

For a General Theory
OF THE STREET



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For a general theory of the street

RESULTS OF THE SHINE A LIGHT INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT,
LOOKING AT 230 NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS SERVING STREET
CHILDREN IN 49 LATIN AMERICAN CITIES

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INTRODUCTION

“The street is good and bad. You just need to know how to cross it.”

-Claudia, 10 years old, Córdoba, Argentina

“Desire (eros) is filthy, barefoot, and homeless; it always sleeps in the dirt, in the open air, in doorways and in the street.”

- Diotema, in Plato’s Symposium

Life on the street is miserable. Those who work with street children know only too well the filth, the sickness, the poverty, and the invisibility that these children feel. Nonetheless, this misery occludes an important fact: *many children that live on the street insist that they want to be there.* Their lives do little to convince us of their sincerity, but enough children say exactly this that we need to take the comment seriously.

Many years of research have focused on the *causes* of youth homelessness: poverty, the collapse of the nuclear family, abuse... We know quite a bit about *why* boys and girls flee their homes for the streets of Latin American cities. We know much less about the “*what for*” of youth homelessness, what it is that children *seek* on the street. We know that children go to the street to escape from violence, poverty, and social exclusion, but we know much less about what they want and expect from the street.

This essay strives to answer these fundamental questions: To what end does a boy or girl run away from home? What is s/he seeking? And, most

importantly, how can we offer another path that satisfies these desires without the horrors of life on the street?

At one time or another, almost every child, even those who live in comfortable houses with loving families, dreams of running away. Many adults long for the same escape, the chance to “leave it all behind” and go in search of freedom and adventure. In this essay, I hope to show that the desires of street children are not strange; they are the existential hopes shared by all of us. More polemically, I want to show that, in the context of the shantytown, seeking to satisfy these desires on the street is not only comprehensible, but even logical. Whether we like it or not, the street offers an answer to several basic existential needs. It does not *satisfy* these needs, but it *insinuates* that, at some point in the future, it will. This dynamic traps the child on the streets and makes it difficult for him or her to accept the help of institutions, be they shelters, day centers, or family assistance programs.

In the last part of this long essay, I will look carefully at many non-governmental organizations that take children’s desire seriously, and that attempt to offer more healthy ways to satisfy the desire for recognition, for freedom, for pleasure, for consumer goods, and for a meaningful life. If children leave for the street in order to satisfy these desires, they will leave the street if they see another way to achieve them.

The stereotype of the street child is dramatically different from the portrait I will present here. I want to avoid the discourse that defines a street child as a victim, even though this discourse has been very successful in inspiring charity – by both street children and by the NGOs that serve them. Instead, I want to emphasize these children’s intelligence, their resilience, and

their subjectivity. Leaving home is hard. Living on the street is even worse. A child who sees herself as a victim seldom survives long. For this reason, I want to emphasize their strengths, not their suffering.

In Colombia, there is an important distinction between the *gamín* and the *chupagrueso*. The *gamín*¹ is famous for her independence and playfulness. She is clever and perhaps naughty, but tricks you with a smile. The *chupagrueso*² also lives on the street, but he is dependent, grovels for spare change, and always seeks a patron to help him. The *gamín* considers herself to be an actor in her own life; the *chupagrueso* sees himself as a victim.

The *chupagrueso* is a great candidate for a shelter or a formal program, because he is looking for someone to help and support him. The *gamín*, on the other hand, who loves freedom for its own sake, will always be reluctant to sacrifice it for the comforts of a bed and a meal.

Because of this, *gamines* seldom learn the skills that they need to get off the street. Many die on the street; others become homeless adults. For this reason, in the following pages, I will focus on the experience and the subjectivity of the *gamín*. These reflections should also illuminate the world of the *chupagrueso*, because these two words are more the extremes of a fluid continuum than they are fixed categories; most children that live on the street have characteristics of both. Because most services are oriented toward the *chupagrueso*, this essay will address how to serve the more difficult – and often more rewarding – *gamín*.

¹ From the French *gamin* or *gamine*, meaning “street urchin.”

² Literally “fat-sucker,” or one who lives parasitically off the prosperity of a patron.

Part 1

THE SHANTYTOWN

11 The shantytown and youth homelessness

Though this essay addresses the subjective experience of the street child, this experience begins in a particular social context. In Latin America (unlike in the United States), children do not come to the street from wealthy neighborhoods nor from private schools. Their families dwell in the shantytowns that ring large Latin American cities. In most cases, there is a history of violence in their lives – abuse, sexual violence, often war – and most of their families share certain characteristics. For this reason, before considering the street child, I want to think about what she finds wanting in her environment.

In study after study, we see that cities have certain “expelling nuclei,” neighborhoods from which street children have fled. In Santiago, they often flee Pudahuel; in Buenos Aires, it is Lomas de Zamora; in Bogotá, Ciudad Bolívar. Even small cities suffer from this phenomenon: la Victória in Goiânia, Monte Serrate in Florianópolis, la Soledad in Barranquilla. Research in these neighborhoods teaches us a great deal about the life that street children want to escape.

Poverty is the most obvious characteristic of these “expelling nuclei.” Unemployment rates are extremely high (reaching 80% in Lima’s shantytowns) and there is little employment available in the neighborhood. People that live in these neighborhoods generally work as street vendors or domestics in richer neighborhoods, if they are able to find work. Public services are scarce: often

these shantytowns lack electricity, running water, and sewer – or more commonly, they steal such services from the municipal grid. Housing and food are of a very low quality, causing grave problems in public health. In Brasil and Colombia, the state has abandoned these neighborhoods to the predations of organized gangs.

Though these conditions might force anyone to seek a life elsewhere, poverty alone does not cause homelessness. In many terribly poor Central American towns, children continue to live with their families in spite of brutal poverty. Rural children do not seek life on the street as their urban peers do. In many cities in the United States, most street youth come from the middle class.

I want to suggest that poverty as such is neither necessary nor sufficient to force a child onto the street. The problem is not poverty but *lack*. Home does not provide the necessary resources for a good life, while a nearby environment does provide these resources. The child of the *sertão*, the desert in the north of Brasil, does not leave home because all of his neighbors are just as poor as he, so there is no hope for a better life. However, the child in Rio de Janeiro does run away, because she will find people to offer spare change and food in the center of the city. In this circumstance, life on the street appears in some way better than life in the shantytown.

In Medellín, the lacking resource is safety, so children leave home to escape from gangs; ironically, the street is safer than the house. In many American homes, love and a meaning for life are missing, so children leave home in search of those goods.³

³ One can interpret this hypothesis ecologically or psychologically; I believe that both are valid. In an ecological model, life flows toward resources: the bee toward the field of flowers, the trees along the river. Children also seek emotional, material, and spiritual resources.

In the psychological model, the presence of the rich person reminds the poor child of his poverty, providing a powerful motivation to overcome that poverty.

Lack and the search for resources form only the base of the context that sends children onto the street.⁴ Studies from many countries indicate that the second necessary cause (though again, not sufficient) is **violence**.

The **Asociación Cristiana de Jóvenes** (Bogotá) has been in the vanguard of research on youth homelessness in Colombia. Its recent studies have shown that almost 100% of Bogotá street children report being the victims of some kind of violence, whether from family members, the police, the school, a gang, or a military faction (the army or the guerrillas). These children insist that they cannot return home because they fear death, abuse, or being press ganged into an armed gang or army.

In Medellín, conditions are even worse. The government has abandoned the shantytowns to armed gangs (allied with left or right wing guerrillas, with drug cartels, or sometimes with the army), which are now the only law. These gangs force all young men (and many young women) to join them, so teens must choose between becoming *sicarios* (assassins) or being killed. Many children prefer instead to flee to the streets of downtown or to leave the city. Though Colombia might seem a limit case, in fact street children in many cities tell similar stories. Children in Rio and São Paulo say that violence is one of their most important motives for life on the street. Buenos Aires and Caracas report levels of violence that they describe as “almost Colombian.” Children in all cultures suffer from family and sexual violence – a study of the US government indicated that 85% of all American street children had been abused sexually.⁵

⁴ Though the language of “send” seems to undermine the subjective experience of the street child, I use it here because it is helpful in addressing the context that creates youth homelessness.

⁵ Report to the Senate before the passage of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, 1974. More recent research has indicated that this number is almost certainly exaggerated.

Certainly, children flee to the street in order to escape this violence, but there is also a deeper connection. In a violent world, the child learns that the only real solutions are extreme solutions: if there is a problem between gangs, it is resolved by guns. Family problems are resolved with fists and screams. The Asociación Cristiana de Jóvenes learned that most street children in Bogotá claimed that the street was the “only” solution to their problems. However, most of these problems were soluble through a reasoned conversation with parents, with the school, or even with the armed gangs. In a violent world, these non-violent solutions never occur to a poor child, so he flees to the street as his “only” option.

Though it is tempting to blame the **families** of street children, this discourse does little to help the child forced to live on the street. Even so, many children insist that they have run away from these families (not from their “social environment”), so we should pause at least a moment to consider the characteristics of these “expelling families.”

Abuse is clearly a key to understanding youth homelessness, as many studies have shown. Whether abuse happens in New York’s Upper East Side or in a poor *favela* of Rio de Janeiro, this violence makes the street seem like a viable option. Because this question has been addressed time and again, I will not repeat it here.

In recent years, research in Colombia and Mexico has found another dynamic among the families whose children leave for the street: families that express love in ways their children fail to understand. When asked by a researcher, parents will insist that they love their children dearly... but they never say this directly to their children. Caring is not expressed with a hug or a kiss, and the parents fail to congratulate their children on their successes. For

this reason, children feel emotionally abandoned, and when they encounter a serious problem, they believe that their parents do not love them enough to help them overcome it.

This issue brings us to the discourse about stepparents. On the street, children speak of these figures as inevitably abusing and cruel, and certainly many stepparents abuse their stepchildren, rape their stepdaughters, and use these children as a target to vent their own misery. However, in other cases, this story is a “successful lie,” used because it encourages people to give out spare change.

I believe that we have to consider the role of these stories in childhood mythology (and not only on the street: remember Cinderella and other fairy tales), in which the stepparent comes “to rob my mother’s love from me.” For a child, it is difficult to understand the interrelated loves of the mother for her new husband (desire for sex, love, and company; the need for financial help) and for her children. The child doesn’t understand that a mother can love multiple people, so he feels abandoned.⁶

In families that have not learned to show love in ways their children can appreciate, it is particularly difficult to deconstruct the myth of the stepparent who “comes to rob my mother’s love.” In this context, the meaning of each absent hug becomes more and more cruel. Sometimes there will be abuse in these reconfigured families, and other times no, but the child can easily interpret the new relationship as violent and thieving.

Here we must also remember the relationship between child labor and youth homelessness. The majority of children on the street do not live there: they are only working to support their families, especially in countries like

⁶ We should note here that this is not a class-based issue. Rich parents, however, have access to child psychologists and other social services; in addition, for the rich, having a child on the street is the worst shame imaginable, while for a family in the shantytown, a child on the street may not seem so unusual.

Argentina, where unemployment has become so chronic that many adults have simply abandoned the hope of a job. There is a long-standing debate about the relationship between child labor and youth homelessness, but we can be certain that for some children, working on the street, with the independence and money that it implies, is the first step to homelessness. When children believe that they have been forced to work or that this labor is a form of exploitative violence, they may be more likely to leave their families.

In the context of violence, we should also address the question of “abandonment,” an old explanation for street urchins. This word makes us imagine that a child is on the street because his parents moved to another city or because they have died. In fact, research by **El Caracol** (Mexico City) indicates that most cases of abandonment happen in the home. Parents leave home at 5AM because they have a several hour commute to get to work. They work from 7AM until 9PM, and then return to the shantytown at midnight, where they can only watch TV for a moment before going to bed. The children have a bed and food, but they feel like orphans. They don’t really know their parents, they live locked up in their houses, and they have only the TV as a friend. According to many street children in Mexico City, this context is a significant cause of their decision to leave home.

In the countryside and in small cities, this problem has an easy solution: if parents work, there is always an aunt or a grandmother to watch the children. Unfortunately, this option does not exist in urban centers. The family has come to the city alone; it has no friends or family with whom it can entrust the children. The social fabric no longer allows such informal solutions.

Other research has shown a close link between youth homelessness and **school**. In Chile, teachers in poor schools (often poor or striving themselves,

and who work horrible hours for little pay) demand the impossible from their students: “Here is your homework: come to class with photos of ten different cars cut out of ten different magazines, and tell me what you like about them, using five different color pencils.” The families of these children have no cars, they don’t subscribe to magazines, and they can’t afford pencils in five different colors. The child can’t do her homework, she fails the class, and eventually she drops out of school.

