



The Bus Hub – Editor’s Preface

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ACME seeks to publish work in “alternative presentation formats” as part of its editorial policy, so I received Kafui Attoh’s submission of a written poem and sound recording called “The Bus Hub” with enthusiasm. As I set out to organize the review process questions surfaced in relation to another aspect of the journal’s editorial mandate: to publish “critical and radical analyses of the social, the spatial and the political”. The word that preoccupied me was “analyses”. What place does a submission that operates evocatively rather than analytically have in a journal dedicated to analysis? How should it be presented? More immediately, what criteria for evaluation should such a piece’s reviewers be given? I dealt with the latter question by asking reviewers to apply *ACME*’s standard review guidelines, as well as to address the following question: if the submission merits publication, should it be published on its own, or does it need some accompanying, more clearly analytical, discussion?

The piece went to three reviewers, all of whom recommended publication. Two of them thought it needed some sort of abstract or set-up, which, in the words of one, “says enough to draw readers/listeners in, but not one which spoils the experience, surprise, etc., by saying too much.” The third offered an alternative perspective:

For me, the work is able to stand on its own without introduction or explanation, and in fact I would prefer to see it printed by itself without any framing by the author. I think that way readers would be likely to



engage with the text in a more questioning and open-minded way, which would enhance the reading experience. Part of what worked for me about this text – one of the reasons why it stood up to repeated readings – was that I felt it had useful and productive ambiguities.

This referee suggested that a commentary or two by interested readers might be more appropriate to the evocative nature of the piece than an introduction or analysis by the author. I decided (perhaps at cross-purposes) to accept the former reviewers' advice to ask Kafui for a brief abstract, and the latter's suggestion to solicit commentaries. Kafui agreed, and the commentators – eventually Sheila Hones and Sarah de Leeuw – were asked to “reflect in some way on (a) the epistemological implications of understanding an evocative creative piece like this as geographical scholarship or representation (how does it work as knowledge?), and/or (b) their experience of it as geography. The outcome follows below: an abstract, a poem, a song, and two commentaries.

I don't want to recommend a specific route through these epistemologically-varied resources; part of the fascination in this assemblage of materials is the chance to freight the sonic performance with textual interpretation in several orders, with potentially differing effects. My own preferred sequence is to listen first to the sound recording, then read the abstract, then the poem, then the commentaries, before listening again to the song.

On the recommendation of one of the reviewers, *ACME* invites readers interested in issues raised by these materials to submit their own commentaries of up to 1000 words. We will consider publishing any we receive in a subsequent *ACME* issue, after appropriate review.

I asked Kafui to offer his own brief remarks on the commentaries. What he said highlights some of the limitations and potentialities of publishing geographical work in an evocative rather than overtly analytical mode. Kafui noted (and I have condensed his words):

After reading both commentaries, what is striking is how differently I see my own work... In the classroom setting, the poem and song have been far better at eliciting comments on issues of public transit and urban space in Syracuse than anything I have written academically... [In this context] I find it striking to then read commentaries, which return the debate to... academic language... Ultimately, in encouraging free commentary I have also encouraged commentary that I do not necessarily understand nor, in moments, agree with... [Nevertheless] I think they reflect what I see as the value of the poem, which has, from my classroom experience, always been about sparking debate and discussion, even if I do not necessarily agree with all that is being said.

See what you think ([link to the song here](#), or read on before listening).



The Bus Hub

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This poem and recording were first produced in the summer of 2007 as I was conducting research and interviews for my master's thesis on public transit in Syracuse. The poem and song are little more than reformatted field notes that I set to music using a software program called Garageband. While the song was borne of my thesis research, it has far outshone the thesis itself. The thesis, with its careful arguments on neoliberalism and urban transit policy, collects another layer of dust; the same cannot be said for the poem and song, which I continue to share with students and friends with great excitement. The degree that such a work constitutes a form of critical geography or speaks to something as abstract as rhythm-analysis or psychogeography is debatable. One may easily find in this poem and song a critique of urban geography *a la* Debord, or perhaps of stuffy and inaccessible academic writing. However, one might also take from the poem a more modest lesson: that buried in our field notes and in the texts we hold so dear, we may also find the trace of a melody, the palpitations of a rhythm, or the beginnings of a tune. We need only to listen.



