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Straining: Young Men Working through Waithood in Freetown, Sierra Leone

Brandon Finn and Sophie Oldfield

Abstract: Young men in precarious situations of persistent un(der)employment in post-civil war Freetown, Sierra Leone are depicted in popular and policy debate as “stuck” economically or “dangerous” and prone to violence. In the present paper, by contrast, we draw on young men’s explanations of their work and livelihood struggles as “straining.” We explore the logic of straining, its innovations and demands, and its geography across the city, especially where acts of straining interface with the prohibition and criminalisation of informal trading. We argue that straining innovates and endures because of (not despite) young men’s marginalisation and limited autonomy and power. In this context, young men build forms of provisional agency and enact dynamic forms of waithood, in their strategies to earn a living to try to support their families and to negotiate a transition from youth to manhood. Drawing on this research, we argue for a more complex understanding of young men at work in Freetown, in particular, and of the “youth bulge,” in general, in African cities.

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Keywords: Sierra Leone, Freetown, young people, employment, informal sector

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Rapidly rising levels of urbanisation (Lynch et al. 2013) and limited formal employment opportunities in African cities have forced young men to engage in often oversaturated informal and petty trading on the streets (Chen 2012).¹ This dynamic shapes the ways in which economic development and, more generally, governance and security are understood and enacted in African cities (Sommers 2011). However, powerful and contradictory assumptions frame this reality and the debate on youth, work and the African city. These discussions and the assumptions embedded in popular and policy discussion on the “youth bulge” shape ideas about the practices and places of young men in society. Problematically, the discussions suggest either that young men’s un(der)employment is a threat to society and requires “securitisation” (what Enria [2013: 9] referred to as the “criminalisation of unemployment”), or that their unsuccessful attempts to become “fixers” (what Fuh [2012: 503] described as “agents of positive change”) are causing young men to become “stuck” or “idle” because of their inability to gain meaningful socio-economic mobility (Sommers 2012).

While it is important not to romanticise their efforts and difficulties (Thieme 2013: 391), the development and inclusion of young men through work has not been well served or accurately portrayed by depictions of them as inherently dangerous, lacking in agency, unstable, lost, a threat to society, or even violent (Kaplan 1994; Cruise O’Brien 1996; Abdullah 1998). Diouf’s powerful prose draws our attention to the immense challenges youth in African cities and societies face:

Although they may be considered today’s warriors and actors, constituting essential resources for the construction of the future and for the restoration of identities confiscated in the course of the colonial night, they have lost their place and function at the centre of society and now find themselves at the margins, feared, calumniated and avoided. (Diouf 2005: 230–231)

Diouf asks us to examine and engage with youth agency in order to break with this conceptual cage and its problematic assumptions. Instead, he suggests:

1 The growth of African cities is accompanied by an increase in the number of young people inhabiting them (UN-Habitat 2014). The relationship between youth and work in cities has become more significant because sub-Saharan Africa has the youngest population in the world, with at least 70 per cent of the populations of 39 of the 46 countries in that region being below the age of 30 (Leahy et al. 2007: 87–91).

In these marginal territories or in the clearings left by a state that finds itself obliged to loosen its totalitarian grip and political straitjacket because of economic bankruptcy, African youth have gone about piecing together their own geography and a narrative that attributes to them a new meaning and significance. (Diouf 2005: 231)

The present paper responds, in part, to Diouf's challenge to "piece together" young men's geographies and narratives, their meanings and significance. We focus on Freetown, Sierra Leone, a city in which young men struggle to build livelihoods and make a living in tough economic times, and where the legacy of the civil war, as Diouf suggests above, enduringly frames the past and future.² We argue that because of these limitations and the imperative to strain, young men at work in Freetown enact a form of dynamic "waithood," a term that Honwana (2014: 24) defined as "the period of experimentation, of improvisation and of great creativity as young Africans adopt a range of survival strategies to cope with the daily challenges of their lives."

The alienation of youth has been understood as a critical causal factor behind the advent of the civil war in Sierra Leone between 1991 and 2002, which resulted in the collapse of the country, as soldiers, rebels and various militias carried out mass violence, rapes and looting (Harris 2014). Young men, often known as "rarray boys" (Abdullah 2002), were heavily involved, as were child soldiers. The war culminated in the seizure of national power through a coup led by the 25-year-old Valentine Strasser in 1992. Abdullah (2002) suggested that the rarray boy image categorised young men as uneducated, unemployed and violent, ostracised and marginalised, occupying social, economic, and physical peripheries within the city. Although the concept emerged in Freetown in the 1960s, the characterisation of young men as rarray boys was especially prevalent during the civil war, portraying young men as the perpetrators of many of the war's atrocities (Abdullah 1998, 2002; Ibrahim and Shepler 2011). Abdullah argued that this identity is also indicative of the collective exclusion of young men from respectable middle-class life within Sierra Leone. These collective experiences led to young men's increasing (and often violent) frustration (Harris 2014). Menzel argued explicitly that the denial of "edu-

