

Representation of Colonialism in Australia in Shaun Tan's Select Graphic Narratives

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Abstract:

My paper deals with Shaun Tan's two illustrated short stories "The Rabbits" and "Stick Figures". The genre of comics becomes a highly useful platform to study the history of colonialism in Australia by the British. Tan draws a narrative of colonialism not only of Australia but also of the history of colonialism around the world. "Stick Figures", like "The Rabbits" also deals with the impact of White Western immigration on the aboriginals. The 'Stick Figures' are of Finnish people who died during the brutal attack by the Soviet Union in the Winter War (1939-1940). This historical reference has been used by Tan to represent the history of ancient Australia. The objective of my paper is to analyse how Tan's detailed research and use of surrealism have helped him avoid a direct reference to the history of colonialism in Australia and transforms the stories into a broader and universal story of colonial supremacy.

Keywords: Graphic narratives, illustrations, colonialism, dislocation

Represented by a combination of image and text, the genre of comics becomes a highly useful platform to study the history of colonialism in Australia. Originally taken from John Marsden's² *The Rabbits* (1998), Shaun Tan³ with his interaction of illustrations in *The Rabbits*⁴ presents a narrative of colonialism not only in Australia but also of the history of colonialism around the world, the representation of collision of two cultures, one driven by technology which transcends nature while the other rooted in ancient ecology. "The Rabbits" concerns more than a historical issue of race and politics and becomes a story of ecological crisis, failure of communication and crisis of conscience.

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⁴ "The Rabbits" is a story taken originally from Marsden's *The Rabbits* and illustrated by Shaun Tan, published in the omnibus *Lost and Found* in 2011.

“The Rabbits” is the third story in the omnibus *Lost and Found*. The story is written by John Marsden and illustrated by Shaun Tan. An unseen narrator describes in minimal details the encounter between the visitors and the natives which seemed friendly and curious in the beginning but soon turned darker and it becomes evident that they were actually invaders. The story is partly allegorical fable about colonization narrated from the perspective of a colonized (Tan). Shaun Tan also comments on the blurb of the book about “The Rabbits” that,

The conflict between the two is, I think, a central concern of our age, one that exists far beyond the Australian landscape of deserts and billabongs that inspired my paintings and John’s words. Aside from historical issues of race or politics, “The Rabbits” is about a deep environmental crisis, a crisis of conscience, and a costly failure of communication. At the end, the question of reconciliation is left open to the reader as it is in the real world: The future, as always, remains undecided (Tan, 2011).

Illustrations in picture books play powerful, analytical and interpretative functions. The images and texts not only complement each other, but they also perform important roles in the process storytelling. The images not only complement each other but they have more important parts to play in the story. The story depends on the illustrations to complete the narrative. The images provide vital clues that inform the readers/viewers of significant meanings in the story.

Shaun Tan has used detailed research and surrealism to avoid any direct reference to draw a parallel with the real history of colonialism in Australia and around the world. The images and the illustrations represent codes that enable readers to recognise, and build knowledge about, the world that the narrative portrays. John Marsden’s “The Rabbits” was inspired by *A Sorrow in Our Heart* (1992) by Allan W. Eckert that depicts a biographical tale of the great North American Indian warrior Tecumseh. Marsden also observes,

The Europeans brought with them pests and diseases, including rabbits. The conquerors cleared forests, fenced the land, and planted crops. The rabbits spread as fast as or faster than the people. They ate the crops, and everything else as well. There was an obvious similarity between the humans and the

animals, and it seemed to me that telling the story of the rabbits – rather than the people – would be a better way of illustrating the damage done by invaders and colonists.

