which panels, the gaps between them, and imagery become carriers of memory, absence, longing, and trauma. This visual medium can transcend linguistic barriers, making migrant stories more accessible and universal. For instance, *The Arrival* is entirely wordless; thus, the readers become migrants themselves into the story. As Shaun Tan declares in an article written in 2006 for *Viewpoint Magazine*, "In 'The Arrival', the absence of any written description also plants the reader more firmly in the shoes of an immigrant character. There is no guidance as to how the images might be interpreted, and we must ourselves search for meaning and seek familiarity in a world where such things are either scarce or concealed. Words have a remarkable magnetic pull on our attention, and how we interpret attendant images: in their absence, an image can often have more conceptual space around it, and invite a more lingering attention from a reader who might otherwise reach for the nearest convenient caption, and let that rule their imagination." ("Comments on *The Arrival*")

In visual storytelling, form becomes very important; panel transitions, page spreads, colour shifts, or visual motifs (objects, maps, family photos), all contribute to meaning. In the context of migration, these formal choices can dramatise the rupture of leaving home, the liminality of transit, the alienation of arrival, and the layering of memory. As far as Ladislava Khailova is concerned, visual narratives of migration deploy "defamiliarisation" to put the reader in the shoes of the migrant subject. "Something like migrants, readers are positioned to leave behind common understandings in attempts to decipher the new society. I argue that the narrative strategies of defamiliarisation and genre blurring, in

juxtaposition with the text's deployment of further postmodern techniques (such as conflicting or mutually-exclusive symbolic referents), challenge constructions of the subject as a stable, coherent entity with a clear cultural and geographic affiliation, representing the empowerment of the ex-centric." (2015: 1) Thus, in a world saturated by images (social media, documentary photography, film, comics), visual narratives can, altogether, become central to how we understand displacement, refugees, and/or migration flows. They influence public perception, empathy, and memory culture. Therefore, understanding migration through the lens of visual representations is not simply a stylistic choice but is deeply tied to affect and the politics of representation.

Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) and Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (2017), the two graphic novels chosen for analysis, are exemplary in combining the intimacy of autobiography with the expansiveness of visual symbolism, employing either the hybrid language of image and text, or only images, to represent the dislocations of migration, the persistence of trauma, and the fragile possibilities of renewal. Yet they do so through contrasting formal strategies: Tan through a wordless, allegorical visual world, and Bui through the reflexive, documentary intimacy of memoir. Read together, the two texts reveal how visual storytelling can negotiate the limits of language in expressing displacement, history, and intergenerational inheritance.

3. Wordless Universality and the Poetics of Displacement in *The Arrival*

Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) stands as a landmark work in contemporary visual storytelling, notable for its complete absence of words. Told entirely through detailed, sepia-toned images (see Figure 1), the book transforms the migrant experience into a universal and deeply human allegory. Through its hybrid form, part graphic novel, part visual ethnography, it explores displacement, alienation, and the fragile process of re-establishing belonging in unfamiliar spaces.

