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Playing the victim? Human trafficking, African youth, and geographies of structural inequality

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Abstract

This article explores the role of agency in determining who is and is not considered to be a legitimate victim of human trafficking. It draws on critical human trafficking scholarship and research on the life chances of West African youth. This is complemented by qualitative data from youth embroiled in football-related human trafficking. The insights from these analyses are brought into conversation with theoretical work on the geographies of commodities. This results in the concept of “the football trafficking fetish,” which is used to theorise how and why the agency of mobile youthful African male bodies undermines their claims of being trafficked human beings. The findings that emerge are significant in two ways. First, they generate theoretical insights on the coexistence of agency and exploitation in young lives and how young people's aspirations and agency can be (mis)read and work against them. Second, they provide a unique illustration of how human trafficking is a product of capitalism yet can be presented as a form of behaviour that lies outside of capitalist social relations. To centre these social relations and foster new forms of critical dialogue within and beyond population geography, the article concludes by recommending we consider the implications of conceptualising people as susceptible to rather than vulnerable to human trafficking.

KEYWORDS

Africa, agency, development, human trafficking, mobility, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

Reports of human trafficking within the football industry involving male West African youth have attracted academic, political, and media interest since the mid-1990s (Darby, Akindes, & Kirwin, 2007; Donnelly & Petherick, 2004; Esson, 2015a; Guilbert, 2015). Poli (2010a) noted that these accounts typically depict the following two processes. In some cases, after giving funds to an intermediary claiming to have contacts with professional football clubs abroad, a young player does indeed obtain a contract or trial with a club albeit of an exploitative nature. This is known as “human

trafficking in football” (see Edwards, 2015). However, in most cases, the alleged interest from a foreign club is bogus, and the intermediary abandons the player on arrival in a destination country. This is often after taking the player's documentation and money. Once the precarious nature of their situation is realized, the player is often said to be too ashamed to return home. He remains in the destination country illegally without any means of subsistence. This is known as “human trafficking through football” (see Pattinson, 2018). Human trafficking in football and human trafficking through football are often conflated together under the term “football trafficking.”

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Aspects of the migratory processes outlined above appear to comply with understandings of human trafficking as outlined in the United Nations (UN) Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the associated Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (henceforth UN TIP Protocol).¹ A conceptual debate has occurred around whether trafficking through football actually constitutes a legitimate form of human trafficking. This is because, while the aforementioned work on football trafficking has documented how youth are recruited and transported, there is ambiguity around whether exploitation has occurred if the player is abandoned upon arrival (Esson & Drywood, 2018; Poli, 2010a). Furthermore, and importantly for this article, as the excerpt below from award winning investigative sports journalist Ed Hawkins' indicates, there is also a different concern about football trafficking emerging. This concern is tied to scepticism around the legitimacy of the claims made by youth embroiled in football trafficking due to a perceived complicity in their predicament. Hawkins' observations are significant, and alarming, given his expertise on this topic. He dedicated several years to investigating football trafficking and boldly reported concerns about what he saw as inappropriate conduct by leading organisations working in this area (see Hawkins, 2015a). An example of this scepticism linked to complicity is as follows:

Dedecker [a former Member of the European Parliament for Belgium] discovered two Nigerians playing for a pittance at Roeselare FC. Their ages had been falsified to make them younger so the club would not breach transfer rules. Dedecker alleged they had been trafficked but the court found in favour of the club, stating *the boys could not be victims if they had agreed to leave their home country*. In essence, it ruled football trafficking did not exist. (Hawkins, 2015b emphasis added)

In this article, I seek to explore how and why the agency of West African youth, for example, as evidenced by their agreement to leave their home country, is (mis)read in such a way that it undermines their claims of being trafficked human beings. To be clear, my aim is not to determine if the youth in question are being truthful. Instead, I want to explore how conceptualisations of youth agency influence how trafficking is defined and responded to. Through doing so, I aim to extend debates in geography and adjacent fields concerned with understanding human trafficking and contemporary forms of exploitation. These debates are conceptually and empirically diverse covering a range of themes. I therefore situate this article within literature that conceptualises human trafficking and slavery as embedded within structural processes (cf. Kempadoo, 2015; McGrath & Watson, 2018), explores the problematic equation between child trafficking and young people's independent mobility (cf. Beazley, 2015; Boyden & Howard, 2013), and the examines the relationship between human trafficking and border management (cf. FitzGerald, 2016; O'Connell Davidson,

2016). Finally, these explorations also advance research on geographies of children and youth, by examining the coexistence of agency and exploitation in the lives of youth and how their agency can be misrecognised and work against them.

The article is structured as follows. The next section introduces human trafficking scholarship in the themes outlined above and provides an overview of the research design. I then ground football trafficking, involving West African youth, within literature on the structural conditions facing young people in West Africa. This is accompanied by insights from research with young people embroiled in football trafficking. Sections 4 and 5 bring the insights from the early sections together by engaging with geographies of commodities literature to theorise how and why the agency of mobile youthful African male bodies seems to undermine their claims of being trafficked. I do so via the concept of "the football trafficking fetish." It is argued that unveiling the football trafficking fetish—that is, trying to make visible the hidden elements of football trafficking during recruitment, transit, and exploitation—(mis)reads the agency of mobile youthful African male bodies, a (mis)reading that undermines their claims of being trafficked human beings. It also leads to a misrecognition of the geographies of structural inequality that both underpins young people's agency and facilitates human trafficking. To bring these wider social relations to the fore, the article concludes by recommending we supplement current conceptualisations of trafficked human beings as vulnerable to exploitation, with a conceptualisation of susceptibility to exploitation linked to structural violence.

