Engaging with a World Outside of Ourselves: Vistas of Flatness, Children's Work and the Urban Informal Economy

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Abstract

This paper considers the work and labour of children living on the streets of Accra, Ghana. It does so in two distinctive ways. First, it considers how the children's photographs of a day or two in their working lives, and the dialogues that go on in, through and around them, may contribute to the making of strong sociological arguments about children's work. In so doing, this paper elaborates the connections between visual sociology and realist traditions of photography, and argues that photographs can contribute distinctive and novel sources of insight into working children's lives and a powerful, humanising media of dissemination. Second, these arguments are then deployed to examine street children's experiences of work. Conceptualised in terms of its 'flatness', the paper explores the informal means of regulation through which the children are locked into types of working that prove difficult to escape.

Keywords: *Child Labour, Informal Economy, Visual Sociology, Street Children*

Introduction

1.1 Our paper examines the working lives of a group of children living on the streets of Accra, Ghana. Its purpose is to explore their working world through the prism of 'flatness', a borrowed term that we feel well captures the austere and desolate landscape of labour they inhabit somewhere towards the bottom of the city's vast and expanding informal economy. Through drawing upon the testimonies of working children, our particular concern in this paper is with their interminable struggles to secure employment, something that is often quite literally fought out each day as too many children chase too few opportunities for work. In doing so, we seek to further explore the processes constitutive of this flatness. In focusing upon the detail of the children's work and the problems encountered in securing even such basic ways of earning money, we look to extend the understanding of those exclusionary social practices that shape the children's integration into Accra's informal economy.

1.2 We make this argument in pictures and words. Through drawing upon still images produced by working children, we advocate a visual ethnography in which photographs are valued for their capacity to aid the construction of strong arguments relating to the nature and significance of children's work. This is more a matter of method than methodology, since it is our intention to advocate a visual sociology in which the value of photographs is not limited to their hermeneutic role. Rather, the position we advance sees in photography a way, to borrow once again, of engaging with a world outside of ourselves through the capacity of images to initiate and sustain a dialogue with what lies beyond our immediate experience. To this end, we identify with and seek to advance a tradition connecting realist photography with social research. This is one that looks to photographs as confirmation and elaboration of what may be known by other means, and which attributes to images a unique capacity to communicate the realities of working life in ways that complement and enhance the making of sociological arguments about work and labour.

1.3 In the following section we begin by elaborating the context within which street children work. We do so by drawing upon the idea of 'wageless life' and how this term points us towards the durability and dynamics of dispossession and exclusion experienced by workers in what is more often referred to as the informal economy. Particular attention is given to the implications of this for working children. This is then followed by a discussion of our research in Accra and the contribution of photography to this. Through a critical engagement with more recent trajectories in visual research, our purpose here is to restate the importance of realism in a way that eschews both naïve realism and the self-defeating relativism of more recent visual sociology. We then proceed with a discussion of the children's experiences of working in the street. By drawing upon their images and words, we explore the detail and texture of their efforts to secure work and focus upon the barriers they face in realising their aspirations.

Terrains of Informality and Dispossession

2.1 Michael Denning (2010 p.81) has characterised vast tracts of the global economy in terms of 'wageless life'. It is, he asserts, 'wageless life, not wage labour, that should be the starting point in understanding the free market', since it is in the processes of dispossession and expropriation that underpin the neo-liberal political economy that we can begin to grasp the emergence of new ways of working and their associated forms of living. If the informal sector – 'work outside the regulative ambit of the state' (Harriss-White 2010 p.170) – has become 'the master [sic] trope for representing wageless life in cities around the world' (Denning 2010 p.89), then, in following Denning, we can see how informality, with all its corollaries of marginality, atypicality, peripherality and disorganisation, fails to capture the durability, magnitude or dynamics of what work now means for large swathes of the global labour force.

2.2 How this expansion of wageless life has come about and what it involves for those forced to bear its degradations are, as the veteran sociologist of informal workers, Jan Breman, points out, still little understood. What is patently evident, however, is that the work Breman describes as 'characterised by fluctuating employment and piece-rates, whether working at home, in sweatshops, or on their own in the open air; and [undertaken] in the absence of any contractual or labour rights, or collective organisation' (Breman 2009 p.29) has become a mainstay of economic growth, especially within the less developed economies (but certainly not excluding the more developed ones). According to the ILO, '*the bulk of new employment in recent years, particularly in developing and transition countries, has been in the informal economy*' (2002 p.1, original emphasis). By the turn of the Twenty First Century, informal employment accounted for around half to three quarters of non-agricultural employment in the global South and in Sub-Saharan Africa 80 percent of non-agricultural employment, over 60 percent of urban employment and over 90 percent of all new jobs were accounted for by the sector (ibid.).

