

The Hustle Economy: Informality, Uncertainty and the Geographies of Getting By

Abstract

This article deploys the conceptual frame of *hustle* to examine the everyday dealings associated with uncertainty and accepted informalities that pervade realms of everyday life amongst youth in precarious urban geographies. In doing so, the discussion advances the theoretical linkages between prolonged periods of ‘waithood’, alternative interpretations of work, and experiments within the everyday city more broadly. The article argues that the hustle economy is a localised but globally resonant condition of contemporary urbanism, coupling generative possibilities that emerge from everyday experiences of uncertainty and management of insecurities associated with ‘life work’ outside the bounds of normative social institutions.

Key words: *Hustle, youth, uncertainty, precarity, informal economy, waithood*

I Introduction

In the last decades, one narrative tying together cities of the global North and global South has been the acute confluence of austerity, diminishing public welfare, and fragmentation of formal employment (Castells, 2012; Harvey, 2012; Honwana, 2012). This has suspended and/or reshaped work opportunities for many in the potentially working (‘economically active’) population, particularly young people (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005; Wilson, 2009). As a result, prolonged periods of uncertainty characterise the experience of youth across cities, such that finding a ‘job’ and attaining other cultural markers of adulthood are increasingly asymptotic (Dillon and Youset, 2007; Honwana, 2012; Jeffrey, 2010; Thieme, 2013). Whilst some have focused on the political economic forces and associated structural problems for those living in such precarity (Davis, 2006; Harvey, 2012; Standing, 2011), this paper foregrounds the everyday agentive struggle of a group of young people who self-identify with ‘hustling’ as a way to socially navigate precarious urban environments beyond the (rule governed) ‘paid job’ and advance their own (sometimes individual, sometimes shared) interests against the odds (Vigh, 2006). From empirical research conducted in Nairobi over the last 10 years, I build an account of ‘hustle’ to braid and thicken scholarship on ‘making do’ (McKensie, 2015) and (or as central to) making a living through urban uncertainties across the global North and South.

Hustling challenges dominant understandings of precarity and working uncertainties not through new categorisations and “ontology-building” (Gibson-Graham, 2003: 35), but rather through the reclaiming of a familiar—seemingly prosaic, certainly loaded—vocabulary. ‘The hustle’ is advanced as a collective condition of individual insecurity disproportionately distributed amongst young people navigating uncertainty in irregular employment through prolonged states of “waithood” (Honwana, 2012). Hustling emerges from the practices of Kenyan youth, who through engaging in informal waste labour in Nairobi, combine hand-to-mouth survivalism, shrewd improvisation, and a vibrant ‘ghetto-based’ politics of struggle that contests various appearances of authority. These Nairobi youth waste workers might characterise an “ordinariness” in their urban struggle (Robinson, 2006; Myers, 2011), people who ‘get by’ rather than exotic slum dwellers who are differentiated and negated by their informal socio-economic practices (Ferguson, 2006; Roitman, 1990; Said, 1973).

By conceptualising the affirmative possibilities of hustle as a situated activity in Nairobi *and* a travelling concept, this article contests tropes across North and South that portray uncertainty and precarious labour markets (including informal economies) as either pathologies of despair and deviance to be fixed, or as enhanced flexibility and innovation. Theory here emerges from Nairobi youth subaltern voices, whose descriptive and analytical skills typically escape formal political and economic recognition. I argue that empirical material born out of an urban ethnography in an East African ‘slum’ may have broader resonance elsewhere, offering a useful analytical frame for understanding wider conditions of uncertainty for young people across geographies. Therefore the ‘hustle’ is mobilized as an analytical and political frame that both normalises and affirms experiences of uncertainty. The paper aims to connect experiences of youth and precarious labour markets in rapidly urbanising cities of the global South back to industrialised (or post-industrial) cities of the global North (Robinson, 2011), inviting thinking across urban experiences of struggle in relation (but not limited) to work, in a way that starts from the urban South (Richardson and Skott-Myhre, 2012; Myers 2011; Wacquant, 2008).

The article is structured in three sections. The first section starts by introducing the empirical context to which the rest of the conceptual discussion is tied. From there, the discussion locates ‘hustling’ within broader urban scholarship on youth and waithood, urban informality, and precarious work. I focus on postcolonial everyday approaches to the city to suggest that ordinary and makeshift urban practices occur across geographies (and increasingly in the global North), where ‘crises’ become unexceptional, and where coping with uncertainty is normalised. The second section positions hustle as a situated cultural economic practice, but one that transcends geographies in its logics. I trace a genealogy of the term ‘hustle’, then demonstrate how hustle pushes us to “think from the south”, drawing more explicitly on the empirical insights from the Nairobi hustle economy. The third section argues that the conceptual contribution of hustle is two-fold: it encourages youth geographies to turn to the ordinary and oft overlooked individual agencies and experiences that challenge dominant conceptions of progress and adulthood. Additionally, it necessitates alternative accounts of geographies of (precarious) work that emerge through diverse forms of making do, distribution and accumulation that turn devalued or invisible practices into meaningful though perhaps unorthodox social and economic experiments (Carr and Gibson, 2016; Ferguson, 2015). I conclude with reflections on the political implications of hustling.

II Hustle and Urban Uncertainties

1. *Theorising from Nairobi ghettos*

Hustling is played out through conditions of youth beyond demographic categorisation. Rather, for the ‘youth’ (re)produced through and producing the hustle economy, generative possibilities emerge from everyday experiences of uncertainty across urban spheres whilst various forms of micro-exploitation and competing interests are continuously negotiated and managed (Cooper and Pratten, 2014; Di Nunzio, 2014; Dolan and Roll, 2013; Jeffrey, 2010; Meagher, 2013; Thieme, 2013). Through this contradictory condition, hustling illustrates how the unofficial “real economy” (MacGaffey, 1991) works to (re)produce youth as a process of making do that negotiates the entanglements of crises and waiting while moving towards the asymptotic horizons of ‘adulthood’. Thus, hustling frames urban youth as uncertain, off-grid, and vulnerable, yet not without logics and agency that can simultaneously combat and perpetuate conditions of adversity (Jauregui, 2009; Saitta et al, 2013; Vigh, 2006).