2 | CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON AGENCY IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Questions of agency are fundamental to academic research on irregular migration, including human trafficking. Critical interrogation of how agency is conceived in human trafficking has the potential to advance discussion of young people's agency more broadly, away from concepts of individual choice (as called for in Holloway, Holt, & Mills, 2019). As noted by Salt (2000), human trafficking disrupts normative conceptions of a migrant's agency by blurring the boundaries between forced and voluntary migration, and the degree of choice a migrant is able to exercise. Howard (2018) explains that this disruption is because agency is often presented in capitalist societies as a matter of "choice" in relation to individual control of private property and self-ownership through the lenses of consent, coercion, freedom, and force (see also Doezema, 2002; O'Connell Davidson, 2010). Howard (2018) goes on to note that a person is understood to be "free" when they use their energy and property as they please and "unfree" when they are forced to use their energy or property according to another person's preferences. This means that the "legitimate" exchange of goods or labour is when both parties to the exchange consent to it (capitalist), and it is "illegitimate" when at least one of them does not because of coercion or force. Furthermore, and crucially for understandings of exploitation, it implies that

coercion can only ever be individual, for in a (an a-historical) world of self-owning individuals exercising their right to self-ownership, only a legal or moral person can impinge upon the ability of another to actualise this right... Exchanges that do not correspond to these conditions—in other words, which are subject to individualised force or coercion—are those that lie outside the putative world of capitalism. (Howard, 2018: p. 265-266)

This critical perspective on agency and choice is evident in literature calling for the conceptualisation of human trafficking and slavery as outcomes of capitalist social relations, rather than abnormal discrete incidents that lie outside of capitalism (Goldman, 2002; O'Connell Davidson, 2015). As noted by Blazek, Esson, and Smith (2019), critical human trafficking scholarship has problematised the perspective of trafficked human beings as lacking agency. This scholarship does so by illustrating how these perspectives atomise human trafficking, thereby continuing a trend of depicting cases of human trafficking as “‘exceptions’ rather than ‘products’” (Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016: p. 1) of wider structural inequalities (cf. Howard, 2018; O'Connell Davidson, 2016). In sum, this work encourages analysts to situate the human trafficking process within a wider set of social relations. These wider social relations are crucial when trying to understand how one person is able to exercise and abuse power over another person which, as noted by Anderson (2007), is key to understanding the machinations of human trafficking. This structural understanding of how exploitation can occur is more in keeping with earlier work on violence and power, such as the work of Galtung (even though he did not like the word exploitation). Galtung (1969) noted that violence can be personal, where an identifiable actor commits harm. But there can also be acts of violence that are built into social structures. These may not always be linked directly to individual actors but enacted and felt through forms of hierarchical power relations and unequal life chances.

The call to view human trafficking as embedded within structural process and not external to them is also evident in literature seeking to retheorise relations between borders, migrant agency, and the state. This research shifts analysis away from viewing people as passive objects circulating within migration regimes and trafficking networks and instead adopting migrant subjectivities and agency as the conceptual and empirical starting point (cf. Blazek & Esson, 2019; Plambech, 2014; Skilbrei & Tveit, 2008). This shift in focus has illustrated how understandings of who is and can be constructed as a trafficked human being is nuanced. Because it is a construction that applies more explicitly to women and children who are explicitly mentioned in defining legal texts, such as the UN TIP Protocol (Andrijasevic, 2010). Furthermore, it is a construction that leads to recurring narratives; for example, Andrijasevic and Mai note how

The mythological function of the trafficking narrative and the victim figure are most visible in the fact that the trafficking plot never varies: it starts with

deception, which is followed by coercion into prostitution, moves on to the tragedy of (sexual) slavery and finally finds resolution through the rescue of the victim by the police ... (Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016: p. 4)

There are several issues with this recurring narrative and the identity politics underpinning its social construction of a human trafficking victim. It negates the need for critical engagement with human agency and the social context informing people's mobility and exploitation. It creates stereotypes, which need to be “understood as a form of powerful aesthetic and social constructs that condense complex connotations into fixed images and recurring narratives” (Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016: p. 3). The implications of this for West African youth racialised and gendered as Black men, who are the subject of this article, are that they do not fit the iconic human trafficking victim archetype. Specifically, a White European woman or child trafficked for sex and in need of rescue by law enforcement (Jones, 2010). This archetype is not fixed, and there has been a recent shift towards greater representations of women of colour as victims of exploitation, albeit related to modern slavery rather than human trafficking (see McGrath & Watson, 2019). Furthermore, the recurring narrative highlighted above also diverts attention towards managing time-space(s) within the linear trajectory of recruitment, transit, and exploitation (Smith, 2018). This multistaged model arguably provides the lucidity required within much of the legal and policy milieu of anti-trafficking (Zimmerman, Hossain, & Watts, 2011), but it isolates the sets of relations that constitute human trafficking within discrete spatio-temporal segments (Blazek et al., 2019). A consequence of this is the underestimating or misreading of the significance of structural factors that underpin human trafficking because they are “external” to the areas under scrutiny: acts of recruitment, transportation, and exploitation. I return to this point in the discussion below.