2.3 The swift progress of wageless life has brought with it profound changes to lives and livelihoods, especially in the cities of the global South. What Mike Davis (2006 p.14, 178) calls 'urbanisation without industrialisation' and its drastic decoupling of economic growth from the creation of regular employment paying incomes sufficient to live on, has 'establish[ed] informal survivalism as the new primary mode of

livelihood in a majority of Third World cities'. A political economy shaped by state-led retrenchment and underpinned by externally imposed programmes of structural adjustment, within Sub-Saharan Africa the advance of 'informalisation' (Meagher 1995 p.266) has not involved the creation of a homogeneous mass of informal workers, or rigid divisions between the formal and informal sectors. Rather, what is emerging are accounts of parlous ways of working in which diversity, division and hierarchy exist alongside a connectedness to and interdependence with the formal, directly regulated economy (see also Potts 2008; Lindell 2000).

2.4 Working children would seem to be well represented within the expansion of wageless life and what we have elsewhere termed 'urban informal childhoods' have become a more important part of living as children in Ghana's towns and cities (Mizen and Ofori-Kusi 2011). According to ILO, 'Any effort to map the informal economy cannot ignore the presence of child labour. Most cases of child labour are to be found in the informal economy' (ILO 2002 p.25). Much of this informal child working continues to involve labouring in fields and villages, but as the cities have continued their exponential rates of growth so too has the presence of children become more clearly established. One of the most perceptible examples of this has been the appearance of street children, the global population of which, by 1989, UNICEF was estimating to be around 100 million (Consortium for Street Children 2011). Problems with counting and disputes over definition make these estimates little more than guesswork (Glauser 1997), but taking the case of Ghana NGOs had already identified significant numbers of children living and working on the streets by the early 1990s. By 2002, a headcount suggested 20,000 children were living on Accra's streets, a doubling of the number from five years earlier (CAS 2003). Recent estimates put the nationwide figure at around 33,000, primarily concentrated in the capital Accra and the second city Kumasi (UNICEF 2009).

2.5 Lying behind this are acts of dispossession and exclusion that are only slowly being comprehended. Street children appear among the most visible remnants of disintegrating households, no longer willing or able to rely on families barely capable of ensuring their own subsistence. In Brazil, for instance, the appearance of large numbers of street children from the early 1980s has been traced to the twin forces of 'democratic transition and neo-liberal reform' (Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998 p.353). In Ghana too, a political economy of liberal democratic reform allied to the pursuit of market-led development have been implicated in children's progressive integration into the urban informal economy. Accompanying the structural adjustment of the 1980s and 1990s was a parallel process of domestic deregulation that shifted children's relationships to their families. Responding to the erosion of relatively secure wage labour by diversifying sources of household income, Martin Verlet (2000 p.69) writes of the "adjusted child" whose work has lost its value in terms of domestic use and [who has] become a unit of exchange, a negotiable labour-market good instantly convertible into cash'.

2.6 Verlet's principal focus is with how families have responded to austerity by monetising their children's labour. A complementary concern is with how children have responded to these pressures. In discussion of street children it is their relationship to home and hearth that is most often the focus, where on the street children are judged to be out of place and thus beyond normative notions of childhood (Glauser 1997; Hecht 1998). The corresponding assumptions of passivity, domesticity and dependence that emerge from this nevertheless sit uneasily with the awareness that taking to the street can be a self-conscious decision. Physical violence, arbitrary punishment, acute poverty and dead-end futures all feature among children's explanations of their journeys, but these sit alongside their aspirations for work to better support themselves and their families, to begin a better life, perhaps to continue their education. Even if work and an income are not initially a paramount consideration, then once on the street the necessity of finding work quickly becomes a pressing concern. Evidence from Brazil points to how street children identify themselves primarily as workers (Rizzini and Lusk 1995) and various surveys indicate a high incidence of working (Rosemberg 2000; ILO 2008). From our own research we too have learned that children's reasons for leaving for towns and cities, often alone and unannounced, includes the commitment to work as one way of transcending the structural and cultural impediments they face in their villages and towns.

Engaging With a World Outside of Ourselves: Making Arguments With Words and Pictures

3.1 Establishing the terms of children's participation in and integration into Accra's informal economy has been a primary objective of a research project investigating street life as labour^[2]. Based mainly in and around central Accra, our project involved a long-term dialogue with children living and working in the streets, markets and transit stations and in which we have encouraged them to raise their voices. Part of this dialogue has involved a visual sociology. By asking some of the children to make photographic accounts of a working day or two and then to reflect upon their images, our intention has been to participate in these children's lives through photography's unique capacity to connect our sense of the everyday with the everyday understandings of others (Mizen and Ofori-Kusi 2000). Like Susie Linfield (2010 p.22), we see the basis of this connection as lying in photography's capacity to excel in initiating an engagement with a world outside of ourselves, by way of an image's ability to create an 'immediate, viscerally emotive connection' with what otherwise remains beyond our immediate experience. Linfield's is no simple restatement of documentary truth, although it is a defence of the documentary tradition. It is one that grasps the openness of photographic meaning as the basis of a productive and knowing encounter. In permitting an experience of something that is beyond direct reach or is otherwise not immediately understood, photography can institute meaningful and durable connections between an image and the world outside of its frame. 'Instead of approaching these images as static objects that we either naively accept or scornfully reject we might see them as part of a process – the beginnings of a dialogue, the start of an investigation – into which we thoughtfully, consciously enter' (ibid. p.30).

