

CHAPTER

2

Emplacing Arrivals

The Infrastructural Accommodation of Migratory Difference in Urban West Africa

Michael Stasik

October 2019. I spent the evening visiting friends at the central bus station in Accra, Ghana's capital, where I conducted my dissertation fieldwork six years ago. As many times before, we spoke about the station. Mohamed, a veteran bus driver hailing from Nigeria, raised the issue of the station's poor reputation, lamenting its negative portrayal in media and local politics.¹ A discussion ensued, with the bar guests rehearsing many of the bad qualities attributed to Accra's station, such as the dangers of theft and its supposedly chaotic organization. Albert, a trader from Côte d'Ivoire, suggested that the station is reviled by locals because it is a place of foreigners. In a tone at once ironic and pressing, he added: "Look at us, all foreigners sitting idly at a Ghanaian's bar." At that point, Victoria, the bar owner, felt urged to intervene, crying out:

Nonsense! I'm not a Ghanaian. My father is Ewe. He arrived here from Togo. There are no locals here at all. Everybody in Accra is a foreigner. Even the Ghanaians. Everybody is an arrival. Some are old arrivals, some new. But they all arrived here from some other place.

This brief exchange of views on the role of the central bus station in Accra's urban life foregrounds key aspects of its significance. Not only does it reveal the station's quality as a site imbued with a range of social meanings and affective resonances, including its perceived quality as a potentially dan-

gerous and out-of-the-way place (as framed by this volume's editors) from the perspective of some city dwellers, but it also foregrounds the generative potential that the station offers to depart from the presuppositions of sedentarist thinking (Malkki 1992), as succinctly expressed in Victoria's intervention centered on the notion of *arrivals*.

In Ghana, as in most parts of West Africa, the central urban bus station serves as a major site for organizing motorized mobility, which here is largely tied to collectively organized road transport (Stasik and Cissokho 2018); it also provides livelihoods for large numbers of people who earn their living as transport workers and traders, and as travelers of various backgrounds, including migrants. Besides choreographing the movement of people and freight, the station is also home to a wide range of businesses, from restaurants and food stalls to retailers, money changers, hairdressers, cleaning and repair services, and the myriad itinerant services provided by head porters, itinerant preachers, sex workers, shoeshine boys, and many others. The many services and establishments it harbors attract people from different walks of life, many of whom come to the station for purposes other than travel. As I will show below, these different functions of the station decisively shape its role in creating encounters.

In its role as an infrastructural and economic hub, the station, through the encounters occurring there, challenges conceptions of groups and places as bounded entities that are central to constructions of autochthony and the social boundaries they delineate. The blurring of social boundaries not only is a key feature of its infrastructural form as a site of intense movement and exchange across geographical distance but is also constitutive of its social form as a site of multiple encounters across social difference, whose role and reach is intricately entangled with the wider urban fabric and the near and far mobilities that connect the urban to the world.

Victoria's incisive comment on old and new arrivals is drawn directly from this mutuality between the station's infrastructural and social form. Not only is the term "arrivals" embedded in the language of West Africa's transport operators, but the rearranged perspective it opens up on the relationship between space, identity, and difference is tied to the work of road mobility performed there. By relativizing the valence of the term "locals," it captures some of the recent theoretical efforts of migration scholars to "de-migrantize" the migrant and "re-migrantize" the citizen (Anderson 2019; Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014). It also echoes earlier anthropological arguments about the relational, situational, intersecting, and ultimately porous boundaries that inform ascriptions of self and other, whether regarding ethnic or other types of distinctions (Barth 1969; Werbner 2018).

By framing mobility as the norm rather than the exception, Victoria's arrivals notion replaces a categorical distinction between locals and for-

eigners, or non-migrants and migrants, for a chronological view of those who arrived earlier and those who arrived later, and continue arriving. Reminiscent of Kopytoff's (1987) classic theory of the shifting grounds of the African frontier (see also Lentz 2013), it articulates a salient social reality of the demographic composition of the city of Accra, and similarly of many other urban centers across West Africa, where most people claim some near or distant elsewhere as their ancestral home. While her alternative concept of arrivals foregrounds the commonality of newcomers with earlier or old arrivals, it does not gloss over differences but rather situates them within different degrees of orientation, attachment, and belonging. Resonating with insights on the relative irrelevance of territorial belonging across West African societies (Kopytoff 1987: 22; Whitehouse 2012: 210), the different temporalities of arrival here supersede place- and ascription-based forms of identification. These temporal differences may also create social fault lines, linked for example to cohort effects created by shared generational or mobility experiences, but the shared experience of being an arrival (whatever the time frame) provides ample ground for social connection and empathy.