2 As in many other African countries, Sierra Leone provides a critical context to explore and engage with questions of state power in relation to war, structural adjustment, and post-conflict development. Diouf (2005) alludes here to the state loosening its totalitarian grip on society in countries faced with an expanding youthful population. In the Sierra Leonean context, by contrast, the state has begun asserting more control over access to the streets of Freetown.

cation, jobs and ultimately social-adulthood” from young men played a significant role in the social and economic causes of the civil war, even perpetuating the war itself (Menzel 2011: 107).

It is important to note here that it is the ostracising and distancing of young men within Freetown (and indeed Sierra Leone) that created and perpetuated the characterisation of young men as rarray boys. It is their active economic and social exclusion and marginalisation, rather than their status as youth and the stereotyping of young men as embodying inherent danger and violence that contributed to the civil war.³ While the rarray boy image has faded from post-civil war Freetown, young men continue to be excluded and find it nearly impossible to attain formal and secure work, despite the pressure to earn a living to support families and to negotiate a transition from youth to manhood.

Young men in Freetown describe their work and its challenges – namely, the need and struggle to make ends meet – as “straining.” This is the focus of the present paper: young men straining to construct and improve their social and economic situations. We explore the logic of straining, its innovations and demands, and its geography across the city. A means of social navigation (Vigh 2009), straining innovates and endures because of, not despite, young men’s marginalisation and limited autonomy and power. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted with working men aged between 15 and 35⁴ across various sites of Sierra Leone’s bustling capital city, we examine what straining demands, its spaces of practices, and where and how it meets the city and state, particularly in relation to the prohibition of informal trading. From this discussion we build a thick notion of straining, situated between problematic notions of young men as idle or stuck, violent or passive, and positioned between youth and adulthood (Honwana and de Boeck 2005), demonstrating the ways in which young men build provisional livelihoods.

3 The issues examined and the practices of work drawn here can be framed and understood as performances of masculinity within a society that has tasked its urban youth to be the family breadwinners. While an important topic, this paper does not explore masculinity *per se*; for this subject, see Fuh (2012) and Sommers (2006).

4 We draw on a biological definition of youth, focusing specifically on young men aged between 15 and 35 years as our target research group. Young people in Freetown, however, move fluidly between socially constructed categories of “youthhood” and “adulthood.” The social construction of these categories is critical to the practices explored in the present article.

The Struggle for Work and Place: Waithood in African Cities

The majority of young men in Freetown make a living and navigate their lives between the extremes of “idleness” (Honwana and de Boeck 2005), “being stuck” (Honwana 2014; Fuh 2012), and criminality and violence (Bürge 2011; Menzel 2011; Enria 2013). This is the polemic that frames this debate and our paper, as well as a broader debate on youth and work in African cities. Much of the work performed by youths cannot be neatly categorised into the “employment–unemployment dichotomy.” This is because regular practices of informal underemployment in developing cities are often infrequent and difficult to quantify (Sommers 2010: 322) and these practices often occur in improvised spaces of the city, such as trading in temporary stalls or informally on the streets. Such troubling depictions affect policies on youth development that shape, and too often limit, their inclusion in cities. Sommers (2010: 322) suggested that depictions of the youth bulge incorrectly “inspire unproven assertions about how young people think and act” and include “little data featuring the views of youth themselves.”

To address these shortcomings, Fuh (2012) argued for an improved understanding of the identities of the “overwhelming presence” of young people in African cities in the context of limited economic opportunities. Within this context, youth are perceived as being trapped in a failed liminality, which Fokwang described as a protracted period of unsuccessful attempts at achieving stable and meaningful lives (2008). These are the spaces where young men strain in Freetown, constructing livelihoods in order to build some provisional stability, a set of practices and a status that does not equate with an overly simplistic linear notion of economic upward mobility. Young men attempt to “find [...] a place in a society that apparently does not have one for them” (Fuh 2012: 501), suspended between being youth and adults. Honwana described this suspension as “waithood,” a performance and period of activity in which young people exercise agency in an improvised but constructive way (Honwana 2014). This dynamic notion draws attention to the provisionality and resilience that contextualise everyday life for youth, as well as the blurred spaces and junctures in which improvised agency is performed. As Honwana emphasised:

Waithood, with all its challenges, constitutes also a period of experimentation, of improvisation and of great creativity as young Africans adopt a range of survival strategies to cope with the daily challenges in their lives. They identify, explore and try to maximise

whatever opportunities arise in a constant effort to improve their situation. (2014: 24)

In order to side-step the problem of depictions of young men as stuck, agentless and acquiescent, these approaches emphasise different modes of social and economic agency. Maira and Soep (2005) called this terrain a “youthscape,” a fluid classification of the shifting stages of waithood; a way to understand the everyday actions of the youth that acknowledges the enterprising activities and challenges, the micro-practices of agency and actual everyday experiences of youth that emerge from waithood. Vigh (2009) also built on this notion by showing how people act in difficult situations, using various forms of “tenacious struggle” to get by in their everyday lives. He argued that “social navigation” can be understood as agency, a way to grapple with change and other social forces in order to construct the “socially immediate and the socially imagined” (2009: 425).

We draw on this literature to frame and explore the following question, which is central to this paper: How do young men in Freetown, who are often expected to be the breadwinners of their families, respond to and make a living in the context of waithood?

Situating the Strain

A rich literature on youth and agency has grappled with the above question. Jauregui (2014: 76) drew on the notion of “provisional agency” as “a capability to provide a social good and a temporary means of mobility geared towards a better future.” Understanding this as a concept between “resistance” and “acquiescence” (Jauregui 2014: 76), provisional agency is built in “a transformative mode of ‘can do’ sociality, a means of opening up possibilities through improvisation and creation of something new and effective, which may allow for thriving as well as surviving” (2014: 80). The term “provisional agency” provides a more nuanced lens through which we can read the actions of marginalised youth, especially when mobility is in contravention of the state.

The “hustle economy,” elaborated by Thieme (2013), also helps describe economic opportunism as a mechanism for survival. Thieme (2013: 390) discussed how young people in Mathare, Kenya, face a “protracted liminality” that has resulted in them seeking opportunities in the informal waste economy. The “hustle” undertaken by these young people sees them carve out economic niches through recycling informally as a livelihood strategy. Thieme (2013: 390) described the political significance of this process by arguing: “The *hustle* is an implicit critique of the state’s failings, while ceasing to expect anything from or even ‘see’

it.” Through this analysis, Thieme successfully demonstrated that young people in Mathare find resourceful and opportunistic ways to respond to and fashion their liminality on the margins of society. Similarly, Jeffrey (2010) drew attention to the improvisational and inventive methods of “getting by” in the context of Uttar Pradesh, India. He called these practices “*jugār*,” a Hindi word that roughly translates as “a capacity to ‘fix things’ through bringing together unlike practices or materials in a novel and ingenious manner” (2010: 161). *Jugār* speaks to an improvised sociality that disturbs the binary between the all-powerful state and the powerless. In *Timepass*, Jeffrey (2010) described this sociality as processes that underscore the ways in which people interact with each other and the state, extending beyond dichotomies of power and powerlessness in the performative spaces between resistance and acquiescence.

We draw on this literature on informal trade and livelihoods to document and reflect on the straining that young men go through to earn a living. What are young men’s experiences of “hard work and determination”⁵ (Koroma 2013) in Freetown? How might their stories reflect a provisional agency, a hustle or *jugār* in an attempt to gain socio-economic mobility? How might city policies influence the ways in which young men are able to work and trade? These questions help us engage with and examine the practices through which Diouf (2005) argued young people re-invent themselves while moulding public space. In the discussion below, we turn to young men’s experiences of work to explore the straining and resilience at its heart, and the provisional agency that emerges within this dynamic form of waithood.

Dynamic Waithood: Following Young Men at Work

The streets of Freetown bustle with activity. From the centre of the city at the “Cotton Tree,”⁶ along the main Siaka Stevens Street and its surroundings, people routinely and enterprisingly practise their livelihoods. This paper draws on fieldwork conducted mainly (but not only) on Siaka

5 In a speech in 2013, Sierra Leonean President Koroma stressed that, in order to prosper and to overcome its economic crisis, Sierra Leone needs its young people to employ “hard work, determination, and sincerity.” We return to his proposition in the conclusion of this paper.

6 The Cotton Tree is the tree under which the freed slaves who founded Freetown in 1787 gathered when they came ashore, hence its importance as a symbol of Sierra Leonean national identity.

Stevens Street, focusing exclusively on young men (15–35 years old) involved in various types of work.⁷ In total, 44 interviews were conducted; 37 qualitative interviews were held with young men⁸ and seven other interviews were conducted with policy-makers from institutions such as Sierra Leone’s Youth Commission and the Centre for Coordination of Youth Activities. Research also involved more immersive in-depth interviews with four of the (37) young men interviewed, combined with participant observation, which included accompanying each man through his day, joining him in his work and varied activities. This mixture of qualitative interviews allowed for a rich understanding of the everyday actions and practices conducted by the interviewees.

