

**Life after Guns: The Life Chances and Trajectories of Ex-Combatant  
and Other Post-War Youth in Monrovia, Liberia**

*Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy*

By

Abby V. Hardgrove

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
QUEEN ELIZABETH HOUSE  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

EXETER COLLEGE  
October 29, 2012





## Declaration of Authorship

**Name:** ABBY HARDGROVE

**Candidate number:** 407376

**College:** EXETER COLLEGE

**Supervisor:** Jo Boyden and Dawn Chatty

**Title of thesis:** LIFE AFTER GUNS: THE LIFE CHANCES AND TRAJECTORIES OF EX-COMBATANT AND OTHER POST-WAR YOUTH IN MONROVIA, LIBERIA

**Word count:** 94,148

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## Abstract

This thesis is about the life chances and trajectories of ex-combatant and other youth in post-war Monrovia, Liberia. In it I present the results of a qualitative inquiry into the relationship between shifting structural conditions and youth agency in the aftermath of 14 years of civil war. Much of the literature concerned with ex-combatant “reintegration” remains a-theoretical and fails to situate their experience within the contours of transition from structures in armed groups to structures in post-war society. It is rife with normative assumptions about how ex-combatants should “return” to civilian life. The ex-combatant trajectories detailed in this study challenge this literature reflecting neither “reintegration” nor “return.” Instead, they highlight how ex-combatants negotiate a complex environment in which structural norms, values, and relationships converge and conflict after war. To demonstrate this, the thesis presents an analysis of the relationships between structural constraints and youth agency among youth who fought, and others who did not. In so doing, it provides a situated analysis of post-war society which is often missing in the literature concerned with ex-combatants. The empirical material shows the significance of interdependent relationships at the level of the family and the household. It is “wealth in people” at this proximate level that supports survival and enables socio-economic mobility, with implications for social respect. Without patronage through family and kin, socio-economic possibilities diminish significantly. This means that options available to many ex-combatants are limited after war, as they are often unable or unwilling to be incorporated into families and former communities. Their navigation of the post-war social terrain reflects efforts to survive and maintain respect through patrimonial relationships within and outside of their structured networks from war. Some retain the status and respect they achieved in war through relationships maintained from their years of conflict. Others were able to survive and achieve respect through new or renewed relationships with families and extended kin. Life chances and trajectories emerge from embedded positions within structured social relations that are produced and reproduced in the aftermath of conflict. With this work, I argue that social processes are vital to any theorisation about life after war.



## Acknowledgements

I fully recognise that despite whatever contributions might come from this work—to theory, or research, or practice in the field—no one has benefitted from this research more than I. The opportunity to do this work has transformed the way I understand the world, and my place in it. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to write this thesis, which required many months of living and learning in Monrovia. I cannot express enough my gratitude to all of those who made this possible, in Oxford and in Liberia, but I would like to begin by acknowledging the countless people in both locations who went out of their way to lend a helping hand. I know that I must have been tiresome, awkward, and difficult in my efforts to get things done and to understand, especially while in the field. It was with the help of friends and strangers alike—people who offered hospitality and care—that I was able to do this work at all. I am indebted to many.

There are a number of people to whom I would like to express particular gratitude. In Liberia, I am especially grateful to Kona and Sup, Tenneh, Korpo, and TJ for their hospitality, instruction, gentleness, and friendship throughout my stay in Monrovia. I would like to thank Jerry Kande and his family for their initial assistance. I would also like to thank Morlee Zawoo, Sam Clawson, Chara Itoka, Chris Lang, John Moniba, Pastor Success, Michael ‘I Mean It,’ and Pastor Johnson for just being helpful.

In Oxford, I would like to express thanks to my supervisors, Jo and Dawn. Thank you for your consistent feedback, and for your critical attention to the writing and research process. The thorough comments, attentiveness, and wisdom I received went such a long way. Thank you. I would also like to thank the assessors and examiners who pushed the work forward across the development of the thesis. At the transfer of status, I would like to thank Gina and Raufu for their attention and support. At the confirmation of status, I would like to thank Gina again, and Ginny for their encouragement, wisdom, and critique of my emerging empirics. Finally, I am very grateful for the attention, thoughtful critique, and encouragement I received from Joss and Mats at the final stage of defence. Thank you all for offering your time and thoughts to this work. I owe a great deal of thanks to Lynda Walters. You believed in me, and the idea of a DPhil at Oxford, long before I did.

I can’t imagine writing this thesis outside of the Loft. The DPhil community at QEH has been a tremendous source of support, insight, and fun, and has contributed in ways too complex to acknowledge fully. I am deeply grateful for the conversations over fieldnotes and drinks and meals together, for the hugs, smiles, thoughts, questions and care I received in the Loft. What a tremendous contribution you have made to my life, my work, and to your world.

I owe special thanks to the colleagues and loved ones who meticulously read and offered feedback on drafts of this work. Your thoughts were invaluable to the development of my ideas and my articulation of them. So thank you to my Aunt Pam, David Brown, James Morrissey, Kirrily Pells, Liz Cooper, Luisa Enria, Lynn, Marco DiNunzio, Nadiya Figueroa, Narae Choi, Neil Howard, Robin Cohen, SJ, Taylor St. John, and Zoe Marks. I would also like to thank Michelle, Taylor, and Sanne for helping me haul it over the line the morning of submission.

Lynn, thanks for being my buddy the whole way through. For reading my stuff, for loving me, for supporting the work in ways I can’t begin to quantify, but value and deeply appreciate. It really did happen in the end, buddy!

Finally, I’d like to acknowledge that while this is a rigorous effort, it is limited and imperfect, and I take full responsibility for any errors or shortcomings in the iteration of this thesis.



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## Acronyms

|         |                                                                           |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ACS     | American Colonization Society                                             |
| ATU     | Anti-Terrorist Unit                                                       |
| CDF     | Civil Defence Force                                                       |
| DDR     | Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration                            |
| DDRR    | Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration             |
| DV      | Diversity Visa                                                            |
| ECOMOG  | Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group                |
| ECOWAS  | Economic Community of West African States                                 |
| LAMCO   | Liberian-American-Swedish Minerals Company                                |
| LD      | Liberian Dollars                                                          |
| LFF     | Liberian Frontier Force                                                   |
| LURD    | Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy                         |
| MODEL   | Movement for Democracy in Liberia                                         |
| MOJA    | Movement for Justice in Africa                                            |
| NGO     | Non-governmental Organisation                                             |
| NPFL    | National Patriotic Front of Liberia                                       |
| PAL     | Progressive Alliance of Liberia                                           |
| RUF     | Revolutionary United Front                                                |
| TRC     | Truth and Reconciliation Committee                                        |
| ULIMO   | United Liberation Movement for Liberian Democracy                         |
| ULIMO-J | United Liberation Movement for Liberian Democracy under Roosevelt Johnson |
| ULIMO-K | United Liberation Movement for Liberian Democracy under Alhaji Kromah     |
| UN      | United Nations                                                            |
| UNMIL   | United Nations Mission in Liberia                                         |
| US      | United States                                                             |
| USD     | United States Dollars                                                     |



## Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis is about young people in post-war Monrovia, Liberia. With this study I have tried to understand how opportunities are structured and how young men in particular are subsequently directing their lives. Daniel was one of these young men. He leaned back against the car door to face me as we travelled along the road from Roberts Field Airport to his neighbourhood in Matadi, Monrovia. “This is our war-torn country,”<sup>1</sup> he announced as we passed small patches of dwellings interspersed with the dense green of untamed countryside stretching out on either side of the road.

I met Daniel several years before in a refugee camp in Ghana. He had since moved back with his family. He elaborated—unprompted for the most part—about the difficulties Liberians faced in the post-war years. There were few jobs. People were poor. Life was hard. It was what I expected to hear. I did not expect what he said next. “The ex-combatants,” he continued, “some put their guns down with their hands, but not in their minds.” It was a descriptive, though perplexing phrase. What did he mean? They were “traumatised” he added, as though reading my mind. More elaboration about what trauma was or how it affected former fighters was not forth-coming, however. Suffice it to say, the ex-combatants were in some way or other damaged by their participation in the war. They were likely to be disorderly and quite possibly dangerous.

This initial encounter points to a central problem with the study of ex-combatants and “child soldiers” that prompted me to pursue this research. There has been a great deal of attention given to trauma. Ex-combatants across the Global South have been assessed for signs of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. I do not doubt or question that war deeply affects the minds and memories of those involved. There is evidence to suggest, unsurprisingly, that ex-combatants experience more exposure to violence, and this is associated with more numerous and difficult psychosocial implications after war (Blattman & Annan, 2010). What Daniel was suggesting was that somehow—through some kind of traumatising, mind altering process in the war—fighters had been changed. The changes made them violent. “Trauma” was his answer for why ex-combatants were the way they were after war. “Socialisation” is another answer (Vermeij, 2011). Through experience with armed groups, fighters are thought to be socialised into violence. I am offering a different answer. In this work, I suggest that young men have diverse experiences after they put the guns down with their hands. They negotiate uncertain social, economic, and political contexts after the armed groups that have structured their lives—some of them for the majority of their lives—are gone.

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldnote, January 21, 2010

Once the groups that have informed, facilitated and organised their everyday lives have been reduced and disbanded young people face a world in flux. It is a world in which they must reassess where they fit in—where is their place? It raises challenges about how to achieve livelihoods and respect—things that were taken care of during the war. These are far less certain afterwards.

My answers are not given as exclusive replacements for trauma or socialisation, though I find both problematic and will address them each in turn. Rather, what I offer is one part of the answer for inquiry into how and why young people do what they do after war has ended. It is my hope that this work will provide a coherent contribution to a multifaceted and complicated phenomenon of youth experience during and after war. This thesis points to other influences that help to constrain and enable social and economic advancement and the direction of ex-combatant's lives after war. I look at the structural shifts that redefine options when war is brought to young people, and when it is removed.

That young people had not “put the gun down in their minds” was a phrase that stuck in my head. What follows is my attempt to understand what it meant for young people to pick up guns, to put them down, and to live in a post-war country that has seen the destruction of 14 years of civil war. I am trying to understand how war has affected the lives of young men in Monrovia, some who participated in the war through fighting, “holding gun” as they often said, and other young men who did not. More than anything else, it is about how options and possibilities are formed, made available, or constrained after the guns have gone away.

### *About Guns*

Given the prevalence of harrowing media images of sometimes very small children firing very big automatic weapons, I would like to start with a note about the title and about why I have chosen to introduce the narrative and the analysis of this thesis with guns. In my fieldwork, guns were a primary symbol of the war. “The war came” as Liberians often said. The coming of the war was signalled by the sound of shooting, of young people dressed in T-shirts, toting AK-47s. Guns were the reference point to the war during my participant observation and interviews with ex-combatants and those who were not a part of the fighting.

“What do you think about the condition of your country now?” I asked in interviews.

“But for me I alright now,” came the reply from a woman living in Slipway. “There’s no gun sound. You can walk in peace.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, when ex-combatants reflected on their experience of war, they often framed it around possession of a weapon. Jacob put it this way, “I could go anywhere. Anything I wanted I could get it...That’s when I had the arm (gun).”<sup>3</sup>

Note the symmetry in the two responses. Guns *enabled* mobility for combatants. They remembered the ways in which the possibilities were expanded because they held guns. Not only where they could walk but who they could see and how they could conduct themselves. An explicit contrast is seen in the quote from the woman in Slipway. Guns meant armed conflict which *prevented* mobility—literally, right down to when and where she could walk. Guns altered options.

It is not my intention to reify stereotypes of armed children committing “mindless, amoral violence” (Hoffman, 2011b, p. 3), by invoking the image of the gun. Instead, I want to draw our attention to what it meant to be armed, unarmed and disarmed. The gun was a symbol of power for ex-combatants—power to combat foes, and power over the subordinate, and the unarmed civilian. Holding guns in affiliation with fighting forces meant empowerment to achieve socio-economic mobility. There were chances to move up rank. There were possibilities to gain wealth. For civilians, guns meant disempowerment. The “gun sound” instilled fear, sent people running into hiding in their homes, into the bush, and across borders. 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.

Of course it was not the weapon alone that empowered young men to act in certain ways, or to take control over others. Far from the exoticised, decontextualised and essentialised portrayal of child soldiers in the popular, Western media (Denov, 2010), for Liberians guns indicated a shift in the social terrain of their country. Guns signalled a systemic and structural change that had immense implications for life during and after the war. Guns symbolised what Shaw (2001) refers to as a “habitus of war,” or what Vigh (2006a) calls a “war terrain.” What these authors are referring to, and what the Liberians in this work were indicating, are the ways in which war changed the political, economic, and social landscape of the country—with implications for the practices of everyday life. Routines, habits, conscious and unconscious modes of action were challenged and in many ways altered. The places one could do business and with whom

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<sup>2</sup> Interview June 2, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Focus Group, April 17, 2010

might be changed based upon which faction was in the area. When and where it was safe to go out in the streets might change in an instant.

In short, this thesis is about how life chances were altered during and in the aftermath of war. “Life chances” merely designate social options and possibilities that actors perceive as available to them based upon their position in a given social context (Dahrendorf, 1981). Chapters Seven and Eight show how many combatants benefitted from their participation in the war, at least while the war was being waged.<sup>4</sup> Fighting provided a source of livelihood, protection, and the possibility for socio-economic mobility. While a habitus of war improved life chances for some participants, many others lost families and friends to death and separation, were displaced, had their property looted and damaged. Guns signified these changes for the ex-combatants and non-combatants who informed this study. Similarly, life after war was a life without guns and the improved or diminished life chances that came once guns were no longer instruments of power. “Life after guns” is my effort to understand the implications for life chances and trajectories of young men after “they put the guns down with their hands.” How are they embedded in their social worlds, and how does their position influence their emergent trajectories?

In this vein, one could look at this work as a study of “reintegration,” at least in part because of the analytical focus upon ex-combatant life trajectories after war. As an intellectual pursuit, reintegration remains a “theoryless” field of inquiry (Nilsson, 2005, p. 35). The term itself is more often used to talk about policies and programs than to refer to the process of engagement between an individual and society. For example, though he takes local processes into account in his analysis of agricultural assistance to ex-combatants, when he refers to reintegration itself, Peters (2011b) is mainly referring to the sustainability of a livelihood intervention program. This trend is beginning to change (see Özerdem & Podder, 2011a). Regardless, I do not wish to advance a theory of reintegration with this work. I do hope that this work will inform and complicate notions about what “reintegration” is like for ex-combatants. One of my aims is to challenge short-sighted and narrow assumptions about ex-combatant experience after war.

This thesis is as much about the chances and trajectories of *youth* as it is about those of ex-combatant young people. Much of the academic and advocacy research suggests—whether explicitly or implicitly—that ex-combatants face specific social and economic challenges that other young people do not, namely stigma, and lack of education and employment (Betancourt et al., 2008; CSUCS, 2008; Gates & Reich, 2009; Roberston &

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, it is only those who lived to tell about their involvement who can speak about benefits of war.

McCauley, 2004; Schultz, 2004; Wessells, 2006b). Though such conclusions appear quite reasonable, as is often the case, the lived experience of ex-combatants is far more complicated, less linear, and not nearly as neat and tidy as these projections suggest. The work of this research began with a simple argument: if we are to understand how ex-combatants are *differently* challenged after war, we need to understand their challenges against those of other youth who did not fight. Otherwise, we are “shooting in the dark” and have little to offer aside from pure speculation and assumption. Though there are notable exceptions (see Alexander, McGregor, & Ranger, 2000; Blattman & Annan, 2010; Schafer, 2007), most studies fail to provide empirical material to support their conclusions about differences for ex-combatants. Therefore, in this work, half of the material is focused upon the life chances and trajectories of other post-war youth who did not fight in armed factions during the Liberian civil war. Their contributions inform notions about what it means to be young and male in a developing African nation, and especially a post-conflict country.

