

# **Timeless Stories of Migration in Comics: A Study of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese***

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Nancy Pedri  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Timeless stories “depict and capture” a core emotional experience (Hogan 1) or what Farrin Jacobs, executive editor of HarperCollins Children’s Books, calls “the emotional truths of life” (Jacobs qtd. in Lawson).<sup>1</sup> Although rarely addressed directly by theorists of immigrant literature, considerations of the timeless quality of an overarching immigrant story often factors into critical discussions of literature about immigration or immigrants. Approaching immigrant literature from a thematic angle, Joanne Brown hints at the timeless quality of the immigrant narrative when she posits emotional ambiguity as the key characteristic of the immigration experience featured in the twenty or so young adult narratives about immigrants and immigration she examines. Likewise, Paul White, who writes about the literary representation of migration, notes that “much of the body of [migration-themed] literature serves to illuminate general aspects of human conditions through analysis of individual situations” (13). While readily described as “individual, subjective, diverse” (King et al. xv), theorists have nonetheless approached immigrant literature as proposing explorations of common, shared emotional, psychological, and physical challenges of migration. As suggested by these and other critics, immigrant literature more often than not couches the unique experience of individual characters in a much larger, well-known story implicit in the narrative’s engaged, emotionally nuanced treatment of the themes connected to migration, such as, racial, ethical, and national identity; displacement; disorientation, fear, and hope; home, assimilation and belonging; and exploitation.

In what follows, I will examine the portrayal of timelessness in Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* and Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese*, two long-form comics about immigration published in 2006. Whereas *The Arrival* adopts a photo-realist

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<sup>1</sup> This view of what constitutes a timeless story is shared by several authors of young adult fiction, including Laurie Friedman, Bruce Hale, Lauren Myracle, and Lisa Yee (Weiss).

style combined with surrealist images in sepia to tell the story of a young father leaving his homeland to establish himself in a new country, *American Born Chinese* uses a superhero comic style of flat, bold colors and black outlined figures to trace the struggle to assimilate of an American-born son of Chinese immigrant parents. Despite these significant thematic and stylistic differences, both imbue personal with shared communal experience, the unique with the universal, in their treatment of the emotional impact of immigration. These two long-form comics, one wordless, the other comprised of words and images, intersect in their nuanced blurring of temporal, spatial, and diegetic borders, of those spaces and set of relations that, as Gloria Anzaldúa explains, are designed “to define the places that are safe from the unsafe, to distinguish us from them” (3). They do so to render explicit and even highlight the timeless story of immigration, a story charged with the emotional truths of the immigrant experience as a familiar human experience that extends across different people and different times and places.

To propose that these two long-form comics examples of immigrant literature engender a timeless story, one with a recognizable set of topoi shared across generations and socio-linguistic backgrounds, may understandably render critical readers uneasy. However, in reading the representation of immigration in *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese* as portraying a shared experience and immigrant identity as belonging to a communal, group identity is in no way to engage in the mystification of a universalist and ahistorical understanding of immigration or its representation. The reading that follows does not deny the uniqueness of personal experiences of migration; it is not meant to propose a homogenizing lens on immigrant literature in comics form that would eradicate important differences between immigrant texts and writers. Instead, the analysis of *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese* that follows sets out to grasp how comics about immigration and the immigrant experience can address, structure, and communicate the terms and conditions of a dispersed, heterogeneous community that is nonetheless united through the intensely emotional experience of immigration. In *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese*, the general gains in meaning across the personal through the representation of the emotional resonance of migration on an individual or on a specific group of individuals.

