4 Loading

During my fieldwork, the most frequent question I put to the station workers (in a variety of ways) was 'What work do you do?' By far the most frequent answer I received (formulated in a variety of ways) was 'We load vehicles.' This was the most common response I received not only from bookmen and loading boys, but from all of the many different groups of station workers. Enoch, a seasoned branch worker in the position of TO, with whom I served as an assistant for some time, expanded on this answer by posing me a riddle. 'How many people do you need to run a lorry park?' he asked. Before I could collect my thoughts for what I reckoned would be an appropriately elaborate answer (which would have included 'many'), he unravelled it himself: 'Two: one driver and one passenger.' As I asked him what was then the purpose of all the many station workers, including his own, he came up with an answer that summarised the *raison d'être* of the station in a single sentence: 'We bring the passenger to the driver.'

The station, despite the involuting ubiquity of different engagements evolving with and within it, is basically about getting vehicles onto the road. That is, first preparing them by getting passengers and goods on board, and then dispatching them. This is what the station workers refer to as 'loading', a key process of station work that simultaneously represents the most prominent practice related to hustle as activity. Indeed, in their everyday language, loading is so closely related to hustling that the two terms are often used synonymously. As an essential practice of station work, loading reveals key aspects of the ambiguity underlying the station workers' understanding of hustling – above all, the combination of struggle, effort, and exhaustion, on the one hand, and of smartness, toughness, and endurance, on the other. In this respect, it ties in to broader notions of hustling as articulated in the language of youth across (urban Anglophone) Africa and, in a similar vein, in North America – a language that denotes the everyday struggles to make a living while asserting agentive capacities realised through improvisation, adaptation, opportunism, and fierce persistence (Thieme et al. 2021).

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However, unlike the often deceitful money-making practices linked to the hustling of youth in settings such as the Arada's 'street economy' (Di Nunzio 2019) or the 'black ghetto' of inner-city Chicago (Wacquant 1998), the hustling involved in loading at Accra's Neoplan Station takes place within a major urban institution, albeit one that largely operates outside state purview and formalisation. As the primary source of revenue for the station branches, loading is at the centre of a complex system of income distribution that all of the branch workers rely on; and it is framed by a set of long-institutionalised, protocol-like rules of procedure that reach far back into the history of collectively organised commercial road transport in Ghana.

These rules largely follow from the system of departure, which, as mentioned before, is not organised according to a fixed time schedule but according to the inflow of passengers. Referred to as 'fill and run' in the Ghanaian drivers' parlance, this principle is a crucial proxy for understanding Ghanaian road travel practices (and I will attend to the minutiae of its implications in subsequent chapters). A direct corollary of the 'fill and run' principle is the system of rostering deployed at Ghana's bus stations. Founded on a system of rotation, it is meant to safeguard an equal share in the revenues generated from the route that each driver and station worker serves and helps to load, within each branch and gang. In the practices of the station workers, the rostering system contains the rule that the first vehicle in the queue for a given route must be fully loaded before passengers are allowed to enter the next vehicle. As Ghana's drivers put it: 'First come, first served.'

However, as described in Chapter 3, the station branches' system and its organisational structure are themselves in a state of ongoing transformation, and so are the practices of loading. Driven by labour intensification and involuting growth, these transformations materialise in increasing competition both between and within Neoplan's branches while creating the conditions for complex constellations, hence intensifying the situation of hustle. The increase in competition has corrupted the principle of rotation insofar as, for about half the routes served from the bus station, there is not one but several (and at times up to two dozen) queues of vehicles loading simultaneously for the same destination. Overall, however, this subversion of the 'first come, first served' rule has affected Neoplan's departure system only in terms of quantity and complexity, not in principle.

Following up on the description of the context and constituents of hustle as situation, as developed in Chapters 2 and 3, here I focus on the shifting practices through which the station workers perform the hustle of loading. I suggest that the shifts in the station's organisational set-up,

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accelerated by dynamics at larger scales, prompt what AbdouMaliq Simone (2004a: 14) terms a 'recombination of contingency': an active, anticipatory set of responses on the part of the station workers to unpredictable constellations. In other words, in order to thrive inside the station and make their hustling productive, they need to order contingencies. This ordering task pertains to what Jane Guyer (2011: 489), on a more abstract level, outlines as 'people's acute attentiveness to how the contingencies of life might be made to fall together rather than just happening'. The ways in which the station workers act on contingency, as I show in this chapter, are reflected in their adaptive and flexible reinterpretations of established loading practices.