For Nairobi youth who are the first post-independence generation born and raised in urban informal settlements (and refer to their neighbourhoods as ‘the ghetto’), ‘hustling’ is integral to everyday vernacular. Over the years, my research has paid closer attention to this under-examined local street argot and its deeper significance. Misleading in its nebulous and presumed illegitimate connotations, hustling in Nairobi ghettos encompasses an assemblage of everyday struggles, dealings, and opportunistic practices in the absence of formal institutional support of any kind. For street children, hustle is tied to daily survival and short-term gains to secure the next meal (referred to as “feeding my stomach”) or shelter for that night. For organized youth groups who have become established (albeit informal) waste workers in their neighbourhoods, hustle combines the daily graft of garbage collection, with the long-term strategies to secure their economic zone and customer-bases, and keep diversifying their sources of income to manage the inherent risks of volatile and unpredictable local economies. On some (if not most) days, hustling involves defying rules and finding alternative routes to accessing and even distributing both basic services (like electricity and water) and ‘nice to haves’ (like the latest Timberland shoes or a smart phone) that equip ‘local’ struggles with ‘global’ consumer cosmopolitanisms. For certain individuals within youth groups, hustling involves navigating eclectic constellations of potential ‘sponsors’ (NGOs, social enterprises, and local politicians) for forms of support that would benefit the local commons. The hustle is thus an economic performance that might enact yet also undo appearances of urban marginality; as entrepreneurial hustlers strain to raise funds to build a state of the art football pitch in the middle of the ghetto, and a community social hall.

Hustlers then are caught in a web of “protracted liminality” (Thieme, 2013) as the harsh realities of urban life has come to muddle the cultural constructions of life stages. Through this they become versed in starting over, in recovering from crises of all sorts, from the mundane black-outs disrupting a job, to rebuilding their inventory of recovered waste plastic the day after a theft, to relatives’ unforeseen hospital bills that they are expected to pay for by once again depleting life savings, each an example that occurred to one or more research participants in the time I spent in Nairobi. The non-linear and unpredictable vicissitudes of hustling that move in ebbs and flows between opportunity and set-back, hope and disappointment are inextricably linked with the period of limbo experienced by ‘youth’, and with spatio-temporalities of the the informal economy, developed below. As the empirical vignette above demonstrates,

as an urban condition, practice, and performed identity, 'hustle' becomes mobilised as a kind of choreographic practice in which aptitudes for navigating various rhythms and states of emergency become critical to the skills associated with the uncertainties of living on edge (Pieterse and Simone, 2013; Vigh, 2006).

Thus, the temporalities and geographies of 'hustling' observed in Nairobi present affinities with but also departs from various literatures related to geographies of uncertainty. This section advances three frames for experiences of urban uncertainty to make the case for travelling across geographies: youth, informality and precarity. The forms of 'getting by' that sustain each of these experiences can emerge as negation, 'merely' a mode of survival. Setting the stage for the rest of the discussion, I foreground such urban uncertainties more positively for the forms of adaptation that they engender. The suggestion is that processes of working with and through uncertainty in cities of the South (such as Nairobi) resonate with experiences of precarious work in the North, which together might be understood through 'the hustle' as I will go on to develop.

2. *Youth*

The category of 'youth' has been a means for examining the cultural expectations and pressures that shaped youthhood and transitions to adulthood across geographies (Honwana and De Boeck, 2005; Jeffrey and Dyson, 2009; Mead, 1928; Willis, 1977). Urban scholars, anthropologists, and development geographers have been studying youth in the global South where general structures of institutional support have been unevenly distributed and with varying effects within the broader realities of rapid urbanization. Increasing economic uncertainty for youth in particular has elicited a variety of competing but often homogenised responses to the "youth bulge" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005). Low-income youth in cities across geographies, particularly from marginalised or minority backgrounds, have been portrayed as a troubled, dangerous, and vulnerable demographic, stuck in persistent un(der)employment, depicted as either victims of structural injustice, or the "ticking time bomb" that poses potentially significant risks to urban order (Finn and Oldfield, 2015; Sommers, 2010; Venkatesh and Kassimir, 2006). This section suggests that conceptualisations of 'youth' as a period of suspended transition connect the experiences of youth in the global South to those in the North. Firstly, across geographies, youth are part of a disaffected and disenfranchised social group that is simultaneously off-grid in relation to work, but also highly connected to (ICT) networks of solidarity. Secondly, they are caught in a state of "protracted liminality" and "waithood" which assumes a deferral of (but also a challenge to) normative cultural, social and economic structures. Thirdly, youth experience alternative interpretations and ways of making a living that do not necessarily fit within formal economic norms.

The changing role of state welfare since the 1980's, economic liberalisation policies, and the shifts in labour conditions have increasingly undermined young people's efforts and criteria associated with adulthood (Diouf, 2003; Jeffrey, 2013; Mabala, 2011; Thieme, 2013). Austerity measures aggravate the confluence of penalties young people face as they tackle insecurity of housing and service provision, rising inequality, and especially the growing realities of insecure labour and systemic under-employment. And while they witness the dissolution of these structures of support, this generation of youth finds itself reproduced via 'new' and apparently decentred networks of information and communication technologies. The intensification and acceleration of global social media have turned seemingly isolated qualms into widespread geographies of outrage, through the formation of global movements of solidarity and shared struggle animated across digital platforms and "hashtags" (Castells, 2012). This generation of youth are super-connected yet disaffected, super-informed yet expressing their aspirations and identities through new mediums and vernaculars. Though expressions of revolt and the dramatic effects of 'austerity urbanism' on geographies and insecurities of work are not limited to youth (Tonkiss, 2013), these technologies connect youth across localities, as situated yet global disaffection becomes apparent through social media reporting (Castells 2012).

