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Multidirectional Trains: Co-operative (Post)Memory in Colson
Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Abstract

This essay reads *The Underground Railroad* as an operation of 'multidirectional memory.' The essay explores the collaborative negotiation between Whitehead's (post)memorialization of slavery and the postmemory of the Shoah, as figured in the potent image of the railroad—a ubiquitous element in Holocaust narratives and memoirs. By literalizing the abolitionist metaphor, Whitehead turns the salvific underground network into a material train that leads to death and oppression. The essay aims to examine the powerful role of the railroad as the affective vehicle that ties together different memories in a communal project of public remembrance.

Toward the end of *MAUS*, Vladek Spiegelman gasps in wonder at the sight of a train—A “real train to take passengers,” he says, not “for cows and horses” (Spiegelman 2003, 257)—which is supposed to take the few survivors from Dachau to the Swiss border for an exchange of prisoners. This is not the first nor the only railroad related image to appear in *MAUS*, or in narratives of the Shoah, for that matter. The train is in fact, as Baruch Stier observes, one of the most “significant and recurring images and symbols of the Holocaust” (2015, 40). In its multifarious variations, the railway has become a veritable “Holocaust Icon,” as he calls those images and artifacts that have come to “completely embody and encapsulate the Shoah,” to the extent that they become “a metonymy for it” (3). Citing the influential work of Marianne Hirsch, Stier includes the railway car among those images that, through inexhaustible repetition, have come to signal emblematically the Holocaust and are intimately “incorporated into the visual landscape of post-memory” (3).

Yet my interest in Stier's work on the iconicity of the Holocaust-era railway car lies less in the train's ubiquity than in its ability to elicit a “quick, noncognitive access to the larger, hidden reality” (7) of the Shoah. Like other icons, he claims, the train “neither show[s] nor tell[s] but rather viscerally present[s] the Holocaust for comprehension and consumption” (8). In this essay, I argue that

such automatic, visceral response originates not from the train's representational or figurative meaning, but rather from its material force—or, what Mitchum Huehls calls “ontological presence” (2016, xii). While I don't share Huehls's apparent lack of interest in ideology critique,¹ I find his resort to ontology useful, inasmuch as it draws attention to “the ways beings exist in relation to each other” (xii). I in fact turn to the railroad's conspicuous and assertive ‘being there’ in order to investigate the kind of connections it promotes. More precisely, I examine the ways in which the train's intrusive material presence in unexpected places complicates its iconicity. May we escape from the railway's fixed association with the Shoah so as to embrace other histories of trauma, in a way that *at the same time* retains its status as a Holocaust icon? May the image of the train thus understood be “prosthetic,” in the sense intended by Alison Landsberg, as allowing or promoting a “portable, fluid, and nonessentialist form of memory” (2004, 18)? May the railway be the vehicle of the “productive, intercultural dynamic” that Michael Rothberg (2009, 3) places at the basis of his idea of multidirectional memory? Because of the undeviating linearity of the railroad tracks, the train would seem to signal an ironbound, univocal directionality. Yet, in what follows I explore how it may derail from its iron way towards a rhizomatic multidirectionality.

1. Trains for People and Dilapidated Boxcars

Vladek Spiegelman's “train for people” (Spiegelman 2003, 257) speaks to my argument in at least another important way, inasmuch as it reverses the usual significance of the railroad both in Spiegelman's graphic novel and in Holocaust narratives in general. Together with the barbed wire, the crematoria chimneys, and the striped pajamas, the railroad or train is, as I have said, a prominent part

¹ On the wave of the recent post-critical turn in the humanities, Huehls argues that Whitehead and other contemporary authors “seem curiously reluctant to critique the injustice and inequality that they clearly recognize as endemic to twenty-first century life” (x). Ontology, rather than representation, becomes in his opinion the device these authors propose for rethinking politics in a neoliberal era. Now, post-critique, especially in the work of Rita Felski and Bruno Latour's famous “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?”, rather than to a complete dismissal of critique, amounts to a new, positive, affective (as opposed to skeptical and suspicious) critical attitude—and in this sense the new turn can be immensely fresh and productive. However, it seems hard to describe *The Underground Railroad* as “reluctant to critique,” when, as Lee Konstantinou rightly argues “Whitehead . . . seems to revert to the sort of ideology critique—the historicist-contextualist paradigm—he [elsewhere] repudiated” (2017, 15).

