

A Social Negotiation of Hope

Male West African Youth, 'Waithood' and the Pursuit of Social Becoming through Football

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the present-day perception among boys and young men in West Africa that migration through football offers a way of achieving social standing and improving their life chances. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among footballers in urban southern Ghana between 2010 and 2016, we argue that young people's efforts to make it abroad and "become a somebody" through football is not merely an individual fantasy; it is rather a social negotiation of hope to overcome widespread social immobility in the region. It is this collective practice among a large cohort of young males—realistic or not—which qualifies conceptualizations of youth transitions such as *waithood* that dominate academic understanding of African youth today.

KEYWORDS

Ghana, masculinity, migration, social mobility, youth transitions



The popularity of football in West Africa is now so pervasive that even the most inattentive visitor to the area would struggle to overlook the sport's hypnotic hold over the hearts and minds of children and youth. A journey through any town in the region will almost certainly involve seeing young people wearing counterfeit versions of their favorite European football team's jersey, and either playing football on dusty untreated pitches, or watching European leagues and international tournaments at home, in a sports bar, or in a betting joint. Yet young people's fascination with football goes beyond the spectacle provided on the pitch. In an age of global news media, West African youth are inundated with mediated representations of professional footballers enjoying ostentatious lifestyles (Esson 2013). Notably, players based in Europe are frequently depicted kitted out in designer clothes, driving expensive cars, residing in palatial homes, and dating model girlfriends. The allure of football as a form of popular entertainment coalesces with a geographical imagination that conflates social mobility with certain places,



which, in turn, cultivates the dreams of thousands of young West Africans to migrate to Europe and become professional footballers (Esson 2015a; Ungruhe and Büdel 2016; van der Meij and Darby 2014).

In this article we examine the present-day perception and hope among boys and young men in West Africa that migration through football provides a way to achieve social standing and improve one's life chances. By referring to the social dimension of hope (see Hage 2003) we argue that the hope of social becoming is not just a shared vision but also a collective practice to overcome one's state of *not-yet* (see Bloch 1986). Through so doing, we aim to extend the literature on the strategies used by young people in sub-Saharan Africa as they try to circumvent the structural barriers blocking their path to social becoming and accepted understandings of adulthood. Significantly, accumulating social standing by achieving a recognized notion of adulthood, and thus *becoming a somebody*, is of crucial importance to the young generation more generally (Jeffrey 2010), and young men particularly (Langevang 2008). Yet the triumvirate of economic uncertainty (Gough et al. 2013), political unrest (Diouf 2003), and the reconfiguration of established cultural practices (Masquelier 2005) now obstruct social mobility and trajectories to *become a somebody*.

Alcinda Honwana (2014) has recently sought to conceptualize this period of suspension between childhood and adulthood in African settings by using the notion *waithood*, a portmanteau term of *wait* and *hood*, that means *waiting for adulthood*. Waithood has become an influential way of thinking through the perceived sense of powerlessness afflicting those who have outgrown childhood but remain unable to accumulate social and economic capital and reach the sphere of social adulthood. While we agree that socioeconomic difficulties and social immobility play a prominent role in the everyday lives of many young people, we suggest that waithood as currently proposed and deployed is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it does not reflect the dynamic and agentive life worlds of African youth today. Although Honwana does not deny youths' creative potential, waithood analytically projects a state of gloom, apathy, and hopelessness and hence fails to acknowledge the multifarious attempts and visions of young people on the continent to overcome social immobility. Second, it contains an innate inclination to overlook young people's participation in the reproduction of the very socioeconomic structures and practices that inhibit their attempts to enact social becoming.

We use the case of aspirant young Ghanaian footballers to illustrate empirically the above-mentioned limitations of waithood. We demonstrate

how football, both as a bodily activity as well as imagined possibility to go abroad, offers a novel and suitable way of understanding better how young West African males attempt to overcome social immobility while simultaneously reinforcing and reproducing established power structures. In summary, we use football as a way of qualifying conceptual oversimplifications and shortcomings in accounts that portray African youth as a passive generation in social decline, one that is playing an increasingly prominent role in academic engagement with and on youth in African contexts currently.