## Themes

In summary, this thesis is about youth. It is about ex-combatants and other post-war young people. It provides an analysis of their life chances and trajectories in the aftermath of a very prolonged civil war. The following overview introduces each of these themes, so that the remainder of this work may be read with coherence.

## *Youth*

This work is first and foremost, about youth, a term I interchange with “young people” and at times, with reference to “young men.”<sup>5</sup> In the most general sense, youth is a social age situated between childhood and adulthood. The experiences and expectations of “youth” however, may vary enormously from one context to the next. What this means is that while policies may set age parameters around who may be considered “youth”—15–24 or 15–35 years of age (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2005)—actual transitions into and out of youth will be different depending on where young people are structurally situated within a given society. “Our social structure is something we have to consider,”<sup>6</sup> Cyrus explained. Cyrus was a Liberian youth director. He continued, “so there is no specific demographic for age, for who a youth is because there are a lot of factors involved...it depends on their sex, their class, religion, those are all demographic—it depends on different factors...if you want to catch everybody in the

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<sup>5</sup> This study is about young men, and I will address my reasons for limiting the study to male youth in Chapter Two.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, January 26, 2010.

net you have to put it between 15 and 40, because there are different dynamics involved.” Those who are considered youth in Liberia may range in age from 13 or 14 well into the mid-thirties and forties (Moran, 2006). Utas (2005a, p. 142) explains, “the category of youth is constructed upon notions of social age, social markers such as marriage, or at least a stable relationship with a woman, are requirements for moving out of the youth category and into adulthood.”

This definition is obviously gendered. Youth is a gendered and generational experience. For young females, adulthood is usually ascribed to those who have born children, and become responsible for their own households (Bledsoe, 1980). At the local level reference to “youth” is nearly always implicitly reference to *male* youth. That is at least partially because youth as a category is about being in-between social statuses of childhood and adulthood. It is a generational position within which young people are seeking to “generate adulthood” (Christiansen, Utas, & Vigh, 2006). The transient nature of youth makes it much more applicable to young men. When it comes to youth in many societies, and particularly Liberia in this thesis, young females are not expected to undergo a social transition from childhood to youth like young males are. They are not expected to leave home to develop and establish themselves. Young men are expected to leave their parent’s home to establish independent, sustainable livelihoods that will enable them to provide for and protect families of their own (Jeffrey, 2008; Utas, 2005a). Young girls on the other hand are expected to remain at home until they are married and move to the home of a husband. “It is the responsibility of the father in the African system to take care of his daughter until she leaves his house and gets married,” Cyrus continued.<sup>7</sup> Females go from provision and protection of father to provision and protection of husband. Their status as adults is not *generated* through work or achievement in the same ways as young men. Male young people progress through social benchmarks of establishing livelihoods and building homes. Young women *become* adults through marriage and childbirth. In this sense, female categories of youth scarcely exist in many cultures (Sommers, 2006).

Responsibility for a family of one’s own is paramount to social recognition as a man or a woman. In this study most of those who considered themselves, and are considered in their social systems as “youth” already have children. What separates them from other parents who are considered adults is their level of responsibility for the lives of their children. Most of my informants were not able to support the children they had fathered. They were not involved in the provision or care of their children. Thus, as a

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

point of departure, this study is about young people who have not received social recognition as adults in their society.

### *Ex-Combatants*

Many of the informants to this research fought for part or all of the 14 year civil war—some even participated for periods of time in the war in Sierra Leone. Ex-combatants have been defined very generally in the literature. Actual combatants, as well as men, women and children who provided a host of support roles such as cooks, wives, slaves, or porters, are often included in conceptualisations of “ex-combatants” (Gates & Reich, 2009; Guyot, 2007). In Liberia, Lemasle (2010) distinguishes ex-combatants as those who actively fought and are in a position to use arms to spoil the peace process. Humphreys and Weinstein (2004, p. 9) expand their definition in Sierra Leone to anyone who “lived or worked with a fighting faction for at least one month.” These definitions are useful in the sense that they draw our attention to aspects of participation that extend beyond the violence of combat. However, at least in the case of Liberia there were many people who were forced to act as porters, servants, or cooks but who did not consider themselves as members of the factions they served, nor would they identify themselves as ex-combatants after war. Thus, to take such a broad view is unsuitable for this thesis.

For this thesis, I recognise the utility of these various iterations. Combatants had other responsibilities outside of active engagement in armed conflict. They participated for varying lengths of time. Some formally demobilised and disarmed. Others did not. However, all of the informants in this study were actively engaged in combat during their years with fighting factions or government troops. Having “held gun” was a central aspect of their identity as former fighters. They learned to care for and use weapons, and they participated in combat—many of them on the frontlines. When ex-combatants are referred to in this study they are understood as encompassing all of these characteristics of conflict participation.

It may be apparent by now that I have omitted reference to “child soldiers” or “former child soldiers.” This is an intentional choice. It is often a very appropriate term. Many very young—by all accounts—children are conscripted to fight in wars, and Liberia was no exception. Some in this study were indeed children when they were initiated. However, over the course of the war, many transitioned out of gendered and generational positions as children or youth to status as adults. Others were not considered children at all, having already been recognised as youth. Thus, to use child

soldiers as a term of reference would be ill-fitting in numerous cases. “Ex-combatants” is much more congruent to the experience of all the former fighters in this work.

### *The Other Post-war Youth*

The aim of this study is to inform an interpretation of ex-combatant life chances with a concentrated analysis of post-war youth whose life chances reflect similar options and constraints. The literature is full of key terms and phrases assigned to describe and designate post-conflict youth in particular ways. “War-affected,” “non-combatant,” “post-war” or “post-conflict” are prefixes used in different ways to distinguish youth in particular circumstances after conflict has ceased. Sometimes these umbrella terms include ex-combatants, sometimes they do not. War-affected, though widely used by policy makers and practitioners at a local level in Monrovia, as well as in the literature, ultimately appears obtuse. The study of the effects of war on children and youth ranges from the psychological (Berman, 2001; Yule, 2000), to the social (Eyber & Ager, 2004; Hart, 2008b), vocational and educational (Sommers, 2006). All Liberians were affected by the war in one way or another, directly or indirectly. Every Liberian’s set of options has been changed as a result of the civil war. However, not all Liberians experienced a reduction in their social or economic options. Some actually have improved opportunities. Youth and young adults in the elite class of repatriates have returned to find numerous job opportunities in the fledgling economy. Similarly, non-combatant youth presents an implied distinction from youth who were combatants. However, by the time of my research youth who fought and youth who did not were all actually non-combatant as they had either been demobilised or were never fighters to begin with. Thus, the term appears less accurate to the circumstances of their post-war status.

In this work, I use ‘post-war youth’ and “post-war young men” interchangeably. These terms are perhaps no less broad than “war-affected” or “non-combatant.” None-the-less, post-war youth is an accurate (though open) description which I will narrow for use in particular ways—rather than taking a broad term that is rife with connotations and re-applying it in my specific work. The post-war young men I discuss in the following chapters are young men whose life chances provide the foundational analysis against which ex-combatants are understood. These are young men whose social options have been reduced because of war. Most often, they are outside of their family home and “making life”<sup>8</sup> on their own. If youth are living on the street, this presents a further reduction in life chances and I indicate this by referring to them as “street youth.”

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter Six for a full discussion of this phrase.

Otherwise, post-war youth in this study designate young males who have left their homes or households of origin to make life on their own.

### *Street Youth*

Chapter Six provides a discussion of the life chances of street youth—a sub-set of other post-war youth whose options bear marked similarities to many ex-combatant youth. Early frameworks conceptualising “street children” or “street youth” tended to reinforce the stereotypical and stigmatising portrait of young “throwaways” or “runaways” due to poverty or family breakdown (Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003). In the more recent literature, “most definitions of street youth share three elements: spending significant amounts of time on the street; making the street into a way of life; and inadequate protection, supervision, and/or care from a responsible adult. In southern Africa many of the street youth are young people engaging in legal or illegal economic activity in the public arena” (Mufune, 2000, p. 234). This definition is well tailored to the circumstances of the street youth I worked with for this thesis. It incorporates the socio-economic positions and characteristics that are attributed to “street youth” in Monrovia, without reinforcing pejorative portrayals of street youth as “urchins” or necessarily “delinquents.”

The National Youth Policy summarizes, “street youth” in Liberia as referring “to young people who live and/or work in the streets...They lack any protection supervision or direction from responsible adults” (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2005, p. 9). In contrast, many of the street youth in this study sheltered with adult siblings or friends. Though these relationships did not provide monetary assistance or the social or moral council that “responsible” adult parents were expected to give, they were providing crucial protection from risks of sleeping on the street (these are discussed in Chapter Six). Further, these young people though not yet “adult” did exercise responsibility for themselves. Some *wilfully chose* life on the street to unburden destitute families. In short, lack of supportive adult caregivers did not mean their behaviour was *undirected* or *irresponsible*.

Most of the street youth in this study came from diverse situations, and were on the street for different reasons. What unites them is the time they pass in the slums and market places of the city. They find their own food, their own clothing, and the means of getting it. What is most important to understand about the street youth in this study is that while they represent unique and diverse life histories, they share a common socio-economic space that will be explored in Chapter Six.

*Pathways and Trajectories*

As part of my analysis of life chances, I look at how young people assess their positions in post-war Monrovia, and chart their futures accordingly. “Pathways” and “trajectories” are two related, though distinct terms that I use to talk about charting life courses and navigating in particular directions. I would like to draw a metaphorical distinction which I make use of throughout this work. Pathways are usually pre-existing options that have been carved from a terrain for the purpose of mobility. For instance, a map presents any number of pathways that may be taken to reach a given destination. Trajectories are, in contrast, a singular course of action that is both charted and traversed. They indicate movement along a plane projection (de Certeau, 1984). “Trajectories” draw our attention to action put into a specific direction. The young men in this work were aware of a number of social options (or pathways if you will). What I am concerned with in this study is the choice of direction. In some cases youth charted their life trajectories along conventional social pathways. They finished high school then went to university. They had plans to marry, to build a house. In Chapter Six, we meet Titus, whose post-war trajectory followed the contours of this very conventional social pathway. For others, like the street youth discussed in the majority of that chapter, conventional pathways became unmanageable. These young men charted alternative trajectories that have taken them in directions that diverge from socially prescribed benchmarks.

Trajectories is a particularly useful concept to the material on the lives of ex-combatants in Chapter Seven. That chapter contains a discussion in which I set out several pathways available to young ex-combatants. The post-war experience they present is about the assessment of life chances available through a number of pathways. Ultimately, each chooses to chart a specific trajectory.

*Wealth in People*

Throughout this piece, I argue that young men’s options for survival and socio-economic mobility are constrained and enabled through “wealth in people.” In many African contexts informal relationships between patrons and clients are essential to everyday survival. Liberia is no exception. These patron-client relationships are so important that Bledsoe (1980) argues that economic stability and security are dependent upon a person’s network of patrons and clients. Her conceptual expression of structured and informal relationships provides a useful springboard for my analysis of young men’s life chances. Though her analysis of wealth in people is based in a rural, agricultural context, as is the work of others who write about wealth in people (Guyer & Belinga,

1995; Nyerges, 1992), the concept holds sway for my young, urban informants as well. They live in uncertain social and economic circumstances, where much of their existence is “hand-to-mouth.” They have no formal access to employment or education. What they *do* have are networks of other people. Much of what I conclude in this thesis has to do with the ties that young men have to patrons and clients, and what those relationships of dependence and obligation can afford them. It is the terms of these relationships and the obligations involved that enable or constrain survival and support mobility. Their post-war life chances exist in, and are accessed through other people.<sup>9</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, this thesis is about life after war. It is about life after the positions to dominate with violence and automatic weapons have been stripped away from factions and their fighters. It provides an interpretation of the social and economic options young men perceive as within their reach, and how they work to improve their opportunities to generate adulthood and higher social status. In particular, I am interested in how the life chances of young men who fought during the war may be more congruently understood through a careful analysis of the life chances of those who did not. In this work, I argue that life chances for post-war youth are constrained and enabled through relationships of reciprocity, interdependency and asymmetrical power relations that facilitate survival and support mobility. In short, this work is about how wealth in people shapes the life chances of post-war youth in Monrovia, Liberia.

## **Chapter Overview**

### *Chapter Two: Research Methods*

In chapter two I present the research design. I outline the methods I used to collect and analyse the information contained in this work. In particular, I discuss my position as a participant observer, as a person from another culture and context, and consider how my involvement influenced the data I was able to collect. I relate the inherent limitations of the methods, and the ethical issues that emerged in the process of this work. My aim is to present the kind of data this work contains and how it was obtained so that the conclusions I draw can be understood as relevant to the specificity of my study and my informants.

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<sup>9</sup> Wealth in people will be theorised more completely in Chapter Three.

*Chapter Three: Framework for Analysis*

This chapter provides a specific review of the literature that has informed this study, and to which this study contributes. It is an analytical engagement with the literature concerning structure and agency, youth, ex-combatants and the causes and conditions for conflict and conflict participation. The objective is to assess the theoretical and empirical utility and limitations in the works reviewed so as to set the stage for the interpretations, arguments, and conclusions drawn in this contribution.

*Chapter Four: History*

Chapter Four presents a specific history of the Republic of Liberia. My aim is to review the structural developments that took shape socially, politically, and economically in the years preceding the war. This chapter offers a necessary background to the youth experience discussed in the remaining empirical chapters.

*Chapter Five: Social Reproduction through Imagined Post-war Trajectories*

Chapter Five is the first of the empirical contributions to this work. I begin with a discussion of the structural constraints and possibilities young men negotiate as they chart their life trajectories into the future. I draw out a number of ways in which social reproduction of a class divide appears in the narratives of my informants. They appear to be continuing the modes or means of mobility that were outlined in the history chapter. I discuss these in terms of perceived life chances along pathways into rural contexts, within the urban centre, and outward to the US. I show how the desired trajectories into government were in fact reserved for the dominant minority elite who possessed the cultural capital and financial means to achieve top positions in the post-war political economy. I conclude by arguing that the structural conditions that existed prior to the war were being re-established in many ways, with implications for the future life chances of the young men in this thesis.

*Chapter Six: Street Youth and Impoverishment in People*

Chapter Six is about the life chances of post-war youth who have limited wealth in people. In it, I concentrate primarily upon the life chances of street youth who did not participate in the fighting. As young men outside of family households, their experience highlights a number of important structural conditions that limit their life chances when reciprocal relationships among family and kin are unavailable. Their life chances set the stage for the analysis of ex-combatant life chances presented in Chapter Eight.

Throughout this thesis, I argue that possibilities are embedded within people. The constrained options of street youth illustrate how significant family and kin networks are for survival and socio-economic mobility. Relationships of obligation and reciprocity are vital. Without them, life chances greatly diminish.

*Chapter Seven: Life Chances and Trajectories in Armed Groups*

In this chapter, I move to the life chances of young men who fought in the war. I discuss the reasons given for participation. I argue that participation in the fighting meant incorporation into an alternative habitus within factions which reconfigured the life chances for young soldiers. This chapter helps to lay the empirical foreground for the final analysis of ex-combatant life chances and trajectories discussed in Chapter Eight.

*Chapter Eight: Ex-combatants and Life after Guns*

In this final empirical contribution, I discuss how young ex-combatants assessed their post-war life chances and navigated their trajectories in the months and years following war. I argue that wealth in people from the war allowed many ex-combatants to preserve the socio-economic positions they achieved as big men during the war. Like Utas (2003), I observe how transitions from war could result in demotion from the status that fighting with armed groups facilitated. I discuss how the convergence and confliction of structural norms and values from factions and civilians had to be negotiated by young men who had grown up in structural conditions that were altered when the war ceased.

