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Re-creation as recreation: the re-enactment of heritage buses in the everyday city

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the re-enactment of running heritage buses in the everyday city through a series of events. It presents findings from enthusiast-organised activities to re-create the past, based on four public and private events involving the reappearance of heritage buses on the streets of London. Through participatory observations undertaken in late 2022, these buses were arguably performing a re-enactment consisting of a re-dressing of the material culture of the bus, which involved paying tribute through considerable attention to detail. It also involved enthusiast conductors engaging in role-play with passengers to perform historical everyday mobility practices, thus reconstructing the atmosphere of the past. The juxtaposition of heritage buses with contemporary city landmarks for photography purposes was found to be popular among enthusiasts and appealing to the general public, which potentially also transformed private events into semi-public ones. The difference between the two notions of “nostalgic heritage” and “bonding heritage” (Laar 2013) was found not clear-cut because heritage buses impart different meanings and connections to individuals with different backgrounds, for which auto-biographical and familial references appear key. As newcomers to Britain, Hongkongers formed a significant demography in these events, which they described as making them “feel at home” and on a “pilgrimage”. Critical reflections on current bus services were also prompted by the re-creation of past routes, which could be a useful strategy for collecting public opinion as the future of bus mobilities is reconsidered in the context of the past re-created.

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1. Introduction

Re-enactment is fun.

(Agnew 2004, 327)

This article investigates the re-enactment of heritage buses in everyday city, primarily based on the operations of heritage buses in London during several events of different types. It investigates encounter contexts in which historical buses intersected with the everyday contemporary city to determine, firstly, the relationship between moving heritage and citizen diversity and, secondly, the meanings for the city space into which such

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buses run. The impacts and reception of encounters with re-enactment opportunities involving heritage buses are examined by studying the events beyond everyday encounters with the buses, while their reception is analysed via empirical, opportunistic observations conducted mainly in London.

The paper is organised as follows: first, an overview is provided of the literature upon which the paper draws, spanning various mobilities studies but especially those connected to public space. This forms a bridge towards key notions of re-enactment in the field of heritage, tourism and museum studies. Method deployed are then outlined, which were mainly based on the ethnography of four fieldwork opportunities. Next, the findings and discussion relate mainly to the ways re-enacting bus heritage in the everyday city could generate both bonding and nostalgic experience by applying Laar's (2013) concepts of nostalgic and bonding heritage. The re-creation of former bus routes for the public to directly experience, and its ability to evoke critical reflections on contemporary bus services, are then discussed. The paper concludes by summarising the contributions and recommendations for future research.

2. Unpacking sociality on buses via historicised experience in the everyday city

This paper is premised upon mobilities studies literature, especially the burgeoning interest in mobile publics (Sheller 2004, 2023). This forms a bridge to re-enactment studies, which can be subsumed under tourism, museum and heritage, and responds to the call for cross-disciplinary research on public transport (Tuvikene et al. 2023). The space of the bus compartment has been encapsulated (Sheller 2004); as an extreme version of "throwntogetherness" (Massey 2005), this has led to extensive research on forms of sociality on buses. Such research can be summarised as "passengerling" (Bissell 2010; Wilson 2011) and is based on empirically studying on-board happenings with a focus on human interactions. Rink (2023) terms the experience of togetherness in shared spaces of mobility and correctly points out (Rink 2023) that such research is developing through urbanisation scholars' interest in public space (such as Bodnar 2015). In the wider context, such studies can be regarded as an expansion or overflow of interest in urban public space. Yet Bodnar's critical comment must be noted: public space should not be treated as "undifferentiated genres". Likewise, it has been argued that public transport studies should involve a sense of specificities and that the specificities of public transport types entail different genres of moving public spaces that await analysis; this also applies to the diverse mix of people (Tsang 2022). Within "passengerling", therefore, the metro and the bus are different types of public space, given their configuration and the experiences of senses, speed and materiality, as with single- and double-decker buses, for example. In this paper, therefore, the age of the bus and its heritage status/materialities are highlighted as forming a special, extraordinary kind of encounter and space for analysis.

Given the points made above, it appears that an overarching theme can be identified when studying forms of sociality. However, as argued previously, the expanding literature on bus mobilities seems not to have developed into a more diversified approach, as Tsang (2022) has argued, while pre-framing contexts in empirical research into bus mobilities might predetermine the findings to a certain extent. Hence the need to encourage a more open approach to the unexpected

happenings of bus mobilities, which can be effectively achieved by embracing unexpected opportunities (see also Tsang 2022). Whereas the study by Koefoed, Dissing Christensen, and Simonsen (2017) of the Copenhagen 5A bus represents a common attempt to explore forms of sociality in everyday bus mobilities, especially in multicultural cities, the possibility of encounter (Bissell 2010; Koefoed, Dissing Christensen, and Simonsen 2017; Wilson 2011) can be extended towards considering responses of the public and meanings in the surrounding city space. Therefore, studies on buses need not be limited to the bus encapsulated compartment since a bus traversing the city does itself interact with urban dwellers and other material structures.

