

# ‘Untold stories’: The relationship of word and image in the work of Shaun Tan

> **Melanie Otto**

School of English, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland  
ottom@tcd.ie (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1852-3486>)

## ABSTRACT

Primarily known as a children’s book author and illustrator, Shaun Tan has repeatedly resisted this label and rather positioned himself between the fields of literature and fine art, emphasising that his training and primary interest are in the latter. This essay approaches Tan’s work via his idea of ‘untold stories’, articulated in the eponymous section of his book *The bird king and other sketches* (2011) and in the 2018 solo exhibition at Beinart Gallery in Melbourne, *Untold tales*. Untold essentially means unpremeditated in Tan’s vocabulary and relates to his evocation of Paul Klee’s idea of ‘taking a line for a walk’. Using his idea of untold stories as my central point, the essay foregrounds the untold *critical* story of Tan as a fine artist, focusing in particular on works that have received minimal to no critical attention: his 2015 series of paintings *Go, said the bird*, his 2003 public mural *The hundred year picnic*, and his ongoing 9x5 inch series of observational works in the tradition of the Heidelberg School of Australian Impressionism. The latter is a particularly strong and formative influence on Tan’s career as a painter, allowing for a discussion of his work in the broader context of postcolonial art history and settler colonialism.

**Keywords:** Shaun Tan, animal studies, Heidelberg School, Indigenous, settler colonialism, drawing, postcolonial.

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# Introduction

‘My stories generally begin with images rather than words’ (Tan 2011:6). This opening sentence of the chapter ‘untold stories’<sup>1</sup> in *The bird king and other sketches* is indicative of Shaun Tan’s creative process and the relationship between word and image in his work. Mainly known as a children’s book author and illustrator, Tan has repeatedly resisted this label and instead positioned himself between the fields of literature and fine art, emphasising that his training and primary creative impulse are in what TJ Clark has called the ‘counter-language’ of depiction (Tan 2009; Marcus & Spaulding 2019). Clark has emphasised the need to ‘confront the investment of the human species in non-linguistic forms of thought’ despite the fact—or rather because—the discipline of art history ‘is happiest when it finds a piece of language to “correspond” to an image, or indeed to generate (to determine) it’ (Marcus & Spaulding 2019).

In fact, Clark’s observation relates more broadly to how we as ‘human beings dwell so completely in a textual universe’. For Clark, the value of paintings lies in ‘their muteness and their indeterminacy’ (Meehan 2019). This connects with Tan’s own sensibility and practice:

The characters and situations that appear in my working sketchbooks exist for the most part outside of a spoken narrative. I do work frequently with words, but feel I am most fluent when drawing, opening up a kind of day-dreaming process in which questions of meaning are constantly delayed in favour of the next line or shape, akin to what the artist Paul Klee describes as ‘taking a line for a walk’ (Tan 2009).

This essay approaches Tan’s work via his idea of ‘untold stories’, stories that are unpremeditated but come into being in the act of drawing.<sup>2</sup> As such, Tan is in conversation with artists and theorists who refer to the act of drawing as embodied knowledge. William Kentridge (2009:35), for example, argues: ‘The ideas are not the driving force in drawing, nor is meaning. [...]. Rather I have a need to be making marks on paper. Drawing isn’t a decision, it is a need’. Kentridge emphasises that the physical mark-making process is the basis of invention rather than any preconceived idea in the artist’s mind. Tan himself supports the notion when he says: ‘Images are not preconceived and then drawn, they are conceived as they are drawn. Indeed, drawing is its own form of thinking, in the same way birdsong is “thought about” within the bird’s throat’ (Tan 2011:4). In other words, the origin of the visual image lies in the physical act of the hand moving across paper.

In *The primacy of drawing* (2010), Deanna Petheridge refers to this idea as the 'thinking hand' (Petheridge 2010:11-12). Marlene Louise Wassermann expands on this in her dissertation *Drawing as thinking: An enquiry into the act of drawing as embodied extension of mind* (2013). Referring to the work of neuroscientist Andy Clark, Wassermann argues: '[T]he physical act of sketching is itself a thought process and [...] the new thought processes which it facilitates would be impossible or severely impaired if it were absent' (Wassermann 2013:iii). Andy Clark's understanding of drawing as '*thinking on paper*' (Clark 2008:xxv) represents 'an integral process of artistic cognition itself' (Clark 2003:77) and speaks directly to the primacy of drawing and the visual image in Tan's own practice. Wassermann's work, via Clark, is critical of the mind-body split in Western culture and its attendant assumption that cognition is disembodied (Wassermann 2013:17). For Tan, the act of drawing as embodied thinking creates the ideas for his written stories. As such, his practice subverts the mind-body split in two ways: by emphasising that creativity is body-centred and by giving primacy to the image over the written word. Tan thus joins in the broader conversation on the relationship between word and image in human culture.

In his seminal study *Iconology: Image, text, ideology* (1986), WJT Mitchell observes: 'The dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself. What varies is the precise nature of the weave [...]. The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs' (Mitchell 1986:43). He outlines how, in the history of Western thought, word and image have often been pitched as opposites of one another—with the image as the word's opposite and 'other' and vice versa. This, Mitchell (1986:48) explains, is in part based on the assumption that painting represents the 'visible world' and literature the 'invisible'. Mitchell (1986:48) himself does not polarise this relationship further but argues for 'accepting the fact that we create much of our world out of the dialogue between verbal and pictorial representations'. However, TJ Clark's observation that we live in a textual universe highlights a power dynamic between word and image that pitches it in favour of the word. In her analysis of the illustrated editions of Ted Hughes's *Cave birds*, Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux frames this dynamic in a way that will be helpful for my purpose. She proposes that the image is 'present, replete, silent, and irrational' whereas the word represents a 'logical, symbolic, and "civilizing" discipline' (Loizeaux 2004:43). This takes on particular significance in postcolonial and ecocritical debates, which Tan's work addresses, where the civilising word is continuous with the colonial civilising mission, on the one hand, and the 'civilising' impulse in human culture (as opposed to nature), on the other.