I start by describing loading that is performed in a non-competitive setting, which serves to exemplify the basics of the craft of what Enoch describes as 'bringing the passenger to the driver'. Building on this, I then turn to the practices of loading in competition, which come with an increasingly elaborate set of tricks, bluffs, and ruses. Next, I focus on a specific type of unsolicited loading activity performed by a group of

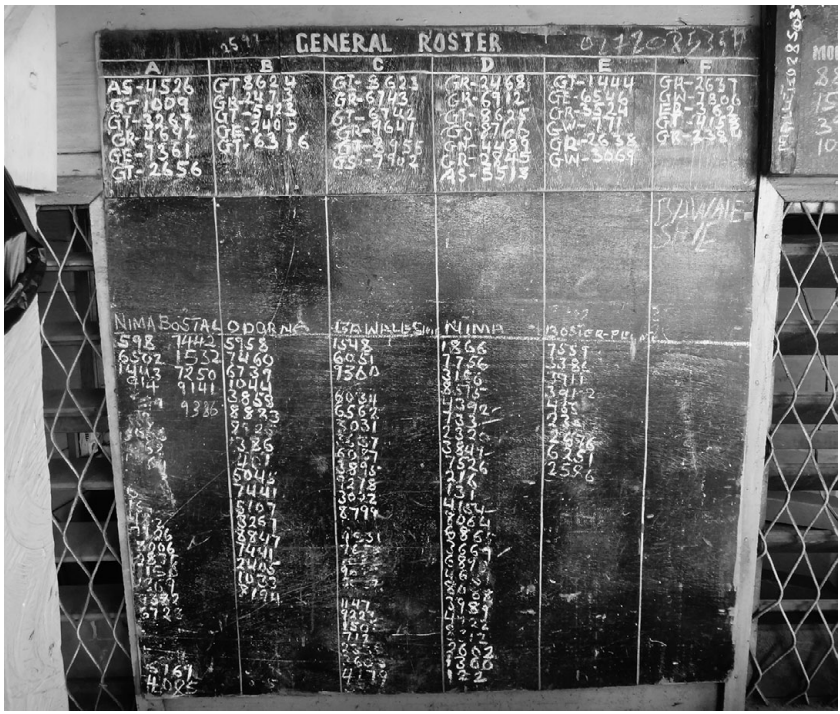


Figure 4.1 A general roster.

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people who do not belong to any branch organisation, known as balabala, and whose presence contributes significantly to the often erupting confusion of loading at the station. In the last section, I again take up the topic of complexity and contingency, describing the different ways in which the station workers and travellers experience, accommodate themselves to, and exploit the situation of hustle.

Loading to Lagos: The Basics

A good example of non-competitive loading can be seen in Neoplan's Lagos branch, which is the only one of Neoplan's 13 branches that plies just one route (to Lagos). This long route is served exclusively by small and 'resilient' saloon cars (mostly five-seater Volvos and BMWs). On normal days, about five vehicles carrying a total of 20 passengers make the trip from Neoplan. Due to the limited turnover of vehicles and passengers, the fleet of vehicles registered with the branch is of a manageable size, as is the number of staff. Besides the customary board of five officers, there is only one main yard worker, who acts as station master, TO, and bookman: Mohammed.

Mohammed is in his mid-forties and is a so-called 'Agege returnee'. Born in Ghana, he lived for many years in the Lagos suburb of Agege, where he worked as a driver for a Ghanaian-owned company. He later started an import business for spare vehicle parts, but his business went bust and former colleagues encouraged him to return to Ghana and seek work at Neoplan. The fact that he has previous experience in the very destination for which he now loads the vehicles is a common pattern among Neoplan's branch workers. There are pragmatic reasons for this: the workers know the ins and outs of the place concerned and are able to communicate with the passengers in their own languages and idioms. Although Mohammed has no permanent group of loading boys, there are usually two youths who assist him in exchange for a daily meal and the opportunity to sleep in one of the branch's parked vehicles, in which he spends his nights as well. Being the only yard worker responsible for loading, he is on duty permanently and has made the station his home.

Because there are no competitors for the Lagos route within Neoplan, Mohammed does not scout for clients; rather, the incoming travellers come looking for him. When a traveller has found his or her way to him, Mohammed first inquires about the 'immediacy' of the person's needs, as the journey to Lagos is best begun just before dawn, so that all border checkpoints can be passed before nightfall (and before possibly closing for the night). If the journey is not particularly urgent, the traveller is offered tea and asked to make him- or herself at home, Mohammed's

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home. Even if the intended trip *is* urgent, the traveller must wait for three other passengers to fill up the vehicle, unless he or she is willing to pay for the empty seats. Impatient passengers will, in any case, be asked to pay an extra fee for what is called a 'hurry car', the amount of which depends on the willingness of the driver and the other passengers to depart early.

As more travellers come in, Mohammed begins dividing them into groups of four according to the size of their luggage. Ideally, each group's luggage will fill the boot of a Volvo. Next, he surveys the travellers' passports, checking for the number of entry stamps into Nigeria. Those with so-called 'virgin passports' (passports with no entry stamp at all) pay the highest fare, as a fixed amount is added to the regular fare for 'balancing' the fees (that is, paying the bribe) needed to pass Nigerian customs. This fee is reduced with every collected entry stamp. From seven entries upwards, 'virginity' is fully lost and no additional balance is levied.

