



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: PICTURING AMERICA

MAKING TRACKS—ESSAY

Essay by Suzanne Ozment

Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Professor of English
University of South Carolina, Aiken

In 1876, less than fifty years after the first railroad lines were laid in North America, Walt Whitman composed a poem—"To a Locomotive in Winter"—that captured the power and energy of the train, the machine that Whitman hailed as the "Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power-pulse of the continent." As the art and literature of the past 150 years reveal, the railway has had a profound impact on Americans' sense of mobility and range of opportunities and on their thinking about time and distance.

Making Tracks includes two nonfiction books, a selection of poems, a documentary film, and a novel. The series opens with an account of the construction of the transcontinental railroad (*Nothing Like It in the World*), followed by a cluster of poems by nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets that offer views of trains and from trains. *Rising from the Rails* presents the stories of the black men—and ultimately women—whose work as Pullman porters not only shaped the quality of train travel in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century but also shaped the black middle class. The fourth work, *Riding the Rails*, is an award-winning film that tells the little-known story of the adolescents who became transients during the Great Depression. In the novel that closes the series (*Housekeeping*), the railroad exerts a powerful influence on the lives of the principal characters, who grow up near the tracks.

The images in the **Picturing America** collection suggest ways in which the railroad transformed the American landscape and helped determine where settlements and industry would develop. Several of the works listed are not directly related to the railroad (the photograph and painting of the Brooklyn Bridge, 13A and 14B, and the panel from Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series*, 17A) but are related to the larger theme of **Making Tracks**, either literally or figuratively.

**Stephen Ambrose,
*Nothing Like It
in the World: The
Men Who Built the
Transcontinental
Railroad***

In the building of the transcontinental railroad, Stephen Ambrose finds a striking example of American ingenuity, daring, and ambition. Ambrose begins his lively history by recounting how use of steam-powered rail transportation in the first half of the nineteenth century caught the public imagination and came to be identified with the progressive spirit of the American industrial age.

Following the discovery of gold in California in 1848 and the construction of the first railroad in the state in the 1850s, interest mounted in a transcontinental line that would link East to West. The route that was ultimately chosen was the one across the Great Plains proposed by a young railroad engineer and surveyor, Grenville Dodge. Despite the advent of the Civil War in 1861, plans proceeded to lay track from Omaha, Nebraska, to Sacramento, California. The Central Pacific Railroad of California, established in June 1861, moved from the West Coast toward the interior, while the Union Pacific Railroad, created a year later, ran from Omaha westward. Construction began in 1863; in early May 1869, the two roads met at Promontory Summit near Ogden, Utah.

In describing the monumental construction project, Ambrose acknowledges the greed and corruption of some of the railway magnates and the deception they practiced

on the government as well as the American public to ensure that the staggeringly costly venture was completed. He also notes the prejudice against immigrant workers and the dangerous, at times brutal, working conditions that resulted in untold numbers of job-related injuries and accidental deaths. He does not dwell on other attendant costs—Native Americans were displaced and dispossessed, wildlife all but exterminated in some areas, and the landscape ravaged. Instead, Ambrose focuses on how the feat was achieved and on the men who made it happen.

One of those men was the young Abraham Lincoln, a lawyer for the early railroad. Even before he saw or rode on a train, Lincoln championed railway development, convinced that the railroad would revolutionize transportation and communication in America. He saw it as essential to the development of the vast American territory. Other statesmen, financiers, and entrepreneurs shared Lincoln's conviction and played important roles in making the transcontinental railroad a reality: Grenville Dodge, Thomas (Doc) Durant, Theodore Judan, Charles Crocker, Leland Stanford, Collis Huntington, Brigham Young, to name only a few.

Ambrose charts the development of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific lines in alternating chapters, an organizational structure that corresponds to the "race" staged by the federal government between the two companies. Because financial incentives were linked to reaching an unspecified end point—an approach Ambrose labels "typically American and democratic"—the most pressing issue became speed of construction, not quality. Much of the track was so hastily laid, it had to be replaced almost immediately.

The scope of the project was daunting. It covered nearly two thousand miles, mostly across uninviting terrain where there were no white settlements (with the exception of the Mormon settlement in Salt Lake City). Thousands of men surveyed land, cleared roadbeds, built embankments, cut tunnels, built depots, and laid mile after mile of rail, braving climate extremes that ranged from numbing cold to searing heat.