of the Shoah imagery of suffering and annihilation. Consider Primo Levi's and Elie Wiesel's memoirs. Consider Claude Lanzmann's titanic documentary *Shoah*, which rather than on Holocaust-era footage capitalizes on the infamous rail-tracks, boxcars, and train-drivers. Recall the prominence of the railroad in Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. In these and other films, books, and graphic novels the railway functions as an ominous token of death and devastation. Trains, as Baruch Stier puts it, "represent a monumental turning point in the destruction of the European Jewry: deportation via railway marked a key systemic shift from mobile murderers and stationary victims to stationary murderers and mobile victims" (2015, 40). Conversely, the 'real train' in *MAUS* is, if transitorily, a hopeful sign of liberation. I say transitorily, of course, because—as we know from Vladek's own successive mishaps, as well as from the testimonies of Levi, Wiesel, and others—the path to freedom after the liberation of the camps was anything but smooth. Yet the fact that the reversal of the train's function is here coupled with the alteration of its outer appearance is indicative of the immense associative potential of the train's very material presence.

Now let me take a huge leap, to yet another railroad image that, at least apparently, retains that same liberating promise—and, as we shall see, marks an analogous reversal. The leap is huge both chronologically and thematically, as we move in time and space from mid twentieth century central Europe to mid-nineteenth century Southern USA—from the Shoah to America's 'peculiar institution': chattel slavery. The title of Colson Whitehead's 2016 Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *The Underground Railroad*, refers of course to the undercover organization—a network of persons, routes, and shelters—that helped many African American slaves out of bondage. The novel resonates with an increasing public and artistic interest in slave narratives in general and in the Underground Railroad in particular to which novels like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), films like *12 Years A Slave* (2013), tv series like *Underground* (2016), as well as the foundation of "The Underground Railroad History Project" in 2003, testify. Yet, in Whitehead's brilliant conceit, this popular and "potent trope" (Dubek 2018, 68) becomes an actual railroad, a (literally) real train.

The flight of the novel's protagonist, Cora, and her fellow runaway slave, Caesar, begins at the Georgia station of the Underground Railroad. A 'real station,' as Vladek Spiegelman would say, even equipped, thoughtfully, with "a small bench on the platform" (Whitehead 2017, 80). After a short wait, we are told, "the bench rumbled [...] and the rumbling became a sound:"

The thing arrived in its hulking strangeness. Caesar had seen trains in Virginia; Cora had only heard tell of the machines. It wasn't what she envisioned. The locomotive was black, an ungainly contraption led by the triangular snout of the cowcatcher . . . The bulb of the smokestack was next, a soot-covered stalk. The main body consisted of a large black box topped by the engineer's cabin. Below that, pistons and large cylinders engaged in a relentless dance with the ten wheels, two sets of small ones in front and three behind. The locomotive pulled one single car, a dilapidated boxcar missing numerous planks in its walls. (83)

The trope of the abolitionist movement becomes fully palpable: a preposterous steel and steam subway intrudes with material force into a (post)memorialization of slavery. But, to what end? As Mitchum Huehls has rightly argued, Whitehead's novels often revolve around conspicuous "mundane" objects, that function as the simultaneous "source of and foil to interpretive desire" (2016, 110). The railroad, that is, demands our attention as the apparent key to unlock the novel's meaning, at the same time refusing to be read according to a representational logic. The train imposes its ontological presence, forcing us to scrutinize its conspicuous materiality; to look at how its very being there shapes, determines and affects the fictional world of the novel, as well as our reading of it.