Following these initial inspections of baggage and passports, Mohammed checks for the order of vehicles to 'go on scale' (i.e. to become first in the row of waiting vehicles) by consulting the roster to see which vehicles are to 'fill and run' next. Then the loading of the luggage starts; this is the moment when his assistants are called into action. The process often lasts long into the night, with pieces of luggage repeatedly being rearranged or exchanged between different vehicles until an ideal fit is obtained. In the meantime, Mohammed negotiates luggage fees with the passengers, a process that can continue well after all the pieces are stored away inside the boots of the vehicles. If there is trouble reaching an agreement over additional luggage fees, Mohammed's favourite (and usually successful) way to leverage reluctant passengers is to order his assistants to unload their luggage again, while countering subsequent protests with a shrug.

Finally, the fares are collected. While the preceding negotiations are usually accompanied by much fanfare, the collection of fares is performed in silence, attesting to the amounts of money paid. Mohammed deducts from the collected amounts the fees for loading, which represent the office money and are subsequently passed on to one of the branch trustees, and for the luggage, which is the chop money. The remaining sum is the driver's share. While the drivers are usually present during these pre-arrangements, they do not get involved. The loading procedure is the responsibility of the yard staff only, which, in this case, is Mohammed and his boys. Once the passengers are seated and the drivers have received their share, the loading is completed and responsibility passes to the drivers.

The practices involved in loading the Lagos vehicles largely follow well-developed routines with little deviation. The most turbulent

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moments during Mohammed's daily work are when the vehicles return from Lagos. His role is then to coordinate rearrangement of the parking order, as the outgoing vehicles need to make way for the incoming ones and regroup again within the boundaries of the area of the yard reserved for the Lagos branch. Even with moderate levels of congestion in the Neoplan yard, and thus little interference from the vehicles belonging to other branches, this re-parking procedure may well take more than an hour, as well as excessive amounts of abusive language traded between Mohammed and the drivers.

During times of heightened demand for transport to Lagos, usually before holidays or when the exchange rate of the Nigerian naira goes into sudden decline (favouring purchases in Nigeria), Mohammed pre-empts possible shortages of available vehicles by calling on his extensive network of befriended drivers to be available if needed. For such a 'spare car', the driver's share will usually increase significantly (often to twice the amount of the normal share). In most cases this additional cost is not added to the passengers' fare, but deducted from the office money. While this practice may deprive the branch of any share from the ticket sales (except the luggage fees), it serves to 'keep the market moving', to use



Figure 4.2 At the Lagos branch.

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one of Mohammed's most frequently uttered dictums. The attitude thus formulated is not one of benevolence. Rather, it stems from Mohammed's efforts to make all incoming passengers commit themselves to using the vehicles of his branch in the long term. While there is no direct competitor inside Neoplan, the branch still competes with about ten Accra-based operators that ply the route to Lagos from other stations. This, however, is about as far as the effects of competition impinge on the loading activities in Neoplan's Lagos branch. The general absence of direct competition makes the branch an island of tranquillity in the midst of what otherwise constitutes an arena of tempestuous situations of hustle.

Loading to Kumasi: The Combat

The roughest scrambles take place among workers loading vehicles to Kumasi, Neoplan's main destination. Even during the least busy days, the overall number of Kumasi travellers dispatched from Neoplan will normally be around 2,000. On particularly busy days, this number regularly increases tenfold. Passengers for the Accra–Kumasi route are competed for by four of Neoplan's branches. Two of these branches have what, in a broader sense, might be termed 'friendly relations'. Their chairmen have established a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to the effect that one branch will register (and thus load) only vehicles with a carrying capacity of 35 seats and above, while the other will limit its loading to vehicles with fewer than 35 seats. The practical effects of this bilateral agreement are fairly limited, however, as the vehicles still need to be 'filled', regardless of their size. Moreover, as the other two branches are not party to this deal, they register and load their vehicles at will, whatever the size.

Passengers' own preferences do have some influence on the type and condition of the vehicles, with novelty and speed being the most important criteria. Consequently, the most recent (and fastest) models are usually introduced first on the Kumasi-bound route. Yet, due to the diversity of travellers and the high frequency of their journeys, many other, slower, and (much) older types are also 'put on scale'. During periods of high-density travel, when all four branches approach full capacity, virtually any kind of available vehicle will be deployed in order to handle the number of incoming passengers. This regularly includes private cars, taxis, and at times even motorbikes.

Many more hands are at work on the Kumasi-bound route than in the tranquil loading procedures of the Lagos branch. While the basics of the craft remain the same (getting the vehicle on scale and passengers and their luggage on board), the division of work and tasks increases

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substantially, due mainly to the dynamics of involuting competition, which here gain full momentum. The impetus behind this accelerated involution comes down to the fact that, rather than simply wait for the passengers to come to them, the yard staff of the Kumasi branches need to actively entice them and get them into their vehicle before their competitors do. The loading of Neoplan's Kumasi vehicles is characterised by ongoing struggle, a state of perceived 'warfare' that is underlined by the terms *okofo* and *asafo*, which the workers regularly use in metaphoric self-designation; they are Akan terms for warriors and a military unit, respectively. The following vignette exemplifies some of the main manifestations of the practices involved. It stems from my own experience at the forefront of the loading 'combat', which, for the most part, I acquired under the guidance (and command) of station master Rasford.

