

THE DRAGON'S SHADOW BEHIND MY BACK IS NOT DEATH'S EMBRACE. SYMBOLS OF FEAR, STRANGENESS, AND HOSPITALITY IN *MIGRANTES* BY ISSA WATANABE AND *THE ARRIVAL* BY SHAUN TAN

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The fabulous keys of Issa Watanabe's *Migrantes* refract the fantastic trajectories of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*. Both works pursue a certain universality—albeit one not free from tension—in their representation of the migratory experience. Thirteen years separate their publication, and a century seems to lie between their stories, Tan's narrative advances toward the luminous horizon of modernity, while Watanabe's sinks into the telluric substance of mourning and reciprocity. The movement unfolds from the comic to the tragic, from the idealization of estrangement to the disillusionment of the real. Through their visual symbols, the two books express opposing cosmologies of migration: one linked to the Enlightenment imaginary of human perfectibility (*The Arrival*), and the other rooted in a relational and cyclical conception of life (*Migrantes*). This opposition defines specific aesthetic and ideological singularities and determines two distinct ways of understanding the symbols and imaginaries associated with the migratory experience, particularly those related to death. The article situates both narratives within the tradition of wordless picture books that, by renouncing verbal narration, transform silence into a form of meaning. It employs symbolic hermeneutics and Rodrigo Argüello's *simboanalysis* to interpret the visual devices as spaces of condensation where mythical, affective, and ideological dimensions converge. The comparative reading explores how each work constructs a semiotic order of its own, Tan's images, shaped by the modern allegory of progress and the moral pedagogy of integration, contrast with Watanabe's nocturnal procession, guided by a cosmology that conceives death as continuity and care. By confronting two cultural regimes—the Eurocentric, governed by the ascending logic of light and reason, and the Andean, sustained by reciprocity and the vital cycle between life and death—the study explains how the experience of mobility is imagined through heterogeneous symbolic grammars. Ultimately, both works expose the tensions between universality and difference and propose, through silence and image, a meditation on the fragile conditions of belonging that shape contemporary migration.

Keywords: migratory narratives, visual symbolism, fear and estrangement, Issa Watanabe, Shaun Tan

Thirteen years separate the publication of *The Arrival* (2006) from that of *Migrantes* (2019). Other differences –diatopic, cultural, and ideological– are perhaps less evident. While Watanabe's work merges Andean imaginaries of death

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with the consequences of the twenty-first-century war on migration, Shaun Tan, in his attempt to universalize the migratory experience of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, reworks and validates the illustrated mythology of Western progress. Both books belong to a genealogy that, in recent decades, has turned to the narrativity of the image to construct stories that dispense with words in their exploration of migration, the so-called wordless picture books. These are not, in such cases, efforts to name the “unnameable”, in the sense articulated by Fernando Reati (1992) or Vladimir Jankélévitch (2005) –though they often do so–, but rather another form of textuality that renounces literalness and relies entirely on suggestion. Alongside Shaun Tan’s and Issa Watanabe’s works, this genealogy includes *Migrando* (2010) by Mariana Chiesa Mateos, *Orizzonti* (2015) by Paola Formica, and *La valigia* (2019-2020) by Angelo Ruta¹.

The Arrival (2006) tells the story of a man who, forced by a dark and nameless menace in his homeland, separates from his wife and daughter to embark on a migratory journey. His passage by train and ship leads him to a strange country where, little by little, he manages to integrate into society: he finds work, builds bonds of solidarity with other migrants, and finally reunites his family in their new home. The story ends with his daughter, now accustomed to the new environment, guiding a recently arrived woman through the same disorientation her father once endured. Beyond this narrative line, Tan’s picture book employs a series of visual devices to lend depth to its allegory of migration. The sepia tones, the texture of a photographic album, and the use of complex symbols –dragons, guiding creatures, sages, solar mountains– as well as simpler ones such as birds, suitcases, and family portraits, all evoke memory and nostalgia (Buzzi Rizzi 2021). Meanwhile, the fantastic beings and surreal landscapes heighten the reader’s sense of estrangement, placing them in the same position of bewilderment as the protagonist (Singer 2020). Within this crossing of the real and the dreamlike emerges an idea of migration that, while acknowledging hardship, unfolds within the overly idealized space of progress. This can be read as an uncritical reiteration of the “American dream” myth, one that omits the difficult realities of migration –racism, exploitation, and death– in order to privilege a certain notion of universality (Boatright 470).

