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## **Street child spaces. Belonging, conflict and resistance in the city of Durban through the eyes of street youth.**

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## **Street Child Spaces. Belonging, conflict and resistance in the city of Durban through the eyes of street youth.**

This article is concerned with the everyday 'spatial tactics' deployed by children in a street situation in order to deal with notions of public space that define them as 'out of place', marginal and deviant. Using photovoice, we reconstruct former street children's definitions of and feelings about their spaces in the city, bringing into view a complex set of social problems, attitudes and strategies that moves beyond the traditional binary notion of street children as either deviants or victims. This work points to the importance of finding ways to ensure the voices of marginalized and disadvantaged children are heard and presents the narratives that are important to our understanding of their worlds. Analyzing their spatiality in contexts of conflict, belonging and resistance, we found that street youths are mainly concerned with empowering themselves and resisting dominant labels and police repression.

Keywords: street youth; street child spaces; belonging; resistance; conflict; spatial tactics.

## **Introduction and background**

Ever since urbanization began to spread rapidly across the Western world, from the nineteenth century onwards, children's and youth's presence in the city streets became a subject for public hand-wringing. Social reformers and government officials attempt to shield young people from premature exposure to the 'dark wisdom' to be gained in urban public spaces – knowledge of the world that is considered to be unsuited to them. The problematization of the 'dangers of the street' and street children thus has a longstanding history. From the 1980s onwards, this has inspired an increasing number of academic studies (Luiz De Moura 2002), concentrating mostly on establishing the number of street children, describing their family background, life trajectories, activities on the street and their common physical, socio-psychological and social-economical characteristics (Thomas De Benitez 2011). Images as such created a stereotyped and oversimplified profile that had a stigmatizing effect on children and young people in a street situation (Baker 2013; Velasco et al. 2014).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the term street child has become accepted and used by policy makers, welfare agencies and international bodies such as UNICEF to refer to children on the street as “any girl or boy for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood; and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults”(UNCHS 2000, 16-7). The multiplicity of experiences and perceptions of street children themselves, however, has not always been addressed in dominant definitions (Luccini 1996; Luiz De Moura 2002; Panter-Brick 2002).

In different urban contexts and periods of time, problem-definitions regarding street children and their construction as 'deviant others' have always tended to centralize around two main elements; (1) the children's visibility in public space and (2) their lack

of adult supervision. However, two-dimensional definitions as such are inadequate to grasp the heterogeneity and complexity of the concept of street children, as they are not part of a clearly defined and delineated group. Instead, we are dealing with a constructed concept that has been created through discourse (Thomas De Benitez 2011). At length, categorizations established by society are constructed identities that can differentiate with self-perceptions of the children and young people in question.

Broader; more recent definitions of street children recognize the significance of ‘the streets’ by applying concepts such as ‘children in street situations’ (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2017), ‘street-connected’ children to illustrate their changeable involvement of with the ‘streets’ (Rahman, Samadder, and Khan 2018; Abebe 2008). Authors have engaged with experiences and agency of children and young people living on the streets in order to form a more critical understanding of categories (Butler and Rizzini 2001, 2003). Research has explored the complex spatial and temporal relationships of children and young people with urban street environments and relational contexts, hereby debating and discrediting traditional binary notions of street children (van Blerk 2006; Ursin 2012; Aptekar and Abebe 1997; Abebe 2008; Ennew and Swart-Kruger 2003). Van Blerk, for example, argues for “a broader understanding of street children that positions them *in between* the street and the home and most importantly connected to others in the wider family/community nexus” (van Blerk 2012, 332).

Social reactions to the category of ‘street children’ and the feelings it provokes in adults are thus often two-sided (Butler 2009); on the one hand, there is a strong focus on the negative perception of highly visible, and ‘transgressive behaviour of children and youth in public space. And on the other hand, the connotation of street children as helpless victims can result in a strong disempowerment of this group (Panter-Brick 2002;

Aptekar and Abebe 1997). Being unsupervised and highly visible in a space considered to be 'inappropriate' for them, children in a street situation are generally viewed as being in the wrong place, or 'out of place' (Abebe 2008; Ennew 2002). As a result, both youth care programs and repressive policies predominantly focus on removing these children and youths from the streets. Since urban space is always a 'space in use' (Thrift 2000), however, one could consider that street children belong as much in the city streets like any other category of their 'users'.