If we attend to the material semblance of the 'dilapidated boxcar' that the fugitives board in Georgia, the first thing that gives us pause is that it doesn't look like Vladék's 'train for people' at all. Rather it bears more resemblance to those freight trains—the Holocaust-era railway car that Stier considers iconic—that transported prisoners to the death camps. The train's outward appearance would seem a minor issue, were it not for the fact that Cora and her fellow runaway slave are, as we soon learn, headed to quite a bleak destiny. Like Vladék's "train for people," although in the opposite way, Whitehead's "dilapidated boxcar" overturns the liberating significance of the underground railroad. Likewise, it reverses Radu Mihaileanu's operation in *Train de vie* (1998), where, if you recall, the deadly train becomes an oneiric image of hope and life—until, in the devastating ending, we are confronted with the brutal truth.² By literalizing the

² In *Train de Vie*, the inhabitants of a *shtetl* in Central Europe concoct a brilliant plan to escape deportation: they organize their own train, manned with some of them disguised as German officers. But, instead of any camp, their final destination is the Russian frontier as a gateway to Palestine. At the end, however, we see a close-up of Shlomo, the village fool that came up with the plan, saying: "This is the true story of my shtetl." But then the camera zooms out and we see him on the other side of a barbed wire fence, dressed in the infamous striped uniform, as he says: "Ne yu, *almost* the true story!"

metaphor, Whitehead turns the salvific underground network into a material train that leads to death and oppression. I will have more to say about the reach of Whitehead's complex operation; for the moment let us just notice that, rather than communicating a particular story of slavery, Whitehead's improbable train functions as a vehicle that connects different and distant traumatic histories.³

2. Improbable States of Possibility

The agent of the Underground Railroad in Georgia tells the runaways that every state or train station is different, "Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and ways of doing things" (Whitehead 2017, 82). As the novel follows Cora in her short-lived journey northward, and its circuitous continuation through Tennessee, Indiana, and, finally, westward, we enter an alternative-historical landscape, in which every "state of possibility" becomes uncannily familiar, resembling other (temporally and/or spatially distant) traumatic histories. The sight of a skyscraper as Cora and Caesar step out of the train station in South Carolina (80) clarifies that the literalized railroad is merely one of the many liberties Whitehead takes with the historical past.

South Carolina, the protagonists' first stop, has, as the local agent of the organization tells them, an "enlightened attitude toward colored advancement" (108). And it indeed seems an idyllic place to live in, where the runaways have jobs, education, free time and fancy clothes—and, apparently, universal healthcare. However, we soon discover that this apparent haven harbors its own kind of hell. There is a technical caveat to their freedom: the runaways are now "property of the United States Government," which has bought up "most of the colored folk in the state" (110) in exchange for food, employment, and housing. The State power over its colored property, however, goes beyond the patronizing supervision of their intellectual, emotional, and physical well-being. The new hospital, it later turns out, runs undercover syphilis experiments on black males and recommends "birth control" (134) to black women. In a fantastical and anachronistic move, Whitehead incorporates the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study, conducted between 1932 and 1972 by the Department of Health in Macon

³ In this sense, I hope this is clear, my interest lies not in how trauma theory illuminates *The Underground Railroad*, understood as a neo-slave narrative. Rather, my intent here is to explore the interconnection and cooperation between different traumatic histories. Whitehead's idiosyncratic fondness for material objects, and in particular his inventive literalization of a metaphorical train in his 2016 novel, provides a particularly appropriate vehicle for such interconnection and cooperation.

County, Alabama, into the South Carolinian landscape. On the other hand, the practice of forced sterilization, simply suggested to Cora as “a chance for [her] to take control over [her] own destiny,” but “mandatory for . . . imbeciles or otherwise mentally unfit” (135), conjures up the specter of Nazi eugenics experiments along with the American ones.