Inspired by his family’s history, Tan identifies himself as an Australian of Chinese, Malaysian, and Irish descent. Although he insists that his work is not autobiographical, he admits that this heritage exerts an indirect influence that

¹ María Jesús Colón Castillo (2021) has developed a comparative reading focused on the semi-otic tools for the analysis and pedagogical use of the aforementioned works in school contexts. I refer the reader to her study for a more detailed discussion of these texts.

has led him to engage repeatedly with notions of belonging and difference, as well as with the thresholds separating the familiar from the strange (Earle 386). His declared aim was to construct a universal representation of migration that could resonate with this personal background, through an imaginary city where historical reality intertwines with dreamlike invention. As he himself explains, «The place I thought of as “The New Country” ended up being rich in all sorts of details, so it is not a boiled-down version of real history at all. It’s a sideways history, an alternative universe that we might usefully compare to our own. It allows us to consider the common intersections of feeling, what we might do as international travellers, and instinctively as readers» (Earle 391).

Migrants (2019), by contrast, portrays a group of anthropomorphic animals in the midst of a forced diaspora, their sorrow and anguish legible on each of their faces. Giraffes, rabbits, lions, birds, and elephants walk together in silence, carrying small suitcases, blankets, and the few utensils needed to endure the endless night of their journey. The group, composed of adults and young alike –some carried in arms or wrapped in cloth– moves forward compactly, with no apparent destination. Along the way, the interspecies bonds and the shared condition of the herd become evident: an elephant holds a frog’s hand, a goat shelters a fledgling. Accompanying them, always timid and at the rear, is Death itself, depicted as a pale barefoot figure with a skeletal face, shrouded in a floral blanket that curiously changes color throughout the narrative.

Like Shaun Tan, Issa Watanabe has a migratory background. Yet *Migrants* does not arise from that experience alone. Its first impulse came from a photographic series by Swedish photographer Magnus Wennman (2016), *Där Barnen Sover* (Where the Children Sleep), which documents the conditions endured by children forced to flee their countries due to war, many of whom live in refugee camps or precarious settlements. «When you get close to hell, you can’t keep drawing in the same way» Watanabe remarks in reference to the series (s.p.). Moreover, during what was called “the cayuco crisis” in 2006, she recalls meeting –and even sharing a house with– one of the thousands of migrants who set out from Africa toward the Iberian Peninsula in small boats. «After that,» she adds, «you truly begin to wonder whether you are tall enough to speak about certain subjects» (s.p.).

We are faced with two divergent visions of migration. *The Arrival* reworks it through the keys of an initiatory journey that, via retrofuturist figuration, seeks to universalize the experience and reaffirms the Enlightenment promise of progress and human perfectibility. It also relies on representations of nostalgia as a motor of symbolic integration, in line with what Busi Rizzi (649) calls «nostalgic tensions», to ensure an empathetic response from the reader. *Migrants*, by contrast, situates the narrative within a horizon of concrete political consequences,

those stemming from the twenty-first-century war on migration. The silence of its narration, traversed by the figure of death, symbolically intertwines with Andean imaginaries that remind us of death's permanent presence, its inevitable role in the cyclical rhythm of life. These differences establish the coordinates of the comparative reading proposed in this work.

I propose that, through their visual symbols, *The Arrival* and *Migrantes* reveal two opposing cosmologies in relation to migration: one linked to the Enlightenment imaginary of progress (Tan) and the other rooted in a telluric and relational vision of the world (Watanabe). This opposition defines specific aesthetic singularities and determines two distinct ways of understanding the symbols and imaginaries associated with the migratory experience, particularly those related to death.

