

***The Polar Express* and the Disruption of Childhood: A Dystopian Allegory**

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Chris Van Allsburg's award-winning picture book *The Polar Express* has been described as "a holiday favorite" ("All Aboard!") that has "touched the hearts of millions of readers, young and old" ("All Aboard!"). In his 1986 Caldecott Medal Acceptance speech, Van Allsburg described *The Polar Express* as a story about "faith and the desire to believe in something" (Van Allsburg, *Caldecott*). Van Allsburg's description of this work makes use of language reflective of a utopian discourse, stating: "*The Polar Express* is about faith, and the power of imagination to sustain faith. It's also about the desire to reside in a world where magic can happen, the kind of world we all believed in as children, but one that disappears as we grow older" ("A Conversation"). Had I not read *The Polar Express* and seen the recent film adaptation, I might be drawn to Van Allsburg's story, assuming it to be a warm, sensitive, and imaginative Christmas story. Van Allsburg claims that he wrote *The Polar Express* for the child within him ("A Conversation"), and the child that remains within me might be similarly drawn to a story about the magic of childhood. Unfortunately, however, I consider *The Polar Express* to be a problematic picture book, containing images that belie the warm-hearted holiday story of faith and magic to which Van Allsburg refers; the story contains a double narrative that on the one hand asks me, as the reader, to remember the utopia of childhood innocence, while at the same time jarring my senses with images that I can only describe as dystopian and disturbing. There is tension in the images and text, and this tangible disruption is perpetuated in Zemeckis' film adaptation. When I read *The Polar Express* I am unable to stop the parallel images of the Holocaust, Hitler, the Nuremberg Rallies, and concentration camps from obfuscating my engagement with Van Allsburg's

seemingly innocent Christmas story <sup>1</sup>. Perhaps the tension I identify in The Polar Express is less a creation of Van Allsburg and more a tension created within me as I consider my own family history.

In *My Mother's Voice: Children, Literature, and the Holocaust*, Adrienne Kertzer begins by explaining: "This is an essay about memory and voice, about how a child makes meaning out of the story her mother tells" (21). Although the experiences of Kertzer's mother and my own mother are different in many ways, the themes that run as threads through their respective lives are remarkably similar; death of a father (31), separation from family and friends, separation from one's life and community, the witnessing of brutality (32), the post-war remaking of a life, a dissociation from the trauma of war through memories kept and memories buried. Kertzer's mother is a concentration camp survivor and to attempt to define or describe her experience is impossible for me; it is Kertzer's description of how she comes to terms with her mother's experiences that resonates for me and why her mother's story is important:

"[...] I contrast my memory of my mother's story with the coherent narratives found in children's books. Despite how little I know of her story, that knowledge affects how I read these books and how I have come to appreciate that their implied reader is constructed as "the one who needs to know". (13)

The difficulty I have personally when reading about the Holocaust and Nazi Germany, and hence the surprising difficulties I have with *The Polar Express* stem from the conflict I feel knowing that the German people will always be identified with Hitler and the Holocaust, yet knowing that beyond historical truths, my family truth is that my mother and what remains

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to photographs provided in Appendix, documenting Auschwitz, Birkenau, Nazi Party rallies.

of her family (only one brother) owe their lives to German soldiers. I identify with my Hungarian-German background perhaps more closely than my Australian upbringing, and always feel uncomfortable with discussions that define Germany, Germans and German history only in terms of the Holocaust; how comfortable would American citizens be if the rest of the world defined American only in terms of its treatment of African-Americans during slavery? Or the war in Iraq? The issues surrounding crimes against humanity such as the Holocaust and the history of world conflict become even more complex when they have a personal face; my mother is neither Jewish, nor a concentration camp survivor, and yet, I consider her a survivor who bears profound and deep emotional scars.