Shaun Tan's "The Rabbits" is a graphic adaptation of Marsden's short story of the same name. My paper is an attempt towards a visual and textual interpretation of Shaun Tan's "The Rabbits" and "Stick Figures" in the perspective of Diasporic Studies to show how there has been a geographical, cultural and historical dislocation of Australian natives by the colonisers and the natives' search for a home space of their own on the same land. Giving the animals (the rabbits and the numbat-like creatures, possibly bandicoots) anthropomorphic features has not only attributed to them human emotions and traits, but has also allowed space for both the author and the illustrator to universalize a very personal and subjective narrative. Representing through images of animals and things, the story serves as a window for multiple interpretations. It does not remain confined to the colonial history of Australia; it becomes a universal narrative of colonial supremacy, control and oppression.

The history of migration to Australia gives another symbolic dimension to the story of "The Rabbits." Australia's geographical location in the southern hemisphere accounts for its foreshortened history. The colonization and the settlement of the British in Australia in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries have shaped the history of the continent. The Age of Enlightenment and the Revolution stimulated a desire for knowledge and encouraged such explorations. It was further accelerated by industrial and agricultural developments. The history of newcomers in Australia can be traced back to the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch ships arrived irregularly and for short periods of time. Although there were seafarers and fishermen who often visited the island before these explorers, they remain unrecorded. With the arrival of the first British fleet in 1788 on the shores of Botany Bay, modern Australian history begins. Europeans maintained detailed records of their encounters with the native people in this island. Between the early seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries Europeans, including French, British explorers, merchants and privateers, witnessed the arrival of the Macassan fishermen from the Indonesian archipelago (Konishi and Nugent, 43-44). Britain began transporting its convicts to Australia from 1788 to 1866. The later part of the eighteenth century to mid nineteenth century (1793-1850) saw the immigration of free settlers who came to Australia to

start their new lives.⁵ Chinese immigrants began to come to Australia as labourers during the Gold Rush in the 1850s. Their numbers increased so much that by 1901, they became the third largest population in Australia (“Immigration Australia Timeline”). The labourers in the Queensland sugar plantations were immigrants from South Sea Islanders. Afghan cameleers assisted the Europeans in expeditions into the arid interiors of the continent. The Malay, Japanese came to Australia to work as divers or mariners in the pearl harvesting industry in Australia. In 1901, the Immigration Restriction Act was implemented by the Federal Government in Australia, which formed the basis of the White Australian policy.⁶ In the later part of the 1970s, the Boat people from Vietnam and certain seaborne refugees from Indochina and East Timor appeared in the northern territory of Australia to avoid social upheavals in their own countries. The asylum seekers from the Middle East and Sri Lanka kept pouring in from the 1990s. Thus, there had been waves of immigrants from different corners of the world to Australia since the seventeenth century. They played a vital role in shaping the history of Australia. But it was the British colonisers who emerged as the most powerful group in the continent. “While the British interest in Australian settlement was motivated primarily by economic and political objectives; these were linked with the desire to know the land in scientific terms. Such scientific enquiry gave British imperial claims greater legitimacy and also raised the possibility of more effective utilization of land through the techniques of scientifically based developments” (Gascoigne and Maroske, 442).

Similar kinds of power conflicts are found in the story “The Rabbits.” The title of the story “The Rabbits” originally given by Marsden is rather significant in multiple ways. Firstly, choosing an animal in place of a person or a race would suggest the scope of wider application so far as oppression and destruction are concerned. Besides, the rabbits dressed up in traditional colonial attire, may also symbolise the British people who in fact introduced rabbits in the Australian island. These rabbits multiplied in huge numbers just like the British invaders. The native Aboriginals are being represented by the numbat-like creatures, possibly bandicoots (a kind of marsupial) which are native to Australia. The rabbits are given human forms but the natives are represented as animals. The parallel of marginality is drawn at the

⁵ Most of them who could make the long journey received financial assistance from the British government, which had the motive of setting up a colony in Australia. There were also a number of Irish and Scottish free immigrants who escaped the social and political turmoil in their native lands.

