

# “Save Ga\$. Ride this Bus”: Racialised Poverty, Violence and Climate Change in Urban America

*Jürgen Heinrichs*

## Abstract

This project examines the relationship between poverty, violence, race relations and environmental change in the United States today. Focusing on a bus line in Newark, New Jersey, this essay evokes the experience of riding a bus as a platform for studying a host of social and political conflicts that presently unfold in American society. Campaigns prompting people to switch from individual (car) to shared (bus) modes of transportation as a means to avert climate change often mask underlying class divisions and racialised poverty. Engaging the inextricable histories of race, mobility and economic inequality, this essay employs art history and cultural studies to chart how public transportation continues to function as a space in which social and political conflict unfolds.

## 1 Mass Transit, Poverty and Violence

In 1997, a Newark city bus became the site of yet another bloody episode in a town already plagued by violence. Passenger complaints about a radio playing loud music prompted an argument. A scuffle ensued. Shots rang out on board the crowded vehicle. Two passengers, both uninvolved bystanders, were wounded as the shooter escaped the bus. One victim recovered. Another young man sustained critical injuries that rendered him a paraplegic for life.<sup>1</sup>

The bus shooting is but one example of how violent crime has troubled the largest and most populous city of New Jersey, nicknamed the “Garden State” in reference to its historic role as a supplier of agricultural products to neighbouring New York City and Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> Contrasting with the bucolic

---

1 Feuer, Alan, “New Jersey Daily Briefing: Two Shot on Bus in Newark,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1997, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/10/22/nyregion/new-jersey-daily-briefing-two-shot-on-bus-in-newark.html>.

2 Prominent attorney Abraham Browning of Camden, New Jersey is reported to have coined the term “Garden State” while speaking at the Philadelphia Centennial exhibition on New

connotations of the state's nineteenth-century moniker, Newark today hardly evokes associations of rustic farms and tranquil country life. Companies and businesses abandoned the city in the wake of the 1967 riots. As a result, Newark struggled with capital flight, economic devastation and high unemployment. The city subsequently joined the plight of other post-industrial American cities that experience abject poverty, urban blight and rampant crime. Despite signs of economic recovery and urban renewal in recent years, crime is on the rise. The recent murder of a 17-year old girl already marked the city's 43rd homicide victim only half way into the year, compared with 65 murders in 2008. A local newspaper reports that residents "offered the familiar lament of living in a city where gangs, guns, drugs and poverty conspire against a decent quality of life."<sup>3</sup> Capturing how residents experience this latest spate of violence, a 20-year old woman shares that

[gunshots] [...] claimed one of her friends from West Side High School shortly before graduation. Down the street from her grandfather's home, a 13-year-old boy was shot dead on South Orange Avenue in 2011. "I worry about being a victim," [...] "I don't affiliate with people who might get in a jam, but the way things are happening now—wrong place, wrong time—I don't feel safe."<sup>4</sup>

Crime in Newark has left its people on edge as they grasp that violence is not restricted to the activities of drug dealers and street gangs but that it could erupt any time and anywhere, even aboard buses, one of the most public spaces.

Many Newark residents rely on buses for their transportation needs. In fact, the greater metropolitan area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut

---

Jersey Day (August 24, 1876). Browning described "our Garden State" as "an immense barrel, filled with good things to eat and open at both ends, with Pennsylvanians grabbing from one end and New Yorkers from the other". Benjamin Franklin also has been associated with naming the Garden State. State of New Jersey, "Nickname," accessed May 21, 2014. <http://wxww.state.nj.us/nj/about/facts/nickname/>.

3 Mueller, Mark, "Voices from the Street: Newark's Residents Describe Fear of Violence in Wake of Teen's Killing," *The Star-Ledger*, July 6, 2014, accessed May 21, 2014. [http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2014/07/voices\\_from\\_the\\_street\\_newark\\_residents\\_describe\\_fears\\_of\\_violence\\_in\\_wake\\_of\\_teens\\_killing.html](http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2014/07/voices_from_the_street_newark_residents_describe_fears_of_violence_in_wake_of_teens_killing.html).

4 Ibid.



FIGURE 8.1 *Newark city bus*<sup>5</sup>

registers the highest numbers of transit ridership with some 30 percent of rides to and from work taking place on buses.<sup>6</sup> Most city buses are owned and operated by New Jersey Transit, the statewide public transportation system and the nation's third-largest mass transit provider. Private carriers run additional bus lines to meet the demand for transportation in this densely populated city. One such bus makes its scheduled stops along South Orange Avenue in the city's West Ward.

Attentive bus passengers on this line notice a host of surprising sights and sites of cultural and historical significance. Describing the urban landscape that passengers observe as they ride this bus through the streets of Newark, this essay ponders the nexus of racialised poverty, street violence and climate change in the United States today. Focusing on this inconspicuous bus line and the observations of passengers riding this bus, my project revisits a series of

<sup>5</sup> Photo © Jürgen Heinrichs, January 2014.

<sup>6</sup> United States Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, "Table 4-3: Transit Ridership in the 50 Largest Urbanized Areas: 2010 and 2011," accessed May 21, 2014, [http://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov/bts/files/publications/state\\_transportation\\_statistics/state\\_transportation\\_statistics\\_2013/index.html/chapter4/table4\\_3](http://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov/bts/files/publications/state_transportation_statistics/state_transportation_statistics_2013/index.html/chapter4/table4_3).

recurrent conflicts that nowadays unfold in American inner cities. The rise of poverty and the profusion of firearms have caused a wave of violence that occurs on streets, buses and trains. Studying the appearance of this bus and its associated stories, my analysis probes the dynamics of poverty, race relations and climate change in the United States. Serving as a prism through which to examine the different facets of the present historical moment, the bus and its related discourse exemplify how the collective American imagination habitually conflates environmental concerns with anxieties over class status and racial mingling. I argue that the widely accepted link between carbon emissions and climate change, evident in calls to shift from individual (car) to shared (bus) modes of transportation, frequently masks underlying, yet unacknowledged constellations of economic inequality, class divisions and the effects of racialised poverty. Put another way, it may not be as easy as the motto suggests to save gas by switching to public transportation for a people who may not own cars in the first place, who ride public transportation out of necessity rather than by choice and who may be unable to afford and partake in suburban lifestyles deemed safer than inner-city life. Looking at the bus as a utility of everyday life and as a trope in cultural history, this essay draws from art history and cultural studies to reconsider the relationship between anthropogenic climate change, class status and race relations in 21st-century America.