Considering TJ Clark's notion that we exist in a textual universe, it seems no coincidence that scholarship on Tan has focused primarily on his own contribution to the civilising discipline of the word. Discussion of his work centres on children's literature in particular but also the graphic novel, immigrant narratives, animal and environmental studies, and postcolonial debates. Much less, if any, critical attention has been given to his fine art and how his practice as a fine artist relates to, for example, animal or postcolonial studies. As such, Tan's work is the victim of binary thinking: despite his own assertion that his creative roots are in fine art, the importance of the silent, material image is relegated to a secondary position, especially in the international reception of his work, whereas criticism instead emphasises his written and *narrative* visual output, i.e. anything that appears in book format. No doubt Tan's own way of promoting his work has much to do with this. His website shows an increasing tendency on his part to verbally contextualise his images, especially those that appear in his books. This is particularly striking in relation to his illustrated stories *Tales from the inner city* (2018) and the picture book *Rules of summer* (2013), where Tan has added not only a general introduction to the work but also extensive notes on individual images, to the point of over-determining their meaning. In part, this is due to Tan's interest in the process of making art. In the companion volume to his 2006 graphic novel *The arrival, Sketches from a nameless land*, which reveals the process of making his acclaimed book, Tan (2010:5) says: 'I love seeing the origins of ideas, the connections with real-life experience, the myriad choices and problems – and the reminder of what attracts us to art and fiction in the first place, its "made-ness"'.

The tendency to over-textualise his images and process may seem surprising in someone who emphasises the power of leaving things unnamed. No doubt Tan is responding, at least in part, to an actual or perceived need on the part of his readers, who are no longer visually literate, to have images explained to them. Tan has himself observed that the open-endedness and indeterminacy of the counter-language of depiction, its tendency to have more conceptual space around it, leaves it open to multiple interpretations, making it the antithesis of linear, logical narrative (Tan 2006). Like TJ Clark, Tan pays attention to how images speak differently. In this, his understanding relates to the fundamental difference between word and image outlined by Nelson Goodman. In *Languages of art* (1968), Goodman posits: 'Nonlinguistic systems differ from languages, depiction from description, the representational from the verbal, paintings from poems, primarily through lack of differentiation – indeed through density (and consequent total absence of articulation) – in the symbol scheme' (Goodman 1968:226). Density in Goodman's sense refers to the way a painting (as opposed to a written text) signifies: the meaning of

a painting is constituted as much by *what* it represents as by *how* it represents: 'Any thickening or thinning of the line, its color, its contrast with the background, its size, even the qualities of the paper – none of these is ruled out, none can be ignored' (Goodman 1968:229). In other words, all aspects of the painting—what it represents as well as its 'made-ness' or materiality—contribute to its meaning.

Using Tan's idea of 'untold stories', i.e. his understanding of how images speak *differently*, I want to look at the untold critical story of Tan as a fine artist, focusing in particular on works that have received minimal to no critical attention: his 2015 series of animal-centric paintings *Go, said the bird*, his 2003 public mural *The hundred year picnic*, and his ongoing 9x5 inch series of observational works in the tradition of the Heidelberg School of Australian Impressionism, a powerful and formative influence on Tan's career as a painter. I consider these works in the context of animal studies and postcolonial debates on settler colonialism, respectively, and how the word-image relationship operates in each of these. I also consider how Tan's references to literary works inform the reading of his paintings. I conclude by discussing one of Tan's early illustration projects, the 1998 picture book *The rabbits*, detailing how Tan's illustrations of John Marsden's text subvert, in the particular context of Australia's colonisation by Europe, the civilising power of the word via the counter-language of painting.

## *Go, said the bird*

According to Tan's own introduction, *Go, said the bird* is a 'loose wordless narrative' of 'large scale paintings' that were exhibited as part of a group show in 2015 (Tan 2015). Taking its title from a passage in TS Eliot's *Four quartets*, the series focuses on different species of birds native to Australia that have learned to survive in human-made urban environments. Thematically and stylistically related to *Tales from the inner city*, *Go* explores the birds' perception and memory of space that exists like a palimpsest or alternative map underneath the human-made space of the city. Tan speculates that the animal's experience of space and time 'differ[s] radically from our own', and that it is certainly older and probably more enduring than our human knowledge (Tan 2015). In his essay 'Silent voices', he compares painting—quite fittingly in this context—to a form of map-making, 'working with traditional physical materials like paint, charcoal and pencils on canvas and paper [...] to make little maps of experience through a kind of long-exposure act of observation' (Tan 2009). In *Go*, each image can be read as a map-making exercise, but the series as a whole also creates a narrative map or arch. As a narrative

sequence, it is characterised by what Goodman calls differentiation or lack of density, meaning the materiality of the individual paintings is not, in the first instance, integral to the meaning of the series as *series*. Instead, the paintings operate as distinct individual components in a linguistic system (e.g. words in a sentence). That said, the narrative element of *Go, said the bird* remains as loose as Tan himself suggests, and each painting can stand as a self-contained unit independent of the surrounding images.<sup>3</sup> The only discernible plot-like structure is the birds' conquering of human space and their full establishment within it. The series also reflects in interesting ways on animal death and the idea of an animal afterlife, concerns that Tan shares with one other great animal painter: the German Expressionist Franz Marc, an important and under-researched touchstone in reading Tan's animal-centric work. Indeed, like most of Marc's paintings, *Go* is striking in that it is almost entirely animal-centric.