Rasford's *Adzaa* Tricks

Rasford works for the Odzinga Ford Highway Express branch, the branch that has emerged from a secession from Neoplan's Branch No. 4 (described in Chapter 3). It has the highest turnover of vehicles and passengers among the four Kumasi branches. The chairman (Odzinga's successor) did not sign the MoU regarding the seating capacities of registered vehicles, and the branch's relations with the others are generally anything but friendly. The assertiveness expressed in the foundation story of the branch – namely, that Odzinga's men were 'the fastest loaders of the fastest cars' – continues to be present among its workers to this day. For Rasford, who was hired by the branch five years ago, the story serves as a vocational ethos. He told me on various occasions that his aim is to 'produce the fastest loaders' of all. Aged 27, he is remarkably young for the position he holds and his rapid advancement within the branch hierarchy is a result of the adept loading skills he demonstrated as a loading boy and, later on, as a bookman. And while many of his subordinate workers are senior to him in terms of age, they approach him with a mixture of admiration and awe.

During each 24-hour shift, which starts at 7 a.m. every other day, there are between six and eight (at times, ten) gangs loading Kumasi-bound vehicles for the Odzinga branch. Their overall number depends on the inflow of passengers and the availability of vehicles. Rasford supervises half of these gangs, sharing the responsibility with another station master. Each gang comprises at least nine members, including one bookman, about three loading boys, and five shadows. When fewer vehicles are on scale simultaneously (because of a limited inflow of passengers or the limited availability of vehicles), the two station masters merge the gangs,

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with bookmen taking shifts as loading boys and loading boys positioned as additional shadows. When the number of vehicles loading at once exceeds the number of gangs (usually just before peak times of travel), the loading boys step in as bookmen, while shadows assist as loading boys. Within these fluctuating arrangements, there are recurring constellations that foster collaboration among the yard staff of different gangs, although more often than not the gangs tend to work against each other. This highly competitive mode is further spurred by competition with the gangs of the other three branches loading for Kumasi.

From the perspective of each gang, a crucial factor that determines the intensity of the competition – and the ingenuity needed to defy its ramifications – is the location of their vehicle within the yard. The further inside the yard it is parked, the higher the number of other Kumasi vehicles that are passed by incoming passengers before they reach it, thus making the loading task more difficult. The vehicles loaded under Rasford's supervision are usually positioned right in the centre of Neoplan's yard. In order to get travellers into his vehicles, Rasford instructs his gangs in what he calls 'a well-designed psychology', a 'psychology' aimed at reading the passengers' minds. As he explained to me, it consists of three main '*adzaa* tricks':[1]

> The first trick is to rush. You catch the passenger at the entrance, fast. You tell them, 'Master, only two seats left.' And you rush them to the car. Like that, you give the feeling of hurry; like they need to hurry to catch the last seat. You make them sweat on the way, 'Hurry hurry hurry.' And when you reach the car, you seat them right inside. This is manipulation by speed. Then we got manipulation by promise. Like when sometimes they reach the car and they see that it's not filled up, not as they expected. Then you do the trick to make them stay. You promise, 'Ten minutes only. Master, I promise, ten minutes we go. If not, you get refund.' So they agree. You check the ticket, you get the balance, you go. Once they pay, there is no turning back. Even if they call on you for refund, you never refund them. If they quarrel, we show them what's written on the back side: 'Ticket not refundable.' … Then we got 'AC-ten'. This is the trick for *nkurasefoɔ* [village people]. They pay for the rural type of car, but they like the city type of treat. When you see them coming in, you tell them now we got the AC [air-conditioned car] for 10 Ghana [cedi]. Of course this is false. We know AC starts from 15. But they don't have the sense. This is enough to carry them across and make them sit. If they ask the driver for the AC, he just laughs at them. He tells them it goes automated, that it will start when they get into more heat in the bush. But this is not your concern any more. They check the ticket, they are through.

[1] *Adzaa* is a Hausa term for 'conman' or 'trickster'. It is frequently used by Neoplan's yard workers and passengers.

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In resorting to these 'tricks', Rasford is not more reckless than the staff of other competing gangs. In the common 'combat' for Kumasi passengers, pretence and persuasion are long-established and integral parts of the trade. What distinguishes Rasford from most of his colleagues and competitors is the level and promptness of inventions by which he refines the loading skills of his gangs. It was not without pride that he pointed out to me that yard workers of other branches copied the 'manipulations' of which he claimed 'authorship'. One invention he was particularly proud of related to the ways in which he advanced the performative register of shadow passengers.

Before his invention, the outward appearance of shadows sitting in the loading vehicle was not different from that of the loading boys. And as shadows are regularly called on to help with the loading, they often came to sit in the vehicle dirty and soaked with sweat. Dissatisfied with this easily debunked pretence, Rasford began working out ways of adding more credence to the shadows' performance. First, he ordered his shadows to bring along clean spare shirts, which they had to change into when on shadowing duty. He then equipped them with a set of props, such as travel bags and briefcases they could place on their laps, as well as brochures and books that they could (pretend to) read.

