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Rail Intertextuality: A Time-Travel Escapade upon the Iron Rails of the Americas

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Abstract

The representation of the railroad in literature is by no means new. The train-trope has been significantly re-presented through repetition and difference in cultural production across the Americas ever since the nineteenth century, consolidating an inter-American 'rail intertextuality'. The ensuing pages track this intertextuality by carrying out a close reading of literary trainscapes in the past four decades. The discussion focuses on how trainscapes from Maxine Hong Kingston's China Men (1980), Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad (2016), and Los cuatro espejos (1973) from Afro-Costa Rican Quince Duncan articulate a rail intertextuality along the categories of repetition and difference. The paper is grounded upon the premise that trainscapes create an intertextual narrativealong stories of im/mobility, of exclusion and erasure, and of the struggle for recognition.

Keywords: literary trainscapes, transcontinental railroad, underground railroad, Costa Rican railroad, rail intertextuality

1. Introduction

The symbol par excellence for tracking Modernity (cf. Aguiar), the nineteenth-century railroad transport revolution defined a wholly new "collective experience of technology" (Harrington 229) in that metropolis and rural areas, people from different social classes, time intervals and stretches of land were all reunited on the wagons gliding upon the iron rails, thrusted by a steam locomotive. As a result, the train ride radically transformed the sensuous awareness of geography, distorted through the reformed mathematical occurrence of a condensed space-time ratio (Schivelbusch, ch. 3). That is, the railway represented a life-changing innovation in transport technology, and by extension in modern capitalist economies, because of the compression of the categories of *speed* and *vicinity* by way of the mechanized journey. As Eric Hobsbawm asserts, by bringing places and people together in ways before unimaginable, the railroad became right from the start, "a sort of synonym for ultra-modernity in the 1840s" (89). From then on, 'progress' became a discourse embedded in the railroad imagery.

The representation of the railroad in literature is by no means novel. It is not far-fetched to argue that the train-trope has been significantly re-presented through repetition and difference in cultural production across the Americas ever since the nineteenth century, consolidating an inter-American 'rail intertextuality'. The ensuing pages track this intertextuality by studying the sociohistorical meaning carried in the representation of *literary trainscapes*, which are defined here as narrative nodes that portray human and material capital put in motion by both the railway system and the specific economies mobilizing such capital. Generally speaking, literary trainscapes articulate a complex portrait of modern capitalism whose emergence since the late 1700s combined and thus determined new interactions among land, labor, material and human capital (see Frieden and Rogowski 384). In the following analysis, the nineteenth-century slave-plantation economy of the US and the Chinese and the Afro-Caribbean labor diasporas of the same period are approached as examples of modern capitalism. In these contexts, literary trainscapes depict both the railroad-transport technology and international overseas labor

mobility as indivisible aspects of modernity. As a result, they create a triangular constellation in which the interrelationships among the train, people, and capital can be traced by way of close reading.

I have referred previously to literary trainscapes and the idea of a rail intertextuality elsewhere (Ravasio, *This Train*). There, I examined the correlation between spatial mobility and social immobility along and upon the railroad tracks in literature concerning migrant im/mobilities at the Panama Canal Zone, the United Fruit Company's enclaves, and undocumented transmigrants traversing Mexico towards the US border upon 'La Bestia'. With the purpose of expanding on this inter-American intertextuality, I explore here a different literary corpus pertaining to other historical imaginations and following a different purpose. The present discussion thus draws first on Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980) and the construction of the US transcontinental railroad. Next, Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) is approached so as to correlate the railroad's relevance for resisting slavery in nineteenth-century North America. The last section deals with *Los cuatro espejos* (1973) by Afro-Costa Rican Quince Duncan, a work which engages Afro-Costa Rican "double consciousness" (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* 1903). By exploring these works from the perspective that tackles the intersection between the sociohistorical processes of the past and the literary production referring to those processes, the ensuing study shall demonstrate how a relational approach to selected literary trainscapes identifies a rail intertextuality drawn around the experience of erasure and discrimination.

2. The Wedding of the Rails

Chinese American literature, together with oral history, legends, and travel notes concerning the construction of the US transcontinental railroad express in many respects "a different sensibility" (Xiaohuang 10) regarding the acclaimed industrialization and modernization of the United States of America. As Xiaohuang mantains (20), compared to the ideals of progress and prosperity that the transcontinental railroad meant for the economic development of the country in order "to move the nation forward" (Hall 331), the American dream that many Chinese immigrants pursued as railroad builders was met with unfulfilled expectations of advancement and of betterment.

Almost half a decade after the western portion of the transcontinental railroad started laying the tracks across the harsh Sierra Nevada landscape in 1863, the Central Pacific Railroad and the Union Pacific Railroad were successfully merged in May 1869 in the "wedding of the rails" (Dearinger 70). This landmark event represented without a doubt one of the ultimate technological achievements of nineteenth-century America, which had demanded the hiring not only of Chinese, but also of Irish and Mormon wage workers for it to be accomplished. Notwithstanding Chinese historical agency in the development of nineteenth-century USA, the stories of these railroad builders have been however left out of "the national narrative that celebrated American progress in the 19th century" (Hall 331).

As a response to this lack of recognition, literature by generations born out of the Chinese labor diaspora articulates how fundamental these migrant workers were to this epic event and thus to the industrialization of the US as a whole. Chinese American literature takes on the task of deploying a collective memory through individual tales, which, together, craft a historical imagination concerning the building of the transcontinental railroad. In so doing, it underscores, on the one hand, the Chinese's role in the industrialization of America, while declaiming, on the other, how they were excluded both from the recognition of their labor and from the benefits thereof. As a result, feelings of "alienation and disillusion" (Xiaohuang 20) fill Chinese American nineteenth- and twentieth-century writings, whose impressions of the Reconstruction Era's transportation technology contrast the aforementioned awareness of industrial innovation. They reveal instead exclusion and marginalization of Chinese and their US-born children on account of racism both after the wedding of the rails and in the production of historical knowledge on the subject.