In this chapter I wed the theoretical space that Victoria's arrivals concept offers with the ethnographic vantage point of the bus station to rethink the significance of migratory difference in relation to mobility, place, and belonging. By examining the station's spatial and material affordance for providing new arrivals with direction, contact, and exchange, I bring an infrastructural perspective into conversation with what migration scholars call the "sociabilities of emplacement" (Çağlar and Schiller 2018; Wessendorf and Phillimore 2019). Following Çağlar and Schiller, I understand emplacement not as a synonym for "integration," a term conspicuously absent from local discourses in urban West Africa anyway, but as a dynamic concept that links the conditions, opportunities, and contingencies of building connections with and through specific places, on the one hand, with "a person's efforts . . . to build a life" (2018: 21), on the other.

In keeping with the emphasis on relationality that the concept of emplacement establishes, I seek here to refine its reach through the lens of infrastructure. I build on a cluster of studies that consider how interlinked material sites facilitate transnational mobility and shape lives abroad, thereby opening up new ways of thinking about and decentering migration. In their study of labor migration in Southeast Asia, Xiang and Lindquist (2014) introduce the notion of "migration infrastructures" to problematize assumptions about migration as linear movement between two sites, conceptualizing it instead as a "multi-faceted space of mediation" that conditions mobility.² In the same effort to better account for the plurality of spatial and social relations that give direction to migrant trajectories, Meus and colleagues (2019) foreground the multiscalar constitution of

“urban arrival infrastructures,” challenging teleological accounts of the accommodation of newcomers as tied to specific places and groups (see also Wessendorf 2022).

The following ethnography expands on these approaches, extending the purview of infrastructure as an analytic to consider what Berlant, at a more abstract level, outlines as the capacity to accommodate multiplicity and create proximity across difference: an “infrastructure of association” and “of sociality itself” (2016: 401, 394). The value of this perspective is brought home strongly in Kleinman’s (2019) work on the infrastructural practices of Soninke migrants in Paris. She describes how the migrants’ life-building efforts are directly linked to the Gare du Nord train station they engage with, as they seek to realize the potential for connection its locale affords.

Drawing on the perspectives of the West African migrants I work with in Ghana, I argue that their efforts—to build a life by making connections—are similarly found in cultivating infrastructural practices to create expansive social relations conducive to emplacement. This is manifest in the ways my research participants themselves think through and express ideas about infrastructure in different ways, and in the ways new and old arrivals draw on the place of the station to create, harness, and at times also disrupt connections. Unlike the practices of West African migrants at the Gare du Nord or of southern African migrants around Johannesburg’s Park Station (Zack and Landau 2021), the sociabilities of emplacement at Accra’s station are not a kind of residue of formal or dysfunctional infrastructural relations realized from social and legal margins, as Simone (2004) suggests. Rather, they are a long-established and institutionalized feature of the infrastructural work in mobility performed there. As I will show, this feature is tied intimately to the station workers’ *sensus communis*, which, following Berlant’s (2016) evocative interpretation, blends practical judgment with a strong sense of commonness.

By shifting the focus from groups to sites of interaction, the lens proffered by infrastructure provides an apt avenue to depart from the tendency to approach West African migrations within fixed categories of identity and objectives; a tendency that critical migration scholars working outside the African context have criticized as the “ethnic lens” (Schiller and Çağlar 2018). Such fixity becomes acutely visible in the emphasis placed on how hierarchic affiliations of kin, village, ethnicity, religion and nation (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000) are mobilized in cross-border movement, then reproduced in migrant quarters and institutionalized through patterns of chain and circular migration (see, e.g., Cohen 1969; Lambert 2002; Nyamnjoh 2017; Schildkrout 1978).³

A key motion stemming from my study, one prefigured by Bruce Whitehouse (2012) in his detailed portrayal of West African migration to and

strangerhood in Brazzaville, is that this fixation on kinship, ethnicity, and nationality tends to obscure more than it reveals. In particular, it tends to conceal the relevance of contact, sociality, and solidarity outside co-ethnic affiliation, including those between hosts and strangers. In framing my analysis outside categories of ethnic and national groups, however, I do not mean to suggest that ascribed affiliations are, or have become, irrelevant to the social organization of West African migrations. But rather than taking their relevance for granted, I argue that they should be interrogated and situated more dynamically within the multiple linkages of different social relations and places that shape urban lives.

Contemporary migration practices in West Africa are constitutively diverse, and my aim here is not to convey a generalized or comparative view of these practices. By focusing on the eminent site of West African mobility and connectivity that is the central bus station, I want to highlight how different kinds of social and spatial relations shape mobility practices and lives and how these relations contribute to and transform modalities of urban place-making.

I begin this chapter with a brief description of the background of my research. I then discuss two examples to explore the affordances for emplacement the place of the station offers to new arrivals. Next, I turn the analysis around and describe the perspective of old arrivals, attending to the composition of the groups that run the station, which, I suggest, is conducive of a particular ethics of accommodating difference. In the concluding section, I scale up the argument to consider how the vantage point of the station opens up new perspectives on emplacement practices in urban West Africa.