*Chapter Nine: Conclusion*

In this chapter, I draw together the arguments presented in the preceding material. I cast these results against the discourse and debates reviewed in Chapter Three. I then draw conclusions about the contribution this work makes to the literature, and provide suggestions for future research.



## Chapter Two: Research Methods

This chapter contains a discussion about how I conducted this research. This is a qualitative work. It contains an interpretation of how young people live in urban Monrovia, and how they see their place in the world. Though not an ethnography of one group or space-place in the city, the empirical material rendered in this thesis is very ethnographic, and will read as such. This thesis is an inquiry into youth positions in society, and how they perceive and act on their positions. My aim in this study was to understand and interpret how human experience, thought, emotion, and belief were influential to the circumstances and outcomes experienced by my informants. The subjective perspectives and evaluations young people constructed and used to make decisions about their daily lives and their future possibilities were of primary importance. I approached the subjective interpretations about young people's social lives and positions not as objects to be explained away, but rather as phenomena that might be understood as influential.

This chapter is organised as follows. In the first section I discuss scope and sampling. I establish the parameters within which data were collected, and from whom. Next, I discuss what I did to get the data that is presented in this work. I present the methods and means by which the information was gathered. Once the methods are set out, I turn to a number of important aspects of the process of doing fieldwork. I talk about access to informants, building trust, reflexivity, ethics and compensation. Each of these parts of the process is vital—how trust was built, or how access was achieved did much to shape the resulting data that was collected. Lastly, I discuss how I interpreted the data and told the story that is presented in this thesis. I explain how I coded the information and made choices about how to present the emergent analysis to the reader.

### Scope and Sampling

#### *Urban Young Men*

Urban young men are the primary unit of analysis in this study. Scope and sampling choices were made in order to optimise my ability to understand and articulate young men's options and experience in post-war Monrovia. Setting the scope of the study was about positioning myself within workable parameters, so that I could gather sufficient information in a set period of time. Thus, there were a number of limits that were placed on the study. The first was to remain an urban study only. I considered working in rural and urban contexts, comparatively. Because I could not afford this, both in terms of time

and finances, it seemed more suitable to limit the study to one regional location. The map on the next page shows the areas where I worked in the city.

I also chose to focus on young men. The adult men and women, the young and elderly discussed in my empirical chapters are incorporated because they can help us to understand the male youth more fully. Their insights support, inform, and sometimes complicate the material gathered from the youth themselves. For example, in Chapter Six the perspectives of young men living on the street are corroborated by the views of a group of elders. They concur with one another. In other instances they provide contrasting, often generational or gendered perspectives that may contradict what young men had explained or experienced. In Chapter Five, Tee gives an alternative view of rural social transitions in Poro society. While all of the young men in this study were averse to rituals of incorporation in Bush School, she provides a perspective tempered with hindsight and with lived experience in both rural and urban settings. At all times, regardless of who was answering questions, my objective remained upon trying to understand the lived experience of the young men who are the focus of this work.

#### *Sample and Size*

In the introduction I mentioned that this is not an ethnography of a specific group. Rather, this thesis is the culmination of a diverse group of contributors from a number of locations in and around Monrovia. I chose to take a purposive sample because I wanted to learn about any cross-cutting issues that might be important for young men in urban post-war Monrovia. Therefore, I retrieved information about my research topic in a number of locations throughout the city. The results of this study come from a snowball approach. Over the course of the first few weeks and months in Monrovia, I identified several communities in which to work either with ex-combatants or other post-war youth. Eventually, there were six locations from which I collected data. These were: Bernard's Beach, Gardnersville, Red Light, Slipway, University of Liberia (Capitol Hill campus), and West Point.



Many young people informed this work through allowing me to see and participate in the practice of everyday life. Those who contributed substantial conversations to my fieldnotes, interviews, or through focus groups are included in the account of sample size. I got to know many of these men through more than one method. I spent time in their communities, listened to them in focus groups, and then interviewed them later. Some I heard from only in interviews or focus groups. However there are only a few instances of one-off interactions.

With these specifications in mind, approximately 50 ex-combatants informed the content of this study. These combatants hailed primarily from Taylor's National Patriotic Front (NPFL). Many of them continued to work for his security forces after he became president in the late 1990s. This is important, particularly because these young men chose to stay in the urban centre after the war, having been established there for many years. The conclusions drawn about their life chances and trajectories need to be understood as coming from an urban based sample of ex-combatants who had fought in and around the urban centre for many years.

A host of other informants have contributed to this study. Another 50 post-war youth informed the material about non-combatant experience. 15 of this group were street

youth in Red Light. Their position in post-war society offers the closest non-combatant experience from which to compare and contrast the socio-economic positions and possibilities of ex-combatants. Most street youth were surviving without the support of families and kin networks. The majority of ex-combatant young men in this study faced the same circumstances when the war ended. They were unwilling or unable to return to families, and were thus, forced to survive either with the networks of support from their factions, or more difficultly, on their own. The empirical material contributed by street youth illuminates the challenges and options of everyday life for young men who are not connected to networks of support in families. The rest of the sample were other post-war young men I spent time with on Bernard's Beach, in the park at the University of Liberia, and in my area in Matadi.

In addition to this combined group of young men, two focus groups—one of 10 men, and the other 10 women—contributed their thoughts about the impacts of the war on their families and communities. These are supplemented with five interviews conducted with parents. Finally, 15 youth workers contributed their perspectives about the constraints and possibilities faced by ex-combatants and other post-war youth. The term “psychosocial counsellor” is sometimes included in my reference to members of this group. Psychosocial counsellors were all Liberians who worked in reintegration programs with ex-combatants in the months and year following the cessation of conflict. They were trained by NGOs to run programmatic interventions designed to help ex-combatants transition from life as fighters to lives of socially acceptable conduct outside of their factional structures and networks. They were not therapists. Rather, they were as best I could gather pragmatic practitioners who had helped to instruct and re-orient ex-combatants to everyday life outside of fighting forces. Their insights, though occasionally tempered with NGO jargon, were primarily directed toward illuminating the local, interpersonal struggles and successes that ex-combatants faced in “our social structure” as they often put it. This brings the total figure to 135 informants to this study, though there were countless others who have contributed in ways I cannot enumerate, but am deeply grateful for.

## **Research Methods**

I was in Monrovia for five and a half months in 2010 and for another month and a half in 2011. Qualitative methods were most useful as they allowed for greater exploration of depth and breadth of meanings and local understandings (Hakim, 1987). Participant observation, interviews, life histories, and group discussions were used to collect the data included in this thesis. These methods were used to capture the ordinary, everyday

aspects of life in a given contexts, as well as the subjective thoughts, feelings and beliefs of the people involved (Fetterman, 1998). Each of these methods will be discussed in detail. First, I introduce my living circumstances, and talk about how my place in Monrovia positioned me to see and experience life on an everyday basis.

*My Place and the Practice of Everyday Life*

“To observe a way of life best, it seems, involves living that way of life.”

(Jarvie, 1969, p. 505)

Where I stayed and what that place was like for me has had tremendous influence on the analysis presented in this thesis. My position in the city, and my experience on an everyday basis informed how I understood the options and limitations of living in Monrovia. Some of these were physical things like access to water and electricity. Where I lived also enriched my understanding of social life, for instance how gendered and generational relationships were organised and how they functioned. A brief summary of how I was situated will give a sense for what I was able to observe and experience and what I can bring to my analysis of young men and their life chances and trajectories.

I stayed in a rented room provided by a host family in Central Matadi, an area located behind Sinkor. My host mother was married to a professional who worked in the centre of town. His income and her family land gave them the financial means to support their children, and several foster children who lived in their household. My host mother maintained several small rental properties on her small strip of land. They had a television in their bedroom, and one in the living room. These were luxuries that most Liberians did not enjoy.<sup>10</sup> This said, the house they lived in was very modest in size, with anywhere from 2 to 4 children sharing the only other bedroom apart from the adult's. I ate with their family, but stayed in a room in a shared house with other tenants. We were not surrounded by the concrete walls of the compounds that more elite households resided within. There was not a family car or driver. Neither my housemates nor the majority of neighbours owned a car. Everyone took taxis. This was a huge distinction between the rich and the poor. I once asked an elite man for directions by taxi and he flatly replied, “I have never been in a taxi in this country in my life.” So while I was not living with the poorest of poor, and certainly not under the same constraints that were daily realities for the youth in this study, I was far from the upper

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<sup>10</sup> The Demographic and Health Survey reports that only an estimated seven per cent of Liberians own a television (LISGIS, 2007).

class practice of everyday life experienced by upper level government officials, and expats.

Most importantly, living in Central Matadi gave me a chance to live the urban way of life that non-elite Liberians experienced, at least to a certain degree. By living in a local community, the everyday routines, ways of operating or doing things were not an “obscure background of social activity” (de Certeau, 1984). Instead, I was incorporated into the everyday routines, social rituals, and patterned behaviour and interactions that structured survival and supported well-being. Being embedded within this local context, and situated within interdependent relationships contributed invaluable understanding about social hierarchies, expectations, values, and narratives that popped up repeatedly throughout my conversations and interactions with ex-combatants and other youth. I also experienced and observed many of the constraints, pressures, and possibilities that they experienced. My city water sometimes ran dry in the pipes before I could get a bath. I got short-changed by the guys who changed money. When I stayed too long in the city centre, I had to fight my way through the same elbowing crowd to find a taxi home.

Living with a family in Matadi gave me an on-going experience of daily constraints and possibilities in the urban environment, as well as how those possibilities were socially and economically negotiated by individuals, families and households, and within and between generations. When youth like James and Washington spoke about reciprocity with younger siblings (see Chapter Six), I understood what they meant. I had seen such informal social exchanges, some subtle and some very explicit, within social hierarchies in my daily life in Matadi. When the children washed my clothes, I gave them money for cell phone minutes or brought them DVDs from town. When the ex-combatants (see Chapter Eight) talked about their unwillingness to return to families because they would be subjected to the authority of elders, I had a clear picture of what this meant on an everyday basis. It meant fetching and carrying, obedience, being controlled by another’s wishes or needs. In other words, my immersion into a small community in Matadi has been invaluable to the analysis that is offered in this work, and it has influenced it in very specific ways.

### *Participant Observation*

This brings me to participant observation, a principle method for this research. Participant observation is exactly what it says it is—it is observation taken during participation in a particular circumstance or activity. For me, there was a spectrum of

embedded experience and observation in the field, ranging from positions of passive on-looking to active participation in a certain situation (Spradley, 1980). Sometimes I was as much a part of an interaction as anyone else. I took turns buying rounds of beer in the evenings, and learned to hold my own in debates over politics with the neighbours. On the other hand, I never learned to cook over a coal stove. I remained a passive onlooker. This was in part because food preparation was the children's responsibility. My position as an older household member and a foreign guest meant that I did not need to contribute to the domestic labour of food preparation. Occasionally I obliged to stir the pot, which was enough to elicit shrieks of laughter from my younger observers in the household. I became a part of these social systems. I sent children to buy things for me. I scolded them when they returned with incorrect change. In these and so many other ways, participant observation was a fluid and continuous research method that informed my understanding and interpretation of daily life in Monrovia.

Participant observation took place within multiple social venues and with different degrees of frequency and continuity. My experience with my host family and the neighbours in the immediate vicinity provided the most proximate social space for interaction and observation. Outside of their household, I spent time with youth at their "hang outs." I sat with boys selling phone cards on the corner. I watched pool on the beach. I smoked cigarettes and talked politics by the public toilets in Slipway. My level of interaction was not as "emplaced" in young men's communities as it was in Matadi. There were a number of reasons for this. My time was split up. Instead, I made regular visits to each of these areas over mornings or during afternoons. I could not continuously observe young people who were spread out over the city, on the beach, by the river, on the corner, or in the market. It was also unsafe. I could not remain with my informants at night for instance, to go to video clubs to watch football, or to drink beer on the beach after sunset. I felt very safe with the majority of young men involved in this study. The city was not safe, however. The risk of exploitation in taxis or on motorbikes late at night was too high. I could not remain with them for the full cycle of everyday routines as I could in Matadi.

I kept a diary of fieldnotes each day. "Jottings" were taken down in a notebook during the day (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). These were short hand notes about things I saw and heard that were made to remind me to write more fully when I had time and space to put down more substantive material. Developed fieldnotes were written in the evenings or early mornings. These notes comprised descriptive information about the physical and social environment, my social interactions, and my own subjective feelings and perceptions.

Data gathered through participant observation provided “spring boards” that informed interview questions. For example, I quickly observed that often, young people would initially represent their current life chances as perhaps more grim than some of their other peers. Because I was interested in their social options, I would ask who they could depend on, or if they were receiving any kind of help from family. “I not depending on nobody, really, I got nobody” was a very common response. In some cases, particularly with street youth, it was also fairly congruent with the youth’s daily experience. I used my knowledge of household functioning and interdependence as a rough gage for the level of support a young person experiences. “Who cooks for you? Who washes your clothes?” I asked. If there was a younger sibling to do the washing, a girlfriend or grandmother who cooked, then there was a clear level of social support and interdependence at work in that young person’s life. An instance of a young man who washed his own clothes, and took care of his own food indicated that he was not linked into social hierarchies of dependence and reciprocity on a daily basis. This level of analytical detail and inquiry could not have been achieved if I had chosen to live in a guest house and to rely on interviews and focus groups alone.

### *Interviews*

Unstructured and semi-structured interviews were used to collect information about young men’s lives. These were the most useful way of acquiring in-depth information about the post-war conditions for young people, their perceptions of their future, as well as the events and developments in their own lives since the war. During my first few weeks in the field, all of my intended interview questions were piloted on several initial interviewees, and then adjusted for clarity or content. Even once this short list of questions was settled on, I stuck to this preliminary list very loosely. The order was often changed, and the wording was phrased and rephrased based on how an informant responded. I used the list as a guide for topics of conversation, and did my best to balance the topics of interest to me, with the answers and issues that informants raised. I tried to prompt them in a direction, and give them free reign to expound. There were times when the list was altogether abandoned because a person wanted to discuss something they felt was more important. Their initiated conversations were often much more dense and descriptive than answers to my prepared questions. For example, my interview with Matthew (see Chapter Seven) was far less structured than many others, and yielded extremely useful information. When we sat down to talk, he asked, “So, why you want to talk to me?”<sup>11</sup> I told him my purpose very briefly, and before I was able to finish, he began telling his personal story of capture, incorporation into the NPFL, and

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<sup>11</sup> Interview, April 23, 2010

his experience after war was over. He spoke for two hours with few questions or comments from me, and offered some of the most relevant and detailed information contained in this thesis. In contrast, many other informants were not comfortable with such an open-ended format. To ask them to tell their post-war life story without more specific direction resulted in a long silence and a series of stops and starts. More direction was often requested. I tried to calibrate my participation as the interviewer so that informants had suitable direction and could answer and converse with the greatest ease possible.

The semi-structured interviews covered three main themes. One was about young men's trajectories since the war ended. I asked them questions about where they were when the war ceased, what they did afterwards, and how they had arrived to the place and circumstances where they were at the time of my conversations with them. The aim was not to record a biographical account of the person's last seven years since the war. Rather, I was interested in how they narrated the events and situations that were important for the direction of their lives since the war. I wanted to know what their options had looked like to them, and what challenges or situations they faced.

