

# window to the world

PROFILE OF SIMON BERREBI  
PHD CANDIDATE AT GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
(GEORGIA TECH) AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND SERGEANT  
OF THE MARTA ARMY

*Interview location: Krog Street Market in Inman Park, Atlanta, GA*

*How we got there: On foot and by MARTA train.*

*In one word, he describes himself as “Effervescent.”*

*By Laura Lee Huttenbach*

Though I’ve never met  
Simon Berrebi, I’m sure he  
is the guy pedaling toward  
me with a neon yellow bike  
helmet and Adidas soccer  
cleats swinging from his black  
backpack. Standing up from  
the bench outside the train  
station, I extend my hand as  
Simon dismounts his bike.

“Have you decided where  
you want to go for lunch?”  
he asks, releasing his springy  
black hair from underneath  
his helmet. >



Simon Berrebi in front of Atlanta Streetcar, July 2015. (Photo credit Simon Berrebi.)

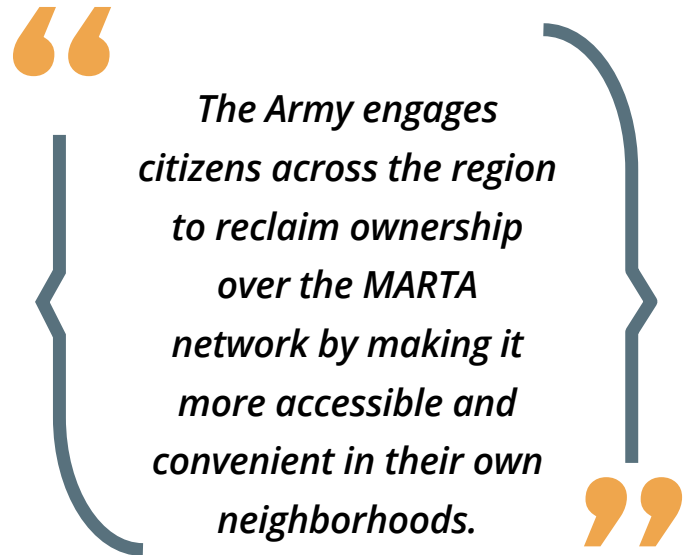
# always been a transit nerd

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I suggest Inman Park, an Atlanta neighborhood about three miles away from where we are in Midtown. My normal route to Inman Park would be to climb in my car and ask Siri to take me, but today we are using public transit. I ask Simon if he knows how to get there by MARTA—Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority.

“Yes,” he says confidently, “my girlfriend lives in that neighborhood.” Simon is a PhD student in Civil Engineering with a concentration on Public Transportation at Georgia Tech, where he designs algorithms to prevent bus bunching. Bunching, he explains, happens when “you’re waiting for a bus, and it doesn’t come, it doesn’t come, then all of a sudden, there are three in a row.” Simon is also the founder of the MARTA Army, a grassroots organization whose mission is to enhance the ridership experience on public transit in Metro Atlanta. According to the website, “The Army engages citizens across the region to reclaim ownership over the MARTA network by making it more accessible and convenient in their own neighborhoods.”

We walk into the Arts Center Station and tap our MARTA Breeze cards at the turnstile. Simon carries his bike down the stairs and



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looks at his phone at the platform. “I think the train will be our fastest option,” he says, explaining that a bus could take us closer to the destination, but it only comes every thirty minutes, and we’ve just missed it. I ask which app he’s using to obtain this information. “Google,” he says, “though it’s not real time in Atlanta. In Portland and Seattle it is.”

I point to his white bike. “I see you’re using multi-modal transportation,” I say, trying out some transit-speak. Simon smiles, nodding slowly. “I just wanted to show off my new vocabulary,” I admit. “Are you impressed?”

“Oh, I am,” he says. “I really am.” A train heading north picks up passengers on the other side of the platform, but we are going south. “It’s really

cool that you can just put your bike on the train,” he says. When I ask how he became interested in MARTA, he replies, “Well, I’ve always been a transit nerd.”

A transit nerd, by Simon’s own definition, is “somebody who really looks around when they’re on the train; somebody who’s captivated by the aesthetic of having so many people travel together.” He is both telling and showing me what a transit nerd looks like as we board the MARTA train. Scanning the car, we take inventory of fellow riders. “There are people who have a strong calling for transportation,” he says. “I didn’t have, like, posters of buses in my room when I was a kid, but I was always attracted by the concept. Everywhere I go, I find people like that.”