Reading *The Polar Express* forces me to imagine and re-imagine the trauma of childhoods disrupted and distorted by war. As Kertzer so eloquently states: “If today, I read Holocaust fiction with great tension, in particular fiction that focuses on mothers and children, is this because I am now aware of what I refused to imagine when young? Am I afraid that I will find the details my mother’s story omits?” (25). If, in fact, *The Polar Express* is a story about faith, what are we supposed to have faith in? That childhood is always a magical place, despite the world Van Allsburg has created in *The Polar Express*? If it is a story about believing, what should we believe in? *The Polar Express* reminds me that childhood is not always a magical, safe place; it can be dark, ominous, and cold.

In her article “A Knock at the Door: Reading Judith Kerr’s Picture Books in the Context of Her Holocaust Fiction”, Louise Sylvester writes about her own attempts to understand Kerr’s seemingly innocent children’s books *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* and her series of *Mog* books (17). Sylvester describes the same emotional response I experienced when reading *The Polar Express*. She writes: “It is the quality of danger conveyed by the

story, rather than that of naughtiness, that I wish to focus on, in an attempt to investigate why Kerr's picture books seem so frightening to me, and perhaps to other readers who come to them from somewhere other than an undivided British background" (19). Reading *The Polar Express* is a difficult experience for me. I want to simply read it as a pleasant children's book and yet I am incapable of doing so, because the internal conflict within me is too great; I struggle to make sense of the Holocaust allusions that seem glaringly obvious to me, as I find myself arguing my family story of lives saved by young German soldiers whom some might consider equally guilty of war crimes by virtue of their nationality. Just as Holocaust survivors and refugees suppress their memories (Jewish Women in London Group qtd in Sylvester 18), so too my mother has buried the most difficult memories; what remains are vignettes and images that are defining motifs in her own life. Perhaps growing up experiencing her memories vicariously enables me to recognize glimpses of and allusions to the horrors of war in *The Polar Express* that other readers might not acknowledge. It is an irreconcilable tension. Van Allsburg's *The Polar Express* remains for me a disturbing, discomfiting allegorical work that contains none of the magic to which he refers but instead captures a dark side of childhood. Rather than a hopeful story that reaffirms childhood innocence, *The Polar Express* is a troubling story that paradoxically speaks to me instead of the loss of innocence.

The cover of *The Polar Express*<sup>2</sup> contains foreshadowing that is effectively conveyed by Van Allsburg's characteristic use of perspective to draw the reader/viewer into the visual narrative; I feel as though I am virtually at ground level, looking slightly up at the train that

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<sup>2</sup> No pagination. All references and quotations from The Polar Express are from the following edition: Van Allsburg, Chris. The Polar Express. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985.

will rapidly loom over me as it passes. The Polar Express is an imposing, slightly forbidding train, made of heavy dark metal that contrasts markedly with the burgundy and teal brightly lit carriages it pulls. Steam escapes from the engine, suggesting to me that the train is either slowing down to pick up its child-passengers, or is getting ready to leave a station and move on to the next; foreshortening of the train and its placement from left to right suggests movement captured in an artist's freeze-frame. The cover of a picture book often prompts me to pick it up and read it, depending upon such factors as an intriguing cover illustration, a particular use of color or image, an interesting and curious title or some other element that causes me to want to look within the pages of the book and solve its particular puzzle. In all honesty, even when *The Polar Express* was first published, I had little interest in reading it and when I did was immediately unsettled by illustrations and a story that were unsatisfying for me as the reader. Van Allsburg's train stirs up images of other trains that become symbolic of the macabre: Ray Bradbury's carnival train that brings mayhem and evil in *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and images of Hitler's trains taking away those bound for concentration camps.

