

# OUT OF FOCUS

## The Migrant Journey\*

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**ABSTRACT** • This article briefly touches upon the debate about whether the conditions of the 1951 Geneva Convention are too restrictive in so far as they limit the definition of the refugee to a specific fear of persecution. It asks questions about whether those fleeing from poverty, material and environmental degradation, and profound social disadvantage should also be considered alongside those with a claim to political refugee status. Richmond's typology of 'reactive migration' demonstrated the inadequacy of existing criteria which surround the refugee situation and, with this in mind, the article examines two cultural texts – both graphic novels but with very different styles – which feature migrants, one, on the surface, an economic migrant, the other an asylum seeker who fled from "a genuine fear of persecution". Although the protagonists in both texts face quite different challenges, they both suffer from a profound ontological insecurity.

**KEYWORDS** • Migrations, Graphic Novel, Asylum Seekers, Shaun Tan, Neyestani

As Europe is "on the cusp of a humanitarian crisis" ("Guardian" 3/3/16), with thirty times more refugees entering the continent in January and February of this year (2016) than in the same two months last year, it is timely to ask what kind of lives will these people be able to live in spaces of asylum, presuming that these are granted. Given that the majority of refugees will have already suffered trauma, exclusion, conflict and personal loss well before they reach the borders of Europe, then what is the likely impact of these experiences on their well-being, their emotional or mental capital? The fact that so many have got so far, across deserts and seas, suggests a certain amount of resilience and cognitive resource, an ability to meet and overcome challenges. How might they enhance their 'wellness' in the face of the complexities of different asylum processes, assuming that they have managed to surmount the obstacles placed in their way by fences, border patrols, and local hostilities? How can they develop and flourish in their new environment? Apart from the physical deprivations of the migrant journey, account also has to be taken of the effects on mental health. Will this generation of refugees be able to progress from a condition of passive victim to flourish as an active citizen with choices, a restoration of agency? Inner resources are likely to be severely depleted and each family, or individual, will need assistance in acquiring the various dimensions of well-being and accessing new living spaces, physical and mental health, and social networks.

All of this has to be done in the context of what Foucault called *biopolitics*, the preoccupation of the state with the health and well-being of its populations, a preoccupation which does not necessarily extend to, and in many cases is actively opposed to, those not entitled to national health programmes. A British government minister discouraged the rescue of those drowning in the Mediterranean on the basis that it only led others to make the same

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journey. Biopolitics often implies a ‘reciprocal exclusivity’ – a policy of live and let die – which minimizes, where it does not totally deny, the rights of ‘others’ to welfare. This leads to policies and legislation designed to deter the migrant, except for certain privileged categories. The vast majority of displaced people never get anywhere near to Europe. The massive influx of refugees, mainly but by no means only from Syria, into Europe in the past two years or more, has been seen by some states as leading to a crisis of the sovereignty of the border which, in turn, has produced a militarisation of border controls. Far Right political parties have grown in strength in many parts of Europe, demonising and ‘othering’ the migrant, relegated to the status of the ‘sub-human’, Muslims in particular. The so-called ‘war on terror’, a term dropped from political discourse for a while but now returned, has been used to generate a culture of fear and ethno-nationalism in Europe and the USA.

So far, my explicit focus has been on the refugee but, in the popular imagination, distinctions between asylum seekers, EU migrants, and ‘irregular’ economic migrants are conflated. In academic, legal and policy circles, there is now a debate about whether the conditions of the 1951 Refugee Convention are too restrictive and questions are being asked about whether those fleeing from poverty, material and environmental degradation, and profound social disadvantage should also be considered alongside those with a claim to political refugee status. Does material destitution, threats to well-being, and ‘involuntary economic migration’ constitute a deterioration in mental capital and ontological security which should merit consideration together with those currently with a right to claim asylum? Anthony Richmond (1993) emphasizes:

[T]he complex interaction between political, economic, environmental, social and biopsychological factors [determines] the propensity to migrate. Thus it demonstrates the inadequacy of any definition of a “refugee” which singles out one element in the causal chain, such as having “a genuine fear of persecution”, because such fear is often only one factor in a much more complicated relation between predisposing factors, structural constraints, precipitating events and enabling circumstances. (23)

