

# Imagining Refugees in Spanish Children's Books Stories that Erase the Past and Promise a Happy Future

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Spain is a gateway to Europe and has long been a destination for migrants and refugees from Africa and Latin America. In the last decades, the country has received a significant number of people from the Saharawi tribe in the Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony today occupied by Morocco and Algeria. Like other European countries it has also received individuals and families fleeing from the conflicts in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring. Spain has a history of its people crossing the borders during and after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Despite these experiences, exiles and asylum seekers are seldom depicted in its children's books. When they address such topics, most stories in recent books are about forced displacements of people during World War II or conflicts in regions far from Spain such as Nepal, the Middle East, or Afghanistan. A few Spanish books addressed to young adults, or recommended for readers between nine and eleven, deal with Saharawi refugees but they are usually set in African refugee camps. They seldom depict the refugee as a migrant who might come and establish a life in Europe.

There are therefore very few books with narratives about people who have been forced to leave their countries<sup>1</sup>. Amongst the numerous books recommended for children under 13 by the Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez, a prestigious institution in reading promotion based in Madrid, I could identify only four stories originally published in Spain —either written in Spanish or in another of the official languages such as Basque or Catalan—, in which a character features who could be classified as a refugee in a Western country. In this article I will explore these stories. They are the novel *Blanca y Viernes* [Blanca and Friday] (Sartí 2007), for readers from 9–11, and the picturebooks *Caja de cartón* [Cardboard Box] (Arnal/Amekan 2010), *Usoa, llegaste por el aire* [Usoa, You Came By Air] (Zubizarreta/Odrizola 1999), and *Mi hermana Aixa* [My sister Aixa] (Torras/Valverde 1999). All feature human characters and follow what Temple, Martínez, and Yokota describe as »contemporary realistic fiction«. (Cited in Yokota 2014, p. 65) They each present the »newcomer« as a child who is welcomed by the locals; even if some traces of resistance to welcoming migrants and refugees can be identified they are, nevertheless, downplayed in the stories. All four either end or begin with the migrant character being adopted. None of the books actually use the term refugee, nor do they refer to asylum applications, nor to the geopolitical forces that explain the global flux of people fleeing conflicts. We may note these references are generally rare in picturebooks, as the complexity of the matter is difficult to address in short texts addressed to young readers. Yet what appears to be peculiar to the Spanish context is the emphasis on how »foreign« characters are welcomed by local families that take on the burden of looking after them.

<sup>1</sup> One of the better-known children's books about forced displacement and migration is *The Island*, published by Swiss author Armin Greder in 2008. *The Island* presents a rather dark account portraying

how a foreigner arrives to an island where villagers first tolerate him but later attack and expel him. This book has been translated into Spanish, but is recommended for readers over 12.

I distinguish between refugee and migrant narratives in terms of the reasons that force people to leave a country. Typically, migrants move to another country as a result of a combination of ›push‹ and ›pull‹ factors: they have reasons to leave and reasons to move to a specific place, whereas refugees are generally forced to leave. In other words, the push factors —generally war, political persecution and other conflicts— are much stronger than the pull factors such as economic security, education, possible career developments. (Cf. Keeley 2009) The term migrant is often used as an umbrella term to designate all who move countries; in this essay I will be focusing on the particular group of displaced people or refugees.

The four books are analyzed drawing upon insights from narratology, cognitive linguistics, and key concepts from adoption, identity, and kinship studies. Narratology provides the foundation to reflect on the plots and how they are rendered in the stories. The idea of »focalization«, introduced by Genette and elaborated on by Bal to denote the »agent that sees« (Bal 1997, p. 162), shows how stories are narrated with access to the thoughts and feelings of certain characters. It provides an insight into whose ideology and world vision is offered to the reader. The distinction between the »constituent events« and those which are »supplementary« (Porter Abbott 2008, p. 230) to a plot helps us to understand how some events have major consequences for the story, and structure what is relevant and what is not. In general, these books give glimpses into the refugees' (traumatic) pasts, yet the reasons that made them flee remain relatively unexplored. Instead, the stories offer happy endings when the foreign characters are effectively removed from their communities and are transformed into one-of-kin of the Spanish families.

Endings are especially important for the plot analysis and are examined using what Noël Carroll calls »narrative closure«. (Carroll 2007, p. 1) Carroll argues that stories in which the endings bring a feeling of completeness —a promise that the characters will not be bothered again with the same problem— have narrative closure. This is most often the case in children's literature. Authors subscribe to the idea of a need to provide a happy ending based on the notion that children may be haunted by stories that end without solving all the problems. (Nodelman 2000, p. 1) In the stories I deal with here, all problems appear to be solved after domestic arrangements are made to care for the newcomer. Local institutions do not play a role, and this allows local (Spanish) characters to be portrayed as individually rescuing the marginalized foreigners. The absence of local and state-organized institutions brings to the fore the fact that Spanish families play an important role in integrating and assimilating the foreign/other/refugee character.

