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## Rewriting Institutional Narratives to Make Amends: The French National Railroads (SNCF)

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### Abstract

In 1940, France, threatened with total annexation by Nazi Germany, signed an armistice agreement with Germany that placed the French government in Vichy France and divided the country into an occupied and unoccupied zone. The Armistice also requisitioned the rolling stock of the SNCF—French National Railways—which became a significant arm in the German effort, transporting soldiers, goods, and over 75,000 deportees crammed into merchandise wagons toward Nazi extermination camps. Between 3,000-5,000 survived. Of the roughly 400,000 SNCF employees, Nazis murdered a couple of thousand for resistance or alleged in subordination. Railway men who resisted the Germans also often has to resist their employer as well. After the liberation of French at the end of WWII, the company—not simply the brave individuals -- received France's Medal of Honor for its alleged role in the ultimate defeat of the Germans. This medal, along with other postwar propaganda in the form of films and books, instilled a singular narrative about the company's heroic wartime role. This narrative continued uninterrupted until the 1980s. Those who returned, along with the relatives of many who did not, increasingly challenge the company's simplified wartime narrative. In the 1990s, lawsuits against the company began in France and continue through 2016 in the United States. In response, the SNCF made efforts to intertwine story of deportation with the company narrative of resistance. One key forum for this attempt was a colloquium held in 2000 at the *Assemblée Nationale* in Paris.

That colloquium is examined here through the lenses of three forms of narrative analysis: structural, functional, and post-structural. Each analytic frame illuminates different challenges to that colloquium's attempts at revising history through altering a mystified institutional narrative. Through the analysis of this case, the author establishes the power of these analytic frameworks when examining problematic discursive spaces that hold in place master narratives and limit moral work.

### Key Words

power; imperialism, postcolonial; resistance; conflict; resolution

### Recommended Citation

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## **Introduction**

Between 1941-44, the French national railroad— the SNCF (*Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français*) –under the direction of the Vichy Regime transported 75,721 Jews to the German border where German train drivers carried them to Auschwitz. The mostly foreign-born Jews found themselves stripped of their identities, and crammed into merchandise cars without food, water, and light. They rode terrified on the horribly rocky voyages often lasting thirty-six hours. Those who survived the journey arrived partially dehumanized and fatigued, and, of those, most met their death soon after through starvation, overwork or in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Of those roughly 3,000-5,000 who did return, decades would pass before they regained their voices and before the world would acknowledge the indignities they suffered and the lifelong trauma that ensued. The descendants of those who perished would also wait decades before speaking. Lawsuits and public complaints against the company began after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when transnational Holocaust litigation proliferated. The SNCF, which had sustained a story of wartime resistance as it grew into a world-renowned rail company, had to face the tragic role it played in the Holocaust.

This article examines one of the SNCF's attempts to integrate this unfortunate chapter into its history. For that purpose I utilize three forms of narrative analysis that, as a set, provide important insights regarding the politics of revising histories and the impact of doing so poorly.

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Narratives do moral work (Nelson, 2000). Narrative analysis makes this moral work visible— amplified voices can be acknowledged and shifted to make room for marginalized voices and previously delegitimized ways of speaking. Narratives and discourse are also highly political means through which relationships are negotiated (Cobb 2013). This narrative examination demonstrates how such negotiations occur, providing a guide for transitional justice practitioners exploring productive spaces for individuals and communities in the wake of mass atrocity.

Three forms of narrative analysis—structural, functional, and post-structural—illuminate the complexities of these narrative shifts and the subtle ways in which institutions resist the change. I selected these forms of narrative analysis because each builds on the one preceding it, while speaking to its limitations. A *structural approach* helps identify the actors and their roles. *Functional analysis* helps consider the dialectic between master- and counter-

narratives and the politics of the process. *Post-structural approaches* push beyond the binary framework of victim-perpetrator and instead embrace the complexity of complicity and moral responsibility in ambiguous and dangerous times. In post-structural forms of narrative analysis, we cannot analyze the SNCF's efforts without looking at the politics of our own meaning-making and present day actions.

### **The Colloquium**

A mounting number of survivor lawsuits and new incriminating historical findings catalyzed an important event in Paris June 21-22 in 2000. *L'Association Pour L'Histoire Des Chemins de Fer en France-AHICF* (Association for the History of Trains in France) led a colloquium of approximately two hundred historians, researchers, archivists, librarians, journalists, SNCF staff, members of the train union, and a few survivors to discuss the SNCF's "true" role in the war. The title of the SNCF colloquium was *Une entreprise publique dans la guerre la SNCF 1939-45* (A public company in the war: the SNCF 1939-45). The title highlights the positioning of the company as "public," stressing its government ownership during the war. This helps position the State and the Germans, rather than the SNCF, as responsible for wartime actions.