The interrogation of dominant narratives and tropes has also fostered research problematising the equation between child trafficking and the independent mobility of children and youth. Ciapaldi (2015) illustrates how independent youth migration is often portrayed in policy and media accounts as increasing their vulnerability to exploitation (see also Anderson, 2012). Using insights from Southeast Asian contexts, Ciapaldi argues that the default labelling of youth and child migrants as victims of human trafficking is reductive (cf. Beazley, 2015; Huijsmans, 2014; Huijsmans & Baker, 2012). Similar opinions are found in research concerning youth in East and West Africa, where migrant labour involving youth becomes embroiled in policy efforts aimed at combatting child trafficking (cf. Boyden & Howard, 2013; Manzo, 2005). To be clear, this research is not claiming that human trafficking involving young people does not happen in these contexts. But rather that understanding the independent migration of young people solely through the lens of human trafficking is counter-productive. This is because it often results in legal and regulatory policies and practices that miscomprehend the realities of young people's agency and subjectivities. Particularly how spatial mobility is often part of young people's repertoire of strategies to overcome unfavourable structural conditions (Holloway et al., 2019). Yet the

introduction of restrictive immigration policies and tighter border controls by migrant-receiving countries, especially in Europe, is argued to make young people more dependent on forms of transit that increase the likelihood of exploitation and irregular migration (cf. Andersson, 2014; De Haas, 2007).

The analysis within this section has two conceptual implications for the discussion that follows, particularly in Sections 4 and 5. First, it demonstrates that in order to understand how one person is able to exercise and abuse power over another person to facilitate human trafficking, we need to acknowledge the agency of those who might be and are trafficked. This agency needs to be situated within a wider set of social relations and structural conditions. Second, by fixating on the migration-exploitation couplet, origin and destination countries take on particular imaginative geographies in narratives of human trafficking. Geographies whereby destination countries are implicitly positioned as off-limits, whereas origin countries are (re)imagined as locations where a person can and should be returned when they have been removed from their trafficker(s) because they will not be socially disadvantaged. These two points are shown to be particularly salient to the scepticism around some young people's claims of being trafficked through football. They also chime with the treatment of young people in anti-football trafficking approaches adopted by regulatory bodies, such as FIFA, and leading European-based non-governmental organizations, whereby emphasising the relationship between movement and exploitation works to underscore the dangerous consequences of international migration for young people (see Esson & Drywood, 2018).

2.1 | Methodology and methods

The empirical data informing the discussion that follows build on multiple and long-term ethnographic fieldwork among footballers in Ghana between 2011 and 2017 and in Paris (France) between 2011 and 2015. In Ghana, one of the top five origin countries for African football players plying their trade outside the continent, this entailed in-depth and semistructured interviews as well as participant observation in the players' social and sporting environments in Accra. I have attended over 100 training sessions across three case study clubs as well as home and away matches. I have conducted over 200 informal interviews with youth players in order to gain their thoughts on football, life in Ghana, and their migratory aspirations.

The choice to use ethnography and flow into informal conversations rather than conduct formal interviews was appropriate to the relational dynamics of these youth-centred spaces and attentive to the need to minimise power disparities between an adult researcher and young people. Alongside these interviews and observations, I have conducted 40 interviews with club coaches, club owners, district governors, head teachers, representatives from the Ghanaian Football Association, the Ghana League Clubs Association, the Professional Footballers Association of Ghana, Lizzie Sports Complex, and the Right to Dream Football Academy.

Paris was selected as a research site because it provided a way to locate participants who had experienced irregular forms of football migration. This migrant group can be hard to find or gain access to as they comprise "hidden" or "invisible populations" (Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005), due to their association with stigmatised or potentially illegal behaviour, in this case football trafficking. I aimed to overcome this challenge through assistance from the non-governmental organization Culture Foot Solidaire (CFS). Ten one-to-one in-depth interviews alongside participant observation were conducted during 3 consecutive months of fieldwork in 2011 and subsequent short visits in 2014 and 2015 where six follow-up interviews were conducted. Interview participants consisted of Guinean, Ivorian, and Cameroonian youth aged between 16 and 24 who had been involved in irregular football migration.

To complement the one-to-one interviews, I was informed by CFS of an informal football club that acted as a social meeting place for irregular football migrants, which averaged circa 30 players per session. At the end of training sessions, I spoke participants in a focus group format. This provided rich insights on commonalities about their experiences before migration through to the present and their aspirations. This approach has not been possible since 2014 due to organisational challenges at CFS. The interviews and focus groups conducted in Paris took place primarily in French with the support of a native speaker who also helped with transcription accuracy. All interviews and focus groups across the fieldwork sites were analysed using *in vivo* coding to identify categories and trends within the text material and to build themes that connect the empirical findings to broader literature and concepts. It is important to end by noting that the methodology was not designed to trace linear migration pathways between Ghana and Paris. Rather, I sought to examine the "articulation of regions into global processes, thus overcoming another limitation of methodological nationalism and breaking up the national focus of the development and modernization paradigm" (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002: p. 323).

In the next section, I situate the argument that the boys could not be victims if they had agreed to leave their home country within literature on the structural conditions facing young people in West Africa. This is interlaced with insights from research on African football migration more broadly. Through doing so, I seek to briefly show how these young people's agency emerges from and interacts with geographies of uneven development and to draw attention to two interrelated conclusions within existing literature on West African youth and football migration. The first conclusion is that West African youth are well known to partake in strategic forms of agency to improve their life chances, including international migration through football. Second, this agency is bound up in neoliberal understandings of how to become economically secure in precarious times. These conclusions somewhat qualify the argument that young people cannot have been trafficked if they agreed to leave their country of origin, because both point to how neoliberal governance induced structural violence might lead young people to partake in a problematic agreement.