Each of the 37 young men interviewed spoke of wanting different and better futures and a more secure socio-economic status. However, despite the numerous ways in which they improvise and adapt in an attempt to improve their socio-economic standing, many of the interviewees perform these actions while waiting for better opportunities and jobs. Young men in Freetown bear large responsibilities to themselves and their families; despite the difficult conditions they find themselves in, they are still able to find ways to carry out acts of provisional agency. The word “provisional” sums up their fluid states of waithood; facing uncertain futures, they hope for and seek upward socio-economic mobility within an environment that is not conducive to it. They often drop out of school, rely on and invest in themselves and their businesses, and struggle to emerge as agents who move beyond the provisional; thus, their waithood is nuanced and dynamic.

7 Brandon Finn completed the fieldwork. An essential part of this research involved walking the same route, at approximately the same time, each day, inspired by Sommer’s work on Rwanda (Sommers 2012). This method of qualitative research involved walking along narrow and busy roads until reaching Siaka Stevens Street, becoming familiar with some of the intricacies of the bustling informal economy and meeting many of the men that make up the research sample. This methodology led to participant observation, interviews, and varied invitations to young men’s homes, and other areas of the city.

8 The in-depth interviews and a portion of the participant observation occurred at the following sites: the “junks” second-hand clothes Kabiya Lots Market; observations with the money exchangers close to the central Cotton Tree in Freetown; a sand-mining site in Bessberry Village, on the outskirts of Freetown; and an ablutions area at the Kroo Bay slum.

Beyond “Empty” Time

“I live with fifteen people in my house. That’s why I sell ‘junks,’” says the 22-year-old Ibrahimini.⁹ “I don’t have a job, so I come here. Without me, at home there is no money. I am not comfortable in this house,” he says while reaching for one of the meticulously packed shirts in a hessian bag he unpacks as he sets up his second-hand clothing stall in Kabiya Lots Market. “I am the man in the house; it is my responsibility to support my family.” Ibrahimini mentions that he doesn’t have a job, but a half-job, where he is diligent about setting up his store each day, packing it away in a bag each night before setting it up again the next morning, but earns very little money. He has to pay another man 6,000 leones (USD 1.50) each day to carry his heavy bag of clothes to and from storage. “I can make a sale every day, or none for three days. Usually it is 100,000 leones (USD 25) a week.” Ibrahimini speaks of how he has no credit to start any other business, no “platform to develop.” He dropped out of school because he had no money to pay for it, and plans on returning to school if he can gain the capital to do so. “The money I have is the money I give to my mother so that we can eat.” Ibrahimini discusses his future plans by saying, “If I had more money I would open my own shop, but not in the market here, in a ‘proper’ shop, and then maybe I could also return to school.” He complains that he lacks the “papers” and qualifications to improve his life and that of his family.

In the three days spent with Ibrahimini in the clothing section of Kabiya Lots, time in this market dragged on slowly, with customers passing infrequently through the aisles. Ibrahimini passes the long hours waiting for customers by talking to fellow second-hand clothes sellers, such as Hassan, a 22-year-old with similar experiences to Ibrahimini. “I would like to go back to school,” says Hassan. “I have to sit at the market though, waiting for money to come in. At least here we have friends; we can talk to each other, help each other with money for lunch. If I am sick – I know I can come to my friends.”

Ibrahimini and Hassan enact their waithood by building social ties to the several other second-hand clothes sellers at the market. Beyond waiting for customers, they are constantly moving between the stalls, checking up on each other. Although in direct competition with one another, the “junks” sellers at Kabiya Lots share news as to when and where they might get good deals finding “new” second-hand clothes to sell. On two separate occasions, for instance, those who had made sales successfully shared some of the proceeds with others by buying them

9 Only the first names of young men interviewed have been used in this paper.

lunch. By building networks in these varied ways, they have crafted a longer-term form of stability for themselves and each other. Nonetheless, Ibrahimini describes how seasonal factors often impede his ability to work. The rainy season in Sierra Leone, which lasts from June to September, causes him to miss out on many business opportunities. “When it rains, nobody comes to do shopping for clothes. We have no roof here.” Ibrahimini and the other junks sellers at Kabiya Lots Market have found a way to earn a small living in Freetown but operate within conditions that entrench the provisional nature of their agency.