Under the overarching theme of sociality in such studies, the “affective atmosphere” was identified in an analysis of the heritage bus during the London Tube Strike (Tsang 2022), when the conviviality produced by an unanticipated heritage bus ride led to a collective soothing effect that was explored via passenger interactions. Tsang (2022) introduced the historicised experience of heritage buses, as well as possible related fieldwork contexts, by demonstrating that the reappearance of heritage buses in the everyday city they used to serve could be an interesting gateway to the myriad possibilities of reactions and interactions outside the normal bus journey contexts of commuting or sightseeing. The current paper builds on this previous work by exploring a greater variety of significant contexts in which heritage buses reappear and are encountered in the city. The aim is to build upon affective possibility, as explained initially by (Bissell 2010, 2018) in the context of transit life on public transport, to examine the re-enactment of the past via heritage buses; Agnew (2007) would regard this in re-enactment studies as an “affective turn”. Such “re-enactment” literature appears to be burgeoning, notably in the “Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies”, a concise series exploring different themes of re-enactment, which also makes “re-enactment” a study and an emerging field in its own right (Agnew, Lamb, and Tomann 2019). Like mobilities studies, re-enactment studies are multifarious and multidisciplinary (Agnew, Lamb, and Tomann 2019). Therefore, pursuing research in the developing field of “re-enactment” in the context of mobilities, via heritage buses as material remains, would be a potentially productive bridge.

A prerequisite to studying re-enactment is having the history, which in this case would be that of the buses. Re-enactment refers to history enthusiasts gathering and enacting past events (Agnew 2004), which could well apply to bus enthusiasts. Agnew defined re-enactment as fun, saying that it “indulges the twin passions of work and play” (2004, 327). It “licenses dressing up, pretending and improvising ... and getting others to play along” (2004, 327). Re-enactment often verges close to fantasy role-playing in its elastic appropriation of both the real and imagined past (Agnew 2004; Agnew, Lamb, and Tomann 2019; Gapps 2019). Thus, scope for empirical fieldwork is offered through social research on how such improvisation occurs and how a diverse and likely unexpected mix of people engage in a co-created role-play as the heritage bus moves through the city. Studies on transport history and museum exhibits suggest that historical re-enactment through living history can make vehicles into a “medium of communication” and help the public understand the past (Divall 2003, 260). However, no social research has been undertaken on ways people experience heritage transport (although see Roy and Hannam 2013 for a discussion of the heritage Himalayan railway), particularly

heritage buses and in cities vis-à-vis secluded leisure and tourism sites, but also steam railways and transport museums. To return heritage buses to operation as an experience activity also reflects notions of performance and performativity, as in the contexts of tourism and re-enactment, because “to re-enact is to perform again” (Johnson 2019, 169).

For Agnew (2004) and Agnew, Lamb, and Tomann (2019), questions of aesthetics and affect are key when studying re-enactment, whereas other commentators argue that different dimensions – such as bringing history to life for educational purposes – are the most critical (Cook 2019). Moreover, re-enactment fits new museum education paradigms that privilege experiential and participatory learning (Magelssen 2019). There is also a connection to nostalgia (Schroeder 2019), a key theme in museum and heritage studies. Nostalgia can be variously deployed in the production of historical meaning; in re-enactment studies, it designates a mode that prioritises affect, imagery, intimacy with and absorption in the past, as well as autobiographical experience (Schroeder 2019).

This is a useful point to introduce Laar’s (2013) discussion of city museums, in which he distinguished “nostalgic heritage” from “bonding heritage”, concepts that developed against the background of heritage in contemporary multicultural cities. Moreover, this discussion indicates the publicness of history, which can be placed in dialogue with the publicness of buses. Laar (2013) advocated that heritage should not be narrowly defined in a nostalgic sense and that the bonding function of heritage should not be undermined. Arguably, this also constitutes the “publicness” of heritage in multicultural cities. Therefore, Laar (2013) problematises “nostalgic heritage” by positing that newcomers do not share the same subjective experiences, yet they are “future stakeholders” in the diverse populations of multicultural cities. In contrast, he argued, “bonding heritage” is not based on romanticising the past but on “dynamic interpretation”, with the affordance of “reinterpretation of the historical canon” (Laar 2013, 41). This discussion can be read alongside the aforementioned multicultural-city literature in mobilities research. The multicultural city constitutes a key theme in public transport research, most notably in the negotiation of differences and boundaries (Bovo, Briata, and Bricocoli 2023; Koefoed, Dissing Christensen, and Simonsen 2017; Lobo 2014; Wilson 2011), that may well be unpleasant and merely tolerated. However, Tsang (2022) also demonstrates that with the heritage dimension, a historicised experience can generate conviviality beyond the tolerated coexistence and that small talk is more commonly observed when public transport is used for commuting. Meanwhile, for Schwanen (2020), the mobilities aspect has influenced questions of colonial history and coloniality in relation to mobility systems. A further layer of analysis could therefore be added by tracing postcoloniality within such experiences of heritage, which might intersect with and destabilise the paired concepts of nostalgic and bonding heritage.