"Great-Grandfather built the railroad through the Sierra Nevada in difficult seasons," remembers Rainsford Chan, the narrator of Shawn Wong's 1979 novel *Homebase* (9). The novel crafts a transgenerational narrative from the perspective of Rainsford, a fourth-generation Chinese American, whose memories pronounce how his family constantly attempted to make the US their home ever since Great-Grandfather first immigrated to the country. Particular to the account is the amalgam of sources used by Chan to articulate his family's stories. Poetry, dialogues, essays, short stories, memories, letters, all of these intertwine with each other in order to unravel those "'hidden corners' of American Asian history" (Chen 393). In so doing, they enunciate precisely those silences and elisions that have given the descendants of the labor diaspora an ambiguous place in their country's historical imagination.

The permanent presence of the railroad in the fabric of Chan's familial memoires reveals the heartaches and the pain that Chinese immigrants underwent during and after its construction. Its literary trainscapes thus reveal and place at the forefront those hidden corners which pertain to the physical hardships endured at the Sierra Nevada mountains. As Great-Grandfather recalls: "[t]heir eyes [were] swollen from the blood pushed into the aching veins of their sight" (Wong 15). Emotional struggles are also touched upon by Wong, traversed by the impossibility of belonging to the host country on account of nineteenth-century institutional racism. When the railroad was finished, the narrator goes on to tell us, his great-grandfather and the many other Chinese immigrants were "chased out of the mines" and "cut loose to wander through the West," until racial considerations of national belonging prohibited them to continue working the land as farmers, eventually banning them to enter the country altogether through the Exclusion Act of 1882 (14).

Although the Central Pacific Railroad was built mainly by Chinese migrant workers who had come to substitute European laborers by late 1865 (Chang et al. 2), and while American mining corporations thrived thanks to Chinese miners and merchants alike, the Chinese fell however prey to class exploitation and hostile racial discrimination (Yung et al. 2). The Exclusion Act, which Chan's Great-Grandfather referred to, had in reality banned the entry of Chinese labor for ten years, prohibiting Chinese to acquire US citizenship (4). Other legal strategies were also implemented so as to eradicate Chinese presence from the American social tissue. "They were allowed to live, but not to marry," explains Chan. As Wong states, "The law was designed so that the Chinese would gradually die out, leaving [behind] no sons or daughters." (14)

Despite such tactics, meant to hinder Chinese' integration to mainstream society, Yung, Chang, and Lai (5) also refer to the fact that Asian communities developed judicial and diplomatic strategies in order to defend their civil rights. As a result, the American constitutional jurisprudence was developed and modified significantly due to the Chinese' contribution and struggle as the undesired Others. Nevertheless, the anti-Chinese civil and governmental movement of the time had long-lasting consequences for the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of the labor diaspora. Among these consequences is the absence of their forefathers' and -mothers' contribution to 'The United States of America' in official narratives. As David Leiwei Li maintains, "America/Americanness is a geopolitical concept motivated by interests materialized in canonical texts." He goes on to clarify how this concept is constructed not only literarily, but also historically (482). I agree with Chang, et al. that a central deed necessary to accomplish the deconstruction of the homogeneous construct of 'America/Americanness' is the recognition of those hidden and silent stories concerning Chinese railroad builders as fundamental narratives of US history. As the editors of *The Chinese and the Iron Road* (2019) have emphasized it, these are narratives that have been "pushed to the margins of public memory and historical scholarship" (Chang et al. 19).

Julia H. Lee refers to this dual presence/absence of Asian Americans in US history as a dialectics of in/visibility which she considers is made fully evident with the train trope. For Lee, the transcontinental railroad occupies a dominant yet complicated place in Asian American literature (31). It articulates an encrypted message which localizes the labor of Chinese immigrants at

the center of US history, while simultaneously emerging from the American landscape as a hollow image embracing the experience of economic exploitation, exclusion, and, above all, erasure of America's Asian "others."

Reminiscent of Chan's Great-Grandfather's tales from Sierra Nevada, Maxine Hong Kingston's story of Ah Goong in "The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains" (*China Men* 1980; 1981 National Book Award) too speaks of the completion of the transcontinental railroad while underscoring, simultaneously, the eradication of Chinese presence in the records we find in the historical archive. Like Wong's male narrator, Kingston's female narrator recollects and transmits the individual and collective memories of Chinese immigrants. She reconstructs the stories of her forefathers and brother, as well as experiences of other men outside her family, creating thus an intricate web of transgenerational memories.

As Aiming Cheng considers *Homebase* to *reclaim America* as a home for Chinese families, for Elaine Kim *China Men* portrays "the [Chinese] heroes who lay claim on America" (212). Accordingly, in one of her scholarly contributions to *Chinese Railroad Workers in North America*, [1] Pin-Chia Feng underscores that *China Men* reenacts in effect a counter-history of official US narratives of the past. Chinese American literature, and hence the literary trainscapes portraying the construction of the transcontinental railroad play a critical role in underscoring those historical imaginations placed at the margins. For Lee, the train trope is in fact the narratological element that sets the stage for these historical re-enactments, which "have been otherwise made invisible." (266) She offers furthermore a keen understating of the railroad in *China Men.* For the author, "Kingston represents the railroad as *narrative*" (267; emphasis added). This narrative is constructed upon a system of signifiers that correlate the naming and claiming of the Chinese's fundamental role in the history of US with their erasure and omission in the national imagination.