The absence of written language in the book is not merely an aesthetic choice, but a conceptual strategy that mirrors the immigrant's disorientation in a world where the dominant language is, predominantly, incomprehensible. In this sense, *The Arrival* performs what Homi Bhabha terms "the unhomely" (1994: 9), a state in which the familiar and the foreign collapse into one another, destabilizing one's sense of identity and place. "In that displacement," Bhabha contends, "the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting." (ibid.) Readers, like the protagonist, must navigate meaning visually, through gesture, texture, and pattern. Tan's visual silence compels a phenomenological engagement: comprehension occurs through empathy rather than through linguistic decoding.
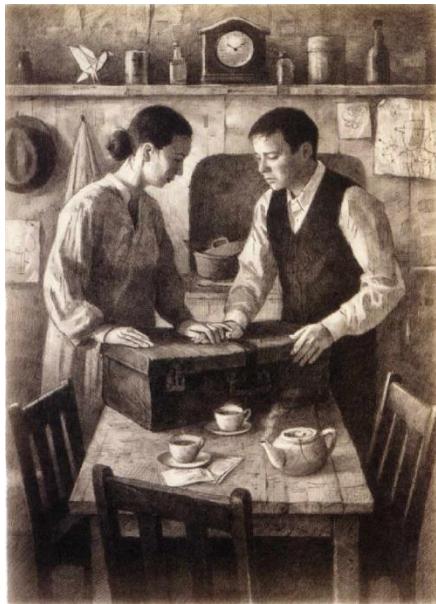
The world Tan constructs is at once fantastic and historically resonant. His use of sepia tones evokes early twentieth-century immigration photography, while the surreal architecture and hybrid creatures displace the narrative into an otherworldly space. This fusion of realism and fantasy echoes what Edward Said (1994) called the "contrapuntal" perspective of exile: the coexistence of memory and invention, of nostalgia and estrangement. The life of an exile, Said states, "moves according to a different calendar, and is less seasonal and settled than life at home. Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew (2001: 186). In Tan's imagined city, everything is both recognisable and alien; it is a metaphorical representation of what migrants experience when confronting new social and cultural systems.
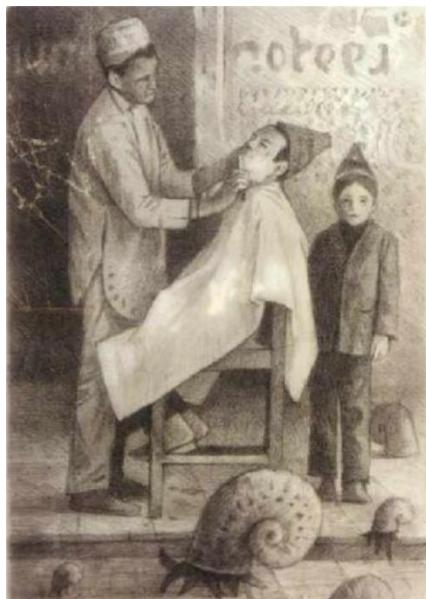
As a visual text, *The Arrival* extends the semiotic possibilities of the graphic novel. The absence of written words invites what Roland Barthes described as "readerly participation," where meaning is constructed collaboratively between author and audience, i.e., "it asks of the reader a practical collaboration" (1977: 163). Readers must interpret the strange script, the incomprehensible machines, and the symbolic architecture that the book's pages provide (see Figure 2) without external guidance. This interpretive process mirrors the semiotics of

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everyday immigrant experience, decoding social norms, gestures, and signs in order to survive and belong.

Tan's treatment of space and architecture further reflects theories of liminality articulated by Victor Turner in his 1969 book, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*. As far as Turner is concerned, "[l]iminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial." (95) Following the same pattern, the protagonist's journey from departure to adaptation in Tan's graphic narrative occurs within an in-between realm, a threshold between old and new worlds. The city itself, with its organic and mechanical hybrids and labyrinthine structures, becomes a spatial metaphor for hybridity and cultural negotiation (see Figure 3). Such representations also recall Bhabha's notion of the "third space" (1994: 218), where cultural identities are rearticulated through interaction and translation rather than fixed boundaries.

Figure 3.
Source:
Tan, S.,
The Arrival,
p. 37

Interspersed within the main narrative are snapshots of other migrants, each recounting their own stories of loss and flight. These embedded narratives function as collective memory and testimony, echoing what Marianne Hirsch terms "postmemory", i.e., the "relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right." (2008: 103). Thus, the transmission of trauma and resilience travels across generations. (Hirsch, 2008: 106) Tan's visual storytelling captures this process without words: the faces, gestures, and fragmentary images convey both the personal and historical weight of migration.

Emotionally, *The Arrival* grounds its larger political and social themes in the intimate sphere of family. The recurring image of the family portrait becomes a symbol of identity and continuity, anchoring the protagonist amid dislocation. The closing sequence, in which his daughter helps another newcomer find her way (see Figure 4), transforms the narrative into a cyclical meditation on migration as an intergenerational process. Here, Tan evokes Stuart Hall's conception of cultural identity as a "production" rather than a "possession" (1990: 222), something continually shaped by history, memory, and encounter.