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Downtown Syracuse on Salina and
Fayette people are waiting for...

Bus Route 28
Route 54
Route 3
Route 122
Strathmore

Downtown Syracuse on Salina and Fayette
10 past 6 p.m. and the bus has not come yet
The intersection is packed with people
With a penchant for cigarettes
And spending their pensions on lottery tickets
They rest their eyes on the street and wait
I spit phlegm down a rusty grate

Splat
And I watch the stoplight change
From green
To yellow
To red
Waiting for...

Bus Route 33
Route 45
Route 21
Shoppingtown via East Genesee

Grandma is wearing a funny ill-fitting green dress
Her bright red lipstick is a mess
And smeared on her cheeks
She stumbles and stares
Eyes curling
I hold my burning head in my hands and
I'll be damned if I give her money
I cross the street
A man with a cross and a placard attached to his chest
Greets the hot air with scripture
He is screaming
Jesus Christ
And waiting for...

Route 167
Route 143
Route 78

Solvay Express

Everybody is waiting
 Kids with gigantic book bags
 Kids with dime bags
 Kids who stare me down
 Kids who push infants in strollers
 Old men who push walkers
 Women who push religion
 Girls with push-up bras and pumps
 She is 15 pushing 25
 Talkers
 Beggars
 Sinners
 High rollers
 Liars
 Waiting for...

Bus Route 2
 Route 67
 Route 43
 Carousel Mall

Nurses in rose-colored robes
 Shuffle across Salina Street
 A flock of linen
 Hey Bobby long time!
 Hey Richard, when was the last?
 Hey Martha, how much time has past?
 Kisses, hugs and handshakes
 Slow salutes, mean mugs, heartbreak
 This is the crux of a city on crutches
 And I am waiting for...

Bus Route 5
 Route 7
 Route 54
 S.U. Drumlins

And to the south
 I see a phalanx of abandoned storefronts
 The whole block reminds me of my
 Grandmother's toothless grin
 To the north
 Route 690 cuts the blue sky in two
 A vertebrate of cement
 And steel
 And iron

And asphalt
To the west
Stand rows of industrial mausoleums
Haunted by the specter of prosperity
To the east
A gleaming group of buildings
And a white dome inflated with hope
No joke
But down here in the heart of it all
People are waiting for...

Bus Route 90
Route 67
Route 45
Camillus

I buy a panhandler a hot dog
With onions
And chili
And cheese
I buy him a cool drink with a straw
I just bought my way into heaven
On an express bus
YES!
I get myself a cup of coffee
And a place to watch the spectacle unfold
I bought a voyeur's pass at the information booth
With a two week unlimited ride option
And I'm coppin' a good seat
Waiting for...

Bus Route 76
Route 22
Route 4
Liverpool

They meet at the intersection of urban decay and the carnivalesque
It is a walk-able street but people are
Standing in place
Black folks on the corner
Poor people and their problems
Out in the open, like an exposed wound
The upper echelon wants them hidden and gone
Buried under the rug
I shrug and sip my coffee
Waiting for...

Bus Route 67

Route 43
Route 25
O.C.C. and South Ave.

Former industrial workers
Former foremen of shiny factories
Former Marines in tattered jeans
Former sons
Former daughters
Smile and joke, smoke heavily
And look forward to tomorrow

Bus Route 43
Route 26
Route 32
Western Lights

The manager of Rite Aid must not remember
He must not remember the time when he called the police
And confiscated my card
He must not remember my red hat
And my red eyes
And my disbelief
I must just blend in
With the heathen masses that claw at his door
For beer, lottery tickets and potato chips
With the criminals who bum rush his store
And steal paperback bestsellers and hallmark cards

Bus Route 321
Route 45
Route 1
Lemoine
Waiting...

