Navigating Bodies, Borders and the Global Game:
An Ethnography of Youth, Football and the (Productive) Politics of Privation in Ghana, West Africa

By

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This dissertation explores the precarity and politics of youth as it intersects with the game of football in postcolonial Ghana. Departing from scholarly assertions of a ‘crisis’ of youth in its masculine guise, the study is predicated on the lived experiences of a male youth citizenry excluded from the prosperous narrative of Ghana’s neoliberal state, and unable to procure the basic means to work, wage and wedlock. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in southern Ghana, I ask of how this generation of peripheral male youth construct the game of football vis-à-vis the precarious nature of their societal ‘becoming’, and their broader quest to live productively through the fractured, crisis-ridden exigencies of these neoliberal times.

Drawing on the metaphor-concept of the borderland, I proceed to argue that the game of football – both as a mediated form of global popular culture and a hegemonic masculine practice – has come to represent an alternative source of mobility and a most millenarian resolution to the ‘crisis’ of youth in its masculine and West African guise. I contend that the game now serves as a primary vehicle for utopian imaginaries of future amongst male youth in Ghana, where migration and the quest to ‘go outside’ have become fundamental
features of a youth culture edging ever-further away from its former anchoring in Pan-African narratives. Ultimately, this project is an ethnography of the non-linear journeys that are enacted by male youth in their quest to become mobile *out of* Africa, and through their corporeal investment in the ‘global’ game.

Stretching from the impoverished hinterlands of Accra to the insulated rural confines of one of West Africa’s premier football academies, it is an ethnography which speaks to the virile forging of personal biography amidst postcolonial history – its foremost contribution being to illuminate the productive politics of youth, agency and mobility as they manifest on the margins of the modern world.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. A PARADOX OF THE PRESENT

‘THE ONLY DREAM is to go outside to play’, explains Big Bro as we amble by a cluster of small boys tenaciously battling for possession of a tattered old football, their unrelenting enthusiasm contrasting sharply with the sudden tranquillity of the evening scene. It was fast approaching sundown amidst the sprawling, shanty-like margins of Accra, and as the manic disorder of daylight softened into darkness, Big Bro and I were returning to ‘camp’ following an interview with nineteen year-old, Nana; an aspiring young footballer who – despite his recent ‘sacking’ from one of Ghana’s premier football academies – told of his unwavering faith in the transcendent power of the game. ‘I know it’, he replied when asked if he had a future in professional football, ‘I am certain He has such plans for me. No one can doubt His power to guide me in my dream’.

‘You see it now?’, asked Big Bro – evidently unmoved by such divine optimism – as we meandered back through a dense and decaying maze of makeshift dwellings, their mud-caked narrow alleys treacherously riven by a morning downpour. ‘All the boys, they are thinking like this… they don’t see anything here now’, he bemoaned, his frustrations evidently shifting from Nana’s fading hopes as a footballer, to the emergent ‘crisis’ that is said to confront his entire generation. As a self-proclaimed ‘local boy’ himself, Big Bro knew only too well the abject realities that now befell Ghana’s ever-swelling reservoir of idle, impatient male youth – their expectations of future progressively shadowed by soaring rates of unemployment, ever-receding labor opportunities, and a related decline in the perceived value of education. Most fervently, however, Big Bro argued that he had come to know this ‘crisis’ through the prism of ‘the game’, for it was the emergent import of football, he avowed, that most vividly captured the shifting politics of the urban postcolony, and the plight of a generation compelled to escape the uncertain temporariness of their becoming.

1 Please see Lindsay and Miescher’s (2003) edited volume on masculinities in Africa, as well as Matlon (2011; 2014) for more general elaborations of the themes discussed in this paragraph, principally those of youth, masculinity and urbanism in Africa.
Diminutively-built and wiry with a severe limp on his left side, I first met Big Bro upon hearing about an unorthodox training camp located on the outskirts of Accra – one where, as my reliable informant advised, I would find a quasi-adopted crew of aspiring youth footballers living communally alongside their coach in an overcrowded compound. Here, amidst the dense fabric of the city’s impoverished peripheries, I encountered Big Bro, his much-revered coaching partner, Fifi and a ramshackle training camp that was to become the initial ethnographic outpost from which I sought to apprehend the growing import of football for a youth citizenry no longer buoyed by the prospect of formal schooling, and willing to do ‘whatever it takes’ to propel themselves towards ‘something better’.

‘They are all desperate for a chance to go outside… hoping that they can become professionals!’, exclaimed Big Bro as we arrived back in the threadbare comforts of Coach Fifi’s living room – its dominant adornment being a massive poster of the all-conquering FC Barcelona team emblazoned across the otherwise bare walls. Coach Fifi, evidently relishing a brief moment of respite, nodded in agreement. ‘We try to help them make it to the next step in their journey’, he declared of his investment in the boys, recognizing that the ‘big hope’ for most is to ‘be seen by one of the academies’. ‘Over the last ten years, with many [academies] coming to Ghana, the boys are all wanting to justify, to get a scholarship there’, he professed, before pointing to its knock-on effect on his own training camp. ‘You have seen the many boys who are coming asking to justify!’2’, he added with a puff of his cheeks, needing only to gesture in the general direction of the training field, and our arrival at a ‘justify’ a few days previous, to make his point.

Under the blast-furnace heat of the midday sun, we had watched on as an ever-deepening wall of adolescent bodies assembled on the side-lines – their unyielding conviction that ‘today is my day’ threatened by the assured step and dogged stare of each new arrival that came striding over the rotting waste embankment. Much like Nana, this ceaseless stream of nameless hopefuls were wholly beholden to the millennial promise of playing the ‘global’ game – each ready and willing to relinquish ties to family, kin and continent for a ‘journey’ they hoped would steer them beyond the marginal conditions of their existence.

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2 A term which, in localized vernacular of Ghanaian youth footballers, denotes a trial or try-out.
The reality, as Coach Fifi confessed before calling it a night, was less promising; for of all those who have ‘turned up’ seeking to jumpstart their journey in the game, only one has successfully navigated a route beyond the countless justifies, agents, Big Men and borders that stand between the abject undersides of Accra and the perceived ‘promised land’ of Europe. In his path, however, as the trailblazing local boy living the dream, lies not just the forsaken fantasies of his generation, but the emergent hopes of the next – each poised to perform, to toil and to compete in the virile quest to forge a future through the crisis-ridden conditions of West Africa today. Here, I contend, amidst the productive ‘crises’ of journeys foiled, failed and yet to begin, is the borderlands manifest.

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In this dissertation, then, I explore the emergent relationship between youth, masculinity and the game of football in a moment of volatile political and economic transformation in southern Ghana. Thoroughly imbued with the ethos of neoliberal reform, it is a moment that, as Chaflin (2008: 521) affirms, has seen Ghana emerge as a ‘beacon’ of economic growth amidst the ‘troubled’ coastal corridor of West Africa – it’s politically stable geographies and bountiful reserves of oil and gold making it a ‘model student’ of neoliberal development. Moving beyond the jaded socialist visions of the early independence period – and the decades of Cold War privation that followed – Ghana today, we are told, has become ‘a vanguard in the epoch of the market’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012: 124), with foreign financing and export-led trade powering an economy at the forefront of a heady ‘Africa rising’ narrative. And yet, as the scene narrated above suggests, the plotline of Ghana’s ‘rising’ star – akin to the universal logics of neoliberal reform – is one which turns on something of a paradox.

Reading against the grain of such prosperous imagery, the opening scene proffers an alternative vantage point onto what it means to be in or of West Africa in this neoliberal moment – a time of scaled-back state sovereignties, ever-widening wealth gaps, and increasingly opaque generational fault-lines (Matlon, 2011; Piot, 2010). Viewed from here, this is a time of extreme hardship, with vast enclaves of Accra’s ever-swelling population

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3 Devastating outbreaks of political and ethnic conflict, civil war, and most recently, the pandemic of the Ebola virus and Islamist uprisings have swept across the West African corridor, with Sierra Leone, Cote D’Ivoire, Nigeria and Togo to differing degrees affected.
forced to encounter soaring rates of inflation, ever-more stringent austerity measures, and a currency crunch that has seen the Ghana cedi (GHC) plummet by 40% in 2014 alone (Mark, 2014). Few places evoke the current moment’s two faces – prosperity, privation – more dramatically than the postcolonial city of Accra, a confusing metropolis now furnished by postmodern superblocks and stagnant slums, at once suffused by worldly trappings and yet shadowed by a sprawling hinterland of insolvent, destitute margins. In response to currency devaluation, and with a return to the dark days of IMF and World Bank debt programs on the horizon, the nation’s socio-political terrain appears increasingly defined by what Mbembe (cited in Shipley, 2010: 659) argued was ‘one of the most brutal effects of neoliberalism in Africa’ – namely the ‘generalization and radicalization of a condition of temporariness’. Bereft of viable labor opportunities and forced to ‘make do’ amidst an informal sector bursting at the seams, this is a moment in which the postcolonial subject – or, for Ferguson (2006) today, simply the ‘poor African’ – is charged with producing value in the face of volatile, uncertain futures.

1.2. YOUTH, AFRICA AND THE NEOLIBERAL POLITICS OF PRIVATION

As elsewhere on the continent, Ghana’s recent economic renaissance hinged on the discovery of one of Africa’s largest oil-fields off the coast of Sekondi-Takoradi in 2007 – a discovery which prompted the overnight migration of tens of thousands of young men buoyed by the promise of its economic offshoots (Kollewe, 2012). Forecasts were optimistic, with many predicting that the country would transition into middle-income status over the decade to come – it’s privatized, optimally deregulated and highly incentivised economy destined to bring in large amounts of foreign investment (Hicks, 2014). Eight years on, few would argue that the oil-fields have stimulated growth, even transformation in Ghana’s export-led economy; conversely, however, their optimism that it would translate into social development and employment opportunities has long dissipated as petrodollars bypass the still-rusted tin roofs of local settlements on route to the coffers of the Ghanaian state, and the outsourced operations of Western and Chinese oil corporations. While street protests have accorded blame to a corrupt political apparatus, others have argued that the relationship between Ghana’s prosperous oil-discovery and its

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4 Chief among such predictions was a Ghana-specific report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2013.
negligible impact on social development is emblematic of Africa’s long-standing disconnection – perhaps even exclusion – from the neoliberal world order at large (Ferguson, 2006). As one local fisherman gestured while raking up the heaps of dark, sludgy vegetation that now come ashore on the sandy beaches near Takoradi, ‘this is all that the oil has brought us’.

Ferguson (2006: 11) forewarned of the ‘dangerous and destructive illusion’ of neoliberal economic ‘growth’ to stagnant economies such as Ghana’s when he cautioned that ‘the latest round of worldwide capitalist restructuring has left little or no place for Africa outside its old colonial role as provider of raw materials’. Ghana’s ‘rising’ economic renown is, therefore, a cautionary tale for the continent overall, for as Ayelazuno (2013: 2) aptly instructs, the devaluation and export of oil, cocoa, gold and gas have driven an illusory form of ‘growth without development’ – with the accumulative enterprise of the neoliberal state neglectful of some of the steepest inequalities seen in the nation’s history. Of similar provenance, Simone (2004: 184) points to the general marginality of Africa and Africans vis-à-vis the emergent global economy when he bemoans that ‘the so-called new international division of labor has largely bypassed major parts of the African continent’ – an argument that is afforded contextual resonance in the marginal subjectivities of many ordinary, unemployed Ghanaians today.

But, what of the predicament of youth amidst such uncertainty? After all, as the International Labour Organization (ILO) reported in 2012, over seventy-percent of Sub-Saharan Africa’s population are under the age of thirty, and said to be at the forefront of the continent’s astounding rates of urbanization (Hope, 1998; Sommers, 2010). At the same time, however, as the African Development Bank (AfDB) report (Soucat et al., 2013), this ‘extraordinarily youthful’ (Sommers, 2009: 7) demographic conversely account for sixty-percent of the continent’s unemployed populace – occurring at a rate of more than twice that for adults. Put simply, as the title of a 2012 ILO report signposted, West Africa is now confronted with a ‘Youth Unemployment Crisis’. The writings of Comaroff and Comaroff (2005: 274) speak to this ‘crisis’ – and for the mushrooming literatures that address it – when they herald the advent of a ‘new moment in the history of youth’, arguing that

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5 Please see Chapter 2 for a critical analysis of the socio-historic ‘place’ of Africa as it is constructed in and through scholarship addressing themes such as globalization, modernity and development.
generation is now the ‘dominant line of cleavage’ in postcolonial societies; its liminal entrapments amplified at a time when the modernist myth of Africa’s imminent development – and dare I say it, ‘progress’ – has all but been extinguished. Youth, particularly in its masculine guise, they assert, has come to embody the contradictions of the neoliberal African polity, with the once well-paved ‘progression’ toward adulthood now obstructed by an inability to procure the basic means to work, wage and wedlock.

Excluded from the promise of work-based affirmation – and minus the means to income generation – growing numbers of male youth ‘sense that they have little to offer women who can or must fend for themselves’ (Lindsay, 2003: 201-211). On the peripheries of Accra, the majority of male youth cannot live up to the wage-labour model that has distinguished ‘small boys’ from ‘Big Men’ since being instigated under the ideology of colonial regimes (Miescher, 2005). ‘Life in Ghana’, as one despondent teenager plainly affirmed, ‘is not so easy now’ – its multiple deprivations meaning that he struggles to independently support himself, let alone a wife or family. As Matlon (2011: 388) aptly posits, a ‘crisis of work’ – understood as a stable, salaried construct – is also a ‘crisis of masculinity’, with unemployed male youth unable to perform the traditional roles of African manhood, and faced with the painful predicament of their marginal standing in a context which has rendered them economically redundant. In short, young men are failing as providers; their aspirations of future now wholly discordant with the informal, feminized and thereby emasculating infrastructures to which they are beholden (Agadjanian, 2005).

This conditionality at the fulcrum of African gender roles, and of ‘being masculine’, means that a ‘bulging’ (Urdal, 2012: 7) populace of unemployed, idle and impatient male youth are of growing concern for academics, policy makers and politicians alike; their purview ranging from espousals of a male breadwinner model now ‘losing saliency’ (Lindsay, 2003: 211), to concerns of increased male-on-female domestic violence (Campbell, 1992; Silberschmidt, 2005), and even to suggestions that youth unemployment is concomitant with outbreaks of political instability (Urdal, 2012), and the mounting risk posed by terrorism (Lia, 2005). Youth, here it seems, is less a temporal phase of ‘becoming’ than a

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6 Although gender ideologies are by no means rigid in their construction, the male breadwinner model has long been at the crux of African masculinity. See Lindsay (2003) for a detailed analysis of how this model is ‘losing saliency’ in the postcolonial moment.
subordinate social category (Newell, 2009), its marginalized subjectivities now harbouring the demoralized social roles and values of a generation who are both vectors of Ghana’s neoliberal-present, and a potentially mutinous threat to its prosperous unfolding.

Marooned amidst the shadows of the state – and of capitalism in its African guise – the postcolonial subject is now posed with a ‘choice’ between absolute exclusion and inevitable exploitation; their modes of being- and becoming- in-the-world increasingly shaped by what Mbembe (cited in Shipley, 2010: 660) discerns as a ‘radicalized’ shift in the ‘dialectics of expendability’ in neoliberal Africa. Where once ‘the drama was to be exploited and the horizon of liberation consisted in freeing oneself from exploitation’, ‘today’, he asserts, ‘the tragedy is not to be exploited, but to be utterly deprived of the basic means to move, to partake of the general distribution of things and resources necessary to produce a semblance of life. The tragedy is to not be able to escape the traps of temporariness’. This dissertation, then, explores how Ghana’s male youth citizenry seek to produce such a ‘semblance of life’ through the fractured, crises-ridden exigencies of West Africa today – a moment which, in speaking to the ‘productive’ undercurrents of ‘crises’, has also spawned extraordinarily inventive bricolage, ‘acts of conjury’ (Piot, 2010), and alternative means of ‘becoming’ on the margins of the state (Makhuli et al., 2010; Matlon, 2011; Weiss, 2009).

1.3. BORDERLAND MASCULINITIES, FOOTBALL AND THE QUEST FOR EXILE

To speak of masculinity amidst this neoliberal ‘crisis’, asserts Diouf (2003: 4), is to speak of a generation now channelling their energies into constructing ‘new places of socialization and new sociabilities on the margins’ – their quest for alternative, redemptive forms of belonging leading them towards novel projects and fantasies of futurity. Becoming ‘actors-through-consumption’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005: 25), male youth are said to contest their marginal subjecthood via engagement with the imagery and style of African men elsewhere – their accomplishments vicariously co-opted into a self-affirmative yet shared model of the achieving, globally-revered African man. For example, Matlon (2011: 402), in her scrutiny of marginal Abidjanais men, argues that barbershop signs – typically depicting black icons of hip hop and football – allow young men to domesticate ‘global’ tropes of blackness, thus ‘countering their irrelevance’ in Africa ‘through proof of their
participation’ in a world beyond its borders. Particularly vivid amidst the ‘worldliness’ (Simone, 2004) of African cities such as Accra, this mounting fascination with all things ‘global’ – and by association, non-African – has been heightened by the proliferation of world media and internet networks, cell phones, cybercafés and Euro-American television broadcasts; all of which have expedited what many consider to be a growing rejection of tradition amongst West African youth cultures (Diouf, 2005; Piot, 2010).

Capturing the broader architecture of such changing scripts of African masculinity, Ferguson (2006: 191) asserts that the continent is gripped by a shift ‘from the temporal dynamics of societal progress toward a new reliance on individual spatial mobility’; one which is propagating the advent of ‘going outside’ – and even aspirations to ‘escape’ – as principle livelihood strategies on the urban postcolony. No longer buoyed by the temporal promise of domestic becoming, and yet perversely ever-more connected to various elsewheres, the juvenile generation of today, he asserts, ask only one question: ‘how can I get out of this place?’. However, such fantasies of exile are by no means the exclusive provenance of youth alone; as Piot (2010: 4) observes, an emergent ‘culture and imaginary of exile’ has been one of the most vivid manifestations of response to the ‘bare life’ (Agamben, 1998) of a neoliberalized Africa. Looming over this project, after all, have been headline stories of boats loaded with human cargo from Africa floating rudderless off the Mediterranean coast7, and viral images of African migrants scaling the six-metre, razorwire fence lying between them and their dream of making it to Spain’s North African enclave of Melilla8 (Kassam, 2014). In this era of ‘Europe madness’ (Godfrey, 2006), ‘it would not be exaggerating – as Piot (2010: 4) observes of the Togolese context – to say that ‘everyone is trying to leave’; many willing to risk life and limb for the chance to exit Africa by the front door or the back9 (Makhulu et al., 2010; McGee, 2012; Quayson and Arhin, 2012).

Mobility, both in its imagined and material guise, has become the ‘new’ leitmotif of everyday life in West Africa; where the longing for ‘something better’ is said to have instigated movement and migration as fundamental components of a youth culture edging

7 See most recently, ‘Italian helicopter scrambles to save 450 migrants abandoned in rough seas’ reported in The Guardian newspaper, January 2nd 2015.
9 I refer here to the growing alarm surrounding human trafficking routes from North Africa to various postings along the southern Mediterranean borders of Europe.
ever-further away from its former anchoring in Pan-African narratives (de Bruijn et al., 2001; Langevand and Gough, 2009). It is against such shifting conceptions of African masculinity that I seek to elucidate something of the predicament of male youth in Ghana today; a grouping whose everyday existence and aspirations no longer neatly bound by the prolonged uncertainty of the postcolony, but wedged in an interstitial and partly-imagined in-between ‘straddling African reality and the Euro-American dream’ (Diouf, 2003: 231).

The theoretical construct I deploy for understanding this predicament of youth in its masculine and West African guise is the borderland(s). Derived from the term’s broad deployment in contemporary literatures addressing non-normative – even transgressive – forms of transnational and cross-border domicile (Sparke, 2011), I conceive of the borderland(s) as a fruitful metaphor-concept for thinking through the relationship between youth, marginality, and agency as it manifests on the African postcolony. It serves, therefore, as a prismatic lens through which I seek not merely to denote the marginal spaces in which youth ‘cultures’ coalesce, but to elucidate something of the productive – even pioneering – effects that such ‘expulsion’ (Ferguson, 1999) engenders; its attendant ‘crises’ mobilizing the carnal cravings and aptitudes of a generation compelled to escape the uncertain ‘temporariness’ of their extended, even eternal state of becoming.

A borderland is not, however, ‘reducible to the free play of the imagination’ (Diouf, 2003: 6); rather, it denotes both the concrete presence and effects engendered through one’s marginal standing on the peripheries of community, city and continent, as well as the paradoxical opportunity for transgression that one’s proximity to such borders at once create. Put differently, I conceive such a borderland to signify a figurative margin or outlying periphery – what Wolputte (2013) terms a ‘grey zone’ – along which youth, in this case male youth in Ghana, are forced to engender alternative modes of being and becoming along the outer limits of legality, morality and state. Ultimately, I bespeak of a borderland neither to romanticize nor sanitize the interlocking deprivations and desires of male youth in Ghana today, but to encourage us to think of them together, as resonant, mutually entailed energies compelling productive action. Of those that have explored such intersections, the work of Weiss (2009: 32) is particularly noteworthy for his alternative reading of the ‘margins’ of Arusha, Tanzania as ‘highly productive spaces’ – his emphasis firmly centred on the productive offshoots and largely unspoken potential of the abject’s position.
My imperative in this project, it follows, is to elucidate what is produced amidst the volatile juxtaposition of privation and potential, exploring pertinent questions of agency as it intersects with the problematic of youth in its African and masculine forms. I take my cue here – and in further detail in Chapter 2 – from a burgeoning corpus of work which seeks to ‘defamiliarize’ (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: 352), perhaps even disrupt, commonsensical readings and imaginings of African cities, spaces and life-worlds, challenging in particular the moralising undercurrents that champion ‘mantra-like’ (Jeffrey, 2012: 245) avowals of youth as resourceful, resilient and agentic, even amidst the ‘victimhood’ of poverty, warfare and exploitation. In fact, my conception of the borderlands is, at least in part, a riposte to such facile and sanguine avowals of the agentic nature of youth; much of which idealizes the re-actions of young people as expressly positive, unequivocally ethical, and finitely rational ‘evidence of agency’ (Robson et al., 2007: 138). In this dissertation, I attempt to refigure how we conceive of and claim to identify ‘youth agency’ through the shifting schemes and projects of futurity that now mark the horizon of possibility for Accra’s male youth citizenry.

To return to the opening sentiments of Big Bro, it is a project which explores how the game of football has come to symbolize both the shifting politics of youth on the African postcolony, and their growing fascination with the millennial promise of ‘going outside’. After all, the profound appeal of ‘the game’ across the vast expanse of the African continent and its myriad cultures has long been professed by academics, politicians and proletariat alike, with South African rights activist and former Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, memorably declaring that ‘soccer isn’t like a religion in Africa, it is bigger than religion’. With less hyperbole perhaps, the recent edited collections of Alegi and Bolsmann (2013), and Chari and Mhiripiri (2014) – in adding to the extensive writing of Darby (2000, 2007, 2010), as well as notable works by Armstrong and Giulianotti (2004) and Hawkey (2009) – have illuminated the contemporary interface between the game and identity politics, labor migration, mega events, media, violence and even religiosity. Again, in its best forms, this has been productive work. Indeed, what they collectively bring to the fore, albeit often unacknowledged in an explicit manner, is a conviction in the salience of football as a culturally-patterned platform for broader social scientific inquiry – its unique contextual import providing a nuanced vantage point onto some of the most profoundly intricate and complex problematics of contemporary social life.
It is these more expressly social scientific, less scrupulously sporting problematics that I interrogate here: what, I ask, is the meaning and import of football in the lives of a male youth citizenry marooned amidst the shadows of the Ghanaian state? How do male youth construct and understand their investment in the game relative to the broader pursuit of social mobility, material betterment and future aspirations? Further still, to what extent is the growing import of football in the everyday lives of West African male youth a response to the broader politics of their privation on the borderlands of city, community and kin? These are the questions, conundrums and dilemmas that were at the forefront of my ethnographic inquiry as I embarked on six months of fieldwork amidst the football-crazed cultures of Ghana in 2012. I entered the field seeking to understand if and how the relationship between male youth and ‘the game’ had changed in a postcolonial nation no longer at ease with its own image and harbouring a disaffected youth population eager to uncover alternative ways – in truth, any way – of becoming mobile out of Ghana. As will be unpacked in Chapter 3, the ethnographic ‘journey’ that unfolded brought forth a project that sought to mimic and map the ‘lived journeys’ – both imagined and agonizingly real – that are enacted by male youth in their quest to become a ‘professional’. Yet, as the organic process of ethnographic fieldwork revealed, such opportunistic investment in the game of football is not the exclusive preserve of Ghana’s male youth citizenry; rather, theirs is a journey which now intersects with the enterprising schemes and initiatives of a broader matrix of entrepreneurial actors – including agents, coaches, scouts and academies – who harbour a distinctly economic interest in the nation’s emergent talent surplus.

This thesis, ultimately then, is an ethnography of everyday life as it is lived, negotiated and scrapped for by a generation of male youth marooned on the margins of West Africa, yet wholly committed to reaching the ‘global’ world beyond its borders. Stretching from the impoverished undersides of Accra to the idyllic rural confines of one of West Africa’s premier football academies, this is an ethnography steeped in the virile forging of personal biography and postcolonial history; its lived journeys challenging our comprehension of morality and right, and forcing us to encounter solidarity amidst scarcity, commodities in the corporeal, and agency where there appears none.
1.4. READING THE THESIS

To write ethnographically is both compelling and challenging in equal measure, and this project is no different. The topics I seek to represent here speak to some of the most pertinent dilemmas concerning how one writes ethnographically in the contemporary moment. My particular contribution to such fruitful scholarly dialogue shall be mediated by the epistemological and practical challenges of writing about youth, writing about Africa, and writing coherently about this interrogative coupling as they are variously inflected by broader social assemblages and scales of urban marginality, gender, globalization and (im)mobility to spotlight but a few.

My ethnographic ‘journey’ through this postcolonial moment has entailed an eclectic constellation of encounters, each variously textured by direct and indirect relations with the neoliberal state, schools, patronage, NGO’s, football clubs, academies and agents. The first caveat I feel compelled to offer, therefore, is to caution that such encounters map and mimic my own embodied movements as a researcher, which were in turn routed according to the enacted relations and social mobilities of the sample of male youth under study. In this sense alone, the meandering course of the thesis – and the diversity of themes addressed – can be said to elucidate something of a ‘cartography of the present’ (Rose, 2007: 4-5) as it is navigated, constructed and experienced by male youth in Ghana today. That said, however, in bundling these admittedly wide-ranging domains into a single thesis, I wilfully endeavour to illuminate the predicament of youth as it intersects with, and is variously textured by, the broader social and political force-field of Ghana the ‘neoliberal pacesetter’ (Chalfin, 2010: 29); one which is asymmetrical and uneven in its politics, yet deeply and disparately connected in its ‘global’ production.

Durham (2008: 151) is but one of a burgeoning cadre of scholars to point to the challenges inherent in writing about youth let alone ‘youth agency’ – an oversized analytical category which has proved remarkably difficult to pin down. Add to this the volatility and constraint of the neoliberal moment in West Africa and one is posed with questions that speak both to scrupulously localized and contextual experiences of male youth, and the relationship between youth, marginality and the thorny issue of agency on the whole. How do young men negotiate the politics of their becoming in contexts where they are deprived of the
basic means to work and wage? How do male youth in purportedly marginal contexts such as West Africa construct and enact their masculinity and how are they connected to the global circulation of imagery and discourse(s) about youth, race, the body and football? The related, more expressly epistemological dilemmas to which this dissertation speaks concerns how we, as social scientists, are to appraise such complex social assemblages in the field – a challenge which is amplified by the socio-spatial fluidity of the ethnographic project in question.

The dilemmas I grapple with in what follows concern how one ethnographically documents, interrogates and narrates of the lived journeys – both aspirational and agonisingly real – that are enacted by a male youth citizenry eager to justify their footballing talent and ultimately, uncover opportunities to progress in the game. The challenge posed therefore is to discursively reconstruct the non-linear unfolding of what is a spatial and temporal process – one which stretches across Ghana’s postcolonial landscape, from the schizophrenic geographies of Accra’s sprawling metropolis to the cossetted rural idyll of the Right to Dream Academy. Intersecting such journeys – and mediating their unfolding – at every turn is the emergent political economy that surrounds the game of football in West Africa and beyond. To narrate of such intersections, as we shall see, is neither predictable nor neatly intelligible; rather, it demands an ethnographic form that weaves and wanders, flitting back and forth between the corporeal projects of male youth and the ever-growing matrix of entrepreneurial actors – including agents, academies and domestic Big Men – eager to capitalize on the extractive potential of their youthful vigor. The result, I contend, is an ethnographic ‘journey’ which brings to light the messy realities of a journey along which dreams, careers, memories and bodies are made, remade, shattered and stirred.

Against these many dilemmas, I have harnessed a necessarily eclectic and tactical gamut of writing styles, representational techniques and conceptual resources – all of which seek to breathe life, in its turbulent, tragic and touching dimensions, into ethnographic inquiry. Each of the chapters to follow are laced with distinctive experiments in what it means to write ethnographically, and I have looked to a diverse and didactic group of scholars for inspiration. Chief among this group, for his ability to put literary means of expression at the service of an interrogative social science, is Loic Wacquant (2004, 2005, 2015), whose use of documentary devices – including the elaboration of scenes and the depiction of
characters – to ‘presentize’ the reader and insert her into the socio-moral and temporal universe under study has been formative. Then there is the Africa-specific ethnographies of Hoffman (2011) on the weavings of war and male youth (as well as the use of photography) in Sierra Leone, Piot’s (2010) eloquent use of storytelling in offering both a political and poetic angle of vision onto development in Togo, and Ferguson’s (2006) explorations of scale in narrating of neoliberal discontents across a continent so often banished to the shadows of global-modernity. Finally, and arguably most influential to the conceptual drivers of this ethnography, has been my reading of Friction by Anna Tsing (2004), and Theory from the South by Jean and John Comaroff (2012) concurrently. For their intellectual projects, while substantively worlds apart, collaboratively implore us to rethink the politics of doing and writing ethnography at a time when hegemonic avowals of unprecedented ‘global connections’ have all too often silenced the counteracting questions of membership, inequality and immobility in this emergent world order.

This thesis, it follows, does not aspire to be an ethnography of neat and knowable form, nor does it sit squarely within any one genre of social scientific praxis. Rather, I have endeavoured to bring forth a spatially and temporally fluid mode of doing ethnography which speaks across and is conversant with the disciplinary framings of anthropology, sociology, and human geography, while integrating a literary dimension from further afield. The result, I contend, is an unabashedly narrative-driven ethnography. Much of the text is crafted around stories, stories people tell about themselves and their everyday lives, about the perpetual uncertainty of the urban postcolony, about the imminence of their football dream, and stories that I retell about my interpretations of their stories. Amongst the layers of textual construction, there are stories that are intended not only to detail a scene or a character but to achieve empirical clarity and conceptual weight well beyond the immediacy of the events narrated. The privileging of such stories, rumouring and narration shall be differentially weighted across each of the chapters, often mitigated only by the candour exhibited by the subjects in question, and the sensitivity of the themes pursued. At all times, however, there is a commitment to crafting a multi-vocal, layered ethnographic text which retains something of the context to which it speaks. My hope, ultimately, is that – as Hoffman (2011: xx) requests – ‘taking storytelling seriously’ will allow for a more complex, nuanced and convincing portrait of the lives and journeys of male youth as they strive to become mobile amidst the volatility and constraint of postcolonial Ghana.
1.5. CHAPTER OUTLINE

The thesis opens, in Chapter 2, with a detailed outline of the theoretical and epistemological keystones of the project. Organized in two parts around the interrogative coupling of ‘Africa’ and ‘youth’, I present a critical and counter-normative reading of intersecting scholarly debates on Africa’s ‘place-in-the-world’ (Ferguson, 2006) at the current and purportedly global-conjuncture. In the first half, I explore the ideological grounding of concepts such as globalization, modernity and development, spotlighting in particular the politics of scale and vantage point that have historically excluded Africa and Africans to a place on the margins of modernity. In seeking to invert such framings of the historical-present, I then instigate postcolonial Africa as the alternative and ‘ex-centric’ (Bhabha, 1994: 6) vantage point from which this projects departs. The chapter then proceeds to introduce the intersecting analytic lens of youth, broadly sketching the emergent debates surrounding its paradoxical and ambivalent nature as a concept, before moving towards a dialogue of more organic grounding. I am particularly concerned in this latter section to introduce and trace the theoretical genesis of the core concept in much of what follows, namely the notion of the ‘borderlands’. Organically derived from empirical observations at the crux of the project, the concept of the borderlands is intended as a riposte to the much-avowed and ‘mantra-like’ (Jeffrey, 2012: 245) assumption that young people are naturally and neatly agentic and enterprising, even in contexts of turbulence, conflict and constraint. In keeping with my broader concern with the politics of agency, I institute the concept of the borderland as a prism onto the messy and contingent means by which youth seek to negotiate and live productively through material scarcity, hardship and even war.

In speaking to the integrated theoretical and methodological foundations of the project, Chapter 3 then proffers a reflexive sketching of the biographical, ethical and epistemological contouring’s of my ethnographic praxis. The chapter opens with a critically-oriented appraisal of the major influences on my ethnographic project, speaking to emergent questions and challenges posed by recalibrated ‘fields’ under study, and growing sensitivity to the politics of scale and vantage point. This then forms the foundation on which I seek to mobilize the analytic promise that has accompanied increasing inter-disciplinarily in social scientific theory and method, highlighting in
particular the methodological innovations proffered by making space and scale a central feature of ethnographic consideration, and by drawing on the respective ‘turn’ to embodiment and the senses to ‘flesh out’ a theory of place-making. The chapter then diverts to matters empirical, as I (re)trace my ethnographic beginnings within the football-crazed confines of Ghana; pinpointing both the ‘keys sites’ under study and the organic constitution of my ethnographic ‘journey’. My aim here is to articulate the inductive and unforeseen conditions that ultimately culminated in a spatially and temporally fluid mode of ‘doing’ ethnography in a moment of volatile social change in West Africa. The final section reflexively and critically unpacks the politics of my becoming an ‘infrastructure’ (Simone, 2004) in the social force-field of postcolonial Ghana, articulating how the friction of ethnographic encounter was forever mediated by the mutable connotations of my race, class, gender and nationality as they were read and interpreted amidst the relational power equilibria of everyday life.

In keeping with the spatial and temporal fluidity of the ethnographic ‘journey’ narrated, the thesis is thereafter organized along three sequenced yet non-linear parts – moving from a point of departure in the impoverished undersides of Accra and a band of male youth bereft of viable modes of social mobility, to an endpoint in the insulated rural confines of the Right to Dream Academy. If one conceives of such ‘sites’ as two connected socio-spatial coordinates within the broader cartography of West Africa’s postcolonial landscape, the ethnographic offering presented shall interrogate, narrate and elucidate the lived relations, experiences and journeys of male youth as they seek to move across this postcolonial terrain and attain one of the most coveted opportunities in West Africa today; namely to become an ‘academy boy’. Chapter 4 launches this ethnographic ‘journey’ by contextualizing the relationship between youth, masculinity and the game of football in the postcolonial city of Accra, Ghana. I depart from the urban margins of Accra with a critical vantage point onto the politics of privation: the aim being to unpack how a decade of aggressive neoliberal restructuring has eviscerated the existential certainties of youth in its masculine guise, connecting the scaling-back of state provision to diminished labor opportunities, a decline in the value of education, and the rise of development NGO’s – and theorizing their co-emergence through the burgeoning import of football in the socio-cultural and material vacuum of the urban postcolony.
I propose the concept of the *borderland* as a prism through which to read the peripheral yet productive effects that neoliberal restructuring and the feminization of work has engendered amidst the turbulence of the 21st century African city. Bringing together theoretical insights from youth studies, urbanism and a burgeoning literature on African masculinities, I explore the paradoxical predicaments of a youth citizenry deprived of the opportunity to participate in the prosperous narrative of Ghana’s neoliberal resurgence, yet ever-more attuned to the promise of a world beyond African borders. It is against this paradox that I argue for the emergent import of football as an archetypal borderland practice for male youth; at once as a primary resource of masculine sociality, and perhaps with added significance, as a vehicle through which male youth seek to enact their aspirational quest for exile. Finally, here, I unpack the politics of masculine patronage as it increasing coalesces around the game of football and this quest to ‘go outside’, speaking in particular to the importance of local ‘Big Men’ in facilitating the inception of one’s journey in the game.

In Chapter 5, the analytic lens then shifts more overtly towards the emergent politico-economic transformation of Ghana’s football industry as a metonym for neoliberal restructuring in West Africa. In particular, I spotlight the political and economic praxis that spawns from the mushrooming presence and influence of football academies and agents in Ghana, interrogating how the aspirations of male youth footballers increasingly intersect – in both productive and potentially exploitative ways – with the shifting schemes and speculations of a transnational matrix of entrepreneurs; each of whom stake competing claims to the sovereignty of the African male body. Crucially, in tracing the lived journeys of male youth footballers, my principle concern here is to elucidate the contextual practices, relationships and perceptions that bind the African male body to the ball, and the ball to this ever-expanding matrix of human actors, corporations, clubs and governance across the African and European continents. At the crux of the chapter, therefore, is an attempt to theorize in concrete terms the *processes of bodily commodification* through which Ghana’s male youth footballers have emerged as a primary ‘site’ of capital accumulation – their physical vitality and labor rendered as ‘fleshy merchandise’ (Wacquant, 2001: 187) to be bought, sold, and struggled over. I conclude this excursus with an ‘insider’ account from the vantage point of an African football agent, illuminating the informal practices – both licit and illegal – through which they seek to augment the commercial value and market visibility of a youth footballer out of Ghana.
Finally, in Chapter 6, the ethnographic journey culminates with an experiential account of the lived experiences of an exclusive group of male youth footballers awarded scholarships to attend the Right to Dream Academy, a prestigious football academy and educational institution situated in the remote and rural confines of Eastern Ghana. Revisiting Goffman’s (1961) writing on ‘total-like institutions’, I critically dissect how the social structuring and development-oriented focus of the academy both governs and nurtures a collective reconditioning of the African self – affording ‘underprivileged’ yet ‘talented’ recruits an opportunity to manufacture, in the most literal sense, the ‘right’ to dream beyond Africa. Drawing upon the intelligible yields of my immersion within the socio-moral and sensuous patterning of daily life at the academy, I then illuminate the mundane rituals and regimen through which the ‘academy boy’ seeks to reinvent himself, both on-field and in the classroom – the two nodal points of academy culture. Juxtaposing the internal categories of ‘professional prospects’ and ‘geek recruits’, I explore how male youth actively negotiate the politics of their becoming through an ongoing and reflexive evaluation of their life-chances vis-à-vis the potential opportunities open to them in the professional echelons of European football and the educational scholarships offered by North American universities. This self-surveillant ‘academy boy’ provides a unique window onto the micro-political ‘tactics’ (De Certeau, 1984) of youth in their hierarchical yet pragmatic ranking of future aspirations.

Finally, in bringing the ethnographic ‘journey’ to a point of conclusion, I present a critical analysis of the foreign flight of Right to Dream’s most talented graduates – the majority of whom, despite being held up as the fount of Africa’s future, have opted to depart West Africa at the earliest opportunity. This critical commentary allows me to close the thesis by looking towards the future prospects and responsibilities of youth in a moment when they are increasingly heralded as the answer to Africa’s development impasse. I conclude the project with a critical reflection on the core social scientific themes to which I contribute, asking pointedly of what we have learned about the politics of privation, African masculinities, youth, agency and football along the ethnographic ‘journey’ narrated. I thereafter bring the thesis to a point of closure by bookending some of the many arguments, questions, conundrums and dilemmas that run through this work, arguing most expressly that the emergent import of football for male youth in Ghana today provides a superlative vantage point not only onto the broader politics of a West African region gripped by violent
and volatile social change, but onto the similarly volatile unfolding of global futures at large.
CHAPTER 2: THEORIZING AFRICA, YOUTH AND THE GLOBAL-PRESENT

2.1 INTRODUCTION

‘Modernity in Africa is both a discursive construct and an empirical fact, both a singularity and a plurality, both a distinctive aspiration and a complicated set of realities, ones that speak to a tortuous endogenous history, still actively being made. A history, as it turns out, not running behind Euro-America, but ahead of it’ Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 120-121)

Africa, as Ferguson (2007: 26) attests, has long been an ‘inconvenient case’ in scholarly invocations of the global, with the continent afforded little more than a passing allusion even in the most ostensibly all-encompassing narratives of our purportedly globalizing world. Perhaps adding ideology to absence, when we do hear of the continent today, it is proverbially shadowed by economic crises, state collapse and political conflict; disregarded as a ‘global ghetto’ (Smith, 1997) ceaselessly impounded by tradition, sorcery and darkness. Perpetually re-imagined in the ‘Third World’, the ‘Developing World’, and now the ‘Global South’, Africa – its myriad peoples, cultures, geographies and nations – has historically served, and arguably continues to serve, as the ‘raw life’ (Mbembe, 2001: 197) from which Euro-modernist knowledge has fashioned its intellectual project and ontological vigor. It is against this intellectual backdrop that many portend of the continent as a radical domicile of otherness in the contemporary world; a reading which, while certainly not without merit, runs counter to the equally radical polemic tendered in the excerpt proffered above. In a passage from their much revered tome, Theory from the South, Jean and John Comaroff (2012) boldly proclaim Africa, contrary to its construction as the archetypal heart of the non-West, as a vanguard of the global present and the ‘ex-centric site’ (Bhabha, 1994: 6) from which contemporary unfolding’s of modernity ought to be read. Refiguring the abrasive histories of the world as a North-South ‘collaboration’, the Comaroff’s (2012) seek to re-theorize Africa, not as some abject outpost eternally lagging behind the curve of universal modernity, but as an ‘advanced’ frontier running ahead of the neoliberal capitalist present, and signposting Euro-America’s imminent history in the making.

At the crux of their intellectual project, therefore, is a provocative attempt to invert Euro-American narratives and their imperious structuring’s of our ‘global’ contemporary
episteme – one which is ideologically refracted through concepts such as globalization, modernity and development. Theirs too is a project which implores one to critically appraise the scale and vantage point from which knowledge of the contemporary moment is produced, motioning in turn for the enactment of alternative referents from which the politics of the present might be more democratically known. This chapter, in establishing the theoretical and epistemological keystones of my own intellectual project, departs with similarly provocative intent. With the Comaroff’s (2012), I too situate Africa as an alternative temporal and spatial vantage point onto our global present, one which exposes how tenuously grand narratives of globalization – both as a discursive orthodoxy and a multi-referential conceptual frame for all things contemporary – has (re)produced a distinctly Euromodernist imagination of the world’s geography. Massey (2005: 87-88) neatly captures the ideological genealogy of such narrations when she posits that ‘this imagination of globalization is resolutely unaware of its own speaking position; neoliberal to be sure, but also more generally western in its locatedness… This is a story of globalization (as with the story of modernity) that has been largely provoked by what is happening to the West, by the experiences of that West’. Owing a depth of gratitude to the piercing theoretical writings of Anna Tsing (2004), I ask of what it means to ‘be connected’ globally as a tentative and experimental analytic conduit for an alternative ‘global’ episteme; one which takes direction not just from Africa as the inverted ‘margins’ of the modern, but from the ‘borderlands’ along which African youth – here male youth – craft and co-operate, compete and collude in their attempts to prosper on the ‘advanced’ frontier foretold by the Comaroff’s (2012).

Paramount to my intellectual project, therefore, is not only the cessation of Africa as a continental anomaly in existing commentaries of the global and contemporary, but the invocation of youth – at once a social category, a relational concept and an ever-changing group of embodied actors – as a largely unexplored ‘lens’ through which to invert the normative enframing’s of what it means to ‘be connected’ globally. In forcing the twin categories of Africa and youth onto the global agenda, I endeavor towards a critique that finds coherency, not simply from its marginal expression, but in its ‘opening up’ of a more politically progressive architecture from which to illuminate not just the social and material realities of what it means to be in or of Africa today, but offers up the promise of hearing silenced voices, (dis)quieted histories and alternative stories of what it means to ‘be connected’ in a world ravaged by neoliberal capitalist restructuring and the predatory
invigoration of former colonial inequalities. What does it mean to be ever more connected across this uneven and unequal global landscape? And more pertinently, how do the social and material realities of such connection shape the everyday experiences, interactions and aspirations of those who inhabit its increasingly marginalized spatialities? I advance such an inquiry not merely to question the teleological linearity with which global history and development have served the needs and desires of a few, but rather to challenge the very constitutive base from which our knowledge of progressive ‘epochs’ and successive ‘junctures’ are grounded. It derives, I contend, from a commitment to looking beyond the excited hyperbole and fetishizing veneer of a global-modern episteme that has enthralled economist and social scientist alike, advocating for a shift in our analytic orientation from the mystifying velocity of a planet ‘in flow’ to the agonizing mendacity of its erasures, its perpetual reproduction of exclusion, and to the questions of membership, inequality and (im)mobility that variously serve to differentiate, entrench, and reproduce what it means to be in or of West Africa in the world today.

What follows therefore should be considered a theoretical and epistemological statement in itself; one which radically contextualizes the social realities of West Africa and it’s ever-swelling male youth demographic as a relational and ‘ex-centric’ (Bhabha, 1994: 6) vantage point from which to interrogate the broader political-economic and cultural symptoms of the global condition. The global here, therefore, is not a uniform totality hurtling towards a period of unheralded communion, nor is it an over-arching spatial level where flows of people, cultural and capital flit back and forth across a ‘borderless’ (Ohmae, 1990) topography. Rather, in speaking less to a world gripped by a panoply of liberated flowing’s than one fashioned through social friction, I bespeak of a highly differentiated global landscape forged in historical encounter and contingent conjuring’s; it’s ever-changing constitution being the shifting corollary of a multiplicity of embodied interactions, conflicts and political struggles across place, history and difference. With Massey (2005: 9), I contend of space as the ‘product of interrelations from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny’, thus reconfiguring scale as a fluid spatial ecology rather than a ‘nested hierarchy moving from global to local’ (Thrift, 2007: 174). To inquire of what it means to ‘be connected’ globally is to insist on the relational character of the social, contending that one’s capacity to ‘know’ is contingent upon the vantage point assumed; what one sees is shaped by the ‘place’ or ‘places’ from which one is looking. This is not, I hasten, to forsake or to revoke the analytic promise of a global framework of analysis;
rather it is to refigure both the scale and vantage point from which convincing claims about the global condition may be made.

It is, however, not a project without precedent; rather it echoes the slowly advancing critique and condemnation – compelled most vociferously from Afrocentric and postcolonial scholarship – that has sought to destabilize and centre the hegemonic ‘Eurocentric positioning… which undervalues, ignores or rejects non-European, non-Northern visions’ (Aina, 1997: 19). It follows that if one aspires towards an alternative framing of the historical-present, a most salient point of departure is to shine a critical light on how hegemonic concepts such as globalization and modernity have acquired ‘a life in the world’ – as intensive and extensive referents for a constellation of incongruous processes and contradictory practices. My argument thus derives from a conviction that it is only through an understanding of what concepts such as globalization do in the world that one can endeavour to detach its exceedingly valuable scholarship from the vapid certainties and political enclosing’s of its globalist lexicon. Foregrounding taken-for-granted ideas about globalisation, development and modernity as part of the study has proved to be a fruitful thread of inquiry in itself, both because such ideas were foundational to the initial framing of the project, and more importantly, because I have experienced them as woefully inadequate impediments to the quest for empirically-grounded forms of knowing; their multi-referential structuring’s of thought demanding an ever-present reflexive vigilance.

It is from this reflexive vigilance that I initiate my intellectual excursus, which departs from the margins of modernity with a critical commentary on how the politics of global (dis)connection have engendered the marginalization of Africa from the possibility of world-making projects and the purported promise of modernity. There then follows an intersecting excursus on the borderlands of youth, wherein I speak to the burgeoning array of scholarship on childhood and youth; both on the African continent and within the context of a globalizing world. Especially pertinent shall be questions of agency and youth; oft posited as an elusive and ambiguous coupling in traditional perspectives. It is, however, to the margins of modernity that I now turn, as I seek to ‘place’ the purging of Africa within the argumentative tropes that coalesce around the concepts of globalisation, modernity and knowledge production.
2.2. (Dis)Engaging Globalism: From the Margins of Modernity

To narrate of the global ‘out of’ Africa, or perhaps to narrate Africa into the global, is a compelling and exhilarating charge. It is, as Magubane and Zelesa (2004: 165) aptly suggest, a profound challenge given the virtual absence of the continent from the ‘celebrations and conceptualizations, critiques and condemnations’ that have rapidly accumulated in social scientific narratives of our purportedly ‘global era’. This astounding myopia is further expounded by Ferguson (2007: 25) who laments the disregard for Africa ‘even in the most ambitious and ostensibly all-encompassing narratives’, where ‘the entire continent is often simply ignored’; a critique that is substantiated with reference to ‘academic blockbusters’ by Sassen (1998), Hardt and Negri (2001), Giddens (2002) and Held et al. (1999). Further still, where globalization theorists have addressed the ‘place’ of Africa in the global, it has been cast through overwhelmingly destructive aspersions; rendered a ‘global ghetto’ abandoned by capitalism (Smith, 1997), a continent of ‘wasted lives’ (Bauman, 2004), and a residuum of ‘lost generations’ (Durham, 2000). Disregarded as an ‘absent object’ (Mbembe, 2001: 2) in narrations of global economic and political convergence, the continent of Africa – its myriad and contested cultures, social modes of being and livelihood, as well as religiosity, governance and languages – has habitually been reduced to a ‘dark’ and ‘shadowy’ expanse ‘over there’ on the margins. Such ‘dark’ portrayals, as Mbembe (2001: 9) observes, appear to speak to ‘nearly everything of what African states, societies and economies are not’; an oversight that, he feels, is rooted in more elementary questions of western enlightenment, progress and modernity. Tantamount to Mbembe’s (2001) observations, one would be forgiven for asking what, precisely, is ‘global’ about globalization? Indeed, my argument hinges on an interrogative coupling of related sort: firstly, how does the virtual erasure of Africa afford us an insight onto the ideological framing of the global contemporary and its historical antecedents? And crucially, what does this intellectual purging of the continent reveal about the spatial and epistemic (dis)connection of Africa in the ‘modern’ world more broadly?

When James Ferguson (2007: 26) declared that Africa doesn’t ‘fit the story line’ of globalization, he not only illuminated the substantive absence of the continent from extensive literatures on the global-present, but incisively captured something of the
ideological genesis of the concept itself. Even to evoke the global contemporary is to reify the universal currency that globalization – both as an academic concept and a popular axiom – has acquired from the early 1990’s onwards, following which its ubiquitous appropriation and expansive deployment as the master trend (Bauman, 1998) of our times came to symbolize the widely held conviction that the speed and density of interconnections between people and ‘places’ had propagated the dawning of a truly ‘global era’ (Kelly, 1999). Definitions abounded, variously heralding the ‘compression’, ‘convergence’ and ‘connection’ of the world as a ‘single place’ (Robertson, 1990: 220), propagating in turn the advent of globalization as the central thematic in social theory, commerce and political discourse by the dawn of the twenty-first century. Writing at the turn of the century, however, Arjun Appadurai (2000: 4) eloquently captured the antagonistic fervour surrounding the concept when he proclaimed that ‘there is a growing disjuncture between the globalization of knowledge and the knowledge of globalisation’. It was a statement that spoke to the conflicting deployment of the term amidst a rapidly accumulating body of knowledge at the close of the century; its polarized appeal evidenced in its incongruous ascription to claims of nation-state regress in the face of international free trade and the rise of a global economy (Fukuyama, 1992), the spread of a homogenizing ‘global culture’ (Featherstone, 1995) and the irrepressible permanency of global capitalism (Friedman, 1999).

Most incisively, however, in the context of Ferguson’s (2007) positing’s on Africa, is Appadurai’s (2000) judicious allusion to the fault lines inherent in the production and dissemination of knowledge about globalization, not to mention its own discursive circulation within predominantly Euro-American networks of electronic and print media, as well as academic exchange. In the context of my critique, it is this trans-planetary ‘flow’ of globalization as an idea in itself that affords us privileged insight onto the multi-referential charm of the concept and the discursive conjuring’s that have transcended even the most entrenched antagonism of its detractors. Consider the writings of Castells (1996) and his proposition of the world as a ‘network of financial flows’, or Stiglitz’ (2002: 9) celebrated book, *Globalization and its Discontents*, which defines globalization as ‘the breaking down of artificial barriers to the flows of goods, services, capital, knowledge, and people across borders’. Elsewhere, Beerkens (2004:13) defines globalization as ‘transnational flows of people, products, finance, images and information’, while Ohmae (1990) declares of it being ‘the onset of a borderless world’. Here we are enticed into the
imaginative charm and seductive imagery that accompanies a world connected through a panoply of unfettered flow, where freely mobile people, capital and cultures are circulated and exchanged across the amplified spatiality of the globe; flitting across expansive networks, and breaking down barriers among cultures, languages and nations in the process. Such an ‘imagination of the world’s geography’ (Massey, 2005: 88), here one spellbound by total unfettered mobility, speaks to what Appadurai (2000: 5) himself has described as a ‘world of flows’ – of everywhere opening borders, rapidly converging market economies, and a world dislodged from its pivot amidst a globalizing dynamic that purportedly ‘unlocks the gates to all present and future mysteries’ (Bauman, 1998: 1).

While united in their fixation on capital as the primary modality of circulation, the all-pervading rhetoric of *flows* – a most impractical and naïve metaphor for the complex exchange, surveillance, securitization, and movement of money across national borders – typifies both the underpinning malaise afflicting the concept of globalization and its outright exclusion of the African continent. Capital, here, as Kelly (1999: 382) suggests, ‘is negligent of the context in which its circulation becomes fixed’, thus legitimating the ideological and global-future determinist maneuverings of a seemingly natural, inevitable and ultimately, inexorable globalizing logic. It is through this rhetoric-laden charisma of the globalist lexicon – in which ‘flow is valorized’ and circulations are ‘the ruling image of global interconnectedness’ – that Tsing (2004: 330) argues that ‘we lose touch with the material and institutional components through which powerful and central sites are constructed’ and ‘from which convincing claims about units and scales can be made’. As Massey (2005: 81) supports, what we are contending with here is a ‘mantra which evokes a powerful vision of an immense, unstructured, free unbounded space’ rather than the constitutive matrix of socio-cultural and political relations through which it is shaped, produced and contested. Panoramic imagery of planetary flows and circulations illuminate the purported mobility of people, capital, commodities and ideas, but fail to unravel how such mobility is the unpredictable and shifting aggregate of a multiplicity of interactions, conflicts and struggle across a brutally unequal global landscape. What represents itself here is not the asymmetrical topography of power in which ‘global’ (dis)connection is forged and resisted, but the alluring veneer of a Euro-American world that manifests as an exhilarating cluster of liberated flowings across the passive surface of space.
Conversely, to ask of Africa’s ‘place’ amidst such planetary flowing’s is to pinpoint the ‘inconvenient case’ (Ferguson, 2007: 26) skirted over by those enthralled by the mobility, circulation, and liberation of a decidedly western invocation of the global; one constructed against Africa as the unspoken antinomy – the ‘black hole’ (Castells, 2000) – of immobility, abjection and incarceration. Even when scholars do gaze beyond the borders of Euro-America to the ‘place’ of Africa, such work has tended to concern itself less with Africa’s connection to, lest not a site of, the global, than its aura as an isolate and antiquarian ‘culture’ laden with remnants of the ‘globally’ forgotten; of primitive peoples and parochial places ripe for the richness of ethnographic inquiry. Undergirding this juxtaposition of antiquarian Africa vis-à-vis emergent forms of globalism is a perplexing misconception of ‘the global’ as an all ‘encompassing, overarching spatial level’ (Ferguson, 2007: 42) counter-posed against the isolate cultures and bounded place(s) of ‘the local’. This brings us to my second tenet of critique: the need to break with the politically-fabricated and analytically obstructive antinomy between ‘global’ spaces and ‘local’ places. Most vociferous is the need to disrupt imagining’s of an original and inexorable global condition, acknowledging the political conjuring’s and global contortions that such ‘scale-making projects’ (Tsing, 2004: 57) perpetuate as naturally occurring, and thus, emphatically depoliticized. As Tsing (2004: 58) cautions, deploying unhelpful dichotomies between the ‘global blob and local details isn’t helping us’; rather ‘by letting the global appear homogenous, we open the door to its predictability and evolutionary status as the latest stage in macronarratives’.