In recent years, several long-form comics portraying the immigrant experience have been published, including Gia-Bao Tran’s *Vietnamerica* (2010); Derek McCulloch, Colleen Doran, and Jose Villarribia’s *Gone to Amerikay* (2012); David H.T. Wong’s *Escape to Gold Mountain: A Graphic History of the Chinese in North America* (2012), and Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do* (2017). These comics portray the immigrant experience as one that spans across generations and impacts immigrants and their children alike. In their representation of the hardships and achievements, fears and hopes that befall immigrants who plunge into an alien world, these comics present immigrant stories that are distinct in their specifics, but that nonetheless converge thematically in their treatment of the emotional ambiguity of the immigrant experience and its reach beyond the specific experience of one immigrant character or family. In them, the timeless story of

immigration is implicitly – and not explicitly as in *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese* – portrayed across the details that mark individual stories of migration.

The multimodal comic medium offers a particularly rich opportunity to portray the emotionally nuanced universal immigrant experience because it is well equipped to straddle temporal, spatial, as well as diegetic and stylistic borders. In their combination of at least two modes, words and images, comics present stories in a sequential, linear fashion (McCloud 20), but also by breaking familiar patterns of narrative presentation through stylistic changes such as the introduction of splash pages, different panel shapes, or empty space. As Charles Hatfield attests, comics are a form “characterized by plurality, instability, and tension” (66). At once pop culture and high culture, comics make extensive use of symbols, stereotypes, and metaphors, and evoke painterly, but also photographic styles and genres. Comics often feature drawing, but may also include or rely exclusively on other media, such as painting, photography, stamped images, and collage, as well as maps, sketches, or newspapers, receipts, letters, and other verbal documents (Pedri). Indeed, they are said to “bridge the gap between media we watch and media we read” (Yang, “Graphic Novels in the Classroom” 187). Comics, with their highly malleable storytelling practices, can easily transcend generic, discursive, and narrative borders by employing varying forms and stylistic features to present what Thierry Groensteen calls a “heterogeneity of the discursive texture” (40) or Neil Cohn drawing from film theory refers to as “multi-tracking” or “parallel-cutting” (61). Comics can, in other words, engage a polyphonic narrative practice that presents parallel stories – actions and emotions – that unfold in distinct times and places, but that are intricately related one to the other. They are thus “uniquely positioned, as a visual literature, to deal with issues of race, gender, sexuality and ethnic prejudice” (Jakaitis and Wurtz 19).

Shaun Tan, a non-indigenous, mixed-race Australian artist, is careful to stress that “each experience [of migration] is as individual as its circumstance, where people of different nationalities are entering different countries, at different times in history, and for different reasons. But they are linked by common challenges and emotions” (*Sketches from a Nameless Land* 10).<sup>2</sup> Considering *The Arrival*, Tan signals his aim to find “something universal in the particular” and translate individual, specific experiences of migration “back into the common currency of emotion” (*Sketches from a Nameless Land* 10).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Gene Luen Yang, an Asian-American cartoonist born to Taiwanese and Chinese immigrants, specifies that the “experience of feeling like an outsider wasn’t unique to [him]. It was actually a very common thing. Especially among immigrant kids” (“This Chinese-

<sup>2</sup> Tan’s mother is a third-generation Australian of English and Irish decent. His father is Chinese; he was born to immigrant parents in Malaysia and immigrated to Australia in 1960.

<sup>3</sup> Dalmaso and Madella argue that *The Arrival* is also “representative of the specific construction of immigration as integral to an Australian identity” (67). This is questionable since Tan drew much material from the Ellis Island Museum archives, and presents readers with an “extraordinary” (Martínez-Roldán and Newcomer 90), unfamiliar “unidentified Promised Land” (Dony 86).

American Cartoonist”). Speaking specifically to the racial bullying encountered by Jin Wang, the protagonist of *American Born Chinese*, Yang emphasizes that the intimacy of his character’s experience is representative of a shared collective experience. He asserts, “anyone who’s grown up as a minority has experienced something similar, regardless of what makes them a minority” (Interview with Miguel Poonsawat). Although both authors acknowledge that individual immigrants are subjected to uniquely specific circumstances, they put into play a universal approach to the topic of immigration. In their comics, they accentuate how personal experiences and the emotional impact of those experiences on self overlap in important ways with those of other immigrants.