*The Polar Express* does not appear to follow the conventions of the clichéd Christmas or holiday story; there is nothing warm, bright, or appealing in the dark, slightly drab colors of the cover illustration. Closer examination of the rest of the book reveals a similar use of dark, muted, washed-out colors. Perhaps my own dissatisfaction stems from personal expectation and inflexibility as a reader, rather than the creative choices made by Van Allsburg? And yet upon opening the book and considering the paratext, I am struck again by the use of grainy textured, heavy end pages in brown earth-tones, which also contribute to the feel of this book as an unconventional holiday story. The title page contains echoes of this use of earth-tones in

the textured coat of the pacing wolf, which runs across a small, centered frame; the wolf in the foreground, however, runs in the opposite direction to the train in the background, which we assume to be the Polar Express from the cover. In contrast, the page facing the tracings page contains the framed text “The Polar Express” on a completely white background; does this perhaps allude to the polar snows of the title? In these three illustrations – cover, title page, tracings page – I am already given significant clues as to elements of the story. Am I curious to continue reading? Yes. Am I convinced that this is a Christmas story for children? No.

Van Allsburg’s interesting use of perspective is perhaps the most effective part of *The Polar Express* and were I to focus solely on his illustrations and artwork, I might be more satisfied and less uncomfortable than when I combine his illustrations with his text and my own expectations about the story he tells. As the story opens and the narrator tells of a particular Christmas Eve when he was a young boy, the accompanying illustration conveys an interesting mix of immediacy or intimacy with distance (Van Allsburg no pgn). Though the angle and perspective of this double-page spread force the reader into close proximity, as though crouched at the foot of the narrator’s carved, wooden bed, the narrator himself stares eagerly out the open window, his pajama-clad back to us; we are both part of the action and excluded from it by Van Allsburg’s careful use of perspective.

Although we do not see the train, the Polar Express, in this first illustration we can almost hear the sounds the narrator hears: “Late that night I did hear sounds, though not of ringing bells. From outside came the sounds of hissing steam and squeaking metal” (no pgn). Van Allsburg’s sparse text contributes to the still, silent mood of anticipation on the night the train arrives: “It was wrapped in an apron of steam. Snowflakes fell lightly around it” (no pgn). The second full-page spread shows the length of the Polar Express; once again

perspective causes the reader's eyes to be drawn immediately to the engine in the foreground, though the narrator can be seen in the background looking up at the conductor who stands in the bright doorway of a carriage.

Once inside the train the dark, subdued colors that Van Allsburg used to set the initial mood of the story give way to warmer, though still muted, shades of red and brown in stark contrast to the white of the two waiters who serve hot chocolate to the passengers: "The train was filled with other children, all in their pajamas and nightgowns" (no pgn). Although the thought of riding a train to the North Pole in the middle of the night, clad in pajamas and eating "candies with nougat centers as white as snow" (no. pgn) or drinking "hot cocoa as thick and rich as melted chocolate bars" (no png), might appeal to the child in me on a superficial level, as an adult reader I keep returning to Holocaust images of the many Jewish children (and their families) and their final journeys to Auschwitz, Birkenau and other concentration camps throughout Europe <sup>3</sup>.

As I read *The Polar Express* I constantly experience an oddly unsettling mental juxtaposition of images; Van Allsburg's illustrations stir up in me memories of stark photographic images of the Holocaust that conflict with the story he tells and this disjoint makes it difficult for me to read his book for pleasure. The simplicity and sparseness of the text also leaves room to extrapolate and add another layer to my discomfort with the story. As the children drink cocoa and eat candy on the train, somewhat unconcerned by their final destination because they have blind faith that they *are* going to the North Pole to see Santa, I feel a certain uneasiness when the narrator states: "Outside, the lights of towns and villages flickered in the distance as the Polar Express raced northward" (Van Allsburg, no pgn).

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to photographs provided in Appendix.



