

Paola Ravasio

This Train is Not Bound for Glory

A Study of Literary Trainscapes

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Introduction

...las Américas – Tierras de Lágrimas
Cubena, Chombo

The literary representation of the railway system is highly useful for visualizing mobility and the social world as correlated entities in the Americas. Understood here as the conjunction of the social and the mobile, *literary trainscapes* underscore modern displacement as being at the heart of a complex matrix of traits, patterns, and structures of societal (trans)formations. Deployed by the novels' own narrative textuality, trainscapes are constituted as an intertwining of pictorial representations constructed around the train. They are complex narrative nodes represented around the mobility of human and material capital by the railway system, which are both interdependent on the economies moving that capital. The following pages aim to demonstrate how trainscapes (also, *tsc*) correlate train-caused spatial and social im/mobilities by considering how the dynamic relations between bodies, movement, and money are depicted in the chosen narratives to be explored next.

The meaningful content literary *tsc* withhold regarding the correlation of the social and the mobile in different historical imaginations of the Central American region is composed across two overlapping arrangements. *Infrastructurally*, they depict scenarios, people, goods, and histories in movement conjoining the *train-people-money* triad across movement and standstill. *Informationally*, *tsc* deploy a circulation rhetoric (cf. Tsing 2002) where mobility encapsulates social content and dynamics across movement, economic exploitation, and political (ir)regulation. Under this framework of thought, *tsc* mirror Mimi Sheller's claim that "mobility systems are informational as much as they are infrastructural" (2014, 799) and are hence approached here as metaphors (from Greek μεταφορά) exemplifying systems of mobilities, immobilities and moorings (cf. Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). Understood as the transferal of a word to a new meaning, metaphors *bear* or *carry* (Gr. φέρω) a con-

notation that has been transferred from one significant to (Gr. μετά) the other.¹ In this sense, *tsc* are metaphorical insofar they *carry* the conjunction of the social and the mobile in the form of the *train-world*, which across these pages indicates the triad *train-people-money*. Here, the social is represented as a ‘hybrid geography of materialities’ composed by the interaction between machine-bodies-money, which coexists and is codependent with differentiated practices of mobility (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006, 14). As a consequence, literary *tsc* depict “social kinetics” (cf. Bryson 2003, 75) that reveal how mobility operates within fields of power, sketching how movement of human and material capital are represented both as products, as producers of power (Cresswell 2006). Trainscapes, therefore, are not reduced solely to the portrayal of the train, itself rather unlimited in its semiotic potential.

Representing modernity’s first mechanized mass transit scheme (Harrington 2000), the railway system revolutionized (that is, ‘annihilated’) the concepts of space and time in the nineteenth century (Schivelbusch 2014). Even though human mobility was just as central to ancient empires as it was to power structures of early modernity (Sheller 2014), the movement of people, information, and material goods underwent revolutionary transformations with the *iron horse*. In fact, “the train acted as a metonym for modernity – its very existence testified to the presence and legitimacy of the modern” (Aguiar 2008, 71), thus inaugurating modernity as “an obsessive march forwards” (Bauman 1990, 10). Like other systems of mobility, the railroad transported things and people from one place to another. What distinguished it radically from these, however, was the fact that *route* and *vehicle* became one and the same with the railway (Schivelbusch 2014, 16). While on the other hand, the lim-

1 In the *Poetics* (1457b), Aristotle defines metaphor as “the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy. [...] Metaphor by analogy means this: when B is to A as D is to C, then instead of B the poet will say D and B instead of D.”