In *The Arrival*, highly detailed pencil drawings chronicle the emigration of a young husband and father to a fantastically strange country where he meets other immigrants who share his emotional and physical challenges in the journey towards securing home. In contradistinction to the critique that “by using a white male protagonist, Tan creates a representation of immigrants that exist in stark contrast to multiracial, multiethnic immigrants of recent immigrant trends” (Boatright 471), it is imperative to emphasize from the start that *The Arrival*’s protagonist is portrayed with white and Eurasian features and travels to a new world populated by countless nameless immigrants from different parts of the world, as one quick glance at the endpapers (examined below) confirms. Each inhabitant dons garb riddled with ethnic overtones, thus communicating their foreign status, and each betrays the traces of a struggle to assimilate, from learning to read maps and tell time to living in similarly arranged apartments, eating the same type of food, and playing the same games. In *The Arrival*, the constellation of nameless inhabitants with their similar experiences come to represent “the anonymity of the immigrant and their troubled sense of belonging” (Tan, *Sketches from a Nameless Land* 5).

Although *American Born Chinese* differs from *The Arrival* in its strong focus on the racial and socio-cultural isolation faced by the children of Asian immigrants, it too features the immigration experience of foreignness and the emotional struggle toward belonging, integration, and cultural assimilation as being at once individual and collective, multiple and inclusive. It does so by weaving together three seemingly unconnected and vastly different stories. The book opens with the story of the Monkey King, a Chinese mythological folk figure (Sun Wukong) who is endowed with superpowers – immense speed and strength and the ability to transform himself – but has for centuries repeatedly suffered under racist perceptions of his inferiority. A legendary want-to-be-deity that is cast as Other, the Monkey King struggles with his difference; ultimately, he does not want to be a monkey because there is no place among the ranks of the immortal gods in heaven for a monkey. This story gives way to that of Jin Wang, a second-generation Chinese-American middle school teenage boy who is forced to confront questions of racial and ethnic difference after moving from San Francisco’s Chinatown neighborhood to a mostly middle-class white suburb. In his new school, Jin Wang suffers from feelings of alienation and shame about his Chinese heritage and thus works hard to blend in and appear if not American, at the very least, less

conspicuously Chinese. Notwithstanding his efforts, Jin Wang fails to assimilate: he repeatedly faces prejudice and adversity and is close friends with Wei-Chen Sun, one of three Asians that attend the predominantly white school. The third story is about Cousin Chin-Kee, a Chinese teenage boy who visits his white blond-haired teenage cousin Danny in America every year. Personifying a conglomerate of negative stereotypes directed at Asians and Asian Americans living in the US over centuries in both appearance – large buck teeth, a long braid, yellow skin, small slanted eyes – and behavior – intelligent, gregarious, likes to eat ghastly food – his presence not only embarrasses Danny, but also risks rendering him strange through imagined and real ethnic association.<sup>4</sup> Although the three stories present distinct characters that inhabit unique storyworlds, they overlap in their treatment of the emotional ambiguity and the self-consciousness associated with being regarded as an outsider. Each story broaches “issues of identity, culture, and racism that confront Asians and Asian-Americans in US society” (Schieble 47) by presenting characters that are forced to ask: what does it mean to belong, and how can someone achieve belonging?

