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## Introduction: All through the Town

MONTHS BEFORE THEY BECAME running mates and were subsequently elected president and vice president of the United States in 2020, a testy exchange took place during the first democratic presidential primary debate between Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Seeking to highlight discrepancies in Biden's legislative record, Harris made a powerful accusation: "You also worked to oppose busing. And, you know, there was a little girl in California who was part of the second class to integrate her public schools, and she was bused to school every day. And that little girl was me." Muddying the line of attack, Biden retorted, "I did not oppose busing in America. What I opposed is busing ordered by the Department of Education."

The exchange made headlines as one of the most effective moments during the debate (even if Biden ultimately prevailed as both democratic nominee and the duly elected forty-sixth president of the United States). As one of the only times that education was even mentioned during the electoral season, Harris's comments humanized the costs of desegregating U.S. public schools and efforts toward providing an equitable learning opportunity for students of all backgrounds. Journalist and creator of the 1619 Project Nikole Hannah-Jones described how the presidential exchange spoke to the central arguments of failed desegregation efforts throughout the twentieth century in a *New York Times* article fittingly titled "It

Was Never about Busing.”<sup>1</sup> As Hannah-Jones explains—and as a key argument in this book—busing became a convenient euphemism for desegregation in U.S. schools while also working to expand our school system beyond the one-room schoolhouse. This twinned form of progress has blurred the lines of what buses do and what busing means today.

The school bus is the longest-lasting and most widely felt intervention in public schooling in the past century. It’s been wielded as a tool for moving U.S. education beyond rural one-room schoolhouses at the turn of the twentieth century and as a means for directly addressing segregation in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954. At the same time, I argue that while its no-frills design belies an archaic mode of transport, the school bus—hissing brakes, clacking windows, blaring intercom, and all—is the most disruptive piece of technology that has shaped the learning experiences of young people. No other comes close. Not the slide projector, the graphing calculator, the computer, or the VR headset.

Most readers may not be accustomed to seeing the utilitarian and archaic bus as a piece of cutting-edge technology. That’s because in this book, I approach the bus as technology and examine the histories of schooling and innovation that have left an imprint on the United States. In this way, busing technology refers to the actual school bus as a piece of educational equipment and the cognitive technology of busing to integrate and broaden access to schools. Across the chapters of this book, I detail how the school bus has been operating invisibly as a technological intervention for generations. As a de facto approach to desegregating public schooling and shaping city networks around bureaucratic education systems, the bus is heralded as the most direct pathway toward improving the schooling experiences for millions of children every day. Yet, the bus is not a perfect vehicle for educational reform.

1. Nikole Hannah-Jones, “It Was Never about Busing,” *New York Times*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/12/opinion/sunday/it-was-never-about-busing.html>.

Setting aside the substantial carbon footprint of this intervention for the time being, let's recall what was so effective about Harris's line of attack during that presidential debate; she moved beyond debating if the bus was impactful to instead pointing to the experiences of people like her who rode school buses daily. While educators and policy argue the merits and drawbacks of busing, these squabbles do not typically consider the experiences of the students riding buses, like Harris did, each morning and afternoon. Likewise, policy discussions typically do not define the bus as a particular technological object: why this shape, these features, and these operating structures? The affordances of the school bus as a form of technology and the limitations that come with it have been overlooked in the ongoing use of this mass-produced technology.

The beauty of the school bus as a technology is how, even in its bulky form, it invisibly carries forward effects from one generation to the next. The thousands of hours that people accumulate as passengers to and from school each day—far more commuting time than their non-bus-riding classmates—are a time tax levied on the bodies and minds of predominantly Black and brown young people in America.

As part of my work as a qualitative educational researcher, my research team and I spent an academic year riding a local school bus with elementary and middle school children. On this bus, students spent an average of ninety minutes each way (and sometimes closer to two hours in afternoon traffic) simply to get to school. These students boarded the bus as early as 6:30 a.m. each morning and often did not arrive home until 5:00 p.m. They spent this time sitting, waiting, sleeping, with no access to a bathroom or permission to eat food—a tall order for children and young adults. Bus time contests the perception of school as a fixed set of instructional hours transpiring from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. each workday. The bus extended the school day, during which time it educated young people (particularly young people of color) about how to be docile, passive, and grateful for the opportunity to travel *away* from home for education. In this light, consider the power of the school bus as a

technological intervention; it transforms who students are and what they assume they are capable of. You cannot presume a laptop or a tablet or educational software to so consistently and pervasively instruct young people in the same way as the bus.