## 2 Storefront Ministries and Ghetto Fabulous

Absorbing the sights along South Orange Avenue, bus passengers register the abiding power of black spirituality and religion as evidenced in numerous storefront churches, holiness temples and mosques. In his study of the American religious landscape, cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky identifies the number, variety and ubiquity of religious institutions as a well-defined cultural and historical phenomenon that is germane to the United States:

We have a kind of palimpsest in many urban neighbourhoods, one in which the spectral geography of vanished, or vanishing, ethnic, racial, and denominational groups can still be deciphered beneath that of their latter-day successors.<sup>7</sup>

---

7 Zelinsky, Wilbur, "The Uniqueness of the American Religious Landscape," *Geographical Review* 91.9 (July 2001): 569–570.

South Orange Avenue features an especially rich variety of storefront churches housed in former stores, warehouses, churches, synagogues, movie theatres and other structures. The sheer number of these houses of worship and the range of denominations that they represent speaks to their past and present significance as sources of social and spiritual support for their constituencies. Emulating the appearance of larger, more representative buildings on a reduced scale and with simplified stylistic vocabularies, these churches frequently incorporate stylised pointed arches to evoke Gothic cathedrals, whereas illuminated crosses and other religious symbols convey institutional profiles to potential worshippers.

The abundance of storefront churches and holiness temples on South Orange Avenue also points to the historical function of religious institutions in African American life and society. As sociologist Robert Boyd describes the emergence of such ministries during the early twentieth-century Great Migration,

African Americans from the South brought to the urban North a demand for religious services that were traditional, emotional and intimate. The old-line churches of northern African American communities failed to satisfy these demands. Hence, a niche arose for those African Americans who were willing and able to start churches that could accommodate the religious demands of southern migrants. This niche was relatively easy to enter, and it offered reasonable rewards to its occupants. It was also an important source of support to many African Americans.<sup>8</sup>

Fellow sociologist William J. Wilson even proposes that such institutions deliberately upheld conventional norms that functioned as ‘social buffers’ to ameliorate the effects of joblessness and poverty.<sup>9</sup> Given the area’s high rate of poverty, unemployment and violence, Wilson’s assessment of the affirmative function of religious institutions certainly remains valid today.

The storefront churches on South Orange Avenue differentiate themselves from one another through variations of their architectural appearances and their names. Expressing the vitality and imagination of their congregations, the names run the gamut of references from biblical figures, names and places to associations with the life of Christ. The plethora of church names on

---

8 Boyd, Robert L., “The Storefront Church Ministry in African American Communities of the Urban North during the Great Migration,” *Social Science Journal* 35, 3 (1998): 319.

9 Wilson, Julius W., *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 56.

Newark’s South Orange Avenue suggests that Robert Noreen’s pioneering 1965 study of the names of Chicago storefront churches has not lost its relevance when he states:

These many examples reveal how expressive and imaginative are the names of storefront churches. [...] Most unlike traditional church names, many storefronts freely express the immediate hopes and desires of their congregations for a better world—even though that “world” may never be reached until heaven is gained.<sup>10</sup>

Then, there is Ghetto Fabulous, a now defunct retail store that featured an assortment of urban clothing.<sup>11</sup> Presently a substation of the Newark Police Department, the former store and its provocative name once added another layer of meaning to South Orange Avenue seen as a cultural and historical text. In humour and self-reflexion, the name comments upon the district’s reputation as an impoverished yet stylish quarter of the city. The phrase wittily references an inventory of clothes whose style has been characterised as one “of nouveau riche people who have grown up in ghetto or urban areas” and reflects the “combination of bad taste, an urban aesthetic and desire to wear one’s wealth”.<sup>12</sup> As with other instances in which formerly subjugated groups embrace and appropriate disparaging language that was traditionally used as a vehicle to discriminate against them, the idiom “Ghetto Fabulous” playfully signals empowerment and pride. In the vein of Susan Sontag’s influential definition of camp as an aesthetic that celebrates artifice, irony and stylisation, the phrase simultaneously acknowledges and counters pervasive cultural and racial stereotypes.<sup>13</sup> Media studies scholar Roopali Mukherjee offers a still different reading of this cultural phenomenon as “the contemporary proclamations of the black American Dream epitomised by the hyper-consumerist excesses of

10 Noreen, Robert G., “Ghetto Worship: A Study of Names of Chicago Storefront Churches,” *Names* 13.1 (1965): 29.

11 The former “Ghetto Fabulous” store can be seen in an October 2007 capture of Google Street View, accessed May 21, 2014. [https://www.google.com/maps/@40.74507,-74.218784,3a,75y,172.97h,84.05t/data=!3m4!1e1!3m2!1srQufhX3f2FRzFVhof\\_UdUA!2eo](https://www.google.com/maps/@40.74507,-74.218784,3a,75y,172.97h,84.05t/data=!3m4!1e1!3m2!1srQufhX3f2FRzFVhof_UdUA!2eo).

12 Urban Dictionary, “Ghetto Fabulous,” accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=ghetto%20fabulous>.

13 Sontag, Susan, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” In *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* by Susan Sontag, 275–292 (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 279.

Ghetto Fabulous ‘bling’<sup>14</sup> Addressing the roots of this phenomenon, she posits:

The historical record of white ridicule and racist violence directed at black prosperity especially when it was greater than their own, is one indication of the ways that black access to material goods destabilised the racial logics of white superiority and black inferiority.<sup>15</sup>

Supplementing one another, the different interpretations of the Ghetto Fabulous aesthetic present the former Newark retail store in a fresh perspective that highlights the interplay of consumption, race and history.

### 3 Cemeteries, Land Use and Environmental Change

Yet, of all historical traces that present themselves to perceptive bus passengers traversing Newark’s West Ward today, the cemeteries most profoundly bespeak bygone eras and the district’s former residents. Newark’s once representative Fairmount, Holy Sepulchre and Hebrew cemeteries are now mere shadows of their former selves. As vestiges of the Victorian era, some of these graveyards feature crumbling markers and collapsing mausoleums that still reflect the area’s once predominant Irish, Italian, German and Jewish immigrant populations. The descendants of the communities that formerly buried their family members and visited their graves have since moved on to suburban settings or have died themselves. Generations later, these burial grounds remain unattended and have fallen into disarray.

Following the 1967 Newark riots, ‘white flight’ set in with its large-scale migration of whites to the suburbs, a demographic shift that, in turn, paved the way for the influx of black Americans and, more recently, immigrants from Caribbean and African points of origin.<sup>16</sup> Newark’s deteriorating cemeteries are powerful reminders of these demographic shifts. While the graveyards or parts thereof still accept interments, some sites have reached capacity or they

14 Mukherjee, Roopali, “Bling Fling: Commodity Consumption and the Politics of the Post-Racial,” in *Critical Rhetorics of Race*, ed. Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 181.