This study adopts a hermeneutic-comparative framework that integrates symbolic analysis with the resources of *simboanalysis* as proposed by Rodrigo Argüello. The analysis of the visual devices is carried out in the understanding, following Argüello, that the symbol does not speak directly; rather, it suggests and summons, which means that interpretation must search within the material composition of the sign for its meanings in flight (2005 27). Rather than an object of interpretation, the visual text is conceived here as a matrix of signification: its surplus of meaning does not lie in what it presents or represents but emerges from the web of correspondences intricately folded among its constituent elements (2022 16). Accordingly, the visual devices in *The Arrival* and *Migrantes* are approached as spaces of symbolic condensation where affective, mythical, and ideological dimensions converge.

As for the comparative dimension of this work, it begins with the recognition of two distinct cultural regimes—the Eurocentric and the Andean—that orient the imaginaries of progress and reciprocity, respectively, as will be examined later. For the analysis of Western imaginaries, the study draws on the categories of ascension, light, and verticality developed by Gilbert Durand (2012) and on the poetics of matter formulated by Gaston Bachelard (1991), whose reflections illuminate the symbolic rationality of progress in Tan's work. Concerning Andean imaginaries, the study relies on the contributions of Mario Polia Meconi (1999), Marisol de la Cadena (2015), and Millones and Mayer (2021), which provide the conceptual and historical framework to understand the reciprocity among life, death, and nature that underlies Watanabe's work.

The Arrival: Symbolic Exaltation of the Western Mythology of Progress

Although wordless, *The Arrival* is a narrative rich—even dense—with symbols and allegories of progress as conceived at the height of Enlightenment ration-

ality by none other than Nicolas de Condorcet. The story abounds in positive valuations of industry, science, light, and reason, and their “natural” derivation toward collectivism, solidarity, and happiness. The illustrations of that *New Country* to which Shaun Tan refers depicts a world «without distinction between the destiny of peoples and of individuals,» where «the human species, governed by its own laws,» walks «steadily toward perfection,» and where the sun shines only «upon free men» whose master seems to be none other «than their own reason» (de Condorcet 73)

Tan acknowledges (117) that he drew inspiration from Ellis Island to imagine certain characteristics of his protagonist’s final destination. The illustrations of passports and the process of entry registration in *New Country* directly recall photographs from the Ellis Island Immigration Museum collection, as well as others embedded in the popular imaginary of arrival by ship. Perhaps the most emblematic is that in which migrants, from the deck of the vessel, gaze upon the Statue of Liberty rising against the hazy horizon of Lower Manhattan. In Tan’s rendering, this image is reimagined as two colossal figures –one seemingly a migrant, as suggested by the objects at its feet, including a suitcase –extending their hands in a gesture of apparent fraternity and hospitality. The work thus refers emphatically to the migratory processes that took place between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from various parts of the world toward the United States².

The Arrival opens with an image of forced departure and of promise. The old city, shrouded in darkness, is dominated by the monstrous silhouette of a serpentine creature whose toothed tail slithers through the streets like a mythical dragon; its presence arouses the fear that precipitates exile. In a sequence of six panels, Shaun Tan condenses the farewell: the final embrace, the tears, the promise of reunion, and the train receding under the threatening sky. In contrast, *New Country* emerges as an industrious utopia animated by aerial means of transport, retrofuturist machines, and multitudes engaged in their daily work. The city breathes order and vitality; its conical and pyramidal structures, its ascending steam, and the solar emblem stamped on newcomers’ passports are the signs of a prosperous civilization in which even the zoomorphic creatures –gentle and domestic– participate in the harmony of a world that transforms fear into hope. That is the landscape awaiting the protagonist.

