Chapter 1: Introduction: Theory, Fieldwork, and Storytelling

Published by

Hardgrove, Abby.
Life after Guns: Reciprocity and Respect among Young Men in Liberia.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/51811.

⇒ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/51811
I began spending time on Bernard’s Beach in Monrovia during 2010, seven years after the final cease-fire that ended fourteen years of civil war in Liberia. The beach was usually quiet. Young men clustered under the coconut trees, out of reach of the sun, talking and smoking and passing the time. There was a pool table and some huddled around the games, taking small bets or waiting to play. Darlington was easy to spot among the others. Always clad in a sleeveless undershirt, shorts, and slippers (flip-flops), he cut a thin male figure, several inches shorter than me. When we met for the first time he informed me that he was security. He kept an eye out for any trouble on the beach as a favor to a friend. Though there were occasional kickbacks for his security work, he made most of his living selling rolled joints on the beach and in the neighboring area. He was a hustler, living on his own in a small room just off the main road. He talked to me at length about studying at a university, but had no money to pay for it. His life and prospects for the future were limited in scope, much like those in ethnographic accounts of other youth in Africa and around the world.

One afternoon while we were passing the time on the beach I asked Darlington to speak about the condition of the country for young men like himself. He sat back, joint in hand, and delivered an articulate analysis of the opportunities available to young people. It included a descriptive account of the implications
of poverty, an evaluation of the government’s failure to meet the needs of the people—especially the young people—and the reasons beneath local crime and violence. “The helping hand is not there,” he finished. So many parents had died or lost the means to support their children, and there was little work. “The helping hand is not there,” he reiterated. This book is about the presence and absence of a helping hand in young men’s lives, and what that means for their “life chances,” a phrase I borrow from Dahrendorf (1981) to indicate the options that people perceive based upon their social positions.

“A helping hand” might refer to a government program or a favor from a friend, but mostly, as Darlington used it, a helping hand meant the support of intergenerational relationships in families and kin networks. Family relations were a constant topic of conversation and concern for the young men in this book. Recent research in youth studies has ballooned with observations and theoretical interpretations about life chances, transitions, and trajectories. An interdisciplinary literature portrays urban young people in the Global South¹ as a marginalized generation (Mains 2012; Resnick and Thurlow 2015; Sommers 2003). More often than not, those who are studied are male. They can be found hustling for subsistence, or sitting with their peers. They are often away from their families, navigating individual trajectories toward uncertain future possibilities. They appear like Darlington and the youth on the beach. For the most part, and with a few exceptions (see Cole and Durham 2007), the intricacies of family life, household reproduction, and intergenerational reciprocity have been largely passed over in the literature. Though their familial networks might have been elsewhere, or fragmented by the destruction caused during the war, reciprocal obligations among family relations were essential to young men’s survival and their achievement of social respect in postwar Monrovia, Liberia’s capital and largest city. For most, their support networks were too depleted to offer a helping hand for education or livelihood support. The inability to make transitions and sustainable livelihoods is one they share with youth around the world, and which has become so pervasive that it has
been described as a “crisis” of youth (International Labour Organization 2013; Richards 1995). However, this book demonstrates that the marginalization felt by young people was not a generational crisis, but rather a crisis felt across generations, and one that had specific implications for young people. It provides an ethnographically grounded analysis of intergenerational hierarchies in Liberia, and illustrates how networks of reciprocal obligation organize social life, forming the foundation of support for young people’s lives and future possibilities.