Animals hold a special place in Tan's work and are often the central characters in his paintings and his writing, a further characteristic he shares with Marc, whose work I will turn to in full later. Talking more specifically about his own exploratory sketchbooks, Tan has observed: 'If there are characters, they often don't have a mouth, or are animals or other creatures that can't talk' (Tan 2009). As such, animals are associated with silence or non-verbal expression. In this respect, animals are conceptually related to Tan's idea of 'untold' stories. *Tales from the inner city*, for example, explicitly align the human with the word: 'From the cradle to the grave



FIGURE N° 1



Shaun Tan, *The new world*, 2015, oil and collage on canvas, 180 x 150cm. Copyright Shaun Tan. Courtesy of the artist.



our lives are measured, trimmed, emboldened by words' (Tan 2018:169). The word is experienced as restrictive (measured and trimmed) and as holding power (emboldened) over the non-human world. At the same time, the very construction of the book rejects the primacy of the textual and human over the visual and animal, aligning animals with the counter-language of painting. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the table of contents: none of the stories are listed by title; instead, the page numbers are contained within the shape of the animal at the story's centre.

Go emphasises the abstract and cerebral aspect of the human word and world in the depiction of its different cityscapes. In the first painting, titled *The new world* (see Figure 1), the city's architecture is merely implied in indistinct shapes of colour. The only element defined and rendered in full realism is a bird in flight, small but at the centre of the painting. The position and depiction of the bird in relation to the background highlights the animal-centric perspective: for the bird, the new world of human habitation is unfamiliar, indistinct, and undefined. In the subsequent paintings, the human world becomes gradually more distinct as the birds establish themselves in the city space. In fact, the birds become so large in size that they occasionally tower over the cityscape, as in the third painting, *The Kingdom* (see Figure 2), which shows a giant sparrow rising above the rooftops.



FIGURE N° 2



Shaun Tan, *The kingdom*, 2015, oil on canvas, 180 x 150cm. Copyright Shaun Tan. Courtesy of the artist.

*The Kingdom* is also one of two paintings figuring human presence: here in the shape of a woman on a bicycle. The human figure, however, is one of several diaphanous or disappearing shapes in the painting, indistinct and unreal, like the cars parked in the street next to her. Despite being in the foreground, the figure of the woman remains a small, indistinct detail that seems to disappear into the canvas. The towering bird, by comparison, has a compact and material presence and, as in 'The new world', is the painting's most real and realistic element. At the same time, the human world seems utterly oblivious to the bird's presence; both exist side by side but do not intersect or interact with each other. Tan (2018b) himself states that the 'barriers of language' separate us from the animal: we can never enter into the animal's mind; it remains inscrutable and opaque, completely other to us. At the same time, he continues, 'our cities are built on the suffering of other animals' (Tan 2018b). Tan specifically refers to 'the sometimes overlooked history of horses in pre-industrial cities, when horse-power was literally the main energy source of transportation, manufacturing and other industrial processes in the time before steam engines and electricity. The governing philosophy of the day dictated that animals were machines without feeling or consciousness' (Tan 2018b). By repeatedly emphasising, as he does, that the barriers of language prevent us from true communication and empathy with the animal kingdom, Tan engages with topical debates in animal studies and, more specifically in *Go*, with animal theory.

Whereas animal studies can range from zoology to animal rights, animal theory is primarily concerned with philosophical questions raised within the larger discipline of animal studies (Rhinehart 2013:2). In her thesis on the work of Franz Marc, Morgan Rhinehart (2013:6) states that animal *theory* is 'a conceptual framework in the humanities that investigates animal being—the way animals exist in and experience the world'. Outlining the presence of animal theory in Western natural history and philosophy, Rhinehart (2013:7) highlights the centrality of 'the exploration and evaluation of animal life, animal consciousness, and animal death as well as the practice of arranging man and animal into a hierarchical scale of being'. With its emphasis on animal life, death, and afterlife, Tan's *Go, said the bird* directly addresses questions of animal consciousness. In this context, it is instructive to look at Marc more fully. Apart from his iconic animal paintings, Marc produced a sizeable body of writing in which he reflected on his practice. 'How does a horse see the world?', originally published in German in 1920 in the two-volume edition *Briefe, Aufzeichnungen und Aphorismen*, is of particular interest to my discussion. It opens with the lines: 'Is there a more mysterious idea for an artist than to imagine how nature is reflected in the eyes of an animal? How does a horse see the world, how does an eagle, a doe, or a dog? It is a poverty-stricken convention to place



animals into landscapes as seen by men; instead, we should contemplate the soul of the animal to divine its way of sight' (Marc 1968:178). In making the animal's way of seeing—its consciousness—central, Marc anticipates contemporary animal-centric debates. Commentators have indeed highlighted Marc's interest in animals as animals and not as metaphors for human emotions and situations, the latter frequently the focus of Marc's contemporary, Heinrich Campendonk, whose work—at first glance—resembles that of Marc. Rhinehart's extensive research on animal theory in Marc's work observes: 'Marc is interested in using symbolism to explore animal consciousness, while Campendonk uses animals more conventionally as symbols for expressing themes in human consciousness' (Rhinehart 2013:31). In the course of his short career, Marc's visual language shifted from realism to abstraction both in form and in his use of colour. At the same time, his focus on animals is consistent and continuous throughout his work. His early painting *The dead sparrow* (1905) is often used to illustrate this. Painted in muted colours and anatomic realism, *The dead sparrow* differs from the semi-abstract animal scenes and landscapes of Marc's well-known mature work, rendered in vibrant, non-naturalistic colours meant to express the spiritual essence and consciousness of animals rather than their material form.