This masquerade triggered aggressive reactions on the part of competing branches, all of which deploy shadows as well. During periods of low travel density, which are the times when shadows are most in demand, they formed mobile squads to stalk Rasford's shadows and sabotage their loading by warning potential passengers about the sophisticated bluff. Rather than cutting back on his disguise practices, Rasford responded by diversifying his shadow cast. He engaged female hawkers and sellers of various ages to sit in his vehicles. In return for their services, they were granted privileged access to passengers who boarded vehicles that were loaded subsequently, which helped to increase their sales. As unmasking became increasingly difficult, at times leading to awkward encounters in which genuine female passengers were accused of shadowing, the competitors abandoned their sabotaging endeavours and instead began making use of Rasford's invention themselves.

As a result, shadowing became even more firmly established than before. What had started out as an attempt to reduce collective practices of deceit and lend more predictability to loading routines led to an even more sophisticated bluff. (The latest refinement introduced by Rasford was the use of myself as what he dubbed an 'international shadow'.) Here, creative intervention does not serve to stabilise a volatile field of social interactions. Rather, it serves as a means to adjust one's actions to complex and contingent constellations, thus helping to sustain and fuse together emergent contingencies.

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Unsolicited Loading: Balabala Interference

The marked volatility of actions and interactions that characterises the hustle of loading, particularly the loading performed in competition, is further increased by a small group of people who tout passengers but do not belong to any branch: the so-called balabala. This is a group of predominantly homeless, young, and exclusively male 'vagrants', as they are called by some station workers, who solicit for work at the station entrances.

The term 'balabala' is a derogatory loanword from the Hausa language. In Hausa, it is a colloquial expression used with reference to trivial or deceptive speech and forms of exploitative, poorly paid physical labour. As one Hausa speaker explained to me: '"Balabala" is when you talk shit, or when you carry shit.'[2] At other stations in Accra and Ghana, groups of people who engage in comparable activities are either labelled differently or are not present at all. Particularly at smaller stations, their presence appears to be ruled out by tighter social control, as well as by less involuted levels of occupational organisation. The most closely related label I came across was the '*goro*' or '*goro-goro* boys' (derived from the Hausa term *goro* for kola nut), which is used in Accra's Tudu and Tema stations.

The negative connotation of the term reflects the marginal social position of these individuals within the station communities. In turn, this marginality also corresponds to their particular spatial situatedness at and around the station entrance areas, which the station workers commonly refer to as 'no-man's land'. The work the balabala perform not only stands outside the patterns of labour division and established, if contingent, dynamics of cooperation and competition at the station; it is also regularly remarked on as a downright disturbance of the station's organisation and conduct.

In this sense, the balabala stand outside what the station workers consider legitimate hustle activities. Although these activities are frequently performed by way of ruthless and opportune action, as Rasford's '*adzaa* tricks' make clear, they nonetheless conform to a certain set of shared principles and, crucially, they are carried out in an organised fashion. The work of the balabala, by contrast, is unsolicited and unorganised. While they represent a veritable counterpoint to the

[2] Implied in this somewhat blunt explanation is that, in Hausa, the term is used as an adjective. In the course of its adaptation into Ghanaian English, it has maintained its pejorative connotation while being transformed into a noun that is commonly used without an inflectional plural (hence 'two balabala').

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station workers' understanding of hustle activities, their presence at the station significantly contributes to situations of hustle.

The balabala primarily engage in the activity of touting passengers, which they refer to as 'front door balabala' and 'back door balabala'. These labels do not indicate an organised division of work or some sort of turf; rather, they refer to the specific tasks they perform based on the location where they perform them. 'Front door balabala' refers to scouting for departing passengers and offering to escort them to the bus on which they want to travel while carrying their luggage for a small fee. 'Back door balabala' means waiting for arriving passengers and offering to carry their luggage to onward transport or to other locations, such as the market place.

The balabala face two main challenges in their unsolicited passenger-touting activities. The first is posed by the loading boys, who view the balabala as intruders into what constitutes their primary field of work. Particularly at the station's main entrance (the 'front door'), the loading boys react to them in hostile and frequently violent ways. The balabala either endure these hostilities, which are usually accompanied by insults, jostles, and punches of varying intensity, or simply quit the field, only to return a few moments later. By way of these repeated encroachments and feigned retreats, the balabala wilfully play on the confusing situation that commonly prevails at the station entrance. In so doing, they take advantage of the fact that their appearance is similar to that of the loading boys, and that it is well-nigh impossible for incoming passengers to distinguish a scouting loading boy from a scouting balabala. At times, this mimicking of appearance is enhanced by imitating the ways in which loading boys shout out particular destinations, which, in the case of the balabala, comes down to shouting out the most popular destinations at random.

The second and greater challenge is to convince the incoming passengers to entrust their luggage to them and make the passengers believe that they will not run off with it or lead them astray. The main obstacle to this persuasion, for which the balabala usually have no more than a few hectic moments, is the negative image of the station as a place of the 'poor and violent', as Adeyemi Ademowo (2010) frames it, which resonates with the image of the balabala among the station communities. Parallel to the tactics of persistency and mimicry that the balabala use to cope with the challenge posed by loading boys, the techniques they use for persuading passengers consist of insistent attempts or simulation, or a combination of both.