Figure 4.
Source:
Tan, S.,
The Arrival,
p. 115

Ultimately, *The Arrival* demonstrates the narrative and ethical potential of visual language. By removing words, Tan equalizes the reading experience, creating a text that transcends linguistic hierarchies and cultural specificity. "In contrast to a written account," Susan Sontag states, "which, depending on its complexity of thought, reference, and vocabulary, is pitched at a larger or smaller readership – a photograph has only one language and is destined potentially for all." (2003: 20) Tan's work thus invites a form of what Susan Sontag called "ethical seeing", an engagement with the suffering and endurance of others through attentive observation, the images transforming into "an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn" (Sontag, 2003: 117). The reader's encounter with Tan's imagery becomes an act of empathy, a way of imagining the world through the eyes of the displaced.

4. Memory, Postmemory, and Intergenerational Trauma in *The Best We Could Do*

Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* approaches migration from a more explicitly historical and autobiographical perspective. A Vietnamese American artist and educator, Bui reconstructs her family's flight from war-torn Vietnam and their subsequent resettlement in the United States while simultaneously exploring her own journey into motherhood. Through its layered narrative structure and restrained visual style, the work constructs a complex meditation on displacement, inheritance, and the limits of understanding between parents and children. As the author confesses, she was "tracing our journey in reverse … over the ocean, through the war, seeking an origin story that will set everything right. (2017: 40-41)

Just as in the case of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, *The Best We Could Do* grapples with Marianne Hirsch's postmemory concept, i.e., the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal and cultural trauma of those who came before. As Hirsch posits, postmemory distinguishes itself from memory "by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection." (1992-93: 7) Bui, born shortly before her family departed from Vietnam, experiences the war and refugee crisis not through direct recollection but through inherited stories and emotional residues. The memoir thus becomes an act of both recovery and reconstruction, an attempt to render visible the invisible scars of exile that have shaped her parents' lives and, by extension, her own. "… I began to record our family history … thinking that if I bridged the gap between the past and the present … I could fill the void between my parents and me," Bui declares (2017: 36). "And that if I could see Viet Nam as a real place, and not a symbol of something lost … I would see my parents as real people … and learn to love them better." (ibid.)

Figure 5.
Source:
Bui, T.,
The Best We Could Do,
p. 89

Visually, Bui's style is both delicate and deliberate. Her use of limited color, primarily shades of sepia and muted orange (see Figure 5), evokes the fading warmth of old photographs, situating the narrative within the emotional register of memory and nostalgia. Bui's drawings blur the boundary between documentary and impression, using abstraction to convey experiences that defy direct representation. In the *Preface* of her book, the author reveals the reasons underlying her choice of representing snapshots of her family's history through this hybrid medium: "I was trying to understand the forces that caused my family, in the late seventies, to flee one country and start over in another," Bui confesses. "I titled my project "Buis in Vietnam and America: A Memory Reconstruction." It had photographs and some art, but mostly writing, and it was pretty academic. However, I didn't feel like I had solved the storytelling problem of how to present history in a way that is human and relatable and not oversimplified. I thought that turning it into a graphic novel might help." (2017) And indeed, it did help. The spare line work and recurring motifs – boats, water, and bodies in transit (see Figure 6) – managed to transform individual memory into collective symbolism. The sea, in particular, becomes a site of trauma and rebirth, reflecting both the peril of escape and the possibility of renewal.

Figure 6.
Source:
Bui, T.,
The Best We Could Do,
p. 30

The memoir's title, *The Best We Could Do*, encapsulates the book's central tension: the fraught relationship between understanding and forgiveness within the family unit. Bui, now a mother herself, revisits her parents' past with empathy but also with a critical awareness of the emotional distance that shaped her childhood. The narrative oscillates between first-person reflection and retrospective reconstruction, creating what Homi Bhabha (1994) terms a "hybrid temporality", a movement between past and present that resists closure. This structure mirrors the fragmented nature of diasporic identity itself: always divided between memory and reinvention, between homeland and host land. As Stuart Hall states, identities are "never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation." (1996: 4)

Bui situates her family's story within the broader history of Vietnam's colonial and political upheavals, the fall of Saigon, the exodus of the "boat people," and the complex legacy of U.S. intervention. Yet her narrative resists reduction to a single historical perspective. Instead, it foregrounds the multiplicity of voices and experiences that constitute postcolonial identity. Edward Said's notion of the contrapuntal (1994), the coexistence of overlapping histories within a single narrative, resonates strongly here, too. Bui renders the Vietnamese refugee experience not as a passive object of Western humanitarianism but as an active process of self-definition and remembrance.