One can’t make a hard and fast rule, but I do want to suggest that many poor children, all around Latin America, experience school as oppressive. Teachers and principals make nonsense rules. Education depends on rote learning and memorization. “Schools reject the knowledge that children have, refuse to value the strength that allows them to live in extreme poverty, and ignore their learning style, their emotions, their hopes, and their dreams.”⁷ Teachers seldom understand the life of a poor child, but even more significantly, their salaries are so low that they must work in two or three schools just to survive. Research by **Acción Educativa** (Santa Fe, Argentina) shows that many children are very aware of this regime of oppression and that some consciously see their rebellion as resistance. “They have the power to boycott their homework, to be apathetic, to refuse to answer questions. Some even become violent.”⁸

When the Asociación Cristiana de Jóvenes asked street children in Bogotá about dropping out of school, they gave four reasons:

⁷ Personal communication, Teresa de Kakisu, July 3, 2002.

⁸ *Ibid.* This paragraph was inspired by various comments from Teresa de Kakisu of Acción Educativa. Her letter goes on, “The school is now more than just classes and lunch room; it has become the space where children are supposed to form their primitive attachments. The FEC in Mendoza published a book in which it contends, interestingly, that the school ‘functions as day care, as a “maternal garden” that replaces the mother, bringing caring, food, attention, play... school is then lived as a return to the constitutive gaze of infancy.”

In this context, to abandon school is to abandon the mother. Oppression and violence in the school are not just another example of injustice, but a fundamental betrayal.

1. Mistreatment by teachers, administrators, and peers
2. Oppressive discipline and constant repression
3. Boring classes. One child said, “The teacher never teaches anything, but the street always teaches me something!”
4. (the least common reason) Economic necessity

This study also showed a close link between leaving school and leaving home. In almost all cases, children ran away within two weeks of dropping out of school.

I don't want to limit the causes of youth homelessness to the above. There are clearly others: addiction, delinquency, following the next door neighbor who ran away last week... However, as stated at the beginning of this essay, this field has been well explored, and here I only want to establish the context from which children flee. The question now becomes, Why do these children believe that they will find a solution on the street?

1.2 From the street to the street

In a healthy neighborhood, there will be children in the street. They are playing with their friends, riding bikes, jumping rope, playing football... This activity on the street is fundamental to the construction of civil society, to the idea of social responsibility, and to creating a sense of community.

In shantytowns, this fact is true in spades. The homes of the poor have no space in which to play: there is no yard, no patio, and no large living room, and a dozen people might live in that small space. In this context, the street is a basic part of healthy child development: it is there that children make friends, find their role in the social gaze, play, and become part of the community.

Though we might give the phrase “street child” a negative connotations, poor children are always already on the street. They go to school; at night they return home. However, the majority of their lives passes in the street, in the plaza, in the park, or at the little corner store. The trajectory that worries us is not the path that leads from the home to the street, but the road that goes from the street to the street – from the streets of the shantytown to the streets of downtown.

In order to understand this transition, we must first understand the semiotic of the street, the complex of meanings that children learn in the shantytown. How do poor people experience the street? What does the street mean to them?

Because of the diversity of Latin America, this is not an easy question to answer, and it becomes even more complex if we attempt to add the

experiences of street children in the United States. Clearly, an Argentine who sits in a street café does not understand this environment in the same way as a Mexican who goes to Garibaldi to listen to the mariachis, or a *boricua* in New York who takes to the streets in a Puerto Rican Day parade. Even so, I believe we can generalize several ideas about the semiotic of the street, which will then allow us to think about a child's trajectory from the streets of the shantytown to the streets of the city center.

The street is about transit. We can easily forget this obvious fact, largely because of the term “street kid,” which supposes that the street is a place, or a condition. The street, however, is something very different. If I step out my front door, my street will quickly lead me to the Plaza in Santa Fe, mythological space of cowboys and Indians and Spanish colonists. If I keep going, the street (now a road) will lead me to the lands of the Apaches, then the Navajos. If I keep going, I end up in Los Angeles, Tijuana, Baja California... The street is an open path to other worlds and other futures.

In the shantytown, everyone understands that the street is about transit and transition. In order to do anything “important” – to go to work, to go to the movies, to go to the football game or a party – one walks along the street. The street also leads to grandma's house and to the family home in the countryside. If a poor child wants to see the world, he first walks through the narrow streets of the shantytown to the arteries where urban buses can take him to the avenues of downtown.

Every street has this character, but in the shantytown it is exaggerated. To a certain degree, middle class streets are circular: people go to work and return; their children do the same with school. People dream of having this circle continue – in a richer neighborhood perhaps, but without a fundamental

change. However, in the shantytown, the future is always elsewhere. Children do not dream of a life that mimics the life of their parents. In order to get ahead, they have to get on the street and follow it, without wanting to return.

As such, *a child who wants a future is always already a “street child.”*

The street is fun! If you walk through the streets of a poor neighborhood anywhere in Latin America, what do you see? A group of men gather around a window to watch a football match; they drink beer and scream for their teams. Grandmothers walk slowly to mass, gossiping happily about the neighborhood. Mothers watch their children, who are playing football with homemade goals. On the corner, a young couple kisses.

I paint a mythological portrait, of course, but it comes close enough to reality to allow us to think about how poor children might imagine the street. People have fun there. They enjoy themselves with games, with friends, with drugs (beer and cigarettes), and with sex (kisses).

There is an interesting locution in Spanish. When a mother asks her son “Where are you going?”, he will reply “*A la calle, mamá.*” (“To the street.”) What does this mean? It means “I’m going out to play.”

In contrast, the home is boring. It is small and probably dirty. There are many people and many rules. The street appears to be the opposite, a sort of “Garden of Earthly Delights.” A child of the middle class will not always share this dichotomy between **street-fun** and **house-boring**, but this idea is common to many children in poor neighborhoods all around Latin America.

The street is a social space. Middle class people can greet guests in their living rooms, but dinner parties aren’t possible in the poorest of homes. Whether one is planning a big party or just chatting with the neighbors, in

shantytowns social activity happens on the street (or perhaps on the plaza, but most shantytowns do not have this common space).

Where does a child go to play with her friends? The street. The street becomes a football pitch, an imaginary battlefield, a place to play with dolls or with the jump rope. It is also the place where a child can socialize with adults, look for role models, and feel the kind gaze that says, “Oh, what a charming child.”

When puberty comes, adolescents find other social outlets on the street. They meet and hang out with friend, boyfriends, and girlfriends there. Walking through any park in Mexico, the foreigner will be stunned by the hundreds of young couples kissing intensely on park benches. Why go home, where grandma is watching and the house will hardly impress one’s object of desire?

Other social activities also happen on the streets of the shantytown: football games, gang posturing (and sometimes violence), political campaigns... at both macro and micro levels, one seeks company and community on the street.

The street is a stage, and all the world are actors. A group of men stand on the street watching a football match, laughing and drinking, when two drunks begin to argue about a referee’s call. For the next week, everyone in the neighborhood can only talk about the fight: the winner has been walking through the streets like a rooster, but the loser hasn’t been seen; rumor has it he’s at home with his mother cleaning his wounds.

Drama on the street isn’t just about violence and gossip. There are also political protests; people talk about the news of the world. Women’s movements go door to door to teach about health, politics, and gender. Gangs

recruit new members. There is always something happening, something to watch as one looks through the window.

Drama isn't important just because it is interesting. In the social gaze and even in gossip, people feel recognized on the street. In the broader world, the inhabitant of the shantytown is invisible, but at least here, on these streets, he or she receives the recognition that is fundamental to the development of subjectivity.

The street is freedom. At home, parents can impose rules; on the street, they can't.

This, at least, is the myth. In fact, liberty is much more uncertain on the street. Violence between neighborhoods often means that children cannot cross certain streets or enter certain places. The police (if they dare to enter the shantytown) randomly stop and search people on the street. Children must be aware of a huge set of unwritten rules and prohibitions if they are to survive on the street.

Nevertheless, one can see why children might come to believe that "open air" means freedom.

Before I conclude here, I want to add a gendered perspective. For many girls (though not all), the meaning of the street is different. Because of persistent machismo in the shantytown, the street is still defined as masculine and the home as feminine: boys go outside to play football and war, while girls play in more enclosed spaces or help with the chores at home. In addition, daughters are seldom taught to value freedom and independence in the same way that sons are. In general, one will see fewer girls on the streets of the shantytown and fewer girls living on the streets downtown.

I will be justly criticized for generalizing. Not all boys and girls see the street in the way that I have described. More significantly, any observant child will see millions of opposing examples: on the way to school, children will see drunks who have passed out on the street. They will see heroin needles and crack vials. Vacant lots are full of trash and gangs threaten everyone. The street is no paradise!

Absolutely. In this chapter, I have tried to describe the semiotic of the street, what we *imagine about it*, and not what it *is*. The contrast between myth and reality cannot help but strike a child. She will have to make a choice: to accept the sad reality that the myth of paradise is a lie, or to seek that paradise on other streets.

13 On the streets downtown

The street has betrayed the child. It hasn't provided what it had promised. The child heads off in search of a better street, one which will provide what the mythology of the street has promised: liberty, pleasure, recognition, change, drama... The shantytown street becomes a route to the center of the city, to the streets and plazas and markets of downtown.

Ecology also plays a role here – in fact, it is intimately connected with the mythology of the street. On commercial avenues, tourists and rich people hand out spare change. They also provide role models for success and for the good life.

When poor children come to the neighborhoods of the rich, other people hear their stories for the first time. Street children tell these stories in plazas, in restaurants, and in buses, endeavoring to inspire pity in passers-by and to get some change. For this reason, they portray themselves as victims: of abuse, of poverty, of violence. These stories are mostly true. However, they are never complete, because they seldom emphasize the subjectivity of the child, her initiative in the move to the street. Many children are abused in shantytowns, but very few seek a new life on the street; most stay and suffer, or go to live with an aunt or a friend. This chapter attempts to look for a supplement, the added factors necessary to move from victimization (a lamentably common experience) to the street (statistically unusual, if visible).

I have several reasons to address youth homelessness from the perspective of the initiative and subjectivity of child. Some of these are pragmatic, others are personal, and some have to do with methodology.

- There have been numerous studies on who forces children onto the street and why. I do not want my work to be redundant.
- My experience as an educator of street youth in the United States has taught me that children are more likely to *choose to leave* the street when they believe that they *chose to be there in the first place*.
- This perspective affirms the power and the protagonism of boys and girls. They have many mirrors to tell them that they are helpless victims, and it is best that professional educators offer another way for children to define themselves.
- The best programs for street children are those that allow children to see themselves as actors in their own lives, and I want to strengthen their perspective.
- Finally, the narrative of victimization is already well known. I prefer to tell a new story.

For these reasons, we move on to the basic question: What does a child want from the street? What does he or she seek there? And does she get what she wants?

Part 2

WHAT DO I REALLY WANT?

Without a doubt, there are as many desires on the street as there are children, and these desires depend on the family, on the social imagination of each country, and on the individual personality of the child. Even so, we can categorize these desires within a theoretical context. In some cases, children seek what they cannot find in the shantytown. In other cases, their desires are motivated by social factors or perhaps by the human condition.

In this chapter, I will address certain desires that might lead children to live on the street; in the next chapter, I will consider how they achieve said desires there.

I want to emphasize that the desires of street children are in no sense perverse or strange. Almost all human beings want similar things. The difference is that street children have not accepted that they cannot achieve these desires; instead of giving up, they look for a solution.

- **“I want to be free!”** I have met thousands of street children and youth, from Rio de Janeiro and Bogotá to New York and Moscow. I do not remember even one who did not talk about freedom. “Yeah, it’s tough on the street, but at least I’m free.” “Here, I do what *I* want.” “On the street, nobody can tell you what to do.” Anyone who has worked with street children and youth has heard the same refrain. I confess that one

of the reasons that this work attracts me so much is that street kids seem to care about liberty as much as I do.⁹

We should challenge this concept of freedom. First, it is important to note that “freedom” plays a special role in the postmodern, globalized world. Freedom and human rights form the core of the hegemonic ideology, justifying the foreign policy of the United States, the economic nostrums of the International Monetary Fund, and the military interventions of NATO. In a world of cultural relativism, freedom seems to be the only value that no one can challenge.

The paradox here is that freedom is naturally subversive to any world order. George Bush and the World Trade Organization attempt to redefine freedom as free trade, but behind this idea there is always a trace of liberation, of being free, of the anarchic tendencies at the base of freedom.

In this context, it is not strange that street children would choose freedom as their most basic value. They are not conscious revolutionaries, but people who want what society values. They know that the world is unfair and that they are unfree, but they don’t understand exactly how, so they express this existential anxiety through rebellion against their families and their communities. Freedom stands as a perfect mediator between accepting and rejecting the values of a society that has excluded these children.

What is the liberty that street children want? There are so many definitions of freedom, but unfortunately I have never met a child who

⁹ Teresa de Kakisu justly criticizes me for presuming that “liberty” is the same in all of these cultures. What a girl in a shantytown of Buenos Aires means by “freedom” is not the same as what a Quecha boy or a rural Brazilian means. I have attempted to address this question more systematically in my “Oedipo en la Calle,” available at www.shinealight.org.

explained that he wanted freedom as defined by Plato, Hobbes, or Thomas Aquinas...