Blending cognitive linguistics and metaphor theory to identify so-called »cognitive metaphors« which structure the way we think about something rather than merely reflecting our thoughts, George Lakoff has identified ›the nation-as-family‹ as a very potent one. (Lakoff 2002) The ›the nation-as-family‹ implies that citizens are like children whom the government needs to care for. Two different approaches to this concept of care and parenting characterize the political division between liberals and conservatives: the first advocates nurturing parents, whereas the second opts for a strict father. This cognitive metaphor of ›the nation-as-family‹ assists our analysis, shedding light on the roles played by the Spanish families and the foreign/displaced/refugee child character.

Finally, certain concepts from adoption, identity, and kinship studies support the analysis of the text. One of these is the »kinning of foreigners«, introduced by Norwegian anthropologist Signe Howell to explain how transnational adoption requires cultural work to transform a foreign child into a daughter or son. Howell explains how the

flesh and blood metaphor is central for kinship and how adoptive parents perform »kinning« narratives that transform the foreigners into significant and connected members of their family as if they were connected by blood bonds. (Howell 2006) As I will suggest later, the books examined here attempt to »kin« the refugee as a means to establish a promise of care.

Other relevant constructions of the orphan help to reveal the complex position of refugees as if in need of a family to look after them. The »rescued orphan« in transnational adoption (cf. Dubinsky 2007, p. 142; Briggs 2003, p. 180) and the »resilient orphan«, a literary trope which originated in Victorian novels (cf. Wirth-Nesher 1986; Wesseling 2016; Nelson 2006), play a role in this construction of the refugee as a solitary being who only needs the care of a (new) family to thrive.

### Origin stories for adoptees

Two of the books selected may be regarded as forming part of an emerging group that depicts the lives of children adopted internationally. Spain led the list of destination countries for transnational adoption between 2000 and 2010 and had one of the highest number of adoptions per live births in the world. (Marre 2007, p. 74) International adoption became visible in Spain, and this visibility was translated into the publishing market for children. There is an identifiable niche of books that aim to assist socializing this new form of family reproduction. (García-González 2017, p. 4) Like any other children, adoptees want to find out where they come from. With national (or domestic) adoptions—the most common form two decades ago—the fact of the child's adoption was often kept a secret, but with global, transracial adoptions this is no longer possible as adopted children's physical features makes it more evident. (Carp 1998, p. 76) Adopted children today are provided with origin stories to assist them in the complex endeavor of reconciling their birth in another part of the world with their membership of a Western family. (Dorow 2006, p. 25) *Mi hermana Aixa* and *Usoa, llegaste por el aire*, both published in 1999, were the first books which referred to transnational adoption of children as the so-called adoption boom was beginning.

*Mi hermana Aixa* is a picturebook that recounts the new life of an African girl adopted by a Spanish family. Aixa lost a leg stepping on a landmine in her country of origin. The story is narrated by and focalized through her Spanish brother who appears to be very proud of his sister, and tells the reader that her amputated leg is looked with »miedo y asco« [fear and disgust]<sup>2</sup> (Torrás/Valverde 1999, p. 20) by her classmates at school. He tells us that Usoa reacts to children's questions with a smile explaining that she does not feel any pain and that it only itches sometimes. At home, though, she has confessed that losing her leg was very painful. The brother relates that when Aixa remembered the moment it happened, she cried. This is the extent to which her loss and grief is acknowledged. The rest of the events in the book – mainly organized around how she gets a prosthesis – are narrated in a cheerful tone, suggesting that Aixa's loss does not haunt her and that she is a very resilient child. The only pain mentioned is physical pain. The reader is invited to believe that she smiles at everyone as she does not feel bothered by their looks of curiosity (or fear and disgust); she is just grateful to be among them.