Such misconceiving’s of space, here global space, speak to a deeply fraught imagining of the global as a dominant scalar level, as somehow ‘always up there’, ‘out there’ (Massey, 2005: 61) – a ‘space of flows’ (Oakes, 1993: 55). It follows that this conflation of the global with the spatial and abstract inevitably renders the local as a residuum of concrete place(s) in which global processes come to rest, transforming and corroding the confinement of isolate culture(s) in the process. Reinforcing this dichotomous apposition of the global and the local is a supreme assumption of isomorphism between space and place, and a recurring ‘imagery of break, rupture and disjunction’ (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 6). Places, societies and cultures are thus (mis)conceived as bounded containers of internally generated meaning and authenticity, their distinctiveness fashioned in difference and separation from other places and in what lies ‘beyond their borders’ (Massey, 2005: 64). The effects of such imagined geographies – albeit rather ironically devoid of spatiality –
are patently discernible in nostalgic invocations of local ‘resistance’ and dissention to the effects of global processes, with the global-local dichotomy that pervades much anthropological writing a particularly blatant exemplar (Besnier, 2012). The global – as perpetually (re)imagined through such globalization scholarship – is fundamentally grounded in the proclamation of a world of everywhere opening borders, unbounded cultures, and liberated peoples. Africa, conversely, has long been popularly constructed and represented – particularly in mainstream media – as the antinomy of this ‘global’ world, a bounded ‘place’ wherein traditionalism remains unsullied by the multiplicities of spatial connection and of intersecting trajectories with other places, peoples and cultures.

In the context of my argument, Charles Piot’s (1999), *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa*, is particularly insightful to such notions as they pertain to Africa, challenging us to appraise the simultaneity of the ‘modern’ and ‘global’ in a West African village – so often characterized as the very epitome of tradition and parochialism in the contemporary world. What Piot (1999) incipiently disrupts is the legitimating effect of such ‘aspatial’ (Massey, 2005) ideologies of scale in naturalizing the discursive musings of an imagined ‘global’ geography minus Africa – one which masquerades as an ineluctable master-narrative of Euro-American modernity in the making. That said, however, recent years have seen mounting dissention to, and critique of, such aspatial ideologies of scale, with geographers such as Swyngedouw (1997), Massey (2005), and Thrift (2007) proposing a strong case for a relational view of scale as ‘simultaneous’ rather than hierarchical.

The final tenet of my critique thus concerns the historical construction of Africa vis-à-vis the spatial and temporal moorings of modernity; both as a category of historical time and a form of social experience or reality – perceived, imagined or expected – that is predicated on a notion of the ‘now’ as breaking from the bonds of tradition and advancing towards the realization of ‘being modern’. To ‘be modern’, therefore, denotes a manner of being-in-the-world, not simply in the phenomenological sense, but rather a condition of, or comportment to, the world that is bound by a pursuit of progress, development and reason. Yet, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 114) caution, the hegemonic penmanship of Euro-American social theory – of which globalization theory is a most striking exemplar – have long conceived modernity as though it were borne of Enlightenment reason, with the Global South, if acknowledged at all, immortally rendered ‘an outside that requires
translation, conversion, catch up’. Ferguson (2007:176) upholds and perhaps extends such sentiment when he asserts that ‘generations of Western scholars have regarded Africa as either beyond the pale of the modern (the savage heart of darkness that lurks beyond the edges of the civilized world) or before it (the “primitive”, “traditional” place that is always not yet in the time of the up-to-date present)’. To disentangle such narratives of modernity, and Africa’s marginal ‘place’ amidst its distinctly Euro-American musing’s, requires that one engages with related (albeit often unquestioned) matters of temporality, space and global rank; each of which coalesce, not just in the broad strokes of globalization and its story of a singular global-future trajectory, but in the preceding world-making project of modernization theory and its remarkably similar series of ideological enchantments.

Just as the charismatic allure of globalization engenders the imagining and ordering of a globe gripped in the midst of an integrated trajectory of transformation, so too did modernization theory from the early 1960’s onwards; the common thread being a shared contortion of spatial inequality, and perhaps most insidiously, the establishment of a power/knowledge relation that solidified a hierarchical topography in which rank and status were demarcated merely by a temporal sequencing of progress – what Ferguson (2007: 178) refers to as the ‘passage of developmental time’. Africa, as with Other nations corralled in ‘The Third World’ or the more sanguine notion of ‘The Developing World’, was not (re)presented as ‘backward’, but rather as ‘behind’ or at the beginning of a process of development that would culminate in the continent’s attainment of a ‘modern’ designation. Chakrabarty (2005: 49) encapsulates the ideo-logic of modernization when he posits that ‘from the standpoint of historicism, the non-West, as the Other of the West, occupies the space of lack, the condition of the ‘not yet’. It follows that Africa, the quintessential site of development and the epicenter of the non-West, was lodged in the temporal ‘waiting room’ (Chakrabarty, 2005: 49) of modernity, soon to become a belated arrival to the ‘advanced’ modern order of Euro-American nations and the teleological promise of a ‘worldwide family of nations’ (Ferguson, 2007: 177).

Fast forward half a century and the figuring of modernity as a universal telos to which all were on route has appeared more and more like the discursive and ideological project of a particular historical period, with scholarly endorsements of development having come and gone with the rise and fall of modernization theory. Amidst a sharp deepening of politico-economic inequalities, failed states and widespread civil war, ‘no one talks about African
economic convergence with the First World anymore’ (Ferguson, 2007: 183); an assertion which speaks not only to the ‘end of development’ (Sachs, 1992) as some have posited, but to the enduring axis of exclusion, abjection and absence that has characterized the marginalization of the African continent from the emergent script of globalization and the latest in what Tsing (2000) contends to be a procession of Western-oriented world-making projects. Of profound implication, therefore, is the diminishing promise(s) of development, and the shattering of conviction in modernity as a teleological state of becoming – to which even ‘traditional’ outposts such as Africa would reach within their own temporal passage. Yet, as Ferguson (2007:189) attests, once modernity ceases to be understood as a telos, it emerges as a ‘de-temporalized’ status or rank – ‘a status of living to which some have rights by birth and from which others are simply, but unequivocally, excluded’. No longer buoyed by the optimism of the ‘waiting room’ and the promise of what is to come, the Sub-Saharan Africa of today sits exposed and excluded amidst a political and economic world order; one which no longer positions the continent as ‘developing’ – simply behind or emerging – but rather as a place of unchanging hardship and suffering that is rendered beneath or perhaps even beyond the margins of modernity.

Destined to wallow in the squalor of a brutally unequal world order (Porter, 2009), the ideological re-placing of a statically ‘backward’ or ‘de-temporalized’ Africa serves as a disturbing yet powerful solicitation of the unspoken shadows of global (dis)connection; not just those inflecting globalization scholarship and its conjuring’s of world geography, but also of the fetishized veneers that serve to (re)present modernity devoid of its less decadent moorings, disconcerting berths and outright atrocities. To ask of Africa’s place-in-the-world is therefore to invoke how the haunting spectres of a ranked and racialized hierarchy is a product of its past; borne not just from the spatial and temporal ‘decomposing’ of modernization and the promise of development, but equally attributable to the more enduring lineage of colonial conquest, the scramble(s) for Africa, and the original inhumanity of transatlantic slavery. It follows that an understanding of what it means to be African in the contemporary world can only be grasped through the striated histories of racialized dispossession and the ‘never ending process of brutalisation’ (Mbembe, 2001: 14) that has been enacted and (re)produced through (neo)colonial plunder, rapacious capitalist enterprise, and post-colonial sovereignties.
Understanding what it means to be in or of Africa today thus requires coming to terms with how the ‘two great world movements’ (Du Bois, 1942, cited in Porter, 2009: 480) of slavery and colonialism have served to define the relation of Africa to the rest of the world, with the former ‘episode’ considered to have ‘stimulated capitalism’ (Williams, 1994: 30), while the latter ‘scramble’ propagated ‘the hierarchisation of the world – economically, politically, and culturally – and the crystalizing of a domination… constituted essentially by economic power’ (Ake, 1996: 23). It is only against the unfreedoms and dispossession of such histories that an elaboration of contemporary modernity as a ranked and racialized hierarchy rather than a teleological state of becoming is possible, bringing to the fore how slavery and colonial conquest served to radically remap, (re)produce, and legitimate the naturalized inequalities of African bodies and the politics of their (dis)connection amidst the ‘global’ landscape of today. Originating in the pitfalls of Enlightenment thinking, the naturalization of racialized inequalities can be said to hinge on the presumed ‘nature’ shared by Africa’s ‘natives’ and their milieu in early sociological and anthropological writings – what Mbembe (2002: 256) terms the ‘quasi equivalence’ of race and geography.

Like Porter (2009), however, I contend that one must return to the enlightenment postulating’s of Hegel (2004: 80) to situate the roots of globalist ideologies of a modernity minus Africa, and the origins of how Africa has come to be ‘both temporally before and spatially outside universal history. Hegel (2004), in speaking to the ‘true theatre of history’, elevated Europe, racially and spatially, as the apex of a stratified hierarchy of global civilization and historical agency, while rendering Africa as having ‘no historical part of the world’. Finding expression in waves of racialized ‘ideologies used to justify conquest and subjugation’ (Magubane and Zelesa, 2004: 169), and (re)worked by geographical imaginarlies of civilizational hierarchy, Africa and its population is relegated to a place that is outside the spatialities of agency and below all others in a ranked hierarchy of racialized cultural difference in which Europe reigns dominant. Essentialized amongst such racial ideologies has been the subjective personhood of the African, and the black African body; its character, capabilities, and potential ever-subjected to disparaging and dogmatic misconceiving’s of race as an ‘immutable biological characteristic by which the humanity of populations could be ranked’ (Magubane and Zelesa, 2004: 169). It follows, perhaps inevitably, that Africa’s engagement with, or place in, a distinctly Euro-modernist conception of the ‘global’ has rarely been permitted to be anything more than a

It is here, at a point of intersection with each of the three tenets proffered on the concept of global modernity from Africa that I return to the opening assertions of Comaroff and Comaroff (2012), and to their radical positing of the continent as a vanguard of the unfolding present. Reading against such received Euromodernist narratives, and of Africa’s perpetual subjugation to the advancing’s of universal history, the Comaroff’s (2012) argument is admittedly penned with counter-evolutionary intent; and, on that basis alone poses an intriguing and much-needed provocation to Euro-American ways of knowing and representing the contemporaneous trials and tribulations of our global present, past, and futures. However, the cogency of their intellectual project extends well beyond a purely abstract counter-posing to the genealogy very briefly sketched above. Rather, theirs is a call for theory-work that is inductively grounded in the spatial registers of everyday life; in concrete ethnographic encounters across the interpolations of North and South, and ultimately, in the complex interrelations of a global landscape that increasingly eludes any attempt to demarcate the capillaries of its connections. What they represent is a post 9/11 environ in which ‘old margins are becoming new frontiers’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012: 121), where postcolonial African states, eager for membership of an ever-shifting world order, have thoroughly acquiesced to the mutating neoliberal charges of former colonial metropoles; the latest ‘scramble’ compelled not purely by the extractive accumulation of the continent’s bountiful raw materials, but equally concerned with the containment of terror and the guarding against unknown spatialities of risk that now pervade the global landscape (Hoffman, 2011).

The particularly robust securitization of Africa’s oil rich nations – such as Angola, Nigeria and Ghana – is a most revealing marker of this neoliberal moment; where former metropoles of Euro-America contrive against the aggressive investment and mobile labor of China amidst ever more flexible, informal, and illicit idioms of capital and governance. Africa, too, is ‘rising’ in the midst of this rapacious neoliberal enterprise, with foreign direct investment to the continent rising by 16 percent in 2008, while falling 20 percent globally (Guo, 2010: 44). Yet, this is an Africa ‘rising’ – much like China, Brazil and India – that is especially hospitable to optimal profit at minimal cost, to the venal fiefdoms of governance, and to the precocious callings of capital at the expense of those of its citizenry.
As Ferguson (2006: 48) affirms, this is an Africa where the ‘globally networked enclave sits right beside the ungovernable humanitarian disaster zone’, and where the accumulative logic of neoliberal extractive industry and African economic ‘growth’ coincides with ‘some of the steepest inequalities seen in human history’. Akin to the Comaroff’s (2012), Ferguson (2006: 41) too speculates that this is an Africa that may well be less a site of ‘immature forms of globalisation’ than ‘advanced, sophisticated mutations of it’.

Akin to the counter-posing’s of Ferguson (2006) and the Comaroff’s (2012), I too advocate for a turn away from the enduring ‘truths’ and hegemonic logics of Euromodernist narrations of our global-present. In seeking to elucidate the indeterminacy and contested nature of world-making projects, I too aspire towards the cessation of Africa as an inconvenient and objective anomaly in commentaries of the global and the contemporary. What, I ask, shall we see if we shift our analytic lens towards the ‘undersides’ of the global cosmos and gaze onto the contemporary order of things from a continent that has so long been an inconvenience, an anomaly, perhaps even an absence? What can we learn about the veritable politics of planetary-wide connection from the ‘advanced’ vanguard of West Africa? These questions form part of the interrogative coupling at the crux of what follows – a coupling which, as affirmed at the outset, hinges not only on challenging Africa’s fixed ‘place’ on the margins of modernity, but in giving voice to the everyday experiences of male youth as they seek to live productively through the volatile and fractured nature of what it means to be West African in the contemporary moment. I now ask of where one might begin to theorize the precarity and possibility, contingency and agency of everyday life as it is lived, sensed, and scrapped for on the borderlands of youth.

2.3. (Re)Figuring Futures: On the Borderlands of Youth

The concept of youth, argues Durham (2004: 601), is most fruitfully theorized as a ‘social shifter’ – a kind of indexical term which should be considered less as a fixed generational category than a fluid ‘lens’ onto broader social assemblages of power, agency and structure. To ‘pay attention’ to youth, she writes, is to ‘pay close attention to the topology of the social landscape’ (Durham, 2000: 113), for it is often through the cultures, behaviors and predicaments of youth that wider social relationships, political shifts, technological innovations and moral configurations are most vividly discernible. In recently heralding
the advent of a ‘new moment in the history of youth’, the writings of Comaroff and Comaroff (2005: 274) argue that youth have come to embody the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism and the modernist myth of generational progress. Generation, they assert, has become a ‘dominant line of cleavage’ in the contemporary moment, with young people at the same time cajoled and condemned as ‘innocent and guilty’ (Honwana, 2005), as ‘Vanguard’ and ‘Vandals’ (Abbink & Van Kessel, 2005), ‘Makers and Breakers’ (Honwana and De Boeck, 2005); evidently at once the offspring of tyranny and the prospects of tomorrow. In a paradoxical sense, then, youth – as a historically-constructed category, a relational concept, and an ever-changing group of embodied actors – denotes a complex and elusive signifier; its millennial cast at one and the same time championed as the guardians of the future and the principle threat to its universal unfolding (Durham, 2008; Jeffrey, 2010).

At one end of such antinomic tropes, the burgeoning field of childhood and youth studies has forcefully championed the promise of young people as politically-active, socially-engaged arbiters of change – the distilled précis here being that youth are (naturally) enterprising, resourceful and agentic even in the midst of destitution and poverty (Aitken et al., 2007; Katz, 2004). Indeed, the idea that children ‘have agency’ has become a type of mantra within social scientific research on childhood (Ahearn, 2001; Jeffrey, 2012; Vanderbeck, 2008); a most sanguine portrayal which stands diametrically opposed to the juvenile malaise that is said to fester amidst deepening inequalities, receding prospects of work, and the increasingly opaque generational fault lines of the neoliberal environ. Youth, in this other sense, is a volatile and precarious state of becoming, its liminal entrapments amplified at a time when the frenzied expansion of free markets, the dismantling of welfare states, and the proliferation of global corporate and consumer cultures has eviscerated the existential certainties that once paved a well-worn pathway into that most industrious wellspring of adulthood; namely, the productive domain of work (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005; Matlon, 2011). Herein lies the problem or crises of youth, often said to manifest in the disaffected movements and illicit transactions of a politically-subversive anti-citizenry that must be surveilled and policed, their expectations of future indefinitely postponed as they conjure and compete amidst the shadows of the state – with many migrating towards the illicit economies of juvenile delinquency.
It is in this latter guise that Hebdige (1988) surmised that youth only enter the modernist narrative under the pretence of ‘trouble’ – their ‘deviant’ ways and means forever steeped in the discourse of transgression, menace and moral panic. Marginalized from the normative enchantments of formal labor, youth enter the modernist imaginary as a ‘troublesome’ and rebellious affliction of impetuous drives and irresponsible citizenship; their vociferous claiming’s and disenfranchised dreams posing a mutinous threat to the neoliberal ordering of things. Inverting this subversive predilection for ‘trouble’, however, were the writings of Mannheim (1972: 109), who argued that young people possess a creative proclivity for ‘state-of-the-art’ social and cultural practices and are therefore uniquely adept in troubling the epistemic logics of convention, probability and authority. Nowhere is this paradox more vociferously manifest, I contend, than the post-colonial frontier on which West African youth – here male youth – navigate the plural, intersecting marginalities that are increasingly emblematic of the neoliberal moment across the so-called Global South.

The writings of Durham (2000: 114) echo my argument when she proclaims that youth ‘form an especially sharp lens’ through which the socio-spatial relations of Africa, as with that of the global-present more broadly, come critically into focus. This is, after all, a moment in which the continent’s astounding rate of urban growth is matched only by the ‘extraordinarily youthful’ (Sommers, 2009: 7) composition of its population; as Hope (1998: 352) attests, ‘youth are at the forefront of Africa’s advance towards cities’, while more recently, Barker (2005: 11) predicted that ‘there will likely never be in human history a youth cohort this large again’. In 2012, the International Labor Organization (ILO) reported that 70 percent of the continent’s population are under the age of thirty, a figure that not only situates Africa as the youngest continent on the planet, but is compounded by the African Development Bank’s reporting that youth account for 60 percent of the continent’s unemployed populace – occurring at a rate of more than twice that for adults. Here too a distinctly neoliberal paradox is emerging; one in which the rapidly accelerating wealth of ‘rising’ oil-rich African states reads against the grain of collapsing state sovereignties, proliferating corruption, and a commensurately ‘rising’ incidence of youth unemployment.

Confronted with the bleak prospect of any imminent fulfillment – marked in this context by material possession, wedlock and a ‘bread winner’ role for family – Diouf (2003: 4)
argues that male youth channel their energies toward constructing ‘new places of socialization and new sociabilities on the margins’. Here, a mounting degree of global consciousness and connection are said to be the by-product of a growing exposure to ‘global’ media and internet networks, cell phones, and Euro-American television broadcasts; each of which are generating novel forms of transnational (be)longing, membership and consumption on the margins of the modern (Durham, 2000; Langevvang and Gough, 2009). Far removed from the prosperous narrative of an Africa ‘rising’, I thus contend that male youth increasingly inhabit a borderland; an interstitial and figurative in-between ‘straddling African reality and the Euro-American Dream’ (Diouf, 2003: 231); their everyday existence no longer neatly bound to the prolonged uncertainty of the African postcolony, but in extended – albeit predominantly mediated – forms of engagement with the ‘modern’ enchantments that are perceived to lie beyond its borders. In short, I conceive such a borderland to signify a figurative margin or outlying periphery – what Wolputte (2013) terms a ‘grey zone’ – along which youth, in this case male youth from West Africa, engender alternative modes of being and becoming in the ‘shadows’ of the state. It is, therefore, an analytic concept, a prism through which to refract the peripheral yet pioneering dynamics of African male youth, and the mutual entanglements – both real and imagined – that are ever-more emblematic of what it means to ‘be connected’ globally out of Africa.

Even to bespeak of borders and borderlands is to disrupt the unfettered flowings of capital, people and culture, in its place appraising the constitutive friction (Tsing, 2004) through which social encounters across borders are fashioned, contested and experienced. A borderland is not, therefore, reducible to the ‘free play of the imagination’ (Diouf, 2003: 6); rather, it denotes both the concrete presence and effects of the borderlands of community, nation and continent; as well as the paradoxical opportunity for transgression that such borders at once create. I thus bespeak of a borderland neither to romanticize nor sanitize the interlocking deprivations and desires of youthful becoming, but to argue that the culmination of both has triggered proliferating ‘fantasies of exile’ (Piot, 2010); their allure fashioned in and through fragments of popular culture, in sporting expression, mediated tropes of ‘global’ blackness, and the perceived material indulgences of a (more) modern elsewhere. No longer buoyed by the modernist myth of Africa ‘developing’, and afforded limited hope of realizing their domestic dreams, youth have emerged less as vectors of the social-present, than an enigmatic and entrepreneurial challenge to its
neoliberal laws of progress and probability (Chant and Jones, 2005; Gough, 2008; Porter et al., 2011). Here, on the borderlands, the resolution to the ‘problem’ of youth increasingly manifests in an all-pervading quest for exile, with everyday life-worlds centered less on the domestic appendages of impending adulthood, than the ‘modern’ enchantments that are perceived to lie beyond African borders.

It is this pursuit of a better future that undergirds my conception of the borderland: intended not merely to symbolize the marginal spaces in which youth cultures coalesce, but equally as a theoretical vantage point onto the ‘mantra-like’ (Jeffrey, 2012: 245) assumption that young people have agency. Resounding endorsements of youth as entrepreneurial, resourceful and agentic now proliferate the annals of academic journals, with Comaroff and Comaroff (2005: 273) observing that ‘in the abstract, the term congeals pure, utopic potential’. Yet, as Durham (2008: 151) astutely observes, one is left wondering as to the kind of agency that youth are said to possess. The related epistemological dilemma concerns how we, as social scientists, are to appraise and ‘know’ such youth agency ‘in the field’ – particularly if and when youth actors are implicated in morally ‘ambiguous’ or even illegal activities such as, for example, warfare (Hoffman, 2011, 2003). Bordanaro and Payne (2012) highlight the opacity that pervades the literature on youth agency when they deploy the term ‘ambiguous agency’ as a response to the normative judgments of authors on the kind of behaviors, activities, and places deemed ‘appropriate’ for young people to engage with, and from which ‘responsible’ agency may be achieved. I contend of the borderlands partly as a riposte to such avowals of the agentic nature of youth; its inherent presupposing’s deeply appended to the normative enframements of ‘positive’ moralities and ‘appropriate’ childhoods that much scholarship purports to destabilize.

Agency, in what follows, shall be defined, not as a neat or universally ‘positive’ possession to which some have access and others – due to variously intersecting marginalities – have not; rather I contend that, much like the relational weavings of the social, agency is situational, contingent and crucially, dialogic. It is not the causal aggregate of differential power relations; rather it is unpredictable and disordered, ‘some-thing’ that is struggled over, coaxed and stumbled upon in moments of crises, through acts of ingenuity, atrocity, and corporeal mastery. While tentatively apparent in recent avowals of ‘thin agency’, ‘restricted agency’, and ‘tactical agency’ (Honwana, 2005; Klocker, 2007; Robson et al. 2007), I deploy the concept of the borderland in a conscious attempt to capture this
paradoxical placing of African youth; at once a marginalized social category traversed by unequal geometries of power and ripe for exclusion and exploitation, and a social grouping whose ‘state-of-the-art’ (Mannheim, 1972: 109) practices and everyday adventures are situated between the antinomic poles of freedom and abjection, between transnational dreams and national detention, perhaps even as Baud and Van Schendel (1997: 220) suggest, ‘between poverty and material well-being’. Borderlands are, in short, defined by the paradoxes they create; permitting us a unique vantage point onto male youth as the hopeful other striving towards social and material betterment. If the contemporary moment can be characterized by anything resembling the ‘millennial capitalism’ put forward by Comaroff and Comaroff (2000), then the borderland represents a ‘millennial’ geography wherein African male youth, despite their marginal standing, actualize a life course ‘assimilated to a game of chance, a lottery, in which the existential temporal horizon is colonized by the immediate present and by prosaic short term calculations’ (Mbembe, 2002: 271).

Mobility is the ‘new’ leitmotif of this youthful quest; where the pursuit of labor opportunities and remuneration are said to have instigated movement and migration as fundamental features of everyday life for West African male youth (de Bruijn et al., 2001; Langevang and Gough, 2009; Van Blerk and Ansell, 2006). So too, ‘acts of conjury’ (Piot, 2010) – an attempt to generate something of value from little or no resources – are emblematic of this quest to become mobile out of Africa, with Piot’s (2010) monograph on the Togolese visa lottery a most striking exemplar of the shifting schemes and speculations that are enacted by ever-greater numbers of ‘ordinary Africans’ in their pursuit of ‘something better’. The ethnographic offering I present here can be said to be of related substantive provenance, interrogating as it does the localized construction of football both as an emergent resource of hope for West African male youth, and perhaps more significantly, as a principle vehicle through which male youth seek to enact their aspirational quest for exile. Here too, complex questions of agency emerge in and through the situational predicaments and actions of a generation of male youth abandoned by the faltering promise of domestic adulthood, and whose prospects of ‘something better’ are ever-more aligned not just with the game of football, but with its inextricable association with opportunities to ‘go outside’ (Darby, 2010).
Crucially, however, as will be vividly apparent in what follows, such opportunistic investment in the game of football is not the exclusive preserve of impoverished male youth; rather, theirs is a journey which intersects with the inventive initiatives and schemes of a broader matrix of entrepreneurial actors – including agents, scouts and businessmen – who harbor a distinctly economic interest in the extractive potential and capital-value of Ghana’s football industry. What transpires at this intersection, I shall argue, is neither predictable nor neatly intelligible; it is, rather, an ethnographic story of messy, unstable and unequal friction across difference, where unexpected coalitions and contingent consent are forged from the geopolitical hustle of informal life, and where those marooned in the shadows of the state seek out novel idioms of work, conjure ever-more ingenious modes of trade and exchange, and when needs must, coercively endeavor to maximize their own prospects along the outer limits of legality, morality and kin. This is ultimately a story that endeavors to speak back to the fragmentary politics of the neoliberal-global present from the borderlands of youth, wherein recurrent acts of ingenuity, creativity and the forbidden coalesce in the daily forging of alliance, the navigation of constraint, and the on-going quest to ‘become mobile’ on the outlying margins of modernity.

It is ‘here’ that I bring this theoretical excursus to a halt, not because it has reached a point of conclusion: rather, I contend that it has now reached a fruitful point of departure. I arrive at this figurative landmark having cleared a theoretical path from the margins of modernity, and the borderlands of youth, borrowing from the conceptual lexicon of Tsing (2004) and the Comaroff’s (2012) as I sought to invert the normative cartographies from which the global landscape is ‘known’. In bringing to light the contested nature of world-making projects, I motioned for the cessation of Africa as an inconvenient anomaly in commentaries of the global-present, arguing – in conjunction with the Comaroff’s (2012) – that the continent provides a profoundly insightful window onto the contemporary world at large, the politics of its historical production, and the unfolding course of its futures, whatever they may be. In highlighting the political production of scale and vantage point, I sought to ‘open up’ a more politically-progressive theoretical architecture from which to appraise the global contemporary – an architecture which hinged not just on the ‘ex-centric’ (Bhabha, 1994: 6) site of West Africa, but on the everyday life-worlds of male youth who reside there. Yet, in establishing this interrogative coupling, I have also made an epistemological commitment; one which espouses the salience of ethnographic modes of inquiry in facilitating our capacity to encounter, understand, and appreciate – in ways both
concrete and conceptual – the meaning(s), experiences, stories and dreams of male youth as they crystallize within and against the precarity of the neoliberal moment on the African postcolony. In the pursuit of methodological clarity, and to further elucidate the integrated theoretical and epistemological foundations of my intellectual project, the following chapter shall now unpack the derivation of my ethnographic praxis, illuminating both the politics of my presence ‘in the field’ and the practical challenges that arose therein.
CHAPTER 3:
FROM FLOW TO FRICTION: RE-PLACING THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD

3.1 INTRODUCTION

‘Ethnography can strategically locate itself at critical points of intersection of scales and units of analysis and can directly examine the negotiation of interconnected social actors across multiple scales. The ethnographer is less a chronicler of self-evident places than an interrogator of a variety of place-making projects’ (Gille and O’ Riain, 2002; 278-9)

‘It has almost become a truism to say that ethnographers ‘construct’ the field in which they carry out research. Less considered, however, is the way in which the field ‘constructs’ ethnographers and the fieldwork process’ (Rodgers, 2007: 446)

I had just stepped off an over-crowded bus near the entrance to Rhapsody’s, a popular sports bar in Accra known for its Euro-American cuisine, its broadcasting of international sporting events, and its expatriate clientele. Ironically, however, on that early Wednesday evening, I was there to meet a local FIFA-licensed football agent, Kuku, who had suggested the venue for an interview when we spoke on the phone earlier that day. Like so many of my initial exchanges in the field, our phone conversation had opened on a chary note, suspicious even, before Kuku’s ‘very busy’ schedule suddenly came undone after one candid inquiry: ‘tell me Sir’, he asked, ‘are you from Ghana or are you white?’.

Approaching the front entrance just before 8pm, I was struck by the sight of a boisterous mob of youth jammed up against the elevated steel railing and impatiently jostling for prime position in front of the large glass windows. Perplexed as to the source of their enthrallment, I casually idled at the rear of the group, soon recognizing the fiery uproar of football fans locked in intense debate – the only discernible words being the recurrent namedropping of ‘Drogba’, ‘Messi’ and ‘Essien’. However, noticing Kuku stood searchingly by the large U-shaped bar, I promptly abandoned my inquisition outside, making my way up the stairs and past the imposing young Black (presumably Ghanaian) man at the door. The crossing of a boundary was immediately evident in the cool breeze of the air-conditioning, the lavish décor and the relatively-muted tranquillity inside – it’s interior strikingly manifest as a place apart from the frenetic hustle-and-bustle of Ghana’s capital city, and its highly-congested urban assemblage. Around the bar were elevated seats
occupied primarily by expatriate white men; a few casually engaged in conversation with young Black women, while the majority tilted their gaze towards the live match action emanating from the large-screen television mounted on the back-wall of the room.

It was the evening of April 18th 2012 and the scheduling of my interview had unknowingly coincided with the live broadcast of the UEFA Champions League semi-final encounter between Chelsea FC of England and FC Barcelona of Spain – both of whom command a fanatical support base within the football-crazed communes of West Africa. After exchanging pleasantries with Kuku, a tall, handsome and sharply-dressed man in his early-thirties, we moved to one of the booths that looked directly onto the wall of youth jostling for an optimal vantage point outside the window; their undulant uproars and sporadic unrest wholly inaudible to all those leisurely seated inside the privileged environs of the bar. In the moments that followed, Kuku spoke boastfully of his transition from a career in journalism to what he referred to as ‘the business of transferring players outside’ – a business which hinges, he readily declared, on the ‘discovery’ of ‘unpolished diamonds’ amidst the remote villages and towns of Ghana. Before long, it was abundantly apparent that the interview had become more akin to a business meeting – a feeling which was compounded near its conclusion as Kuku made his pitch for us ‘doing business together’.

‘A black man – an African man – he must have connections with a blonde man on the outside’, he avowed as he pointed to the ‘blonde’ skin of my arm, his reasoning being that I – through my assumed currency as a White European man in a nominally Black postcolonial African nation – must have the ‘respect to complete transfers outside’, which for Kuku signified a ‘white, non-African elsewhere’ (Ferguson, 2006).

The above scene – at once mundane yet profoundly meaningful – serves to provide a critical and experiential angle of vision onto the contextual politics of ‘doing’ ethnography in the contemporary moment. First, as the opening sentiments of Gille and O’Riain (2002) affirm, it spotlights the methodological dilemmas and challenges of undertaking ethnographic forms of inquiry at a time when an inordinately intricate web of global connections are said to have qualitatively refigured the social scale and production of place (Massey, 2005). The ethnographer of today, we are told, must be equipped with a fluid and recalibrated approach – one which remains grounded in the situated registers of everyday encounter, but which is committed to interrogating how such proximate conditions are shaped and produced within a larger ‘global’ geography of ‘place-making projects’. The scene unfolding at
Rhapsody’s thus bespeaks a relation or an ‘event’, with its localized meaning contoured not just by its context but by the way in which points to a series of global processes and connections that seem ever more commonplace in the period of late modernity – processes that converge, through transitory moments of ‘friction’ (Tsing, 2004), an ostracized mob of urban male youth, an Ivorien male at the very pinnacle of world football, an up-and-coming football entrepreneur desperate for contacts ‘outside’, and a Western social scientist eager to understand the emergent relations between all present.

Second and relatedly, in shifting from the methodological to the substantive, the scene at Rhapsody’s also provides a window onto the politico-economic landscape of postcolonial Ghana – a landscape which is being recast in ways that both reinforce and disturb, both sharpen and ambiguate, the ‘axis of hierarchy, exclusion and abjection’ (Ferguson, 2006: 193) that has long typified Africa’s ‘place-in-the-world’ at large. In purely economic terms, as the Comaroff’s (2012: 16) suggest, one finds in Ghana – through the ‘melange of its inherited colonial institutions and its postcolonial availability to neoliberal development’ – a leading light for foreign investment and global integration in West Africa. The interior milieu of Rhapsody’s encapsulates this affluent narrative of an Africa ‘rising’, for here is a venue that mirrors the style and cuisine of eateries in Euro-America, and can call upon an exclusive transnational clientele that includes foreign and domestic business people, Peace Corps volunteers, UN and NGO employees, as well as the odd social scientist. Yet, this represents but part of Ghana’s postcolonial story – and at that, a version which is conversant only with the very exclusive echelons of the nation’s domestic business elite and the development-literate ranks of its ever-expanding diaspora.

In electing to look beyond the insulated confines of Rhapsody’s – quite literally shifting one’s point of vantage outside – one would encounter the very inversion of this hegemonic narrative. For out there looking in was an idle, unemployed and immiserated cluster of male youth – their peripheral vantage point onto the opulence of the restaurant, and the foggy live broadcast of European football, serving as a metonym for the marginalized ‘place’ of youth on the borderlands of community, city and continent at large. The epistemological challenge here, then, is to enact an ethnographic praxis which not only ‘strategically locates itself’ at such ‘critical points of intersection’ (Gille and O’ Riain, 2002: 278-9), but which commits to the (re)telling of stories from alternative vantage points
points that disrupt intellectual and political hegemonies, and speak back to the underlying mechanisms of social domination and stratification (Hancock, 2009; Wacquant, 2008).

Finally, in keeping with ethnography’s reflexive and embodied turn(s), the opening epigraph saliently captures the friction of my ‘emplaced’ (Pink, 2011) relations – as a white, highly-educated, Irish-European man – within the racially-refracted ‘field’ of postcolonial Ghana. The scene made theatrically explicit Rodger’s (2007: 446) positing’s of ethnographic research as a dialogical process ‘constructed’ between the subjective ethnographer and the social realities encountered ‘in the field’. From the ‘vantage point’ of Kuku – who evidently constructed my Whiteness as a symbol of economic wealth and ‘global’ mobility – I symbolized a rare point of contact with the professional echelons of the football world ‘outside’: I transmitted economic capabilities and an exceptional opportunity for social and commercial alliance in spite of my clarifications to the contrary. In short, I was an ‘infrastructure’ – in Simone’s (2004) conception of a socially-valuable human alliance – to be negotiated and maximized, for I granted access to domestic spaces usually denied and offered a direct pathway beyond the spatio-temporal (dis)order of Africa. As will be critically dissected in what follows, however, the subjective intersectionalities of my identity – of my race, class, gender, and nationality – were ‘constructed’ and read in ways that were anything but static; rather, they ‘collaborated and at times opposed one another, creating varied situational power equilibria between myself as a sentient and suffering being and the subjects of my ethnographic study (Matlon, 2014: 4). Indeed, essential to such mutability, I shall argue, was my approach to ethnography as an ‘embedded and embodied social inquiry’ (Wacquant, 2015: 4) that is enriched where possible through the long term, intensive and ‘enactive’ immersion of the researcher in situ, in the mundane ways and meaningful moments of the people under study.

In the oft-neglected pursuit of methodological clarity, this chapter now aims to draw out some of the biographical, ethical and epistemological dimensions of my ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana, West Africa, highlighting in particular the dialogical processes through which my ethnographic praxis was at different times constitutive of, and ‘constructed’ by, the social force-field(s) of postcolonial Ghana. I sketch out the course and constitution of the ethnographic ‘journey’ – both empirical and intellectual – that I enacted ‘in the field’: recounting how the contingent practicalities of fieldwork recurrently led me from the insulated confines of the Right to Dream Academy in the rural backwaters of
Ghana’s Eastern Region to an intensive sojourn with a grassroots youth coach and his aspiring prodigies amidst the highly-congested and impoverished peripheries of its capital city, Accra – a process, both organic and unexpected, that ultimately became the principal theoretical driver of the study and the unique spatio-temporal ordering of its representation. This reflexive excursus on the project’s methodological contouring begins by establishing the major influences on my ethnographic praxis in the study. I then go on to trace my ethnographic beginnings within the football-crazed communes of Ghana, illuminating both the ‘key sites’ of my immersed ‘interrogation’ and the practical challenges that arose therein. The final section speaks to the differential facets of my identity in what was a fluid and ever-fluctuating ‘field’ under study, arguing in particular for the contextual resonance of my embodied capabilities and coaching experience on the field of play, as well as my initial status as an ‘injured’ footballer in facilitating my inter-subjective relations within the ‘football-spaces’ of West Africa.

3.2. Ethnography and its Global Discontents:
The Politics of Scale and Vantage Point

‘The question of comparative modernities… is ultimately a question of scale, the scale on which to do ethnography. It is a question of how to avoid dissolving local particularities in the uniform sameness of global conditions without treating the radical distinctiveness of the local as if it stood against or apart from the global’

(Foster (2002: 247)

An impasse, at once concrete and conceptual, can be said to proliferate social scientific dialogue on the ‘place’ and value of ethnography in the historical-present. It is, as Foster (2002: 247) incisively captures above, a stand-off that is principally epistemological in nature, and one which hinges on the thorny ‘question’ – or perhaps more veritably, the challenge – of ‘scale’. In a ‘global’ moment for which analytic tools remain ‘rudimentary’ (Tsing, 2004: 58), scale denotes the spatial dimension from which particular ‘world-views’ are proposed, practiced and brought into being. As Tsing (2004: 58) cautions, however, the fallacy of such constructions of scale resides in their taken-for-granted assumptions: scale is not neutral, rather it is ‘claimed’, ‘contested’ and ‘conjured’ along a dichotomous range between the ‘global blob and the local detail’ – neither of which are helpful in our quest to explain the constitutive workings of the contemporary world. As established in the previous chapter, such questions of scale are at the crux of my intellectual project, which motions
us to (re)consider the current conjuncture – and its hegemonic avowals of emergent modernities and their globalizing dynamics – from the alternative and ‘ex-centric’ (Bhabha, 1994: 6) spatial scale of West Africa and through the lived experiences of male youth. By way of reminder, it too is a project which hinges on an epistemic challenge – namely to estrange the politics of the present through a recalibration of the scale and vantage point from which convincing claims about the global condition may be made. However, to avoid running ahead of myself, let me briefly sketch – using admittedly broad strokes – the polarising canons of the debate surrounding scale and ethnography, for it is only through clearing such a path that the genesis of my own ethnographic project, principally its integrated orientation to theory and method, can be fully grasped.

The first band of critical thought is aptly captured, albeit in an admittedly melodramatic manner, by Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2003: 152) inquiry as to whether ‘ethnography has become an impossibility’ in an emergent ‘era of globalization’. What, they ask, shall be the ‘fate of ethnography’ in a world where ‘globalization is an increasingly contested, troubling reality’, a world where once meaningful ‘nouns like society, community, culture and class have all been called into question’, and where we, as ethnographers, are ‘no longer sure where or what ‘the field’ is? Of less theatrical purview, but posing a similar dilemma is the work of Gille and O’Riain (2002: 271), who plainly declare that globalization ‘poses problems for ethnography’ by ‘destabilizing the embeddedness of social relations in particular communities and places’. Here we see the politics of ‘scale-making projects’ emerge, where Tsing’s (2004) observations of a dichotomy between ‘global’ forces, circulations and structures and ‘local’ reactions, consumption and resistance are produced and reified. Long enshrined in the ethnographic tradition had been the fixed, place-based ‘immersion’ of the researcher in situ, and it is principally this localized character of the craft that is purportedly ‘under threat’ at the contemporary juncture (Gille, 2001; Hendry, 2003). Appadurai (1997: 115) perceptively arrests such threat, and the dynamics from which it hails, when he warns that the principal effect – to which I would add ‘affect’ – of globalization has been to instil a sense of anxiety that the ‘space of intimacy in social life’ will be lost; the very space that has always been the ethnographer’s principle remit or ‘field’ of study.

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10 In the name of avoiding repetition, I have opted against defining the concept of globalization here. Please see the previous chapter for a detailed excursus of its meaning, import and deployment in academic literatures.
Re-scale your analytical purview towards the localized pole of this dichotomy: the emergent moment has also – read paradoxically – been characterized by a ‘turn’ to ethnographic modes that are micro-cosmic in dimension and scale. As Howes (2006: 121) instructs, the corporeal turn of the 1990’s (see Shilling, 2003; Turner, 1984), coupled with the reflexive shift in social science generally, gave rise to a wave of scholarly interest in the sensuous and experiential contouring’s of social reality – one which has seen much ethnographic praxis become ‘grounded in a methodology of what could be called ‘participant sensation’ as opposed to ‘observation’. At the forefront of this ‘sensorial turn’ (Howes, 2003: xii) – which builds on Simmel’s (1907) earlier writings on the ‘Sociology of the Senses’ – have been radically contextualized explorations of sensory experience, perception and affect (Thrift, 2004), with Stoller’s (1997) writings on ‘sensuous scholarship’, Guertz’s (2004) study of ‘culture and the senses’ in a West African community, as well as Pink’s (2009) recent publication, Doing Sensory Ethnography, all influential in shaping an increasingly eclectic ethnographic field. It is, however, important to note that this ‘turn’ to the senses is but part of a broader endorsement of reflexively embodied and phenomenological approaches to ethnographic practice – approaches that have seen scholars such as Csordas (1990) and Wacquant (2004, 2005, 2014) insightfully re-deploy seminal writings on embodiment and perception by Merleau-Ponty (1962), Bourdieu (1979) and Mauss (1950).

Of principal import to my own ethnographic orientation is Wacquant’s (2005: 466) agenda-setting work on ‘carnal sociology’ – which argues for an ethnography situated ‘not outside or above practice but at its “point of production”, in turn conceiving of the body of the analyst ‘as a fount of social competency’ and a ‘chief investigative tool’ for research. He pleads for an ethnography not only ‘of the body as a sociocultural object but from the body’ as a skilled and sentient ‘vector of knowledge’ (Wacquant, 2004). ‘Ethnographers’, he reminds us, ‘are no different from the people they study: they are suffering beings of flesh and blood who, whether they acknowledge it or not, understand much of their topic “by body” and then work, with varying degrees of reflexive awareness and analytic success, to tap and translate what they have comprehended viscerally into the conceptual language of their scholarly discipline’ (Wacquant, 2005: 467).
Scaling back out from the micro-cosmic and experiential contours of being, one may thus begin to appreciate not just the eclecticism of the methodological moment, but the lines of epistemological fracture that emerge through an artificial dichotomy between ‘global’ and ‘local’ modes of ethnographic praxis. Yet, to (re)present such a polarized image of neat antinomies (of the macro-global and the micro-local) would be misleading if it wasn’t shadowed by a series of caveats: the first of which pertains to an emergent, albeit embryonic body of writing which seeks to enact practical methodological solutions to the ethnographic impasse plotted above. In typically erudite fashion, this critical dialogue has seen a number of calls to refigure and even redesign ethnographic praxis – from its empiricist assumptions of ‘detailed observation and prolonged first-hand experience’ (Ingold, 2008: 69) – for this purportedly ‘global era’. Marcus’s (1995, 1998) conception of ‘multi-sited ethnography’ was a notable turning point, for even the criticism of its proposed extension of fieldwork – to multiple sites and the tracing of people, objects, plots, stories and so on – gave rise to a critical exploration of the relationship between space, place and scale (Burawoy, 2000; Gille and O’Riain, 2002; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Feldman, 2011). Indeed, the analytic thrust of Marcus’s (1998: 90) ‘logic by association’ served to capture in particularly succinct form the constructionist imperative of ethnographic praxis in the decade to follow.

At the forefront of this imperative, and forming the crux of my own ethnographic orientation, is the question with which I began this brief excursus: namely the ‘question of scale’ (Foster, 2002: 247), or more specifically now, the question of how to enact an ethnographic praxis that tacks on the awkward scale between ‘interrogating’ the lived realities of social subjects and ‘articulating’ how such contingent conditions are shaped and contoured by a constellation of trans-local processes, relations and connections. I shall now proceed to argue for a theoretically and politically-principled ethnographic orientation – one which, as Gille (2011: 322) affirms, is ‘more than a method. It is an epistemological position’. In returning to the influential writings of Tsing (2004) and the Comaroff’s (2003, 2012), I aspire, therefore, towards an ethnographic form which holds the potential to disrupt hegemonic narratives of modernity, globalization and development, offering instead a narrative suffused by stories of happenstance encounters from the perspectives of those whose lives are tied up or affected by the issues at hand.
3.3. ETHNOGRAPHIC PRAXIS AND THE (GLOBAL) PRODUCTION OF PLACE

Consider the opening assertions of Tsing’s (2004:1) much celebrated tome, Friction, wherein she proclaims that ‘global connections are everywhere’, an assertion which was foreshadowed by her posing of a seemingly facile epistemological dilemma; how does one study the global? Penned at the height of the ‘fashionability of global thinking’ (Smith, 1997: 17), it was a question suffused with counter-normative intent; not merely an inquiry but the original act of revolt in an ethnographic excursus that would see Tsing (2004) summon us to ‘emerge from the shadows of inevitability’ and to think beyond hegemonic narratives of an inexorable and singular global trajectory. Recall, in turn, the introductory avowals of the previous chapter, in which Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) boldly situate Africa, contrary to its enduring construction as a marginal outpost of the global, as a most ‘advanced’ vanguard of the present and the ‘ex-centric site’ (Bhabha, 1994:6) from which contemporary unfolding’s of the global landscape ought to be read. Championed under the title, Theory from the South, the Comaroff’s (2012: 114) counter-evolutionary thesis implores one to invert the superlative truths and logic of Euro-modernist narratives; inviting us, alternatively, to appraise the global landscape from its ‘undersides’; to ‘see familiar things in unfamiliar ways’; essentially, to think beyond the ideological entrapments that have long relegated Africa to its marginal ‘place’ in the shadows of global modernity. The shared resonance here is profound; with the mutually provocative sentiment of Tsing (2004) and the Comaroff’s (2012) derived not from their opposition to a ‘global’ frame of analysis, but in their reciprocal appreciation of it – an appreciation that shall now form the constitutive platform on which I endeavor towards an alternative mode of ethnographic praxis.

There is ‘enormous analytic promise in tracing global interconnections’, notes Tsing (2000: 330), before cautioning that such promise is contingent on the need to avoid ‘subsuming them to any one program of global-future commitments’. Undergirding this statement, as with her intellectual project more broadly, is the quest to establish an alternative framing in which to interrogate and theorize the ‘productive friction of global connection’ without submitting to the enthralled imaginings and universal claims that are emblematic of the neoliberal moment. With the metaphor of friction at the crux of her analytic lexicon, Tsing (2004) convincingly disrupts imagery of a world characterized by objects and subjects ‘in
flow’; motioning us instead to appraise the creative contingency and haphazard engagement through which people, ideas, capital and crises awkwardly intersect in the (re)making of such ‘flows’. Organically grown from her field-work in the rainforests of Indonesia, Tsing (2004) compels us to apprehend a ‘global’ world gripped in a transformative dynamic that is anything but ordered and linear, one fashioned less in causal ‘flows’ of power and capital than in awkward engagements and unforeseen collaborations; ultimately, a world in which contingency matters. For Tsing (2004), such ‘awkward’ interrelations, collaborations, conflicts and crises represent the constitutive fabric of everyday encounter across history and difference.

Echoing Tsing’s (2004) entreaty, the Comaroffs’ (2012: 47) intellectual project is also decidedly global in its outlook, beckoning us to re-place and refigure our ‘angle of vision’ away from the imperious and antinomic North-South dualism that has long reigned supreme in Euro-American social theory. While entitled ‘Theory from the South’, and substantively narrated from Africa, their counter-evolutionary thesis – as with Tsing’s (2004) conception of global connection – more veritably bespeaks of a dialectical world order that ‘rests on a highly flexible, inordinately intricate web of north-south synapses, a web that both reinforces and eradicates, both sharpens and ambiguates, the lines between hemispheres’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012: 47). Africa, for the Comaroffs (2012), signifies a privileged ‘window’ onto the workings of the contemporary world at large, a world whose geography, they suggest, is being ‘recast as a spatio-temporal order made of a multitude of variously articulated flows and dimensions… a world that, ultimately, transcends the very dualism of north and south’. I ask of what it means to ‘be connected’ globally, therefore, in an effort to illuminate the ‘mutual entailment’ of this highly differentiated, uneven and unequal global landscape, theorizing from Africa – and more veritably from the everyday lives of male youth in Ghana – as an alternative vantage point from which to interrogate the politics of our present, global brand of modernity.

It is most pertinently a question which motions us to engage with the promise of an alternative ‘global’ episteme; one which endeavors towards an organic form of theory-work that is ‘grounded’ in the ethnographic, inductive and mundane – a praxis compelled by the pursuit of a theoretical architecture that is attentive to the shifting registers and scales through which the global landscape is fashioned, contested, and experienced. In other words, it is to speak to the distant entanglements and lived particularities of people and
place, immersing oneself in the ‘risks, collusions, and uncertainties’ that characterize everyday encounters on the borderlands of youth in West Africa; ever-observant that futures of all sorts are forged in the contingencies of connection across, and friction between, the interstices of North and South, real and imagined, illicit and illegal. It is a commitment to (re)telling a multitude of stories from a constellation of vantage points, each fragment giving voice to the contingent particularities that arise from, and are generative of, the making of place(s). Tsing (2004: 271) speaks to this ‘awkward’, ‘messy’ and botched dimension of social relations when she cogently exclaims that ‘ethnographic fragments ask us to pay attention to details’; a statement that speaks to the constitutive acts, interactions and idiosyncrasies through which global connections may be ‘known’ and represented. Her advancement of an ‘ethnography of global connection’, therefore, is not a claim to universal knowing, nor is it an avowal of planetary coverage; rather it is borne of a commitment to seeing the world, and its interwoven geographies of place-making from a multiplicity of vantage points; each place constituted and connected through a relational interweaving of distant entanglements and spatially far-flung collaborations, in situated encounters forged through intersecting social relations.

It is my contention, therefore, that Tsing’s (2004) conceptual lexicon—endorsing the fragment, friction, and global connection—complemented by the Comaroff’s (2012) commitment to counter-normative, grounded forms of inquiry, constitutes a most salient platform on which to institute an alternative approach to ethnography. I use the term platform here to acknowledge that Tsing’s (2004) work, while imbued with the virtues articulated above, is nevertheless lacking the explicit conceptual depth and analytic clarity that is the hallmark of theories and theorists whose acumen transcends the time and milieu of their substantive grounding. Most pertinent to my judgment in this regard is the implicit theorization of space and place that clearly informs Tsing’s chief analytic concept of global connection yet remains a largely tacit feature of what is ultimately an empirically driven project. In offering a series of caveats to Tsing’s (2004) conceptual lexicon, I shall now seek to mobilize the analytic promise that has accompanied a shift towards increasing interdisciplinarity in social scientific theory and method; the insights proffered by making (1) ‘space’ and (2) ‘scale’ a central feature of analysis and (3) by drawing on the respective ‘turn’ to embodiment and the senses to ‘flesh out’ a theory of place-making.
The foremost of such caveats is embodied in the concept of ‘connection’; speaking as it does to the fibrous threads that conjoin, order and link, to the relational wedlock of people, things and ideas, and to the interweaving of the social, physical, virtual and imagined. Motioning us to conceive of the global landscape ‘not as smooth surface but as the sphere of coexistence of a multiplicity of trajectories’, Massey (2005: 63) contends that ‘thinking spatially’ allows one to appraise the relational constitution of the world as it is continually (re)produced in and through a constellation of embodied practices, interactions and encounters. Defining space as the ‘product of interrelations from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny’, Massey (2005: 9) refigures scale as a fluid spatial ecology rather than a nested hierarchy shifting from ‘the global’ to ‘the local’. In part inspired by postcolonial thinking, and in part a riposte to the ‘aspatial’ essentialism of globalization theory, Massey’s (2005: 11) positing’s of the global landscape as an ‘open interactional space’ recognizes the inherent multiplicity and friction of connection, while at once acknowledging that such connections are always under-construction, never finished; forever textured by those yet to be made and those which may or may not be accomplished. The writings of Thrift (2007: 174) eloquently capture this ‘drama of uncertainty’ (Tsing, 2004: 269) when he posits that ‘the world is a making; it is processual; it is in action. It is all that is all present and moving. There is no last word, only infinite becoming and constant reactivation… in which each actual event lies amidst many alternatives’. Making explicit Tsing’s (2004: 269) plea for modes of theorizing that permit ‘alternative and more open forms of global commitment’, Massey’s pronouncements for space – its inter-relational constitution, coexistent multiplicity, and ongoing, open (re)production – resonate with the crystallization of a more progressive politics and the promise of alternative ‘global’ futures yet to be made.

Even to invoke the possibility of such an alternative politics is, however, to acknowledge that the relationality of place is neither uniform nor equal in its constitution; rather it is fashioned and (re)produced through the fractures and (dis)continuities of what Massey (2005: 85) aptly terms ‘a cartography of power’. It follows that thinking spatially compels one to (re)consider the uneven and unequal inter-relations that have given rise to a geoscape that is highly differentiated and dis-connected; a world in which past, present, and future are (dis)ordered by ever-fluctuating geometries of power, prestige and dispossession. Taking seriously the relationality of place-making projects thus demands an understanding of how ‘global space’ is textured and dis-connected along enduring and emerging
geometries of power; a feat which in turn demands not only an explicit theory of place, but one which is grounded in, and provides the blueprint for, the everyday praxis and observations of the ethnographer. Just as concrete engagements ‘in the field’ should form the constitutive fabric on which we construct our theorization of place, it follows that our empirical search for meaning should be informed by a concrete theory of place-making.

With Massey (2005: 141), I contend of place as an event in itself; in the simplest sense encompassing the transitory ‘coming together’ of a ‘constellation of processes’ that are neither conceivable as isomorphic sites of locality, nor as microcosmic enclaves of meaning-making. Rather, as an ephemeral ‘articulation’ of a constellation of embodied practices and interactions, competing claims and colluding movements, the elements of a place shall be ‘at different times and speeds, again dispersed’ as a generation of new trajectories and unforeseen configurations hold the promise and danger of connections still to be (re)made. Such a ‘scaling of everyday life’ (Swyngedouw, 1997: 144) forces us to appraise the spatially embedded and relational character of social relations across ‘bodily, community, urban, regional, national, supranational and global configurations’, in turn demanding a recalibration of traditional ethnographic and theoretical ways of knowing. To think spatially, therefore, necessitates a shifting recalibration of scale, compelling one to (re)construct how purportedly macro-political and economic processes, cultural ‘flows’, and ‘globalization’, articulate with, and are constituted through, historically specific and temporally contingent places; ultimately, in the relational friction of embodied subjects as they coalesce, contest and collaborate in and across a wider ecology of things. It follows that the micro-politics of place – as the constitutive fabric on which culture, sociality and the global are woven – hinges on the organic substratum of the body, or more veritably, in the mutual entailment of embodied practices, (inter)actions and movements as they crystalize within a wider socio-spatial cosmos.

Particularly insightful in this regard are a collection of writings which approach the body as an organism, in turn conceiving of knowing and perception as biological processes that are dialectically constituted through movement, in ‘doing’, and (inter)acting as part of, and in relation too, a broader spatial milieu (Ingold, 2008; Pink, 2011). As alluded to in the previous section, the recent re-turn to the sentient, affective body has propagated the recognition that ‘knowing’ is not merely a matter of the mind: rather, it is rooted in embodied practices, movements and interactions vis-à-vis a broader ecology of things,
affectively entwined in ways that often bely representational form. The writings of Thrift are a case in point, motioning us to consider how ‘human life is based on and in movement’, thus capturing the ‘animic flux of life and especially an ontogenesis that undoes a dependence on the preformed subject’. Propagating a break from constructionist notions of the body as inscribed ‘surface’, discursive ‘sign’ and social ‘object’, such scholarship summons instead a conception of the body as a moving, perceiving assemblage of drives, desires and competencies; a biological, material and sensual organism that comes to ‘know’ through its relation to other elements of its environment, in its interface with other people, practices, things and places – both real and imagined.

As Ingold (2000:230) eloquently posits, ‘we know as we go, not before we go’, thus affirming knowing, perception and action as always bound up in the world, ever contingent on the relational interweaving of embodied practice and what Gil (1998:126) terms the ‘mechanics of space’. Making explicit the embodied weavings that remain silenced in Massey’s (2005) writings ‘for space’, Gil (1998:127) posits that ‘the body ‘lives’ in space, but not like a sphere with a closed continuous surface… Being in space means to establish diverse relationships with the things that surround our bodies. Each set of relations is determined by the action of the body that accompanies an investment of desire in a particular thing or particular object. Between the body (and the organs in use) and the things is established a connection that immediately affects the form and space of the body; between the one and the other a privileged spatial relation emerges’. Here too, space is an ‘open ongoing production’ (Massey, 2005: 55), yet Gil (1998) encourages us to comprehend the ‘spatial relation’ in which embodied practice unfolds; a relation eloquently captured by Wacquant’s (2005:466) allusion to the body ‘as a shared assemblage of categories, capacities and cravings; not only socially constructed, and therefore traversed by vectors of power, but socially constructing; as the fount of communal sense, joint sensation and skillful action’. ‘All social life’, he affirms, rests on ‘a bedrock of visceral knowhow’, thus capturing the ‘mutual moulding and immediate inhabiting of being and world’ (Wacquant, 2005: 467).