The migratory journey, as portrayed here, is entirely fortuitous. Despite arriving alone and knowing no one in *New Country*, the protagonist easily overcomes the obstacles typically faced by migrants: crossing bureaucratic borders, grap-

² See the illustrative image at the following link: <https://zenodo.org/records/17547079>.

pling with an unfamiliar language, finding housing and employment, rebuilding a sense of community, and longing for family reunification. The composition of the album responds to a mirror-like structure that translates this passage from the tragic to the comic: the opening pages display domestic objects associated with safety and home –a clock, a teapot, a family portrait, an open suitcase– while toward the end, their equivalents reappear in the new world, now naturalized and imbued with familiarity. «This arrangement indicates the protagonist’s and his family’s assimilation into the new reality» and it is reinforced by the final dinner scene, where «the smiling faces and warm light demonstrate that the life they sought turned out happier than the one they left behind» (Buzzi Rizzi 658).

This specular composition, which recurs across several panels, completes a trajectory of transformation that leads from chaos to control, the structural principle of the narrative and a central metaphor of the modern imaginary of progress. The initial sequence –marked by threat, separation, and disorientation– contrasts sharply with the compositional serenity of the final pages, where everything appears ordered, clean, and legible. The geometry of the panels, the repetition of motifs, and the symmetry of the frames create a visual order that replaces the uncertainty of the beginning. Everyday gestures –preparing food, walking through the city, greeting a neighbor– become signs of integration, confirming that the world has regained its balance. In this way, Tan unfolds his silent teleology: the migrant attains stability, the city finds peace, the family reunites. The movement that began in fear and uprootedness culminates in domestic harmony, reaffirming faith in a progress visible in the luminous serenity of the images.

Between its anxious beginning and idyllic end, *The Arrival* resolves the migratory journey along three clearly delineated axes: the protagonist’s understanding of a collective destiny, revealed through the stories of others who, like him, were forced to leave their homelands for various yet always urgent reasons –and who, for that very reason, are ready to help him–; the domestication of the initial threat, to which I will return later; and the protagonist’s full integration into New Country’s labor complex.

Once disembarked, the protagonist must fend for himself. One by one, he overcomes difficulties, adapts to new customs, becomes accustomed to new food, and learns to navigate the language barrier. The turning point in this journey is represented by the acquisition of a trade suited to his abilities. After failing at two earlier jobs, he finally finds stable employment that allows him to gather the resources necessary to reunite his family in New Country. This is not just any job: he becomes part of what appears to be an assembly line in a vast factory where hundreds of people work. He finds his place, becoming one more cog in the social machine, nearly indistinguishable within the busy multitude along the mechanical belts. The panel representing this moment inevitably evokes

frames from *Modern Times* (1936) by Charles Chaplin, though the valuation is inverted. While Chaplin denounces the dehumanization and alienation of industrial labor, in *The Arrival* factory work marks the culmination of an uphill climb. From this point on, the story enters its decisive chapter.

The protagonist's guide in this final section is an old man wearing a conical hat who works across from him and interrupts the work routine to lead him beyond the city walls. His presence introduces a new symbolic register: the experience of learning and the transmission of wisdom born of suffering and memory. Through analepsis, we learn that the old man once descended into the infernos of war. In his company, the protagonist ascends a mountain crowned by several suns –the same radiant symbol that, upon arrival, the immigration officer stamped into his passport.

The appearance of the luminous mountain introduces the moment of greatest symbolic condensation in the narrative. Up to that point, the protagonist's trajectory unfolds along the horizontal plane of survival. The ascent, by contrast, opens a vertical axis that transforms the meaning of the journey. Guided by the wise old man, the protagonist reaches a summit where a conjunction of spiral time –resembling a strange game– and radiant light suddenly nuances the mechanical logic of the factory, turning the migratory experience into an initiation. That mountain, the radiant center of the album, corresponds to what Gilbert Durand describes as the «fundamental concern of verticalizing symbolization» common to rituals in which the human being seeks elevation «against time and death» (136). As in the traditions Durand himself refers –from the Mithraic climax to *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*– the climb is the “journey itself,” a rupture of level that enables passage into another state of being. Tan weaves the mystical ascent together with the modern metaphor of progress: labor and industry are redeemed in a spiritual impulse that re-enchants matter. The mountain, illuminated and silent, embodies that paradox. Modern rationality sublimates into myth, and technical progress rises into an experience of transcendence³.