The aspect of focalization is central here. Throughout the entire book, we do not get to hear Aixa's voice, but only her brother's, who insists on telling us how well his sister

<sup>2</sup> All Spanish texts are translated by the author.

is doing. Through the lens of intersectional studies, Aixa is the subject of discrimination on different »axes of social power«. (Yuval-Davis 2006, p. 198) She is Black, female, disabled, adopted, and a child. Her brother, from whose point of view the story is narrated, holds a position of power in almost all these categories: He is white, male, able-bodied, and his parents' biological child. He therefore appears to be unable to understand the complexities of Aixa's experience when he keeps assuring the readers that the girl is doing fine. Doing fine appears to be modelled on the trope of the resilient orphan, according to which, after facing numerous misfortunes, the orphan thrives when cared for by a family. (Nelson 2006, p. 83) This Spanish family appears to be especially well-prepared to care for Aixa. They even engage a highly-qualified English doctor to produce a prosthesis for her. The visual narration appears to reinforce the narrative focalization as we see the girl following her brother, imitating him and playing football with crutches while he recounts how talented she is despite her disability. In the final pages, we see that Aixa does not need the crutches anymore. She has two legs and sits on a red couch with her brother. Both wear lapel microphones as they are being interviewed for a TV program on children injured by landmines. It is significant to note it is not Aixa, but her brother, who talks to the interviewer. She is smaller than him and is positioned sitting at the right-hand margin of the page, looking at him with a smile while he speaks.

In her studies of adoption narratives in the United States, Margaret Homans claims that adoption is a »fiction-generating machine« (Homans 2006, p. 5) in which the question of origin inspires a familial storytelling that produces a past according to the needs of the present. *Usoa, llegaste por el aire* is, as *Mi hermana Aixa*, a book recommended to adoptive families to help deal with the identity issues that transnational adoptees face. In both books, the child has been forced to leave her home country. But the stories do not revolve around how they have been displaced, losing not only their families but also their social and cultural context. Instead they delve into how being adopted is something the children should be grateful for and happy about.

*Usoa, llegaste por el aire* is narrated by a voice that addresses the adopted girl, the narratee. We do not know who this narrator is: it tells us about the girl's feelings, but it still occupies an external position by addressing her continuously:

Te llaman Usoa, Paloma<sup>3</sup> la niña que llegó por el aire. Y puede que por eso te guste tanto mirar al cielo, porque de allí viniste, porque de allí te trajeron.

[They call you Usoa, Paloma, the girl that came by air. And maybe that explains why you enjoy watching the sky so much; you came from there, from there you were brought] (Zubizarreta/Odriozola 1999, n.p.).

This text is accompanied by an illustration showing the girl looking upwards. *Usoa llegaste por el aire* does not belong to the type of picturebook in which images and words are in an interplay producing a whole that »is more than the sum of its parts«. (Nodelman 1988, p. 200) It resembles more an illustrated text, in which the visual does not play such a predominant role and where the illustrations tend to reproduce what is stated in the text. Nevertheless, images are unable to simply reproduce what is written and will always convey more meanings. In this specific case, the visual narration portrays the girl from an external point of view, while the narrator explains to the reader what she

<sup>3</sup> Usoa is the Basque word for Paloma, the Spanish for pigeon.

is feeling from the inside. We cannot help wondering if this narrator is just jumping too eagerly to conclusions by just looking at the girl. In other words, the visual narration may contradict the verbal narration simply by offering that external plain perspective in which the girl is portrayed rather than addressed.

The narrator continues rendering the girl's reflections about being adopted and having two mothers – «la de allí y la de aquí» (Zubizarreta/Odriozola 1999, n.p.) [the one from there and the one from here]—: «A tu madre adoptiva la llamas la madre de aquí. Suena mejor. Y la quieres mucho, y no es como las madrastas de los cuentos, malvada y despiadada» (Zubizarreta/Odriozola 1999, n.p.) [you call your adoptive mother, ›mother from here‹. It sounds better. And you love her a lot, and she is not like the evil and ruthless stepmothers in fairy tales]. This fragment speaks to a need of inscribing a narrative about how the adoptive bond is just as insoluble as blood bonds. The fragment also reveals a belief in the power of stories to shape broader cultural scripts. This story is opposed to the trope of evil stepmothers, spread by fairy tales and part of our cultural heritage. Throughout this story, the girl is reassured that the adoptive mother provides the love and care that her biological mother could not give. And, to explain why the biological mother could not provide for her child, the story recounts the terrible conditions she had to face in the child's country of origin.

Te envié desde África porque allí hay hambre, y guerra, y porque por el hambre y por las balas moría mucha gente. Es posible que a estas alturas incluso tu madre y tu familia hayan desaparecido. (Zubizarreta/Odriozola 1999, n.p.)

[She sent you from Africa, because there was famine and war. And because of starvation and the bullets, a lot of people are dying there. It is possible that now even your mother and your family have disappeared.]