Reading outward from the moving, sensing, (inter)acting body as it is relationally constituted in space, one is met by a composite ecology of things; at once rooted in the immediacy of the physical landscape yet traversed by distant entanglements, geometries of power, and the ever shifting ‘coming together’ of enduring processes and emerging
trajectories. This is the event of place. It is, irretrievably, here and now. Soon, ‘it won’t be the same ‘here’ when it is no longer now’ (Massey, 2005: 139). As Ingold (2000: 242) asserts, ‘the world is not ready-made for life to occupy’; rather it is the transitory interweaving of ‘things’ in movement that give meaning to the event(s) that we call place. Open and unbounded, a place is, therefore, a temporally-contingent nodal point of interrelated things in movement and in flux, ever-dispersing only to come together again through the specificity of an-other place. Looking back onto the globe from a satellite far removed, one might imagine place as an articulated moment in a ‘global’ geography of social relations, capital ‘flows’ and communication networks; a moment which is attributed meaning, and will in turn engender such, through its mutual entailment within a broader matrix of social relations. With Massey (1994: 8), I contend that this is an extroverted, ‘global’ sense of place.

In bringing to life these abstract matters of place-making, there have been a constellation of ethnographic fragments that have shaped and guided the constitution of this thesis. Amidst this montage of the mundane have been the embodied, material, and sensual relations that I established with others in the course of my everyday wanderings, with the externalities of ‘things’ in my physical surroundings, and with the shifting socio-spatial environs in which I variously became ‘immersed’. But, to return to the opening avowals of Rodger’s (2007), the empirical drivers of my fieldwork arose not purely of my own intellectual volition and design, but through the contingent and dialogical process of ethnographic encounter, and at least in part through my willingness to be swept up by such events. Doing ethnography in this manner is rooted in a commitment to working-the-field, immersing oneself as deeply and durably as possible within the constitutive events and cultural currents of everyday life and acceding to the original directions – of inquiry and interest – which thereafter arise. Put simply, it is to allow oneself to be caught-off-guard and ‘constructed’ by the interactive friction of the field, all the while aware that such fieldwork shall yield ‘theoretically-surprising’ points of vantage onto the issues or ‘sites’ under study. As I shall now explore in more practical terms, this dialogical aspect of fieldwork exerted a profound footprint upon my own ethnographic beginnings in Ghana, West Africa.
3.4 The Friction of ‘doing’ Fieldwork

To speak of ‘friction’, writes Tsing (2004: 6), is to appreciate the awkward, unstable and creative contingencies of doing research in situ and across difference. After all, it is one’s cross-cultural encounters ‘in the field’ that are the constitutive bedrock of doing research – in defining potential entry points, relationships, movements and ultimately, in mediating the production of a situated and relational agency. Tsing (2004: 4) reminds us, therefore, that it is the ‘awkward engagements’ of the ethnographer which open up the organic ‘possibilities’ of inductive research, and which vibrantly animate the composition of any ethnographic account.

The ethnographic offering I present here is no different: indeed, the thematic structure of its (re)presentation owes in large part to the contingent and organic process of its unfolding – a process that was initiated upon my arrival in Ghana to conduct six-months of ethnographic fieldwork at the Right to Dream Academy. At the outset, while I held an intellectual curiosity in issues of urbanism, masculinity and the politics of privation, I had principally organized my fieldwork around an ethnographic investigation of the social structuring of the Right to Dream Academy, and the lived experiences of its male youth recruits. Given the unique nature of the Academy program in West Africa, I entered the field compelled by a distinct interrogative dilemma: namely, to assess the extent to which it functioned as an instrument of Western-led development or merely an elitist talent factory for youth footballers in West Africa. The envisioned drivers of the study – both substantive and theoretical – were to cohere around youth, mobility and development as they were manifest in, and cultivated through, the everyday conditions and curricula of the academy environ. It quickly became apparent, however, that the Right to Dream Academy not only functioned as a vibrant socio-spatial cosmos with a rich aesthetic, material and moral life-force of its own, but offered an extraordinary window onto – and gateway into – the politics and possibility of the neoliberal moment in Ghana at large.

Analytically, therefore, to return to my earlier excursus on ethnography as a ‘place-making project’, I quickly realized that the contextual import of the academy environ could not be grasped from within its immediate spatial ecology alone: for it serves as the very epitome of an interstitial place paradoxically wedged between ‘African reality and the Euro-
American dream’ (Diouf, 2005: 231), at once legitimated by the impoverished abjection of the continent’s youth and emblematic of the ‘modern’ enchantments that are perceived to lie beyond African shores. It soon struck me that the social genesis of Right to Dream’s mission – focused as it is on the empowerment of ‘underprivileged’ male youth – acquires its constructive import relative only to the social problems of the West African context in which it is enfolded, and the perceived absence of viable opportunities for educational, social and material betterment therein. I thus deemed it epistemologically and theoretically essential that I should extend the ethnographic remit of my project, scaling outwards from the micro-politics of the Right to Dream Academy to appraise the way in which it both feeds upon and fights against the societal ills and inequalities of the neoliberal moment in Ghana – a moment which, as the ensuing account shall explicate, has had a particularly damaging impact upon the social mobility, educational attainment and labour opportunities of male youth. Yet, it was only when three unforeseen events came together that the extension of the project was realized.

First, my commencement of fieldwork at the academy proved to be ill-timed given that one of the annual holiday’s – lasting a duration of three weeks – was scheduled a month after my arrival. While initially perceived as an inconvenience, it was, in retrospect, the event that compelled the extension of my analytic ‘lens’ beyond the academy setting, and thus served to redefine the trajectory of my ethnographic endeavours. This organic process was instigated through a second and similarly chance encounter with a Ghanaian youth coach, Fifi, who had shortly before established a recruitment relationship with the Right to Dream Academy – a relationship that was sparked following the awarding of scholarships to a number of his youth prodigies. In forming a genial relationship with Fifi – which originated as always through a shared affection for the ‘beautiful game’ – I soon found myself intrigued by the tangential places to which the academy is connected, and from which its aspiring youth recruits hail. Such intrigue was peaked, however, when Fifi proudly spoke of his ‘training camp’ back in the urban undersides of Ghana’s capital city, Accra, and perhaps most significantly, of the group of aspiring youth footballers who – having acquired his informal guardianship – share compound lodging with him and his family. Having instantly professed my fascination at this practical intersection of youth, football and masculine patronage amidst the impoverished undersides of Ghana’s largest urban metropolis, Fifi perplexedly sought clarification: ‘really?’ he asked with a frowned expression, ‘you would like to come and help with the team?’.
This was the definitive moment in how I found myself crafting a project that would not only proffer a richly situated account of the socio-symbolic and sentient structuring’s of the Right to Dream Academy and its insulated program of life, but one which would depart from its very counterpoint in the impoverished borderlands of the postcolonial African city and from a band of male youth bereft of viable modes of social mobility. If one conceives of such principal ‘sites’ as two connected socio-spatial coordinates within the broader cartography of Ghana’s postcolonial landscape, the objective of my ethnographic endeavours was to grasp and illuminate the constitutive relations of such connections at their very ‘point of production’ (Wacquant, 2005: 466). What, if indeed any, is the process through which a male youth footballer from the urban peripheries of Accra secures entry to the cossetted universe of an elite football academy? How do male youth construct and understand the game of football vis-à-vis their broader pursuit of social mobility, employment and material wealth? And, ultimately, to what extent is the growing import of football in the livelihood strategies of West African male youth a response to the broader politics of their marginalization in a Ghanaian state otherwise deemed to be on the ‘cutting edge’ of neoliberal reform and economic development? The quest to find answers for these interrogative dilemmas thus demanded that I tack back-and-forth between two principle field sites; that of the Right to Dream Academy in the rural backwaters of Ghana’s Eastern region, and Coach Fifi’s training camp situated amidst the urban peripheries of Accra.

While by no means structured as two neatly bounded phases of sited fieldwork, the project encompassed my immersion within, and movement between, the two principle field sites across a six-month period from February to August 2012. As detailed above, my ethnographic praxis was purposely fluid in its design – dictated at once by the socio-spatial movements of key actors at the Right to Dream Academy, and the organic relationships – at once social and institutional – through which the Academy operated. In each of these sites, I employed situationally-specific modes of ethnographic data collection, combining forms of participant observation11 with semi-structured and focus group interviews with key informants. It was, therefore, an ethnographic mode which was intimately contoured by, and affixed to, my theoretical interest in the social production of place, and the extended spatial scale(s) in which ‘place-making projects’ are connected and come into being. In this

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11 Please see the subsequent section entitled ‘Becoming an ‘Infrastructure’ in the Field’ for an in-depth excursus on the diverse array of ethnographic techniques deployed.
sense, I inductively brought forth an ethnography which would seek to interrogate, narrate and conceptualize a spatial and temporal process: a non-linear one to be sure, but one which – as the following map (Plate 1.1.) details – stretched from a point of departure in the impoverished peripheries of Accra to an endpoint in the rural idyll of the Right to Dream Academy.

Plate 1.1. Map of south Ghana detailing principle research sites. Source: Google Maps 2015

This was, however, no abstract ‘process’; rather, it was a lived journey – both aspirational and agonizingly real – which was steeped in the virile forging of personal biography and postcolonial history, a journey along which dreams, careers, memories and bodies have been made, remade, shattered and stirred. The challenge posed, therefore, was to map and mimic in the excruciatingly mundane temporality of real time, the non-linear unfolding of such journeys – illuminating the lived experiences, triumphs and tribulations of male youth footballers as they sought to ‘justify’ their talent and ascertain one of the most coveted opportunities in the West African landscape today; namely the chance to become an ‘academy boy’. Enacting a spatially and temporally fluid mode of ‘doing’ ethnography in
a moment of rapid social transformation in West Africa, I attempted to tack back and forth between something akin to Ferguson’s (1999) ‘urban ethnography’ and the classically-bounded ‘village study’ that once dominated anthropological practice. The concrete process of my fieldwork thus entailed coming to terms with the turbulent realities of urban domicile in 21st century Accra, a sprawling and confusing metropolis that is at times almost schizophrenic in its geographies – a city furnished by post-modern superblocks and stagnant slums, at once suffused by worldly trappings and yet shadowed by a sprawling hinterland of insolvent, destitute margins. In many ways, the recurrent shifting of ethnographic sites was thus accompanied by a sharp contrast in substantive themes – with my embodied movements from urban to rural more broadly denotive of a shift from destitute poverty to emergent prospects, from immobility to extra-local attachments, and from dystopian conceptions of futures foreclosed to those of more utopian guise.

It began along the axis of the former, and through my residence with ‘Coach Fifi’ and his quasi-adopted crew of youth prodigies on the urban outskirts of Accra. My ethnographic relationship with Coach Fifi, as one of the project’s key gatekeepers, initially developed through his localized revere as a talent scout for the Right to Dream Academy in Accra, before emerging as a primary empirical focus of the project when an invited ‘visit’ culminated in my spending an initial one-month of immersive fieldwork at his training camp. Like so many of the city’s margins, Coach Fifi’s camp was located amidst a dense and decaying labyrinth of makeshift dwellings and compound housing, its high population density akin to the endemic congestion of low socio-economic demographics in the city more broadly. Upon his request, I resided on the floor of his narrow living room – just inside the gaping wooden door onto the compound and separated from his own living quarters by a beaded curtain hanging from the doorway. Metres away was the veritable ‘camp’ Fifi spoke of – a 20x20 metre concrete dwelling which housed up to ten youth footballers at any one time; its interior minimally furnished by a network of thin mattresses and enclosed only by a tattered grey sheet draped over the doorway. This initial fieldwork primarily encompassed my daily observation of, and participation in, the mundane schedule of the training camp, before the latter phase of my broader ethnographic work included repeated visits across a five month period, as well as a series of semi-structured

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12 This initial one-month period of ethnographic fieldwork ensured that I established a strong rapport with Coach Fifi and his crew of youth footballers, and was the impetus for my repeated bi-weekly visits to the training camp over the course of the five months to follow.
and focus group interviews with Coach Fifi, his trusted coaching partner, Big Bro, and eight of their aspiring youth prodigies.

Most formative to my ethnographic learning ‘here’, however, was the bare and infertile expanse of sandy earth on which Coach Fifi and ‘his boys’ trained each morning – its location situated a ten minute jaunt through the muted alleys, uncovered culverts and dense corrugated tin dwellings at sunrise. Better known locally as the revered footballing mecca of Darkuman Park, it was in truth little more than a barren sandy clearing marked by an ever-present lavishing of white lining and a pair of goalposts, their steady upkeep a rare enduring adornment amidst an environ whose mutable surroundings were vulnerable even to the capricious downpours of the rainy season. Scant evidence of material longevity prevailed on all sides, with Coach Fifi’s training field bordered by an ever-mounting stockpile of unroadworthy tro-tros, the rotting’s of a sprawling waste embankment – where a gaunt herd of cattle perpetually mused – and a dense clustering of makeshift dwelling’s on all sides. Yet, what it lacked in aesthetics, it conjured in charisma, for Darkuman Park was a ‘football space’ steeped in local cultural tradition, serving as a distinctly masculine ‘meeting place’ (Massey, 1994; 7) reaching backwards as well as forwards in time; its confines bringing into sharp focus the juxtaposition between the immense footprints of the past, the grinding tenacity of the present, and the compulsive imploration and summoning of futures – futures imaginable and attainable only through the millennial promise of playing the ‘global’ game. For Coach Fifi’s boys, and a generation of male youth in the neighbourhood, Darkuman Park was not simply a local football field, but a ‘point of articulation’ between their immediate embodied investments in the game and the transcendent trajectories of ‘brothers’, friends and foes who had ‘made it’ elsewhere through their footballing ‘talent’. From the vantage point of male youth, Darkuman Park is less a stable place in Ghana than a route out of Africa: it assumes meaning by virtue not only of its immediate ecology but of its connections – the way in which it points to opportunities ‘outside’, and the more immediate chance to ‘justify’ one’s talent under the gaze of Ghana’s emergent network of foreign and domestic football agents, expatriate talent scouts and European-owned football academies.

Crucially, it was only following a series of chance encounters with this ever-expanding matrix of commercial stakeholders that the veritable possibilities and pitfalls of a boy’s ‘lived journey’ came into sharp focus, and the constitutive ingredients of my ethnographic
endeavours were finalized. Each of these encounters, as introduced through my opening interaction with FIFA-licensed agent Kuku, served to illuminate how my racialized whiteness and assumed European roots were constructed as an ‘infrastructure’ (Simone, 2004) to be navigated within the hierarchical echelons of Ghana’s burgeoning football frontier. As a white, highly-educated, Irish-European man with a known appetite for the game of football in West Africa, I signified a complex amalgam of possibilities in my subject’s lives, with the friction of ethnographic encounter forever mediated by the mutable connotations of my race, class, gender and nationality as they variously intersected and clashed with a transitory articulation of bodies, things and emotions in motion and momentarily, in place. It is to such politics and possibility that I now turn as I reflexively and critically reflect on the relational power equilibria that contoured my ‘emplaced’ (Pink, 2011) relations in the field, and crucially, how I sought to actively negotiate – and at times accentuate – particular facets of my subjective identity relative to the interactional dynamics of the situation, space and subject.

3.5. BECOMING AN ‘INFRASTRUCTURE’ IN THE FIELD: NegoTIATING RACE, POWER AND PRIVILEGE

In his writings on the means to livelihood in the postcolonial African city, Simone (2004: 407) draws attention to the ‘highly mobile and provisional possibilities for how people live and make things, how they use the urban environment and collaborate with one another’ – in essence, arguing for an understanding of ‘people as infrastructure’ within the informal, marginalized undersides of urban life. At the same time, Simone (2004: 425) reminds us that the African city of today has become ‘a platform for people to engage with processes and territories that bear a marked sense of exteriority’, their geographies ever-more mediated by, and brought into direct contact with, the dynamics of a larger world beyond Africa. Over the course of my fieldwork, I – as a white, Irish-European man with a known proclivity for all things African football – gave embodied form and contextual resonance to this largely mediated, non-African elsewhere, and the possibilities to which it speaks in the postcolonial vernacular. At the forefront of such localized articulations was my racialized-as-whiteness, for it served as a powerful initial arbitrator of my interactions in the field, and my constructed import in the lives – and potential livelihoods – of all those with whom I crossed paths. Perhaps the great irony of such articulations, however, was the
muted import of my Irish heritage – a heritage which, like Ghana’s, has been indelibly inscribed by cultural, economic and spatial dispossession at the hands of British colonial rule, and the segregated and conflictual aftermath it brought forth.

My Irish heritage notwithstanding, however, Pierre (2012: 74) aptly captures the backdrop to such articulations when she instructs that ‘Whites in Ghana – and throughout the world – represent modernity, technological advancement, industry, innovation, economic success, political leadership and cultural superiority’ – qualities, she asserts, that have come to ‘denote value in today’s world; they are what dictate the terms of membership – humanity – in modern society’. Here, then, the generic markings of my racialized positionality in Ghana are laid bare, with my naturalized whiteness at once textured by its localized equating with wealth and status, and against the inverted predicaments of a distinctly African sense of Blackness. A most mundane illustration of such politics of difference was the excited eliciting’s of ‘Obruni’ that I received from those I encountered on a daily basis, with my presence – particularly in rural locales – often broadcast by frenzied cries of Obruni and a procession of children eager to make my acquaintance. Taken literally, the word, Obruni, means ‘foreigner’, and has been used historically to identify white Europeans in Ghana (Pierre, 2012). To be considered Obruni, as Pierre (2012: 77) elaborates, is to be associated not only with whiteness as a racialized identity but as a ‘particular class status, cultural standing, educational level and outlook’. Equally, therefore, the expression of the term connotes a radical distance from the local population – the Obruni is also a stranger from elsewhere, and thus is often presumed to be naïve or alien to local customs, culture and language.

Yet, while recognizing that the geopolitical and racialized inequalities that manifest in many of my relationships were stark, it would be inexplicably reductionist to attribute a totalising power to the signification of skin color, and a statically conceived one at that. Again, the writings of Pierre (2012) are deemed instructive, for she illuminates a degree of heterogeneity in localized constructions of whiteness in Ghana: on the one hand, she identifies the ‘development Whites’ who are presumed to be part of a transnational expatriate class of workers who are in Ghana as development experts and whose positions denote the conflation of race, class and nationality. Appended to this, on the other hand, is the ‘Peace Corps Whites’, who represent a diverse group of Euro-Americans who are traveling in or through Ghana as part of a student exchange, a volunteer trip or, crucially,
as academic researchers. I recount such fluid stereotypical categories principally because the latter group – that which I most obviously fall into – is read in ways that can transgress or trouble naturalized notions of whiteness. As Pierre (2012: 90) instructs, this ‘haphazard collection of people either seeking adventure or with altruistic intentions… dress differently, they often travel by tro-tro or walk around in groups, they buy food from vendors by the side of the road, they shop at the outdoor markets, and they have developed a certain rapport with some ordinary Ghanaians’. Crucially, while often considered amusing, their apparent ease with working-class Ghanaian life and custom is read in ways that bestow a particular kind of localized respect.

This, I hasten to add, is not to suggest that Ghana is anything approaching a deracialized paradise: far from it, what I contend is that the contextual import of my whiteness was neither totalizing nor static. Rather, at different moments, my racialized identification as ‘White’ and ‘European’ were read and interpreted in ways both unpredictable and malleable, entailing outcomes that were variously refracted by gender, (dis)ability, and in the latter phases of fieldwork, by my embodied proficiencies in the game of football. It goes without saying, therefore, that the ethnographic offering I (re)present here is one composed in ways that are reflective of, and refracted through, the contingent particularities of my established relations in the field; a woman, someone with darker or lighter skin, a Ghanaian or a British citizen would have crafted different ethnographies; each, to borrow from Matlon (2014: 14), would have elucidated ‘different elements of the simultaneous realities that form contemporary life in the African periphery’. Thus, in moving from my general positionality in the racialized consciousness of Ghana at large to the situational particulars of my concrete and contingent encounters in place, I deem it judicious to home in on the intimate politics of my primary relationships in the field: firstly, with Coach Fifi and ‘his boys’ in the urban peripheries of Accra; secondly, with a cluster of Ghanaian football agents, scouts and businessmen, and; finally, within the closed context of the Right to Dream Academy; each of which encompassed my becoming an ‘infrastructure’ (Simone, 2004) in unique and uneven ways.

First, during my time living amongst Coach Fifi’s crew, I embodied the peculiar status of a relatively youthful, white European male who – to the puzzlement of my Ghanaian peers – elected to ‘hang out’ far from the privileged spaces they associated with ‘Whites like me’ in Ghana. Such initial puzzlement subsided, however, when our shared passion for the
game of football was brought to the fore. Indeed, with Coach Fifi’s boys in particular, my initial arrival elicited a somewhat cagey and standoffish response – one which progressively diminished as I actively accentuated our mutual passion for, and frustrations in, the game of football. Principally, to borrow from Goffman’s (1959) writings on the dramaturgical essence of social interaction, I chose to present a self-script which accentuated my status as a recently injured footballer; a script which was recurrently legitimated through the gasps of the boy’s as they inspected the scars on my left knee – the only aesthetic marker of the surgical reconstruction I’d underwent on my left anterior cruciate ligament only months before. Indeed, in speaking to the importance of such moments of interactive friction, I recall in particular a happenstance encounter with seventeen year-old, Mensah, who – upon hearing me reluctantly decline an invitation to join in the morning action – therapeutically declared of the pains he had been experiencing with his own knee, before requesting that I assess the ‘softness’ – read swelling – around his patella as some of the other boys watched on. Rather tellingly, such moments of informal dialogue quickly turned towards the game in ‘Europe’ – a partly imagined and singular ‘place’ employed largely as a floating signifier for their mediated knowledge of football ‘outside’.

For that reason, it would be naïve to neglect the contextual import of my designation as a ‘European’; indeed, my introductions were often finished with the words ‘and he’s from Europe’. I was, in effect, both a novel outlet onto the mediated, partly imagined worlds they ‘know’ and consume, and a transitory escape from the worlds they inhabit – with the game of football at once highlighting a point of cultural crossover, yet heightening the very real inadequacies of their immediate surroundings. It must be said, therefore, that Coach Fifi’s relationship with the Right to Dream Academy, coupled with my assumed identity as a football coach, meant that I too was an ‘infrastructure’ (Simone, 2004) in this setting: as an external figure in my subjects everyday lives, I came to signify a precarious yet hyper-productive sense of hope – a sense which is intimately affixed to the game of football and its inextricable association with a ‘European’ elsewhere. In short, my presence symbolized a rare, direct encounter with the ‘European’ world to which they aspire, while my interest in the fanciful minutiae of their future aspirations inevitably had an affirmatory, legitimizing effect on the subjective identities they sought to embody. Such affirmatory symbolism was not exclusive to my interactions and encounters with Coach Fifi’s crew of youth footballers, however, for in the months to come, I would unwittingly be drawn into
– or at least be presented with an entry point into – Ghana’s burgeoning politico-economic matrix of sports agents, scouts and businessmen; each of whom were keen to bolster their entrepreneurial activities through the forging of trans-local, non-African forms of social alliance and collaboration.

In speaking to the organic nature of the fieldwork process, the inclusion of this commercial thread owed largely to a series of encounters in which I was mistaken for – or presumed to be – a European football agent; the assumptive logic evidently being that my white skin and understanding of grassroots football in Ghana must derive from an entrepreneurial investment in its extractive potential. Indeed, in addition to the ‘partnership’ proposed by Kuku in the opening epigraph, I recall an earlier encounter wherein the naturalization of my white skin with economic and socio-political privileges led to a most unexpected invitation from a high ranking member of Ghana’s national youth team. I was sitting under the shade of a small wooden stand watching an early morning exhibition game between one of the nation’s premier football academy’s and the visiting Ghana U-17 ‘Black Starlets’ – purportedly the elite group of youth footballers selected from across the nation. As the tetchy on-field action drew to a close, I was approached by two members of the Ghana U-17 coaching staff, their bright yellow tracksuits emblazoned with the iconic symbol of the Ghana Football Association (GFA) and the nation’s vibrant tri-color flag. To my considerable surprise, the two senior figures extended a firm handshake and sincerely inquired as to my ‘opinion’ of the on-field action – an inquiry which, due to its unexpected arrival, found me momentarily off-guard. Intuitively discerning that an honest – read frank – response may be fruitful, and drawing from my modest coaching acumen, I declared my surprise at the scrappy nature of the contest, pinpointing in particular the poor ball retention of a team purportedly comprised of the nation’s most talented youth footballers at U-17 level.

‘Most of our boys are not in camp yet. The majority of those who played today are young players we are looking at’, assured one of the coaches, before predicting his team for glory at the upcoming U-17 African youth championship.

While still perplexed as to the basis of their interest, I elected to continue the casual dialogue: ‘Is it a conscious decision to play local opposition such as the academies or do you also play against youth teams from European nations?’, I asked without any real interrogative direction – my concern being only to pinpoint the age at which Ghana’s elite
youth footballers are presented with opportunities to travel ‘outside’. However, as the more senior of the two coaches began recounting some of his side’s recent – almost exclusively West African – opponents, the other interrupted: ‘Perhaps you could organize some friendly games for us in Europe?’, he asked in a manner that abruptly concluded the small-talk and broadcast their assumption that I was not just a White European, but a football agent capable of arranging international exhibition games between some of the world’s most influential footballing nations.

Such encounters became commonplace as my fieldwork progressed and I ventured ever further into the politico-economic matrix that administers, governs and variously seeks to profit from the capitalization of football as a highly lucrative extractive industry in Ghana. Here too, as I shall argue in what follows, Ghana reveals itself to be at the forefront of neoliberal development, with football’s postcolonial structure bearing the undeniable trappings of a highly racialized global political economy, and the extractive conquest on which its inequitable circuits are fuelled. Paramount to the epistemological nuances of this project, therefore, are the contingent outcomes – and access – that were engendered by the intersecting currency of my identity as a White European with a passion for football; a subjective triad that indexed beyond any doubt my localised standing as an entrepreneurial, agent-like figure harbouring some as yet unknown extractive intent in Ghana’s football industry. It was such routinely presumed – rather than actively assumed – identities that therefore facilitated the encounters that later gave rise to the interactional fragments and interviews with members of Ghana’s ever-burgeoning matrix of football agents, scouts and academy coaches, with their initial interest in my ‘project’ no doubt bolstered by the potential opportunities it signified for the kind of makeshift alliances and social collaboration that Simone (2004) spoke of when he coined the notion of ‘people as infrastructure’.

Finally, in shifting to the most enduring field-site of the project, my ethnographic immersion within the cossetted world of the Right to Dream Academy arguably demanded the most complex negotiation of my enacted relationships and constructed roles vis-à-vis the staff and students – a divide that was clearly delineated through the institution’s highly regimented and disciplined program of life. The conundrum that thus presented itself was one of internal perception: how could I, as an external figure entering the academy environ, actively seek to transgress – or at least disrupt – its established classifications and
hierarchy? To take a cue from Goffman (1959), could I cultivate a ‘role’ which permitted my everyday engagement with the ‘academy boys’ while avoiding the hierarchical classification as a ‘staff member’ – in effect, therefore, entering a kind of interstitial ‘grey area’ between the academy staff and its male youth denizens. Such dilemmas, both epistemological and practical, soon led me to the pioneering ethnographic work of Wacquant (2004), whose borrowings from Marcel Mauss (1950), Merleau Ponty (1959) and Bourdieu (1979) amongst others was insightfully captured in his plea for enactive, immersive forms of incarnate inquiry. Crucially, as he empirical demonstrates through his long-term ‘apprenticeship’ in a Chicago boxing club, such an ‘enactive’ mode of ethnography demands that one ‘enter the theatre of action in some ordinary capacity and, to the highest degree possible, apprentice in the ways of the people studied’ (Wacquant, 2015: 5). It was at this point that my corporeal proficiencies as a footballer and modest history in the bowels of the professional game came to the fore, not just as an asset and mode of ethnographic acceptance amongst the academy’s youth footballers, but as a ‘major technique of ethnographic investigation and interpretation in its own right’ (Wacquant, 2005: 465).

In practical terms, I decided to mimic as deeply and durably as possible the everyday routine of the ‘academy boy’ in order to gain a ‘visceral apprehension of their universe as materials and springboard for its analytic reconstruction’ (Wacquant, 2015: 5). Crucially, this entailed a gruelling daily schedule: I would train on-field (or in the early days during my injury rehabilitation, on the sideline with the other injured players) twice daily at 6.30am and 4pm, eat breakfast, lunch and dinner with the academy boys (as opposed to with the staff off-campus), attend the school day from 9.30am to 3pm in both a teaching assistant and mentorship capacity, and finally, maintain a presence in the library each evening while the cohort were either completing homework or analysing a live broadcast of a European game deemed educationally valuable by the coaching staff. From the classroom to the training field – the nodal points of academy culture – my role(s) recurrently shifted from teaching assistant and researcher to training partner and teammate; a juxtaposition that quickly proved fruitful in distinguishing myself from the academy’s broader compliment of Euro-American staff. Ultimately, however, it was the processual unfolding of my enactive becoming in the academy which I consider most influential to the rapport I established with its youth recruits – a process which I commenced as an injured footballer seeking to rebuild the strength and integrity of my left knee. In hindsight, this
‘injured’ classification was an influential mediating factor in the ethnographic offering presented here, for it both established my passion and adoration for the game, and allowed the academy’s youth recruits a direct and visceral point of connection to the vulnerability of my standing as a footballer temporarily deprived of the capacity to ‘play’.

Empathetic inquiries as to how strong my knee was feeling became a normative feature of the post-training walk to breakfast in my early days at the academy, yet it was not until I began the physical reconditioning phase – and was reintroduced to on-field running and ball-striking – that such intrigue gave way to attentiveness of a more somatic variety. Indeed, it was a scorching Saturday afternoon a month after arriving at the academy that my excursion into the affective and carnal realm of corporeal connection began in earnest with a timid swing of my right leg across the sweet-spot of the ball; my left leg decisively planted as the blades of my boots breached the grassy surface and embedded in the turf. It was a milestone moment, both in the long road to a full recovery, and perhaps more poignantly, in prompting a radical shift in my inter-subjective rapport with the academy’s male occupants and their deeply carnal apprenticeship in the game of football. It was a moment shared with my primary training partner, Clinton; an effervescent thirteen year-old with an unquenchable appetite for the game of football, and a mercurially gifted left foot. ‘Darragh, tell me please, is your knee strong for some personal training today?’ he routinely posited, before we collected a sack of balls and got to work. In the weeks that followed, as I overcame the fear of dynamic movement on-field and slowly regained confidence and fluidity in my lower limbs, I noticed a distinct shift in my standing amongst the academy’s youth recruits. I quickly found myself enmeshed within the material, affective and highly skilled exchanges of the training field – invited to join in informal ball-striking sessions with the younger cohort, inundated with individual requests of ‘personal training’, and even subtly challenged by a few of the senior boys to the technical duel that is ‘football tennis’ – a much hyped test of one’s technical mastery of the ball in a confined space.

In the final month of my fieldwork, I began full-contact training with the academy’s elite development squad after having initially commenced my rehabilitative ‘journey’ alongside the fledgling recruits. The progressive temporal phasing of my rehabilitation process therefore mirrored the developmental trajectory and hierarchy of academy life, moving from my initial re-integration to a similar technique-oriented curricula to that of the
academy’s newest recruits through to the performance-led demands of the most senior professional prospects. This process, I contend, represents a fundamentally significant dimension of my ethnographic project; indeed, to defer once more to the recent observations of Wacquant (2014: 4), I enacted a mode of ethnographic praxis which entailed actively working to become a ‘vulnerable’ subject amongst others, leveraging my own corporeal proficiencies and problems, comprehensions and fears in an effort to deepen my grasp of the academy’s cosseted inner universe. ‘I can see now that you are a player!’, affirmed one of the senior boys in a legitimation of such efforts as we walked off the field after an evening passing session.

The import of such legitimation was not restricted to the training field; rather, my progressive reintegration to full-contact training was accompanied by a growing curiosity in my pedigree as a footballer. Lunch conversations routinely entailed question and answer sessions on where I have played in ‘Europe’, the ‘big players’ that I have competed against, and my aspirations in the professional game upon my departure from Ghana. Crucially, however, given the normalcy of Euro-American visitors to the academy, the significance of my whiteness here was greatly reduced; in short, I was less an infrastructure to be navigated than a peculiar presence whose commitment to the demanding daily routine of academy life ensured a certain sense of localized approval. This was reinforced by my conscious engagement in the reciprocity of everyday exchange: my assistance with reading in the classroom was exchanged for ‘help’ with passing practice after school, or for weekly lessons in local dialects such as Twi. Indeed, the extent of my engagement with the everyday demands of the academy was vibrantly illuminated as I lazily entered the dining hall one Sunday morning to face the stern inquiries of Clinton, who was perplexed as to the reason for my absence from morning bible readings.

To conclude this brief excursus, however, I must reiterate that I have sought not to argue for a facile conception of transcending difference in the field; rather, my aim here has been to illuminate the situational particulars that have textured the ethnography composed, and which have variously mediated the provisional and partial attenuation of many differences pertinent to the inquiry. That said, however, I contend that my deeply carnal apprenticeship in the academy program of life, and the reciprocal bonds it engendered, had a contextually unique and provisionally profound impact on my relationship with the academy boys. To borrow from the vibrant lexicon of Ingold (2000: 192), I became one of ‘the very threads
from which the living world’ of the academy was woven, and in so doing, opened up and enacted a radically contextualized, incarnate angle of vision onto the social and symbolic structure of the Right to Dream Academy, and the everyday life-worlds of its male youth denizens. It is, however, from its very counterpoint in the urban peripheries of Accra – and the sandy confines of Darkuman Park – that this ethnographic journey shall now commence; a journey which, to evoke Hoffman’s (2011: xv) rallying cry, attempts to elucidate the stories, experiences and vantage points of male youth as they seek to ‘live productively through the fractured, experimental, and decidedly unfixed nature of what it means to be African in the world today’. 
CHAPTER 4:
ON THE BORDERLANDS: THE POLITICS OF YOUTH, FOOTBALL AND MASCULINE PATRONAGE ON THE URBAN POSTCOLONY

4.1. INTRODUCTION

‘THEY ARE ALL HUNGRY for the game’, exclaimed nineteen year-old Kweku, the dust yet to settle following a particularly brutal coming together of bodies and ball. By that point, we had exhaustively scrutinized the frenetic unfolding’s of the game; an altogether dogged affair in truth, but one made memorable by the ease at which Coach Fifi’s boys had dictated the rhythm of proceedings; their commanding movement and ownership of the ball all the more impressive given the harshly sloped, exceedingly sandy conditions underfoot and the scorching sun overhead. Pointing through the sizeable crowd that lined the field, Kweku had offered a detailed brief on each of the up-and-coming youth prospects; a motley crew of ambiguously-aged footballers he avowed, their shared desire to ‘be seen’ drawing them to the vibrant football culture of Accra’s urbanities, and under the ever-more revered tutelage of Coach Fifi.

‘Nana is a big talent’, Kweku enthused, directing my gaze towards a diminutive figure on the opposite flank. ‘He has justified many times. Many of the academies like him a lot. But the problem is he is considered too small for an African player’.

‘What about this boy?’ I inquire, tracing the marauding path of a tall midfielder. ‘You must believe me; this boy has fitness like no other. You will see him running the hill [he gestures in the opposite direction] each morning before sunrise. But he has not been able to make the grade for what they want. Many of the academies have rejected him. I cannot be so sure why.’

Bringing his lengthy excursus to a close – one in which hard luck stories and rejection were recurrently tempered with an unwavering, almost deistic sense of expectation – I asked about Coach Fifi’s relationship with his aspiring youth prodigies. ‘He is like a brother, maybe even like a father for some’ he said. ‘Many young players have come here to justify’13 with him, hoping to become a part of his team. Some boys come to live with him.

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13 A ‘local’ West African term denoting a trial or try out opportunity or period with a football team, academy or agent.
at the camp beside his home and he is training them each day: preparing them to go to justify’s at the academies and helping them to be seen by scouts or agents. I think this is his hope for them.’

With the sounding of the final whistle, and having momentarily eavesdropped on Coach Fifi’s post-match debrief, we accompanied the players back to ‘camp’ – a 20x20 metre concrete dwelling set amidst the dense fabric of Accra’s interior sprawl: compound housing, wooden kiosks, market stalls, and filth streams enfolded into a mutable matrix of urban decay. Shafts of evening sunlight beamed through a tattered grey sheet hanging over the doorway, its interior minimally furnished by a network of thin mattresses and the cluttered personal belongings of its youthful inhabitants. ‘This is it’ Kweku explains, adding that it has housed migrant youth footballers who have ‘turned up’ from as far afield as Togo and Nigeria: their decision to embark on such journeys paved with a conviction that Accra was at the vanguard of West Africa’s burgeoning football frontier.

As we approached the gateway to the compound in which Kweku lived with his mother and two siblings, he unexpectedly shifted the focus to his own investment in the game. It was a topic that I had not breached in our previous encounters, despite my knowing that he had ‘justified’ – a colloquial term denoting a trial or try-out period – with at least two of Ghana’s major football academies. Lamenting his failure to secure a ‘scholarship’ at any of the ‘big academies’, Kweku revealed his mother’s mounting impatience at his ‘wasting time with football instead of schooling’; a charge he disputed only with a meek throw of the arms and by seemingly assigning culpability to the cosmic allure of the game for male youth across West Africa today. ‘You will come to learn that everybody here is watching football, they are playing it and with the grace of god, they are hoping that they can go outside to a big team in Europe. Any of us, if he has the chance to go outside, he will say I want to go. It’s just what we do. It’s like a disease or something. Like maybe a kind of African disease you know’.

At the crux of Kweku’s statement, and the encounter sketched above, is a compelling narrative of crisis. Borne of the interlocking deprivations and affective desires of the African postcolony, it is at once a gendered and generational crisis – its effects most productive where the ‘problem’ of youth encounters the informal ‘infrastructure’ (Simone,
of the urban periphery. Inverting the prosperous imagery of Ghana’s emergence as a ‘neoliberal pacesetter’ (Chaflin, 2010: 29), what reveals itself ‘here’ – amidst the abject undersides of the postcolonial city – is an ever-growing surplus of male youth abandoned by the neoliberal state, unemployed by the free market, and incarcerated within the ‘de-temporalized’ (Ferguson, 2006) abjection of Africa today. Unemployed, uneducated, idle and thereby emasculated, Kweku embodied such a crisis: the acute ‘problem’ of his youth symbolic of a distinctly masculine longing to jettison the past in the quest to produce a future; a millennial future in which he would ‘go outside’, become a professional footballer in Europe, and perhaps most significantly, escape the disaffected ranks of ‘eternal youth’ (Matlon, 2014) in the underdeveloped, overused shadows of urban West Africa.

Capturing the broader architecture of Kweku’s disaffection, Ferguson (2006: 191) asserts that the African continent is gripped by a shift ‘from the temporal dynamics of societal progress to a new reliance on individual spatial mobility’; one which is propagating the advent of ‘escape’ and the pursuit of ‘going outside’ as principle livelihood strategies on the urban postcolony. No longer buoyed by the modernist myth of development, this is a moment in which Piot (2010) observes a broader crisis of belonging in West Africa; characterised by a growing rejection of tradition, the rise of occult economies, and proliferating, all-pervasive fantasies of exile. As Kweku affirms in his allusion to ‘everybody watching football’, urban life-worlds in West Africa are increasingly attuned to, and mediated by, global forms of popular culture; with the emergent script of male youth at once articulated within extra-territorial tropes of idolized blackness, yet sharply delimited by the impoverished, ‘bare life’ (Agamben, 1998) of African realities. In this chapter I contend, therefore, that male youth increasingly occupy an interstitial and outlying borderland; their existence wedged between the perpetual uncertainty of the postcolony and the ‘modern’ enchantments that are perceived to lie beyond its borders.

The essence of my argument, if I may briefly sketch it out in interrogative form, is that the collective quest for exile amongst male youth has transformed the peripheral space of urban West Africa – so often admonished as an apocalyptic, barren exterior – into a hyper-productive borderland. I read the chapter’s opening epigraph, therefore, as a striking

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14 Simone (2004) extends the concept of infrastructure to emphasise the notion of ‘people as infrastructure’, thus grasping the importance of collaboration and alliance in navigating urban space.
illustration of an enterprising underclass propagating novel forms of masculine sociality, seeking out ‘new’ projects of futurity, and striving to enact alternative modes of ‘becoming mobile’ out of Africa.

Providing an organic or ‘grounded’ theoretical caveat for the chapter is Kweku’s articulation of football as a ‘kind of African disease’ – a concept that I argue is symbolic of the paradoxical meaning and construction of the game in the everyday lives of male youth in West Africa. At one level, therefore, I contend that the game of football has become a primary vehicle of out-migration and a most millenarian resolution to the ‘problem’ of male youth. Yet, inverting the paradox, I too reason that Kweku’s pathological construction of football – which he simultaneously proclaims a feverish sense of adoration for – stems from a reflexive consciousness of his own precarity vis-à-vis a game that has become ‘for everybody’ the elected vehicle through which to ‘go outside’. The conundrum of Kweku’s pathology notwithstanding, it is this collective quest for exile, and its emerging alignment with the promise of playing the ‘global’ game that forms the chief substantive dilemma in what follows; one which I contend affords a unique point of vantage onto the vastly under-theorized life-worlds of male youth in urban Ghana at large.

Grounded in, and narrated through, the interactions, stories and experiences of ethnographic fieldwork in the over-populated periphery of urban Accra, I have endeavoured toward a placed, richly experience-like form of praxis; a mode of theory-work that, to borrow from the vibrant lexicon of Comaroff and Comaroff (2012:49), ‘tacks on the awkward scale’ between the affective and contingent phenomena of the lived world and the larger determinations – both proximate and far-flung – that impinge on the production of such ‘place-events’ (Ingold, 1999). While acknowledging the insights proffered by Alegi (2010), Bale (2004), Darby (2000, 2005, 2007, 2010), and Esson (2013), the theoretical narrative of the chapter is not, I hasten, centred on the socio-cultural organization of African football per se: rather, I focus more expressly on the particularities of its intersection with, and appropriation in, the production of borderland masculinities and youth amidst the peripheral urban spaces of the African city. The unique contribution of

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15 The grounded form intended here seeks to achieve the dialectic theory-work espoused by Jean and John Comaroff’s (2012) entreaty against the ‘flight from theory’ in social scientific writing; a form which seeks to interweave the ‘points of articulation’ between empirical phenomena and their multi-scalar determinations.
the chapter, therefore, lies in its interrogation of hitherto underexplored points of articulation\(^{16}\) between issues of masculinity, youth and urbanism as they coalesce through the game of football and the marginal cityscape(s) of Accra, Ghana.

The chapter commences with an appraisal of how football has been constructed and experienced by male youth as a *borderland* practice; situating the game’s emerging significance to the place-making of peripheral urban locales of Accra, and in the ‘global’ forms of (be)longing established by its male youth populace. There then follows a concerted analysis of the chapter’s primary thesis; namely that male youth have actively appropriated the game of football as a vehicle through which to actualise their quest to ‘justify’. The latter section of the chapter explores the politics of hierarchical patronage that have crystalized around the game of football in urban Accra, wherein I interrogate how male youth consciously navigate the precarity of their masculine becoming through the forging of alliance with a host of domestic and foreign intermediaries. It is, however, to a morning scene in the sandy confines of Darkuman Park that I now turn as I seek to ‘place’ the *borderlands of youth* amidst the informal undersides of urban Accra.

### 4.2. The (PRODUCTIVE) POLITICS OF PRIVATION: YOUTH, MASCULINITY & THE AFRICAN CITY

Each morning a similar scene unfolded: up and out of ‘camp’ before sunrise, a painstakingly swift jaunt through the muted maze of the city’s dense peripheries, and arrival into Darkuman Park by daybreak. A putrid waste embankment marked the horizon at one end, an ever-replenished stockpile of unroadworthy tro-tros\(^{17}\) on the other, while the dense, makeshift stuffing of Accra’s *sub*-urban sprawl enclosed the margins on all sides. Upon the arrival of Coach Fifi, and his trusty assistant, Big Bro, the ‘serious training’ began; an arduous yet orchestrated assemblage of repetitive technical practice and team drills sandwiched between sprints and fitness work. Coach Fifi barked instructions, encouraged, and intermittently appealed for a higher intensity, for greater accuracy, for more. Chaotic yet choreographed, the ball whizzed and bobbled across the dusty surface, its patterned movement in sync with that of the boys as they raced, scrapped and competed

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\(^{16}\) See Ratele (2008) who highlights how analyses of masculinity need to adopt a more explicit focus on how such gendered identities and performances *intersect* with poverty/unemployment/development.

\(^{17}\) A ‘Tro Tro’ is a privately owned minibus share taxis that travel across fixed routes in Ghana.
for its possession. The desolate, dusty field became a workshop; its youthful inhabitants harnessing the very physicality of their bodies – its strength, vitality and creativity – as an instrumental resource or tool\footnote{See Wacquant (1998b) for a more comprehensive dissection of the instrumentalism surrounding athletic pursuits and the ‘remoulding’ of the black body.} to be trained, disciplined, and perfected (Wacquant, 1998a). Watching on from the edges of the field, I conversed with Big Bro about the meaning of football in Ghana, about Coach Fifi’s training camp, and about the aspirations of the young footballers on the field.

On football: the game is ‘the main passion for men’ in Accra’s urban neighbourhoods, with mediated coverage of ‘the European Leagues’ now trumping the domestic Ghanaian Premier League in the daily consumption patterns of the urban male populace.

On patronage: the co-habitation of football coaches and their youth players was a ‘normal’ practice in Ghana, he assured, so long as the parents ‘gave their blessing’ and the coach agrees to take care of their ‘schooling’.

On the aspirations of Coach Fifi’s young footballers, Big Bro exclaimed:

‘For these boys, the only dream is to go outside to play [football]. They don’t see anything here. They don’t really care where they go or who takes them. If an agent or a scout tells them he wants them to travel, they will do whatever he says. If they ask for a thousand dollars, they find it, whatever it takes’

The scene narrated here – amidst the peripheral undersides of Accra, Ghana – captures the productive uncertainty of youth on the urban postcolony. It is, I contend, a scene that motions us – perhaps even forces us – to appraise the peripheral yet pioneering effects that youth marginality or ‘expulsion’ (Ferguson, 1999) engenders – its attendant crisis mobilizing the carnal cravings and aptitudes of a lumpen proletariat compelled to escape the uncertain ‘temporariness’ (Mbembe, cited in Shipley, 2010: 600) of their becoming. Not just a tale of material privation, it too proffers an angle of vision onto the affective potentiality of youth as it intersects with the infrastructure of the urban metropole, the politics of masculine patronage, and the prospects that may be summoned through both. As Coach Fifi’s crew of perpetual ‘small boys’ attest, expectations of future are now commensurate with a collective quest for exile; their modus operandi, as both Kweku and Big Bro affirm, being the appropriation of football as a vehicle through which to ‘go outside’. But what of the social genesis of this quest for exile at a time when neoliberal processes are said to be refiguring what it means to be in or of the territories of urban
Africa? And what of the positionality of youth in its masculine guise when Post-Fordist economies have profoundly altered the productive relations of labor and capital? To avoid running ahead of myself, let me sketch in broad strokes some of the existing assertions and knowledge(s) on the predicament of youth as it manifests in its masculine guise and on the urban African postcolony.

With Sommers (2009: 7), I read this collective quest for exile from the vantage point of ‘an extraordinarily youthful and rapidly urbanising’ corridor of southern Ghana, and the explicitly gendered malaise that is said to proliferate therein. I contend that the collective longing to ‘go outside’ amongst male youth should not be equated with a rejection of Africanity per se; but rather as a response to the deprivations and desires that both extend and retract the ‘horizons of possibility’ (Simone, 2004) on the peripheries of urban Accra. It is most forcefully an expression of discontent by a male youth citizenry – an ‘incoherent counter-nation’ to borrow from Comaroff and Comaroff (2005: 270) – deprived of the means to participate in the affluent narrative of a Ghanaian state at the ‘cutting edge of neoliberal reform’ (Chaflin, 2008: 521). Theirs is, therefore, an inverted narrative, shifting our gaze from the rapid economic growth of an export-led state to the youthful (dis)order that festers amidst deepening inequalities, receding prospects of work, and increasingly opaque generational fault lines. As the Comaroff’s (1999: 284) affirm, this is a moment in which generation is trumping more familiar axes of social exclusion – class, race, gender, ethnicity – as the ‘dominant line of cleavage’ in African cities; with soaring rates of youth unemployment and Accra’s status as a regional hub for migrants propagating an ever-swelling reservoir of idle, impatient young men. The alarming paucity of work, coupled with a lack of conviction in education (Esson, 2013), and the gutting of state services has eviscerated the existential certainties of youth in its masculine guise; leaving a male populace to ‘make do for themselves’ (Myers, 2005: 43) amidst the informal – read unregulated – infrastructure that has become a ‘vital facet of African urban life’ (Konings et al. 2006:3).

Out of school and without work, the liminal entrapments of youth – principally its import as a temporal phase or state of becoming – are said to have rendered solid; the outcome being that young men remain ensnared ad infinitum in the ‘waitroom’ (Honwana, 2012) of a diminished, juvenile form of personhood. Youth, in this sense, is less a demographic signifier than a subordinate social category (Newell, 2009) – its marginalized subjectivities
enfolded within the broader racial and spatial afflictions of being a ‘poor African’ (Ferguson, 2006: 191). To grasp the nuances of youth, therefore, is to understand the way in which it inflects – and is ‘shot through’ (Farquhar, 2005) by – wider social assemblages and scales of gender (dis)order, poverty, and urban inequalities. It is only through such myriad intersections that the meanings and practices, fantasies and myths of youth in its masculine, African, and urban articulations may be fruitfully scrutinised. As Matlon (2011: 388) aptly posits, a ‘crisis of work is also a crisis of masculinity’, with unemployed, impoverished black male youth unable to perform the traditional roles and practices of African manhood. Gainful employment, material possession and the means to wedlock are all at the fulcrum of urban African masculinities – their pluralized yet hierarchical character oscillating from the wealthy, power-wielding ‘Big Man’ to the subordinate dependence of the ‘small boy’ (Miescher, 2005). Excluded from work-based affirmation, young men are failing as providers; with Lindsay (2003: 211) suggesting that the male breadwinner model is now ‘losing saliency’. This conditionality at the heart of ‘being masculine’ means that those minus work or wives are excluded from full status as men; their aspirations of future wholly discordant with the emasculating informal sector to which they are ever-more beholden (Agadjanian, 2005; Barker, 2005).

Rendered ‘economically redundant’ (Matlon, 2011: 389) by the neoliberal state, male youth en masse are forced to conjure and compete for the right to be productive; their shared abjection generating novel forms of male solidarity and a collective quest for alternative, redemptive modes of masculine belonging. Looking elsewhere to counter their failure as providers, male youth seek to engage with, and participate in, non-African – read ‘modern’ – worlds through mediated symbols and ‘transatlantic’ (Gilroy, 1993) tropes of idolized blackness; each of which allow them to validate a sense of ‘global’ membership. Becoming ‘actors-through-consumption’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005: 25), male youth seek to contest their marginal subjection via identification with the imagery and narratives of iconic African men elsewhere – their accomplishments vicariously co-opted into a self-affirmative yet shared model of the achieving, globally revered African man. Matlon (2011: 402), in her scrutiny of marginal Abidjanais men, argues that barbershop signs – typically depicting black icons of hip hop and football – allow young men to domesticate ‘global’ tropes of blackness, thus ‘countering their irrelevance’ in Africa ‘through proof of their participation’ in a world beyond its borders. Yet, for Matlon (2013: 6), such global forms of belonging are conceived and realized only in the imagination; the reality being that male
youth remain ensnared in a ‘figurative, timeless and spaceless borderland’ as consumers of a world forever beyond their reach.

Conversely, I motion us to consider what is produced through the consumption of such ‘global’ tropes of blackness, and the alluring imagery of African bodies depicted therein. I contend that Matlon (2011) fails to question the impact that such exposure to a ‘global’ world beyond Africa exerts upon one’s assessment of their life chances in the undersides of the African city. It is against such a question that I deploy the concept of the borderlands. It is not, however, ‘timeless’, ‘spaceless’ or indeed ‘reducible to the free play of the imagination’ (Diouf, 2003: 6); rather, it denotes the concrete presence and effects of youth marginality on the borderlands of community, city and continent, as well as the potentiality for transgression that one’s proximity to such borders at once create. As exemplars of Accra’s marginalized youth citizenry, I contend that Coach Fifi’s boys are archetypal borderland figures; their appropriation of, and shared investment in, the game of football at once a response to the abject conditions of their becoming and the millennial promise of a cityscape ever-more defined by its non-African, global ‘lines of flight’ (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: 354). Disrupting the imaginings of the African city – perhaps even the African continent – as ‘underdeveloped’, ‘collapsing’, and ‘dark’, recent works on the postcolonial African city emphasise its spatial and temporal openness as a place of extraterritorial, ‘perverse connections’ (Castells, 1996) to a global domain of operations (Hoffman, 2011; Simone, 2001). Yet as Ferguson (2006:48) cautions, this is a ‘modern’ African urbanity in which the ‘globally networked enclave sits right beside the ungovernable humanitarian disaster zone’, and where the accumulative logic of Ghana’s neoliberal extractive industry coincides with ‘some of the steepest inequalities seen in human history’.

Herein lies the paradox of youth in the post-colonial metropolis of Accra: a city forged in the simultaneity of ‘global gateways’ (Grant, 2009) and immiserated enclaves – its emergent ‘worldliness’ (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: 352) providing a ‘constant reminder of what could be but isn’t’ (Simone, 2007: 81). Simone (2001:18) captures this ‘worlding’ of neoliberal Accra, and the challenges it poses to youth livelihoods, when he theorizes the contemporary African city as a platform to engage in processes and territories elsewhere:
‘Urban residents appear increasingly uncertain as to how to spatialize an assessment of their life chances – that is, where will they secure livelihood, where can they feel protected and looked after, where will they acquire the critical skills and capacities? When children across most African cities are asked about what they will do with their lives, the answer usually entails a life trajectory carried out far away from the place they consider “home” (Simone, 2001: 18).

On the borderlands, orders of all kinds may be inverted: male youth refigure the scale and logic of their gendered identities, the clandestine becomes visible in the face of public egress, and projects of futurity replace the continuity between past and present. The outcome, I contend, is that male youth increasingly occupy an interstitial geography ‘straddling African reality and the Euro-American dream’ (Diouf, 2005: 231), their borderland masculinities rendered marginal ‘at home’ yet firmly affixed on the millennial potentialities of life elsewhere. For a generation bereft of viable modes of social mobility, the informal undersides of Accra are considered less a place of stable domicile in Africa than a mutable matrix of urban infrastructures stretching far beyond its borders. I thus bespeak of a borderland, and the masculine identities produced there, neither to romanticize nor sanitize the deprivations and desires of male youth, but to argue that the culmination of both has triggered proliferating fantasies for exile (Piot, 2010). Seeking out novel modes of becoming mobile out of Africa, and harnessing their bodies as tools of the trade, male youth actualize a life course ‘assimilated to a game of chance, a lottery, in which the existential temporal horizon is colonized by the immediate present and by prosaic short term calculations’ (Mbembe, 2002: 271).

Woven into the substratum of the chapter, therefore, is an exploration of the sociological conundrum of agency as it intersects with the problematic of youth. My conception of the borderlands, in turn, is not intended merely to symbolize the marginal spaces in which youth ‘cultures’ coalesce, but to provide a contextually-grounded point of vantage point onto the ‘mantra-like’ (Jeffrey, 2012: 245) assumption that young people have agency – even amidst dire conditions of poverty, warfare and exploitation. In what follows, I shall attempt to refigure how we conceive of and claim to identify ‘youth agency’ on the borderlands of city, state and continent, and through the shifting schemes and projects of futurity that now mark the horizon of possibility for Accra’s male youth citizenry. It is against such shifting schemes and projects of futurity that I theorize the emergent appropriation of football on the borderlands of city and continent – its millennial promise.
and long-standing appeal to African male cultures amplified, I avow, by an ever-mounting
degree of global consciousness and connection. I shall now unravel – through the
interactions and perceptions, experiences and discourses of urban male youth – how the
game has become a fundamental source of knowledge and imagery about ‘global’ worlds
elsewhere, and the millennial vehicle through which youth seek to enact their quest for
exile.