Our empirical data is based on various studies and long-term ethnographic fieldwork among footballers in urban southern Ghana between 2010 and 2016. Mainly, it entailed informal conversations, formal interviews (biographical and narrative) as well as participant observation of the players' social and sporting environments in the country's capital city of Accra and its surroundings on the Atlantic coast where most clubs and footballers are based. More specifically, we draw on data obtained by the first author who conducted 25 formal interviews with young players, youth and academy coaches, football agents and leading staff of academies as well as the Ghanaian players' association and regional youth football associations in 2010, 2015, and 2016. In addition to short-term stays at various football academies in the country, he gathered information from a number of informal conversations with youth players and by ethnographic observations at various youth tournaments, matches, and training sessions in Accra and nearby cities. Further to this, we also draw on fieldwork conducted by the second author in the form of multi-sited ethnography at three amateur neighborhood football clubs with youth academies (players under twelve, fourteen, and seventeen years of age) in Accra from 2011 to 2016. The second author attended over one hundred training sessions across the three clubs as well as home and away matches, conducted thirty-five interviews with club coaches, club owners, representatives from the Ghanaian Football Association (GFA), the Ghana League Clubs Association, the Professional Footballers Association of Ghana, Lizzie Sports Complex, and the Right to Dream Football Academy. Ethical clearance was obtained from the authors' respective institutions prior to fieldwork for all associated projects.

Youth and Social Becoming in (West) African Settings

In this article, we follow a conceptualization of youth that focuses on its dynamic and relational characteristics. Studies in African contexts have illus-

trated how generational positions such as childhood, youth, and adulthood are neither natural nor predetermined but are the outcome of sociocultural contexts and power relations (Christiansen et al. 2006). Hence, youth is not primarily defined by age, by a certain stage of psychological and biological development, or by legal standards but, rather, as a fluid category that reflects local sociocultural understandings of social status and of one's position (and self-positioning) in the life course. Hence, we refer to those (young) people as youth whose specific social, economic and cultural capital as well as their individual social relations assign them to a particular position in society that implies certain rights and duties, moral and social expectations, experiences and means that differ from those of adults (and children respectively). We define youth as those (young) people who are beyond the life phase of childhood but have not (yet) achieved the sphere of social adulthood in their society yet whose various forms of capital and social relations still hold the promise to achieve social maturity in a not so distant future.

Why do we conceptualize youth in this way? In many West African societies, achieving social adulthood goes along with an increase of both social obligations and authority and certainly reflects a person's higher social standing in his or her environment. Often, marriage and social reproduction is the most important threshold to maturity while educational and or economic success may add up to it. In any case, being responsible (for one's children and other family members, for example) and being in an economic position to give are crucial indicators for achieving social adulthood (Martin 2016 et al.; van der Meij and Darby 2014). Particularly among young men achieving a giver-position is an important feature of masculinity since manhood is widely associated with the ability to serve as the household head and to take care of one's (extended) family. In this, the cultural norm of an inter-generational contract becomes visible: while childhood and youth are life phases in which one is taken care of, a person acquires social and economic responsibilities for young (and old age) family members when reaching the sphere of social adulthood (Kabeer 2000; Ungruhe 2010).

Whereas West African youth seem generally to aspire to achieve a giver-position from a relatively young age onwards (in relation to Ghana see Langevang 2008), they also relate to immediate hopes and needs in the here and now. Identifying themselves with transnationally circulating images of being young promises a modern appearance, recognition among peers, and self-ascertainment as a youth. Hence, for many, connecting themselves to a perceived global youth culture and enjoying a modern life phase of adventure, freedom, pleasure, and consumption is as important as future prospects

as adults. However, so-called modern youth requires access at various levels (to, for example, financial means, urban experiences, the internet and so on) and participating in these is a challenge for the contemporary young generation in African settings (Thorsen 2006; Ungruhe 2010).

Applying an emic perspective of youth allows us to investigate what it means to be young for today's youth and what it means to struggle with achieving social maturity and to *become a somebody* in a West African setting. Given that around two thirds of the African population is referred to as youth and children according to the African Union (Martin et al. 2016) already indicates that this struggle may be a crucial and widespread phenomenon in many societies on the whole continent. If the majority of the continent's people are caught between the difficulties of following cultural norms to achieve social maturity and a higher social status on the one hand, and of achieving social status as modern youths on the other, Honwana's observation of a whole generation in waiting seems to be a valid generalization at first sight. Indeed, this is not a new finding; waithood builds on a conceptual legacy of similar perspectives that have portrayed young people as socially stuck, and conceptualized them as victims of increasingly unfavorable economic, political, and sociocultural structures during the last twenty years (see, for example, Cruise O'Brien 1996; Hansen 2005; Resnick and Thurlow 2015). Hence, if African youths face a state of social immobility and marginalization, their presence appears as a state of lack and their future looks bleak or, at least, uncertain.