Then, all that remains is to wait for the cycle of life to return upon itself. At this point, Tan resolves the passage of time through the image of a flower and its seasonal rhythm, and through the construction of a nest and the watching of chicks from a native winged creature. Birds, it should be noted, traverse the story from beginning to end as a permanent symbol of migration. At the close of this cycle –when the flower has survived winter and the chicks stretch their hungry beaks beyond the improvised nest– the family is reunited, and all the pieces fall into place.

³ See the illustrative image at the following link: <https://zenodo.org/records/17547189>.

Before equilibrium can be restored, however, the initial threat must be conquered or at least domesticated. This menace takes the form of the serpentine, toothed tail of a dark dragon-like creature whose shadow haunts the skies and streets of the protagonist's homeland, where his wife and daughter still remain. The creature's long, faceless tail may well be likened to the serpentine line of men marching toward war, a war that culminates in a death field strewn with human remains, the one seen in the flashback of the wise old man the protagonist encounters in the factory. In this way, the dragon—or at least its faceless dark silhouette—finds its counterpart in the irrational terror of war and the horrifying death depicted in the narrative. It is precisely this deadly force from which the protagonist flees, and from which he seeks to liberate his family.

This serpentine, toothed figure alludes to a threat bound to the archaic principle of chaos and dissolution. Once again, under the lens proposed by Gilbert Durand, the dragon concentrates within itself the primordial forces of fear and destruction:

[...] a pre-diluvian monster, beast of thunder, fury of water, sower of death, it is, as Donteville has noted, a 'creation of fear.' Nothing is more common than the relation between the saurian archetype and vampiric or devouring symbols. [...] Psychologically speaking, the Dragon seems to exist as borne by the schemas and archetypes of beast, night, and water combined. A knot where the writhing, swarming animality, the ferocious voracity, the clamor of waters and lightning converge and mingle, along with the viscous, scaly, and tenebrous aspect of "thick water" (91).

The monster thus condenses the darkness that precedes order, the collective fear the narrative must transform into harmony. In *The Arrival*, its shadow foreshadows both war's devastation and exile; its symbolic domestication defines the passage from chaos to form, from the death drive to vital reconstruction. Tan turns this formless force into the point of departure for a vertical journey: by taming the dragon—the projection of collective fear—the protagonist ascends toward the light of the mountain and reunites with his family within the promise of a reconciled world.

I use the term domesticate instead of others more commonly associated with a threat—especially one that takes the form of a dragon—, such as defeat or eliminate, because what literally occurs in the story is the reduction of the creature's entire threatening potential. Narratologically (Bal 39-40), the function assigned in Tan's work to the strange zoomorphic beings—companions that resemble pets—is meaningful. Their role is to link the references of a distressing past with those of a benign present, delimiting the new nature of a sign that originates in fear. In keeping with the Enlightenment imaginary of progress, in New Country—the culminating end of a line moving ever forward—irrational terror, darkness,

and bestiality are redirected through collectivism and rationality⁴.

That which in the old city crept through the air with hostility, reappears in this new world of light and order as a playful, docile, and affectionate creature. The conflict is resolved pedagogically. Fear becomes familiarity; threat turns into companionship. Instead of suppressing the monster, it is subjected to the therapeutic power of imagination: «To imagine time under its dark aspect is already to submit it to a possibility of exorcism through the images of light [...]; while projecting the dreadful hyperbole of the monsters of death, imagination secretly sharpens the weapons that will bring down the Dragon» (Durand 115). In *The Arrival*, this exorcism takes form in the sequence where the small monster, emerging from a jar, allows itself to be caressed and played with by the child. Tan turns the playful gesture into an instrument of symbolic sublimation.