The desire to belong and the will to transform oneself in order to belong is central to each story: the Monkey King masters the twelve disciplines of kung-fu in an attempt to no longer be a monkey but rather a deity (62-63), and Jin Wang dreams of being a transformer when he grows up (28) and as a teenager perms and colors his hair and changes his name to Danny (198) to appear more American (98). Only Chin-Kee accepts who he is without reserve, eating “flying cat gizzards wiff noodles” (114), correctly answering all questions in class (111-113), and attending school dressed in his bright-colored stereotypical Chinese clothes all the while praising American schools and popular culture. However, emotional anguish about belonging is also portrayed in this narrative thread with Danny who laments how Chin-Kee’s ways are “embarrassing the crap out of [him]” (127) and whose own characteristics – drooling with lust (45) and buck teeth (124) – clearly and self-consciously resemble those of his Chinese cousin. In each story, identities, but also the experiences and emotions that inform the immigrant’s identity are being examined, challenged, remade, and recast over and over again. *American Born Chinese*’s exploration of “self-image, cultural identity, transformation, and self-acceptance” (Crawford 240) unfolds in similar patterns of experience across the three stories that run parallel to each other until the very last chapter when a series of amazing, fantastical transformations reveals their interconnectedness.

The treatment of belonging and transformation in the three stories that despite different temporal, spatial, and diegetic frames converge into a parable about acceptance of self and others helps give *American Born Chinese* thematic and structural unity (Fu 275). It also serves to highlight the “exiled, split, and doubled identity” (Chaney 135) of those who have experienced exile and migration. The comic’s ending is particularly telling for how characters, place, and time meld and blend one into the other, thus forgoing the uniqueness of each character and each

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of the merging of Asian and Asian-American stereotypes in the character of Cousin Chin-Kee, see Schieble (47-48).

character's experience to represent the influence of immigration that lingers for generations. The tripartite tale closes with astounding revelations of doubleness: Danny is revealed to be Jin Wang's double, Cousin Chin-Kee is the Monkey King's double and serves as Danny's consciousness, and Wei-Chen Sun turns out to be the Monkey King's eldest son, who in order to be an emissary of Tze-Yo-Tzun was made to pass a "test of virtue" and "asked to live in the mortal world for forty years, all the while remaining free of human vice" (217). Familiar characters transform into other, already well-known characters as storylines and diegetic boundaries crisscross. Through transformations and doublings, human and non-human characters converge across time and place, united in their emotional struggles with assimilation and their strong desire to belong. With this rupture of narrative boundaries separating characters, place, and time, *American Born Chinese* makes a strong case for how the processes of ethnic and racial identity construction and belonging it addresses are undeniably timeless.

*The Arrival*, by contrast opens and closes with a direct address of a communal immigrant experience. Its endpapers feature no fewer than sixty equally passport-sized, sepia colored and variously aged drawn photographic portraits inspired "from archives of the Ellis Island Museum in New York City" (Tan, *Sketches from a Nameless Land* 12). Described as images that "might come from the past or an imagined future" (Farrell et al. 199), these drawn photographs represent a key threshold of cultural memory, but also an invented reality. As renditions of historical photographs, they are documentary evidence of people that immigrated to America from faraway lands; as drawn photographs of real and fictional people (Tan includes a picture of his father in this collection), they are overtly fictional renditions of what these people may have looked like and may continue to look like well into our own day. Because they are exactly or loosely "quoted directly from reality" (*Sketches from a Nameless Land* 12), they serve as historical anchors for readers who are quick to recognize this type of photograph. And, because they open and close, literally frame, the overtly fictional world of *The Arrival*, the collection of photographs wrap the story in the aura of the real, the historical, and the familiar.

There are other ways the endpapers collapse borders between the real and the fictional, the personal and the universal, and the individual and the collective to cue readers to the timeless quality of the story they frame. As aesthetic renditions of identification photographs, similar to those one would see in passports or on identity cards, they amplify realities, directing readers to see and read traces of immigration. Specific features – such as a girl's down-turned lips or an elderly woman's darkened eyes or angular face – gain in meaning as Tan's drawing techniques rework, even poeticize them, to express the profound displacement and cultural disorientation of the immigrant. In addition to accentuated facial features, light and dark contrasts, signs of wear and tear, and the absence of background details ensure that these images carry the strong emotional weight of a familiar immigration story for readers.