15 Mukherjee, “Bling Fling,” 183.

16 Mumford, Kevin, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 3. Also, see Porambo, Ronald, *No Cause for Indictment: An Autopsy of Newark* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971).

are no longer considered for burials. Headstones have been toppled and mausoleums are collapsing due to a lack of care and maintenance. In his study of American cemeteries and memorials, cultural geographer David Lowenthal observes that “the cemetery takes on secondary historical characteristics. [...] No longer just a set of monuments to the departed, the cemetery becomes a relic in its own right”.<sup>17</sup>

The Jewish cemeteries of Newark—many of them located alongside or in close vicinity to South Orange Avenue—present well-studied examples of the phenomenon Lowenthal describes. With their unattended graves and dilapidated monuments, these burial grounds symbolise the transience of ethnic communities and their once lively cultures. Like nearby Catholic cemeteries that have equally fallen into disrepair, Jewish graveyards in various stages of dereliction bespeak the bygone vibrancy of the communities that maintained them. Andrew Jacobs offers a haunting account of the afterlife of Newark’s Jewish burial grounds. Once boasting nearly 100 such sites, many today have become “monuments to vandalism and neglect”.<sup>18</sup> Although the author acknowledges that America is strewn with abandoned cemeteries, he notes that “few [are] as ravaged as those in Newark”. Describing one such “crowded” cemetery, “hard by the Garden State Parkway” and bordered by South Orange Avenue and Grove Street, Jacobs recalls the impression of looking around from the site of a vandalised gravesite commemorating the untimely death of a 21-year old man in 1925: “Spreading out from his narrow plot in every direction is a landscape of chilling desecration. Photographs obliterated, headstones toppled and bronze memorial plaques ripped out, perhaps to be sold as scrap.”<sup>19</sup> Newark’s cemeteries and the vanished communities that they commemorate demonstrate that these sites, once embedded in people’s everyday lives and culture, have been cut off from their living contexts. For David Mallach of the New Jersey-based Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest, Newark’s abandoned cemeteries even represent “a typical American story” in which “[e]veryone scatters and disperses and only the cemeteries are left”.<sup>20</sup>

---

17 Lowenthal, David, “Age and Artifact: Dilemmas of Appreciation,” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, ed. Donald W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 123.

18 Jacobs, Andrew, “Jewish Newark’s Urban Pioneers Rest Uneasily: The Dead, Left Behind in the Suburban Diaspora, Lay Amid a Landscape of Ravaged Monuments,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2000, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/15/nyregion/jewish-newark-s-urban-pioneers-rest-uneasily-dead-left-behind-suburban-diaspora.html>.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.



Passing Newark's forgotten burial grounds may prompt inclined bus passengers to ponder broader questions about cemeteries, land use and environmental change. The city's older cemeteries thus may have already experienced a process that still awaits other such sites in the future. At a time when family ties loosen, religious traditions fade and populations become ever more mobile, burial practices and cemeteries, by extension, have become the subject of family conversations and public discussions. People often no longer live in one place for their lifetimes or for generations so that maintaining gravesites has become difficult. Moreover, a growing sense of the scarcity of open land even in large surface nations like the United States has called into question the practice of maintaining final resting places in perpetuity. While permanent gravesites remain common in the United States, other countries reuse grave plots after periods of 15 to 25 years. Foregoing mortuary procedures such as the embalming of bodies and burials in caskets made of durable materials, the reuse of graves rests on the observation that human remains decay to humus within such time frames.<sup>21</sup> In the United States, such recycling of graves would likely be viewed as a desecration. However, the evolving debate on the subject points to the environmental cost of traditional interments and calls for 'green burials'. According to Greensprings Natural Cemetery in Newfield, New York, which is one of only five natural burial grounds in the United States as of 2008,

the average U.S. cemetery buries roughly 9,343 litres of embalming fluid, 219 tonnes of steel and 42,333 metres of high-quality wood used in caskets in a single hectare, whereas a body wrapped in a shroud or contained in a plain wood box decomposes quickly, leaves behind few pollutants and thus helps create new life.<sup>22</sup>

Others even view Western burial rites as an "expensive relic of 19th-century habit" that poses threats to the environment and public health:

The last big innovation was cremation, which is now under fire for its environmental costs. A study conducted in 2007 for Centennial Park, a cemetery in Australia, found cremations produce the equivalent of 160kg of CO<sub>2</sub> per body. A cemetery burial emits a mere 39kg. But maintenance

---

21 Thadeusz, Frank, "Germany's Tired Graveyards: A Rotten Way to Go?" *Spiegel Online International*, January 7, 2008, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/germany-s-tired-graveyards-a-rotten-way-to-go-a-527134.html>.

22 McCausland, Janet, "Burial Out of the Box," *Alternatives Journal* 34.1 (January 2008), 6.

(mowing lawns and the like) makes the ultimate carbon footprint of burial bigger than cremation.<sup>23</sup>

Cemeteries may further jeopardise public health by polluting air and ground water through chemicals used in mortuaries. Exploring the history and use of formaldehyde in the American funeral industry, Jeremiah and Ted Chiapelli chart how this hazardous substance passes into the soil, ground water and atmosphere through burials and cremations. A toxic and proven carcinogenic substance, formaldehyde, especially in trace amounts, eventually reaches drinking water supplies and the atmosphere. Although the dangers of formaldehyde to public health are well known, the embalming of bodies continues unabatedly. Debunking common misconceptions about the supposed need for embalming with historical and scientific evidence, the authors trace this widespread practice in the United States from its origins in the American Civil War to the present. They counter claims of embalming as a sanitary requirement to avoid the spread of disease or as a psychological necessity to aid the mourning process through the aesthetic presentation of bodies. Instead, the persistence of embalming is driven, they argue, by the American funeral industry, which, in 2002, was estimated to be a \$13 billion-a-year business.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of whether the ride-by impressions of Newark's forlorn graveyards prompt bus passengers to contemplate the impact of cemeteries on environmental pollution, climate change and the future of land use, the sense of gloom emanating from these sites is not lost on any observer. Torn fences and ornate metal gates, nowadays permanently flung open, grant passers-by unsettling glimpses of these graveyards. To be sure, Jacobs's account of Newark's forgotten Jewish cemeteries nevertheless concludes on a more optimistic note as he mentions the activities of a newly founded Jewish citizens' movement from suburban towns that annually invites families and mourners to the cemeteries so they can visit family graves on an afternoon before the Jewish High Holy Days. Yet, even these efforts to breathe new life into an old tradition nowadays occur with police protection. Reported muggings and the area's high rate of crime have prompted calls for police to escort families and mourners on this special day of remembrance.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Jacobs's description of these

---

23 Anonymous, "Exit Strategies: Green Funerals," *Economist*, September 16, 2010, 74, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.economist.com/node/17043348>.