Even so, we can give a certain definition to the liberty that street children want: they want to be free of rules. Freedom means the absence of chains and responsibilities. “Here, nobody tells me what I have to do.” “I don’t have to do my chores.” “I go to sleep when I want to; I get up when I want to.” “On the street, I get to do what I like.”

We can say that the street betrays this promise of freedom, because it is clear that children who live on the street are not free to do many things. Nonetheless, the taste of freedom is there. They know that their freedom is not complete, but they struggle to gain more.

- **“I want Nikes.”** As much as we might hate advertising, we can’t ignore its power. Commercials and billboards teach us about the bright shining world of consumer goods, about Nike and Tommy Hilfiger. They don’t only teach that this world exists, but also that it is synonymous with the good life. The collected power of the capitalist world works to construct the desire to consume, and poor children are hardly immune.

In Portuguese, the word for absolute poverty is “*miséria*,” and it is certain that infant mortality and hunger make the shantytown a miserable place. However, even in the most miserable shanties, one will see a TV antenna – sometimes even a parabolic dish. I won’t ever forget when I visited the home of a family that lived inside the Guatemala City dump; their house was built from trash and they had no running water or sewer, but in the middle of the sole room in the house, there was an

immense new television. As postmodern citizens, we are required to have a television, so that it can teach us of our responsibility to consume.

Consuming is a responsibility, but not an achievable one in the shantytown. There will always be more to buy than there is money with which to buy it. This fact is true among all social classes: we always want more than we can get. This is the secret of the consumer economy.

When a worker wants to buy more, he can always work longer hours or work another job. The capitalist can look for other investments. But what about a boy or a girl? They ask their parents for things, and middle and upper class children get enough toys that they can delude themselves that, someday, they will get what they want. Poor children cannot maintain this delusion. They know quite well that their parents' salaries (if they are employed!) will never provide enough money to buy the toys and games and Nikes that they want. They have to look elsewhere.

Some children will attempt to find consumer satisfaction on the street.¹⁰ Unfortunately, as we will see in the subsequent chapter, the street will not provide the consumer goods for which these children long.

- **“They gotta respect me!”** We’ve all seen it: we’re in a park, or maybe a swimming pool. A child throws a ball in the air or jumps into the pool again and again. Clearly, she’s having a wonderful time, but something is missing. “Mom! Mom! Look, look. OK, watch. Why aren’t you watching? Look, Mom! Don’t you see what I’m doing?”

¹⁰ The Brazilian scholar Rita da Silva reminds me that the street is only the most obvious of the paths for a child who wants to buy things. Joining a gang or dealing drugs are much easier techniques. Many children also find a “patron” from the upper classes. [Comunicación personal de Rita Oenning da Silva, Julio 19, 2002]

Here we are speaking of a desire that is really a necessity: not just for children or for the poor. As I write this essay, I think about my friends or about my father – “Oh, he’ll love this phrase. I’ll send it to him, so he can tell me how good it is.” We all need to be recognized by others; this gaze makes us real and human. In the eyes of the other, we learn – or perhaps confirm – who we are.

For children in a shantytown, it is terribly difficult to satisfy this need. Their parents, always the most important mirror in which children can see themselves, work such long hours that they can spend little time with their children. When they are at home, parents are often so tired that they want only to collapse in front of the television. If the neighborhood is dangerous, boys (and especially girls) are often prohibited from being in the streets where they might find someone to see them.

Another common situation, particularly in contemporary Argentina, is that of jobless parents who are *always* at home. They certainly look at their children; they recognize their existence. However, there are two problems here: first, this recognition often manifests itself as abuse. Second, the recognizing gaze is never enough. One wants to be recognized by someone who is respected. After a certain age, an unemployed parent may not fulfill this role.¹¹

In the streets of the shantytown, children can find recognition. Even if it is just the grandma who says “Hi” or the drunkard who invites a boy to watch a football match, someone will look at him. However, not all recognition is equal – we long more for the respect of someone

¹¹ Comunicación personal de Teresa de Kakisu, Julio 3, 2002

“important” than for the casual gaze of a bum. Where does one find people whose recognition matters most? Downtown.

- **“I just wanna have fun.”** Fun and pleasure are not easy categories. Even so, we do like to think that we know what fun is – and we also know that someone else is always having a better time than we are. In movies and on TV, we see that everyone is always happy in Los Angeles, or in Mexico City, or someplace else.

A street child isn’t content with the fun he has in the shantytown, because he knows that there must be something better. Instead of accepting his conditions, he goes off in search of what commercials tell him he deserves. Children who end up on the street are generally curious: they want new lessons and new experiences. They go downtown to find pleasure, fun, and growth.

There are innocent pleasures on the street, things we want for any child: street kids play football, run around laughing, and splash in public fountains. Many sing and dance as part of their mendicant routine, while others seem to find a real joy in their work: jumping onto a moving bus so that they can ask for spare change, juggling balls at a stoplight.¹²

There are also more horrible pleasures. Drugs on the street are infinitely more dangerous than those bought at a college or for a high class party. Glue is even worse. Nevertheless, it would be a lie to deny that these self-destructive habits contain some dose of pleasure.

Outreach workers often insist that street children “drug themselves to

¹² Two of the more dramatic “games” of street children are the following: In Rio and São Paulo, street children “surf” on top of trains – the most challenging routes are the ones with bridges. In Medellín, street children attach ropes to the back of buses, then “waterski” behind them on roller blades or sometimes just on a sheet of metal.

forget, or to ignore hunger,” but street children themselves give a different reason. “I smoke because I like it.”

There is also sexual pleasure on the street. In a crowded shanty, it is almost impossible to experiment with sex, but on the street there is always someplace hidden away. Our culture insists that sex is the greatest of all pleasures, and then denies it to children and adolescents; of course they want to try it. More significantly, the prohibitions against sex and against the street often hybridize into something even more intense.¹³

I don't want to contend that the street is a pleasant place; that would be a lie. Nor do I want to suggest that all desires are fulfilled on the street. I merely want to show that the child in the shantytown can imagine that the street is full of pleasure, and that this imagination can be one of his or her motives to seek a new life on the street.

- **“How boring!”** Few street children have the vocabulary necessary to speak about the meaning of life, so they seldom speak philosophically about their reasons to seek another life on the street. Nonetheless, in the rhetoric of “life sucks” and “why?” we can begin to detect a sort of existential crisis in the interior lives of these children. As with all of us that live in consumer culture, street children aren't quite sure why they are on Earth, but at the same time they – again, like most of us – do not have the vocabulary to express this fundamental discontent.

Colombia is an extreme case, but it can serve as an important example. In Colombia, as we see in the works of Álvaro Mutis, adventure has long been the technique of choice for constructing

¹³ Personal Communion from Rita da Silva, July 19, 2002.

meaning from life. Though narrating the adventures in their lives, people learn – or prove – that life is worthwhile and that it follows a purposeful path. Old men and women, especially the poor, earn the esteem and respect of their friends, while at the same time they provide a framework with which they understand their difficult lives. In these stories – and in the performance of storytelling, Colombians give meaning to their lives.

Street children are also looking for stories and for adventures. On the street, they see violence, drugs, and sex, all of the elements of a Hollywood adventure. “Traveling children” in Colombia, who hitchhike from the Amazon to the Caribbean, earn the admiration of their friends, of the truckers with whom they ride, even of street educators. Their life is hard, but it is also interesting and challenging.

Jorge Luís Borges once said that the Colombian city of Manizales was a “factory of vistas.” One might equally say that the street is a “factory of tales.”

The street is a way to escape misery. At the same time, it is also a solution and a seeking, the effort to find liberty and meaning and pleasure. In the next chapter, we will begin to see how these children either achieve or fail in their hopes for the street.

2.1 There's pleasure on the street

During the last decade, Brazil has achieved more success than any other country in solving the problems of street children. Whenever I speak with a Brazilian intellectual or anyone else who has thought seriously about services for street kids, I ask what the secret is.

There are, of course, many answers to this question. The most common and important, however, is the following: “We came to understand that there is pleasure on the street.”

The misery of the street is obvious. We can't escape the filth, the illness, the violence, and the solitude that make up the street environment. This suffering has inspired many, if not most, of those of us who work on the street, and it inspires charity from governments, international foundations, and caring individuals. The problem is that this misery occludes an important fact: the street offers something more than suffering.

If the street were only a horror, there would be only one challenge for the agencies that serve street children: build homes and beds for them. However, this simply is not true: all over Latin America (and the United States) we see shelters constructed by caring, well intentioned people that nevertheless stand half empty, because street children feel that they have a better option.

How can it be that a child achieves his or her desires better on the street than in a shelter? It seems impossible, but a quick conversation with a street child – or a glance at the annual report of many NGOs – will confirm the strange fact.

In this chapter, I want to examine the five existential desires that we considered above. Can boys and girls fulfill these desires on the street? Is there real pleasure there?

2.2 Consuming

The TV, ads, and everything else about contemporary culture promise us *things*: cars, brand name clothes, radio, music, a beautiful home with immense numbers of appliances... Clever boys and girls know that these are traitorous promises, because the salary of a poor family will never allow for such luxuries; for this reason, one must look for such goods outside of the shantytown.

Adolescent consumers are hardly limited to Latin America. In recent years, Germany has suffered from horrible rates of child prostitution: middle class girls, looking for a new outfit or an expensive watch, sell their bodies on the street. Something similar is going on in Japan. Often, child labor has the same origin: not in the need for survival, but in the desire for some luxury. In the Colombian film *La Virgen de los Sicarios (Our Lady of the Assassins)*, the protagonist asks his young lover, a street boy and hit man, what he wants out of life. “Some Reeboks, a uniform from Atlético de Medellín, Tommy Hilfiger jeans, a mini-Uzi, and a Whirlpool refrigerator for my mom.” For many children, the good life is defined by consumption.

However, no street child can get these consumer goods. He or she has no money to buy them, and certainly no place to keep them. If he has a t-shirt from his favorite football team, it will soon be filthy; if he steals a walkman, it will soon be broken or stolen. Clearly, children cannot satisfy consumer desires on the street.

Is this true? I’m not so sure.

In spite of appearances, there is money on the street. Studies by **EI Caracol** (Mexico City) show that children working as fakirs (lying on broken glass, eating fire, etc) earn more money than skilled laborers. In Venezuela, young street vendors often earn twice the minimum wage. Street children who become involved in drug dealing get rich quickly, as do *mulas* (girls who transport drugs) in Colombia. Certainly these children do not use this money as an economist would hope, and they never create capital, but money passes through their hands.

However, even if a street child has money, he can't *possess* consumer goods. Some thug will rob his shoes and brand name clothes will soon be soiled. Radios and walkmans are lost... Money does not buy what these children want. The issue of possession brings us to two fundamental questions: what is consumption? And what strategies work on the street?

The pleasure of consuming is never having. It is *getting*. A child with a new toy is happy for a couple of minutes, but then he asks, "So, what else did you get me?" Think about the young man who shows off his new motorcycle, of the woman with her new formal dress. The success of the economy of consumption depends on the following fact: the thing that we want will never satisfy our desire. For a brief moment, upon getting it, we feel a huge relief; but this pleasure will soon be replaced with more desire.

The street child has nothing – or more exactly, nothing belongs to him. Nonetheless, he *gets* many things: he buys an ice cream and eats it. She robs a walkman, listens to it for several days, and then forgets it on a park bench. He saves for weeks to buy new tennis shoes, but two days later a thief takes them. There is also a gift economy on the street, in which a child, tired of her new

toy, gives it to her friends.¹⁴ The important thing is that the desired object was in her hands for a moment; she got it, so she got the pleasure of consuming. This life is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the consumer culture: the hidden logic behind commercial propaganda is that desire is not satisfied in having, but generates itself even more.

We think that the street child has nothing because he appears filthy and because he tells us that he has nothing. However, it is not so simple. During the last several years in Bogotá, the recession and the flood of refugees have made it impossible to earn money as a beggar: the competition for limited goods is simply too stiff. The techniques of the beggar (filth, pathetic stories) are less and less common, and street children have sought other ways to support themselves.

Today, street children in Bogotá aren't filthy. They dress well and behave impeccably so that the police will not notice them. And then, as the saying goes in Colombia, "they'll rob you down to your underwear." A new context demands a new strategy, so in this moment, Colombian street "urchins" dress in fashion, show off a cell phone, and look you in the eye.

Street children in other countries also have things, though the passer-by and the street educator might never see them. In hidden corners of the city, they have places to keep things that matter to them: photos, lucky charms, sometimes even money.

Even though a middle class adult might not see it this way, street children do get something from consumer culture. They don't get the Whirlpool fridge, but they do get the brief pleasure of getting – and the intensification of desire that this dynamic implies. It is hardly a perfect

¹⁴ Cf. Rita de Cácia Oening da Silva. "A Porta Entreaberta": *Práticas e representações em torno das relações entre casa e rua junto a crianças de camadas populares em Florianópolis*. Dissertação de Mestrado - Antropologia Social, UFSC, Dissertação de Mestrado - Antropologia Social. Florianópolis, 1998

situation, but – like all of us – they imagine that someday, consuming will actually make them happy.