It is against this backdrop that some scholars have articulated the notion of 'waithood', described as the prolonged period of suspension between childhood and adulthood, which has affected an entire generation 'in waiting' (Dhillon and Yousef, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010; Honwana, 2012). Although the concept of waithood at first emerged in relation to Middle-Eastern and African contexts where youth unemployment was especially high; similar employment insecurities and experiences of limbo affect youth across geographies, particularly since the financial crisis. It was telling that in 2015, the BBC Radio 4 produced a three-part series on 'waithood', with voices from Ghana, Spain, and the US featured to describe what it

meant across different cultural contexts to deal with deferred aspirations.¹ Of course, cities in the North have always harboured marginalised communities and individuals who have experienced poverty and precarious living conditions. Hobbs' work on young entrepreneurs in London's "dodgy" East End (1988) and Willis' study of working class young men dealing with social conflict with middle class peers in school only to later assume low-paid work and perpetuate the class-based cycle of inequality (1977), are reminders that struggles to find one's place in (despite of) the labour market have long been an urban reality of industrial capitalism. But we might reasonably ask, given the noted high rates of youth unemployment, how (and with what implications) the cultural-economic experience and production of youth has altered since the late 20th century.

The similarities between infrastructures, services, and planning available to cities of the North and those of the South should not be exaggerated, but there are remarkable parallels in how young people globally are increasingly experiencing a state of normalised uncertainty related to housing, employment and service provision across social classes, migrant or citizenship status, despite variations in life chances and modes of belonging (Cooper and Pratten 2014; Tonkiss, 2013; Vasudevan, 2014). Reflecting on 'hustle' as an urban condition opens up opportunities for "comparative gesturing" with increasingly fragile advanced capitalist economies (Robinson, 2011) and for questioning normative understandings of adulthood. 'Hustle' challenges situated cultural expectations of adulthood that have been echoed in the conception of 'waithood', which have tended to refer to the dramatic deferral or prolonged suspension from particular aspirations. These are, across social contexts, often contingent on culturally prescribed milestones such as marriage, a stable job, and ability to afford property in some form (Honwana 2012; Sommers, 2012). Waithood, therefore, describes a suspension from particular expectations, perhaps giving way to alternative interpretations and realisation of goals, when former conceptions of work, life, love, and property are increasingly being reconfigured. In particular, the state of uncertainty associated with youth and their unstable futures expose different working practices and relationships between work and life. Clearly, geographies of youth in the global South shed light on the noteworthy coping mechanisms and strategies for dealing with everyday crises and waithood and merit increasing attention as urban phenomena in their own right (Jeffrey, 2010; Honwana, 2012). But the climate of austerity urbanism provokes study and connections across the global North/South divide, where seemingly fixed categories across cultural spheres are being redefined, as a result of necessity, crisis, and suspension of various sorts.

As an increasing number of young people enter the labour market with diminishing opportunities to even think about chasing the "cruel optimism" and false promise of a particular "good life" (Berlant, 2011), new parameters, aspirations and goalposts are being built. So here it becomes especially useful, theoretically and empirically, to look towards what has been happening for decades in cities that are "urbanising without industrialising" (Davis, 2006). In cities of the global South, livelihoods take on diverse forms of 'work', that not only operate outside capitalist industrial modes of productive, but also often outside regulated spheres. Therefore, in order to understand the plural experiences of suspended transition through the various calculated strategies related to both work and social experiments, we must look at one of the dominant frames through which livelihoods in the global South have been theorized to date: informality. Against the backdrop of post-Fordism, the oil crisis, and Structural Adjustment Programmes, the informal sector has been the major repository of work opportunities and income generation in the global South since the 1970's (Ferguson, 2006; Hart, 1973; Roy and Alsayaad, 2004). Informality has come to describe all modes of urban practice from infrastructures that are centrally unplanned but locally cobbled together into makeshift arrangements of provisioning (Amin, 2014; Simone 2004; Vasudevan 2014), to the diversification of income opportunities being a matter of everyday common sense and risk mitigation (Collier et al, 2009; Moser, 1998; Thieme, 2015).

3. Informality

Since the 1970's, debates amongst scholars ensued concerning the relationship between rapid rates of urbanisation in the global South, the growth and diversity of the informal sector, and the roles of both the state and formal market economies in enabling informality. This section makes three key points. Firstly, depictions of informality emphasising *what is absent, transient or defective* require counter-narratives to conceptualise what actually *is* taking place (Roitman, 1990). Secondly, makeshift urban practices are increasingly also taking place in the global North where uncertainty is increasingly normalized. Thirdly, if youth are structurally excluded from formal realms of political and economic organization not

¹ The programmes are available on: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p036ntvs>

only in the South but also in the North, closer attention needs to be paid to the alternative strategies and practices of suspension and struggle of those who ‘hustle’ and deal with everyday uncertainties.

Keith Hart’s seminal work in Accra, Ghana made the case for investigating and theorizing the increasingly prevalent diverse micro-economic practices of new urban migrants in this recently independent African city (Hart, 1973; ILO, 1972). King conducted a longitudinal ethnography of *Jua Kali* in Nairobi (King, 1996) to demonstrate that the urban informal economy was contingent on the arrangements between an absentee post-colonial state and citizens for whom vast opportunities associated with work and income generation continued to develop outside the formal labour market. More recently, apocalyptic scenarios associated with a “planet of slums” depict informality as a failure of capitalism to absorb a growing surplus urban labour (Davis, 2006). The informal sector, under this light, is regarded at best as piecemeal, survivalist, and akin to a poverty trap (Marx et al, 2013). At worst, it serves as a breeding ground for an increasingly abject and fractured urban sub-proletariat class waiting to erupt.