It is this agency, these uses of urban public space, and the perspective of these young users which this article seeks to address. In particular, we want to know which strategies former street children<sup>1</sup> in the city of Durban (South Africa) applied in order to create their own spatiality within public space (to re-appropriate public space to their own ends). Next, to street children's everyday 'spatial tactics' (De Certeau 1984) for creating such spaces of belonging and refuge in Durban, we are also interested in the spaces in which conflicts between the street children and repressive or controlling agents are being played out. Thereby children contest and sometimes invert dominant notions of 'appropriate' child spaces. To reconstruct these spatial practices and their meanings, we rely on the perspective of the children and youth themselves. Drawing on photographs taken by former street children in Durban and their accounts accompanying these images (photovoice), this article provides (visual and narrative) insights into street children's spatiality and the ways in which these youths experienced and created spaces of belonging, conflict and resistance in Durban.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article we use the concepts 'street children' and 'children and young people in a street situation'. We approach these concepts by adhering to a broader understanding of the term 'street children'. Therefore we relied on the words of our participants who constructed concepts such as *street kids* in a rather broad way indicating the social heterogeneity of young people in street situations, complex relationships with urban street environments and social environments.

## Methodology and methods

Between March and June 2015 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the experiences of street-connected children in the city of Durban. This empirical phase was part of a qualitative study in which employees from four organizations for street children in Durban, South-Africa, were interviewed in order to discover *which interpretations and definitions are involved in the construction of the concept of 'street children'* (Van Buggenhout 2015). This article zooms in on a particular aspect of that research by elaborating on the narratives of *Lwazi and Njabulo*<sup>2</sup>, two former street children and members from the organization Surfers Not Street Children (SNSC)<sup>3</sup>.

Pretty soon after I had met the former street children from the organization SNSC, I found myself spending significant time learning, talking, walking but also surfing with some remarkable young people that are both surfers and ambassadors for street kids around the world. Participation in their activities allowed me to get to know the city streets and the network they were involved in. The idea of a photovoice project grew throughout the fieldwork in collaboration with *Lwazi and Njabulo*. The participants created images that evolved inner-city areas, institutions they came in contact with in the past (or present), anything related to their past life on the streets or even their everyday realities. After the pictures were developed, they were used as a facilitator for a dialogue

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<sup>2</sup> Fictive names are used in order to safeguard the anonymity of the research participants.

<sup>3</sup> Surfers Not Street Children is an awareness raising organization. At the time of this empirical study the surf team existed of eight former children in street situations that aim at changing the way society perceives and treats street children. They promote the use of surfing to empower children to leave street life around the world. SNSC considers psychological support and mentorship as the best tools in order lead street youth into independency (<https://www.surfnotstreets.org/>). In the ethnographic study I worked with the whole surf team (former street children between the ages of 16 and 24). This article focusses on the visual narratives created by two participants, *Lwazi and Njabulo*. By focusing in depth on these two stories from the streets, we can fully acknowledge the voices of the two former children in a street situation.

in which the participants choose which pictures they would like to comment on. Rather than calling it a full methodology in this study, I like to refer to this way of conducting field data as a *photovoice* project<sup>4</sup> since it was performed in a larger ethnographic research design. Photovoice, in this case, served as a tool in a ‘non-directive interviewing situation’ in which I asked the research participants “to produce their own images with respect to a certain issue” (Pauwels 2017, 66).