Ethnographic Background

The analysis of migrant emplacement practices I develop here draws on twenty-one months of fieldwork conducted intermittently in Ghana from 2011 to 2021. It combines insights from two research projects. The first was a study of the workings of Accra's central bus station. Migration was not the focus of this research. But the close engagement with various mobile groups of the station, including old and new arrivals of different backgrounds, revealed to me a certain discrepancy between the way West African migration is commonly described in the Africanist literature, with its strong emphasis on kin and ethnic ties, and my interlocutors' own conceptions of migrant ventures, which weighted differently the relevance of ascribed affiliations over other relationships, both spatial and social. These emic conceptions then served as an analytical guide and ethnographic point of departure for

my subsequent project on the mobility and associational and livelihood strategies of West African migrants in urban Ghana.

Accommodating the diversity of connections constitutive of West African migration was one main goal of my study. This is particularly evident in the composition of my study group, which includes people from more than a dozen countries. Corresponding to the large number of different nationalities, my research participants were very differently situated in terms of linguistic and educational backgrounds, prior migration experiences, legal status, and preestablished social ties in and social knowledge of Ghana. I focused primarily on people of francophone backgrounds who had recently arrived in Ghana, most of whom had made their journeys individually and without mobilizing transnational kinship networks. This diverse group of largely neophyte migrants represents a growing share in West Africa's current migratory circuits toward Ghana, which is characterized by intensified mobility from countries with no significant historical, political, or economic links (RMMS 2017).⁴

Owing to my own gendered positionality, the majority of my research participants were men. Some women also participated in my research, but with few exceptions (including the case of a young female migrant discussed in this chapter), their involvement was less profound than that of my male interlocutors. Many of the migrants I engaged with came with little financial capital, some almost penniless. While a significant proportion had relatively high levels of cultural capital, particularly in relation to levels of education, the general lack of knowledge of English forced nearly all to start from scratch. As a result, their occupational profile was mostly limited to menial and low-income work. Some older and long-settled migrants also participated in my research, and although their experiences were not the primary focus of my study, their perspective as old arrivals adds substantial depth to the analysis I develop here.

Spending time with different research participants in different constellations took me to a variety of places in Accra and beyond. I visited their homes and accompanied them to work, school, job interviews, and the immigration office. I attended activities in mosques, churches, and places of nighttime leisure. My interlocutors would often take me to the bus station where they first arrived. They utilized the station not only to leave for home visits or other destinations but also to inquire about work, travel, housing, particular types of food, or the rates for exchanging, sending, and lending money, as well as for the purpose of sociability, which was, however, inseparable from more practical matters.

During these go-along tours, I shared insights about Accra with my migrant interlocutors, drawing on my familiarity with the city developed over the previous decade and introducing them to various old acquaintances in

and beyond the bus stations. These encounters highlighted the fluid, situational, and connecting nature of the old and new arrival categories. Because of my social knowledge and contacts, the migrant newcomers positioned me firmly within the old arrival category. To many of my old acquaintances, especially those whom I rarely have the opportunity to visit when I am in Accra, I may have not been a newcomer, but I was still far from being an established old arrival. Notably, it was at one of the stations where I had previously worked that I first encountered some of my research participants, such as Ali, a twenty-five-year-old new arrival from Cameroon.

Urban Entry: Ali (Baba)

Ali, nicknamed Ali Baba, knew no one in Accra when he arrived in mid-2015. In Cameroon, he had completed his *baccalauréat* (high school degree) and was looking for employment while making do with sporadic jobs arranged for him by relatives. To improve his chances, he decided he needed to learn English and explore new opportunities abroad. When he left for Ghana, he adopted Ali Baba as his *nom de voyage*, a self-fashioned journeying title referencing the folktale hero who unlocked hidden treasures.

His retelling of the night of his arrival, four years before I first met him, abounds in detail. He recalls the heavy downpour that began immediately after he stepped out of the dilapidated Nissan car that carried him on the final leg of his journey from Lomé to Ghana's capital. On arrival, the fatigue stemming from the arduous three-day travel from his native Yaoundé gave way to the characteristic blend of excitement and anxiety that captures the newcomer to unknown lands. That night, Ali's anxiety prevailed. Disoriented by the darkness and the strangeness of languages and people around him, he sat on a bench right next to the vehicle he arrived with and held firmly to his small travel bag filled with nothing but a clean spare shirt, a tattered English pocket dictionary, and some Naira he had exchanged in Lagos, the actual value of which he was unsure about. There, he stayed put throughout the night, remarking that he would have remained seated on that bench forever if not approached by a female vendor at daybreak.