In the midst of this I also recognised that re-told stories from the past were always remembered in the particularity of the present. When people narrate their experiences, they "select, mold, and edit cultural meanings into their stories" (Lieblich, Zilber, & Tuval-Mashiach, 2008, p. 614). This is done in retrospect as re-presentation. As Schafer (2001, p. 217) reminds us, "All historical sources are grounded in a particular present...it may be that the stories people tell in the post-war period are very different from those they told while the war was still raging, because of current pressures and influences as well as simply the tricks of memory". The passage of time and experience make it impossible to remember with absolute clarity the way that events unfolded and were understood while they were happening. Memory, then, is "as much about the present and future as it is about the past. People remember not for scientific or historical reasons, but as members of current social communities, and they tend to edit the record accordingly" (Peters, Richards, & Vlassenroot, 2003, p. 14).

I was not concerned with stringing a set of coherent events together to make a "complete" life history, but rather with listening to how events were given meaning, and with what the narrative could tell me about young men's positions and possibilities in post-war Monrovia. Still, this turned out to be the most challenging piece of the interviews. To reconstruct a series of events from the last several years did not come easily for many of my informants. What ultimately came through these segments of our dialogue were topics that emerged as important to them, and were then unpacked, much

like a rucksack. Rather than a chronological retelling, or an ordered recollection that prioritized the most salient events, I often received pieces of a person's life story based on what was "on top"—what came to mind first. Often it was only at the very end of an interview that I could see all of the memories laid out in sundry array and could then begin the work of thinking through how the pieces fit together to bring about the story of this person's life. Ultimately, what these segments of the interviews provided were a number of themes that emerged in the life histories of most of the post-war young men. As discontinuous as many of their accounts were, patterns in experience emerged and have been instrumental in my iteration of their life chances.

The ex-combatants were much more pre-occupied with events of the war. Often, the way to learn about life after the war was to listen my way through their re-telling of events *during* the war. It also culminated into the content of Chapter Seven, a chapter I did not intend to write when I designed this research. However, when asked about life since the war, many began with life when the war was interjected into their personal lives. For instance, this is an illustrative example from the first sentences of my interview with Alhaji:<sup>12</sup>

"Tell you what, let's start wi' this. Can you tell me what happened to you when the war ended? Where you were, what you were doing. Kind of the events that led you to be where you are right now, doing what you're doing right now."

"So long I been in war. So long I been in war because when the war started, I was not a soldier. But what made me to join I will tell you now. You know when those people enter, me—murder my brother and my sister in front of me."

"Murdered them?"

"Yes, my mother and father. Soldier man came. Had my sister, and you know, none were available, 1990."

"1980?"

"Yeah, 1990, yeah when the war came..."

The painful memories that Alhaji immediately connects to were the very sort of information I was trying not to ask about. There were ethical dilemmas surrounding this kind of painful experience that I did not wish to bring up, and did not see as at all

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<sup>12</sup> Interview, April 28, 2010

essential to my research aims. I will discuss the ethical dimension of such conversations in a following section. However, what the ex-combatants made clear was that the war experiences were important for understanding the post-war situations they faced. They consistently ignored my introductory remarks about wanting to know what happened *after* the war, my explicit statements about not wanting to come asking questions about what happened *during* the war itself. As we will see, the post-war experiences discussed in Chapter Eight could not have been understood with the depth or coherence that they are if it were not for the war-time experiences that ex-combatants brought me back to over and over again.

Another theme concerned how young people saw their position in post-war society at present. Usually this topic was breached with a simple statement, “tell me about the condition for the young people of your country right now.” This gave young men the freedom to speak generally about Liberia and about society. They often began with denouncements of the government for having failed the youth, or with general observations about the post-war poverty and lack of development:

“Alright, tell me about the condition for the young people of your country today.”<sup>13</sup>

“Abby, you see, for the country right now, there is no facility for the young people in Liberia right now, because the government is not doing anything...”

I could then listen for themes in their initial thoughts and pose more pointed and specific questions about their lives and experience.

A third theme covered the topic of imagine futures. I asked young men to talk about what they wanted and expected their lives to look like in the future, and what they needed to do to achieve these outcomes. Vigh (2006a, p. 13) writes, “We concurrently plot trajectories, plan strategy and actually move towards a telos a distant goal in or beyond the horizon, and we do so both in relation to our current position and possibilities in a given social environment and in relation to our imagined future position.” Asking about imagined futures was not a mere journey into daydreams. On the contrary, hearing about what they wanted to become in the future gave me insight into the social values and norms that informed their choices in everyday life. For example, I learned how important it was for young men to build their own house, and what a statement of status it was if a man had a car of his own.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview, May 1, 2010

In this phase of interview I wanted to avoid two issues that have been raised in the literature regarding imagined futures. One was rehearsed answers about “life planning” (Langevang, 2007). Langevang found that Ghanaian young people in her research offered prepared or rehearsed responses to questions about their futures, many of which seemed to result from a public discourse around young people’s educational and social trajectories. I wanted to avoid “pat answers” that were disconnected from my informant’s actual outlook on life. I also wanted to avoid what Crivello (2009) refers to as “inflated” futures. She observes that many of the future aspirations voiced by her participants in Peru seemed inflated because they did not reflect the structural inequalities that constrained their childhoods and their pathways through poverty and into adulthood (p. 21). Aspiring to be a doctor or a football star was a dream that they would love to pursue in an ideal world. The demands in their current contexts meant that many were working toward adult livelihoods in rural agriculture on a daily basis. Though genuinely interesting, the unlikely was the last thing I wanted to spend time on during interviews. I wanted to hear about expectations and how current positions and possibilities were expected to unfold into various outcomes.

To circumvent these issues I found a psychological concept theoretically useful and methodologically helpful. “Possible selves” are conceptions of self in the future that represent desired and undesired states (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are distinct from aspirations as they are visions of probable outcomes that are based on one’s current experiences. Where aspirations may be inflated and unrealistic, possible selves are very much grounded in past experiences and present circumstances. They “encompass within their scope visions of desired and undesired end states” (p. 159). These are the various selves that one can imagine taking form in the future: the poor server in a small restaurant, or the well paid hotel manager; the educated professional, the tradesman or woman, the unskilled day labourer. Such possible selves are rooted in daily life, in personal experience and interpersonal relationships that help an individual to picture what her or his life could become. These possible selves provide useful images of potential outcomes that motive particular decisions, strategies, and behaviours.

In their research with low income eighth graders, Oyserman et al. (2004) used a series of questions designed to identify the ways in which possible selves motivate decisions that impact a young person’s education. To do this, one of the questions they asked in an essay method was “In the lines below, write what you expect you will be like and what you expect to be doing next year” (p. 146). This particular question appeared suitably designed for my research into young people’s imagined futures for two reasons. First, it asked about expectations, rather than dreams. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it

gave a specific time frame within which young people were asked to imagine themselves. As their results yielded congruent answers to the question, I chose to use it as a springboard for interview questions during my fieldwork in Monrovia. I asked what young people thought their lives would look like in three, five, and ten years from the present. Similar questions have proved effective in research with young men in other contexts (see McDowell, 2003).

The resulting dialogue was by far the shortest and simultaneously, one of the most revealing sections in terms of young people's view of their positions and possibilities. Most responses were characterised by brevity which was often preceded and followed by silence. Initially this was very disconcerting to me. Were the questions badly phrased? Had I been insensitive in some way? With reflection I have come to see that silence and brief responses to questions about the future have a great deal to tell us.<sup>14</sup> For the majority of young men who responded with brevity or silence, the future was bare. Their social horizons were bleak, and the chances of mobility—of change, even—often appeared very unlikely. My interview with David provides a clear example.<sup>15</sup>

“So when you imagine your life in the future, how do you imagine your life will be like in three years time? What do you imagine?”

“There is no plan in my life right now... Your life will be better if you have a plan.”

He went on to say, through numerous stops and starts, that there was nothing to plan with so there could be nothing foreseeable to plan *for*. There was no money. There was no consistent work. He had such a difficult time speaking about the lack of possibilities and became so visibly uncomfortable that I abandoned further questions about the future in five or 10 years.

The way that future possibilities were framed in the telling was also helpful. Informants often chose to answer questions about what they would be doing in life by introducing them with a qualification. “If I am opportune...” “If God bless me...” There was an explicit reference to the need for external intervention if socio-economic mobility or change of any kind were to occur.

As with Crivello's (2009) research, many young people responded with what sounded like highly improbable imagined futures. They spoke of becoming professional football players, musicians, or settling into a middle class life in America. It was not how

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<sup>14</sup> For an in-depth discussion about what silence has to say, see Ghorashi's (2007) thoughtful piece about ‘giving silence a chance.’

<sup>15</sup> Interview, May 11, 2010

unrealistic these possibilities appeared that was helpful as it is not for me to judge or speculate about the likelihood of a given answer. What was helpful was how these answers were given, and from whom. Answers like these often appeared in narratives by young men like David, who had endured very difficult and sparse circumstances for long periods of time and saw very few plausible options for change. Instead of struggling through the weight of frustration and uncertainty that David contended with in his response, many chose to direct their answers to happier, more enjoyable possibilities. These possible selves received the spotlight of our attention in the conversation, shielding them from the discomfort of discussing a bleak future.

Many were aware of how improbable such imagined futures sounded. “I can leave this country,”<sup>16</sup> Morris said to me. “You don’t believe it?” he added, smiling as though he knew I doubted his assertion.

“How will you do it?”

“I will find means to go.”

“How’s that?”

“I can go, playing football.”

Such narratives were contrasted by numerous young people who were in the midst of, or had already completed university education. They spoke confidently of next steps that presented natural progressions from one degree to another or from life as a bachelor student to life as a professional man with a family. Their possible selves were clearly linked to practical steps toward particular imagined outcomes. Where the imagined future as a football player appeared disconnected to Morris’s everyday life in Slipway, these young people drew clear links between their current position at present and the possibilities they could work toward in the foreseeable future. Both in their recollections of the past, and their projections of the future, the informants to this study provided descriptions that helped to explain how they saw their positions in post-war society, and how they assessed their possibilities.

The majority of interviews were recorded and transcribed. Notes were taken if permission to record was denied. In some situations, particularly in discussions with street youth in Red Light, the presence of a recorder or even a notebook seemed intrusive to the social environment. The freedom in conversation and informal

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<sup>16</sup> Interview, May 13, 2010

discussions was eclipsed by their awareness of my avid attention to dialogue. Further, the use of either tended to invoke a more formal response. Young people suddenly sat up straight. Their voices and expression of ideas transitioned from interpersonal dialogue to something more akin to a radio interview. This was understandable. However it often replaced the details and content they were willing to discuss amongst each other prior to the introduction of a recorder or notepad. Worse still, the visibility of a notebook alone drew a crowd of people who were curious to see what the “white woman” was doing. Among the young people the intrigue of a new comer quickly ebbed, and I was able to move about without attracting a great deal of attention from them. However, the constant flow of petty traders through Red Light meant that I was always a new stranger to the steady stream of curious passers-by.

I decided against formal recording methods in the data collection with street youth in Red Light. Instead, I sat and talked with them in groups, or arranged to speak one-on-one about more personal life experiences. Once in the taxi to go home, notes were immediately jotted down to cover the topics of dialogue. These notes were subsequently expanded. This strategy had several benefits and drawbacks. By avoiding the use of notes or recordings, I lost some of the verbatim quotations that were available from formally recorded interviews. I also lost the intricate development of conversations that can be traced through transcripts, as well as the subtle changes in expression and tone. Nonetheless, I felt that more informal means served the research in a more useful way. It allowed me to hear from street youth in a far less inhibited manner. They forgot about my doing research, and spoke candidly about their lives and their country.

### *Focus Groups*

I ran a number of focus groups with young people and with adults during the first phase of fieldwork. Three focus groups were conducted with ex-combatants. Another series of focus group discussions were conducted with community members in West Point—one with male elders, one with women, and one with youth. All focus groups were digitally recorded. These group sessions were conducted with a research assistant, Zawoo. One of the primary reasons for using this method was to listen for diverse or divergent answers that people might think to give in a group, but might not think of giving to me in a one-on-one conversation. By using this approach, it was possible to allow participants to prompt dialogue among each other, which enriched the discussion.

The quality of the data collected during focus groups is due in large part to the skill and dedication with which Zawoo facilitated the flow of conversation. One of downsides of using focus groups is that responses can become repetitive. Sometimes people hear a

participant respond to a question, and choose to give the same or similar answer. There is also the chance that some will feel more comfortable and gregarious than others. It is easy for the discussion to become dominated by one or two voices. Additionally, by virtue of the group experience, people may choose to give information that is socially acceptable among their fellow participants, concealing details that they might perhaps feel free to share in a one-one-one interview. Anything that could be cause for discomfort of themselves or other group members is unlikely to come to light regardless of how it might inform the study.

Zawoo was adept at minimizing such drawbacks. He had worked as a research assistant for an NGO and a couple of academics, and was very astute about directing the discussions. We met several times prior to the focus groups to exchange ideas about the questions that I included in the protocol, and how the conversation would flow. One of the strengths of his contribution to focus groups was his ability to draw out participation from everyone, and to minimize the extent to which eager participants dominated the discussion. “Another person?” he would encourage them. “I think you have spoken a couple of times already, let’s hear from someone else first...” When similar answers were given, he would ask if someone had a different view, or if the answers given always held true in the experience of those in the group. If there were particularly shy people in the group, he would warmly encourage them to speak up. “We haven’t heard from you yet, what do you think?” Further, as a Liberian, his ability to converse in Liberian English was much stronger than mine. In interviews, if I had a rough time with an expression or a phrase there was time and freedom to sort that out. For the sake of clarity and efficiency in the focus groups, he asked the questions and directed the flow of conversation.

I took notes while the focus group was being conducted. Notes served two purposes. First, they enabled me to keep track of each individual voice that was raised to answer each of the questions put to the participants. By doing so, the quantity and diversity of responses was recorded. Second, there were a number of occasions in which background noise made it difficult to make out the dialogue in portions of the recording. Notes enabled me to salvage the content of discussions that would have otherwise been lost to street noise or the pounding of rain on tin roofs. Ultimately, what we gathered from these groups proved to be useful thematic material that was both complemented and complicated through other forms of data collection.

## **Integral Parts of the Process of Data Collection**

There were a number of important parts of the process of data collection that I discuss below. These integral parts were essential to the collection of information that I present in this thesis. The way in which they unfolded in my research experience shaped much of the depth and breadth of information I could gather. These include access and building trust, reflexivity about my role as the researcher, ethics, and compensation.

### *Access and Credibility*

Working with marginalised groups like ex-combatants or street youth meant that care needed to be taken in identifying individuals or particular areas. While elites and professionals could be easily identified and were usually amicable about requests to meet, street youth and ex-combatants were not immediately willing or interested to meet with strangers. Ex-combatants were especially averse to being identified as former fighters. Usually my initial access to a community was facilitated through introductions made by someone who lived within the community itself, or held some credibility in the community.

My interviews in Slipway and subsequently in Gardnersville are results of access through introductions. As mentioned in the previous section, Zawoo and I worked together on focus groups. An ex-combatant himself, Zawoo had worked as a pastor and a psychosocial counsellor in the years since the war. He knew of a number of possible communities that could be approached to conduct focus groups. Because of he could identify himself as an ex-combatant, he did not transgress the political, social, or economic fault-lines that can inhibit trust and rapport between local research assistants and informants (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). He suggested Slipway as a good place to propose a set of focus groups. Knowing that it was a community of former fighters, he contacted the community chairman. We then scheduled a meeting with the community elders and the chairman explaining our wish to conduct several focus groups with ex-combatants. Passing through figures like the community chairman in Slipway was an important display of respect for his position in the community. To bypass him would have been to disrespect his position and would have likely caused offense. After explaining the procedures we were granted access. I returned to Slipway for interviews over the following weeks. At the conclusion of one such interview, Jake, my interviewee, asked if I would like to speak with ex-combatants in another community across the bridge. I said yes, and he did the initial arrangements for my interviews in Gardnersville.