3.2 In assigning to photography this communicative and dialogic function we further seek both a rejoinder to the current scepticism permeating much visual ethnography and a restatement of a realist alternative. As Doug Harper elaborates, 'the realist tale has become a discredited form in visual ethnography. It is seldom seen yet often criticised' (1998 p.27). This exorcism rests on the conflation of realism with positivism which, once accomplished, allows the 'scientific-realist' (Pink 2005 p.4, p.8) approach to be dismissed for its clearly unsustainable commitment to the facticity of an image and to photographs as objective records. No longer held up as a mirror to reality, photography has been redirected towards a hermeneutic function and the seemingly extraordinary capacity of photographs to elicit otherwise unarticulated human experiences and understandings. For the anti-realists, this role is a necessary consequence of the constructed nature of (visual) knowledge and conventionalist ontologies of (photographic) truth. 'Rather than existing objectively and being accessible and recordable through "scientific" research methods, reality is subjective and is only known as it is experienced by individuals' (2005 ibid. p.20). For the visual researcher the implications are clear: 'ethnography is more usefully thought of as a created tale ... Ethnography should draw upon narrative, emphasising the point of view, voice and experience of the author' (Harper 1998 p.31).

3.3 The realism we advocate similarly rejects the inert positivism of simple realists and the pellucidity it assigns to photographic evidence. Even if photographs were capable of providing exact copies of reality, these would add little to our understanding of social life beyond what can already be observed. However, it does not follow that because 'naïve realism' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007 p.15) and foundationalist accounts of knowledge are untenable, and that our claims to reality are always socially constructed (including photographic ones), then what counts as knowledge (including that derived from photographs) is always irredeemably subjective. To pursue this reasoning would be to mistake the appreciation that we can only know the world through the means we possess for its (photographic) representation and mediation with the (photographic) production and constitution of that world (Sayer 2000). This is certainly a position advanced by some where those like us, who see in the iconic and indexical qualities of photographs possibilities for generalized understanding, are held to offer nothing more than expressions of our ideologies and subject positions; if you will, of offering no more than self portraits (Piper and Frankham 2007). This accusation, as we have argued elsewhere, is clearly unsustainable not least because photographs cannot be made to mean whatever one may wish them to. In our research with street children, for instance, the one thing that can be said with certainty is that their photographs will surprise and confound, as much as confirm our existing assumptions (Mizen and Ofori-Kusi 2010).

3.4 However telling the critique of simple photographic realism may be, the reduction of photography to a matter of hermeneutics is similarly limited. To equate the truth of an image solely with the meanings that viewers give to it is to endorse the fallacious reasoning shared by all anthropocentric accounts of

knowledge. It requires recourse to what Margaret Archer (2000 p.45) calls a 'human perspectivism' that neglects both the fallibility of human experience (i.e. experience of what is *not* the case, like a face, place, time or event erroneously attributed to a picture) and that reality encompasses the non-observable (i.e. the physical processes through which light interacts with chemicals or produces an electrical charge capable of being used to form a recognisable picture). Knowledge of human experience is a necessary but insufficient basis for understanding social life, since to assert their equivalence requires taking seriously the otherwise fanciful proposition that what is experienced can never be wrong. For, if the truth of a photograph lies solely in the eye of the beholder then there is no standard against which calls to human experience may be judged. Even substituting truth with the gentler Geertzian tones of 'ethnographic fiction' (Harper 1998; Pink 2005) is insufficient because without a notion of truth beyond that claimed by a viewer, visual ethnography descends into a self-defeating relativism because there is nothing against which its pictorial (or literary) inventions can be compared.

3.5 In any case, it will not do to equate realism with inert positivism without wilfully neglecting realism's status as a complex historical category of representation. 'To defend realism is not necessarily to defend an unmediated notion of photographic truth, but to keep faith politically with the everyday world of appearances' (Roberts 1998 p.145). Such a conviction need not rest solely upon the degree of correspondence between a photograph and the object that it depicts; although such material relationships clearly play a determinate role in defining the universe of possible meanings. Rather, there is much of value in the realism of the social or critical realists and their emphasis upon the socially produced and self-qualifying nature of claims to knowledge, through the creation of fallibilistic accounts of a stratified and transitive world (Sayer 2000). For photography, an exemplar of this can be found in the collaboration between John Berger and Jean Mohr. Here, their recourse to the self-evident truth of a photograph has been replaced by 'a process of narrative redemption' (Roberts 1998 p.134), in which their images are discursively reconstituted into moments of a larger, more abstract and generalized argument (in their case, explorations of community life and migrant workers). For Berger and Mohr, realism is not just a matter of extracting truth from *within* the detail of an image, nor the degree to which an image mirrors the world. Rather, their realism is rooted in an appreciation of photographs as both a resource and a media capable of playing vital roles in the making of coherent and strong arguments.