In contrast, optimistic accounts of informality speak of rapidly growing informal cityscapes as “arrival cities”, not to be abhorred or feared but rather viewed as rational and inevitable forms of 21st century urbanization (Saunders, 2010). Similarly, Huchzermeyer’s (2010) comparative study of 19th century Berlin and 21st century Nairobi argues that slum dwellers are often willing to live in slums because of the flexibility it gives in terms of affordable rent and the ability to negotiate the price of most things in a local economy adapted to the volatility of household income streams. These conditions provide forms of support that would not be available in more permanent and up-market neighbourhoods, as explored in Holston’s work in Brazil (2009) and Bayat’s work in Iran (1998), where slum dwellers’ everyday “encroachments” become a form of political practice in their own right.

Neurwirth (2012) offers a different reading of informality all together, moving away from familiar terminologies and their normative connotations (Potts, 2007), and re-appropriating the term “System D” — D standing for *débrouillardise* to connote making do, thinking fast, and managing under adverse conditions. Neurwirth moves away from debates concerned with whether the informal sector is a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ thing, or a form of “popular empowerment or political exclusion” (Ferguson, 1994; Meagher, 2011). Instead, System D depicts the diverse resourceful and frugal capacities of countless individuals making up, in aggregate terms, a rapidly rising ‘real’ shadow economy that has been the largest generator of jobs in the post-2008 economy, across post-industrial and industrialising countries alike. Similarly, Sundaram (2010) examines the diversity of activities that hinge on various forms of *jugaad*, (Jeffrey 2010; Radgou *et al*, 2012) improvisation and “piracy” in Delhi, that often blur the lines between legality and illegality, and may at times trigger claims to urban citizenship and visibility, and at other times become part of underground practices that evade surveillance and being seen. Despite the significant risks associated with these practices, piracy has become, to many urban dwellers cut off from access to basic goods and services, a way to facilitate resources for the urban poor unable to enter (or cut off from) the legal city (Datta 2012).

Challenging depictions of informality that focus predominantly on what is missing, accounts of “System D” and “pirate modernity” offer important counter-narratives, emphasizing the ways in which these urban practices may be off-grid but nevertheless engage intimately with wider global markets and commercial processes. As such, they inhabit urban life across geographies. In ‘thinking from the south’, where System D and piracy may be more pronounced and integral to the way a city (like Delhi or Nairobi) operates, we might see alternative regimes of ordering and provisioning (Amin, 2014; Valverde, 2011) that rely on moments of piracy, system D and “do it yourself” urbanism in cities of the global North where it is increasingly difficult to access services and waged work (see Kinder, 2016). These depictions of creative “provisional agency” (Jauregui, 2014) and accepted informality at play in the face of precarious urban environments is what Simone has described as “cityness”, or the city’s plural capacities to reshape the ways in which people, places, materials and ideas come together (Simone, 2009; Vasudevan, 2014). In his work on squatting in Berlin, Vasudevan conceptualises the “makeshift city” as a paradoxical interplay of “unjust structures of dispossession, exclusion and violence that define and shape the experiences of many of the world’s urban dwellers”, but also the “possibilities – complex, makeshift and experimental – for extending, improvising and sustaining life in settings of pervasive marginality” (Vasudevan 2014: 16). Here it is important not to romanticise portrayals of the improvisational nature of informality (Varley, 2013). The point is that for most urban residents who live and work in conditions of

resource scarcity and adversity, the needs and possibilities are subject to the paradoxes of makeshift urbanism that go beyond tensions with or avoidance of formal labour markets and legal systems.

If informality, as Roy (2004) has argued, has become a “mode of practice,” this mode of practice is increasingly common across not only rapidly growing cities in the global South, but also in the shrinking, de-industrialised, or in-recession cities of the global North. Informality inhabits a spatial and temporal category, often associated with low-income neighbourhood where formal service provision is outstripped by demand, it takes on an organisational form through formally unregulated labour relations, and it can be a governmental tool for the allocation of resources (McFarlane et al, 2012). But it is also a negotiable tool, continuously performing but also contesting and redefining the understated codes that govern conduct in any given informal practice (Anderson, 1999; Venkatesh, 2006). As Saitta (2013) argues in relation to informal economies in Italy, and as reflected in debates concerning the recent Eurozone bailout and the Greek crisis, informality does not only take place outside the purview of the law and state, it is often integral to the way things work across public/private spheres. Questions of informality are as much a concern of politics and social policy as they are about economics, and about how “different classes of citizens practice informality in relation to available structures of opportunity” (Saitta *et al*, 2013: 1) broadly defined.

There is a notable parallel between the tropes of youthhood and the informal sector, both generally stigmatized as transient states. Youth navigating uncertain urban terrain today must be examined as a phenomenon not only prevalent in makeshift urbanism of post-colonial cities but also in austerity urbanism of post-industrial cities. Therefore, in “thinking from the South”, we might see familiar things in different ways (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012: 2; Robinson and Parnell, 2012), but we might also see unfamiliar things as reflective of elsewhere, challenging certain dominant binaries and paradigms associated with economic and work life that pervade our legal, economic, and institutional categories in advanced capitalist economies. Youth whose position is structurally excluded from realms of representational politics and economic opportunities are a major part of urban experience, in African cities, but also across numerous other geographies. Whilst comparing their experiences and the contexts in which they find themselves risks glossing over some of the stark contrasts in the scale of urban demographic shifts inversely proportionate to available resources, access to support and safety nets, there are noteworthy nodes of similarity in their narratives of struggle and disaffection, and how they construct livelihood strategies in the face of uncertainty. In the last few years, the notion of precarity has pervaded the performance of protest and categorisations of vulnerability associated with uncertain labour markets and futures. Yet, ‘precarity’ has been predominantly associated with the Global North. Through the hustle, precarity can be understood as having resonances with informality.