Laar (2013) also identified re-enactment by deploying an object-oriented approach to stimulate the audience to be active members in transforming a museum into a “borderless museum” and linking contemporary urban stories with the past. Elaborating on this from the museum standpoint, Laar (2013) emphasises “working memory” while arguing that heritage serves a collective purpose of community building, which then adopts a more serious form as a new urban and cultural capital. This framework proved useful for discussing the fieldwork observations obtained for this paper.

3. An opportunistic method in naturally occurring events

Ethnographic research was deployed in this study of bus mobilities of re-enacted heritage buses. The ethnographic methodology is based on direct observation (Gobo and Cellini 2021). Agnew et al. (2019) corroborated this, stating that ethnographic research is common when studying re-enactment, while the “mobile ethnography” of travelling with people and things in a sustained relocation of the researcher (Streule 2020; Watts and Urry 2008) was useful for this dual-focused research. Alternatively, as Marcus (1995) suggested, ethnography necessarily means going multi-sited. Moreover, public space research into encounters has often utilised ethnographic methods, with Kusenbach (2003) suggesting in an early work that “go-along” be used as an ethnographic tool. For Kusenbach (2003), both participant observation and interviewing have limits as people do not necessarily comment on what is happening in a natural setting, whereas formal interviews remove informants from “natural” settings. This study is grounded more in unobtrusive observations of “naturally occurring” events (Atkinson 2007), with the researcher avoiding organically developing conversations as such interventions would add no value to the research.

Kusenbach (2003) emphasised phenomenological sensibility to ethnography. In this attempt to explore the appearance of heritage buses during city events, an opportunistic mode of research had to be adopted instead of a random pre-framing of dates and times. Therefore, this research utilised several opportunistic and one-off¹ ethnographic fieldwork occasions that occurred in late 2022. These were sampled from the bus events website “Bus Events Diary”, which advertised events involving heritage buses running in London. For Atkinson (2015), participatory observation means being attentive to a multiplicity of actions, both spoken and unspoken, by social actors, material culture, and spatial and temporal arrangements; collectively, these constitute the “field” for research work (2015, 40). Strategies include noting natural conversations, recording them and producing fieldwork reports either on the move or immediately afterwards (see Joseph and Gopakumar 2023; Koefoed, Dissing Christensen, and Simonsen 2017). Direct quotes are presented in the findings.

As Clifford (1988) proposed, the actual experience in ethnographic work is a means of producing knowledge from intense, intersubjective engagement; this is then recorded in writing while deploying an “experiential authority” obtained from the field. The researcher also followed the invitations of event organisers to participants, such as to run on and off the heritage bus via the open platform to take photographs of the bus stationed near different landmarks. The researcher moved beyond only one site and observed what was accessible, based on the need for “mobile methods” as proposed by Büscher and Urry (2009). In brief, the strategy employed for the current fieldwork was to be adequately aware of different happenings surrounding the main target of the heritage bus, both inside and outside, as well as alternating between the two decks, which was specific to this operation and subsequent research on the British double-decker buses, as opposed to research carried out in other places where buses only have one deck and researchers only situated at the front and back such as that of Koefoed, Dissing Christensen, and Simonsen (2017)’s study in Copenhagen, Denmark. Fieldnotes were taken during these observations on smartphones in the form of verbal notes and photos.