In addition to this, Michelle Foster argues that “a range of emerging refugee claims challenge traditional distinctions between economic migrants and political refugees” (Foster 2012) and this situation is likely to increase, at a time of ever-widening global inequality and risks to well-being, as environmental disasters are added to already existing levels of economic deprivation, hunger, and resource depletion. Writing in the early 1990s, Richmond anticipated much of this contemporary debate by claiming that “a distinction between voluntary and involuntary movements [...] is untenable”. He constructed a set of 25 categories of what he called “reactive migration”, linked to those whose life choices and well-being were “severely constrained”, such that “decisions made by both ‘economic’ and ‘political’ migrants are a response to diffuse anxiety generated by a failure of the social system to provide for the fundamental needs of the individual, biological, economic, and social” (Richmond 1988, 17). With all the media emphasis on Syria, it is important to remember that what Richmond says applies to many countries today, including Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Richmond’s typology of “reactive migration” demonstrated the inadequacy of existing definitions which surround the refugee situation and with this in mind, I shall proceed to examine two cultural texts – both graphic novels – which feature migrants, one, on the surface an “economic migrant”, the other an asylum seeker who fled from a “genuine fear of persecution” in the terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Although the protagonists in both texts face very different challenges, they both suffer from a profound ontological insecurity, or *dépaysement*, that insecurity and disorientation felt in a foreign country or culture. In the one

case, the man in Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006), this fear and anxiety is produced by the migrant journey of 'unsettlement', and in the other, the case of the figure of M in Mana Neyestani's *Petit Manuel du Parfait Réfugié Politique* (2015) it is the asylum process itself which destabilises and unsettles. In both instances, this experience has a significant impact on their mental capital and ability to function at the level of well-being, as their senses are atrophied and, although aware of the objects and forms around them, they are not capable of understanding their functions or meanings.

Each protagonist in the texts under discussion undergoes a process of transformation in which they are rendered temporarily superfluous and those skills, resources, understanding, and knowledges which they had developed prior to migration are almost totally undermined as they become figures of 'expulsion' almost, and dispossession: disposable people. Their previous well-being might be described as a form of possession, empowerment and self-ownership, part of their belonging. The migrant journey, in the first instance, is a journey of 'unbelonging', of defamiliarisation, in which all habits of recognition, language, time, space and relationships become precarious. Mobility on one level produces a measure of immobility at the level of cognition and navigation, a feeling of maplessness is undergone. If, as Thomas Nail argues, "the migrant is the political figure of our time", then the figures in these texts are both specific and individuated, as well as being, in some ways, archetypal in so far as they represent people within "regimes of circulation" (Nail 2005), who are in flux, moving from a sedentary, territorially defined *heimat* (homeland) to being in motion and in spaces of unpredictability, the unknown. The whole process is one of re-cognition, explored through what Bidisha Banerjee (Banerjee 2016) calls "the lens of difference", leading to the restoration of a sense of territory and habituation, and of temporal and spatial predictability as a precondition of a renewal and of mental and physical capital, that movement from the status of the "expelled other" (Nail), metaphorically if not always literally, to a position of resettlement, arrival.

While accepting that well-being is a dynamic process, in many instances it is related to, what has been called, mental maps or 'mental capital', that is having the resources and command of life skills which enable a person to navigate the circumstances of everyday life. It could be argued that such mental capital stems from an ability to be at home with one's self. Not always, of course, but often this means literally being in a place surrounded by family and the familiar, forms of attachment – people, objects, images, sites, routines, language, spaces; perhaps, above all, proximity. Together, this matrix of perceptions and actions form a prism through which later experiences are filtered. For the migrant, forced or otherwise, who travels across the world in search of a better, or at least different, life, the moment of departure marks the beginning of a rupture, the first of a series of interruptions to the known and the customary, the initial stages of a loss of well-being in which a sense of lack and abandonment sets in. As the journey progresses and each new obstacle is encountered, and each new experience is seen as strange, all the ready-made sources and resources of meaning and belonging break up; above all, language and customary codes and modes of understanding. Habitual reflexes no longer function effectively and identity has to be totally re-thought and newly configured, like beginning to walk again metaphorically – finding a place in a realm of placelessness.

These ideas will be explored initially through an analysis of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006), a graphic novel which traces the long and tortuous journey of a father and husband from an unspecified location through a range of alienating, nameless spaces and surreal events to a point of eventual arrival and family reunion, the resumption of shared mental capital; the last gesture of the book is his daughter pointing towards the future. Technically very sophisticated in its design, the displacement at the centre of the journey is charted wordlessly, the silence carrying the absence of meaning at the core of much of the narrative, suggesting the painful struggle to decode new and challenging signifiers.