As in the case of Aixa, Usoa's place of origin is not identified as a country but rather as a continent, Africa. Usoa fled—even if not by her own will— from famine and war to a country where food and care would be provided. She does not remember anything about her original home but keeps a letter written by her (biological) mother. This letter is quoted in italics as an embedded text in the next two double-spreads. In it, the mother—who is portrayed from behind in the illustrations— explains that she took the girl to the airport before it was bombed. The mother is so certain that the airport will be destroyed that she writes about it as if it had already happened. The idea of the bombed airport implies there is now no place for the girl to fly back to. In the letter, the mother writes that she told the girl an uncle would be waiting for her at her destination. «No es verdad, pero ella se ha alegrado y yo estoy segura de que alguien la recogerá y cuidará» (Zubizarreta/Odriozola 1999, n.p.) [It is not true, but it made her happy, and I am sure that someone will pick her up and take care of her]. In contrast to the frame narration, the mother's letter does not directly address Usoa, but rather those who will find her on the plane or later, in the country of destination. Significantly, the visual narration only shows the mother's back: she appears to be speaking to someone else, while the adoptive mother is shown with her arms open towards the child.

The biological mother only relates to the basic physical needs of her child – to be safe from war, fed, and warm. But for Usoa this letter is the only trace of why she was abandoned, she might come back time and again to it to look for an explanation. The illustrations show the seemingly sad girl holding the letter. It provides her with only limited consolation. The (Western) narrator with her insight into Usoa's thoughts and desires

provides a strong contrast to this distant (biological) mother who does not reveal any remorse when she confesses she has told the girl that an uncle would be waiting for her. Instead the mother recounts how Usoa was »happy« when she heard this, as if the idea of »an uncle« would be enough to overcome the distress of separation from her mother in the middle of a war and to sustain this little girl to board a plane full of people at an airport that might be bombed soon afterwards.

In contrast, the Western narrator knows that the girl cried then and now:

Hace dos años que un avión enorme te trajo desde África, completamente sola, con la carta de tu madre como único equipaje. Y también esta vez, como siempre que la lees, estás llorando. Estás tranquila: en el aeropuerto no encontraste a tu tío, pero el piloto de aquel avión, encandilado contigo, te trajo a esta casa, y él es tu padre de aquí. Tu madre de aquí también es muy buena y ahora mismo te está llamando para cenar. Además sabes que este año no faltará el dinero en vuestra casa. (Zubizarreta/Odrizola 1999, n.p.)

[Two years ago a plane brought you from Africa, completely alone, with your mother's letter as your only baggage. And now, as every time you read it, you cry. You were calm at the airport. You did not find your uncle when you arrived, but the pilot of the plane, charmed by you, brought you to this house and is now your father here. Your mother is a very nice person also, and right now she is calling you to come have dinner. And you know this year your family won't be short of money either.]

The narrator underlines how well-cared for Usoa is now, with special emphasis on the material wealth of the new family: »your family won't be short of money«. Material means should be enough to dispel any haunting memories, any worries about her country of origin and the conflict taking place there. As in *Mi hermana Aixa*, the material possibilities of the Western family are meant to erase the traumatic past as well as to underscore the importance of the biological family. Aixa's adoptive family manages, through the English doctor and the prosthesis he makes, to ›fix‹ Aixa's troubled origin. By the same token, Usoa is rescued by the very pilot of the plane that brought her to the country of destination. That man is now her adoptive father, and the narrator tells us that she realizes how lucky she has been. It is unclear whether we should consider this to be a focalization on the child, or rather a phrasing that implies the hope of the external narrator that keeps projecting feelings and thoughts onto the addressed girl.

The narrator assures Usoa that she looks at the sky so much because she came ›by air‹. This seems to underline a privileged origin – refugees are usually associated with packed open boats, not with planes. Coming ›by air‹ also de-essentializes her country of origin. It becomes a forgotten land where some conflict takes place. In this way the past is erased; Usoa is told that her biological family has very possibly »disappeared«. So, what could she long for? If there are no bonds to relatives there, Africa can be discarded from the adoptee's »personal narrative«. (Cf. Langellier 1999, p. 126) Coming ›by air‹ also relates Usoa's origin to European folklore in which babies are delivered to parents by storks. Usoa is thus not depicted as a refugee; her displacement and the war to which her mother referred are downplayed in the construction of what is meant to be her origin story.