4.3. Playing the Global Game?
Football, Masculinity and Mobility on the Urban Postcolony

‘It is my game, and my passion you see’, avowed twenty-five year-old Richmond to my
question, ‘why do you like football’. ‘Anytime I try to do anything else with my life, it
brings me back. I try to go sell some phones at the market, but if I see the game, like in a
chop bar, it brings me back again and again. It is my calling. If you see me play, you will
see my style like [Michael] Essien in the centre. I know I am a major player and they will
be trying to look for me to go outside but I am patient, it takes time. The future is bright
for me’.

A week earlier, I sat a few hundred metres away in a local chop bar watching the semi-final
of Europe’s most lucrative club competition – the UEFA Champions League – in the
company of a local youth coach, Kodjo. Contested by Chelsea FC of England, and FC
Barcelona of Spain, it had drawn a sizeable gathering; both those who had the means to
pay for a privileged vantage point by the television, and the boisterous mob of male youth
encasing the outer fringes. Each fleeting image of Chelsea’s numerous African players –
including Nigerian John Obi Mikel, Ivorian Didier Drogba and Ghanaian Michael Essien
– brought a reverberating uproar, much vigorous debate, and a sense of reverence that
appears unrivalled in the local vernacular of masculine sociality. Gesturing towards the
television set, Kodjo professed: ‘These big guys like [Michael] Essien and [Stephen]
Appiah, they did not have a silver platter to get there. It was not an easy journey for them.
Today, the small boys [he gestures towards the panoramic wall of male youth watching on]
are all believing that they can go… They are thinking Europe, Europe, Europe – looking
for a shortcut to go outside. But, I try to tell them that life, it is not like this. The problem is they are all in a hurry to become the next Black Star\textsuperscript{19}, the new Essien’.

When Kwame Nkrumah proclaimed football as the sporting symbol of a newly independent Ghana in 1957, he considered that the game would represent the advent of a ‘new African in the world’; unshackled from the shadows of colonialism and inspired by modernist imaginaries of an emerging Pan-African, post-colonial brotherhood (Armstrong and Thompson, 2010). A half-century on from Nkrumah’s optimistic decree, the game’s profoundly gendered appeal is vividly apparent in both the parallels and contrasts of the encounters sketched above. The sentiments of Richmond and Kodjo each affirm the game’s contemporary import as a pertinent form of sociality for Accra’s urban male youth. Yet, as Kodjo avers, such import has diverged far from Nkrumah’s Pan-African vision, with its ‘calling’ for male youth today firmly affixed on the extralocal allure of ‘Europe, Europe, Europe’ – the very antithesis of that which was once envisaged. Consequently, the post-colonial African brotherhood to which the game bespeaks today is that of Ghana’s ‘bulging’ (Urdal, 2010) male youth underclass – a populace for whom postcoloniality has meant privation, unemployment and abjection. Disempowered at home, and deprived of work-based affirmation, Richmond exemplifies the marginality of Accra’s perpetual social juniors – their expectations of future increasingly affixed to the spectral, millennial promise of global worlds elsewhere.

In the popular logic of male youth ‘here’ – amidst the resource-starved undersides of Accra – football has become synonymous with the ‘global’ enchantments of the world ‘outside’; it’s mediated spectacle serving as a primary signifier of the ‘modern ways of life’ (Simone, 2004: 46) to which they aspire. As averred by Big Bro and the encounters narrated above, daily consumption of ‘the European leagues’ is now integral to communal forms of urban male sociality – the upshot being that the spectacular imagery, styles, and spaces appended to the game’s mediated broadcasts have become a fundamental source of knowledge about, and imagery of, the world beyond Africa. Crucially, however, as narrated in the above scene, the emergent cultural allure of football owes in no small part to the growing prominence of West African footballers in Europe’s most prestigious leagues – their

\textsuperscript{19} The Black Stars is the popular nickname for Ghana’s national football team and derives its symbolism from the black star positioned at the centre of Ghana’s national flag after gaining independence from British rule.
embodied presence therein altering the localized resonance of such mediated spectacles and the consumptive practices of male youth.

Certainly, the game has acquired unrivalled import as an emergent resource of masculine solidarity; at once a consumptive vernacular of ‘global’ belonging and a productive vehicle through which to mobilize and refigure latent expectations of future. Indeed, both are inextricably entwined, I suggest, with the exterior connectivity of Accra’s urbanities ensuring that even marginal communities are ever-more attuned to mediated worlds elsewhere. Richmond’s allusions to Essien’s ‘style’, his ‘Big Man’ status, indeed his very presence ‘there’ – amidst the hyper-real imagery of European sports stadia – all articulate a thread of connection between the game of football, the globally-revered African man, and his expectation of a ‘bright future’. In short, he accentuates a quasi-imagined yet shared sense of ‘transatlantic’ (Gilroy, 1998) blackness – a narrative that vicariously co-opts imagery of global African footballers as symbols of the transcendent – read ‘rags to riches’ – potentiality of the African man. It follows, therefore, that any attempt to understand the emergent cultural revere of football – and specifically, of mediated broadcasts of European football – in the lives of Accra’s male youth citizenry, must consider the pivotal presence of the African male bodies therein, for it is their presence that profoundly alters the consumptive nuances of the relationship that transpires.

At the crux of such allure and idolization is, therefore, the perceived transcendence that the game has afforded other black male youth – with Accra-born Michael Essien a particularly iconic ‘local’ man who achieved wealth, prosperity and fame in Europe and through the game of football. Indeed, as pointed out to me by Kodjo, such revere for Essien’s achievements, and the question of how he achieved them, are amplified by his image ubiquitously emblazoned on advertisements for a popular yoghurt drink – each rather poignantly inscribed by the slogan, ‘My Secret’. With many towering over the aptly named George Walker Bush Highway – intersecting some of Accra’s most impoverished neighborhoods – such advertisements proffer striking fragments of a postmodern African city: an urban landscape wherein male youth – ubiquitously clad in counterfeit replica jerseys bearing global symbols of wealth – are at once deprived of the basic means to mature citizenship yet have become avid consumers of the signs and semiotics of a ‘global’
world elsewhere. In a similar sense, adopted nicknames such as ‘Young Baby Jet’\(^2\), ‘Saviour Zidane’ and ‘Divine Messi’ converge the polarities of religious faith and the ‘global’ football superstar; a most ethereal and geographically-unbounded coupling that again affirms the game’s deistic character in the lives of urban male youth.

Waid, a twenty-year old footballer who migrated to Accra from Ghana’s Eastern region, spoke of such localized idolization when he described the ‘big crowds’ that assemble to see the nation’s ‘famous brothers coming back in summer to visit their old [football] teams’. Describing an event that further accentuates football’s interstitial allure as the ‘global’ game in Africa, Waid continues, ‘they come back with big cars and big money. They are giving some things to their families, and sometimes to their coaches. If they come to play, like [Sulley] Muntari, everybody is wanting to see them, to talk to them’. This growing domestic adulation for the game has been commensurate with the ever-growing exodus of West African footballers to ply their trade in Europe, with the work of Darby (2010) and Poli (2010, 2006) amongst others mapping the exponential increase in football-related labor migration out of Africa in recent decades. As Ghana’s Black Stars have attained ever-greater ‘global’ eminence – coupled with the national team’s quarter-final placing at the 2010 World Cup – they have come to embody the potentiality of every Ghanaian man; their presence in Europe defying the impossibility of what was once an impossible dream and planting a seedling of curiosity as to how they got there.

‘I want to be a professional footballer. That is the only thing I want to do… I want to play for Barcelona in Spain. I like their style’, exclaimed thirteen year-old Mohammed in a statement that I came to expect in my encounters amongst Accra’s football spaces. For a youth citizenry marooned on the shadows of the state, such a statement has very real traction in an explicitly gendered, sub-cultural sense. Countering their societal stigma as failing providers, male youth have evidently appropriated the game, and its many devoted spaces in the city, as essential features of an exclusively masculine vernacular. Indeed, daily gatherings in the compound revolved around the game, with morning training sessions often followed by casual pick-up games, and an early evening spent watching – or seeking out – live coverage of European football in the neighborhood or at a nearby chop bar. In many ways, the game signifies a complete or ‘total’ vernacular, allowing male youth

\(^2\) Derived from ‘Baby Jet’, the nickname afforded to Ghanaian international footballer, Asamoah Gyan.
to gather as men in male spaces to play, train, compete, and consume the game, both as a highly localized and productive practice and a mediated form of global masculine theatre. In colonizing the temporal and social void left by an absence of work, and counteracting against the ‘temporariness’ of everyday life, the game becomes central to the formation of an alternative, redemptive form of urban masculine culture; a form which permits domestically-excluded male youth an opportunity to invert the hierarchical schema of African masculinities – if only for the duration of the game. Young men frequently avowed, for example, that they could not afford school fees, or that there was no possibility of work, even amidst the proliferating local street markets dotted around the city. Yet, such claims often proved little more than a pragmatic reasoning for their investment in the game, which was perceived as a more distinguished – perhaps more veritably, a less stigmatized – everyday investment than the demeaning ‘low work’ that is now the lifeblood of Accra’s proliferating informal economy.

Owing to this redemptive import of the game, the manifold ‘football spaces’ in which I regularly participated were not inhabited by an evidently abject male citizenry; rather, the local chop bar, the communal area of the compound, and the football field were spaces of performance and contestation; the game on-screen or on-field providing the backdrop for a fervent and often heated exchange of opinion, bravado and ‘global’ knowledge. After all, at stake in such virile encounter was the definition of one's masculine identity vis-à-vis other young men; a grouping at once ‘internally’ hierarchical yet collectively rendered powerless on the peripheries of Ghanaian society. Herein lies the complexities of borderland masculinities as they are negotiated in and through mediated broadcasts of football ‘outside’, with ‘inter-group power relations’ (Ratele, 2008: 517) delineated not just by the shared exclusion of black male youth at the hands of the neoliberal state but also by their individuated response to such exclusions, and the active appropriation of alternative modes of masculine affirmation. It is on this ground that I agree with Matlon (2011: 393) when she posits that hip-hop music and football – as prominent ‘global’ and mediated tropes of blackness – have emerged as ‘dominant strategies for escape in the local imagination’ and a redemptive outlet for those seeking to counter failing masculinities. Yet, focusing my observations on the mediated import of football in Ghana, I suggest that male youth engagement with, and consumption of, the game is not reducible to an exclusively imagined – and hence passive – form of masculine validation. Rather, as the following
meeting with Kweku and his mother denotes, the import of ‘the game’ has very real consequences for youth livelihoods in urban West Africa today:

31 July 2012. Just as it’s time to call it a day and I hint at my return to the compound, Kweku spots his mother ambling towards us amidst the shady din of the evening scene. Making out only the aging contours of her face and her greying long hair, I extend my hand as a greeting. ‘Good to meet you Sir!', she utters with a warm smile, before cutting straight to the chase with a statement that shattered the much-spouted notion that it is over-ambitious parents who push their sons towards the footballing dream over the pursuit of educational attainment. ‘Please Sir, can you talk to my boy. He is wasting his time with football and this camp. I have warned him that he must go back and continue his schooling if he is residing in my home!’, she says in a cathartic manner, pointing thereafter to his decision to ‘sack’ his schooling in favour of ‘justifying’ at a number of the region’s premier football academies.

While embarrassed at his mother’s outburst, Kweku dare not show any sign of dissent beyond an awkward smile. Sensitive to his pride, I decide to tentatively agree, insisting that; ‘your son is a wise young man. I’m certain he’ll make the right decision for his future’. As his mother peered reflectively in my direction, I decided against any further comment, despite knowing that her conviction in the capital value of a school education was one that seldom triumphed over the millennial promise of the footballing dream for any of the young men in the compound.

No longer buoyed by the pursuit of ‘schooling’, disempowered young men such as Kweku are, as Kodjo argued, ‘in a hurry to become the next Black Star, the new Essien’, with their appropriation of, and investment in, the game of football inextricably associated with the prospect of a professional career in the game. Much like Wacquant (1995: 504) writes of boxing in the black ghetto of Chicago, at a minimum, football symbolizes ‘the possibility of advancement’ for male youth – a means ‘for carving out a margin of autonomy from their oppressive circumstances’ and a productive alternative to the meagre spoils available amidst the informal hustle of Accra’s markets, or the declining promise of education. It must be said, therefore, that football’s sub-cultural import – principally as a mediated source of ‘global’ knowledge and imagery – extends well beyond its consumptive significance for Accra’s urban male youth. It is, rather, of hyper-productive import in youth life-worlds, not only accentuating all that they are deprived of, but seemingly offering a viable pathway towards their realization of such imagined, utopian constructions of future.

For most, therefore, the prospect of a career in the game is inextricably affixed to the transcendent prospect of ‘going outside’ – of escaping the ‘bare life’ of inner city Accra
for a utopian elsewhere in which African men rise above their birth status to attain wealth, prosperity and fame.

‘I only want to be a professional football player outside. And with God’s grace, I will be playing hard to achieve my dream’, affirmed thirteen year-old Clinton, directly correlating his embodied investment in the game with his ‘big hope’ of ‘going outside’. Like Clinton, nineteen year-old Bismark declared hopefully, ‘since I was a young boy, the game was all I thought about. I would think about the game when I was supposed to be schooling, basically everything I did I had football in my mind. The game is everything to me and my friends… we are all wanting to be professional players’. Male youth such as Clinton and Bismark don’t just look towards a global elsewhere to redeem their failed masculinities; rather, the elsewhere to which they are ever-more attuned – that of Euro-America – and the primary source of its allure – the game of football – have become the foremost signifiers of a much coveted future outside Africa. Utopian in nature, such constructions of future are habitually furnished with the kind of sanguine faith that is – as Piot (2010) informs us – emblematic of the rise of Pentecostal churches and religious narratives of imminent fulfilment across West Africa. Vociferously discernible here too is the individual character of such narratives, with Clinton’s emboldened plea for ‘God’s grace’ in his quest to ‘go outside’ a forceful affirmation of both the religious impulses underpinning his conviction, and the markedly individual character of his ‘dream’.

Equally, the juxtaposing of football and ‘schooling’ above is deemed instructive; with the indifference of Kweku and Bismark towards their formal education a recurrent theme in the narratives proffered. As Langevangel (2008: 2044) observes of Accra more broadly, formal education is rarely a linear process for male youth; rather, the vast majority ‘enter school, drop out, work for a couple of years and then begin formal or informal education again’. Similarly, Esson (2013: 87) points to rising tuition fees, familial responsibilities and the material necessity of work as he affirms that we are witnessing the ‘declining value of education’ for male youth across Accra’s urbanities. Daniel, an eighteen year-old footballer now living in Accra, encapsulated the material realities that impinge on such decline when he explained that, ‘until I was 6 years [old], I was living with my mother in Accra. But when things were not so good I stayed with my mother’s sister in Kumasi for some time. I was helping to look after her two children – washing them, dressing them and walking them to school’. Having confirmed that he was not ‘schooling’ in Kumasi, I inquired whether he
was attending school since returning to Accra: Daniel replied, ‘I am not schooling so much as my mother got a job as a cook and she is working a lot at night. She would leave me money to get food for me and my brother [who he later asserts was two years-old]. I am training [football] with a certain team in the mornings after I walk my brother to school’.

Such an expression of indifference towards education was by no means an anomaly amongst Accra’s male youth citizenry, with twenty-year old footballer Thomas insistent that, ‘schooling was not going to be good for my future’. Of a similar outlook, twenty-one year-old Kwesi reflected ‘I was attending school for my early years but after some time, I decided that I will not be getting something better through schooling’. For Accra’s ever-swelling male youth populace, it appears that the pursuit of formal educational goals are deemed antithetical to the more pressing responsibilities of family and the potential rewards of finding remunerative employment. As evinced by the earlier avowals of Kweku and Big Bro, it is evident that Accra’s male youth populace no longer conceive formal education as a productive investment towards their futures, with many doubting its capacity to generate labor opportunities beyond the city’s emasculating informal sector. Nowhere was such ambivalence towards education more pragmatically expressed than the sentiments of thirteen year-old, Clinton, who rationalizes his investment in the game of football by accentuating his – and his mother’s – inability to pay school fees: ‘I wanted to go to school’, he professes sincerely, ‘but when they were sacking me from school fees, I say to myself ‘why do I do this’. I will just go and play football and forget about schooling’.

I first became aware of such educational ‘drop out’ when seventeen year-old Abdul admitted that he had foregone his attendance at school at the age of eleven in order to attend a ‘justify’ for a ‘new football academy’:

‘I had been playing for some time with my coach’s team and he told us that there was an academy who would be coming for a justify, a new football academy owned from outside Ghana. But I had a problem because I had an exam at school at the same time you see. If I didn’t do the exam, it would mean I would not be able to progress to junior secondary [school]. I was thinking a lot about what I would do. I decided to skip my schooling and the exam. I told my mother that I must go and promised her that I will make it. I told her to pray for me because this is my biggest chance to justify. The choice I have made, it is the right choice’

21 Abdul was subsequently awarded a five-year football scholarship at one of Ghana’s premier football academy’s.
Presenting a radical challenge to what it means to ‘be educated’, I contend that Abdul’s ‘choice’ – at the age of eleven years-old – to forego his schooling in favour of playing football is grounded in a self-reflexive and rationale assessment of his life-chances. Unconvinced of the capital-value conferred by a formal education, Abdul defies the protestations of his mother and actively prioritizes his ‘schooling’ in the game of football as a more productive investment towards his future. The quest to ‘justify’, as Abdul affirms, represents the original challenge; the ‘big chance’ for any aspiring footballer to establish their visibility as a talent prospect and to instigate their pursuit of a professional football career. Such an embodied investment in ‘becoming’ a professional football player is, I suggest, undergirded by an acute awareness of the potential opportunities at stake on the field. The following sentiments of nineteen year-old Evans are a case in point, with his allusion to Europe and the steps required to ‘justify there’ evidence of a male youth populace actively invested in ‘going outside’:

‘I am always training, training and getting stronger. There are some scouts who can be coming to watch us play in the tournaments, sometimes from the football academies or an agent who can be taking some players outside for justifies. My coach is preparing me, advising me to be working hard on my weaknesses so I can become stronger. You must take that opportunity in front of them as they can be taking you outside to Europe to justify there’

Moving from the dusty fields of Ghana to the commercial spectacle of Europe’s professional game, Evans articulates his perceived pathway to becoming a professional footballer. Underpinning his assertion that he is always ‘training, training and getting stronger’ is a desire to ‘be seen’ by Ghana’s ever-growing legion of foreign scouts, academies and agents; thus creating a linear correlation between his arduous investment in the game and the dream of ‘going outside’ with an agent – represented here as the primary gatekeeper to securing a justify in Europe. In actively submitting himself to be scrutinized, objectified and assessed, Evans exhibits a visceral cognizance of the perceived opportunities tied to the prospect of Europe, and the primacy of his embodied capabilities in producing such opportunities. His commitment to ‘working hard’ on his ‘weaknesses’ attests to the way in which his body becomes a primary site of work and implicated in the more enduring regime of his becoming a ‘strong’ footballer. The message is crystal clear: this is more than a leisurely avocation for Evans. The game, in short, is perceived to represent a springboard toward ‘something better’ and a most millenarian resolution to the ‘problem’ of his extended youth. Likewise, as the product of an arduous training regimen,
his embodied proficiencies and technical skill are trained, refined and ‘worked on’ through years of sacrifice and sweat on the field. In striving towards mastery of the game as a ‘skilled bodily trade’ (Wacquant, 1995: 501), the physical body – through its cognitive, affective and technical dispositions – becomes the primary marker of selfhood; defined, valued, and commodified not just by its corporeal aptitudes, but by its embodied (in)visibility relative to the gaze of European scouts, agents and academies.

With Abbink (2005: 2), therefore, I contend that it would be a serious error of judgement to deny male youth such as Evans and Abdul ‘intentionality of action and agency’, with their embodied investment in the game intimately affixed to an active and enduring quest to become a professional player ‘outside’. However, in providing empirical context for Kweku’s pathological construction of football as an ‘African disease’, this is a desire now shared by the majority of an estimated 25’000 ‘youth players’ officially registered and ‘playing hard’ across two hundred and forty youth clubs in the city of Accra (Ghana Football Association, cited in Esson, 2013). As Big Bro eloquently avowed of Ghana’s neoliberal generation, their ‘only dream is to go outside to play’ – with the quest to ‘justify’ as much about validating one’s social worth as it is a valuation of their athletic talent. The crisis of youth in its masculine guise – as evinced by Christophe, an expatriate scout for one of Ghana’s premier football academies – can therefore be said to have provoked an ethos of competition and a sub-culture articulated towards the maximisation of the self at whatever cost necessary:

‘Look around you, when you grow up knowing that a life selling phone credit is your future, and you constantly see that football is a way out, you do whatever you can to get an edge on everybody else. Simple as that. The odds are stacked against them but they are desperate to make it in the game’

What results from this neoliberal regime, I contend, is a hyper-productive youth citizenry – a ‘reservoir of young men’ (Hoffman, 2011: 146) – languishing on the borderlands of city, state and continent: their individual aspirations towards ‘something better’ contingent upon the production of a mobile and visible self vis-à-vis Ghana’s football frontier. But how does one produce and sustain such a sense of visibility amidst the marginal undersides of Accra? What are the risks of committing oneself and one’s future to the prospect of becoming a professional footballer? And to what extent can male youth be considered agentic in their relationships with Ghana’s burgeoning array of talent scouts and domestic
football coaches such as Coach Fifi? It is to such questions – at once substantive, sociological and moral – that the chapter now turns as I explore the politics of masculine patronage and the relations through which urban male youth seek to become a professional footballer out of Africa.

4.4. **Masculine Patronage and the Quest to Justify**

‘He was unhappy that I was not schooling you see’, said Waid of his late father’s irritation at the game of football. Recounting his earliest memories of playing the game in Ghana’s rural Volta region, Waid enthused, ‘I was the strongest player in my village, and I knew it. Even my father knew it. He was always telling me, you are the best player here, but what is that? It is not anything for big things to happen. He said to me – you must be the best player in Accra to know that you can be going somewhere. I was thinking then that I must be going to Accra, to the big city if I want to be a player. That is where I need to go to justify to find a good coach’. Waid departed his home village at the age of eleven to ‘become the best player’ in the city of Accra – a journey that he suggests is the ‘only option’ for male youth seeking to ‘make big things happen’.

Several months later, upon arriving into Darkuman Park with Coach Fifi’s boys during a torrential morning downpour, we were met by the drenched figure of a young man stood on the side-lines. Fully clad in football attire – a pair of well-worn boots, socks smartly up to his knees, and a zebra-striped Juventus shirt from the early nineties – it was immediately apparent that he had come to play. Recognizing Coach Fifi, he made a beeline towards him: introducing himself as Kwame before explaining that he had travelled from Kumasi – a four-hour drive by car – for the chance to justify. ‘I would like to become part of your team’, I overheard him declare to Coach Fifi – his restless stance and deferential sincerity tell-tale signs of a young man determined to secure the mentorship of a proven coach. In this regard, his aspirations were no different to the boys warming up on-field, many of whom had similarly ‘turned up’ seeking to ‘justify’ their football talent to Coach Fifi. Such acts of ingenuity were standard fare amidst Accra’s football-crazed communes, where the all-pervading quest to ‘justify’ pushes aspiring youth prodigies to conjure,

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22 Waid was subsequently offered a football scholarship at one of Ghana’s most eminent football academies.
23 A prominent football club located in the Italian city of Turin.
compete and collude as they seek to defy the laws of probability and ‘make big things happen’. On the likelihood of probability alone, the journeys of Waid and Kwame, as but two of the city’s bulging male youth populace, would culminate in worlds apart. Such is the harsh reality of this quest to ‘become a player’ out of Ghana: few will successfully navigate their way beyond the myriad ‘justifies’, ‘Big Men’, and ‘gatekeepers’ that stand between the abject undersides of Accra and the prospect of becoming Ghana’s next Black Star in Europe. What they all share, however, is a peculiar form of masculine kinship as marginalized men; their mutual quest to become professional footballers dependent on and ordered by, the politics of patronage relations on the urban postcolony.

‘Whatever the scale’, avers Hoffman (2011: 130), ‘West African social worlds are defined by exchanges and alliances among unequal partners – among clients and patrons’. Patronage, in this sense, denotes the relations, networks and bonds that weave the subjective into the social; instituting in turn the reciprocal logic of obligation, debt and responsibility that mediate one’s standing vis-à-vis others. Put differently, patronage organizes and orders social life by weaving people into the ‘fabric of obligation and responsibility’ (Hoffman, 2011: 130) to those who have supported, provided and/or facilitated their social becoming. Few places evoke such ‘webs of relations’ more dramatically than the informal African city, where as Simone (2004: 426) notes, ‘incessantly flexible, mobile and provisional intersections of residents’ engender ‘new forms of solidarity through their participation in makeshift, ephemeral ways of being social’. This, for Tsing (2004), is the relational friction – situational, messy, and contingent – through which inter-action inflects and (re)figures the possibilities that may arise in the joints and fissures of cultural forms, movement and situational dilemmas. Tsing’s (2004: 6) observation that ‘the effects of encounters across difference can be compromising or empowering’ is most apparent on the borderlands of the urban postcolony, where ‘people are infrastructure’ (Simone, 2004), and one’s capacity to navigate such infrastructures is paramount to their aspirations of social and material betterment. From the vantage point of male youth such as Waid and Kwame, soliciting a patron in the city – in the form of finding a ‘good coach’ – represents the principle means by which they can aspire towards ‘becoming a player’; with Coach Fifi’s knowledge of the local game, coaching intellect, and extensive social and professional networks instantly shifting the laws of probability in their favour.
‘The dividing line between youth and adulthood’, as Hoffman (2011: 131) aptly suggests, is one ‘that overlaps that between patron and client’, with Accra’s demographic of excluded male youth increasingly dependent on, and thereby indebted to, those of more elevated social standing; namely the older, wealthier ‘Big Men’ of postcolonial Ghana. As the ‘most enduring image of African masculinity’ (Lindsay and Miescher, 2003: 3), such ‘Big Men’ are the all-powerful patrons of Ghana’s inter-generational tension; their material wealth, reputation and political clout all markers of their hegemonic standing in the ‘ranked’ (Guyer, 2004: 68-82) social worlds of urban West Africa. In short, they represent the arbiters of transition on the African postcolony; harbouring the power to facilitate or foreclose one’s advancement from perpetual ‘small boy’ into adulthood, from poverty to material well-being, and from incarceration in Africa to the prospect of alternative futures elsewhere. For Coach Fifi’s boys, that elsewhere is less ascribed to a geographic point on a map than it is to their becoming a professional footballer outside – a floating signifier broadly conceived through utopian imaginaries of European football stadia. Much less malleable, however, was their dogged commitment to getting there – a quest that, as Waid and Kwame avow, was contingent on their initiation into Accra’s football-crazed communes and the solicitation of a patron therein.

The logics of such football-related patronage were first apparent to me during a conversation with Bismark – now nineteen years old – who explained that he had departed his family at the age of seven to ‘go and live with his coach’. Bismark explained, ‘My coach saw a big potential that I had and he knew that I could have a big future and make a name for myself you see. He wanted to make sure my parents didn’t stop me from my dreams. And so my coach spoke to my parents and asked them to let me leave with him. They let me go and he [Coach] agreed that I wouldn’t just play football and that I would take my education serious’.

‘What do you think your Coach wanted to achieve with you?’, I asked curiously.

Bismark’s response – worthy of inclusion in extended form – is one that encapsulates the political logic of patronage relations as they intersect with Ghana’s burgeoning football industry:

‘Here in Ghana, some coaches have sympathy with some small boys who need help. They know that some boys have serious potential but won’t be able to go anywhere without help. He could see what my life could be, so he was helping me along so that
maybe I can be successful and will go on to gain something later. He was providing everything for me – boots, socks, kits, school fees. He believed in what my destiny could be. I think he was hoping that he could maybe benefit from me in the future. Then it’s time for you to look back and remember all the things your coach did for you. It is your duty then to look after the person for that. It’s about honour you see’.

It is enticing to read Bismark’s relationship with his coach as a striking exemplar of the ‘new economy of persons’ that Mbembe (2006: 304) observes on the postcolony; its capital logic occasioning social relationships that are ‘purely market and object-like’. Certainly the benevolence shown by Bismark’s coach appears at least partially compelled by economic motives, a reading that gains momentum when considered alongside the sentiments of Christophe, an expatriate scout24 with whom I’d discussed such co-habitation practice in football-related patronage.

‘Yes, of course I know of it’, he replied to my question: ‘the parents give the boy up to the coach and they will feed him, look after his needs, maybe even send him to school and so on. Many boys are living like this, with a person who is looking out for them – we call it ‘Les Oncles Partenels’. But don’t be naïve. These managers who have boys living with them, they are hoping to get something from it. There will always be money when you have so much poverty. The parents are only too happy to give the boy up. One less mouth to feed you see’.

The urban ‘infrastructure’ that Christophe evokes here is one in which male youth such as Bismark – as the ‘loose molecules’ (Kaplan, 1994) cast out by the neoliberal state – are increasingly beholden to prospective coaches and others for the basic necessities of everyday life and social mobility. Here – amidst the impoverished undersides of the postcolonial African city – an ‘ideology of dependency’ (Murphy, 2003:75) is said to have propagated highly mobile and provisional modes of masculine patronage; relations that, as Christophe suggests, are certainly discernible as an economic investment in embodied potentiality. And yet, in troubling normative constructions of the domestic homestead as a ‘safe haven’ for youth development, Christophe implores us to consider both the precarious – even burdensome – positioning of male youth amidst impoverished family settings, and the capital logic on which their departure to live with a prospective coach is rationalized.

24 Christophe’s standing as a European scout in Ghana ensures that he has an antagonistic relationship with local youth coaches; an important caveat mediating one’s interpretation of his statement.
So too, as Bismark himself endorses, his relationship with his Coach – lasting as it did only three years – was a ‘makeshift’ one; shaped by the implicit understanding that providing for his immediate material needs now permitted his coach to ‘benefit’ from any wealth he should accumulate later. Thus, to submit an instrumental reading, I contend, would be to bankrupt male youth such as Bismark of any autonomy in such mutually conceived arrangements, in turn reifying universalising notions of ‘youth’ as a passive, vulnerable ‘phase’ of life.

An alternative reading, and one which I espouse in this case, is to sidestep such moral typecasting of youth, instead scrutinizing Bismark’s decision to ‘go and live with his coach’ as the judicious act – one which he reflexively articulates above – of a rational actor actively seeking to maximise his embodied apprenticeship in the game. This is not, I hasten, to sidestep the ethically problematic character of such relationships, nor is it to encourage one to neglect the starkly asymmetrical power dynamics on which such co-habitation practices often hinge; rather, I seek to present a timely riposte to the naïve shepherding of youth agency as something which is unequivocally affixed to the ‘positive’ moral structure of the nuclear family. It is, most vociferously, therefore, to implore one to strip back the ‘positive’ moral communion of youth and family, instead interrogating the empirical nuances of the relationship at hand, and the perceptions of the subjects’ involved, before reaching a critical conclusion about any ethico-moral risks that such patronage relationships create. Taking Bismark as a case in point, it is immediately clear that the opportunity to depart the family home and solicit the support and tutelage of a proven football coach represents a fruitful and positive alliance – enabling, as he informs us, a more thorough devotion of his energies to ‘becoming’ a professional footballer and the chance to realize the potential of his own ‘destiny’. For Bismark, it appears that this enhanced capacity to (inter)act, move and ‘play football’ is understood as an agentic one, despite the moral panic that such a patronage relationship inevitably provokes.

My critique thus derives its impetus not through the a priori imposition of ethico-legal frameworks onto the empirical relationships in question, but through its grounded interrogation of Bismark’s relationship with the coach in question, and its appraisal of the
broader context in which such patronage relationships have emerged. Moreover, in speaking to my overarching theoretical interest in the politics of youth, I contend that Bismark’s predicament – and the morally problematic relationship he enters with the coach in question – forces us to consider how agency is all too often garnered in and through abstruse, ambiguous (Bordanaro and Payne, 2012) differentials of power on the African postcolony; its uneven spoils all too often conjured, coaxed or stolen amidst the relational friction (Tsing, 2004) of everyday encounter. Attesting to the inventive, even immoral aptitudes of Accra’s urban male youth, Christophe declared, ‘the city boys are not kids like you have in your mind. These boys know what they are doing. They must be smart – they have to be to survive. They know what they have to do to escape these conditions and you must look at them for responsibility’. Amidst the all-pervasive and competitive quest to ‘get an edge on everybody else’, the profiteering of one may mean the dispossession of another, with agency less the causal product of social and material hierarchies than a deeply situational some-thing that may be garnered in and though the atypical alliance that Bismark and his coach shared. What reveals itself thereafter is a mutually constructive patronage relationship, with the paternal role adopted by Bismark’s coach structured at once by reciprocal bonds of debt and affection, obligation and ‘honour’.

Affirming the normalcy of such co-habitation practices, twenty year-old Enoch – once of Coach Fifi’s boys prior to securing a scholarship at the Right to Dream Football Academy – declared: ‘I owe everything to Coach Fi. He was the one helping me to get where I am – providing things for me. He gave me everything I need to play well and helped prepare me for the future’. Again, the mutual relations that bind those who owe and those who are owed are vividly apparent here, with Enoch’s affection for Coach Fifi emblematic of their peculiar form of masculine communion. It was a bond that I had come to expect of Coach Fifi, whose ‘virile mothering’ (Wacquant, 1998a: 346) of his aspiring youth prodigies – both past and present – contravenes the normative logics of coach, mentor, disciplinarian and even father. Indeed, notwithstanding the familial character of the latter, Coach Fifi’s relationship with his recruits at times even supplanted the absenteeism of biological fathers.

25 The following chapter – engaged as it is with the ‘geographies of commodification’ that have coalesced around youth footballers in West Africa – shall elucidate the broader social realities on which patronage relationships have crystalized, and critically interrogate the exploitative undercurrents of football in Ghana today.
and guardians, many of whom were reported as having little presence in the domestic homestead. In many ways, such affection was indicative of his standing as a ‘local’ – read black, urban, and African – intermediary in Accra’s football frontier; his organic knowledge of up-and-coming talent prospects making him a key middleman bridging the city’s aspiring youth footballers and the growing array of academies and agents that now proliferate therein. While lacking the material wealth and authority of the proverbial African ‘Big Man’, Coach Fifi’s developing affiliation with Ghana’s foreign-owned academies had undoubtedly elevated his social and economic standing; their interest, and his reputation, amplified by each favourable performance from one of his boys. His rising stock, therefore, owed to the peculiar frictions (Tsing, 2004: 18) engendered by his standing between the colloquial revere of the commune, the aspirations of his youth prodigies and the professional respect of football’s foreign legion.

‘I try to help the boys make it to the next step’, said Coach Fifi when asked to describe his investment – at once emotional, financial and paternal – in the aspirations of his youth footballers. He often observed that his training camp was little more than a half-way house for the most talented among them – a base in the city from which they could become immersed in the occupational ethic and daily regimen of becoming a footballer. The ‘big hope for the boys’, he asserted, ‘was to be seen by one of the academies’. ‘Over the last ten years, with many [academies] coming to Ghana, the boys are all wanting to justify, to get a scholarship’, he professed. Further still, however, Coach Fifi affirmed the ranked and racialized character of patronage relations when he declared that this ‘big hope’ – as perceived by the city’s male youth underclass – was synonymous with academies that were owned, populated and/or attached to ‘white people’. Kodjo, a local youth coach, had a similar outlook, touching the ‘blonde’ skin of my arm as he asserted: ‘All of them [male youth footballers], they are looking to meet a blonde man. They believe they are truthful, like respectful and can be trusted’.

‘What do you mean “trusted”?’, I inquired, before Kodjo explained:

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26 In the narratives discussed, the most prominent factors impacting the absenteeism of fathers included cultural and/or tribal customs which (in)formally legitimated polygamy, transnational migration in search of enhanced labor opportunities, and even their premature death due to illness and disease.

27 In this sense, there is correlation with the buscones that Klein (2011) theorizes in the production of baseball migrants in the Dominican Republic.
‘You see here in Africa you have many academies now, and many people call themselves agents – but a lot don’t honour their agreements with young players. They exploit them for some small sums of money. So all African players want to be managed by a white man as he will have the contacts in Europe and will not be wanting to make the small money. He will be trying to make the boy a big star. To take him to a European team instead of running off with a few hundred cedi’s’

In the racialized consciousness of Ghana’s male youth citizenry, the white man – both through his structural positionality and racialized whiteness – denotes knowledge, power, economic success and integrity. As Pierre (2013: 72) posits, however, such aspirations to ‘be managed by a white man’ cannot be read solely through a localized or African prism; rather, such an articulation of whiteness only acquires meaning ‘within a world hierarchy of race’ – one in which a ‘white, non-African elsewhere’ (Ferguson, 2005) is bestowed with economic and socio-political supremacy. By endowing the ‘white’ agent or academy owner with ‘all the gifts of Whiteness’ (Pierre, 2013: 75) – in this case, those of material wealth, transnational mobility and contacts in European football – male youth reveal the racialized contours of patronage relations, and the hierarchically-ordered aspirations that inform their quest to solicit contacts, to be seen, and ultimately, to ‘get signed’. Recounting his experience of ‘being seen’ by a white academy scout – and of his coach’s reaction – the following sentiments of Bismark are deemed instructive:

‘After a tournament up in the Northern region, a scout from the Right to Dream Academy came into the dormitory and told us that they had selected some players who would be invited to justify at the academy. After he left our coach was giving us some feedback and he told us that two boys had been picked and that I was one of them. My coach sat me down and told me that this is my big opportunity as these people are white people. They can take you places you see. In Ghana, we don’t have so many academies set up by black people but when someone sees white people in the crowd they know they might be academy scouts, or agents from outside. My coach was telling me, these white scouts are from Europe and maybe they will camp you in Ghana when you are developing as a player and then you could be traveling to Europe later. He told me that I must take this opportunity because then everything that I want to achieve in life, I can do it with them’

Acclaimed as the gatekeeper to Europe, the ‘white man’ thus stands at the pinnacle of Accra’s burgeoning football frontier; his embodied transience in Ghana concurrently signifying all that the game promises beyond its borders. Contiguous with the othering process of colonialism, and the racial hierarchies it perpetuated, whiteness becomes a
‘global’ infrastructure in itself; in effect, and troublingly so, a ‘higher’ order of patronage – a racialized and gendered web of relations that reinforces and delimits, both sharpens and regulates, the ‘pathways’ out of Africa. Undergirding Bismark’s avowal that ‘they’ – as the universal embodiment of white hegemony and power – ‘can take you places’ is a valorisation of whiteness as the ‘gateway to modernity’ (Newell, 2009: 179) for male youth in Africa. It follows that the quest to ‘justify’ thus reveals itself as a highly racialized encounter across difference; arguably, the opportunity for Bismark to validate the potentiality of his embodied mastery of the game and his performative visibility as a talented African footballer. For those who ‘make it’, the rewards, as Bismark and his Coach see it, are clear: with access to, and membership of, the white, European and thereby ‘modern’ space of the academy representing the stepping stone to ‘everything’ that an African man wants ‘to achieve in life’.

For Accra’s male youth citizenry, to solicit the gaze and patronage of whiteness – as vectors of the academy space and the prospect of Europe – is to tear themselves from the territorial stigma of Ghana’s domestic football industry, giving rise to a ‘transcendent masculine self’ (Wacquant, 1998a: 325) that belongs in the amplified, extra-local fabric of the ‘global’ game and the more singular logic of capital that organizes relations therein. In both its licit and illicit dimensions, then, Ghana’s football frontier rests on a ‘highly flexible, inordinately intricate web of north-south synapses’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012: 47), its emergent politico-economic structure and popular meaning ascribed by a marked sense of exteriority. It follows that the quest to ‘become a player’ is contingent on one’s advancement through a spatio-temporal sequence of hierarchically ranked patrons and sites – its ascending scale ‘spacing out’ from the Ghanaian grassroots coach and the sandy communes of inner city Accra to the white man and the pristine green fields of the academy. As explained to me by Coach Joe, an experienced scout of over ten years across West Africa, the ‘pathway’ demands that male youth are actively invested in the game by the age of ten, with the ‘best sixty players in the country signed to academies by the age of thirteen’. Those who miss out, he notes, enter ‘an age of vulnerability’ from sixteen years onwards; their ‘fading dreams of becoming a footballer’ giving way to a progressive sense of

28 The following chapter engages with the positionality and production of the athletic black body vis-à-vis Ghana’s football frontier and the extralocal scales in which it acquires its contemporary meaning and structure.
‘desperation’ and for many, a ‘willingness to listen to any offer’ – irrespective of its source.

The by-product of such mounting desperation, as Big Bro affirmed, was that ‘many boys have lost their money to fake agents’. Navigating our way through the labyrinth-like density of the compound one evening, Big Bro insisted that I meet eighteen year-old Philip, who told of how he and four other youth footballers each paid $800 to a ‘certain man’ who invited them ‘for a justify in Portugal’. Likewise, twenty-one year-old Emmanuel recounted his experience as one of twelve boys who were ‘left waiting in Kumasi’ having each paid $700 to expedite their ‘travel to a professional team in England’. Over thirty male youth footballers provided similar testimonies, each proffering minor variations on a common thread that Big Bro succinctly captured as follows:

‘These are just fraudsters… fakes who claim that they are agents and can be taking the boys outside to justify. Always they will be asking for a certain sum of money, sometimes big money. But if he tells them he wants them to travel outside, even if he is black, they will find it, no matter what they have to do. They get scammed because they are desperate to go. They are all thinking they have a chance’

Proliferating instances of fraud and exploitation reveal this ‘pathway’ of patronage to be a risky one, its inter-subjective relations ever-susceptible to deceitful acts of sabotage and manipulation. Berman (1998: 338) captures something of such risk when he posits that ‘big men and small boys are also potential rivals who can turn and devour the other’. In the frantic quest to attach themselves to more powerful actors, male youth are vulnerable to the insidious dramaturgy of patronage – with the hollow performativity of wealth, status and prestige coaxing those ‘desperate’ enough to part with money they don’t have. In a curiously contradictory effect, even the harrowing experiences of the exploited – widely disseminated and shared across the urbanities of Accra – have little impact on the aspirations of others, nor incredibly in some cases, on the exploited themselves. Despite being ‘cheated’ by a fake agent who ‘disappeared with $1000’, twenty-something year-old Richmond told of how his ‘victim’ status had little impact on the ‘other boys’: ‘as far as I am a victim, it is a positive message. I share my story with the other boys, warning them about these men and what they did to me. But I feel they are not listening to what I have to say. They are just thinking it cannot be true’. Most unexpectedly, despite falling victim to such a scam, Richmond went on to describe his continued investment in the game: ‘I am
not rushing to go outside anymore. I am patient now. I know I am a major player and the proper agents will be trying to look for me. With the Lord, I am certain’.

The ‘dream’ therefore endures, even for the abject, exploited, and visibly older ‘men’ such as Richmond – whose initial claim that he was nineteen years-old was betrayed both by the furrowed contours of his face and his failure to recount anything approaching an accurate year of birth. ‘My real age is twenty five years… but my football age is nineteen’, he eventually confessed with a wry smile. It was a discrepancy that I had come to expect in my age-related encounters with Accra’s ‘youth footballers’, particularly those struggling to accept their rapidly ‘fading dream’ of ‘becoming a player’. Yet, such ‘age cheating’ has become such a normative practice to those ‘inside’ Accra’s football frontier – a ‘tactic’ in the lexicon of De Certeau (1984) – that adolescent footballers would often sincerely respond, ‘do you mean my real age or my football age?’, when posed with the question. Richmond’s illusory logic was modest yet coherent: finding himself ensnared amongst the excluded citizenry of Accra’s ‘eternal youth’ (Matlon, 2014: 6), and confronted with the imminent rejection of being labelled too old for the age-capped sequencing of Ghana’s football ‘pathway’, he bestows himself with an altered, younger ‘football age’. Retemporalizing himself discursively as ‘youthful’, and therefore – in theory at least – gaining a physical and developmental advantage over younger competitors, Richmond elongates and invigorates his ‘failing’ prospects of ‘making it’ as a professional footballer ‘outside’.

Again, the striking paradox of youth is evident, with disempowered male youth such as Richmond at once clamouring to attain the material wealth and cultural endowments that are deemed commensurate with adulthood, while conversely attempting to manipulate the temporal markers of age so as to achieve the prolonged, perpetual designation of a ‘youth footballer’. Hope, as a manifestly religious and stubbornly durable affective formation, is the most bountiful currency and means to exchange ‘here’ – amidst the nether regions of the ‘pathway’ towards becoming a professional footballer on the peripheries of family, city and state, and on the borderlands between African realism and the global world outside. For Richmond, as the archetypal figure of Accra’s male ‘youth’ citizenry, such hope is at once textured by blind religious faith, and a Gramscian optimism of the will – a most unrealistic and fading hope that has been eroded by countless rejections, injuries, and episodes of exploitation. And yet, its illusory character notwithstanding, this remains a hyper-productive hope; its effects most intensely manifest in the masses of ‘grown-up’
footballers whose first waking thought remains one of unwavering faith in the millennial ‘destiny’ of their investment in the ‘global’ game.

4.5. CONCLUSION

The opening scene to the chapter was intended as an introductory angle of vision – at once partial and situational – on to the intersecting trajectories that would form the fulcrum of my thesis thereafter. The first of such trajectories concerned the sense of crisis that now arbitrates and delimits the life-worlds of Accra’s ever-swelling male youth populace; their gendered and generational becoming severely compromised, arguably even foreclosed, by the volatile uncertainties of Ghana’s neoliberal restructuring. From receding prospects of work, declining conviction in the value of education, and the emasculating experience of Accra’s informal sector, I sought to place – quite literally in the confines of Darkuman Park – male youth as a marginalized (anti)citizenry pushed to the outlying peripheries of the city and excluded from the full rights and responsibilities of mature citizenship. Yet, as a preliminary window onto the borderlands of youth, I avowed that male youth seek to counter such exclusions – and their abject subjectivities – through their consumptive engagement with mediated tropes of ‘global’ Africanity elsewhere; the idolized representations of black African footballers therein not only affording a redemptive assemblage of masculine symbols but stirring a most productive response amidst the undersides of the postcolonial African city.

It is here that the two trajectories of my theses converge: here where the first assertion of male youth as a hyper-productive anti-citizenry harbouring an all-pervading quest for exile, meets the second claim that, in a globally-connected urban infrastructure, they have actively appropriated the game of football as a most millenarian symbol and ‘pathway’ for that quest. Engaging with corporeal practices in situ, I sought to excavate the ‘emplaced’ (Pink, 2011) relations of male youth as they are variously textured by, and produced through, the situational dilemmas and contingent frictions of Ghana’s football frontier, and the ‘global’ cartography in which it is increasingly enmeshed. Tacking back and forth between the concrete and the conceptual, I endeavoured to navigate a ‘pathway’ of my own, one that avoided the self-fulfilling, over-intellectualizing prophecies that plagues much social theory, yet captured something of the awkward relationality that interweaves
the immediate possibilities of contingent encounter and the wider determinations of its social form.

Encapsulating such insights is Kweku’s allusion to football as ‘a kind of African disease’; an organic conceptual framing that I now return to in my concluding remarks. First, contiguous with the empirical fragments (re)presented, I argue that Kweku’s calling forth such a metaphor of ‘disease’ – invoking contagion, pathology and carnal possession – is emblematic of the paradoxical locus of male youth in West African cities today, and the importance of football in illuminating this paradox. As the quintessential borderland activity, the game of football – both in its mediated ‘global’ and distinctly African tropes – has come to embody the transcendent potentiality of the African man, while its colloquial import in the Ghanaian national imaginary also invokes collective memories of independence and Pan-Africanism. In this sense, I contend that Kweku speaks to the visceral infatuation that male youth possess for the game: it is, in the colloquial logic of the commune, their game. So too, however, and owing to the ever-rising number of African football icons ‘making it’ into the professional ranks of European football, such a visceral infatuation is now principally constructed vis-à-vis the millennial possibilities that may be summoned through one’s mastery of the game. In short, as exhaustively averred in the excerpts proffered, to become a professional footballer outside is the ‘dream’ occupation for vast numbers of Accra’s excluded male youth populace. Reiterating my conclusion in-text, football has emerged as a principal resource of masculine sociality, and a most millenarian resolution to the multiple exclusions that compel their collective quest for exile.

Second, this is, as with any paradox, only a partial truth, with the pathological connotations of Kweku’s statement equally instructive. Thus, I read the destructive inversion of Kweku’s ‘African disease’ against the simultaneity of Accra as a globally connected metropolis, and the heightened sense of abjection felt by those looking on from its shadows. By the same logic, the ‘global’ allure of football in Accra is marked and delimited by this doubling; with access to mediated broadcasts of European leagues, and the embodied presence of foreign agents and academies, cultivating a belief that professional football is a viable profession for male youth. Yet, as Kweku reflexively articulates, such a belief is at best a utopian one; its probability rendered negligible by the mass appropriation of the game amidst Accra’s ever-swelling, hyper-productive youth populace. Football, in this sense, denotes a ‘dream’ occupation that invigorates both the imagined aspirations and daily regimens of male youth,
yet shall remain – for the vast majority – an impossible one. Herein lies the intersecting potentiality and pathology of football that, I contend, is excruciatingly apparent in Kweku’s construction of the African disease.

Third, in addressing more canonical social scientific dilemmas, the chapter has implicitly motioned us to (re)consider how we theorize and seek to identity ‘youth agency’. Drawing upon Tsing’s (2004) concept of friction, I sought a break with avowals of agency as the neat ‘inner property of social actors’ (Bordonaro, 2012: 422), instead looking towards the situational dilemmas of the urban African postcolony for empirical cues as to how male youth – despite the multiple exclusions that impinge on their life-worlds and -chances – actively produced enhanced capacities, to act, move, and crucially, to ‘play’. Amidst the ‘pathway’ to becoming a player, Bismark’s decision to depart the family home to ‘go and live with his coach’, coupled with Richmond’s ‘age cheating’, and the opportunist fraudulence of ‘fake agents’ each underscore the relational, morally ambiguous, and situational character of agentic capacity. Indeed, in each case, the (inter)action pursued, when considered relative to the social actor in question, gave rise to favourable outcomes – outcomes that could be garnered only in the friction of social encounter, and through the relative dispossession of an-other. Agency, in this sense, reveals itself not as the raw precipitate of unbridled human action, nor a universally ‘positive’ inner possession to which some have access and others – due to variously intersecting inequalities – do not. Rather, much like the relational weavings of the social, agency reveals itself to be situational and disordered, its often opaque differentials of power struggled over, coaxed and stumbled upon in moments of crises, through acts of ingenuity, atrocity and corporeal mastery.

Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 125) aptly capture my concluding thoughts when they aver that ‘it is often those most adversely affected by modernity who recommission its means most effectively and radically’. For Ghana’s neoliberal generation, the ‘modern’ has manifest in a volatile discrepancy between the excruciating privation of their existence and the millennial potentiality of their becoming; both of which, I have claimed, are accentuated by their infatuation with the ‘global’ game. It is, perhaps, the game’s dual appeal that lies at the crux of its collective adoration; at once a consumptive platform through which to ‘survive’ the pain of abjection in Africa and the millennial vehicle through which to ‘escape’ out of Africa. As twenty-four year-old, Nana, twice rejected by Ghana’s major
football academies and refusing to go back to school, earnestly assured, ‘I know it… I am certain he has plans for me in football. No one can doubt his power to guide me in my dream’. For Nana, as with the others that comprise Accra’s disaffected male citizenry, the principal dictate appears to read as ‘keep training and carry on’ – their hopes of something better uplifted by a most deistic faith, against insurmountable odds and extreme privation, that ‘today might be their day, but if it isn’t, surely tomorrow will be’ (Piot, 2010).
CHAPTER 5:
BODY POLITICS: COMMODIFICATION, CAPITAL AND THE CORPOREAL AMIDST GHANA’S FOOTBALL FRONTIER

5.1. INTRODUCTION

‘EVERYONE IS DESPERATE for their piece of the pie, to find that player so that they get their big payout’, said Christophe as he scrutinized and scribbled, his gaze intimately affixed to the virile physicality, movement and craft of all those seeking to realize their ‘raw talent’ on field. As the morning sun peaked above the tree line, the highly charged ‘justify’ was long underway, its frenetic unfolding’s making for a poor spectacle; fierce tackles flew in, passes went astray, while moments of individual mastery were strikingly at odds with the collective chaos that ensued. Shaking his head dismissively, Christophe brought the game to a premature conclusion, ‘nothing to work with here… not one’, he cursed. ‘This is the challenge in Africa you see… you must find what the market is looking for. These boys [pointing to those trudging off the field], they are too old, too short. Look at them, they have finished growing already so it is a waste of time. When my phone rings, I must have what the European market is looking for. If I say I have a talent, the first thing they ask is what height is he? Before even the position! The clubs are interested in taller, more physical players and if you want to sell them African players, you must find and produce this type, otherwise you simply won’t have any calls coming from Europe’.

Later that afternoon, I sat across from Akwasi, a ‘local’ FIFA-licensed football agent in his Accra-based office. Images of his expanding portfolio of professional Ghanaian footballers adorned the otherwise bare walls, their presence standing out amidst the more subtle trappings of his Big-Man status – the tailored suit, laptop computer, numerous cell phones, even the cool breeze of the air conditioner. We worked our way through the familiar terrain of African football-speak; he briefed me on the wealth of ‘natural talents’ waiting to be unearthed in West Africa, on his growing repertoire of contacts with clubs and agents in Italy, and on his reluctant yet resigned acquiescence to the ‘dirty business’ of football in Africa. Exhausting that, he inquired of my own ‘mission’ in the game, before stressing that ‘there is money to be made if you have the contacts… especially for a white man in Ghana. It has become big business. Europeans now see us [Ghana] as the primary exporting
football country on the African continent. We have shown that we are producing players fit for the highest level and now we are benefiting as more players are leaving all the time’.

Capturing the broader neoliberal architecture of the above encounters, the writings of Jean and John Comaroff (2012: 125) boldly declare that African post-colonies – long dismissed as ‘old margins’ – have become the ‘new frontiers of capitalism’. Compelled by the ‘entrepreneurial freedoms’ (Harvey, 2005:145) and accumulative logics of the neoliberal moment, African polities – eager to capitalize on bountiful natural resources – are said to have thrown open the gates to the precocious callings of foreign capital and the rapacious extractive agendas of former colonial metropoles. To this, Ghana is no exception; indeed, as Chaffin (2008: 521) affirms, ‘this West African beacon’ stands at the ‘forefront of the neoliberal mandate’ – it’s highly flexible, optimally (de)regulated, and politically stable geographies making it a ‘a vanguard in the epoch of the market’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012: 124). Profitable economies, both legitimate and illicit, have flourished, with rapid inflows of foreign capital intensifying the aggressive extraction and devaluation of natural resources such as gold, diamonds, cocoa and oil – each of which now signify the ur object of a vast and uneven commercial cosmos out of Africa. Yet, as the opening sentiments of Christophe and Akwasi affirm, such neoliberal modes of extraction have also found untapped bounty in the ‘raw’ labor-value of the ‘talented’ African male body – the performing ‘black body’, that as Mbembe (cited in Shipley, 2010: 660) asserts, is always and ‘at the same time a body and a commodity’. This chapter, in seeking to elucidate the political economy of Ghana’s football frontier, motions us to critically appraise the process through which the African youth footballer has been appropriated as a site of capital accumulation – his physical vitality and labor re-sourced, (de)valued, and commodified as ‘fleshy merchandise’ (Wacquant, 2001:187) to be bought, sold and struggled over.

In the logic of Capital, writes Marx (1976: 12), the commodity signifies the ‘economic cell-form’ of capitalism – the origin point from which its rapacious modes of production and ‘society of commodity producers’ (ibid, 49) derive. It is, he argues, a ‘mysterious thing’, drained of its social biography (Kopytoff, 1986) and labor value, transformed into an ‘object of economic desire’ (Sharp, 2000: 293), and circulated, exchanged and consumed in accordance with the demands of the capitalist economy. Marx argued that this process – the process of commodification – was concealed or fetishized by the ‘science of political economy’ (Makhulu, 2010: 43), the outcome being a commodity-form that
emerged as if untouched by the sociality of labor relations; or in the words of Marx (1976: 174-75) himself, ‘of belonging to a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man’. This chapter, as the opening epigraphs vividly portray, seeks to explicate and illuminate such ‘geographies of production’ (Coe and Hess, 2012) as they coalesce around the lived journeys of Ghana’s male youth footballers, and their growing demand as the coveted object of economic desire at the crux of the nation’s rapidly-expanding football industry. At once valorized for their virile physicality on-field, yet (under)valued as mere ‘flesh to be peddled’ (Wacquant, 2001), I explore how the African youth footballer has, in recent decades, emerged as a ‘lively commodity’ (Collard and Dempsey, 2013) for a trans-local matrix of football entrepreneurs – all of whom, as Christophe makes known, are ‘desperate for their piece’ of Ghana’s latest ‘resource frontier’ (Tsing, 2004). Ultimately, then, my objective in what follows is to offer an alternative vantage point onto the meaning and import of football in West Africa today, shifting our analytic gaze from the lived experiences of Ghana’s male youth footballers to the politico-economic matrix that now intersects – and arguably even governs – their ‘pathway’ in the game.