This discussion utilises fieldwork undertaken on various occasions involving heritage buses running along contemporary city streets. The major findings and arguments were derived from the following events:

- London Bus Museum Re-creation of Route 37 (October 1, 2022)
- Hendon Vintage Bus Running Day (November 20, 2022)
- Ensignbus Running Day (December 3, 2022)
- Drake's Tour 3 – Re-creation of Routes 168, N88, N89 and N97 (December 17, 2022)

These events are brought together forming the empirical basis of this paper as they all involved re-creations of the scenes and experiences of heritage buses running on currently operational routes or those that had been cancelled or re-routed. In other words, their connections to everyday bus mobilities with a heritage twist in the contemporary city, are what defines the investigative goal of this paper. As "Drake's Tour 3" event programme suggests, "the buses travel over parts of the above routes as closely as possible to how they existed in earlier years", with heritage buses running alongside ordinary contemporary buses. For the first three events on the list, the general public were officially welcomed on board to travel for free. Heritage buses also performed the role of everyday buses, despite their heritage status and having transferred into museums or personal collections. Hence, they are useful examples to counter museumification, in effect being the very opposite² of this. The last event observed was intended to be a private enthusiast tour (by invitation only³), yet it unexpectedly became semi-public.

Observations were carried out during the hours of which heritage buses operate which defines what it meant by "opportunistic research" as the researcher(s) attended the events when they were available and/or being invited. The observations were without pre-determined agenda as whatever noteworthy were jotted down as fieldnotes. The observations were not limited to reactions and forms of socialities i.e. bodily encounters and verbal interactions among people within the bus, but that of materialities of the bus as well, and what happened outside of the bus, such as people's facial expressions. As several events took place that share copious commonalities and differences in their respective nature and outcomes, this paper emerged with the overarching theme of "everyday bus mobilities", in particular how heritage buses were observed to have played a role in it, despite having been officially withdrawn from everyday service.

3.1. Re-creation as recreation: attention to details for authenticity and photography in re-enactment

The findings in this paper reflect the key notion of "re-enactment" in various ways. Bus enthusiasts involved in creating such events were a kind of "history enthusiast" (Agnew 2004) in such contexts. The attractions of this "re-creation" as recreational activities and form of play (Adriaansen 2019), which bus enthusiasts are keen to organise and with much pride, often consist of elements of re-enactment and commemoration in that almost all their actions had historical roots to which they paid tribute, with nothing done randomly.

Due to the explicitly "commemorative" purpose of these activities, high levels of attention to the details of re-enacting with meaning and significance, both historical

and symbolic, were observed. The event organisers displayed great concern for material details. Meanwhile, the conductors on the heritage buses always appeared fully dressed in the former uniforms, with some also carrying obsolete ticket machines. The costumed conductors delivered a “professional image” that transcended temporal boundaries, and they attracted ordinary passengers who also asked questions about other contemporary everyday bus services, which did not necessarily relate to the day’s event.

Moreover, despite the rides being free, the dressed-up conductors were observed to issue tickets to passengers on board (with payment omitted) while loudly calling “*Tickets please!*” Meanwhile, passengers who had already received tickets showed these to the conductor, forming a convivial scene of the re-enactment of a historical everyday event via this role-play. The act of “hole-punching” tickets was seen on some journeys but not all. On 1 October 2022, an interesting observation on a route 37 heritage bus involved two attendees discussing in Cantonese why the conductor would take such a “redundant” action of issuing tickets without charging fares. On another route 37 heritage bus during the same event, one conductor said when issuing the ticket (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)), “*Keep this. You can make some money out of it*”. The ticket also effectively became memorabilia for the attendee.

The events of recreating the past were found to relate to performing different aspects of the past, thus paying tribute both explicitly and implicitly via re-enactment. The material culture belonging to a city of a bygone era entails performativity to re-enact the city’s past when these “things make cultural events and aesthetic experience tangible, such that they can impact on recipient’s sense, emotions and bodies” (Samida 2019, 130). Such tangible experiences could be further verified by photographic opportunities, which was found a key activity for those organising such re-enactment events.



Figure 1. A fully dressed-up conductor handing a bus ticket to an event attendee on a rt-class heritage bus operating London bus route 37.



Figure 2. An “omnibus ticket” with the hole having been individually punched in sight of the passenger upon boarding the heritage bus. The background was a seat moquette, which was refurbished when the bus entered preservation to resemble the historical seat pattern on London buses.

Deliberateness in finding photogenic spots was common, with juxtaposition often a key element. Heritage buses would be placed against iconic city features and landmarks that clearly indicate the eras to which they respectively belong. For instance, younger landmarks like the London Eye juxtaposed against heritage buses and older sites like St. Paul’s Cathedral produced different kinds of time-space disorientation and surrealism with semi-collapsed temporal and spatial boundaries, which appeared to be what the organisers sought and what enthusiasts felt passionate about. To the former, this conveyed how heritage buses still exist today by placing together materials belonging to separate eras. For the enthusiasts, this juxtaposition resembles a time machine in which one travels back to a particular point in history when the bus and a particular landmark already co-existed. The significance of these scenes could represent intense moments of a felt historical connection, as Johnson (2019) puts it, moments when re-enactors feel almost as if they were in the past. In such moments, the performativity of re-enactment evokes a poignant but transitory affective response in the re-enactor.