Tan shares with Marc an empathy for the perspective of animals and a desire to depict a world mediated by animal consciousness. This relates to my earlier observation on the abstract rendering of human architecture in *The new world*: the city is a world shaped by humans and, therefore, as yet unrecognisable to animal consciousness. Where Tan differs from Marc and where Tan's contemporary—post-animal turn—perspective informs his work is in his realist depiction of the birds in *Go*. Where Marc's mature work deliberately empties the animals of their species-specific characteristics, rendering their inner essence instead (Partsch 1993:46), Tan's birds in *Go* are all recognisable species of birds native to Australia. In fact, we only see them from the outside, placed in the abstract human landscape of the city but not structurally entangled with it in the way that Marc's animals appear as continuous with the surrounding landscape. Tan's emphasis on the birds' separateness highlights his ultimate conviction that humans cannot know what an animal is thinking or feeling precisely because we are separated by the language barrier, the foundation of our cultural worlds of which the city is an epitome.

In this context, it is interesting that Marc rarely *wrote* about animals, preferring to make them the core of his painting instead. As such, Marc, like Tan, was aware that animals and animal images express something that can be visually conveyed and understood but that remains beyond the grasp of verbal and textual articulation. In an essay on Marc's writing, Jean Marie Carey (2017) argues that for Marc,

‘understanding animals might be a form of understanding best elided in language’. At the same time, Carey (2017) notes that Marc’s writing’s open-ended and fragmentary nature is linked to the ‘guiding principle of the open and experimental way in which he conducted his painting practice’. As such, Marc’s writing, like his painting, refuses gratification by deferring explanation. While this cannot be said of Tan’s writing, which is instead a response to a need for gratification, it can certainly be applied to his engagement with TS Eliot’s poetry in the context of *Go*. It is perhaps not insignificant that Eliot’s poetry appeals to a visual artist. Eliot’s language is rhythmical and sensuous, an important aspect in critical approaches to his work. In her introduction to the Modern Library Edition of *The waste land*, Mary Karr argues that the key to understanding Eliot’s poem lies in the reader’s becoming attuned to the sound of the poet’s words, the sensuousness of his language, rather than in a cerebral approach to the ideas of the poem (Karr 2001:xiii). The same can be said of *Four quartets*, from which the title of Tan’s series is taken. The eponymous lines appear in the first section, ‘Burnt Norton’, which opens with a meditation on time that is partly conveyed in the voices of birds. Apart from the delicate imagery—steeped in observations of the natural world—and appealing musicality of the poem, its philosophical content also speaks directly to the concerns of this essay and Tan’s own reflections on the limitations of language. Eliot is very direct in highlighting the shortcomings of language, emphasising that words always reach beyond themselves and gesture towards something that cannot be articulated, only intimated:

Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness (Eliot 1959:19).

In other words, the sensuous and musical rhythm of poetry carries its meaning beyond the limitations – the barriers – of language. This speaks to TJ Clark’s observation that ordinary language ‘knows in its heart that its patterning of experience is partial, and it is obliged all the time to “open onto the object”— to stutter, to improvise, to disobey its own rules, to be scandalously “figurative”’ (Marcus & Spaulding 2019). Eliot continues:

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still (Eliot 1959:19).

Even though Tan does not give a detailed reason for his choice of Eliot's poem, the similarities are obvious: Eliot expresses a belief in the power of words to gesture towards a reality beyond them, of which words will always fall short. Tan engages with a similar idea when he elevates the expressive power of depiction over verbal or textual articulation.

More specifically, the spiritual dimension of Eliot's *Four quartets* and the specific emphasis on the passing of time in 'Burnt Norton' resonates with the theme of life, death, and rebirth that Tan outlines as the underlying narrative of *Go*. Most of the paintings in the sequence deal with the animals' life, particularly the various instances of wild species becoming native to urban environments. Only the final two engage with death and rebirth, respectively. *The death of a bird* (see Figure 3) is set at night in a quiet suburban environment with a house and a garden. This seemingly peaceful setting contains an easily overlooked detail: a cat killing a bird. Humans are absent in this painting, yet a wild bird's death occurs through a domesticated species. As such, the cat is part of human culture rather than nature, representing indirect human impact on wildlife. Significantly, the killing happens close to the house, just outside the garden wall. At the same time, the killing itself represents a small portion of the painting, the focus of which is the large fruit-bearing tree in the garden, itself an archetypal evocation of the biblical Garden of Eden. As in the biblical context, death occurs outside of Paradise, but Tan's rendition presents it as diminutive, mundane, and easily overlooked. The bird itself is merely a tiny brushstroke, almost unrecognisable as a bird, suggesting that the death of wild animals is insignificant and invisible in the broader context of human culture.



FIGURE N° 3



Shaun Tan, *The death of a bird*, 2015, oil on canvas, 200 x 150cm. Copyright Shaun Tan. Courtesy of the artist.