Where the hell am I?
I turn to the south and see seven bus drivers brandishing the seventh seal
disembarking seven horse drawn buses
They are followed by bus riders flagellating themselves
The Macarthur building's cement foundation melts and Salina Street starts boiling.
I am trapped in painting by Hieronymus Bosch
I want to grab a cross anoint myself with holy water
But I can only find cheap beer
I guess that will do
The sky turns from blue to bright red
What are we waiting for
Revelations or DestiNY?

Route 666
Route 25
Route 32
Route 190
Bus Route 452
Route 980
Route 3
Route 45
Route 37

Everybody is searching for their roots

The buses are here!
And everybody is searching for their roots....

Down on Salina
Everybody is searching for their roots

Down on Fayette
Everybody is searching for their roots

Down on East Genesee
Everybody is searching for their roots

The buses are here
And everybody is searching for their roots

I have a clipboard
A camera
A digital voice recorder
A pen
A pad
And no idea where I am

Press here for link to M4a Song File: [The Bus Hub](#)



Author and Reader: Meeting at the Hub

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“The Bus Hub” starts with an explicit orientation—“Downtown Syracuse on Salina and Fayette”—and so I begin my encounter with the text there, in a named city, at a named intersection. Five pages later, I am still there, but more intensely there, with a stronger sense of what being in downtown Syracuse on Salina and Fayette might be like, how this location emerges out of movement and how it stands still, what kind of people and what kind of buildings and what kind of histories and memories and hopes and fears come together here. But the narrative voice who has animated, organized, and sung the bus hub for me seems to have given up: despite the orientation and detail, he reaches the end with “no idea where I am” . . .

I understand this feeling. The narrator, as he stands there in the final line, is baffled by the bus hub: what am I doing? where am I going with this? where am I? He seems suspended between his tools of description (clipboard, pen, camera) and the place around him as it happens (screaming, waiting, gleaming, haunted). He seems lost in the gap between two kinds of spaces and his responsibility to each: to the immediate space of the bus hub and to the academic space in which he works. Reading the text, I am first drawn into the bus hub, but then even more strongly drawn into the drama of the narrator wrestling with his ways of knowing and representing the bus hub.

But (unlike the narrator) I am not left stranded in the yawning gap between the “abandoned storefronts” and the “gleaming group of buildings,” between the



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gritty downtown and the university on the skyline, torn between an MA thesis, full of “careful arguments,” and Salina Street as it “starts boiling.” I am rescued by a third voice: not the voice of the note-taker inside the text, and not the voice of the thesis-writer in the abstract, but the song-maker, who has taken hold of his confusion and given it rhythm. And so, at the end, I am able to find myself thinking “yes.” Not the “no” of “it’s all too difficult,” or “I can’t make any sense of it,” but also not the academic “yes” with which I might agree to an argument, a solution, a proposal. My “yes” is the simple “yes” of being present and paying attention, that I might offer to someone telling me a story. To say yes, I’m listening; yes, I see what you mean; yes, this has affected me.

Where does the sense of orientation that enables this “yes” come from? Reading the text, on an “unlimited ride” along with the narrator, I experience disorientation, but I experience it vicariously, mediated through the sounds and rhythms that circulate through the text on the page like reassuring buses: moving in patterns, making connections, generating spaces, passing through destinations both temporary and meaningful. So while the song tells of confusion, in its singing at the same time it generates order. There are the circulating patterns of simple rhyme: “wait / grate,” “marines / jeans,” “joke / smoke,” “claw / door / store.” But there are also the more shadowy routes taken by the half-rhymes, the alliteration and assonance: “intersection / penchant / spending / pensions / phlegm,” “crux / crutches.” Words and phrases come round once and then come round again, their meanings shifting: “Kids who push infants in strollers / Old men who push walkers / Women who push religion / Girls with push-up bras and pumps / She is 15 pushing 25.” “I watch the stoplight change / From green / To yellow / To red.” “The sky turns from blue to bright red.” And of course, there is the oscillation between “roots” and “routes.” Roots, perhaps, not only in the conventional metaphorical sense of “where we came from,” but also in the sense of the roots that locate us “where we are,” mangled together with the routes that offer the options for “where we are going.”