⁶ The law restricted the non-White, rather non-European immigrants, particularly the Chinese and South Sea Islanders to enter the country. This was purely based on racial discrimination.

very beginning of the story. Besides, unlike the rabbits, which are specified, the natives are represented as a certain kind of creatures. They have not been specified but left ambiguous. Even the title of the story is “The Rabbits” and throughout the book, the creatures are graphically placed in the margins, far away in corners of the picture while the rabbits dominate with prominence.

The introduction of foreign species changed the balance of Australia’s ecologies. Some introductions created economic opportunities – for example, the cultivation of exotic fruits such as bananas and avocado – but other flora and fauna destroyed crops and indigenous species. Australia’s history of foreign plant, pest and animal invasion fits into a larger transnational history of settler societies, particularly in North America, Argentina, South Africa and New Zealand. European migrants introduced to Australia many of the twentieth century’s most invasive species, including cane toads, rabbits, camels, foxes, myna birds, carp, and numerous species of grass and trees. Altered ecologies also meant that native species (including sulphur-crested cockatoos, rainbow lorikeets, galahs and noisy miners) expanded aggressively throughout Australia...European settlers brought in hardy grasses, shrubs and trees as fodder for cattle and sheep in the marginal hinterlands; trees were selected for accelerated growth; and animals were introduced that bred rapidly and tolerated varied environmental conditions. Certain species, such as rabbits, were protected even after it was widely known that they had become invasive (Barton and Bennett).

Australia has always been about land. The first three pages⁷ of the text, including the title page, take a wide shot view of the landscape. From visibly clear night sky to the lake “alive with long-legged birds,” (Tan) the nature is shown unaltered by anything man-made or rather rabbit-made. The natives, represented by the “numbat-like creatures” exist in mutual harmony with nature. The scene then proceeds to the arrival of invaders. The encounter

⁷ It is intriguing to note that there are no page numbers in the text. The three individual stories, namely “The Red Tree,” “The Lost Thing” and “The Rabbits” are separated by their respective title pages. It is unclear why the author did not use the page numbers. In my opinion, it might be that the author wanted the readers to associate the essence and the sentiments attached to each shot (image and illustration) and avoid any mechanical inclusion. The sequence of page numbers may sometimes refer to the sequence of events that happened historically, the direct reference to which the author tried to avoid.

between the natives and the invaders is filled with strangeness. At first, the natives are bewildered both at their similarity and strangeness. They did not know how to react. “At first we did not know what to think. They looked a bit like us. There were many of them. Some were friendly.” But they were apprehensive about the miscommunications that would ultimately lead to between the two groups. The image associated with the line “They came by water” (vide Appendix Illustration no.1) resonates to *Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770* drawn by E. Phillip Fox in 1902 (vide Appendix Illustration no.2). Cook is shown gesturing to his sailors not to fire at the Aborigines.

Between 1770 and 1803 more than 20 European expeditions landed on the continent, then still known as New Holland, but only a handful have had an enduring legacy on the history of culture contact. Prominent among them is James Cook’s *Endeavour* voyage along the east coast in 1770, which included interactions with Indigenous people at Botany Bay (near present-day Sydney) and Endeavour River (near present-day Cooktown) on the far north coast. During his second voyage, Cook’s companion ship, the *Adventure*, visited Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) and Cook himself landed there briefly on his thirds and final voyage. Despite these later contacts, it is his first voyage on the *Endeavour* that was long considered to have inaugurated British history in Australia (Konishi and Nugent, 55-56).

The invaders began to introduce science and technology on to the land and soon started to convert the land into an industrial region. They exploited the nature, killed and experimented with the animals (lizard being killed in the picture) as scientific projects, tested and scrutinised the land for their own development and inventory purposes (vide Appendix Illustration no.3). Unlike the natives, who preferred the primitive ways of living on trees, the colonisers made their own houses. The numbat-like creatures’ sleeping on the trees refers to the dehumanising section 127 of the Australian Constitution of pre-1967 where Australian Aborigines are considered not as humans but an extension of the flora and fauna.