At the forefront of my theoretical lexicon is the concept of bodily commodification – a concept which, as Parry (2012: 213) asserts, is of growing import in a moment when we are witnessing a ‘tranche of new “bodily commodities” and a flourishing ‘global market’ for their production, trade and circulation. Despite its dignitarian sanctity and elevated moral status, an expanding corpus of scholarly work attests to this commodification and trade of whole and disarticulated bodies (Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant, 2003; Sharp, 2007; Williams, 2005), with proliferating reports of human trafficking and child labor, as well as the ‘harvesting’ of organs, tissues and stems cells raising ‘new’ questions about how we theorize the body-as-commodity (Radin, 1996; Parry, 2008). That said, despite the obvious precarity of the athletic or performing body amidst the highly commercialized echelons of late capitalist societies, the process of bodily commodification has seldom been the principle theoretical imperative of empirically-driven research and writing on sport. This is not to disregard the rich array of literature which speaks to the commodification of sport (Carrington and McDonald, 2008; Donnelly and Petherick, 2004; Giulianotti, 2004; Horne, 2006; Moor, 2007; Walsh and Giulianotti, 2012) in its myriad contextual forms; rather, it is to spotlight the need for more sustained and critically empirical examinations of the radically contextual ways in which commodification has altered global geographies
of sport at a range of intersecting scales – from the corporeal and sensuous registers of the athletic body through to the reproduction of national sporting economies. It is this shifting scale of commodification which I seek to illuminate in this chapter, moving outwards from the ‘talented’ African male body as the ‘origin point’ from which Ghana’s contemporary football frontier and its proliferating ‘commodity producers’ derive.

Grounded in an ethnographic analysis of the trade and exchange of live bodies in Ghana’s football industry, I ask of how we as researchers can seek to elucidate the social relations through which concrete processes of bodily commodification unfold. And, of more epistemological geneses, I explore how we may begin to appraise the political and economic relations through which the sentient body can be said to exit its state of ‘raw’ effervescence and transition into the dehumanizing domain of the commodity. Ultimately, I contend, with Parry (2008: 1135), that much scholarly writing fails to capture the complexity of bodily-commodification-as-process – with instrumental accounts of a ‘threshold moment’ when formerly sacrosanct and live bodies cross an ontological divide into the realm of the object merely proceeding to reify and obfuscate the expansive ‘geographies of production’ (Coe and Hess, 2012) in which such bodies, whether sporting or otherwise, are entangled.

As a point of departure, the writings of Appadurai (1986) are deemed instructive, principally his assertion that commodification must be understood as a complex spatial and temporal process – objects do not simply materialize in the world as ‘commodities’ but rather move into and out of the commodity state during the process of what he terms their ‘lifecourse’ or ‘careers’. Similarly, Kopytoff (1986: 73) contends of commodification as a ‘process of becoming’ as opposed to an all-or-nothing state of being, with the commodified body less a mechanized object forever governed by the laws of supply and demand than a ‘biographical’ some-thing marked by a succession of commodity phases across its cultural and economic trajectory. Contrary to popular presumption, I motion us to appraise commodification as an ‘incomplete’ (Radin, 1996) and unstable process across time and space: what may at one point of vantage be considered as inalienable – here, the live bodies of male youth footballers – may later or elsewhere be (mis)appropriated as resources of capital accumulation and coveted ‘objects’ of economic exchange. Thus, while a political economy approach has long been utilized in sociological inquiry and its substantive concern with late capitalist sport, the unique contribution of this chapter lies in its attempts
to elucidate the discursive and material processes through which male youth footballers are simultaneously produced and (de)valued, prized and capitalized as youthful bodies to develop, cheap labor to exploit, and commodities to be traded amidst the ‘body-centered universe’ (Wacquant, 1995: 66) of Ghana’s football ‘business’.

On a more methodological note, to assert that Ghana’s football industry is a part-illicit and indiscriminately capital-driven ‘business’ would be an understatement. Eliciting malevolence and antagonism even amongst those profiting, the ‘business’ of African football depends in no small part on the alternative artistries of deception and secrecy; a concoction which has transfigured rumoring and greed as norm and motif of ‘how business is done’ (Tetteh, 2009). Owing to this obscurant and guarded cartography, this is an industry – as with the echelons of professional sport more broadly – that is notoriously hostile to the intrusions of ‘outsiders’ and has largely resisted any form of academic inquiry – certainly of the ethnographic form – that has sought to illuminate its embedded social logic and organizational praxis. It follows that extant literatures on the subject of the African footballer have – with the exception of Pannenborg (2010) and sparse elements of Darby’s (2002, 2006, 2010) extensive body of writing – been largely restricted to a macro-structural gaze from afar, thus rendering the athletic body as little more than the mechanized product of global capital flows, aggregate structures and institutional policies (Bale, 2002; Poli, 2006). As such, the greater part of what we do know about the inner workings of football’s politico-economic matrix has, aside from this narrow cluster of divergent academic scholarship, been overly laden with activist rhetoric, undercut by journalistic sensationalism (McDougall, 200829), and lacking in sustained empirical observation and contextual insight (David, 2005).

Such knowledge – much of which is definable as such only in the broadest sense – has exacerbated and reified polarized stereotypes of football’s evil entrepreneurs, whose inhumane and avaricious penchant for capital occasions the exploitation of unwitting youth athletes. While by no means utterly devoid of empirical veracity, such proliferating stereotypes shall form a conspicuous undercurrent to the exposition that follows, as I seek to unravel, through first-hand observation and participation, the social fabric of Ghana’s

29 In a recent article, McDougall claimed that there were over ‘500 illegal football academies’ in Ghana’s capital city of Accra alone – a figure which, upon the ‘observant participation’ (Wacquant, 1998: 5) of over six months fieldwork in Accra’s urban peripheries, appears to be grossly exaggerated.
football frontier. The fine-grained anatomy of the ensuing discussion is informed by a commitment to what Wacquant (1998b: 4) cleverly coins as ‘observant participation’; a methodological form premised on a comprehensive personal engagement with the multitude of ‘spaces’ in which football’s commercial universe is fashioned and held together on a day-to-day basis. Having effectively negotiated the obstacles to becoming a quasi-member of Ghana’s football cosmos at a multitude of levels – from injured footballer to academy coach, and from teacher to aspiring sports agent – I was able not simply to elicit and observe the practices and experiences that constitute the empirical ingredients of this chapter, but also to cross-reference and verify information from divergent sources, affording me a unique opportunity to interrogate the points of conflict, collusion and contradiction generated by the ruthlessly competitive nature of Ghana’s football ‘business’.

The purpose of the chapter is two-fold. First, I seek to illuminate the trans-local cartography of Ghana’s football industry, situating the game’s politico-economic re-production amidst the broader tide of neoliberal restructuring that has swept across West Africa in recent decades. I present a sociological analysis from the African male body outwards; moving through the contextual practices, processes and perceptions that bind the male body to the ball, and the ball to an ever-expanding yet fractured socio-economic matrix of human actors, corporations, clubs, and governance in multiple localities across the African and European continents. Having established the contemporary genesis of Ghana’s football’s frontier, the chapter then shifts to its political and economic praxis; interrogating how the performing male body is produced as an ‘object’ of economic desire for football’s ever-growing legion of agents, academies and entrepreneurs in Ghana – each of whom stake competing claims to its sovereignty. There then follows an ‘insider’ account from the perspective of the football agent, exploring the informal practices – both licit and illegitimate – through which they seek to augment the commercial value and market visibility of a youth footballer out of Ghana. It is from such practices that the chapter shall now commence, as I seek to establish the socio-historic production of Ghana’s football frontier against the broader terrain of neoliberal developments in West Africa and beyond.
5.2. From Nkrumah to Neoliberalism: 
The Production of Ghana’s Football Frontier

‘It’s all about producing and selling players, it’s that simple. It’s a big business – the youth teams are a business, they attract the agents and the scouts from European clubs, and if they don’t find and produce players at the high level then the business will quickly dry up. The European clubs want high level players at a cheap price, and the agents and academies are all trying to produce that player’ (Interview with Michael, 22nd April 2012)

Capitalist frontiers, asserts Tsing (2004: 27), ‘are not just edges; they are particular kinds of edges where the expansive nature of extraction comes into its own’. Obscuring the boundaries of law and ethics, a frontier is a space wherein exploration and exploitation represent the normative order of things, and natural resources the object of one’s desire. Principally, however, they are projects of intensifying accumulation – reaching forwards and backwards in time as they remake geographies of capital, reenergize ‘old forms of savagery’ (ibid, 29), and enable a profitable union between ‘raw’ sites of commodity extraction and the end-point of refined consumption. Contiguous with the othering process of colonialism, and its racialized systems of power, West African geographies have long been situated at the ‘raw’ end of such extractive economies – its territories, bodies and labor treated as capitalism’s ‘final frontier’ and rendered ripe for accumulation in its ‘primitive’ (Marx, 1976) imperial forms. It was precisely such inherited ethno-racial legacies of capital – and the predatory modes of accumulation they legitimated – that Kwame Nkrumah so vehemently opposed when he became Ghana’s inaugural President following independence from Great Britain in 1957.

Inspired by his unwavering commitment to Pan-Africanism, Nkrumah sought to revive consciousness of the cultural and spiritual unity of the African people – ‘Africa is one continent, one people, one nation’ (Nkrumah, 1970: 87-88), he declared, emphasizing that his vision of a shared ‘African personality would become a strong driving force within the African Revolution’. At the forefront of Nkrumah’s Revolutionary Path, both as a sporting symbol of a newly independent Ghana and a shared vehicle of Pan-Africanist sentiment, was the game of football – a game, he maintained, would come to symbolize the

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advent of a ‘new African in the world’ (Kwame Nkrumah, cited in Losambe 2004; 44). Lauded as a bulwark against the imperialist forces of yesteryear, Nkrumah set about transforming the game into a shared expression of a post-colonial Africa ready to ‘demonstrate to the world, to the other nations, young as we are, that we are prepared to lay our own foundations’ (ibid, 44). A half-century on from such an optimistic decree, the above sentiments of Michael provide a cogent historical framing of football’s veritable ‘transformation’ in the decades that followed.

Far from the postcolonial bulwark eulogized in Nkrumah’s electoral mandate, Michael illuminates the game’s contemporary emergence as ‘big business’ – its politico-economic ecology and mandate now aggressively centered on the production, trade and export of youth footballers out of Africa. ‘It’s all about money now, about finding that diamond’, concluded academy director, Christophe – his sentiments, much like that of Thompson and Armstrong (2010: 295), accentuating the extractive ethos that now governs Ghana’s transcontinental trade in athletic male bodies. Indeed, Akwasi further captured the localized expression of such an extractive ethos when he affirmed that ‘there is money to be made’ if you can ‘produce players fit for the highest level’ – a realization that is now shared by a hierarchical network of football entrepreneurs across the African and European continents. In the neoliberal-present, therefore, football’s appropriation as a millennial vehicle of upward social mobility is not the exclusive preserve of Ghana’s male youth populace; rather, it extends, capillary-like, to football agents, academies and African ‘Big Men’ – a commercial triad whose modus operandi is to appease the outsourced demands of European clubs, and their appetite for ‘high level’ labor at a ‘cheap price’. It is against such asymmetrical relations of power, and the neocolonial geographies from which they stem, that I situate Ghana’s football industry as an archetypal resource frontier – its extractive impetus and inequitable ‘regimes of value’ (Simmel, 1978) controlled and dictated by the imperatives of the European football labor market and its accumulative project of capitalist expansion.

This is, however, not a project out of place; rather, the socio-historic production of Ghana’s football frontier has paralleled, and at times, predicted, the broader political and economic instability that has befallen the nation since the ignominious ousting of Kwame Nkrumah in 1966. Indeed, the scale of the game’s ‘transformation’ in the years following Nkrumah’s reign is all the more profound when one considers the ‘foundations’ he had established in
the latter years of his presidency. The veritable magnitude of such foundations were exemplified in the establishment of the Confederation of African Soccer (CAF) in 1957, thereafter endowing Africa with a political voice and administrative presence in the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the game’s world governing body. Harnessing the wave of national euphoria after independence, the Ghana National Football League was established in 1958, while the Ghanaian national team was rejuvenated by the founding of the Real Republikans – an elite squad whose raison d’etre was to ‘to act as ambassadors for pan-Africanism’ and ‘the new spirit of the African man’ (cited in Darby, 2005). Much to Nkrumah’s delight, such spirit found in the game a powerful vehicle for its expression, with domestic clubs such as Asante Kotoko packing a crowd of over 40’000 into the Wembley-Accra Stadium for their encounter with the Real Republikans in 1961; an attendance which owed much to the fact that the continent’s most famous players were present on the field of play.

Unequivocal in his aspirations for what he understood to be an ‘African Revolution’, Nkrumah’s modernizing project had found in the game of football a most vibrant and universal platform for its political expression, and by the time of his ousting from power in 1966, his legacy had been secured with the victories of the Ghanaian national team – popularly known as the ‘Black Stars’ – at the African Nation’s Cup in 1963 and 1965. Furnished with the wisdom of hindsight, one might be forgiven for questioning Nkrumah’s judgment in hoisting football as his chosen symbol of postcolonial Ghana; a game that, as critics now point out, was introduced in the country by British colonialists and which had its political and economic roots firmly embedded in the European power-bloc (Alegi, 2004). What can be said with some certainty, however, is that Nkrumah could not have fathomed the seemingly perpetual state of political and economic crisis – what Arrighi (2002: 17) termed the ‘African tragedy’ – that would progressively unfold across the continent in the decades to follow. Ghana nevertheless began the 1970’s as one of Africa’s most revered footballing nations following Asante Kotoko’s triumph in the African Cup of Champions in 1970, while the ‘Black Stars’ would add further African Cup of Nation’s titles in 1978 and 1982. These triumphs on the field did, however, betray the ‘unmitigated economic disaster’ (Aryeetey and Harrigan, 2000: 11) that Ghana endured in the early 1980’s – a period, often lamented as Africa’s ‘lost decade’ (Meredith, 2005), that left the Ghanaian state teetering on the brink of bankruptcy.
The catalyst for politico-economic change in Ghana, and the watershed moment in the production of its football frontier, I contend, was the decision of the newly-appointed Rawling’s government to accept structural adjustments loans from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1983 – reforms, which as Aryeetey and Tarp (2000) observe, were grounded in orthodox neoliberal principles that privileged the ‘market mechanism as a vehicle for promotion of efficiency and development’. From that point, as Chaflin (2008) affirms, Ghana began cultivating a ‘development’ mandate in which the hallmarks of neoliberalism – of economic extroversion, gutted state services, foreign financing and export-led trade – were all to the fore. By the early 1990’s, foreign financing had become the watchword of Ghana’s ‘new’ regime, with the nation’s political stability and relative peace ensuring that it rapidly emerged as a safe haven for foreign investors amidst West Africa’s notoriously ‘troubled’ corridor. So too, as Darby (2010: 32) argues, the ‘turning point’ in the growth of Ghana’s football industry may be situated in the early 1990’s, with the triumph of the nation’s ‘Black Starlets’ at the U-17 World Championships in 1991 said to have ‘awakened European clubs to the potential offered by young Ghanaian talent’.

In the decade to follow, the extractive ethos of Ghana’s football frontier prospered – its flourishing export-trade in youth footballers in keeping with the broader advent of the nation’s neoliberal renaissance and the ‘raw’ commodities that form its accumulative ‘foundations’. Indeed, when Ayelazuno (2013: 2) declared that Ghana’s recent economic renaissance constituted an illusory form of ‘growth without development’, he not only illuminated the paradoxical essence of neoliberal economics, but incisively captured the trajectory of the nation’s football industry. Despite being Africa’s fastest growing economy in 2011 (World Bank, 2012), Ghana’s rapid neoliberal resurgence has been dependent on foreign investment into its extractive sector, thus promoting an economy that is contingent on the devaluation of natural resources, and their export as raw materials and unskilled labor (Aryeetey and Harrigan, 2000). The export-trade in youth footballers to Europe is, I contend, emblematic of such neoliberal ‘development’: promoting the aggressive incursion

31 In Ghana, the loans were known as the Economic Recovery Program (ERP).
32 Ghana was among the first African nations to adopt World Bank and IMF Structural Adjustment Programs intended to promote an Economic Recovery Program (ERP) in 1983. This commenced a period of neoliberal restructuring.
33 Devastating outbreaks of political and ethnic conflict, genocide and civil war swept across the African continent, with Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and Nigeria notable West African nations affected.
and extractive ethos of foreign investment in the form of football academies and agents; devaluing and commodifying the ‘raw’ labor of its male youth footballers; and hastening the decay of its domestic football structures as ‘Big Men’ owners are forced to sell their most coveted youth talents. All three tropes simultaneously hinge on the ‘raw’ potential and commodity value of the performing male body – the ‘origin point’ of Ghana’s contemporary football frontier, and the ‘life flesh of capital accumulation’ (Vogts, 2013: 770) for the game’s emergent commercial triad of football academies, agents and domestic Big Men.

In pinpointing the emergence of a vast network of foreign-financed football academies and agents across West Africa, academy director Christophe argues that football’s neoliberal era began in earnest with the founding of the MimoSifcom Football Academy near Abidjan, Cote D’Ivoire, by the Frenchman Jean-Guillou in 1994:

‘It all began with the ASEC [Mimosas] Academy in 1994. After their success, the prospect of Africa’s footballers was known to European clubs and it wasn’t long before the agent business began here and Feyenoord [Rotterdam FC] decided to set up their own academy in Ghana – a place they decided had a strong situation for finding talented players.’

As Darby et al. (2007: 149) affirm, ASEC’s Academy ‘was one of the first structured football academies in sub-Saharan Africa’, with its development philosophy – which espoused the importance of providing youth footballers with both a football and academic education – a major influence on the establishment of a number of Afro-European academies in Ghana by the turn of the millennium. Chief among them, as Christophe avows, was the Feyenoord Fetteh Academy in 1999 – originally a venture instigated by the Dutch club, Feyenoord, with the aim of ‘producing’ two players annually that would progress to its mother club in Rotterdam. The stream of foreign investment continued apace with the formation of the Right to Dream Academy by British social entrepreneur, Tom Vernon, in 2000 – a non-profit organization that currently boasts a fully residential campus

34 Darby et al. (2007: 148) proposed a four-tier typology of football academies:
35 Afro-European Academies, as one of four academy ‘types’ proposed by Darby et al. (2007), is defined as an academy ‘which involve either a partnership between an existing academy and a European club or an arrangement whereby a European club takes a controlling interest in an African club and then either subsumes the club’s existing youth structures or establishes new ones’.
36 Feyenoord Rotterdam have since ended their official financing of the academy, which – according to its Director, Karel Brokken – is currently financed by a private philanthropist.
– including a school, dormitories and football training facility – in Ghana’s Eastern Region. A plethora of academies have since been founded, with experienced academy scout, Joseph, suggesting that Ghana is now at the forefront of foreign investment in West African football with ‘six major football academies’ – each of which, as Darby (2010: 38) aptly instructs, ‘are ultimately extractive ventures’ seeking to ‘source, refine, and sell football labour for the overseas, mostly European, market’. Intensifying such competition yet further has been the related rise of the ‘football agent’.

Wide perceived as the ‘middleman’ in local parlance, the football agent emerged following the commercialization of the game in Europe in the late 1980’s – with the emerging demand for cheaper sources of athletic labor giving rise to an expanding troupe of football entrepreneurs and the crystallization of a highly profitable profession. With the Bosman Ruling of 1995 and the ‘opening up’ of Europe’s football labor market (Poli, 2006), this troupe of football agents extended across the untapped talent havens of Western Africa and South America – the mission being to profitably bridge and broker the relationship between aspiring youth footballers and professional clubs. Practically speaking in Ghana, the football agent is constructed – by both male youth and domestic coaches alike – as the ‘gatekeeper’ to securing a ‘justify’37 with a professional football club in Europe. It is, however, a profession ‘characterized by uncertainty’ (Poli and Rossi, 2012: 44), with FIFA’s now defunct licensing system, and the absence of its regulatory policing, leading to a pervasive lack of transparency, negative stereotypes concerning ‘fraudulent practices’ (ibid, 7), and ill-defined professional ethics.

As local ‘FIFA-licensed’ agent, Percy explained, the ‘agent business’ in Ghana is a two-tiered commercial cosmos: ‘To make money in football, you must be making contacts to work with other agents outside because the game down here [in Ghana] is no use for anything else now. It’s about finding players and passing them to get a smaller cut of the monies later. It’s not easy to make it’. In the course of voicing his frustration at ‘fake agents’ – who he claims are defiling his professional repute – Ghanaian FIFA-licensed agent, Akwasi also spoke to such a hierarchical agent business:

‘As an African agent, there is a perception that you are just useful for doing groundwork down here [in Ghana]. It is the white European who must finalize

37 A colloquial term denoting a trial or try out period.
the move for the player. You need to make contacts in this business – contacts outside. That is crucial because no one wants to deal with African agents. Too many issues of mistrust and fraud. The thought is that the white Europeans are more knowledgeable and more connected with big clubs outside so young players will do anything they say. We are seen as not being able to do the same big moves and having a European contact just makes things easier’

In both its licit and illicit dimensions, then, Ghana’s contemporary ‘agent business’ rests, not just on an ethno-racial hierarchy between the ‘African agent’ and the ‘white European’, but on a highly flexible, inordinately intricate web of trans-local collaboration across continents. Much like the football academies, however, such agent collaboration is founded on unequal terms of exchange – terms that exacerbate, as Christophe instructs, ‘the desperation of small time middlemen’ in Ghana, whose diminished standing as ‘African agents’ propagates a highly-racialized degradation of both their industry credentials and professional integrity vis-à-vis the trustworthy and knowledgeable ‘white Europeans’. Reports of inequitable contracts, fraudulent scams and allegations of human trafficking have done little to extinguish such negative depictions of football’s ruthless underbelly (Darby, 2010; McGee, 2012). Recognizing the game’s escalating impropriety in 1999, Ghanaian President, Jerry Rawlings commissioned a judicial investigation – led by Justice Nasiru Sulemana Gbadegbe – into 150 overseas transfers involving Ghanaian players, revealing numerous cases of player exploitation, alongside a web of financial corruption that extended from a former Chairman of the GFA, Mr. Nana Sam Brew Butler, right through all levels of game in Ghana and its ever-growing connections to Europe.

Completing football’s commercial triad is a new generation of African Big Man – what Pannenborg (2010: 74) terms ‘one man shows’ – whose private investment in Ghana’s domestic football clubs is unequivocally motivated by the accumulative potential of ‘plugging into’ the booming export-trade in youth footballers. This is, however, principally

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38 – As evinced in the previous chapter, the most common of such exploitative relations concerns proliferating incidences of male youth being ‘cheated’ by opportunistic fraudsters’ masquerading as official ‘FIFA-licensed agents’, enticing aspiring footballers with claims of European contacts before disappearing with any financial sum provided. See Donnelly and Petherick (2004) for broader discussion of child exploitation in sport.

39 The experiences of African footballers in the latter have been replete with exploitative scandals surrounding duplicitous labor contracts, agent abandonment, and the illegal transfer of minors by European clubs – with FC Barcelona of Catalonia, Spain, sanctioned in 2014 for flouting FIFA’s regulations prohibiting the international transfer of youth under the age of 18.

40 A Ghanaian term for men who possess economic, social and political influence. See Pannenborg (2010) for an extended analyses of how Big Men have impacted the development of football in Africa.
a response to the declining standards and commercial decay of Ghana’s once prosperous football infrastructures, with the Ghanaian Premier League – inaugurated by the Ghana Football Association (GFA) in 1995 – now afflicted by a dramatic fall in attendances, dwindling gate receipts, and the destabilizing presence of European-financed football academies. Desmond Sarpong, former Chairman of Ghana’s most successful club, Asante Kotoko, in a recent plea for ‘co-operation with international clubs and sponsors’, captured the struggles of the domestic game when he exclaimed41:

‘How do we raise money? We are not getting enough from sponsorship, woefully inadequate. We aren’t getting money from the gates. In fact, we are now in competition with the EPL42, with the Bundesliga, with La Liga in terms of viewership and this is where we are having real difficulty. We are unable to bring in money locally to run the club’

Responding to this economic crisis, many of Ghana’s once prosperous football clubs, and the African Big Men at their helm, have turned their attention to the lucrative extractive ‘business’ that has threatened their very existence. Exemplary of football’s entrepreneurial ‘Big Men’ was the late Sly Tetteh, who co-founded Liberty Professionals, a club based in Ghana’s capital city, Accra in 1997. Revered as a ‘football entrepreneur par excellence’ (Pannenborg, 2010), Tetteh earned his acclamation through the impressive production line of youth talents that would go on to star for Ghana’s Black Stars at the 2006 World Cup in Germany43. As the most globally-renowned ‘Black Star’, the career trajectory of Michael Essien provides a most striking illustration, with his transfer to French club, Bastia, in 2000 instigating a career trajectory that would include spells in France, England, Spain and Italy and generate transfer fees exceeding £30million. Owing to such unrivalled success, Tetteh’s export-led vision became a blueprint for a new generation of Big Men – many of whom, as Pannenborg (2010: 70) argues, purchase majority shares in Ghanaian clubs as ‘vehicles’ through which to profit from the ‘buying and selling of football talents’.

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42 English Premier League

43 His youth protégés included national icons such as Michael Essien, Asamoah Gyan, Sulley Muntari, John Pantsil, and Dereck Boateng – all of whom had graduated from the Liberty Professionals youth academy before being lucratively transferred to clubs across Europe’s most prestigious football nations.
Of the 23 players who comprised Ghana’s squad for the 2014 World Cup Finals in Brazil, all but one\(^{44}\) played their club football outside the borders of their home country – a statistic which illuminates the exponential increase in the exodus of football talent from the pre-1990’s ‘trickle’ to the ‘explosion’ (Darby, 2010: 20) that followed. While it remains difficult to determine with any precision the number of Ghanaian football migrants currently playing abroad, the number of African footballers playing 1\(^{st}\) or 2\(^{nd}\) Division in Europe increased from 350 at the mid-point of the 1990’s to an estimated 770 by the turn of the millennium (Ricci, 2000); an increase of over 100 percent in just five years. Ghana featured prominently in this export-trade, with Bale (2004) observing that it had emerged as one of the top three talent-exporting nations on the African continent at the onset of the twenty-first century, a trajectory which accelerated significantly in the decade to follow as the commercial triad of football academies, agents and African Big Men acquired ever-growing authority over the economic levers of the game, and its flourishing economy of vivacious live bodies.

And so, in the neoliberal-present, the extractive ethos of Ghana’s football ‘business’ has gained sway, its contemporary ecology now lucratively predicated on the export-trade of athletic male bodies that are valued as much for their inexpensive sourcing as for their mastery with a ball at their feet. The outcome, as Christophe’s opening sentiments averred, is an expansive commercial cosmos where ‘everything is about money’, ‘about finding the diamond’, and about ‘the next big payout’ – in sum, then, about optimal economic ‘growth’ with minimal infrastructural ‘development’. As a microcosm of the nation’s neoliberal renaissance, Ghana’s football frontier may be most fruitfully understood as a trans-localized project of extractive capitalism – its accumulative impetus derived from the intensified demands of Europe’s football economy and its proclivity for ever-cheaper sources of athletic labor. Acting as the pivot between the large scale and the local (Besnier, 2012), between desire and demand, the athletic male body is therefore circulated and exchanged across trans-local ‘regimes of value’ (Simmel, 1978) – regimes that, I contend, cannot be unlinked from the historico-racial inequalities propagated by colonial conquest and the uneven ‘geographies of production’ (Coe and Hess, 2012) which have long since endured. In the neoliberal moment, such racialized systems of power and capital – and the

\(^{44}\) The only domestic-based player was goalkeeper, Stephan Adams, who is currently contracted to Ghanaian club, Aduana Stars.
racial hierarchies of humanness (McKittrick, 2006) they propagated – are manifest in the credential degradation of ‘African agents’ vis-à-vis ‘white Europeans’, and crucially, in the unchecked commodification and ‘cheap’ export-value of the racialized-as-African body.

It follows that the fragmented, trans-local geographies of production that accompany Ghana’s export-trade in youth footballers to Europe are riven with the enduring inequities of capitalism as a ‘racialized structure’ (Kane, 2007: 360; Fanon, 2004) – its preferred modes of accumulation still intimately imbued with the ‘matrix of domination’ (Hill-Collins, 1990) that is destructively ascribed to racially and ethnically othered bodies. Entangled in an increasingly global division of labor and the fragmentation of production practices, Ghana’s football frontier thus reveals itself as a relegated socio-economic space – a quintessential extractive ‘enclave’ (Ferguson, 2006) structured by the quest to capitalize on the surplus value of the performing male body. It follows, therefore, that the performing male body emerges as the primary site of production on Ghana’s football frontier – at once valorized and sought-after for its labor power yet (de)valued and dehumanized as a ‘commodity like any other’ (Harvey, 2005: 171). It is this quest to commodify what Marx (1976) once termed the ‘natural forces’ of the athletic male body that the chapter now turns to, as I seek to explicate football’s contemporary allure for a trans-localized matrix of actors, institutions and entrepreneurs; all of whom are embroiled in the struggle to secure economic rights to, and sovereignty over, the African male body.

5.3. BODY SOVEREIGNTIES:
TOWARDS A GEOGRAPHY OF BODILY COMMODIFICATION

‘These are the invisible hands… the hands that feed, that help a boy to make his way through the tough conditions here’, declared FIFA-licensed agent, Percy, as he wrapped up a lengthy excursus into the entrepreneurial echelons that now coalesce around Ghana’s youth footballers. Several hours earlier, Percy had opened our afternoon exchange with a declaration of sorts, a ‘big problem’ to be precise: namely that ‘everybody is an agent in Ghana’. Weaving his way through the impoverished social fabric of the family and community milieu, he spoke of the benevolent acts and gestures bestowed upon a ‘talented boy’ by parents, relatives and youth coaches – many of whom will ‘buy them boots, feed them, even house them’. ‘That’s when the problems begin’, he then exclaimed abruptly,
his exasperated tone signaling that we had arrived at the root of his frustration. ‘For me as an agent, you think you have found a new player but then you have these people coming from nowhere claiming to own this boy! This is the big problem in Ghana as these many people will call themselves the player’s manager. Maybe they have seen the boy play when they are young and taken him under their wing. But you know, they are waiting until a player is good enough to have an opportunity to be seen, then they are hoping that they won’t be forgotten. It’s the poverty, it makes people want to grab onto anything’.

Scaling outward further, Percy too alluded to the intimate antagonism that now pervades the commercial echelons of the game in Ghana, with the fiercely competitive investments of agents and academies evidently a point of friction. ‘It is not so easy with all the academies here, many of them are scouting boys all over the country when they are very young, taking the best talent before it is old enough for us [agents] to look at. It is a problem now to get a boy at 15 [years old] as the big academies are already having them training for a few years by then’. Evidently keen to accentuate the prestige of the agent profession, however, and in a direct riposte to any suggestion that the academies had acquired a stranglehold over the export-trade of Ghana’s ‘natural talents’, Percy bullishly continued, ‘can you tell me how Essien, Ayew or Mensah were found? I can tell you it wasn’t the academies who did it! They were not readymade players when they left Ghana but an agent here found them and saw their raw potential – the natural talent that is inside them. Everybody is looking for that natural talent now in Ghana’.

Sovereignty over one’s body has long been enshrined as the moral or natural right of an autonomous individual – its dignitarian sanctity safeguarded by the edict that laws of property and ownership should not extend to the human body. However, as Parry (2012) cautions, while the antecedents of slavery have ensured that the ‘ownership’ of an-other is prohibited, the legal position regarding how materials derived from the body – in this case the right to extract economic value from them – remains a point of vigorous debate. It is against such debate that I position the above epigraph, and its depiction of the striking paradox that now surrounds the ‘talented’ youth footballer in Ghana – at one and the same time a vivacious assemblage of deeply affective and corporeal aptitudes, and the coveted ‘object’ of economic value on which football’s commercial matrix has flourished. In the visceral vocabulary of the African footballer, his body represents a somatic site of production – the ‘raw’ or ‘natural’ materials with which he endeavors to maximize both
the fortitude and finesse of his athletic aptitudes and the probability of his future flight beyond the confines of Africa. Yet, as Percy so aptly denotes, such an *ethos of entrepreneurship* is not exclusive to the aspiring youth footballer, with the performing body not just a fertile ‘colony’ of the self but a body-to-be-colonized – its physical prowess and destiny shaped as much by the commodifying forces of Ghana’s football entrepreneurs as it is by the ‘bodily work’ (Wacquant, 1995) of its beholder.

Such forces are heightened, I contend, by what Millar (2014: 34) observes as the increasing ‘precarity’ of labor under tenuous conditions of neoliberal reform – conditions that are encapsulated in the rapid expansion of Ghana’s informal economy and the unstable yet ingenious entrepreneurialism on which it thrives. Amidst such a neoliberal environ – where formal employment has become the exception, and material hardship the norm – the singular compulsion to secure alternative means to livelihood has given rise to a politico-economic landscape where, as Percy aptly instructs, ‘everybody is [now] an agent’. What Percy illuminates therein, I suggest, is the way in which Ghana’s flourishing export-trade in youth footballers has begun to refigure long-standing webs of relations into something approaching what Mbembe (2006: 304) defined as a ‘new economy of persons’ – with the ‘talented body’ increasingly valorized, by family, community and commercial networks alike, as a coveted resource or site of capital accumulation. Elaborating on such sentiments, Percy later grumbled that ‘when there’s money on the agenda, no one thinks properly’ – an assertion which speaks to the juxtaposing imperatives of capital versus kinship, and the emergence of a ‘new’ resource-centered economy. It follows that, in keeping with Appadurai’s (1986) notion of commodity ‘phases’, this emergent ‘economy of persons’ is contingent upon the reduction of vivacious live bodies to a ‘thing-like’ state – creating a distance between the valorized labor-value and performative guise of the body and its alienated biological being. Ultimately rendered as some-*thing* saleable, the body-as-labor-power becomes the coveted ‘object’ of economic desire amidst the highly competitive and commercialized echelons of Ghana’s football ‘business’ – its fleshy sentience drained and negated amidst the geographies of production that now accompany the export-trade in youth footballers.

The dehumanizing lexicon of the industry is one such discursive mechanism, with youth footballers routinely debased to the rank of rare and precious stones to be unearthed, ‘raw’ or ‘natural’ resources to be processed, and commercially-valued livestock to be reared and
traded. Nowhere was this more vividly apparent than Christophe’s argument that the ‘mission’ behind Ghana’s football industry was the ‘search for that gem… that diamond that everybody talks about but doesn’t exist’. Elsewhere, Accra-based agent, Kuku, spoke of the ‘unpolished diamonds’ that lie in waiting amidst the untapped ‘villages and towns’ of Ghana’s predominantly rural northern territories, their procurement and subsequent sale perceived as the gateway to vast riches and prosperity beyond African shores. Yet, the dehumanizing effects of such linguistic idioms was perhaps best captured during an evening conversation with expatriate academy coach, Jan, who declared, ‘when you have so many different interests competing for the best young talents here, what do you expect? They are all fishing in the same pond, they are all competing, doing anything they can to ensure that they get the catch’. Emblematic of the industry’s legitimizing vernacular, such illustrations proffer an angle of vision onto the discursive ‘phasing’ (Appadurai, 1986) of the live body into an economic object to be ‘caught’, processed, and transacted.

Extending Jan’s metaphor to encompass the material processes of such commodification, Ghana’s football industry may be said to hinge on a limited ‘pool’ of commercially-viable youth talents – its heightened competition owing to the ever-expanding matrix of actors – both domestic and foreign – that now scramble for the most valuable ‘catch’. At the forefront of this commercial matrix, and its conflict-ridden relations, are what Coach Joe termed ‘the big players’ – namely the nation’s ‘six major football academies’ and the hierarchical agent industry comprising a handful of FIFA-licensed and internationally-reputed agents of Ghanaian nationality, and an expansive network of ‘local’ middlemen – often referred to as scouts – who are intimately attuned to the youth structures of the game across the country. Considered in abstraction, the ‘big players’ appear to share the spoils of football’s burgeoning ‘business’ according to an intricate spatial and temporal division of labor, with the professional mandate of agents and academies seemingly distinct enough so as to avoid a conflict of interest. As Coach Joe instructs, the scouting networks of the ‘big academies’ initiate their nationwide surveillance of ‘emerging talent’ from the age of eight years onwards, actively cherry-picking Ghana’s elite youth players through the provision of fully-residential athletic ‘scholarships’ by the advent of the early teenage years. By comparison, the professional entry point for Ghana’s football agents is much later, with FIFA-licensed agent, Percy, affirming his active solicitation of youth talents from the age of fifteen years onwards; the official ‘mission’ being to act as the intermediary bridging emerging African talents with professional opportunities ‘outside’.
The reality, however, as Jan alludes to above, is a highly uneven and illicit commercial cosmos that fuses uneasy collusion and cut-throat competition, with the pressure to do ‘anything’ necessary to secure ‘the catch’ promoting a landscape wherein deception and antipathy are the normal order of things, and the undercutting of one’s rivals a customary trick of the trade. As FIFA-licensed agent, Akwasi, irritably explained, ‘everybody talks about trust in the business but I don’t trust nobody… been shafted too many times for that’. Ironically, trust represents a prominent theme in the dramaturgical narratives of industry-speak – its purported inviolability routinely preached in moments when the galvanizing bonds of reciprocal relations are at stake: FIFA-licensed agent, Percy, memorably assured me during our initial introduction that ‘a man’s word is his bond. What kind of person are you if you should break it?’ More often than not, reliably appended to these dramaturgical affirmations of morality are denunciations of fraudulent practice and the emphatic *othering* of its provenance – the motive seemingly being to tarnish the reputation of one’s rivals so as to diminish their share (or to recall Christophe’s sentiments, their ‘piece’) of the player market. Regardless of their origin or attribution, however, such allegations of ‘dirty business’ are ultimately afflicted upon the male youth footballer, in many cases severely compromising the degree of sovereignty he exerts over his body and his future.

Such questions of body sovereignty originate within the sanctum of the family milieu, and with competing claims – both paternal and meritocratic – to the ‘guardianship’ of talented male youth footballers. In a candid appendage to Percy’s reference to ‘the invisible hands that feed’, Pierre, the director of one of Ghana’s ‘big academies’, spoke to the economic undercurrents that now punctuate such competing claims to a prospective youth talent:

‘There are many thinking they are managing the boy. We only deal with that problem when we go to sign a boy and we encounter all these people claiming to be his managers. So we go straight to the parents most of the time but this brings its problems too as many of the boys are not with their parents. They are living with coaches or relatives. The parents often give up the boy to coaches and they will then feed them, look after their schooling and so on. They are only too happy to. One less mouth to feed, you see. But when we go to the parents for the boy’s signature, you later have these people saying that they are the guardians, but that is no good for us. So we end up paying the parents. Parents are usually 500 cedi45 - that is the normal price so that they can get something for the family’.

45 The national currency of Ghana is the cedi (GH₵)
In affirming the customary ‘price’ tendered to secure the economic rights to a ‘talented’ youth footballer, Pierre illuminates the initial point at which the performing body is subject to the act of exchange – what Kopytoff (1986: 85), following Marx’s (1976) dialectical understanding of commodity value, defined as the ‘hallmark’ of commodification. For Marx (1976: 198-199), the act of exchange not only occasioned the coming of the commodity-form but produced ‘a differentiation of the commodity into two elements, commodity and money, an external opposition which expresses the opposition between use value and [exchange] value which is inherent in it’. It follows that the ‘raw talent’ of the performing body, while inherently imbued with a use value, is then subject to (de)valuation from others – its exchange value realized in, and conferred through, the reciprocal relations between academy and guardian(s), whether parental or otherwise. Pierre later cautions, however, that such relations of exchange are highly susceptible to sabotage and manipulation from ‘other’ interested parties, the upshot being that the market value of a coveted youth talent rises proportionate to the competing ‘offers’ presented – in short, his economic rights are auctioned off to the highest bidder. As Pierre laments, ‘the problem is when you have two or three academies competing for a young player… the 500 cedi is up to 1000 cedi and 1500 cedi and so where does it end?’.

Calling attention to one allegedly common end-point, renowned academy scout, Joseph, told of how a rival academy had resorted to bribery in their quest to overcome such competition, allegedly proffering a financial package worth up to two-years of the parent’s salary in exchange for their son’s signature. Inverting the spotlight onto the entitlements of parental guardianship, and its economic undercurrents, the following protestations of Kodjo – an Accra-based youth coach renowned for his patronage relations with youth talents – succinctly captures both the inequalities that cleave football’s ethno-racial division of labor, and its (im)moral fixation on securing sovereignty over the bodies of emerging youth talents:

‘The [unnamed] academy had one of my boys training there and even though I was not aware, they were taking him to a European team trying to find a deal. So I got a call, a big surprise, telling me that he is signing in [Scandinavian country]. They told me I would be given 10% of the fee. I was so shocked at this so I told them, I don’t have a percentage, I own him! He is my boy. There are two types of people here, whites and then Ghanaians. It’s never a fair deal.’
Such lines of fracture are by no means exclusive to the initial act of procuring male youth from parental guardians nor the relational antagonism of the ‘big academies’; rather, malignant claims and counter-claims proliferate throughout the hierarchical echelons of the game’s commercial cosmos. Framed around securing privileged access to the **means of profit-making**, that is to say to the nation’s most talented youth prospects, the discordant organization of Ghana’s football frontier is characterized by the horizontal antagonism between foreign-financed academies and agents, who themselves relate vertically to an entourage of lower-level, domestic middlemen, scouts, journalists and youth coaches; all of whom, like Kodjo above, are enmeshed in a highly uneven assemblage of reciprocal bonds and corporate cliques. Decisive in the formation and control of such cliques – both symbiotic and parasitic (Wacquant, 1998b) – is the inimical opposition between the ‘big academies’ and the agent; their relentless wrangling owing not just to the heightened competition of the ‘field’, but to their divergent *pathways to profit-making*.

‘The academies are not really interested in working with agents in Africa’, said FIFA-licensed agent, Percy, when asked of his relationship with Ghana’s ‘big academies’. ‘You see, they are cutting us out’, he then admitted, before extending what proved to be a judicious appraisal of the dissonance that characterizes the academy-agent relationship:

> ‘You see, they are making their contacts direct to the big European teams so they don’t need us. Like with [Feyenoord] Fetteh Academy being owned by the Dutch team, and with [unnamed English club] funding the [unnamed] academy. But we [agents] are working our own way, with our own methods of doing business. We are finding the chance for the boy to get away from Africa, to make it to Europe. We don’t really have any contact with them, they [the academies] are doing their own thing here’.

Divergent ‘methods’ of ‘doing business’ thus prevail, with the extractive ‘development’ model of the ‘big academies’ – and the outsourced directive of their European-financiers – largely extricated from the broader politico-economic geography of Ghana’s football industry and its matrix of agents, governance, clubs and competition. As Percy accurately

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46 Requested use of confidentiality by academy involved.
47 Given their lack of official registration and licensing by Ghana’s Football Association (GFA), the major football academies identified do not participate in any of the nation’s official youth competitions. Rather, as confirmed through field observations at several of the ‘big academies’, the primary form of competitive match-play comes in the form of weekly ‘exhibition games’ against other academies and selected youth teams alongside traveling to international youth tournaments in European destinations such as England, Ireland and Sweden each year.
denotes, the nation’s ‘big academies’ – most notably the Feyenoord Fetteh, Right to Dream and Redbull Academies – are all financed and controlled from beyond the continent’s borders, thereby opening up direct lines of flight between extractive ‘sites’ in rural Africa, and the capital centres of Europe’s football economies. The conscious extrication of the ‘big academies’ is strikingly evidenced in both their lack of registration and participation in official domestic youth competitions, and the secluded rural areas in which their respective sites are located. Borrowing from the lexicon of Ferguson (2006), I contend that such football academies function largely as extractive ‘enclaves’ – at once spatially segregated from football’s urban nodes in Ghana, and removed from the broader politico-economic and institutional context in which the domestic game operates. In sharp contrast, the growing troupe of football agents – whom Akwasi referred to as ‘African agents’ – represent the miniature-made-men of Ghana’s football structures, their occupational repute directly proportionate to the depth of their localized knowledge, and their capacity to connect ‘homegrown’ youth talents with opportunities ‘outside’. Encapsulating this alternative ‘pathway’, FIFA-licensed agent, Kuku, professed, ‘in the agent business, you must be having contacts everywhere. I am discovering the talents, looking for highly skilled players in the villages and towns… where the academies are not checking you see’.

In spite of their divergent ‘pathways’, the academies and agents nevertheless converge, and recurrently clash, in their battle to secure sovereignty over the nation’s most talented up-and-coming youth footballers, with defamatory indictments of professional misconduct so repetitive as to appear routine. The malevolent character of such claims were most strikingly apparent during an early morning exhibition game in the bucolic rural setting of one of Ghana’s ‘big academies’ – the opposition provided by the nation’s U-17 ‘Black Starlets’, who were in the process of evaluating trialists from across the country. As the on-field action got underway, Pierre, the Director of the academy, became visibly perturbed by a growing entourage of vehicles parked on the tree-lined verge overlooking the field – his gaze repeatedly diverting to what I would later learn was a convoy of agents and player managers taking advantage of a rare opportunity to scrutinize emergent talent from within the sanctum of the academy, a space which is vehemently opposed to their presence. ‘Did you see them?’, Pierre later inquired in the academy clubhouse, ‘they are like vultures! Always up to their necks in dirty business’. Doggedly-assured in his condemnation of their occupational ethics, Pierre rhetorically asked, ‘why do you think we built the academy in the bush?’,
his statement before resuming where he left off: ‘It is so we can work in peace… without them being able to come and be around the facility. They [the agents] are not trying to produce players, they are always up to their tricks trying to poach players from the academy. They will do anything to get the player to go with them. These people call themselves agents but they are all desperate as the real business is done with agents in Europe that can be trusted and will do things professionally’.

The ‘agent problem’, as academy scout, Jan, later elaborated, is constructed in diametric opposition to the morally-righteous appeal of the football academy, with disparaging portrayals of the former juxtaposed with the development-oriented mission of the latter:

‘They [the agents] are a massive problem. They are everywhere and always looking to sign the rights to a boy. I have seen much of it here… agents going behind our backs to the parents, offering them this and that, saying they can take their boy to European clubs. You don’t see it coming when you have a boy here for 5 and 6 years and then an agent has spoken to the parents. So many of the players forget who has fed them, educated them and looked after their needs. When the time comes, they are leaving with these false promises. But what can you do? The agents promise Europe and even if the player clearly isn’t going to make it, they still want to believe’

In the virtuous vernacular of the academy – which to recall Darby (2010: 38) may ultimately be defined as ‘extractive ventures’ – the dominant narrative is one of holistic growth amidst a sanctuary of development, the emphasis firmly placed on the morality of the means rather than the raison d’etre. Responding to the suggestion that academies primarily function as a means by which to produce Ghana’s next generation of export-talents, an unnamed academy director reasoned that ‘the aim is to produce footballers, yes, but to produce a player who is capable of performing at that level, you must have a special environment for him to grow as a person, to be educated in football and school, and he must be brought up to appreciate the right values’. In keeping with Wacquant’s (1998a) notion of ‘virile mothering’, and with Jan’s sentiments above, Pierre also recounted an honorable tale in his exposition of a recent academy-graduate who had been ‘poached’ by one of Ghana’s premier football agents:

‘We had a problem with one of our boys recently when he turned down our contract offer after he turned 16. He was a big talent and we had hopes that he would have a chance of making it somewhere in Europe. I told him: we have given you everything since you were a small boy, educated you, fed you, and paid
for your development, and now you just tell us goodbye? That’s the thing, you can do everything for a boy and still they will turn their back on you. It’s very difficult to accept that you have given them everything and still no loyalty but that is football in Africa.

Invoking the ‘boy’ as a site-of-development (rather than one of capital accumulation), Pierre appeals to the moral entitlements of the academy as his ‘rightful’ custodian – its investment in the ‘growth’ of his athletic aptitudes identified as the legitimating factor upholding their claims to ownership over his future economic value. Amidst the sound-bite battle that divides football’s commercial cosmos, such virtuous entreaties to trust, loyalty and morality form part of a compelling narrative of legitimation – inverting the ethico-moral dynamics of the ‘blame-game’ onto the ungrateful youth footballer and the unscrupulous agent, both of whom represent a purported threat to the insulated moral universe of the academy. Scaling back from such ethnographic minutiae for a moment, recall the chapter’s overarching theoretical concern with the discursive and material processes of bodily commodification – processes that, as they pertain to Ghana’s youth footballers, must be appraised as transcontinental in both extractive impetus and value production. It is against such expansive ‘geographies of production’ (Coe and Hess, 2012), and the ethno-racial hierarchies on which they rest, that I position the antagonistic relationship between academy and agent – a rift that, I contend, is emblematic of the moral order on which Ghana’s football frontier is delineated, and the subtle yet insidious ways in which the performing male body segues in and out of its coexisting systems of value production.

Of particular theoretical resonance is the ‘development’ model of the football academies, which is predicated not just on the recruitment of ‘raw’ and ‘naturally talented’ male youth – between the ages of 8-14 years-old – but on their long-term production and refinement as highly skilled performers. From the vantage point of the academy, what is being commodified is not the bodily integrity or sovereignty of the ‘performer’ himself, but rather the labor-value of the ‘performing body’ that the academy has invested its time, money and technical expertise in creating. In seeking to nullify the ‘negatively charged’ (Hoeyer, 2007: 328) quintessence of bodily commodification, the academy model thus accentuates the ‘developed’ personhood of the performer rather than his production as privatized property, with the agent profession providing a most expedient foil for the othering of such morally-objectionable industry practices. Yet, as I have sought to explicate in this chapter
to date, the academies and agents must be understood as intimate antagonists – their respective *modus operandi* being to unearth and secure economic rights to – and thereby some degree of ‘ownership’ of – the most talented of Ghana’s emerging youth footballers. It is their *pathways to profit-making* which diverge, with the foreign-financed, ‘enclave’ extraction model of the ‘big academies’ largely bypassing Ghana’s politico-economic and institutional networks in its direct connection as a ‘talent feeder’ to European clubs. The alternative ‘pathway’, which I shall now explore in greater depth, departs from the moment when an ‘African agent’ acquires economic rights to a promising ‘natural talent’ – his ultimate objective being to maximize the commodity value of the youth footballer and secure his profitable transfer to a professional club in Europe.

5.4. THE POLITICS OF COMMODITY VALUE

ENCOUNTERING THE ‘AFRICAN AGENT’ AT WORK

‘I invite you Sir, if you want to learn about the football business, go and try to transfer a player outside of Ghana’, averred FIFA-licensed agent, Kuku in my direction; his wry smile and nonchalant shrug of the shoulders an orchestrated extension of his already equable demeanor. Moments before, having likened himself to a ‘small fish’, Kuku concluded a brief foray into Africa’s agent industry with what appeared to be a proposition – in truth, more of a tentative insinuation, but one which explicitly spoke to the mutual benefits that our ‘doing business together’ might engender. ‘A black agent – an African man – he must have connections with a blonde man on the outside’, he avowed as he pointed to the ‘blonde’ skin of my arm; ‘you have the respect to complete transfers… then we agree to split the deal, like maybe 60/40’. In my eagerness to learn more, I swiftly enquired as to how we would secure the transfer of a youth talent out of Ghana, a question which led Kuku towards the thorny issue of trust: ‘if we are to work together in such business, and have trust between us, I won’t lie to you. This is a corrupt business… it is how the system is. This is not Europe, you’re in Africa now! I can promise you, to be successful in the business of transferring players, you must learn to play the game’.

Commodity value, asserts Simmel (1978), is not an inherent property of objects, but is a ‘judgment made about them by subjects’. The task of ‘valuing’ what he terms an ‘economic object’ – in this case the performing male body – is, in turn, an immensely complex socio-political process: ‘market value’ is not instrumentally conferred but reciprocally negotiated
and ‘produced’ within the specific history and experience of capitalist exchange in a defined geopolitical site. It follows that the commodity value of Ghana’s youth footballers, much like the nation’s major export commodities such as cocoa and gold, is negotiated and ‘produced’ across competing ‘regimes of value’ (Simmel, 1978) – regimes that, as Kuku vividly articulates above, remain intimately imbued with the historico-racial inequalities of colonial encounter and the unbalanced terms of exchange that now characterize Africa’s post-colonial ‘place-in-the-world’ (Ferguson, 2006). Indeed, Kuku’s candid allusion to his own subordinate standing as an ‘African agent’ encapsulates both the ethno-racial hierarchies that cleave football’s politico-economic matrix, and the structural violence on which its systems of value production are founded. Yet, equally discernible in Kuku’s sentiments is an admission that the production of value is an unfixed and mutable process, in turn highlighting the relational forms of autonomy that may be gleaned by those proficient in the elusive artistry of ‘playing the game’. It may be said, therefore, that the ‘business’ of transferring youth footballers out of Ghana hinges on a transnational system of value production, with Kuku’s metaphor of ‘playing the game’ providing a most illuminating insight into the process – part-illicit and informal – through which ‘African agents’ seek to manipulate and maximize both the market visibility and commodity value of their most coveted youth footballers.

‘When I would meet agents from European countries, they would always tell me the same things: we are interested in Africa but we don’t have the contacts that can be trusted to find us the best young players… so that is what I do’, recalled Akwasi of his occupational beginnings as a purveyor of live bodies and a trader in hard-cash. As an archetypal ‘fleshpeddler’ (Wacquant, 2001: 181), Akwasi belongs to a narrow band of ‘African agents’ whose commercial portfolios have flourished through the booming export-trade in youth footballers to Europe. Furnished with an abounding stock of ‘localized’ football know-how, he is, by his own admission, neither a fountain of morality nor of purely foul extraction; rather, as a ‘serous businessman’, he identifies his ‘mission’ to be the ‘creation of partnerships that will allow Ghanaian boys a better future outside’. At one end of that partnership, the boys, he asserts, ‘don’t care so much, they will go anywhere. Serbia, Romania, it doesn’t matter… the chance is what’s needed, they will take care of the rest’. Preceding this much sought-after ‘chance’, however, is a process of value production that originates with what Kuku termed the ‘discovery of a talent’ and advances through a
contingent series of chokepoints – each of which shall ‘make or break’ the probability of one’s professional aspirations.

‘When I know I have discovered a talented boy at 15 or 16, I have them sign a contract with me and then I think about getting them seen’, he explained of the initial phase in his professional praxis. ‘Loaning’ the player to a domestic club in the Ghanaian Premier League then represents the next stage – the objective now being to ‘polish’ the young player’s match-play, and to raise his profile amongst the game’s domestic networks: ‘I loan him out so that he can play every week, to become stronger day-by-day and to play on television here in Ghana so that he can build up his name’. Ultimately, however, the vital chokepoint in the early career trajectory of any youth talent, Kuku denotes, is securing a ‘call up’ to Ghana’s U-17 and U-20 national teams – namely the Black ‘Starlets’ and ‘Satellites’:

‘When I find a boy who I think I can work with, I loan him out for a year. If he is playing well, he will be seen by the national teams and then if he gets into the squad, I know I have a chance with him. Once we get to the national team, [U17 or U20], I know the [European] clubs will begin to see him. He will have a chance to be visible’

Becoming something of a rite de passage for the next generation of elite players, securing a call-up to represent Ghana at U17 and U20 levels provides a major international platform – what Pannenborg (2010: 77) termed a ‘showcase’ – on which to fortify both the strategic investment of the agent and the talent profile of his youth progeny. As Kuku articulates above, the veritable magnitude of such a call-up is measured against the enhanced sign-value and marketability to be garnered, not to mention a young player’s potential visibility on the scouting networks of European clubs. ‘The national teams have become a shop window for aspiring young players and their agents’, confessed expatriate academy scout, Michael, before delivering a critical appraisal of how the national youth teams – traditionally a cherished symbol of national pride – have become an integral feature of Ghana’s football ‘business’ and the extractive ethos on which it now rests:

‘The national teams are all about selling players now. It comes back to the business of it because making sure a boy achieves as many caps as possible [for Ghana at U17 and U20 levels] is vital for increasing market value, especially with Ghana being one of the most respected football countries in Africa. The [national] teams allow agents to get exposure for their player and for the player to prove that they are good enough to make it at the highest level. After the success of Ghana’s
youth teams, the agents know that European clubs and scouts are watching the
games and if your name is in there, and you perform, your chance of a move
[transfer] increases.’

The ‘success’ to which Michael alludes in the above passage extends back to the triumphs
of Ghana’s ‘Black Starlets’ at the FIFA U17 World Championships in 1991 and 1995 – a
feat which Darby (2010) posits as the catalyst for an ‘explosion’ of foreign interest in the
nation’s youth footballers. Over two decades later in 2009, such international honors were
enriched with the dramatic victory of the nation’s ‘Black Satellites’ at FIFA’s U20 World
Youth Championship in Cairo, Egypt – a ‘success’ that led to over 70% of the 21 squad
members subsequently signing lucrative contracts with professional clubs ‘outside’ Ghana.
With globally renowned clubs such as Real Madrid C.F of Spain and FC Porto of Portugal
among the destinations, the amplified strategic importance of the nation’s youth teams
appears unquestionable. However, with this amplified importance has come allegations
concerning acts of bribery and corruption in the selection procedure.