Considering the frustrations that I heard and personally experienced while researching the school bus, I am particularly aware that we could use this piece of technology differently. Every day, as I rode the school bus, I was reminded of better busing solutions whizzing by my window. With minute-to-minute regularity, white charter buses would pass the students, transporting workers to and from the tech giants—Google, Facebook, YouTube, and Apple—that surrounded this area. Spacious, with modular layouts, lightning-fast Wi-Fi, bathrooms, and delicious free snacks, these nonschool buses speak to how transportation has refused to update when it comes to the needs and desires of America's youths. This technology is one of control.

This book looks at the specific features of the bus as a technology, what happens on this vehicle, and the possibilities for transforming this technology for future generations. To take you on this journey—one that shapes the lives of millions of young people every day—we need to first familiarize ourselves with key terms and attributes related to busing technologies.

### **Busing Technologies**

In my conversations with educators, parents, and policy makers, I'm met with an equal mixture of confusion and skepticism around my claim that the school bus is the most powerful form of educational technology modern society has experienced.

For one thing, the school bus is so . . . *old*. It surely can't be the thing we collectively refer to as "technology," can it? When faced with comments like this, I draw on learning scientist and researcher Roy Pea's definition of technology as "any medium that helps transcend the limitations of the mind, such as memory, in activities of

thinking, learning, and problem solving.”<sup>2</sup> Pea’s description reminds us that the humble school bus extends where and how school transpires every day. Adding a slight nuance to Pea’s description about the role that educational technology plays in schools today, I want to suggest that there are three broad ways it is utilized in public education:

**IT MAKES EDUCATION BETTER.** This can include opportunities to broaden learning by illuminating new ways of engaging with material, such as through exploring distant worlds with VR headsets, or by implementing customized tutoring support through a mathematics software program.

**IT MAKES LEARNING MORE CONSISTENT.** By ensuring all students might receive similar learning experiences using similar tools, educational technology is frequently pointed to as a resource for “leveling the playing field” when it comes to educational opportunity.

**IT MAKES EDUCATION EASIER.** For students both to access content in multiple modes and to provide teachers with easy-to-deploy curricular resources, the tools of technology make learning easier.

I offer this subjective categorization of the purposes of educational technology pessimistically. Very little of how we have deployed educational technology as a form of intervention in schools has to do with the joy, freedom, or interests of young people or the dignity of a teaching profession beleaguered by years of disrespect. While the entrepreneurs behind technological tools may talk a big game about the agency and engagement their products instill, their bottom line when it comes to digital devices is about profit, productivity, and ensuring global competitiveness. Across more than a century of interventions, educational technology has done little

2. Roy Pea, “Beyond Amplification: Using the Computer to Reorganize Mental Functioning,” *Educational Psychologist* 20, no. 4 (1985): 167–82.

to fundamentally change the landscape of schooling. As stalwart educational researcher Larry Cuban wrote, “those who have tried to convince teachers to adopt technological innovations over the last century have discovered the durability of classroom pedagogy.”<sup>3</sup> It’s no surprise that the classroom of today *still* looks remarkably like the classroom of your childhood.

Entire fields of research, policy, and mainstream media obsessively detail and explore the affordances of new technologies within schools. Admittedly, a large portion of my own academic career has navigated this space. Yet, for all our continued interest in the possibilities of technology, we have not transformed the learning experiences of students in wide-scale, life-changing ways. Sure, we like to spend large swaths of educational budgets on the latest technologies. Tablets, laptops, VR headsets, and wirelessly connected “smart” classrooms all get regular attention as innovations that might revolutionize schools. They will not. Simultaneously, scant attention has been paid to the mundane, dutiful tech that hisses as it stops just *beyond* the threshold of our school entrances.