4. Precarity

Precarity or “*précarité*” has since the 1990’s been associated with conditions of exploitation in contexts of urban adversity and scarcity of waged employment (Bourdieu, 1998). Since the early 2000’s, precarity has grown as a conceptual and political platform for social struggles associated with times of austerity across industrialised and post-industrial contexts (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). Associated with the structural inequalities of neoliberalism, particularly the retreat of a welfare state and the casualization of labour (Vosko, 2000), precarity has become a proxy for in work poverty.

Standing (2011) in particular has received widespread attention for his identification of a “precarariat” class. Building on his years as an ILO economist between 1975 and 2006 focused on the vulnerabilities associated with ‘flexible’ labour conditions in OECD countries, Standing (2011) examines the extent to which labour standards ought to be defined in relation to advanced capitalist countries. He defines seven forms of labour security: adequate opportunities, protection against dismissal, barriers to skill dilution, health and safety regulation, training, stable income, representation. He argues that these have historically been viewed as absent in informal economies, but are also increasingly eroded in post-industrial, ‘advanced’ economies in the 21st century (Bremner, 2013). Alongside his seven categories of labour security, Standing argues that today there are seven socio-economic classes of labourers. These are the elites (a tiny number of absurdly rich); the (stably employed) ‘salariat’; (skilled consultant-type) ‘proficians’; a dwindling working class; the ‘precarariat’ (temporary part-time workers); the unemployed; and the ‘misfits’. While Standing’s commentary offers an important analysis of changing labour conditions across geographies, his conceptualisation and categorisation of a new social and economic class raise several concerns. In Standing’s structure, the precariat, the unemployed, and the misfits are defined by what they are *not* engaged in. They are not part of other groups or prescribed economic models (Clay and Philips, 2015; Ferguson, 2006; Roitman, 1990). Not only are they engaged (at best) in insecure forms

of employment, but they are also in many ways branded as welfare cases, unable to organise into a class conscious politicised cohort unlike the unionised working class of a former Fordist era, or exploit the advantages of professional mobilities like wealthier groups.

As a conceptual lens, precarity offers important levers for advancing engagements concerned with insecurity associated with work and sheds light on the effects of vulnerability on those forced to enter flexible and intermittent structures of work. However, if ‘precarious’ are positioned as largely victims of structural exploitation within contemporary insecure labour markets (Bourdieu, 1998; Standing, 2011; Davis, 2006), who live life under others’ control (Berlant, 2011), we are left with little room for imagining and conceptualising political agencies of those caught in webs of precarity. Precarity does, however, offer useful insight as a *political* concept that moves away from socio-economic approaches to work that largely perceive social conditions to be contingent on modes of production (Ferguson, 2015; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). Popular narratives of informality and precarity are often associated with stigma and misconceptions of poverty, namely that the poor lack planning and economic rationality (Collins *et al.*, 2009). If, following Neilson and Rossiter’s argument (2008), “precarity is the norm” and “Fordism is the exception”, then it becomes theoretically and politically crucial to *see* the “cultural logics” (Gidwani, 2001) that are at play amongst those navigating conditions of wretchedness and precarity across the North/South. This brings me to ‘hustle’, a notion that resonates across diverse geographical contexts as a set of loosely common practices, conditions and identities amongst youth navigating the precarious present across post-Fordist, and post-colonial informal economies.

II The Hustle as cultural economic practice

The ‘hustle’ infers a constant pragmatic search for alternative structures of opportunity outside formal education, employment, and service provision. It assumes a continuous management of risk associated with living and working beyond formal institutional norms. This section shows how the personae and practices of “hustling” operate through experiences of urban uncertainty. Hustling evokes, expands on and in some cases is in tension with other articulations of shrewd improvisation, frugal innovation and creative calculation of risk examined above, including precarity but also *jugaad*, “System D” “pirate modernity”, “makeshift urbanism”, “misfit economy” (Clay and Phillips, 2015; Jauregui, 2014; Jeffrey, 2010; Radjou *et al.*, 2012; Neurwirth, 2012; Sundaram, 2010). I suggest that ‘hustling’ translates across localities as representations and practices that entangle youth, informality and precarity. As a conceptual category, hustle rethinks contemporary experiences of urban uncertainty that couple struggle and hope. Weaving ethnographic insights into a broader analytical frame for conceiving and researching ‘hustling’ practices, the following discussion engages with the politics of creative experiments in the face of urban struggles. To do this, two associations with the term ‘hustle’ are made explicit. First, the prototypical figure of the ‘hustler’ as first featured in film, and later in popular culture, is invoked in the discussion on ‘dirty work’. Second, ‘hustling’ is conceptualized through the cultural economic logics and knowledge of extra-legal and informal practices of ‘getting by’, illustrating that hustle goes beyond familiar conceptualisations of informality and precarious work to describe a process of being caught in—but also creatively detangling oneself from—the vicissitudes of labour limbo. Throughout this section, empirical inflections from Nairobi fieldwork are interwoven to set in dialogue existing academic theory and the field from which the article proposes to ‘theorise up.’