The focalization as briefly reviewed here is central for understanding the effort to transfer a story to the adoptee. The adopted character, Usoa, is first presented as being uneasy and emotionally affected by the abandonment. The narrator relates that the girl

is »worried« and »nervous« (Zubizarreta/Odriozola 1999, n.p.), while the pictures show her downcast reading the mother's letter. Yet the narrator projects resilience onto the character by saying things like »you are calm« and »you know that this year your family won't be short of money«. (Zubizarreta/Odriozola 1999, n.p.) Implementing the trope of the resilient rescued orphan imagines the orphan as a solitary being who will thrive in the care of a well-off adoptive family. (Dubinsky 2007, p. 142; Briggs 2003 p. 180) Both *Usoa, llegaste por el aire* and *Mi hermana Aixa* touch very briefly on the narratives of forced displacement – the war, the conflict and the flight. In terms of the plot development, the reasons they fled only serve the purpose of constructing the orphan child as one who has no possibility to return to her home (country).

### The shipwrecked

*Blanca y Viernes* and *Caja de cartón*, the other two books that depict children who escape from conflicts in their home countries, have a happy ending when the refugees are taken under the wing of a family. The narrative closure of these stories is only achieved after the children have been ›kinned‹ by a local family. In both stories, the protagonists arrive by boat, and the books' paratexts and epitexts – back covers, pedagogical guides, reviews, recommendations etc. – refer to them as stories about immigration. They were published before the so-called European refugee crisis of 2015 and appear to respond to the social imaginary of the »illegal« immigrant. As Carmen González-Enríquez explains, most irregular immigrants actually arrived in Spain by plane and overstayed their tourist visas working without a proper contract for a number of years until they could ›regularize‹ their situation. Nevertheless, the media shaped the social representation of immigrants as desperate people arriving at Spanish shores in open boats. (González-Enríquez 2010, p. 248) In the past few years, this image has slightly changed, since Spain has received – even if a smaller number than other European countries – refugees coming from Syria and other countries in conflict such as Eritrea.

*Blanca y Viernes*<sup>4</sup>, a novel recommended to readers between 9 and 11, thematizes the arrival of *pateras*, open boats. *Caja de cartón* is a picturebook for younger readers about a mother and a daughter who flee and become homeless in their destination country. The focalizer in *Blanca y Viernes* is Blanca, an only child on the verge of adolescence, who, bored during her holidays with her parents at the southern coast of Spain, reads *Robinson Crusoe*. One night, she encounters a young Black child hidden inside her playhouse. Inspired by her reading, she calls him »Viernes« – the Spanish word for Friday. She attempts to instruct him as Robinson did Friday. Soon she realizes this boy was one of the survivors of a *patera* arriving at the Spanish coast, and decides to protect him from deportation by hiding him from everyone, including her parents. Shortly afterwards Blanca has to return to the city as the summer holidays have come to an end. She leaves some food for the boy, but it only lasts a few days, after which he manages to call her on the telephone saying the only Spanish word he apparently knows: »hambre« [hunger]. Blanca realizes that she has failed to provide him with the means for survival and takes a bus back to the seaside to help him. Her parents follow, calling the police on their way. When everyone arrives, the boy is detained. Blanca, who narrates the story, relates how she felt so miserable after Viernes was captured that she refused to speak to anyone.

4 Blanca is a Spanish name which literally means white.

After dealing with Blanca's obstinate silence, her parents decide to search for Viernes and find him at a refugee shelter. Its director explains to them that the boy came from a place where:

de la noche a la mañana, pueblos enteros ... *desaparecen*. Y no por causas naturales. Y es muy posible que él haya presenciado eso ..., es muy posible que viese *desaparecer* ante sus ojos a la gente que le había rodeado desde que nació. (Sartí 2007, p. 139)  
 [from morning through night entire towns ... *disappear*. And not from natural causes. And it is very likely that he witnessed that ..., it is very likely that he has witnessed with his own eyes how the people who had known him since birth just *disappeared*.]

When the director of the institution mentions the disappearances, the words are in italics, as if to signal that it is a reality that cannot be represented without using a euphemism. As it is Blanca, as narrator, who recounts what she heard when she was in that room, the italics are supposedly hers. However, they seem to be a »wink« from the director to the parents and possible adult readers responsible for further explaining (or not) the concept of »disappearance«. In children's literature, the death of a parent and details of violence the child or his or her family may have suffered have been long held taboos. (MacLeod 1996, p.179–180) Disappearances are a form of state violence which hides murdered bodies. The disappearance of the (dead) body impedes acknowledging the execution, makes it more difficult to identify and condemn the murderers, and prolongs a grief that cannot be reconciled with events. (Preitler 2015, p. 112) But the inclusion of this passage in the novel does not aim to engage the reader with the conflict in the land from which the boy has fled, but rather serves to confirm what the story has already suggested: There is no one other than Blanca (and her family) who can care for Viernes. Her parents are moved by what they hear and ask the director what will happen to Viernes.