The picture that the houses have legs, suggests that the invaders were so nostalgic about their own country that they ported their houses by ship. The legs on their houses may also reflect on how unattached these colonisers were to the Australian land and the nature.

The large framed photo of a city in Britain, which is carried carefully by couple of rabbits, shows how they valued and missed their own country. The presence of an “unseen queen rabbit”, the Imperial Head, is felt throughout.

English migrants – forced or free – were understandably nostalgic for home, and with imported technologies, seeds and animals they set about re-making England in the antipodes. By 1827 one visitor to Sydney found himself ‘scarcely to be sensible that I was out of England.’ Gardens were an important symbol of transformation, marking possession as well as providing food and evoking memories of home. But in the gardens of Sydney’s Government House, visitors’ encountered native banksias, tea-trees and eucalypts alongside cherry, pear and apricot trees. Although the growing towns, in particular, were filled with sights and sounds familiar to the English visitor, the landscape would inevitably be a hybrid: ‘a foreign place made English, and England turned exotic (Gaynor, 274).

These rabbits which stand for British colonisers in the text seemed to have labels for everything and even for themselves. The role of power is significant in this respect. This suggests that these people lacked their individual identities. They were all the same under their administrative head and they could be identified by certain numbers and codes. The things they carried like their glasses, their books, the roads, the vehicles also had labels for identifications. They also wanted things to be perfect and systematic. The optical devices, the glasses and monocles symbolise the invaders’ incapacity to visualise the future of the world, their craze for scrutiny, their preoccupation with the details. The invaders killed many native animals during their settlement. The lizard, for example, was killed under the wheel of the cart. This is a visual representation of how the invaders displaced the native flora and fauna of the land for their own development projects. They built houses and constructed roads. The natives encountered strangeness in their manners and ways of living. The rabbits brought new food with them and introduced many new animals into the aboriginal land. Some food were liked by the natives like the beef cattle, sheep, wheat, etc, while some food such as alcoholic beverages like wine, rum, beer made the natives sick. Some of the animals were accepted by the natives while some animals like horses, dogs and foxes scared away many indigenous communities and native animals like kangaroos which never knew them

before. Overgrazing the cattle and sheep exploited the pastoral land and the native animals and people were pushed to the remote areas. They spread all over the island and cut down their trees, their mountains, to serve their needs, construct roads and set up industries. “The rabbits spread across the country. No mountains could stop them; no desert, no river.” Plans for future development and settlement of the rabbits were being implemented at the cost of aboriginal Australians and the ecological balance.

The image that follows, show a war-like encounter between the native numbat-like creatures and the rabbits. The rabbits came in large numbers. They were too many and there was no end of them. The image turns dark and blood stained. The weapons used by the rabbits shown in the pictures are technologically advanced, and the rabbits exhibited order and discipline. All the objects that belong to the rabbits had “MIGHT=RIGHT” written over them. This is an implied suggestion of how unethically the British colonisers used their brutal force over the natives to make accomplish their missions. We find them on their weapons and also on the high rise buildings few pages later. The natives lost the war. They lost their lives, their land and their identities. The victory of the rabbits/ the colonisers is visible through the images of red flags with “vector lines” (Tan) which implicitly hinted at the British flag dominating above the creatures who ‘curled themselves up’ into the darkness under the ground like fossils. The image in the page that says, “They ate our grass. They chopped down our trees and scared away our friends,” shows huge giant “industrial fish-head machines” (vide Appendix Illustration no. 4) stripping the landscape. These robotic machines represent the rabbits’ lack of emotion and considerations towards nature. Tan comments, “The reader can’t make the connection through the most obvious picture recognition (i.e. bunnies eating grass), but have to go off-course a bit, which hopefully fires off some otherwise dormant neurons. Then you get a certain strange chemistry between words and pictures, an interesting tension which the word ‘illustration’ doesn’t adequately define.” The picture resonate the exploitations that the invaders carried on in the name of development. They exploited the water bodies (seas, rivers and lakes), killing the fish, whales and other aquatic creatures. The land was exploited through overgrazing (by sheep and cattle), industrial activities, industrial and sewage wastes that displaced a greater part of native flora and fauna, thus collapsing the whole ecology of the continent. After the white invaders came in contact with the Aboriginals, there had been also been a catastrophic decline in the latter’s population.