1. Dirty work

As epitomized in Tevis’ 1959 novel, *The Hustler* (followed quickly thereafter with the epic Paul Newman film adaptation), the term ‘hustle’ has held a connotation of individualistic rogue practices performed by a trickster operating within or in relation to the criminal underground economy. Polsky’s book first published in 1967, *Hustlers, Beats and Others*, like Tevis, explores the underworld of American pool halls. Polsky offers a critical and uniquely (for its time) reflexive sociological commentary on mainstream perceptions and criminological classifications of urban deviance. He advocates for engaging ethnographically with so-called ‘deviant’ practices in their everyday urban setting, urging social scientists of all stripes to study and appreciate practices normatively considered delinquent or illegal by examining them as social practices in their own right. It is by conducting such an ethnographic study of these practices outside the realm of their criminological or societal propriety that the skills, motivations, and logics of these ‘hustlers’ can better be understood. His theory of “crime as moonlighting” is of particular interest here. Polsky’s pool hall ‘hustlers’ dedicate themselves, part-time, to vocations that technically break the law (i.e. gambling) though they never really get caught. So these hustling practices are firstly, a supplementary income to their other ‘normal’ (but low-paid) jobs, and secondly on the periphery of legality so

always 'risky business' but safe enough given the unlikelihood of law enforcement paying much attention to these particular spaces. In other words, moonlighting was the "extra bit on the side".

To hustle has generally, since the 1960's, been associated with an underworld of morally and legally dubious practices (Duneier, 2000). Set in a post-colonial urban African context, the hustler was later classified by Hart as part of the "illegitimate" category of the informal sector along with prostitution and "spivs" (Hart, 1973). In the 1980's, the concept of hustle became central to the repartee of African American hip hop genres (Roffelson, 2013; Jay-Z, 2010), reflecting an amalgam of politicized narratives depicting inner-city poverty, speaking out against the under-exposed or misunderstood realities of urban injustice, violence, and struggle in everyday street life of the post-Fordist American 'ghettos' of West Baltimore, Detroit, and Brooklyn. These accounts relayed the obstacles for youth who were systematically excluded from mainstream employment opportunities, relegated as urban outcasts, school drop outs and more accustomed to the revolving door of prison than holding a steady job (McKensie, 2015; Wacquant, 2008; Wilson, 2009).

Ideas and practices associated with hustling translates across different contexts, born out of urban marginality in the shadows of the post-American city, redeployed in a rapidly changing post-colonial African city, and resonating with what Mali born Paris based Hip Hop artist Oxmo Puccino calls 'Ghettos du monde' (Rollefson, 2013). As Richardson and Skott-Myhre (2012: 5) argue, every city "knows marginality, poverty and stigma". The notion of hustling has travelled from the American pool halls, to African American Hip Hop (Jay-Z, 2010), to post-colonial African cities (Fredericks, 2012; Ntarangwi, 2009; Pieterse, 2010; Roffelson 2013), to Detroit, Paris, Berlin and London. In Nairobi, the term "hustle" (used from English and not in translation) has become folded into the "creolized argot" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005) of *Sheng*, a combination of Swahili, English, and neighbourhood-based badinage. In doing so, hustling offers a conceptual framing device for rethinking the relationship between youth and work practices in urban contexts of resource scarcity. In this regard, hustle may therefore be a form of 'traveling theory' (Said, 1983).

While hustling in the Nairobi context does suppose blurring the lines between what is normatively considered licit and illicit work, it also implies shrewd improvisation and adaptation to conditions of adversity (Jeffrey, 2010) that combat social injustice and unequal resource distribution. As an embodied practice, hustling inhabits the overlapping spaces between work and "hanging about" (Jones, 2012) that characterise work taking place in street economies, and often deliberately re-appropriates stigma to fashion creative expressions of "struggle and insurgency" (Jay-Z, 2010) through various "politics of style" manifest through forms of dress, music, street argot and other cultural repertoires (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005). These popular repertoires complicate the legalistic and economic categories seeking to express vulnerabilities and insecurities associated with work and legitimacy in the city. And as seen and heard through such vernaculars as Hip Hop and other urban stories from the streets, these allegories travel and resonate with youth whose accounts of localized struggle and exploits speak to youth experiencing their own elsewhere.

Informed by but moving beyond popular cultural registers, the notion of hustling offers an important commentary on youth's relationship to work in the makeshift city. In the context of Nairobi, employment is scarce but 'work' (beyond industrial labour production) is made everywhere. Many youth born and raised in the slums became involved, to different degrees, with small scale, neighbourhood based 'trash is cash' collectives. A sophisticated but fragmented social and economic organization, garbage collection groups territorially mark each sub-neighbourhood of the slums in gang-like formation. Each group collects residential garbage from up to 400 households for a monthly fixed fee, and in order to insert exchange value into this solid 'waste', sorted through its composite materials to decipher what was worth shredding (such as plastics), re-using (such as metal), fixing (such as electronics), and re-selling. Multiple sources of income are sought at any one time to mitigate risk, so "moonlighting" is the norm as opposed to "something extra on the side."

These practices are seeking to render "dirty work" and liminal spaces more visible (recognized by local authorities and community residents alike), but equally operate and thrive under the radar, resisting any form of wider collective federation or institutionalization. These hustle economies remain fragmented and small scale in their operations and anchored in place-based social ties. They are politically charged on particular days when dumping on the side of the road becomes a strategic provocation (and shaming device) to the local authorities, and are inflected with style as spaces and moments of work and leisure,

craft and banter, running and waiting, pushing and pulling, getting dirty and looking good, overlap and become integral to the habitus of hustle.

To hustle is therefore an urban condition (the hustle), an action (to hustle), and an identity marker (to be a hustler) that evoke multiple forms of prosaic, industrious, and political labour: combining everyday survivalism and waiting, strategic diversification of income streams to mitigate risk, punctual contestation of authority in order to access key services and resources, and the ability to navigate and even shape local politics of distribution (Ferguson, 2015). All the while, the hustle is articulated through various modulations of style and performance, which include what may appear like various stations of “idling” between jobs (referred to as *kuzurura*), yet become crucial moments that exercise the ability to endure and strategically manage constant uncertainty. These performed acts of loitering are charged with both a demeanor of apathy towards the future and the understated making of (sometimes ambitious) plans.