3.2. The publicness of heritage buses: nostalgic heritage and bonding heritage

Heritage buses traversing the city remained an unusual sight due to their material form and other sensory characteristics such as the engine sound and the smell. Different levels of involvement were observed in public reactions, ranging from raised eyebrows to pleas to participate. As observed from the bus or the street, the appearance of the heritage bus caused some people to stop in disbelief, some to display

expressions literal jaw-dropping and others to walk closer to check if the bus was real. The most obvious response was photography, which was also contagious. When enthusiasts lined up at a certain location to take photographs or when pedestrians raised their mobile devices to take photos or videos of the heritage buses, others who had not necessarily noticed the bus frequently did so eventually and performed the same photographing and/or video-recording actions, as well as asking what was happening. Some video-called friends and family, creating live social media broadcasts in front of the heritage buses in the city to communicate their shock and excitement. During the event of 20 November 2022, when heritage buses ran alongside contemporary London buses on route 183, some older buses were parked at Golder's Green Bus Station alongside their modern equivalents. Some drivers of the modern buses also took photos of the heritage buses and made thumbs-up gestures to their enthusiast-drivers.

These observations indicate how the unusual appearance of the buses generated public reactions and that the conviviality of such contagious and collective acts was not limited to the bus compartment. Thus, despite the physical separation of the bus compartment from the street, observations did not necessarily need to be separated, regardless of whether the researcher was situated on the bus or the street. In effect, a heritage bus appearing in the city was "enmeshed in the urban fabric" (Tuvikene et al. 2023, 2968), which also demonstrates the publicness of a bus. Therefore, whether a heritage bus event was public or private, the public appearance of the buses enabled the involvement of the public on the streets. During these events, passengers on board the heritage buses often waved at people on the streets who were looking at the moving bus and waving back. As Martin (2023) stresses, taking non-passengers into consideration in empirical mobilities research can be important, which applies to this observation.

One remarkable case is worth reporting, in which a passer-by asked to join a private enthusiast tour (17 December 2022) as the heritage bus was making a brief photo-stop in Wandsworth before heading to Central London while re-creating former London bus route N88. A white man (around 30–40 years old) and his Japanese girlfriend, dressed in the traditional Japanese *kimono* costume, boarded the heritage bus via the open platform and kept asking those on board "Who owns this bus?" and whether they could ride it. Some attendees answered that the bus was heading to Westminster. The man continued asking to see the event organiser, who was shocked as he did not expect such a request. At first, the organiser told them it was a "private party", but eventually the couple was allowed on board after some sincere pestering, paying the organiser £10 for the two of them to get to Westminster. The man initially said to the organiser, "I am happy to pay 500 quid!" The man was overjoyed when they were allowed to get on board, saying to his girlfriend, "Baby, you have to try this, go upstairs. It's an absolute classic!" As Sheller (2023) suggests, public transport is not always a straightforward case of being a public space. Yet publicness was still alternately achieved and manifested on this occasion, when a former type of public transport, effectively heritage public transport, was being used for a private tour on public streets. Public participation was seen to be unintentionally invited, turning this into a semi-public space.

The unanticipated presence of the couple also changed the atmosphere in the bus compartment, with some interesting conversations taking place between them and other enthusiasts on board, while the organiser assumed the role of a temporary "guide" to

briefly recount the history of the bus to the couple. The man also video-called his mother after hearing that the bus was the last RT-type removed from everyday service and that this particular bus had entered service in 1953, which happened to be the year his mother was born as a familial connection.

Such personal connections were also pertinent to other passengers, as observed on bus journeys during other events. For instance, on a heritage bus plying route 37, a black mother (born in 1994, according to her conversation) said to her child, *“You got a bit of history of how mammy grew up”*, whilst another man said to his child, *“This bus is a similar age to Grandpa”*.

In a multicultural city like London, divergent reactions to the buses came from people with different backgrounds, such as their place of birth and upbringing. During “Ensignbus Running Day” on 3 December 2022, a bright yellow preserved bus appeared in Upminster, East London. Significant groups of bus enthusiasts from Hong Kong were urgently seeking photographs of that particular bus, which had the Chinese character “城巴” on its exterior (see [Figure 3](#)). A casual chat in Cantonese, the group’s mother tongue, revealed that these enthusiasts were very excited about seeing this bus, whose livery and Chinese logo represented connections to Hong Kong Citybus, the parent company of Capital Citybus in London during the deregulation era of London buses. These Hong Kong enthusiasts knew the history of the bus and this bus company, seizing the chance to photograph this particular bus as it was juxtaposed against the contemporary route 248