3 | “BARCELONA OR DEATH”: YOUTH AGENCY AND FOOTBALL MIGRATION

West African nations have spent the last three decades implementing neoliberal modes of governance that encourage a range of intermediaries to take on the state's welfare duties. Unfortunately, these reforms have not led to the convergence in living standards between the so-called developed world and developing world promised by modernisation (Escobar, 2011). On the contrary, World Bank (2019) data illustrate that West Africa remains one of the poorest regions in the world in terms of income level. The African Development Bank notes that between 2014 and 2018, West Africa's gross domestic product growth rate of circa 3% trailed the rate for Africa as a whole (African Development Bank, 2018). This macro-level data cannot convey the conditions on the ground, with research highlighting how young people in the region recently have or are still grappling with armed conflict (Vigh, 2006), access to quality education and un (der)employment (Gough, Langevang, & Owusu, 2013), and strained intergenerational relations (Coe, 2012). Consequently, a rich body of literature has emerged documenting the difficulties young people in West Africa encounter when trying to find ways to survive in these difficult circumstances (Honwana, 2012; Utas & Jörgel, 2008). This work seeks to understand how young people experience and interact with broader social forces as opportunities and blockades to their social mobility, while recognising that this agency is relational and will take different forms depending on the spatial and temporal context (cf. Durham, 2000; Martin, Ungruhe, & Häberlein, 2016).

An instructive example of how the agency of West African youth is theorised, and one broadly in keeping with analyses of African football migration, is Vigh's theory of “social navigation” (2009). Put simply, social navigation is an understanding of agency whereby young people seek to negotiate the trajectories of their lives, using a repertoire of tactics, strategies, and sociocultural assets to maximise their social opportunities. One of the strategies that has emerged to navigate the economic uncertainty and precarity in West African contexts is international migration outside of Africa (Carling, 2004; Langevang, 2008; Schapendonk, 2015). This strategy builds on the idea that travelling to Europe, North America, and more recently the Emirates leads to social mobility and reproduces what Kalir (2005) terms a “migratory disposition.” The migratory disposition denotes how people develop the desire to migrate through experiences of socio-economic inequality and expressions of wealth connected to migration. As Ungruhe and Esson (2017: p. 33) note, it is not just that return migrants and the import of various media, commodities, and ideologies from around the world associated with migratory disposition have brought an awareness of consumer culture and lifestyles in parts of the world they deemed more developed. The issue is that this awareness goes hand in hand with a belief that such lifestyles are beyond the reach of most youth if they remain in West Africa. As a result, instead of anticipating the development and transformation of their lives within the region, young people seek ways to migrate to other parts of the world.

A common challenge facing young people within West African contexts, whether aspirant footballers or otherwise, is that although recourse to migration as a strategy for improving one's circumstances and quality of life is widespread, it is also difficult to realise. The “accelerated closure of the West” in the form of tightened immigration rules alluded to above has fostered the perception among youth in West Africa that it is almost impossible to acquire a visa to the regions mentioned above using official channels (Andersson, 2014; Schapendonk, 2015). Carling (2002) conceptualised and termed this disjuncture between the aspiration and ability to migrate as “involuntary immobility.”

In a study on transnational links in relation to football migration between Africa and Europe, Ungruhe (2016; p. 1777) highlighted the popular saying among young aspirant migrants in Senegal, “Barça ou Barzakhe” (“Barcelona or death”). This saying means “getting to Europe or dying on the way in the Mediterranean,” therefore underlining the yearning to migrate. Thus football, rightly or wrongly, is now considered a realistic way to navigate involuntary immobility (van der Meij & Darby, 2017). The extensive global media coverage dedicated to professional, particularly European football, and the cult of stardom attached to footballers in these leagues, is argued to have propagated this narrative (Besnier, Guinness, Hann, & Kovač, 2018; Hann, 2018; Poli, 2010b). In the case of young men in Ghana, for example, I have shown how a local contextualisation of this narrative that a career in football offers young men and boys a path to socially and spatially mobility coalesces with a neoliberal ethos of entrepreneurship and self-reliance (Esson, 2013). The male West African professional footballer who is able to overcome involuntary immobility and migrate outside of Africa and earn a living embodies success.

Male West African youth view the professional footballer as an “entrepreneur of self” (cf. Esson, 2013; Hann, 2018), “being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings” (Foucault, 2008: p. 226). Monetary success through sport is also appealing because it offers the chance for social mobility, which in the eyes of West African youth allows them to throw off the stigmatisation of living at or near the bottom of a global racial hierarchy. Armand, an Ivorian who at 17-years-old was abandoned in Paris by someone claiming to be a licensed agent, used two high profile American athletes to articulate this point:

I played football because I know that if I achieve in that sport, it can open for me a lot of doors that I cannot open if I do a normal job. If you reach a certain status people can say what they want but we are in a world where the money runs things ... Look at Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods, money has abolished the idea that they are black. It doesn't make them white, but they earn so much money that they get respect.