24 Chiapelli, Jeremiah, and Ted Chiapelli, "Drinking Grandma: The Problem of Embalming," *Journal of Environmental Health* 71.5 (2008): 24.

25 Chen, David W., "Returning to Newark to Remember the Dead," *New York Times*, September 15, 1996, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/09/15/nyregion/returning-to-newark-to-remember-the-dead.html>.

cemeteries as “landscapes of chilling desecration”<sup>26</sup> tacitly acknowledges the associated devastation of their surrounding neighbourhoods and the lives of a population mired in runaway poverty and violent crime.

#### 4 Buses as Stages for Conflict, Resistance and Violence

The aforementioned 1997 shooting on Newark’s city bus is but one of a long series of such crimes committed in the proverbial “broad daylight”. The incident suggests that unlawful transgressions no longer unfold under cover of darkness but brazenly play out in the public eye. Buses and bus stops in Newark and other American cities have increasingly become the sites of spectacularly violent crimes. Over the years, Newark alone saw its share of shootings and stabbings that occurred on buses or at bus stops. Some of the most egregious and highly publicised incidents include the fatal stabbing of a 15-year old girl in an apparent hate crime at a Newark bus stop in 2003.<sup>27</sup> Two years later, a young man died after being hit by several bullets on a Newark city bus as horrified passengers looked on.<sup>28</sup> In 2013, a 14-year old girl died when her 19-year old assailant fired several rounds of ammunition into the side of a city bus in nearby Queens, New York.<sup>29</sup> Still more recently, a man succumbed to gunshot wounds to the head on a crowded bus during rush hour in Brooklyn. The victim, a 39-year old father of two, was on his way home from work when he was randomly caught in the crossfire. The 14-year old shooter and other youths belonging to rivalling street gangs had abruptly exchanged gunfire on board the bus. Such rampages on public transportation are too numerous to count, yet each time they occur, the seeming normalcy of contemporary American society unravels as lives are shattered in the wake of targeted killings or through eruptions of arbitrary violence.

Together with reports of rising assaults on bus drivers, the stream of news stories about mass transit shootings and the random victimisation of

26 Jacobs, “Urban Pioneers.”

27 Smothers, Ronald, “Teenage Girl Fatally Stabbed at a Bus Stop in Newark,” *New York Times*, May 13, 2004, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/13/nyregion/teenage-girl-fatally-stabbed-at-a-bus-stop-in-newark.html>.

28 “Shooting on Newark Bus Leaves Man Dead,” *New York Times*, February 26, 2005, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/26/nyregion/26bus.html>.

29 Goodman, J. David, “Man Arrested in South Carolina Over Killing on Queens Bus,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2013, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/nyregion/suspect-in-shooting-death-of-girl-on-queens-bus-is-caught.html>.

bystanders fuels public fears for these incidents suggest that the assumption of "safety in numbers" is failing. People realise that close proximity to one another in public spaces may no longer yield protection. Buses prove particularly vulnerable as people depend on them. At the same time, their narrowly confined cabins require passengers to gather close to one another, leaving them, for better or worse, exposed to the actions and behaviours of strangers. One of the most infamous shootings on public transportation in recent American memory came to be known as the 1993 "Long Island Railroad Massacre". The gunman, a Jamaican immigrant, had randomly opened fire on board a crowded commuter train that left six people dead and nineteen wounded. Even two decades and countless mass shootings later, the slayings still stand out as one of the nation's worst such crimes. Criminologist James Alan Fox emphasises that "[i]n a mall or a school or a movie theater", there is at least some opportunity for "hiding or escaping", whereas the commuters on board the railcar "had nowhere to go".<sup>30</sup> Investigations of the killings explored whether the actions of the convicted killer, at least in part, were fuelled by a history of conflict and discrimination in the assailant's biography during which he came to experience himself as a marginalised and excluded racial other. This racialisation of the gunman since his arrival in the United States as a young man from his native Jamaica was cited by some observers as a potential factor contributing to the murders he later committed.<sup>31</sup>

My work also responds to transport historian Cotton Seiler who called on scholars to counteract the paucity of knowledge about the historical relationship between race and mobility. As Seiler puts it, "the history of modern transport is inextricable from a history of race".<sup>32</sup> While much scholarly attention has focused on the significance of race in housing and employment, the dynamics of interracial encounters on public transportation have not yet been

---

30 Anonymous, "20 Years Later: Long Island Rail Road Shooting Remembered as Day Killer Colin Ferguson Went Off the Rails," *New York Daily News*, December 6, 2013, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/lirr-bloodbath-remembered-20-years-article-1.1539603>.

31 William Kunstler and Ron Kuby, Ferguson's initial team of attorneys had proposed a defense of insanity based on the notion "black rage", caused by "years of exposure to white racism". Ferguson had come from a privileged Jamaican background and it was only until his arrival in the United States with its different racial dynamics that he came to experience himself as a negated subject based on his blackness. See David J. Langum, William M. Kunstler: *The Most Hated Lawyer in America*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

32 Seiler, Cotton, "The Significance of Race to Transport History," *Journal of Transport History* 28.2 (2007): 310.

adequately studied. A turning point towards understanding the role of race relations in the history of transportation and mobility occurred with historian Robin Kelley, who deciphers buses and streetcars as “moving theatres” of 20th-century black working class resistance. Studying what he views as “racial dramas” unfolding on buses in Birmingham, Alabama during World War II, Kelley describes how Black Americans utilised public transportation as a space of resistance to segregation and racial humiliation. These workers, Kelley argues, employed everyday actions such as loud talking, joking and cursing as invisible forms of political action that turned buses into flashpoints of conflict and resistance.<sup>33</sup> Complementing Kelley’s research on interracial contact and conflict on southern buses, the work of fellow historian Sarah Frohardt-Lane uncovers the mid-century racial undercurrents on buses in northern cities like Detroit. “In de facto segregated cities such as Detroit,” she explains, “public transportation was one of the few spaces in which blacks and whites routinely encountered one another.”<sup>34</sup> The author describes how buses and streetcars in an already overburdened Detroit transit system became sites of racial violence as blacks and whites expressed their frustration with each other aboard transit vehicles. “In fact, buses and streetcars were primary sites of racial violence in the city. Nearly every day, minor annoyances blossomed into arguments, scuffles, or violence.”<sup>35</sup>

The research presented by Kelley and Frohardt-Lane registers a fresh interest in how the study of racial contact correlates with the history of transportation in the United States and elsewhere. In the same vein, Seiler reminds scholars of mobility to account for “the always raced identity of the traveler/passenger/driver” along with the ways in which the “‘scientific’ notion of race crafted in the nineteenth century underwrote the imperial expansionism, which brought about the revolution in modern transport”. Seiler reiterates that “self-directed mobility signifies freedom and self-transformation”. Therefore, “regimes of white supremacy have sought to police the movement of racial Others” because the latter “tended to be characterised as threatening to a social order based on spatial, cultural, and biological segregation of the fictive categories known as races”.<sup>36</sup> On the upside, Seiler acknowledges that

---

33 Kelley, Robin, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 33.

34 Frohardt-Lane, Sarah, “Close Encounters: Interracial Contact and Conflict on Detroit’s Public Transit in World War II,” *Journal of Transport History* 33.2 (2012): 212.