Figure 3. The non-red appearance and company logo with Chinese characters represented the deregulation era of London buses, when bus companies were often owned by foreign capitalists. Their identities, like Capital Citybus, would also be boldly displayed.

buses on the same street, a route previously operated by the yellow buses in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Thus, the enthusiasts from Hong Kong appeared to already know these histories and find themselves at home by encountering the buses again during events abroad, despite not being in Hong Kong. Some also described such encounters as a “pilgrimage” upon hearing the sound of the engine, which was essentially the same as that used by Hong Kong Citybus vehicles. Moreover, the particularly energetic response of the Hong Kong enthusiasts caught the attention of a white man, who said “*Well done*”, whilst explaining that he used to be a Capital Citybus driver on routes 248 and 365 and felt “stunned” to see such a bus again.

The notions of “nostalgic heritage” and “bonding heritage”, and their distinctiveness as a pair, were proposed by Laar (2013) and proved highly valuable in this discussion. These aspects can be regarded as an alternative to the theme of multiculturalism on buses outlined by Koefoed, Dissing Christensen, and Simonsen (2017), in which likeness and differences are directly produced through embodied encounters, not necessarily in the form of tolerated presence but meaningful exchanges. On various levels, these key ideas demonstrate why heritage buses caused people’s expressions that varied between interest and shock, as well as their further interactions.

First, “nostalgic heritage” is based on the reappearance of an erstwhile iconic materiality that lingers in people’s minds. Whereas Laar (2013), who coined the terms, seems more supportive of “bonding heritage” than “nostalgia heritage”, the findings from this paper demonstrate that these paired heritage concepts function together in interactive and productive ways. For Laar (2013), the nostalgic approach limits the possibility of involving transnational populations because it “inadvertently excludes those citizens with different ethnic or cultural backgrounds” (2013, 41). However, the current research revealed this to be not so clear and absolute. Instead, it was often those who regarded heritage buses as “nostalgic heritage” initiating and producing an affective atmosphere through contagion (Bachmann and Wittel 2009), causing those who were not part of the history to experience and learn about it through collective elation, which defines “bonding heritage” in practice.

The white man bringing his Japanese girlfriend to experience a bus from his childhood that was the same age as his mother exemplified the mingling of nostalgic and bonding heritage by narrating an autobiographical account to an intimate partner. As Wildt (2018) suggests, a biographical approach enables us to talk concretely about otherwise abstract social phenomena (2018, 74). That creation of personal or familial connections using the age of the bus as a mutual reference also translated the “public history” (Divall 2003) of the bus and the city into an aspect of “private history” within the “public history”. The intersection of individual and collective memory is rooted in the work of Halbwachs (1992), who discovered that individual acts of remembering are closely intertwined with the memories of other family members and social groups, which are communicated or otherwise transmitted to the individual, subsequently serving as his or her frame of reference. Therefore, apart from the tangible sensory experience of the actual heritage bus ride, the historical connection can also be sensed by knowing that one is experiencing an intimate partner’s past. For instance, jumping onto and off a bus through the open rear platform constituted not only a performance for re-enactors but also a first-hand experience for those who had never done that before.

Second, it was significant that people from Hong Kong (hereafter referred to as Hongkongers⁴) were a key demography in the events described above, amongst others besides white British people.⁵ They might “find a home” as newcomers to Britain amidst their diaspora, sharing almost the same types of buses and the bus company Capital Citybus in London, which also had connections to companies in Hong Kong, according to them. This unique kind of “nostalgic heritage” was not limited to those born and bred locally in London but also applied to those from Hong Kong. Such connections owe their roots to the colonial background of Hong Kong, which provided material for bus enthusiasts and was evident in other events like bus rallies and bus museum open days during the remaining fieldwork, which involved a larger-scale project from which this paper stems. Whilst the deregulation era when the iconic red London buses were removed is less frequently mentioned, the preservation and reappearance of heritage buses representing that era induced varied reactions from different groups of people, aside from the reactions to the more iconic buses with rear open platforms.

The historical significance of the yellow bus was affirmed by the white British former Capital Citybus driver, who became involved upon seeing the bus and the enthusiastic atmosphere surrounding it. At this point, the heritage Capital Citybus vehicle acted as nostalgic heritage with different meanings to this former bus driver and the Hongkongers, who were in effect looking at different pasts. For this driver, it was his own past of driving these very buses, which were yellow in this area of East London. For the Hongkongers, it was the connection to Hong Kong having the same company and bus type, as well as the same Chinese characters on the bus,⁶ that were the sources of their nostalgic sentiments. With all these, the parties were drawn together through multiple interpretations of this bus as nostalgic heritage, potentially adding another meaning to “bonding heritage” and rendering the interpretations of this pair of concepts richer in application.