Then another important issue is introduced through the image that is associated with “And stole our children” (vide Appendix Illustration no. 5). This brings back the issue of the “stolen generation.” The next image that follows symbolizes the innumerable rabbits that came into Australia, settled there and turned her into an industrial city. The use of colours by Shaun Tan, limits to darker brown, grey, black and white. The grassland, the natural landscapes, the lakes are slowly replaced by cities with busy streets full of rabbits, high rise apartments, offices with large clocks hanging on their walls, industries, pipelines, smokes. The image of an administrative building in the form of a crowned queen is noticed at the centre of the city. The “MIGHT=RIGHT” represents the centre of the imperial power. The human and natural resources that get drained into the queen shaped building through the overhead pipe contribute to the overall might of the imperialism (vide Appendix Illustration no.6). The sequences of images portray the transforming landscape – overwhelming in the presence of gloomy wasteful lands, with barely any native creatures or vegetation (vide Appendix Illustration no.7). The land is covered with wastes draining from long pipes. Tan’s use of imagery becomes symbolic representation of the loss of the natural ecology. He uses contrasting colours in the beginning and the end of the story. The last couple of pages are complete black with a rabbit and the numbat-like creatures reduced to the size of postal stamps. Even though they exist on the same picture or land, they are positioned opposite to one another.⁸ The story ends with a sad note displaying the words “who will save us from the rabbits?” This metaphorically suggests that the Aboriginals are still in a marginalised state under the control of the Western imperialist rule. They have no power and control over their own future and they are waiting for a saviour to rescue them.

Like “The Rabbits,” the story “Stick Figures”⁹ also deals with the impact of White Western immigration on the aboriginals. “Stick Figures” is a heart-wrenching tale about how the invaders from unknown nations have captured and displaced the natives from their own habitats. The theme of dislocation and home space run as an undertone in both the stories. The dynamics between the image and text create a narration that is historically relevant to the history of Australia. As described later in the chapter, they have ‘passively upright body’

⁸ Both the rabbits and the numbat-like creatures are on the verge of extinction. The creatures (natives) are endangered while the rabbit (colonisers) in the picture foreshadow their inevitable extinction in future as a result of natural exploitation.

⁹ “Stick Figures” is an illustrated short story from Shaun Tan’s *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, published in 2008.



(Tan, 66) with a head like the ‘faceless clod of earth.’ As can be derived from the text, they are not being liked in the suburban society residents. They are matters of great hate, disgust and irritation. The people around usually do not like their (the Stick Figures’) presence around their homes. So they try to keep them off with loud music and smoke from barbecues. The adults avoid them by paying no attention but the young children try to have fun with them by dressing them up in old cloths and hats “as if they are dolls or scarecrows.” There is a hint that these figures are treated as objects or derogatory creatures. Some older boys try to hurt them with baseball bats, golf clubs or whatever they can lay their hands on or even smashing them under their feet. They go on doing this for hours until their amusement turns into boredom as these figures just stand and bear this. The reason for this is unknown. Nor do the people know what they are or what they wanted.