Perhaps it is the choice of the word “raced” which unsettles because it suggests that there is now no stopping the train, that there is no getting off for the children, at least until they reach the promised North Pole, and here again I cannot help but imagine the children as victims of the Holocaust. The atmosphere – and tension – increases as the train, racing through the night leaves civilization behind: “Soon there were no more lights to be seen. We traveled through cold, dark forests, where lean wolves roamed and white-tailed rabbits hid from our train as it thundered through the quiet wilderness” (no pgn). In these two sentences the anticipation builds, but it is intensified by a mounting tension created by the choice of such emotive, evocative words as “cold, dark forests”, “lean wolves roamed”, “rabbits hid”, “thundered”, “the quiet wilderness”. The use of these words effectively creates a sense of isolation and even desolation that, while highly descriptive, conflict with my expectation that this is a holiday story. The wolves in the illustration on this two-page spread pause momentarily to watch the train as it thunders by, though the alpha male (I assume) pays no attention to the train, and the discomfort increases.

Van Allsburg draws me into the illustrations through the use of perspective that often places me, the reader, in the middle of the action and then immediately disrupts this by changing the angle of the reader’s vision and the perspective of the illustration; for example, while the children continue to sing carols and drink cocoa on the train, I am effectively forced off the train into the role of spectator, watching it race by while surrounded by wolves. This isolation and removal from the activities of the children is further increased in the next two-page spread as the train disappears into the distance as it climbs the mountains. The text also heightens an inexplicable tension, created by the suggestion that the mountains were “so high it seemed as if we would scrape the moon” (no pgn); there is a jarring harshness in the

description of the mountains *scraping* the moon which leaves me wondering why Van Allsburg selected this verb. The reminder that the train is picking up speed also suggests a mounting tension: “But the Polar Express never slowed down. Faster and faster we ran along, rolling over peaks and through valleys like a car on a roller coaster” (no pgn). I can only assume that as the reader, I am expected to sense the excitement that the children must feel as they approach the North Pole.

If this were a holiday story I would naively expect to turn the page and be enchanted by the clichéd picture of Santa’s bright, vibrant, lively and welcoming city at the North Pole; I would be, however, surprised and disappointed by the illustration that offers the first glimpse of Santa’s city. Fortunately, I have no such expectations reading *The Polar Express* and thus the train’s arrival at Santa’s city confirms my discomfort with this picture book. The Polar Express does not appear to be arriving at some Christmas village or festive city whose sole purpose is to make toys for deserving children; instead smoke stacks and chimneys spew forth dark, dense smoke from partially lit massive buildings that we assume are made of the same brick as the arched bridge across which the train travels. This is one of the most disturbing images for me, as it immediately calls to mind any number of well-documented photographs of the concentration camps<sup>4</sup>. The city at the North Pole, Santa’s toy-making factory, echoes of the crematoriums of Hitler’s concentration camps. Is it coincidence? The arches and smoke stacks parallel those of Auschwitz<sup>5</sup> with its falsely hopeful motto “Arbeit macht frei” (trans. “Work will free you”). Is it a coincidental mental connection that my mind makes when I think about the “work” in which concentration camp inmates were forced to engage in the

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to photographs provided in Appendix.

<sup>5</sup> Refer to photographs provided in Appendix.

false and illusionary hope for possible freedom (though the freedom to which camp Commandants referred was undoubtedly the freedom that comes through death) and the work at the city in the North Pole, a place of unreality and illusion?

At this stage of the story it is impossible for me to read *The Polar Express* with any sense of enjoyment or delight. Van Allsburg's *The Polar Express* has become for me a Holocaust allegory that unsettles, disturbs, and provokes an uncomfortable emotional response in me. The North Pole as a child's destination where dreams will come true conflicts with the knowledge that train journeys of many children during World War II represented a final journey towards the unknown and death. Although images of trains heading towards Hitler's concentration camps are the most prominent in my mind, I can just as easily call to mind other trains and similar journeys that have become symbolic in our minds of final tragic destinations for the innocent. What of Stalin's gulag's? What of his labor camps in outermost Siberia? The dark, industrialized steel of Van Allsburg's train, the Polar Express, in both name and image calls to mind the trains of Hitler's Germany and the Soviet regime that took millions of people from their homelands to unknown destinations, uncertain futures and more certain death. Family history entwines itself with my own emotional response to the image of the Polar Express arriving at the North Pole creating a discomfort that makes it impossible for me to read *The Polar Express* as a story of faith and magic; we do not know what happened to my mother's extended family, except that many were sent to Stalin's labor camps in Siberia and were never heard from again. Perhaps there is a greater peace in this not-knowing than the upsetting photographic records that documented so many of the concentration camp victims? I