3.6 For visual ethnographies of work, the realism of Berger and Mohr has much to offer. As a resource, photographs can stand, to borrow Howard Becker's (2002 p.5, p.11) vivid phrase, as 'specified generalisations' giving testament to the 'real, flesh and blood life' that provides the substance of realist sociological argument. In embracing this deeply humanistic understanding of photography, we too deploy images as further confirmation that there really are children whose lives are like those we write of. This is photography as giving both substance and form to arguments about the world, a contribution all the more absorbing as these visual testimonies come from below in what might be regarded as something akin to 'triangulation plus' (Bolton, Pole et al. 2001). To be clear, this is not photography as definitive proof, where a photograph stands as an ultimate arbiter over the veracity of what is being claimed. As both constituent and embodiment of the arguments we make about children's working lives, our images are 'not evidence as "compelling proof", but rather as what is sometimes called an "existence proof", a showing that the thing we are talking about is possible' (Becker 2002 p.5).

3.7 We also offer these images because of the qualities of the evidence they can supply. Our photographs, like Berger and Mohr's, emerge from a prolonged participation in the lives of others, the product of a shared concern with the children's trials and tribulations, triumphs and accomplishments. This is 'photography ... as a craft of given forms, rooted in the process of finding rather than making' (Edwards 2006 p.83-84), where encouraging children to explore the world of appearances and to reflect upon what they observe, facilitates a voice for workers otherwise (wilfully) silenced. Photography thus adds much to the ethnographer's repertoire as 'one who listens, records and tries to interpret human lives ... a keeper of records, a minor historian of ordinary lives of people presumed to have no history' (Scheper-Hughes 1992 p.29). That photography is so adept as record and memorial is testament to its powers of close description and capacity to initiate historical recall, an ability to affirm the existence, fabric and texture of other people's lives in all their unfamiliar, edifying or pitiless forms. To fictionalise this function, as visual ethnographers are now encouraged to do, is to risk disabling these powers and possibly to concede that unforgiving worlds like those inhabited by our working children, together with the creativity with which they confront them, are merely a matter of invention. To avoid this requires stressing photographs as 'an inscription of, and an intervention in, a socially divided world' (Roberts 1998 p.4); the means to simultaneously reflect and comment upon unnoticed ways of living delivered in a form that is sometimes immediate and compelling. That to do so requires photographs to be assembled as moments in a broader discourse – whereas texts do not require images – does not negate a photograph's capacity for 'autonomy' (Chaplin 1994 p.207) of meaning. Communicated in the information that photographs present to the eye can be a wealth of detail and richness of information regarding the lives of working people beyond the expressive talents of even the most able wordsmith.

3.8 Insisting that photography can communicate something of the reality of children's working lives is not to deny that our arguments have no room for improvement. If understandings of working lives are always constructions then they are also fallible ones, since if absolute truth is beyond our reach then the likelihood is that extant knowledge will always be superseded by more adequate understandings. This is especially significant for photographs, since an embrace of the openness of photographic meaning – a further dimension of the 'autonomy' that Elizabeth Chaplin writes of – and a refusal to reduce all photographs to text (or numbers), as we do in this paper, provides a further space from which alternative interpretations can emerge. This self-qualifying dimension is a direct consequence of the photographic form, an openness of images to 'the work of the reader', as Becker (2002) puts it, that positively encourages comment and speculation. 'By connecting ... photographs to the world outside of their frames, they begin to live and breathe more fully' (Linfield 2010 p.29), but in the process of bringing the children's photographs to life others may be tempted to strike out in different directions. That this is possible is further testament to the value of photographs to understanding working lives. 'Photographic images contain everything that went into their interpretation and much more that can be used to make alternative interpretations' (Becker 2002 p.10).

Terrains of Flatness: The Wageless Lives of Street Children

4.1 The argument we make here borrows from Jan Breman in conceptualising the structure of the children's wageless life in terms of its 'flatness'.

By this we mean to argue that these children occupy a closed terrain of labour, one that is characterised by sharp lines of demarcation that serve to confine the children within a relatively narrow and homogeneous range of occupational tasks. This flatness is, as Breman Breman (1996 p.116) puts it, 'a labour scene ... characterised by strong differentiation which is horizontal in nature', a realm of work containing a 'great mass of people [who] are trapped in a work environment that offers almost no prospect of improving their position'. In making this argument we nevertheless want to go further than Breman by elaborating the mechanisms through which these lines of demarcation and separation are maintained. It is our contention here that the children's work remains limited to a narrow segment of the informal economy involving rudimentary forms of manual labour. Largely beyond the direct regulation of state, law and family, we further argue that this restricted range of activities are a consequence of specific regulatory processes forged in and through the children's relationships with one each other and with other groups of informal workers.