Here I want to add a brief reflection on the nature of desire, which may help us to understand why a child will not return home after he sees the failure of his desires on the street. Desire, as we will see, is much more complicated than wanting and having.

Desire does not want satisfaction. Desire desires only more desire. Coca-Cola is a perfect example:¹⁵ Because of commercials, peer pressure, or just because everyone drinks it, I want a Coke. Maybe I'm even thirsty. I drink the Coke, but the sugar and the carbonation don't take away my thirst. They make me even thirstier. After drinking a Coke, I have to drink more and more. The fulfillment of my desire (to rid myself of thirst) always flees in front of me, so I run harder; I want more. The "pleasure" of a Coke, if we can call it pleasure, is desire alone – I want more and more, and this wanting becomes equivalent to the product.

However, an impossible desire is uninteresting. We must maintain the illusion that desire can be fulfilled, or it fails as desire (I can never fly to the moon, but this wish will never obsess me like the desire for Coca-Cola). The perfect desire, like Coca-Cola, must always sit inches behind the reach of my outstretched fingers.

Where is the worst and most perfect realization of this dynamic? On the street. Theft and begging bring money; the object of desire lies just behind the glass of the shop window. Yet these objects are always just a little bit beyond the reach of the street child. She will continue to think that she has *almost*

¹⁵ this example come from Slavoj Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute*. London: Verso, 2000

achieved her aim, but then the glass on the shop window thickens just enough to make that desire impossible.

The street does not fulfill consumer desire. However, it hints that tomorrow, the street child will get what she wants, and that she should not give up. As long as this dynamic exists, street children will be reluctant to give up their desires for the comfort of a shelter.

2.3 Respect

Those of us who work directly with street youth or with gang members hear the word “respect” every day. The world’s greatest sin is disrespect, looking at the street child as an inferior being. Here, I want to address the concrete content of this longing for respect. What does the street child want? And will she find it on the street?

I have mentioned the conditions of the child in the shantytown, his invisibility. His parents are working or begging; perhaps they forbid him to play on the dangerous street. His house is too small for friends to come over and play. His sole company, besides his siblings is the TV. Even there, he won’t see a reflection of himself, because Latin American television is overpopulated with white faces unlike the black and indigenous skins of those that live in shantytowns – except, of course, on the news, where the criminals all seem to be darker than the news readers.

Every child fears such invisibility, but the street offers a solution: people look at each other there.

There are many theories about the gaze that the general public turns toward street children. Children want and need many different forms of recognition, and they will find some of them in the mirroring eyes of people downtown. Tourists and middle class people will be shocked by the presence of a child alone on the street; in their world view, the child belongs at home, with the family, not in a dangerous place like the street. The child is filthy, but the response of the rich may be even stronger: that the street child is, in fact,

filth. Dirt in the garden is fine, but in the house it is not; the poor child in the shantytown is fine, but downtown and alone, he is filth. Boys (and especially girls) should not be there!

The bourgeois response to filth is to clean it: this can be charitable (“Let’s find a place for these poor things!”) or genocidal (as we saw in massacres in Brazil in the 1980s and in Central America today). Other people may respond to street children as they respond to a stain on their neighbor’s rug: it is best to pretend not to see it.

In none of these cases does the street child receive the respect that she wants. She can be the visible invisible, like the stain on a rug, or she can be filth. However, both of these gazes are better than the complete invisibility of the shantytown.

Poor people may see the street child with different eyes; in their world, children play on the street, so street children may not be seen as “out of place.” Many poor adults, especially those that live on the street, may identify with street children, remembering their own youth. In a city like Medellín, where this phenomenon is very strong, children often see homeless adults as role models, finally finding the recognition for which they had longed. Unfortunately these role models provide a limited set of life-options, mostly those of street vendors, beggars, and petty criminals.

Recognition is even more complicated for street girls. Many people feel more pity and worry for girls (perhaps because of the sexist presumption that they are less able to survive in difficult conditions), and only the most uncaring person will not feel something for a six year old girl alone on the street. For this reason, we cannot speak as easily of the “invisible” girl, and girls are generally not the victims of massacres on the street.

Unfortunately, this recognition is a two bladed sword. Though she will be recognized, the girl will be seen *as a victim*, thus complicating her own identity and making it more difficult to see herself as an actor in her own life. Second, she will be seen as a sexual object; this recognition threatens her with exploitation, rape, and prostitution. Often, in order to find even more recognition, she will adopt an identity that forces people to look at her in this way, thus making herself more vulnerable.¹⁶

If girls and boys are looking for respect and recognition on the street, it appears that they are doomed to failure. Nonetheless, most have the emotional and intellectual resources to persist and to find winding paths to recognition.

Violence, drugs, money, and gangs are a powerful tool for recognition. In cities where gangs are strong, the following scene is common: three young men walk together down the street, talking in loud, vulgar voices. They force anyone else from the sidewalk and laugh at anyone who scurries across the street to escape them.

We can easily attack this behavior as rude, but it is also more complicated. Provoking fear is a way to be recognized; we may not like to be frightened by these young men, but we have to admit that they exist. In the mind of the white middle class, the poor black man is a threat of violence, and gang members take advantage of this myth to carve out a social space for themselves.

When we think about gang discourse, the fetishization of the knife and the gun, we see that violence is also a way to be recognized. The weapon symbolizes the phallus and power, a way to make other people pay attention.

¹⁶ Other girls dress and act as boys as self defense.

Street kids often affiliate with a gang and earn money as runners or dealers. In capitalist culture, this money buys respect: flashing money in the market or the store will gain the attention of peers and of adults. New t-shirts and jewelry have the same effect. Many of us have seen an ex-street kid who joins a gang, makes money, then comes back to his old hang-out to show off.

Finally, the gang fulfills an important role here. Even if no one else recognizes the child, the gang will. Like the army, the gang provides ranks, titles, and defined rites of passage. The street child knows what is expected of him and that he is important.

As in the case of consumer desire, the street is not the perfect place to achieve recognition. However, it does provide something, just enough to convince a child to keep trying.

2.4 Pleasure

Without doubt, there is pleasure in the shantytown. Many times, when I am in a poor neighborhood in Mexico, Brazil, or especially Argentina, I believe that there is much more joy in these poor shantytowns than in the retreats of the wealthy. Unfortunately, the pleasure of music, dance, friendship, and sport is never enough. The TV has taught us that someone is having more fun than we are, so we are left unsatisfied with our pleasures.

Middle class children, whether in the United States or Latin America, experience the same feeling of betrayal. Whether it is part of the human condition or of the capitalist economy, we always want more happiness, and other people's pleasure only makes us envious. For the wealthy child, this existential discontent may motivate him to study at the university, to try drugs, to experiment with sex and sexuality... for the rich, there are many options. The poor child must seek this pleasure elsewhere.

The most obvious "pleasure" on the street is that of drugs. I confess that I don't understand this pleasure: the smell of glue gives me a splitting headache and other drugs seem rather uninteresting. Nonetheless, most street children describe their experience with glue sniffing as pleasurable. How is this pleasure? And how is it addictive?

The most common explanation is that glue makes one forget hunger and suffering, but this story may be too easy. Careful studies in Colombia and Brazil have shown that street children suffer from hunger much less than we had assumed: there is always a restaurant or street vendor who will give them

food. In truth, the crisis of malnutrition happens in the shantytowns and the countryside, not in the streets of downtown.

Equally interesting is what happens when children turn 12. In many countries, particularly Colombia and Venezuela, children quit sniffing glue when they hit puberty; when asked why, they say “Oh, glue is for little kids.” Adolescents suffer more from hunger, because small children are more successful mendicants, but these same adolescents use less glue.

Glue abuse requires much more thought than I am able to provide here. I only want to insist that we take seriously what street children assert: that they use glue because they like it, that it is a pleasure for which they search.¹⁷

Many children will also describe sex as one of their pleasures on the street.¹⁸ Though there is little or no privacy in a poor family’s home, on the street one can always find an abandoned building, a sewer, or a bridge. In a downtown pharmacy, there is no shame in buying a condom. There are also boys and girls from all over the city, so one can experiment with homosexuality without getting the feared reputation of “faggot.”

¹⁷ One question, that of “why do children use glue on the street?” opens an interesting line of thinking. In Guatemala, there is as much glue in the shantytowns as on the street – the same is increasingly true in the shantytowns of Bogotá. Many families sniff glue in their own homes, so it is no shame that a child would have to hide – in the dump in Guatemala, a child can sniff glue openly, sharing it with his grandmother. Why would one do the same thing on the street?

I want to suggest a possible answer: in the shantytown, glue signifies sadness, solitude, and despair; it is the drug for those who have given up on life. Downtown, glue has a different meaning: it is the drug of the adventurous, the free, those who try to escape despair and violence. The effects of sniffing glue are the same, but on the street, a child can pretend that glue is the drug of the rebel, of someone with a future. In the shantytown, one cannot sustain this myth.

The problem with glue (and with other drugs) is not just what they *do*, but what they *mean*.

¹⁸ One should note the gender of these respondents: boys say they like sex more than girls. I would suggest several reasons for this difference:

1. Sexual abuse is generally more prevalent among girls.
2. Associations with prostitution and exploitation may take the pleasure from sex.
3. Machismo does not value women’s pleasure.
4. Girls are unlikely to discuss the subject with a male foreigner.
5. Boys need to construct a discourse that emphasizes their own virility, a need few girls feel.
6. There may be many more.

When we think about the stereotypical street child, sex doesn't seem appropriate: we don't want to imagine the sexual life of a six year old. However, many studies in many countries have shown that street children become sexually active at a very young age, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. Many of these children describe sex as pleasurable.

These studies have thrown the whole definition of pleasure into question. We don't want to think that a child who gives oral sex to a gang leader gets pleasure from the experience, and the distinction between sex and rape may not exist when a girl is ten years old. However, in almost all street cultures, one will find young children that "voluntarily" participate in sexual abuse. Some of this dynamic comes from power and survival – having the head of the gang as a protector is no small thing – but there is also an ideological component. In the postmodern west, sex is *the* pleasure. Even when it is awful or torturous, we always define it as something we want. In the underground world of street life, this ideology becomes particularly perverse.

Thinking about pleasure, we should return for a moment to questions of desire: we don't just want pleasure. We want desire. Drugs and sex on the street might appear unfulfilling, but we can say that about many sexual experiences, about alcohol and tobacco. They never provide the satisfaction that we desire, but instead of feeling betrayed, we only want them more.

2.5 Freedom

Even the best behaved children sometimes dream of running away, especially when their mothers say “no.” For the poor child, a mother’s prohibition is hardly the only chain that she desires to break: there is also violence, crime, poverty... School is also understood as a restraint on freedom, as are the judging gazes of neighbors. On the streets of downtown, a child gets a taste of that dreamed-of liberty.

For most children, the idea of freedom is simple: that no one can tell her “no.” On the street, without parents, priests, gangs, or teachers, one approaches this dream. At home, they have no power to resist family controls, but on the street, they at least have the power to escape. Clever children manage to elude police and social workers in spite of adults’ best efforts.

This freedom is only superficial. Though the street child may be free *from* a parent’s “no,” he is not free *for* anything. He need not obey others, but he cannot do all that he wants, either: he can’t become a doctor, he can’t play football in the Plaza de Armas, and he can’t move to France. If one defines liberty as rebellion, then the street child is free; if we define freedom as opening new possibilities, there is little liberty on the street.

We should note, however, that freedom can only be judged in comparison: in the shantytown, the child has *even less* freedom than on the street. After living in the virtual prison of a shack in an impoverished slum, a child is not too wrong to describe the street as free.

We must ask another question. Why doesn't the street child rebel against the injustice of life in the same way that she rebels against the oppression of her family and neighborhood? I have no easy answer to this question, but I will attempt to address it later in this essay, when I examine the organizations that attempt to take the discourse on freedom seriously.

2.0 Adventure Stories

How do we make our lives meaningful? In a culture dominated by the television and by Hollywood, narrative has become the foremost tool in this effort.¹⁹ A poor child will seldom study philosophy as a way to make sense of her life, and religious meaning seems to lose force with each passing year – especially among rebellious children like those who will take to the street. Storytelling is a powerful way to make sense of our lives, and the street never lacks for stories.

The tendency to use stories as the foremost technique of meaning construction can have a positive impact. In the past, people have often made meaning through oppressive and vertical structures: a priest on the pulpit tells the faithful what the meaning of life is. The classical philosophical schools, like Stoicism or Aristotle's Academy, were both dogmatic places.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will find comfort.” This phrase offers a single meaning for everyone, but the meaning of a Hollywood movie is not always so clear – it doesn't have the moral clarity of one of Aesop's fables. In order to make a meaningful life in this postmodern world, we have to use narrative tools to construct our own meanings. We are actors in this process.