In the aftermath of the ‘Black Satellites’ triumph in 2009, such allegations were initially
exposed by Ghanaian U20 player, Ishmael Yartey – a shock exclusion from the 21 man
squad – who warned of ‘endemic’ corruption in the selection procedure. ‘It is common
knowledge that some of the players in the [U20] squad are not there on merit. We all know
how managers and agents have influenced his [that of Head Coach, Sellas Tetteh] final
decision and players who should be truly representing the country have been left out. If this
means that I am left out in future, at least God has seen that I have exposed a wrong for the
good of my country’. While framed in stark contrast to the forceful patriotism of Yartey’s
testimony, such allegations were unequivocally corroborated in the course of everyday
dialogue with agents – whose economic pragmatism ensured that they appraised such
‘corrupt’ practices relative only to their capital investments. ‘We have a saying here in
Ghana that you must pay some monies to get your business done’, Percy professed with a
smile. ‘Everybody is aware that it is not the best young players who are getting to play…it
is those who have someone to pay the required sum’, he casually added.

‘Do you mean a bribe?’, I inquired, before Percy explained:

48 Such accusations were nevertheless quashed by Ghana’s U20 Head Coach, Sellas Tetteh, whose
powerful standing as a veritable ‘Big Man’ of the ‘local’ game was confirmed when he branded Yartey a
‘frustrated player’ who ‘went destroying the hand that fed him’.
‘That is a good way of putting it. It is not like big corruption you know, but here in Ghana it is a part of the business that you will have to pay something to get the player seen, to get him on that level where people outside will see him and know his name’

While scholars such as Thompson and Armstrong (2010: 307) have long observed that ‘the problem of soccer-related corruption in Ghana seems intractable’⁴⁹, my analytical focus here is not the moral decay of the domestic game per se; rather, I am concerned with Percy’s conscious negotiation and manipulation of it in the quest to maximize the value and visibility of his prized body-commodity. Considered from the vantage point of the ‘African agent’, and against the cut-throat competition of Ghana’s football industry, I argue that the routine outlay of such ‘monies’ – regardless of their legal or moral derivation – represent a necessary ‘evil’ and a strategic part of ‘doing business’ amidst football’s informal underbelly. What they illuminate, therefore, is that which Marx (1976) motioned us to consider; namely the fetishized relations – the social acts, practices and exchanges – that become embodied in, yet obscured by, the circulation of the African youth footballer as a market commodity. Indeed, when I suggested to academy scout, Michael, that the capitalization of such talent ‘chokepoints’ constituted an ingenious – and illicit – mode of informal economy, his response spoke explicitly to the rational logic of commodity investment, and the potential value-dividends that structure the agent-player relationship:

‘It’s an investment by the agent, as he knows that if he wants to get the player a move outside, then he must be getting caps in the [national] youth teams. If he has to pay something now, he knows that he has an opportunity to make much more if the player is spotted by a club scout or European agent. So he knows that the payment is necessary’

What Michael proffers here, I contend, is an illustration of the ‘African agent’ at-work – his advanced ability to ‘play the game’ displayed in astute calculations of risk and probability as they pertain to the projected market value of a budding youth progeny. Such a moment, akin to Appadurai’s (1986) notion of a commodity ‘phase’, presents in striking clarity the way in which the African youth footballer is fleetingly transformed into a site of capital accumulation – his potential market value the subject of risk-laden projections,

⁴⁹ More broadly, match-fixing allegations have been recurrent in Ghana for the past decade; the most recent, in June 2014, saw the President of the GFA, Kwesi Nyantakyi, as well as Obed Nketiah, a senior figure in the GFA, and chief executive of the Ghanaian football club Berekum Chelsea, implicated in a contract that would see the Ghanaian national team receive $170,000 for a series of exhibition games organized by match fixers.
contingent chokepoints, and illicit investments. Equally, however, such an insight into the
crooked underbelly of Ghana’s football frontier serves only to introduce the illicit – and
potentially immoral – modes of value production that coalesce around the African-body-
as-commodity, as well as the ethical dilemmas and exploitative dealings that transpire in
the process. In keeping with Tsing’s (2004: 28) notion of a frontier as ‘a zone of the not-
yet mapped, not-yet regulated’, the extractive undercurrents that now exemplify Ghana’s
football industry are, at least in part, owing to what Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) define
as the ‘uneven’ rule of law and the optimal deregulation of Africa’s neoliberal economies.

In a regional context typified by the laissez-faire governance of Ghana’s Football
Association (GFA), and where child labor and human trafficking have long been a
voiceless derivative of ‘disinterested capitalism’ (Bales, 1999: 50), the ethical dissonance
of ‘local’ Ghanaian agent, Karlton – who willingly admitted that ‘I provide a service and I
get the job done. How I do it, nobody cares’ – was by no means a revelatory disclosure.
Indeed, in a frank afternoon exchange, academy director, Christophe similarly
acknowledged, ‘Of course there is a lot of cheating going on… But tell me something, if
everyone does it, is it still cheating or simply how business is done?’. Extant ‘knowledge’50
on the alleged exploitation of African footballers has recurrently exposed incidences of
fraudulent scams involving ‘fake agents’, the regularity of inequitable contracts for African
players and even indictments of human trafficking laws – their violation almost exclusively
attributed to the purportedly unscrupulous and ‘unlicensed African agents’ (McGee, 2012).
Yet, while in agreement that instances of exploitation have long violated the rights of youth
footballers in West Africa, the daily yields of my ethnographic fieldwork – principally
through the ‘African agents’ represented here – offered a contextually-nuanced point of
vantage onto the veritable origins of such exploitation and the othering of its accountability
within football’s transnational matrix.

‘It is getting more and more difficult to get the boys into Europe at the age the clubs want
them’, bemoaned Akwasi as he vented about the escalating demands of European clubs
and their highly-temporalized conceptions of talent development. ‘They want the boys
younger and younger… even younger than 18 years’, he then exclaimed abruptly – the agitation in his voice derived from his awareness that ‘eighteen years’ represents the minimum-age legally permitted for the international transfer of players under Article 19 of FIFA’s regulations on the protection of minors. While visibly perturbed by the moral dilemmas posed, Akwasi nevertheless went on to explain that – as an ‘African agent’ – his livelihood and occupational survival are wholly contingent on meeting such demands, whatever the legal risk and ramifications might be:

‘It is harder to get the boys in [to Europe] younger than 18 years. That is a big problem as an African player at 18 is still very raw if he hasn’t trained in Europe in proper facilities and with European style coaching. If we are taking them at 18, the big teams don’t want them as they’re just not ready for the level of competition. You have to be taking boys at 15 and 16 so the clubs are having three years of working with them to get the weaknesses out of them and prepare them for the style of football in Europe. They want to guide and train them along with their own young players and it’s too late by 18. So I must always work to find ways to get them in’

Governed by his capacity to meet such demands, Akwasi must therefore encounter – and resolve – what he considers to be the ‘major challenge’ facing Ghana’s narrow band of internationally-reputed agents; namely the impasse between the highly-temporalized demands of European clubs and the comparatively ‘raw’ development trajectory of Ghana’s youth footballers. The full extent of this impasse – and a hint as to its potential resolution – was highlighted during an early fieldwork interaction with academy director, Christophe, who described in some detail the divergent growth trajectories of a Ghanaian boy and his European counterpart:

‘From testing we have done, we know that Ghanaian boys are four years less physically developed than a European boy. So you have a 13 year-old Ghanaian boy and you can be sure he will not be able to match the physical development of a European boy of the same age. It’s common sense when you look at how they grow up here. Even during the pregnancy, the mother is usually unhealthy, maybe working, not getting proper nutrition and the boy is much weaker from day one. Then you take the poverty here, the poor nutrition and the hard childhood that a boy has. You can’t tell me that the boy will develop the same way as a boy who is eating well and growing up surrounded by all he needs to grow. So if you have a West African boy who is supposed to be 17 and he is dominating against boys from England or Holland, I can assure you he is much older’
Owing to the candid nature of Christophe’s statement, and detecting that the occasion was ripe for further enquiry, I opted to bypass the chit-chat – so often an enforced strategic feature of interviewing – and advance straight to the crux of the matter at hand; ‘So, if young African players are four years behind in their physical development, how is it that agents are managing to transfer more players to Europe than ever before?

‘Well you see, it seems you have much learn about football here’, responded Christophe, his somewhat conceited grin suggested a fleeting hint of narcissism in his otherwise demure outlook.

‘If you go and ask any boy on the street of his age, he will then ask you; ‘Do you mean my football age or my real age?’, Christophe continued, before explaining that the aforementioned ‘impasse’ has long been circumvented through the practice of ‘age falsification’, or what many have plainly termed ‘age cheating’:

‘It has been part of African football for decades. A high percentage of African footballers playing anywhere are maybe three or four years, maybe even up to six years older than what their passport says [we both briefly break into laughter]. It is that widespread. It is so easy to change the age that everyone does it. You just go and apply for a birth certificate, tell them what age you claim to be and that’s it. Off you go to the passport office with your new birth certificate and you have a new identity for 100 Ghana cedi’s! Even civil servants do it here, because they don’t want to be stuck with the pension at 65 years-old as it’s not worth nothing so they take 10 years off their age and keep on working until they are just too old. Everyone knows it happens but can you blame them?

Congruent with such claims were that of academy scout, Michael, who recounted his sense of disbelief at the ease with which Ghana’s maturing footballers had successfully re-temporalized their talent trajectories and rejuvenated their aspirations of a career in the professional game:

‘Look at some of those who are playing in Ghana’s U20 team and tell me those boys are 19 or 20. Not a chance. The majority of them are well into their mid-twenties but they are getting offers to move and that is all that matters for them. You wouldn’t believe it but I know of boys who have been to Europe for justify’s, and when they were unsuccessful, they simply altered some letters in their name, and went back for a new birth certificate under a new name. There you have it, they’re 18 again!’
In June 2012, the escalating problem of ‘age cheating’ in Ghanaian football was publicly exposed following the expulsion of twelve members of the nation’s U17 ‘Black Starlets’ squad who failed Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) testing introduced by FIFA. The introduction of such mandatory MRI tests followed a series of national scandals that probed the legitimacy of Ghana and Nigeria’s numerous triumphs at U17 and U20 World Championships, with Yaw Preko – a member of Ghana’s triumphant team in the 1991 U-17 World Youth Cup – announcing publically that ‘we’ve all cheated… I won’t lie to you. I did not play with my right age’. While the attribution of culpability for such acts of ‘age cheating’ is by no means straightforward, an unnamed ‘African agent’ readily admitted to his support of the practice, and to having ‘pushed back’ the chronological age of his aspiring youth footballers:

“It is not so easy to say it’s always the agents who alter ages because that’s not true. But there is a lot of pressure on agents to find younger boys so the younger they claim to be the more impressed you will be. You have to look at the boys for responsibility as they know what they are doing. Agents also know what they are doing. It is desperation for both. Simple as that. They will of course get the player’s age pushed back a few years but they are not alone. Everybody is doing it. I have done it myself and I’m not ashamed of it. It gave me the opportunity to get a boy further in his life and his career and it helped me to survive in this business.”

Once again, the process of value production reveals itself to be anything but linear, with the threatened commercial survival of the ‘African agent’ spawning an intensification of efforts to safeguard their ‘piece’ of the profitable export-trade of youth footballers to Europe. Under such precarious conditions, the roots of which can be traced to the unlawful demands of European clubs, it is one’s capacity to ‘play the game’ – namely to experiment with novel modes of accumulation, both fair and foul – that determines the occupational pecking order, and the profitable viability of the profession. The ever-present imperative to maximize the commodity-value of a youth talent thus demands that one consents unequivocally to the ‘rules of the game’, however crooked they may be. As a normalized feature of the African sporting landscape, the practice of age-cheating – which essentially seeks to re-temporalize the talent trajectory of the performing body – has therefore become

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52 FIFA introduced Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) testing of all youth footballers at the U-17 FIFA World Cup in 2009 in response to widespread claims of over age players competing in previous tournaments. See ‘Caught by the wrists’, FIFA, 22nd October 2009. Retrieved 11 April 2010.
a customary ‘trick of the trade’ for both agent and academy alike. The sanitization of such ‘tricks’ – illegitimate as they are – was vividly discernible in Kuku’s balanced defense of the practice:

‘Look at the situation and tell me who loses… You have the player who is allowed extra time to develop to a point where he can compete in Europe, you have the parents who are happy to see their boy make it outside, the national team is winning the U-20 World Cup with a team of 24 year olds and the agents are making their money by doing deals for the boy at his football age. Even take the clubs in Europe, they are not stupid I can inform you! They know how the business is working, they take on a young player who they might know is 22 but has an official age of 18 and they then get to benefit from the best years of that player’s career as he matures into his late twenties and then still have a resale value when he seems at his peak but is really near the end. So you tell me who doesn’t stand to benefit from this?

Shifting through the transnational ecology of Ghana’s football frontier, Kuku motions us to appraise the strategic importance – and reciprocal profitability – of ‘age cheating’ for stakeholders across the game’s competing regimes of value production. In so doing, what he reveals, I contend, is the way in which localized, informal and illicit economies both punctuate and incrementally undercut the leviathan that is capitalism in its neoliberal guise. Academy scout, Michael encapsulates this enfoldling of informal modes of economy – both fair and foul – when he assures that ‘the problem of age cheating won’t stop anytime soon as it’s vital to the business of selling players… everyone connected to football in West Africa is tied in’. At the level of the ‘African agent’, the enactment of such illicit praxis – much like the routine outlay of bribes – might be read as an illustration of the messy, morally ambiguous character of relational autonomy and a striking affirmation of how localized actors may manipulate notions of market value across competing and brutally uneven systems of commodity exchange. For most of the ‘African agents’ featured in this chapter, the safeguarding of a material livelihood remains contingent on their ability to discover, polish and ‘pass on’ suitably talented youth prodigies to European agents and clubs, with theirs ultimately being an insignificant cut of the revenues that will be generated if and when a boy ‘makes it’ as a professional in Europe. In this sense, the impact of degrading stereotypes of the ‘African agent’ remain as much structural as they are symbolic – a point that was encapsulated by Percy’s allusion to the incremental gains that characterize the ‘very difficult life’ of a football agent in Ghana.
And yet, while acknowledging his inequitable differentiation as an ‘African agent’, the burgeoning reputation of Akwasi – principally through his repertoire of professional Ghanaian players in Europe – proves that the glass-ceiling may be broken. While grumbling about the discrimination he confronts in the European labor market, Akwasi nevertheless confirmed that he has made a breakthrough with a young Ghanaian player whose transfer he negotiated with an unnamed professional club in Italy: ‘The issue that you will always face is that you are seen as just useful for doing the groundwork in Africa but I am confident that I now have a Ghanaian boy in Europe who is keeping me on [as his agent]. The big plus for me now is that the parents are with me, they trust me representing him as I secured his move to Europe so they know that I have done well for him and can do so again’. In extending the influence of the ‘African agent’ beyond the domestic chokepoints of the ‘player pathway’, the rising eminence of Akwasi may yet prove crucial in the unfolding history of football agents on the African continent, and a progressive step towards eroding the ethno-racial hierarchies that still dominate the commodifying impulses of Ghana’s football frontier.

5.5. CONCLUSION

I began this chapter amidst the serenity of a morning scene at one of Ghana’s premier football academies, and by recounting Christophe’s portrayal of a politico-economic matrix wherein ‘everyone is desperate for their piece of the pie, to find that player, so that they get their big payout’. In juxtaposing the entangled imperatives of capital investment, the prosperity of the game, and the potential of the performing body, I sought to establish at the outset the chapter’s overarching theoretical tension: namely that which mutually interweaves the production of the capitalist frontier that is Ghana’s football ‘business’ and its ‘origin point’ (Marx, 1976) in the body-commodity that is now the nation’s youth footballers. Conversant with the historical antecedents of what was once conceived as the ‘national game’, the chapter initially proffered an interpretive history of football’s ‘transformation’ in the decades following Ghana’s independence in 1957; my primary objective being to illuminate how the nation’s football industry – much like with ‘natural’ resources such as cocoa, gold and oil – rapidly emerged as an extractive-led ‘resource frontier’ (Tsing, 2004). What followed thereafter was an ethnographic excursus into the ‘occupational world and commercial performance’ (Wacquant, 1998b: 35) that underpins the process of commodification as it pertains to the African male body – elucidating in turn
the trans-local ‘geographies of production’ (Coe and Hess, 2012) through which Ghana’s youth footballers intermittently become sites of capital accumulation for family, community and commercial networks alike. Finally, having established the divergent ‘pathways’ in which the Ghanaian youth footballer may be entangled, I offered a brief insight into the ‘African agent’ at-work, highlighting the brutally uneven and illicit geographies on which Ghana’s football frontier now rests.

In bringing this chapter to a point of conclusion, I want to recall my opening citation of Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2012) assertion that African post-colonies have become the ‘new frontiers of capitalism’, and more specifically, to offer something approaching a concluding statement on what I have defined as Ghana’s football frontier. While taking inspiration from Tsing’s (2004) theoretical writings on the notion of a frontier, and borrowing from the Comaroff’s (2012) distinctively Afro-centric analyses, my deployment of the concept was compelled by the empirical dilemmas posed by the rapid transformation I perceived in Ghana’s football industry and by processes that appeared at one and the same time both deeply historical and yet discernibly novel. Such processes, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 123) made known, were of distinctly neoliberal provenance, with the foreign-led extractive impetus that began to dominate Ghana’s football industry in the early 1990’s broadly symptomatic of the way in which African economies had – in spite of their post-colonial independence – ‘remained dependent and debt-strapped, tending still to export their resources as raw materials and unskilled labor’. Such enduring ethno-racial inequalities, as Tsing (2004: 27) evinced, were hallmark features of how frontier spaces ‘create wildness so that some – and not others – may reap its rewards’ – an assertion which aptly captured the unbalanced terms of exchange and exploitative relations that now characterize the nation’s export-trade in youth footballers to Europe. Ultimately, however, Tsing’s (2004) concern with the frontier as a space between ‘exploration and exploitation’ was the concept’s defining allure – allowing me to capture both the trans-local geographies of explorative capital on which Ghana’s football ‘business’ has flourished, and to question how its associated process of commodification is enacted upon the vivacious live bodies of male youth footballers.

Shifting from the historical production of football’s frontier to explore the process of bodily commodification, I then sought to unravel – through first-hand observation and participation – how the ‘poison pill’ (Harvey, 2005: 74) of neoliberal reforms had re-
energized deep-rooted ‘geographies of production’ (Coe and Hess, 2012) and transformed the African male body into a site of capital accumulation. In so doing, I opened up fruitful lines of articulation between seemingly divergent scales of social inquiry – proffering a fine-grained ethnographic analysis of bodily-commodification-as-process, but in a manner that tacked back and forth between the African youth footballer and processes which ran to the very heart of contemporary capitalism: to the unruly volatilities of its neoliberal guise, to the rapacious foreign financing associated with it, to its predatory modes of labor extraction in Africa, and to the brutally uneven and illicit geographies on which it thrives. It is from within such processes, I argue, that football’s commercial triad of *academies*, *agents* and domestic *Big Men* derive – their relational antagonism manifest in an all-pervading quest to secure economic rights to, and thereby some degree of sovereignty over, the African youth footballer and his envisaged ‘journey’ in the game. From the interactions, collusions and corruption that are constitutive of Ghana’s football frontier, and its matrix of ‘commodity producers’ (Marx, 1976), my primary argument emerged: namely that existing theorizations of bodily commodification all too often reify an oversimplified notion of instantaneous metamorphosis of the corporeal into a market commodity.

Rather, what I have provided throughout the chapter are a constellation of empirical ‘fragments’ (Tsing, 2004) that, when read together, offer a contextually-grounded insight into the complex and messy processes through which the human body may segue into and out of ‘unstable’ or ‘incomplete’ forms of commodification. To recall the shared sentiments of Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), commodification does not unfold in linear and instantaneous ways; rather, it is a biographical process of ‘becoming’ marked by a succession of commodity phases across a broader cultural and economic trajectory. A unique contribution of the analysis proffered, therefore, is its excavation of such ‘commodity phases’ – both discursive and material – as they are enacted upon Ghana’s youth footballers in the course of everyday relations, both familial and commercial. While existing literatures on the African footballer have centered almost exclusively on the macro-infrastructures through which an aspiring footballer would ‘progress’ (Bale, 2002; Darby, 2010; Poli, 2006), I have demonstrated here that the impulses of capitalist exchange emanate from within the fractured sanctum of family and kinship networks, and extend outwards through an array of reciprocal exchanges and capital alliances.
Scaling back from the intimate ethnographic analysis presented in the final section, what reveals itself is a ‘player pathway’ that is anything but linear – its contingent ‘chokepoints’ a striking illustration of the everyday realities of becoming a professional footballer out of Ghana. While establishing precedent for the social scientific study of the football agent, my decision to explore the occupational praxis of the ‘African agent’ was principally driven by its offering of a privileged window – a window onto the largely unexplored processes, both illicit and informal, that undergird the fetishized production of commodity value as it pertains to the youth footballer in Ghana. What I have attempted to illuminate, however, is the transnational production of such illicit praxis, with the analysis of ‘age cheating’ in particular emphasizing the very real implication of European clubs – and their escalating and unlawful demands – in fuelling the proliferation of West Africa’s so-called corruption problem. Given the recurrent demonization of the ‘African agent’ within journalistic and academic writing, it is hoped that such findings shall not only provide a timely challenge to lazy forms of empirical inquiry, but engender the debate and intellectual impetus required to elevate what I consider to be canonical questions of ethics, exploitation and corruption in sport.

Finally, as an extension of the previous chapter, I consider it valuable to close this analysis by revisiting the age-old question of agency, and to extend my earlier comments on the relational, morally ambiguous, and situational character of agentic capacity. Moving yet further away from the moral undertones that so often inform how we theorize autonomy, this chapter – given its central thrust of bodily commodification – has motioned us to appraise the situational dilemmas that coalesce around the lived journeys of African youth footballers, but to do so from alternative points of vantage. To appraise such dilemmas from the perspective of the ‘African agent’, the academy scout, or an aspiring youth footballer’s parental guardians, is to reflect on the relational friction through which one’s enhanced capacities to move, act, or indeed transact, are contingent and produced – often to the deprivation of an-other and always garnered in and through relationships with others. Recall the point at which parental guardians’ auction off economic rights to their son, or the soliciting of corrupt ‘monies’ in exchange for ‘call-ups’ to Ghana’s U17 and U20 teams, or the act of re-temporalizing the body and its commodity value by an ‘African agent’: each of these examples, when appraised from a particular vantage point constitute an act of relational autonomy, regardless of their illicit and/or exploitative impact on others. Herein lies the veritable character of agency amidst the commodifying logics and cut-throat
competition of Ghana’s football frontier, where one’s commercial survival – let alone profitability – are contingent upon the potentially immoral capacity to ‘play the game’ and the entrepreneurial inclination to extract economic value from the performative labor of another.
CHAPTER 6:
ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT THE RIGHT TO DREAM

6.1. INTRODUCTION

‘OP-POR-TU-NI-TY’, I repeated slowly, before directing eleven-year old Modibo’s gaze to the scrap of paper on which I had inscribed the English translation. ‘Repeat after me’, I again requested: ‘I am very happy - for the opportunity - that Right to Dream are giving me - and I will do my best - to become - a better football player - a better student - and a better person’.

‘Bravo! ‘Etes-vous prêt?’, I then inquired before Modibo – still clad in the orange replica shirt of his native Cote D’Ivoire – nodded gleefully and continued to perfect his pronunciation before the bell rang to conclude the school day.

It was a typically humid Tuesday afternoon at the Right to Dream Academy^53 located deep in the green-canvassed hills of Ghana’s Eastern Region; the ‘academy boys’ were raucously occupied with their final academic lesson, the coaching staff were busy organizing the day’s second training session, and the administration team patiently labored with a weak internet connection to finalize travel arrangements for an upcoming youth tournament in Europe. Yet, for Modibo – impatiently sitting with me in our usual corner of the open-air dining hall – it marked the conclusion of an excruciatingly long ‘justify’ period at the academy and the day on which he would officially be presented with a five-year academy scholarship.

I first met Modibo and his three compatriots, Diomande, Fofana, and Ezequiel, when they arrived on a residential trial at the academy – their fifteen-hour journey having begun in the war-torn Ivoirian capital, Abidjan, and from an urban neighborhood that experienced academy scout, Joe, situated amongst the most destitute he had ever encountered. Owing to my rudimentary grasp of the French language, I quickly acquired a close rapport with Les Garcons Français, offering additional English lessons each afternoon before training. ‘Zidane!’, ‘No Messi’, ‘Drogba!’ they would impatiently implore as they raced into the open-air dining hall and huddled around my laptop. In spite of my diligent preparation,

[^53]: The abbreviated ‘RtD’ is used to signify the Right to Dream Academy in moments of repetition throughout the chapter.
daily lessons routinely drifted towards their preferred topics of family and football – both of which led to hopeful projections in the future tense, and had endpoints that lay beyond African shores. ‘My father… is not rich’, Modibo uttered one afternoon in English, quickly reverting back to his native French to ensure there was no ambiguity as to his ‘mission’ in life. ‘I am training, training, training so I will be a football player in Europe’, he resolutely declared, before his thoughts shifted to the less alluring alternative when he affirmed, ‘I don’t want to go home’.

Exhibiting all the visible indices of a new recruit, Modibo was still fresh-faced and scrawny, his adolescent physique yet to benefit from the growth spurt of the early teenage years. That said, what he lacked in physical stature, he offset with searing pace, trickery, and a dogged determination to justify his ‘talent’ under the incisive gaze of the academy coaching staff. His early days ‘on trial’ nevertheless proved unsettling. He watched on as Fofana and Diomande instantly excelled on the training field; their imperious performances and flourishing self-confidence promptly rewarded with five-year scholarships and their own academy kit – a pivotal symbol of inclusion for the ‘academy boys’. Equally troubling had been the tearful departure of ten year-old Ezequiel – purportedly the ‘weakest’ of the group – when his trial period was abruptly ended and he was packed off on the demoralizing return-leg to Abidjan. Modibo remained, and his agonizing ‘trial’ continued; yet as a steady stream of new trialists arrived, the pressure on his adolescent shoulders intensified – it was, as one academy coach commented, ‘make or break time’ for him. Tearful silences became the norm as he sat next to the ever-more exuberant duo of Fofana and Diomande, both of whom would scowl at the slightest hint of his waterworks.

Such was the harsh reality on which the development-oriented ‘mission’ of the academy was founded – only a hand-picked cohort of West Africa’s ‘talented’ yet ‘underprivileged’ youth would ‘make it’ into its enclosed confines, let alone advance into the professional ranks of the European game. Despite its conviction in the transcendent capacity of football as a development tool, the academy could not save all its devotees from a future of social and economic obscurity. Rather, as Modibo quickly came to understand, it merely offered he who entered the chance to tear himself from the inevitability of such a future – one that was vociferously sought after by a maturing scale of youthful bodies wholly devoted to the occupational prospect of becoming a professional footballer. Knowing that Modibo’s fate would ultimately be determined amidst such competition on the training field, I continued
to encourage and cajole; all the while aware that, like Ezequiel, he may not re-appear for the following day’s lesson.

It was just over a month later when Modibo, unable to contain his joyful laughter, was finally informed of his fate: ‘I am an academy boy!’, he excitedly announced as he concluded his acceptance speech and high-fived everyone in the vicinity. Presenting him with his new academy kit, the founder of Right to Dream, Tom Vernon, congratulated him on this prestigious ‘opportunity’, and reminded him of the ‘responsibility’ he now had to realize his ‘true potential’, both on-field and in the classroom. And so, at the age of eleven years-old, Modibo bid farewell to his family in Abidjan, and began the next leg of his ‘mission’ – one which offered the opportunity to refashion himself and his future within the insulated moral universe of the academy.

In this chapter, I purport to elucidate this process by way of an ethnographic and experiential inquiry into the social structuring of the Right to Dream Academy, and the corporeal regimen of its male youth recruits. Revisiting Goffman’s (1961) writing on ‘total-like institutions’, I critically dissect how the academy functions as a contemporary ‘forcing house’ for transforming the self, arguing that its socio-symbolic dictates – including mission, moral order and value systems – are structured so as to unmoor its male youth recruits from the purportedly abject and immoral coordinates of African life and from their mundane attachments therein. Positing the academy as a case par excellence of Scott’s (2011, 2010) ‘reinventive institution’, I attempt to reconstruct – through my ‘emplaced’ (Pink, 2011) registers as a ‘sensuous scholar’ (Stoller, 1997) – how the social structuring of the academy both nurtures and governs a collective reconditioning of the African self; at once as an elite apprentice of a ‘bodily craft’ (Wacquant, 2004) and the future fount of African moral reform. In so doing, I seek to foreground the material and sensual logics that characterize such everyday conditions, and which afford ‘underprivileged’ yet ‘talented’ recruits such as Modibo an opportunity to ‘make the future diverge from the pattern and causes of the present’ (Grosz, 2005: 72), and to manufacture, in a most literal sense, the ‘right’ to dream beyond Africa.

At the crux of my theoretical lexicon, therefore, is Scott’s (2010) conception of the ‘reinventive institution’ – a concept which I deploy both as a cogent interpretive framing of the relationship between the academy and its male youth recruits and to extend the fruitful yields of such empirical praxis onto contemporary debates about social structure
and the agent at large. Despite its antagonistic origins reaching back to the classic works of Durkheim (1915) and Weber (1922), and their later synthesis by Bourdieu (1979) and Giddens (1984), the structure-agent impasse remains – as Wacquant (2015: 2) has recently argued – one of the ‘perennial flaws’ that continues to cramp social science at the contemporary juncture. In particular, Wacquant (2015: 2) points to reified notions of structure as an adverse set of external and determinative constraints, coupled with ‘dualistic and disincarnated vision[s] of the agent’, as principle impediments to developing ‘vibrant, full-color accounts of society’. It is against such deterministic and disembodied tendencies that I employ the theory-work of Scott (2010: 214), whose insightful borrowing from Goffman’s (1961) concept of the ‘total institution’ opens up fruitful analytic possibilities for understanding the dialectical interplay between the Right to Dream Academy and the youthful bodies that are enfolded within its ‘totalizing’ yet ‘transformative’ culture.

In his much-venerated work, Asylums, Goffman (1961: xiii) broadly defines the ‘total institution’ as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life’. It is, he avows, a closed, impermeable institution – much like Coser’s (1974) ‘greedy institution’ – that ‘totally’ encompasses its denizens within culturally patterned and rigidly routinized modes of collective practice and sociability, with the interactive dynamics between structure and self, institution and individual, molded according to the particular function of the organization in question. That said, however, Goffman’s intellectual project – informed as it was by a concern with institutions that served a punitive, custodial or reformatory purpose such as prisons, hospitals and the psychiatric asylum – focused principally on the coercive or totalizing power of ‘institutional arrangements’ to shape and resocialize individuals through the ‘authoritative imposition of consequential identities’ (Dennis and Martin, 2005: 191).

Such structural instrumentalism was explicitly discernible in Goffman’s (1961) allusion to its functioning both as a ‘resocialization chamber’, and a ‘forcing house for changing persons’ – neither of which grant the human subject more than a symptom of agentic capacity. Therefore, as Scott (2011: 9) aptly suggests, the overall effect of the total institution was one of ‘collective regimentation’ – its members passively controlled and constructed by the institutional setting, with the self ‘not a property of the person to whom it is attributed, but dwells rather in the pattern of social control that is exerted in connexion
with the person by himself and those around him’ (Goffman, 1961: 154). In sum, then, as Goffman (1961: 22) himself acknowledged, the concept of the total institution was marked by a repressively structured and coercive ethos, with the autonomy of its ‘inmates’ restricted to the micropolitical and resistive ‘tactics’ championed by the writings of De Certeau (1984).

My point in rehearsing such well-known features of Goffman’s (1961) intellectual praxis is to argue, much like Scott (2011, 2010), that they retain analytic import in the (late) modern moment. Unlike the repressive, hyper-authoritarian vantage point of his writings, however, the empirical stimuli from which my theory-work derives is the inner, workaday universe of the Right to Dream Academy as a particular case of the development-oriented, ‘NGO fervor’ (Piot, 2010) that pervades the West African landscape today. I am primarily interested in what Piot (2010) terms the ‘new modes of subject-making’ that development organizations such as Right to Dream have enacted, and in the ‘reinventive’ visions that undergird the altruistic logic and mission of development institutions in Africa generally. In sharp contrast to Goffman (1961), therefore, the form of ‘totalizing’ institution to which I commit my ethnographic gaze is, from the outset, of much less overt coercive provenance – a point which Scott (2010) foresees in her revised conception of the ‘reinventive institution’. Broadly defined as places to which people retreat under their own volition, and in pursuit of education, empowerment and self-improvement, the ‘reinventive institution’ is, as Scott (2011: 218) avers, ‘both reinvented, in its structural form, and reinventing, in its effects on members identities’. While the chief purview of Scott’s (2010) work is the distinctly Western idiom of the late modern self, her observations on the growth of elite education programs and military socialization nevertheless intersects with the holistically pedagogic and transformative agendas and techniques of the academy as a ‘development institution’ in Africa.

If it can be said that a central theme of Goffman’s Asylums is of the passive-self under threat, the reverse applies to the development institution – here, at least within the benevolent notes of philanthropic morality, the image is one of a dynamic (yet damaged) self-subject who actively submits to, and participates in, the process of their own resocialization (perhaps even rehabilitation). Willingly adhering to the rhetoric of ‘reinvention’, this is a self-subject who is wholly devoted to the cultivation of a future
identity – albeit one, as Scott (2010: 219) eloquently denotes, whose realization remains under the control of the institution:

‘They embrace the institution’s rules, venerate its staff as inspirational guru’s, and willingly comply with its timetabled activities, believing that it is in their best interests to do so. Whereas Goffman’s asylum patients experienced a mortifying loss of self through institutionalization, Reinventive Institution clients willingly discard their old selves in the hope of finding something better… The real, authentic self is perceived to reside not in the person who went into the total institution, but in the one who might come out’

Crucial here is Scott’s (2010) reference to the conditional nature of the projected self that congeals within such development institutions. It is an ideal-type projection – an aspirational self – that derives its allure from the exceptionality it symbolizes: that few will ever realize it serves only to valorize and uphold its institutional ethics of commitment, sacrifice and devotion. Thus, while less oppressive in practice, the ‘reinventive institution’ is not without hierarchy and authority; rather, as Scott (2011, 2010) encapsulates in her notion of ‘performative regulation’, the disciplining power of such institutions is more akin to the panoptical, capillary-like surveillance espoused by Foucault’s (1977) notion of governmentality. Authorship of the self may therefore be said to be active and agentic relative only to the purportedly positive developmental machinery of the institution and its potential bestowal of enhanced life chances. It follows that to maintain membership within its exclusive and enclosed confines, the self-subject must become a living embodiment of the development institution’s mandate – internalize its values, effect its moral code and, returning to the case of Modibo, perform to the level of his ‘true potential’.

Moving from the general features of the ‘development institution’ to the practical nuances of the Right to Dream Academy, we shall see that these demands are codified by a shared occupational ethic of ‘growth’ – with one’s membership as an ‘academy boy’ mandating an absolute commitment to becoming an elite performer, and a diligent reconditioning of one’s life-world according to the aesthetic, moral and material dictates of the institution. In other words, as Wacquant (1998a: 346) eloquently instructs, they ‘offer us an exaggerated, idiosyncratic, instantiation of a generic social process. They show us how we learn morality; with and through our bodies, by attaching deeply felt, visceral, ‘prepredicative’ reactions’ to the concrete practices and routines that texture our experiential modes of being in the world – what Pink (2011) referred to as our ‘emplaced’ relations within a wider,
‘total environment’. Herein resides the concrete and conceptual focal point of the chapter, namely to illuminate the mundane and daily practices that make meaningful the collective life-world or ‘total environment’ of the Right to Dream Academy – both as a material archetype of the ‘development institution’ and a ‘forcing house’ in which is fabricated the self-subject of the professional performer. In so doing, I ask, pace Wacquant (2005: 454), of how the ‘talented’ African youth footballer – as an ‘intelligent and sentient assemblage of shared categories, capacities and cravings’ – is (re)socialized and potentially ‘reinvented’ through the masculinized and moralized regimen of academy life. And, finally, in probing the practical logic of a bodily craft, how does the ‘academy boy’ – as the ‘site and seat of a practical, enacted ethics’ (Wacquant, 1998a: 346) – come to acquire and execute the habitual flow and competency of the professional performer?

To expound such salient – and sentient – contouring’s of academy life, the chapter draws on the abundant yields of my intensive ethnographic ‘apprenticeship’ (Wacquant, 2005: 465) at the Right to Dream Academy. Over the course of my six-month sojourn – a period which I commenced just three months after reconstructive surgery on a torn anterior cruciate ligament in my left knee54 – I variously adorned roles as a teacher, an injured footballer, and by virtue of my round-the-clock presence on campus, as a conversant quasi-affiliate of the ‘academy boys’ and their daily routine. Akin to the spatially-bounded and ‘enclosed’ character of the classic village ethnography, such roles were enfolded within the insulated microcosm of the academy, and its socio-cultural, emotional and moral universe. That said, however, if the structural unity of the academy as my ethnographic ‘site’ is a throwback, the epistemological nuances of my engagement therein is anything but. Borrowing from an eclectic array of methodological innovations concerning embodiment (Csordas, 1993; Wacquant, 2005), the senses (Classen, 1997; Guertz, 2002; Howes, 2003; Stoller, 1997) and place (Massey, 2005; Pink, 2009, 2013), I endeavored towards an ethnographic form55 that was attuned, not just to the visualist documenting of daily routines and their discursive resonance, but to grasping through one’s own incarnate being the deeply affective and carnal contouring’s of the universe under scrutiny, and the collective manufacturing of its socialized organisms.

54 Please see the methodology chapter for a more detailed excursus on the epistemological and practical significance of my knee injury to the social genesis of my ethnographic study.
55 The methodology chapter provides a more detailed insight into the genesis of my ethnographic sensibilities and the particular blending of the aforementioned innovations concerning embodiment, the senses and place.
Heeding the petitions of Stoller (1997) and his assertion that our scholarship may benefit from ‘lending one’s body to the world’, I sought to immerse myself as deeply and durably as possible within the sociomoral and sensuous patterning of academy life; becoming one of the bodies-in-action on the training field and in the classroom, two nodal points of academy culture. Equipped with a modest mastery of the corporeal skills and techniques (Mauss, 1979) of the game, I came to deploy my own ‘broken’ body as a ‘site of knowing’ (Pink, 2009) and a forceful conduit through which to grasp the praxis of the academy performer at his visceral ‘point of production’ (Wacquant, 2005: 466). ‘When will your leg be strong again, Sir?’ was a common refrain in the period after I resumed light training, with the process of my knee rehabilitation a subject of eternal intrigue and empathy amongst the ‘academy boys’. It wasn’t long, however, before such intrigue gave way to invitations to train, both in the gym with the injured boys in the mornings, and – as I progressively regained my ball-striking abilities – out on the training field in the afternoon. It was here, in the shared sociality of organisms at once in motion, interaction, competition, and devotion, that I trained, toiled and tutored my way towards an understanding of the ‘academy boy’, and the total pedagogy which defines his native relation to the world.

Shifting back and forth from teacher and researcher to training partner and teammate, and effecting the daily cycle of on-field performance, nourishment and recovery, I soon found myself irresistibly ‘at home’ with, and intensely embraced by, the cultural vortex of academy life, and its youthful devotees. I nevertheless found reassurance in Wacquant’s (2011: 87) caution not to ‘go native’ but ‘to go native armed’ – with all the reflexive, theoretical and methodological tools of the social scientific trade as a ‘shield’ against the ‘bottomless well of subjectivism’ that forever threatens ethnographic modes of inquiry. It is to the experiential realities of this cultural vortex that I now turn, as I – equipped with my reflexive ethnographic armoury – attempt to elucidate the social and symbolic structure of academy life and its cloven relation with the broader culture and context of West Africa.

6.2. THE ACADEMY IN AFRICA:
ON DEVELOPMENT AND THE DREAM

‘Sir Darragh, tell me please, what is the nature of your mission here?’, asked eleven year-old Clinton as he slid along the bench clutching his piping-hot bowl of porridge and two bananas. Stationed at the far end of the large wooden table, I had already devoured most of
what was by now the highpoint of my nutritional intake at the academy, with the creamy abundance of the oats, and the intense sweetness of local bananas, amounting to a ‘breakfast of champions’. As always, the open-air dining hall was bursting with the verve and chatter of sixty-odd youth footballers freshly washed and flying high on a wave of endorphins following their early morning exertions on the training field.

‘My mission?’ I responded, initially minded to chuckle at the deeply philosophical roots of the question, before I gleaned – through the sheer intensity of Clinton’s unflinching focus – that this was no frivolous inquiry. ‘Well you see, I am a footballer in Ireland, and I am interested to learn about the importance of football in Ghana, and here at the academy’, I uttered plainly, hoping that such open-endedness might move Clinton, and the sizeable group of boys now listening in, to articulate their own experiential insights on the subject. Without a moment’s hesitation, my account was met with nods of tacit approval: ‘you also have a passion for football’, clarified Saviour – a fresh addition to the table as he fixated on the distinctly emotive grounding of our shared connection to the game. As the clunking of spoons continued, so did the clamour of conversation: we debated the merits of the world’s best players, disagreed on the hypothetical outcome of Ghana vs Ireland, and established that Europe is a vast continental bloc made up of fifty-something uniquely cultured nations. So too, we spoke of culture in Ghana, about football in Africa, and about the peculiar relation of both to the mission and ethos of the academy.

‘We are thankful to God for bringing Sir Tom here and for his mission to have this academy to give back to Africa’, declared Clinton with all the purposive thrust and gratitude of the ideal-type academy boy. Vibrantly enthusiastic, mature, and mercurially talented, Clinton was approaching the conclusion of his second year at the academy, having initially impressed the recruitment team with his ‘naturally-gifted left foot’ during a ‘justify’ in the Ghanaian city of Kumasi. Yet, for the cohort of boys sat around me, such refined sporting competency was much less a unique character trait than a collective disposition – perhaps definable, in a Bourdieuan sense, as the baseline physical capital that gained them entry therein, and which would be rigorously cultivated and sharpened through the reciprocal cycle of practice and performance on the training field. Clinton, however, had astutely grasped that this about more than just sport; that the academy was – or at least perceived itself to be – more than a football factory, not just a production house in which the elite performer moulds himself and his future, nor indeed a ‘forcing house’ for converting raw
and rapaciously talented African youth into richly valuable capital assets. Certainly, it had overtones of each, but as Clinton’s passion for academic achievement, his commitment to Jesus, and his love of Bible studies exemplified, football was but one facet of the holistically pedagogic and moral matter that shaped its daily functioning. Indeed, that Clinton would later be awarded the vice-captaincy of the academy was as much a commendation of his devotion to such holistic teachings and traditions, as it was a marker of his exhilarating performances on the field of play.

For the academy, as we shall see, is not reducible to the sporting competencies it seeks to cultivate, nor is its mission exclusively confined to the male bodies that are enclosed within its confines. Rather, the ‘bold vision’ on which its mission is founded can be said to reflect the broader aegis of the development moment in Africa – a moment which, contrary to the modernization heyday of the 1980’s and its focus on supporting material infrastructures, is dominated by a concern with youth empowerment, education and human development (Elyachar, 2005). Believing, as its mission states, that ‘the greatest natural resource Africa possesses is young people’, Right to Dream purport to address Africa’s development crisis through the education of its youth – and does so, as its founder recently described, ‘through Africa’s passion – football’. The developmental import of the game is similarly enshrined in the academy mission statement, which definitively avers that ‘when thinking about bringing change to Africa, there is no tool more powerful than football’. However, such conviction in the ‘power’ of football – or indeed of sport more broadly – as a ‘tool’ of social development and change is by no means exclusive to the Right to Dream model of development. Rather, as aptly captured by the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP), ‘sport has been increasingly recognized and used as a low-cost and high-impact tool in humanitarian, development and peace-building efforts’. However, whilst an abundant corpus of academic scholarship, and even a Sport-for-Development and Peace (SDP) ‘movement’ (Kidd, 2008) has flourished, it is not the analytic space within which I locate this ethnographic inquiry. In short, my interrogative


57 Two principle factors impact my analytic direction here: the first concerns the developmental outlook of Right to Dream itself, which holds only tenuous linkages with the broader Sport-for-Development and Peace ‘movement’. The second, in turn, owes to the theoretical grounding of the project, which is not concerned with the social organization, deployment, or evaluation of football as a tool of development, but rather on an ethnographic exploration of the dialectical relationship through which the collective
focus is elsewhere: it is the dialectical process through which the ‘talented’ yet ‘underprivileged’ African male body is socialized into, and (re)produced by, the ‘totalizing’ confines of the Right to Dream Academy, and its reinventive program of life.

Attuned to the ‘zeitgeist of these neoliberal times’ (Piot, 2010: 139), and its ‘NGO revolution’, Right to Dream have enacted a development model aimed at bypassing the ‘corrupt’ political apparatus of the state in the hope that investing in the potential of youth as ‘role models’ might be the catalyst towards, and fount of, an emergent future for Africa. In this important sense, the academy functions as a Western-led development machinery – a philanthropic enterprise amongst a broader ‘alphabet soup of agencies’ (Anderson, 2006: 63), which defines its purpose relative to the West African context in which it is enfolded, and the endemic problems that are said to stifle ‘human potential’ therein. Most prominent of the ‘problems’ accentuated is a ‘lack of opportunity’ and ‘leadership’ – which, when coupled with the ‘extreme poverty’ that has long stoked the furnaces of development on the continent (Ferguson, 2006), is said to obstruct the potential of youth ‘to contribute to the development of their families, communities and country’. It must be said, therefore, that the social genesis of Right to Dream’s mission acquires its constructive import relative only to the perceived ‘lack’, absence and abjection of African life, and the scant structure of life chances offered by deprived local systems of labor, mobility and education. As sketched in broad strokes in the previous chapters, this is a moment wherein male youth have found themselves deprived of the means to participate in the affluent narrative of a Ghanaian state at the ‘cutting edge of neoliberal reform’ (Chaflin, 2008: 521), and where deepening inequalities, receding prospects of work (Matlon, 2011), and increasingly opaque generational fault lines (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999) have variously contributed to a state of masculinized youthful disorder (Lindsay, 2003).

It is against this deprived backdrop – of a male youth citizenry bereft of viable modes of social mobility and pushed to the borderlands of family, city and continent – that the mission of Right to Dream is enacted, and its development-subjects identified. ‘These young people need more role models’, reads their mission statement, extrapolating thereafter that ‘Africa needs more role models’, before concluding with a well-narrated

organization of the academy is constituted by, and generative of, the sentient and suffering bodies which are enfolded within its insulated spatial confines.
articulation of the Right to Dream model of development. ‘Right to Dream exists’, we are told, ‘to discover and nurture role models through education, sport and character development… [and] to offer talented, underprivileged children the opportunity to reach their true potential in life, and claim a better future for Africa’. Founded by British social entrepreneur, Tom Vernon, in 2000, the academy advocates a ‘sustainable development model’ that offers residential scholarships to male youth from across West Africa – its motto being that ‘every talented child has the right to dream of a better, brighter future and can reach their full potential when nurtured within the right structure and environment’. Since 2010, that ‘environment’ has been a US$2.5 million purpose-built campus – including fully-residential international school and football training centre – located amidst the rural remoteness of Eastern Ghana; its exclusive confines enclosing a maturing scale of over sixty male youth footballers aged between 10 to 21 years old.

Through a peculiar sense of cooperative antagonism, Right to Dream thus defines itself as a development machinery to Africa’s deprivation: at the same time as its ethos hinges on the recruitment of the continent’s most ‘talented’ yet ‘underprivileged’ youth, it stands diametrically opposed to – and sequestered from – the cultural commons of African life, and the pathological undercurrents that are so often attributed to it (Mbembe, 2001). Put differently, the academy can be said to both fight against and feed upon the societal ills and inequalities, ideals and values that contour West African cultures at the contemporary moment – at once extracting the raw ‘talent’ of its youth, while mourning the grave cultural afflictions that an ‘underprivileged’ African life have allegedly imparted. If I may pause here for a moment, the case of eleven year-old Clinton – as an archetypal development-subject – speaks to the symbolic heart of this peculiar antagonism. By virtue of his being granted a scholarship at the academy, Clinton is not solely defined by his precocious ‘talent’ as a youth footballer, but rather through the cultural resonance of such talent as it has crystalized in, and been variously ‘blocked’ by, the debilitating ‘underprivilege’ from which he hails. ‘He’s a resilient boy… but he didn’t have the best home life, moving around a lot with his mother’, instructed one of the academy’s pastoral staff in the days before Clinton felt willing to disclose the biographical particulars of his life beyond the academy.

As the eldest son born to a single mother, Clinton’s narration of his childhood recurrently featured an uneasy juxtaposition between his labor-related familial responsibilities, his passion for football, and his disaffection with the sporadic nature of his schooling. On his
early engagement with the game, Clinton contrasted his mother’s conditional approval of the game with the breakdown of his relationship with his absentee father in Italy:

‘My mother was happy for me to play. But at times, she wanted me to stay at home to help her, like with my brothers. And we have a food called fufu… at times she is wanting me to pound it for her so I will have to quickly run from the house and go train to get away. But she will meet me there and come and tell me that I must go and pound the fufu. Because if I don’t pound it, the family will not eat. So one time, she stopped me from playing football for like two weeks because I was not learning and also I was not doing the chores in the house. But my father did not want me to play football anytime. He said I will get injured and if it happens, I cannot play anymore. And he said that I must not go to this academy. Since I came here to this academy, I have only spoke to him two times because he heard I signed for an academy and that I am playing football so he doesn’t want to speak to me anymore. He is in Italy and said I cannot call him’.

Clinton spent much of his first decade flitting back and forth along the five-hour journey between Ghana’s capital city of Accra and Kumasi, a bustling urban node in the Ashanti region where he was sporadically sent to live with his aunt. Akin to Hashim’s (2005) writing on ‘family labor’ arrangements involving children in Ghana, Clinton told of his responsibilities in ‘helping to look after’ his aunt’s two children while she went to work at the local market, fulfilling domestic duties such as ‘washing them’, ‘dressing them’ and ‘walking them to school’ – all of which obstructed his own capacity to pursue educational enrolment let alone attainment. Clinton too spoke of his mother’s irregular employment and financial troubles – both of which hindered her capacity to maintain the payment of school fees, and his later responsibilities as a primary care-giver for his two step brothers – the youngest of which was just two years-old – while she labored in a nearby chop bar during evening hours:

CA: My mother was working in Accra when we went there so we can eat something and pay our school fees. She got a job as a cook at a bar. She will come in our house once in the day so I and my little brother will see her only one time when she comes home. She must sleep there as it is a big bar where she must not sleep too much so she can cook the food for people coming. There was a certain woman who worked with my mother and so when my mother knows we will be hungry, she would give this woman food so she can sent it to us

DM: So you were looking after your younger brother? What age was he then?

58 Much like Clinton’s father above, a recurrent theme impacting the dissolution of the nuclear family was the quest – on behalf of absentee fathers – to pursue their own individual mobility in the form of labor migration, both in the form of rural to urban migration within national borders, and transnationally to European destinations such as Italy, France and Germany.
CA: Yes. At that time, my little brother was, I think, two years. I was getting to eight then. Sometimes my mother would leave money on the table for me to go and buy some things for us to eat when she will be gone. So if I wake up, I would see it for us and I would brush my teeth, go and bath my brother and dress him and go and take the money so that I and my brother would go to buy some food. But sometime later, my mother got sick so she had to stop her job and we had to move to Kumasi to live in a family house, a big house with many people living there. I wanted to go to school but when they sacked me from school fees, I said to myself ‘why will I do this’. I will just go and play football and have to forget about schooling’

DM: Who paid for your school fees?

CA: My mother. But when she had some difficulties, she could not pay it. I was trying to help her so when she was frying yam at the bar, when I was coming back from school, I was going to work with her. I have to help to work with the pot on the fire. To help the air get into the charcoal underneath it so the fire will keep coming out. But this was stopping me from going to training.

From the vantage point of the academy, such biographical fragments read as a meandering excursus and model of the travails of African youth generally, with the raw virility of Clinton’s ‘talent’ said to be ‘blocked’ and impeded by the ‘underprivileged’ system of which he is a living vector – a system afflicted by the biological effects of impoverishment and inequality, and where increased exposure to disease, malnutrition and allegedly corrupt modes of governance have brought about dystopic visions of the future foreclosed. Against such suspiciously dark portrayals of an Africa devoid of ‘leadership’, ‘direction’, and ‘role models’ stands the Right to Dream model – its cossetted and exclusive confines offering he who he gains entry to it a retreat from the past impediments of his everyday life, and an arena from which to ‘reinvent’ himself and his future.

As will become vividly apparent hereafter, the academy functions as an enclosed and exclusive school of morality: that is to say an educational institution that is socially and symbolically insulated from the preoccupations and patterning of African life; unmooring its elected recruits from their cultural appendages therein, and offering them a meaningful world structured by the spirit of a heroic meritocracy. The ‘total-like’ character of the academy thus ‘turns the individual into his own arena of challenge and invites him to discover himself, better yet to produce himself’ (Wacquant, 2004: 15) in accordance with the occupational ethics of the professional performer, and the institutional dictates of development, growth and moral reform. Again, however, in exuding a distinctly neoliberal
essence, the academy affords hope only to he who is willing to match the gift of a scholarship with their ‘total’ commitment to its ‘virile fraternity’, and who can marry their requisite levels of talent with tireless and diligent devotion to its heady blend of education, football and character development. The opportunity to which it speaks is aptly captured in the following public notice (Plate 1.2) for an ‘open trial’ in the Darkuman\textsuperscript{59} area of Accra, with its tagline ‘makeithappen’ signifying the ‘entrepreneurial’ self-subject which its development mission seeks to identify.

\begin{center}
\textbf{RIGHT TO DREAM - OPEN TRIAL}
\end{center}

Do you have the talent, the determination, the passion to join the Right to Dream Academy?

If you believe you do, we are holding an Open Trial at Okawahu Park in Darkuman, on Monday 3rd November.

... 

#MakeItHappen

\begin{itemize}
\item Venue: Okawahu Park, Darkuman (Accra)
\item Date: Monday, 3rd November
\item Age groups:
\begin{itemize}
\item Boys: Aged 15 - 18 (7:00am - 10:30am)
\item Boys & Girls: Aged 11 - 14 (3:00pm - 4:30 pm)
\end{itemize}
\end{itemize}

Plate 1.2. Public notice for Right to Dream Open Trial in the city of Accra, Ghana

‘From strong, self-disciplined characters, flows academic and sporting success’, champions one of the academy’s soundbites, with its open affirmation of the academy’s reformatory charisma implicitly positioned against the need to erase – perhaps even reverse – habituated elements of a recruit’s former – read African – self. Herein, I contend, resides the ‘reinventive’ politics of the academy as both a Western-centric development machinery and a school of morality in Africa: its ‘institutional arrangements’ (Goffman, 1961) reinscribing the African male body as a development-subject, as (always) aided and abetted by those beyond the continent’s borders. Note, too, what is inferred in the academy’s five-

\textsuperscript{59} The designated park for the open trial is that which featured as the locus of the first chapter.
year mission to ‘unlock’ the ‘true potential’ of its hand-picked subjects; that this is a mission whose ‘reinventive’ mechanism hinges both on the removal of the continent’s most ‘talented’ youth footballers from their localized communities, and a reversal of the cultural anchoring and dispositions of their African self-structures or what Bourdieu (1979) might term their cultural habitus. He who aspires to become an ‘academy boy’ – and by extension, attain the millennial opportunities to which the academy offers a bridge – must ‘justify’ and demonstrate their right to belong before being granted the right to dream; with the willful discarding of unwelcome cultural habits a fundamental requirement of one’s immersion in the academy program of life, and the transcendent future self to which it points.