No lo sabemos. Si tuviera familia ya se le habría enviado allí de regreso. Incluso no teniéndola, también, si no fuera porque su país se encuentra en la situación que se encuentra. Pero en las circunstancias que se dan allí ... no se puede sin nadie que se haga cargo de él. (Sartí 2007, p. 140)

[We don't know. If he had a family, we would have already sent him back. Even not having a family, we would have done so, if his country wasn't going through the current situation. But under these circumstances ... He cannot be sent back without having someone to take care for him].

The »if he had a family« is crucial here. The director mentions violent events in Viernes' country of origin —suggesting possible genocide. This leads to the conclusion that the boy may even have witnessed his parents' death. Viernes can, therefore, be »kinned« to the Spanish family. There is no further engagement with who his parents might have been or what might have happened to them, his origin is simply erased.

Narrative closure is only achieved when the characters are no longer haunted by the difficulties they have had to overcome in the story. When Blanca's family adopts Viernes, we are led to believe that the boy's origin will not cloud the happiness of their growing up together as siblings. The adoption is not only a humanitarian act, but also a means to provide companionship for the biological child, Blanca. The (post)colonial/racist hierarchies between Blanca and Viernes are clearly maintained. The adoptee, for instance, will not be asked what his name was or given a new one, but remains »Viernes«, a colonial



projection of Blanca. The girl will never again feel as bored as she was that summer when she was an only child reading *Robinson Crusoe* and identifying with Crusoe's solitude.

Blanca has been immersed in a canonic novel, which she projects onto real events. Yet the story advances, teaching her the importance of taking responsibility for her actions. With the refugee child, Blanca needs to learn to relate to the »Other« who is unable to speak her language and with whom she shares no cultural codes. She learns from Defoe, but needs to put these ideas into practice in a real world. This may parallel the aim of these books in which complex and difficult social issues are narrated in stories addressed to children —books which aim to guide actions and show ways to deal with new social complexities. *Blanca y Viernes* responds to media reports on open boats arriving at Spanish shores. There is a passage in which Blanca watches the arrival of a *patera* and subsequent detention of the migrants on the news with her parents. Such reports about *pateras* are usually tragic as they touch on deaths during the journey, shipwrecks, detentions, human trafficking and the lack of compassion on the part of border patrols. This book could be considered a possible counter-narrative, for children, to the media images they are otherwise exposed to. A question that remains unanswered is whether reading books like this and appreciating literature would help the new generations to recognize the needs and desires of those refugees/immigrants.

This book's publishing house, Anaya, is one of Spain's leading publishers and an important producer of textbooks. Their children's books are carefully targeted at school-teachers. For novels like this, they offer a pedagogical guide that summarizes the argument, gives some background information, proposes a number of activities and lists the social values the book fosters. For *Blanca y Viernes* it names »the importance of communication, a sense of justice, solidarity, and friendship«. In the pedagogical guide – available at the publisher's website – the book is presented as one that can help to examine the issue of illegal immigration. Viernes' fate is not related to the refugees' in that pedagogical document, nor in the review published on the internet platform of the Fundación Germán Ruipérez. The fate of refugees who arrive on Spanish shores is not thematized. (Arboleda 2007) The idea of justice we may glean from this pedagogical guide is not any different from the one we inferred from the narrative analysis above: global injustices can be alleviated by domestic solidarity.

In *Caja de cartón*, the fourth and last book to be analyzed in this article, a similar narrative closure tries to address the complex subject of irregular immigration and refugees while trying to avoid presenting it as an unsolved problem. The story, narrated by a young girl, begins with the description of the precarious life of the protagonists in the origin country:

Cuando nací, mamá me metió en una *caja de cartón*, una de esas cajas donde guardan sus zapatos quienes tienen zapatos. Aquella caja era mi cuna, mi habitación, mi casa, las paredes que amortiguaban el llanto de mamá. (Arnal/Amekan 2010, n.p.)

[When I was born, mom put me into a cardboard box, into one of those boxes where people who have shoes keep their shoes. That box was my cradle, my room, my house, the walls that muffled mom's crying.]