Another person interviewed whose waitthood takes on a temporal cycle is Ernest, a professional footballer. He is 25 years old and trains with and plays for Dellor Rosa Football Club. “The season lasts from October until February. I train the whole year to prepare for this, but when the season is over the payment [50,000 leones (USD 12) a week] stops. I must wait again.” He spoke of the difficulties associated with his career choice, as his opportunities to gain steady, year-round employment are limited. “I wait for the scouts to come and watch me play. They never really come – so what can we do? We have to keep training – I earn the money now so that we all can eat.” His ability to move beyond a sense of provisional agency is subject to the presence and approval of scouts, despite his committed training and the maximisation of a short football season to support his family.

Waitthood is more than a tired acceptance of social and economic marginalisation. It is not “empty time,” but an opportunity to build social networks, learn new business strategies, and imagine and plan a different future; this conception portrays Freetown’s youth through Vigh’s (2009) social navigation landscape of “tenacious struggle” in a fluid, constrained environment. Importantly, and necessarily, this understanding of Freetown’s youth moves them away from being understood as the “lost generation,” the rarray boys, the docile, violent young men of Sierra Leone’s past and present. A reflection of the limited opportunities available to these young men and their ability to improvise in the face of these constraints reveals the fluid nature and uncertainty of underemployment in Freetown. Enacted by young men who are often tasked with being the breadwinners of their families, it encompasses the innovation and resilience of young men in Freetown who dynamically shift their social, economic, and physical resources around in order to move beyond their provisional agency.

Everyday Straining in Freetown

The interviewees frequently described the process of “getting by” in Freetown as straining. Jeffrey’s (2010) notion of *jugār* speaks of people’s ability to fashion out a livelihood despite their marginal positions within society. The notion of straining contextualises similar livelihoods and practices embarked upon by the young men in Freetown. Straining encompasses the innovation and resourcefulness Jeffrey expresses through *jugār*, but also provides a slightly adapted understanding of the term. It captures the difficulty of the improvisational work that these men undertake in order to eke out a living to support themselves and their families. In other words, straining refers to a type of work that is innovative and opportunistic, but also takes a toll on the people performing it.

Fifteen of the 37 interviewees dropped out of school before graduation, and a further three were still in school. Consequently, these men may have to make long-term sacrifices in an attempt to ensure more immediate socio-economic stability. Interviewees described their everyday actions as variations on straining; the undertaking of innovative, arduous work in order to improve their lives. They strain to get better employment, to go back to school, to support their families. Straining and innovating form a key component of the ways in which young men attempt to gain socio-economic stability, while waiting, hoping, and working to achieve upward mobility.

“We are straining here in Freetown,” says Olucia, a 25-year-old man living in the Kroo Bay slum, close to Siaka Stevens Street. He lives in a tiny house with 14 other people. Olucia has saved enough money to buy 30 jerry cans, which he fills up with water by using one of the few taps in Kroo Bay. He lines up the jerry cans outside the public toilets of the slum and charges people a nominal fee to take them into the toilets with them in order to clean themselves. “I make 10,000 leones [USD 2.50] per week doing this. I am straining, we are all straining to make something small. I cannot sit down and be a man. I must work hard and earn for my family.” Olucia’s micro-enterprise incorporates the innovation inherent in straining as he finds a way to earn money each day despite the immense difficulties he faces living in Kroo Bay. His acts of provisional agency speak of his ability to adapt to a socio-economic setting that has made little, if any, place for him in which to operate. His economic adaptation and opportunism has allowed him to construct a very marginal living in the impoverished Kroo Bay slum.

A small distance away from Kroo Bay slum, in Bathurst Street (running off Siaka Stevens Street), 26-year-old Kolleh works as a waiter in the small Milenta Restaurant, which serves traditional Sierra Leonean

food. Waiting for him while he works, he meticulously unpacks Heineken beer bottles from their packaging, dusts each one off individually, and then packs them into the restaurant's fridge. He explains "I live with 14 other people in my house. Every child tries to help where we can; my father is very old and sick, so I am now the man of the house." Kolleh leaves the interview briefly to attend to a new customer. Back at the table, he continues, "There are no jobs here. What must we do? Someone has to do something." Despite his small salary of 250,000 leones (approximately USD 62) a month working at the restaurant, he feels one of the lucky youth in Freetown and that his current job is "fine, but I must work on trying to change it in the future." Having to support his extended family through his small monthly earnings, Kolleh is unable to save any of this income. "If I had capital I would invest in my studies. I need papers and qualifications so I can start a business and be somebody. For now I work here for small-small money for my family." Like the professional footballer Ernest, Kolleh is hopeful that someone will notice his straining and his discipline. "If I work hard, maybe someone from the outside will see me and give me a new job opportunity." The sum of his straining is provisional, a repetition of actions aimed at one day allowing him the possibility of realising an improved life.