4.2 Among our fieldwork data are accounts of the working lives of 77 street children aged between 9 and 17 years old and including roughly equal numbers of boys and girls. We do not claim a representative sample, but the

picture that emerges from the children does add to the findings of larger surveys (GSS 2003) by indicating that labour-based activities are the children's most important sources of work and that these are restricted to a narrow range of street trades: portering and load carrying, hawking (especially food stuffs), and helping market stallholders and roadside vendors of prepared and unprepared foodstuffs. A much smaller number reported working as assistants, either minding gaming tables (table football or pool, where games are usually gambled over), collecting fees at a privately owned shower house or sweeping/cleaning shop fronts. One girl earned money hawking lottery tickets. Jobs inside, those not normally undertaken in the street or other publicly accessible places, are marginal activities. Two children had found work unpacking bales of imported secondhand clothing and a small number of boys worked as 'driver's mates' (bus conductors) collecting fares and drumming up business on one of the city's multitude of minibuses and tro-tros^[3]. A small number of children also reported that, at one time or another, they had resorted to begging, either with other street children or for a disabled adult (see Abebe 2008).

4.3 Concentrating on work in the street trades, the single biggest category of employment involves the transportation of goods. This is made up of generic and loosely defined forms of basic physical labour requiring the lifting, carrying and transportation of 'anything at all' (Asumah, female, 15 years old); 'Any load at all: student's chop boxes [i.e. general cases], market women's [i.e. traders] stuff, or someone's shopping loads' (Isaac, male, 16); 'Any load at all. Like cartons of fish or someone's shopping which he or she can't carry because of the weight' (Owusu, male, 14). Commissioned by market traders, street sellers and food vendors or by shoppers and travelers using central Accra's transport hubs, the children trade on the need to move small consignments of market produce and retail goods, shopping or luggage over relatively short distances and through the densely populated markets, transit stations and thoroughfares. Much less frequently, load carrying may also involve using more mechanized forms of transportation, like the work of the 'kayayoo' and barrow boys. The former is usually restricted to girls and young women who carry goods in metal pans balanced on their heads (see below). The latter are groups of two, three or four older boys who use wheelbarrows or large sturdy trolleys constructed from planking and old vehicle axles, to transport heavier consignments like scrap metal, redundant electrical components, building materials, or piles of fruit or vegetables over longer distances.

Int Do any of you here do that sort of work [pointing to a picture of a child portering]?

Clay All of us! That is what we do when we come to Accra [i.e central Accra], especially in the first few days and weeks. (male, 16)

Yaw I used to do that when I came here [to Accra] three years ago, but since I got the support from CAS I have stopped and have been coming here [to their refuge] all the time. (male, 15)

Int How come all of you do virtually the same work?

Yaw In Accra you can't do that sort of work, it is not available except in Kaneshie [market]. There is some division of labour in the city, you know. In Accra, it is the girls who do the portering work while at Kaneshie it is the boys who do it.

Steve It is the commonest work because that is the easiest work to do. Many of the boys you meet when you come here for the first time are already doing that sort of work; you just follow them to do what they are doing ... (male, 16)

Clay You don't need any money or overheads to go into load carrying. It's all about your ability to carry the load and to withstand the pressures at the market.

Int Does it mean all the boys at Kaneshie are porters?

[They nod their heads in agreement]

Clay Most of us are ...

4.4 This work is both basic and uncertain, but concentrating on portering work and load carrying is a good tactic for the children, as the discussion with Clay, Yaw and Steve demonstrates. Start up costs are minimal and the work itself requires little more than the physical capacity to carry loads by hand or on heads, jobs whose multiplicity, transience and lack of skill demands little in the way of assets or forward planning. Seeking out jobs load carrying is a common first move among the children after their arrival in Accra, either, as in the case of Steve above or Kwaku James (male, 14) who observed other street children at work: 'I saw them running after a vehicle for loads so I joined them and that was how I started working with them'. Alternatively, like David (male, 16), other children already knew of this type of work before arrival, learning of load carrying from friends and relatives who had already worked in Accra. 'When I first came, I went to stay with a sister who was selling carrier bags and she told me to sell some of her bags and while doing that I could carry things for people. That was how I became a porter'.

4.5 The ease of access to work load carrying nevertheless presents the children with a significant paradox. On the one hand, its accessibility underscores its importance as a source of work; in theory, it is open to any child capable of lifting and carrying. On the other hand, this openness confronts the children as intense competition, as individual street children find themselves chasing finite opportunities for work in the context of a rapidly increasing supply of (street child) labour. UN-HABITAT (2010 p.100) identifies Accra as a case of 'over-urbanisation' in West Africa, where 'populations are growing much faster than

local economies, leading to major social and economic problems like high unemployment rates ...'. During our fieldwork children regularly remarked upon the competitive pressures they faced in looking for work and linked this to the growing number of children and young adults. With opportunities severely restricted and with endemic over-supply of labour, the children found themselves caught in a daily tussle over access to even this most basic form of work.