6.3. THE FOUNT OF FUTURES REINVENTED

Over the horizon of the hill, the roof of the south dormitory comes vibrantly into view – its rows of sandy red-brick slates towering above the tropical greenery that encloses the academy on all sides. A stone’s throw to the west, the iridescent blue waters of Lake Volta meander alongside the tortuously jagged dirt road that guides one between the Akosombo Dam – often posed as the gateway to Ghana’s Eastern Region – and the rural village in which the Right to Dream Academy is situated. The academy campus itself is a sprawling entity, with its two principle sites – commonly referred to as the ‘football side’ and the ‘school side’ – located a half-kilometer apart, and curiously adjoined to the densely-populated village settlement of Old Akrade. Standing in the centre of the dirt road, one cannot but be struck by the divergent sights that lie to the right and left, with the traditional village medley of mud-brick, straw roof dwellings rather at odds against the grandiose archways of the school building – its fresh white coating and red-brick roof yet to bear any discernible signs of wear and tear. Emblazoned on the outer white walls of the school entrance is the iconic emblem of the Academy, its bright red signage extolling Right to Dream’s commitment to ‘nurturing sporting talent in Africa’.
Plate 1.3. The entrance to the ‘school side’ at Right to Dream

Plate 1.4. The ‘school side’ campus from outside its walls

Plate 1.5. The village of Old Akrade adjacent to the ‘school side’
For those on foot, a paved walkway runs from the security outhouse at the entrance – its station staffed day and night – along the manicured grass lawns and into the expansive open-air dining hall; the central hub of all communal eating, assemblies and formal ceremonies. Walking into the dining hall, one is met by two ever-populated rows of wooden tables adjacent to the kitchen facilities, with the walled partition in between a shrine to the academy’s high achievers, both past and present. Mounted across eight uniquely themed plastic boards are chronological listings of all those that have gone before – with academy captains, high flying scholars, and international honors variously spaced around the prestigious categories of ‘professional players’ and ‘academic scholarships’, the academy’s most coveted pathways out of Africa. Above that hangs a poster imprinted with one of the countless quotations to be found across the campus, each deeply imbued with the ethic of sacrifice and the ethos of the institution:

‘History has demonstrated that the most notable winners usually encountered heartbreaking obstacles before they triumphed. They won because they refused to be discouraged by their defeats’

At the more spacious end of the hall is situated the entrance to the academy’s educational wing, where a series of steps lead down into an enclosed quad that marks the heart of the academy ‘school side’ – its centrepoint adorned by a solitary yet sprightly twig of a tree. Enclosing the quad to the west is the English classroom, its animated interior draped from skirting board to ceiling with colourful examples of student work, with short stories strewn across the walls, and copybooks stacked high on the teacher’s desk. East of the quad stands the aptly-named Obama library, a much favored space for the academy boys because of the collection of desktop computers sited along the outer perimeter of the room, and the flat-screen television which is mounted on the wall nearest the entrance; its presence evidently the dominant adornment therein given the few dozen plastic chairs that perpetually lay tilted in its direction.

Situated directly ahead of the quad, and sandwiched between a further two classrooms – one of which is dedicated to Math – is the operational ‘nerve-centre’ of the academy: with the private office of the CEO, Tom Vernon, bordered on one side by the open-door of the administrative office – its small confines a hive of logistical planning, communication and travel organization – and the official archway entrance to the academy school on the other. Directly under the archway stands a wall-sized color map of the world, its vast geography
peppered with carefully-placed images of all those who have departed the academy for pastures new. Alluring images of former graduates decked out in the replica kits of professional football clubs are pinned in clusters across the globe, with a concentrated European contingent in Scandinavia, England and Russia surpassed only by the constellation that stretches from coast to coast in North America. Rather poignantly, however, such images mark not one’s original introduction to the inner workaday universe of the academy school for adorning the top of the archway that greets disembarking visitors is a quotation that welcomes one into a world in which collective solidarity and sacrifice are the ascendant moral codes: ‘Do not expect to accomplish your dreams if you are not willing to help others accomplish theirs’.

Plate 1.6. The back wall of the open-dining hall

Plate 1.7. The archway entrance to the school courtyard
A few hundred yards across the village as the crow flies, or a five minute walk along the dirt road, is situated the ‘football side’, which also doubles as the residential nucleus of academy life. Entering through an opening in the hedgerow to the left, one first encounters the sight of a two-storey dormitory towering over a semi-enclosed shared garden on the right; its ground level housing half of the academy’s young recruits while the upper tier contains a series of small apartments in which the physiotherapist, coaches and a teacher reside. Directly across the lawn is a similarly styled bungalow dormitory in which the remainder of the academy boys are housed; its interior mapped as a maze of bunk-beds draped in mosquito nets and lined against each side of the room. Enclosing the shared lawn on the third side is a series of staff-specific mini-apartments; each equipped with a basic hob, fridge freezer and television conjoined to a separate bedroom.

Behind the dormitory area and looking down from its height on the steep gradient is the incomplete construction of the football training centre, its entrance yet to have a set of concrete steps added. Immediately inside, one encounters a collection of rudimentary gym equipment concentrated within one corner of the unfinished and dusty room, its curiously tiled surface bearing the inevitable cracks from rogue dumbbells. Against the back wall, a heavy duty power rack stands about seven feet tall with an Olympic barbell hung at mid-height, its outer ends loaded with two 20 kg plates. Scattered on the floor next to it are a row of rarely used dumbbells, with the dusty state of the heaviest amongst them to be expected given the youthful cohort which toil therein. In the corner rest a number of thinner...
barbells, a bunch of gummy blue workout mats and a worn exercise bike on which many of the academy’s injured athletes are put through their paces.

Through the door to the left is the minimally furnished coaching office, a shower suite and the small outer room in which the performance analysts can be found editing clips of recorded matches from the weekend and preparing the game footage that will serve a pedagogical purpose later in the week. On the opposite side of the gym is the ever-populated physio room, with its long narrow structure inhabited by a desk brimming with the recent techniques and conventions of rehabilitative science. Taking centre stage is a cream plinth on which all massage and assessments of injury are conducted, while the panoramic of the walls display the musculo-skeletal structure of the knee joint and the human physiology system. The rest of the equipment consists of an improvised wooden device for evaluating the elasticity and core strength of one’s lower body, a number of exercise mats, a stocked game-day physio bag and a few medicine balls. Beyond that, one enters into the open-planned base of the academy’s scouting team, with a series of work stations facing a large whiteboard overloaded with ‘local contacts’ for coaches, scouts and academies in Nigeria, Benin, even South Africa. Logistical information concerning security risks in northern Nigeria, the need to gain contacts in Togo, and question marks about potential new talent havens are scattered amongst the minute details of upcoming ‘justifies’ and established contacts.

Plate 1.9. Dusk scene from the upper field at the ‘football side’
From the elevated vantage point of the football training centre, one looks out onto the academy’s two grass pitches – their trimmed and tidy coating of luscious green grass contrasted spectacularly with the rugged overgrowth of the region’s tropical fauna, the blue waters of nearby Late Volta and the undulating hills that soar high into the distant skyline. Separated by a steep verge, the two grass pitches are furnished with a weather-beaten academy hoarding on one side and the movable goal frames that stand diametrically opposed at either end. Just off the grass on the field nearest the road rests an old shipping container loaded with a diversity of training equipment; with hundreds of footballs organized in net sacks, multi-colored pylons and sleeveless training vests, brightly colored plastic poles equipped with a spike at one end so as to pierce the surface of the field, as well as a host of machinery used to maintain the grass, and mark the white lines of the playing surface. In both layout and symbolism, the training field represents the sacred heart of academy life. It is here, amidst the excruciatingly mundane temporality of real time, that the academy boy – as impassioned performer of a bodily craft – is most effervescent and engaged, where his sensual bond with and mastery over the ball is realized and refined, and where his willful devotion to the rituals and regimen of the academy are reaffirmed and fortified each day from dawn until dusk.

6.4. ON RITUAL AND REGIMEN
THE ‘TOTAL’ PROGRAM OF ACADEMY LIFE

As the obstinate din of darkness softened into daybreak, the ding-ding-ding of the morning bell rang – its chime summoning a stream of sleepy silhouettes out from the shadows of the dormitories. Seconds later, the rhythmic uproar of morning devotion began: a surge of synchronized clapping established the opening tempo, a seemingly doleful bout of chanting then kicked in, before the pulsating beat of the Djembé drum roused the boys into a mantric state of climax – their bodies enraptured at once by the affective rhythm of the ritual and the intense esprit de corps they share as ‘academy boys’. Having completed their morning chores, I later greet the boys – now fully clad in training attire – as they stride purposively onto the playing fields; the glistening layer of dawn dew interrupted only by the intelligible walkways of the coaching staff and the vast network of pylons, poles and footballs laid out across the field.
Its 6:30am on a typically humid Monday morning and as the sun rises over the rippling mountains behind the training field, the day’s first session is already underway. Yet to recommence full contact training, I join seventeen year-old Godsway – who is nursing a niggling hamstring injury – for a gentle jog around the perimeter of the upper field. As we leisurely loop the on-field action, I overhear Coach James introduce his session; its theme crafted around developing the technical finesse of one’s ‘first touch’ – a coaching term that denotes an ability to cushion or trap a moving ball, and to bring it seamlessly under one’s control using a repertoire of foot, thigh and chest techniques. ‘Do you hear that contact?’, enquired Coach James of his U-11 boys, cupping his ear to underscore the symphonic thud as he fluidly cushioned the ball out of the air with the instep of his right foot. ‘That’s what you want to hear! You should feel that contact’, he instructed as he paced around the corner of the field, coaching and correcting as he went; ‘read the flight of the ball’, ‘keep your eyes on it’, ‘open out your body’, ‘think about the direction you want to move’.

On the field adjacent, the U-18 elite performance squad worked intensely through a tactical phase of play, their refined technical proficiencies and maturing physiques vividly discernible in the collective sights and sounds of bodies exquisitely connecting through the ball and brutally colliding in the tenacious battle for its possession. ‘There’s no lack of intensity around here, even at dawn!’, I exclaimed as myself and Godsway rebounded up from a lunge stretch of the right hip flexor – our form keenly watched by Matt, the academy physiotherapist. ‘That’s the thing with our boys… they are always going all out. It’s the style of football out here. We have to be careful with their training as they don’t know when they’re tired… they’d train all day!’, said Matt, before sarcastically inquiring as to what happened to Godsway in this regard. ‘I just score the goals’, Godsway responded with aplomb, before collective laughter broke out.

Winding down after the session, Godsway and I watch the remainder of U-18 training from the elevated sidelines of the upper field. He spoke of his total commitment to becoming a professional footballer, declaring that ‘there is nothing else for me’ in an instant riposte to my mention of schooling, before later adding the caveat that he has diligently applied himself in the classroom over the course of his five-year academy scholarship. Moving swiftly onwards, however, he excitedly spoke of his recent training excursion with one of Europe’s most prestigious professional clubs, affirming thereafter that he is now ready and willing to move ‘anywhere’ in Europe ‘for a chance to play as a professional’.
Just before 8am, as the morning sun peaked above the distant hills, a boisterous wave of playful joviality breaks out as the boys collectively spill off the training field and into the shower room at the back of the upper dormitory. Making my way onto the dirt road towards the ‘school side’, I see the diminutive figure of eleven year-old Abdul – originally recruited during a ‘justify’ in the city of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso – racing to catch up. Gently spoken and extraordinarily mature, Abdul told of how former coaches had dismissed his potential because he was ‘too small’ – a feeling of rejection which prepared him for the challenge of ‘justifying’ his talent at the academy and learning a new language:

A: ‘When I came here, my English was not so good and when I saw the boys all playing, I saw that my level is too low for it. It was very hard for me to say ‘he is the best player, this one is the strongest boy’. They were all very good and training hard. At the school side, I could not understand any of my class… the basic small words like good morning and how are you. That was all I could speak. I was learning with Mr Daki [French-speaking teacher] two days per week and then the other days, I was sitting in the classroom but when the teachers are talking, I do not even understand anything. It was like watching a movie around you and you just want to sleep but you need to keep sitting awake. They [the academy staff] were not happy with me and they said I should go away for the holiday and come back to show what I can do. They said they will decide after that’.

DM: How did that make you feel when you returned to Burkina?

A: ‘I was very afraid. When they first told me that I would be going to Burkina and that I would come back, I was crying because I was thinking that they don’t want to tell me that they will not be picking me.

After a month at home reading ‘many books’, Abdul spoke of his ‘big improvement’ upon returning to the academy, as well as the pressure he felt during the final series of ‘tests’ he completed before receiving his academy scholarship. ‘All the time, I was thinking when I go to sleep that ‘oh they will not pick me’… If they don’t pick me, what am I going to do? I would have to go back to Burkina, to school, what am I going to do? And then in the morning, I couldn’t even give a good pass because I was thinking about that and I was crying during the training. Coach Addo asked me, why are you crying, and I said because I do not play well. And he told me that it is not every time that I can play well’. A year on from what he terms his early ‘difficulties’ at the academy, Abdul has acquired a relatively fluent grasp of English, and his ability on the ball is matched if not surpassed by his intellect in the classroom – an anomaly which the academy’s teaching staff were quick to celebrate. Perhaps most exceptional, however, in the context of an elite football academy in Western
Africa, is Abdul’s open-minded outlook on his future and the possibility of one day becoming a lawyer:

‘When I was coming here, something was telling me that if I stay here and continue my schooling, I can be somebody. If I come here and the “justify” is not good and I am having to come back… [he shakes his head at the thought]. But when I came here, I have seen that I can do it because the only thing I wanted to do in my life, and I am still young, is to play football. For all of us here, we want to be a professional [footballer] but I don’t know if that can happen. At school too, I like to learn…and I know that God can help me to get better. When I go to the school side, I can learn something about life, about society, about science. Science is now more interesting when I came here. But I think I want to be, if I can choose, a lawyer! When I watched some movies, the lawyer is helping to do the right thing. He is doing good things. That’s what I like’

These early morning conversations, while deceptively mundane and ephemeral, should not be underestimated, for they serve as essential vectors of the academy’s inner workaday universe: they convey in oral and organic form the ascendant values, virtues and demands that are anchored in the highly ritualized structure of its daily life, and the ways in which such ‘institutional arrangements’ (Goffman, 1961) rely on, and often intentionally seek to orchestrate, affective states such as (in)security, elation, fear and respect. Across its maturing scale of youthful bodies, from the adolescence of Abdul as a new recruit to Godsway as an impending graduate professional, such affective states – as trans-individual and ‘contagious formations’ (Nouvet, 2014: 85) – serve as the pre-discursive registers through which the dominant norms and relations of academy culture become collectively inculcated and internalized. The aspirant ‘academy boy’ is defined not by his individual or creative ability to stand out from the crowd; rather, he must learn the (in)formal pedagogic codes and localized moralities expressed through the habituated deportment of the more senior boys, and be able to perform them appropriately during the collective rituals and ceremonies on which the academy regimen is structured. Those who are unable – or indeed unwilling – to embrace such institutional values, or who fail to demonstrate ‘total commitment’ to its ‘reinventive’ (Scott, 2010) program of life, are promptly punished or relinquished of their academy status.

The academy thus retains many salient features of a quasi-total institution which seeks to regiment and recondition the holistic life-world of the youth footballer – his perceptions of the game and Africa, the management of his body, and his imaginings of future. Indeed, its ‘totalising’ character is heightened by its effective segregation from the outside world –
both through its geographically isolated campus in the rural heart of Ghana’s Eastern region and its strict regulation of media consumption and visitor access. Inside its social and spatial confines, a highly temporalized regulation of bodily action prevails, with all aspects of one’s daily life organized and prescribed around the clock. Designated times for waking, washing, training, eating, sleeping and studying are mapped across each day of the week, with normally private practices carried out in a communal or public manner; from sleeping in the open-planned communal dormitories, to eating all meals in the long dining hall tables, and washing in the shared shower rooms and bathrooms. Added to that are a micro-politics of corporeal regulation, with all facets of the academy curricula instigating common rules concerning the punctuality of one’s arrival, formal greetings to all staff, and appropriate academy clothing – all of which instructs that he who aspires to become ‘something better’ shall abide at all times by the shared ethic of individual sacrifice and mutual solidarity. All in all, he learns to become a fully-fledged academy boy through a continual process of observance and reaffirmation, wholly devoting himself not just to the performative principles of the training field, but to the everyday rituals and ceremonies that shape the academy’s community of practice.

Akin to Goffman’s (1961: 89) writing on ‘institutional ceremonies’ – and the dramaturgical conformism they are designed to engender – such rituals serve to foster ‘unity, solidarity and joint commitment’ to the development dictates of the academy mission, and its reinventive vision of one’s future-self. Few rituals rank more symbolic than the Monday morning assembly which awaited Abdul and me as we arrived at the school side and joined the line outside the kitchen for breakfast. Alive with the effervescent force of post-training chatter, the breakfast scene – as with mealtimes more generally – was dominated by clunking spoons and convivial laughter, with its localized import extending far beyond the replenishing bowls of oatmeal that populated the long tables of the dining hall, and the fatigued and famished bodies that gathered therein. Rather, the breakfast table served as a mundane and daily site of peer socialization – a time in which the academy cohort rehearse and reaffirm their collective cohesion as a peculiar kind of surrogate family or brotherhood. So too, it is a spatial and temporal microcosm of the academy’s shared, tacit codes of behavior and etiquette, with the maturing hierarchy of academy boys regulating each other through the citing and exchange of institutional discourses, the performance of acquired roles, and the monitoring of differential responsibilities. Immediately after the empty bowls
are returned to the kitchen and the tables wiped down, the opening of the academy week is officially celebrated at morning assembly.

As the academy boys ordered themselves along the two-tiered set of benches in the dining hall, I reluctantly accepted an invite to sit with the teaching staff at the head of the gathering. Once a prevailing silence was reached, the formal pleasantries began with a welcome by the Head of School, who spoke to the fruitful week that lay ahead, and the many opportunities that it promised for each of the boys present. That was followed by an overview of recent news, achievements and milestones for the academy’s graduates in the UK and North America, with each mention of ‘the professionals’ engendering collective gasps and a reverberating sense of awe. Indeed, a toast to the academy’s newest professional – who secured a contract with a club in Scandinavia – provoked the kind of shared elation rarely engendered by the action of an individual. Through an upsurge of clapping, whistling and wonder, a joyous outpouring of pride was instantly discernible in the visceral gesticulations and incredulous murmurs of a youthful congregation rejoicing at the achievements of one of their own. Moments later, the emotive energy of this mundane ceremony was further amplified, with the entire cohort of academy boys united in a vocal rendition of the academy song – its lyrics suffused with affecting notes of African development, future dreams and the shared suffering of bodies inspired, and in motion:

Arise the youth of Right to Dream
    The nation cries for us
    Arise the future leaders
    To serve our motherland
We shall use our hands to write and work
We shall use our legs to run and play
We shall fight and sweat for victory
    In the name of Right to Dream

Following the impassioned climax of morning assembly, the boys empty out of the dining hall and into the classrooms that encircle the inner courtyard. At 9.30am, the school day begins – its curriculum defined by the academy’s status as an accredited Cambridge International Examination Centre, and structured around the core subjects of English, Math, Science, French, Development Studies, Physical Education and African History.
Conjoined to this curriculum, and texturing the delivery of each of the subject areas is the academy-specific Character Development Program – the espoused ‘key’ to ‘unlocking potential’ reads the Right to Dream mission statement. More specifically, the ‘fundamental building blocks’ of the academy’s vision for an ideal graduate are derived from seven identified character traits: that of self-discipline, passion, initiative, integrity, social intelligence, giving back and winning. They each form a highly ritualized feature of daily conversation amongst the academy boys, and in the classroom as the following fieldnote excerpt – detailing the interactive dynamics of a Monday morning English class – reveals:

11 March 2012. I’m asked by the English teacher, Kate, to assist with the U-13 boys during their morning reading class. Keen to accentuate the shared process of learning, I bring along a book of my own – Unconquered by Scott Wallace, a book that charts the expedition to map the lands of Amazonian tribal groups. Taking station at the end of the rectangle frame of small tables – most of which are populated with an English dictionary – I listen on as Kate introduces the importance of developing a passion for reading and taking the initiative to read a set number of pages each day. Shortly after the boys are instructed to begin quietly reading their individual books, I am approached by 12 year-old, Shamshudeen, who inquires as to the meaning of the word ‘static’. After guiding him through the process of searching the word in the Oxford dictionary, I briefly return to my own reading before Clinton – sitting to my immediate left – asks of its theme. Aware of the pictorial feature in the midpoint of the book, I tell of how the book is about a group of explorers who seek to ensure the indigenous tribal groups who inhabit the Amazonian rainforest are allowed to maintain their cultures and privacy.

‘This man has passion for the people there?’, inquired Clinton as the book lay open on the image of an indigenous rights activist in Brazil.

‘Yes. He thinks it is important that they are allowed to decide their own future and to keep their land’, I respond, knowing it will do little to quell the barrage of questions to follow. ‘He needs a lot of discipline to do it, I think… and he is having the initiative to try and go into the jungle’, Clinton rationalizes, before becoming fixated on the subject of flesh-eating piranhas shown in a graphic and the wild animals – including jaguars and anacondas – that inhabit the rainforest.

Amidst the highly ritualized conversations of academy life – both in the classroom and on the training field – the seven character traits serve at once as a universal vocabulary of motive, a guiding frame for action, and a preferred modus of explanation. Through weekly classes exploring the functional import of a particular character trait, the academy boys are nourished with the canons of a ‘new’ moral lexicon of perception and practice, with the collective inculcation of such personality traits deemed essential to the reinventive ‘growth’
of the academy boys as ‘well-rounded individuals’ capable of ‘positively influencing the lives of those around them’.

After a hearty lunch containing starchy slabs of boiled yam with egg stew, an afternoon fieldtrip to a primary school in the nearby village of Old Akrade served as a striking illustration of the practical import of the character traits into the pedagogical fabric of the academy program, and the importance of exerting a ‘positive influence’ beyond its borders:

30 May 2012. ‘Have you organized all the equipment? The pinnies, balls, and cones?’ inquired one of the academy’s pastoral leaders, Paul, of the senior boys as they concluded the lunchtime clean-up. With affirmative nods all around, the boys soon set off with the equipment along the dirt road for a few hundred metres, before veering through the luscious vegetation to the right and into the grounds of the village primary school. As the boys prepared their physical education lesson under the blast furnace heat of the afternoon sun, the children excitably assembled and watched on with intrigue from the tree-lined verge. Just before they invited the children to approach the mound of well-worn footballs in the centre of the patchy, slanted grass field, I spoke with 18 year-old Osei about the importance of the event. ‘It is to give back to the community because the many small boys here are like us some time ago. So Sir Paul is showing us to take initiative and help to bring up the young people here’, he informed, before joining his peers in front of the few dozen children that listened attentively as they introduced the educational games and exercises that would unfold over the course of the hour to follow. Minutes later, the scene was one of intense focus as the village children – eager to impress their senior coaches for the day – performed the warm up to the exact specification of 18 year-old Dominic: flicking their heels behind, lifting theirs knees up in front and scurrying around barefoot on the rough grassy surface. Each of the academy’s senior boys became a lead instructor on a progressive series of ball drills and small-sided games, orating the rules of the game, before encouraging and guiding the boys during their frenzied performance of the activity. On route back to the academy, pastoral leader, Paul, spoke to a cluster of the senior boys about the importance of their social intelligence in a setting such as the village school, where the children idolize them and consider them role models.

Back at the school, afternoon classes were approaching their conclusion. I nevertheless caught the latter moments of a Development Studies lesson delivered by Ghanaian-born pastoral leader, Harry, to the U-15 boys. A heated debate is in full swing upon my arrival, with Harry explaining that the session is designed to trouble the students’ assumptions and stereotypes about gender relations in the domestic setting. ‘Why should women be expected to do all the cooking for the family?’, Harry posed to the boys, their frowned expressions immediately indicative of their oppositional stance. ‘That is their job to prepare the food and to look after the home’, said 15 year-old Evans; ‘because the men, the husband, must
go to work to get some things for the family’, he continued, receiving nods of support from his peers as he spoke. Soon the lack of opportunities for girls to participate in sport was on the table, a subject that – perhaps owing to its intimate proximity to the boys and their self-development – appeared to prompt less polarized viewpoints, and a sense of puzzlement amongst the academy boys that they had never considered the patriarchal relations underpinning sporting participation. Having succeeded in moving the boys to at least reflect on gender relations and the possibility of social change, Harry brought the class to a conclusion and the bell rang to conclude the school day.

The academy boys shift their orientation and return to the ‘football side’ in the late afternoon to begin the day’s second on-field training session at 4pm – its focus and intensity altered according to the coaching staff’s appraisal of collective energy levels and the ever-fluctuating climatic conditions. As with academy life more broadly, the relations of the training field are at all times collegial yet competitive; its borders enclosing a maturing scale of bodies wholly committed to the occupational praxis and prospects of daily self-improvement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, as one of the coaching staff warned, ‘you plan to reduce the intensity of a session, but the boys still want to play at 100 mph and kick lumps out of one another!’. As the sun gradually descends behind the hills, afternoon training typically closes with the boys scattered across the two fields, some finely honing their individual skills, others ‘pairing up’ to work on long range passing, and large clusters forming around the portable mini-goals watching the much-hyped contest that is ‘football tennis’. With the training day complete, the academy boys are back to the shower room, washed, dressed and off to the ‘school side’ before the blanket darkness of dusk descends. In the softly-lit dining hall, dinnertime commences at 6.30pm and is structured according to a hierarchical order of service, with a select number of boys from each age-group assuming waiter duties and carrying the large trays to their respective peer groups. A set weekly menu further accentuates the routinized character of the academy program, with local staples such as groundnut soup, Banku, and Friday night’s ‘Chicken and Fried Rice’ particularly popular amongst the academy cohort.

After dinner, and before collectively walking back to the dormitories on the ‘football side’ at 8.30pm, the boys disperse into the classrooms to complete their homework for the next day, with pastoral staff and permitted visitors often providing informal support where needed. Where requested by the coaching staff – usually on a maximum of two nights per
week – this homework period is shortened so as to allow the academy cohort to congregate in the Obama library to watch and analyze live coverage of midweek games that are deemed constructive to the learning and development process, with those featuring FC Barcelona of Spain – renowned for their distinctive passing style – especially prominent. Amidst the throes of the game, the library becomes a hive of chatter and commotion, with a mish-mash of debate and disagreement characterizing the creative interactions of the boys and their engagement with football as it is played beyond the borders of the continent. As the clock ticks beyond the ninety-minute mark and the full-time whistle arrives, it brings to a conclusion the average day at the Right to Dream Academy, and ‘lights out’ for its devoted denizens.

Plate 1.10. The typical evening scene in the Obama Library

6.5. ‘PROFESSIONAL PROSPECTS’ AND ‘GEEK RECRUITS’
FORGING A FUTURE WITHIN THE ACADEMY

‘It’s like my mother was telling me when I was a small boy, school has to come first before I can go anywhere. That’s what I can hear her telling me now’, said 15 year-old Kadre as we struck up a conversation in one of the classrooms after dinner. The day previous, I had noted Kadre’s decision to prioritize additional after-school study time over the optional ‘position-specific training’ at the football side – a choice that, as he would go on to elucidate, revealed much about the changing aspirations of the academy boys and the veritable politics that undergird the authorship of one’s future-self.

Musing over his original childhood decisions in the northern city of Tamale, Kadre admitted to disobeying his mother’s orders when he skipped a school exam to attend the
Right to Dream justify in which he was first spotted: ‘after they picked me to come to the academy, I sat down with my mother [and my uncle], and I told her the truth. She was not happy but my uncle\textsuperscript{60} said that I should be allowed to have a choice. I promised my mother that when I go there to justify, I will work hard every day and I will make something out of myself’. Shifting his contemplative gaze to the shock that awaited him within the academy program, Kadre then seemed to forecast an impending modification of his mindset: ‘when I came here, I wanted to be a footballer… but the justify is very tough and you will ask yourself how can I make it here?’.

Sensing as much, I probed whether his aspirations had changed in the three years that followed:

‘Yes. I am thinking that I want to go school now. When I first came here to the academy, I couldn’t even read. It was difficult for me as I could not pick up a book and I had no confidence to speak. But since I am here, that really changed because they are setting us targets to read some books and I have the library to go and read on my personal time. The staff are here for you to learn and improve at reading so I had to take it serious and I have improved a lot. So since I have come here my aim to play football really changed and I decided with the staff that I want to go to school if they can help me. If I can get good grades in school and get a certificate that is strong then I am thinking I want to go to school in the US where they are taking school more serious than football and I can get a good degree’

Like any socialized organism, the academy boy is an impassioned and purposeful bundle of drives and desires, with his carnal commitment to the game of football – and the academy program of life – at least in part owing to its localized import as a vehicle of social mobility and transcendence. It follows, in turn, that the overwhelming majority of those who step into the academy program do so in the hope of becoming professional footballers, with the veritable prospects attainable through schooling almost entirely repudiated by the pervasive lack of faith they harbor towards its local iterations. ‘What use is education without the resources or opportunities to apply one’s knowledge’, they appear to be saying, with few foreseeing any tangible correlation between formal schooling and employment, let alone economic betterment. Yet, as Kadre’s story makes clear, such perceptions are often altered, sometimes even reversed, within the academy setting – a pattern which I suggest might be read as evidence of a reflexive and pragmatic approach taken by the academy boy as he

\textsuperscript{60} Kadre’s father and older brother both passed away before he was 10 years old through illness.
progressively evaluates the probability of his life chances vis-à-vis the professional echelons of European football and the educational scholarships offered by North American universities.

Recalling his mother’s stern resistance to the game, Abdul spoke to this juxtaposition when he avowed that ‘she told me that there are many small boys who are playing football so I should look at every one of them before I stop my schooling… because they are all praying to God that they can be the one to be a professional’. At one level, therefore, it must be said that Kadre’s transformed outlook on his future is a most noteworthy commendation of the academy’s reinventive project, and its mission to ‘unlock’ the ‘true potential’ of the continent’s youth. However, we might also consider Kadre’s choice to prioritize an educational pathway as the prudent decision of an entrepreneurial self-subject who responds astutely to his highly contingent and fluctuating prospects of ‘making it’ as a professional footballer, and the relational autonomy he may glean by making an early decision about his preferred route out of the academy. Perhaps most edifying in this regard is Kadre’s acknowledgment of how ‘tough’ his early introduction to the academy’s football program was – the dilemma that then presented itself being to strategically (re)consider how he could ‘make it’ in either of the respective pathways. He was by no means an exceptional case, however, for most of the academy’s recruits spoke candidly of the fluctuating rank and rivalry of the collective peer group, and the pressure it generated to maintain high standards of performance – thereby maximizing one’s prospects – both on-field and in the classroom.

‘I want to be a professional footballer. It is the only thing I want to do’, responded 12 year-old ‘Burkina boy’, Mohammed to my inquiry of his future aspirations. ‘And when I am playing well in training, I have confidence that I can do it’, he continued optimistically, before recounting the struggles he endured upon first training with his peer group. ‘When I came here, I didn’t know what to do. In my team [in Burkina], I was the best player, but here it is difficult because I saw that some of the boys were more good than me… I will remember forever when I wanted to take the ball from Basit [one of the U-13 peer group], but when I tried, he just put out his strong leg to protect it and I could not get it! I never felt like that before I came here’. Many of the academy boys recounted similar stories of their early encounters on the training field – which evidently served as a rite de passage into the competitive cauldron of academy life, and the contingent and relational nature of the
opportunities to be garnered therein. What distinguished Mohammed’s outlook, however, was his subsequent admission that he ‘fears’ being channeled towards an educational pathway when his steadfast goal remains to become a professional footballer:

‘If I do well in school, I am afraid that they will bring me to university, because I want to be a professional footballer. I think that maybe if I go to university, I will not be able to do that. So sometimes something is telling me that I should not work so hard in school. But my mother has told me ‘if you think always that you will be a professional, if you are not, what will you do?’ So when I arrived here, on the school side, I was doing very well and at the football side, I was not playing good. And I told myself that if I am not doing so well at football, I must be strong in school. But if I can be, I want to play football’

Authorship of one’s future-self thus reveals itself to be an ongoing and active negotiation between one’s preferred pathway and a pragmatic appreciation that the alternative – in this case an educational scholarship at a top university – still constitutes a highly desirable prospect. Such pragmatism was vividly evidenced in the following dialogue with Clinton, who – despite sharing Mohammed’s commitment to becoming a professional – refused to rule out taking up an opportunity pertaining to education:

DM: When you came to the academy, what was your dream?

CA: To become a professional footballer

DM: And now after two years, has that dream changed?

CA: No, it is still like this. I want to play for any European team who want me.

DM: What about your schooling?

CA: ‘Yeah, but it is not any subject that I am very good at in school but I am trying to catch up with the subjects and I am pushing myself to be disciplined… to do better at the school side. Like anytime I don’t have training, I rush to the school side to do some extra math and some science so I am pushing myself higher. So if any opportunity comes, I will catch it and I will deal with it. If it is school, I will go and if it is football, I will play.

Embedded in Clinton’s desire to keep his options open, and to an even stronger extent in Mohammed’s affective expression of fear, is an acknowledgement that such authorship is not wholly steered by their own will; for they are at the behest of the academy’s coaching staff and subject to the daily surveillance of their every move, pass and performance on the training field. It is they who ultimately determine the pathways for each of the graduating
cohort, defining with such decisions one’s future trajectory beyond the academy, and for the elite amongst them, beyond Africa too. An early morning interaction with one of the academy’s senior coaching staff on the sloped embankment of the upper field would – in the latter phase of my fieldwork – shed light on this process. ‘We pretty much know within the first two years whether a boy is a genuine prospect to go down the football route’, he informed, before admitting that the coaching staff distinguish the academy cohort, and their future pathways, along a spectrum between ‘professional prospects’ and ‘geek recruits’:

‘Has he really kicked on and developed technically? Has he sharpened his first touch? How is he developing physically and does he possess the game intelligence for the higher levels of coaching? That’s what we’re always looking to answer from the football side of things... and that’ll decide how we plan their future pathways in the academy. You have the pro’s [shorthand for professionals] and the geek recruits… it’s about making sure we guide them towards what best suits their skillset’

While it was emphasized that such classifications are always open to review, each academy apprentice nevertheless finds himself and his regimen at the academy progressively customized according to his future trajectory as a ‘pro’ or a ‘geek’. Intimately attuned to the micro-politics of their daily routine, I contend that the academy boys quickly discern such customized classifications, thereafter confronting the need to revise their own self-priorities and aspirations so as to perform in accordance with the evolving expectations and demands of the academy’s hierarchy. Here, certainly, we see echoes of the kind of ‘performative regulation’ espoused by the writings of Scott (2010), with the self-surveillant academy boy encouraged to (re)orient himself and his future to the changing commands of the academy hierarchy – or what Goffman (1961) would surely have referred to as the coercive power of its ‘institutional arrangements’. Eager to explore the extent of such temporally-specific and rationally-revised forging’s of one’s future, I posed a dilemma to four members of the academy’s senior boys – three of whom were believed to be ‘professional prospects’ – in an attempt to evaluate the alignment of one’s decision-making with their projected pathway by the coaching staff:

16 June 2012. Having been tasked with delivering a lesson structured around ‘pre-migratory preparation’ with four the academy’s senior squad, I decide to structure the session around the notion of informed decision-making concerning one’s career pathway. As the boys sit attentively in the front row of tables in the otherwise empty classroom, I explain the hypothetical scenario to them, challenging them to articulate the rationale behind their decision to accept one of the following two offers which have been presented to them:
Offer 1: A two year contract with a semi-professional club in the Norwegian second division worth 300 euro per week

Offer 2: A four year athletic and educational scholarship to Harvard University and the opportunity to compete in the NCAA soccer championship

Their decisions align with what I expected, with three of the four boys indicating that they will accept the offer to sign for the Norwegian second division club. When asked to present their reasons for choosing their respective pathways, two of the boys struggled to provide a rationale, with one simply indicating that ‘I want the opportunity to play football. I will be happy to be on a European team. Then I will show myself and justify to a bigger club’. Another similar response followed, with fifteen year-old Evans indicating that ‘I will be happy to take the contract in Norway and I will somehow find a way to live simple. I will just make sure I play very good in the early days and a bigger club will then come and find me’. Interestingly, two years older and having been informed that a future in the professional game is unlikely, Kobe decided to accept the scholarship to study at Harvard University, explaining that, ‘I will go to Harvard because then I can be a high level student and learn and I can play football too. If I play really well during my studies, maybe I will get an opportunity to play professional like our graduates Michael and Titi’.

A word of caution is required here, however, for one must recall that any classification of the ‘academy boy’ marks only the judicious endpoint of a practical, long-term process of surveillance and evaluation. Each unique ‘talent’ profile is therefore generated through the extended evaluation of a recruit’s individual performance both on-field and in the classroom; the logic being that he is thereafter afforded an optimal chance of ‘making it’ in the category which best correlates with his personal aptitudes and skillset. That said, however, the majority of academy recruits commence this temporal process, and their academy scholarship’s, as ‘professional prospects’, and it is only through the continual appraisal of a boy’s incarnate commitment and conversion to the rules, practices and ‘techniques’ (Mauss, 1950) of the game that such external assessments of his ‘talent’ profile are arrived at. For he who aspires towards the ultimate victory – in this case a professional contract at a European club – must toil, train and ‘work’ towards becoming skilled in the ‘bodily craft’ (Wacquant, 2005) that is the game of football, learning and mastering its fundamental matrix of ‘habituated bodily action’ (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2009: 222), and reconditioning one’s material and sensory infrastructures in accordance with the demands of the training field as an arena of perfectionist-oriented performance. It follows that this bio-pedagogical assemblage of techniques, dispositions and proficiencies are situated at the outer limits of intellectual knowing, and can be
apprehended only in the affective depths of its embodied action, and within the highly localized, cultural sensorium of the training field (Guertz, 2002).

The ‘emplaced’ (Pink, 2009; Howes, 2005) relations of the training field cannot therefore be discursively defined through a neat ensemble of discernible information; rather, each daily session signifies an inter-subjective and temporally-specific ‘coming together’ (Massey, 2005) of fleshy bodies and the ball – their relational consociation amidst the spatial limits of the field defined by a peculiar blend of inter-corporeal kinship and competitiveness. The training field thus signifies the spatial and symbolic crux of academy life, at once an effervescent space of communal sociality and a punishing crucible geared towards instilling the embodied ethics of what many popularly recognize as the ‘beautiful game’. To recite the observations of Wacquant (2005: 59) and his borrowings from the work of Durkheim (1956), this means that ‘one cannot construct a science of this “social art”, that is, of a “pure practice without theory”, as Durkheim defines it, without undergoing a practical initiation into it, in real time and space’. It is only by immersing oneself firsthand within the social sensorium of the training field, to learn and experience the techniques of the game amidst the competitive cauldron of organisms at once devoted and opposed, combined and competing, that one may apprehend the pre-discursive postures and ethics, imagination and moves of the academy boy who harbors realistic ‘prospects’ of ‘making it’ as a professional.

6.6. THE FIELD OF DREAMS

26 June 2012. Crouched on the sidelines of the upper field, I tighten the laces of my boots and apprehensively sweep through my ritualistic series of preparatory stretches; bounding dynamically into multi-directional lunges, thrusting out of jump squats and gradually seeking to counteract the dull ache that has engulfed my lower body. *Whoosh!* A ball whizzes past my outstretched right leg, before a sheepish hand is raised to acknowledge its deviated course. Seeming like an opportune moment to join in, I chase after the ball, leisurely lofting it back over the cluster of senior boys casually in conversation as they await the formal call of the coaching staff and the commencement of the session.
Its 6.25am and as the warm up gets underway with a prescribed series of dynamic movements and stretches, I hang back at the rear of my assigned group – my white training shirt and black shorts ensuring some degree of continuity with the assigned attire of the academy boys. ‘Open out the groin!’, instructed the academy physio, Matt, before the rhythmic synergy of the group kicked in and we repeatedly ‘opened up’ to the right, before sweeping back to the left, in seamless motion over the twenty-five yard pathway. Front lunges, calf raises, quad pulls, and lateral bounding all followed, each performed and rehearsed in sync and with impeccable form. My heart rate soon began to soar, and I instantly find myself saturated in sweat. I inhale gasps of humid air, my lungs begin to burn ever so slightly. ‘Are you warm yet?’, asked Matt of a number of senior boys, cautioning that ‘we’re gonna be shootin’ this morning so make sure you are well stretched!’.

‘Let’s keep the intensity high. I’m looking for sharp, incisive movement of the ball and a burst of pace after you play the pass. And remember, hit the target!’, explained Head Coach Gareth as we gathered around him, each of us studying the intricate network of pylons spanned out from the goal frame as he talked through his expectations and the progressions to follow. ‘Okay, let’s get to work!’, he then exclaimed, vigorously clapping his hands, and with a heightened sense of urgency, assigned us in groups to the network of pylons extending forty yards in set intervals from the goal frame. Stationed next to a heaped mound of balls at the goalmouth, I decide to step straight into the action and get the drill going; rolling the ball out of my feet and stepping into a short, briskly weighted pass towards the instep of Theo’s right foot ten yards away – the precise expectations of the coaching staff ringing in my ears as I plant my left foot and sweep through the ball with the right. Whoosh! It moves swiftly through the glistening grass surface and onto the ‘sweetspot’ of Theo’s instep. With the controlled caress of his finely honed ‘first touch’, Theo cushions the ball instantly back along its path, his weight of pass balanced such that it has lost its energy by the time it approaches my eager stride forwards. Discerning the raised arm of my intended target fifteen yards ahead, I lean forwards, head down over the ball, left arm swinging up and anti-clockwise for balance, and wrap the instep of my right foot across the center-point of the ball in vigorous motion – my intention being to execute what many coaches label as the ‘daisy cutter’, renowned for its low trajectory and fast pace as it ‘cuts’ across the grass. Ping! I connect with the ball – the kinetic energy passing through my outstretched right foot and into the ball as it rebounds away from the collision with renewed vigor and direction. Instantly, I know that I haven’t connected as I’d wanted, a feeling that is
confirmed when I raise my line of vision and dart towards the pylon that Theo has vacated seconds before, the ball already soaring rapidly towards its intended target at knee height – a notoriously challenging pass to bring under one’s control.

To my surprise, 17 year-old Prince re-orientates his body almost instantly, springing off the ground as he raises his right foot to meet the undesirable flight of the pass. Strikingly composed, Prince softly and fluently cushions the ball into his desired pathway, its finesse encapsulated in the forward momentum he generates as he plays a ‘wall-pass’ with Dominic and lashes a powerful strike past the goalkeeper, Ali, from all of twenty yards out. ‘Good strike! That’s the standard now!’, challenged Coach Gareth as the ball nestled in the corner of the goal, and the next cycle got underway.

Now receiving the opening pass from Senior, I bounce up and down in anticipation, pushing my body weight away from the pylon (which serves as an imaginary opponent) as Senior strikes smoothly through the pass. *Thud!* I delicately judge the weight of my ‘lay off’ into Senior’s stride, his right foot plantar-flexed as he strikes confidently through the ball with the dorsal or laced area of his boot. Once again, a sharp exchange – what many term a ‘one-two’ – at the base of the drill is followed by a booming shot towards goal, it’s forceful flight interrupted only by the strong left hand of the goalkeeper as he pushes it around the post. Racing to my next station at the base of the drill and directly facing the goal, I ready myself as the next cycle commences. Eyes fixated on the pinball interchange next to the goal, I nervously anticipate the long range pass about to come my way. *Ping!* The ball’s trajectory is elevated right from the point of contact with Daniel’s left foot, but it’s a ‘floated’ pass, thereby relatively devoid of power. That means time! I frantically seek to adjust my footing, scrambling to my right, amending my body stance while seeking to avoid losing my balance. As it approaches at head height, I spring off the ground so as to enact a chest trap. Arms out to my side, pectoral surface area maximized, and feet off the ground. *Thud!* It strikes the left side of my chest and instantly settles on the rain soaked grass surface. Head up, I make eye contact with Senior to my left, eagerly moving a pass into his left foot, and darting through the gap in anticipation of the return pass that predictably arrives with near perfect measure into the space in front of me. It’s rolling slowly across my body as I stride purposively onto its line of flight. A split-second glance towards the goal, left arm out for balance, right foot drawn fully behind my body. *Boom!* I strike across the moving ball with as much vigor as I can muster, consciously knowing that
my uncompromising thirst for power will inevitably undermine my control of its accuracy. ‘Decent strike! Well done!’, encourages one of the coaching staff, as Ali deflects the ball over the crossbar – its high trajectory and power meaning that only a guiding fingertip is required to reroute its trajectory high into the field behind the goal. Buoyed by the experience, I sprint after the ball before taking my place at the back of the line, ready to re-enter the firing line.

Several repetitions later, I am struggling to sustain the unrelenting pace and intensity of the cycle. My now sluggish first touch is failing me. My quadriceps burn, and the rain-soaked surface saps the former sharpness I possessed. Still the boys cycle through with a near robotic efficiency of passing accuracy, and sustained intensity of ball-striking towards goal; albeit with varying levels of success in terms of goals scored. My breathing rhythm has long deserted me by the time that Coach Gareth brings the exercise to a conclusion and urges us to rehydrate before entering the next element of the session: a ‘small-sided’ game wherein a series of pedagogical restrictions seek to mimic yet modify the intensity and challenges of competitive match conditions.

‘Can we now transfer some of the sharp interchanges and finishing I’ve just seen into the game? That’s what I’m looking to see!’, challenged Coach Gareth as he ushered us back onto the field and sought to reboot the competitive fervor amongst the group. Catching the bright yellow mesh ‘bib’61 thrown in my direction, I join the cluster of boys sauntering towards the goal-frame set back against the dense overgrowth that enwraps the training field on one side. Directly opposed on the half-way line stood the other goal-frame, which had been rolled forward so as to restrict the spatial confines of the field, while the flanks had been squeezed ten yards in from each touchline. Lined up in-between stood our orange-clad opponents. ‘Two touch maximum! Move the ball sharp!’, instructed Coach Gareth as he lofted the ball into play from his observation post on the sideline. On the opposite flank, Dominic plucks it seamlessly out of the air, laying it back into the path of Theo whose first touch initiates a confident surge forward so as to invite the pressure from those around him. Exuding the advanced spatial awareness required of any aspiring footballer, Theo assesses the changing passing angles open to him in a split second, decisively threading a pass

61 Often referred to in North American athletic subcultures as a ‘pinnie’, and denotes a double-sided, mesh vest of various colours that is ubiquitously used to distinguish and organize team members during training.
between the two opponents closing on him from either side and into the feet of Emmanuel, who makes the most of his tall muscular frame as he holds off the physical assault of the opponent behind him. Recognizing the open corridor of space to his right side, I dart from my deep central position, managing only a high-pitched yelp so as to alert him to my impending presence and provide him with another passing option. Crunch! In comes the outstretched leg of the defender as Emmanuel shapes to lay it off in my direction. The ball ricochets to an orange bib. He pops it off to a teammate behind. One. Two. Three crisp passes and the orange bibs stream towards our goal with searing pace. Boom! The ball is lashed home in the far corner of the net. ‘Good finish! Well done’, yells Gareth. There’s no time to process it though, as the goalkeeper instantly grabs another ball and whips it out to Daniel on the left flank, who opens out his left foot and prods it forward as he scans the options ahead.

Eager to get a feel for the ball and assert myself on the game, I fall back into the centre of the field, checking my shoulder for nearby opponents as I make eye contact with Daniel. He whips in a pass but it’s slightly behind me. I spin around, and with an outstretched left lunge, I manage to trap it. But I’m now static in the centre of the field, devoid of momentum and that means trouble. Crunch! A scathing tackle comes in from my left before I can even assess my options. Shit! An upwelling of latent aggression streams through my veins. I clamber back to my feet and sprint after the orange haze that robbed me of possession. Before two seconds have elapsed, the ball is crossed from a wide position into our penalty box. Thud! I’m relieved to see the towering physique of Sirdick forcefully head the ball high into the air and away from our goal. It’s looping back in my direction. Desperate to avenge my error, I dash after it, fixated on its trajectory as I push off the soggy surface, arms up for leverage, as I jump off the ground. Crash! My left shoulder smashes into the orange blur of my opponent. I feel the ball brush off my forehead as we rebound in opposite directions and momentarily scramble to regain our balance. Adrenaline pumping, I get a surge of energy. I feel confident. Daniel recovers possession. I fall back behind him, offering an outlet from which to realign the point of attack. He flicks it towards my weaker left foot. Unfazed, I take a sharp first touch, anxious not to give up possession again. I spot Dominic converging on the back post of the goal-frame from the opposite flank. Ping! I don’t think twice. I arrow a powerful cross-field pass towards his intended end-point, its trajectory akin to that of a frozen rope elevated over the competing bodies underneath it in the goal mouth. The cadence of Dominic’s convergence on the goal increases. I get a jolt
of excited expectation. Clop! Out comes the colossal leap of Ali and – just as Dominic arrives underneath its flight – he clasps it safely into his elevated reach. ‘Good idea… unlucky!’, I hear from the sidelines. Yes! I feel elated as I dash back into rank, the ball already making its way down the flank at the feet of an orange bib.

In the five minutes that remain, I settle into the frantic flow of the game. I probe for pockets of space, receive, pass and move again. The ball pinballs around the field in a mesmerizing fashion, its movement dictated by the spatial coordinates of all those in motion therein, and occasionally spiked by the creative possibilities engendered by an astute dash behind the defensive line, a piercing ‘through ball’, or a ‘piece of magic’ by one of the more skillful wing players. As the academy’s most senior performers, my peer group for the day boast a highly refined technical repertoire; an exacting first touch, imposing physique, and a commendable adeptness with both feet while particularly lethal with one. Long before the formal components of the session are brought to a close, an agonizing cramp jolts down both my hamstrings, a dizzying sensation has clouded my judgment, and my lungs throb with a burning sensation. Sauntering towards the sideline, I notice the other boys jovially messing around as they empty out the contents of a large sack of balls. ‘You are staying for some personal?’, inquired Prince in my direction. Unwilling to reject such an invite, I instantly agree despite the exhausted state that has depreciated my customary enthusiasm.

Content to let Prince guide our activity, we are soon locked in the classic duel of ‘keep ups’ – the challenge being to keep the ball off the ground using one’s two feet, thigh, chest and head. Prince raises the stakes by imposing a two-touch stipulation, and gets us started by flicking the ball in the direction of my chest. Thud! I embrace the ball under my control with a forward thrust of my chest, popping it up into the air as I adjust my footing and nudge it airborne in his direction using a finely weighted instep pass. Softly taking it on his thigh, Prince returns it almost instantly from his left foot onto my right. I pop it up again, before stepping into a headed pass back. Laughter briefly ensues as our duel heats up with each successful exchange. Chest trap and left instep return. A headed combo return. Left and right foot laced returns. We move through the bodily repertoire of control and return, carefully balancing our natural desire to assert a technical superiority with the fatal risk of dropping the ball. Eventually a misjudged return by Prince forces me into a 180 degree spin and a frantic series of desperate touches that leave me unbalanced and in a heap on the grass. We burst into laughter and jovially contest who should be awarded the victory as we
slowly make our way across the field. ‘I can see that you are a player now!’, enthuses Prince as he reaches out for an archetypally masculine handshake and progressive embrace. ‘When you are just here at the academy, I didn’t know but I see now that you can play… your passing, I like it’, he continued before sauntering off towards the shower room at the back of the upper dormitory.

Whilst fluently performed in the heat of the action, the total pedagogy of the academy footballer is not naturally-imbued or self-evident. He is, rather, in his own embodied self, an ever-changing kinetic marker of a long-term corporeal project – its temporal phasing forever framed by the academy’s maturing scale of ‘talented’ bodies and their respective commitment to the repetitive toil of training, both in its formally-instructed and ‘personal’ guise. The training field thus represents a peculiar kind of workshop – its localized resonance spiked by notes of creative artistry yet structured by a heroized ethic of bodily labor. Foot-work, ball-work, and fitness-work form the constitutive ingredients of his deeply corporeal engagement in quotidian labor practices, each honed through a discrete constellation of postures and movements, yet collectively woven into the moral fabric of his corporeal schema. Taken together, the mundane ‘work’ of corporeal reconditioning – and its creatively-inspired drudgery – is said to converge in the transformation of the academy boy into an elite level performer of a ‘beautiful’ bodily craft. For the game of football demands ‘full-body coordination’ (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2009: 223), with even the most ostensibly simplistic instep pass necessitating a complex and deeply coordinated synergy of bodily action. Layered upon a constellation of kinesthetic processes that ‘speech cannot congeal’ (Katz, 2000) is a habitual mode of action that is fluently enacted through the precise and coordinated placement of the non-kicking foot, the rotation of the torso, and the balanced flight of the arms. Commensurate with a real-time assessment of the target distance and angle, one must take a stride towards the ball, enact a micro-bend in the knee of the non-kicking leg as it plants in the turf, before fixing one’s eyes on the ball. Drawing back the kicking leg towards the buttocks, torso leaning forwards, one then attempts to strike through the centre point of the ball with the instep surface area of the foot, all while evaluating the optimal levels of force, direction and timing required in the heat of the action.

My point in rehearsing such a ‘thick’ description of the coaching points around an instep pass is to expound the veritable complexity of its highly skilled praxis; it is not derived or
attributable to some neatly theoretical coda, but is – to paraphrase Crossley’s (2001: 123) leaning’s on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962) – ‘an incorporated bodily know-how and practical sense’ that eludes much scholastic interpretation of its elemental, pre-reflective features. This practical and enacted sense is learned and developed through habitual engagement with the ball, and with the broader corpus of work-related ingredients articulated in the above paragraph, from postural refinement and physical conditioning to nutrition, rest and recovery. The comprehensive ‘body work’ (Wacquant, 1995: 73) of the academy footballer thus amounts to a ‘total’ and progressive curricula of self-transformation, and ‘it is only after it has been assimilated by the body in and through endless physical drills repeated ad nauseam that it becomes in turn fully intelligible to the intellect’ (Wacquant, 2005: 69). In other words, he must devote himself to becoming invested or sensually ‘possessed’ by the game in the mundane temporality of real time, subjecting to the ritualistic challenges of the training field in the knowledge that concerted exertion therein is part of a long-term process of embodied becoming.

Here, too, the academy’s character traits form a behavioral substratum of performative regulation, with the teachings of the coaching staff – as well as peer interactions on-field – routinely laced with the regulative logic of self-discipline, passion, initiative and winning. Indeed, in speaking both to such virtuous qualities of the ideal-type academy boy, and to the growing respect that I acquired amongst the academy cohort, the following fieldnote details a conversation with Clinton on the sidelines of the upper training field:

17 May 2012. I train on the upper field under the blistering heat of the afternoon sun. As I battle through a sluggish series of interval runs around the outer perimeter of the field, I notice the U-13 squad congregated and crouched on the sidelines listening to Coach Gareth as he presumably delivers a theoretical or tactical-oriented lesson. The boys disperse fifteen minutes later, but Clinton stays behind, enthusiastically clapping me on as I pass his position on my last grueling 300 metre jaunt around the field. Once complete, I collapse in a heap beside him and he joins in as I tediously complete my mandatory post-session stretches. ‘What was Coach Gareth discussing with you guys today?’ I inquire as we sink deep into a static extension of the right hip flexor.

‘He was telling us that we have to think a lot about our mindset… that we need to have a growth mindset so we are always trying to improve in football and school’.

‘Ah interesting!’ I encourage as we switch legs and sink into the stretch.
‘And he was telling us to look at you as an example when you were running past us… because he says that you are having the self-discipline to work hard even though no-one is here looking at you when you were injured. He says we must have this passion every day and take initiative to do more personal [training] when we are free’

Beyond its fruitful impact upon my standing amongst the boys, the above interaction served to illuminate a more generic feature of the academy’s pedagogical strategy; namely the harnessing of its senior graduates as living embodiments of the academy program and role models for the maturing scale of bodies within it. This cyclical ‘growth’ and scaled production of talent thus creates a recurrent conveyor belt of senior role models at the academy, with each incoming generation of adolescent recruits immediately presented with an ascending scale of their potential future selves, and an instant snapshot of the developmental markers that they must aspire to at each point in their apprenticeship. The temporality of one’s self-production is therefore externally mediated by a peer group of older and more advanced student-athletes, who serve both as a major source of collegial support, and a potentially intimidating pool of like-minded competitors. The veritable power dynamics of such hierarchical peer relationships were particularly acute during the ‘position-specific’ training sessions each Wednesday afternoon, the one weekly session in which the academy cohort are grouped according to on-field position rather than chronological age:

27 June 2012. I enter the lower training field and jog towards the variously-aged group of midfielders huddled around Coach Kenya. The theme for the afternoon session is one-touch passing, and Kenya appeals for concentration on the weight of pass, adding that the objective is to establish a rhythm across the collective interchanges to follow. We begin working sharply in a confined space in pairs; one member throwing the ball to either foot and the other aiming to execute a cushioned side-volley back into his arms. The drill progresses to working in a group of four, with two players on one side throwing the ball while the two players adjacent shuffle back and forth across each other to execute a similar side-volley while in motion. In my element, I seek to maximize the speed of footwork after each side-volley, rapidly shuffling my feet sideways, challenging my 13-year old partner, Evans, to increase the pace. Equipped with the technique to do so, Evans rises to the challenge. We’re scrambling past each other, left and right. Thud! Our volleys are almost in sync. Shuffle left. Thud! Shuffle right. Thud! ‘And time! Switch over’, Coach Kenya instructs as Evans and I swap with those directly ahead of us and become the thrower for the next two minutes.

Soon we move onto the next drill: ‘Pass and move, find rhythm in your exchange and keep the ball moving!’’. Initially, I struggle to grasp the intricate series of interchanges required, the first being a sideways ‘one-two’ before threading a
pacey through ball to a teammate twenty metres ahead. With six players involved in one cycle, the drill repeatedly breaks down, with individual errors of execution and mix ups in communication inhibiting the kind of rhythm and flow Coach Kenya had appealed for. A certain tension creeps into the drill as the errors mount up, with the younger boys (and myself!) evidently troubled by the speed of play. As the session winds down with personal time, the younger players sheepishly gravitate to their own peer group for some short passing. It seems that the session is as much a reality check for the academy’s younger generations as it is for myself as I struggle to inflect upon my rehabilitating limbs the kind of fluid efficiency and technical ‘flow’ that seems second nature to the senior midfielders in the group.