The woman probably spoke to him in Twi, Ghana's main lingua franca alongside English, which at the time might as well have been Sanskrit, as he did not understand a word. Realizing that he was a francophone, she sent for a befriended vendor who spoke some French, to whom he explained that he was looking for cheap accommodation. The young man, a Burkinabe, accompanied him to a lodging place at the back of the bus station. The shared room in the hostel, frequented by itinerant laborers from northern Ghana

and sex workers from Nigeria and Togo, became his stay in Accra for several weeks. From there, he set out to discover the opportunities (and treasures) he hoped the city would offer him to work, learn English, and “learn about life” (*apprendre la vie*), as he recapitulated his motivation for migrating.

Every morning, Ali started his exploration from inside the bus station where he first arrived. And each time he would return to the station before setting off in another direction, gradually widening the radius of his explorations. The first English sentence he learned by heart, he recalls, was to ask for directions to the station, the place of which became his anchor, both geographically and socially. It was here that he ate at the various food stalls, accustoming himself to Ghanaian dishes and to ordering these in the first place. And it was here that he spent many hours watching people depart and, even more curiously to him, arrive, which made him reminisce about his own arrival. It was at the station that he began to make contacts, first with fellow francophones, then with people from across anglophone West Africa, from whom he picked up a rudimentary command of English. As chance encounters developed into more regular acquaintances, Ali accessed his first jobs, working in various shops in and around the station yard while gradually consolidating his presence and gaining knowledge of further opportunities.

Recursive Projects of Place-Making and Relationship-Building

The challenges Ali faced on arrival were spatial, social, and linguistic. He did not know the place, the people or the language. This is by no means the situation of all newcomers to Accra. Many new arrivals rely on existing networks of kin as well as, and increasingly so, on commercial and technological solutions—notably, mobile apps for route planning, accommodation, and translation. But neither is Ali an unusual case. Many of the migrants I met during fieldwork had to shift for themselves after coming to town, often with limited means for survival and only a vague idea of where to find what they were looking for, especially shelter and work.

For new arrivals like Ali, the place of the station becomes an essential reference point. It was inside the station that he began to take his bearings and map the urban surroundings. His concentrically structured exploratory walks illustrate the centrality he ascribed to the station’s geographical location: he used it as a compass of sorts. In a closely related capacity, the station also provided him with a safe space, granting him security and respite. Reflecting on his initiatory experience of arrival, Ali emphasizes the role of the station in facilitating his entry.

I arrived as a complete stranger. Everything was strange to me: the food, the language, the women's attire. The station made me access the city (*accéder à la ville*). When you come to the station, people don't ask where you are from. They ask where you are going.⁵

As Ali's case further demonstrates, spatial orientation alone is not enough. The "objective of everyday orientation," Widlok (1997: 324) remarks, is a matter "not primarily of getting somewhere geographically, but of getting somewhere socially." In other words, practical knowledge of spatial coordinates is only a means of accessing resources, establishing contacts, and entering into exchange relations. For new arrivals, the task of place-making is primarily one of navigating social coordinates (see also Reiffen in this volume about new arrivals in a shopping mall in Argentina).

Here, the station's diverse groups serve new arrivals to realize what Kleinman (2019) describes as a recursive project of channel and relationship building. The mainstay of this project is the repurposing of place in ways that create new social relationships. These relationships open up new channels that can be mobilized for social and economic means. The outcomes of these projects cannot always be anticipated; and Ali's emplacement path bespeaks of various contingencies and "serendipitous encounters" (Wessendorf and Phillimore 2019). The place of the station, as an infrastructural site that mediates many different relations, makes serendipity a particular kind of engine for creating expansive connections.

Ali put this engine to good use. Through one of his station jobs, he met a Togolese bookseller who hired Ali as his assistant at his vending spot outside an English-language school. The bookseller also arranged a more permanent place for him in the school's dormitory. Through his contacts with students and staff, Ali began attending English classes and working toward a B1 language certificate, which he believed would improve his opportunities upon his return to Cameroon.

While the station served as an anchor for Ali upon arrival, the contacts he made there opened up new channels for furthering his emplacement in Accra and for building a life beyond his stay in Ghana. The distance to the station increased in proportion to his consolidation of contacts. His progressing place-making endeavor provides a striking illustration of the strength of "weak ties" (Granovetter 1973). In contrast to the hierarchical associations based on the "strong ties" of kin, village, ethnicity, and so forth, emphasized in much of Africanist migration scholarship, weak ties foreground the potential to create new relationships outside of one's familiar affiliations, which may or may not convert into more networked connections. Creating connections outside kin and co-ethnic affiliations also allowed migrants to loosen the grip of social control and expectations, as

several participants in my research emphasized. In Ali's case, as in the case of other new arrivals with whom I worked, these familiar ties were non-existent to start with. For other arrivals I met, the station's affordance for encounter served to detach them from existing (strong) ties, allowing them to explore new connections and redirect already commenced emplacement practices, as the example of Mariam from Côte d'Ivoire illustrates.