Int When you are working or begging for money, do people tell you not to come to a particular place again?

Steven Yes, they do.

Int Is it when you are begging for money?

Steven No, it's when we are struggling for loads to carry.

Int Why do they do that?

Steven It's because the number of children on the streets has increased and most of the children don't mind how measly their payments are; it could be as low as 10 pesewas^[4] a load. This spoils the market, you know, so those who have been in it for sometime, I mean the older boys, chase us away...

4.6 This competitive pressure can take intensely physical forms. Steven's use of the word 'struggling' is apposite here, particularly relating his description of off-loading vehicles that carry travellers moving in and through Accra each day, or that move goods traded in and out of the central market areas. Off-loading vehicles with the intention of claiming a load to carry can be intensely physical encounters in which success depends upon the speed, strength and fortitude of a child. To observe the arrival at a transit hub or curbside one of the mini-buses or taxis that have proliferated with the deregulation of Accra's public transport system is to witness street boys, as Joseph (male, 14) puts it, 'rush for loads. It's a free-for-all situation'. As a vehicle approaches, small groups of children jump into action, scampering along pavements or running in the road, through and around the many other vehicles, traders and pedestrians, racing against one another to be the first to claim a load to carry. Once stationary, cases and bags are handed down from the top of 'Benz buses', pulled from the inside of tro-tros or hauled from the rear of taxis, and the children scramble to place a hand or body to claim an item. These can be moments of intense competitive activity, the bodily necessities of 'informal survivalism' (Davis 2006: 178), where success depends upon being 'strong enough' (John, male, 14, and James, male, 14) and where, 'the stronger you are the better chances of getting loads to carry' (Kwaku James, male, 14). Disputes are common, altercations frequent and fights over work break out periodically. As Kofi (male, 14) elaborates,

you need to be fast and tough to be able to get loads to carry everyday [...] when the vehicles come in we have to run after them. I needed to struggle to get loads. We had to compete with each other to get the chance to carry some load [...] We just run after the vehicle or go to where the vehicle is going to park. There is a lot of jostling and pushing and shoving, even fighting on some occasions ... There is no form of negotiation or agreement. I just had to compete and get something to carry. If you don't, there won't be anything for you.

4.7 This is competition for work in one of its most elemental forms, where strength and force are one of the primary regulatory mechanisms. While work is accessible, force is used as an exclusionary practice as not all children can endure the psychological and physical toughness required, or are willing to submit to these demands. Maximus (male, 14), for instance, tells us that '[fighting] is very common with the older boys. Sometimes when a vehicle comes in you'll find them struggling over the things in the car. If I realize that I can't stand the jostling, I just walk away'.

Even for children willing and capable of withstanding these forces there is a recognition that working in this way is difficult to sustain. As John (male, 14) explains, 'It's no use in the long run because I can't run after vehicles as I get older ... Most of the times I get hurt; something may prick you as you struggle to get loads to carry and you wouldn't notice until later. I also get body pains, headaches and the rest'. So, too, for Justice (male, 16), when he concedes, 'A time will come when I can't do it anymore. Nobody does this kind of work over a long period'. For the younger boys and for those without the necessary physical stature, off-loading is not a viable means of securing work. And pressures like those described most likely explain why we encountered no examples of girls working in this way.

4.8 These exclusionary pressures are among the reasons why the children also seek work carrying for shoppers in the markets. Again, obtaining this type of work depends upon providence and fortitude, as the children roam the markets '... shouting "who is going?" ... that is, the offer to carry loads. When the shoppers hear us they will ask us to come and carry their loads for them' (Yeboah Richard, male, 13). Others choose to wait at busy spots or focus their efforts on popular rows of market stalls, where they wait in the hope of being summoned to carry a purchase. Others still seek a competitive advantage by 'going to the market to sell plastic bags and then carrying their load' (Abigail, female, 14).

Kofi Yes, we hold the plastic bags and go around the market with the hope of attracting shoppers who need somebody to carry their things. We then follow them as they go around and some of them will buy bags from us and we will carry their loads. Sometimes somebody will call you when they see you in the market and so ask you to carry their load for them. (male, 14)

4.9 Carrying groceries merges into or combines with running errands for market stallholders, or doing odd jobs for one of the many food and roadside vendors. Still highly irregular, work like this can nevertheless provide greater predictability, like in Mawule's case (male, 13) where, '... mostly I sit beside one lady who sells biscuits, so when her customers come and they buy in bulk I carry the packets for them'; or, for Constance (female, 16), '... each day I go to those who sell frozen fish and meat and carry the loads for their customers'.

Obtaining work this way requires a child to convince a stallholder or food vendor that s/he is reliable and because the children know that they are viewed with suspicion:

sometimes when they [i.e. traders] see you passing, they tell the other ones to be alert because the thieves are coming (Asumah, male, 15).