The problem is that Hollywood and television provide few narrative tools. Adventure, understood as a crusade against the bad guys or as a search

¹⁹ This reference to Hollywood is not meant as a criticism of narrative as a path to meaning. One finds the same technique in the Bible, in Tolstoy, in García Márquez... However, the majority of children do not learn about narrative from *Anna Karenina*, but from *Star Wars*.

for the Holy Grail, brings meaning to the hero's life. Love is another worthy goal for a life. On the path to achieve love, or to bring the crusade to a successful end, what do we find? Sex and violence.

The street is full of sex and violence, with a Hollywood-like intensity, allowing street children to think that their lives are exciting and important, worthy of being presented on the silver screen. When I worked with street youth in New York City, outreach workers joked that the kids' lives were defined by "drama and trauma," and I have seen the same thing in many other countries. Children want to tell their stories to other people, but they need adventure as the raw material for these stories.

We should also remember that story is not only an emotional tool: it is also the street child's *employment*. When a child gets on a bus to ask for spare change, he will declaim in a dramatic tone, "Ladies and gentlemen, please pardon me for interrupting your pleasant ride, but I am a poor boy, and because there was not enough food in the house for my little brothers and sisters, I went to the street to make a life for myself..." Or "Excuse the interruption, but I ask for your help because my stepfather kicked me out of the house..." Turning oneself into an object of pity is good business; people give more money and they often even look you in the eyes. A powerful story, be it true or fiction, allows a child to buy food, clothing, and shelter.

Storytelling fulfills emotional and material needs. This powerful story also makes him believe that his life is interesting and important. He also makes money. However, what is the content of this story? And what impact does the story have on the child's life?

The easiest story is one of victimization. The father dies in the civil war and the mother does not have enough money to buy food for all of her children, so the oldest child runs away so he is no longer a burden. The

stepfather rapes his stepdaughter, so she flees for the street. A poor child sells candy on the street to help his family. They are true stories that occur in every country on the planet. They are also *successful* stories that inspire pity and financial help.

The narrative of the West insists that the victim is innocent and noble: Christ and the early Christian martyrs are the archetype here. On the Latin American left, the Indians are often the innocent, noble victims of the Spanish Empire and the inhabitants of the third world are the innocent victims of global capital. In conservative narratives, the suffering of the mother proves her goodness and the misery of the poor man guarantees him a place in heaven. These may be hypocritical narratives, but they point to a close relation between suffering and innocence. Street children use this connection to make sense of their horrible lives: because they are miserable, they must be good. If one doubts, look closely at the face of a child as she tells her tale of woe: there will be pleasure there.

The street always brings adventure: running from the cops, making fun of the rich, falling in love and having sex, or just the quotidian adventure of finding food and a bed. In the extreme, this tendency leads to the Colombian *niño viajero* (child traveler). In Cartagena, on the Caribbean coast, the majority of street children come from Medellín or Bogotá; I asked them how they made the long voyage to beautiful colonial city, and they told compelling stories of days on the road, hitching rides from truck drivers or local peasants. They had crossed areas controlled by the guerrillas or by the *autodefensas* (right wing guerrillas), sleeping at night by the side of the road or in abandoned buildings. They showed immense pride in these adventures and in their ability to survive them.

For some children, these adventures were incredible: one ten year old boy told me of his trip to the Amazon, where he swam with the pink dolphins. He insisted that they were much cooler than the dolphins of the Caribbean, but also much more shy. Sleeping in the jungle, he had learned the calls of different birds, and he imitated the oropendola and the toucan. A sixteen year old girl told me how she had visited every city in Colombia, how she had escaped from the guerrillas and the army, what she had learned from the people she had met. She had decided that she wanted to see the world, and she was going to hitch to Rio de Janeiro. I met another boy who had stowed away on a ship and reached Cádiz, Spain. Another had signed up with drug dealers because he wanted to visit the United States.

In each of these cases, the story provided a center for the child's life. They were flattered by my interest and believed that their adventures gave purpose and importance to their lives. They all participated in a program for street children, but none planned to stay. To live in a shelter meant abandoning the meaning that they had found in tales of adventure.

Like other desires, one cannot find perfect meaning on the street. Though there may be adventure and a series of exciting events, an overarching plot is often lacking. It is more like MTV than like a feature film, because the clips don't fit together, and it is difficult to find the moral of the story – and on top of everything else, it is hard to imagine a happy ending. Nonetheless, the story of the street is more compelling than the story of the shantytown, so the child will continue to look on the street for a story that will make sense of his life.

In these reflections, I have not wanted to hint that the street is a paradise. Such a conclusion would be completely false. However, we cannot say that the street is pure misery, either. Even though it seems strange, the child finds pleasure on the street, a kind of recognition, and a story that seems to offer hope of a meaning.

Thinking that the street is only misery is not a simple academic error. This mistake inspires us to create programs that fail to address the existential needs and desires of street children. When we think that the street offers only suffering, we conclude that we only need to construct a shelter, and children will come. It seems obvious that a home, a school, and vocational education are better than the street.

Unfortunately, this “obvious” fact is untrue.

In the next chapter, I will describe the programs that take children’s existential desires seriously and provide them a real alternative to the street.

Part 3

LEAVING THE STREET

If a child has left home to fulfill certain desires – for liberty, pleasure, recognition, etc – what will she need in order to leave the street? Children often declare that they will “never” return home, either because of violence or because returning is a sign of failure, but what is required for them to think that leaving the street is moving *forward* and not backward?

In some cases, street children and youth manage to leave the street on their own. In the United States, research shows that most street youth find a home and a job on their own – with a strong economy, they can eventually find a job and rent an apartment with friends. Remedial education and scholarships to community colleges also help in this process.

In Latin America, this process is much more complicated, and not only because ten year olds cannot rent their own apartment. Schools serve the poor badly, the economy is both more rigid and more informal, and conditions of exclusion are much more powerful. Even when these children decide that they want to leave the street, their education and the national economy seldom offer the opportunity.²⁰

In these circumstances, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have a fundamental role to play. Over the course of this long chapter, I want to laud

²⁰ There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. In Mexico I met a group of young men and women that had constructed a shelter under a bridge. They and other street youth used this shelter as a sort of revolving half-way house where they could live until they made enough money to find an apartment.

the work of programs that offer real options to the street, providing a way for children to realize their existential desires.

These organizations take children's desires seriously, and they see in them a road to a better life. The NGOs whose work I detail below don't pretend to know what "the good life" is (a home, family, work...); instead, they offer options so that children can make their own lives.

3.1 Leaving the street in search of recognition

When some children flee for the street, they are looking for a mirror in which they can see themselves; unfortunately, most find that this mirror is clouded. They find an identity in the eyes of the people downtown, but this identity is built on pity, opprobrium, or fear. Many NGOs have had great success in offering other mirrors and with them, other identities.

Unfortunately, many programs fail because they do not understand that children desire not only recognition, but *recognition as* – to be seen as important and independent. Many people begin to work street children because they want to “help,” because they see these children as the innocent victims of a cruel world. Such an attitude may recognize a child as a “subject of human rights” or as a “child of God,” but it also defines him as poor, lacking, and as an object of pity.

When a child runs away, she does not desire pity. She wants the sort of recognition that will give her pride and confidence, not the sort that defines her as a victim. These children have immense talents and they want people to see them: their cleverness, their personal strength, their courage, their ability to survive...

How does this process work, allowing a child to be recognized in his strength, not his weakness? Among the hundreds of NGOs that serve street children, one can find several exemplary answers to this question.

The Arts

The arts are a powerful tool of recognition, because they transform the way in which the general public perceives street children. In the artwork – whether dance, painting, music, theater, circus... – the child experiences the social gaze as admiration, not as a put-down. Before, the child had belonged to the street, but now, suddenly, she fills another social role, another place in the social hierarchy. In this new position, she can create a new identity that will permit her to find a life off the street.

The city of Cali, Colombia, provides a powerful example of this phenomenon. A census at the end of 2001 found 1240 boys and 78 girls living on the streets of Cali, most of them downtown, in the rich neighborhoods north of the Río Cali, or by stoplights in the suburbs.²¹ Many earn their money at these stoplights, where they juggle, swallow fire, walk on stilts, or play at clowning. They do not earn a good salary from this work, because there is little money in today's Colombia for beggars, but they do survive. Even so, such work provides only a minimal recognition: when they work at stoplights, they will always be seen as beggars and urchins.

Circo Para Todos (Circus for Everyone), a school that trains street and shantytown children to become professional circus artists, is based in Cali. Under the big top of the circus school, children learn juggling, stilts, clowning, and unicycle. In the four years of training at Circo Para Todos, students become more professional artists than their peers who work at stoplights, but in fact, if professional clowns were to work at a stoplight, they would play the social role of the beggar. The role of the Circo is not only to train artists, but to construct a climate of respect and recognition.

²¹ Data derived from an unpublished study by Bosconia-Cali.

When people pay to get into the big top, when they sit on benches instead of in their cars, when they applaud... suddenly, everything is different. The child is no longer a street urchin that can juggle, but an *artist* worthy of an admission fee. He works beneath an envious and not a pitying gaze. This transformation happens not because of the activity, but because of the big top – in this new context, the child comes to see herself as dignified, noble, graceful... and funny.

This experience teaches us that the important thing is not mere recognition, but *respect*. The physical space of the circus allows and encourages the audience to respect the child for his abilities.

A similar example, though one that draws more explicitly on the fine arts, is dance. **Colegio del Cuerpo** (Cartagena, Colombia) and **Projeto Axé** (Salvador, Brasil) are ballet schools for street and shantytown children. The dance instructors are serious professionals, teaching the techniques of the Ballets Russes, Martha Graham, and Alvin Ailey, and the results are stunning. When I saw a ballet class in Salvador, where each ex-street child was dancing on point, with remarkable grace and extension, it was simply sublime. The Colegio del Cuerpo was the hit at the Iberoamerican Theater Festival in Bogotá, where young men and women choreographed and danced some of the most creative and beautiful work I have seen on stage.

The explosive applause at the end of the Colegio performance didn't come because the dancers were war refugees living on the streets or in the shantytowns of Cartagena – the audience didn't even know this fact. The applause came because the dancers were brilliant. It was a true sign of respect.

What is our stereotype of the ballet? The cruel and cold Russian ballerina, perhaps, or the audience in tuxedos and gowns. In the intermissions,

high society wanders through the lobby, talking about art, philosophy, and politics. Dance is a “high” art, distant from the life of a street child. Then, suddenly, these young dancers find themselves on the pedestal that had been reserved for “high art,” a social role they had never known. They have found a new font of respect.

The applause at the end of the performance taught me an important lesson. During the ballet, the dancers were adults and professionals, with strong bodies and elegant postures; then, suddenly, with the applause, they became young again. Their shoulders fell a little, their feet shuffled, their bodies became thin and adolescent. At that moment, one could almost believe that they lived in the poorest neighborhoods of Cartagena.

With this applause, I realized that what matters is not explicit respect (applause, complements, prizes), but *imagined respect*, not what the other thinks, but what I imagine that he thinks. When the lights illuminated the audience, the respect that the dancers had felt became almost too real, so the dancers felt something like shame. When the theater was dark, the dancers could only imagine the audience, allowing it to be a clearer and more flattering mirror.

We can also see imaginary respect in US programs for street youth, where chess is often the daily pastime. Chess, like ballet, is part of the intellectual life of “respectable people.” Learning chess is not just about a game; it is access to another social role, entrance to a previously forbidden world. When I began to play chess with homeless teenagers in New York, I thought it would be great for their self-esteem: “Look! I just beat a guy who graduated from Harvard!”

This was true, but something even more important also happened: everyone knows that chess is a game for smart people, so teenagers that learned to play chess soon concluded that they were smart. This imagined “everyone”

allowed my chess opponents to see themselves with new eyes, to define themselves as other kinds of people.

If one wants to speak about recognition and art, what medium is better than the movies? The **FOC** (Buenos Aires) runs a film school for street and shantytown children, where they learn to be actors, screenwriters, cinematographers, and directors. The young people become artists and receive the recognition of the camera. At **Taller de Vida** (Bogotá), refugee children make video documentaries about their families and communities, and their work is aired on TV each month. In both of these cases, the children never see the audience that admires them, but they still feel the gaze of this imagined audience, and they feel properly recognized in it.

There is a real power in the recognition of rich people or of the imagined “everyone,” but art can also win the respect of neighbors and family. **Centro Comunitario Salgueiro** (in São Gonçalo, close to Rio de Janeiro) teaches theater to street and gang-affiliated children, but it doesn’t stage the plays downtown, let alone in Europe. Here, the plays are performed for the community: the parents, friends, and families of the young actors.

The program’s director, Maurício Camilo da Silva, told me what happened after the first play: “After the show, I looked out over the audience and they were all crying. You know what? It was the first time that a lot of those parents had ever seen their children. Really seen them, I mean. They’d always been working, or watching TV, so they thought their kids were just a burden. And then, suddenly, the stage showed them that they have good, talented kids.” The admiration of an audience is important – especially if the audience is the family.