The mother buys a ticket on a ship that will take them to a land »donde las niñas no duermen en cajas ni las mamás lloran« (Arnal/Amekan 2010, n.p.) [where girls do not sleep in boxes and mothers do not cry]. But the ship capsizes, and the girl and the mother fall into the sea where the cardboard box saves their lives when used as a raft. The girl



Figure 1  
 Arnal, Txabi /  
 Amekan, Hassan:  
 Caja de cartón.  
 Pontevedra: O'QO  
 Editora (2010)

*Refugees gather together and build up a »cardboard village«.*  
 Art by the Iranian illustrator Hassan Amekan.

and the mother are stranded on a beach and survive eating roots. Days later, they meet another woman from the same ship, and together they create what the girl describes as »un pueblo de cartón, pobre, pero alegre« (Arnal/Amekan 2010, n. p.) [a cardboard village, poor, but happy]. A suggestive illustration (Figure 1) shows children playing while a woman – the mother – cooks something. The perspective lines are mixed – shadows fall to different sides of the page – giving us the strange feeling of a place in which different moments coincide. A girl is portrayed playing hopscotch with another child while washed clothes hang on a clothesline. The images add meaning to the text in which the girl describes their situation as precarious, but happy. The sepia background picks up a tone already on the front cover of the book; cardboard boxes are a motif throughout the book. The cooking on the right page appears to take a predominant role as it adds color – a white steam that emerges – and shows traces of highly textured yet also transparent painting. This whiteness – as the whiteness of the washed clothes – speaks of the transformative power of care: the characters in the pictures are very poor, but they care for one another and live happily together. They seem to manage without institutional intervention. It is also interesting how the traces of social identity are marked in such a distanced way in this illustration; this may also be related to the Iranian background of the illustrator. The women in the picture wear headscarves, but they cannot be easily identified as Muslims; the knot under the chin and the hair which can be seen below it relate more to how older women in different European regions wear them.

On the next double-spread, the text tells us that the »cardboard village« has been set on fire and the sepia tone of the background is covered by black.

Pero no todos eran amables con nosotras, hasta hubo quien jugó con fuego. Sucedió bien entrada la noche, una noche que jamás se borrará de mi memoria. El fuego se extendió por el pueblo de cartón y todas las cajas ardieron. Nada pudo silenciar nuestros gritos de dolor. (Arnal/Amekan 2010, n.p.)

[But not all were kind with us. There was even someone who played with fire. It happened at night, one night that will never be erased from my memory. The fire spread through the cardboard village and all the boxes were in flames. Nothing could silence our cries of pain.]

*Caja de cartón* is one of the very few Spanish children's books which show (physical) violence towards the migrant community. The verbal narration appears to downplay the (xenophobic) attack by saying that someone was »playing with fire«, rather than decidedly attacking a community of foreigners; this may yet be read as the girl's account when receiving limited information from the adults. *Caja de cartón* is also one of the very few books that present a migrant/refugee community at all; most children's stories about immigration focus on a sole migrant character, thus avoiding to have to represent the existence of diverse ethnic and cultural groups in society. (García-González 2017, p. 164)

*Caja de cartón* differs from the other three books analyzed here in that it is narrated in the first-person voice of the refugee. Using this internal focalization, the text renders not only the first-hand experience of a traumatic past, but also the difficulties of a group of people living at the margins of the Western society. The perspective of the girl is used to narrate a story of misfortunes:

Nunca volví a ver a mamá [...]. Me llevaron a un orfanato, y después quisieron que volviera a mi país, pero en mi país nadie sabía de mí y aquí nadie parecía saber de mi país. (Arnal/Amekan 2010, n. p.)

[I never saw mom again [...]. I was taken to an orphanage and then they wanted me to return to my country. But in my country nobody knew me. And here no one appears to know about my country.]

There are no references to specific countries in these books. The characters in *Usoa ...*, *Mi hermana ...* and *Blanca y Viernes* are described as coming from Africa; in *Caja de cartón* there no specific region referred in the text or pictures. The events that make each of the protagonists flee are actually supplementary events in the stories. And, as the analysis of the endings show, there is no place for them to go back to or to long for. There is no conflict to understand or to engage with in the future. The happy ending in *Caja de cartón* coincides with the previous examples in achieving narrative closure. The traumatic past is erased and the child lives in security thanks to the solidarity of a family:

Finalmente me adoptaron y, al cabo de un tiempo, volví a sonreír. Parece imposible pero, a pesar de todo, no se me había olvidado sonreír. Ahora soy feliz junto a mi nueva mamá. Yo la quiero y ella me quiere. Me quiere tal como soy. Vivo en una casa. Tengo mi habitación, mi cama, mi armario.

[Finally, I was adopted and after a while I could smile again. It seems impossible. But, after all that happened, I had not forgotten to smile. Now I am happy with my new mom. I love her and she loves me. She loves me just as I am. I live in a house. I have my room, my bed, my wardrobe] (Arnal/Amekan 2010, n. p.).

The girl is depicted playing in her room with other girls and cared for by a mother. As in the previous stories, the character is adopted. And, as in the other stories, the adoptive family has a lighter skin color.