Another group of young men straining to earn a living can be found in Bessberry Village on the outskirts of Freetown. A short walk off the main road that connects Bessberry and Freetown, a group of up to 200 young men informally mine sand. Each day, without motors or paddles, these men arduously move their boats from the river banks at Bessberry to the ocean, using long bamboo sticks to guide their trips. Once they reach the sea, two of the three men dive overboard armed with cut-open jerry cans in search of the sand they sell to large construction companies. They dive up to 10 metres deep to retrieve the sand from the ocean floor and then dump it back on their makeshift boat. They repeat this dive up to 40 times, with a round trip taking approximately four hours.

One sand-miner, Abubaka, explained proudly: "I am the sole breadwinner for my family [and] this sand-mining allows me to earn 80,000 leones [USD 20] a week, which I use to pay for my family's rent, food and also foot the bills of my siblings' schooling." Unlike his younger siblings, Abubaka dropped out of school in form 3 (grade 8) to ensure the rest of his family could survive and become educated. He explains, "I hope one day to become an educator. I do not know if I can manage this. The main thing I lack is support. There are very few opportunities for us here. We are here waiting for help. We are not poor because we do not work hard – we do work hard. We are poor because

we have no skills and no support; we have nothing else that we can do.” Abubaka is innovative, hardworking, and determined to help himself and his family improve their socio-economic standing. He has sacrificed his short-term (at the least) ability to go to school or enrol in a vocational centre in order to support his family and to ensure that his siblings are able to go school. His immediate personal sacrifices may speak of a longer-term agency that extends beyond everyday provisional agency to make a marginal living. He acknowledged as much when he said, “Maybe my brothers or sisters will get into university and be able to make more money than me one day.” In sum, straining in Freetown is an everyday practice for young men at work in the city. The term encapsulates the difficulties of working and earning a living, highlighting the resilience with which such men attempt to do so. The following and final discussion situates the ways in which these livelihood strategies come into contestation with the laws of the state.

The Constraints of Straining

Recent policies enacted by the government recognise but also limit some of the important livelihood strategies in Freetown discussed in this paper. The government’s “Blue Print for Development” (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2014) aims to encourage 2 million (socially and politically) young citizens to become economically active, and to generate 1 million new youth jobs by 2018. The picture of inclusive growth painted in this blueprint belies a set of anxieties linked to the youth bulge as a dangerous driver of societal instability; that is, the tensions that frame this paper. For example, Ngolo Katta, the executive director of the Centre for Coordination of Youth Activities (CCYA) in Freetown, complained of the inactivity of the city’s young people: “We have a massive youth bulge here, basically doing nothing.” Katta’s generalised comments gloss over the details of innovating and straining undertaken by young people – men in this instance – to make a living in very challenging circumstances.

Victor Fornah, the regional coordinator of Sierra Leone’s Youth Commission, was not negative about youth initiatives, but did highlight the limits produced by a lack of funding available to youth development in the country. He suggested that their programmes amount to “small changes, maybe 200 to 300 people can benefit per project. We have good, effective programmes that exist but they can only touch a tiny proportion of the young population.” Alphonso Manley, the youth representative on the Youth Commission Board, agreed that the “intervention by the youth commission has been minimal.” He understood this

problem as reflective of Sierra Leone's dependence on international funders such as the World Bank and UNDP, particularly the ways in which these organisations set the agenda for programmes and their implementation. This echoes the sentiments of Pemunta (2012), who argued that aid continues to be given to Sierra Leone without adequate engagement with the communities it is meant to assist.¹⁰

A lack of funding and ability to implement meaningful policies affecting a large number of the country's youth has meant that youth continue to strain to support themselves and their families. However, many aspects of the exclusionary relationship between the state and young people straining to build livelihoods emanate in particular from Freetown's new bylaws that restrict and regulate certain practices of business within the city.

For example, the Presidential Task Force, Sierra Leone Police, and Sierra Leone Transport Authority have implemented normative "improvements" to Freetown through the municipality's "Operation Waste Management, Improved Road Access and Decongestion" (WID), which came into effect in January 2013 (Enria 2013). WID aims to alter the ways that business is conducted in Freetown and severely restricts the business strategies used by many of its youth. The WID policy includes restrictions placed on street trading in busy areas of Freetown, and also prevents the "dangerous" *okada* (motorbike) riders from accessing important roads and routes within the city. Young people rely heavily on being able to access busy central areas of the city to conduct business. If the presence of the (male) youth in specific parts of Freetown is deemed undesirable by the city's authorities, their already limited opportunities to earn a living are made even slimmer. The "securitisation" of the *okada* drivers (who are overwhelmingly male) in conjunction with the restrictive new business laws within the city actively inhibits socio-economic mobility for the many people that rely on the openness of Freetown's streets for their livelihoods, restricting the ways in which the youth can earn a living.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these regulations are often ignored or avoided. For example, 19-year-old high school student Abu Bakar sells