11 July 2012. After the position-specific session, I find myself on the upper field with a cluster of the midfield players, including two of the academy’s most polished senior performers, Senior and Collins, as well as newly arrived Ivoirian, Fofana of the U-13 boys. While I have regularly completed personal sessions alongside Fofana and his own peer group, it is evident that he is intimidated by the presence of his older peers – with their advanced technique on the ball a particular source of distress as we began a long passing drill in pairs. Eager to put Fofana at ease, I invite him to my side, with Collins and Senior drifting back to around thirty metres away. Ping! I get us off to an incisive start with an accurate and powerfully arrowed pass in the direction of Senior, whose unbreakable focus on the flight of the ball means his first touch is a sumptuously smooth cushioned volley into the path of Collins who simply guides it back from whence it came as Senior rockets a lofted pass towards us again. Having rotated position with a noticeably nervous Fofana, I watch on as he gets a sudden rush of jitters and lunges to his right in a vain attempt to meet the rapid flight of the ball. Bump! It awkwardly ricochets off his shin and veers off to the right, much to his obvious annoyance. Eager to atone for the error, he races off to retrieve the pass, pinging it back in my direction and veers off to the right, much to his obvious annoyance. Eager to atone for the error, he races off to retrieve the pass, pinging it back in my direction and veers off to the right, much to his obvious annoyance. 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Eager to atone for the error, he races off to retrieve the pass, pinging it back in my direction and veers off to the right, much to his obvious annoyance. Eager to atone for the error, he races off to retrieve the pass, pinging it back in my direction and veers off to the right, much to his obvious annoyance. Several interchanges later and Fofana had fared little better. In fact, it only occurred to me after the fact that the distance of the long pass demanded Fofana to maximize his power output over accuracy compared to the matured physiques shared by myself, Collins and Senior. This is confirmed by a rather despondent Fofana as we walk off the field, who scowls in his French accent, ‘my foot is not good’.

At the root of Fofana’s frustration is an acute awareness that such informal exchanges on the training field are not without broader merit or consequence, for they serve as pivotal moments of peer appraisal and rivalry – moments in which to ‘spar with’ the academy’s senior athletes and make a name for oneself beyond the caliber and competition of one’s peer group. For the training field is not only a site of (body) work; it is also a relational
force-field – one wherein self-assessment and aspiration are constituted (and continually revised) through inter-corporeal encounter and comparison. In Fofana’s case, by way of illustration, such self-assessments are gleaned not only along a horizontal plane against the fellow members of his U-13 peer group, but vertically vis-à-vis the academy’s elite senior performers such as Collins and Senior; their advanced technical abilities interpreted and revered as a kind of embodied index of their ‘growth’ in the academy, and their devotion to its program of life. From the ambitious vantage point of Fofana and the academy’s younger generations, senior performers such as Collins and Senior represent living embodiments of professional morality, their supreme performances on-field read as an instrumental outcome of their unwavering commitment to the academy ethic of sacrifice and their individual moral fortitude. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the ultimate barometer of this embodied and enacted morality, and the principal marker by which its constituent features are appraised, is the perceived deftness and skill of one’s ‘first touch’.

‘He who possesses and can perform with the aesthetic grace and habitual ‘touch’ of the professional performer has achieved so through his commitment to the academy program of life’ appears to be the official memorandum that greets the incoming academy boy. In practical terms, a refined ‘first touch’ denotes an ability to control, manipulate and stylistically govern the movement of the ball using a sensorial assemblage of bodily inflections and techniques, each enacted through a seamlessly coordinated fusion between bodily action and the ball. The localized import of such a ‘first touch’ was routinely affirmed in everyday conversation at the academy: ‘who has impressed you most since you arrived?’, inquired one of the coaching staff as we watched the ongoing training session one afternoon. Having quickly ascertained that his inquiry was exclusively premised on footballing ability, I listed Clinton’s impressively ‘cultured’ left-foot, the ‘tricky’ wing-play and searing pace of Senior, before mentioning the explosive ball-striking and dribbling skills of Yeboah. ‘So silky isn’t he?’, responded the coach as he focused exclusively on my latter mention of Yeboah; ‘he’s got the full package… with the touch that he’s got, he can play anywhere on the left or even down the middle. He’ll go really far’. Predictably, therefore, the technical development of a recruit’s ‘first touch’ was a dominant feature of daily training sessions; most of which sought to isolate or incorporate age-specific techniques through tailored educative challenges and repetitive practice – their function being to progressively advance each academy recruit along an ascending scale of performative refinement.
The pedagogical process guiding such refinement was most vividly exhibited during a coaching showcase delivered by the academy founder, Tom, on the south corner of the lower training field:

27 June 2012. I arrive at the football side and kneel down beside a cluster of the academy’s younger recruits on the thick grassy verge of the lower training field. Tom begins his coaching showcase using a fully-kitted Yeboah as his only coaching subject. A bag of balls are positioned around fifteen metres from a small goalframe, while a small gathering of academy recruits, staff and visiting guests watched on from all sides. Tom opens the session by speaking to the importance of acquiring a broad and versatile repertoire of ball-striking techniques, his emphasis firmly placed on the notion that the world’s elite performers exhibit an ability to perfectly balance the use of force, accuracy and weight in their execution of an infinite number of different techniques and game scenarios. He then proceeds to introduce and narrate an array of conventional techniques of ball-striking, his argument being that young players must diligently practice and seek to perform an eclectic assortment of such ball-striking skills in live game situations. The session is thereafter framed around what Tom describes as a crossbar challenge, the objective being for Yeboah to strike a static ball using a series of prescribed techniques from a series of set distances from the goal-frame, each time attempting to hit the crossbar of the goal. Over the course of the session, Yeboah was instructed to employ a nuanced and distance-specific array of techniques, his challenge being to experiment with the relative ratio of power to accuracy used across a repertoire of techniques, from a delicately lofted strike using the dorsal or laced area of the foot to a floated instep chip that aimed for maximum curvature in its flight towards goal. Seemingly miniscule variations were introduced by Tom as Yeboah continued his assault on the crossbar; 'aim to get right under this one… you want to lift it as high as possible while still getting it down on time to hit the [cross] bar'. Dink! Yeboah stabs his left foot into the turf immediately under the ball, the impact creating an instantly high wispy arc on the ball, its trajectory pinpointed dead centre on the goal, only to glide marginally over the crossbar. ‘Not bad at all!’, encouraged Tom of his much-revered prodigy, who amassed an impressive number of hits over the course of the hour.

In stark contrast to the seemingly ‘natural’ or effortless mastery exuded by Yeboah, the process of cultivating such a refined ‘first touch’ is as much laborious as it is imaginative, with the frustrated avowals of the academy’s younger generations painting a picture of an ongoing and deeply embodied battle with one’s own limbs. Such frustration was aptly captured in the avowals of thirteen year-old Mohammed when he exclaimed that ‘the training is hard work… when you are playing with the other boys here, you see that their technique is so strong. I was afraid that I would not play good for the founder’. Yet here amidst the localized sanctum of the academy, and its quasi-panoptical modes of
performance-related surveillance, one’s progressive acquisition of a polished and versatile ‘first touch’ signifies more than a purely technical competency. I contend that it serves as a microcosmic snapshot of one’s developing character – evidence of one’s progressive assent to the institutional pedagogic codes (Bernstein, 2000) of reinventive growth and self-perfectionism, and to the realization of one’s ‘true potential’ as a future leader for Africa.

At the very least, however, the attainment of a sharp and incisive first touch comes with an aura of moral supremacy amongst one’s peer group, establishing at the same time one’s rank as a ‘role model’ for younger generations and a prime prospect for the professional pathway.

Nowhere was the elevated social importance of one’s ‘first touch’ more vividly discernible than the informal jousting that routinely unfolded in the immediate aftermath of afternoon training, and through the hyper-competitive game of ‘football tennis’:

13 June 2012. After Coach Gareth concludes the afternoon session, a group of the senior boys cluster around the small goal-frame that usually sits along the sidelines of the upper field. Dragging it a few yards infield, they set up a mini-tennis court using the four-foot goal-frame as the dividing net, before dropping a rectangle of colored pylons on either side of it. Amidst much excitement and laughter – and a cluster of the younger boys keenly watching on from the embankment below – the game kicks off with a volleyed ‘serve’ over the improvised net and into the spatial purview or ‘court-side’ of the two players standing therein – their objective being to avoid letting the ball bounce more than once within the allotted space while using a maximum of two touches to exchange the ball amongst each other and to send it back from whence it came. Thud! Zakyi traps the high ball using his chest as it comes over the net, laying it off with a near perfectly soft instep volley – its graceful weighting granting his teammate Tom the time to adjust his body shape, scan the position of their opponents, before executing a sweeping side volley with his left foot that packs a lot of power yet dips over the net and eludes the best efforts of Senior and Osei. Yaaaaaaah! Cue a brief celebratory berating by Zakyi and Tom and we’re underway again. Senior consciously lofts the ball high into the air and over the net, his objective being to bamboozle the boys with the high trajectory of the serve. His efforts almost pay immediate dividends as Zakyi takes a nervous cushioning touch with his right instep, his struggles epitomized by the height to which the ball rebounded. He rescues it, however, with a cleverly conceived outstep flick of his right foot – a notoriously difficult and rarely-used technique – into Tom, who softens the pace with a thigh trap and pops it back over the net. Osei controls it seamlessly with his right instep, exchanging a rapid one-two with Senior, who pops the ball up into the air close to the net as Osei streams through with a meticulously timed run and jump, his arms out for maximal leverage as he powers through the ball with his forehead, directing it downwards so as to minimize the chance of the boys recovering it. A ‘high five’ greets their first point on the board! Before long, the majority of the senior boys are avidly watching on,
accentuating the virile allure of the contest and raising the decibels levels around the makeshift court. Over the ten minute contest that follows, a dizzying array of advanced technical abilities, deft touches and cunning strategies are exhibited, with the competitive fervor of the action evident in the intense focus of the boys and the ongoing banter, bravado and laughter exchanged with each duel won.

Situated at the nexus between social and somatic modes of practice, informal games such as the ‘crossbar challenge’ and ‘football tennis’ represent a fruitful appendment to the academy’s formal pedagogical praxis – their enactment not only evaluative of the hyper-individualist contouring’s of one’s first touch, but at the same time supportive of a collective culture of peer-inspired performance. They function – to borrow from the writings of Guertz (2002) on the sensorial grounding of cultural ways of knowing – as an informal feature of one’s sensory socialization to the academy, as well as an examination of the degree to which one has internalized and can execute the techniques of the game while under pressure to perform. The latter reference to performance-oriented pressure here is important, for the codified pedagogy of the academy performer is not transmitted with the detemporalized teachings of the textbook in mind; rather, as a ‘subject of perception’ (Merleau Ponty, 1962), he must acquire a surgical sense of timing, his every action being the relational outcome of what Leder (1990: 23) termed the body’s ‘ceaseless stream of kinaesthesias, cutaneous and visceral sensations’. Further still, the relational genesis of his calculated actions can only grasped vis-à-vis the broader inter-corporeal relations of the playing field and what Thrift (2007: 5) aptly termed the ‘animic flux of life’. Put differently, the constituent elements of the playing field are forever in fluid motion, therefore demanding that an improvisational ‘game-sense’ be employed to execute a skillful action within the patterned energy-flow and movements of its ongoing action. He is but one of the fleshy, live ‘threads’ (Ingold, 2000: 242) through which the ‘emplaced’ (Pink, 2011) relations of the field are woven, the upshot being that his skillful actions are not isolated or abstract competencies, but unfold in the relational entanglement of his intended bodily action as it meshes with the dynamic and oppositional forces of the field as a ‘total environment’.

At the level of coaching-speak, this sensuous and relational interplay between technically-skilled organisms is categorized under the ‘tactical’ dimensions of the game – its principle remit being the strategic organization of a collective group so as to enact the most effective routines and patterns of coordinated performance. This instructional balance between
‘technical’ and ‘tactical’ dimensions of performance can be seen across all the training sessions at the academy, albeit with its ratios shifting further towards the latter with each ascending age progression. Even during his initial tutelage in the technical arts of the game, the academy boy is schooled in the spatial logics of the playing field, learning about conventional team formations, and the patterned angles which may be ‘opened up’ through choreographed movements of the ball. Yet, its tactical underpinnings really begin with the repetitive enactment of game-simulated ‘patterns of play’, the objective then being not just to simulate the live realism of game-action, but to challenge those in action to join forces as a team unit collectively and creatively pursuing a shared goal. The synchronization of movements, coupled with intuitive and multi-sensorial modes of communication thus become paramount features of collective synergy, with their relative achievement having a major bearing on what is commonly referred to as a team’s on-field ‘chemistry’. In practical terms, such ‘chemistry’ is often anything but natural; it is a nurtured and learned competency brought forth through painstakingly mundane collective routines on the training field, and the tactical intelligence exuded by individual team members.

One’s ‘tactical’ tutelage is not confined to the formal instruction of the training field, however, for the game’s tactical nuances are most fluently enacted by its elite professional performers – the upshot being that much tactical knowledge is transmitted through the mimeticism of observing others in action. In the academy, such mimeticism took the form of scrutinizing live televised coverage of encounters involving European clubs such as FC Barcelona of Spain, with their playing style, formation and philosophy deemed to hold major pedagogical value for the tactical development and holistic growth of its young players. Here too, the academy boy is expected to be a scholar, his challenge being to study the embodied movements, tactical behaviors and technical aptitudes of the world’s most accomplished professional footballers – their performing bodies constituting a kind of complete carnal blueprint from which to supplement one’s ideas, skills and aspirations. Learning to master and marry the technical and tactical dimensions of the game were therefore a paramount feature of evening sessions in the Obama library, its confines animated by the interpretive analyses of the live match action, and its powerful import in the utopian imaginings of those present. Nowhere was this dual dynamic more vividly evidenced than the evening of May 19th 2012, when the academy cohort crammed into the Obama library to watch the UEFA Champions League Final encounter between FC Chelsea of England, and FC Bayern Munchen of Germany.
19 May 2012. After a hearty dinner of chicken with groundnut soup, I join the boys as they stroll into the Obama library just before kick-off – its confines already dominated by excited chattering’s about Didier Drogba and Michael Essien, the two West Africans taking to the field for Chelsea FC in this most prestigious of encounters. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the Ivorian boys are in good voice from the outset, chanting Drogba’s name as they huddle around the 32-inch television set mounted on the wall. Just the day before, Modibo was unambiguous in expressing his adoration for Drogba – who is both the captain of the Ivorian national team and a forceful symbol of the nation more broadly. As the frantic early exchanges of the game settled down, so too did the volume in the library – the boys now captivated by Bayern Munchen’s hypnotic movement of the ball, and the counter-attacking style employed by Chelsea as they sought to remain compact in defence while springing forwards when the opportunity presented itself. As an enthralling first half continued, Bayern commanded possession of the ball, spraying passes from one side to the other, probing and searching for a solution to Chelsea’s defensive resistance. The boys watched and groaned, occasionally gesturing towards the television in frustration at a loose pass or yet another hopeful punt forwards. ‘They are very strong!’, Mohammed nevertheless reasoned of Chelsea’s early defiance, his optimistic view of proceedings capturing something of the broader atmosphere amongst the boys – most of whom, given the West African connection, had become Chelsea fans for the evening. Indeed, each fleeting image of Didier Drogba sparked an outburst of cheering and chatter, with his presence therein – as a West African at the very pinnacle of European football – clearly serving to affirm the perceived realism of their ‘right’ to dream, and the prospect that they too could follow in his footsteps to Europe.

Such footsteps soon grew in stature, however, as the game entered its final minutes with Chelsea trailing Bayern’s opening goal. By now, a blanket of tense silence had set in, only for Didier Drogba to rise highest at a corner kick and smash a powerful header into the roof of the net. Yeeessssssss! The library exploded into celebration, everyone jumped out of their seats, fists pumping and hugs exchanged all around as the French boys broke out into dance under the television. By the time the room calmed down, the game itself had ended – extra-time would be required to decide the
winner! ‘Drogba, he will score… and win!’, predicted a particularly animated Fofana in his broken English as the tense exchanges of extra-time began. While a tactical battle unfolded for the twenty minutes to follow, the emotionality of the occasion meant that the boys had long discarded their scholarly gaze; this was no longer just about football, it was about a peculiarly vicarious sense of African brotherhood. A point of culmination soon arrived as extra-time ended: the UEFA Champions League Final would be decided by the drama of a penalty shoot-out, and perhaps more poignantly, by the right foot of Didier Drogba himself, as he stepped up to take the final and definitive penalty. The room was awash with emotion – hope, tension and the portents to tears were etched into the visceral gesticulations and anxious facial expressions of the boys as they sat waiting and wishing. Twelve year-old Romeo skulked nervously in the doorway, his torso snaked around the door as he clutched the door handle and repeatedly disappeared behind its frame only to emerge again with one eye on the television. Mediated images of Drogba purposively placing the ball on the penalty and retreating three steps backwards streamed into the room, the sound of the referee’s whistle vaguely discernible against the white noise of the crowd, and the anxious uproars in the room.

*Boom!* Drogba struck a perfectly placed strike into the left corner of the net and the Obama library exploded into life. Under the beaming images of Drogba’s celebration, some of the boys jumped around, dancing and cheering as they went while others raced around the room in a frenzied state of ecstasy. ‘*Drogba! Drogba! Drogba!*’ bellowed out of the library as the boys became enthralled in the merriment of the moment and reveled in the profound nature of Drogba’s achievement. This was more than a personal triumph, the boys informed me as we watched Drogba clutching the trophy of Europe’s most prestigious club competition, for this was a shared victory, vicariously mediated through one African’s attainment of the dream, yet injecting a deeply affective sense of hope into the collective regime of the academy and all those encased within its confines.

A classic symbol of ‘rags-to-riches’, Drogba is the very embodiment of the African football migrant in Europe, with his confirmed ‘place’ amongst the world’s elite performers accentuating his localized import amongst the academy cohort, and their collective belief that they too can pursue a professional pathway. In this sense, their consumption of
Drogba’s triumph – not to mention their more mundane engagement with European football each week – served only to reinforce and validate their prolonged commitment to the reinventive program of academy life, and the sacrificial giving of themselves to the techniques, tactics and rules of the game. Africa’s elite footballers such as Drogba – as well as Michael Essien, Samuel Eto, and Yaya Toure – are thus held up as the ultimate expressions of professional morality in the academy: they ‘made it’ because of their ‘total’ dedication to the craft, and their possession of the character required to overcome its inevitable trials and tribulations. Ultimately, however, this is a contingent and practical morality: its relative possession is appraised in and through the enacted competencies of the player(s) in question, and their exceptional ability to execute elite level performances while under pressure to do so. It is here, in the transition from perfectionist-oriented practice to the pressure of game performance, that the complete or ‘total’ pedagogy of the academy boy must come to fruition, for it is his ability to do so that will ultimately dictate his future destiny. The practical syntheses of such performance-elements can therefore only be appraised and evaluated in competitive match-action – an occasion that presented itself each Saturday morning as youth teams from across Ghana’s southern corridor provided the external opposition for the academy’s aspiring professional prospects:

26 May 2012. Hopping out of the rickety tro-tro parked next to the south dormitories, a cluster of teenage boys made straight towards the freshly cut grass of the lower training field. Some chattered excitedly as they walked on to the field, while others stood silent as a palpable sense of awe took over. With near military precision, the U-13 boys sat on the outer steps of the dormitories as they fixed their shin guards into their long striped socks, and pulled tight the laces of their boots in preparation for the warm up. Moments later, they emerged united: clunk, clunk clunk went their studded boots as they jogged along the cement path towards the training field and purposively passed their observing opponents – a youth team who had been travelling from the urban peripheries of Accra since well before sunrise. With the morning sun now soaring high, the on-field preparation got underway with both teams warming up on the lower training field – the gulf in their respective organization, funding and prospects strikingly manifest even in the clothing and equipment available. On one side of the field stood the collective unit of the academy boys, each clad in the official academy kit comprised of a white shirt, teamed with navy shorts and striped socks, each of which were emblazoned with the Right to Dream symbol. In stark contrast,
across the half-way line was a hodge-podge collection of yellow-clad youngsters, each teaming their own variously colored shorts and socks with an over-sized and tattered yellow shirt. This did little to dampen their determination to impress, however, for this was an opportunity of enormous magnitude: if they could ‘upset’ the rhythm of their privileged opponents, the incisive gaze of the academy’s coaching staff – sitting in makeshift chairs on the sideline – would inevitably be drawn to the potential talent within their rank. That said, however, as the action got underway, the veritable gulf between the two teams was instantly discernible, with the academy boys dictating the rhythm of the game through their commanding possession and mesmerizing movement of the ball. As the goalkeeper caught a long punt forward, an almost instant offering of multiple distribution options spoke to the early tactical tuning of the academy boys, with their strategic spatial alignment and connected movements ensuring that they raced into an early lead. ‘Make the field big!’, ‘keep it moving!’, came the memos from the sidelines as the coaching staff sought to maximize the pedagogical value of the encounter for each of their young charges – all of whom were under constant surveillance and appraisal as I watched the recurrent note-taking and collective discussions of the three coaches. Pass-receive-move-repeat became the order on-field, with each interchange followed by a burst of strategic movements in search of new ‘pockets’ of space in which to attack and ‘break down’ the defensive barrier of the opponents. As the first half came to a close, the superior fitness levels and ball retention exuded by the academy boys meant that they were cutting through their opponent’s defense with consummate ease. Still the coaching staff appealed for more as the boys sat on the sidelines sipping water, pinpointing the need for more vocal communication by the four defensive players, as well as faster movement of the ball as the principle team objectives for the second half. While the competitive tension gradually seeped out of the encounter after the academy boys amassed a four-goal lead, they dared not ease off, for these Saturday morning matches were used by the coaching staff to conclude the weekly training load with an appraisal of all involved. Each individual player is appraised over the course of the game, his performance(s) continually monitored as his player profile develops, and his professional prospects are determined.
6.8. BEYOND THE BORDERLANDS:
THE FOREIGN FLIGHT OF AFRICA’S FUTURE

‘Why did he come to Africa to build Right to Dream? That’s what he asked me’, recounted Abdul of the conversation he shared with academy founder, Tom Vernon, in the moments before he presented him with his five-year academy scholarship.

‘I said that I think he wants us to get something… like he knows we have the talent, he has seen that Africans have the talent but there is no opportunity here so that’s why he came to give us the opportunity in school as well as football’, Abdul continued, before narrating the agreement he made with Tom as he excitedly accepted the scholarship offer and commenced his formal five-year tenure as an academy boy:

‘After that, he asked me… If I should become a professional player in my future, what am I going to do for Africa? He said that my character is most important and that I must give back if I have the opportunity in my future, and if I have the money. I promised him that I will want to build hospitals, academies and schools, and help the community to become better for people. He told me that he is picking me because he needs me to work hard to do it for Africa’

Notice the profound sense of irony that shadows the above interaction between 12 year-old Abdul, as the ‘talented’ yet ‘underprivileged’ beneficiary of an athletic and educational scholarship, and Tom, as the sovereign figurehead of an organization espousing that investment in education and youth might be the answer to Africa’s development impasse. In the mutual arrangement that transpires, Abdul makes a pledge to ‘give back’ to Africa in exchange for the prestigious opportunity afforded to him by the Right to Dream Academy; in effect agreeing that he will – upon his graduation from the academy – become a live source or mechanism of development and a ‘role model’ in the quest to forge a more prosperous future for Africa. Herein, I contend, we are presented with a radical instantiation of the broader development moment in West Africa, with Right to Dream’s reinventive mission – embodying the ethos of a thousand other programs – wholly centered on the future potential of youth; on their education, empowerment, and the granting of opportunities for individual social and material betterment. This too, it must be said, is an interaction that offers a unique angle of vision onto the politics of development in its emergent neoliberal guise: Abdul is not the passive recipient of the ‘handouts’ that dominated the era of ‘top-down’ development-aid, rather he is charged – in keeping with Right to Dream’s assertion that the development of communities shall be an organic
byproduct of empowering individuals – with a personal responsibility for the future of his community and continent. In exchange for the opportunity granted, Abdul agrees to ‘work hard’ not just for a future career in professional football, but for the future of Africa; indeed, it is he, we are told, who will – and herein lies the irony of the development moment – assume responsibility for building the schools and hospitals that are the bedrock of social development, and the infrastructural fount from which an alternative future for Africa might be forged.

I wish to pause for a moment on this development relationship – between the academy as development-donor and Abdul as its reinvented citizen-subject – for it is from here that I shift towards a rather long-winded process of conclusion, both to this chapter, and to the major theoretical and thematic foundations of the thesis overall. It is from this relationship – one shared by a ‘talented’ adolescent boy from an ‘underprivileged’ neighborhood in Burkina Faso, and the British founder of a development organization in Ghana – that I suggest we may most vividly appraise how the patterns and processes of neoliberal globalization are (re)shaping the development landscape of West Africa, and the changing livelihood ‘opportunities’ for male youth in its resource-starved communities. These intersections, in bringing together relational force-fields at once local and global, have been at the forefront of my empirical praxis across each of the preceding chapters, as I attempted to illuminate how the mundane and daily practices, perceptions and relationships of male youth in West Africa today are textured by a suite of historically specific conditions – conditions that have congealed in a postcolonial landscape which, to paraphrase Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 47), is being recast in ways that have propagated an unprecedented ‘crisis of youth’ in its masculine guise. Appended to this, as Ferguson (2006: 191) reminds us, have been ‘decomposing’ conceptions of modernity as a temporal process for African nations, the upshot being that the continent is said to be gripped by ‘a shift from a focus on [the] temporal dynamics of societal progress toward a new reliance on individual spatial mobility’.

Today, Ferguson (2006: 191) asserts, we are witnessing the dissolution of traditional and shared visions of community development, with many compelled less by the prospect of national or societal growth than by a relentless and more singular desire to ‘escape the low global status of being a “poor African”’. It is only against this broader suite of spatio-temporal dynamics – of absent infrastructures and futures foreclosed – that one can begin
to appraise the veritable significance of Abdul’s relationship with Right to Dream, and the promise he makes to Tom – a promise that ultimately safeguards his entry into the academy’s highly-privileged program of life, and one of the most sought-after ‘opportunities’ in West Africa today. Note too the derivation of this relationship: Abdul’s very presence at the academy is a striking commendation of his individual ability to outperform the hordes of male youth who attended the same fiercely competitive ‘justify’ as him, with subsequent invitations to attend a residential trial at the academy, coupled with his scholarship offer, serving only to affirm and reward his singular and independent commitment to his craft. That 12 year-old Abdul then departed the domestic homestead to continue his development within the ‘total’ institution of the academy only accentuates this process, with its isolated geographical location and effective insulation from the outside world creating a distancing effect between Abdul as academy boy and the cultural coordinates from whence he came. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Abdul hinted at the progressive effects of his dislocation from family, and the sacrifices he was willing to make to succeed, during an evening conversation in the Obama library:

“When I first came here, every day I thought about them. But now, I don’t even care. They sometimes call to talk with me but I don’t want to put them in my mind because I am here now and I want to leave Right to Dream very fast and I have to go for it. What I mean is not to forget my family but if I think about them, it will not be helping me to work well’.

In harmony with the academy’s institutional tagline of ‘make it happen’, Abdul personifies neoliberal ideologies of the entrepreneurial self-subject who is relentlessly committed to the realization of a reinvented future self – one which, as he steadfastly affirms, will one day graduate beyond the academy for pastures new. What impact, I ask then, will Abdul’s effective dislocation from family, culture and community have had upon his future aspirations and intentionality as a purported ‘role model’ for this emergent Africa? ‘He who performs best shall prosper’, the academy appear to be saying, ‘and in this way shall develop into a future leader for Africa’. But, the question that must then be asked of Right to Dream’s development mission is ‘how’ – where is the discernible correlation between its reinventive yet deeply individualistic program of life and the coming of an emergent but as yet unknown conception of African futures? And how does the cultivation of an elite, hand-picked cohort of ‘talented’ male youth footballers translate into the social and material development of West African communities? I ask such questions knowing that from the moment he accepted his five-year scholarship at Right to Dream, Abdul embarked
on a development trajectory that was wholly contingent upon the production of his own ‘individual spatial mobility’, and which catapulted him into a hyper-competitive yet collegial brotherhood of sorts. Akin to the observations of Piot (2010: 161) on the ‘NGO revolution’ more broadly, I wish to draw attention to the politics of this surrogate brotherhood; one whose constitution is derived from Right to Dream’s elite model of development, and its extraction of West Africa’s most ‘talented’ male youth from their local attachments to family, kin and community.

In thus extracting ‘individuals’ deemed worthy of development, Right to Dream have enacted a process that not only destabilizes existing community hierarchies and their intergenerational balance, but which is supplementing such local attachments with ‘new dependency relations’ – relations that conjoin the dreams of Africa’s marginalized youth with the external directives of Euro-American development agencies. It is these ‘new’ development agencies that Piot (2010: 135) argues have ‘become the new sovereign’ for Africa, with their ‘distant international agendas’ replacing not just the ‘hollowed out’ (Clapham, 1996) African state, but in many cases the African parent too. I return here to the case of twelve year-old Abdul, whose recruitment by Right to Dream, and his subsequent relationship with its founder, Tom Vernon, offers a striking illustration of this shift from local to translocal forms of dependency, and the ‘new’ processes of surrogation that have since followed. Yet, the veritable magnitude of such processes are discernible not in the localized relations of the academy itself, but in its extraterritorial, ostensibly global connections to all those who have transcended its program of life – their trajectories thereafter vividly manifest on the giant, wall-sized map of the world that hangs at the entrance to the academy’s ‘school side’. Questions concerning the ‘impact’ of Right to Dream’s model of development are thus directed towards this vast network of ‘academy boys’ that are now dotted across the European and North American continents, with twenty-four graduates having signed professional football contracts, and over forty others furthering their education on student-athlete scholarships at colleges and universities in North America and the United Kingdom.

‘All our graduates are part of the Right to Dream family… part of a common cause to claim a better future for Africa’, assert the academy of their expanding pool of graduates on both sides of the Atlantic: its constitution markedly split between ‘the professionals’ – predominantly located across Europe – and ‘the geek recruits’, who depart the academy as
young as fifteen years old, acquiring the guardianship of a satellite family in North America as they commence their high school education. The veritable ‘impact’ of such vastly different pathways was vibrantly apparent during the academy’s annual ‘graduate game’, an event that saw a collection of former ‘academy boys’ spend a few days amongst the current cohort. Whilst the on-field action served as a joyous and jovial homecoming for the academy’s ever-expanding brotherhood, it too offered a window onto the privileged life-worlds into which they enter beyond its enclosed confines – worlds which, in the case of those recruited to North American colleges and universities, push the academy boy ever further away from his former attachments to family, community and even continent:

27 May 2012. The dining hall is a hive of activity this morning as the boys welcome three of the graduates back ‘home’ – two of whom are visiting during a break from their studies at universities on the East Coast of America, and the third from Sweden, where he holds a professional contract. There is an unusually high level of excitement reverberating around the breakfast tables, as old friends embrace, and the current cohort stare attentively at the graduates as they field questions about the professional life, give advice on what it takes to ‘make it’, and recount stories of their travails elsewhere. Taking a seat next to me is CK – an eccentric graduate in his early twenties who graduated with the very first generation at the academy. Introducing himself with a confident handshake, it’s immediately apparent that his time on the East Coast of America has had a profound impact on all elements of his being; with his Americanized accent, piercing wit and refined fashion sense particularly striking when contrasted with the sheltered uniformity of the academy, and its disciplined program of life. ‘Oh man… you gotta’ remember that I moved to the [United] States a long time ago’, he reasoned as I sarcastically inquired as to where he misplaced his Ghanaian accent. As spoons clunked and porridge bowls were emptied, we discussed our respective adjustments to life in North America, with CK noting the shock of adapting to the alien food culture and his ‘new family over there’ – a reference to the family which served as his guardians when he first arrived as a teenager to begin high school.

Talk of initial challenges soon gave way to sharp-witted ‘banter’ as he divulged details of the modest celebrity status that his footballing ability and African roots have earned him during his two-year athletic scholarship at university. Most intriguing, however, is CK’s admitted passion for the fashion industry: he excitedly speaks of his upcoming summer internship at a fashion outlet in New York City, an ‘opportunity’ that seems particularly
unfathomable at a table populated by the adolescent expressions of the academy’s youngest
recruits. Indeed, as CK fluently narrates a life-world that is now thoroughly anchored in
the cultural throes of contemporary America, I can’t help but ponder the alternative
trajectory that might have befallen a boy who grew up amidst the same impoverished
surroundings as twelve year-old Abdul sat attentively next to him. What if, on that most
important of days, CK had missed the tro-tro destined for the Right to Dream ‘justify’ in
his local village, or if he simply had an ‘off day’ and failed to impress the deeply subjective
standards of the coaching staff. Would he have simply continued his progression in life
oblivious to the parallel existence in which he would become a footballing celebrity at a
prestigious American university, have strolled along the fashion boutiques that line Times
Square in New York’s bustling metropolis, and achieved an honours degree before the age
of twenty-three?

Looking around at the current generation of academy boys, I struggle to imagine CK at the
same age – a feeling which owes to the depth of his transformation within the all-
encompassing culture of North America. Indeed, taken together, the absence of any
detectible Ghanaian lilt in his deep voice, the sweetwise swagger, and the polished
repertoire of African-American cultural idioms create a sense of dislocation from the
academy boys sitting around him – their closed life-worlds defined by the finite spatiality
of the academy campus and its isolated locale amidst the dense greenery of Eastern Ghana.
Unexpectedly, CK confirmed as much in the moments that followed as we traded our
thoughts on settling in North America, and I directly inquired as to whether he had any
plans to return to Ghana: ‘maybe one day… but I’m pretty happy over there. I’ve been
there for some time now you know so I don’t know. We’ll see what happens… where I
meet a girl, that’ll be the issue!’

What thus becomes of those who graduate beyond the confines of the academy? This is the
pivotal question on which Right to Dream’s development model hinges – for theirs is a
model that is purportedly realized in and through the future actions of the reinvented
‘academy boy’ and his imminent emergence as a leader of domestic-led development. Put
otherwise, as Abdul’s peculiar promise to build schools and hospitals laid bare, the
development footprint of the academy program is contingent upon the future capacity and
inclination of its graduates to ‘give back’ to the communities from whence they came, and
to serve as ‘role models’ in the pursuit of a more morally-just and democratic continent. Conversely, what CK brings into sharp focus in the above interaction is the broader political ecology of Right to Dream’s transnational web of relations – a web that, ultimately, expedites the foreign flight of the academy’s most promising young graduates; concluding a process that hinged, from its inception, on a highly individualized conception of opportunity and development. CK is, therefore, the live product of a development model that disrupted his localized attachments to family, kin and community, and which encouraged him – perhaps even implored him – to pursue his own right to dream beyond the borders of Africa. Thus, while the statistics are undeniably laudable and individual futures bright, critical questions remain as to the veritable correlation between Right to Dream’s graduate pathways and the ambitious development directives they espouse.

‘Hope’, as Coalter (2013: 174) recently reminded us, ‘is not a plan’ for sustainable development, the message thus being that the foreign exodus of Right to Dream’s most promising young graduates represents a major impediment to any claim of domestic development, let alone their much-heralded ‘impact’ as the drivers of an unknown African future.

A decade on from his academy departure, CK’s relative disengagement from his development ‘responsibilities’ thus symbolizes the fault-lines of a model that largely fails to appreciate the intoxicating allure and transformational imprint of American cultural life on the graduate academy boy and his future desire to ‘give back’, let alone return ‘home’. If anything, therefore, Right to Dream’s investment in CK’s athletic and educational tutelage can be said to have granted him the individual ‘right’ to transcendence, pushing him beyond the abjection of Africa and towards a surrogate form of membership in an affluent, middle class African (American) diaspora. Yet, in bringing this brief excursus to a close, I want to return to the opening dialogue between Abdul and Tom, for this was a moment that coincided with the instituting of the ‘character development program’ at the academy and an organic attempt to re-order the responsibilities that befall a graduating academy boy. At the crux of this reordering was the addition of the final character trait of ‘giving back’ – the master trait that academy founder, Tom, hopes will become the ultimate expression of character in current academy boys such as Abdul, Clinton and Modibo, each of whom are granted not just the right to dream beyond Africa, but the responsibility to develop the communities from whence they came. Only time will tell of the veritable impact of this ‘experiment in what can be done to the self’ (Goffman, 1961), but if the
following sentiments of academy vice-captain, Clinton, are a barometer of the academy’s next generation of ‘role models’, Right to Dream may yet grow into a development organization of more extended social worth: ‘even if I do become a professional in Europe, I will return. I will come back to Ghana to help the people who are here trying to go to school. It’s not all people that are the same in the world. Some people have one leg, some are blind, so I want to help the people who did not have the same opportunity as me’.
CHAPTER 7:
CONCLUSION

‘By jumping on the “today is new and different” bandwagon, scholars risk being taken in by the ideology of the moment’, wrote Charles Piot (2010: 13) in the introduction to Nostalgia for the Future, his much-revered work on West Africa after the Cold War. Ultimately, in the absence of decisive evidence either way, Piot (2010) concludes with a wager on ‘rupture’ – hanging his intellectual hat on an argument that a ‘threshold has been crossed’ in a world now gripped by volatile and increasingly global regimes of neoliberal capitalism, and the ever-more violent mobilizations that oppose its Western-led offensive. Drawing from the ethnographic and experiential ‘journey’ narrated in this dissertation, I too can be said to wager on a sense that the political-economic terrain of West Africa today is qualitatively different from anything that came before. That said, I settle on such a verdict only with the caveat that it does not preclude an appreciation of the historical and cultural continuities that have persisted during these turbulent, transitional times.

The postcolonial subject of today, after all, finds themselves at an unfamiliar crossroads – their everyday life-world now peculiarly balanced between the abject realities of a neoliberal present, the eroding cultural imprints of a colonial past, and the impulsive summoning of a still unknown, partly imagined future. ‘The neoliberal generation’, to borrow from Matlon (2011: 384), find themselves situated in a time that is best known not only for its proliferating global connections (Tsing, 2004), but for its contradictions, its paradoxes, and its production of ‘crises’. And yet, as I have sought to illuminate throughout, it is a time most coherently appraised through the changing politics of membership; both as an individual assertion towards belonging and value in a culturally-connected ‘world society’, and as a national – perhaps even, as Ferguson (2006) motions, a continental or African – plea for political and economic inclusion in the unfolding drama of neoliberal globalization, and the richly capitalist promise it so fervently implies. For the latter, and here I speak of state-governed nations such as Ghana, the postcolonial moment has manifest as an opportunity to capitalize on the feverish market demand for natural resources, throwing open the gates for foreign investment, resource extraction, and, in the short term at least, an economy ‘booming’ under the flow of petrodollars, biofuels, and in some cases, even ‘blood diamonds’. Contrasting sharply with the flow and mobility of such
‘raw’ commodity-forms has been the abrasive and obstructive friction encountered by Ghana’s male youth citizenry: it is they, I contend, who have felt the most ‘brutal’ (Mbembe, cited in Shipley, 2010: 659) effects of these neoliberal times – of being tentatively drawn towards a consumptive-oriented interface with global popular cultures, yet abruptly and agonizingly pushed to the outer margins of family, community and kin. In both their marginal standing and millennial hope, then, the male youth citizenry depicted across the full trajectory of this dissertation serve as something of a metonym for the alternative socio-spatial realities of Ghana’s – and indeed Africa’s – broader claim to membership in the neoliberal world order.

Standing now at the endpoint of the ethnographic journey represented, I want to conclude this thesis by revisiting – and retrospectively expanding – a point made by Mbembe (cited in Shipley, 2010: 660) in the introduction. Appraising the landscape of West Africa today, Mbembe argued that capitalism in its neoliberal guise had altered – even ‘radicalized’ – the ‘dialectics of expendability’ such that ‘many people are no longer indispensable specimens’. Today, he asserts, ‘capitalism, in its present form, might need the territories they inhabit, their natural resources… But it doesn’t need them as persons’ (ibid). It is against this backdrop that Mbembe delivers his verdict – worthy of inclusion in full form – on the ‘choice’ that has befallen the postcolonial subject of today:

‘Not long ago, the drama was to be exploited and the horizon of liberation consisted in freeing oneself from exploitation. Today, the tragedy is not to be exploited but to be utterly deprived of the basic means to move, to partake of the general distribution of things and resources necessary to produce a semblance of life. The tragedy is not to be able to escape the traps of temporariness’ (cited in Shipley, 2010; 660)

Herein lies a troubling angle of vision onto the larger lessons of this ethnographic project – one which has illuminated the precarity not just of youth in its masculine guise, but of a West African populace collectively deprived of the right and opportunity to ‘be productive’, even in the exploitative sense that once proliferated under colonial regimes. For many Ghanaians, as I have sought to unpack, the contemporary moment has been experienced as but the latest chapter in a perpetuating story of hardship, its multiple privations laying bare the asymmetrical politics of their shifting yet ultimately marginal membership in a world purportedly gripped by globalizing processes (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012). As Ferguson (1999, 2006) helps us understand, the contemporary West
African other is no longer simply definable as excluded from an unknown world beyond their borders; rather, as his concept of abjection denotes, today’s experience is one of disconnection – of being ‘thrown aside, expelled, and discarded’ from the possibility of reaching a global, largely mediated world to which one already feels affectively attached. The boys of Ghana’s neoliberal generation embody this sense of abjection – their daily consumptive practices having edged them ever-closer to worlds elsewhere at the same time as they struggle to overcome the debilitating stasis of unemployment, and their marginal standing amidst the family and community milieus. Theirs, therefore, is an experience troublingly captured by Ferguson’s (1999: 236) avowal of abjection as ‘not just being thrown out but being thrown down – thus expulsion but also debasement and humiliation’. Robbed even of the status once accorded by the patriarchal contouring’s of masculinity alone, Ghana’s male youth citizenry are now confronted with the ‘choice’ articulated by Mbembe (cited in Shipley, 2010) above – one which oscillates between a sad and paltry existence minus the ‘basic means’ to membership, or a life-course paved by a ceaseless and exploitation-ridden quest to escape the so-called ‘traps of temporariness’.

This dissertation, then, has been an ethnography of the latter ‘choice’ as it intersects with the shifting meaning and structure of football on the West African postcolony – their coming together generating the millennial impetus for the lived journeys at the crux of my analytic purview in the preceding chapters. Yet, as I have signposted throughout, this was never intended as a neatly-bounded ethnography of football, youth or indeed of West Africa alone; rather, it has endeavored from the outset to bring forth an alternative vantage point onto the broader politics of what it means to be in or of West Africa in this contemporary moment. Further still, it is an ethnography which aspired to elucidate something profoundly mundane about what it means to ‘be connected’ in a world now renowned for its highly uneven, blatantly unequal spatial patterning. What would we see, I forcefully motioned, if we looked onto this ‘global moment’ from the vantage point of a youth citizenry ensnared by the destructive doubling of their West African situ, and the generational ‘crisis’ that now proliferates therein? Organically grounded in an ethnographic and experiential mode of inquiry, I then sought to reconstruct and represent – both in concrete and conceptual terms – a nuanced depiction of this moment as experienced and understood by Ghana’s emergent mass of male youth footballers, and the broader entrepreneurial matrix of the game in West Africa.
One could have traced any number of connections between such youthful investment in the game and the broader political and economic architecture of West Africa: the rise of neoliberal economic policies and their implementation by a Ghanaian state beholden to the commands of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund; the politics of masculinity and marginality in a rapidly urbanizing African postcolony; the erosion of traditional gender roles in the domestic African homestead; proliferating extractive economies traceable through commodity chains out of West Africa; and the re-invigoration of development praxis through an ‘NGO revolution’ (Piot, 2010: 139). Across each of the preceding chapters, I have traced and interrogated – admittedly with varying degrees of depth and vigor – each of the themes articulated here; my objective in each standalone ‘part’ being to illuminate how the lived experiences of West African male youth are contoured by, and intersect with, some of the most profound social scientific dilemmas and puzzles facing academics today. The result, I contend, is less a seamlessly interwoven, neatly theorized offering in the meta-narrated and abstracted mold, than an ethnographic narrative that remains unapologetically true to the contingent, crises-ridden context from whence it came – spawning as many fresh dilemmas as that which it can be said to elucidate. In the midst of doing so, however, I avow that we have gained considerable purchase on an array of key substantive and theoretical debates in the social sciences – insights that speak across and extend inter-disciplinary divides that all too often remain unabridged. I conclude this project now by scaling back out from the lived minutiae and social dilemmas pursued in each of the chapters, and by sketching in broader strokes what we might learn from the intersections of such canonical themes along the full trajectory of this ethnographic journey.

In echoing the opening sentiments of Big Bro, I want to open my concluding passage by affirming the substantive import of football as the richly situated and organic ‘lens’ through which my intellectual project has been grounded. Despite its relative neglect in the anthropology and sociology of Africa and youth, ‘the game’ as Big Bro often declared of it has proffered a critically incisive angle of vision onto both the everyday politics of youth on the urban postcolony, and the broader architecture of Africa’s ‘place’ within a neoliberal world order. After all, there are few more mundanely symbolic sights than a West African boy clad in a sham replica shirt of Chelsea FC and furnished with a tattered old football at his feet. In many ways, it is irresistibly tempting to define such imagery through the intersecting lens of neoliberal globalization, (post)modernity, and capitalism, yet its
complex signification brings myriad other facets of West African life to the fore. That said, however, such imagery has long been overlooked in prominent – and by all accounts comprehensive – African commentaries by Piot (2010), Matlon (2012) and Comaroff and Comaroff (2005); each of which collectively allude to the visibility of football as a cultural form in the African contexts they respectively address, yet seemingly decide that it falls short of the more ‘serious’ life-forms they go on to analyze. This dissertation, then, serves as both a riposte to the trivializing of football as a social arena of everyday life, and a remedy to the still inchoate knowledge of sport generally within the social scientific appraisal of Africa today. As the ethnographic journey narrated here has shown, there are few social practices which reach as durably and deeply across the global landscape as that of football – at one and the same time the ‘peoples game’ and a vast and expansive form of global popular culture.

Crucially, however, my argument – to retrace it in its interrogative form – is that the meaning and import of football today serves to reflect, arguably even predicts, the unfolding history and politics of the African postcolony. As affirmed in Chapters 3 and 4, the import and construction of football in West Africa has been transformed amidst the broader throes of neoliberal globalization, and its debilitating consequences for Ghana’s ever-swelling youth populace. As such, whatever else it may be perceived to represent, whatever political or economic ends it may serve, the game of football proffers a window onto the contemporary landscape of West Africa at large – a landscape which, as I have endeavored to illuminate throughout, is being recast and even transformed amidst the volatile restructuring and response to these ‘neoliberal times’ (Mains, 2007: 659). In the broader purview of my intellectual project, therefore, the game has served to provide a contextually-grounded vantage point onto some of the most profound dilemmas, questions and problems confronting social scientific research today. I now want to bookend this project by offering some final words on but a few of the most prominent themes that have emerged across this ethnographic journey.

Arguably the most prominent has been that of the relationship between youth, masculinity and the game of football on the urban postcolony. For a generation deprived of the opportunity to participate in the prosperous narrative of an Africa ‘rising’, and now excluded from the full rights and responsibilities of domestic adulthood (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005), the game has acquired novel, perhaps unrivalled, import. It has, as the
ethnographic fragments of Chapter 3 established, become synonymous with emergent forms of masculine sociality amidst Accra’s urban peripheries, providing an idle, unemployed male youth populace with an alternative resource through which to offset their failed domestic roles as providers (Lindsay, 2003; Matlon, 2011). The growing import of the game is, therefore, directly correlated with, and to some extent even a response to, the purported ‘crisis’ that male youth are now forced to confront – its debilitating effects leaving a generation without the traditional avenues of masculine affirmation (Diouf, 2003; Langevang and Gough, 2009). My argument, ultimately, is that the game serves as an archetypal borderland practice – it’s exclusively masculine vernacular and global connotations constructed as a fundamental feature of a redemptive, albeit consumptive-based identity. In conclusion, then, I argue that the game of football – both as a mediated form of popular culture and a sensuously social and physical practice – thus serves to illuminate shifting notions of neoliberal (be)longing in Ghana, with an excluded male youth populace now bypassing their marginal membership ‘at home’ in search of affirming masculinities in the cultural footprint and extra-local revere of the African diaspora.

Yet, in pointing more expressly to the theoretical construct of the borderland, it must be acknowledged that the game’s allure resides more forcefully in the millennial possibilities it symbolizes for social mobility and even transcendence. As I sought to unpack throughout, the borderland is a concept that is helpful for thinking through the often unspoken relationship between marginal modes of being-in-the-world and the highly productive, even pioneering effects that such marginality can engender. Borderlands allow us to paint a more nuanced and complex picture of the ways in which West Africa’s male youth citizenry – as with its peoples more broadly – harness and recycle any and all available resources in the quest to produce a ‘semblance of life’ on the margins of the modern world. It is, I contend, a most apt concept through which to interrogate the predicament of male youth in postcolonial Ghana; allowing us to apprehend something of the all-too-real privations that contour what it means to be in or of West Africa in the contemporary moment without romanticizing the debilitating effects of what it means to come-of-age under a perpetual state of crisis. In speaking to the broader promise of what is ultimately a grounded-theoretical concept, I avow that it holds much potential as a curative analytic conduit for the ‘agency-centred paradigm of childhood studies’ (Bordonaro (2012: 414), and its ‘mantra-like’ (Jeffrey, 2012: 245) portrayal of young people as naturally and unequivocally ‘agentic’. Contrary to such sanguine – even simplistic – notions of agency
as some natural inner property or capacity, the concept of the borderland, and the case of Ghana’s male youth citizenry, motion us to appraise the situational dilemmas and contradictions of the neoliberal landscape – only then deciphering from the empirical cues encountered how the micro-politics of agency are produced, contested and struggled over.

It is a concept that notably attempts to circumvent the existing fallacies of much writing on youth by disrupting the moralizing ideals which all too often construct agency through heroic, morally righteous acts of resistance, resourcefulness and resilience – its expression all too often welded to articulations, further still celebrations, of the morally positive and appropriate behaviors of children and young people (Bordonaro, 2012; Durham, 2008; Jeffrey, 2012; Klocker, 2007). The borderland, alternatively, has provided a prismatic lens onto the everyday life-worlds of a youth citizenry compelled to overcome the gendered and generational crises that are said to have foreclosed their aspirations of future. Equally, however, in line with the scholarship of Piot (2010) and Weiss (2009), it is a conceptual resource for thinking through the complex machinations of how people seek to forge something approaching such a future through fractured, crises-ridden contexts such as that of West Africa today. In this sense, I have sought to bring forth a reality-congruent concept which not only offers an insight onto the multiple exclusions that have rendered Ghana’s male youth citizenry ‘abject’, but equally motions for a recognition of the profound sense of hope and potentiality – even blind faith – that spawns regardless. ‘Hope’ here, to borrow from Tsing (2004: 267) is something of ‘Gramscian optimism of the will’, and I contend that there are few cultural vehicles in Western Africa more optimistically-imbued than the game of football. To reiterate my in-text conclusion, the game has not only become a prominent resource of masculine sociality, but a most millenarian vehicle through which to bypass the neglectful neoliberal state and overcome the perpetuating crisis of youth in its West African and masculine guise.

In bringing such intersecting themes of youth, football and the politics of agency to a point of conclusion, it is however necessary to reaffirm that such millennial constructions of the game are not the exclusive provenance of male youth alone. Rather, as Chapter 5 in particular explored, the game of football has become a vehicle of opportunity for a burgeoning troupe of entrepreneurs – including ‘African agents’, local ‘Big Men’, scouts and coaches (Darby, 2010; Thompson and Armstrong, 2010). They too are borderland figures, and their appropriation of the game is similarly grounded in an individual quest for
social mobility, material betterment and self-affirmation. Here, then, a relational dependency transpires between male youth footballers eager to progress through the many ‘chokepoints’ that structure the domestic game, and the aforementioned entrepreneurial gatekeepers who purport to hold the key to such progression. What unfolds might be likened to a calculated game of risk, with agency here revealing itself to be situationally contingent and opaque; its differential spoils there to be garnered, shared and even stolen amidst the reciprocal bonds and hustle of a football industry now bristling with the fantasy talk of European contracts, imminent transfer dealings and capital gains. To appraise such relations from the vantage point of an aspiring young footballer, an African agent, or an academy scout would be to uncover the relational politics of agency as it is conceived and sought after by an antagonistic matrix of actors – each seeking to maximize their investments in the game, even if it means the relative dispossession or exploitation of another. Herein lies the veritably disordered character of agency amidst the commodifying logics and accumulative competition of these neoliberal times in Ghana as elsewhere, its differentials of power oft gleaned in acts of atrocity, ingenuity and immorality.

However, in returning to Mbembe’s (cited in Shipley, 2010) observations once more, the commodifying processes I detailed in the preceding chapters should serve as a warning that Ghana’s male youth footballers – in their eagerness to escape the so-called ‘traps of temporariness’ – are now willing to accept any offer, even an overtly exploitative one, so long as it affords the modicum of progression and the continuation of their journey in the game. Concerns surrounding youth welfare must be raised, therefore, in a context rife with reports of ‘rogue’ agents soliciting cash payments in return for trials that never transpire, of fraudulent academies skimming profits from youthful aspirants, and rumoring of youth trafficking networks leading through North Africa and onwards across the Mediterranean into Spain. At the very least, what can be said with certainty is that the structure and functioning of football in Ghana is now thoroughly imbued with the ethos of talent production and foreign export. Once again, it seems, if the watchwords of Ghana’s neoliberal restructuring can be said to be foreign financing and export trade, then the game of football is ahead of the curve – its political economic landscape now dominated by the influx of foreign-owned football academies, a proliferation of expatriate agents, and a domestic football structure unmistakably imbued by the directives of systematic talent production and export. My concern as expressed in Chapter 5 lies with the ever-mounting evidence that Ghana’s football industry – as with those that coalesce around gold,
diamonds, cocoa and oil – has thoroughly acquiesced to the rapacious extractive agendas of Europe’s lucrative football economies and their search for ever cheaper sources of athletic talent. Here too, I conclude, football serves as a metonym for Ferguson’s (2006: 11) observation that Africa’s ‘place’ in the neoliberal world holds little ‘progression’ from its former colonial role as a mere ‘provider of raw materials’ – the troubling reality now being that such commodification, and its attendant exploitation, has become an aspiration for a generation of male youth footballers in what is rapidly becoming an era of exodus.

There is a certain irony, therefore, that I feel compelled to close this ethnographic project by shedding light on the parallel yet utterly paradoxical championing of youth – and as an appended vehicle, the game of football – as the latest ‘solution’ to Africa’s development impasse. As the expansive narrations of Chapter 6 unpack, the neoliberal moment in Ghana has seen a blurring of lines between the aggressive pursuit of economic growth and the now secondary concern of social development – an unlikely coupling now wed through the part-philanthropic, part-public relations mandate of corporate social responsibility. Reflecting the broader aegis of the development moment in West Africa, youth are now hailed as the custodians of the continent’s future, with the discursive thrust of western-led agencies espousing commitments to fostering youth empowerment, education and leadership potential (Elyachar, 2005). As an offshoot of this ‘NGO revolution’ (Piot, 2010: 139), a proliferation of football academies have emerged across the West African landscape, with their focused remit on the provision of educational opportunities for youth at once financed by the small grants of international bodies such as the United Nations, and the philanthropic-petrodollars of West Africa’s most prosperous oil corporations. Such, it seems, is the politics of development in its neoliberal guise, where the scaling back of state sovereignties has seen foreign NGO’s step into the breach, often seeking to re-establish basic social provision in areas such as health, hygiene and education (Piot, 2010). Yet, while the case study of the Right to Dream Academy featured in Chapter 6 served – by design – as a noteworthy example of best practice in the intersections of football, youth and development, it nevertheless raised alarm bells concerning the development footprint of this neoliberal moment.

If indeed there could ever be anything approaching a live ‘laboratory of the future’ (Hoffman, 2011: 252) in West Africa, the Right to Dream Academy may be a fruitful and fitting location. Founded by an expatriate philanthropist from Ghana’s colonial motherland
of Great Britain, and financed by some of the world’s most lucrative transnational corporations, it serves to symbolize both the precarity, the peril and potentiality of the neoliberal moment *tout court* – a moment that has starved an entire generation of the opportunity to mature into adulthood at the same time as it has ushered them into consumptive worlds beyond their borders, and ultimately, beyond their reach. In the void left by a disinterested state now stands this Western-led development organization; its elitist and insulated program of life offering a talented few the opportunity to transcend the abject realities that now afflict the communities from whence they come. Youth, here, it would seem, is not only a signifier of exclusion, of immobility, and emasculation, for it is they, we are at once told, who will become the live source and fount of alternative, but as yet unknown futures for West Africa.
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