## Conclusion

The most salient feature of the representation of refugees in Spanish children's literature is, arguably, its absence. As reviewed here, it is very difficult to find examples of books with refugees or asylum seekers as protagonists. In the few recommended books dealing with this topic, it is striking that characters that have fled countries in conflict or war are not presented primarily as refugees but rather as adopted children or irregular («illegal») immigrants. I identify in this a difficulty to imagine the refugee as well as the privilege of those who decide who may fit into the category of refugee/asylum seeker and who may not. The reasons these characters had to leave their countries of origin are downplayed in the narrations: we do not get many details, neither do we get the idea that there is a problem about which we need to know more. On the contrary, the focus is set on how well-intentioned locals are able to ›rescue‹ the characters by helping them to become included in the receiving country.

Previous research analyzing the depiction of immigrant characters shows they are most often presented disconnected from a diaspora or ethnic community, as solitary characters rescued by white locals. (García-González 2017, p. 80–82) Something similar happens here. All these characters are isolated from their communities, and this puts them in a position of need. *Caja de cartón* presents an interesting counterpoint here. In it, the refugees do set up a community – that »cardboard village« in which the girl recounts having been happy. The establishment of this community is, however, not sufficient to provide narrative closure to this book. *Caja de cartón* could have been the story of how a girl flees a war-torn country with her mother, how they are shipwrecked yet manage to get to the shore and later meet people with whom they set up a community of care. If the story had ended a little earlier, this could have been the main plot. But it continues with the disappearance of the mother and the adoption of the girl by a local family. These stories coincide strikingly in choosing the adoption of the characters as the means to achieve that desired narrative closure. They promise that the characters will not be haunted by the same problems again in the future.

The adoption by local families may be connected to the effort to erase the past of the refugees at the same time as their future is secure. The recurrence of this solution in the plots reveal how permeating the metaphor nation-as-family is. (Lakoff 2002) In the plot organization of home-away-home (Nodelman/Reimer 2003, p. 197), recurrent in children's literature, home is most often embodied by the family, a nuclear family that provides care and protection. Characters may go away on adventures but will be safe again after they return home. This is the moment the happy ending and narrative closure is achieved. As George Lakoff argues, the nation-as-family implies that citizens have to be taken care of like children. The books analyzed reason that to become a part of the nation, one needs to first become part of one of its families. In order to be turned into one-of-kin, the bond to the countries and families of origin are removed. The stories show the difficulty of imagining the refugee as a citizen in his/her own right, an asylum seeker with the right to stay and the possibility of receiving special assistance in order to fully integrate into the host society. There are no references to applications for asylum or to the geopolitical forces that explain the global flux of people in these stories. Any reference to why they had to flee their countries is downplayed.

Refugees are not expected to go back, because the places where they come from are metaphorically erased from the map. There is nothing to fight for, or to long for; they are truly homeless. Research on the depiction of (economic) immigrants in children's liter-

ature shows, contrastingly, that they are expected after a few years (of productive work) to go back to their countries. (García-González 2017, p. 168) Immigrants are imagined as guests that will leave, while refugees are guests who require something more. The nation-as-family conceptual metaphor jeopardizes our efforts to think about how many different ethnic communities form a nation.

The concept of the ›kinning of foreigners‹ (Howell 2006) helps us to understand the importance of establishing a bond that is as-if-biological in order to secure belonging – both to that family and to that country. The transference of this concept of ›kinning‹ to the Spanish context is promising: ethnographic and anthropological research in Spain shows how the family takes the burden of the care not only of the elderly, but also of younger generations whose salaries are not sufficient to afford housing and childcare. (González 2015, p. 174–175) The lack of public policies and state support is reflected in these books, yet they could be viewed as naturalizing the government's incapacity to deal with the refugee flux into Europe.

These texts reveal tensions between the primacy of the family in the social organization and a Western humanitarianism that would have to be organized at governmental level. Bernardo de Sousa Santos has written about »semi-peripheral societies« with an intermediate and intermediary position between the center and the peripheries of the world system. He writes specifically about Portugal, but his argument can easily be transferred to Spain. Semi-peripheral countries have many economic and social indicators which resemble those of the Northern European countries, while others indicators are more closely aligned to those of so-called peripheral societies. (de Sousa Santos 2002, p. 207–210) Western humanitarianism in this specific case, the ability to receive, support and ›integrate‹ refugee communities, would be a responsibility taken upon by Northern countries. In these stories we can identify an effort to take on this geopolitical responsibility and to contribute to global social justice beyond the limits of the nation. Yet, as the same narratives reveal, in order to play the Western humanitarian role, Spain has to recast justice as solidarity and confine it to the boundaries of the domestic.

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