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Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* opens at a particular juncture in the life of its protagonist, an unnamed husband and father. The design of the book is integral to its narrative of displacement, a narrative which is eclectic in its sense of both time and place. The book has the physical appearance of a well-worn, partly 'distressed' photo album, a familiar register of the private and the familial. Its cover, title page and publication details bear the stains of time and usage as well as, in their sepia colouring, carrying the traces of inspection, certification and registration (date stamped documents etc.), signifiers of immigration, of mobility. The album framework and the signs of passage denote the personal and the individual – on the title page there is a small photo insert of the protagonist, the hat and tie recognisably male but with an undefined face. The narrative trajectory which follows supplies the definition. Countering, and accompanying/framing, the individual marks of journeying are the 60 images on both end papers, each individuated and drawn from a range of, mainly, non-European ethnicities, predominantly male, and presumably forerunners of migration and displacement, those expelled and 'othered' on a global scale, mainly by colonialism, and over a considerable period of time, going back to the nineteenth century and earlier. These expressionless faces are part of a generative archive designed to historicize and generalize the specific migrant journey to follow but also to suggest that the migrant experience is ongoing, one repeated story in a continuum.

The narrative starts at a point of departure with a grid of nine panels of images and objects of domesticity, symbols of belonging and belongings, resources of value – a clock, a hat and coat on a peg, a cracked teapot, a chipped cup, a child's drawing of a family, a family portrait, travel tickets, an origami crane, and an open suitcase with clothing inside. The bird, the travel tickets, and the suitcase are indices of flight/travel and suggest a fracture in the domestic, a rift in belonging. The furnishings, the damaged crockery, and the battered suitcase secured by a belt, give an overall impression of relative deprivation and insecurity which hints at a motive for the husband's decision to leave. Man and wife clasp hands over the suitcase, a time of parting and sorrow. It is a familiar migration scenario, the man leaving in the hope of a better life for his wife and child. The time is indeterminate, some point in the early to mid-twentieth century. There is a sense in which the book is designed as a document of post-memory, a narrative to be read at some time in the future by the daughter, perhaps, or her descendants.

There are several images of the daughter which indicate the future, the need for a legacy of security. The family travel together in a darkened street, shadowed by a monstrous dragon-like tail, a possible index of oppression, and pass by shabby, asymmetrical and identical tenement buildings which almost dwarf the family who are diminished and obscured. The fact that the man has travel tickets and departs from a train station suggests that he is an 'economic migrant'. A number of other, indistinguishable passengers wait in the smoke-filled station, presumably on a similar journey. The father tries to distract the child with the origami bird – a motif which will recur throughout as a bond between them. The wife weeps and the child, husband and wife join hands. Child and mother return home alone, the tail of the dragon still looming.

The book is very much about *scale* and *perspective* – ways of seeing and being seen, and as the man is viewed in transit on a ship placing the family portrait – itself a recurring point of anchorage – on the cabin chest of drawers, an image of him seen through a porthole gradually diminishes as his specificity is lost among numerous portholes. The ship, in turn, is diminished and displaced in a vast, darkening sky and seascape as 60 panels of differing cloud formations signify the sea crossing, and the passage of time and increasing distance. The passengers are grouped on deck as 'huddled masses', already figures at a loss, lacking any eye contact as they watch huge dragonfly-like, origami figures flying above them. Apart from the earlier dragon tail, these figures are the first break with the 'photorealist' drawings, the initial signs of the non-real, the surreal, indicating the migrant's entry into a de-familiarised, discontinuous world – zones of indistinction – where images are no longer anchored in a knowable context. As

‘knowability’ is a condition of well-being, this marks the first stage in the gradual depletion of mental capital. Although the images of estrangement are given a strong visual presence, they could also be seen as projections of a sense of internal loss and anxiety, of cultural/mental incapacity. The husband, trying to recover a thread of continuity, writes in his journal/diary and tears out a page to shape into an origami bird. The attempt to sculpt and fold meaning in the form of this bird is a moment of anamnesis, a link with his child.

The arrival at an unspecified port is shown in contradictory, full-page panels from different realms – on one page a realistic cityscape which ‘bleeds’ into the facing page showing a mythical space in which a giant-sized ‘oriental’ traveller is greeted by a similar-sized host, their identities indicated by their headgear, their presence a symbol of ‘welcome’, analogous to the Statue of Liberty in New York harbour. The disembarkation scene is drawn, Tan says, from iconic Ellis Island imagery which suggests a generational and archetypal moment, but the immigration hall has a large banner in a non-Western language, an *ersatz*, Cyrillic-styled alphabet positioned to signify the strange: unfamiliar, unknown codes which are part of the estrangement of migration, the language deficit. Migrants, seated in long rows, are processed – medically examined, labelled, and tagged – as yet another stage in their transformation, their re-inscription. The man is shown in numerous poses indicating bewilderment, failure to understand, at a cultural and cognitive loss, part of the diminution in well-being. Characterised by passivity, he is infantilised as his coat is covered in tags and stickers, his signed and stamped papers issued. These are all new forms of recognition, of certification, of emergence into migrant space, the first of many thresholds encountered.