There is one particular literary trainscape in "The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains" that makes the authors' claims obvious, re-writing the unwritten racial story of the inauguration of the First Transcontinental Railroad in 1869: "when the engine from the West and the one from the East rolled toward one another and touched." (Kingston 145) "The transcontinental railroad was finished," the narrator goes on to describe. "The white demon officials gave speeches" in which they underlined how the "The Greatest Feat of the Nineteenth Century" and "in the History of Mankind" could "only" have been done by "Americans." Next, a photograph is taken so as to commemorate the extraordinary occasion. "*While the demons posed for photographs, the China Men dispersed,*" the story continues. It is little surprise that "*Ah Goong does not appear in railroad photographs.*" (145; emphasis added)

Displaced wage workers, technological innovation, and the recognition of the greatest accomplishment of the century in racist key are fused in this literary trainscape. Particular to it, furthermore, is the fact that the moment has been framed in time and for generations to come in the form of a photograph, itself an innovative technology of the epoch for preserving the moment. Apparently transparent and straightforward, this visual archive documents the happening of the *wedding of the rails* itself. As a means of stor(y)ing the past, the photograph portrays a historical truth, one that, when perceived from Kim's, Feng's, and Lee's considerations, must however be explained from the elision and suppression of those absent from it.

Kingston's literary trainscape has a bearing on the enforced removal of the Chinese wage workers' significant contribution to US economy. Their physical effort cutting and chipping away through the Sierra Nevada was going to make it possible "to cross the country in a matter of days instead of months," allowing people to travel faster and easier across the country's continental expanse, costing less to merchants to transport goods from one point of the country to another and beyond (Chang et al. 2). Hence, Chinese railroad builders helped modernize the United States through the transcontinental transport technology. The photograph not only documents the inauguration moment of this exceptional industrial achievement, its literary trainscape also showcases the exemplary omissions enabled

and conjoined in the historical imagination of 'the greatest feat of humankind'. As described by Li, the section dedicated to Grandfather Ah Goong in the Sierra Nevada Mountains "is a chapter that exactly makes up the historical loss the Chinese of America have suffered" (490). The taking of the photograph condenses and simultaneously restores this historical loss by underlining the 'dispersal of the Chinese' as the scenery (not) captured by the camera.

As a result, the photographic trainscape brings to the fore a historical 'truth' that, paradoxically, makes visible the process of invisibility that Chinese railroad workers underwent once their work was no longer relevant to their host land, for many of whom it was to become their unwelcoming new homeland. Their *dispersal* together with Ah Goong's *absence* from the picture/s are underscored moreover through speech acts that emphasize how *Only Americans could have done it.* Kingston words echo journalist Samuel Bowles's remarks, who in 1869 stated how the transcontinental railroad was "a triumph of the American people" and asserted "no other people than ours" could have accomplished it (qtd. in Chang et al. 19). Kingston's decision to capitalize "Only" reveals with a sarcastic tone what Lee has so acutely underscored: the presence of the railroad represents "the cause and sign of Chinese American erasure." (266) The visual archive and the written speech act thus conspire together to remove and obliterate the Chinese from the big picture so that Only Americans could be recognized – i.e. *seen* – as those responsible for the Greatest Feat of Humankind. It is not a coincidence that Bowles's book, from where Kingston draws her inspiration, is entitled *Our New West*.

A picture is said to be worth a thousand words. Here, ironically, the photograph, a source of power for constructing master narratives of the past, calls for masking and silencing. In the words of Pin-Chia Feng, the picture "references a glaring historical injustice in need of redress."

3. Back into the Future

Invisibility and historical injustice are two of the manifold experiences associated to the train-trope in African American literature as well. Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2017, is emblematic thereof. The novel tells the story of young Cora, a third-generation plantation slave born to and raised at the Randall brothers' cotton plantation in the southern province of Georgia in the mid-nineteenth century. One of the narratives that introduce the reader to Cora's story is that of her mother Mabel, who decided one day to escape from the cotton prison and flee to the North. Mabel did not take her daughter with her. While growing up motherless, Cora resists the plantation logic, sustained by the enslaved human capital that sows the crops of this violent plantation economy, and becomes the sole proprietor of her life when she decides to run with Caesar, another slave. Like her mother before her, she escapes determined to arrive at those states up North where the right to live as a free wo/man regardless of the color of a person's skin is respected and advocated for. Cora flees from the South to the North via South and North Carolina before Ridgeway, her hunter, finds her for the first time and takes her to Tennessee, straying her from her original path. Before and after this moment, when she escapes from him and flees next towards Indiana, Cora uses not only her feet, legs, and the totality of her body and mind during her endless exile, but also, as the title implies it, the underground railroad.

A freedom movement that began in the late 1830s, the Underground Railroad (URR) represented a "political position" (LaRoche xii) that helped runaway slaves to escape from inhumane captivity enforced on them in the South's plantations. The URR was no ordinary railway system. It was actually *not* an actual railroad at all nor an ordinary train with a steam engine, railway tracks and wagons, stopping at train stations to un/load goods. Rather, the "Underground Railroad" refers to a system of clandestine routes, safe houses, and a network of individuals who worked together in order to aid black slaves in their journey up North (Shadd et al. 17), be it by supplying housing arrangements, food, transportation means, or new identities. As a result of the new transport technology of the time, that is, *the steam locomotion*, "the name

'Underground Railroad' caught on," affirm the authors of *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop, Toronto!*, "and was used by abolitionists as a metaphor to describe their activities in assisting slaves." (Shadd et al. 17f.) The term first appeared in 1839 in an abolitionist newspaper, leaving no definite trace of who coined the term. From then on, it has been frequently used as a figure of speech in reference to the organized assistance it offered slaves in escaping their lifelong bondage in the South (Schulz, "The Perilous Lure").

