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Wandeka Gayle

Jamaican Bus Rides

I avoided driving in Jamaica for much of my professional life, which blossomed into full on phobia while living in America. I managed to avoid it for eight years, convinced I would hit someone or that I would be hit. When I was struck while crossing South College Road in Lafayette, Louisiana, in September 2014, I realized that could be my fate even as a pedestrian.

Still, I preferred taking the bus, even as it was a long-suffering exercise. I got some of my best ideas while riding the city bus in Lafayette, because it gave me time to just people watch or look out at the activity on the streets, but often it changed routes seemingly on a whim or was sometimes not on time.

Perhaps now with the revamped transportation centers in Half Way Tree, and the fleets of JUTC buses, traveling by bus is less painful in Jamaica than it was when I was a teenager, but it is hardly the stoic rides I have experienced more often in America.

The Spanish Town terminus in Jamaica during the evening rush hour in pouring rain is always a nightmare. People stand in crowds in the open, some under umbrellas, others with make-shift plastic bag hats, school children with school bags hovering overhead, others standing in front of stores on the piazza, waiting eternally for the buses to veer into the bus park while the astute vendors who were once selling peanuts in fair weather would suddenly brandish umbrellas for sale.

The waiting is painful but does not compare to the anxiety of glimpsing the approaching buses and knowing what will happen next.

People, from the fidgety to the weary-eyed and stoic, would snap awake and make a mad dash to the buses that have not even released the other passengers. I have lost parts of my clothing and hair accessories, torn the handle of my bags, and lost umbrellas in these episodes. There have been instances when one of my sisters gets inside and I could not get in and she would, with a heavy heart, have to fight her way to reunite with me.

The reason it is a near stampede to get inside one of these buses is not for the luxury of a window seat but just for any seat, for otherwise you will become wedged into the sweaty bodies of strangers as the conductors insist on filling up every nook and cranny of the bus before closing the door. Sometimes, the bus is so packed that the bodies are nearly hanging off the step, pressing the conductor against the open door, while fifty percent of his body is already outside. He will slap the side of the bus twice and shout, “Sen’ on, driver” or simply “Road, driver” to signal that they are full and ready to go. I always scoff

when I look up at the letters in red on the top of the bus near the driver's side: Capacity 32 and then at the people holding onto poles and the tops of the seats and knowing there are more than twice that number in the bus. Some people sit so close to the driver that if they move their legs slightly to the right, they can easily control the brakes. The most annoying part is when someone at the back of the bus is the first to disembark and we, standing or sitting uncomfortably close to each other, must untangle appendages and torsos and filter out of the bus to allow them room to get off. Then we must reassume those spaces or cast evil eyes on those people who have shifted just so that we don't fit quite as comfortably as we did before.

Of course, this is a glimpse of desperation during peak hour on the privately-owned public buses. The looming government buses insist that people line up and have their fares in hand before entering, but these buses usually travel within the corporate areas and not to the rural sections of the island. But, interestingly, Jamaica has a thriving transportation system with more and more privately-owned vehicles providing services to areas where there is demand.

However, this is not without liability. Buses have been in the news in recent years because of the trend where high school girls exchange sex with conductor boyfriends for free rides, gifts, and money. They were said to cut out their pockets and sit on the laps of these men, providing easy access for groping while the bus jostled over pot holes and thumped with sexually suggestive music. Some drivers were said to exclusively pick up students and show illicit videos called "blue movies" to minors. Other drivers get flak for demanding that no "schoolers" board their bus because it cuts into their profits as students pay significantly less fares than adults.

Evidenced by these sordid tales and my losing parts of clothing just by trying to get on the bus, travelling by bus is a guaranteed adventure. The worst of it and best of it is travelling by minibus. Minibuses have a special energy and their own M.O. There are those legally operating vehicles and those whose drivers appoint themselves without getting the stipulated red license plates and are referred to as "robots" for some reason. They are constantly on the look-out for traffic cops and work in a state of frenzy and unease. This thriving business means heightened competition known as the "more dog than bone" phenomenon, the bone, of course, being the avidly sought-after passenger.

The first stage of getting on the bus is surviving the near-violent wooing of the conductor or the loader man. The loader man is a self-appointed side man who gets a "load" of passengers into the bus one by one and who demands payment from the driver at the end of the process, whether he helped significantly or not. Some police officers call these people extortionists, but these loader men see themselves as fledgling entrepreneurs in the busing system.

A seasoned bus traveler like myself would stand several meters away to scope out the rows of buses, spot one that is going to my destination and already has some passengers, and then make a beeline for that bus. I would walk as if with blinders on, all the while avoiding the pleas of "Lady? Lady? Yuh going Mobay? Christiana?" Once a woman ended up in one bus and her bags in another and there was a stand-off between one loader man and another until the woman cursed a blue streak. I have learnt to firmly hold onto my bag, refuse any help from anyone until I get to the desired bus and watch the conductor place it in the back under the seat.