The event was held at the Assemblée Nationale, a very prestigious Paris location, and conducted by René Rémond, President of the Académie Française. The event, closed to the public, was transcribed by Marie-Noelle Polino of the AHICF and published by Presses Universitaires de France (AHICF 2001). All excerpts in this analysis will be taken from this work.<sup>1</sup> The success of the colloquium is evaluated based on how well it addresses previously marginalized narratives and promotes the agency of all people to engage in meaning making, rather than just those in power (Cobb 2013). The background information stems from over 120 interviews conducted by this author in France and the United States with survivors, lawyers, SNCF executives, ambassadors, journalists, historians and others, as well as archival work and general research.

### **Background on the SNCF Conflict**

In contemporary battles over the SNCF's wartime role (including many lawsuits between 1991 continuing into 2016), critics often call the SNCF an outlier, arguing the company is one of the few remaining entities to tell the truth about its nefarious role in the

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<sup>1</sup> Note: all translations are my own.

Holocaust. In actuality, the SNCF's moves towards transparency did not lag far behind efforts in this direction by so many countries as well as specific institutions worldwide. Specifically in France, after the war, President Charles de Gaulle and many others encouraged silence about the previous Vichy period under Nazi rules. François Mitterrand, French President between 1981 and 1995, had his own Vichy connections and became infamous for his protection of collaborators. The SNCF's story emerged just as the Swiss Banks and other companies faced litigation; Steven Spielberg had begun collecting thousands of Holocaust testimonies, and trials had been launched against French collaborators. The SNCF did not eagerly revise its wartime narrative, but it did eventually do so and while the state-owned company never compensated individuals directly, to say it still lies about its past would be untrue. In spite of its efforts, however, the company finds itself in the news often for its wartime role—facing legislation in multiple U.S. states designed to boycott the company unless it makes amends.

Of all the myriad of market actors who provided everything, from barbed wire to Zyklon B, why so much modern focus on the French railroad company? Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg considered railroads indispensable in a way few others could be. He points out as an example the over forty parallel rail tracks at Auschwitz alone (Hilberg 2003). The Nazis relied heavily on other train companies (French, German, Hungarian and others). However, the SNCF provided thousands of railcars and, as a result, most paradigmatic images of boxcars used to transport Jews that appear in Holocaust museums and iconography worldwide have the SNCF's name painted on them.

The survivors of this deportation living in the United States and their supporters continue to cry out for transparency, apology and compensation from the state-owned and operated SNCF (Bretholz 2014). At the end of the war, the official SNCF's story about itself was quite simple and pristine, and the company received a medal of honor for Acts of French Resistance. The famous 1946 French war movie *La Bataille du Rail* (the Battle of the Rail) supported that view by offering many glorious images, some allegedly original, of acts of sabotage by railway workers.

Right after the war, the government commissioned Paul Durand to interview railway workers that self-identified as participating in the resistance. Durand's government-sponsored study on the resistance within the SNCF was published and became the master narrative (Durand 1968). At that time, no one was commissioned to study the deportations. Cobb (2013) would call the company's story about itself a "thin narrative." She notes how these thin narratives can be hegemonic when anything that challenged them would be considered

unpatriotic (2013: 28). This was surely the case for those observing the SNCF's story about itself. As one survivor noted, "You must understand the conflict is quite delicate because the *La SNCF? C'est la France!*" The SNCF is France.

The heroic story lasted uncontested publically for over five decades until the above-mentioned Colloquium in 2000, in which the French government and the SNCF broadened the company's history beyond the works of Durand and *La Bataille du Rail* to include its role in the transports of deportees to their death. Cobb (2013) notes that identity transformation requires, "a new setting, new interactions and new neural connections" (106). The colloquium provided the opportunity for all three.

### **Narrative Methodology Applied**

This article examines – using narrative analysis – how this Colloquium advanced a new narrative, a more integrated story about the SNCF during the war, while still maintaining State control. To demonstrate this simultaneous narrative development and narrative control, the article employs three forms of narrative analysis. The *structural* portion of this analysis examines the Colloquium using a version of Greimas' Actant Analysis, chosen for its strengths in deconstructing cultural myths. The *functional* analysis considers the dialogic interplay of master and counter- narratives in the context of the colloquium. And the *post-structural* analysis embraces inter-subjectivity and reflexivity that structural and functional analyses avoid. This analysis not only illuminates this case, but also supports the use of narrative approaches as a vital and viable means to unpack politicized spaces so they can do the moral and historical work they intend.