The ‘Stick figures’ are of Finnish origin. They are, Tan comments too in “Comments on ‘Stick Figures’, Lappish ‘the Silent People.’ It is a crowd of several hundred scarecrow-like figures in a field on Highway Five, outside of Soumussalmi, Finland. They are made up of wood, and they are being dressed in colourful old clothing, with a clod of grassy earth for a head stuck on top. “The effect is both amusing and eerie, like whimsical ancestral beings or puppets.” These figures are installed by artist Reijo Kela. The reason behind their installation is not clear but they do evoke the long lost, forgotten people who died at the brutal attack of the Winter War of 1939-1940 between the Finns and Soviet Russia. The Lappish ‘Silent people’ represent the ancestral people of the Finland who occupied the land before the Russian army illegally attacked and captured the people in order to invade the Finnish territory. This historical reference has been used by Tan to represent the history of the Ancient Australia. The image of the stick like figures that belonged to Finland is seen roaming around the Suburban areas of Northern Perth. The stick figures here refer to the Aboriginal people who lived here before the colonisers displaced them and built up their own residence.

The growth of the residential areas in the Suburban regions, the cities, the tracks and roads for transport which were increasing at the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century resulted in the depletion of natural inhabitants of the region. The Aboriginals were not considered any better than “piece[s] of card-board or dead cat[s]’ (Tan, 65). Thus, the stick figures, which represented the aboriginals of the Australia, the ancient

people of the land, were seen roaming around those houses and front lawns. These people were homeless in their own home country. (vide Appendix Illustration no.8) The story can be read as a projection of Tan's *The Rabbits*. "They are not a problem, just another part of the suburban landscape, their brittle legs moving as slowly as clouds. They have always been here, since before anyone remembers, since before the bush was cleared and all the houses were built." This narrates the whole history of Australia. These people were close to nature. But the invaders have dehumanised them in the sense that they are reduced to inanimate objects of nature like wood. These lines also suggest that the settlers somewhere at the back of their conscience have a suppressed feeling of guilt for taking away the natives' land and building their own. Tan comments,

'Stick figures' is a combination of these two ideas, crow and Lappish 'silent people', but moreover relates to my feelings about the rapid, large-scale clearing of bush-land to make way for fresh roads, homes and shopping malls. Too often things seem to be built without a proper acknowledgement or empathy with the natural landscape – it is simply swept aside as if it never existed, replaced by an amnesiac culture. One of the few remnants of the original forests are big tuart trees in parks, ancient sentinels that tend to drop long, angular sticks from time to time. If you stand them up, they sometimes look like human figures ("Comments on "Stick Figures"").

That's where the stick figures came from. They are visual amalgamation of Australian past and the concept of the Lappish 'silent people.' The stick figures were silent too. They never protested but bore every humiliation and torture; simply because they had no power to strike back. They were made voiceless, or they were never heard. The story can be read as a critique of Australian ecological exploitation and the role of economic development and legislative inactivity. A tension between the historical and social issue is created in this story. The narrator is a voice speaking from the perspective of a settler whose questions at the end of the story suggest that they very well knew who those stick figures were, why they were there and what they wanted. The text and the illustrations complimented each other to create a complete story. The old vive of an ancient history is accompanied by Tan's use of old photographic painting of the suburban landscape and the stick figures were surrealistically added the background.

The English believed that the island was *terra nullius* (no man's land) and they occupied Australia as their own with the arrival of James Cook in 1770. The seventeenth and the eighteenth-century encounters between the invaders and the aboriginals which have been recorded by European voyagers like Captain James Cook, William Dampier, Flanders and other historians and botanists, only give us accounts of how difficult it was for these invaders to adapt themselves to such an unproductive, barren, strange land that completely lacked material resources. They have represented the Aboriginals as savage, primitive, dark-skinned and uncivilised creatures. They recorded how they suffered and faced difficulties in a strange land, among strange people. History has remained silent on the subject of the experiences of the aboriginal people. There are no written records by the aboriginal people of these encounters as these people remained rooted in an oral tradition. But in the twentieth century, many aboriginal literatures in English, Australian Children's Literature, autobiographies and films have rewritten the history of Australian aboriginality, their ecology, and their history of land and struggle for survival from their own perspectives. Alexis Wright in his novel *Carpentaria* (2007) has represented the history of Australia's aboriginal culture and the conflicts which arose with the arrival of the invaders. John Marsden has richly contributed to Australian Children's Literature in which ancient Australian history was rewritten. Marsden's spare use of text and Tan's surreal images have combined to produce a tension that arises from the dichotomies of self and other, of ancient and modern, of the powerful and the weak through a fabular representation of the destructive powers of colonization.