If we look beyond the classroom, the school bus fits all three purposes of educational technology described previously. Subtly, the bus has been shifting the learning landscape for generations. Despite how noisy, brightly painted, and bulky it may be, the bus is an invisible disruption; its bodily and emotional shifts are accepted by millions of families rather than questioned. It is *because* the bus is not considered a form of educational technology that it has insidiously and persistently shaped the lives of young people nationwide.

In *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*, Harsha Walia accounts for the construction and enforcement of state-based boundaries in eras of global migration. She makes clear that the impact of a “border” extends

3. Larry Cuban, *Teachers and Machines: The Classroom Use of Technology since 1920* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), 109.

far beyond the small space a wall, fence, or invisible boundary circumscribes.<sup>4</sup> Rather, she suggests that a border is a technology that exists and changes the meaning and status of individuals regardless of where they are physically. As a shared social understanding, borders shape the meaning and interactions of people throughout the world. Building on Walia's logic, the influence of the bus as a form of technology persists long after students have completed their morning and afternoon commutes.

Extending Walia's work, I discuss two types of bus technologies throughout this book. First, I detail the physical bus as a form of technology that operates, intervenes on, and supports student learning today. As you may recall from your own childhood, they are brutally functional, no-frills vehicles. The second form of technology is a cognitive one. The role of *busing* in U.S. school systems reorients where, how, and for whom schools operate on a daily basis. Binding policy efforts like school desegregation to yellow school buses turned these vehicles into the primary drivers for diversifying schools and shifting the quality of education. As this book argues, no other form of technology singlehandedly transformed the lives of young people across generations in such a profound and ongoing way. Importantly, these two technologies are interwoven historically and socially. As detailed in the next chapter, the history of the school bus mirrors the history of the formation of U.S. public schooling and, shortly after, the impact of policies around school desegregation.

Riffing on the name of a popular children's book, there is a kind of "magic" in how the school bus consistently moves so many children without substantial halts in operation. There is a trick to moving millions of students millions of miles, extracting millions of hours of time that could be used for learning, sleeping, eating, playing, or dreaming. Like all good magic tricks, buses deceive us

4. Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

all by directing the public gaze away from social costs and toward the blinking light of educational equity and opportunity.

### **A Brief Word about Technology and Buses in a Time of Global Pandemic**

It may seem odd to explore the nature of the school bus as a form of educational technology now; it has been operating for decades. Even more recently, a global pandemic has shifted our attention even further away from the seldom considered bus. However, it is precisely because of the invisible nature of the school bus as technology—across time and during social catastrophe—that this book can offer alternate understandings of educational technology and of the school bus. As a means of diving deeply into a particular and often ignored resource, this book demands we imagine a system of schooling that does better. There are other ways of getting children to school, beyond assuming technologies might get our school system out of inequitable pitfalls that have little to do with technology. Rather than seeking alternatives from apps, digital resources, or even from buses, I suggest that innovation and ingenuity must be analog in nature, driven by human imagination and compassion.

I hope that the journey of this book convinces you of the overwhelming power of busing technology on the lives of children in America across history. By understanding the contemporary and historical forces of this innovative device, this book offers us an opportunity to reimagine how technology functions in society today and how we might question who designs the tools we use. In the remainder of this book, I offer a history of how the school bus and the processes of busing in America became so fundamental to public schooling. Tracing its history and physical construction and role in desegregation, the first chapter of this book argues that the school bus is the greatest educational intervention. It has endured a century of operation, rewriting the racial makeup of schools. Next, my research team and I invite you on the daily journey of current elementary school students in chapter 2. We detail a year-long,

prepandemic study of student experiences on a public school bus. Building from this, chapter 3 offers a systemic overview of the bus's physical features to argue that the bus embodies the broader societal shifts toward what scholars today call "platforms" in educational technology. Adapting these contemporary metaphors for online tools, I look at how analog technologies like the school bus are constantly reconfiguring school life. Finally, the concluding chapter of this book speaks to the future of bus technology and how schools, machinery, and educational technology might transform the lives of their bus commuters. Settle in, passenger, for a multistop journey.

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