### **Structural Analysis**

A structural analysis makes visible the parties and their roles in the conflict. Louis Hébert (2011), when introducing Greimas' Actant Analysis (Hébert 2011) model, specifies six actants for purposes of that analysis, namely:

1. Subject
2. Object/Goal
3. Adjuvants/Helper
4. Receiver/at the effect of Destinator
5. Sender/Destinator
6. Opponent/Traitors

## Subject and Object

While an actant analysis usually considers human actors, this analysis expands the definition of actors to include corporate entities:<sup>2</sup> making the SNCF the *subject* requires a personification of the company (an approach also welcomed by Herbert (2011)). Not to mention that, at the time of the 2000 event, most wartime executives and railway men were dead—anyone else would have been quite old. Few living humans could have served as *subject*. In fact, the SNCF 2000 Colloquium positions an anthropomorphized SNCF as the *subject*. The *object*, or goal, of the SNCF Colloquium stated by the hosts, was the advancement of French society and the development of the SNCF's historical narrative. In the words of former SNCF President Louis Gallois, the event would reaffirm French society's commitment to "progress together towards a society freer, more just, and more fraternal." René Redmond, the *Président de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques* of the *Académie Française*, in his own opening statement reaffirmed this view: "...my role is limited to positioning this colloquium at the service of the historians working to advance their work on this subject" (AHICF 2001: 13).

## Adjuvant/Helper

By helping to organize the event, sponsoring the location, and providing the opening remarks, the French state, via the *Académie Française*, the AHICF (French historical train association), and attendees served as the *adjuvants* or helpers. The positioning of the French state as the *adjuvant/helper* for the SNCF has special importance. While before 1937 many independent railway companies operated throughout France, from that year on the SNCF became to only operator of trains in France, as a state-owned company. After WWII the SNCF defended legally its role during the German occupation on the basis of Article 13 of the 1940 Armistice between France and Germany, in which the latter placed under its own control all French state-owned and operated divisions, especially those of transport and communication (Convention Franco-Allemande d'Armistice 1940). Therefore, by assuming the role of *helper* in this colloquium, the French state backed its railroad.

The AHICF, an organization dedicated to French railroads history, assisted by creating an event that would help the company make progress towards writing a new history

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<sup>2</sup> The question of corporate personhood is more fully addressed in my dissertation Federman, Sarah. 2015. *Aller Simple (One-Way Ticket) Corporate Accountability for Mass Atrocity: A Study of the French National Railroads*. Diss. George Mason University.



about itself that would encompass both the collaboration with the Reich as well as the Acts of Resistance that made up its WWII history. The attendees served as *adjuvants* in their mere willingness to witness or participate in the evolution of the company's historical narrative about itself. Their willingness to evolve with the company would allow any progress in this regard to be shared by the French community.

### Sender

The *senders* (or instigators) of this SNCF colloquium could arguably be two French citizens who were invited and attended the event. Firstly, Kurt Schaechter, who secretly copied 12,000 documents in a French archive in Toulouse. These documents demonstrated after the liberation that the SNCF received payment for Jews transported through deportation trains that left from different locations in France toward Auschwitz. Secondly, and to avoid any minimization of issues, Serge and Beate Klarsfeld, Nazi Hunters and Holocaust activists, painstakingly documented the names and convoy numbers of all 75,721 Jews deported. While Klarsfeld later exonerated the company, at the time of the 2000 event, he chastised the company for its acceptance of payment for deportee transports.

### Receivers and Destinators

The introductory statements to the 2000 Colloquium by Louis Gallois and René Redmond control very closely the junction between the *subject* and the *object*. The *destinators* were the SNCF, the AHICF, and the *Académie Française*, because this group determined the setting and the format of the event. French culture takes history and a historical approach seriously and the event was held in accordance with these standards.

According to SNCF president Louis Gallois and *Academic Française* president Réne Redmond, the *object* (or goal) of the event was advancing French society. Therefore, French citizens and culture would be the *receiver* of the event. This makes clear that the SNCF colloquium was not designed to help survivors process their pain by having an opportunity to face the company directly.

Gallois also identified as a *receiver* the collective memory:

The collective memory was held by some and obscured by others, probably because the pain was too big. Today we must face the contrast between the shadows and light without masking the emotion that grips us and with all the respect deserved to the victims and heroes known and unknown. (AHICF 2001: 3)



In this fragment Gallois sets the frame: in this discussion one would be asked to face the painful along with the heroic truths about the company's role during the war. He also asks that respect be maintained for the emotion of those attending the conference as well as the heroes and victims. Collective memory would be the *receiver* of the event.

It may be noted that the SNCF, as a *destinator* via Gallois, positioned the *object* of the event to face the dark and light spectrum as represented by the victims and heroes. The gray zone, which forces the collective memory to address the SNCF administration as part collaborator/part victim, was not addressed here.