I first heard of the MARTA Army when I attended a panel discussion on public transportation in Sandy Springs, a city in northeast Atlanta where I grew up that was incorporated in 2005. During his speech, MARTA’s CEO, Keith Parker, happened to mention the group. The idea of foot soldiers for transit intrigued me. That afternoon, I visited their website, which has little information about what the group does or who runs it. I left a voicemail at the phone number listed on the contact page, and Simon called me back the next day. “I love the idea of your series,” he told me on the phone. “I wish you could’ve come to our event on March eighteenth, which, you know, is National Transit Workers Appreciation Day.” I didn’t know about a national holiday for transit workers, and Simon wasn’t surprised. “These are people who are always overlooked by society. They wake up early, they go to sleep late, they work their fingers to



At the State of MARTA Breakfast, January 2016. (Photo credit Adam Shumaker.)

the bone for little pay and are the last ones to see their kids during a snowstorm. They keep Metro Atlanta moving, and we wanted to highlight their exceptional service.”

In the months leading up to March 18th, the MARTA Army collected nominations via their website. In all, ten MARTA employees, wearing tuxedos and ball gowns, accepted medals of achievement at the first-annual MARTA Army Kudos Award Ceremony. A veteran bus driver named Nathaniel Smith was declared the overall winner and took home an Amazon gift card as his prize. “It was very emotional,” said Simon. “You need to read Nate’s nomination. It’s like a poem in prose.” After twenty minutes on the phone, I knew nothing about Simon aside from the fact that he





In Inman Park, in front of an adopted MARTA bus stop, April 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)

has immense respect for public transit and its workers, particularly the bus drivers.

Two days after this phone call, we're on the train. We transfer from the Gold Line to the Green Line at Little Five Points and head east, toward Inman Park. On the second ride, Simon gets into the history of the MARTA Army, which he traces back to two years ago at Transportation Camp South, an annual gathering that Professor Kari Watkins, Simon's adviser, organizes at Georgia Tech. "Transportation Camp is like a national movement for un-conferences," explains Simon.

"An un-conference?" I ask.

"An un-conference," Simon confirms. "At a conference, you go, and there's a program, and

you have speakers scheduled on specific topics. At an un-conference, you go, and there's this huge board with rooms and times, and people say they wanna host a session on this or that, like on the fly, and they put their ideas on the board. Whoever wants to show up, shows up. It's a great way to spur organic brainstorming and stuff like that."

So at this un-conference two years ago, continues Simon, a man named Lyle Harris, who is the Chief Spokesman of MARTA, hosted a session and posed one question to a bunch of transit nerds: *How do we make MARTA cool?*

"And the overall reaction of the crowd was, 'Leave it to us,'" recalls Simon. "We said, 'You're broke. You're big. You're bureaucratic. You've been running on duct tape since the

seventies. We're young. We're creative. We're technologically savvy."

***We're young.  
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savvy.***

Everyone felt good about the idea, but nothing came to fruition until the next Transportation Camp South on September 26, 2014, when "we unveiled our military coup," says Simon, referring to his co-founders, Binh Dam, Bakari Height, and Harshath JR. "We came on stage and said, 'We're the MARTA Army, and we're gonna fight for transit and take over.'" They directed potential recruits to enlist at their tables outside, where they had set up computers, printers, laminators, and a hardcore hole-puncher. "It's really heavy artillery," says Simon, moving his bike out of the way for someone to board. The artillery was used to make signs for their primary initiative—Adopt a Bus Stop. "Oh," says Simon, interrupting himself, "you should stand here. I love this view." He directs me toward the window, where the Atlanta skyline and a huge Coca-Cola billboard loom for a moment before disappearing behind us as we pass.

Our trip on MARTA takes about 30 minutes, with seven stops and one transfer. We exit at the King Memorial Station, where a bus is parked outside. "Are we taking that?" I ask.

"No," he says, "That goes to Emory." He looks at his watch, which reads about 12:45 PM. "It's pretty full for this time of day. It gets on the Clifton Corridor—this whole strip of Emory University and the CDC and other major employment centers—which is extremely congested at any time of the day. The roads are just not handling the capacities at all, and the buses aren't either." I think to myself that it must be exhausting to live inside the mind of a civil engineer, where every urban inefficiency begs you for a solution.