The memoir's engagement with trauma theory is subtle yet profound. As Cathy Caruth (1996: 4) suggests, trauma is defined not simply by the event itself but by the belatedness of its return, how it resurfaces in memory, narrative, and even silence; it represents the "story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available." (1996:4) In *The Best We Could Do*, trauma manifests not only in the depiction of war but also in the emotional inheritance passed from parent to child. Bui's mother's stoicism, her father's volatility, and her own anxieties as a parent form a continuum of affective transmission. The memoir becomes a site of working-through, where the act of narration enables partial reconciliation with what cannot be fully known or healed. "How much of ME is my own, and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined? I used to imagine that history had infused my parents' lives with the dust of a cataclysmic explosion. That it had seeped through their skin and become part of their blood. That being my father's

child, I, too, was a product of war … and being my mother's child, could never measure up to her. But maybe being their child," Bui acknowledges, "simply means that I will always feel the weight of their past. Nothing that happened makes me special. But my life is a gift," the author beautifully continues, "that is too great – a debt I can never repay." (2017: 324-325)

Figure 7.
Source:
Bui, T.,
The Best We Could Do,
p. 323

The interplay between word and image in Bui's work reinforces this psychological complexity. The juxtaposition of handwritten text with expressive yet understated visuals (see Figure 7) invites the reader into a dual mode of perception: rational and emotional, cognitive and embodied, in which the reader witnesses trauma without the voyeurism often associated with photographic documentation. Bui's drawings, intimate, tactile, and humane, achieve precisely this: they invite compassion without spectacle. As Hillary Chute states, authors like Thi Bui for instance, through their work, "revisit their pasts, retrace events, and literally repicture them." (2010: 2) What Chute contends is that graphic narratives represent "a manner of testifying that sets a visual language in motion with and against the verbal in order to embody individual and collective experience, to put contingent selves and histories into form." (2010: 3)

By the memoir's conclusion, Bui arrives at a tempered understanding of her parents, not as heroic figures or victims, but as fallible human beings who, in their own words, did "the best they could." This realization reframes the immigrant narrative not as a triumphant saga of survival, but as an ongoing negotiation of memory, loss, and love. The cyclical structure of the narrative, beginning and ending with motherhood, suggests continuity rather than closure. The inheritance of trauma becomes, paradoxically, the foundation for empathy and creative expression.

Conclusions

Together, Tan and Bui demonstrate how visual narrative can bridge the gap between history and emotion, between the collective and the personal. Both authors transform migration from a political or economic condition into a deeply human experience of transformation. Tan's wordless world invites readers to

inhabit the universal body of the stranger, while Bui's memoir translates the inherited trauma of displacement into empathy and self-understanding.

Through its fusion of realism, fantasy, and emotional precision, *The Arrival* redefines the possibilities of the graphic novel form. It functions simultaneously as an artwork, a historical allegory, and a theoretical exploration of what it means to inhabit more than one place at once. Tan's wordless narrative reminds us that migration is not only a movement across borders, but also a continual negotiation between loss and renewal, between the memory of home and the imaginative construction of a new one. *The Best We Could Do* contributes to a broader conversation within postcolonial and diasporic literature about how histories of violence and displacement are transmitted across generations. It also exemplifies the unique power of the graphic memoir to represent complex temporalities and emotional truths. Bui's restrained aesthetic, her interweaving of historical and personal memory, and her ethical engagement with the past position as a significant contribution to both the visual and literary canons of migration narratives. Through the act of storytelling, she transforms inherited pain into understanding, suggesting that remembrance, though imperfect, is itself a form of repair.

In different registers, each work enacts what Stuart Hall calls the *production* of identity (1990: 225), an ongoing process shaped by memory, loss, and encounter. Their stories, though distinct in form and context, converge on the same insight: that to tell the story of migration is not simply to recount movement across borders, but to map the emotional and imaginative labor of becoming at home in an unrecognizable world.

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