As a consequence, between the 1830s and the end of the US Civil War, steam locomotion and imageries of freedom were co-drafted as indissoluble in the minds and actions of slaves, maroons, abolitionists, plantation owners, and slave catchers alike. The URR-trope synonymized train "stations" or "stops" to the safe houses; in turn, "cargo" and "freight" became synonyms for the runaway human capital; and "stationmasters" and "conductors" developed into metonymies for the white, black, and Native American people who put their own lives at risk for the slaves' right to freedom (Shadd et al. 18). Quakers from Ohio, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass are in fact distinguished conductors of the URR.

Across the border between the slave-free North and the plantation-driven South lay promises of liberty and autonomy. Ralph Harrington asserts that the nineteenth-century railway system represented a groundbreaking symbol of progress, "promising economic and social betterment, democracy, energy, freedom" (229). Even though the author is referring to the social innovation provided by the modernization of transport technology in Victorian societies, his connotations can certainly be stretched in reference to the nineteenth-century slave plantation scenarios in the United States. *Democracy*, *freedom*, and *prosperity* do, indeed, underscore the tangible meanings ascribed to the industrial metaphor of the Underground Railroad. As it was suggested by Whitehead's abolitionists of New York, "any colored person became magically free once they stepped over the border." (94)

Nevertheless, to cross the threshold at work between freedom and captivity meant enduring the difficulties, life-threatening risks, and the endless exile, together with the uncertain future at the desired destination that the decision to flee from the plantation economy involved. In this sense, the railroad withholds a substantially different meaning when explored against the history of slavery in the United States. As Cheryl J. LaRoche maintains, "the Underground Railroad movement nags at the nation's psyche." (1) It "nags," hassles, and lastly confronts those imageries of freedom inherent in the URR because they are also indivisible from the counterpart experiences of captivity, violence, and injustice endured by African Americans riding it – as embodied by Cora herself.

Embraced by the title, Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* is a literary trainscape from the beginning to the end. The novel is a story-in-motion, of being on the move and still bonded to captivity while escaping from it. In these dialectics of im/mobility, freedom (or, at least mobility toward it) has been made possible because of the URR. The underground railway system shapes the pace and nature of Cora's journey by framing it with experiences of imprisonment, exile, and interrupted escape. As a result, her story is one of un-arrival on account of the stories of im/mobility she endures as a runaway slave. "Between departure and arrival, in transit like the passenger she'd been ever since she ran" (Whitehead 215), Cora hides in attics and basements; runs through the woods and across the swamps; is transported in a wagon after her slave catcher captures her the first time; and after the URR takes her to South Carolina, she works as a free woman under the alias "Bessie," first as the hired help at the Andersons household, later as a live African stand-in-statue at the Museum of Natural Wonders. At the end, Cora flees once again from Ridgeway upon iron lines of the Underground Railroad.

Hence, the URR constantly cuts across the plot. It checks the tempo of Cora's fight for freedom while unfolding a social world defined by exploitation and violence, captivity and racism. Cora herself is not oblivious to the dialectics of im/mobility that the Underground Railroad offers her. "Whether in the fields or underground or in an attic room, America remained her warden" (Whitehead 207), she confides in her readers.

The Underground Railroad was the engine driving her through the corners of this "labyrinth of bondage." (48)

The URR was and remains to this day a symbol to freedom seekers and enablers in a country where racism continues to mark the social, political, and economic tissue of the nation. Cora's story illustrates it as a trope of resistance in antebellum US slave and escape narratives, by which African Americans sought to find a way to flee from exploitation in an oppressive and inhumane economy so as to belong to the Northern states as free human beings. Very much like the literary trainscapes in Wong and Kingston, which demand recognition and visibility, the URR, too, in its own declamation of racial oppression of African descendants, dwells deep and strong in the national imagination. In its wake, we are left with a historical imagination that, like the Asian American, has been articulated at the margins not only with oral histories, laws, newspaper articles, and scholarly treatises dating back to its very origins in the first half of the nineteenth century, but, of course, by contemporary literature as well. [2]

Whitehead's narrative stands out in this literary historiography due precisely to his take on the Underground Railroad's "fantastical infrastructure" (Schulz, "The Perilous Lure"). The acclaimed author's "wildly inventive" novel, as acclaimed by *The Observer*, finds its ingenious approach to black history and its relationship to technology in the train-trope. Whitehead imagines a past that is defined by the forthcoming and not-yet-existent technology—not a real railway system, but a network of people and means of transportation. Throughout the novel, however, the Underground Railroad appears as summoned from the future, that is, in the form of a genuine steam iron horse, built underground and ridden over actual railroad lines, rumbling and whistling on its way from one underground station to the next—almost as a subway train were it not for its nineteenth-century setting.

In her study of the (underground) railroad in literature, Zabel engages how the train-symbol is used by twentieth-century African American writers in a way that distinguishes itself from other American writers. For Zabel,

> [w]hen there is a train in the text, instead of being an object symbolizing progress to which an author has either a positive or negative response, the train most often symbolizes an interstice in time and space that transcends chronological history. (5)

The author's understanding of the train-trope is insightful. Written over a decade before *The Underground Railroad*, her affirmation is quite fitting for scrutinizing Whitehead's novel. Otherwise said, Whitehead's URR-trope is an excellent illustration of Zabel's keen affirmation. His inscription of a futuristic train in America's slave-past constitutes the narratological quintessence of his Afrofuturistic narrative, [3] by which linear temporal dimensions (i.e. past-present-future) are merged into one single and unique instant, disrupting the temporal continuum. More precisely, the presence of the Underground Railroad in Whitehead's novel is the narratological element *par excellence*, an interstice that fuses and alters the plot's time and space, creating instead a parallel universe: as though the past were a memory of the future. This is accomplished across the novel in its entirety and Cora's first vision of the steam-engine's greatness best illustrates the use of the railroad with the purpose of disrupting chronological time. Baffled in awe, she is mesmerized by its industrial greatness:

> The locomotive was black […] 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. (Whitehead 83)

By representing US slave history through Cora's break from the plantation economy, the reader is transported to nineteenth-century America. At the same time, however, the plot is fueled by an actual steam locomotive and the spatio-temporal scenery is constantly altered by way of the URR itself. As a result, (the disruption of) time is transformed into a rhetorical tool, suitable for engaging themes

like structural racism and racial violence in the United States from a historical perspective that traces their origins back to slavery and African American resistance to it. Through this dexterous maneuvering of non-chronological time, we, the readers, experience an all too familiar and invariable present. As stated by Schulz ("The Perilous Lure"), "the story of slavery is fundamentally the story of America, and [Whitehead] uses Cora's journey to observe our nation." In this sense, the URR-trope annihilates time by narratologically inscribing historically inaccurate technology in order to explode and challenge the history of white supremacy in the United States.

Unlike Wong's and Kingston's literary trainscapes, deemed to unearth long hidden historical facts, the URR-trope entails instead an anachronic representation of the past. Yet each one of the Underground Railroad's train stations, as stated by Knowles, "reveals a possible configuration of race relations in America." As Knowles further posits, these relations could be as easily situated in the eighteenth century as in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries (163). Recalling the shooting of George Floyd and the many other tragic life-stories from which the Black Lives Matters movement has emerged, it is rather pertinent to add 'the twenty-first century' to Knowles affirmation as well. This way, Whitehead's Underground Railroad travels back into the future.

4. The symphony of reminiscence upon the rails

So far, I have approached Asian and African American literary trainscapes so as to portray how labor and slave-plantation economies, mobility, and the new railway system interlock at the train-trope in nineteenth-century US historical imagination/s. As a way of concluding this tracing of inter-American rail intertextuality, I would like to draw once again on Zabel's consideration of the train-trope as disruptive of chronological time in literature. In my reading, this view is, in fact, not exclusive to African American literature and can be usefully applied to literature south of the border as well.

In *Los cuatro espejos* (1973) by Afro-Costa Rican Quince Duncan, the train-trope is indispensable to the deployment of the plot, whose story is persistently carried from the present to the past, and back to the present again in order to question the relationship between racial premises and national belonging in twentieth-century Costa Rica. Although the literary trainscapes sketched in Duncan's novel do not portray a futuristic railroad like Whitehead does, the train that travels between San José and Estrada in *Los cuatro espejos* stands, like the URR and the Chinese American train-trope, as a gateway to freedom and recognition. This time, liberation is sought not from slavery, but from the psychoemotional crisis (Martin-Ogunsola 9) that overwhelms and cripples the Afro-Costa Rican protagonist. Thereby, the erasure of the Afro-Caribbean labor diaspora's contribution to the modernization of Costa Rica's economy is alluded to tacitly.

The novel starts when, after attending a conference on ethnonational minorities at the National Theater in the capital of San José, Charles McForbes, an Afro-Costa Rican from Limon, wakes up the next day and, submerged in a state of invisibility, cannot see his face in the mirror. The second time he looks into the mirror, he is still submerged in a state of blindness. When he attempts to see himself a third time, he realizes that his face has blackened. His state of mind aggressively disintegrates henceforth because of this unrecognizable reflection materialized in the mirror-heterotopia. [4] Drawing on the parallels between Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Duncan's *Los cuatro espejos*, Dellita L. Martin-Ogunsola comments on the mirror as the medium that reveals heretofore masked racial identities. In her words, "McForbes is blind as well as invisible because his face, which has no distinguishing features, dissolves into darkness." (10) From this moment on, the protagonist wanders in a sort of urban Odyssey searching for his sanity and his identity. This search is the organizing principle of the novel (Jackson 173).

Los cuatro espejos is in fact a paradigmatic example of the catastrophic psychological effects of what W.E.B. Du Bois termed *double consciousness* at the beginning of the twentieth century.[5] Charles, a light-skinned Afro-Costa

Rican of Caribbean descent, does not recognize himself as black. An educated landowner from Limon, he imagines himself as a white-mestizo rather than as a Costa Rican of Afro-Caribbean origin. On this day, however, the image reflected in the mirror challenges Charles as he becomes a "character who literally and figuratively confronts his reflected self." (Martin-Ogunsola 9) Growing up in a mestizo society whose racial cartography has been ideologically whitened and discursively imagined as of European ascendence (Ravasio, *Black Costa Rica* 51-61), Charles imagines himself and, subconsciously wishes to be, non-black. Hence, caught between two seemingly dissimilar identities, i.e., *black* and *Costa Rican*, Charles's double consciousness materializes in the mirror-heterotopia in the form, first, of invisibility and then of blackness, a sequence that results in his loss of self.

Complementary to Du Bois's double consciousness, the protagonist's fall into madness is best understood in light of what Frantz Fanon (*Peau noire, masques blancs* 1952) described and explained as the psychological alienation Afro-descendants have historically endured due to the discursive hegemony of European colonialism. In Fanon's words, Charles has internalized and assumed both an attitude and a way of thinking and seeing that are, in essence, white constructs (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 148). His character is the literary embodiment of this "psychoexistential complex" (14), which culminates in his incapacity to see himself in the mirror mainly because what he sees is the reflection of an unrecognizable self. Drawing on Fanon, we can conclude that Duncan has transposed a sociopolitical discourse to prose fiction, in which Charles's competing Afro/Costa Rican double consciousness had long provided him with a white mask for his black skin.