With luck and persistence, as Kawaku James (male, 14) tells us, completing the occasional chore for a stallholder or food vendor can turn into something a little more predictable.

You work for them for some time to build some trust. For instance, a woman I used to work for, one day she asked me to carry her loads for her, then she asked me if I would like to bring her things to her every evening. I said 'yes' and she later asked me to be helping her to arrange her bags in the mornings and unpacking them in the evenings. So, that is how she became my customer [i.e. regular client].

4.10 Even here, however, the children's work is heavily circumscribed. Once again, in their efforts to gain a commission, the problem of too many children chasing too few opportunities means that weaker, smaller bodies invariably come up against stronger, 'older ones' capable of imposing their will through intimidation and physical force. Extortion, exaction and coercion are all important mechanisms regulating the children's access to work and we have heard stories from Philomena, Justice, Kawku James and many others of securing a load to carry only to have it taken from them by those older and bigger. As John

(male, 14) explains in response to a question about expected earnings for carrying loads at the bustling Kaneshie market:

John Not that much, I haven't had more than ₵2 before.

Int Why not?

John It's because whenever there are things to be carried, the older ones beat us, the small ones, when we try to go for the things. Even when you have been able to carry some loads and have earned some small amount of money, they will come for that money too ... When a vehicle arrives all of us struggle to get a load to carry so if you're not strong enough, you won't get anything to do for the whole day. And yet, if you can get hold of a load to carry and you get some money it can be taken from you by the older ones.

4.11 These acts of dispossession are compounded by the children's disposability. Cultivating relations with a stallholder or shop owner, perhaps to pack and unpack goods each morning and evening, tidy or sweep shop fronts for a few minutes each day, fetch water or run errands to buy onions, beans or eggs, clean tables or wash dishes, may allow a child to take a small step up from the volatility of load carrying or off-loading to slightly more predictable forms of working. Such a move, where it can be taken, nevertheless remains exceptionally tenuous. Some children do note moments of relative stability, like when Mawule tells us how he obtains regular work from a woman trader who refuses offers from other children to carry her goods.

And Allosua, too, speaks of a regular client who reserves her the right to sweep the veranda outside of his shop. But the children's work relationships with stallholders and market traders, such as they exist, tend to be short-lived and brittle. The children are plentiful, cheap and disposable, a source of convenient, flexible labour instantly available to run an errand or lift and carry when the need arises, assist during periods of peak demand or perhaps add security or company to a lone vendor working late into the night. Such work relations are therefore transient and insecure, ones that can be terminated without warning, perhaps on the whim of a capricious vendor or following a minor misunderstanding or petty dispute. Others are told they are no longer wanted following accusations of theft or deceit, or find their work given to others when late or if they require a period of absence.

Int How much were you paid [working at the chop bar]?

Tara ₵1 and free breakfast, lunch and supper, I could even take my bath there [i.e. wash] on some occasions. But she hired another person when I went to Asikuma [for her father's funeral] (female, 17)

4.12 Further constraints emerge from the exclusionary practices of those who Ekow (male, 13) refers to the 'the older people'; other groups of informal workers, older children and young adults in their late teens or early 20s, who actively exclude the children from particular work segments and/or from specific geographical areas of the city. The children are therefore required to make their way within an economic geography whose spatial and temporal relations are, in part, shaped by the actions of other informal workers responding to their own problems of scarcity and underemployment by looking to restrict the work opportunities of those less fortunate than themselves. In this respect, it is difficult to follow Bromley and Mackie (2009) in identifying the children as entrepreneurial, where Peruvian street children's petty trading at key tourist spots is seen as affirmation of their creativity and tenacity. We too have come to know that street children are, indeed, active in seeking work and that their creativity in the face of such privations is sometimes astonishing. Resilience, ingenuity and cooperation are all necessary to survive on the street (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi 2010). Nevertheless, the work of street children in Accra is more adequately conceptualized as a response to their subordinate status and to their active marginalization to some of its least rewarding forms.

4.13 The mechanisms of this spatial exclusion are often overt and conspicuous, and the means of implementation crude. It is common to observe groups of older boys and young men confronting the younger street children, particularly along the roadsides of the central areas and the busy markets where commissions are more plentiful. The presence of these 'older people' moving up and down the pavements is sometimes enough to deter the younger children from working and at these times they keep their distance or wander off to find some shade. If they remain, the older ones resort to more direct tactics, like those described in Richard's (male, 14) reply to a question about whether there are places where he cannot work: 'Yes, especially along the street. Once you are a child and you get there, you will be driven away by the older boys'. Steven's (male, 13) response to a similar question is more phlegmatic: 'You have to pay heed to them sometimes if you don't want any trouble'. Other children told us of threats or physical intimidation, with Isaac recalling (male, 16), 'They come along with canes, they beat us and sack us because they want to be the only ones working there'. Justus too remarks that, '... the older ones amongst us, if they tell you not to work at a particular place and you do, they will batter you'. As Kofi elaborates (male, 14):

You see, the big boys beat and shove and prevent us from competing with them. So normally, the small ones will be at the fringes of life in the streets here and we have to wait until about midday when the big boys have earned enough and are tired ... That is the time we, the small ones, go in and try to

earn something reasonable ... The thing is that we, the small ones ... the loads the big boys will charge ₵1 but we charge about 30 pesewas because we are usually desperate for the money, so they get annoyed when they see that. They say we are destroying the market for porters. They would beat you, sometimes squeeze your hands for whatever money you have ...