Rather than these biopolitical horrors, however, it is the arrival of the slave catcher Ridgeway that precipitates Cora’s lonely flight. But she escapes the South Carolinian frying pan only to land into the fire of North Carolina. While the former State hid its brutality under the paternalistic veneer of “colored advancement,” the latter is openly and unabashedly hostile to the blacks. Found by mere chance by the reluctant local agent, Martin, Cora is forced to hide in an attic—a bit like Harriet Jacobs, no doubt, but a bit like Anne Frank, too. That the parallel between the “slave girl” and Frank (and other victims of the Nazi genocide) must be intended is beyond question, as it emerges from Whitehead’s depiction of the Tar Heel State.

Shortly before her arrival, the powerful men of North Carolina, Martin tells Cora, had “convened to solve the colored question” (196). The expression has evident echoes of “the final solution to the Jewish question”—the infamous code name for the Holocaust formulated at the Wannsee Conference in 1942. North Carolina’s “solution” includes “new race laws” that “forbid colored men and women from setting foot on [its] soil.” Those who refused, “were run off or massacred” (198). Traces of such massacre are visible enough: upon her arrival, Cora is led to precarious safety through the so-called “Freedom Trail,” a country road leading to town in either side of which hang, like so many ‘strange fruits,’ the mangled corpses of lynching victims. The odious trail is, of course, suggestive of the many images that attest to the practice of lynching in the U.S. from the Reconstruction and well into the twentieth century, but it is also reminiscent of the exemplary public hanging of Jews, for example in the Lwów ghetto.⁴ “In what sort of hell had the train let her off” (183), Cora now wonders. In North Carolina in fact, as the narrator tells us, “The negro race did not exist except at the end of

⁴ Some testimonies on public executions exist. Consider, for example, the words of Leon Saper, registered in the Yad Vashem Archive: “I knew one guy, Mark . . . he was selling something that was sort of leftover from before the war and I suppose they did it as an example. And I think three people that they hanged off trees, you know, and I remember passing them . . . and I remember him hanging there.”

(https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205070.pdf); the visual images of the public hanging of Jews in Lwow are eloquent enough: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa10135>; <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa10147>.

ropes” (187). If Cora was running to the Northern Free States, she paradoxically ends up in a “Negro-Free” state: “Free,” as one of its political leaders barks in one of the public rallies or “festivals” held every Friday, “from the contamination of a lesser race” (191). The idea closely recalls the *Judenfrei* or *Judenrein* areas, a tag used during the Third Reich to designate sections, towns or villages in which the Jewish population had been wiped out. Of course, this kind of white-supremacist rhetoric is not unique to twentieth century Nazi-fascism, and Whitehead himself has linked his fictional North Carolina with the foundation of the State of Oregon upon white supremacist ideals (Whitehead 2016a, 10:22). And yet, the connections with the Nazi atrocities are too many, and too suggestive, to be coincidental. Even when Cora is finally captured, not by the slave catcher after her, but by uniformed “night riders” (2017, 223) who had been alerted by the Irish housemaid working for her saviors, in exchange for a reward. These riders are no doubt inspired by the “slave-patrollers,” a “de facto police force in the South” (Whitehead 2016a, 16:45) during the early nineteenth century. But, are they not reminiscent of SS members that enforced racial policing in Nazi Germany, too?

As the rendering of the Carolinas makes clear, Whitehead’s imaginative version of the slave narrative refuses the format of the straightforward historical novel, so as to accommodate different histories of segregation, oppression, and genocide. Yet the connections that his novel proposes are both trans-generational and trans-cultural, exploring both the linear and the transversal perpetuation of systemic racism over time and across space. Even as Whitehead clearly rearranges history, he never invents from scratch. As he stated in a widely quoted interview for *The Fader*: “If I stuck to the facts then I couldn’t bring in the Holocaust, and the KKK, and eugenic experiments” (2016b). The counterfactual timeline of *The Underground Railroad*, as Matthew Dischinger argues, forces us to see the events of the novel as “simultaneously preposterous and real” (2017, 90). But the anachronism is not merely chronological. Throughout the pages of his novel, Whitehead has us wondering: Is it Tuskegee or Mengele; Jacobs or Frank; the KKK or the SS; Oregon or the Third Reich? The narrative evokes both, without ever forcing us to choose, thereby turning an “either/or” logic into a “both/and” one. Whitehead’s commemoration of slavery rejects that kind of “zero-sum logic” that, according to Michael Rothberg (2009, 20), exclusivist or competitive conceptions of memory bring about.