Having a credible introduction also meant that there was someone who could vouch for me. Monrovia has been over-saturated with journalists and researchers in the years since the war. The local people were tired of white foreigners coming in and asking for stories. Many of them were suspicious that I would take their stories back “on that side”<sup>17</sup> and make money off of magazine articles or other media related material. For example, on a trip to introduce myself in a community of street youth, I was met with initial hostility and suspicion. They were rowdy. They pushed each other around and spoke in sharp, loud demands to one another. They were “rude” as the Liberians refer to it—to each other and to me. I told them who I was and waited for the group to quiet down. From fieldnotes,<sup>18</sup> *“There were two or three really loud girls who were pushing each other around, playfully, but loudly. ‘All these people come in here, they get the stories and they leave and make money from them. We can’t see nothing!’ one of them interjected into the group of people.”* That was in Red Light. 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. Individuals like Zawoo or Jake could defuse some of these attitudes and opinions by vouching for my purposes, my integrity, and by offering assurance to a sometimes very sceptical audience.

Building trust through credible contacts was even more heightened with the ex-combatants. Some were suspicious of my intended purposes for their information. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) had collected statements from some ex-combatants in the years since the war. Many of them were genuinely concerned that I might publish their names and deeds, or turn them in to the TRC. These suspicions were reduced through personal contacts with people they knew and trusted. The interaction between myself, an informant, and Jake in Gardnersville provides a clear example.<sup>19</sup>

“This man (Jake) came to me and convince me that—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?”

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<sup>17</sup> This is a phrase they used often to refer to the West, usually America. I discuss it in much greater depth in Chapter Five.

<sup>18</sup> Fieldnote, February 21, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, April 28, 2010.

“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.”

“She’s a student,” Jake noted.

“Yeah, ‘she’s a student.’ That’s what he told me. So I said, ‘I ain’t got problem with that, so I will go.’

The initial introductions began the proverbial “snowball” within each sample group. Once established in these communities, my informants could identify others who could contribute to the work. I was always introduced to people within personal networks—friends, acquaintances of guys like Jake. This meant that the diversity of informants represented in the sample can be traced back in large part to the access I acquired through personal contacts with communities of marginalised young men.

### *Reflexivity and Building Trust*

Fieldwork was an unfolding process and one that depended a great deal upon relationships and interactions between me and my informants. The way in which my interactions with the young men in this study developed from the initial introduction directly influenced the kinds of information I eventually collected. Acute awareness of difference was an everyday reality for them and me. Most informants were between the ages of 20 and 35, with a few above and below this general age range. They were black, Liberian. Most presented the chiselled physique that male bodies take on through hard physical labour and a diet that provides little excess if not undernourishment.

A young, white, unmarried female, I represented a world of wealth, information and influence that stood in stark contrast to the slums and communities where I did my research. On an initial trip to a small community, I remember being struck by this difference when I was asked as I so often was—“why are you here?” Standing next to a narrow drainage ditch, I scanned the clump of figures who gathered to smoke by the public toilets in the morning. Clad in worn T-shirts and jeans, cigarettes, joints, and cane juice in hand, I could hardly look more conspicuous amidst these battle-hardened figures. I felt it was best practice to explain my purposes as honestly, and non-

threateningly as possible (Harriss, 1992). “I’m a student,” I began. With a few probing question the awkward imbalance crystallised. I was there because I was doing research for my PhD. I had grown up in the United States. I had been able to travel to England, where I was currently studying for a postgraduate degree. As the hours of sitting, talking, listening and watching turned into days and weeks, I came to an appreciation of Lammers’ (2006, p. 108) conclusions regarding her own fieldwork with displaced and ex-combatant youth in Kampala, “My work is about the lives (tragedies, celebrations, labours, deaths, dreams, songs, flights, nights, fights...) of real people (young, black, exiled, talented, hopeless, hopeful, hungry, proud, confused, determined...) interacting with a living anthropologist (young, white, educated, curious, bewildered, trustful...)” It was the interactions between us, latent with curiosities, misgivings, and expectations that shaped much of the information exchanged.

I found myself working to minimise a number of embodied stereotypes. Certain qualities and attributes were assigned to me on sight purely on the basis of my sex and skin colour. Though I never arrived in a Land Cruiser, flanked by a driver and local fieldworkers, my white skin and presence in marginal urban spaces gave many people the initial impression that I was working for an NGO. This understandable presumption was followed by a subsequent expectation that I was coming with a development proposition and a hand-out of one kind or another. Even indigenous Liberians who worked for NGOs faced such anticipations. As a local director for an international relief organisation, Winston noted,<sup>20</sup> “Once they see that you’re working with an NGO, they say ‘wow, they’re going to bring something for me.’”

As these misperceptions were dispelled with an explanation of my actual intentions in Monrovia, a clear North American accent could be detected. I was peppered with questions and curiosities about the United States. Whether immediately or after some time had passed over casual conversation, the dialogue was often steered around to my marital status. ‘Would you date a Black man?’ was a question I got numerous times. I was offered more than one marriage proposal, and numerous proclamations of interest. Some of these were playful and several others were not.

None of these exchanges stemmed from affectionate or romantic interactions. Rather, most young men knew of one or more Liberian men who had become intimately involved with a white ex-pat woman. Some such relationships enabled them to emigrate to the West. Over the course of fieldwork I diffused dozens of expressions of interest. This happened most often with unoccupied young men who had lots of time and few

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<sup>20</sup> Interview, February 4, 2010.

prospects. I represented a viable way out of their depreciated post-war environment and into the modern world of the West.<sup>21</sup>

The misperception that I was an NGO worker or possible marriage material was indicative of the kind of valuable social capital I represented. One of my biggest challenges in the field was learning to set interpersonal boundaries around who could have my phone number, who could borrow money, who I would or would not give money to. I represented an untapped well of Western wealth and information. Strangers, acquaintances, and friends were constantly asking for help. This is not a challenge unique to me, nor to Liberia. Wilson (1992) notes that for most field researchers, social membership within a community usually requires economic engagement of some kind. In my host family and the extended kin and friendship networks around it, sharing and giving money were everyday practice. I learned—falteringly—to become a part of that system.

Interactions changed with experience over time. Initial meetings with many of my young informants were marked with overtly expressed interest to get money, to be my boyfriend, to establish contact with a white foreigner who could possibly help them. It took hours, sometimes days or weeks before people began to relate to me as a visitor, a friend, and a scholar, rather than a potential rescuer—to stop asking about America and how they could get there, and to begin expressing their views and experiences about where they were. Even as misperceptions about me eroded and were replaced by more candid exchanges, there was always a certain divide between us. It was there in part, because I would always be an outsider. There would always be the tacit knowledge that my exposure and experience of their daily struggles, the limits they could not move beyond, was temporary. As a privileged member of a Western country and academic institution, I could choose to go or stay (Lammers, 2007).<sup>22</sup>

Further, though I could sit and smoke cigarettes through the morning and afternoon hours there was always the gender difference between us. There were some topics that they would avoid with me because I was a female. For instance, I know that they chose not to chat about their sexual exploits with me present. A male anthropologist might have been privy to banter or gossip about such things. Though I was an honorary male in many respects there was always latent understanding that I was not “one of the guys,” and that there was a gendered limit to my access. In contrast, though women were far more reticent with me initially, I came to know very personal and intimate

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<sup>21</sup> This means to mobility will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

<sup>22</sup> See Gunst (1995, pp. 127-129) for an insightful and hard-hitting perspective of a young, white, female researcher from a young, male, black informant.

details of family and romantic situations from several of the women I lived among in Matadi. Though this was partially a factor of shared, daily experience over many months, the level of personal access with me as another female eventually made it okay to share about personal matters in a way that they would not with a man. In the same vein, there was a level of access that young men would not allow to me as a young woman.

### *Ethics*

There were several ethical considerations that were taken into account during fieldwork and in the write-up and representation of the research as a whole. These include informed consent, disclosure of sensitive information, confidentiality and anonymity. Informed, oral consent was obtained prior to interviews and focus groups. Informants were explicitly told that their participation was voluntary and that they were under no obligations to participate or to answer questions if they did not wish. I explained that their identity would not be revealed and that their contributions would be used to complete my degree at university. This was a relatively familiar idea. Being urban, most were very familiar with doing degrees at university and with gathering information that would complete assignments.

That their identities would be kept safe was especially important for ex-combatants. To insure this, no identities were taken down on any of the data collection implements. The significance of this effort became apparent when I began taking notes one day at the start of an interview. The ex-combatant informant gave me a mild protest. “You say you don’t take names,”<sup>23</sup> he said, eyeing me. I opened my notebook where I kept all of my informant’s details and interview notes. I flipped it open to show him the numbers in the top corner of the page and asked if he could see any names on anything. He could not and he agreed to continue with no further objections. This was plenty of evidence to bolster my conviction about the necessity of keeping identities completely off my written records as well as the finished product of this work. Confidentiality was essential to ex-combatants who discussed issues to do with their former fighting experience. However there were many other participants who were also uncomfortable with being identified, especially if they voiced anything related to the political environment—past or present.

Informed consent presented an ethical dilemma as much of the data was generated through participant observation (Emerson et al., 1995). There is a spectrum of opinions concerning how much to reveal about observed phenomena (Wilson, 1992). I chose to

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<sup>23</sup> Interview, May 11, 2010

incorporate observations that were taken in public or highly communal spaces. My presence, by virtue of my skin colour, was always known, and my purposes were made very clear to all of those directly involved in this research. I felt that what was done in clear view of others and a known, foreign researcher did not merit a significant ethical dilemma. People were speaking and interacting in shared spaces under the assumption that others were listening. For example, I have included a number of conversations and exchanges that took place in taxis, in my yard, or in conversation with people in restaurants or on the beach. In some of these instances the person may or may not have known that I was writing a thesis. However, nothing from such content presents any risk of harm to the person. Nothing private, personal, or incriminating has been included from observations or interactions of such nature. Further, no one's identity is given, and I have taken great pains to insure that information presented from such interactions could not be traced back to the informant (anonymity and pseudonyms are discussed in following paragraphs). I chose not to use any covert observation. There was never a time in which I chose to interact in a social situation under the pretence of being or doing anything other than fieldwork. While scholars like Wilson (1992) have justified covert research, I felt that to take information that was gained in private and without consent would be to transgress the good faith of those who were hosting me in their homes and communities.

This brings us neatly to the topic of disclosure of sensitive or damaging information. In the cases of ex-combatant information, several disclosed doing harmful things to other people during and after the war. The only one who is included in this thesis with reference to specific events is Sumo (pseudonym, see Chapter Eight). In his case, he had already publically confessed the details of his participation in the war at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Also, he noted that the details of his violent background had featured in a newspaper article shortly after the war. Thus, any inclusion of his experience in this work would not pose a risk of stigma or incrimination to him should his identity be traced back to him. However, his narrative is listed under a pseudonym in keeping with the practice used with other informants. I have used pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of all informants to this research. Zawoo is the only person identified by his real name, and this is with his explicit permission. The real names of communities are given on the map. I have included them to provide readers with a sense of space and diversity of locations across the city.

Further, I felt compelled to avoid evoking painful experiences in which young people, ex-fighters or not, may have endured tragedies or harm during or after the war. Alhaji's narrative in the earlier example is an illustration of how quickly painful experience could

be brought to the surface of an encounter. As I had no ability to offer sustainable help or even comfort, it appeared unethical and unnecessary to access experiences from the war itself. However, as Alhaji's interview illustrates, such experiences were often volunteered "off the cuff," without request, and despite my attempts to move the conversation in other directions. Ultimately, it is my hope that no one said more than they felt comfortable with expressing. What was volunteered has enriched this study and for that I am grateful.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained to the best of my ability during field research and were strictly observed in the completed work. In communities of young people, I was ethically compelled to state my purposes. Anyone over-heard talking to me or seen with me, could be identified inside their community as being a part of my work. This also applied to focus groups, where by the very nature of a group interaction, people reveal information among others. With the focus groups in particular, Zawoo and I were very careful to construct questions that were unlikely to embarrass or cause discomfort to anyone participating. For instance, I had initially suggested that we ask for a few basic demographics from our focus group participants, such as their ages and their tribes. Zawoo felt uncomfortable with asking about tribes. As people arrived for the first focus groups, looking around the room of elderly women I realised how naïve it had been to think of doing that. Many of them had lived through the years preceding the onset of civil war. The 1980s were marked with discrimination and abuse based on ethnicity during Samuel Doe's regime. To call awareness to ethnic differences in a mixed group gathering such as a focus group could have been deeply uncomfortable for those who had lived through long years of fear. Zawoo was right to refrain from requesting identification along ethnic lines.

A final ethical choice to note was that I chose not to collect any interview data with youth in Matadi. My presence and purpose in the community were publically known and the community as a whole was very socially interconnected. I felt that data collection with youth in that context could put them at risk of unwanted exposure if they were seen or overheard in a focused discussion. This was another decision made after I arrived. I conducted one interview with a young man in my community. Alex agreed to interview, but only on the condition that we conducted the discussion elsewhere. We did and once finished, he asked again, was this going to be kept anonymous? I reassured him and from that point forward, chose to keep my work with young men separate from my community of residence.

*Compensation*

My first interviews took place in a community of ex-combatants just outside Red Light. One of these initial interviews took place on a Sunday after church. In the middle of a discussion with a former fighter, he excused himself. Looking up from my chair, I saw two men glaring down on us from a small mound, still dressed in their Sunday shirts and ties. Thomas, my interviewee, went to speak with them and then returned.<sup>24</sup>

That one was a general for the Antiterrorist Unit, ATU, Charles Taylor's soldiers. They are Charles Taylor's soldiers. What now they are telling me—because most of your friends come to take our stories...and carry it without giving us anything...And now they are talking that we can't just talk and expose yourself to an international audience if we are not given small things. So they are telling me now that after three of us conversations we need your support, at least small thing that [will help] us today. So after the discussion you should give us small thing...Small little bit of cash, at least to encourage us, because this story is a very important story. It's not something that we can just expose ourselves to the international [community].

Thomas's insistence upon compensation was based upon a number of points that led to my decision to compensate research participants. The first concerns his remark that "most of your friends come and take our stories..." He was referring to other white foreigners, journalists and researchers who have over-saturated the greater Monrovia area with questions and curiosity about ex-combatant's experience and knowledge of the war. The perception on the part of many Liberians is that pictures and reports generate profits to the individuals who come to collect and compile them. This felt intrusive and unfair. Though I did my best to assure them that none of the material I collected was going to generate fame or profit for myself, to conduct lengthy discussion in which young people explain the difficulties of life lived in poverty—without offering some token of material appreciation—appeared unethical (Lammers, 2006). Most of my informants were not involved in income generating activities. What I offered did not replace a day's wage or missed meal. Rather, it showed as Thomas insisted, a "small thing" that would help them for the day.

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<sup>24</sup> Interview, February 28, 2010

Additionally, by the time of my fieldwork, it had become a well-known and customary practice for researchers to offer monetary or material compensation to research participants. It was an expectation that researchers as well as NGOs provide compensation for participation in research or workshops. Upon consultation with a Liberian social scientist I decided to offer 100 Liberian dollars (LD) in appreciation for participation in focus groups and interviews. For the very poorest of the street youth this was enough to buy food for the day. For those youth who were not as destitute 100LD could buy a beer or a couple of games of pool. In either case this amount showed appreciation for their participation without altering their financial situation or causing jealousy among others. I chose to compensate only the youth who participated in this study. Other professionals and youth workers provided interviews on their own time. Most were usually happy to accommodate me for an interview during their work day. They were employed and self-sustainable and had none of the sensitivities to exploitation expressed by the ex-combatants.