Ambrose points out that this was "the last great building project [in America] to be done mostly by hand." The labor was supplied by Chinese and Irish immigrants, as well as by young Civil War veterans and freed slaves who were drawn to railway construction by both their need for work and their desire for adventure. And there was plenty of adventure to be had: Danger was inherent in the work, from blasting powder accidents and avalanches to gunfights among the workers and raids by Indians.

The construction of the transcontinental railroad was a remarkable accomplishment with far-reaching consequences. Through much of the book, Ambrose displays boundless enthusiasm for the project. As he researched railroad histories, read contemporary newspaper and magazine stories, and studied maps and photographs, he came to marvel at the vision of American railway developers, financiers, and lawmakers; the resourcefulness of American surveyors; and the genius of American engineers and inventors. Repeatedly, Ambrose boasts that there was "nothing like it" anywhere else in the world.

Several images in the **Picturing America** art collection relate to Ambrose's book. Alexander Gardner's photograph of Abraham Lincoln was taken in February 1865 (9B), two years after the transcontinental track began to be laid. N. C. Wyeth's cover illustration for *The Last of the Mohicans* (5B) reminds us of Native American displacement (although James Fenimore Cooper's novel and Wyeth's illustration for it are set in a different time and place). Albert Bierstadt's monumental panorama, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley* (8A), painted in 1865—when construction of the transcontinental railroad was underway—depicts a region of the country that became accessible because of the railroad but whose unspoiled beauty was threatened by it. *American Landscape* (15A) by Charles Sheeler shows the importance of the railroad to the development of industry and the impact of both on the landscape. In Sheeler's painting, the geometric shapes and somber colors of the massive industrial complex are reflected in the steely water of the canal even as the smoke billowing from the factory tower merges with the pale gray clouds of the sky.

Selection of Poems

The seven short poems featured in **Making Tracks** were written by some of the masters of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American poetry. Four convey the experience of traveling by rail, one evokes a vivid image of travelers in a crowded train station, and two describe the train itself.

Trains captured the imagination of poets early on. Emily Dickinson, known for seldom venturing far beyond her own quiet New England home and garden, nevertheless wrote one of the most striking poetic descriptions of the power of a locomotive in "I Like to See It Lap the Miles." She compares the energy and sounds of the train to those of a mighty horse that easily laps mile after mile, pauses to feed itself, maneuvers neatly around "a pile of mountains," slips through a narrow quarry, and speeds downhill on its way into the station, where it arrives as reliable and "prompt" in its appearance as a star.

Walt Whitman, another nineteenth-century poet, was also intrigued by the engineering wonders that made railway travel possible, and by the dynamism of the train. He addresses his words directly to the locomotive, which he describes as an animate being, with a "black cylindrical body," "great protruding head-light," and "ponderous side-bars" for limbs. Its "throbbing" implies a pulse; its "swelling pant" suggests breathing. Whitman sees the train as conquering its environment, as a symbol of mastery and domination. The sight and sound of the train pervade the atmosphere. The engine belches smoke and soot, undaunted by wind or storm. "[R]umbling like an earthquake, rousing all," its echo bounces back from the "rocks and hills." Whitman describes the transcontinental train as independent and unrestrained, "launch'd o'er the prairies wide, across the lakes,/To the free skies unpent and glad and strong."

Both "Window" by Carl Sandburg and "Night Journey" by Theodore Roethke offer a view of the natural world from the perspective of a railway passenger. In only three lines, Sandburg manages to make palpable the immensity of night as it appears beyond the train window.

In Roethke's poem, the speaker watches images of the natural world slide past the window of his Pullman berth as he travels westward. Roethke describes how railroad trestles are transformed into "bridges of iron lace" in the fading light. In the course of the journey, the scenery changes dramatically. A "suddenness of trees" is replaced by a lake and mountains draped in mist, which are succeeded by brightly lit ravines and gullies. The poem charts the physical sensations generated as the train's "rhythm rocks the earth." The speaker's body responds to the feel of sharp curves and to the vibration as the "wheels shake the roadbed stone." The short, even lines of "Night Journey" replicate the strong, steady movement of the long, cylindrical train.

In "Riding the A," May Swenson also describes the experience of riding a train, this time the New York subway. Swenson positions the words on the page to suggest the long, rocking line of the A train's cars as they roll over the rails. The poem is dominated by images of light and dark, of movement and touch. The speaker notes, "I sit/in a lit/corridor that races/through a dark/one." She compares herself to a ball bearing in a roller skate. The movement of the sleek train over the tracks reminds her of the blade of a new knife slicing a long black loaf of bread. The contact of the wheels with the rails suggests the coupling of lovers. All in all, the sensation is one she wishes "to prolong." "The station/is reached/too soon."