## Opponents

*Opponents* would be the collaborators and politicians who kept the company's painful history silent. Those who controlled the conversation within the conference, silencing and cutting off survivors, also made it harder for the SNCF colloquium to reach its goal. Interviews revealed other opponents to shifts in collective memory. Certain Jewish SNCF workers and French citizens refused to speak about the company's tragic history and became visibly angry when the topic was discussed. Two Germans living in Paris expressed extreme hostility at the mere mention of the subject, arguing that the topic ought to be settled by then. They found continued discussion pointless. However, these discussions occurred only in 2011, so it would not be far-fetched to assume that these forces were at play at the time of the colloquia.

## From Actant to Functional Analysis

The actant analysis permits the description of the players, the actors (actants), and setting of the play. But no one attends the theater to read the Playbill—actant analysis leaves us only more curious. We want to see the interplay *between* parties, not simply a description of them: a functional analysis must follow to show the dynamics between the actants (or actors). The following functional analysis examines how the SNCF colloquium created a new master narrative that carefully controlled tragic stories. Counter-narratives – stories that orient towards or respond directly to the master narrative (Cobb 2013) – are selected, considered, and absorbed almost as a stamp collector might consider new additions to his collection. Stories, to be honored, however cannot just be organized neatly on a page and glued down.

Stories are not just told; they are created in the telling. The way the Colloquium was convened and conducted strongly controlled the telling. The functional analysis will demonstrate how the Colloquium served as a master narrative's response to a counter-

narrative in a controlled setting. The organizers helped revise the institutional history, but prevented the full expression of victims.

### **Functional Analysis**

The actant analysis describes the cast and the setting. The functional analysis moves into what Bamburg (2004) would call the *story performance*. In this performance, actants gain their existence. This functional analysis considers the event as a dialogic event working to integrate a master narrative with a powerful counter-narrative. The story of resistance had to integrate the story of the deportations. Cobb (2011) labels such a process *narrative braiding*. She describes narrative braiding, “as a kind of discursive practice that would support the reduction of marginalization of delegitimized groups, contributing to the emergence of their *voice* as well as the critical intelligence needed for any subsequent negotiation *between* identity groups” (2011: 12). In other words, at its best braiding includes previously sidelined peoples and stories, increasing their voice and providing them a means to contribute to future negotiations over meaning making. The Colloquium, because it was presided over by an official body equally promoted and constrained this process, carefully interweaving different stories into one palatable and organized whole. In its attempts for clarity and tidiness, it sidelined some of the messiness and complexity that post-structuralism more easily embraces.

The functional analysis helps reveal the struggle for power over a given story. The SNCF’s past was haunting it globally, making international contract bids difficult to win. It had a lot money and prestige at stake in terms of how its story was told. Owning the history formally was a way to regain control of the brand image. This section argues that the Colloquium was designed as much to allow the company to reposition itself amidst attacks as to advance historical understanding. To make these politics visible, the master, counter, and narrative defenses will be outlined.

### **SNCF Narrative Overviews**

- **Master**: Throughout WWII’s occupation many brave SNCF workers sabotaged the trains and participated in many passive acts of resistance. In 2011, the SNCF office in Paris had a wall-sized bronze commemorative scene depicting some acts of resistance. The company also proudly displays medals received for wartime acts of bravery. The irony being, of course, that those who resisted the war effort risked losing their jobs with the SNCF for doing so.

- Counter: The SNCF willingly participated in the transport of deportees. Acts of sabotage rarely were designed to save deportees. The company itself collaborated with the Nazis, and any heroic act of sabotage was, in fact, an act against the SNCF as part of the German war machine.
- Counter-Counter: The SNCF was forced to comply with the German demands. The terrible things the company had to do ought not to overshadow the heroism of some of its employees.

### **SNCF Master Narrative**

The SNCF colloquium aimed at maintaining control over the master narrative by legitimizing the counter-narratives. In other words, the SNCF would have the best chance of controlling its history if it faced emerging counter-narratives directly and integrated them formally. The SNCF would have taken a far greater risk had the company continued to tell the WWII story solely as one of resistance and not integrated its role in the deportations. As the counter-narratives mounted from survivors and emerging documents, the company's silence or denial could have led people to consider the company not only as a past collaborator but also as a current one. Those who participate in denial or deliberate silence can easily be accused of collaboration. Owning the company history does not protect it from lawsuits or backlash. The formal event simply served as an opportunity to take control of the narrative, whatever it was. Because of the strengths of the train unions and the pride that many SNCF workers and French take in the company, there was understandably resistance to integrating the stories of the deportations.