This understanding of migration as a luminous itinerary –in which fear is subdued by reason, chaos is transformed into order, and death dissolves within the horizon of progress– stands in radical contrast to the vision proposed by Issa Watanabe in *Migrantes*. Rather than positioning herself under the Enlightenment sign of ascent and reconciliation, the Peruvian artist portrays the migratory journey as a passage dominated by fragility and darkness. Her story unfolds in a nocturnal desert, a symbolic space of war, exclusion, and death, inseparable from the experience of mobility in the twenty-first century. Where Tan trusts in the domestication of threat, Watanabe sustains its persistence. Death cannot be defeated; it can only be accepted as a companion. Its constant presence, invested with compassion and deference, seems to emerge from an imaginary that resonates with Andean cosmovisions of Peru, in which the ritual interplay between life and death affirms the reciprocity that sustains the cycle of existence.

***Migrantes*: «How Many Borders Must we Cross to Reach Home?»**

«How many borders must we cross to reach home?» The question posed by the Greek filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos (1991) travels from the turbulent end of the twentieth century, just after the Cold War, to the back cover of *Migrantes*, Issa Watanabe's wordless picture book. The question closes a list of signs that define the twenty-first century: «Migrants, refugees, displaced persons, bombings, violence, war, hunger, fear, exodus, camps, children, orphans, midwives, rescues, drownings, borders, illegals, stateless people, the disappeared, humanitarian crisis, global compact on migration, human rights... Silence» (Watanabe s.p.).

⁴ See the illustrative image at the following link: <https://zenodo.org/records/17547200>.

The imaginary proposed by Watanabe's narrative encompasses the multiple phases and geographies of migration from the late twentieth century to the present. The fabulous tone of her composition allows us to recognize, in the procession of animal figures, those fleeing recent conflicts and economic collapses –such as Venezuelan migrants moving northward with their belongings– as well as displaced peoples from the Middle East traversing the Balkan route after prolonged wars in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, or Yemen. Their journey also recalls the forced displacements of the late twentieth century, when the implementation of NAFTA (today USMCA) and the Central American civil wars intensified the exodus toward the United States, a prelude to the Mesoamerican caravans that still cross Mexico under present-day violence. The silent figures also condense the drama of those who, from the African coasts, attempt to reach Europe across the Mediterranean or along the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, victims of policies of containment.

The nocturnal landscape that the caravan crosses could easily be the merciless Sonoran Desert; it could also evoke the emblematic crossing at Idomeni, on the border between Greece and North Macedonia; the border posts of Preševo and Horgoš, between Serbia and Hungary; the dense jungle corridor of the Darién; or the border town of Tapachula, between Mexico and Guatemala. And when the journey opens onto water, the liquid expanse in which the characters suffer and perish seems to allude to the “sea of pain”, as Chilean poet Raúl Zurita called the Mediterranean: the deadly distance between Libya and Lampedusa, the Aegean scattered with shipwrecks, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Atlantic passage to the Canaries, the Caribbean Sea, and the Río Bravo, the riverine frontier on the route to the United States.

Migrantes thus unfolds a human landscape whose location multiplies itself. A global exodus crossing deserts, seas, and borders, what Emiliano Monge has called «the invisible Holocaust of the twenty-first century» (Paul 2016). Several of the symbols she employs have been widely studied, and recent scholarship abounds in reflections on their meanings (Cattoni & Perassi 2023; Christou & Janta 2018; Colomer-Solsona 2020; Pérez Murcia & Boccagni 2022): suitcases, trunks, fabric bundles, blankets, scattered utensils, all evidence of a particular form of memory and forgetting, of what has been left behind and what is carried along; threads linking past and future, tangible presences that point to irretrievable absences. In the study of displacement from one land to another, and beyond their aesthetic or utilitarian value, «objects attest to a place left behind and therefore play a crucial role» (Cattoni & Perassi 10). In this interrelation between subjects and things –almost always mediated by emotion– objects become true reservoirs of memory, material links to lost people and territories, perhaps the only fragments capable of stabilizing identity after the trauma of

uprooting. Watanabe deploys them to reveal the state of *dispossession* (Butler & Athanasiou 2017) to which her characters have been subjected, expelled toward an unknown destination carrying only what their hands can bear. This detail implies that there was no time –or barely enough– to prepare for departure. The exodus in *Migrants* is, by all accounts, a flight⁵.