A father and son travel together in "January Chance," Mark Van Doren's poem about a missed opportunity. The railway car they share is confining, likened in succession to a well—albeit a "plush" one—to a cubicle, and to a prison. Their warm coach contrasts sharply with "winter sounding past" outside. Both the time and place seem conducive to closeness, to intimate conversation. Despite the insistent urgings of the howling wind, the bumping seat backs, and the creaking walls of the coach—that all urge the father to "begin," "to open the deep things"—he misses his chance as he drifts off to sleep in the "somnolent" atmosphere of the railway car.

In his title, Ezra Pound identifies a subway station as the setting of his memorable two-line poem, "In a Station of the Metro." With a concisely rendered metaphor, striking for its simplicity but profound in its ambiguous implications, Pound imprints in our minds an "apparition" of human faces as the bright features in a dark, teeming space.

Thomas Hart Benton's mural, *The Sources of Country Music* (18A), in the **Picturing America** collection depicts a lively scene of country musicians and square dancers in the foreground just as they might be glimpsed by passengers on the train speeding down the track parallel to them.

Larry Tye, *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class*

In 1859, less than thirty years after railway travel became available in America, George Pullman, a young entrepreneur from upstate New York, offered the first sleeper-car service. Pullman did not invent sleeping cars or even some of their best features; however, he did master the art of marketing a dependable, high-quality service package. The Pullman Company manufactured sleeping cars and rented them to railroad lines, complete with linens, soap, curtains, pillows, and an impeccably trained staff. At its peak in the mid 1920s, the company employed 12,000 porters who catered to 100,000 people a night on Pullman sleepers. In *Rising from the Rails*, journalist Larry Tye draws from his interviews with nearly forty porters and other railroad employees, as well as with dozens of their descendants, to recount the 100-year history of blacks working as Pullman porters.

George Pullman purposely hired blacks to work as porters—the darker their skin, the better, to ensure that they would never be mistaken for passengers. In the early years of the Pullman Company, he sought to hire former slaves, favoring those who had worked as butlers and other house servants because they had obliging manners and were practiced in being deferential to whites.

The position of porter was the best blue-collar job available to black men for decades, but the work was demanding and ill paid. Porters were responsible for a range of duties, including making up and tidying berths, steam-pressing clothes, and polishing shoes. They were required to master a fifty-page rule book, complete six days of training, pass a written exam, and provide personal references. Before 1937, porters worked as much as 400 hours a month and traveled as much as 11,000 miles for as little as \$10. The low pay forced them to rely on tips, which, in turn, may have promoted subservience.

With their tips, and in some instances a second job, many porters managed to make a decent living. Through their contact with well-to-do white passengers, porters' "tastes grew increasingly white and bourgeois." They adopted middle-class aspirations. Many owned homes and cars and saw to it that their children were well educated. Their travels broadened their perspective and made them more cultivated. When they returned from a trip, they brought back to their families and neighborhoods the latest magazines, books, music, and fashions.

For more than half a century, porters had little power to improve their pay or working conditions. That changed when A. Philip Randolph, a socialist activist who had studied politics at City College in New York, took on the cause of Pullman porters. Randolph helped organize the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925 and eventually helped the railroad workers gain higher wages, a reasonable limit on working hours, and fairer treatment. Following the example of Randolph and other leaders of the union, many porters were emboldened to become involved in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s.

The number of sleeper-car passengers declined in the 1930s and fell dramatically after World War II, largely because of a steady increase in the number of private automobiles and, ultimately, more affordable air travel. At the same time, more blue-collar jobs offering a good income became available to blacks. For all these reasons, the status of porters had diminished with their numbers by the time the Pullman Company ended sleeper-car service in 1969. Nevertheless, porters could look back on a proud history.

As Tye so aptly puts it, "The tale of [the] Pullman porters is, most of all, a story of America—of how one group, disadvantaged and powerless, learned to triumph in the sometimes brutal arena of American democracy."

In **Picturing America**, change in the life of African Americans is the subject of the small tempura panel captioned *The Migration of the Negro, Panel No. 57* from Jacob

Lawrence's sixty-part *Migration Series* (17A). The painting addresses the movement of blacks from the rural South to the urban North as well as their passage out of bondage.