### **Counter-Narrative**

Invoices for Jewish deportations found by a civilian survivor delivered a crushing blow to the master narrative. Kurt Schacheter visited the Toulouse Archives repeatedly one summer sneaking out documents each evening, photo copying them, and returning them the next day. Eventually Schacheter and his assistant gathered 12,000 documents, some of which demonstrated that the SNCF issued invoices to the Germans for the transports done within France. He launched a lawsuit against the State. In the 1990s, the SNCF's independent study surfaced other evidence about its role in the "Final Solution," demonstrating that SNCF senior executives, railway workers, and materials all assisted – at least did not seem to resist – the deportation and ultimately death of tens of thousands of Jews. Their hands may have been tied, but the results were the same. This evidence was and continues to be used against

the SNCF in lawsuits and legislative debates. Lawsuits continued and the company jockeyed to construct a legal defense, which required adjustment to undeniable challenges to the master narrative.

### **Master Narrative's Defense**

Ultimately the SNCF's best narrative defense was to integrate this unfavorable storyline. The company could no longer risk having others surprise the company with tragic evidence about its past. It positioned itself as a truth-seeking enterprise, transparent about its past. In 1996, the company funded an independent analysis and report by the CNRS (*Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*), an independent research body. Henry Rousso, the head of the institute, assigned Christian Bachilier to spend what became four years in the SNCF Archives and elsewhere piecing together the history of the company. Rousso rejected the first draft, claiming the accusations the SNCF destroyed documents could not be substantiated. The resulting 900-page document, while available in French on the Internet, remains mostly unedited and difficult to understand. Bernard Emsellem, head of Corporate Responsibility of the SNCF and a French holocaust historian conceded in interviews that, while the report made efforts to be transparent, its difficult format makes it of little use.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, in many interviews the SNCF still points to the study when people suggest secret machinations. The mere act of conducting the study was a way of not only opening the past but also owning the entire scope of possible counter-narratives and avoiding surprise attacks.

### **Narrative Braiding to Create a New Master Narrative**

The SNCF 2000 Colloquium created a formal environment during which participants would undergo a formal process akin to the already mentioned narrative braiding (Cobb 2013). The presiders over the conference cautiously handled the counter-narratives and historical findings. Like archeologists reassembling bones of an excavated dinosaur, the participants of the Colloquium would build the "true" story under the auspices of the company's guidance and leadership. This controlled the tone of the event and continued to place the SNCF and the French state in charge. If it could not control the company's past, the French state could at least formally construct a new story with others. In this way, the dominant narrative would still be owned by the State. Henry Rousso, presiding President of CNRS, articulated this braiding attempt:

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<sup>3</sup> Interview. 24 March 2011 and 16 April 2011.

How do we take into account the two memories, the two experiences, the two traditions knowing that they come from the same company? Not everyone in the company had the same experience. (AHICF 2001: 331)

Rousso's comment highlights what he sees as the conference's challenges, namely, handling two different clashing narratives. The dominant and previously entrenched narrative was that the SNCF was a company with many workers active in the French Resistance. SNCF workers and members of the union have been historically, and remain today, very proud of their association with the company. The SNCF and much of the French culture held this narrative from the end of the war arguably until 1992, when Kurt Schachter uncovered the incriminating documentation in the Archives of Toulouse.

The counter-narrative holds the SNCF responsible for transporting Jewish deportees to the German border in sub-humane conditions and with clear foresight about their ultimate fate. SNCF staff drove the trains, SNCF equipment was used, and SNCF workers observed the conditions of the victims. Questions regarding the extent of collaboration at the executive level still remain. Rousso acknowledges both narratives and the challenge of addressing another radically different story, one is of heroism, and one is of cowardice. With over 500,000 employees at the time of the war, history surely has room for both. The SNCF, like France, continues to struggle to balance stories of Resistance alongside tales of collaboration.

Jean-Pierre Masseret, Secretary of Defense of Former Combatants, stated that the goal of the SNCF colloquium was to create a new master narrative that would reconcile two competing "images" of the SNCF, one of the heroic French Resistance and the other of trains that brought people to the camps and in most cases to death. He believed that with sixty years perspective, historians could handle this task objectively and dispassionately (AHICF 2001: 8).

In this sense, the SNCF colloquium had a very clear function. The way in which it was positioned and conducted "through an objective and dispassionate process," alludes to the kind of control that would be exerted. Masseret positions the SNCF colloquium as an attempt to undertake an almost detached scientific approach. The narrative braiding process would "fix" the problem of the competing stories. In this attempt to braid scientifically, the AHICF, French state and the SNCF did not allow a public space where people could be heard. The rewriting of the master narrative seems almost a farce when one looks at the participants. The invitees included approximately fifty SNCF staff, historians, archivists, roughly three survivors and about five representatives of the deportees. For every individual

marginalized voice (the emotional voice of a victim or representative) there were at least five, if not ten, representing either the master narrative or the master paradigm to historical process.