## **Analysis**

This short section offers a brief overview of how I analysed the material collected in the field. All of the fieldnotes were typed on a laptop during fieldwork. Recordings were transcribed word-for-word to the best of my ability. With this material in written form, the analysis could begin. In this section, I show how I have organised, interpreted, and pieced together the material from fieldnotes, interviews, and focus groups.

## *Coding*

Coding, or labelling, the data was the primary way to making sense out of my material. Coding allows one to organise and begin to interpret data in a systematic way. The need to avoid 'cherry-picking' some content over others is paramount to making the most out of a qualitative study. One of the early criticisms of qualitative methods harped on the lack of systematic assessment applied to the content (Mays, 1995). Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was one of the responses to these criticisms. A full implementation of Glaser and Strauss's method for analysis proves far too meticulous and cumbersome for the purposes of this work. Therefore, I decided to use an adapted, scaled down versions of their original theory as a guideline (Charmaz, 2006).

All of the data were thematically coded, usually by paragraphs, though in some cases multiple codes were assigned per paragraph. Once themed codes had been assigned each was then broken down into sub-themes. Each of these were subsequently reassembled together to form an emerging story. Thus, the story that has emerged has been drawn

out from the coded data, selected and assembled in constant comparison with itself and organised and presented through a theoretical interpretation.

### *Selecting the Story*

The content presented in this work emerged over the course of data analysis. Certain themes present as more robust and nuanced and these are usually relevant for inclusion. Though I cannot offer statistically significant variables or outcomes in a small, qualitative sample like this one, unless otherwise indicated the stories and cases presented are indicative of repeated themes and common experience. As a general rule of practice I chose to present information that appeared repeatedly in multiple sources of data, whether fieldnotes, interviews, or focus groups. In most cases, any topic presented in the empirical material can be triangulated in other sources. Sometimes I present an exception that will provide a stark contrast for a more common theme. Such instances are always introduced as such. However with seven months of fieldnotes alone there is more data to work with than can be included.

The challenge is to analyse and include material which will fulfil the research aims in the most congruent way possible. Inherent in the process of selecting is the reality that selection of some threads, fitted together for particular reasons means that other material must be left aside (Whyte, 2008). As Weber (2004 [1904], p. 374) puts it, “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.” Ultimately, these are subjective decisions made by a subjective analyst who cannot be removed or released from a one-sided view of the phenomena. Yet in being as clear as I possibly can about my intentions and position in this research, my hope is that the story told can be received as a product of interactions which generated a specific body of knowledge from which I have worked. From this body of knowledge

### **Conclusion**

My aim in this chapter has been to present in an open and straightforward manner, my approach to doing research, the implementation of methods, and analysis that has culminated from the empirical material of this thesis. This research presents a partial view of the lives and circumstances of the informants represented here (Clark, 2006). By examining the methodology and methods behind the data presented we are able to

understand the limitations as well as the strengths of the contribution this material might make to scholarly discourse.

Zeitlyn (2008, pp. 158-159) writes, “we can think of talk (the recounting of a life-story), transformed into text, as delineating the silhouette of a life-history. Our goal is a silhouette, honest about its incompleteness, yet striving to faithfulness around the edges where *relatively* dispassionate accuracy is possible.” I have striven to present the methodology and methods used in this work so that the most direct light possible might be cast upon the representations of the young people I discuss. It is an attempt to avoid any skewed or exaggerated portrayal that might occur without an assessment of how the data was collected and the analysis constructed.

## Chapter Three: Framework for Analysis

In this work I will consider the social positions and possibilities for young men who fought in armed groups during the civil war, who were disarmed in the aftermath and went on to live and struggle and settle in post-war society. In the empirical chapters I will consider what it meant for youth to live on the street, to hustle for their “daily bread.” I will relate how youth imagined their futures, what they wanted to achieve in life, and how they needed to go about it. In short, I will be working with the relationship between structures and agency throughout this thesis. I will be thinking about what it means to be a young person, a fighter, and an ex-combatant. My aim is to describe and explain how young men’s trajectories emerge from their embedded positions in post-war society. My analysis is primarily concerned with the relationship between structures and the agency of my informants. In this chapter I discuss my approach to constructs of structures and agency, to youth as agents, and to the interplay between structures and agency in armed conflict.

### Structures and Agency

I begin with a discussion about how structures enable and constrain agency. This is a conceptual relationship that has a long history of theory and debate and yet it continues to be the focus of critique and inquiry. I have chosen to take the work of Bourdieu and Giddens as a starting point. “Structure” is perhaps one of the most important and simultaneously elusive terms in social science scholarship (Sewell, 1992). Societies function and perpetuate themselves through unseen, often unconscious assumptions, values, social patterns and “rules” that inform and influence, facilitate, enable and constrain human action and interaction. These work together to form the structure of society. There is no single, agreed upon definition and the term is often tossed about with a variety of connotations. For example, Arnett and Bynner talk around “structural factors” in their debate about youth transitions but never really tell us exactly what structure or structural factors are or how they manifest in the lives of young people (Arnett, 2006; Bynner, 2005; Côté & Bynner, 2008). Therefore, these opening paragraphs are dedicated to a rather arduous discussion of what I mean in reference to structure and agency, and how I have sought to understand the relationship between them in this work.

There are several elements to tease out in an analysis of structure. To begin with, what are structures made of? Bourdieu’s (1977) *habitus* is a “community of dispositions” that are enacted in the practice of everyday life. Giddens (1984) defines structures as “rules and resources” recursively remade in the production of societies. Rules and resources get

somewhat tangled up in this definition, and it seems useful to pull them apart just a bit. He uses “rules” to designate the underlying guidelines or principles that inform action and interaction. Resources on the other hand, seem to be more the result or effect of social principles than a separate defining entity (Sewell, 1992). In other words, resources that are used to maintain or establish power between individuals or groups are the result of structured relationships that may be based on gender, generation, class and so on. So, resources are used and distributed based upon structural rules and in so doing, reinforce the structures themselves. Rules tend to imply formally stated prescriptions. There are formal rules about who can vote, for example. Yet much of the underlying guidelines that structure societies are quite informal, implicit, and assumed on the basis of experience rather than through formal prescription. That is why I prefer Sewell’s (1992) use of “schemas.” He uses schemas to get at the more informal and less conscious or explicit codes for etiquette, aesthetic norms, recipes for action that inform thought and behaviour. So for example, one of the most immediately recognisable schemas in Liberian society—and West Africa more broadly—is that the younger should serve the older. It is a gerontocratic society (Murphy, 1980). Gerontocracy is one of the most basic and essential schemas within the social structure. It has all sorts of implications for everyday life, for social and economic possibilities, both in the short term and the long term. This one schema has significant influence upon how young people live their everyday lives and imagine future possibilities.

It is important to note that with “structure” in this work, I refer not just to the purely social stratification by class or gender, but to the interpenetration of schemas through politics, economics, and social relations. They are mutually interdependent. The schemas informing behaviour and action are intimately linked to who receives or accesses certain economic opportunity, or political positions. There is also an important note to make about scale. Structure penetrates and informs at macro and micro levels, from who is included or excluded in high ranking positions of government, to how resources are distributed within households. Finally, there are occasions in which I use “system.” This merely refers to a unit of relationships such as a family or an armed force. Systems in whatever size or purpose may be structured in different ways.

### *Social Reproduction: Agency, Power, and Navigation*

One of the most salient themes in this work concerns how a community of dispositions or recipes for action are reproduced, adjusted, or discarded over time. When the war came in Liberia, it seemed to reconfigure some of the most fundamental schemas—gerontocracy being one of them (see Podder, 2011). I will consider the extent to which this schema was altered in Chapter Seven. After the war, it seems that much of what was

disrupted during the fighting has begun to realign. In Chapter Five we will look particularly at the reproduction of class relations.

Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977) speak about structure as being recursively remade in the unconscious and conscious movements of everyday life. If we think about structures as reproduced through habits, routines, and practices what we get initially is a dialectic relationship. There are social practices on the one hand—what people actually do—and the underlying schemas that inform them on the other. One is an outflow of another. Social reproduction is cyclical. Thus the reproduction of society perpetuates itself from the past, to the present, and into the future. It is this cyclical perpetuation that appears too static for Vigh. The appearance of stasis produced by the dialectic of habitus is the point of departure for his concept of social navigation. From his work in Guinea-Bissau, Vigh (2006a, 2009a) has advanced quite a popular theory of social navigation. He argues that “in trying to make sense of the actions of agents within a socio-political environment that is in itself in motion, we need to go further than the concepts of ‘field’ and ‘habitus’ can take us.” His work is attractive to study of societies in transition, as he notes that his concern is with how his interlocutors “navigate networks and events as they move within fluctuating social structures” (2006a, p. 13) Navigation serves as a metaphor that describes praxis in the midst of social change. It is “motion within motion” as he puts (2009a, p. 420).

Social navigation contributes a number of useful insights to this work. That said, in the context of Bissau, the notion of constant flux in the social environment seems itself to be an example of *reproduction* rather than transformation. Vigh argues that youth in his study face a constantly changing social environment in which their navigation of life trajectories is based on constant re-assessment of chaotic upsurges of conflict. Yet in reflecting over years of ethnographic study with the Aguentas (Vigh, 2011), what appears most striking is the structural conditions that *persist*. Conflict reoccurred for instance. Young men demobilised and remobilised. They gained and lost patrons. These examples of having to navigate networks that required decisive and assertive action as situations in Bissau were frequently volatile and explosive. Young men were in motion because of reoccurring instability. As Lubkeman (2008) observes in Mozambique, instability became the expected. It was continuity rather than change that appeared as the defining feature.

If duality maintains status quo, then there appears little room for agency, for alteration or improvisation. We can however, see transformations in societies over time, and in an increasingly interconnected world, intersections between structures that might have once remained untouched and separate connect, converge, and conflict with one another.

There are several points of conceptual use. One is that structures are not impervious. Durkheim (1982) presents us with a rather fixed notion of structures as altogether rigid, external, imposing upon or dictating human thought and action. We must account for change in some way. To present structures as inevitable reduces human agents who reproduce them to mere 'automatrons' (Sewell, 1992). Casey (2001) reminds us that the very notion of habitus is grounded upon the *enactment* of beliefs and ideas by agents who are more than unconscious reproducers. Social actors engage *consciously* as well as unconsciously with their social environments. The young men in this work were certainly aware of how values and social norms could be translated into action. Their abilities to consciously reproduce structures through conformity could also be directed instead toward resistance. They were not living unconsciously, or as "cleverly programmed automatrons" (Sewell, 1992, p. 2). They were consciously engaged.

So how can we think about agency affecting change in structures over time? One way in which actors exercise agency towards change or transformation occurs when structures are transposed to or intersect with another social environment. The history of the Republic of Liberia begins with a Western society's exportation of people whose norms and values contradict and compete with those of the indigenous population, eventually becoming the "dominant cultural fraction" (Mahar, 1990). Structures converged. Alterations in social practice began to emerge over time. In Chapter Four I argue with d'Azevedo (1969, p. 4) that the incorporation of the indigenous majority was *not* the result of a national leviathan that "slowly and awkwardly overwhelmed indigenous cultures." It did not impose and overwhelm. Rather, indigenous leaders and their communities were consciously engaged with the settler government in ways that ultimately facilitated their subjugation.

This point has further relevance for the empirical material in Chapter Eight. The schemas which informed, enabled and facilitated life in armed groups during war ultimately converged and conflicted with dominant schemas that structured everyday life outside of fighting forces in post-war society. Much of ex-combatant's post-war experience is a socio-economic project of renegotiating conflicting schemas that converged in the aftermath of war. The transition from war to post-war was largely about the restricting of political power, economic possibility and social practice. War lords at the helm of military systems like the NPFL no longer controlled imports and exports. They were no longer given free rein to loot and pillage homes and businesses as their factions had done during the conflict. The leadership, resources, and purpose for fighting were reduced and to a large extent removed after war. Militias no longer held the dominant position in the social order. In Chapter Eight I argue that many ex-

combatants retained schemas from war in the order to preserve the prestige that they achieved as big men in their factions. In such instances, it *does* appear appropriate to consider young ex-combatants as “motion within motion.” They are in motion within a moving structural context. It is with the passage of time in years since the war that the previous structural order appears to have re-asserted itself. The extent to which the structuration of pre-war society is being re-produced will be discussed in Chapter Five.

This work is about trying to understand how young men are a part of the project of shifting and re-shifting the structural parameters that widen and narrow the scope of possibilities they subjectively assess and manoeuvre. Agency has to do with the ability to act or withhold action (Giddens, 1984). If agency is what reproduces or transforms structures we must have some idea about how it functions and how it might be limited. I find it helpful to think in terms of “bounded agency” (Evans, 2007). Bounded agency is socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by environments” (ibid, , pp. 92-93). This notion sees actors having a structured past, and imagined future possibilities which guide and shape actions in the present.

I would like to consider first about how structures bound agency in various ways and this is intimately tied to ideas about power. How we understand what power is has everything to do with how we understand the ability to act or withhold action in a structured context. Power is a frustrating construct, as it is almost easier to say what it is *not* than to say what it is. A discussion about what power is or how it works has everything to do with the relationship between structures and agency. What I will sketch out in the following sections is a system of relationships in which patron-client relationships are operating along asymmetric power configurations. Patronage is about who is dominant, and who is dependent (Bledsoe, 1980), who is over the other. With this kind of language of subordination, one could easily slip into a notion of power as something quantifiable, a virtual substance that some people have disproportionate to others because of the way in which society is structured. Agency then would be bounded differently according to who has more or less power. Such a conception reduces power to structure itself forging rigid lines between the haves and the have-nots who hold power because of where they sit on a social totem pole. This would give us a construct of power as structurally predetermined (Allen, 1997). How then would we explain situations in which those who are not dominant push back—the civil rights or feminist movements, for example?

It seems to me that power, or empowerment, is better understood as constituted through social narratives, through discourse. Power is situated within structures to the extent that social understanding and acquiescence to a given schema perpetuates who

has the capacity to do or to be over another. Discourse shapes the world as it “ought-to-be” (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 161). Social discourse gives meanings to proscribed conduct, so that “an agent can have at one and the same time the feeling that there is nothing to do except what he is doing and also that he is only doing what he ought” (ibid). Empowerment comes through interrogation and re-interpretation of the social values and norms that structure society. Such engagement informs the exercise of agency. In Chapter Seven we will observe how young fighters took on reconfigured norms and values that equipped them to engage in violence—to see, for example, how “the gun” could provide for them in ways that their parents or communities had done prior to their recruitment. “The gun is your mother and your father” Michael remembers. Part of the empowerment experienced in war came through incorporation of such narratives. Let us be very clear that incorporation requires engagement. Agents are not passive receptacles for programmed indoctrination—they receive, edit, appropriate, and reject meanings in different ways with implications for lived experience—for action and inaction (Lieblich et al., 2008).

People are then constituted in thorough ways, through discourse in routine, everyday practices and socio-cultural rituals (Allen, 1997). Agents enact power configurations such as patrimony (Cheater, 1999). Rather than holding more or less power, or having more capacity for power, agents exercise power in particular ways according to discourse (Foucault, 1994). What this means is that people constitute themselves, “but not necessarily in all possible ways of choosing” (Allen, 1997, p. 64). They exercise power by adhering to or resisting the schemas that order their lives, that place them above or beneath one another as dominant or dependent. In summary, power is exercised. Agency is the exercising of power. Empowerment is the interpretation provided through schemas that give means to an exercise of power.