35 *Ibid.*, 14.

36 Seiler, “Significance,” 307.

some scientists and literary scholars have begun to explore the relationships between racialised power and the prerogatives of local, regional, national, and global mobility, producing theoretically informed analyses of the ‘politics of mobility’ through the lens of literary, aesthetic, legal and historical texts.<sup>37</sup>

This essay contributes to this growing body of knowledge about the link between mobility, poverty, violence and race relations.

## 5 Close-Up: Newark City Bus

“SAVE GA\$. Ride this Bus”, reads the motto that nowadays greets pedestrians and motorists in the streets of Newark. The slogan spans both sides of a white bus that links the city’s western districts with its bustling downtown, an area in which traffic is frequently slowed down by the busy commotions at the intersection of Broad and Market Streets. Abuzz with pedestrians, cars, buses and trucks in the midst of an open-air market atmosphere, this city hub features street vendors offering goods of all kinds. Sometimes barely moving in bumper-to-bumper traffic, the bus frequently idles in traffic at this lively downtown crossing. While stuck on the bus in such jams, passengers’ attention is involuntarily drawn to the happenings on the busy sidewalks.

The experience of gazing at street life from the window of a bus evokes the influential 1958 photobook “From the Bus” by Swiss American photographer Robert Frank.<sup>38</sup> The series features snapshots of people on New York City streets and sidewalks that the photographer took with his handheld Leica camera while riding the bus during the summer of 1958. One of the works depicts people walking or standing on the busy sidewalk of a New York City street.

The shot’s slight downward angle and the camera’s distance to its subjects confirms that it must have been taken from the window of a passing bus. The curb, diagonally visible in the lower left foreground, aligns with the row of storefronts and building entrances in the background. Set against the tableau of display windows and store signs, the broad sidewalk resembles a stage for a dozen or so pedestrians as they walk, stand or engage each other. Some appear

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>38</sup> See the photography by Robert Frank, “From the Bus,” 1958, gelatin silver print, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/296353>.

to be passing strangers. Others converse with acquaintances or colleagues. In the right foreground, a middle-aged man directly looks at the camera, as does a young man leaning with his back against a display window in the left background. Both men smoke, as do four African American men, perhaps on break from work, who can be seen conversing near a building entrance. The range of retailers, including a radio shop, a shoeshine parlour and a book and magazine store, suggests that it is not a posh part of the city. Some pedestrians are pacing swiftly towards their destination. Others resemble twentieth-century American embodiments of the *flâneur* strolling down the sidewalk while exploring the city. Figures move in different paths: in both directions of the sidewalk, facing the storefronts or turning toward the camera and passing traffic. The camera appears to capture and freeze instances of ordinary city life. However, a closer look at this photograph reveals peculiar details. For instance, all figures are male, whereas women seem entirely absent from this view. The scene also registers a striking variation of body types and clothes. In the foreground, a man facing the street has just turned back around to his left. His loosened tie and awkwardly positioned right arm contrast with the upright appearance of a tall young man in black business suit who briskly strides into the opposite direction. Examination of this seemingly random street scene yields a plethora of details and potential stories. Accordingly, Steffen Siegel, historian of photography, describes Frank's shots as the kind of images that were not simply taken by a photographer but rather as images that "sought out" their own photographer. And yet, Siegel notes, all such seemingly cursory glances out of the bus window nevertheless remain guided and controlled by the photographer's critical eye and ordering hand.<sup>39</sup> As in other examples of Robert Frank's photography, ordinary street scenes turn into complex but subtle statements about class, race and gender relations in post-war American society.

Close analysis of Frank's photograph offers a new perspective on Newark's city bus as well. Just as passengers on the bus glimpse the swarming street life outside, so do passers-by, in turn, take fleeting glances at the bus and other elements of traffic moving up and down the street. However, while other buses feature large-scale images and familiar brand names to promote consumption, this particular bus stands out for its plain appearance and call to embrace the benefits of public transportation. Extending wheel-to-wheel and laterally covering the span of four window segments, the prominently displayed slogan invites fellow commuters to "save gas" as they "ride this bus". Bold, orange letters, set against a bright, sky blue background spell out the adage urging motorists

---

39 Siegel, Steffen, "'Thru the City', Robert Frank flaniert mit dem Bus durch New York," in Frank, Robert, "From the Bus," 1958 (Berlin: Kulturstiftung der Länder, 2012), 7.



FIGURE 8.2 *Bus driver's rest area, Newark, New Jersey*<sup>40</sup>

to conserve fuel by switching from individual to shared modes of transportation. Both phrases are imperative constructions. Each consists of the infinitives of the verbs “to save” and “to ride” with corresponding direct objects “gas” and “bus”, respectively. Information is presented truism-style, in highly abridged form. Featuring all capitalised letters, the first phrase substitutes the capital “S” in GAS with a dollar “\$”-sign, thus adding another layer of meaning to the statement. Viewed by itself, the text simply reads as a call for behaviour modification driven by sheer economic considerations. Such interpretation emphasises cost-cutting and a frugal lifestyle, while omitting the environmental benefits of taking the bus. This initial understanding of the bus campaign as driven by economic considerations is confirmed by an emblem that adorns the outside wall of the bus operator’s rest area at the line’s terminus on the Western edge of the city.

Placed under a red, medallion-shaped logo listing the number of the bus line, the rectangular sign suggests: “Don’t pay those high gas prices, save and ride our bus!” As if to compensate for the shortcomings of a call to ride public transportation out of mere monetary considerations, a supplemental

40 Photo © Jürgen Heinrichs, January 2014.





FIGURE 8.3 *Newark city bus (detail)*

catchphrase appears in smaller font near the rear end of some buses. Cast against a blue and green background that evokes blue skies and green meadows, the tableau of text and images makes an enhanced statement about the benefits of mass transit as an effective tool to counteract climate change.

A pair of stylised human hands protectively holds a miniature Earth that appears beautiful yet fragile. Differing from its customary representation as the “blue planet”, Earth here is rendered green and surrounded by matching green flowers and butterflies. Expanding the “Save gas, ride this bus” motto, the enhanced statement adds an imperative clause about saving carbon for it now calls on riders to “Save gas. Save carbon. Save Dollars!” Transcending the economic pragmatism of the previous idiom, the revised motto acknowledges the reduction of carbon emissions as an objective for switching from cars to buses.