The partiality to this entrepreneurial disposition is cultivated within the context of societies, as noted above, which encourage young people to fend for themselves with little to no support from the state (Besnier et al., 2015; Langevang, 2008; Honwana, 2012).

Furthermore, if youth decide to pursue a football career, they often do so as part of a household livelihood strategy associated with an intergenerational contract (Agergaard & Ungruhe, 2016; van der Meij & Darby, 2017). For although childhood and youth are stages where a person is cared for, a person acquires social and economic responsibilities for family members both young and old when they are recognised as having reached social adulthood (Kabeer, 2000; Ungruhe & Esson, 2017). Coe succinctly articulates this point as follows, "For Ghanaians, like other West Africans, the reward of parenting is the lifelong ties of obligation among those one has raised" (Coe, 2012: p. 105). Achieving a "giver position" is an important feature of masculinity among young West African men (Martin et al., 2016), because manhood is commonly associated with being able to attain a position where you can perform as the head of the household and cater for your (extended) family's well-being.

This desire to use football as a way to generate an income and help their families financially, alongside their family's zeal for them to do so, plays a key role in how one person is able to exercise and abuse power over another person to facilitate football trafficking. For example, even in cases where suspicion about an intermediaries' authenticity has been raised by coaches and staff at a football club, a player's family may still place considerable pressure on them to pay the intermediary whatever is necessary to secure a trial abroad (Esson, 2015b). But it is not just parents who are keen for young players to migrate. Players are a potential source of revenue for West African football clubs from the professional to more informal (Darby, 2013). Crucially, this financial value can only be realized when a player is transferred or sold to another club. This has resulted in intense financial speculation over young players within the football industry more broadly, and West Africa is not exempt from this (Yilmaz, Esson, Darby, Drywood, & Mason, 2018). In fact, the speculation is quite intense. The lowly stature of West African football within the global game results in a limited range of revenue streams. Therefore, despite FIFA regulations restricting the transfer of minor players, club and academy owners are increasingly geared towards the grooming and export of young players to the more lucrative leagues in Europe and Asia (Darby, Esson, & Ungruhe, 2018).

To be clear, club owners and parents want their players to be able to migrate. They do not want them to be exploited and/or trafficked. But the structural logic of a football industry that promotes movement as a prerequisite to financial success merges with the migratory disposition in West Africa, and it is in this context that exploitative and irregular migratory practices are able to occur. The late Jordan Anagblah, former vice President of the Ghanaian Football Association, provided the following example that is worth repeating:

There was a small boy in my team, and the father came and told me somebody is taking him to Belgium. Whether he is going to kill him he doesn't know, but because he has heard football and Europe, he thinks his son will make money and be OK. You don't know these people, you only met them now in Ghana when they came to watch him play, and you say you are

giving your boy out for adoption? Nonsense! But it is his child he says the man wants to adopt his son. What can I do?"

Trusting a stranger as part of an attempt to migrate through football may be considered risky; however, the consequences of this risk can be positive or negative. It is therefore not risk taking itself, but the possible outcomes that are value-laden and that intertwine with expected outcomes. When West African youth and their families weigh up the risks versus rewards of attempting to migrate through football, they invariably opt to take the chance to be mobile when approached by someone offering them the opportunity to play football abroad. It provides an opportunity to overcome the lottery of involuntary immobility. Gerard, who as a 16-year-old ended up in Paris after being trafficked through football, articulated the situation well when he stated.

In Guinea everything is a question of money, but football is a mythical sport. Money plays a part, but with football there is chance which comes from God and also you have to have talent and be able to play, so it is not always the people that have money who succeed. There are people who live near where I came from that have money and tried everything they can so that their child can go [to Europe], and they still don't have a visa, but I got a visa.

On one hand, the material presented in this section appear to place West African youth open to criticisms from those who are sceptical about the legitimacy of their claims of being trafficked. This is because these youth are keen to migrate to better their life chances, and are willing to do so knowing it is risky which demonstrates agency. As Section 2 elaborated, within trafficking discourses agency is conceived of as individual free choice. Their agency is therefore interpreted by some as complicity in their outcome. On the other hand, the findings in this section also appear to qualify the argument that football trafficking does not exist because youth agreed to leave their home country. It is not intuitively clear from the above why the positions underpinning this argument must be mutually exclusive, that is, being a trafficked human being and wanting to migrate to improve your life chances. People moved by human traffickers are often keen to migrate and willingly agree to do so, but that does not preclude them from being tricked, coerced, or exploited (Blazek & Esson, 2019). So how and why it is that judgement over young people's agency undermines their claims of being trafficked?

4 | HOW THE AGENCY OF YOUTH UNDERMINES THEIR CLAIMS

To understand how the agency of youth caught up in football trafficking undermines their claims to have been trafficked, I draw on critical theory related to commodity fetishisation. Geographical work on

commodities, influenced by Marxist theory, often sought to “unveil the commodity fetish.” This was part of an intellectual project to make visible the hidden injustices of commodity production by pinpointing the appropriation of labour. Standard commodity fetish analysis sees the process of unveiling the hidden content of the commodity as the final goal of analysis. It is believed that by unveiling the hidden content of a commodity's production, an appropriate political programme can be identified and implemented. Page (2005), however, argues that transformative political change often fails to take place as a result of unveiling the hidden content of a commodity's production. This is because we need to realise that

The point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the ‘content’ supposedly hidden behind the form: the ‘secret’ to be unveiled through the analysis is not the content hidden by the form... but, on the contrary, the ‘secret’ of the form itself. (Zizek cited in Page, 2005: p. 293)

The point being made is that what needs to be revealed is not what is hidden within the commodity during the history of its production, that is, unveiling the commodity fetish. Rather, it is examining how it can be that we *know* commodities have a history and are linked to a wider network of social relations, but in order to make markets work, we *act as if they do not have a history* and are not linked to a wider network of social relations (Page, 2005). Put differently, commodities can make their history visible and knowable, but there is an unspoken agreement reached, “a shared lie,” that we participate in when engaging with markets to not let that history hinder the present operation of exchange. It is this shared lie, which is linked to the abstract notion of what a commodity is, that disguises the appropriation of labour time during commodity exchange. It does by misrecognising the wider social context and structural relations that enable market exchange.