Further, agency is temporally situated. Vigh argues that his interlocutors navigate both in the immediate and the imagined. Future outcomes are the objects toward which young people choose to chart their life trajectories. In the remaining discussion I try to unpack this notion a bit further. Before I do however, I would like to make a note about the relationship between agency in the “immediate and imagined.” To think about youth navigating their life trajectories towards imagined possibilities presumes that there is room to manoeuvre and something toward which they can direct their life course. However, there are some circumstances in which agency is so narrowly bounded that there is very little room to direct one’s self. In Chapter Eight we meet David, a young man who has no plans, no imaged possibilities toward which to invest himself. The constraints on his life are such that he can only attend to immediate needs in a very

“hand-to-mouth” sort of way. His agency in the present certainly has implications for the future, but he does not have the necessary capacity to chart a course beyond the present. In circumstances such as David’s as agency is constrained, his social horizon—what he can see ahead of him (Vigh, 2006a), shortens. Now, I certainly do not mean to suggest that constrained agency means that young people cannot use their imaginations, or plan. What I do mean to say is that practices in the present are navigated with different degrees of space for intentional action toward the future. The extent to which imagined possibilities motivate action in the immediate is a function of those boundaries to do with constrained experiences that young people negotiate.

Because tight constraints alter the scope for agentic capacity, some authors have found it useful to distinguish between what de Certeau (1984) refers to as tactics and strategies (Honwana, 2005; Utas, 2005b; Vigh, 2006a) or what Klocker (2007) refers to as “thick” or “thin” agency. Each has to do with the positions from which possibilities are made available. De Certeau understands strategies as calculated efforts to generate a relationship between one entity and another. Strategies are a “vector of space over time” (p. xix) because to have a position from which strategize is to have space of distance from which to calculate a plan of action to be implemented. This is quite similar to Klocker’s “thick” agency, which she uses to denote the latitude to act in a broad range of options. The distinction is about space for action that can be generated in a number of directions. Tactics are far less prepared. They are implemented when there is not the same distance from an outcome. Rather, tactics or tactical agency are applied when there is no base from which to capitalise on advantages or to prepare for expansion in a particular direction. They are far more reactive. This corresponds to Klocker’s “thin” agency, which is exercised in highly restricted spaces for decision and activity. In research with youth who experience constrained and rapidly changing circumstances, notions of strategic or tactical, thick or thin agency have been invoked to indicate more or less space over time from which to prepare or merely react. Importantly, “it is possible for a person’s agency to be ‘thickened’ or ‘thinned’ over time and space, and across their various relationships. Structures, contexts and relationships can act as ‘thinners’ or ‘thickeners’ of individuals’ agency, by constraining or expanding their range of viable choice” (Klocker, 2007).

Imagined futures have become of interest to social science research with youth (see Crivello, 2011; Foster & Spencer, 2011; Hubbard, 2000; Langevang, 2007; 2008). Some of these studies focus particularly upon youth aspirations. While the concept of aspiration can indicate dreams or hopes for the future (Chatty, 2010), it lacks the explanatory power needed to articulate the relationship between desirable futures as

mere daydreams or as potentially motivating youth action. For instance, youth in Crivello's (2011) work aspired to attain professional jobs. However, there was a significant disconnection between such a desirable outcome and their ability to achieve it in the Peruvian political economy. While they maintained aspirations to achieve professional jobs or further education, they were *motivated* to pursue other endeavours. Other pressures and demands in their structured positions informed their priorities and ultimately, their navigation of life trajectories. Aspirations tell us perhaps more about what youth would *like to have* (Foster & Spencer, 2011) than what they are motivated to do.

I have used "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) to help me think about the motivational relationship between the imagined and the immediate. Possible selves are projections of one's self in the future which serve to *motivate* agency in the immediate. They are the imagined outcomes an individual foresees as plausibly occurring in their future based upon how they choose and act in the present. For example, a possible self as employed, enrolled in school, or able to watch football at a video club might motivate Liberian youth to migrate from the interior to the urban centre in Monrovia. Likewise, a possible self as sequestered away from modernity, perpetually entrenched in subsistent agricultural livelihoods might equally motivate a young person to leave their rural communities, even if the chances of employment or education are slim. Throughout this thesis, my young informants discuss their social options within the parameters of their social context. They have watched, and heard stories of other youth who have taken specific pathways. They imagine themselves in future positions that increase or decrease life chances. Those possible selves inform choice and action.

## **Wealth in People**

Thus far I have outlined my understanding about how structures and agency produce social practice. In this section, I discuss social practice in Liberia. I deal with the structure of society and how agency is constrained or enabled for the informants in my research. A number of theories could be used to interpret the empirical material about the post-war life chances for youth. I have understood the life chances and navigation of my informants through a lens of wealth in people. In this work I have leaned heavily on Bledsoe's (1980) ethnographic work in Liberia and on her analysis of wealth in people. Wealth in people offers a clearly defined relationship between structures and agency, and informs notions of trust, respect and reciprocity all of which are significant to the experience of my informants, and none of which are dealt with as precisely in other frameworks.

What we will see throughout the following chapters is that life chances are embedded in other people, through primarily informal relationships. So, there are at least two other frameworks that could be used to appropriate the significance of social and informal ties. One is social capital, the other is Hyden's "economy of affection." I present these first, so that we can see the benefits of Bledsoe's earlier work for the context and analysis of this one. Social capital in its many iterations, directs our attention to social linkages and the actual or potential resources that can be gleaned in and through them (Lin, 1999). A theory of social capital asserts that resources, potential and realised, can be accessed through other people (Putnam, 1995). Empirical research about social capital confirms that people's life chances are indeed improved through dense and diverse social networks (De Silva, Harpham, Huttly, Bartolini, & Penny, 2005; De Silva, Huttly, Harpham, & Kenward, 2007). The difficulty for this thesis is that social capital is fairly generic. As a concept, it conceals perhaps more than it reveals (Meagher, 2005). Though scholars note that social capital must be understood within specific cultural and structural contexts, social capital as a theory itself will not illumine the terms under which people are interconnected (Campbell, 2003; Mosse, 2007). In general, there are clear limits to the utility of social capital as an organising or explanatory construct. It seems more suitable to think of it as a metaphor than an analytical concept (Campbell, 2003).

Social capital literature often comes with implied assumptions that where there is little, it would be better to have more. Rather than use social capital as a descriptive term as Bourdieu (1986) has, there is an assumption that social capital is always beneficial and the more of it, the better. For example, Leff (2008) suggests that social capital is the key to successful reintegration of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone. He cites practical needs for trust and reciprocity as vital to social cohesion after war. This is a useful observation, but it takes us only halfway. We need to understand *how* relationships are *structured* to understand how trust or reciprocity might be re-built in a specific context. Similarly, in her recent work in Liberia, Cheng (2011) has advanced a concept of "conflict capital." Derived from social capital, conflict capital designates the post-war relationships between ex-combatants and other wartime actors. She argues that the features of social organisation during conflict intensify social bonds between ex-combatants and other wartime actors. The trust, norms, and networks established during war facilitate and enable the post-war activities of extra-legal groups in her work. They are able to take over and control areas of rich natural resources like the Guthrie Plantation *because* they have prior social ties to each other that were established in the war. As a theoretical construct, social capital describes a lot more than it explains (Morrow, 1999). For example, in the in case of ex-combatants in Liberia, Lemasle's (2010) analysis of

patronage and coercion provides a more in-depth interpretation concerning how ex-combatant networks operate than Cheng's (2011) notion of conflict capital. Through an understanding of patronage and coercion, we can get a better sense about the reasons behind the continuation of ex-combatant networks that Cheng observes. I am similarly interested in relationships that ex-combatants continued after their armed groups were formally disbanded. In Chapter Eight I discuss the implications of relationships maintained from war. However, while scholars like Cheng or Leff are concerned with the presence, absence, and quantity of capital in post-conflict relations, I am much more interested in *how* and *why* relationships are structured and maintained in various ways.

Hydén (1983, 2006) has advanced a more nuanced and Africa specific theory of informal relationships that maintain and advance social or economic opportunities. His "economy of affection" introduces a more complicated analysis of networks and the way they function. He defines the economy of affection as "constituted by personal investments in reciprocal relations with other individuals as a means of achieving goals that are seen as otherwise impossible to attain" (Hydén, 2006, p. 73). In his analysis, contexts of scarcity explain the necessity for interpersonal relationships. His theory also takes a longitudinal approach which tends to be missing from conceptions of social capital. There is, an understanding that "a helping hand today generates returns tomorrow" (Hydén, 2006, p. 72). This is a view held by the young men in this study, and one that has the added benefit of introducing the notion of long-term relationships, built over time.

Hydén asserts that in times of scarcity mutual dependence is necessary for survival. He notes that in situations of scarcity, informal relations enable achievement of survival and development where otherwise impossible. Though I would not argue that this is often the case, to stop here appears reductionist. Hydén recognises that interdependence is a long established feature of many societies. However, what he renders is a rather functionalist analysis of interpersonal relationships which support survival. He presents informal relationships as socially structured in particular ways which enable society to function. However, to depend on one another may not be only a function of scarcity, but of socially structured values and norms in time of plenty as well.

Social capital and the economy of affection are theoretical frames that have been used globally, and in Africa (see Grootaert & van Bastelaer, 2003; Narayan, Chambers, Shah, & Petesch, 2000; WinklerPrins & de Souza, 2005; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). However, by offering a more general and quite broad analysis such theories lack explanatory power. For instance, neither theory can provide a description or explanation of the terms under which reciprocity, trust or interdependence are constituted because all of these very important constructions are experienced within

diverse social structures. There needs to be a clear conception of the relationship between particular structures and particular agents in order to understand how social relationships improve or diminish life chances. We need to know how schemas in Liberian society inform the Liberian youth at the centre of this work.

Building on Bledsoe's (1980) work, thinking in terms of wealth in people offers a more complex and specific conceptualization of structures and agency from which to draw upon concerning important elements in this thesis such as respect, reciprocity, and trust.<sup>25</sup> At the outset, "wealth in people" and social capital might appear as similar metaphors. Each appears to treat social connections as metaphoric currency. What separates wealth in people from the economy of affection or from social capital theories is that it is about *control of others* (Mosse, 2007). Wealth in people begins with the assumption of hierarchy and "vertical" inequality between people (Stewart, 2008). It identifies stratified diverse networks of subordination. As Guyer and Belinga (1995) illustrate, wealth in people can take different forms based upon specific structural context. This is why drawing from Bledsoe's (1980) work is useful. Though her ethnography dealt with legal rights in people—specifically marriage among the Kpelle of Liberia—her conceptual expression of structured and informal relationships provides a useful springboard for my analysis of young men's life chances.

Wealth in people presents patrimonial relationships as fundamental to everyday survival, beginning with relations in families and households. At the crux of Bledsoe's analysis of wealth in people comes down to subordination and clientship in societal organisation—from the family to the higher levels of political authority and leadership. She observes (1980, p. 48), "Labor and allegiance are critical to people's economic substance as well as to their political and economic advancement. Wealth and security rest on the control of others." Though it has previously been examined in rural social relations, I find wealth in people remains conceptually vital to the urban relationships discussed in this work. "People are wealth" (Nyerges, 1992, p. 860). People are not merely helpful connections that assist personal development or mobility. They are literally the means to it. As in other African contexts (see Harrell-Bond, 1975; Hopkins, 1973; Mair, 1969), political power, economic security and mobility, as well as social respect are achieved through patrimonial relationships based upon mutual dependence.

Structurally, patrimony at its most basic form, is a system of relationships in which resources are distributed to dependents (clients) by a patron. It is a form of domination that Weber (1978) describes first as a hierarchical system of relationships in which

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<sup>25</sup> There are a number of ethnographic interpretations of wealth in people, some more contextually specific than others (see Guyer, 1995; Guyer & Belinga, 1995; Nyerges, 1992).

domestic authority is used to decentralise resources for the private needs of the household master. He then extends his analysis to patrimony as it functions within politics. In African scholarship, a great deal of attention is given to patrimony and to patron-client relationships as they are manifest in politics.<sup>26</sup> Some have even argued that patron-client relationships do not overlap into family or kin networks. Mair (1961) defines patron-client relations as those explicitly *outside of* kinship ties, entered into by deliberate choice. Bledsoe (1980; 1990) observes otherwise among the Kpelle in Liberia and the Mende in Sierra Leone. She finds that patronage best describes the relations that organise kinship. Vigh (2006a) comes up with something of middle ground. He chooses to distinguish between what he sees as the economy of affection at work in close, household and family relationships, and patrimonial networks accessed for mobility at a less micro-level position in society. Yet in doing so, he fails to address any hierarchy that may organise the mutual dependence that his young informants access through their immediate families. In Liberia I find that relationships between benefactors and dependents—patrons and clients—are a vital schema at work among the most proximate relationships between parents and children, uncles and nieces and nephews. These relationships are crucial to the young agents in this study.

To have wealth in people is to have dependents to call on and patrons who can be depended upon. Bledsoe (1980) tends to focus more on dependents as wealth. However, it seems useful to me to think about having wealth in people who are above and below one in the social order. D'Azevedo (1962) describes hierarchical series of patron-client relations among the Gola, noting that every adult is a patron to the lesser person or people, usually women and children in the Liberian context, and a client to others. A patron figure could be a parent, teacher, chief, or older sibling (Bledsoe, 1990). As a gerontocratic society, the elders have control over younger persons, even after they have reached full maturity as adults (Bledsoe, 1980; d'Azevedo, 1962; Murphy, 1980). Fulfilment of roles and responsibilities strengthens reciprocal relationships. To have wealth in people is to have relationships in which obligations bind two or more parties together. The loyalty and labour of dependent children is contingent upon the provision and protection of their parents or guardians. Each must do their part for the other. Through the exchange of reciprocal obligations, each becomes increasingly *indebted* to the other. Wealth in people means the access to obligated parties who must—out of the debt to the other—provide the loyalty, labour, or favour when demands for such are made. In what follows, I outline the ways in which wealth in people structures relationships of reciprocity, trust, and respect among the Liberian youth in this study.

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<sup>26</sup> This is a vast literature (see Clapham, 1982b; Hydén, 2006; Jackson & Rosberg, 1984; Lemarchand & Legg, 1972). For specific works on patrimonial politics in Liberia, see Boas (2001a), Clapham (1982a) and Reno (1995).

*Reciprocity, Trust, and Respect*

Reciprocity is neither a unique feature to Africa nor to Liberia. The sense of obligation to reciprocate a favour or a helping hand could probably be found in all societies. It is *how* reciprocity functions—and is expected to function—that is so important (Lemarchand, 1989). I understand reciprocity as operating on conditional basis. Maintenance of wealth in people—of indebtedness one to the other—requires reciprocation. Obligations are contingent upon reciprocity. Whereas Mauss (1990 [1950]) views reciprocity as set within folk beliefs or sentiments that present a *moral* obligation to reciprocate (Lemarchand, 1989), in Liberia I have understood it more pragmatically. It is not a sense of immorality that compels reciprocation so much as a loss of benefits provided through patronage, and the public shame of failing to fulfil obligations. One's honour (discussed below) is damaged if social schemas are not adhered to.

When patron-client relations function in ideal form, reciprocity supports mutual trust among indebted people (Lemarchand, 1989). That is because trust is implicitly about expectations (Barber, 1983). In relationships bound together by indebtedness, one party can *expect* the other to fulfil their end of an obligation because reciprocation is contingent upon fulfilment. Trust is vital as patronage is about informal agreements to reciprocate, to fulfil one's debt to another. The utility breaks down if there is no trust. This is a very functional argument. Fulfilment of obligations has consequences for social respect as well, which is also influential and will be discussed below. Luhman (1979) argues that trust is only possible in a familiar world. Trust is a bet about another person's or collective's future and uncontrollable actions (Sztompka, 1999). Placing trust is a gamble in which one relies on the fact that the trusted party will prefer fulfilling expectations to experiencing the consequences that would occur upon a breach of trust (Luhmann, 1979). In unfamiliar circumstances it is best then, to trust others who adhere to the same set of social norms and values, as this increases the predictability of their conduct.