2. *Cultural logics of Hustle*

Hustling as described and experienced by Nairobi youth in my research is place-based but also akin to Waage’s study of youth in Cameroon, who examines the multiple social meanings of the stock phrase commonly used by youth in Ngaoundéré, “je me débrouille” (I make do, think fast), to explain how they cope with unforeseen everyday life situations and challenges in the urban social environment, and also how *la débrouille* becomes itself part of their “cultural repertoire for making a life” (2006: 23). The confluence between seizing the moment, making do and opportunism is also reflected in Jeremy Jones’ work in Zimbabwe (2010) describing how entrepreneurial youth have responded to recent economic crisis through the *kukiya-kiya* economy, depicting expressions of capitalist endeavour, creative improvisation and hustle.

Hustling in the Nairobi context resembles aspects of *jugaad* (Jeffrey, 2010) and *provisional agency* (Jauregui, 2014) in the Indian context, but equally departs from these logics. Jeffrey (2010) writes about “timepass” amongst educated unemployed lower-middle class youth whose aspirations are rarely met, and who end up engaging in *jugaad* practices where they become tricksters, opportunistic “political entrepreneurs”, part of the fabric of generalised and normalised corruption. Jauregui conceptualises *jugaad* as a form of ‘provisional agency’, “both a capability to provide a social good and a temporary means of mobility geared toward a better future” (2014: 76). While *jugaad* assumes a better future, working towards an imagined escape out of the present struggle, hustling assumes the struggle as a condition of urban life, a possibility in its own right.

Vigh (2006)’s ethnographic account of at risk youth and their modes of *dubriagem* or “social navigation” in wartime Guinea Bissau is especially relevant to the hustling practices of Nairobi youth. Vigh focuses not on warlords (the obvious structures of power) but instead on youth war soldiers, and the everyday efforts that youth put into surviving and forging a future for themselves in a context of persistent poverty, conflict and motion (2006: 142). These different accounts of youth’s everyday “zigzag” economies (Jeffrey, 2013) and insurgencies to claim but also redefine the terms of urban citizenship (Holston, 2009) reveal the contradictory implications of uncertainty where youth expose, in raw, rough, and provocative terms, the structural injustices of uneven distribution of resources and rising inequalities. But unlike many of their elders who assert their “rights to the city” through dignified claims to housing or land tenure (Attoh, 2011; Weru, 2004), hustlers provoke mainstream senses of propriety, and definitions of ‘upgrading’ through alternative channels of expression, re-appropriations of urban public spaces, and turning the most undesirable, undignified realms such as waste into a confluence of economic opportunity, community service, and territorial zoning within their neighbourhoods. While their elders exercise a “politics of patience” (Appadurai, 2001) and a certain deference for endless deliberation and following the order in which proceedings happen, hustlers operate within a politics of urgency, where time may be spent waiting for the next opportunity but cannot be drawn out through claims to a material right. In other words, hustlers refuse to belong to the city as is, but they make a claim to a symbolic right, that is making the city as it could be otherwise (Harvey, 2008; Simone, 2012).

Investigating geographies of urban struggle particularly amongst marginalized youth offers an opportunity to deepen “comparative gestures” (Robinson 2011), theorising not only from the South (in itself a vital project), but also from the neighbourhoods where the habitus of hustling has naturalized particular attitudes and behaviours amongst youth whose expectations do not include access to former Fordist markers of adulthood such as secure housing or employment. These attitudes and behaviours have in turn shaped diverse aspirations and outcomes within communities, where “getting by” in a low-income

neighbourhood (McKensie, 2015; Venkatesh, 2006). The dualism between dejection towards the present and desire for an imagined future, have become translated into various genres of urban youth expression.

The “politics of style” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005) from the Nairobi ‘ghettos’ are transposed onto the informal urban transport *matatu* system, which literally travelled throughout the city’s arteries, moving from the ghettos to the Central Business District, across the city’s main roads and off-roads. Technically illegal but used by the majority of Nairobi citizens, the *matatu* featured a paradoxical urban popular fashion that almost romanticised the daily *mêlée* of “ghetto life” through out of turn Swahili Hip Hop telling raw stories of ghetto life, with bold graffiti on the canvases of these often dilapidated Nissan minivans rendering each one its own unique work of mobile urban art (FERENCE, 2016). On the roadside, ordinary commerce is punctuated by imaginaries of elsewhere, as the stylised portraits of popular culture icons featured on the murals of barbershops in the slums (Ntarangwi, 2009; Weiss, 2009). Moments of ‘bluffing’ (Newell, 2012) the good life combined with affinities with the ghettos of West Baltimore or Brooklyn are entangled with raw expressions of struggle rooted in everyday local reality. These appeals to elsewhere are paradoxically juxtaposed with no intention to ever leave ‘the hood’. In Nairobi, this characterised youth’s liminal position in space and time, as they live and work in the poorest neighbourhoods, occasionally travelling to middle class enclaves of consumption and social gathering for leisure, but always return to the ‘base’ where they have made a life and feel they belonged.