Michael Uys and Lexy Lovell, *Riding the Rails*

Michael Uys says he was inspired by reading *Boy and Girl Tramps of America*, a 1934 book by sociologist Thomas Minehan, to investigate what had become of the adolescents who left their homes for the open road during the Great Depression. He sent letters to the editor of forty periodicals inviting communication from men and women who had ridden the rails as teenagers in the 1930s, and received several thousand letters in response. Ultimately, he and co-director Lexy Lovell focused their film on the reminiscences of ten people in their seventies and eighties.

According to the documentary, nearly a quarter of a million teenage boys and girls were transients in 1932. Many had been living in comfortable middle-class homes until their fathers lost their jobs and the family's savings. Once on the road, they confronted danger, cold, hunger, loneliness, and humiliation. Jobless and homeless, they begged for food and slept in hobo camps and relief shelters as they crisscrossed the country in search of opportunity.

In the film, we are introduced to Peggy DeHart who ran away from home at age fifteen following an argument with her father. Accompanied by a girlfriend, she rode the rails from Idaho to Wyoming before returning to her family.

We meet Clarence Lee, the son of a desperately poor sharecropper in Louisiana who at age sixteen is told by his father that he will have to look out for himself, and Bob "Guitar Whitey" Symmonds, a musician who set out from Washington to find adventure when he was sixteen and was still hopping freight trains at age seventy-two, when the film was made.

The documentary's ten subjects reflect on the social and political issues at the core of the Depression and describe what became of them after their freight-hopping days ended.

Uys and Lovell weave together archival newsreel footage with photographs supplied by their subjects to present a thought-provoking, deeply affecting record of a desperate time. An exceptional soundtrack features plaintive folk songs by legendary musicians such as Woody Guthrie and Doc Watson.

The **Picturing America** image *Migrant Mother* (18B), Dorothea Lange's 1936 photograph of a destitute woman and her three children, speaks volumes about the hardships endured by the victims of the Great Depression.

Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

Housekeeping is narrated by Ruth Stone as an extended flashback. Most of the story takes place in the remote mountain town of Fingerbone, Idaho, during the years of Ruth's adolescence.

Abandoned in one way or another by a succession of relatives, Ruth and her sister, Lucille, have found no security or constancy in conventional home life. Early in the book, Ruth describes the "spectacular derailment" that took her grandfather's life one "moonless night" when the "black and sleek and elegant" train on which he was riding plunged from the bridge into the lake near his house. Efforts to recover the bodies from the dark water failed, and townspeople lived with the awareness that a train full of people rested on the bottom of the lake. Some years later, Ruth and Lucille's mother, Helen, shares her father's watery grave when she commits suicide by driving her car off a cliff into the same lake.

Ruth and Lucille are cared for by their grandmother, and then, after her death, by two spinster great-aunts summoned to Fingerbone. Kind, but overwhelmed, they, in turn, send for Helen's youngest sister, Sylvie, who is in her mid-thirties and who, though once married, has been living as "a drifter" for the past decade.

Sylvie never complains or expresses a wish to return to her wandering life, yet she has difficulty from the beginning adapting to living in one, fixed place. Her love for her

nieces and her intention to care for them are evident, but the extent of her sacrifice is equally apparent. There are many signs of “her transient’s shifts and habits.” She is drawn to the train station, where Ruth and Lucille find her “studying the chalked list of arrivals and departures.” She becomes acquainted with female drifters who are passing through, on one occasion a woman traveling from South Dakota to Portland “to see her cousin hanged” whom she invites home to dinner. Sylvie never becomes housebroken. Months after she returns to Fingerbone, she continues to sleep fully clothed on top of the covers and keeps her belongings in a cardboard box beneath the bed.

Although more of her time has been spent in boxcars than in passenger cars, Sylvie describes to Ruth and Lucille the charm of railway travel: “They have heavy white tablecloths in the dining car, and little silver vases bolted to the window frame, and you get your own little silver pot of hot syrup.” As she talks, Ruth imagines herself and Lucille traveling on a train with Sylvie, but not in the dining car. “I saw the three of us posed in all the open doors of an endless train of freight cars—innumerable, rapid, identical images that produced a flickering illusion of both movement and stasis.” The girls have long been interested in trains and their mysterious passengers. Ruth recalls that she and Lucille “used to watch trains passing in the dark afternoon, creeping through the blue snow with their windows all alight, and full of people eating and arguing and reading newspapers.”

Sylvie is more at home in the natural world than in the family house. Ruth says that Sylvie “talk[s] a great deal about housekeeping,” but her heart is not in it. She ties a scarf over her hair and carries a broom; nevertheless, leaves gather in the corners of rooms, while squirrels and bats and sparrows inhabit the eaves and attic. Despite sporadic periods of concentrated effort, she cannot remain long indoors or sustain a conventional lifestyle.