In the case of 'front door' work, the most basic technique is simply to snatch a piece of luggage from the incoming passenger while asking the

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destination he or she wants to travel to. A variation of this technique is used in 'back door' work, where passengers arrive inside buses and not on foot. Here, the balabala run alongside the arriving bus until it stops, then they open the luggage hold and lay claim to a particular piece of luggage, usually the heaviest item, either by taking it out or by holding on to it. This technique takes on a more spectacular form when luggage is attached to the roof of the arriving bus, as the balabala clamber onto the roof of the moving bus to select pieces for subsequent porterage. An advantage of 'back door' work is that loading boys do not usually take an interest in arriving passengers, which is also why the back entrance attracts most balabala. In addition to these 'snatching' techniques, the balabala frequently also make use of a more sophisticated method of persuasion. They scare passengers with talk of thieves and the need for protection, which they are willing to provide in return for payment of a small fee. They thus play on passengers' fears of theft and deceit. At times, they make use of a particularly twisted manipulation of such fears by explicitly referring to 'balabala thieves' who waylay people at Neoplan and whom they, unlike the passenger, could identify.

Despite these savvy practices, in most cases the passengers either shake off the balabala or simply ignore them. Even when a passenger consents to hand over his or her luggage, the sum paid for the service, which is usually not agreed on beforehand, is either next to nothing or nothing at all. Especially with regard to the 'front door balabala', passengers regularly assume that the ticket price includes the service of having their luggage carried to the departing bus. When a passenger refuses to pay, the balabala will usually not insist on his remuneration but will depart silently, aware that starting a quarrel would be to no avail and possibly earn him a beating from a station master.

Market women who travel with heavy loads are most likely to make use of the balabala's portering services and to pay for them. They also tend to be most adept at dealing with them. In one instance, a balabala took a heavy bag of yams out of the luggage hold of an incoming bus and lifted it onto his shoulders, waiting for the owner to exit the bus. The owner, a full-figured market woman who was clearly not amused by the unsolicited service, grabbed him in the crotch and pulled him all the way across the yard to the main road, where she flagged down a taxi, not loosening her grip until he had loaded the yams into the car. What was remarkable about that incident, besides the uncompromising action of the woman and the loud laughter of bystanders, was that the balabala did not attempt to resist or fight her off. This kind of compliance is not just sangfroid or humility, and neither are the balabala averse to using violence. Rather, it appears to be a form of tacit understanding that, although they are not

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welcome at the station, their interfering presence is nevertheless accepted as a necessary part of the hustle.

Manoeuvring the Loading Hustle

Expanding on this description of the loading practices, the ruses adopted to refine them, and the confusion emerging from their collective staging, I now delineate some prominent aspects of how people experience, manoeuvre through, and thereby co-constitute the many parts that account for Neoplan's complex whole. I start by reconstructing the experience most travellers go through upon entering the station.

Generally, Neoplan's travellers are not particularly pleased with the many manipulative tricks that are played on them. Upon entering Neoplan's yard, they virtually turn into fair game that is preyed on by the station loading boys and balabala. For the loading boys, this is the crucial moment when they need to entice the potential client to their vehicle ahead of their competitors. Approached by a gang of men pulling arms and shouting directions, most travellers experience this as a kind of ambush. Accordingly, their reactions range from panic to attempts at self-defence or masterfully enacted forms of ignoring the surrounding agitation. In the corridor-like set-up of the yard, this can be compared to running the gauntlet: a form of punishment in which a convict is chased through two rows of men who beat the victim with whips. In the bus station, this strategy is as rude as it is sophisticated. While fighting for the traveller's attention and luggage, the workers create an aggressive atmosphere. Embroiled in this turmoil, most travellers seek for options to escape, with the most obvious escape being inside a bus. They are virtually chased into the buses.

Experiences of aggression and feeling threatened were reflected in many of the talks I had with Neoplan's travellers. As one young man who occasionally travels via Neoplan explained to me: 'When I go to the lorry park, I put on a rough face and make myself aggressive. I show those Neoplan thieves that they cannot fool with me.' Other typical statements were: 'This is a place of endless wahalla [trouble]'; and 'The station people are disorganised. They don't know how to put two and two together, but they make you believe it was five after all.'

These negative and self-defensive attitudes regularly turn into anger once the passengers realise that the vehicle they are seated in (and have paid the fare for) is not as cheap, new, fast, well equipped, or 'filled' as expected – and that they have been 'trapped'. The most common cause of irritation and subsequent fury is the discovery of shadows, despite the many refinements of the latter's bluffs. Reactions to this fraud become

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even more furious when the passengers feel betrayed on a more personal level. As vehicles may take up to several hours to fill before departure, shadows regularly engage in long and intimate conversations with real passengers. While on shadowing duty, I more than once found myself telling fellow passengers fantastic stories about the things I planned to do upon reaching the destination that I was never actually going to travel to.