When doing research with groups who are generally depicted as vulnerable and at risk, we are often confronted with complex and challenging situations. Traditional interviews or surveys are not always recommended and can even be damaging and inherently violent to research participants (Redwood 2008). Interviewing children directly about their experiences on the streets is challenging; one has to deal with power imbalances (Barker and Smith 2001; Holland et al. 2010; Hunleth 2011), cultural differences, experiences of violence and trauma (Cashmore 2006), language barriers and a lack of trust. Previous research on the livelihoods of street children has shown that voices can be ‘institutionalized’ depending on who is listening to the voice (Velasco et al. 2014; Gilligan 2015), thus causing issues with validity. With the influence of new methodological paradigms in childhood studies, came a movement away from the limiting notion that children are helpless and not capable of making their own decisions (James and Prout 2015; Powell et al. 2012). Having children actively participating in research and listening to their voices has become a powerful tool for researchers, activists and policymakers worldwide (James 2007; Powell and Smith 2009) and is grounded in

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<sup>4</sup> “Photovoice is a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique. Photovoice has three main goals (1) to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers” (Wang and Burris 1997, 369)



the UN Convention on the Rights of the child (UNCRC 1989).

By actively engaging Njabulo and Lwazi in the research process, it was possible to not only co-create a dialogue but also collaborate on formulating research questions and gathering the research data. This immediately affects the issue of power imbalance, an ethical problem often reported upon by scholars (Barker and Smith 2001; Hunleth 2011; Hood, Mayall, and Oliver 1999; Holland et al. 2010; Gallagher 2008; David et al. 2005; Christensen 2004). Participatory methods, and in this case visual narratives, allow the participant to keep control over the narrative that is shared with the researcher. Further, it can help to understand the heterogeneity of childhood and power disparities (Hunleth 2011). Even though the voices of marginalized groups seem to appear almost routinely in academic studies, we need to remain critical about “giving voice” and what it means in the context of research (Lundy and McEvoy 2011; James 2007; Lundy, McEvoy, and Byrne 2011)<sup>5</sup>. Including children as co-researchers can only help to manage issues of authenticity of voice and power imbalances, not fully dismantle them as it is still the researcher who reports and thus decides what elements are represented into scientific output (Kellett 2010).

In this retrospective research, the participants recall their experiences and narrate about their lives as former children in street situations. Knowing that attachment to place and space changes across time and space (Gadd 2016) in a complex interplay between different social worlds, these visuals must be seen as ‘snapshots’ out of their lives (taken at the moment of the fieldwork). Hereby we must keep in mind that visions

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<sup>5</sup> Laura Lundy has written extensively on what it means to conduct ‘rights based’ research and has developed a model of child participation (Lundy and McEvoy 2012, 2011; Lundy, McEvoy, and Byrne 2011). In line with Hart (1997) argument of the ladder of participation, Lundy (2007) observes that “tokenistic or decorative participation is not only in breach of Article 12 but can be counterproductive” (Lundy 2007, 938). It is arguments as such that make clear the distinction between passive voicing and active participation of children in research.

about the past, present and future change over time. The visual narratives, however, made it possible to view and access areas that are otherwise inaccessible for observation, it introduced, conducted and guaranteed the connectedness to and involvement of the youngster's perceptions. Participative research also counters top-down 'expert based' approaches in which the analytical and creative abilities of young people are neglected (Horelli and Kaaja 2002; Dedding and Moonen 2013) and avoids stigmatizing claims about the livelihood of this group. We are not able to generalize the conclusions brought forward in this article. However, it can be argued that the information created by this visual method is very rich and adds to the experimental character of this paper because of its pleasant and instructive way of gaining in-depth understandings into the subject.

### **Spatiality within public space: conflict, belonging and resistance**

Children in their environment are seen as social actors and the relationship between them and spaces, places and landscapes have been the subject of many studies (Matthews, Limb, and Percy-Smith 1998; Chirstensen and O'Brien 2003; Breitbart 1995; Karsten 2002, 2005; Vanderbeck and Johnson 2000; Valentine 1996a). One of the main characteristics of street children's identity is an interesting and unique relationship to their environment and their public existence on the street (Young and Barrett 2001). In what follows, we present the results from the photovoice project in which we analyze the spatiality of street youth in contexts of conflict, belonging and resistance.