Paths of Escape: Mariam

Mariam was twelve when she first arrived in Ghana together with her mother, having fled from the violence that erupted after the 2010 election in Côte d'Ivoire. After spending a year in a refugee camp, her father put them up with distant kin in the so-called Liberia Camp at the outskirts of Accra. While her mother soon returned to Abidjan, Mariam stayed for another two years. During this time, she did mostly domestic work while sporadically attending school and making friends among the members of her host family's Ivorian Roman Catholic church.

Shortly after her return to Abidjan, the reunited family experienced threats of reprisal. Mariam, now aged sixteen, was again sent back to Ghana, where her father's relatives arranged for her to work as a housemaid for the family of the Ivorian church's pastor in Accra. She recalls the two years she spent there as the "worst" of her life, alluding to work exploitation, social restrictions, and ongoing sexual harassment by the pastor, which eventually led her to run away.

Her retelling of the night of her escape is reminiscent of the detailed description of Ali's arrival. Like Ali's narrative, it centers on the place of the bus station where she went to seek help and refuge. I reproduce here an extract from an interview I conducted with her in English, in which she describes the course her life took after she left the pastor's house.

There are many people I know in Accra, Ivorian and Ghanaian and other. But the people are from the church. I don't trust them. But I know I want to go to the station, where I arrived with my mother. I don't know the place, really. But I remember francophone women who work there. They helped my mother. So, I go and ask them for help, for work I can do. If they have no work for me, I can take the bus to Abidjan. I had all my money with me, not much, but the ticket is not too expensive. When I walk the street I fear for myself. Everywhere the city is empty. But when I find the station, I see many people. I feel . . . [switches to French] *Je suis tellement soulagée, heureuse* [I am so relieved, happy]. But I don't know a person. So, I walk the station. I listen to how people speak, who speak French. One woman shouts. She is an-

gry with a man. She curses in Twi. But she has this accent. I know the French accent, even in Twi. She is Fon from Benin, Efosa. She listens to all my story, like you listen now. She says she helps me. But that night, she travels to Benin. She brings me to another woman. She is Ghanaian. The woman takes care of me before she returns. I stay with the woman three days. She sells bread inside the station. Many women sell and sleep there. They are very kind to me.

When Efosa returns, she did not forget about me. She brings me to a friend, a Nigeria man, Al-ḥajj. He owns a restaurant inside the station. The man, he takes me as his daughter. I work in his restaurant with many girls, Burkina, Dagbani.⁶ The manager is Nigeria-Ashanti, Zauna. She is very disciplined but she is fair with us. We live together in a compound behind the restaurant. . . . When I start [the work in the restaurant], Efosa tells me two things. One, I call my family in Abidjan. Two, I don't waste my wage but save for schooling. So I do. . . . After seven months, I tell Efosa I saved so much. She brings me to the seamstress shop. The master is a Fon woman. I give my money to the master for training.

Mariam's path of emplacement differs from Ali's in significant ways, as does the position from which she approached the station. Unlike Ali, Mariam was not a new arrival. She had already attained some familiarity with the city and its people, and she had competences in English and Twi. Most importantly, she had long been involved in a transnational network of extended kinship relations that had facilitated her entry and shaped her life abroad. Clearly, this was not the life Mariam had imagined for herself. Her situation in the pastor's house, as well as her status as an involuntarily displaced refugee, placed her in a position of a high vulnerability, particularly in relation to gendered dynamics within domestic relations.

Of Exit, Reorientation, and Reentry

In turning to the station for help, work, and possibly return, Mariam, unlike Ali, was not seeking orientation but rather reorienting her position and action. Notwithstanding the difference in positionality and objective, the kind of gravitational pull the station exerted on both of them underlines the importance it holds for new and old arrivals alike: it is from inside the station that most migrants enter the city; and it is from here that they can exit or escape, whether to return to where they came from or to travel on to other destinations. In this dual capacity—as a principal port of entry and of departure and return—the place of the station blends spatial with emotional security, revealing the affective force of its infrastructural function of providing transport connections.

Mariam's escape was less an exit from Accra than a reentry. There is a certain irony in the fact that in seeking to escape from the pastor's family, Mariam sought refuge inside the bus station. This not only contradicts ideas about the bus station as a place of insecurity and danger, a stigma shared by urban stations in many parts of Africa (Stasik and Cissokho 2018), but also complicates often taken-for-granted notions about kin, ethnic, and religious ties as providing "the backbone of coping strategies from insecurity" for migrants (Nyamnjoh 2017: 248).