The man leaves the hall – an atemporal, liminal space – and enters a new temporality, an ‘Eastern’ cityscape, a surreal, fantasy scene with dream-like qualities, perhaps an analogue of the migrant hope but also a space of alienation and category confusion. He is transported in a Pegasus-like, Tardis structure and deposited in a bizarre, part-realistic, part-fantastic space with mythical birds. This is the most dramatic stage of his disorientation, at a loss and unable to decipher, the lowest point of his loss of well-being, virtually resourceless. He wanders the city trying to read the signs, attempting to wrest meaning from the new environment, his ontological status suspended. The whole book is wordless, emblematic of conceptual and cognitive ruptures, the migrant ‘lack’, and the man uses graphic means to communicate with someone who takes him to a lodging where a ‘real’ landlady is mixed with surreal creatures, and his room is full of tubular structures which puzzle and confuse because they are outside his framework of understanding. He now has a place but is still dis-located and struggles to make sense of any of the household implements, objects of an alien domesticity which he will have to learn. In the process, he comes across a small, alien creature – described as a “walking tadpole” by Tan ([www.shauntan.net](http://www.shauntan.net)) – who will figure throughout the narrative as a kind of ‘familiar’, a magical companion. If the man is an Everyman type of figure, then the “tadpole” could be compared with Knowledge in the medieval play *Everyman*, who says “Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide, in thy most need to go by thy side”. As a bearer of Knowledge – key component of well-being – the guide is there to help the man navigate the new world of migrant experience and to find ontological security. Migration, apart from all the features already mentioned, is also a form of disenchantment – almost akin to depression or trauma – and the creature is a guide back to a world of enchantment. Slowly settling, the man opens his suitcase and re-acquaints himself with his knowable past, aspects of his mental capital, by imaging and imagining his wife and daughter by hanging the family portrait. A series of familiarising images follow which are seeds of agency but these are intruded upon, punctured, by the still, as yet, alien creature. That this is a period of relative well-being is indicated by an outside view of the hotel whose windows look like picture frames and the city resembles something from a magical fairy tale, a space of potential enchantment.

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Although his sleep is troubled and he is still uncertain about his ‘familiar’, the man does manage a series of normative actions – showering, shaving, dressing – which are tokens of an incipient agency, the beginning of a new mobility, despite the unreadable map with which he sets off for the surreal city of conical structures, flying boats, and spaces and images which resist meaning. He has the confidence to approach a woman who shows him how to get a ticket for one of the flying boats. By introducing himself to the woman by means of his ID card he takes a step towards sociality and, as she shows her ID, the onset of reciprocal mutuality, itself a condition of well-being. What we become aware of is that this is a city of migrants, newcomers who exist on a graduated scale of acculturation and in/security. In 24 dark-toned panels, the woman tells a story of abjection and the trauma of her abduction, confinement and forced labour cleaning industrial chimneys. This very different backstory from the man’s indicates that she is a refugee. She eventually escaped her captors and sought refuge in this cosmopolitan space. The man parts from her and continues his journey through the fantasy spaces in continuing bewilderment but meets a man with Western features and draws pictures of food in order to make his hunger understood. This man and his son provide food and guide him to the port. The father relates his story of terror and flight from unspecified persecution. He and his wife are shown in a number of darkened panels and enclosed in a vast Cubist structure, from which they finally escape with the help of a friendly figure who guides them to a harbour where they find a small boat to take them to where they are now. The presence of their son, absent from the dark story, indicates that their refugee journey has lasted about eight years. The family offer hospitality, sharing their now relative comfort, another example of empathy and the kindness of strangers. The man makes an origami figure of a fox for the son, metaphorically substituting him for his daughter. This family story, like that of the enslaved woman, is both specific and also generic, exemplary parables of the migrant situation, securing for the man evidence of the fact that integration and adaptation, a process of continuous adjustment, can take place even if ‘arrival’ is a long drawn-out process. The origami is linked to “the production of spatiality [which] results in folded spaces” (Ek 2006: 383), as the man gradually unfolds the spaces around him.