I began this research out of an interest in the life chances of ex-combatants, specifically those who had fought when they were young. Half of the empirical material comes from the postwar experiences of ex-combatant young men. There are two dominant perspectives that inform much of the discourse about “child soldiers”: a rights-based narrative that emphasizes how damaging war is for children (see Machel 2001), and a security narrative that constructs former fighters as posing significant risks to postwar stability (see McMullin 2012). I traveled to Monrovia with two related assumptions about young people who live to tell their stories about fighting with armed groups. First, I assumed that they had been deeply affected by their experience, that trauma is a real thing, and that it has lasting impacts on how people live their everyday lives. There is now an enormous amount of research concerned with trauma in the aftermath of war. I conducted this work under the assumption that everyone had been affected by the war, and that while trauma is part of postwar life, it is not the sum total. I have left the analysis of trauma to psychologists and their critics and pursued an ethnographic description of youth experience in the social landscape of the postwar city. Second, in regards to the security narrative, I assumed that ex-combatants could pose risks to the well-being of others, but that disruption of the peace was only one among many possibilities on their postwar horizons. In short, this ethnographic account of the experiences of ex-combatant and noncombatant youth in Liberia is designed to offer at least a glimpse of postwar life defined by more than the essentializing “damaged” or “damaging” narratives prolific to the
topic of child soldiers and postwar youth. I dedicate much of the narrative work in this book to challenging pejorative assessments of youth as security threats, and argue that such reductionist rhetoric is not merely a limited evaluation of young men, but a deeply destructive force that has its roots in the causes for war itself.

The ex-combatants in this work contribute to an urban understanding of reintegration in Liberia, and their stories provide a glimpse of what fighting and “reintegrating” is like within the city. They are only a few among thousands who have transitioned out of armed groups. It is difficult to account for the volume of lives lived and lost in wars, and especially those who served in armed groups for which we have no enlistment records. The total number of combatants who participated in the war will never be fully known. Approximately 103,000 were disarmed (they turned in one or more weapons), and approximately 101,000 were demobilized (formally discharged from active duty) following the 2003 ceasefire (see McMullin 2013). These numbers account for those who survived the perils of the war and who participated in the United Nations (UN) facilitated disarmament and demobilization process. In the aftermath of wars like this one the UN leads a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) intervention. The goal of this three-pronged approach is to secure weapons, break up factions, and return former combatants to “civilian life.” In Liberia, they tacked on a second “R” for rehabilitation. With admittedly minimal resources, the National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration intended to provide some basic form of group psychosocial counseling and civic engagement along with the vocational skills and training that came under the reintegration program (see UNDP 2003–2004). There are two primary strands of academic literature regarding ex-combatant reintegration, one that informs and critiques demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration policy and practice (see Jennings 2008b; Knight and Özerdem 2004; McMullin 2007, 2012, 2013; Muggah 2009), and the other that looks more intently at the lived experience of social, economic, and political transitions.
after war (Blattman 2009; Blattman and Annan 2011; Peters 2007; Shepler 2014; Utas 2005a).

The research in this book contributes to both of these strands of inquiry and argument. First, the empirical material is rendered in a comparative perspective. With notable exceptions (see Blattman and Annan 2010), the majority of postwar research about reintegration is conducted with ex-combatants only. Without empirical research with noncombatants, it is difficult to grasp the structure of broader postwar society, or the extent to which ex-combatants face unique challenges in comparison to others—an implicit assumption made by humanitarian discourse, though one that is difficult to challenge or inform without research among young soldiers’ noncombatant peers. This ethnographic account demonstrates that social isolation and stigma pose significant challenges to young men, irrespective of whether they fought in the war. However, the implications of stigma and social isolation appear more acutely felt by former fighters who have lost both the helping hand of their previous armed groups, as well as their families. Second, conventional wisdom of the DDR process asserts that armed groups must be demobilized—formally disbanded to prevent further uprising or instability. Though there are cases that confirm this concern, many of the ex-combatants in this research were able to make sustainable transitions to jobs and nonviolent ways of life specifically because they were helped and supported by former comrades and commanders, challenging the derogatory notion that networks of former fighters are always and only detrimental social communities. There is also a pragmatic question to be raised around whether “demobilization” is remotely effective. Even within an intentional, lengthy residential program in Liberia, Blattman and Annan (2016) report that combatant networks seemed to retain their strength, even with intensive intervention through psychosocial and vocation training in a designated residential environment. Third, DDR discourse asserts that vocational skills that are appropriate to market needs are essential to sustainable reintegration. There is some evidence to support this. In rural farming contexts, some research finds that ex-combatants who
have the appropriate land, resources, training, and monetary incentives have redirected themselves away from illicit activities (Blattman and Annan 2016; Peters 2011). This work demonstrates that in war-torn urban environments like Monrovia there is an enormous amount of human labor, far more than the market can absorb. The ability to “make life,” as the young men put it, is far more dependent upon having a helping hand than it is on the acquisition of skills, or entrepreneurial ambition.