So, what does this tell us about the trafficking of West African youth in and through football? Arguments that some young people are being deceptive and are complicit in the football trafficking process are the outcome of trying to “unveil the football trafficking fetish.” By which I mean attempts to make visible the hidden elements of football trafficking during recruitment, transit, and exploitation to identify how trafficked human beings are produced. However, in seeking to unveil the football trafficking fetish, there is a danger that we fail to recognise that a trafficked human being is an administrative category based on an ideological social character. As Andrijasevic and Mai (2016) illustrated above, this social character requires a particular form in order for someone to be recognised as a trafficked human being (see also Yea, 2015).

The question is therefore not only who what and where are crystallized in the form of a trafficked person, but also why it is that this work can affirm its social character only in this form. (adapted from Page, 2005: p. 299).

Certain characteristics, for example, coercion, deception, force, race, age, and gender, are subconsciously drawn into and embodied in a person in such a way that they become recognisable as a trafficked human being. What connects these characteristics, as highlighted earlier in Section 2, is individuated victimisation and *a lack of agency* (cf. Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016; Blazek et al., 2019). This is evident if we consider the example of someone highlighted as a legitimate case of football trafficking.

Jay-Jay, from Guinea, thought he was coming to London to play football at the age of 17. But the “scout,” who sexually abused him, wanted to sell him to other men for sex. He is desperate to go home but cannot because the Muslim community in his village found out about the abuse and threatened to kill him. Now 21, he is enrolled in an east London college and working in a charity shop. (Hawkins, 2015b)

For some youth, it is not just that their experience does not fit the extreme individuated victimisation like Jay-Jay, which causes scepticism. Or that their agreement to leave their home country may be read as a legitimate form of capitalist exchange, because both parties are considered to have consented to a transaction. It is the added issue that the “social character” of a human trafficking victim is racialised and gendered (see also Kempadoo, 2015). Many of the youth I met in Paris explained that when they sought help with no formal identification (as it had been taken by their traffickers), White support service staff often claimed they could not assess the age of dark-skinned people, and by default, they were aged, racialised, and gendered as *Black African men*. This mattered because Black African men do not fit the iconic human trafficking victim archetype noted above, specifically a White woman trafficked for sex and in need of rescue by law enforcement.

Such experiences also underline the difficult position of adolescents who disturb the victim-agency binary, as has been explored in research on the figure of the “unaccompanied child-migrant” (Howard, 2014; Huijsmans & Baker, 2012; O’Connell Davidson, 2010). The need to determine whether youth are children or adults lies behind state-sanctioned medical testing to verify age (cf. Abel, 2018). Disturbingly, some of the youth in Paris were subjected to this in ways, which appeared to have the intention of expediting the removal of their access to rights and services available to minors and facilitate deportation. One of my participants, Gerard, found himself in this predicament before his documentation from Guinea was sent over confirming his age:

I didn't have my papers to confirm my age [sixteen] so they made me do a bone test to verify my age ... they told me that the results said I was eighteen years old ... I was kicked out of the hostel the social service agency had been keeping me in [and onto the streets] because they [social services] only deal with minors.

In sum, these young people's agency, and racialised and gendered identities, are at odds with the social character associated with those who come to be known as a trafficked person. A construction that relies on individualised force or coercion in the interactions between a human trafficker and the person(s) they exploit. This is *how* the agency of male West African youth can undermine their claims to have been trafficked. What is interesting here is that the social character of the human trafficking victim involves a form of abstraction. An abstraction where agency and certain markers of social difference come to be at odds with the normative social character of a trafficking victim and where *the wider structural violence* underpinning an individual's agency can also be overlooked.

This is why in Section 3 ; I intentionally drew attention to research on the agency and neoliberal subjectivities of would-be football migrants and those who claimed to have experienced football trafficking. I did so to make an obvious but important point. A point that most if not all people reading this paper are already aware of, which is that male youth in and from West Africa have agency. But not just that this agency exists, rather that this agency is visible, knowable, and set within a wider network of social relations and structures. Agency that can be theorised as a form of social navigation (Vigh, 2009), whereby young people seek to negotiate the trajectories of their lives, using a repertoire of tactics, strategies, and sociocultural assets to maximise their social opportunities. Agency that is expressed, for example, in mobility and entrepreneurial desires. It becomes apparent therefore that

The secret that needs to be revealed is not what is hidden during the recruitment, transit and exploitation of trafficked West African footballers i.e. unveiling the football trafficking fetish. The secret that needs to be revealed is how it can be that *we know* a trafficked West African footballer has agency, and that this is linked to a wider network of social relations. But in order for them to be recognised as a victim of human trafficking, we act as if they do not have agency and are not linked to this wider network of social relations. (adapted from Page, 2005: p. 294)