10 For instance, the British Department for International Development (DFID) has been instrumental in pushing a security-first agenda in Sierra Leone. Denny (2011) argues that, while security should form part of the development, it should be designed alongside economic growth and sound governance. In contrast, the prescriptive security assistance that DFID has offered Sierra Leone pays little attention to the nuances of development, and the realities of everyday life within the country.

plastic “Rail Master” train sets on the side of Siaka Stevens Street in downtown Freetown. “I am selling these trains to make something small to save money for university. I am lucky because my parents pay for my food – all the money I make I can save.” Abu Bakar sits about 10 metres away from a sign that reads “Freetown City Council; No Trading.” “Life is tough,” he says. “Every day the city council comes to try arrest all the street traders on this street. I pick up my goods [4 to 5 small train sets] and run. If they catch me they confiscate my goods and I pay a fine. If I don’t sell here, where will I make money?” Abu Bakar’s straining occurs in contestation with the rules of the state. His difficulty selling the train sets and his contravention of the city’s laws are an implicit critique of Freetown’s WID, its newly implemented city beautification project, an act of economic improvisation that contravenes state policies.

Money-changer Saïid works very close to the iconic Cotton Tree in the centre of Freetown, exchanging foreign and local currencies. He makes commission from trading these currencies with local (travelling) businessmen and the few tourists that visit Freetown in the dry summer months. Business becomes very slow in the rainy months (June–September) because he has no adequate place from which to trade in the city and is limited to trading on the street. He conducts his trade as a hawker, as his business occurs in a space that is not legally permitted in the area. Much like Abu Bakar and his “Rail Master” business, Saïid works in very close proximity to the Freetown City Council’s signs prohibiting trade in the area. However, as he explains, “We [the money-traders] have a good relationship with the police. Our business environment is better than it was before. We have our needs and they have theirs.” He indicates with his hands that some money is paid to the policemen to facilitate this process. He emphasises how important his trade is to his livelihood: “I make 50,000–100,000 leones [USD 12–25] a week with this business. Without me, there is no money for my family. The government ministers don’t come onto the streets to know our problems. They need to come to the grassroots to know how we live.” Saïid is able to blend into the bustling city’s streets while conducting business because his only “product” is money. His innovation requires mobility within and around the city in order to make an income.

Julius, a 26-year-old qualified nurse who now works as a motorbike (*okada*) driver, is an example of someone innovating despite the new city laws. As Enria (2013) explains, *okada* riders are commonly perceived to be former child soldiers from the civil war and are seen as dangerous threats to society at large (Menzel 2011). This perception resonates with Julius’s assessment of his and other *okada* drivers’ purposeful targeting by

the police, which includes confiscating motorbikes (sometimes indefinitely) and tearing down their temporary shelters because they are deemed to be “illegal.” These shelters were erected close to the Siaka Stevens National Stadium and were built by the riders as a place to sleep and shelter. “There is no money in that,” he says of his former nursing profession, “I drive my bike around looking for work. Some days it is good – I can make 25,000 leones [USD 6] a day. We must always be careful of the police though. They banned us from riding our bikes in the central business district.” He stops to point abstractly at the areas where he is no longer legally allowed to earn his living. “They can confiscate your bike for up to one year! I still ride around there sometimes looking for money. Sometimes I take the back roads where the police don’t go.” Julius contravenes the WID laws out of necessity, adapting to the restrictions imposed by it. While *okada* riders seek to earn a living from their transport services, these businesses also play an active role in social and economic development within Sierra Leone (Bürge 2011). As Julius explains, “When I do get business I send some money to my family in eastern Sierra Leone. I sleep on the streets now. The government is trying to show that everyone has jobs; that’s why they want us off the streets – so that nobody knows about us.”

Okada riders are not alone in being pathologised; young men in Freetown in general are seen through this lens. “Ascriptions of roughness and brutality are not exclusively reserved for bike riders; rather, bike riding is but one element of a broad aesthetics of danger, by which ‘dangerous young men,’ suspected to be former fighters, are identified in [...] Sierra Leone’s [...] urban centers” (Menzel 2011: 100). Perceiving young men as “rough” or “brutal,” as agents of instability within society, leads to policies such as WID in Freetown, which attempt to criminalise young men’s work in public spaces and serve to marginalise them further. Moreover, conceptualising young men as “stuck” also strips them of agency and ignores their ability to shape elements of their social and economic surroundings.