Two symbols stand out for the particularity of their synthesis and their omnipresence throughout the narrative. The first is darkness. From beginning to end, the journey unfolds against a backdrop of shadow. In *Migrants*, there is no distinction between night and day: the herd moves through darkness, sleeps in darkness, and sets off toward the waters under that same darkness. The sky never brightens for Watanabe's migrants; light never reaches them. We discern the shape and the sorrowful expression of the characters only through the vividness of the illustration and the natural heterogeneity of the species. That darkness constricts the scene, even more so because against it stand out the silhouettes of bare trees and, only toward the end, a few branches that recover color after the offering to death and to nature, as will be discussed later. Total darkness, then, becomes decisive in shaping both the bidimensionality and the uncertain unidirectionality of the narrative.

This background void –an apparent nothingness– suggests the closure of time and the suspension of the future, all the more so because the story's tragic climax –the shipwreck, the remnants of the journey scattered along the shore, and the lifeless body of one of the migrants– brings to mind the Mediterranean turned into a mass grave. Even the water into which the characters hurl themselves shares that somber condition: a dark, ominous mass that imposes itself as a space of suspension and loss. This representation coincides with that proposed by Nicholas De Genova, for whom Europe's maritime borders have become a «macabre deathscape», a mortuary landscape produced by the accumulation of nameless bodies that wash ashore again and again on the continent's southern coasts (2-3). Death on the shore –figured by Watanabe with the restraint of a silent fable– reactivates the global trauma of contemporary migration. The anonymous body stretched upon the sand recalls the open wound of an era that has turned rivers and seas into lethal borders⁶.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, the darkness of *Migrants* is power –and, above all, potential. Through the presence of the second key symbol –death– the infinite darkness becomes a space of passage, a stage for the hospitable cyclicity of the telluric. It is, one might say, a mineral darkness. In the sense

⁵ See the illustrative image at the following link: <https://zenodo.org/records/17547233>.

⁶ See the illustrative image at the following link: <https://zenodo.org/records/17547255>.

proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, this darkness represents the latent form of life, a plane (let us recall that it encompasses everything in the work) of immanence where existence folds in upon itself only to unfold again (259-260). The penumbra surrounding Watanabe's characters contains movement, slows it down, and prepares it for transformation. Hence our sense that death—covered with a floral blanket, timidly keeping to the rear of the caravan—is gentle and even fragile.

In his reflections on the earth's reveries, Bachelard distinguishes between two fundamental movements: that of extroversion and that of introversion. In the first, the dream urges us to act upon matter (which easily aligns with the narrative of progress already analyzed in *The Arrival*); in the second, «[...] the dream will follow a more familiar slope; it will trace that involution that brings us back to our first shelters, that values all images of intimacy» (Bachelard 16). Intimacy and fragility are words rarely associated with death, yet the world of *Migrantes* is perhaps one such exceptional case. The author herself affirms that «this little death that appears in the book has more to do with that, with the inexpressible thing we carry with us» adding that «[...] one thing that comes up in conversations with children, teenagers, or adults is that this death is fragile, almost like any other being. It is a constant companion throughout the journey. Memories, absences, and what is left behind when life moves are like that too» (Watanabe 2022).