4.14 This spatial exclusion also takes a gendered form. In the first quotation from the children at the beginning of this section, Yaw explains to us the gendered and spatial division of labour that delineates access to work lifting and carrying. In the streets and markets of the central business district it is girls and women who regulate the movement of petty goods. Known as *Kayayoo*, the girls and women are a conspicuous presence, sitting together under trees, dozing in the shade, eating, passing time, some attending to their babies, or walking through the streets and busy market places carefully balancing their metal head pans. According to (Agarwal *et al.* 1997 p. 249; see also Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008), 'In Africa, load bearing is primarily the responsibility of women' and that the involvement of males is restricted to the mechanical transportation of larger loads. In Ghana, it is girls and women from the northern regions who are the main migrants to the 'Kaya business', where they seek short-term employment for long-term gain: a switch to a more lucrative occupation, to fund their marriage, to acquire capital necessary for trading.

4.15 Our research is suggestive that this gendered division of labour may be under pressure. As Overa argues again in relation to Ghana, 'Today's meager formal jobs market forces men to cross gender barriers and enter female domains. Women, on the other hand, continue to have few opportunities in male domains' (Overa 2007 p.557). As we have argued, and contra to Argarwal *et al*, petty load carrying *is* an extensive activity amongst street boys and very little of this takes mechanized forms; the upfront rental costs of a wheelbarrow or trolley alone make this prohibitive for all but a tiny minority of older boys. Perhaps because there is never enough work for the children, more and more boys are looking for work in tasks normally regarded as girl's work. Richard (14), Joseph (14) and David (16) even described themselves as 'Kayayoo', although none had carried using head pans and each accepted that it was not possible for them to work in the central business district. Yet we found no indication of a movement in the opposite direction. A number of girls spoke of how the physical dimension to off-loading meant that it was not a practical for them to seek work in this way and that there was an increased risk of threat or intimidation if they carried loads outside the central district. As Mary (female, 13) recalls, 'I can't work, not at this place. Here it's the boys who work as porters, so if I wanted to [do the same] they wouldn't allow me. I wouldn't be able to get any work to do. There are no Kayayooos at Circle'.

Conclusion

5.1 Our purpose in this paper has been to make sociological arguments about children's work and labour using photographs. We do so by claiming for photography a distinctive way of engaging with the lives of working children, one that emphasises the capacity of photographs to forge connections with the children in ways that can initiate and sustain a dialogue and that, in so doing, forges the possibility for new knowledge and understanding. We have done so by taking issue with what we see as the trajectory of current visual ethnography in which the commitment to images as containing possibilities for generalized understandings has been repudiated by an emphasis on the specificity and context dependent nature of photographic meaning. This, we argue, is to confuse the openness of photographs with a licence to impose any meaning. Such a position is not sustainable, we argue, not least because photographs will not surrender to any interpretation and because we must allow for the fallibility of such interpretations. In its place, we have advocated a realism in which photographic images play a distinctive role alongside words (and numbers) in the construction of strong sociological arguments. Here, photographs are valued as both a resource and media. The former allows photographs to add unique detail and texture to our understandings of what constitutes the children's work and to contribute an additional, powerful humanistic dimension. The latter relates to the form in which our argument is made, as the children's photographs are used as both the means and embodiment of our argument.

5.2 This argument has stressed the 'flatness' of the children's working world. The street children are confined to a specific range of occupational tasks somewhere towards the bottom of Accra's informal labour market, a landscape of labour whose narrow limits are defined by the exclusionary practices of other informal workers. Competition stemming from too many children chasing too few opportunities for work means that the children's working days are underscored by minor acts of dispossession directed towards one another and in which they are both victim and perpetrator. These acts of exclusion work to place significant limits on the quality and quantity of work available to the children, and this is compounded in other ways. The disposability of the children's labour constantly threatens even the most basic and tenuous forms of work security, while the exclusionary practices of older, adult informal workers means they must work within spatially restricted order governed by the social regulation of space and gender.

Notes

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³Chopbar refers to a small local restaurant, often road-side, usually run by women. Tro-tro is the name for crowded and inexpensive minibuses used for short distance travel.

⁴In July 2007 the Ghana Cedi was re-denominated with one new Cedi (100 pesewas) equivalent to 10,000 old Cedis. All monetary values are given as new Cedi values. For convenience, one new Cedi equates to approximately one US dollar.

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