While the SNCF colloquium did serve to amend a gross oversight in the company's historical account of itself, victims still did not control their own stories—at least not publically. For this reason, narrative braiding that takes place outside of the public space, or without the public's participation, can be problematic. Controlling the story in this way arguably re-victimizes the victims. They cannot regain their humanity through having their experiences publically legitimized and included in the history. In 2002, the SNCF included more survivor testimonies in materials and commemorative spaces. Serge Klarsfeld, for example, together with the SNCF presented an exhibit entitled, "French Children of the Holocaust." The exhibit existed for multiple years and was shown in railway stations in Paris and throughout France (Paris St. Lazare, Lyons Par-Dieu, Limoges, Clermont-Ferrand, Marseilles, Rennes, Lille, Strasbourg, Perpignan, Nice, Toulouse, Nancy, and many more).

This raises the question of whether formal efforts at narrative braiding ever really work or if they inevitably oversimplify the past. Better spaces to handle contradictory stories would embed participants in the complexities and make room for emotions without the teleology of a tidy story. The teleological pull – the purpose driven nature –to establish a true story moves towards a kind of closure that is antithetical to self-expression and growth. Emotions must be allowed to be expressed without resolution. There must be room for the offensive comment and shameful acknowledgement, otherwise liberation remains delayed. Otherwise, the story, and therefore its actors, still reside under the thumb of tyrannical rule.

### **Braiding Facts and Emotions**

This formal historical conference was more prepared to handle dissenting facts than dissenting emotions. Facts can be integrated into a timeline; emotions upend the whole timeline framework. They change the tenor of the discussion and raise questions of accountability and restitution due. The SNCF had to handle multiple truths, as well as balance emotions of pride and shame. How would a historical conference respond to raw anger, not always organized into coherent arguments?

While at the event, survivor Schachter fought repeatedly to be heard and was frequently cut off. He often came across as aggressive during the conference. In the context of a formal and controlled colloquium, his emotional outbursts arguably made it easier to dismiss his comments. Several times he was asked to stop speaking or to wait until later in

the conference to address certain issues. In the transcription of the event, only he and Serge Klarsfeld appear to have exclamation points after their comments, suggesting their impassioned intercessions.

Herman (2000) notes how narrators tailor their stories to fit into social norms and shifting contexts. In this conference, counter-narratives, but not counter-emotions, were included. Ideally, a reflexive loop would have been created whereby victims and their families would have been able to express more fully their emotion around the issue and then had the SNCF representatives respond emotionally to those emotions.

As late as 2011, the SNCF's integration of emotion into revised wartime histories seemed limited. For example, in January 2011 for the Bobigny ceremony, the company filmed survivor stories about the trains (Ville de Bobigny, 2011). They practically do so with enthusiasm. Even survivor narratives have been placed neatly into videos given to the French press. For example, in one video Charles Zelty, (deported in Convoy 70 on March 27, 1944) pulls out a shoebox and recounts to the SNCF-sponsored interviewer with a full smile how they were lined into the cattle cars. The expression on his face seems to be one of joy. His eyes sparkle as if he is telling a story about a wonderful family memory, not his survival of genocide. Perhaps including survivors is a way of subduing rage rather than embracing it.

### **Braiding Facts and Memory**

The 2000 Colloquium also struggled to handle situations in which testimony conflicted with historical "truths." For example, after testimony from child survivor Catherine de Bechillion regarding the arrest and deportation of her father, Klarsfeld made an historical point of clarification. His comment was perceived as an attack on the testimony. In response, Michèle Merger of the CNRS says:

I would like to return to the importance of testimonials. I believe that we are not, in our position as historians, to carry judgments on the value of testimony. A testimony is a testimony. I believe that we do not have to look carefully at the truth of these comments and that each testimony ought to be considered as it is. (AHICF 2001: 166)

Merger encourages the conference attendees to allow testimony to stand independent of truth. Testimony can stand on its own, but the insinuation here is that it may not be included as part of history. In doing so, he allows the space for multiple counter-narratives and challenges the conference's opening statements that one truth be found and clarified. The potential pitfall of Merger's approach is that testimony could be left outside of the master narrative of 'truth.' This is probably why Klarsfeld disagreed with Merger's attempts to separate survivor



testimony from historical facts. Nazi Hunter and lawyer Serge Klarsfeld responds, “It is completely the work of a historian to critically examine testimony.”

The SNCF colloquium served as a solid early effort to acknowledge and integrate the counter-narratives to the SNCF’s tales of heroism—even if it sidelined victims’ perspectives. Since 2000, the company has initiated or participated in numerous other events recognizing the tragic part of its history. The SNCF along with Serge Klarsfeld and his organization the Sons and Daughters of the Deported (founded in 1979) created an exhibit about the children of the Holocaust displayed in train stations throughout the country. Still an historical account, this exhibit made room for more narratives. Additionally, the company also co-sponsors the annual commemoration held at the Shoah Memorial in Paris during which all 75,721 names are read aloud over roughly 72 hours. Many train stations now have plaques that commemorate the deportees. The plaque mounted at the station in Noé convinced Kurt Schechter to drop his legal case against the company.