Reciprocity and respect are defining themes throughout this work, shaping everyday life, and especially informing ex-combatants’ experiences of reintegration. As the book progresses, young people’s dignity and the dignity of their fellow Liberians emerges as a central feature of their stories as they are variously positioned within local, national, and international contexts. The dignity of these black men and women on the West African coast has always been in question, since before the nation was founded in the nineteenth century. And in the years following a long and bloody civil war, it remains vital to my account of their lives and their life worlds.

Like Jensen (2008) I did not set out to make dignity a conceptual priority for this research. However, as this book has taken shape I have found myself brought back to questions and observations about dignity as it is claimed, bestowed, or denied in the everyday lives of the people who fill these pages. As dignity surfaces in the following stories, I draw on Jensen’s insightful exposition of dignity as a product of dominance. Following Agamben (1999) and Coundouriotis (2006) he understands dignity not as an inherent quality of the self, but as a social distinction bestowed by the state (or the dominant) on certain individuals or groups who are deemed worthy. This inescapable theme is especially present in my understanding of the historical roots of the civil war, and threads throughout my observations of postwar life as it is enabled and inhibited by power relations that extend across local and international contexts.
My theoretical orientation to the empirical material is oriented toward inquiry about structure, and how structure shapes and is reinforced by agency, in this case, young men’s agency. This theoretical approach elicits an account of social process within context, one that links youth actions to the norms and values of their society, to their relations with the distribution of power or hierarchy in their context, to their lived experiences of exclusion, inequality, or privilege. A structure/agency approach avoids, or at least greatly reduces, the opportunity to misconstrue young men and postwar life based upon my own social and cultural biases—an occurrence all too common in the field of international development. It also, importantly, informs youth experience with international humanitarian and security efforts, providing a local description and explanation of young people’s “bounded agency” (Evans 2007) from the ground up.

Structure is one of those constructs that, despite prolific use across the social sciences, can prove an elusive concept to pin down (Sewell 1992). Perhaps it should be, as it refers to the “community of dispositions” (Bourdieu 1977) that influences routines and rituals in everyday life, and to the values and norms that guide important social dynamics. These unseen and often unconscious schemas shape society in particular ways, forming distinctions between classes, genders, and generations. Reference to “structure” actually refers to quite a lot, and nothing very specific, unless we set to work observing the social, economic, and political processes that are an outflow of these underpinning values and power relations. In this book, my emphasis is primarily on social structure; I understand political and economic realities as intimately tied to the ways that people relate with, and value one another. “Agency,” very simply put, is the ability to act or withhold action (Giddens 1984). As structures inform action in everyday life, they are recursively remade in our social worlds. So, with this research, my aim was to understand how unseen “recipes for action” (Sewell 1992) informed the motions of everyday life, shaping young people’s
perceived options and possibilities, and how their structural context organized the distribution of resources at macro-levels that encompass politics, economics, and social relations, or in the most basic interactions within households or peer groups.

The analysis I articulate in this book is rendered through a close and descriptive inquiry into everyday life, and the underpinning schemas that inform action. Mains (2012) eloquently describes his work in Ethiopia as a continual movement between the abstraction of articulating broad structural realities and the depth of details explored in the layers and layers of people and places in which he submerged himself on a daily basis. Similarly, in the following chapters I have chosen to spend more time in the personal experiences of everyday life in the postwar capital, though I zoom out at points in order to position actors more proportionately within the broader parameters of their society and their national position in a global context.

“Youth” as Young Men

Young men like Darlington are the subject of this book. Most were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. In Liberia, as in most other parts of the world, youth is a social category, defined not so much by age but by one’s position in society. Institutions use age ranges to designate who the “youth” are. Many of the UN bodies define youth as between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. In Liberia, this number was extended to thirty-five (Ministry of Youth and Sports 2005), “to catch everybody in the net,” as one youth worker explained. These are merely numerical approximations. Those who are considered youth in Liberia may range in age from thirteen or fourteen well into the mid-thirties and forties (Moran, 2006). Within the society itself, youth are understood based on their social age, as being in a period between the dependency of childhood and the responsibility and autonomy that comes with adulthood (see Durham 2000). Darlington was in his mid-twenties, and had a small child. Though he was a father, he
was still considered a youth because he was unable to care for her or support her as a “breadwinning” male. He had yet to become “established.” He had no house, no ability to support a wife or a family of his own. He was able to independently support himself through his dealing and was responsible for his own shelter and food. Thus he was no longer dependent on the care of others as he had been in childhood. He could not support dependents of his own, however, a basic social requirement for an adult man.

