

## HOW TO GET OFF THE BUS

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Well, I did it. I got off first in Durban, and then after a lot of hemming and hawing, a month later in Joburg. Like others on it, I saw the bus transform from a container, a vector of intense conversation and a field day for the common cold, into a metaphor for a longer journey, a detour through uncomfortable places and unpalatable pasts, a time machine, as Neo Muyanga prophesied, for travel to possible futures.

I think of other buses when I put up a photograph of men in suits contemplating racial zoning in midcentury South Africa.

This image of men in suits pointing at another image, a map, presumably in relation to the surroundings, speaks in its layers to the enduring, impossible fantasy of a white city of the future they are meant to see themselves in. This is Eurofuturism in Africa. We know that while the times have changed, so has white space, and



From *About Blank: Architecture and Apartheid*

so have the fantasy projections that circulate around it. Our bus drives by, touching the power of projections, glimpsing a few individuals with means or the inclination to step outside the frame, including the remains of a poet who steps out so widely that he is lost. We can only touch these realities, looking through the windows of our own expectation; there are opportunities and costs to this mode of mobile critique.

I want to ask Angela Davis and Gina Dent about their bus trip through Palestine, and its parallels with ours (well, half the journey I was direct witness to). Despite all the internal love and solidarity, and also alienation and awkwardness for some people and at some moments, there are deeper questions to ask about *communitas* on the fly. A friend in Durban who was witness to one event said to me, “all this bus talk is like being with a bunch of stoners.” And of course he was right: get a group of very congenial and interesting people together, and you have instant subculture, with all its cryptic talk and shadow-play.

Getting off the bus is about moving on from this false sense of security, and about using being moved to connect with others in common cause. We write and make work, in the best of times, in order to communicate something to another we do not know and perhaps never will. Getting off the bus is also about, to paraphrase Achille Mbembe, “becoming alien to one’s assignments...as a way of constituting a utopian surplus.” If this is what the bus accomplished as a mobile workshop, what does this utopian surplus mean when we return to the world we were already in, whirling dizzily around the onslaught on the people of Gaza. What critical import do we transfer to the world we never left?

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When the bus was a space of introspection, it was also for some a stage with a captive audience. I did have my drama queen moments, let it be said. The work of race and racism in these moments of testimonial overflow was in many ways fraught, and I cannot quite understand it. Some very interesting people did not share their words and tears as many of us did, perhaps too easily. Were we performing our Plan B, the university that listens to us, the institutions that nurture us? Even in moments of performance overload, including performances of silence, questions of race tugged at the ruse of an interior, of a discomfort with what Achille, again, called “the affective infrastructure which conditions our ways of seeing and relating.”

One thing that stays with me as I get off the bus is Achille’s response to a very pointed critique by Françoise Verges on the place of capital, technology and masculine domination in his account of our precariousness-as-species in the Anthropocene. While delicately side-stepping this, I was struck by his call to embrace the possibility of estrangement. This embracing is of course double-edged and contradictory, and as Françoise returned to throughout her formal and informal comments, it turns us back to some of the well worn tools of our past, of critiques of our brutal pasts, of slavery and capital, masculinity, militarism and the afterlives of imperialism. We cannot all be Afrofuturists, or poets, or musicians, and indeed the bus is powerfully symbolic of the politics of coalition, of the collective praxis that might make music of our shared estrangement with settled modes of critique.

In another footnote in my notes from Achille's talk (which I paraphrase again) he asks for a reopening of the question of life, confined to lines of blood and descent, and an opening to a future in which life is understood as emergence. I scrawl, with Angela Davis in view, "what is 'prison abolition' in general?"

How do we transit through our varied palimpsests, once we get off the bus, to think of this question along many fronts of antiracism. With Ruha Benjamin's political critique of genomics in mind, I pressed David Theo Goldberg on why he insisted in his talk that 'antiracism' relies on biopolitics, while 'antiracism' is always activist; I asked why we cannot imagine an antiracist biopolitics aimed precisely at securing the infrastructure for revolt, perhaps for "prison abolition in general." Every movement needs its infrastructure, and its construction workers, a point I tried to make, with respect to a modest antiapartheid activist in our midst, Helen Douglas.

What I took from many talks, from Siba Grovogui as well as from fleeting conversations with Josslyn Lockett, Gabeba Baderoon, Sasha White and Zen Marie, was what Siba so wonderfully called the project to "reimagine the archives of the next commonwealth." We do this, always, in all our ways of collecting all that remains neglected and marginal, and also in our ways of revisiting that which we think we know. I hear in the soulful voice of Roberta Estrela D'Alva exactly this archival project, just as I felt it the "ritual" for the drowned put together on the hoof by Françoise Verges. I offer the notion of damaged critique, of those marginal or fragmentary pieces drawn too easily into collections that confirm popular prejudice of gangs and urban decay, or sexual degeneracy and illicit desire, or indeed of super-exploitation and devaluation to the

point of 'social death.' Might we not also find in these archival fragments what Siba called the "common places" which re-imagine the human? I find this a powerful way to revisit my own archival practice and its search for "anticipatory critique" that is not easily read because it has not yet found 'coherent' voice. And yet we know it might, from music that comes from elsewhere.