While it cannot control the details of the past, the SNCF can integrate and own counter-narratives in a way that actually can serve as a layer of protection. By embracing a more balanced story about the past under the auspices of the Académie Française, and other respected groups, there is an assurance that the historical revisions made will be more accepted than had survivors simply told the story on their own.

### **Diaspora Participation**

The SNCF’s efforts to conduct a study, open archives, hold a colloquium, create commemorative plaques, and sponsor ceremonies and sites demonstrates a willingness to embrace the counter-narrative to its story of French Resistance, or at least elaborate it. So why continue boycotts and lawsuits within the USA? From a narrative perspective, the SNCF’s approach has two primary limitations. Firstly, their efforts have been made primarily in France. Survivors abroad do not see plaques, exhibits, or hear about the study. Some survivors, like Rosette Goldstein living in Florida, no longer speak French and so cannot even read those reports.<sup>4</sup> Given the mass diaspora incited by World War II, had the company’s management believed that reaching the survivors with the new story would be the ultimate goal, more work would have been done to translate and disseminate the company’s efforts. In addition, the colloquium overly controlled the narrative braiding process, impacting the ability of the narratives to do their moral and social work.

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<sup>4</sup> Goldstein, Rosette. Phone Interview. 27 May 2011.

Stories disconnected with the master narrative remain outside the discussion just as the survivors remained outside the colloquium. Roe (1994) would call these *non-stories* – neither part of the master or counter narrative; they had no impact on the metanarrative produced by the integration of both. In 2000, still no space existed for survivors to express rage, anger, or distrust in an environment not controlled by the company. Rather than trying to produce a nicely braided history, the post-structural approach makes room for thousands of stories.

### **Post-Structural Analysis**

The post-structural analysis considers the contexts of narrative production and the ability to encourage reflexivity and moral judgment through the inclusion of multiple perspectives. The functional analysis could only point to limitations of the colloquium's discursive space by highlighting which narratives were included and excluded from the narrative space. It could not, however, go deeper into the issues of politics and power differentials that lock these dynamics into place. The post-structural view of the SNCF colloquium that follows leans upon the work of María Pía Lara's work in *Narrating Evil* (2007) and Hilde Lindemann Nelson's narrative approach to ethics addressed in *Damaged Identities* (2001).

### **Avoiding Complexity**

The colloquium's effort to construct a master narrative limited a more nuanced view of the past and did little to increase reflexivity in the present. Simple narratives about the past assume that the world of yesterday was less complex than the world in which we find ourselves today. Looking for a simple story suggests a belief that the past must somehow be inferior (in the sense of being dull, dim, simplistic, or organized) or less complex than the present.

Every day we fill thousands of web pages, books, news broadcasts, scholarly journals and more as an attempt to describe and understand the world in which we find ourselves. Ought not the past be allowed to experience as much if not more mystery? The eighty survivors interviewed for this research had a much more textured view of the past than many of their second-generation counterparts. They saw themselves as well as their perpetrators caught in the web of their times—everyone was desperate to survive and, as one survivor put it, “people were selling other people all the time. Life was very cheap during the war.” The SNCF, a tragic part of that process, neither caused nor impeded the dynamics already at play.

### Rewriting History vs. Moral Work

A post-structural look at the SNCF's role during the war and the colloquium asks to what extent our analysis of these events encourages greater reflexivity. Can our analysis consider the dynamics within cultures that permit and perpetuate violence? The SNCF had and still has considerable stake in the outcomes of such analysis. Any guilt ascribed to the company could translate into settlement fees or boycotts. With the company's "life" on the line, it becomes difficult to frame the story in the disclosure terms and with the aesthetic expression necessary to form a moral and critical view (Lara, 2007). In the 2000 colloquium, the stories of horror were not presented freely nor were the discussions open to the public.

Nelson (2001) argues that community ethics are at stake when narratives are not allowed to do their full narrative work. How could the transcript of the conference be morally edifying for the *narrative agents* if most of the stories were left untold? How can one "orient to the good" (Nelson 2001) if the full terrain is not presented? Victims of the deportations or their families can do little to reconstruct their identities when not invited into the history in their full-unedited expression. A post-structural analysis demonstrates that while the event integrated a counter story, it could do only partial work. Nelson argues that good counter narratives free individuals as well as "the entire group whose identity is damaged by an oppressive master narrative" (2001: 183). Through the colloquium, the State and the SNCF acknowledged greater participation in the genocide, but through the controlled nature of the discussion they could only partially liberate those harmed.