3.3. Awakening of bus route histories: critical reflections and implications on current bus services

Another unanticipated finding was the elicitation of public reflections on everyday bus services via the re-creation of past routes. This has further implications on role of heritage buses operations in the researched events, in evoking memories and critical reflections on contemporary bus services. For instance, during the London Bus Museum Route 37 public event (1 October 2022), most trips followed exactly the route 37 used today,⁷ although some were scheduled to follow the significantly longer route 37 used between the 1930s and 1980s in accordance to the historic bus types that corresponded to the former routings. The trip sampled on the day of fieldwork involved a long ride from Peckham in South London to Hounslow in West London, which took almost three hours and spanned from daytime to nighttime. During that journey, a black male bus enthusiast (claimed to be turning 50 years old), presumably a London resident since his youth and apparently gifted in bus knowledge, was recalling numerous details about buses of the past and starting conversations with others on board. He frequently began by saying,

Excuse me, do you know the ____ [bus route] used to go to ____ [destination, that is different from today for the same bus route]?

This effectively stimulated conversation with those sitting nearby as he seemed keen to demonstrate his superior knowledge of these histories. Another black lady responded to him in a clearly British accent by reflecting on the current bus policies of curtailing bus routes and axing services:

Do they the TfL (Transport for London) planners ever sit down and look at the map and think there used to be a better route than what we've got now.

I don't know what I am gonna do when they scrap the route that I need.

The re-creation of bus routes by running their original versions, such as those dating from the 1930s to the 1980s, enabled attendees to experience, or re-experience, what a bus route used to be like, not only what a heritage bus used to feel like. This discussion, triggered by the combination of relatively sociable bus enthusiasts and the general public led to reflections on the current bus route and was a valuable process with implications for everyday bus services. Of particular interest were “bus-related” conversations, which contrasted with the observation by Koefoed, Dissing Christensen, and Simonsen (2017) that bus communication is mainly non-verbal, with passengers treating each other with civil inattention. On the contrary, prolonged conversations involving critical comments occurred due to the opportunity to reflect on modern bus routings, which could be an invaluable aspect to consider given the perpetual issue of transport planning and calls for greater democratisation of public views (Legacy 2016). This reiterates how storytelling and narratives can cast new light on projects of urban futures, as argued by Finch (2016). Furthermore, that re-enactment could be regarded as tangible story-telling, aside from the verbal stories about the history of the bus and its route.

Today's significantly shorter route 37, which operated during the fieldwork, represented a general transport planning tendency to curtail bus routes, yielding to rising car ownership and, more recently, the widening of London's pedestrian and cycle paths; the latter has reduced road space for motor traffic, thus increasing the journey times and reducing the reliability of buses. However, this has also led to the loss of direct links for those who could previously travel from A to B on one bus but who must now transfer to a second or even third bus.⁸ Further research demonstrates that the 1930s-1980s version of route 37 took three hours during the event day but each journey took just over an hour between 1946 and 1958.⁹

Under the current orientation, bus services continuously suffer cuts in London and elsewhere in Britain, despite official efforts to encourage people to replace car travel with buses and the agenda to achieve a zero-emissions future. With transport planning often utilising surveys to forecast demand (Schiefelbusch 2010), the comments observed during this fieldwork represent a potential alternative form of consultation in which genuine public opinions were expressed about bus routes and related planning decisions. As Sheller (2023) notes, the mobile publics concept opens new avenues for exploring the relationship between public space and public spheres. The critical comments about bus routings indicate how public opinion, informed by a former bus routing re-enactment, has the capacity to produce new knowledge concerning the future of bus services. From the heritage perspective, this also recalls Laar's (2013) view that city museums should be not only interesting but also relevant to contemporary cities. This role of the heritage buses,

transcends the pure recreational purpose that such events started out to achieve on the enthusiasts' end. The public and enthusiasts' interactions, also found their way in to reflect on the other aspects of bus histories not only limited to the bus type, which forms the key of an unanticipated finding for this paper as well.

4. Conclusion

Public transport as public space is now a proliferating aspect of mobilities research. Building on Tsang's (2022) study, this paper discusses more specific events involving heritage buses with a focus on the re-creation dimension on the very city streets they used to belong to and serve, which also make them a "medium of communication" (Divall 2003) for city people. It contributes to the bodies of knowledge in applied mobilities on buses and transport heritage in the city, based on the three core findings and argument that heritage buses generate.