Of course, there are also more well-versed travellers, especially market women who frequently travel to or from Accra, as well as clerks who commute home upcountry at the weekends. Passing through the station regularly, they know how to manoeuvre through agitated loading situations while avoiding most of the pitfalls. It takes time and endurance to become one of these veterans of Neoplan travel, though. An important skill developed by experienced travellers is the ability to tell when a bus is filled with shadows rather than with 'real' passengers. In this regard, the high number of shadows deployed at Neoplan is indicative of the equally high number of novice travellers passing through the station. Yet for some of the most veteran passengers travelling via Neoplan, the masquerade is but an indication of the finesse of the gangs' loading skills. For example, during the course of a long conversation I had with a woman bound for Kumasi, she 'unmasked' me, telling me that she was well aware that I was a shadow. Having figured out the parameters and ploys of loading, she deliberately picked the vehicle I helped to shadow. If they are able to hire an *oburoni* (white man), she explained, they will 'delay me the least'.

If we turn to Neoplan's station workers, their reactions to the 'endless wahalla' of loading can be scaled along a continuum. At one end, there are the many young new station recruits. Toiling mainly as loading boys and shadows, they form a large cluster of workers who are susceptible to aggressive behaviour while also being the group most present on the ground, and most involved in the loading hustle. From the perspective of these low-qualified workers, the station's atmosphere of rush and competition is often perceived as an utterly hostile environment, hence the framing of the loading hustle as combat. The expressions they use to refer to their work reveal their underlying attitudes, and the resulting patterns of action: 'We are at war' or 'We fight to kill.'

These aggressive attitudes are also reflected in the language of many young yard workers and in the ways in which they trade insults. Recalling what Ato Quayson (2014: 17–19) described as the 'spectatoriality' of 'messy interactions' on Accra's streets, their insults are regularly staged with exceptional levels of linguistic and rhetorical mastery. Cultivating a peculiar kind of lorry park pidgin, they habitually recombine idioms from a variety of West African languages (predominantly English, Twi, Ga,

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Ewe, Hausa, and French). While the multilingualism they draw on for performing their altercations supports their outward appearance of prolific chaos-mongers (or 'confusionists', as Ghanaian English has it), it ultimately translates into the ability to make confusion and (linguistic) indeterminacy productive – not least as conflicts are usually resolved through laughter following especially harsh or comical derisions.[3]

Similarly, in their scramble for passengers, the main conditions for success – thus for the successful hustle – are wit, agility, and cunning ways of cheating. Passengers are lured into vehicles with lies about renewed engines, competitors' contaminated vehicles, or fixed departure times (what station master Rasford labelled suggestively as 'manipulation by promise'). Corresponding to the poor conditions of employment, the rates of resignation and dismissal among these low-ranking workers are particularly high. There is a continuous flux of employees that maintains the large number of young workers in the station yard as well as the 'general state of harassment' (Hill 1984: 2) they are largely responsible for.

At the other end of the continuum, there are the long-serving station workers. Immunised to most forms of agitation, their tranquillity bespeaks the school of hard knocks they have passed through. These older workers, however, rarely remain permanently on the yard staff, as long-term employment usually leads to a position off the yard. Seth, the branch secretary I quoted in Chapter 3, explained to me the prerequisite for advancement as follows:

> To work at the station, you need a strong heart. Too many different people come here. They come from everywhere, and everyone has his own mind, his own way of going about things. You need to keep cool with all the different minds. If you force, you will not succeed, not in the long run … If you lose your temper, you will get lost yourself. In all the confusion here, you need to keep your mind in order.

According to Seth's practical wisdom, it is important to anticipate the diversity of attitudes and actions, of both passengers and co-workers, and to evolve practices that allow for accommodating the frictions that arise from this diversity. Having a wealth of experience provides a good basis for adaptability. The main thing is not knowing how to control the many

[3] There is a strong parallel to be drawn here between the productive kinds of confusion emerging from the station workers' daily hustle activities and Guyer's (2015) discussion of Amos Tutuola's 'Slanderer' (who causes 'one confusion after another' and is referred to by Tutuola as the 'confusionist'). The 'Slanderer' exemplifies the idea that indeterminacy (like confusion) is to be expected and therefore needs to be acted upon.

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'minds' but the ability to face external confusion with internal composure – an ability the majority of young yard workers lack.

And that is the crux in respect of the station workers' contribution to Neoplan's complex regulatory arrangements and the organisational tensions they ferment. Those who lay down the rules, those with experience, tend to confine their presence to the back areas of Neoplan's yard. Those who play these rules out on the ground are the ones whose perspectives are narrowed by inexperience and competition. On the one hand, this division of work fosters increasing degrees of versatility and virtuosity. The yard workers, who follow conflicting aims, are anything but reluctant to reinterpret the rules; and successful reinterpretations of the rules may lead to successful hustle. On the other hand, it is this proclivity for transformation – through organisational tension – that produces a fecund ground for contingent constellations, feeding into the situation of hustle. Prone to create situations of confusion and uncertainty, these contingencies also open up new kinds of engagement, facilitating opportunity and chance. They are at once blockages to be endured and resources to be exploited.