am unable to picture the unknown faces of lost family members, but I can immediately visualize the faces of children from concentration camp records <sup>6</sup>.

The train stops at the North Pole, “a huge city alone at the top of the world, filled with factories [...]” (Van Allsburg no pgn), but it arrives to empty streets, not the festive welcome I would expect if this were a holiday story. According to the conductor, the elves have all gathered in the center of the city to await the arrival of Santa and here too I am unable to prevent the intrusion of concentration camp stories and images. The ceremonial giving of the first Christmas gift by Santa to a special chosen one is a powerful allusion to the initial selection procedures conducted at concentration camps (Kertzer 30-31, 32, 35). There is a strange macabre quality to the conductor’s statement to the children: “He [Santa] will choose one of you” (no pgn); perhaps it is just the over-analytical adult reader in me who would hope and pray that Santa would *not* choose me?

At this moment in the story, the much-anticipated, magical figure of Santa is yet to appear, but my anxiety builds. As The Polar Express approaches the center of the city, one unnamed child notices elves awaiting the arrival of Santa: “Outside we saw hundreds of elves. [...] we slowed to a crawl, so crowded were the streets with Santa’s helpers” (no pgn). The accompanying illustration is an aerial shot of the crowded city streets and while the elves’ faces are obscured, what is obvious is the bright red of their caps and garments. My immediate response to this illustration is one of unsettled disquiet; it echoes, with a powerful

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<sup>6</sup> Refer to photographs provided in Appendix.

clarity, Hitler's Nuremberg Rallies <sup>7</sup>; even the bright red of the elves which is reminiscent of the blood red used in Nazi flags and propaganda <sup>8</sup>.

The arrival of Santa is described succinctly and simply: "Across the circle, the elves moved apart and Santa Claus appeared. The elves cheered wildly" (no pgn). The first glimpse of Santa is equally unexpected; although he greets his elves, and we assume the recently arrived children on the Polar Express, the reader is placed behind him, forcing the reader outside of the spectacle. My eyes are drawn to two images: Santa in the center of the illustration, standing with arms raised and outstretched as though basking in the adulation of his peons; and the four elves struggling with the massive, obviously heavy, dark brown sack to the left of Santa. Although I should assume that this sack contains all the gifts Santa will distribute at Christmas, I still find myself pondering the slightly macabre image of grimacing elves dragging a mysterious sack containing what appears to be heavy, lumpy objects; I feel as though I am witnessing some gruesome Christmas caper, which in reality is what this illustration represents to me: Santa as an archetypal Christmas figure (and Anglo/European cultural icon) is transformed in my eyes into Santa-as-Hitler who has come to represent the archetypal figure of evil <sup>9</sup>. Santa's first words are similarly evocative as he selects the narrator for the lauded first Christmas gift: "He marched over to us and, pointing to me, said, "Let's have this fellow here." He jumped into his sleigh. The conductor handed me up" (no pgn). Even this wording is chilling when considered in the context of Holocaust stories.

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to photographs provided in Appendix.

<sup>8</sup> Refer to photographs provided in Appendix.

<sup>9</sup> Refer to photographs provided in Appendix.