Hustle as it is deployed amongst Nairobi youth combines the urgency of everyday economic survival with aspirational urban identities anchored in making the everyday struggle meaningful and culturally significant. It can be survivalist but aspirational at the same time, deployed by youth on their own terms to face conditions beyond their control. It does more than Standing’s concept of precarity, which oscillates between description and prescription, because hustling becomes a form of pragmatic politics contesting different levels of authority and power by claiming agency through the deliberate appropriation, in some cases, of the seemingly least desirable forms of work. Louise Waite’s work offers a more useful critical geography of precarity. Referring to precarity as “life worlds characterised by uncertainty and insecurity”, Waite argues that it is double-edged as it implies both a “condition and a possible rallying point for resistance” (2009: 412). Hustling, therefore, is akin to Waite’s understanding of precarity as both a condition of contemporary urban life, and as a possible hook for contestation. The waste workers of Nairobi, the self-identified hustlers of the city, are neither unorganised nor economically inactive, and they certainly do not depend on hand-outs. They expertly dance from one state of (in)security (what Standing might call ‘class’) to another. They are technically unemployed but manage diverse income streams from various class-types. Multinationals and NGOs hire them as skilled ‘proficians’ of urban engagement; local politicians, retailers and factory owners hire them as part-time labour; and they can sometimes be found amongst misfits of varying types. These hustlers’ ability to navigate “class fluidity” or rapidly changing levels of uncertainty means that they can be stigmatised as misfits one moment while hailed as “entrepreneurs” at other times. The inspiration and empirical evidence of this discussion may be locally specific to Nairobi and the particular rationalities of young people living in informal settlements. But the logics of hustle are evidence of the wider hybridization of precarious economic status, identity and politics found elsewhere. For example, these logic travels to the global North where a precariously employed young person on a zero-hour contract could be considered a ‘misfit’ tenant, and simultaneously celebrated as a potential “under 30” start-up entrepreneur (Clay and Phillips, 2015).

IV Conclusion: Harnessing the hustle

The article locates the possibilities for rethinking and researching urban precarious environments through the analytical frame of the hustle economy, drawing from ethnographic work conducted in Nairobi but presented here as a condition of contemporary urbanism amongst (though not limited to) youth, a set of working practices in the face of uncertainty, and a place-based performative politics of style that potentially speaks to multiple elsewheres. In connecting the literatures on informality and precarity to geographies of waitness and uncertainty, the conceptual lens of ‘hustle’ offers a way to capture the everyday incremental livelihood strategies that inform youth identities and expressions of resistance in the face of *both* failed promises *and* increasingly outmoded cultural expectations.

As the article argues, uncertainty and precarious urban environments are increasingly integral to ‘ordinary’ urban experience (Robinson, 2006). Under this register, diverse forms of hustling can become integral to a potentially progressive politics of adaptation and experimentation in times where dominant capitalist economic models and labour relations are undergoing dramatic shifts. These experiments have the potential to resist, escape, and rework hegemonic structures of power in incremental ways in the everyday city, and travel across localities to inspire new shared solidarities (Amin, 2014; De Certeau,

1984; Pieterse and Simone 2013). As such, the overlapping rhythms and spaces of work, social life, and contestations of authority are at once ephemeral, and yet become part of a rich repertoire of experiments that shape the alternative logics of the hustle economy, incorporating economic, individual and political implications for everyday struggles that redefine the terms of adulthood, and of the real economy tout court.

To finish, I make three points with regards to the future of hustle.

Firstly, as uncertainty related to work continues to grow globally, it seems urgent to enrich the economic and legalistic reading of informality and precarity with insight into the lived experiences of people for whom work may increasingly blur the line between the formal, informal and even criminal sector (Saitta *et al.*, 2013). Hustling in Nairobi slums reflects, albeit in variegated ways, broader trends in other urban spaces where it is increasingly difficult to imagine let alone attain one source of stable income and secure employment. Therefore, the ‘hustler’ who is able to adapt to a multitude of uncertainties and create multiple potential opportunities with diverse stations of remuneration, planning, aspirations, and disappointment, is not only a survivalist but also potentially an activist, a community organizer, an entrepreneur, an opportunistic *jack of all trades*. Therefore, young people’s strategies to “get by” are also shaped by and shaping cultures of learning, calculations of risk and reward, interpretations of work and parameters of hope.

Secondly, the conceptual category of hustle operates within a paradoxical reality. It infers particular stigma and loaded associations evocative of a palimpsest of politics of struggle, but equally in redeploying these narratives of hustle, new expressive articulations of urban struggle emerge and shape unlikely but important experiments. Incremental, off the grid, and on the margins though they may be, they are significant because they break away from (or reconfigure) the normative forms of capitalist labour and consumption. They contest dominant structures of opportunity (or lack thereof) and create new ones, that may be off the charts of what constitutes “value”, “a good job” or a specific “class”, but open up a range of questions related to urban life marked by incremental adaptation and improvisation in the face of uncertainty. Methodologically, this means as researchers we need to make it a priority to seek opportunities within and outside academia to bring those who study hustle and those who do hustle in conversation. This involves suspending normative categories of criminal or legal, and focusing on the skills, agencies, and resources that are constantly being carved out in times of adversity and scarcity. Here a crucial challenge emerges: Without displacing, romanticizing, or appropriating the hustle, we need to work with its progressive and generative dimensions, without condoning or collaborating with the structures that render young people’s lives precarious and vulnerable, as they face an attachment to yet dis-possession by volatile and uncertain futures.

Thirdly, one of the crucial questions this article raises for further research is whether the hustle economy should be read as (and desired to be) a transient state, or whether it might be regarded as a mode of urban life in its own right. We don’t know enough about these spaces of struggle and the everyday significance for youth whose experience involves navigating harsh realities of everyday life and uncertain futures within and around these socio-economic and spatial fields. Youth living or moving in and out of these realms have too often been defined by what is missing, defective, no longer valued, lawless, and deviant. In arguing that urban youth are “hustling” in cities across various urban contexts, I call for further investigation of hustling in various forms of urbanism where the state of ‘crisis’ has become integral to normalised uncertainty. The context and period of ‘youth’ is therefore lived through different yet overlapping experiences of uncertainty that relate to (but go beyond) ‘informality’ and ‘precarity’. I suggest ‘hustling’ as a way to foreground the everyday practices of makeshift urbanism through which (young) lives on edge produce and are produced through these uncertainties. Thus, the myriad experiments related to making a living that may lie outside formal employment relations challenge what is understood as a ‘productive activity,’ while also becoming, as hustle has in Nairobi and perhaps elsewhere in its own form, a kind of performative youthful practice of ‘getting by’ but also of ‘getting things done’.

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