Lastly, the sheer number of images of old and young nameless male and female figures from different ethnicities that stare out from the photographic

portraits captures a sense of timelessness: of personal experiences that come together to form a collective experience, of past experiences that are actual ones and future ones, and of identities that are individual but collective, unique but shared. As Golnar Nabizadeh notes, “the anonymity of this endpaper populace suggests an affinity with large streams of refugees and migrants, who are displaced for many different reasons” (369); the endpapers present the image of an “extended family” of sorts (368). The very first portrait of our protagonist, in which his head is turned from view, further suggests that the multiple stories of migration to which the sixty endpaper photographs allude are subsumed and reflected in the singularity of his migrant story. The facelessness of our protagonist featured in a photograph that is larger in size than those reproduced on *The Arrival*’s endpapers, but resembles them in format and color, reinforces his anonymity as well as his membership in the extended family of immigrants. Pertaining to, but also set apart from the endpapers, our protagonist’s portrait announces his immigrant identity as grounded in personal experiences that reflect and meld with those of all immigrants.

Although the immigrant narrative in *The Arrival* is based on canonic visual and verbal representations of European immigration to the US at the turn of the century, its city of immigrants is at once familiar and strange, not fully recognizable, but also not fully unfamiliar. In it, the unfamiliar closely mirrors things and occurrences that are familiar to readers and, presumably, to the characters within the storyworld. Each family hosts unusual animals that act very much like common domestic animals; people use bizarre flying ships and air balloons to move from one place to another; the intricate clocks tell time; and the indecipherable language is a tool of communication. At the same time, almost every aspect of the new world is tinged with strangeness and is met with confusion by our protagonist. The birds that fly through its sky resemble origami cranes, eggs are so large that they require two hands to hold on to them, and food is bizarrely shaped with spiraling tendrils that spill out of bowls. Things and modes of conduct seem to pertain at once to or, better, between a real, concrete storyworld and one based in imagination. Diegetic borders are put under pressure as readers are encouraged to wonder if *The Arrival*’s world is, indeed, characterized by strangely altered but nonetheless recognizable features or if familiar features are presented as strange to reflect the sense of alienation and confusion experienced by the immigrant characters.

The ontological and epistemological status of unfamiliar elements remains ambiguous throughout *The Arrival* as readers are repeatedly confronted with surprising elements of this setting that demand an explanation that is withheld by the wordless picture story. For instance, when our protagonist walks with his wife and daughter through the city on the day of his departure for the new world, a large shadow of a dragon tail winds in and out of buildings, suggesting a potential threat. The same tail figures in the window of the realistic, but imagined replica of the protagonist’s wife and daughter sitting at the kitchen table he left behind when he opens his suitcase upon arrival at his new apartment. However, uncertainty ensues when the protagonist draws the same allusive tail to explain his fearful reaction to a boy’s fox-dragon animal, thus casting doubt on whether or not the tail is to be

understood as a real threat in the diegetic world or as indicative of a general sense of fear felt by the protagonist. Similarly, the large animal that frightens the protagonist and his pet during his rounds as a delivery man holds two possible meanings: either the animal is large for real and thus resembles large dogs that frighten delivery people or the animal is large to figuratively communicate the protagonist's fear. Throughout *The Arrival*, the oscillation between the unfamiliar and the familiar gives rise to an ontological uncertainty that leaves readers struggling to understand what they are meant to see, and this struggle mirrors the protagonist's own struggle for understanding.

Several visuals in *The Arrival* prompt readers to contemplate if a literal memory or past event or if the character's emotional engagement with a particular event or to a general shared feeling of angst is being represented. Are they to be understood to represent a concrete reality or are they metaphors for some kind of personal or collective trauma? These possible readings overlap so subtly that readers cannot decide for certain which ontological and epistemological positioning is the correct one. The blending of distinct types of storyworlds – real and imagined worlds, past reality and current reality – and of different levels of meaning further ensures that intimate details transgress into broader shared emotional experiences through the common currency of emotion.