In this book I focus specifically on young men for reasons that will be discussed later in the section of the introduction to fieldwork. In so doing, my work has fallen into a large body of academic research in which “youth” almost always implicitly refers to young male people, whereas studies with young women often have to designate their focus on “female” youth in order to bring attention to otherwise “invisible girls” (Nordstrom 1999). In terms of invoking “youth” as a social construct, most of the young people who are considered youth in Liberia are male. Young women are not expected to experience transitional periods of time between households of caregivers and households of their own. Few undergo a liminal period of caring for themselves and working toward the financial and material status that demonstrates that they are adults, capable of caring for households and families of their own. I found this circumstance only among young women on the street, or those who were engaged in sex work, the two often going hand in hand. Because this in-between period is one of the primary indicators of being a youth, it is often synonymous with being male. Unless otherwise stated, my account of “youth” experience is limited to young men.

Reciprocity and Respect

This research illustrates how young men’s life chances, transitions, and trajectories were determined in large part by relationships of reciprocity that enabled and facilitated their achievement of respect. Each of these terms is rendered in specific ways throughout my
interpretation of the empirical material. Reciprocity is an essential aspect of Liberians’ broader social structure, which is known to anthropologists and Africanists as “wealth in people” (see Guyer and Belinga 1995). Wealth in people organizes a system of people who exchange goods and services for the purpose of maintaining and accumulating social relations that ensure security, labor, and status (see Bledsoe 1980; Newell 2006). The manifestation and function of these relationships is articulated in detail in chapter 3.

Reciprocity itself has long been a point of empirical inquiry and theoretical debate among anthropologists. Lemarchand (1989) observes that the literature tends to fall along something of a continuum, with interpretations of exchange as a moral imperative on the one end, and as a strategic and functional social practice that ensures production on the other. In this work I understand reciprocity as a pragmatic necessity undergirded by moral values. Fulfilling obligations to reciprocate earns the respect of one’s social community and the recognition that one has conformed to the social structure that organizes everyday life.

Respect is intrinsically about one’s social standing and status in a given context. Respect, respectability, and dignity have featured in recent work with young people, especially marginalized young men (Di Nunzio 2012; Jensen 2008; Newell 2012), as their struggle for value and recognition in society is frustrated by economic, political, and social constraints. Dignity becomes an issue or a struggle when dominance produces humiliation (Jensen 2008) or “abjection,” that sense of being thrown down or excluded by boundaries that confine agency, and are largely determined by the “dominant cultural fraction” (Mahar 1990). Bourgois’s (2003) evocative and seminal work among crack dealers in Harlem illustrates how political and economic systems were set up in such a way as to deny access to sustainable economic opportunities, producing exclusion for his informants, most of whom became involved in drug dealing. The structure of a society, the values that underpin social worth, the distribution of political power and economic opportunities, creates access for some and inhibits access for others. Dignity and abjection are inherently structural. The social
values that imbue or deny dignity are produced and reproduced by agency. As long as actors assimilate and accommodate the terms by which dominance bestows dignity, then those terms, and the struggle to achieve dignity, will persist.

Jensen’s (2008) iteration of the struggle for dignity in South Africa closely resembles the search for respect among Bourgois’s (2003) informants in Harlem. In this work I draw a conceptual distinction between the two terms. Dignity has to do with values that bestow worth. The struggle for dignity is the struggle for worthiness. When I speak about respect I am referring to something related to, but distinguished from, dignity. Respect manifests in two forms, for which I borrow Spencer’s (1965) constructs of “honor” and “prestige.” Honor is associated with socially acceptable conduct or benchmarks of achievement, and prestige is obtained through success in competition with peers.