#### ***Spaces of conflict***

The high visibility of street youth in public space appears to make them threatening and 'problematic' in the eyes of adults, and therefore a privileged target of the police. Due to these negative constructions of street children, they are perceived as a public disorder

problem in cities because they are assumed to hang around in the streets, run a black market by selling items without a license, beg, use drugs, etc. (Connolly and Ennew 1996; Van Beers 1996; Dallape 1996). From the perspective of street children themselves, however, the street has plenty to offer (See for example the work of Hecht 1998; Aptekar and Abebe 1997).

A negative perception of street children can result in repressive and punitive policies aimed at excluding this group (Luiz De Moura 2002), which is reflected in the marginality of the spaces children occupy in the streets (Beazley 2002). From the assumption that street children do not live according to the norms of society, the government in southern countries often aims at purifying the public space by cleaning-up<sup>6</sup> homeless people, vagrants, unwanted city dwellers and children maundering about (Beazley 2002). Public space - defined by Mitchell (1995) as a “location where the social interactions and political activities of all members of ‘the public’ occur” (Mitchell 1995, 116) - is a controlled place. Through this exclusion, power relations emerge and become visible, whereby the dominant layers in the city oppress the others.

*Fig. 1. This picture was taken by Lwazi: Metro Police*

This picture symbolizes a constant struggle over contested spaces, in Durban usually externalized in a negative relationship between street youth and South African Police Services (SAPS). Just as beggars or homeless people, street children do not contribute to the image of a modern and beautiful city. *‘This picture reminds me, like it gives me memories of how far have I gone in life from the streets. Like the reason I took this picture is because we are, we used to be round up by metro police<sup>7</sup> for nothing, they say*

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<sup>6</sup> This word points out past and current reactions to street children and homeless people. In South Africa the word is often used to refer to repressive policies towards these groups of people in order to ‘clean’ the streets.

<sup>7</sup> South African Municipal Polices Forces.

*that euh we are messing up their time. Like in 2010<sup>8</sup> they started doing it so badly that guys were getting hurt and they take us (Lwazi).*

By controlling these children throughout public space, the government is able to re-establish dominance over the city. As indicated by Steve Herbert, street policing ensures portraying police presence as ‘all-powerful’ (Herbert 1998). This is further reflected in the marginality and temporality of the spaces in which these children spent their time, as Lwazi illustrates: ‘*That time when you sleep you sleep from maybe one hour and then they are here to pick you up and stuff.*’ When children occupy contested spaces they often have to change their location because of police action or violence. This can result in conflicts when different groups have different attachments to similar areas (Beazley 2002; Young 2003). Another element that increases this segregation, and thereby affects these children and young people in a street situation, is the fear of uncontrollable youth, causing socio-economic exclusion and stigmatization of certain groups. People will start avoiding places that are considered ‘unsafe’, producing a fragmented city. Because of those geographies of fear, a decline in accessibility of public space can be noticed (Valentine 1996a, 2004). Controlling children and youth through the public space can possibly result in the ‘othering’ of street youth, further strengthened by restricting their access to public space (Valentine 1996a; Ursin 2012). Despite those restrictions, street children manage to creatively construct their own (temporal) geographies within the city (Ursin 2012).

### ***Spaces of belonging***

As Lwazi and Njabulo narrate about their ‘spots’ in the city, one can sense several facets of conflict, but also negotiation between hidden and public spaces. In spite of the

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<sup>8</sup> 2010 FIFA World cup in South Africa

repressive policies with as a goal removal of street children from visual spots in the city, this group of children still manages to survive and create its own spatiality within public space by resourcefully using the urban environment (Ursin 2011). They can adapt and reconstruct the meanings attached to spaces using geographical strategies and spatial tactics, allowing them to transform public places into their ‘own’ dwellings.