The text of *The Bus Hub* in this way presents confusion in patterns, pulling together sounds and images, rhythms and repetitions, the academic and the casual, the public and the personal. “Grandma,” some generic grandma, “is wearing a funny ill-fitting green dress,” but then the narrator’s own grandmother turns up in the “toothless grin” of a block of abandoned storefronts. Characters walk, talk, and hug on the street, “Hey Bobby long time!” but then the narrative location shifts under our feet to a seminar room: “They meet at the intersection of urban decay and the carnivalesque / It is a walk-able street but people are / Standing in place.” In this way, the text itself works like a real bus hub—and, less physically, it occurs to me, like a USB hub—made up of and enabling connections and linkages and transfers.

In print and in sound, the song of *The Bus Hub* presents a place (making it happen) and at the same time questions how places are presented: not just how they happen but how we apprehend that happening and how we ourselves then make

them happen in notes, recordings, pictures, songs, arguments. When I come to the end of my reading of *The Bus Hub* I go back to the beginning to make the ride again. And on a side-trip, I take a detour back to the quotation Nigel Thrift (2008) takes from H-G Gadamer to head the first chapter (“Life, but not as we know it”) of his book on non-representational theory: “But can we really assume that the reading of such texts is a reading exclusively concentrated on meaning? Do we not sing these texts? Should the process by which a poem speaks be only carried by a meaning intention? Is there not, at the same time, a truth that lies in performance? This, I think, is the task with which the poem confronts us.”

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New Routes of Geographic Contemplation: Poetry and Public Transportation

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Over twenty years ago, Stéphane Quoniam wrote a paper contemplating the landscapes of Arizona. Observing that a fundamental “frustration” about representing place was the seeming impossibility of reconciling, on the one hand, social science traditions of didactic, semi-omnipotent, objectivity with, on the other hand, deeply emotive, train-of-consciousness, and subjective engagement with both urban and wild landscapes, Quoniam elected to represent and theorize Arizona’s cities and canyonlands simultaneously as an artist-painter and a geographer. His work, born principally from sketches and field notes produced as a graduate student studying landscape geography, are meant to underscore both the legibility and invisibility of what surrounds us. “As an artist,” stated Quoniam, “I practice a kind of parallel but separate geography...[But it] is also a difficult, if not hazardous exercise to talk about myself and about my painting because I want to remain on the boundaries between geography and art” (Quoniam 1988: 12-14).

Challenges of representation remain a central concern for geographers. Work about the world in which we live is increasingly, and rightfully, attending to the politics of positionality, of power, of how to make and disseminate meaningful knowledge, and of conveying the dynamic, living, and multi-dimensional nature of vastly different geographies. Like a small handful of geographers before him (see for instance Bunkse 2004 and Lovell 2000), Kafui Attoh has found that art (in his



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case, spoken-word/song poetry) is a method to theorize and represent place with both critical and creative attention. His poem “The Bus Hub,” both in its textual form and as a song set to a hypnotic beat, generated with what remains in the work an invisible computer software process, is an effort at breaking down traditional disciplinary boundaries between human geography, with its dominant social science conventions, and the creative arts, with their representations and interpretations that attempt some escape from the primacy of philosophical and theoretical considerations. “The Bus Hub” is situated on disciplinary boundaries, in a borderland of traditional conventions. In this way, the work is perfectly suited to the topics with which Attoh is concerned, namely transient and seemingly dispossessed subjects who, in automobile-fixated America, inhabit and crisscross the marginalized geographies of public transit.