3. Who Ain’t a Slave? Collective Memory Beyond Universalism and Particularism

During their brief interval of apparent freedom in South Carolina, Cora and Caesar often talk about their past life in chains. “Much of what they said could apply to any former slave who overheard them,” the narrator explains, “A plantation was a plantation; one might think one’s misfortunes distinct, but the true horror lay in their universality” (Whitehead 2017, 122). Likewise, one might be tempted to say, the connections Whitehead’s novel encourages only point to the commonalities between atrocities. Oppressors are just the same old gang and, as Ishmael quips in the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, “Who Ain’t a Slave?” Such implication is provocative in its own way, especially if we consider that uniqueness is often predicated both of the Holocaust and of the African American experience. Whitehead seems to be challenging any claim to uniqueness.

Yet his operation is much more complex than that. Even as he pushes back against the notion of uniqueness, he never falls back into platitudes about the universality of racial oppression. In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead is less interested in analogies or commonalities than he is in connections and intersections, or overlapping spaces. When he incorporates elements from the Shoah into an overt remembrance of African American slavery he does not resort to clear-cut images or situations that impose themselves upon, or cancel out, slavery’s memorial traces; nor does he attempt to blend or fuse one into the other. Rather, he relies on subtle and supple intimations that keep the different traces visible. As I have tried to make clear, each reference can be intended both ways; each can be bent and stretched so as to fit into, and satisfy, different (post)memorial needs. In deploying events or situations in which separate histories overlap, Whitehead forces his readers to confront racialized horrors in a way that recognizes the commonalities between, while at the same time retaining the distinctness of, the different experiences. It is as if we were looking at a cubist painting by Picasso or Juan Gris, in which different perspectives, the past and the present, the here and the there, are represented simultaneously, side by side, and taken in with a single glance.

Michael Rothberg has described a similarly inclusive, all-embracing glance in relation to W.E.B. Du Bois’s visit to the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto in 1949, as registered in his article “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto” (1952). His response, Rothberg suggests, provides both “an example and method for conceptualizing memory beyond the logic of competition” (2009, 114). Du Bois’s visits to the ruins prompt a theoretical revision of his formulation of the color line, as he explicitly grapples with material and conceptual lines that both hold together and separate different histories and “varieties of racial terror” (115). I do not have the

space here to delve into Rothberg's careful analysis, but his reading of Du Bois's reaction to the Holocaust Memorial is worth noting with some detail. The controversial monument by Nathan Rapoport, Rothberg ventures, appealed to Du Bois because of its very "Du Bosian" form, which allows for "a kind of double consciousness" (128). The double-sided monument offers a stark opposition between images of universalizing heroism on the one side—with emerging bronze figures representing the fighters of the ghetto uprising—and the specific suffering of the Jews on the other—a bas-relief depicting a "train of huddled figures herded toward their deaths by barely visible Nazi soldiers" (128). The monument was harshly criticized particularly because its dominant "universalizing Socialist dimension" (128) risked suppressing the particularity of the Jewish experience within the memory of the Shoah. Yet, as Rothberg argues, it is precisely the double-sided form of the monument, which does not favor easy synthesis, that allows for non-appropriative but inclusive or co-operative readings, like Dubois's, that elude the same universal/particular dichotomy Whitehead grapples with.