By developing spatiality within the city, they develop solidarity, an identity, feelings of belonging and attachment and a form of ‘social and cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1980, 1986) that their home and families cannot always provide. For street children, the public space is a working space but also a place for learning, relationships, freedom and play (Connolly and Ennew 1996; Butler 2009). Hence, street youth and children structure certain domains and environments according to practical considerations, but also attach meanings to them in terms of pleasure(s) and the creation of their identity (Beazley 2003; Ennew and Swart-Kruger 2003). Creating their own territories away from public gaze allows street connected youth to explore the streets in a more predictable way. This illustrates well Conticini’s claim that “the concept of place includes both the social and spatial elements of children’s lives, and the relationship with and experience of place is fundamental to children’s feelings of belonging” (Conticini 2005, 79).

*Fig. 2. This picture was taken by Lwazi: empty building.*

*‘So, like there is nobody in the building normally it’s empty and it’s like overruled, nobody wants it. So we could stay there so we used to stay under the veranda and passage there. Which was pretty cool but in the public, that why we used to get round up’ (Lwazi).* Street children will use their spatiality within public space in a unique way by creating their private niches within the city where they are able to live together with peers, build up friendships and grow up in a meaningful way. The word ‘belonging’ is used in this regard to describing what Ursin calls “the feeling of being someone to

somebody and having a social network, as well as knowing a place and how to get by there” (Ursin 2011, 230). Whereas Hammond (2003) refers to the word ‘emplacement’<sup>9</sup>, Young (2003) uses the term ‘street child spaces’, spaces that are created by the exclusion from social and spatial areas in the city. Those niches (such as tunnels, rooftops, empty houses or busses) are untouchable spaces, more or less hidden in the urban landscape, away from the public gaze. These domains are thus not permanent and are constructed differently across time and space (Beazley 2002). Moreover, street children occupy different ‘niches’ depending on for example day or night-time and on the purpose of the space (sleeping, begging, working, washing, etc.). This indicates the importance of a notion of temporality when it comes to re-appropriating urban space and the creative ways in which children move about within geographical separations.

In addition to the geographical aspect attached to niches, we were also able to observe a transformation in the connotation that is given to these spaces. Not alone did this spot provide Njabulo with a certain degree of safety: *‘this is where I used to sleep, I used to think I feel safer here, more comfortable and warm’*, it also permitted him to be supported with a network of significant others, people he met along the way that allowed him to have fun and create a social network. Although he recognizes the negative reputation of the street, he transformed this part of public space into his *own* spot: *‘[...] this is where I used to hang around, like every 6 o’clock just chill here and have fun and with people I don’t know and I ended up meeting people. So this is where I used to sleep and I used to have a lot of fun you know (Njabulo)*. Street child spaces do not fit in what Gill Valentine calls the “public space as ‘naturally’ or ‘normally’ an adult space”(Valentine 1996b, 212). Hearing street-connected children out about their

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<sup>9</sup> ‘emplacement’ referring to a place becoming a *meaningful* place.

perspectives on public space, and more precisely on the so-called street child spaces, leads to an inversion of dominant-adult conceptions of public space as well as mainstream conceptions of childhood.

From an outsiders' perspective, street child spaces are associated with geographies of refugee, danger and covert behaviours. For street youth, however, these spaces form a distinctive social world, a habitat that is not being associated with problems but rather on the contrary, it is viewed by them as a solution and a way to shape an individual identity (Beazley 2004).

Creating a significant group of peers on the street and a highly socialized street child existence (Beazley 2003) is not only useful to pass time in an entertaining way, but it also provides one another with a safety net in case things go wrong. Hanging out with a group arranges for protection from nuisance and provocation coming from other groups or the police. Further, it offers opportunities of gathering and sharing resources for Lwazi: *'I have always been in a lot of places with guys, it is very important 'cause they used to help me for money, you know, when I haven't begged properly. They provide me with stuff'*. Both Njabulo and Lwazi were able to shape street life in a way that it became enjoyable and pleasant.