If it is true that existing pathways to social adulthood like marriage and social reproduction seem to be blocked then trajectories to an aspired successful future and what it implies need likely to be modified. Indeed, as Michaela Pelican and Jan Heiss (2014) point out, future aspirations are subject to change and may differ (or need to be adjusted) from generation to generation. Western-type education has long been such an additional trajectory to future success and prestige in many African settings. However, although it is still widely followed today (Martin et al. 2016), it seems to have lost its ability to provide successful futures or to serve as the "passport to modernity" (see Richards 1996: 138). The widespread obstacles of economic decline, corruption, and nepotism may prevent even university graduates from social and economic rise (see Esson 2013; Oldenburg 2016). Nevertheless, as Charles Piot (2010) has outlined, Pentecostal Churches, job opportunities with international NGOs, as well as intercontinental migration are regarded as new means of providing a route to success and better lives in the future.

Today's popular forms of international migration practices as a means for social becoming are rooted in long established patterns of internal and regional migration. While regional migration has been an important livelihood strategy among young men since the early twentieth century (see Fortes 1936), it continues and appears today to be the only way for many rural youth to partake in a perceived modern youth culture, envisaged better futures, and a "rite of passage" (Thorsen 2006: 99) towards social adulthood. Additionally, contemporary youth in West African urban settings view embarking on international migration to Europe or the US as a similar kind of transition, an almost inevitable pathway in order to achieve future success and social mobility both as modern youths and future adults (Langevang and Gough 2009; Simone 2005). However, while migration may be associated with the promise of a better future, accounts of negative migratory experiences, and/or the discovery that migration is impossible, can lead to disillusionment and frustration (Schapendonk and Steel 2014; van der Meij et al. 2016). There is therefore analytical purchase in examining how this migratory disposition is turned into practice among male West African youth seeking to enact social becoming.

Football Migration: European Allures, African Mediocrity, and a Dubious Business

Football as a means of migration is a rather recent phenomenon in Ghana. For decades, it did not serve outside-orientated attitudes but, rather, evoked feelings of national, ethnic, or local belonging among the local population. After football had been introduced by European seamen, traders, missionaries, and soldiers in the nineteenth century it served different purposes and interests in various African settings over the course of time; it was an arena for pleasure as well as a contested political field between colonial authority, anti-colonial resistance, and nation-building. When Ghana gained independence in 1957, the nation's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, a leading figure in the pan-African movement, deliberately used football to emancipate his people from colonial values and images of the wild and unsophisticated African man. The game was seen as a vehicle to foster *new African values* of man's integrity, intelligence, and authenticity (by, for example, a focus on technique, dedication, and sincerity on the pitch). In addition, football was used to promote national unity and pride and Ghana's national team, the Black Stars, was chosen to further the nation's new identity.

Moreover, particularly between the 1960s and 1990s, Ghana's local game benefited from matches between the national rivals Kumasi Asante Kotoko and Accra Hearts of Oak, which were followed by tens of thousands of spectators in the stadiums and which attracted nation-wide attention (Wachter 2006; Darby 2010). However, this inward-orientation of football is barely visible today.

Having previously visited Accra on several occasions for reasons unrelated to our research on youth football in Ghana, we were already aware of the popularity of European and non-domestic football amongst Ghanaians. At the time this was merely a passing observation. However, while we were undertaking fieldwork and applying a more critical perspective, the salience of GFA executive Herbert Adika's¹ assertion in early 2011 that "the popularity of the European game here is so strong it is driving them [male Ghanaian youth] crazy" proved prophetic. Indeed, compared to European football the local game in Ghana today is neither popular to follow as a local Premier League team supporter nor regarded as an opportunity to make it as a professional player among today's young generation of football talents and enthusiasts. Rather than having allegiance to the (former) national strongholds, Accra Hearts of Oak or Kumasi Asante Kotoko, football enthusiasts support and dream of Real Madrid, Chelsea, or Manchester United. It is in this externally orientated atmosphere that budding Ghanaians keen to emulate their sporting heroes look "to 'go outside' in search of a professional career in the game" (Darby 2010: 22, emphasis in original).