On first glance honor and dignity may appear conflated but they are not. In the following chapter we will see how the dominant cultural fraction of elite Americo-Liberians set the terms for inclusion in political power and access to resources. They confined access to their group. Though indigenous Liberians sought socio-economic mobility in the urban capital and came to value emblems of modern and American culture—hallmarks of elite society—they were fundamentally denied equal opportunities to achieve the structural positions enjoyed by the dominant. They could be honorably providing for families through socially acceptable means and conduct, yet as long as their pursuit of social worth conformed to the terms of the minority elite dignity would always remain largely out of their grasp. Thus it was possible to achieve honor and prestige in the sight of one’s peers and community, while struggling to obtain dignity determined by the regard of the dominant cultural fraction. In summary, dignity is about worth. Honor is about conduct. And prestige is about achievement in competition or comparison with peers.

A sense of abjection and struggle for dignity mounted, creating the conditions that led to the inception of war. Before embarking on that analysis I would like to turn our attention to the
young people who transitioned into armed groups, who fought in their ranks, and to how I have conceptually understood their “reintegration.”

Ex-Combatants and Reintegration

Who are the ex-combatants, and what does “reintegration” actually mean? Some scholars use a wide conceptual definition for “ex-combatants” in regards to the roles that they fill with armed groups. Some include, in addition to the armed fighters, the men, women, and children who acted in noncombat support roles like cooks and porters (see Gates and Reich 2009; Guyot 2007). In contrast, Lemasle (2010) limits her use of “ex-combatants” to those who have actively fought and are in positions to use arms to disrupt postwar peace. Such variations in definition may be relevant to these and other contexts. During fieldwork I spoke with people who had been forced to fulfill service roles that included cooking and carrying possessions, equipment, and supplies as porters. However, they did not identify as ex-combatants, nor were they identified as such by others. Similarly, though Darlington and I never discussed this, a friend of his alluded to his participation with one of Charles Taylor’s militias. Darlington carried a gun for a short while, and held some form of security and combat support responsibilities during the later years of the war. However, he never identified, and was never identified by his peers, as an “ex-combatant.” Thus, the only people I have chosen to refer to as “ex-combatants” are those who self-identified with that term and were identified in their community as former fighters. It should also be noted that I use “combatant,” “fighter,” and “soldier” interchangeably. I am certain that there are instances in which these terms require distinction. For this work, I see no need to do so, and have chosen to alternate the use of them to provide some variation in vocabulary. Some young men fought during most of the fourteen years of civil crisis. Others served shorter periods. The common denominator is their participation and affiliation with a fighting force that separates their wartime experience from those of noncombatants. All of them were young when they were incorporated
into their units. Most were in their teens or early twenties, and by any definition were considered “youth” at the time of their conflict participation.

The label “ex-combatant” is layered with meanings. Former fighters and others appropriate it in order to meet certain ends (McMullin 2012), and there is undoubtedly some error or misappropriation in much of its use, no matter the specificity applied. For example, a huge signifier of ex-combatant identity was attached to those who participated in the UN-led Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DDRR) program. It publicly identified participants as former combatants in the civil war. Participants were given ID cards to identify them as ex-combatants who were enrolled in the program. However, given the amount of money offered in the Transitional Safety Net Allowance (see UNDP 2003–2004), it is unquestionable that some of the participants presented guns and signed up for the program to claim the 300 U.S. dollars in cash even though they were never actively involved in the combat or with armed groups. Jake, who features later in this chapter and others, was never a fighter, nor did he belong to an armed group. However, when they were offered the opportunity to participate in DDRR, his friends in a rebel group gave him a gun to turn in so that he could claim the cash assistance. At the same time, many women did not participate in DDRR. Among the most pronounced reasons for this was a heightened fear of gendered stigma and exclusion in the postwar environment (see Christoffersen 2010; Coulter, Persson, and Utas 2008). They were afraid that as women they would be treated with more severe disregard than their male counterparts. Thus, there is some margin for error no matter the discursive or institutional parameters in place. Suffice it to say, everyone included in this research identified themselves as ex-combatants.