**Fig. 3.** *This picture was taken by Njabulo: street of Cool Runnings*

*'This is a street of basically, we call it street of Cool Runnings'<sup>10</sup>. This is where I have started to learn my drums and stuff [...] Cool Runnings that made me realize something about music and about understanding being with other people around you and stuff like that. So for me when I have been hanging around Cool Runnings it's been an amazing thing for me because I've learnt how to play the drums and I've met up with people that*

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<sup>10</sup> Cool Runnings is a bar where people dance and play the drums. The pictures depicts the wall of Cool Runnings.

*are open and friendly to me. And I felt love when I used to stay in the same street so for me for those people that were showing me something that would get me out of bad things and out of trouble and out of wrong things like smoking Wanga<sup>11</sup> and smoking the rest of other crap things that are coming up' (Njabulo).* Through interactions as such in public spaces that are not considered 'street child spaces', we can in some instances observe the co-existence with and the acceptance from the wider society of those groups that are considered to be street youth. Despite several spatial exclusionary processes that stigmatize, oppress and conceal street youth from the urban public space, street children can identify with certain places that they associate with fun, friends and pleasure. This draws attention to discrepancies and tensions about what can be considered by different urban groups as 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' uses of public space.

### ***Spaces of resistance***

The in mainstream society highly contested group of street youth uses urban space pursuing certain goals that alienate from conceptions of normality and conventionality adhered to by control agents such as the police or organizations trying to keep children and youth of the streets. The alternate goals adhered to by children and young people from the street are perceived by 'outsiders' as 'transgressions' of social norms, forms of deviance or even crime (De Koster and Reinke 2010). In this context, it is the concept of transgression that is particularly interesting to explore. Transgression does not simply refer to 'a criminal act' but rather to the disruption of a social order in which certain limitations are constantly being constructed by those who have the upper hand in society (Ferrell 2011). Transgression is a concept that can be used to refer to crime and

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<sup>11</sup> A local word for a drug



criminality (Campbell 2013) but also “relies on that particular action being noticed and considered deviant and marginal to society” (Young 2003, 609). Campbell (2013) discusses the traditional notion of transgression, by adding an extra dimension that makes the concept of transgression more applicable to the contestation or negotiation of public space, hereby going beyond a limited focus on criminality and crime. She indicates that ‘crime’ (in a much broader sense than those acts punishable by law) “marks an occasion to erase, redraw and reinvent the urban landscape, to animate it through different sensibilities, to re-imagine the form and content, nature and style of city life” (Campbell 2013, 22). There is, in the case of these former street children, a certain degree of resentment as they feel that the city is a space that is equally theirs. It is the place in which they grew up, the place where they feel comfortable and have built up significant relationships with peers.

Creating their own private space within a public, adult-oriented environment, is a way for street children to protest against the exclusion from mainstream society and re-negotiate senses of place. Hereby they prove that they remain present in the city centres, no matter what officials undertake to chase them away. Njabulo and his friends decided to resist and actively ‘transgress’ the dominant codes and labels imposed on them by the South African Metro Police, *‘so, we decided like: hey town is one place we can’t get away from. We feel more comfortable when we have more friends, you know. So we decided to just make sure that Metro Police doesn’t round us up any more so we need to fight so hard to actually make them stop what they are doing to us you know’* (Njabulo).

**Fig. 4.** *This picture was taken by Njabulo: place to sleep.*

*“This is where we used to get round up by metro police. We used to sleep here. You know. Like metro (police) will come around 5 in the morning start picking us up, telling us we are not allowed in here. So we just decided just like, okay, we are not going to*

*listen to you guys, and carry on doing what we wanna do. Until somebody else bought the place and started putting a fence around it, as you can see' (Njabulo).*

Acts of resistance against certain structures and discourses can be active and explicit, as is the case with protests and political demonstrations, but practices of resistance can also happen on a smaller scale through everyday spatial tactics, spontaneous practices and encounters (Frers and Meier 2007, 2017).