Teaching

Everyone thinks that teachers are adults and children are students; the child learns at the feet of a master, recognizing himself as an inferior being that will only advance with the help of the teacher.

Many children accept this regimen of power, waiting patiently for adulthood to receive the respect and recognition that every human being deserves. But as we have seen, the street child refuses to accept the sad facts of the human condition, so she is unlikely to accept pedagogical injustice either.

Unfortunately, a child that wants recognition and respect will seldom find them at school.²² However, several NGOs have found that teaching can bring immense respect for street children – not in being taught, but in the process of teaching their peers or adults about the lessons that they have learned from life.

One of the most interesting of these pedagogical projects is that of **Taller de Vida** (Bogotá), where refugee children, generally Indians and blacks that have fled the countryside because of the civil war, go into middle and upper class schools to teach about politics, history, and conflict. Because Bogotá has largely been an island of peace in a warring country, the rich children know little of what goes on in their country, but when their teachers are children who have experienced this tragedy, the history of Colombia comes alive.

Bogotá is a formal and exclusive city where black and campesino refugees are seen with suspicion. But then, in the schools of Bogotá's elite,

²² We should remember in this context the close link between dropping out of school and running away from home.

these children suddenly find a place of respect and power; they play a new social role.

Sex education has been a common way for young people to become teachers. In **De Joven a Joven** (Cuernavaca, México), poor campesina girls travel from town to town teaching their peers about birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, the relationship between sex and love, gender equality... The girls in these rural schools learn about subjects that their teachers had feared to address, but equally important is that the young educators become respected as knowledgeable and capable.

There are many other programs with the same methodology.

ADEJUC (Guatemala) follows a similar model, but its young educators don't limit their teaching to sex and gender. In this program, young campesinos and Mayas learn how to build sewers, how to grow corn, how to make cheese out of goat's milk. After mastering the subjects, these young men and women go into the countryside to teach others: their peers, but also adults. They transform the infrastructure of rural communities, they train new educators, and they campaign for human rights.

At **Monte Azul** (São Paulo), young people learn to be educators for babies and small children. These girls provide an important service for working mothers, they earn a just wage, and they learn a skill where they can always find work. Most importantly, as teachers they are admired and respected by their charges and by the community.

A vastly different experience, that of **CEDEP** (Florianópolis, Brasil), also proves the power of this model: in a pen pal program, shantytown children write back and forth with children in Italy. They tell about their lives, about

football on the beach, about the ocean and their kites and what they do each day. When they get a letter in response, they are often shocked by the envy of the Italian children. “She really learned something from me? He wants to come and play football on the sand here?” The Brazilian children learn to value their own lives and to recognize their own happiness.

Among the projects that invert the relation between student and teacher, the most interesting may be that of **Melel Xojobal** (San Cristobal de las Casas, México). Melel serves children from many ethnic groups: Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol, Lacadón... Most are refugees from the countryside and many do not speak Spanish. There is a long history of racism and discrimination in Chiapas, and though the indigenous population has become accustomed to oppression, they often rise up against the white power structure, as the world saw in the Zapatista rebellion.

Many of these children have had bad experiences with the government; they justly fear the DIF (Department of Children and Families) and suspect the motives of all social workers. The government has tried to steal their land and to destroy their culture. It is a tough context in which to provide social services.

Melel’s solution has been tremendously creative.²³ Half of program staff are not Maya and do not speak the language, a high barrier to effective services. In order to do their work, educators must learn a Maya language, but Melel does not have the budget to provide for such expensive training. Thus, the Maya children have become language teachers, professors to adults who had been educated at prestigious universities.

²³ Shine a light and Melel have partnered to create the Indigenous Solutions Project, which will develop a teaching tool to help other programs to work with indigenous children and youth. For more information, please contact www.shinealight.org

Instantly, the context of power flipped. Boy and girls used to oppression and exclusion suddenly find themselves in respected, powerful role. They are teachers, envied, respected, and valued. In the course of their lives, education had always been about oppression and suffering, but in Melel's program, they find an education that values them and their knowledge.

We often talk of "education" as a way to get ahead, but too often we give the word an orthodox interpretation: adults educate children. We see exactly the opposite in these examples: when children teach their peers and adults, they begin to find a way off the street.

Unfortunately, I have seen few or no programs that begin from the knowledge that a child learns on the street: Taller de Vida works with refugee kids, ADEJUC with peasant children, and the girls at De Joven a Joven never lived on the street. Even the kids at Melel work on the street, but very few of them live there.

Yet children living on the street know things that all of us need to learn. Let's think about Colombia for a moment: today, street kids are some of the few people who can travel the country freely, without excessive fear of kidnapping or murder. I talked about the boy who had swum with the Amazonian pink dolphins and with porpoises in the Caribbean, who knew the names of every bird in Colombia. How much could he teach his peers, or even adults and biologists!

I could say the same of the young Colombian woman who had traveled to every city in her country and was now ready to go to Brazil. After hitching with dozens of truckers, she understood gender relations and how to defend herself better than any academic feminist. She also knew the politics of every gang and guerrilla, understanding what rhetoric she would have to use to get by

their roadblocks. Could these lessons be useful to diplomats trying to negotiate peace in that war-torn country?

There are hundreds of other examples: the mathematical skills of young street vendors, the business administration skills of gangstas, the visual esthetic of graffiti artists, and the rhythm of a girl playing drums... How can NGOs take advantage of this knowledge and this expertise?

Politics

Traditionally, politics has been the space for social recognition: votes for the bourgeoisie, then for the poor, for blacks and women... each manifested the inclusion of these groups in the social contract. Participating in politics invites the gaze of the other and may open doors to respect and recognition. In some countries, politics has been the way that street children receive recognition.

The most famous case is, of course, that of the **Movimento Nacional de Meninos e Meninas de Rua** (the National Movement of Street Boys and Girls, Brazil), founded during a difficult pass in the history of Brazil, during the repressive dictatorship of the 1980s. Not only did the government repress all dissenting voices, it sponsored death squads that murdered children on the streets every week. In order to defend themselves, the street children joined with adult activists to demand their own rights.

In subsequent years, the MNMMR grew to include thousands of activists. They marched on Brasília and on state capitals, staged protests against police brutality, and broadcast their plight through press agencies the world over, and eventually forced the government to take action against the vigilantes killing children in the street. When the dictatorship finally fell, the

MNMMR promoted and passed what is widely recognized as the world's most progressive law on children, the ECA.

The results of this movement are thrilling and provide hope to all of us who work with marginalized children. However, there is also another important issue to consider: the recognition received by each child that participated in the movement. Whether marching in a protest or speaking before city hall, the child came to see himself as important. The issue is not only a city council member saying "what a smart girl!" but also recognition by a vague "them", sometimes represented by a TV camera, but most often just the knowledge that these children are participating in an important historical event and have thus been recognized by history itself.

The MNMMR works on a national stage, but we can see the same effects on a local level. **Transas do Corpo** (Goiânia, Brazil) trains young men and women to be peer educators in sexuality, but always with a political component. They don't just talk about AIDS and pregnancy, but also about women's rights and tolerance towards gays. They certainly receive the recognition of their peers as teachers, but they also know themselves to be a part of a historical movement, bringing justice into the world. Even if no one were to look at them, they would still be recognized by this imagined other.

Another example of the power of local politics comes from collaboration between the MNMMR and **Cecria** in Brazilia, where the NGOs train ex-prostitutes and victims of sexual abuse to be peer educators. These girls and young women go into the *favelas* to talk with young prostitutes and girls at risk of prostitution; they also speak before city council, demanding better protection for girls. They tie together local politics and personal experience, gaining recognition for themselves and hope for their peers.

The most explicitly political movement for street children may be **Projeto Meninos e Meninas de São Bernardo do Campo** in a poor suburb of São Paulo. Through consciousness raising work in the *favelas* and on the street, the boys and girls learn “how the world works” through the intellectual tools of Marx, the Frankfurt School, and Liberation Theology. Once again, recognition by the powers of the state is important, and the program is excited that several of its graduates have run for elective office, but equally significant is the fact that these children feel like they are actors on a world-historical stage, and that they understand their own role in the world.

Political recognition need not always be so militant. At the school that **MAMA** runs for street children and street workers in Guadalajara, Mexico, children also learn about current events. Several years ago, the kids were stunned by the tragedy of hurricanes in Central America, so staff showed them how to raise money for disaster relief. Since then, every time that the children have learned of a disaster, they have raised money for the victims and sent letters to the children that live in the damaged communities.

At **Benposta** (Bogotá, Colombia), we can see how the dynamics of recognition need not depend on the other. The children living in Benposta try to realize absolute democracy, where the vote on every decision that will affect them. Clearly the children recognize the leaders they have elected to administer the program, but they also recognize themselves, because they know that their voices will be heard in the weekly plenary sessions of the community.

Economics

We live in a capitalist world where the rich are recognized for their wealth, where one’s job and money defines who he is. Lawyers and bankers

earn a more envious gaze than do street vendors. Many programs have attempted to use economics as a way to get recognition for street and working children.

We are all frightened by the number of children who must work to support their families or themselves, and frightened even more by the way they are exploited. Street vendors must give most of their profits to middlemen; squeegee boys have to pay the local mafia for the right to work on a street corner; the smallest beggars often give most of their alms to older members of the band in exchange for protection.

For many NGOs working with this population, the question is how to overcome this exploitation. **MANTHOC** (Peru) and **ONATs** (Paraguay) organize street kids' unions, so that they can stand together against middlemen and get a better price for their wares. They can also stand together to protect themselves from the police and the local mafia, defending their basic rights.

The magazines that the street vendors at **La Luciérnaga** (the firefly) sell provide an important source of income, but they also teach the people of Córdoba, Argentina, about the lives of street children. When the magazine began, its founders asked, "what things can a child do in the street that increase his dignity? What work is respected?" They found an answer in sales; in an industrial city like Córdoba, a child who earns his keep selling things earns a certain respect from his peers and from adults. The magazine saw this idea as a way to gain the public's respect for street and working children.

Ednica (Mexico City) also uses the economy to gain recognition for street children. In the city's open markets, one always sees children begging, so Ednica teaches local small businessmen that it is better to give work than to give alms. The children feel more noble and dignified if they help with some cleaning or errands in exchange for money.

The most interesting link between work and recognition may be **EDELAC-Quetzaltrekkers** (Quetzaltenango, Guatemala), a program for street children financed by a trekking and tourism agency. Not only does Quetzaltrekkers donate all of its profits to EDELAC, it also trains the children to be mountain guides. In a tourist destination like Quetzaltenango, this job means money, but it also means respect: guides are seen as some of the most important people in the community.

In each of these cases, the idea is simple: bring dignity to street labor. In this way, boys and girls learn that they can do something with their lives.

Religion

Religious programs offer something that other NGOs cannot: recognition (imaginary or real) by God.

Niños de la Luz (Caracas, Venezuela) has reflected extensively on this issue. As one staff member told me, “Our basic goal is to teach the kids that they are important. Important to us and important to God.” The challenge, they say, is that the recognition of any individual is always insufficient: sure, it is great to hear a compliment or see an applauding audience, but people always disappear. And there is always a doubt in our minds: is the audience applauding because they like it or because they feel pity for street kids?

In contrast, many religions insist that nothing is more valuable than knowing oneself important to God and God’s plan. God does not disappear, nor does he betray, and that’s what makes life worthwhile.

The great danger of this attitude, of course, is its exclusive character: “God recognizes me because I have faith, but not you, infidel!” The Pentecostal program **Misión la Vid** (Barranquilla, Colombia) addresses this

problem directly, seeing God's love as inclusive, not exclusive. For the volunteers that staff the program, being a part of the people of God does not mean preaching but being an example of God's love. In this way, they feel recognized (for doing God's work) yet they also recognize others (though sharing love with them).

3.2 Leaving the street in search of pleasure

Social workers often see their role as helping people overcome suffering, but street children have different motivations to orient their lives. They are not so much trying to escape misery as they are trying to find something, and they are willing to suffer quite a lot to get what they want. A bed and food simply aren't enough to make a child want to change his life: they have gone to the street to find pleasure and fun, and they won't be turned aside easily.

“Desire” and “pleasure” may have negative connotations, but children have interiorized this connotation less than adults, and they are often quite frank about what they want from the street: they want to have fun.

Unfortunately, the pleasures of the street are often dangerous and seldom fun: drugs keep the child numb on the street, promiscuous sex brings STDs, and though it is great to play soccer on the park, a scraped knee brings infection.

In Western culture, we have come to associate childhood with play; so many programs have decided to use pleasure as a way to draw kids in: soccer games, movies on Tuesday afternoon, a trip to the swimming pool...

However, most of these programs see play as part of the seduction of the child, and few NGOs have come to see pleasure as a fundamental part of a full life, as a satisfaction for existential need.

In this chapter, I want to look at how some NGOs manage to integrate play into their programming: not only as a tool of seduction, but as a way to think beyond the street.