The extensive global media coverage dedicated to professional, particularly European, football and the cult of stardom attached to footballers playing on this lucrative stage, are claimed to have popularized the notion of a career in football as a means of upward social mobility among African youth (Poli 2010). This aspiration among boys and young men to become professional athletes can be found throughout the world and also in other sports as the case of young men in Fiji dreaming of a similar professional career abroad in rugby reveals (see Besnier 2015). Yet this dream is considered particularly problematic for young men and boys in West Africa because a handful of high profile cases depicting upward career paths are argued to conceal far more common occurrences of downward career trajectories and unfulfilled dreams (Agergaard and Ungruhe 2016; Darby et al. 2007; Poli 2010).

To put this in context, Paul Darby (2013) highlights that Ghana is the third highest exporter of footballing talent in Africa, accounting for 10 percent of African footballers in Europe, yet according to the GFA only forty players currently leave local clubs in Ghana each year on officially sanc-

tioned international transfers. This figure is relatively small given that approximately twenty thousand young people are registered at amateur clubs in Accra alone (Esson 2015b). Adjacent to these concerns, attention has been drawn also to exploitative migratory practices in the football industry through cases known as *football trafficking* (Esson 2015b). In some cases, after handing over money to individuals claiming to be football agents, players are transferred internationally to clubs and placed on exploitative contracts. In other cases, players pay agents considerable sums of money to attend trials and secure playing contracts only to find that the opportunities promised do not exist.

But why does the precarious nature of professional football fail to deter male West African youth from pursuing this career path? This situation has been explained at the macro level: after the success of African teams at the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cups and youth tournaments in the late 1980s and early 1990s, African players became augmented transfer targets of European clubs. The number of African players recruited by European clubs increased more noticeably after 1995 following the introduction of the Bosman ruling and the rise in value of broadcasting rights, going from 160 in the mid-1990s to 316 in the mid-2000s (Poli 2006). While the Bosman ruling eased foreign player restrictions in European professional football according to general EU labor market regulations and also made it possible for clubs to include more footballers from outside the EU in their squads, it also stipulated that all players whose contracts had expired were free to sign for another club without paying any form of compensation to their previous club. As a consequence, players and agents benefit from clubs' increasing and de-committed financial resources (Poli 2006). Hence, the increasing number of African players in men's European football since the mid-1990s, who benefitted from higher salaries, contributed to the notion of European football as a pathway to success among young men and boys in Africa (see Poli 2010). In order to turn such ambitions into reality, entering the Ghanaian football industry and joining a football club becomes the obvious course of action among young players. This is fitting since the last two decades have seen an increase in the establishment of clubs and academies for under-seventeen-year-olds, and an even more notable increase in player registrations in the youth leagues (Esson 2015b). Somewhat ironically, this situation is linked to international transfer regulations introduced by FIFA in 2001.

FIFA attempted to discourage the international migration of minors by deterring rich—that is, European—clubs from signing talented young play-

ers based in Africa and South America. A ruling was made stipulating that clubs involved in the training and education of players between the ages of twelve and twenty-three must receive financial compensation from the buying club. This compensation can range from hundreds to millions of US dollars. The 2001 FIFA regulations give the labor and investment spent training a youth player monetary value; this makes young footballers at academies a potential source of revenue. Crucially, this financial value can be realized only when a player is transferred to another club. This has resulted in intense financial speculation and increased trading of young Ghanaian players by academy (and club) owners who are searching for the next star to try to sell at a profit to a wealthier foreign club (Esson 2016).

Football academies and clubs in Ghana are therefore increasingly geared towards the grooming and export of players to foreign clubs since regulations and policies taking place in football at the global level are being interpreted and put to use in locally specific ways. This goes alongside what some commentators have dubbed African football's culture of mediocrity, entailing endemic corruption, inadequate sporting infrastructure, and a fragile political economy in relation to its European counterpart (Darby et al. 2007). For example, the average monthly salary for professional football players in Ghana is relatively low, particularly in comparison to players at European football clubs, where a handful of players in the English Premier League, for example, are known to earn \$300,000 per week, and, in some cases, more. In Ghana, the monthly salaries range from 50GHC² to 500GHC, with the vast majority earning less than 200GHC, and it is not uncommon for players not to be paid at all (Esson 2015c).