If bus hubs are places of repetition, replete with the rhythmic exhalations of exhaust pipes, the groans of engine brakes, and the timed throngs of people methodically adhering to carefully orchestrated schedules displayed in tiny type fonts affixed to seemingly perpetually awkward surfaces, they are also places of social engagement and conscious and unconscious resistance against single-occupant driven vehicles. The spaces of public transit, be they station hubs, the buses and trains themselves, the routes and tracks and lines upon which travel the various vehicles, or the seats for which people jostle, are also very much alive spaces, full of human emotion, relationship, and expectation. As Attoh observes, they are places “packed with people” including a “Grandma [in a] funny ill-fitting green dress/her bright red lipstick is a mess/and smeared on her cheeks,” “A man with a cross and a placard attached to his chest/greet[ing] the hot air with scripture,” “Kids who push infants in strollers/Old men who push walkers/Women who push religion,” and “Nurses in rose-colored robes.” Each of these people, purely by virtue of sharing the places and times of public transit, is engaged in a relationship with each other. Because Attoh renders these subjects through sound-poetics, readers/listeners are able to dispense with the linearity of more traditional social-science contemplations of people and place, contemplations that, for instance, follow conventions of ‘assertion-followed-by-evidence’ or ‘if-then’ syntaxes. Place, and human occupation of it, is stanzaed and broken, uneven and perpetually shifting. By virtue of being represented through an embodied and motion-full combination of breath and rhyme, a bus hub in Syracuse becomes the organic and eminently alive site that geographers understand all places always are. Furthermore, because song and poetry invite (if not demand) replays and re-readings, the configurations of people and place within Attoh’s Syracuse bus hub can, like the hub itself, be perpetually (re)produced. Capturing and representing the aliveness of place is no easy task. Attoh’s choice of an artful rendition provides one solution.

A tense relation between roots and routes, the first always organic and often genealogical, the latter often inorganic and prescriptive, exists in “The Bus Hub.” The relationship between roots and routes has wide implications, for geographers

and others, at the heart of which is the agency and power of living subjects to push back against boundaries and externally imposed restrictions, particularly of their movement and expression. In Attoh's sound-poem, people are enabled as agents in location. In the act of traveling bus routes, the roots of a socioeconomic class that the elite and powerful want invisible are, instead, made powerfully visible: "They meet at the intersection of urban decay and the carnivalesque/It is a walk-able street but people are/Standing in place/Black folks on the corner/Poor people and their problems/Out in the open, like an exposed wound/The upper echelon wants them hidden and gone/Buried under the rug." In part because they are sung into being, and breath-spoken into place, the disenfranchised become living and transformative subjects with the capacity to occupy and resist. Attoh, as geographer/poet, joins the melee. The routes of Syracuse's buses, it seems, allow Attoh to contemplate his own tangled – and one might assume conflicting – roots as a clipboard wielding, pen clutching, taker of geographical field notes, a person in search of some redemption ("I buy a panhandler a hot dog/... I just bought my way into heaven/On an express bus/YES!"), a fellow public transit traveler ("I bought a voyeurs pass at the information booth/With a two week unlimited ride option/And I'm coppin' a good seat") and a not too far removed member of the very classes he is contemplating ("I see a phalanx of abandoned storefronts/The whole block reminds me of my/Grandmother's toothless grin"). Here again the medium of song-poem allows for richness in subjective positionality that a more traditional social science rendering would likely make invisible.

Critical social geography, of which Kafui Attoh is certainly a student, demands considered attunement to justices and injustices (see for instance Smith 2000). Positioning and considering oneself in the configurations and geographies of power that produce social (in)justices is difficult. Indeed, as feminist and anti-racist geographers are increasingly pointing out, an axiomatic self-reflexivity is too often a pretext for those with sociocultural and economic privilege simply to refocus upon themselves (Kobayashi 2003). Balanced as it is on the borders of human geography, social science inquiry, poem, and song, "The Bus Hub" literally co-exists with the marginalized othered subjects with which it is concerned. In expression and representation then, Attoh's work becomes the very subject(s) about which he is writing. His poetic sound geography is as much a work balanced on borderlands, a work claiming new spaces and (re)making places on the margins, as it is a work **about** people and places that are doing those same-said activities. In this way, creative and artistic representation is the perfect venue to consider a bus hub in Syracuse. And, although Kafui Attoh suggest he has "no idea where [he] is" I would suggest that by taking geography into the realm of song and poetry, he is exactly where he should be.

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