We have arrived at ex-combatant “reintegration,” a construct often synonymous with the implementation of policies and programs, though as a term it suggests an experienced process, or a transition of some kind. “Integration” means being incorporated, or not differentiated from others. Reintegration as a UN policy
and program is a security measure designed to help ex-combatants adjust to “normal life” through economic and social supports (UN 2016). It is framed as an attempt to put ex-combatants “back” (McMullin 2013). That there is a “normal life” to be put back into is an enormous assumption that compels an array of questions. Back where? Back with whom? Back into what exactly? What is “normal”? The policy narrative implicitly frames “civilian life” as normal, and conflict or life in armed groups as abnormal. I do not wish to digress into a lengthy deconstruction of such an obtuse term as “normal.” Rather, I would like to point out how dichotomous and unidirectional this notion is. In the UN and other international policy discourse, “reintegration” of ex-fighters implies an assumption that the physical and social structures of communities exist in static form (Boersch-Supan 2009). It assumes that society is a homogenous “field,” unitary, whole, and different from the wartime life experienced by fighters. The narrative implicitly draws a rigid line between the kind of people who fight war and the kind of people who do not, and assumes that one must become like the other. Thus “reintegration” is represented as a kind of “going back to,” as though these structures have been unchanged and are ready and able to receive and resituate former soldiers who “return” to civilian society (Schafer 2007). In fact, wars may deeply change communities. Combatants do not reintegrate into what was, but must integrate along with the rest of the nation into what is becoming. It is a process of “motion within motion” (Vigh 2009).

Having problematized the term, I have chosen to keep and use it in this book, though I understand it more broadly and with fewer dichotomous connotations. In this work reintegration is first and foremost a social process, though it certainly intersects with and has implications for economics and politics. As the following section and chapter 6 will make clear, ex-combatants do have to negotiate transitions from lives shaped and enabled through social structures in armed groups to lives defined and empowered differently in other social arenas after war. Former fighters make decisions about which social norms and values to reject, retain, or reconfigure after conflict, and those decisions carry significant
implications for incorporation in communities of noncombatants. So too, noncombatants exercise their agency, their acceptance, their rejection, or ambivalence regarding ex-combatants in their lives and their communities. This means that reintegration is a transactional process that occurs over time among and between former fighters and noncombatants. This being the case I have made a discursive choice not to use the term “civilian,” as once they are disarmed and demobilized, ex-combatants are civilians as well, and the postwar space is one that belongs to them, and is shaped through their agency as much as through anyone else’s.

About Guns

The depiction of wars that incorporate young people have become synonymous with images of AK-47s, the assault rifles designed in the Soviet Union at the end of World War II, and that continue to be brandished by young children, youth, and adults in conflicts around the globe. War is much more than guns, or the violence dealt at the tip of a gun barrel. It is not my intention to reproduce a stereotype with the title “Life after Guns.” However, in the Liberian context of my research, guns were a defining feature of the conflict for those who participated and for those who were affected directly and indirectly by a war waged in their backyards, on their streets, and in the bush. Guns symbolized what Shaw (2000) refers to as a “habitus of war,” in which violence became an integral part of the environment. Social and cultural reproduction continued, adapted, and reconfigured with the perpetuation of violence and armed conflict. Life did not stop because of the war, but it was drastically altered as a result of it. For the fighters, guns were a source of immense power, unlike anything they had experienced before.

“When I was a soldier I could go anywhere,” Jacob explained. A twenty-eight-year-old ex-combatant, he related well the sense of agency that many remembered fondly from their time with armed groups. “Anything I wanted I could get it. I got money. Anytime, anything I wanted, I get it. I bust people’s door, I bust people’s store. I take it. That’s when I had the arm [gun].”
The gun was a symbol of power for ex-combatants—power to combat foes, power to direct subordinates, and power to control unarmed civilians. Guns were the instruments that enabled otherwise small, relatively uneducated, and unskilled young people to take lives, to force old and young to fetch and carry, to go or stay. The “gun sound” instilled fear, sent people running into hiding in their homes, into the bush, and across borders. Memories of the beginning and the end of the war were invoked most often by reference to the sound of guns.

In the small community of Slipway, an elderly woman sat and talked with me one day, and related simply, “But for me, I alright now. There’s no gun sound. You can walk in peace.”

*Life after Guns* is an exploration of what it meant for young people to be armed, unarmed, and disarmed in the years during and after the Liberian civil war. It is about the social practice that enabled survival and imbued status among those who fought as well as those who did not.