The Pedagogy of Desire

Maria Eneide Teixeira taught me the basic insight of programs that emerge from play and desire: “No kid goes onto the street to subject himself to new rules or to go to school. So why do we keep giving them rules and school? We have to offer what they love.” For this reason, Teixeira created the **Circo de Tudo Mundo** (Belo Horizonte, Brazil), where everything is “re-creation” in its most profound sense. Play – in the form of a circus school – is the basis of re-creating one’s being and re-constructing life off the street.

Projeto Axé (Salvador da Bahia, Brazil) has taken this idea to its theoretical conclusion. Axé realized that desire is not just *there*, but is constituted by culture, family, and imagination. For this reason, Axé dedicated itself to teaching new desires and new pleasures, and using these new desires as a way to participate in society. Instead of the pleasures of street sex or drugs, Axé offers dance, music, and art.

Axé knows that the street child’s basic experience is that of exclusion: he can’t participate in social or economic life. He is invisible, and if seen, he’s just “trash”. He just doesn’t fit into the way that we see the world, where children should be at home and at school, so he is invisible or defiled.

What pleasures are available to excluded children? Sex, drugs, theft, adventure. Children want these pleasures, but they are poor pleasures: dangerous and unfulfilling. For this reason, Axé began to think of new pleasures, ones that aren’t just fun, but also offer the hope of inclusion and participation.

When we talk about “inclusion” we are also talking about recognition, so we could read Axé through the perspectives we developed in the last chapter, but here I want to look at the way Axé has developed the “Pedagogy of Desire” as a way to teach kids to want more from life. They learn to want not

only the fleeting pleasures of the street, but also to desire a new life. When they learn dance or drums, they see new opportunities, something both fun and fulfilling. And because of Axé's connections with the culture industry in Salvador, their new desires can also make them a living, through dancing in professional troupes or playing in a band.

Here we see an important difference between the Pedagogy of Desire and other programs that use fun merely as a tool to seduce children into the program. For Axé, leisure is the foundation of the program: not an educational tool, but education itself.

The Pleasure of Learning

Pleasure can become educational, but education can also become pleasant. "To learn by playing" has become a refrain of many NGOs, especially those that work with the youngest children on the street.

The **Fundación Ximena Rico** is a pre-school for children from one of Medellín's most violent slums, one that sends many children onto the street. The children are always playing: sports, toys, board games, and these games are always educational. They teach movement and dexterity, personal relations, new thought patterns. **Fundación Vivan los Niños** does the same work, but on the streets of Medellín, with the children of street vendors. I could use many other examples of the same premise.

There is a long tradition of recreational education with young children, often inspired by Maria Montessori, but things become more difficult when we talk about older children and teenagers. In most cases, education for these children returns to a more orthodox plane: schools and vocational programs. We tend to think that these kids have outgrown the need for games, and they

are ready to dedicate themselves more seriously to their studies. Sometimes this is true; other times, it is not.

El Caracol works with teenagers in Mexico City, kids and young people with a long history on the street and with many dangerous habits. Education may lead them to a new life, but mostly it is necessary to keep them alive: how to protect oneself from AIDS, how to escape vigilantes, how to prevent a drug overdose. These kids have to learn about sex, drugs, and health, but they show no desire to learn in a formal setting.

So how can we help these kids to learn? El Caracol begins with the excitement of high technology and pop culture. After gaining the trust of a band on the street, educators go to their hangouts – abandoned buildings, bridges, vacant lots – with a laptop and a PowerPoint presentation. Art, cartoons, puppets, comic books – they use everything that pop culture has declared interesting. And this technology and fun all includes a message: safe sex, harm reduction, non-violent relationships... Classes on drugs happen in the places where kids get high; classes on sex where the kids have sex; in this way, even kids whose minds are numbed with glue come to remember the lessons.

The educators at El Caracol have nothing more to offer than respect and fun, but kids still come. They come because the classes entertain them; but in the midst of the entertainment, they learn.

Sports

Venezuela is crazy about baseball and basketball; where outreach workers in Brazil or Colombia carry a soccer ball, in Caracas one has to bring mitts, bats, and baseballs. More significantly, for many Venezuelan NGOs,

sport isn't limited to street outreach; rather it structures education in shelters and serves as a technique to prevent youth homelessness.

La Asociación Apoyo a un Niño (Caracas) supports a baseball team for the children that live in its various shelters. The team practices every day, and every weekend they play serious games against other teams in a city league. Their opponents come from rich and poor neighborhoods, but they play the street kids as equals. The coach says that the team offers many advantages to the kids, including discipline, friendship, and fun, but that the most important thing is that on the field, they know they are equal to any other children. Winning a game against rich kids in fancy uniforms shows that dedication and desire can overcome social class.

For **La Asociación Muchachos de la Calle** (Caracas), sport serves as a technique to prevent youth homelessness. One of the program's day centers is in the middle of one of Caracas's poorest neighborhoods, where many children dream of life anywhere else, of the life they might have on the street. Basketball offers a motivation to stay: as long as they live with their parents, the kids can play in a great league, but if they leave home, they also leave basketball. I asked the kids in the neighborhood whether there was anything at all they like about where they lived, and they said, "Of course. Our team, our friends..."

When the **City of Mendoza** (Argentina) decided to change the emphasis of its work from street outreach to preventing youth homelessness, it put its money into creating football leagues in marginalized neighborhoods. Suddenly, children had a reason to stay home. The number of kids on downtown streets dropped 80%.²⁴

It is a pity that most work with sport has focused only on boys. Even though this prejudice is changing little by little, most of us still fail to think

²⁴ I should note that the city also provided other new services in the shantytowns, including better education, counseling, food, etc. Football wasn't the only reason to stay!

about gender when we discuss sport. How can a program offer sports to girls? Are there other options for them?

The limits of pleasure

Most programs that work with street kids aren't able to finance a dance troupe that travels to Europe, as Axé's does, and most cities don't enjoy the city sports leagues of Mendoza or Caracas. We should look also at programs where fun is an integral part, but where this fun happens on the street – some people have suggested that this only “roots” children on the street more.

The **Vicaria Sur** (Santiago, Chile) has very little money, but it does enjoy the commitment of many volunteers, some of whom were once child street workers. On weekends and nights, the volunteers go onto the street to talk with the kids, to share a little hot chocolate, to play football or make kites... The group doesn't have the resources for a shelter or a vocational training program; it isn't going to get the kids off the street on its own. So the question is, by bringing some pleasure to the street, even in the limited form of making kites or playing ball, is the Vicaria making it harder to leave the street? Is it making the street a more attractive place?

I think that the answer is a clear “no”. Playing soccer with a teenage volunteer isn't strictly a street pleasure. The same is true with a kite, which may bring memories of going to the park with grandpa. These activities may happen *on* the street, but they are not *of* the street – in fact, they may remind the child of other moments of happiness and show a path to a more fulfilled life.

3.3 Leaving the street in search of consumer goods

I confess I don't particularly like this subject. I think that one of the major problems with the contemporary world and one of the major causes of youth homelessness is consumer culture. We can see virtue in the quest for freedom and recognition, but I find it harder to laud the quest for commodities.

However, we have to admit that many children look to the street as a way to participate in consumer culture: they want Nikes and Tommy Hilfiger, and they know that they'll never get them in the slums where they live. Even so, the television has told them about the joys of these things, so they head onto the streets of downtown, where beautiful shiny sneakers lie just behind the glass in a display case.

We should break the responses to this desire into two categories: the first tries to bring training that will give kids a better life so that they might have access to consumer goods. The second response tries to teach children about commodity fetishism and the way they are manipulated by advertising. I think that the best programs maintain a fragile balance between these two strategies.

Earning your daily bread

The orthodox service model for street children has always stressed vocational training: if we think that children leave home because of family

poverty, we hope to offer the tools that will allow them to enter a different economic class. A carpenter or welder will never be rich, but he can buy a house and provide food and clothing for his family, certainly a better life than that of a beggar or a street vendor. This is one of the reasons that the model derived from the Salesian Fathers at **Bosconia** (Bogotá, Colombia), has had such an influence around the region.

Vocational training is perfect for some street children: if they want a good, average life, they can find it this way. However, we have to recognize two basic problems here: first, in a globalized economy, it is cheaper to buy a shirt from Indonesia than to produce it in Argentina. There isn't much work for tailors and carpenters.

The second problem is more fundamental. Many children don't leave the slum in hopes for an everyday, average life in the lower-middle class. They want to get all that capitalism has promised them: the big house, the BMW, the brand name clothes. This life is inaccessible to a welder, so that job training may appear uninteresting to the most ambitious street children. Children also know that training means delay, that they have to wait, while if they spend their days on the street selling or begging – or getting involved in drug trafficking – they get their money and their things right away.

The **Fundación Niños de los Andes** (Bogotá), offers some kids the possibility of a more dramatic lifestyle changes. Because the program's founder, Jaime Jaramillo, is a businessman and oil engineer, he knows businesspeople all over the world. He has used his leverage to get good jobs for many ex-street kids: one even managed to get a tennis scholarship to study in Florida. Unfortunately, this option will only be possible for a small number of fortunate children – I don't see it as becoming a generalized solution.

One of the best considered economic development programs is **La Luciérnaga** (Córdoba, Argentina), where working children produce and sell a magazine every month. They sell the magazine for a dollar, which turns into quite a salary in a country in economic crisis, and because the magazine is unionized, the children learn how to organize labor and defend their rights. The sellers also voted to give 25% of their earnings to a school where they can learn the basics of a new life and where they can learn how to spend and invest their earnings. When they understand the way the economy works, few kids waste their money on Nikes and McDonalds.

Offering other goods

However effective vocational training may be, we have to recognize that there will always be shorter and easier paths to consumer goods: gangs and traffickers will offer a good salary in exchange for work as a runner, a hired killer, or a thug. Programs for street kids must either work only with the kids who have decided to reject this easy money, or they must deconstruct the desire for commodities.

By offering some answers to other fundamental existential needs – freedom, recognition, pleasure – NGOs can help to challenge the idea that only buying fulfills our lives. This strategy is particularly effective when we see that much of a consumer’s desire is really a desire for prestige and power. If the real point of Nikes is to get others to envy you, aren’t there better ways?

But there are also programs that attack the ideology of the consumer culture head on. In the “How the world works” workshops at **El Projeto Meninos e Meninas São Bernardo do Campo** (São Paulo), kids learn how a product becomes a fetish, and how consumption has become necessary for

capitalism to function. Nike uses cheap labor in China to make sneakers, and then sells those same shoes at an incredible markup to other poor people. The poor come to love their things so much that they accept their oppression. These workshops don't subvert the need to consume – after all, we need to eat – but they do point to the way that marketing constructs our needs. According to the program, activism is the best way to escape the consumer culture.

Ethics also offer a route to challenge mindless consumption. Many religious people will declare that the consumer culture is idolatry, because people love things more than they love God. The Pentecostal program **Los Círculos Infantiles por la Paz** (Maracaibo, Venezuela) tries to replace the desire for things with a desire for peace, justice, and family.

In spite of all of the creative work that has addressed the desire to consume, I have yet to see a program that takes on the basic paradox of the consumer culture: that we want to *get* more than we want to *have*. On the street, this dynamic is particularly obvious: though a street kid can get a pair of tennis shoes, he can never keep them.

We should consider another, more health desire that has the same dynamic: curiosity. Here, one wants to *learn* more than he wants to *know*. Curiosity is, of course, particularly potent in childhood and adolescence, so we might imagine a program that replaces the desire to get things with the desire to learn.

3.4 Leaving the street in search of a meaning to life

Many people condemn postmodern life for lacking meaning, and life in the shantytown doesn't escape this logic. There is very little time and very few resources to think about "big questions". In Western culture, we have always used philosophy, literature, and religion as way to think through these problems, but all three of these resources are absent in the slum. Libraries don't exist, and TV has replaced words as the primary narrative medium. Schools are underfunded and stress rote learning above critical thinking – many kids leave school without even an idea of how to read, and "educational reform" has turned schools even more toward job training. Few churches brave the violence of the shantytown, and even those that do offer little attraction to poor, rebellious kids.

Yet in the shantytown, finding meaning in life is vital to survival and happiness. Death is a constant presence. Politics offers little hope. The black market, where poor people work, will never provide a way out of poverty – and it certainly doesn't make people feel important.

Many adults will resign themselves to the tragedy of life, but children resist. They want something more, a reason to live. The street, with its adventures, sex, drugs, and dangers, offers some sort of hope for meaning through narrative, through the chance to test oneself.

One hears a great diversity of stories on the street and a great number of "morals of the story", but one commonality is the way street children define themselves as brave, strong, and clever. I remember a young man living on the

street in New York: “When the apocalypse comes, I’ll do better than you,” he told me. “I know how to survive. Throw both of us in a deep jungle, and who’s coming out?” Many street children feel like the challenge of the street offers meaning to their lives, while others find it in the freedom of the street.