Jonathan,³ a twenty-two-year-old footballer from Accra, reveals some of the challenges associated with the so-called culture of mediocrity that aspirant youth face as they pursue a football career. When Jonathan received an offer from a local Premier League club, his current second-tier based club did not want to release him and promised to reward him financially for staying. He stayed with his club but, as he said, "They did not give me the money. And also [my] monthly salary was not coming. So I [had] [to] stop going to training because I [had] no money for [a] car (public transport) to [go to] training." Jonathan lost his place in the squad but it was already too late in the season to move to the club that had shown interest in him initially, or to a different club. Such and similar experiences (like coaches demanding bribes from their players to include them in the team, lack of adequate medical treatment for injuries, and contractual insecurity) are frequent among ambitious players in Ghanaian football. In general, Jonathan states that

“living in Ghana and playing [professional football] is very, very tough. How to even feed, how to clothe yourself is ... a problem, because [clubs] are not paying you money.”⁴ Such experiences contribute to the variety of reasons why players wish to leave the country and be successful abroad. However, as we will outline in the following section, motives for football-related (as well as other forms of) migration go beyond economic explanations and structural differences reflected by narratives emphasizing the allure of European football, and the mediocrity of the African game.

Social Becoming through Football Migration: Insights from Male Ghanaian Youth

Enjoying economic wealth and living a life as a football celebrity in Europe may be an appealing image among young talents. However, if football-related migration is but one of many forms of spatial mobility in African settings, then it needs to be analyzed beyond the realm of those images. From a local perspective, as we have outlined above, forms of migration among young people are first and foremost a means to achieve social mobility towards identities of modern youth and future adult. Moreover, the social experience of migration itself, its connotation of adventure and freedom, already serves the masculine identity of travelling footballers. Concerning social adulthood, achieving a giver-position and contributing to the well-being of one's social environment is an important motive to pursue a career in sports abroad. As Niko Besnier (2015) outlines, this seems to be widespread among young men in the global South. This is because the emergence of sport migration as a means of social mobility is linked to young people's engagement with structural changes taking place within society that are underpinned by a neoliberal ethos that encourages young people to be job creators not job seekers (Gough et al. 2013), while simultaneously placing tremendous pressure on young men to be financially successful because monetary success is deemed an inherently masculine trait (Adinkrah 2012; Ungruhe 2010).

In Ghana, it seems that football mirrors shifting meanings of masculinity in society. From being a vehicle to promote social-oriented values of manhood such as integrity and authenticity in the era after independence it now serves the neoliberal agenda of individualization and personal success today. This pressure on boys and young men in Ghana to become financially independent given the values associated with this particular variant of hegemonic

masculinity is problematic because although the Ghanaian economy has grown at a rate of between 5 and 11 percent during the past decade (Obeng-Odoom 2013), much of this growth is tied to the discovery of oil and gas whose long-term effects for economic growth and the job market are uncertain. Meanwhile, three decades of neoliberal reforms have resulted in a scenario in which the informal sector constitutes an estimated 80 percent of the economy, and dominates the employment landscape (Obeng-Odoom 2013). In this context, the supply of educated labor is considered to exceed demand, and perceptions of so-called qualification inflation has fueled a belief that returns from education are in decline or insufficient (Rolleston and Oketch 2008), particularly amongst those from low-income families who often struggle to pay the fees for post-primary education. Thus the longstanding argument that investing in one's human capital via formal education is a prerequisite for individual social mobility and national development has lost credibility among many young people and some adults as we also noted during numerous informal conversations in Ghana.

It is this situation in which existing pathways to social becoming are blocked for the majority of young men and boys in Ghana while cultural demands of achieving success have not been adjusted that leads to analyses of youth in *waithood*. However, by remaining at this structural level and not taking youths' responses to their marginalization into account, concepts like *waithood* have a tendency to oversimplify the complexity of the situation faced by today's young generation. How do young men and boys in Ghana decide where to look and which path to follow in order to keep the hope of social becoming and participation alive in the midst of this uncertainty and marginalization induced by neoliberalism? A recurring theme that emerged in the quest to facilitate progress from an uncertain present to an imagined stable future was the correlation between spatial mobility and a sense of personal progress. Thus, navigating uncertainty was linked to mental projections of life outside (and mobility beyond) Ghana.