Charting the “bus discourse” as it presents itself to people in the streets of Newark takes on additional meaning when considering that the majority of buses serving this particular line rarely feature any advertisements at all. By contrast, most other buses operating in Newark, throughout New Jersey or in nearby New York City display large, colourful ads that capture the attention of consumers in the guise of motorists and pedestrians. The frequent absence of ads on this Newark bus also reframes the meaning of the “Save gas” campaign.

Although the reasons for the often-neutral appearance of these buses remain difficult to ascertain without knowledge of the line’s business operations, one wonders whether advertisers shy away from investing in a market considered weak due to the low purchasing power of its impoverished residents. 2012 United States Census figures list Newark’s median household income as \$34,387 compared to \$71,637 in the State of New Jersey at large. The data confirm the city’s status as one of the state’s poorest with a staggering rate of 28 percent of its population living in poverty.<sup>41</sup> With nearly a third of its residents subjected to life below the poverty line, Newark presents an environment in which the need for economic survival may indeed eclipse environmental concerns. As a result, the “save gas” campaign may resonate with those who follow out of economic necessity and for whom concerns about carbon emissions may hold less weight. Put another way, pleas to save money and carbon by reducing the emission of greenhouse gases may often mask an underlying scenario in which poverty dictates the choice of buses as the only transportation option. Moreover, poverty itself often manifests itself in deficient transportation infrastructures and their impact on people’s lives. In his insightful study of transportation and poverty in Philadelphia, Matthew Schell thus works with an expanded definition of poverty as constituted through the organisation of transportation.<sup>42</sup>

The well-aided idea underlying save-gas-ride-this-bus campaigns holds that switching to buses as alternate choice of transportation benefits the environment in various ways. They save gas since they transport more people from one point to another while using less fuel as compared to individual modes of transportation. By doing so, buses reduce emissions and their associated carbon footprint. They further ease traffic congestion by decreasing the overall number of vehicles on the road. In that spirit, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) celebrates school buses as a “big part of American education for generations” since they provide safe transportation, help avoid accidents through driver training, decrease fuel consumption and ease traffic congestion. “Every time students take the bus,” an EPA-commissioned study concludes, “they are getting a safe, clean, and environmentally friendly ride, and parents have peace of mind (and a bonus: they spend less on gas).”<sup>43</sup>

---

41 United States Census Bureau. State and County QuickFacts: Newark, New Jersey, “Persons Below Poverty Level, Percent, 2008–2012,” accessed May 21, 2014. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/34/3451000.html>.

42 Schell, Matthew, “Poverty in Philadelphia: Transportation as a Change Agent,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 20.3 (2000): 185–190.

43 Koester, Christine, “Take the Bus—Save the Planet!” United States Environmental Protection Agency: It’s Our Environment: EPA’s Blog About Our World, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://blog.epa.gov/blog/2013/09/take-the-bus-save-the-planet/>.

## 6 Buses as Social Spaces

What indeed is the meaning and the origin of the term “bus”? Translating as “for all”, dictionaries state that the contemporary English term “bus” presents an abbreviated form of the now outdated Latin phrase ‘omnibus’. The word commonly denotes a public carriage or vehicle designed to move a large number of people along a route of scheduled stops, where passengers are received or discharged. The first iterations of the modern bus appeared on the streets of Paris in 1828. Carriages were initially drawn by horses, whereas successive methods employed steam engines in the following decade and utilised electricity in trolley bus designs by the 1880s. The late 19th century saw the introduction of buses with internal combustion engines, a technology that survives in today’s widely used motor coaches.<sup>44</sup> Studying the symbolic role of the omnibus in the nineteenth-century cultural imagination, French scholar Masha Belenky examines key literary texts in nineteenth-century Paris. The omnibus, Belenky argues, quickly emerged as a symbol of urban transformation and of radical social change.<sup>45</sup> It always functioned as a social space. The bus was embraced by contemporary observers as a quintessentially democratic vehicle for it was “by law opened to everyone, regardless of social class or depth of one’s pocket”.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, it offered “unprecedented possibilities of class and gender collision within its confined space”.<sup>47</sup> Graphic artists such as Grandville and Daumier in particular “capitalized on the popularity of the omnibus as a vehicle for social satire and commentary”.<sup>48</sup>

Considering the core meaning of the term “bus” as a vehicle “for all” confirms that the association of buses with equality and egalitarian causes is a fitting connotation backed by a long historical track record. As a public space in which people gather in close proximity to one another for the purpose of traveling from one point to another, buses always doubled as stages for broader social and political conflicts. In the United States, buses played an essential role in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. They became the flashpoints of political conflict and subsequent protest. By mid-twentieth century, black Americans were still regarded as second class citizens on a daily basis every

44 Papayanis, Nicholas, *Horse-Drawn Cabs and Omnibuses in Paris: The Idea of Circulation and the Business of Public Transit* (Baton Rouge, London: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

45 Belenky, Marsha, “From Transit to Transitoire: The Omnibus and Modernity,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 35.2 (2007): 408.

46 *Ibid.*, 410.

47 *Ibid.*, 411.

48 *Ibid.*, 411.

time they boarded a bus and were forced to move to the 'coloured' section in the back of the cabin or give up their seats for a white passenger boarding after them. In March 1955, Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old high school student, refused to surrender her seat to a white passenger out of her conviction that local laws relegating black passengers to the back of the bus were in fact unconstitutional. Nine months later, in December of the same year, 42-year-old seamstress Rosa Parks similarly refused to give up her seat for a white passenger. Although the actions of Parks have been widely praised as the turning point in the history of segregation, the still earlier deeds of Claudette Colvin and other historical figures equally deserve credit for mounting the seminal bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. Together, these acts of non-violent protest and civil disobedience ushered in the 1956 Supreme Court decision that declared the city's segregation laws on buses to be unconstitutional. Economist Yana Van der Meulen Rodgers points out that

local leaders of the African American community perceived Claudette's youth, personality, and class to be unsuitable for holding her up as the key figure to initiate a mass boycott of the city's bus system. Rosa Parks assumed this role nine months later, thus precipitating more than a year of organised protest to end segregated bussing in Montgomery.<sup>49</sup>

Margot Adler, National Public Radio journalist, confirms this assessment of the historical record in her interview with Colvin:

When asked why she is little known and why everyone thinks of Rosa Parks only, Colvin says the NAACP and all the other black organisations felt Parks would be a good icon because "she was an adult. They didn't think teenagers would be reliable". She also says Parks had the right hair and the right look. "Her skin texture was the kind that people associate with the middle class," says Colvin. "She fit that profile."<sup>50</sup>

Even before the actions of Colvin and Parks, still other Montgomery residents and groups set the stage for ending segregation such as the Women's Political

---

49 Meulen Rodgers, Yana van der, "Review," Rutgers University Project on Economics and Children, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://econkids.rutgers.edu/book-of-the-month-econ-menu-204/2039-claudette-colvin110>.