**Fieldwork**

I spent seven months in the field during 2010 and 2011 conducting ethnographic research in the greater Monrovia area. I rented a room in Central Matadi, a community located just behind Sinkor, to the east of downtown. Most of the homes were made of cement block and painted in bright colors, a structural and aesthetic step up from the straw woven huts or zinc sheets that sheltered those with the fewest means. Schools were dotted throughout the community, and the roadsides were peppered with small stands where young men sold phone credit, charged cell phones, and changed money. Much of my analysis is the result of living alongside the families whose houses framed the parameter of my backyard. Though I was considered a guest throughout my stay, and never fully integrated into the routines of household reproduction, being grafted into the goings-on with the family and our social life in the yard was invaluable to my understanding of daily life and social process.
I gained access to a number of communities around the city, where I spent time with unoccupied youth, conducted informal and semistructured interviews, and implemented focus groups. I always entered with an introduction of some kind—through a pastor, a youth worker, or a friend. The ex-combatants and street youth were the most suspicious, and building trust was not as quick or as easy as with others. That is quite understandable. Monrovia was a bastion for international journalists and researchers after the war. Many Liberians felt raked over by impersonal and exploitative interest in their postwar plight. One afternoon my research assistant took me out to meet some young people in Red Light, the largest market within the capital city region. They were loud and rowdy, and some were agitated when Zawoo explained my purpose for being there. One responded, “All these people come in here. They get the stories and they leave and make money from them. We can’t see nab-ting!”

I heard the same thing in Bernard’s Farm, and Slipway, and from people who were formally a part of the research as well as others who were not. Assurances that my work was not a pathway to becoming rich and famous on my return to the university did little to ease the minds of the skeptical, most of whom had felt used and looked at, without being cared for or seen. With most, I built rapport slowly, over hours spent watching the pool on Bernard’s Beach, smoking cigarettes with young men in Red Light and Slipway, and through respectful introductions made by allies to the work. On a visit to Gardnersville, an ex-combatant described his reluctance about my work: “This man [Jake] came to me and convince me. He came to me first, he told me [about you]. I say ‘I refuse.’ I say, ‘I don’t want for anybody to interview and take any statement from me.’ But he still try to convince me this morning. And he went for me at the house. That how I came.”

“What did he say to convince you?” I asked.

“Really, he’s my brother, because he and I live together before. We did things in common. He said, ‘the woman means nothing. She only came to do a study with me. She came to find . . . she came on a’—how you call it?”
“On a research,” Jake interjected affirmatively.

“Research! ‘Yeah, she don’t mean no harm. She only want to talk to you, to get your view . . . ’ That’s what he told me. So I said, ‘I ain’t got problem with that, so I will go.’”

Initial introductions like the ones Jake made in Gardnersville began the “snowball.” Once established in these communities, my informants could identify others who were willing to contribute to the work.

I used various qualitative methods in six areas around the city. I spoke with ex-combatants in Bernard’s Farm, Gardnersville, and Slipway in an attempt to find common themes about reintegration that were not particular to one community or subgroup. Most hailed from Charles Taylor’s forces, though I did not specifically target his recruits. As Taylor was based in Monrovia from 1996 to 2003, when the war ended, it makes sense that there would be many of his former troops settled within the region. Young men on Bernard’s Beach and in the park at the University of Liberia informed my understanding of postwar life chances and trajectories for noncombatant youth. In Red Light, my participant observation and interviews with youth on the street illustrated the constraints of life lived without intergenerational networks of support. This is a reality that many ex-combatants faced once their factions were disbanded. I wanted to comprehend the challenge of everyday life for the street youth in order to better grasp any added or different challenges that compounded the everyday struggle to “make life” among ex-combatants who finished the war but did not “have people” who would be part of that process with them.