At this point those aligned with the culture-of-mediocrity position in the context of West African football migration could argue that our findings are tied to the nature of the footballing political economy in which the participants reside. It is therefore important to recall the points made above in which we noted how studies not related to sport have observed that young people in Ghana and other parts of West Africa claim that their movement and spatial mobility are crucial to their life chances. We concur, and propose that this conception of movement as being vital to grasping potentially unforeseen opportunities, particularly through migration abroad, is intrinsic

to but goes beyond aspirations of social becoming through football. This already indicates that long-term future prospects of becoming a social giver are just one side of the coin. Besides the hope to achieve social adulthood, immediate needs to take part in a perceived global youth culture are also important. Thus, an underlying source of this present-day intensification in the desire to migrate amongst the young men and boys we encountered, is that for them life in Ghana now involves “an economy of goods that are known, that may sometimes be seen, that one wants to enjoy, but to which one will never have material access” (Mbembe cited in Ferguson 2006: 192).

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 global consumer culture and lifestyles. The issue is that this awareness is also accompanied by the belief that even with educational qualifications such lifestyles are beyond the reach of most youths if they stay in Ghana, as exemplified in the words of Ato, a twenty-four-year-old university graduate, and co-owner of a youth league football club.⁵

Based on what we hear and see people think the best way is to go outside. The main thing now is leaving regardless. I have spoken to guys who are currently in their first semester of their fourth year in Legon (University of Ghana). I am talking about guys who are doing well, minimum B students. They are willing to give it all up to get a two-week visa to the US.

To borrow Paul Richards’s (1996) expression, for many young males in West Africa today, football is the new passport to modernity, recognition, and social adulthood. The reason that football matters here is that it provides an example of how young men and boys appraise both the potential and the limitations of their spatial location, and evaluate where and with whom prospects seem better. As a result, instead of anticipating the development and transformation of their lives in Ghana, young people scour their surroundings for means of actualizing some form of escape (see also Simone 2005). Football is now considered a realistic means to assist in this escape.

In this particular case, the dialectic of subjective hope and objective chances imprints definitions of the possible and impossible upon young Ghanaians, and from this they are able to make out a future they believe will lead to social becoming and being in a giver-position. For many youth, this future invariably involves football because, in a society devoid of state welfare and shaped by neoliberal reform, the belief that football offers a means to create an income is very appealing since it coalesces with prevailing ideologies that encourage youth to be self-sufficient. As shown by James

Esson (2013), young men and boys in Ghana view the West African professional football player who is able to draw upon his sporting bodily capital to attain spatial mobility as the embodiment of successful manhood. He is an “entrepreneur of self, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings” (Foucault 2008: 226). This individuated understanding of the sporting body as a means to generate an income has been (and is also being) articulated in discourses circulating through the global sports media. For example, Draymond Green, of the Golden State Warriors, recently argued that NBA players should view themselves as businesses and that their career choices should be guided by a desire to maximize the earning potential of their bodily capital, which will enable them to better their lives and the lives of their family members materially (cited in Polaceck 2016).

Accordingly, as noted by Nienke van der Meij and Paul Darby (2014), when young men and boys in Ghana decide to pursue a football career, they often do so as part of a household livelihood strategy, which points to a shift in how football is viewed within Ghanaian society. Before the success of the national team at major youth tournaments in the early 1990s, parents and older family members would dissuade sons and nephews from involving themselves too deeply in football (Esson 2016). This was based on the argument that attending school would lead to better life outcomes than a football career. Ghanaians both young and old alike are now not only engrossed by the performances of the players on the pitch, they are also made aware of and captivated by the considerable material wealth and glamorous lifestyles associated with a professional football career (see also van der Meij et al. 2016). Ghanaian families are therefore now more willing to support their son’s decisions to pursue a career in football than they were in the pre-Bosman era (which was characterized by more moderate salaries and restricted spaces for foreign players in European football).