The first key argument was that heritage bus re-enactment events always involved deliberate actions by dedicated enthusiasts, who displayed considerable attention to detail to ensure the re-enactment attained a high level of authenticity and aesthetics as a source of pride. This was achieved by reconstructing historical materiality such as re-dressing the bus, as well as role-play involving conductors no longer engaged in the contemporary everyday bus experience, which led to direct experiences and discussions about the bus-riding practices of yesteryear. Photography was a major objective and activity, with the juxtaposition of city landmarks and buses from different eras found to be an important element, and a source of contagious feelings among heritage bus passengers and non-passengers.

The second key argument was that the researched heritage bus events were not only nostalgic but also bonding experiences. In addition to being thrown together to negotiate differences, this paper has revealed cases of people being drawn together, which produced conversations pertaining specifically to buses as both nostalgic and bonding experiences, rather than just small talk or avoidance. The private heritage bus city tour event to which the couple invited themselves shows that propinquity within a capsuled space (Sheller 2004; Wilson 2011) need not be a prerequisite for sociality. Rather, the publicness of the heritage buses with their iconic and unusual materiality, and the subsequent surreal and disorientated experience at the given time and space in the contemporary city, drew people together generating some forms of conviviality and meaningful exchanges.

In terms of the heritage dimension, the conceptual pair of nostalgic and bonding heritage represented an interesting intersection, with biographically informed narratives and familiar references of time connecting them. The unique histories of Hong Kong and London buses also destabilised the boundary between nostalgic and bonding heritage because Londoners and Hongkongers have different definitions and perspectives regarding their respective nostalgia, which nonetheless had a bonding potential and effect. These observations of multicultural interaction might nonetheless be limited by researcher positionality, which also determined the level of comprehension of the multiple languages encountered during the fieldwork in this multicultural city.

Lastly, the return of not only the sight, sound, smell and bus-riding practices of old buses but old routings through temporary re-creation of former bus services, was found to be able to evoke reflections on contemporary bus operations. These critical comments

with potential implications for the present and future of everyday bus mobilities, go beyond the heritage and nostalgic aspects. Such experiential element of collecting public opinions about bus services, could be useful in applied mobilities by assisting those with decision-making responsibilities.

All in all, heritage bus reappearances and the ability to re-experience these on various levels and aspects could help build more historically connected impressions of buses, which could bond different races and ethnicities together with their respective bus and urban experiences of the past, present and future. More opportunistic research on the heritage dimension of bus mobilities and identifying more peculiar contexts of bus mobilities beyond commuting and sightseeing could benefit the bus mobilities field. Through opening more angles for unprecedented findings in bus mobilities might also find more alternative ways to inspire passengers to return to everyday bus services as well as participating in the decision-making processes.

Notes

1. The one-off events in this study contrast with the actions of Koefoed, Dissing Christensen, and Simonsen (2017) and Larsen et al. (2021), who spent prolonged periods on a certain bus route for months and, with a team of researchers, triangulated the findings with follow-up interviews.
2. The functional-aesthetic hybrid of these heritage buses is also, in effect, at least part of the reason for their preservation. Being hired for private events like wedding ceremonies and corporate event shuttles provides revenue, which in turn fund preservation projects.
3. The researcher(s) secured this fieldwork opportunity by establishing a network of bus enthusiasts via a larger research project investigating bus enthusiasm, which made the researcher(s) aware of similar events.
4. Hongkonger has been added to the Oxford English Dictionary as a noun meaning “a native or inhabitant of Hong Kong”. Available at: <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/393663?redirectedFrom=hongkonger#eid> (accessed March 14, 2023).
5. In the broader part of this research examining the pursuits of bus enthusiasts, white British constituted a major demographic in the heritage bus events across the United Kingdom where fieldwork was carried out, with London being an exception for having more participants of other ethnicities. One limitation to address is researcher “positionality” (Rose 1997), especially when researching multicultural contexts. A researcher can only make notes of languages they can comprehend when using these methodologies and contexts. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that some conversations were unfortunately missed owing to the language proficiency of the researcher(s), which was also likely affected by the latter’s cultural background and sensitivity.
6. This bus, the Leyland Olympian (J135PVC), is currently owned and preserved by the London-based Bromley Bus Preservation Group.
7. The current route 37 runs between Peckham and Putney Heath. Available at: <https://tfl.gov.uk/bus/route/37/> [accessed March 14, 2023].
8. This major change to shorten route 37 took place in May 1991, with the route only running between Putney and Peckham; the western part of the route was replaced by the new routes 337 (Clapham Junction to Richmond) and H37 (Richmond to Hounslow). Available at: www.LondonBusMuseum.com/RTs-on-route-37 [accessed Oct 1, 2022].
9. This information was obtained from the “London Bus Route histories” website, created by Ian Armstrong and containing old route timetables. Available at: https://londonbuses.co.uk/_routes/current/037.html [accessed March 14, 2023].

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