The illustration capturing the moment that Santa gives the narrator the first Christmas gift contains a series of disturbing allusions that might be overlooked were I less familiar with German social history. The silver bell from Santa's sleigh that the narrator requests evokes in me a macabre image of discarded silverware collected from Auschwitz (refer to Appendix). The warmth contained in the text is not represented in the accompanying illustration: "What I wanted more than anything was one silver bell from Santa's sleigh. When I asked, Santa smiled. Then he gave me a hug [...]" (no pgn). Santa towers over the narrator; he is stiff, upright, his eyes are cold, and the upraised hand reminds me of Hitler urging on his loyal supporters with his fanatical "Sieg' Heil!"; the bell that Santa holds up in his hand is barely visible, though this symbolizes the narrator's renewed faith in the magic of childhood. Just as the train, as a symbol of dystopia, becomes very much a character in *The Polar Express*, overshadowing the children it transports, so too Santa, as an enigmatic leader to whom I feel no emotional connection, overpowers the significance of the silver bell as a symbol of childhood magic. The Santa of Van Allsburg's story is as cold and emotionally distant as the North Pole setting and this emotional absence is hinted at when Santa departs: "Santa shouted out the reindeer's names and cracked his whip. His team charged forward and climbed into the air. Santa circled once above us, then disappeared in the cold, dark, polar sky" (no pgn).

Cold and dark is a fitting description of *The Polar Express*. There is no joy and none of the excitement that I would expect from children hoping to see Santa. Perhaps the most powerful visual representation of the children is at the end of *The Polar Express* when the children have reboarded the train and the narrator realizes that he has lost the silver bell. Sitting dejectedly, the narrator is surrounded by six other children, but there are three children whose eyes convey a perplexing sense of fear, rather than commiseration for the loss of the

gift. A little girl in the left foreground looks up and away from the narrator, her eyes are wide open, the whites bright and visible and I wonder: What is she looking at? Why does she look afraid? On the opposite page in the right background a small dark-haired boy holds a hand to his open mouth and his eyes are equally wide as though in shock; he too does not appear to be looking at the narrator but at someone else who stands beyond the frame of the illustration. Yet another child, barely visible, peeks over the top of the narrator's seat and all that is visible to the reader are his eyes; he is looking in the same direction as the two other children. What are these three children looking at? Why do they look afraid? This emotional tone is not contained in Van Allsburg's text, in which one child urges the others to go and look outside: "I had lost the silver bell from Santa Claus's sleigh. "Let's hurry outside and look for it," one of the children said. But the train gave a sudden lurch and started moving. We were on our way" (no pgn).

The only real brightness, color, and warm imagery can be found in the two final double-page spread illustrations the show the narrator's return home and the opening of Christmas presents on Christmas morning. Interestingly, although the journey to the North Pole and the meeting with Santa Claus should represent the magic of childhood that the narrator clings to, his home and the real world appear far more pleasant. Finally, Van Allsburg brings light and warmth into this purportedly Christmas story; the living room in which the narrator stands, waving goodbye to the Polar Express, contains bright walls, rich green patterned curtains and a vibrant scarlet couch, all of which contrast vividly with the subdued, washed-out tones throughout the rest of the picture book. Even though the narrator returns to the place where people no longer "believe", this place appears to me to be safer than Santa Claus' city at the North Pole.

The final double-page spread is the most intimate and emotionally comfortable illustration in *The Polar Express*. The narrator and his sister stare at the small box, which contains his lost silver bell; they are surrounded by color and light which contribute to the familiar sense of excitement experienced on Christmas morning as presents are opened. This is the only illustration that might allow me to describe *The Polar Express* as a possible Christmas story, though to do so based upon this scene seems as clichéd as the narrator's excited words: "I shook the bell. It made the most beautiful sound my sister and I had ever heard" (no pgn).