50 Adler, Margot, "Before Rosa Parks, there was Claudette Colvin," National Public Radio, March 15, 2009, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101719889>.

Council, a local organisation founded in 1946 that had been lobbying for improved transit conditions for Black Americans a full decade before the onset of the Montgomery bus boycott.

Buses remained closely tied to the American discourse on social and political causes during the second half of the twentieth century. Following on the heels of successful desegregation of public transportation in Alabama and other Southern states, buses once again became the flashpoints of political conflict during the 1960s. Heated debates over “bussing”, the practice of transporting students across towns and regions as a means of integrating schools, started to surface by 1961. Despite the end of lawful segregation, renewed demographic shifts and persistent patterns of residential dwelling reflected a continuing stratification of society along racial lines. Serving as vehicles to transport white or black students to predominantly white or black schools, respectively, buses were employed in efforts to undo and reverse the rifts of an American society that was de facto still rigidly segregated. The practice sought to heal a nation reeling from the effects of segregation by allowing black and white students to learn alongside one another. Sharing the experience of personal and intellectual growth, the initiative aimed to turn students into conscientious citizens in a diverse and egalitarian future American society.

## 7 Exhibiting Transportation

The central role of buses in social and political movements in the United States paved the way for these mass transit vehicles to enter museums. Since its opening in 2003, the ongoing “America on the Move” exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History has aimed to tell American history through the story of the nation’s evolving modes of transportation. The innovative concept of the show took four years to develop from 1999 to 2003. Project director and curator Steven Lubar reports that his team worked from the premise that

[t]ransportation history is full of important but not-so-exhibitable stories: policy decisions, for example, or demographics. We could do these in words or images or video, but we decided the social history questions, and the vehicles that embody them, would take center stage.<sup>51</sup>

---

51 Lubar, Steven, “The Making of ‘America on the Move’ at the National Museum of American History,” *Curator* 47.1 (2004): 19–51.

In her review of the installation, curator Kirsty Devine praises Lubar's exhibition design by contrasting it with the shortcomings of outdated modes of display: "The sad reality for visitors is that the element of theatre and the resonance with everyday life that transport displays could so readily convey is missing."<sup>52</sup> Previously, transport museums had mounted displays that either explored the subject in overly technical ways or lacked any human reference or stories of everyday use. Lubar's decision to bring actual buses into the museum space and his team's move to embrace what Devine describes as the "element of theatre" resonates with the reading of public transportation as theatrical spaces in the work of Robin Kelley and Sarah Frohardt-Lane.

Myriad paintings and photographs also explore the bus as a site of social interaction. While an in-depth exploration of such examples exceeds the parameters of this study and will be covered elsewhere, a sampling shows that the bus retains a powerful hold on the popular and artistic imagination. The life-size, plaster-cast figures of American sculptor George Segal, a close friend of photographer Robert Frank's, frequently feature bus drivers and passengers or commuters waiting at bus stops. His 1997 sculpture *Bus Passengers* conveys the crowded interior of a public bus, where six seated and standing strangers come into close contact with one another. Incorporating life-size casts of figures along with genuine bus grab rods, handles and seats, Segal's work delves into the tension between the close physical proximity of passengers and their self-contained postures.

A recurrent theme in Segal's work, buses and other mass transit settings evoke an "alone-in-the-crowd" sense of alienation associated with post-war American society. Echoing the practice of other pop artists, Segal removes figures and objects from their everyday contexts and rearranges them in new sculptural ensembles in which the isolated, ghostly appearance of white figures evokes a sense of the impossibility of human communication and relationships.<sup>53</sup>

The 1980s photographs of South African photographer David Goldblatt give haunting impressions of life inside apartheid South Africa. Taken on buses and at bus stops, Goldblatt's photographs record the excruciating circumstances of the three-hour commutes that black workers endured as they travelled from their assigned homelands to their low-paying jobs in Pretoria. Starting and ending in the middle of the night, the depictions of these agonising trips exemplify the unbearable hardships of life for blacks in South Africa at the time.

52 Devine, Kirsty, "Review: America on the Move, National Museum of American History," *Journal of Transport History* 26.1 (2005): 114.

53 Kalina, Richard, "George Segal: L&M Arts," *Sculpture* 29.10 (2010): 74–75.



FIGURE 8.4 *George Segal, Bus Passengers, 1997. Plaster, metal and plastic*<sup>54</sup>

Goldblatt's portraits of the struggle of workers to survive under the most adverse conditions are literally framed by buses as the photographs are either shot on board buses or at bus stops.<sup>55</sup> A persistent trope in popular culture, the bus also structures movies such as Spike Lee's 1996 production *Get on the Bus*. The film narrates the cross-country bus journey of a group of black men destined to join the 1995 Million Man March in Washington, D.C. The protest rally

54 Art © The George and Helen Segal Foundation and Carrol Janis, New York/Licensed by VAGA, New York City.

55 Goldblatt, David. *The Transported of KwaNdebele: A South African Odyssey* (New York: Aperture Books, 1989).

was organised by Louis Farrakhan, the controversial leader of the religious group Nation of Islam. In Lee's film, the bus provides a contained narrative space in which the plot unfolds. Representing a variety of opposing lifestyles, political views and religious beliefs, bus passengers discuss and argue about the meaning of politics, race, religion and sexuality on their way to the American capital. In his critical review of the movie, sociologist Paul Gilroy observes that

[t]he bus journey provides Lee with a legitimate means to exclude women so that he can do what he does best: explore the tortured contours of the black man's being in the world. The film thus owes something to that genre of military movies in which men can confidently become intimate with one another without the distractions women would represent.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to his critique of the film's reductive portrayal of gender dynamics, Gilroy points to its refusal to engage the controversial and political nature of the event itself:

Though footage of the event has been dropped in, history remains secondary to myth. To arrive (and thus to enter history) would be to stretch the field in which Lee's drama unfolds to accommodate the dimensions of a world he is only capable of addressing in the most trivial ways.<sup>57</sup>

Another discourse in which the bus functions as a central metaphor may come as a surprise to some: corporate management. James C. Collins, business consultant and author, has become widely known for his expertise in guiding corporations in tackling organisational change in order to strengthen and grow their organisations. Collins's publications frequently employ buses as metaphors for companies. Echoing the notion of the bus as a clearly defined narrative space in popular culture, Collins explains how "leaders of companies that go from good to great start not with 'where' but with 'who.' They start by getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats".<sup>58</sup> Collins's utilisation of buses as metaphors for the effective staffing of management teams also owes to the widely used American English phrase of "throwing somebody under the bus". This idiom, widely used in

56 Gilroy, Paul, "Million Man Mouthpiece," *Sight and Sound* 7.8 (1997): 16–18.

57 Ibid., 17.

58 Collins, James C., "Good to Great," accessed May 21, 2014. [http://www.jimcollins.com/article\\_topics/articles/good-to-great.html](http://www.jimcollins.com/article_topics/articles/good-to-great.html).



contemporary American political campaigns, usually denotes the act of sacrificing a friend or close ally for self-interested reasons.

