

a gift from somewhere (2021-23)

'It Ain't Perfect, but Everything's Beautiful Here' & 'The City as a Symphony'

Billie McTernan

The City as a Symphony

I'd like to think of the city as a symphony. A symphony of sounds and melodies, plentiful and varied. Songs of laughter and melancholy, songs of love and songs of loss. You danced between these songs with ease, like it was second nature, an electric current pulsing through the streets. We hummed and drummed and strummed to your dance.

And then, your dance stopped. But the symphony continued. The choruses as vibrant as always.

Yeah, I'd like to think of the city as symphony. A city that loved to watch you dance.

Osei, oh Osei, Osei, Osei Nana, Osei, Osei, Osei Nana, Osei, oh Osei, Osei, Osei, Osei...

I'm sitting in a trotro at a bus station in Wa in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The bus is due to go to Tamale and the conductor has been loading passengers for about an hour, which doesn't seem too long given that it's a Sunday. I tend to forget the best plan of action on these trips in deciding what the best seat to sit in is, if not the front (it's by the window on the left, never the back seats or the folding ones). So, I spend a few minutes trying to decide, luckily there aren't too many people here so I don't feel like I have to make the decision under pressure. I pick a seat, shortly after the bus begins to fill up a bit quicker and we're ready to leave. It's a six-hour journey, or so, and because it's trotro and not one of the big buses or coaches, I've tried to psyche myself up for a choppy ride.

I start talking to the guy next to me, actually no, he starts talking to me and mentions that he's not going all the way to Tamale, he's stopping at Sawla, which doesn't mean much to me because I don't know where Sawla is, still I nod knowingly but unknowing.

Now I can't remember if someone overheard him say this or if he announced it again but at some point of our leaving the bus station all the other passengers got to know that he was getting off at Sawla. And that's when it all began...

So as you might hear, the passengers are hugely displeased that my neighbour (his name is Joe) would pay to go all the way to Tamale even though he was travelling for less than half of the journey. The driver was cheating him, the passengers exclaimed, and he too should know better than to be cheated. Couldn't he stand up for himself? He must not need or care about the money they decided, and if that was the case he might as well give it to them. We went on like this for a while and it was funny and also kind of stinging to witness. Poor Joe. At once the object of the passengers' pity and their disdain. It's an odd thing in this moment, to think about how groups of people function and how they can both help and/or hinder individuals.

In a recent conversation I had with the artist collective Asafo Black one of the members, Larry Bonchaka, said something to the effect of, seeing your family as the first collective that you join, one can't choose. We see versions of this across our lives and society, from schoolmates and

work colleagues, to fellow trotro passengers like I just described. How do we progressively navigate being in community with a group of people we've not chosen?

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I was actually in Wa to participate in the Nubuke Foundation's Woori festival, which is a festival of weaving traditions. So there were different artisans, craftspeople, artists and observers that were sharing and exchanging processes and inspirations that relate to weaving practices.

There was this one session where a representative from the Bolgatanga Basket Weavers Cooperative Club from the Upper East region was advising the Nadowli Women's Weaving Association from Upper West on ways to collectively balance and sustain quality production, and by extension income, among all the various groups for a more overarching collective practice. This was very interesting to me, some of the women were taking notes, others asking questions, like properly engaging in what it was he was saying, deciding what would work for them and what wouldn't. It was a highlight for sure. Something about watching this exchange, like reaching out a hand of support towards each other. 'If I'm good, we should all be good' kind of thing. It felt like, at least in that moment, a spirit of togetherness. An attempt towards strengthening community.

Whilst at the Woori festival, I found myself a small community within the community of the festival, a group of sisters, as in actual sisters, whose diverse lives have taken them across continents and a whole range of experiences. They were here in the Upper West region of Ghana reunited in the place that gave them their names. It was beautiful to watch them recall stories of their childhood, occasionally with one or two of them remembering things slightly differently, or filling in the gaps of some sepia-coloured story.