Jonathan’s case illustrates this. As he recalls, his parents allowed him to pursue a career in football only when they saw the benefit of it. His elder brother was earning money to support the family through football in Ghana before he moved to Thailand. “I was lucky because [when] he [got] to a time [when] he was making it, [it made] my parents to like football, because he was ... bringing money. So because of that ... my parents were ... support[ing] me playing.”⁶ Kojo, an eighteen-year-old goalkeeper playing in Ghana’s second-tier Division One further underlines this. His parents had been adamant that he pursue his secondary education in order to secure his future. That was until he caught the eye of a local team’s coach, who

agreed to sign him to his club and also take on the role of being Kojo's manager. Not only did he cover Kojo's travel and training costs, but also gave him a weekly allowance, which he passed on to his parents.⁷

Jonathan's and Kojo's statements not only reflect our argument of the individual importance of achieving a giver-position in society but also the social demand of it. If parents increasingly rely on their sons' physical and sportive abilities to support the family it links cultural notions of mobility, masculinity, and social adulthood to the materialization of the young men's bodies. On one hand, this underlines the precarious nature of sportive self-entrepreneurship like, for example, its limited time frame to achieve success (compared to non-sportive careers), the inability to find adequate means to train the body, or the risk of injuries and a sudden end to the career. On the other hand, however, it is precisely this materialization that brings us to another key reason why a career in football is attractive to male Ghanaian youth, more so than pursuing other vocations—the belief that black West African men are physically predestined to excel in football, a form of palatable racism espoused openly by Ghanaians in social and sporting environments.

Given the relatively small numbers who are actually able to obtain a career in professional football, the tendency to depict black West African males and footballing success as one and the same is argued to run contrary to reality (Poli 2010). Nevertheless, the aforementioned belief is in many ways reaffirmed by the concentration and prevalence of scouting networks and academies in the region. Over two thirds of African footballers playing in top flight European leagues originate from West Africa (Poli 2010). This situation was interpreted by the players as a form of palatable racism and the reason why they, rather than North, East, or South Africans, have become the primary target of foreign football clubs and talent scouts seeking to recruit players for leagues both within and outside Africa. Thus these young Ghanaian males who usually find themselves emasculated in other walks of life because they are unable to obtain markers associated with an acceptable masculine identity, such as a house, a car, and a secure income, believe there is a racial hierarchy of footballing ability and that their genetic make-up places them at or very close to the top (see also Esson 2015c).

Hence, the widespread belief in a superior black sporting body as a facilitator of social becoming through football serves as the natural way out of blocked existing pathways and as a counter to the lack of other means to attain social recognition. Together with a luring European football business, the support of families to try football as a route to success and migration as

a general and long-established means of improving one's social status creates an environment in which football migration serves as a social negotiation of hope, a shared new and promising way of making it in times of (perceived) widespread poverty, misery, and notions of futurelessness. Although players' sporting entrepreneurship comes at the cost of bearing the risks of precarious experiences and failure and may indeed be an unrealistic venture this social negotiation of hope shows that youths are not passive victims of social decline. However small the likelihood may be and no matter how many fellow players have failed on the way, players will keep on trying their luck (Esson 2015c; Ungruhe and Büdel 2016). This, however, points to the irony of the social negotiation of hope: the flow of aspiring football migrants feeds the football industry and creates its logic of a business of profiteers and underdogs. European clubs and West African club and academy owners and agents all profit from the masses of aspiring (and cheap) talent while the ones negotiating their hopes mostly do not benefit from their struggle. In this, young West African footballers reproduce the structures of blocked pathways and lack of opportunities that they are trying to overcome. However, despite its ironic and disillusioning character, the social negotiation of hope in the realm of transnational football migration rather underlines the active role of youths in engaging with and shaping means and pathways of social becoming. It is this active role that challenges the underlying notion of a passive generation in waithood.

Concluding Thoughts: Football Migration as Social Negotiation of Hope

Exploring football both as a bodily activity, as well as imagined possibility to go abroad, offers a novel and suitable perspective from which to understand better how young West African males attempt to overcome social immobility. Using Ghana as a case study, we showed how in recent years playing football and migrating to a foreign club has become a means for young men and boys residing in West Africa to enact social becoming and attain markers associated with adulthood (or partake in a global youth culture). Through doing so, we sought to contribute to recent efforts aimed at countering increasingly dominant analyses of African children and youth as a generation trapped in social stasis as articulated most evocatively in the concept of waithood. We sought to do so because waithood, and allied conceptual approaches often speak of, and for, young people without taking

their explicit engagement with the future into account. We therefore argue that in order to adopt a more nuanced understanding of youth and social becoming it is necessary to shed light on their own ideas, visions and actions towards it (see Martin et al. 2016).