We start walking, and I admit that, though I grew up in Atlanta, I've never ridden on a MARTA bus. "Oh," says Simon, stopping mid-stride with a facial expression somewhere between offended and heartbroken. Checking his phone again, he confirms that we would have to wait another 25 minutes to take the bus. It's a damp spring day in Atlanta. The dogwoods are in bloom, and flower petals cover the sidewalk. The early morning rain has left streaks of pollen on the ground. When I request that we keep walking, he hesitates.

"As a transit nerd, do you feel like it's your duty to accompany me on my inaugural MARTA bus ride?" I ask.

"I kind of do," he says.

I promise him that I'll try to take a MARTA bus soon, and he yields to our remaining pedestrians.

One of Simon's earliest memories takes place on a crowded bus in Paris, where he grew up. He is sitting on his great-grandmother's lap going to the market

on Friday afternoon to buy vegetables for Shabbat dinner that night. He is five years old, and she is 85. She has taken the same bus from home to the market since 1922, when she was seven years old. The neighborhood is densely populated with new immigrants in the north of Paris, and little Simon hears many languages he doesn't understand coming from the bus seats. "There's this laundry machine noise of people," he recalls on our walk. "It just feels like a window to the world."

He spent countless Fridays aboard that bus. Today, when he returns to visit, he still rides with his great-grandmother, who is now 102, to market. When he recounts memories from his teenage years in Geneva, public transit provides more than curiosity. "At thirteen, I could get anywhere in the city by myself or with a friend," he says. "That was a real freedom." If he wasn't inside the streetcar, he was hanging on from behind, riding his longboard.

Simon's love for MARTA didn't happen at first sight. When he moved to Atlanta for grad school four years ago, he says he was "not impressed." To get around, he purchased a '98 Cadillac Deauville. "That car was absolutely glorious," he tells me, gears clicking as he pushes his bike between us. "Then the engine blew up on the way to New Orleans, in rural Mississippi, which was less glorious."

He never replaced the car. Now he gets around the city by bike, bus, or train, or on foot. He finds it strange that most people from Atlanta find his passion for public transit strange. Fortunately, in the classroom at Georgia Tech, he knows a lot of like-minded Millennials.

The pizza shop where we planned to eat is closed, so we walk up the street to Krog Street Market, one of several little food courts that has sprung up in the area. Pointing to a path leading to a wide walkway, Simon says, "You've been to the Beltline, right?" Everyone in Atlanta is excited about the Beltline, 22 miles of new public parks



At Krog Street Market in Atlanta, showing off his Medal of Achievement from the MARTA Army, April 2016. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach.)



and trails built over historic railroad corridors that circle the city's core. Bicyclists pedal past people jogging with friends, walking to work, pushing strollers to lunch, or skateboarding to the skate park.

At Krog Street Market, we pick a restaurant called Ticonderoga and order a chicken sandwich.

"Now let's get back to the story," he says as we sit down at the counter. "Our first initiative, I told you, was for people to adopt a bus stop." To adopt a stop, he explains, a MARTA Army soldier is responsible for picking up a laminated sign and displaying it at their neighborhood bus stop. The sign includes the bus schedule, a map of the route, and a QR code for riders to scan and get more information.

I ask what information they usually have at MARTA bus stops, and Simon says there is none. "They're these rusty metal poles on the side of the street that don't provide any information. They just say 'MARTA.' So if you're not accustomed to taking the bus, you can't even consider it. People had no idea where the buses went. With a simple sign that tells you where it's going, when it's coming, then everybody has the opportunity to take transit. We're putting back these bus stops into the urban visual environment. And these stops are becoming gateways into the broader transit system." Every four months, soldiers are supposed to pick up a new sign to reflect MARTA's change of schedule.

I ask about induction into the Army, and Simon says that hopeful recruits have to attend a boot camp in order to join. "It usually starts at six-thirty," he begins.

"AM?" I ask. With a full mouth, he shakes his head. "Oh," I say. "PM. Why aren't you using military time?"

"You're right," he says, eyes flashing. "That's a good point. So eighteen-thirty. Actually, it's a pretty chill boot camp." They meet at a bar. They hang out. They make a few speeches, and recruits pick up their signs and go home. Four months later, when they collect the new sign with the new schedule, each recruit will graduate to sergeant and get a patch, which Simon shows me is sewn onto his backpack.