And there were several of these little encounters of togetherness that served as little reminders of community. Before the session with the weaving association and basket cooperative, one of the members of the weaving association, Medina, taught my friend, Nuotama and I how to play Ludo. She gave us the basics of the game, you have to get your set of four counters around the board safely home, avoiding other players where possible, and also obstructing them from getting home. And then she gave us some insider tricks, which I've come to learn vary from region to region and country to country. I've since been able to test out my newly gained skills and Medina would be proud to know that I've even won a few games.

By this point, I was just brimming with good feeling really. Under the intense heat of the early-March sun, the interactions were simple, slight even. If you weren't careful you might miss them. That feeling sat with me, in me even.

When I think about community I think about Omonblanks, an artist and researcher, who is also my partner in many things. His life, and by extension his work, is very much grounded in community. His methods are varied, whether they be through conversation, music, or cooking and sharing food, which he really loves to do.

Omonblanks's philosophy is that space should be inclusive for all. Whether talking about the restitution of objects or space, or the colonisation of banga – also known as aben or palm fruit – or hosting conversations on toxic masculinity or the loss of a parent Omonblanks's ever-expanding practice aims to nurture spaces that allow for varied points of view to be heard while making sure that the voices and/or stories of those that are most vulnerable in a given setting are well positioned and supported, especially when for some space not being safe could be a matter of life or death. It's a tricky act of inclusivity gymnastics and the perpetual attempt towards balance is just that, an attempt, but Omonblanks reminds us that community isn't always about being with those that we get on with. It's like with the bus crew, we're somehow on this journey together and though we're going to step on toes we have to try to find a way to make it peaceful, if not pleasant for all of us.

Community isn't always plural and it doesn't need to be. I agree with bell hooks when she says, 'Community cannot take root in a divided life. Long before community assumes external shape and form, it must be present as a seed in the undivided self: only as we are in communion with ourselves can we find community with others.'

The task of being in community with ourselves can be a challenge. I often dream about solo trips and great adventures by myself to just be, and I do do some of those travels. But I think the real thing is to be able to get that certain something, that peace or adrenaline you get when you're by yourself somewhere beautiful or exciting, like the bag is to get that when you're also in your living room on a regular day. I'm not talking about isolation for isolation's sake; I mean to be able to just be cool with being you, whether there are people around or not. Of course it's easier said than done, and I don't think there's a right way round to do that. It might be that your group community helps you learn how to cherish your community of one, or it could be that you're good at being a community of one and the next thing is to learn how to better be in community with others.

The few days that came before the bus confrontation with Joe and the rest had been so rich. I was in a part of the country that I didn't know very well, participating in and observing community with people I didn't know very well. People I was getting to know.

We've all experienced moments or versions of community. Some lasting longer than others. Whether it was at school or in student halls. On buses, like I was, or in compound houses or a block of flats. On holiday or at festivals or parties. At sports events, at work places, at conferences, at religious or spiritual retreats. In canteens, in hospital wards or abortion clinic post-procedure recovery rooms. Finding chosen family physically or online, or seeking community in nature and non-human kin. And like the ones we're born into, our various communities aren't always easy to navigate, in fact sometimes it might seem impossible. And yet we do just that, day in and day out. The complex gymnastics that some are more accustomed to, than others.

Those days in Wa reiterated to me that simple exchanges of genuine togetherness can be some of life's most beautiful and redeeming things.

May we all find safe and supportive communities, no matter how transient they are.

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Audio description

Runaway - Kanye West: 00:00-00:29

Manhyia Tete Nwomkoro Kuo led by Nana Afua Abasa: 00:29-00:58

Recording of cultural troupe from Upper West: 02:11-02:42

Recording of cultural troupe from Upper West: 14:03-14:43

Manhyia Tete Nwomkoro Kuo led by Nana Afua Abasa: 15:44-16:13