The alliance Mariam sought to mobilize for help was based not on the ascribed affiliations but on the more diffused connection of female solidarity and the felt proximity of the French language. These intersecting qualities of gender and language proved vital for many of the migrants I worked with. As noted above, the direction of these encounters is not always predictable, and they may ultimately lead to outcomes that are different from those previously imagined or intended.

In Mariam's case, the chance encounter with Efosa at the station turned out particularly well. Efosa, whom I knew from my earlier research and who also introduced me to Mariam, attributed her protégé's successful change of life situation to what she referred to as Mariam's "*ténacité*" to realize God's plan, implying a particular form of "stubbornness" that echoes what anthropologists working in Africa describe as the "labor" invested in one's divinely predetermined destiny (Elliot 2016). Mariam did indeed demonstrate a remarkably courageous, perhaps even stubborn, determination to work toward improving her life. But there were also other factors at play. Two in particular stand out, both related to the continuity of the cultural grammar and ethics underlying West African frontier mobility.

The first is the solidarity shared among West African female traders (Clark 1994), manifested in the unquestioning support offered to Mariam by Efosa's fellow vendors at the station. The second are the ethics of hospitality that have long helped to sustain host-stranger relations across West Africa (Gaibazzi 2018; Lentz 2013), as exemplarily embodied in Al-Hajj's care for Efosa and the group of other restaurant workers, composed largely of female migrant-strangers. Another more fleeting but nonetheless telling manifestation of this ethics—based on the shared understanding of "the humanity of the stranger" (Gaibazzi 2018: 472; see also Whitehouse 2012)—was also evident in the initial direction Ali received upon arrival, the implicitness by which it was offered to him extends to any other new arrival in need of assistance.

This brings us back to the "sociabilities of emplacement," which similarly invokes a mutual "sense of being human" (Çağlar and Schiller 2018: 128). This emphasis on commonality over difference is crucial to the social practices and relationships that prevail among the groups working at Accra's sta-

tion. This has to do with the station's character as an in-between place, linked to its infrastructural function of facilitating association through exchange across distance, and it relates to the composition of station groups and the routines of their members in dealing with difference. In the following, I attend more closely to this interplay between sociabilities and infrastructures of emplacement by reversing the perspective from the new to the, chronologically speaking, old arrivals and their workplace that is the bus station.

The Difference Old Arrivals Make

A key feature of the groups that run the station is that they are defined as much by their work in mobility as by their own mobile histories. They are almost exclusively made up of people who have come from outside Accra, and often from outside Ghana, whether as transport workers, shopkeepers or itinerant vendors. In most cases, they come from a town or region served by the station, either directly or via the many feeder routes that branch off from its destinations, extending the station's connectivity throughout West Africa. Framed in Victoria's terms: practically all station workers have, at some point, been new arrivals themselves, comprising a broad range of degrees of attachment, identification, and emplacement.

There is a pragmatic reason for their diverse composition, linked in particular to the commercial logic of organizing long-distance transport and trade.⁷ Most transport links to Accra are initiated by efforts at the other end of the route, which then creates an exclave of people who work the connection to their hometown or region from within the destination station. This chiefly includes transport workers, but also traders who use the connection, as well as the many informal service providers peddling their trades in and around the station area. This exclave-like function then also attracts other earlier arrivals, who frequent its site not primarily for utilitarian purposes of travel, trade, or work but to exchange news and gossip from home, to chat in their one language, or to find their native foodstuff brought in fresh from afar.

A station of the size and with the range of route connections (more than thirty in all) as Accra's central station creates a multiplicity of such exclaves in close proximity to one another. This proximity generates encounters, exchanges, and collaborations, both commercial and social. While many of these encounters are fleeting, others prove to be lasting and regularly lead to new connections.

This is not to construct a romanticized image of the station as a place free of conflict, let alone as delivered from inequality. Its organization of labor is deeply entrenched in hierarchical and unequal relations and is linked

to a wider political economy that reproduces the uneven distribution of income and access to resources (Stasik 2024). The chronological distinction between those who arrived earlier and those who arrived later, thus the older and newer arrivals, maps onto these hierarchies and the inequalities that result from them.

Disputes also arise here with a striking regularity and are regularly fought out with great intensity. These conflicts, however, rarely arise along the lines of ascribed affiliations, but rather from clashing commercial and personal interests. And while people habitually draw on ascriptive categories of identification to make sense of their interactions, these are not the primary determinants that structure their relationships. Rather, diversity—in terms of ethnic, national, religious, and linguistic difference—is a taken-for-granted reality here and dealt with accordingly: as daily business.