As the man makes his way through the city in search of employment – another condition of well-being – the range of people he encounters all indicate, through their differing clothes and headgear, a city of displacement but also the positive *difference* of a postmigration situation. He seeks work at four sites but to no avail. Finally, he is taken on as a bill poster but hangs them upside down as he does not understand the signs. Literacy/legibility is a symptom of well-being, missing at this stage. A delivery job enables him to make some sense of the city until he is chased by a giant alien creature. Eventually he settles into a factory assembly line, standing alongside vast numbers of workers in the shadow of huge machinery. 20 panels of limited motion show people monotonously placing objects in a tube. This is another generic stage in the migrant journey, the availability of low-level, unskilled and repetitious labour, jobs vacated perhaps by earlier migrants who have moved on. A fellow worker, in a conical hat, shares a drink with him on the assembly line, another phase in his ‘welcome’, another mark of sociality. The factory images are grey/black and, in a series of flashbacks, his fellow worker is shown as a younger man, part of a returning army parading through a city to a ticker tape welcome. We see the images deteriorate from hard, cobble stoned paving to feet wading through mud and slime, and soldiers retreating under an overwhelmingly dark cloud. The skulls and corpses on the battlefield, which show the other side of the victory parade, give way to 12 images of an individual amputee, finally seen alone in a ruined city. The fellow worker is another generic and particular exemplary figure, the migrant in flight from conflict, finding refuge in this cosmopolitan space. The conflation of refugee and ‘economic migrant’ offers a challenge to the

rhetorical use of these distinctions in both popular discourse and legal procedures. The motivations for flight are demonstrably complex and infinitely variable.

Clocking off together, and collecting their wages, the two men walk into a huge surreal sunset, augury of a new level of consciousness, and the man is invited to a game of skittles with his fellow worker's ethnically diverse friends. Gradually, the new culture becomes part of his nature, through a series of appropriations of the strange objects and environment, and he is moving to the centre of his own being after displacement. Having established a measure of security and social integration, the man writes a letter home, folding the paper into an origami bird and adding some money. The bird, as has been said, is an emblem of his bond with his daughter and the letter a sign of confidence that he has achieved the necessary stage in his path to 'arrival' which will enable family reunion. The shared hospitality, the drink at the factory, the game of skittles, the wages and the letter are all features of a renewed well-being, the restoration of mental capital, a feeling of being at home with himself. These are all stages of internalisation of the strange, of familiarisation, beginning again. Yet another 'guide' shows him where the post-box is.

This moment of confidence is followed by a series of images depicting the changing of the seasons and the passing of time. The man's room is no longer bare but furnished with objects of his new belonging which are now endowed with meaning and usefulness. A letter in the form of an origami bird arrives. The man rushes through stormy, wet streets towards a Pegasus-like structure. Images, of his wife dismayed and his child uncertain, emerge from the vehicle and echo his earlier bewilderment in the face of the strange and incomprehensible. Now, he runs with ease towards them, hailing wife and child. The daughter's face is transfigured. The man, woman, child merge into one – father/husband/wife/mother/daughter/child – in the dwarfing, surreal landscape, as their footsteps are traced away from the vehicle moving inwards, mirroring the perennial migrant journey. Images of a new domesticity mirror the original home – the same, nine grid structure of panels is used – but almost every panel now has a new inflection; only the hat on the peg and the family portrait are the same, and the latter has taken the place of the earlier suitcase. The man's hat is a recurring, and important, signifier, as Banerjee has shown, an image of continuity as well as being a signifier of a generational belonging, part of the homing instinct. The cup is now intact and the teapot complete but they are also now of a different design, auguries of the new. The changed images are metaphors of adaptation, negotiation, and compromise, signs of transformation, markers of arrival; the structures are familiar but they are converted into new forms, different belonging/s. They are not the objects they have kept but are part of a recognisable continuity. The family meal is now in a comfortable room and the daughter's drawings, which proliferate all over the room, depict her new world, readily absorbing the different shapes and perspectives. Independent and competent, a figure of well-being, she has acclimatised rapidly and has the confidence to find her own way round the streets, accompanied by the pet 'familiar'. In a recall of her father's original experience, she meets a woman, with a similar – iconic – suitcase, trying to make sense of a map, and the child, arm outstretched, points her with certainty in the right direction for her migrant journey, enacting the guidance her father received earlier. This 'relay' effect is a key part of the migrant experience. The final page of the book – Artist's Note – has no traces of the earlier signs of transit, of temporariness, but instead carries a child's drawing of a substantial house/home with smoke coming from a bold, red chimney, emblem of habitation, a secure future, of well-being.

In both texts, each of the primary figures experiences a range of the objective and subjective factors which confront the migrant. Stories of migration are, as Shaun Tan has commented: "a constellation of intimate, human-sized aspirations and dilemmas; how to learn a phrase, where to catch a train, where to buy an item, whom to ask for help and, perhaps more

importantly, how to *feel* about everything” (Tan 2010; emphasis in original). Problems of language, finding accommodation, seeking employment, and negotiating officialdom are common to almost all migration stories but it is the *affective* level which is often experienced as the most unsettling as the migrant shifts from her/his position of a relatively privileged gaze and familiar visual and verbal codes of the place of origin to being the object of scrutiny, lost in a regime of unknowable symbols.