We can’t be Pollyannas here, though: the morals to the story can also be terrible “I couldn’t deal with my dad’s abuse anymore, so I had to leave Mom behind... What a bastard I am!” or “I’m just a shit. I ran away to get drugs.” Or “My mom threw me out of the house, but I deserved it, ‘cause I was always beating up my little sister.” Many children find the street easier to deal with if they see it as a deserved punishment for their sins.

Whatever the story, narrative is the brick from which children find meaning in their lives. Some programs have found ways to teach storytelling so that kids can find their own meanings, while others try to offer a new story into which the child can fit himself.

Narrative Therapy

The most self-conscious link between stories and the meaning of life emerges from Narrative Therapy, first developed by the Australian Michael White. The therapist becomes sort of a tutor in storytelling, showing new ways to relate to and to understand the events of a life. For example, in response to the child who says, “I couldn’t deal with my dad’s abuse anymore, so I had to leave Mom behind... What a bastard I am!”, the therapist will help interpret the story to show how much the child loves his mother, how hard he struggled against the father... The moral is no longer “I left her, so I’m a bastard,” but “I fought and fought because I’m strong, but in the end, I lost.”

Narrative therapists have found that in a long story, there is always some kernel that gives meaning to the whole thing, a synecdoche where the part represents the whole. Imagine a good girl who one time has sex with the leader of the local gang. Instead of remembering all of the good things she has done in her life – how kind she is with grandma, how she cared for her little brothers, how she helped out in church school – one mistake comes to represent her life. The therapist works to find other kernels, other stories that will better represent the whole.

Storytelling surrounds our lives, from soap operas to newscasts to Hollywood films, but the genres of these stories are limited: love stories, vengeance narratives, quests for a Holy Grail, war stories... Every day, we lose something of the diversity of storytelling: where is tragedy? When was the last time we saw a movie where the “good guys” lost? What about moral ambiguity? Except in Colombia and Puerto Rico, it is tough to find tragic-comedy, which teaches us to laugh in the face of suffering. So we are left with a small number of stories to tell, stories most often focused on sex and violence. Narrative therapy tries to recover other ways to tell stories.

Though narrative therapy has been very effective with street children, few organizations have dared to implement it. For some years it was very successful with **Youth Shelters and Family Services** (Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA), but innovative programs don't survive long in the US; bureaucratic and funding problems forced the agency to turn to another, more orthodox, methodology. In Latin America, where costs mean that few programs are able to do therapy of any kind, I have not seen the model put into effect.

Storytelling plays a central role in the work of **AIACOM** (Rio de Janeiro), where teachers give workshops on how to tell a story: constructing a plot, dialogue, theme... Children from the local shantytown learn to think

through and tell their own stories, then they share them with their peers and families. In the process, the children are able to re-define their own identity. The model is also self-multiplying, because when they tell stories to their friends, they can also share how to do it, and kids come together on street corners far from the walls of the program.

Latin America has a long tradition of storytelling; reading García Márquez, Lispector, or Paz, we see a creative hybrid of European, African, and Native American techniques, but we can see similar hybridization when we listen to an old man telling stories on a park bench. Unfortunately, this long tradition is dying, a casualty of TV and community breakdown. **Ediac** (Mexico City) and the **ACJ** (Bogotá) work with families in poor communities to reinforce this tradition. They show mothers how important it is to tell and read stories to their children, how it builds belonging and identity – and for refugee and migrant families, this work is of paramount importance. **Acción Educativa** (Santa Fe, Argentina) has a “book cart” that travels to every shantytown in the city, helping parents read to their children, building a connection with culture, and defending “children’s right to literature.”

We shouldn’t limit narrative to words: the young dancers at **Colegio del Cuerpo** (Cartagena, Colombia) tell the stories of their lives through their choreography. At **Taller de Vida** (Bogotá), teenagers wrote “The world is out of joint”, a play about their lives in the civil war. Here we should note that children’s conclusion may be different than ours: “The world is out of joint” is an absurdist comedy and the choreography of Colegio del Cuerpo is not just about tragedy, but “sublimating sadness in the joy of dance.”

Other stories

Most programs that address the meaning of life don't focus on the process of narration, but on finding a new life story. They want to offer a new life and a new meaning to kids who had lived on the street. Some find meaning in art, others in religion or politics.

Here, we see the connection between stories and recognition: yes, it is terribly important that a child create a new story, one that offers meaning to her life. At the same time, this meaning becomes real only when other people hear it, when they see the effects of the story in the mirror of the other. Whether the other is an audience, a teacher, a mother, or the imagined "everybody", the story becomes real when we see the thoughtful nod of a head, a whispered, "yeah, that's how it is..."

And other possibilities

If children need to tell their stories and we need to listen to them, what can grass roots social service agencies do to develop and share the stories of street kids?

When I was in Colombia, I was stunned by traveling children, their ability to overcome suffering, their desire to see the world, their adventures. Yet even in Colombia, many people that work with street kids have never heard these stories. They remain invisible and forgotten. How could one resuscitate and disseminate their tales?

Could we imagine a book that collected the stories of child travelers? Or giving disposable cameras to them, so that they could document their own experiences for those of us who can't cross into guerrilla territory? Or a book of encounters with armed groups, showing how kids were able to manipulate

the rhetoric of the army or the guerrillas and still stay alive? It requires creativity, but with these tools, street kids might be able to show others and themselves that they live important, meaningful lives.

3.5 Leaving the street in search of freedom

During any profound conversation with a street child, one phrase is almost inevitable: “On the street, I’m free.” As we have seen, this statement is often incorrect, because it depends on a very limited definition of “freedom”: that no one can say “no”. However, there is enough freedom on the street to maintain this illusion.

Though most street children justify their lives in these terms, few NGOs have confronted the discourse of freedom directly. It’s a pity, because the few programs that have brought freedom up have found it to be a fecund subject for both street children and educators.

Street educators at the **ACJ-Bogotá** have been trained to ask questions that help children think about freedom. When a child says, “on the street, I’m free,” the educators ask, “So what does it mean to be free?” Often, children don’t know what to say. They think that freedom doesn’t need a definition; it is just obvious. Eventually, they begin to talk about freedom as the absence of authority, having no one around to say “you can’t!”

The conversation then continues along these lines: “Freedom is when I get to do what I want.” The educator may then ask, “so what do you want to do with your life?”

“I want to drive a Formula One car.” (or “be a famous singer, a doctor...” One hears many answers.

“Can you? Are you free to do that?”

“Well, no...”

“Who says you can’t? Your dad?”

“No, nobody really...”

Through these vaguely Socratic questions, the child begins to think about freedom, realizing that he wants to be a Formula One driver or a lawyer, and the street may not provide that freedom. S/he may have to look elsewhere.

Part 4

CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The street and the postmodern condition

Though it is tempting to see street children as a “social symptom”, doing so robs them of their subjectivity and is at the root of many of the bad decisions about services offered for children. None the less, I want to take this risk and step back to look at a broader context, thinking through what the street has to say about the human condition in a globalized world. These are huge themes for an essay like this, and I don’t pretend that I’ll offer any real conclusions, but I do hope to open some important questions and place this debate in a broader political context.

Some intellectuals have suggested that “wild capitalism” itself teaches us to desire, and though this seems to me an exaggerated thesis, we can certainly say that advertising and “Keeping up with the Joneses” has expanded the field of human desire. Two hundred years ago, no poor peasant longed for Tommy Hilfiger, an Audi coupe, or a granite countertop as we do today. Those commodities (or their equivalent) simply didn’t exist for him – either he didn’t know about them, or they belonged to the magical world of the lord on the hill. Today, even though we can’t have these things, they are firmly a part of our world, and we have come to desire them intensely.

Today, everyone wants everything, but no one can buy everything. We are left dissatisfied by life and we know that something is wrong; we’re lacking something very basic.

Lack is a part of the human condition, of course, so much so that the Greek word we translate as “sin” (*hamartia*) really means “lack”. In his theory

of original sin, St. Augustine isn't saying anything more than the obvious: from the beginning, we're all missing something; we feel out of place and somehow wrong. Marketing doesn't create lack, but it does make us more conscious of it.

But as we think about the broad history of humanity, most people did not obsess over their existential lack: what was important was getting the harvest in, not dying in childbirth, making sure that the roof didn't leak... but today, our daily worries run far beyond necessity. Though one can eat enough to feel full, one can never buy enough clothes or shoes to feel full: existential lack has risen to the surface.

Some adults have come to cope with this basic lack, but many children want what they want; they take the promises of global capitalism seriously and want what they have been promised. The world they see on TV is shiny and happy, but their house in the shantytown isn't. Middle class kids whine at their parents until they get what they want, but poor kids know that their parents can't buy the newest toy, so they turn elsewhere.

And how do they make capitalism fulfill its promise? Paradoxically, by rejecting the values of capitalism: they run for the street, live in filth, don't work, irritate the bourgeoisie...

Global capitalism promises consumer goods, but it also promises freedom and recognition. Even if most people only use their liberty to choose a brand of peanut butter, children will take these values seriously, too, freeing themselves from their families, their communities, and their responsibilities. The same is true of recognition, were it appears that I am drinking the right brand of beer, everyone will respect you, and that your vote will be counted. Yet we all know that the rich buy elections and that beer really only makes you

drunk. Many adults will overlook the betrayed promise, but kids want something more: they want to be seen, noticed, and respected.

My hypothesis is this: street children manifest the hypocrisy of global capitalism. We adult cynics accept that the world will betray us, that “life is unfair,” but children still expect something more.

Yet ironically, their innocent belief in the promises of democratic capitalism forces them to abandon the values of capitalism: they build a counter-culture where systems of power, pleasure, and praise follow different codes. Unfortunately, this counter-culture is no better than the world they rejected; in spite of moments of grace, it is brutal and cruel and unfree.

However, these street cultures remind us that there are other options, that capitalism will not have the last word. Capitalism carries the seeds of its own destruction, as revolutionaries have long been known to say, but they often forget that these seeds are capital’s own betrayed promises: freedom, recognition, pleasure, fullness, inclusion... Street children take these promises seriously, and in so doing, move beyond capitalism. Can we?

4.2 Conclusions

Those of us who have seen the misery of the street firsthand may find it hard to believe that children could choose life on the street. We tell ourselves that they are fleeing something worse; we lament the way that poverty and violence “throw” children onto the street and construct programs that might offer a better life than the one a child could find in his own home.

Tragically, this perspective blinds us to the choices and the subjectivity of street boys and girls. They are fleeing from a life that oppressed and abused them, of course, but they are also looking for something better. They hope and they desire, and they think that the street will give them a better chance to get what they want. And to a certain degree, they’re right.

In this long essay, I have not wanted to provide an exhaustive list of what motivates a child to seek a new life on the street, but to offer a new perspective on the relationship between desire and the street. When we think that the street is only a way to escape misery, we build shelters and soup kitchens, programs to solve the immediate problems of violence and poverty. Yet when we realize that children go to the street full of desire and hope, we build other kinds of programs, ones that offer answers to existential needs, not just food and shelter. We try to offer a fuller life.

In the last four years, I have met with almost three hundred organizations that serve street children. The programs that work best are those that take street children’s desires and abilities seriously, that help children to become agents in their own lives. Children’s agency may scare the authorities,

who want obedient students and consumers instead of active subjects, but this vision is fundamental to a new and better life.

Street boys and girls don't accept the daily injustice of their world, so they go to the street to find something else. This decision will have terrible consequences, but it is fundamentally admirable. They remind us that the world should be better, they call us to abandon our cynicism and challenge us to find a new path – not a street, but something that can lead to real liberty, recognition, and meaning.

THANK YOU

Over the last half a dozen years, I have had the good fortune to meet hundreds of people that have dedicated their lives to helping homeless children and youth. The ideas that I have presented here have emerged from conversations with these people, as well as from the emails that appear on my screen each morning. More than 230 NGOs have had the hospitality to open their doors to me, and I have learned something from all of them.

I want to thank particularly several dozen people that have transformed my thinking on youth homelessness: Rita Oenning da Silva, Bene dos Santos, Camila Candiotti, Martín García Pérez, Ricardo Fletes, Sabine LeBow, Leonor Avella, Jocimar Borges, Valeria Nepumuceno, José López, Norma Negrete, Maria Lúcia Leal, Marcos Antônio Cândido Cavalho, Maurico Camilo da Silva, Michael Rose Ramírez, Carrie Steinman, Gloria Macías, Carmen Echeverría, Irma de Schoffel, Greg Burch, Elisa Pineda, Mala Shah, Mike Feigelson, Paula Baleato, Marina Cal, Teresa de Kakisu, Eliana Lacombe, Katherine Miles, Eliane Gonçalves, Sergio Reynoso, Nami Woodspring, Jack Humphrey, y Luiz Carlos Rena.

Unfortunately, confidentiality laws don't permit me to write the names of the boys, girls, and teenagers who have taught me even more.

I did not wish to turn this essay into an academic paper, so I have avoided the footnotes which might have made reference to important studies in this field. Information on the NGO mentioned above is available at

www.shinealight.org. I also include a brief bibliography here, and suggest that anyone interested also consult a much larger bibliography at that website.

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