The sustained coupling of the unfamiliar and the familiar draws together the visual and affective realms so forcefully that the unfamiliar elements come to function as metaphorical equivalents for the fear, disorientation, and alienation associated with immigrants' encounter with difference. When approached metaphorically, the unfamiliar storyworld details join other narrative strategies – the namelessness of the characters that have migrated to this city from different corners of the world and the multiple overlaps in their immigration experiences – to represent the emotional weight of migration as transcending cultural, ethnic, and even social differences. It thus becomes possible to understand instances of strange phenomena in a nonetheless recognizably ordinary new land as representative of what critics describe as the "trauma of migration" (Kobayasbi 219).

A different type of dismantling of worlds is present in *American Born Chinese*. In it, the Monkey King's legendary, fantastic world where animals, deities, and spirits hold dinner parties exists on equal footing as Jin Wang's elementary school reality, Danny's high school reality, and Chin-Kee's American experience. The Monkey King's superpowers – enormous strength and speed; heightened sense of smell; invulnerability to fire, cold, drowning, and wounds; form and shape shifting – are no less extraordinary than Jin Wang's ordinary, if sad playground adventures (35). The Monkey King urinating on the pillars of gold he encountered when he "flew through the boundaries of reality itself" (72) is no less real than Chin-Kee doing the same in Danny's friend's coke (118). And, the shape shifting of the three "emissaries of Tze-Yo-Tzun, he who was, is and shall forever be" (138) mirrors not only Jin Wang's transformation into Danny (194), but also Chin-Kee's transformation into the Monkey King (213) and Wei-Chen's transformation from the Monkey King's son into a Chinese immigrant boy (217). The familiar and the unfamiliar, the ordinary and the extraordinary are presented as



occurrences that happened in the world of a particular story for real. Diegetic borders thus dissolve and different types of worlds – each with their own rules, but each populated by characters that share significant physical and emotional experiences – are equally plausible, equally real, or equally unreal if one agrees with Mike Cadden that *American Born Chinese* is an experiment in metaphor (Cadden).

Yang's *American Born Chinese* may not have the photographic packaging of *The Arrival* or its suggestive inclusion of several parallel immigration stories; however, in its treatment of racial discrimination and belonging, it seamlessly intertwines narratives that cross temporal and personal boundaries. It unites the story of a legendary monkey born "long ago" and buried under a mountain of stones for 500 years (84) after desperately wanting to assimilate into the community of heaven where "the gods, the goddesses, the demons, and the spirits gathered" (7) with that of a Chinese-American boy, who is painfully aware of his outsider status and goes to great extremes to modify his appearance and behavior in his search for acceptance. These stories, in turn, are linked to that of the boy's Chinese cousin, who speaks in a heavily accented English and sings and dances to the popular Ricky Martin song "She Bangs" in a grotesque parody of well-known Hong Kong-born 2003 American Idol contestant William Hung. Not-so-subtle indicators of time collapse temporal frames as individual stories of racial, ethnic, and cultural difference and discrimination extend across characters and communities, times and lands.

In *The Arrival*, different temporal and spatial frames weave into the main story of the protagonist's migration journey with the inclusion of three flashback narratives of displacement that create "a pattern for the narrative in which the old place is systematically depicted as inhospitable and the new one is presented as welcoming and nurturing" (Dalmaso and Madella 72). These embedded stories draw forth a firm parallel between the protagonist's personal experiences and those of other immigrants who came before him and who will, presumably, arrive after him. These stories of time past overlap with that of the main protagonist, offering slight variation to the familiar story of clandestine lonely and difficult departures and dangerous threats that prompt relocation to the new world. They bind people together through similar narratives, but also serve as a means of consolidating the shared emotional experience of an immigrant community. The explicit similarity of the immigrants' stories, remembered by them and lived in the present by our protagonist, as well as the sustained strangeness of all places and the photographic packaging of both the book and the images within it, makes it impossible to determine with certainty if the story we are reading unfolds in the past, present, or future.