He regrets that a lot of people in Atlanta view public transit as a third-class service. "If a bunch of crazy young transit nerds are ready to spend their weekend afternoons and a little bit of money—whatever it takes to improve the system—that sends a pretty strong message to people who view transit as just a subsidized way to move poor people," he says.

Like any public service, criticism from citizens is more common than praise. "There's an ex-French president who says,

***Our first initiative,  
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‘Nobody talks about the trains that come on time,’” says Simon. Popping the last chip in his mouth, he concedes that sometimes the negativity can be poisonous. “I understand how somebody can become a transit troll,” he says. “Because it’s tempting.”

*A transit troll?* I wonder.

“A transit troll,” he continues, reading the confusion on my face, “is a transit nerd who has shifted to the dark side. You see, you have this vision, and it’s not happening, and it’s not getting prioritized by elected officials and landed institutions and real estate developers. And then you just get into this resignation that everything is corrupt, everything sucks, and then you start into this hyper negative that consists of just calling out people building on the cynicism and entitlement.”

To Simon, stories are the greatest antidote to cynicism. “I heard one last night about a bus driver who grew up in southwest Atlanta, and her mother was a crackhead, and her bus driver was giving her food every day and taking care of her—same driver on the same route. Since then, she wanted to become a bus driver, and now she is at MARTA.”

“Wow,” I say, wanting more. “Can you think of any other touching moments when it made you feel good and proud to be a transit nerd?”

He thinks for at least twenty seconds before replying, “The other day, I saw two rats fighting for a pizza on the track, and that was pretty awesome.” I’m unsure of how to respond, so he tries to put me in the scene. “People were cheering and finally one rat just walked off with the pizza.” Spectators, he

***Transit is the one time I can meet people whose tracks I would never find on my own path.***

says, went nuts. “Maybe it’s not something to write,” he concludes, “But transit is the one time I can meet people whose tracks I would never find on my own path. You have these sublime moments—when you’re cheering with random people for one rat to win over a pizza from another rat, and these are the things that unite us.”

**W**e finish lunch and Simon takes me to an adopted bus stop using the MARTA Army map on his iPhone. The laminated sign is curled inward, folded in half, with a streak of water and smeared ink running down the middle. Simon looks embarrassed. “Let’s not take a picture of this one,” he says. “Let’s find a different stop.”

We walk to another stop with a nicer sign. He tells me that in the future, he hopes to raise money to put benches and trashcans by the bus stops. He starts to give me directions back to Midtown, but I tell him I plan to take an Uber, which will take ten minutes instead of 45. “Fine,” he says, “but it’s not hard to get back on MARTA.”



He climbs on his bike and adjusts the strap on his bike helmet. He invites me to a bus crawl, which he is organizing in a couple weeks where they will ride from bus stop to bus stop along Buford Highway, sampling ethnic cuisine along the way and end at a pub. “I’ll email you the details,” he says, “You’re welcome to all of our events. Okay if I leave you here?” We shake hands, and he pedals off.

Uber is on surge pricing—2.7 times the usual price—and the app is telling me it’ll cost thirteen dollars to get back to the Arts Center stop, where my car is parked. I check again a minute later and book when it is 1.6 times surging—about eight bucks for a shared ride. A driver named Michael picks me up. He is from the Congo, and on the ride to the Arts Center we talk about politics, food, and family from his homeland.

Getting out of Michael’s Honda Accord, I think of how less interesting my trip to Inman Park would’ve been if I’d driven, alone with my thoughts in my own car. I wonder if maybe, just maybe, I’m becoming a transit nerd myself. ■

*For more on Simon and the MARTA Army, please use the following links:*

**MARTA Army website:** [www.martaarmy.org](http://www.martaarmy.org)

**Kudos page:** [www.martaarmy.org/kudos](http://www.martaarmy.org/kudos)

**Twitter:** [www.twitter.com/martaarmy](https://www.twitter.com/martaarmy)

**Simon’s email:** [simon@berrebi.net](mailto:simon@berrebi.net)



Writer Laura Lee Huttenbach’s first book is “The Boy is Gone: Conversations with a Mau Mau General” (Ohio University Press, 2015). Her website is [www.LLHuttenbach.com](http://www.LLHuttenbach.com).

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