In a desperate act of self-preservation, the protagonist boards the train in San José in order to return to Estrada, his hometown in Limon, and to cure the "spontaneous" blackness that has brought him to the edge of madness (Duncan 109-118; ch. VIII). Here, the train becomes the most appropriate means of transportation, permitting the protagonist and his readers to travel to the past so as to take care of the present and cure the future. Following Zabel, the train-trope appears here as a narratological strategy that neutralizes, suspends, and reverses the linear dimensions of time in order to articulate a non-chronological storyline so as to reconstruct Charles's memories and thus cure his identity crisis. In this sense, the train trip annihilates time and space so as to enable Charles's "process of self exploration" (Persico 16).

The locomotive transports the protagonist's body from the interior of the country to the Atlantic province. While aboard the train, and with every blow of the railroad's whistle, Charles has an episode of remembrance that transports him figuratively to the past. Therefore, the train trip facilitates both a territorial displacement and a temporal one. It carries Charles emotionally to those reminiscences that his memory had chosen to suppress and that the mirror image has so violently brought to the surface. Here, the narratological features of non-chronological time correspond to one of the most elaborate schemes of the novel. In effect, the novel's readers have to actively reconstruct Charles's life-story, which is built upon various other storylines that continually intersect, intertwine, and construct the background of his identity crisis, set not only between San José and Estrada but also between Limon and the Caribbean islands. The trainscape-chapter therefore connects Charles's psychoemotional breakdown to his departure from Estrada (identified as his cultural uprooting) and to his subsequent rooting in San José—a displacement that equates an attempt at whitening his heritage. Charles's mobile spaces of the past – the train ride to the capital's hospital, his ex-wife Lorena's sickness, her death – are inscribed here as the foundation of his troubled double consciousness, which nonetheless lend meaning to his identity crisis once they are put in relation with the broader narratives of his familial memories, localized between Limon and the Caribbean archipelago. The train journey becomes hence the im/mobile space for coming to terms with his black reflection by recalling the generations that preceded him. As a result, Charles understands the ride back home as a century-long journey ("parecía un viaje a lo largo de mil siglos" [Duncan 111]).

Like Wong and Kingston, Duncan interlaces

the figure of the railroad with the narrator's familial stories, specifically those of his Jamaican forefathers. In so doing, other accounts of collective departures and arrivals are reconstructed – this time between the Caribbean archipelago and the Central American isthmus –, which precede and thus define him. These are traced back to the story of his successful Jamaican grandfather, Papa Saltimán, who exhorted his descendants to deny their blackness and to avoid marrying black women, encouraging them instead to espouse mulatto or white women so as to climb up the social ladder: Hay que subir de color para escapar de esta cochinada en que estamos… Hay que ir blanqueando, esa es la solución: hay que ir blanqueando (Duncan 115). [6]

While Charles's self-assigned white mask can be traced back to his grandfather's beliefs, his psychological cure, on the other hand, interlocks with the memories of his father Pete. After Saltimán's death, Pete fell into misery and poverty in Limon but still sacrificed his body's strength at every cost so that his son could get a better education in San José, master the official language, and have a better future. Charles remembers his father's insistence in erasing Saltimán's wrong assumptions so as to instead help him affirm his blackness proudly: "Charles, usted es negro. Papá Saltiman era un pobre tonto." (Duncan 115) [7]

All of these memories, superimposed and bounded together by the train ride into memories and territories of the past, explain the troubled psychology behind Charles's mirror-heterotopia. During the train ride and between the spatio-temporal jumps inscribed by the locomotive's *pitazos*, Duncan is constantly confronted with the depths of his denied identity. "¿Nosotros los hombres negros?" (114), he asks himself shocked while conversing with another black man traveling from the city to the Caribbean coast, as though the "black" and the "me" implied by the man with "we" were inconceivable to his sense of self. His uneasiness to assume his origins reveals his psychological whitening: "mi piel: pucha, no es negra. Es decir, si no fuera por mi pelo y mis facciones, yo podría pasar en cualquier parte como blanco-mestizo." (114) [8]

Charles's mental conflict slowly becomes untangled with every new confrontation, with every new question and answer that he engages within his mind by the whistle blowing up his memories. Reminiscing, Charles tries to comprehend the precise moment and the particular reasons that made his dreams and ideals come in conflict with his blackness. He continually asks himself: "¿En qué momento preciso perdí mi propia identidad?" (114) [9]

Similar to Kingston's picture of the wedding of the rails-scene, the trainscape-chapter frames the erasure –or better said, the whitening– of Charles's blackness. This white mask has been conceived by Charles as necessary in order for him to survive and thrive among the capital's elites. Not only does Charles recognize himself as white-mestizo, he also expects all others to perceive him as such (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 163, n. 25). Dorothy Mosby, echoing Charles's words quoted above, has coherently described Duncan's novel as a novel of passing. By contextualizing the author's production within Costa Rican literary historiography, she has defined *Los cuatro espejos* as Duncan's second novel of Afro-Costa Rican identity (Mosby, *Quince Duncan* 74). [10] Rightly asserted by Mosby, Charles's story portrays the psychological struggles that Afro-Caribbeans have endured in their attempt to integrate successfully into mainstream Costa Rican mestizo culture. In this sense, the train-trope's distortion of time not only guides Charles's personal self-exploration. It alludes as well to the broader historical imagination concerning Afro-Caribbean migration in the Central American isthmus at the end of the nineteenth century and the Costa Rican generations of Caribbean origin that were assimilated to the hegemonic culture of the twentieth century. In the words of Alan Persico,

> [t]he journey should not be interpreted as an individual struggle alone. It is a statement concerning the plight of Blacks in Costa Rica on the one hand, as well of the contributions that Blacks have made … on the other. (16)

As I noted before, the train represents the most appropriate technology for curing Charles's doubly fragmented sense of being,

[11] a technology and a space that makes him whole again. This is so because the trainscape-chapter, with its temporal breaks enabled by the iron horse, projects, in all its semantic strength, a historical meaning concerning the nineteenth-century Afro-Caribbean diaspora and the conjunction of labor mobility, modern capitalism, and transport technology.