**Fig. 5.** *Picture taken by Njabulo: 'we are waiting'.*

This can be illustrated by the aesthetic and artistic expression made by Njabulo and his friends as a way to portray an act of resistance. *Basically we drew this because we wanted to bring someone that can be able to help us so as we said: "we are waiting" and actually waiting for help and waiting for a good help that will come to us and make that would make us change our lives and make us understand how life it is and you know. And finally what we wrote there it actually worked and even now it still works. And I am really proud of it. And it is always there and it will always be there' (Njabulo).* By writing something on the wall these children were able to call out for help. But at the same time this is seen as a way to express an appreciation of oneself, this place is now symbolized as a place for the street children, something that, to say it in Njabulo's words; *'will always be that way'*, despite the numerous attempts to exclude this group from the public areas in the city of Durban. Hayward (2002) argues that rather than 'criminal acts' these youthful expressions serve as a tool to exert control in adult-dominated spaces.

One of the classical and more *active* forms of resistance is to manifest their presence in public space by performing jobs on the black market. These opportunities to make some money range from watching over people's cars in a car park and washing peoples' cars to collecting plastic bottles and exchanging them for money. *'We like to do something that can keep us busy and able to earn our own money without going to people*

*and stealing from them or going to the beach and take other people's stuff and go sell them for small amounts of money but they know, they do park guards, they make more amounts of money than the one that is stealing' (Njabulo).* Street youth consider such activities as legitimate ways of earning money and consequently feel proud and empowered by this. It increases their level of independence and it is even said that they feel like they can avoid committing a crime by working in the informal market. Working on the black market is, however, perceived by local authorities as an illegitimate way of earning money, in which there is no contribution to the economy. As a consequence, those visible activities performed by street youth in public space are being suppressed. These general perceptions of social control actors are contradicted by the participants themselves. They emphasize the fact that working on the street is for them an opportunity to gain a privileged economic status in their family and among friends because they earn money on their own and thereby create a certain degree of independence (Ataöv and Haider 2006; Hecht 1998; Connolly and Ennew 1996). By shaping an identity that emphasizes independence, their competencies and skills on the street, stigmatizing views are constantly being countered through these visual narratives.

## **Conclusion**

Starting from the perspective of Njabulo and Lwazi we can illustrate the discrepancy between the meanings they assign to public space and conventional conceptions of normality attributed by social control agencies. These two voices from the street illustrated by pictures emphasize a much more diverse and complex set of strategies, positions and attitudes, a narrative that goes far beyond the classical twofold perception of street children as either deviant, disruptive and unaccompanied children or passive victims of repression. By approaching these young people as rights owners and active participants of society we co-created alternative reconstructions. Lwazi and

Njabulo have narrated about their experiences and perceptions with a strong emphasis on their competencies as young people trying to find their way in the city. They have portrayed the ability to gain considerable amounts of money by performing services on the informal market. They have not just been able to survive on the streets, they have been able to empower themselves and create economic opportunities for themselves, and for their families. Using a discourse that focuses on their independence, they resist far-reaching control strategies, such as the repressive interventions of the South African Metro Police, but also the regulatory framework developed by social services and government officials trying to keep these children and young people away from the streets. Street youths' involvement in a constant struggle over the re-appropriation of public space is often perceived as deviant or disruptive, whereas in their own eyes, their behaviours are transgressive at the most and serve as a way to resist existing conceptions. For them, they are about creating their own street child spaces and separate niches within public space and about shaping opportunities for experiences of pleasure and the establishment of a sense of belonging within a group on the street.

Their narratives demonstrate that they actively and passively resist dominant expectations and labels oriented towards them as a group of children and young people spending significant time on the streets. They have expressed that no matter what spatial exclusions they face, *'town is one place we can't get away from'* (Njabulo). Just like any other street users, these children belong in and to the city. It is after all the place where these children and young people have made their friends, created an identity and an important network of peers. It is the place where they earn a living. Their conceptions of conventionality and goals differ from those imposed by control agencies and as a result, they continuously negotiate public space and transgress existing social, legal and spatial borders.

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