The station workers' routinized engagement with difference echoes what Werbner (1999) and others call “working class” or “tactical cosmopolitanism” (Landau and Freemantle 2010). This cosmopolitanism does not follow from some kind of philosophy of moral universalism but relates a form of practical knowledge of, and openness to, different human groups. In terms of the station workers' engagements, this knowledge combines expertise in matters of infrastructure, related to the practicalities of organizing transport and trade, with “matters” of culture, related to the cultivation of practical competence in, and ethical sensibility to, the different languages, customs, and dispositions.

This blending of pragmatic and ethical goals is illustrated by the remarkable linguistic skills of many station workers. They routinely draw on a variety of West African languages to communicate with and attract potential customers and patrons while also cultivating a peculiar kind of bus station pidgin. Bar owner Victoria, for example, not only is fluent in five of the main languages spoken in Ghana (Dangme, English, Ewe, Ga, and Twi) and French but also has competences in half a dozen West African languages, including Hausa, Igbo, and Mossi. Victoria's multilingualism is no exception in the linguistic repertoires of the people at the station, or indeed of West Africa's urban dwellers in general.

The diverse composition of the station's groups of old arrivals, together with their exponentiated infrastructural, cultural, and linguistic knowledge, provides the main ground for social practices poised to explore, engage with, mobilize, and accommodate differences of varying kinds and scales. In turn, these individual and collective engagements with difference, which enfold across the range from old-established arrivals like Efosa and Al-Hajj to new or relatively new arrivals like Ali and Mariam, sustain the station's affordances for encounter, exchange, and connection that facilitate processes of emplacement.

In the context of the station, belonging becomes an utterly flexible and situational construct, and one of multiple intersecting dimensions (see Werbner 2018 for a related argument). While ascriptive affiliations such as ethnicity, nationality, and religion initially define one's identity, these markers do not preclude the possibility of finding commonality with others. The routine of creating commonality across social difference is particularly evident in the elaborate system of joking relationships maintained by the station workers and regular visitors, often in the form of "sweet talk" across the gender divide, as the station dwellers refer to flirting. These interactions and the relationships they generate, beyond their instrumental role in mobilizing resources and business relations, underline the strong tendency to perform, emphasize, and adapt different identities in different social situations. The close relationship between Efosa and Al-Hajj, for example, seems to be based solely on extensive joking and flirting, with to my knowledge no ulterior motives other than sustaining mutuality.

Here, Victoria's chronological view of new and old arrivals adds analytical value in another important way. It foregrounds the particular form of reciprocity that informs the sociabilities conducive of new and old arrivals' efforts of life-building through connection-building, with reciprocity here understood in the classic anthropological sense of delayed exchange. As new arrivals draw on the guidance and help offered by earlier arrivals, they themselves become more established arrivals, now committed to sharing their experience and expertise with fresh arrivals.

Ali and Mariam are cases in point. During my visits to Ali at the book-stall, he engaged in conversations with groups of francophone students, exchanging his knowledge of Accra with the students' insights about the places they came from, visited, and aspired to travel to. The last time I met Mariam at the station, which she continued to visit regularly, she had changed her status at the seamstress shop from "junior" to "senior apprentice," a raise in tasks and responsibilities that she embraced wholeheartedly. She proudly told me how she was helping to guide the new junior apprentices, many of whom, she emphasized, had arrived in Accra lacking even the most basic orientation.

Engaging with Difference

Engaging with difference in encounters is nothing new for West African urbanites. For at least a hundred years, processes of rapid urbanization have created the conditions for different human groups to live together in close proximity, while interacting with and learning from and about one another in different ways and with different effects. Specific cultural politics

of belonging and identity have shaped their encounters and interactions in particular ways, and there is no shortage of evidence of the construction and maintenance of boundaries between groups, as reflected in social, economic, and spatial demarcations and related struggles over prerogatives of access to resources and rights.

But this is only one side of the story, told from the parochial perspective of groups cast as bounded entities. I have proposed here a different view, one that shifts the focus from prefixed groups to sites of connectivity and interaction. What the vantage point of the station helps to reveal is that migrant paths and affiliations are considerably far more diverse than is captured by the tired methodological paradigm of the ethnic lens. It also helps to recast the conceptual purview of these categories in relation to their emic uses and significances. The West Africans I worked with in Ghana routinely use categories of ascribed affiliation such as kinship, ethnicity, religion, and nationality to situate their encounters and relationships, as the ethnography presented in this chapter also showed. But their use in organizing everyday relations is far more flexible, situational and open to rescaling than the fixity they have attained in common use as an analytical category.

Crucially, the affiliations and boundaries supposedly prescribed by these categories are far less formative of my research participants' life-building efforts than Africanist migration research routinely describes them as. Indeed, what is perhaps most remarkable here is the routine with which many of my interlocutors engage in relations across difference, working with rather than reifying categories. The routinized ways in which old arrivals like Efosa and Al-Hajj work with difference in encounters can, to a significant extent, be attributed to the place of the bus station where they work. Many station workers are true masters of working with difference and making it work for different ends—with "work" not understood as some kind of metaphor for agency or practice but literally as denoting acts of human effort and of the creative, often challenging and strenuous labor invested in managing diverse social and material relations.