Where *The Arrival* draws upon an extensive use of sepia panels with dense backgrounds, and deploys varying degrees of timbre, tone and colour, *Petit Manuel* relies almost exclusively upon relatively simple pen and ink, line drawings, a fair amount of hatching and cross hatching, and sketchy backgrounds. Both protagonists undergo considerable discomfort but this is represented in very different genres of suffering – the epic journey and the picaresque satire.

As Linda Kinstler shows (2015), *Petit Manuel* draws upon George Mikes’ 1946 classic novel *How To Be an Alien* in its parody of the tyranny of the asylum procedure in France (equally applicable to the United Kingdom) with its grotesque, two-dimensional, mechanical and puppet-like bureaucrats, simplistic and stereotypical, pitted against the *naïf* asylum-seeker, M, optimistically assuming that, having fled the vicious Iranian regime, his entry into civilized France would be easy. Mana Neyestani’s graphic memoir, *An Iranian Metamorphosis*, which details his experiences in an Iranian jail, has been widely described as ‘Kafka-esque’ and this is no less true of his *Petit manuel* which is an autobiographical account, in comic form, of the everyday experience of an asylum-seeker in the French administration system. Originally an editorial cartoonist for a number of reformist and oppositional publications in Iran, and subsequently, a children’s comic book writer, Neyestani was imprisoned by the Iranian regime for an allegedly offensive cartoon and eventually fled into exile. A combination of autofiction, reportage and newspaper cartoon, the book draws upon traditions of classical satire and features of the Theatre of the Absurd. The book comes with a replica of the author’s “Titre de Sejour” (residence permit) issued in 2012 (and due to expire in 10 years) which underlines the quasi-autobiographical nature of the work. An illustration of a maze on the front cover anticipates the asylum journey to follow. In the foreword, Neyestani points out that the story of each refugee is unique and that his experience of the procedure was a lot simpler than the majority of cases, as his situation was documented and known, and he entered France at the invitation of the city of Paris. He had accommodation, regular work with dissident Iranian websites, and much less red tape to contend with than most asylum seekers, like the hapless M in this graphic novel. The French word for red tape is *paperasserie* which is much more expressive than the English equivalent – paperwork.

Although the book is only *quasi* autobiographical, Neyestani was aware of the many obstacles faced by asylum seekers – long queues, humiliating situations in waiting areas, strict and arrogant attitudes, delayed decisions as a result of negligence, and erratic office opening hours – ontologically devalued. His protagonist is, therefore, specific and generic, both the author and an archetype based upon a number of interviews with his associates. This being the case, I have designated the protagonist as M. Portrayed as the little man, a Chaplinesque or Woody Allen figure, M is, with his small stature and oversized spectacles, shown as anxious, nervous and oppressed, the innocent abroad, without language or resources, trapped in an irrational and illogical system, the coils of a serpent. Condemned to navigate an absurd, dystopian procedure, he is forced into a series of repetitive actions in the face of circumstances described by the author in his Foreword. Like a character from vaudeville, M is both comic and almost tragic at times. Above all, he lacks any of the resources or skills necessary for well-being, his mental capital is severely depleted, as he journeys through an undecipherable system, bewildered and frustrated, subjected to the arbitrariness of the bureaucracy, a plaything of power, of semiotic instability. France, like other western powers, reproduces in its asylum



system the discourses and forms of its former colonial authority – a narrative designed to enlist and license the ‘other’ on its own, incontestable terms. The satirical account of this system constitutes a postcolonial critique, a questioning of the “coloniality of being”: “This is in great part achieved through the idea of race, which suggests not only inferiority but also dispensability” (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 259).

Although, unlike *The Arrival*, *Petit Manuel* uses words and captions, the strength of the work lies in what I would describe as its graphic, visual theatre, the drawings expressing what language is not capable of putting into words. Each panel is an articulate metaphor of both an external situation (delay, obstruction) and an internal affect (frustration, depression). Were it not for the fact that what is represented in comic form is the very real experiences of countless asylum seekers, the work could be seen as akin to Edward Lear’s nonsense verse, a ridiculous dystopia which makes its points through the graphic medium of ‘extremity’.