### Limiting Reflexivity

Restricting the way, number, and kinds of stories that could be told, the SNCF colloquium also limited the potential moral development of the participants and of the French society as a whole (Disch, 2003). Without the ability to hear fully formed stories or at least fully representing these stories, participants could not imagine themselves in the past, not knowing how the war would end. Ideally, historical explorations would occur in the spaces Arendt hoped they would—a moral space in which we could grapple with atrocity, moral dilemmas and compromising. In the colloquium, history was not seen as a moral space, but rather as something to find and proclaim. From a post-structural perspective, however, the process itself calls forth moral challenges and transformation in the participants. Good storytelling forces listeners into the dilemmas of those who tell the tale. Ideally, a dialogic space designed to do moral work would leave participants as befuddled as Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy leave their readers. There is not always a simple way through.

Because the colloquium was not designed to determine the SNCF's liability—that would be court's job—greater nuance and confusion could have been permitted through extended, uninterrupted, storytelling. As it occurred, by the mere nature of the colloquium, all stories presented were in response to the master narrative. People could only respond to the framework in which they found themselves. In such a forum, the full liberation of French society that the presiders sought would be unlikely. Lara (2007) argues that stories need to be heard and considered “through our judgment” so that “the story can take its place in history” (119). If the stories cannot be fully heard, then they cannot be judged, and any history produced will be lopsided and do limited moral work. Lara (2001) points out that, for Arendt, mastering history requires these moral judgments. Without stories you cannot create history, without history you cannot ascribe developed moral judgments and without these judgments the morality of the society cannot advance.

Perhaps this helps explain why the SNCF faced much criticism within France until it engaged with different kinds of commemorative efforts. Once it began funding commemorative sites, events and other efforts that amplified the stories of those who suffered, the rage in France over the SNCF subsided. The fight continued in the United States, however, where the dialogic interplay between the entities that participated in the atrocity and its victims had fewer extra-legal forums in which to expose stories and create history through moral judgment.

### **Conclusion**

Ideally, the moral work of history production extends beyond judging the past. A well-formed historical process transforms the moral environment of the present. Sitting safely seven decades after the events, knowing now who was “bad” and who “won” makes judgment too easy and does little to force us to consider the moral dilemmas of the modern era that may be similar to those faced by our predecessors. Through my five years of research on the wartime history of the French railroads and the post-conflict debates over that role, I have been repeatedly challenged morally. I began my research livid with the railroad company and then discovered its post-conflict efforts. After that realization, I considered the contemporary legal efforts against the company excessive, only to find that their work resulted in a 60 million dollar settlement signed in December 2015 between the French government and the U.S. State Department. This money covers survivors and descendants

living around the world who faced persecution in France and who were not included in other French compensation programs. This settlement proved symbolically important to some of my interviewees. How then could I deny its importance? At the same time, many survivors exonerated the company based on their first-hand experience with the complexities of wartime France. Passing judgment on efforts, or lack thereof, became difficult, so as a result I committed to populating the narrative space with previously marginalized narratives. Additionally, through the encouragement of survivors, my work broadened the discussion beyond the confines of the French national railroad, asking us to consider the ways in which market actors participate in mass atrocity today. Moral judgment turns to the present as much as toward the past. I include this personal journey to demonstrate the kinds of shifts in moral judgment that can occur when engaging with historical research free from agenda – and seeking to amplify versus control narratives.

The three forms of narrative analysis used to consider the colloquium designed to braid the SNCF's tale of resistance with its role in the transport of deportees, demonstrated how historical revisions can support moral work and where they can thwart it. The actant analysis revealed who originated the process and for whom it was designed—what was at stake. The functional analysis demonstrated the efforts to shift the master narrative by absorbing the counter narrative in a way that was overly controlled and organized. While this historical process was done in the name of advancing French society, the post-structural analysis demonstrated how the limited inclusion of survivor participants and the control of their voices restricted work that could be done. There was more space for speaking and being heard (Cobb 2013). Condemning those who came before without considering how society remains implicated today, addressing harms and improving the future exhausts participants with little reward.

The colloquium of 2000 served as an important milepost in the journey towards demystification of a major organization and of a crucial period in the life of a nation. Through the examination of this effort at historical revision, this article also demonstrates the contribution of narrative analysis to post-conflict truth-seeking efforts specifically, and historical revision more generally. Examining critically such dialogic spaces through narrative frameworks allowed us to analyze whether individual narratives that could have helped us do this work were present or restricted. Researchers considering the health of narrative spaces want to watch for the amount of control being exerted on the space, asking themselves, who is allowed to speak? What ways of speaking are privileged? Is emotional expression discouraged? What kinds of emotions are permitted and who decides? Even in

meetings or events, aiming to create safe spaces can simply create constrained ones. Freedom of expression is required to shake off the reverberations of tyranny. Spaces that stifle voices or try to seek closure show us that more work still needs to be done. When we find ourselves trying to conclude, it is an indicator that we are not yet free.

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