Nevertheless, Tan's mundane and low-key treatment of animal death has spiritual overtones, followed as it is by the final painting with its archetypal title *Crossing* (see Figure 4), and this marriage of the mundane and archetypal mirrors Eliot's literary modernism. At the same time, Tan's understated representation of animal death starkly contrasts Marc's renditions of the same theme. His 1913 *Fate of the animals*, for example, depicts a violent scene of animals falling victim to forest fire, a chaotic and intense but at the same time beautiful and elegiac rendition of animal death that is often read as a premonition of World War I. Equally harrowing and intense is Marc's verbal description of the death of a horse in a letter from the war front two years later. Rhinehart (2013:54) quotes from Marc's letters at length:

In these days I also experienced the quite curious and upsetting death of a horse...a real Pegasus of the legends, suddenly died... during its last 2 hours it was in enormous pain and moaned and groaned like a human being. I felt at the time that it sighed like a man that was being shaken out of a lively dream. A few minutes later, an awkward, ugly, decaying horse's body lay in front of me—Pegasus was nowhere to be seen—all that remained to us was the stinking mortal remains, and we had these buried. I thought of those eternally memorable words that have resounded through the ages: 'Let the dead bury their dead!'

Tan's depiction of animal death seems banal by comparison, and yet this banality highlights how far removed human culture has become from the emotional impact of dying animals. Where Marc expresses genuine empathy with the animal to the point where he identifies with the animal's pain, Tan emphasises how the language and culture barrier has separated us from this empathy and, as such, from a connection to the animal parts of our own selves. Here, Tan's visual reflections closely align with broader aspects of animal studies.

Animal studies question the species divide and refer to the human and non-human alike as animal. Jacques Derrida's *The animal that therefore I am* (2002) is a seminal and early intervention in animal studies that looks at the philosophical implications of questioning the species divide. The opening pages of Donna Haraway's foundational *When species meet* (2008), give a scientific account of how much 'animal' biology is actually present in the human body, making the mere thought of the species divide an absurdity:

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny

companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates (Haraway 2008:3-4).

Haraway further argues that 'high art' and 'high science' are exclusively human-centred and as such have an effect not only on the two respective disciplines but also form the basis of today's neoliberal politics and economics: 'High Art, High Science: genius, progress, beauty, power, money' (Haraway 2008:7). At the very beginning of her book, Haraway argues instead for alter-globalisation or autre-mondialisation as a political but also philosophical alternative: 'These terms were invented by European activists to stress that their approaches to militarized neoliberal models of world building are not about antiglobalization but about nurturing a more just and peaceful other-globalization. There is a promising autre-mondialisation to be learned in retying some of the knots of ordinary multispecies living on earth' (Haraway 2008:3). Tan's *Go* as a whole, but particularly its final painting, *Crossing*, is a visual expression of Haraway's idea of multispecies living on earth.



FIGURE **N° 4**



Shaun Tan, *Crossing*, 2015, oil on canvas, 150 x 150cm. Copyright Shaun Tan. Courtesy of the artist.

In keeping with the low-key tone of *Go*, *Crossing* expresses the idea of rebirth in rather mundane images. In fact, if the title and, more importantly, Tan's artist statement did not suggest the numinous and archetypal, it would be difficult to see any connotation of resurrection or rebirth. The painting depicts an Australian magpie diving from a bright blue sky above an equally brightly-coloured urban scene with a railway crossing in the foreground. Unlike the previous scene of death in *The death of a bird*, taking place at night time and—if one wanted to remain within the archetypal—in a dark night of the (animal) soul or underworld journey, *Crossing* is set in bright daylight. Here, the bird has been released back into life, like the hero from classical mythology returning from the underworld. In this context, the bird's diving flight suggests exuberance. In more symbolic terms, the painting shows a bird no longer fighting for survival in the alien environment of the city but relishing a newly acquired freedom of movement. The bird is now thoroughly at home and can navigate freely and easily in its new habitat. Significantly, both bird and human architecture are rendered in precise detail: the lines around both are crisp and sharp, and it is easy for the eye to navigate the urban environment and the bird's place within it. Unlike the first image in the series or the more spatially disorientating scenes in the middle paintings, *Crossing* shows both the animal and human world as one. Whereas the animal and human seem to live in parallel worlds in most of the paintings, indicated either by the contrast between sharply delineated animal and blurry surroundings or exaggerated size and perspective, *Crossing* suggests an intersection of worlds: human and bird species come into contact and our paths cross, which is one way of reading the crossing of the railway line indicated in the perspective of *Crossing*: the viewer is in the position of a traveller on the road, about to cross over the train lines into another part of the city. The bird, in turn, is about to descend from the sky to meet the implied human viewer/traveller.

## *The hundred year picnic and observational paintings*

The multiple meanings of crossing, existing in a palimpsest, one on top of the other rather than following a linear plot, again evoke the idea of poetry as the primary intertext of *Go*. In this context, it is instructive to take a closer look at the supposedly loose structure of Tan's series and poetry as a genre more generally. In its poetics, poetry lends itself to comparison with the 'loose, wordless narrative' of Tan's series of paintings. A quick detour into another poet's work will shed more light on this thought. In her memoir *Object lessons: The life of the woman and the poet in our time* (2006), Irish poet Eavan Boland suggests that her narrative follows the cadence of poetry rather than the linear structures of narrative prose:



I have put this book together not as a prose narrative is usually constructed but as a poem might be: in turnings and returnings. In parts which find and repeat themselves and restate the argument until it loses its reasonable edge and hopefully becomes a sort of cadence. Therefore, the reader will come on the same room more than once [...]. An ordinary suburb, drenched in winter rain, will show itself once, twice, then disappear and come back (Boland 2006:xiii).

