Of Pirate Drivers and Honking Horns: Mobility, Authority, and Urban Planning in Interwar Accra (Ghana)

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Throughout the 1930s, the Accra Town Council complained repeatedly of the presence of “pirate passenger lorries”, which were said to be plying the roads between central Accra (the capital of the Gold Coast Colony) and the eastern suburb of Labadi. The language of piracy highlights the degree to which these passenger lorries threatened the authority of the colonial state and the foundations of the colonial order. Lorries, which came from the cocoa-producing, agricultural eastern interior of the colony, would off-load some goods in Labadi, which effectively served as an eastern gateway to the city. As they continued on into central Accra, lorry drivers traveled on the same roads that were covered by the municipal bus service, picking up passengers along the roadside. While colonial officials attempted to limit the competition of these lorries in the municipal passenger transit sector, the persistence of their practices highlight both the limitations of state authority and the autonomy of African urban residents in the colonial capital. This paper argues that contestations over the practices of drivers in Accra reflects a broader disconnect between colonial visions for the capital and African uses of the city.

Jennifer Hart is an Assistant Professor of African History at Wayne State, where she teaches courses in African, Imperial, and World History. Her current book project, “Suffer to Gain”: Motor Transportation and the Politics of Development in Twentieth Century Ghana explores the history of African commercial motor transport drivers and passengers and their role in the long contestations over development that were central to the twentieth century liberal project.