Many of their efforts are of a more utilitarian orientation, pertaining especially to the organization of transport and trade. But the importance social and linguistic competences, cultural sensibilities, and ethics of shared humanity have in their daily work with difference can hardly be overstated, nor can it be separated from more ends-oriented actions. Here the intimate connection between the infrastructural function of the station, with its capacity to facilitate exchange across distance, and its social form, with its affordance to create exchange across difference, becomes acutely pronounced. This blending of infrastructural and social significances—wedded to movements at different scales—makes its site a powerful engine for the new arrivals' emplacement efforts. In much the same vein, its dynamic

conflation of countless mobilities and of temporalities of arrival makes it an especially relevant site to depart from static notions of place and de-essentialize categorical distinction between migrants and non-migrants, as emphasized in the introduction (Drotbohm and Winters, this volume).

While the power to emplace arrivals is particularly manifest within the place and within the groups of the station, it is by no means exceptional for West African urban spaces and societies at large. The sociabilities of emplacement created within the station, with their dense agglomeration of exclaves and the many weak ties that their proximity produces, differ from the wider urban environment in terms of the density and complexity of their diversity, but not in their basic propensity to accommodate difference.

Both the density and the complexity of differences condensed within the station are, at least to some extent, responsible for its reputation as a chaotic and dangerous place among certain urban groups, as raised in the exchange of views reproduced at the beginning of this chapter. However, their valuation of the station's role in urban life and the hazards it supposedly poses is perhaps less informed by a concern for order and safety than by a particular thinking about difference, which, to paraphrase Hannerz's (1980: 56) critique of the early Chicago school of urban sociology, tends to conceive disorder when describing diversity. In claiming autochthony, they tend, intentionally or not, to obscure the fact that they too, or some of their more immediate ancestors, were new arrivals to the city at some point. From this historically widened perspective, it is not only the station that is "a place of foreigners," as the Ivoirian trader Albert claimed, but the city itself.

Rather than seeing the perspective offered by the station as an exception to broader social practices and values, it serves as a prism through which the practices and values that West African urbanites have long cultivated in their engagements with difference are brought into sharp relief. Victoria's concept of new and old arrivals, with its strong emphasis on commonality over categorical difference, captures the refraction that these engagements generate in a particularly incisive way.

Michael Stasik teaches anthropology at the University of Basel. He is author of *Bus Station Hustle: Transport Work in Urban Ghana* (CUP, 2024) and *DISConnections: Popular Music Audiences in Freetown, Sierra Leone* (Langaa, 2012).

NOTES

1. I refer to all individuals described in this chapter with pseudonyms.
2. For a critical review of the concept of “migration infrastructures” in relation to West Africa, see Kleist and Bjarnesen 2019.
3. Important exceptions to the prevalence of the ethnic lens in Africanist migration research include recent studies concerned with the high-risk mobility of West Africans en route to Europe, which highlight in particular the relevance of “dynamic social networks” (Schapendonk 2015) created outside ethnic and kin affiliations (e.g., Bachelet 2019; Bredeloup 2013).
4. In addition to people from Nigeria, Togo, Burkina Faso, and Niger, for whom Ghana has historically been a preferred destination, these include people from many countries that, until recently, did not represent any significant portion of in-migration to Ghana, especially Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, the two Congos, Gabon, Guinea, and Mali. This changing trend is occurring against the backdrop of Ghana’s widely established image as what many of my research participants refer to as “a peaceful country,” highlighting the absence of xenophobic tendencies and violent conflict. An additional driver includes the perceived chances presented by Ghana’s lasting economic growth, in turn said to facilitate opportunities for education, job training, and employment, especially when compared to the economic strictures across other West and Central African countries. This reputation of economic prosperity, however, may change due to the severe economic downturn in the wake of the pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which in combination created record levels of inflation.
5. Ali’s metaphorical allusion here has a concrete basis in the language of transport workers. Most people coming to the station are first welcomed by the urging cries of the so-called loading boys who tout the bus tickets to “load” passengers onto the buses by asking *Wore ko he?*, meaning “Where you are going?” in Twi.
6. Dagbani is the language of the Gur people of northern Ghana but is often used generically as an ethnic marker.
7. As I have described in detail elsewhere, public road transport in Ghana is, for the most part, neither run nor subsidized by the state but operated by a vast number of small-scale private entrepreneurs and workers (Stasik 2024). This includes the groups running the bus stations, where most of the transport connections are coordinated, who likewise work in a context of a relative lack of state control and support.

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