In other words, a poem or a narrative that reflects the structures of poetry is held together by association, sound, rhythm, and recurring imagery—by ‘turnings and returnings’—rather than a linear plot line. The rhythmic nature of poetry also moves it closer, as I suggested, to a visceral experience and, therefore, the material presence of the counter-languages of music and painting. This takes us back directly to our discussion of animals. The musicality of poetry and the materiality of painting communicate in a way reminiscent of how animals communicate with and affect us. The companion animals of Tan’s graphic novel *The arrival*, animal-like creatures that inhabit the dwellings of the host city as ‘totem “house animal[s]”’, pair up with newly arrived immigrants, giving them a sense of belonging and facilitating their emotional connection to the new place (Tan 2010:35). By being silent and communicating in a non-verbal way with their humans, Tan argues, the companion animals reflect ‘the need to accept certain things in the absence of full comprehension’ (Tan 2010:35).

This sentiment of anticipation beyond full articulation links to a mural that Tan made for the public library of Subiaco in Perth, Western Australia, and that he says was ‘a direct precursor to *The Arrival*’ (Tan 2010:10). In *Sketches from a nameless land*, Tan reveals that the basis for the painting, which shows a group of people in an abstract landscape having a picnic, is based on an archival photograph from the early 20th century. *The hundred year picnic* (2003) (see Figure 5) uses similar loose shapes and colours as several of the paintings of *Go*. Although the protagonists of the mural are human and not animal, reading *The hundred year picnic* in conjunction with, for example, *The new world* reveals interesting parallels, particularly with regard to the postcolonial dimension of Tan’s work. To begin with, Tan’s reflections on the library mural include the idea of parallel and seemingly separate worlds, which is central to the narrative arch of *Go*:

[*The hundred year picnic* is] a stylised, dreamlike interpretation of figures in a ‘foreign’ landscape – one at odds with the European heritage evidenced in the family’s clothing, objects and body language. The two worlds seem inconsistent, but are not necessarily incompatible: against the accidents of historical circumstance, there are often opportunities for individuals to reconcile differences. Connections made to a new

place can be deeply felt without being clearly articulated, much like a composition of nebulous colours, shapes and textures on canvas (Tan 2010:10).

This can be mapped verbatim onto the concerns expressed in *Go, said the bird*. Significantly, both *Picnic* and *Go* deal with moments of colonisation, the former with Australia's settlement by Europeans and the latter with wild animals in human-built environments. Both the group of settlers in *Picnic* and the birds in *Go* experience a sense of displacement and disconnection after arriving in their respective 'new worlds', which is expressed in the form of nebulous and abstract shapes around the figures: the environment of the new world is alien and new, as yet beyond the grasp of cognition, and—in the case of the human context—beyond the articulation of spoken or written language.



FIGURE N° 6



Shaun Tan, *The hundred year picnic*, 2003, acrylic, oil, fabric and collage on canvas, 320 x 320cm, collection of Subiaco Library, Western Australia. Copyright Shaun Tan. Courtesy of the artist.

Colonisation and settlement, whether human or animal, are also accompanied by indigenisation and, inevitably, the displacement and sometimes eradication of other species, ethnic groups, or cultures. In the context of Europe's colonial histories, and more particularly in relation to Britain's settler colonies, indigenisation is a problematic concept. In its early history of European contact, Australia was declared *terra nullius*, land belonging to no one, and its Indigenous peoples were gradually written out of the national story and deprived of their land and ownership of territory. As such, Indigenous communities became marginalised and invisible in the larger narrative of the nation. Writers such as Lorenzo Veracini (2010:107) argue that the goal of the successful settler colony is indeed the indigenisation of the settler, who has ceased to be a foreign coloniser and has instead taken the place of the original Indigenous population after 'having extinguished [their] autonomy'. Read in this light, Tan's *Picnic* acquires a dark undertone, especially when considering some of Tan's visual sources, a detail I will return to later. For the moment, we may want to consider another, more romantic source for the idea of indigenisation, one that Tan himself no doubt had in mind: the final story of Ray Bradbury's *The Martian chronicles* (1950), 'October 2026: The million-year picnic'. Tan has repeatedly cited Ray Bradbury as a major influence on his work, not least since he began his career as an illustrator of science fiction books. More recently, some of his own work has also been categorised as science fiction. As such, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that Bradbury's story and its evocative title are conversing with Tan's painting.

*The Martian chronicles* is a series of loosely connected stories about Earth's colonisation of Mars. Modelled, at a distance, on Europe's colonisation and settlement of the Americas, the book engages with displacement and unbelonging, both of interest to Tan, with homesteading and pioneering as well as the haunting presence of an indigenous Martian population who, like many Indigenous communities in the Americas, was eradicated in the process of Earth's settlement of the red planet. 'The million-year picnic' details the landing of an American family on Mars on one of the last rockets to leave Earth. The parents package this trip to the red planet as an extended holiday, and the children—except for the oldest boy, Timothy, from whose perspective the story is told—are excited about the prospect of fishing trips and picnics. In the story, Earth is destroyed after decades of warfare, and the family settle in one of the many abandoned Martian cities to begin a new life as Martians. Bradbury's story highlights the uncomfortable aspects of colonisation and settlement while at the same time engaging with binary thinking and the civilising power of the word in interesting ways. In relation to the former, the reader is immediately struck by the father's claiming of the Martian cities for his sons:

'I'm giving you this city, Mike. It's yours.'  
'Mine?'  
'For you and Robert and Timothy, all three of you, to own for yourselves'  
(Bradbury 1995:232).

From a postcolonial perspective, this correlates with the history of dispossession of Indigenous peoples. The father lays claim to land that is not his to claim and own. At the same time, the absence of indigenous Martians points to a history of genocide, which Bradbury alludes to in other parts of the book. Martians, similar to Indigenous Americans, were eradicated by the import of diseases, and the people of Earth now take their place. At the end of 'The million-year picnic', the father, in response to the children's desire to see Martians, shows them their reflection in a canal: the settlers have become indigenous, by stepping into the place of the Native population that they have displaced and eliminated.