In her examination of the conjunctions of time and space in *The Arrival*, Rosemary Ross Johnson considers Bakhtin's threshold chronotope to emphasize the importance of emotional engagement for extending the personal experience of one immigrant to a collective experience of immigration. Bakhtin relates the threshold chronotope to the work of Dostoevsky, mostly in terms of literal threshold, such as front doors and halls. Besides this literal understanding of the threshold as a crossing over something – a stepping out, a before and after – Bakhtin proposes a figurative reading that links it to an emotional experience. As Johnson also notes,

he specifies that the threshold chronotope is “highly charged with emotion and value;” its most fundamental instance is as the chronotope of “crisis and break in life” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 248). In this metaphorical manifestation, the threshold chronotope is where significant change occurs, where one thing is left behind and another begins. It is also where ambiguity resides, where interpretation is left open and certainty wavers. It is no wonder, then, that the two immigration stories analyzed here stage the crossing of multiple thresholds.<sup>5</sup> In their treatment of both literal and figurative thresholds, *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese* address the experience of immigration as an emotionally nuanced one that resonates across different eras, nations, and peoples.

They present timeless stories that are overlaid with a strong sense of Bakhtin’s great time (*Speech Genres and other Late Essays* 1-9): the perspective of centuries or a sense that extends the time beyond the now into a universal temporal frame. Through the use of different narrative strategies, Tan and Yang present stories that expand into a sense of a universal mythic, of a new life and new beginning that have the feel of *déjà-vu* and will-see-again. Their stories transgress many borders – national borders, linguistic borders, temporal borders, familial and personal borders – to communicate to readers that a shared experience of immigration is not a homogeneous experience. Instead, it exists across difference; it is about multiple singularities, about individualities that blend under the experience of one grand, albeit ambiguous emotion. The three embedded immigrant stories in *The Arrival* each present distinct dangers – fire, forced labor, war – but they are the same story for what concerns the emotional anguish of having to leave one’s country. The three interweaved stories in *American Born Chinese* differ in relation to individual aims – the Monkey King wants to be admitted into the world of the gods, Jin Wang wants to be an all-around American boy, and Danny wants Chin-Keen to stop visiting him every year so that he can continue to assimilate into US society. But, despite these different aims, they are the same story when it comes to a deep-rooted desire to belong in a foreign society. Both *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese* present readers with expressions of a dynamic and variable collectivity of experiences that intersect on the emotional plane. To conceive of the communal in terms of heterogeneity is to position the personal within the collective, to highlight the emotional weight of immigration over the particulars of one person’s experience.

Both authors marshal a reading that explores a particular story of immigration as belonging to a diverse collection of immigrant stories extending across time and place. Through thematic elements of continuity and the adoption of narrative strategies that dismantle temporal, spatial, and diegetic boundaries they present characters that belong to a vast immigrant community that remains consolidated through a shared emotional trauma. In *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese*, storyworlds are at once real and imagined, familiar and unfamiliar; identity is at once personal and collective, singular and shared; time is neither distinctly past,

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<sup>5</sup> Tan claims that the crossing of thresholds was central to his conception of *The Arrival* (“The Accidental Graphic Novelist” 4).

present nor future. Both long-form comics present an experience, a voice, a perspective, an emotion that impacts many because it belongs to many and can be imagined by many. Consequently, the dismantling of borders forges a point of entry for readers who struggle to grasp the emotional plight of immigrants whose identities partake in “the sameness of difference and the difference in sameness” (Gardner 147). Ultimately, both *The Arrival* and *American Born Chinese* propose not a view of immigration as an intensely personal experience, but rather cast it as a timeless collective one.

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