To be clear, I am not claiming a perfect coincidence between Whitehead's novel and Dubois's take on the Rapoport monument. They are rather somewhat opposites: the latter contains a veritable split, an opposition between two different sides that cannot be observed simultaneously, while the former feeds on the juxtaposition of different planes that overlap, indeed allowing for simultaneous perception. Yet, although seemingly antithetical, each case discourages synthesis in its own way; each shows a different possibility for the reception of the Holocaust that eschews both universalism and uniqueness. And both, on the other hand, might be seen as articulations of multidirectional memory, as they provide, to borrow from Rothberg, "a point of intersection from which to remap the seemingly divergent genealogies of Holocaust memory and the global color line" (114). For Du Bois, the sight of the Warsaw ghetto brought about "not so much clear understanding of the Jewish problem . . . as . . . a real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem" (qtd. Rothberg 2009, 116). Far from the conflation of the two "problems," his reading both of the ghetto and of the Rapoport monument combines, Rothberg argues, "a recognition of the specificity of the Jewish catastrophe . . . and a broad understanding of how that history forms part of a larger path of destruction premised on an unusually virulent biopolitical vision of racial segregation" (129).

The Underground Railroad, I argue, aspires to a similar kind of "broad understanding." In Whitehead's novel, that "larger path of destruction" is traversed by train: a literal railroad that overturns the metaphorical "train of life"

the underground railroad was supposed to be. Moreover, by not sticking to the historical past, as Matthew Dischinger argues, “the novel presents an ahistorical but still faithful admixture of ‘different forms of racial hysteria’ that, in their devastating accumulation, clarify rather than obscure, histories of racism and imperial violence in the U.S.” (2017, 83-4)—and, I would add, beyond.

However, I want to argue that the kind of multidirectional memory that Whitehead’s counterfactual “states of possibility” enable has a precise political goal. How may, in other words, the memory of the Shoah foster a more complete understanding of the “racial hysteria” in the U.S., from nineteenth century slavery on? By having his protagonist witness or experience anachronistic medical experiments, lynchings, and other racial horrors that feel at once preposterous and appropriate; anachronistic and plausible, Whitehead wittingly discloses multiple connections and continuities (between slavery, Jim Crow laws, White Supremacism, and the Nazi genocide)—connections that the American unconscious would rather keep repressed. In this way, Whitehead’s literal train effects an ultimate reversal. Neo-slave narratives and stories of the underground railroad, so popular today, make room for benevolent white abolitionists and heroic black runaways, thus circumscribing the responsibility for the atrocities of slavery to cruel slaveholders and pitiless slave catchers. As Kathryn Schultz claims, they have the soothing effect of “assuag[ing] our conscience,” providing a “comparatively comfortable place” (Qtd. Dubek 2018, 69) from which to look at a profoundly uncomfortable and disturbing past of institutionalized racial oppression. By literalizing the abolitionist trope and seizing on its Holocaust-era iconicity, Whitehead’s tale of a slave’s flight to freedom disallows that comforting effect.

Talking about the ending of his monumental documentary *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann remarked:

I did not have the moral right to give a happy ending to this story. When does the Holocaust really end? Did it end the last days of the war? Did it end with the creation of the State of Israel? No. It still goes on. These events are of such magnitude, of such scope that they have never stopped developing their consequences . . . When I really had to conclude I decided that I did not have the right to do it . . . And I decided that the last image of the film would be a train, and endlessly rolling . . . train. (Qtd. Levine 2002, 318)

That endless rolling of the train, as Michael Levine notes, stresses the way “the Shoah outlives its apparent end” (318). In Lanzmann’s work, as well as in much of Holocaust memorialization, trains and railway cars have become, as

Baruch Stier puts it, “literal vehicles of suffering transformed into vehicles of memory” (2015, 40). Colson Whitehead re-literalizes that same image to complicate the straightforward, linear tracks of memory: as if they could reach back to the past and spread sideways, connecting diverse histories and peoples. Unlike Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, *The Underground Railroad* does have some kind of ending—not ‘happy,’ but mildly hopeful. After witnessing unspeakable horrors, Cora now goes West, where she might, perhaps, discover new “states of possibility.” She is now traveling by horse wagon, not by train.

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