However, Bradbury complicates the settler narrative by having the settler deliberately reject Earth, i.e. Old World, civilisation and 'go native' instead. While this is also part of the history of colonisation, the father's act of burning books associated with civilisation on Earth is a radical gesture of rejection. Unlike most settlers in the history of Australia or the Americas, the settlers in Bradbury's story do not seek to replicate patterns of home (they reject the Earth-made homestead they pass on their outing) but instead desire to inhabit the indigenous world of the Martians. Significantly, the burnt books are associated with science and progress, the destructive potential of which is acknowledged in the story. This connects with contemporary postcolonial debates, such as Walter D. Mignolo's and Catherine Walsh's *On decoloniality* (2018). Mignolo and Walsh emphasise the need to decolonise European methodologies and systems of knowledge, which are complicit with colonial expansion and destruction. More specifically, Bradbury's father's burning of books echoes the Spanish missionaries of the 16th century burning the painted codices of Indigenous Mesoamericans—albeit with some inversions: whereas Diego de Landa's burning of Indigenous books highlights the power of the 'civilising' word over the 'pagan' visual image, Bradbury's father destroys the civilising word *because* of its historical link to oppression and destruction. *The Martian chronicles* imagines Martian culture as an ideal alternative, having successfully married the discourses of science and art—and, by implication, writing and the visual image. In this context, it is important to remember that 'The million-year picnic', and therefore *The Martian chronicles* as a whole, ends with an emphasis on the visual, on looking and seeing rather than reading and writing as a better way to engage with 'the new world'. Bradbury's family, like Tan's, are figures in a foreign landscape. Connections to the new world are 'deeply felt without being clearly articulated, much like a composition

of nebulous colours, shapes and textures on canvas'. In other words, both Bradbury's and Tan's families engage visually with their new environment and as such in a material and seemingly unmediated way, replicating the way Australian Impressionism responded to the Australian landscape.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the artists associated with the so-called Heidelberg School or Australian Impressionism worked together in artist camps, primarily in semi-rural Heidelberg outside of Melbourne, and engaged in plein-air painting. Many of these observational paintings were made on cigar box lids with typical dimensions of 9x5 inches. In 1889, the group exhibited several of these 9x5 paintings in Melbourne, a show that generated much debate in the media at the time. Among the exhibited works were precursors of now iconic images of the movement, such as Arthur Streeton's *Impression for 'Golden summer'* (1888), better known in its finished version of 1890, *Golden summer*. Streeton was a major influence on the young Tan, who began painting small observational sketches in the 9x5 format of the Heidelberg School when he was a teenager and later studied Streeton's technique in particular (Tan 2020). On Tan's now archived and discontinued blog, *The bird king*, these oil sketches of urban and suburban scenes used to appear regularly, making this one of the most enduring aspects of his practice as a fine art painter while at the same time setting his work in conversation with Australia's colonial legacy and debates on national identity.<sup>4</sup> In his short overview of the School in his *Possessions: Indigenous art/colonial culture* (1999), Nicholas Thomas raises several points important to my discussion. Much like the landscape paintings of Canada's Group of Seven, Australian Impressionism 'was seen to have a distinctly national character' (Thomas 1999: 89). Thomas argues that this was of more importance in retrospect than for the painters of the School themselves, though their work depicted elements that became part of Australia's national mythology, such as bushranging and the hardships of pioneer life. In addition, the work of the Heidelberg School was 'celebrated as the *first* Australian art to embrace a local rather than a European vision of the Australian countryside' (Thomas 1999:90). As such, and again in a similar way to the Group of Seven, it became the first distinctly Australian visual idiom.

In this context, revisiting fundamental postcolonial debates on settler colonialism is instructive. Whereas the British Empire exploited many of its colonies for their exportable resources, the primary resource of the settler colony was the land itself. As a result, settler colonies were particularly concerned with the occupation and ownership of land and with establishing new societies with settlers of European descent, displacing and marginalising Indigenous communities in the process. Especially in places like Australia and Canada, which were declared *terra nullius*,



the indigenisation of the settler was envisaged at the expense of the aboriginal population, whose legal autonomy and social visibility were gradually extinguished. In this context, the work of the Heidelberg School emerges as particularly problematic, an element that Thomas highlights. Settler literature and settler art are concerned with the imaginative appropriation of the foreign landscape through narratives that ultimately justify settler presence. As the first school of painting that produced a native visual language, Australian Impressionism had achieved precisely that: owning the landscape through the native settler gaze. Yet, despite Tan's and Bradbury's implication that the act of seeing is somehow more innocent politically than the act of writing and inscription, the seemingly innocent and undoubtedly beautiful vision of Australian Impressionism has a darker side to it, which resonates with the darker aspects of Tan's *The hundred year picnic* that I alluded to earlier. One of the things that Thomas observes in his brief commentary on the Heidelberg School is that '[n]o major work of any Heidelberg artist featured any aspect of indigenous life', a detail that is immediately striking when studying Australian Impressionism from a postcolonial perspective (Thomas 1999:90). In pre-Impressionist Australian painting, Indigenous peoples had been present, though not in any social complexity or as recognisable individuals, but rather as continuous with the landscape, 'like gum trees to mark Australian distinctiveness' (Thomas 1999:92). Crucially, Impressionism created that distinctiveness 'through the evocation of glorious light' with which Europeans sought more 'unproblematic bonds' than with a landscape that uncomfortably indicated Indigenous presence and therefore prior occupation (Thomas 1999:92). In other words, Australia's first national school of painting depicted colonial-born Australians of European descent as the only 'natives', effectively erasing Indigenous presence and inscription from the land.