This absurdity is located right at the start of the story as the diminutive M is contrasted with a number of militant, placard carrying protesters, and bomb-throwers who are ignored by the regime while he is seen as more dangerous and is arrested simply for wielding a pen for “scribbling” (griffoner). This contrastive method highlighting incongruity is used frequently, for example when two facing pages (14 and 15) show, on the one hand, the open, smiling faces of the Paris of romance and myth, of tourist attractions and cafes (shown in montage) and, on the other, the Paris of shabby back streets where the Refugees office is based and where faceless men and women gather, a prostitute lingers, and a man urinates against a wall. Here, the only colour on the tourist page is the yellow of the sun which is contrasted with the yellow liquid trickling from the wall. The next page contrasts an upright figure with a tourist visa or an invitation to a cultural event with M bent over double entering the country illegally concealed by a bunch of sheep. These postural and gestural contrasts recur throughout and the visual caricature is far more expressive than the accompanying words. This use of an extreme visual example extrapolates from the general tendency of the asylum process nowadays to require convoluted deceptions.

M becomes an asylum seeker and is shown approaching a group of aimless refugees still queuing late at night. Half the full-page panel is taken up by a banner in colour signalling the office of the association “France Terre d’Asile” (FTA). The lateness of the hour is indicated by the bizarre image of a cockerel fast asleep on a pillow in the street, the absurdity of which would be impossible to convey verbally compared with the simple visual of a snoring cockerel (at the same time, this animal being the national symbol, it may be seen as hinting at the simple fact that ‘citizens’ are supposed to be asleep). M is also portrayed as a pawn in a game on a large chess board played by the over-sized, iconic faces of party political opponents, the electoral success of one of which will determine his fate – either as a gentle kick up the backside (shown as red footprint) or a massive kick to his whole body (portrayed as a blue footmark). Caught in the large and confusing spider’s web of the FTA, M seeks advice from refugees gathered in a local park. This place and its inhabitants, dispensers of street wisdom, act as a chorus throughout, a space of sanctuary and refuge from the nightmare of the asylum process. Here, he receives more guidance and direction than from official sources. Once inside the offices, M is diminished even more in scale – a giant hand is seen flicking him away to search for an address, a lodging place, before he can start the asylum application. As he makes a phone call, he dreams of an ideal house (shown in a bubble as a childlike drawing) but makes no progress. The list of charitable and philanthropic organisations he is given has been photocopied so often that it is falling to pieces. Again, a contrast is shown between the refugee taken on by ‘do-gooders’, almost as a trophy or pet (M is visually ‘paired’ with a small dog) and the person sent to accommodation miles from the city centre on the outskirts, the banlieues. The absurdity of this spatial remoteness is shown temporally when he encounters Asterix and Obelisk, comic

characters from another timescale and era. This exaggeration is one of the characteristics of satire used frequently in the text. Later, finding himself in a claustrophobic, prison-like lodging house (indicated by a resident who chalks up his 100 days waiting for his application to be processed) M, ironically, tells another resident how happy he is now that he is no longer in an Iranian prison. The verbal/visual incongruity carries the satire.

An alternative scenario is developed in which, as a journalist, M is welcomed with open arms at the House of Journalists (La Maison des Journalistes), given access to a library, a place to work and to live, but is thrown out after the maximum six-month period has expired. Moving to a large city, he visits the Prefecture where, in normal times, he takes a few seconds to reach the entrance but on days when it is open to refugees, the waiting time is up to three hours. Instead of space-time compression, the asylum seeker experiences space-time expansion. Once inside the office, the scale of the drawings emphasize the power relations, as large, bureaucratic figures bark orders at 'shrunken', intimidated refugees. Like many others, M does not speak French and his documents are incomplete. In an aside, one of the most absurd moments in the whole satire depicts, in flashback, a mother telling M as a small child defacing a picture of the Ayatollah, that if he is to become a refugee he should start learning French now – all good refugees should in their infancy anticipate that they will seek asylum and, as a consequence, learn French.

Once the asylum procedure starts, each refugee is shown with their identity number having replaced their face and M goes through the process of being photographed, contorting himself into various poses for the photo booth, only to be told that spectacles are prohibited. This is one of many false steps on the route of a nightmarish sequence during which his dossier is placed on hold for five months while his fingerprinting is completed, immobilised in a zone of total indifference. His increasing anger and frustration are shown through exaggeration as 18 fingerprints are reproduced. The park sages advise committing a minor infraction so that he can be fingerprinted by the more efficient police system and speed up his delay. His lack of identity is graphically indicated by an image of his severed head hovering over his body. To obtain the necessary papers, he has to start all over again, filling forms, being photographed, and waiting endlessly. This waiting is represented hyperbolically by a skeleton in clothing holding a number. In a later panel, M's headstone is shown, suggesting that he has died before exhausting the asylum process. These two instances are examples of the ways in which the satire works using hyperbole. This, along with distortion (e.g. the inflated lawyer who is literally shown being pumped up), exaggeration and magnification of scale, and over-emphasis, is all part of the technique of incongruity and extremity to reveal dysfunction, designed to arouse indignation at the inhumane treatment of both the Candide-like figure M in particular and asylum seekers in general, in order to inspire a re-modelling of the system.