Where does this feeling come from? Beyond the obvious evidence of a consoling death that reunites the castaway with Mother Earth—a motif traceable to the periods of greatest splendor of the Andean peoples of Peru⁷—it is necessary to associate the author's origins with the very depiction of death in her work. This «little death» appears to us clothed in a floral mantle. The intrinsic relationship between death and nature—or, rather, between nature and the whole—is common among the Andean peoples of Peru. It expresses a sense of reciprocity and interconnection among all living beings that has for centuries governed their experience of belonging. In the words of Marisol de la Cadena:

⁷ In Andean religious thought, the continuity between life and death is expressed through concepts such as *mallki*—a term linked to the vegetal world, designating both the «young plant ready for sowing» and the «fully grown tree»—and *camaquen(c)* or *upani*, which refer to the «vital principle» of all beings. Applied to the ancestors, this vegetal symbolism conveys a belief in cyclical fertility, in which the deceased, as the root or trunk of the lineage, ensures the reproduction and renewal of life. Thus, the mummies of ancestors were considered vessels of the *hupani*, the animic double that preserved the continuity of natural cycles, descent, and the community's cultural identity (Meconi 123-124). A glance at the post-shipwreck scene in *Migrantes* reveals that the drowned migrant has been covered with death's floral mantle—that is, mummified in the garments of natura. For an expanded discussion of Andean conceptions of death in Peru, see *Funerales, muerte y el más allá en la historia del Perú* (Millones & Mayer 2021).

Being *in-ayllu*, persons are not from a place; they are the place that relationally emerges through them, the *runakuna* and other-than-humans that make the place. Rather than being instilled in the individual subject, the substance of the *runakuna* and other-than-humans that make an *ayllu* is the co-emergence of each with the others –and this includes land, or what Mariano called *santa tira*. Singular beings (both *runakuna* and other-than-human) cannot sever the inherent relationship that binds them to one another without affecting their individuality –even transforming it into a different one (102).

It is, then, a web of mutual care –*uywa*⁸– in which ideas such as foreignness and *disposability* (Khanna 2009) lose their meaning. A network that involves humans, animals, the earth, and other beings of the world⁹.

In this conception, belonging arises from the living relation that unites all entities. Indeed, the dissolution of foreignness manifests early in the narrative, when death itself – that other who walks hidden behind the trunks of trees– is welcomed as one of the group in the only moment when the herd looks back. In an act of reciprocity, she yields the colors and flowers of her mantle –symbols of *natura*– to the trees that, toward the end, will illuminate the path of the survivors.

By Way of Conclusion

Both *The Arrival* and *Migrantes* propose a visual journey through which the vicissitudes of the migratory condition are laid bare, yet their symbolic universes clearly respond to opposing cosmologies. Tan constructs an imaginary of ascent that begins with the experience of uprootedness and transforms it into revelation and progress. His sepia-toned aesthetic, reminiscent of nineteenth-century photography, lends the narrative a texture of collective memory in which the light of the future redeems estrangement. The New Country –orderly, mechanical, transparent– embodies the possibility of beginning anew, the fulfillment of the American Dream in its most publicized and now exhausted form. Watanabe, by contrast, links twenty-first-century migration to a territory of resonances drawn from the Andean peoples of Peru. Her procession of animals penetrates the material depth of the world, into the earthen hues and the cycles of death and regeneration. In her work, the telluric replaces the promise of the future with the

⁸ The term *uyway* –of Quechua origin– refers to a practice of reciprocal nurturing among humans, the earth, and other beings of the world. It expresses a relation of co-constitution that sustains the continuity of life. In the words of Marisol de la Cadena: «To care and be respectful means to want to be reared and rear [an]other, and this implies not only humans but all world beings... Pachamama rears us, the Apus rear us, they care for us. We rear the seeds, the animals and plants, and they also rear us» (De la Cadena 103).

⁹ See the illustrative image at the following link: <https://zenodo.org/records/17547267>.

wisdom of correspondence: life as passage, loss as restitution. Tan imagines arrival as ultimate fulfillment, while Watanabe turns exodus into return, into a movement of reintegration with the living.

Both works, however, share a common ethical aspiration: to transform the way we look at the other. In Tan, hospitality emerges as an affective learning process that restores trust in the possibility of community; in Watanabe, it becomes a silent gesture of accompaniment in the face of extreme vulnerability. The first celebrates reconciliation with the human; the second confronts its radical precariousness. Yet both coincide in erecting the image as an act of silent insurrection against the structural misrecognition that, as Uhde (2021) warns, defines the migrant experience under global capitalism.

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