## 8 Google Bus Attacks

Presently, buses once again make the headlines in San Francisco, Oakland and other cities in northern California's Bay Area. During what has come to be known as "Google bus attacks", protesters have repeatedly blocked, vandalised or damaged employee buses of Silicon Valley software companies such as Google, Apple and Facebook. Equipped with air-conditioning, wireless internet access and tinted windows, these luxury coaches offer free shuttle service for employees between their residences in Bay Area cities and their workplaces at technology firms. Complaints initially criticised that buses obstructed public bus stops and that companies used such facilities without properly reimbursing municipalities or paying taxes. Protests have since grown into a broader movement that views "Google buses" as symbols of gentrification and rising income inequality fuelled by the technology boom. In these incidents buses no longer function as a social space or the site of violence among passengers as seen in previous historical instances. Instead, protesters view buses and their users as manifestations of the growing divide between a new class of young, well-paid and often foreign-born technology workers who unintentionally displace an existing populace of underemployed residents whose modest incomes cannot keep pace with rising rents and costs of living. While some actions embrace non-violent means of protest such as the blocking of busses, other incidents have turned violent with rocks shattering windows and tires being slashed.<sup>59</sup> The bus attacks have been met with vocal support and vigorous opposition on both sides. Supporters of the protest lament that the backlash against technology companies stems from "anger over spiralling rents and evictions as young tech workers colonise previously low-income areas". In a much-cited recent incident, a young woman was threatened at a San Francisco bar for refusing to take off her Google Glass device. A newly released product of 'wearable technology', this device resembling ordinary glasses allows users to search the internet or record the world in front of them with voice prompts instead of bulky keyboards or screens. Other bar patrons explained that they suspected the woman to have used her device to record them and thus invade

---

59 Alexander, Kurtis, "Tech Buses Blocked, Vandalized in Protests," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 20, 2013, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://blog.sfgate.com/stew/2013/12/20/bus-blocked-again-in-tech-boom-backlash/>.

their privacy. Another guest's description of the event reveals how much the quarrel became the flashpoint of deep-seated philosophical differences about the meaning of technology in contemporary lives: "After a hiatus, someone threw a dirty bar rag at her, she said, and a woman came over and said: 'You're killing this city.'"<sup>60</sup> On the other side of the debate, journalist Joseph Malchow polemically frames the bus attacks as "leftist class warfare" that fails to acknowledge how much these buses ease traffic congestion and invigorate the local economy: "Dubbed 'Google buses', the shuttles remove thousands of cars from San Francisco's madcap streets and allow coders to continue building the enterprises that help to keep the city's jobless rate at 4.8%."<sup>61</sup> Malchow's argument certainly has traction in light of California's notorious highway congestion and economic challenges. Yet, as in other examples explored in this essay, comprehensive analysis of problems related to transportation, the economy and environmental issues such as climate change frequently falls short when it refuses to take into account all dimensions of the issue in dialectical fashion. Therefore, protesters' fear of displacement by what they describe as an invasion of tech workers who price them out of low-income habitats is just as valid as the concerns of those who advocate car pools, employee buses and improved public transportation infrastructure. Yet, the refusal to bring into play all dimensions of a problem, be that environmental concerns, climate change, class tensions or economic considerations, can only yield truncated debates that will not do justice to the complexity of the challenge at hand. Debates about meaningful efforts to promote public transportation as a way to counteract climate change in particular frequently downplay or overlook class tensions. In the 1950s, the aforementioned story of Claudette Colvin's long-standing omission from the historical record of the Montgomery bus boycott already underscored the apparent difficulty of acknowledging class divisions among blacks in an otherwise affirmative political movement that sought to advance racial justice and equality. Today, the arguments over the attacks on "Google buses" unfolding in California's Bay Area reveal a persistent refusal or inability to expand the debate in a manner that fosters the kind of broad, systemic analysis needed to tackle the interrelated effects of poverty, climate change, class

---

60 Allen, Nick, "Google Glass Attack: Tech Giant Accused of 'Killing' San Francisco," *The Telegraph*, 8 May 2014, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/10685059/San-Francisco-divided-over-being-epicentre-of-the-inter-net-age.html>.

61 Malchow, Joseph, "Those Nonsensical 'Google Bus' Attacks," *Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2014, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304026804579411432350179154>.

divisions and race relations. The fact that even some of the most esteemed voices in the American struggle for racial justice and economic equality continue to hold the bus in low esteem shows how much work remains to be done. Amiri Baraka, the late poet and famous Newark native, was recently eulogised by fellow writer and contemporary Ishmael Reed in a telling way:

Amiri Baraka and I clashed. Often. He once called me “a jet plane flying lying n—.” My response was that when Amiri, a communist, gave up his American Express card, I’d start riding the bus. We sat standards for young people with our arguments. They were conducted using poetry and wit. Not once was an AK-47 employed.<sup>62</sup>

Simultaneously critical and affectionate, Reed’s obituary underscores their past practice of constructive debate despite personal difference for the sake of egalitarian causes. Tellingly, this affirmation occurs at the symbolic expense of the bus, a mode of transportation that continues to be held in low regard, perhaps due to its association with the poor and their inability to afford faster and more comfortable means of transportation. Once again, the bus is evoked as a lens through which to debate the meaning of class, race and equality. References to the AK-47 celebrate the fact that the generation of Baraka and Reed did not revert to such destructive technologies for they transcended violence with poetry. Unfortunately, this priceless ability has become far too elusive for current generations that continue to face the everyday effects of poverty and violence, exacerbated by climate and environmental change. Reed’s dismissive account of bus riding reminds readers that unacknowledged class divisions and the challenges of a changing environment and climate remain formidable challenges for future generations.

---

62 Reed, Ishmael, “Ishmael Reed on the Life and Death of Amiri Baraka,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 12, 2014, accessed May 21, 2014. <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2014/01/12/ishmael-reed-on-the-life-and-death-of-amiri-baraka/>.