The hardest part of the asylum process in many ways, apart from all the delays, is the demand placed on the applicant to produce a convincing narrative of dissidence and persecution, the interview feared by most asylum seekers. Again, advice is given from the park about body language – the caricatures of possible poses are reduced to absurdity – evidence of scars, and the problems with interpreters. Attention to minutiae and trivia is advised, irrespective of political militancy, but he is told to construct a narrative of continuing protest in France against the Iranian regime. Accordingly, M shows that he can 'out activist' any of his peers, on the streets and online. In other words, the asylum process is reduced to a *performance*, a series of gestures, timing, and poses which the graphic form is able to capture very effectively. Framing all of this is the experience of waiting – both duration and endurance – missing train stops, going to the wrong place, misreading acronyms, all aspects of insider decipherability, the kind of skills and knowledge characteristic of well-being, resources of mental capital. Duration is linked, again through hyperbole, to M's period of imprisonment in Iran, an ideal preparation for

seeking asylum, especially the refusal and appeal process which is time-bound. Even when asylum is granted, another set of procedures follow, related to accommodation, employment, language learning, social security, health insurance, and transport passes. Again, there is constant queuing and delays as he is bounced back and forth between different sectors of the bureaucracy – graphically enacted in the form of a table tennis match between two large, iconic figures with M as the ball. He has progressed from pawn in a chess game to a celluloid object. The relentless bureaucracy extends to every aspect of his life, including attempts to join the societies for artists or writers, neither of which accepts him as his designs have too many words for the one and he has no publications in French for the other. He is enmeshed in a latter day Catch-22 as he tries to set up a bank account, claim benefits, or permits to travel beyond France.

The penultimate page of the book is a sequence of nine different body positions and expressions as M fills in a visa form which requires him to indicate his nationality. He fills in “Iranian”, then erases it and then “French” and erases that, until on the final page M is shown at a desk, asking where he belongs (“Où suis-je à ma place?”) with his legs morphing into rootless trees. Erasure has been the potential condition of the asylum seeker throughout, forced to adapt to, and adopt, the style, norms and performative gestures of the host society that sees him as the dangerous other it seeks to limit and control. Success, or otherwise, depends upon how far he can become a mimic man.

In the best traditions of satire, *Petit Manuel* works against its professed function as a short guide. A guide presupposes a set of procedures, is logically set out, with step by step instructions, coherently laid out and leading to clear outcomes. Its format would be sequential, proceeding from A to B, linear and progressive. Its purpose is, presumably, positive and enabling, a ‘how to’ manual. The book does outline the asylum process in France but through a series of Orwellian negations and disruptions, incoherent and inconsequential, designed to obfuscate rather than illuminate. Rather than proceeding from A to B, the applicant metaphorically zigzags through every letter of the alphabet to finally arrive at his destination – residence, but even this is conditional and provisional. So, the book is a mock Guide (as in mock-heroic), a ‘how not to’ rather than a ‘how to’ manual, step by misstep, more akin to a game of snakes and ladders than an ordered procedure. Each stage of M’s process carries the risk of being sent back to square one, a state of conditional probability or sequence of random variables in a continuous, time-absorbing Markov chain. In this ironic sense, the structure of the book accurately reproduces its ostensible subject.

The book is organised principally around *time* in the form of waiting, delay, duration, repetition. Sequential in some respects but also reversible, it is a continuum confined and determined by spaces and spatial forms – queues, interiors, reception areas – staffed by iconic, monumentalised officials bearing the prevailing relations of power over the asylum applicant. The marks of time are also carried by hourglass timers, headstones, skeletons, and scratchings on a wall. There is an appearance of forward movement but this is countered by a sense of people marching on the spot, marking time in the military sense. The supplicant outsider is subject to measurement, quantification, categorisation, and objectification as his subjectivity is exposed to random erasures by the hierarchy of authority. In an irregular labyrinth of time and space, the person is evacuated and the appearance of order gives way to its opposite. In *Petit Manuel*, the forces which inhibit and limit the migrant and his well-being are active, explicit and categorical, and time is inimical, convoluted and negative. In *The Arrival* the forces which constrain are more the consequence of fears projected upon his circumstances and environment by the man himself, anxieties and doubts brought about by being a stranger, a figure lacking the decoding vocabulary needed to ‘read’ the new and the different. In a sense, his progress through the alien terrain is almost a learning partnership or a process of recognition, a gradual unfolding in which time could almost be seen as benign.

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