In sum, young men’s everyday practices exceed the stereotypes of a “lost generation” or rarray boys, of idle, dangerous youth. Young men in Freetown strain because of their difficult current situation and uncertain futures, a waithood that requires fluid identities and strategies. The practice of straining that is central to these activities is made more difficult when state restrictions prevent young people from enacting important livelihood strategies on the streets of Freetown. Young men’s straining embodies what Enria (2013: 2) calls a “politics of presence,” defined as

“subtle forms of non-compliance” where people’s very presence in a public space, often in contravention of the law, constitutes political acts.

Conclusion

In 2013, President Koroma of Sierra Leone argued that, “it is through hard work, determination, and sincerity that Sierra Leone will prosper” (Koroma 2013). Implicit in this statement is the simplistic assertion that society’s marginalised individuals – in this case, young men – “can simply pull themselves up by their bootstraps” (Jeffrey and Dyson 2013: 1). Yet, young Freetown men are clearly not inactive or idle. Everyday strategies to find work and to make a living demand strain, a result of and response to the challenging socio-economic conditions in which they find themselves. This exploration of provisional forms of agency, evident in everyday practices of straining, moves theorisation of young men away from being inherently stuck. It demonstrates instead that young men adapt to, manipulate and contest their socio-economic setting. Through their everyday acts of straining, they show a capacity to fashion livelihoods in a context that simultaneously limits and demands this type of response.

As Honwana (2008, 2014) suggested, the active creation of dynamic waithood encompasses the ways in which young men enact their everyday livelihood strategies in time and space, between youth and adulthood. Young men in Freetown do this by enacting a provisional agency to attain social and economic goods because of the challenges they face. However, this provisional agency is limited because it is exactly that: provisional. Like “*jugār*” (Jeffrey 2010) and “hustle” (Thieme 2013), straining embodies actions that are improvised and opportunistic, and encompasses work that is essential as a livelihood strategy, but also piecemeal, provisional, and performative (Jauregui 2014). In other words, straining does not guarantee that young men practising it will “prosper” and simply work themselves out of poverty. Given the challenges facing youth in their everyday lives, straining in Freetown cannot be conceived romantically as “getting by.” Moreover, restrictive, normative business conditions on the streets of Freetown make much of the work that young men do officially criminal (Enria 2013), further compounding these challenges. For young men to “prosper” in cities such as Freetown, social and economic leaders and policymakers need to do more than ask them for “hard work and determination.”

In this paper, by highlighting multiple instances of everyday straining, we argue for a more complex understanding of young men at work in Freetown and of the “youth bulge” in general in African cities. The

voices and practices of urban youth – in this case, young Sierra Leonean men – must be taken into account if we are to understand and develop appropriate strategies and policies that include, rather than purposefully exclude, young men in development plans in African cities.

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Unter Strom: junge Männer in Freetown (Sierra Leone) arbeiten sich durch die Wartezeit

Zusammenfassung: Junge Männer in der prekären Lage andauernder Arbeitslosigkeit oder Unterbeschäftigung im Nachkriegs-Sierra-Leone werden in der öffentlichen und politischen Debatte als wirtschaftlich unbeweglich oder als gefährlich und für Gewalt empfänglich dargestellt. Im Gegensatz dazu charakterisieren die Autoren dieses Beitrags die Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen junger Männer in Freetown als *straining* – angespannt. Sie untersuchen die Logik dieser Situation permanenter Anspannung, welche innovativen Ideen die jungen Männer entwickeln, welchen Anforderungen sie ausgesetzt sind und wie ihre Aktivitäten sich innerhalb der Stadt verteilen, insbesondere wenn sie mit Verbot und Kriminalisierung des informellen Handels konfrontiert sind. Die Autoren zeigen auf, dass die Anspannung immer wieder neu entsteht und fort dauert, weil (nicht obwohl) junge Männer marginalisiert sind und nur über eingeschränkte Handlungsautonomie verfügen. In dieser Lage entwickeln sie provisorische Aktivitäten, um die Zeit des Wartens, in der sie sich befinden, auf dynamische Weise zu nutzen. In ihrem Bemühen, den eigenen Lebensunterhalt zu sichern und ihre Familien zu unterstützen, bewältigen sie gleichzeitig den Übergang von Jugendlichen zu Erwachsenen. Die Autoren plädieren für ein differenzierteres Verständnis für die arbeitenden jungen Männer in Freetown, aber auch allgemein für die große Zahl junger Menschen in afrikanischen Städten.

Schlagwörter: Sierra Leone, Freetown, Jugendliche/Junge Menschen, Beschäftigung, Informeller Sektor