

“Dearly Departed: The Arrival’s Spectral Refugee”

The title of Shaun Tan’s graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006) encourages us to read this book as depicting a journey that culminates in reaching a destination. In many ways, the plot does seem to reinforce a teleological framework. Tan’s nameless protagonist, who crosses oceans to flee from a coercive threat, spends most of the novel becoming acquainted with a new homeland, a process we might view as an extended “arrival.” My paper, however, complicates this way of looking by arguing that *The Arrival*’s protagonist—a refugee—functions as a spectral figure, one who “ushers in an endless process of returning, without ever arriving” (Wylie 171). Return, not arrival, is the device through which this novel asks child readers to reckon with the affective and material costs of displacement: what it means to depart, to be unsafe, to be expendable. Arguably, *The Arrival* never arrives, concluding with a moment that frames migration as a continually recurrent act, an ending that begins all over again. Over and over, Tan’s formal elements and narrative structure stress return. Many images are reminiscent of old and scratched photographs, renderings that widen a temporal gap between the text and its readers, asking us to come back to a documented past that is also paradoxically present. Throughout the novel, the protagonist encounters a series of other refugees who relate their stories to him, traumas that recur in Tan’s illustrations; the space dedicated to these out-of-time stories is the process through which *The Arrival* acknowledges that loss shuns linearity, that it is simultaneously then and now and always. As Yen Lê Espiritu has argued, the specter (or ghost) functions not as something dead, but as a signifier of what someone or something has disappeared, an apparition that asks us to see what’s been hidden. Reading Tan’s refugee as a specter, then, is a political undertaking that acknowledges the extent to which *The Arrival* affectively and visually reproduces real-world acts of exile, disappearance, and devastation. Espiritu, Yen Lê. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*. U of California P, 2014. Wylie, John. “The spectral geographies of W. G. Sebald.” *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 14, 2007, pp. 171– 188.