The building of the railroad to the Atlantic in Costa Rica was, very much like the transcontinental railroad in the US, built by non-white wage workers. Although Chinese and Italian laborers were also contracted for the job, it was mainly emancipated Afro-Caribbeans, mostly from Jamaica, who arrived in Limon since 1872 to lay the railway lines. Parallel to the construction of the railroad, the Costa Rican nation-building process matured into a narrative for which claims of an exceptional racial homogeneity became one foundational pillar (Putnam 142). During the ideological whitening of the national social cartography, black migrant workers were tolerated. Their work was deemed as a "mal necesario" (Alvarenga 4) in order to enter the grand narrative of progress, modernization, and industrialization through the building of the railroad that would facilitate exporting coffee to various markets across the globe.

Once the railroad was completed in 1890, many of the black workers moved on to work at the United Fruit Company (UFCo.) and, like the Chinese railroad builders in the United States, became farmers. At first, land acquisition had been facilitated by both the Costa Rican government and Minor C. Keith, the US entrepreneur who was in charge of the building of the railroad and established the UFCo. The objective was to keep these workers from emigrating and thus to lure them into sustaining the enclave economy (Chomsky 28). Thanks to black agency in the industrialization of transport technology and in the consolidation of the banana enclaves, Costa Rica's export economy thrived in the first decade of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, once civil and governmental fears of Costa Rica becoming an 'Africanized' country grew stronger from the 1920s onwards, institutional measures were taken to prevent further immigration, strip blacks of their lands, and complicate their integration into the nation's social fabric, thus hindering their upward mobility for decades to come (Ravasio, *Black Costa Rica* 75-84). It was not until 1949 that black people in Costa Rica were recognized as lawful citizens who were, from then on, assimilated into the hegemonic culture. As a result, Afro-Costa Ricans have "remained a footnote in Costa Rican history and a forgotten part of the national heritage." (Harpelle 183)

Against this historical backdrop, which resembles to a large extent that of Chinese migrant workers in the United States, the trainscape-chapter in *Los cuatro espejos* fuses the national and the diasporic unto the iron rails. The train-trope alludes tacitly to the diasporic origins of black Costa Ricans at the same time that Charles's memories upon it expose racial discrimination and the straining social conditions that black Costa Ricans had to endure in their struggle to become Costa Rican. Decisively, Duncan sets forth Charles as an example so as to make visible the psychoemotional hardships endured by generations of the Afro-Costa Rican minority in their attempt to belong to a nation that, as an imagined community, did not recognize their ethnocultural identity nor their antecessors' contribution to the modernization of the country. The trainscape-chapter brings this to the fore through the symphony of reminiscences that crowds Charles's self-exploration.

The train-trope is thus bound to collective and individual memories of displacement as migrant wage workers, like Pete McForbes, and of the new places of mooring created at the coasts of the Costa Rican Caribbean. It also refers to the Costa Rican generations born to Afro-Caribbean migrants who, like Charles, left the Caribbean province to forge a new home at the capital. Lastly, the train-trope represents the link to cultural and family roots left behind (Mosby, *Place, Language and Identity* 227). It is therefore apt to assert that the railroad provides Charles with an im/mobile space for recalling and coming to terms with his past, his history of routes and roots, and, above all, his negritude. His psychoemotional crisis finally winds down when, stepping out of the train, he attempts to understand when exactly he began to mask his identity. "En dónde, pues, había perdido mi identidad al punto de redescubrirla con tanto horror?" (Duncan 117)

[12] The protagonist's catharsis takes place as he travels through space and time upon the rail lines. At last, the railroad journey frees him from his psychoemotional captivity in the same way the URR assisted Cora free herself from her existential bondage.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, I have approached three distinct historical imaginations concerning labor mobility through a close reading of literary trainscapes. As I have argued, similar to how the transcontinental railroad triggered the migration of Chinese wage laborers to the United States and the ways the construction of the railroad in Costa Rica necessitated the immigration of an Afro-Caribbean proletarian workforce, the URR represents Cora's escape from the Randall plantation as a rebellious migration out of slavery (cf. LaRoche 105). In sum, in adopting the train-trip, all these novels comprise stories of origins, departures, and arrivals, while they also investigate the experiences of racism and inequality as a result of these im/mobilities.

A relational approach to the deep structure of sociohistorical meaning deployed by trainscapes makes evident how, despite the fact that processes of global change and industrial transformation are inherently bound to railroad imageries, Kingston's, Whitehead's, and Duncan's trainscapes deploy other narratives than those pertaining to the iron horse as a symbol of progress. In all of these storylines, the train-trope persuades us instead to reflect upon the stories of those mobile, marginalized minorities who sustained the modernization of the countries they have struggled to belong to. Hence, much like the way the photographic trainscape in Kingston unravels the Chinese as an un-portrayed shadow of modern America, Duncan's trainscapes-chapter creatively underlines how "Blacks are Costa Rica's double; they exist in the shadow of the country; they are irrevocably tied to her" (Ravasio, *Black Costa Rica* 233). Likewise, the URR-trope reveals another double of American historical identity that nags, as affirmed by LaRoche, at the nation's psyche. "If you want to see what this nation is all about," Lumbly the station manager tells Cora, "I always say, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America." (Whitehead 83) On her journey, Cora looks out the window and sees the shadow of darkness, a metaphor for the spatiality of slavery. Recalling Lee's assertion, trainscapes become in fact a narrative themselves, one whose deep structure of meaning articulates stories of im/mobility, of exclusion and erasure, and of the struggle for recognition.