Once inside the bus, I have become accustomed to the demands for all passengers to “small up ourselves,” meaning that while the buses were intended to carry three passengers in a row, invariably the conductors insisted that four, sometimes five, people be in a row, but one would have to make himself or herself small by sitting forward or pressing against the side of the bus or clenching together our butt-cheeks to make room. And had I any delusions about my size, conductors often set me straight by shouting, “Hold on, Fatty, we need a small one ‘round the back. Let Tiny in.” He would be referring to a slender woman. And just like that we were dubbed “Fatty” and “Tiny” respectively, without any malice or permission.

And sometimes there are the unforeseen circumstances, like once that we had not gone halfway down the road from the bus park when I realized that this bus was a “dry weather” bus – one that often has some windows that cannot move, or some windows missing. This was one I travelled on recently where the window was missing and it suddenly began to rain, and so the driver had to stop, get his trusty piece of cardboard, and put it in the place of the window to protect us from the sprays. And shortly after we set off again, the cardboard fell out and he stopped and asked someone by the side of the road if they could please pick up his “window.” This happened just as I had returned home from Michigan for a quick summer visit before school started again in August, and instead of joining in the people cursing the driver for his apparent cheapness, I found myself laughing as the people murmured that they would not be paying all the fare because the driver did not have one complete bus. I had found I had missed the animated characters on a typical mini-bus.

But the opposite is just as unnerving, like having to shut up all the windows on another rainy day, or hide behind tinted windows while passing traffic patrol on the highway only to learn that the driver’s A-C unit has not worked since forever, and we were forced to endure the stifling heat. Someone always had to choose that moment to release gas when we were already breathing in each other’s moist odors. The passengers immediately distrusted that one person who would eventually verbalize his disgust by shouting: “Is which nasty person do dat?”

But there are the times when people are in a talkative mood, lambasting the government’s tax hike and how all the prices “gone up” since flour and saltfish prices sky-rocketed. And I live for those moments when I travel on the bus that leaves at five-thirty in the morning and the conductor passes around a bag of oranges or lollipops and the radio plays the early morning news or something with a thick rock-steady beat or the droning then shrieking voice of the cricket commentator in Test Match season.

I must note that there is hardly a clinical calm existing on the government buses. There are those occasional interruptions of a man suddenly getting up from his seat on the bus, cracking open his Bible, and gnashing his teeth about fire, brimstone, and hell and then calmly holding out his hat for “contributions to the ministry of God.” Once, while travelling from downtown Kingston to Spanish Town, a blind man carrying his guitar came aboard, positioned himself at the front of the bus, and began strumming his guitar for the passengers as though it were the most normal thing in the world.

Then, when I returned home once more to teach during the summer, I took a bus from Half Way Tree to Spanish Town when I heard the first strains of seeming gibberish: “Shanta la ba la bala ba!”

I inwardly groaned when I realized this was a woman in the throes of “getting in the spirit” and I would no longer be allowed to relish the calm of the bus.

The lady soon began her spiel, but it was evident that she wasn’t a very eloquent speaker as the majority of her religious incantation was chanting “Jesus!

Jesus! Jesus!” and having the passengers chant it as well.

The thing about Jamaican people on a bus is that there is a sense of obligation they feel when someone asks them to say “Amen” or when the driver turns up Christian music to a defeating screech, to just accept it. But this was a different experience altogether. The more the lady shouted “Jesus!” the more impassioned the people got. It was as if something got a hold of the people and I looked around to see if people’s eyes were turning over in their heads, but people hanging onto poles, sitting in seats were bobbing their heads in agreement and shrieking “Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!” as though they were at a revival tent meeting, while the lady once again started shouting mysteriously: “Shanta la bala ba!”

The bus driver through all this had hissed his teeth in disgust, and I was almost at the point of covering my ears, but restrained myself so as not to be called a heathen. Then the bus driver did something that sealed his faith and mine. He turned up the reggae music to drown out the chaos.

The lady beside me shouted, “You don’t have no God in you! Bus driver, you is pure evil!” The bus man did not respond to this, but the woman kept saying that he was going to end up like all the people who had shunned God. He was going to die and go straight to hell.

“Mi don’t want your God if this is of God,” the bus driver finally responded.

Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!

“You wicked! You evil like!”

Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!

I noticed that as the bus passed Central Village, the people were showing no signs of letting up. It had been approximately half an hour and they were just as fervent as before. It was welcome when we finally rolled into Spanish Town and I could disembark from the busload of wailing passengers.

And while every bus has its own dynamic, more and more today people do not engage with each other on these buses except when something collective happens to pull them back into animated discourse. Some are more contented to listen to their iPods than the driver’s overplayed CDs or to drown out that person assuring someone on the other end of his phone that the bus had just passed Clarendon Park when it was clear that we were miles and miles away from this junction.

Perhaps, when I am in America I do miss the frenzy that may break out at any time, that vendors are allowed to walk the aisle with the boxes of grater cake and peanut brittle. On these buses, people do not really talk to each other. They look out the window, just waiting until it’s time to press the red button signaling their stop.

Wandeka Gayle is a Jamaican writer, visual artist, and assistant professor of creative writing at Spelman College. She has received writing fellowships from Kimbilio, Callaloo, the Hurston/Wright Foundation, the Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing and The Watering Hole. She has a Ph.D. in English/Creative Writing from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her book, *Motherland and Other Stories* (Peepal Tree Press), comes out in 2020.

Check out an interview with Wandeka Gayle [here](#).