5 | WHY THE AGENCY OF YOUTH UNDERMINES THEIR CLAIMS

So how might we theorise *why* the agency of youth caught up in football trafficking undermines their claims? Moreover, why is this agency not understood within a wider network of social relations? To answer these questions, we need to begin by realising that rather than unveiling the football trafficking fetish, we need to unveil an unspoken agreement. A "shared lie" to misread how agency, and the wider social context from which it emerges, contributes to one person gaining control over another person for the purposes of exploitation. A shared lie which works to maintain the facade that exchanges subject to individualised force or coercion are those that lie outside the

putative world of capitalism. A shared lie that requires a trafficked human being to adopt a particular social character, one of a victim devoid of agency and/or a victim of extreme, often sexual, abuse, and exploitation (cf. Anderson, 2007; O'Connell Davidson, 2015). As Andrijasevic and Mai (2016) illustrated above, if a person meets these conditions, they are recognised within contemporary Western social contexts as having been trafficked and worthy of support. Significantly, in cases where a person is recognised as being trafficked, once they have been removed from their exploiters, it is assumed that they should be willing to go back to their country of origin.

If youth demonstrate agency by stating they do not want to return to West Africa or by attempting to build a life for themselves in Europe, their status as a trafficked human being is undermined. For example, Hawkins (2015b) notes that

When I first met Ben, I thought he was a victim. But he refused to go home to Cameroon'. 'Why would I do that? [return to Cameroon] he said. "Here [in Europe] we live better than in Africa' ... Another "Lost Boy", Sulley, had been trafficked from Burkina Faso to Portugal at 16. He moved to Paris but rejected an offer of €100 per game from a club because it was not enough. Both boys [Ben and Sulley] had the latest smartphones and wore designer clothes.

To be clear, Hawkins has campaigned to protect the rights of young migrants and is not unsympathetic to their plight. Instead, this position appears more in keeping with the work of police and support organisations who see themselves as acting in a trafficked human beings' best interest. As noted by Blazek et al. (2019), these institutions tend to encourage people who have been trafficked towards certain decisions, such as returning to their country of origin. Often in the belief that more suitable support can be given to them if they return than they will receive in destination contexts. The danger with linking the validity of a person's claim of having been trafficked to their desire to return to their country of origin is that this way of thinking can all too easily be inadvertently appropriated by or misread as anti-immigrant sentiments. These sentiments arise because migrants who want to forge a life for themselves in destination contexts after moving away from their traffickers can be viewed as fraudsters who pretend to have been trafficked when they are really economic migrants (cf. Brennan & Plambech, 2018; Plambech, 2014). For example, Hawkins mentions that

Solange Cluydts, a former director of immigration at Zaventem airport in Brussels, and now head of Payoke, one of Europe's leading anti-human trafficking charities, based in Antwerp, said the stories perpetuated by boys like Ben and Foot Solidaire are "bullshit" and that it was a story concocted by illegal immigrants ... "They have to go to ask for a visa. If it's somebody who is arranging the papers for all those who are arriving in Paris, the embassies have to know the name of that

man" ... Cluydts had seen an "explosion" of African boys claiming they had been trafficked for football in 2001 after the state announced they could receive benefits (Hawkins, 2015b).

The issue of complicity is something that I have struggled to address in my own work (Esson, 2015a). However, this inclination to encourage a trafficked human being to return to their country of origin once they are separated from their exploiters provides an example of the subtle workings of the shared lie. Even though well meaning, encouraging these young people to return to West Africa is to misrecognise the point that Ben, Sulley, and other West African youth associated with football trafficking make explicitly, which is that they do not want to return to an impoverished environment. As we have seen, scholarship on West African youth underlines the ubiquity of aspirations to migrate to improve one's life chances (Darby, 2013; Langevang, 2008; Ungruhe, 2016). They would rather remain in a place they consider more developed and offering a better standard of living. As Robert, a Cameroonian who was abandoned in Germany as a teenager and eventually made his way to Paris, explains below, European life is by far the preferable option in comparison with life in Cameroon.

Douala is very dirty, you can't even breathe well because of all the things that are around and all the dirty things ... I left Cameroon with the agent when I was like at the age of let's just say seventeen, like that, and Berlin was a pure different life. If you leave Cameroon and come to Berlin, I am telling you never in your life would you want to go back [to Cameroon].

We therefore begin to see *why* the agency of West African youth undermines their claims to have been trafficked. It is because to acknowledge their agency and desire to migrate to and stay in Europe is to acknowledge the geographies of uneven development and involuntary immobility that enables one person to exercise and abuse power over another person for the purposes of human trafficking. Alternatively, they become opportunistic economic migrants trying to escape impoverished conditions by moving to a region with better living conditions and prospects. Either way, looking closely at how youth agency is read in trafficking politics exposes these geographies of structural inequality. This is a realisation that many of us living in Europe and "developed" countries, including myself, perhaps find uncomfortable and would prefer not to recognise. Because it goes beyond acknowledging that these youth come from contexts marked by poverty and requires us to acknowledge our place in an inequitable economic system in relation to others.