The final page of *The Polar Express* continues this cliché that contributes to my sense of unease when reading the text and examining the illustrations. *The Polar Express* leaves much unanswered and ultimately creates a greater sense of dissatisfaction than any pleasure or enjoyment. The dystopian image of childhood and childhood fantasy that I see in Van Allsburg's picture book clashes with the clichéd sentimentality of the narrator's final words: "At one time most of my friends could hear the bell, but as years passed, it fell silent for all of them. Even Sarah found one Christmas that she could no longer hear its sweet sound. Though I've grown old, the bell still rings for me as it does for all who truly believe" (no pgn). The power of the bell as symbolic of the narrator's belief seems a contrived literary device intended to elicit a similar sentimental response in the reader; am I supposed to wonder if I too would still hear the bell ring? Am I expected to ask myself if I am one of those who still truly believe? The final image of the discarded bell on the last page of *The Polar Express* does not remind me of the magic of Christmas; instead it encapsulates in one small frame all that is disturbing for me in this story.



Van Allsburg describes his brand of fantasy as “the idea of the extraordinary happening in the context of the ordinary” (“A Conversation”) because the fantasy becomes more “provocative”. I would describe *The Polar Express* as a dystopian view of childhood rather than a fantasy, because the events typify a disruptive event in the narrator’s life, rather than a profound and extraordinary happening. The narrator’s middle-of-the-night escape from reality (where there is no Santa) back to a surreal Orwellian world (that the reader is supposed to embrace and connect with, though in reality Santa’s city is cold and unwelcoming) of imagination and faith. But the place this occurs is cold, empty, devoid of life and feeling. In this regard *The Polar Express* is representative of the type of utopias and dystopia described by Hintz:

Readers encounter such elements as a rigorously planned society, charismatic leaders or masterminds, control of reproductive freedom, and the prioritization of collective well-being over the fate of the individual. [...] Sometimes the utopia takes the form of an idealized world separately created by the child or adolescent protagonists, possibly as a means of escape from adult control, and critical of adult governance. (254)

Hintz has effectively described Van Allsburg’s vision of Santa Claus and his city at the North Pole: Santa is the charismatic leader who oversees and controls the manufacture of the Christmas presents distributed ultimately to child-believers. It could also be argued that *The Polar Express* reflects another characteristic that can be linked to utopian and dystopian children’s literature: the breaking with the conventional Christmas story suggests a postmodern element that might also be characteristic of Van Allsburg’s other picture books. Trites refers to “postmodern tension between individuals and institutions” (qtd in Hintz 255)

and this is yet another apt description of one element of tension in *The Polar Express*; the child narrator is unwilling to give up his belief in Santa Claus, though the outside world urges him to grow up:

On Christmas Eve, many years ago, I lay quietly in my bed. [...] I was listening for a sound – a sound a friend had told me I’d never hear – the ringing of Santa’s sleigh.

“There is no Santa,” my friend had insisted, but I knew he was wrong. (Van Allsburg no pgn<sup>10</sup>).

There is a multifaceted tension between the assumption that this is a warm-hearted holiday story, hopeful and magical because it supposedly celebrates childhood faith in magic and mystery, and the images that allude to the Holocaust. The emotion of *The Polar Express* as a holiday book conflicts with the Holocaust allusions that leave me unsettled. Although I am not suggesting the Van Allsburg intentionally did so, Holocaust images are concealed in both illustrations and images from the film. How can I as the reader reconcile this uneasy tension? Perhaps *The Polar Express* is best defined in terms used by Baer in her comprehensive discussion of Holocaust literature: “[...] the creation of a literature of atrocity for children, and the presentation of that literature, calls upon us to recognize and convey the evil that is new in the post-Holocaust world” (391). Baer’s reference to “a post-Holocaust world” (391) would seem a fitting description of Van Allsburg’s disturbing Christmas story with its unsettling imagery and sparse text that convey a mood both cold and unwelcoming.

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<sup>10</sup> No pagination. All references and quotations from *The Polar Express* are from the following edition: Van Allsburg, Chris. *The Polar Express*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985.

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