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Illustration 1: They came by water



Illustration 2: *Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay, 1770* drawn by E. Phillip Fox in 1902

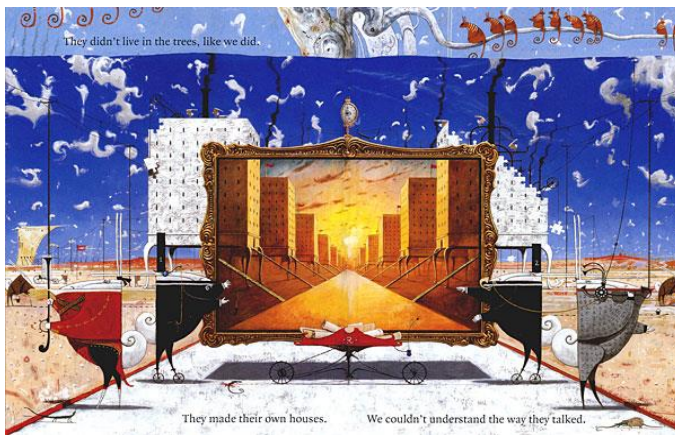


Illustration 3: A lizard being killed



Illustration 4: “industrial fish-head machines”



Illustration 5: “They stole our children”

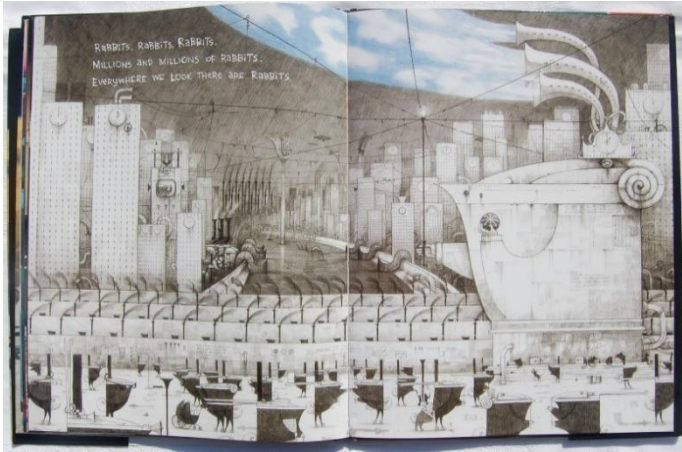


Illustration 6: "MIGHT=RIGHT"



Illustration 7: Transforming Landscapes

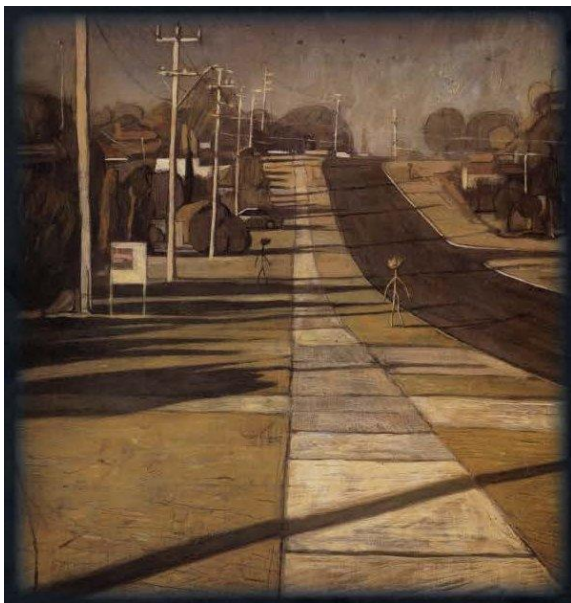


Illustration 8: Homeless in their own country