To be clear, we appreciate that seeking to enact social mobility through football related migration may not appear rational or realistic according to Western ideals, but our findings demonstrate that the approach adopted by the young boys and men we encountered in Ghana correspond to Jennifer Johnson-Hanks's concept of "judicious opportunism" (2005: 370): the hope that opportunities will arise and the trust in a better future, however small the likelihood of this being achieved (see Ungruhe and Büdel 2016). Accordingly, in a situation of uncertainty and frustration, such as contemporary Accra, utopian ideas of a better future are formed and circulated in order to preserve the dream of migration and the hope of a better life (see also Kastner 2014). Notably, these aspirations are built on arguably controversial subjectivities, such as the belief in a relationship between black bodily capital and success in sport, which is widespread among the younger generation.

We also acknowledge that sporting ambitions can play a role in young people's aspirations to forge a professional football career (see van der Meij et al. 2016), yet we also illustrate how this belief in innate sporting prowess fuels the hope of becoming a somebody and living up to socially acceptable understandings of masculinity through football. Significantly, at a structural level, we depict how this belief has fallen on fertile soil because neoliberal modes of governance that construct youth as responsible for their life chances have coincided with the easing of foreign player restrictions in professional European leagues and their increasing commercialization since the mid-1990s, which has created opportunities for African players in Europe. In addition, we have a convergence in the Ghanaian football industry of economic liberalization with migration-based efforts at upward social mobility.

Thus young Ghanaian males are not just trying to migrate because they are footballers. Rather, the attraction of a career in football is the outcome of broader structural changes taking place within Ghanaian society, which, in the absence of state welfare provision, encourages young people to be job creators not job seekers. Meanwhile, the financial logic of the football industry appears to provide opportunities to migrate in a context of constrained mobility. Insincere intermediaries are capitalizing on this potent concoction of a football industry reliant on the movement of players for financial gain,

and a young population that sees migration through sport as a way to better their lives and adopt giver-positions rather than waiting for hand-outs. Moreover, since various forms of migration (both internal and international) have long been roads to social mobility for young men in West Africa (Nyamnjoh and Page 2002), including Ghana (Langevang 2008), linking sport and spatial mobility as a means of making it in life appears as an obvious strategy for young males in Ghana, and West Africa more generally (see Darby et al. 2007; Poli 2010). Consequently, despite the low probability of success, and rising concerns about player exploitation, the notion of migration to a foreign, ideally European, football league as a possible pathway to success is flourishing and probably reflects a widespread hope among young men in the global South today as the above mentioned dream of young rugby players in Fiji indicates.

To conclude, by examining the allure of football migration among Ghanaian youth, we have qualified increasingly dominant narratives of apathetic and passive African youth who are waiting to enact social becoming, and argued that this ongoing belief in the possibility of making it as a professional footballer abroad constitutes a collective social practice towards the making of a better future (see Appadurai 1996). In this, the belief in one's innate talent, luck, and hard work in order to make it abroad and become a somebody is neither merely an individual fantasy nor just a shared vision among young men; it is, rather, a social negotiation of hope, an active and collective contribution to overcome their state of being not-yet. And it is this collective practice among a large cohort of young males—realistic or not—that qualifies conceptualizations of waithood. However, we are not trying to romanticize or glamorize the strategies deployed by the young people we met because this particular social negotiation of hope does not challenge existing cultural patterns of social mobility and/or the underlying structural conditions from which young people are seeking to escape. Moreover, given that only a few aspiring young males become professional footballers abroad, the failing masses also contribute to acknowledging and reproducing social power structures that do not benefit the younger generation. Thus, imagined football mobility may be an active attempt towards social becoming but it is an attempt that does not help to overcome social immobility for most young men in West Africa today.

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Notes

1. Interview in Accra, 28 March 2011.
2. At the time of writing (November 2016) 1 USD = 4 GHC (Ghanaian Cedis).
3. The names of the footballers interviewed have been changed to ensure anonymity.
4. Interview in Accra, 29 June 2016.
5. Interview in Accra, 21 April 2011.
6. Interview in Accra, 29 June 2016.
7. Interview in Accra, 11 November 2016.

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