This brings us to another key implication of the shared lie associated with unveiling the "football trafficking fetish." One underpinned by the social character and narrative bound up in the archetypical victim. The shared lie obscures how countries in the Global North are seeking to impose ever more restrictive immigration policies targeted at populations in the Global South (Andersson, 2014; Vradis, Papada,

Painter, & Papoutsis, 2018). Restrictions are being enacted at a historical juncture when migration has become an increasingly important strategy for people in the Global South to improve their life chances. Tellingly, many of these countries in the Global North have recourse to a different geographical imagination when arguing for the self-evident right to global mobility for capital in the form of financial transactions, investments, and traded goods (see also Massey, 1999).

A key ruse therefore of the shared lie is that it works to conceal the contradictions of contemporary global capitalism as it relates to mobility. For example, the neoliberal doctrine that individuals must take responsibility for their own future within an integrated world market appears to have been successfully internalised among many of the youth in question. They see themselves as "entrepreneurs of self." It seems counterintuitive to request that these same individuals should not seek to migrate to improve their economic opportunities and condition. Moreover, when they do migrate and find themselves in scenarios akin to human trafficking, their desire to improve their life chances appears to count against them in a court of law.

Feminist scholars will rightly note that the shared lie outlined above is neither unique to football trafficking nor a coincidence. It rather highlights how anti-trafficking agendas become intertwined with state-sanctioned efforts at border management and territorial governance (see Anderson, 2012; O'Connell Davidson, 2016), and the biopolitical "regulation of specific populations" and "other national geopolitical agendas" (FitzGerald, 2016: p. 185) under neoliberal capitalism. But I would argue that examining these issues through the case of male West African youth furthers our conceptualisation of human trafficking. It provides a unique illustration of how the ideological and administrative category of a trafficking victim reifies but does not implicate capitalist social relations in the production of human trafficking.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Jeffrey (2012: p. 246) once asked, "what if anything might be distinctively interesting about young people's agency?" This article illustrated one way in which it is so: Examining the agency of young, male, West African would-be footballers extends debates over cross-border human trafficking. I explored how and why these young people's agency results in scepticism about their claims of being trafficked in and through football. It was found that their desire to migrate and improve their lives, and their willingness to take risks in order to do so, is at odds with the social character informing understandings of who is and is not recognised as trafficked human being. A social character that relies on normative ideas about victimisation and coercion in the individuated interactions between a human trafficker and the person(s) they exploit (cf. O'Connell Davidson, 2010; Howard, 2018). Consequently, the agency of the youth in question is read as an exchange between "free" individuals and therefore cannot be human trafficking.

Building on theoretical insights from Page's (2005) work on the geographies of commodities, it was argued that this misreading is

not unintentional. Rather, it provides a novel example of how and why the ideological construction of a human trafficking “victim” enables human trafficking to be a product of capitalism, yet be presented as an abnormal form of behaviour that lies outside of capitalist social relations. Thereby, leaving unchecked the causes of structural inequality underpinning young people’s desire to migrate and which enable one person to have control over another person for the purposes of exploitation. Furthermore, by undertaking this critical exploration of the (mis)reading of agency in trafficking debates, the article also further debates in geographies of children and youth about agency (cf. Holloway et al., 2019; Huijsmans, 2014; Jeffrey, 2012). Specifically, it provided new empirical and theoretical insights on the coexistence of agency and exploitation in young lives and how young people’s agentive mobility, desires, and actions can be misrecognised and work against them.

In closing, it is important to note a broader insight that emerges from using a youth perspective to examine how the presence of human agency effects understandings of and responses to human trafficking. A youth lens enabled us to identify how the conflation of migration and exploitation within popular accounts of, and responses to, cross-border human trafficking results in origin and destination countries taking on particular imaginative geographies. Geographies that conceal the contradictions of global capitalism and structural inequality that underpins young people’s agency and facilitates human trafficking and irregular migration. This insight supports McGrath and Watson’s recent call “for counter-narratives to be made within geography and development studies that demonstrate how unfreedom and exploitation...result from complex power relations that are always historically rooted” (2018: p. 29). I therefore want to conclude this article by recommending one way to develop these counter narratives and shape future research agendas. This would be to bring these power relations and structural conditions to the fore by considering the implications of conceptualising people as susceptible to rather than vulnerable to human trafficking.

Vulnerability is mentioned in the UN TIP definition of human trafficking and is therefore understandably a common feature in academic, policy, and media analyses of human trafficking. Kottow (2003) explains how all human beings are potentially vulnerable to harm and having our rights diminished, because vulnerability describes a state of being, one where harm is possible but has not actually happened. This is known as unharmed vulnerability. Kottow (2003) notes however that susceptibility relates to people and populations who are no longer in a state of unharmed vulnerability, because they have encountered harm. This harm can be a consequence of actions traced to individuals, but it can also be the outcome of wider *structural violence* (see Galtung, 1969), for example, (neo)colonialism, discriminating deprivations (environmental racism), economic austerity, and patriarchy. These people and populations are now in a different state of being, which makes them more prone to additional and compound harm; that is, they are susceptible. This structural conceptualisation of susceptibility provides a way to examine how social conditions enable one person to have control over another person for the

purposes of exploitation. It also encourages analysts to acknowledge that in many cases, people are no longer in a state of unharmed vulnerability and that this is linked to and being exacerbated by the economic order of the day.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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ENDNOTE

¹ The UN TIP Protocol’s definition of trafficking in persons (see Article 3) contains three elements: an act consisting of “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons;”; a means to enforce the act, such as “the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person”; for the purpose of exploitation (United Nations, 2000).

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