For most of the people who work at the station, these contingencies of (station) life happen to them in passing. They form part of the daily tasks, struggles, and actions that together inform hustle as activity, for better or for worse. But they are not the main reason for their presence at the station. For other people, it is the very potentiality of contingency that attracts them to the yard. These are the ones who come to the station without any apparent purpose. They neither intend to travel nor do they come to work. Rather, they wander into the yard to actively seek chances, to provoke them with their mere presence. Mostly, these are people from society's margins: the crippled, the unemployed, or the foreign – 'those whose lives are already atomized', to borrow from Chris Dunton's (2008: 73) analysis of the everyday in Lagos. Hanging around idly in the station, they virtually wait for something to occur to them, for something to happen to them. At the same time, they also accept the risks this entails.

The example of the blind man whom I regularly encountered at the station may serve to illustrate this kind of contingency seeking. When he came to the station, the blind man positioned himself in the centre of the turmoil, right inside the busy yard. There, he was shoved around by people and regularly hit by passing vehicles. When somebody tried to lead him away from this dangerous spot, he resisted vehemently – even more so when somebody offered him alms. What he was hoping for was not assistance but the proximity and the feel of women. And when a woman stumbled into his arms, he reached for her, feeling her hips and breasts and enjoying this moment that chance had bestowed upon him. His behaviour, although 'creative' in certain respects, was tantamount to

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sexual assault, and in this sense offensive and 'predatory'. Later on, it started to provoke appropriate reactions. Some of the permanent female workers became aware of his intentions and gave him a sound beating every time they discovered him in the yard. He kept on returning.

Conclusion

The practice of loading, which at root means getting passengers into vehicles and vehicles onto the road, is a defining task of station work. In much the same vein, loading is also a key element of the hustle at the station. The variations of loading, as developed over time through various ruses, tricks, and bluffs, reveal some of the ambiguities in the station workers' understanding of hustling as activity, which fold together attributes of struggle and smartness, effort and exhaustion, as well as toughness and endurance. These attributes become particularly significant when we consider the broader dynamics of competition-driven involution within a niche economy logic (as described in the preceding chapters) in which the loading at the station became established in its current form.

Both competition and involution are impelled by the continuous attempts of the station workers to accommodate the contingencies connected with changes in external structures, as well as with their own involuting complexity. As Barrett-Gaines (2004: 4) points out, it is precisely because of their 'understanding of the complexities of their environments' that African economic actors 'develop ways of living within constantly changing conditions, engaging in an ongoing process of creating, adapting, and discarding economic niches'. In a similar vein, Simone (2004a: 214) writes that, while the formative 'orientations' by which African urbanites pattern their responses to contingency 'border on acting like discrete rationalities', they are not 'as defined or structured as this term might imply'. The norms that are brought to bear on contingent constellations are themselves provisional, flexible, and open-ended. The unpredictabilities of urban economic (station) life are met with potentially unpredictable responses.

On the one hand, this circularity makes it easier to cope with complex structures, as people keep on adapting and refining the practices (and niches) by which contingencies are anticipated, endured, and exploited, thus fostering their own, and ultimately also the station's, subsistence. On the other hand, the increasing degrees of versatility become the source of further degrees of fragmentation and complexity, in turn setting the stage for further contingencies, and for further refinements, further accelerating the hustle.

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The degrees of fragmentation and complexity that underlie the workings of Accra's Neoplan Station have resulted from the specific combination of geographical, historical, and economic circumstances under which its operations have taken shape. Different stations follow different 'routes' of involuting growth and occupational densification, with factors of location, vehicle and route capacity, and the intensity of competition accounting for the most significant differences. If we conceive of these many differences as material variations of the Ghanaian lorry park, then one of the central traits inscribed into such structural variation is involution within a niche economy logic. Contingent on a range of external parameters, there are also significant differences between the degrees of 'static expansion' reached in terms of niche creation and elaboration, institutional fragmentation, and in-yard competition. As a general rule, we might infer that the more frequented and, in this regard, lucrative and competitive the routes plied from a given station, the more apparent the elaborations of internal divisions of work, and the more honed the virtuosity of practices of loading and of the tricks and ruses involved. The actual ramifications of yard involution, however, appear to follow quite diverse trajectories.

Shadow passengers, for example, are commonly deployed in major stations in Accra and Kumasi where there is competition over routes. Yet the much refined shadowing scripts described above are a unique 'virtuosity' of the practices among gangs loading only in Neoplan. In fact, few other lorry parks appear to match Neoplan's levels of complexity (Geertz 1963: 82). Still, the tendency of involuting growth is detectable across the whole material range of Ghana's main lorry parks. A main indicator of involuting structures is the competitive loading for the same route by at least two different branches within a single station, which – by default – leads to a multiplication of workers and thus static expansion. With regard to this 'overdriving of an established form' (Geertz 1963: 82) – namely, the branch organisation – Neoplan constitutes no exception whatsoever.

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