Lucille goes to live with her home economics teacher, someone we assume values good housekeeping; but Ruth elects to remain with Sylvie. As readers, we are likely to identify with Lucille and the well-meaning townspeople in Fingerbone who are baffled by Sylvie’s eccentricities and cannot imagine an existence so far outside the bounds of customary life. But *Housekeeping* calls into question traditionally narrow views of homeless people, especially of women who choose to drift—of their motives, their values, and their connection to the larger homebound society.

In Edward Hopper’s *House by the Railroad* (16A), a large, empty Victorian house stands in the middle of a picture space dominated by grays and pale yellow. The plane of the house is intersected by a line of train track that stretches across the bottom of the canvas. The ornate architectural style of the house contrasts with the stark appearance of the tracks, the absence of vegetation, and the blank, cloudless sky. The sense of alienation and isolation emanating from the abandoned house belies the connectivity the railroad seemingly provides.

Suzanne Ozment is executive vice chancellor for academic affairs and professor of English at the University of South Carolina, Aiken. She holds a PhD in Victorian literature from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. In addition to publishing articles on Victorian poets and novelists, Dr. Ozment co-edited an anthology of fiction, poetry, drama and essays on nineteenth-century British work titled *The Voice of Toil* (Ohio University Press, 2000). For ten years she served as editor of the interdisciplinary scholarly journal, *Nineteenth Century Studies*. Dr. Ozment has been involved in public humanities programming for more than twenty years as a member of review panels for the public programs office of the National Endowment for the Humanities, as president of the board of the South Carolina Humanities Council, and as a presenter at dozens of community reading and discussion programs. She is the author of the 1996 ALA-sponsored *Let’s Talk About It* series, “The Nation That Works.”



Let’s Talk About It: Picturing America is a project of the American Library Association Public Programs Office, developed with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute for Museum and Library Services.



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT: PICTURING AMERICA

MAKING TRACKS—RECOMMENDED READING

The following works are recommended for those who would like to continue reading and discussing books on this theme:

Jeffery Renard Allen, *Rails Under My Back*. Using the railroad as a metaphor for connection as well as separation, this novel about the twentieth-century black experience in America focuses on two closely related families.

E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*. In this clever, penetrating novel set in the early twentieth century, fictional characters mingle with historic figures and participate in historic events. Much is made of the new modes of transportation at the time, including the biplane and the Model T Ford. The ever-expanding and steadily improving means of rail travel (long-distance trains, streetcars, elevated railroads and subways) prompt the narrator to observe, "It seemed to the visionaries who wrote for the popular magazines that the future lay at the end of the parallel rails" (80).

Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California*. The plot of Norris's 1901 novel centers around the conflict over land between the powerful Pacific and Southern Railroad and beleaguered wheat farmers in the San Joaquin Valley in the late nineteenth century.

Sonia Nazario, *Enrique's Journey*. Based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Los Angeles Times* series about a seventeen-year-old boy's desperate journey from his native Honduras to find his mother in North Carolina. Enrique risks traveling on the top of freight trains for more than half of his 1,600-mile trip through Central America to reach the United States border.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *Across the Plains: "Leaves from the Notebook of an Emigrant between New York and San Francisco."* In the first chapter of this collection of essays and occasional pieces, the famous Scottish novelist and poet Robert Louis Stevenson recounts his experience in 1879 traveling on an emigrant train from New York to California. He offers a vivid and engaging description of the crowded, miserable conditions on board; of the railway workers and his fellow passengers; and of the changing landscape through which he passes.

Studs Terkel, *Interviews with Louis Banks, E. D. Nixon, and Ed Paulsen in Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. In his 1970 collection of Depression-era remembrances, the incomparable oral historian Studs Terkel records revealing conversations with Louis Banks, who spent his adolescent years living as a hobo; Ed Paulsen, who train hopped across the country as an itinerant laborer; and E. D. Nixon, who was a Pullman porter as well as a labor and civil rights activist.

William T. Vollmann, *Riding Toward Everywhere*. Prolific journalist and novelist William T. Vollmann, who has written extensively about poverty and violence in America and is known to immerse himself in the situations and settings of his subjects, describes his modern day experience of train hopping and living as a hobo.



Let's Talk About It: Picturing America is a project of the American Library Association Public Programs Office, developed with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute for Museum and Library Services.