The majority of young people who fought in the war were male, and I chose to limit my work to male experience. I have not offered a significantly gendered analysis because I do not have the comparative female data that would allow me to specify what aspects of life chances or trajectories are gendered in certain ways. With a larger research budget and more time, this would have been a priority. As it is, I chose to use my time and resources to focus on a comparison of young men who fought and young men who did not.
Finally, I looked to elders who could inform my interest in intergenerational relations, and who could offer perspectives that would inform, compare, and contrast the perspectives that youth provided. Zawoo, who was an invaluable support and contributed a wealth of insight to this project, led several focus groups with me in West Point and in Slipway. These added to numerous interviews I had with adults in other communities and with an important contingent of youth workers who had been on the frontlines of the reintegration and rehabilitation programs that were rolled out in the months and years following the 2003 cease-fire. Confidentiality was of utmost importance to many of the people who offered their stories and their thoughts to this work. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all informants in order to protect their privacy.

**Telling Other People’s Stories**

Weber ([1904] 2004, 374) reminds us that “there is no ‘objective’ analysis of ‘social phenomena’ independent of special and ‘one-sided’ perspectives, on the basis of which such phenomena can be (explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously) selected as an object of research, analysed and systematically represented.” As an ethnographer, I was the instrument of research. The materials collected for this work were my field notes, jotted from my observations, and transcripts and notes taken down from my conversations. They have been pulled together to present aspects of other people’s lives, and to demonstrate what I see as important for our understanding of their life chances in a postwar environment. As such, I have thought much about my own involvement in the research and how I present those who participated.

Bourgois (2003, 2009) worries about the problems that come with examinations of social marginalization and the politics of representing the experiences of the poor. He fears that viewing and appropriating meaning to another’s life and life circumstances could easily slip into preconceived stereotypes, and the research itself could be perceived as an exercise in voyeurism. I
would argue that this is a risk in research with any demographic, though perhaps it tends to render the ethnographer more self-conscious in research with the poor, as we perceive them in positions with less of a platform to give voice to the constraints in which they live. That is an uncomfortable dynamic to sit with, and one that many scholars wrestle with as they traverse boundaries of all kinds. Throughout this work I have felt acutely the words of Jamaican posse member Brambles to Laurie Gunst during her work in the underworld of Kingston ghettos (Gunst 1996, 127–128):

To enter into the study of this ghetto society requires a certain kind of courage. . . . It is an enormously variegated and complex subject. Those willing to take on the task must have an active, energetic mind capable of putting together infinite numbers of observations and events into something approaching a meaningful whole. . . . To think and work in such a manner requires intellectual openness. Agility. Or the person must face the distinct prospect of being overwhelmed by the breadth and depth of social and political phenomena. . . . I have seen the incipience of intellectual arrogance in you, and sometimes you question the credibility of events. You are entering a new experience. You are writing something unique. You are white. It is difficult for a white person to simulate a black experience. And it is even more difficult to express or interpret something you have never experienced. Be calm.

I rarely felt “agile” in my movements through Monrovia, with the youth in the market and on the beach, or even in my backyard. And I have been overwhelmed by the immensity of this task—small as it is—from the moment I began it. Nonetheless, I feel compelled by the work of authors like Bourgois and Gunst who, despite entering contexts that were not their own, were able to reflect back to a broader audience the destruction of violence spread unequally through the world, and the ways and means by which it maintains exploitative power. I was young, and white, and “other” in
the context of my fieldwork, and my position in an unequal world absolutely shaped the course of the research, the access I gained, and the story I have told. I say all of this not to issue a caveat about the integrity of the empirics, but to acknowledge where they are subject to my own subjectivities and to those who shared their lives with me. As Lammers (2006) writes of her work with ex-combatants and displaced youth in Kampala, Uganda, the work itself occurs between the lives of real people interacting with a living anthropologist, and the authenticity of the work is bolstered by our attentiveness to the variegated complexities that Brambles so eloquently describes.

Brambles was right. It is difficult to express or interpret something I have not experienced. At best, this is an ethnographic sketch of young men’s life chances in a postwar terrain. Much like Zeitlyn’s (2008) description of a silhouette, my aim is a proportionate outline of actors in context, being honest about the incompleteness of the representation, and striving for faithfulness around the edges—without romanticizing the resilience of those subject to degradation, or gawking at displays of violence in an “exotic” context. I have sought to render their stories with as much intellectual openness as I am able, and to articulate the struggles they face with an analytical scope set wide enough to see the structures that constrain and inhibit, as well as the possibilities that remain.