Another interesting aspect of the Heidelberg School paintings, especially in relation to Tan's 9x5 oil sketches of mainly urban and suburban scenes, is that the Heidelberg artists depicted landscapes close to towns and environments that were easily accessible to city dwellers. This reflects an increasing urbanisation of Australian society in the late 19th century and a subsequent shift in focus to urban and suburban settings where Indigenous presence was either minimal or increasingly invisible and hybridised (Thomas 1999:93). Many of Tan's 9x5 sketches do not contain figures at all but instead concentrate on place and space, highlighting the quiet and sometimes unsettling mystery of empty urban spaces. The figures that appear are contemporary urban city dwellers, many of whom are not recognisably Indigenous. As such, Tan's 9x5 sketches are direct heirs of the Heidelberg School in execution and content. At the same time, Tan's own biracial background as the son of an immigrant father complicates the political alignment of his paintings with



those of the Heidelberg School, whose artists were of white European descent. Tan has said that his interest in belonging and displacement that pervades all of his work is informed, in part, by an awareness of Aboriginal dispossession but, more importantly, by his own experience of growing up biracial during a time when the white Australia policy was still in place ‘in a country with a largely transplanted culture, epitomised in the bulldozed landscape of suburban Western Australia’ (Tan 2010:10).

## Conclusion

It could certainly be argued that Tan’s fine art painting attempts to frame the experience of place and displacement within a larger global context rather than one that resonates specifically with the history of Australia and its fraught colonial legacy of Indigenous displacement. Despite his own biracial background, his indebtedness to the visual idiom of the Heidelberg School politicises and complicates Tan’s approach to place and belonging. Similarly, his engagement with Indigeneity is primarily implied—rather than overtly stated—in the animal content of his painting. Evading direct political reference to Indigenous dispossession, animal content makes his work distinctly ecocritical, with its reference to migration, habitat, and habitat loss. In the context of Australia, however, this sits uncomfortably within older colonial narratives. Especially when read in conjunction with books like *The arrival* and his illustration for John Marsden’s 1998 children’s story, *The rabbits*, where animal content aligns with Indigenous culture, the alignment reiterates the colonial stereotype of Aboriginal Australians as continuous with nature and, therefore, lacking culture. On the other hand, Tan’s work as an illustrator in particular, which often takes the initial form of fine art painting, can be very directly political, often subverting, both in approach and content, the civilising power of the written word and its colonial references.

His paintings for *The rabbits* engage with the word-image binary in the specific context of Australia’s colonisation by Europe, providing a clever and subversive commentary on the historical context the book aims to address. A particularly powerful image from *The rabbits* in this context is the central panel, ‘They came by water’ (see Figure 6), which responds to a significant pictorial statement in the national narrative of Australia: Emanuel Phillips Fox’s *Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay* (1902). Executed a year after Australia became a nation, Fox’s painting harks back to that foundational moment, Cook’s landfall on 29 April 1770. In Fox’s rendition, the crew focuses on two Indigenous men in the background who are depicted in an aggressive pose. Cook’s own stance seems conciliatory, urging



FIGURE N° 5



Shaun Tan, *They came by water*, 1997, oil on canvas, 80 x 50cm. Copyright Shaun Tan. Courtesy of the artist.

against violence, representing the colonising power as the more enlightened and civilised and the colonising project as peaceful. Tan's 1997 version, by contrast, is more dynamic, aggressive, and imposing, especially in the impressive size and forward thrust of the ship, a minor detail in Fox's. The angular shape of the rabbits gives their advance a strong forward movement that looks equally aggressive. In exaggerating the features of the original painting, Tan exposes the colonising project for what it was: undisguised territorial aggression. In one clever detail, Tan further undermines the idea of the civilising mission conceptually: Cook's coat is covered in writing, signifying the uncomfortable political dimension of the civilising power of the written word in the context of Europe's colonial history, disguised in the narrative of the civilising mission. However, the writing on Cook's coat remains illegible and, as such, meaningless. Thus, Tan introduces a destabilising element into the neat division and conventional hierarchy of Marsden's text and his own illustrations by adding text to the visual image. In rendering his own painted writing illegible, Tan's image effectively silences the power represented in the figure of Captain Cook and, as such, undermines the hegemony that colonial power derived from the written word. Tan's postcolonial critique of an iconic painting depicting the foundational moment of colonial Australia is a critique of the text-image binary itself, which, historically tipped in favour of the civilising (disembodied) word, was an integral part of the colonising mission. His insistence on the primacy of the visual, *material* image in his practice and, most of all, on drawing as embodied thinking makes a powerful contribution to decolonial aesthetics.

# Notes

1. Tan spells all titles in *The bird king* in lower case.
2. This idea is also present in Tan's 2018 solo exhibition *Untold tales*, which was held at Beinart Gallery in Melbourne.
3. Strictly speaking, a loosely connected series of paintings such as Tan's *Go, said the bird* would be a hybrid work in Goodman's thinking, where '[a] picture in one system may be a description in another (Goodman 1968:226).
4. Tan kept *The bird king* blog at <https://thebirdking.blogspot.com/> primarily as a visual diary for many years. It was discontinued in 2020 and replaced with a new blog and an Instagram page, both of which are mainly used for promotional purposes. His 9x5 paintings are archived on his website <https://www.shauntan.net/new-page-1>.

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