By drawing on such similarities while considering the novels' core differences, overlapping narratives of historical injustice and struggle are identified. These are linked by way of the train-trope, the narratological constant among them, deployed moreover along the categories of repetition and difference. Difference is necessarily installed by the individual circumstances that situate the novels' plots in space and time. Repetition instead is provided by the trainscapes that frame exclusion, erasure, and discrimination as experiences lived similarly by the Chinese, African American, and Afro-Costa Rican protagonists in different spatiotemporal scenarios.

The various arrangements of mobile individuals, modern capitalism, and technology showcase a rail intertextuality whose historical narratives declaim equally ethnonational discrimination against the mobile Others: Chinese, African American, Caribbean. As a result, trainscapes construct a complex, multileveled narrative of historical references that confronts, refutes, and lastly exceeds the homogeneous and empty time of History (Benjamin 261). Above all, they compel us to replace the idea of humankind's progress in time with a cyclical understanding of historical movement. This movement is defined by the interplay that is woven between repetition and difference across the train-trope.

To conclude, I should add that the use of an industrial metaphor in these novels and my reading of them as a central driving force behind the narratives they put forth are by no means gratuitous. Far from that, this metaphor conjoins capitalism, labor im/mobility, and transport technology as the foundation of western Modernity and confronts the celebratory narrative of prosperity and progress ascribed

to it from the perspective of the human capital used to fuel the machine. As evoked by Cora, be it the forced uprooting for Africans or the labor diasporas of the nineteenth century, "[t]he engine [of Modernity] huffed and groaned and kept running. They had merely switched the fuel that moved the pistons." (Whitehead 205)

Endnotes

[1] *Chinese Railroad Workers in North America* Project at Stanford University (2012-2020) produced a comprehensive collection of sources and reflections regarding the construction of the transcontinental railroad by the Chinese. The collective research project resulted in important publications with the purpose of providing information on issues such as how many Chinese worked at the railroad, where they came from, how much they earned and how much of it was sent as remittances back home, their attempts at unionization, etc. For further information, see https://web.stanford.edu/group/chineserailroad/cgi-bin/website/faqs/.

[2] See "Escape from Slavery: The Law, Media and Literature" (LaRoche 3-15; Introduction), where the author provides a comprehensive literary historiography of the Underground Railroad, including not only narratives of slavery and of escape, but also newspaper articles, scholarly treatises, recollections of oral histories, and the drafting of laws on the subject.

[3] I follow here Whit Frazier Peterson's (2019) term "Afrofuturistic". For Mark Dery, who coined the term "Afrofuturism", this genre refers to "African American voices [which] have other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come." (182) These voices speak across various genres, trascending disciplinary boundaries from literature and music to film and art. In effect, Afrofuturism corresponds to a transdisciplinary genre (Elia 84) in which history, technology, and issues concerning black futures intersect. Drawing on Afrofuturism, Afrofuturistic historical literature is defined by Peterson as "literature that is concerned with black history, and the relationship technology has and has had to black life." For Peterson, this genre "fuses the past with the future" and introduces "modern-day technologies" as an inherent part of "narratives that would not typically include these things." (1)

[4] In "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault defines heterotopias as spaces that oppose utopias. Heterotopia corresponds to counter-sites that contest and invert the representation of real sites, while utopia represents unreal spaces because they stand as perfected versions thereof. As Foucault maintains, the *mirror* stands as a gateway between utopias and heterotopias. "The mirror is, after all, a utopia,", he states, "since it is a placeless place. … I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal virtual space … there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent…" He then defines the mirror as a *heterotopia* by stating instead: "it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there." (24) Similarly, Charles's image is defined here as a mirror-heterotopia because his black reflection stands as an un/real counter-site confronting and inverting Charles's utopian identity (whiteness) which, in order to be perceived as such, has to pass through the shadow of his own invisibility in order to enable him to see himself where he is most absent (i.e. in his blackness).

[5] In "Of our spiritual Strivings", W.E.B. Du Bois describes African American double consciousness as a "two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." (2) In Duncan's novel, the experience of double consciousness is depicted between the alleged incompatibility of being black and being Costa Rican, a discourse constructed by the liberal intellectuals of the nineteenth century (see Ravasio, *Black Costa Rica*, "Imagining Costa Rica: 'We are Different, We are White'").

[6] "We have to go up the color scale to escape from this mess we are in... We have to go on whitening, that is the solution: we have to go on whitening." (Translation is mine.)

[7] "Charles, you're black. Papa Saltiman was a poor fool." (Translation is mine.)

[8] "…. my skin: heck, it's not black. I mean, if it weren't for my hair and my features, I could pass anywhere as white-mestizo." (Translation is mine.)

[9] "At what precise moment did I lose my own identity?" (Translation is mine.)

[10] Mosby identifies *Hombres curtidos* (1971) as Duncan's first novel of identity. She describes it as being "the first novel to explore identity from the point of view of an Afro-West Indian subject in Costa Rica who evolves from foreigner to citizen, but yet remains an Other." (*Quince Duncan*, 50) Contrarily, the protagonist of *Los cuatro espejos* is a Costa Rican-born man of Caribbean origin.

[11] It is doubly fragmented because, as Martin-Ogunsola asserts, the title of the novel, *Los cuatro espejos*, refers to four different moments in the plot in which Charles sees his conflicted reflection. Each of these reflections portray four different identities that overlap one another and contribute to Charles's identity crisis. I quote here the author's catalogue of Charles's psychology: firstly, he is (1) "an Anglophone mulatto in a predominantly black milieu; (2) he is an educated landowner in a basically illiterate and poor community; (3) he is a *moreno* … in a white/latino society, but with roots in an English-speaking 'minority' group; and (4) he is a macho figure in a female-dependent world and an ex-minister of the Anglican Church with a tremendous guilt complex." (9).

[12] "Where, then, had I lost my identity to the point of rediscovering it with such horror?" (Translation is mine.)

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