The scale at which relationships between reciprocity and trust operate within post-war Liberian society has significant implications for the social positions and possibilities of the youth in this work. Sztompka (1999) notes that macro-level, structural conduciveness of trust depends upon normative coherence, stability of social order, transparency, familiarity, and accountability. Civil war undermined and in many ways dissolved solidarity in relationships and confidence in social processes (Barber, 1983). In the years just after the civil war, there were seldom and inconsistent consequences for breaching another's trust. Communities were fractured and reconfigured. People moved

back to live with others they did not know. The means to hold another accountable for a breach of trust were missing more often than not. Without solidarity, there was no public shame or accountability for crossing another person. Without a strong and reliable infrastructure of security institutions (formal or informal), crime and violation could go unchecked. In transitional periods such as the one Liberians have experienced since the war, the necessity of wealth in people was all the more heightened. Only those in need of reciprocation could be trusted to fulfil their obligations. Anyone else outside of a mutually dependent relationship faced few if any consequences for breaching the confidence of someone else. Those who can be trusted to reciprocate fortify their wealth in people.

Trustworthy people earn respect. Respect plays a central role in social navigation of young men in this study. There are numerous ways to think about respect. Honour, respect, dignity and other synonyms might be used to describe notions of 'good name' or reputation, character, or social valuation of a person within a given society. Liberians have one term "respect" which is frequently used in one of two ways. I have chosen to incorporate Spencer's (1965) distinction of "honour" and "prestige" to differentiate between the two meanings Liberians often invoke. Honour is the respect one earns by fulfilling the obligations and expectations placed upon people in families and communities. A father who provides for his children's school fees would be worthy of respect in the form of social honour. Prestige on the other hand is the social respect one achieves by advancing one's status above others through competition. People respect the big man who has achieved "position" above his peers as a man of power, wealth, and influence. This is the sort of respect I often heard voiced for Charles Taylor. He was revered for having come out ahead, for achieving the position he eventually got as head of state. Respect was given not for his methods necessarily, but certainly for achievement of status.

This distinction has received criticism. Iliffe (2005) dismisses Spencer's distinction between honour and prestige on the grounds that he has not observed such a differentiation in his own survey of African societies. "No other evidence from sub-Saharan African has been found to suggest a sharp distinction between honour and prestige" (p. 5). In this work in sub-Saharan Africa I *do* find the distinction useful. Honour incorporates the "code of honour" or schemas that inform notions of value related to conduct in particular societies (Pitt-Rivers, 1968; Stewart, 1994). Prestige designates the respect earned through competition and achievement above one's peers, the sort of respect that Iliffe is interested in. In other words, schemas informing expectations influence what is considered "respectable." For instance, Langevang (2008)

discusses youth in Ghana as struggling to achieve “respectable” adulthood by adhering to social benchmarks of transition to autonomy from parents, and responsibility for one’s own family. In this study, a young person who achieves respect through socially valued roles is understood as earning or maintaining social honour. Such a person might not, however, have advanced to status as a ‘big man’, a patron with many dependents, wealth, or political and economic clout. To achieve respect as prestige is to rise above others.

There are at least two qualifications to make about honour and prestige as I incorporate them in this work. The first is that honour and prestige are to an extent often reinforcing of one another. They are not binary, but intertwined. A young man who rises above his peers to achieve higher status would almost certainly have done so through fulfilling obligations to reciprocate—achieving honour in networks he accesses and builds over time. Greater prestige also engenders greater responsibilities to dependents. Charles Taylor is still widely regarded as an honourable man in Liberia because he took care of those who were dependent upon him within networks of reciprocity. Second, to assign the rules or codes of honour as coming from an entire society would be misrepresentative. Bourgois (2003) notes that respect among young men in East Harlem was not a reflection of norms and values within broader New York, or the US. Rather, street culture in East Harlem offered an alternative forum for personal dignity constructed in defiance to racism and economic marginalisation. Respect in their habitus in East Harlem was constituted differently, out of an abject existence in which alternative values and norms were at work among crack dealers. I raise this example to emphasize that societies are not monolithic. While dominant groups may shape norms and values, their schemas are not likely to be incorporated universally by all. My aim in this section has been to present the relationship between respect, trust, and reciprocity within a society that functions largely through patronage. Opportunities for the young agents in this work are opened up or closed off based upon their wealth in people their position within networks of mutual dependency enables and constrains the possibilities available to them. In the following section, I turn to a discussion of the youth themselves.

## Youth

There is a burgeoning youth literature that has been emerging from a number of disciplines in the last two decades. In this section, my aim is to situate the young men in this work, within the broader literature on youth in the Global South. In this section I would like to begin by moving beyond debates about youth as passive victims or active agents within their societies. In the social sciences we are now well accustomed to the

notion that young people “have agency” (Jeffrey, 2011). They can alter their circumstances by protesting or fighting. The life experience of my informants will attest to that. Their choices and actions leave no doubt that while they are certainly not at total liberty to think, feel, or act as if in a vacuum, they are capable of and are all the time exhibiting tactical and strategic action in the midst of a host of structural constraints in post-war society.

### *Re-presenting Youth*

Perhaps it is the implications of youth agency exhibited in very public spaces that has compelled social scientists to take an increased interest in the study of youth in Africa (Christiansen, Utas, & Vigh, 2006; Diouf, 2003; Durham, 2000) and the Global South more broadly (Boyden, 2007; Guichaoua, 2012; Jeffrey, 2011; Jeffrey & McDowell, 2004). One of the dangers in focusing upon youth—particularly youth participation in conflict—is that without careful, situated analysis of the relationship between structures and agency, it is all too easy to slip into exoticising, reductionist interpretations of youth action and particularly violent action. Kaplan’s (1996, p. 16) famous (perhaps infamous) description of West African youth as “loose molecules in an unstable social fluid” does much to describe the threatening, uncertain, and detached condition that is pervasive in local perceptions (Boyden, 2003; Jok, 2005), journalism (Hawthorne & MacLeod, 1991; Seekings, 2006), academic literature (Singer, 2006), and policy (Walker, Wood, & Allemano, 2009). Despite very little supportive evidence, and much evidence to the contrary, such degenerative understandings of youth have been “carried to the present” (Sommers, 2003) and drive much of the recent literature concerning the involvement of young people in armed conflict. Such pejorative conceptions of youth have been tempered by notions of youth as “vandals” or “vanguards”, “makers” or “breakers”, “troublemakers or peacemakers” (Abbink & van Kessel, 2005; Honwana & DeBoeck, 2005; McEvoy-Levy & Kroc, 2006). With dichotomous conceptions like these youth are given at least the pretence of having potentially positive as well negative impacts upon their societies. However, such a focus on young people continues to isolate them as the unit of analysis. To take a “youth crisis” or “marginalisation” as points of departure from which to theorise about young people often means that they are separated out as entities existing apart from family, home or community (Leonardi, 2007). While this may not be the intention of scholars like Honwana and De Boeck (2005, p. 2), who note that “youth are often constructed from outside and from above,” their conception of youth as making society on the one hand and breaking it on the other tends to reinforce the notion that young people are independent variables that shape social outcomes.

In this study, my aim is to move away from a focus on youth that might in anyway lead to an isolationist or reductionist interpretation of their experiences. Instead, my objective is to understand what a focus on youth might tell us about post-war society in Liberia, and how it can influence and alter their life chances and trajectories. How is their action constrained or enabled in Monrovia? What informs their choices? How do they perceive their life chances and navigate their trajectories accordingly? In other words, rather than *evaluating* youth participation in warfare or gang activity as good or bad, generative or degenerative, I would like to *understand* what their involvement in these social arenas can tell us about the society.

### *Youth as Male, Marginal and Immobile*

In this section I unpack some general notions about youth as a social position, and some of the gendered distinctions between young men and women. These have implications for divergent life trajectories. I provided a definition of what is meant by youth in the introduction. This is a study of gendered life chances and trajectories of young men. Academic study of youth often means implicitly the study of young *male* people. Though there are certainly exceptions, most studies that incorporate young females make a further distinction in the title to draw potential reader's attention to something outside the norm, to something about *females*, to "*girls with guns*" for instance (Mazurana, McKay, Carlson, & Kasper, 2002; West, 2000). They have to designate that "invisible girls" (Nordstrom, 1999) are the focus of their work. I do not wish to reinforce a male bias by demarcating youth as a male experience only. However, I find that in Liberia, local perceptions reflect representation of youth *as male* that we observe in social science research. Young women are not expected to experience transitional periods of time between households of caregivers and households of their own. Because this is one of the primary indicators of being a youth, it is usually assumed to be synonymous with being male.

The one exception to this is with young women who live on the street. Young girls who live and work on the street are also lumped in with young men because they are not living under the care of elders and do not have households of their own. Youth then, is as much about generation as about gender.

A growing body of literature is concerned with young men's liminal experiences of extended youth (Cole, 2011). Young men in the Global South are increasingly finding it difficult to transition to adulthood in contexts where political and economic realities as well as situations of forced migration and conflict inhibit their ability to achieve status as adults (Eyber & Ager, 2004; Jeffrey, 2008; Jeffrey & McDowell, 2004; Mains, 2007).

Vigh (2006b) argues that youth in Bissau is a “social moratorium,” a position of desolation rather than amusement, opportunity, or freedom. It is a social position that is significantly constrained by deprived economic realities and generationally asymmetric control over access to resources. Others have argued that the promises of modernity and neoliberal economic policies have not produced the educational and economic outcomes that young people have sought after in recent decades (Ferguson, 1999; Jeffrey & McDowell, 2004; Mains, 2007). The result has been a failure to transition to jobs and fulfil roles as “breadwinners” (Jeffrey, 2008).

One implication of these delayed transitions is what Jeffrey (2010b) refers to as a culture of “timepass” or waiting, a time in which young men step out of childhood with no further options available. In his work, they remain so even after university education. Their social horizons remain desolate and empty. Similarly, the Ethiopian youth in Main’s (2007) study watched the day go by with few prospects in which to invest their time and energy. He talks about how they spend their days “following the contours of the shade from one side of the street to the other with the passing of the sun” (p. 659). The lives of my informants reflect comparable circumstances.

Are youth watching shadows social “beings” or “becomings?” A useful body of literature presents young people as *social becomings* in contrast to mere social beings (Christiansen et al., 2006; James & Prout, 1990; Uprichard, 2008). The distinction is drawn to emphasize young people as active agents who *generate* social status versus merely *emerging* into progressive stages. I appreciate this distinction, as it avoids representations of childhood or youth as passive receptacles for social input with no contribution of their own to make. However, in the case of my informants and many others in the Global South, it appears more congruent to speak of “maintaining” versus “becoming.” In their situations, their *becoming* has plateaued.

In many respects, youth has been considered a social dead-end. Youth in Bissau is considered such a bleak and immobile social position that Vigh (2006b) refers to it as “social death.” Similarly, Jeffrey (2010a) concludes that in some contexts, particularly Africa, youth is a *permanent* condition. For my informants in Liberia, it is too early to draw such strong conclusions. Like other scholars of West African young men, I encountered male youth who were well into their forties and still saw no signs of progressing from their immobile positions of waiting. They were in a state of perpetually navigating daily survival as youth with no sign of being able to *generate* adulthood. I am not prepared to label Liberian youthhood as permanent social death. As I have discussed it here, status as a youth is deeply tied not to chronological age so

much as to socio-economic development. The political economy is in transition after war in Liberia. New economic opportunities together with a stable government may enable many informants to this study the chance to eventually transition out of their youth. For those in this work, it was abundantly clear that youth meant a position of immobility in which the social fluid remained stagnant and young men lacked the connections and resources to propel themselves forward.

Often synonymous with youth is the notion that they are a marginal social demographic in Africa (Conticini, 2007; Cruise O'Brien, 1996; Honwana & DeBoeck, 2005). Though I address the constraints and limitations that young men face, I find marginality proves to be a slippery concept—too slippery to use. There are a number of reasons for this. One reason is that trying to pinpoint who is on the margins easily becomes an exercise in “othering”—a discussion about any number of differences that separate those on the outside from those in the centre (Staples, 2007). What is “marginal” is often juxtaposed with what is “mainstream.” For instance, Conticini (2007, p. 79) argues that “by definition, marginalised, urban subcultures have experienced economic, social and cultural segregation from mainstream society.” Narratives like this can quickly slide into analytical approaches that privileges dichotomies about who is central and who is peripheral, who is in the mainstream and who is marginal—over more critical inquiries concerned with why and how margins are constituted in the first place. Such assertions leave me to wonder what exactly *is* mainstream?

There are at least a couple of ways to think about what it means to be mainstream. Mainstream can be a reference to a principle trend or common experience. We can think of a primary stream from which smaller tributaries flow, for example. It seems to be from this perspective that Sommers (2003) observes the irony of a youthful African demographic majority that paradoxically considers itself—he believes—to be an outcast minority. They are in fact, quite a substantive contingent. Their informal livelihoods as hustlers, petty traders, day labourers, street vendors and drug dealers are not the uncommon experience of a separated segment of the population. In contrast, the bounded opportunity structures of their daily lives are more the rule than the exception. A second way to think about what or who is mainstream is to go back to Bourdieu's idea of the dominant cultural fraction (Mahar, 1990). Regardless of how big or small what is important to identify is who is favoured by the structures in place and why and how is everyone else complicit? I am interested not in designating youth along an arbitrary spectrum of marginality but instead, with understanding who is connected to option and opportunities and who is cut off and why.

Finally, there is a strand of literature that is concerned with "youth culture" (Jensen, 2006; Young, 2002). This strand of inquiry attends to young people's cultural expression through art, music, and dress (Forman, 2002; Lammers, 2006; McNee, 2002; Prince, 2006). It is, therefore, very linked to youth concerns about where they fit into society, and to their political beliefs and agendas. While related, this is not a particular focus of empirical or theoretical inquiry for me in this work. Though the political values and concerns of my informants are touched upon, and while they certainly did have different and interesting cultures of expression on the beach or in the slums, this was not the focus of my work in Monrovia.

### **Civil War: Causes and Conditions**

The causes for civil war have been the topic of much theorisation. Violence and conflict of various kinds do not merely "erupt" (Richards, 2006). Rather, the outbreak of violence and conflict are the culmination of social and political projects that emerge as a result of experience over time. The Liberian civil war has been understood in a number of ways. In the following discussion, I have limited my attention to an analysis of the theories that are relevant for or have been brought to bear on the Liberian civil war in particular. I argue that we must take great care to distinguish between *conditions* that correspond with the onset and continuation of conflict, and the factors that *cause* it. Similarly, I have attempted to distinguish the causes for youth involvement from the conditions that may have contributed to their participation. My aim is to demonstrate the ways in which interpretations of the condition of youth coincide with interpretations of causes for conflict and vice versa. What seems to limit many of the theories included here is that often, accurate observations about an aspect of pre-war conditions are converted to theoretically exaggerated explanations of causation. A partial insight gets blown out of proportion and offered as *the cause*. Ultimately, I argue that there were structural inequalities that led to the outbreak of the war. Similarly, I argue, as Maclure and Denov (2006) have in Sierra Leone, that youth participation in the conflict must be understood as a result of a shifting structural context to which they contributed through fighting.

#### *Young Devils in the Demographics?*

I begin with what appear to me to be perhaps the most limited and most problematic interpretations. Demographic analysis of historic revolutions and recent conflicts has yielded the "Youth Bulge Hypothesis" (Goldstone, 2002; Moller, 1968). The argument is that where there are high percentages of youth—twenty per cent according to

Huntington (1996)—conflict is very likely to occur. There is some statistical evidence to support this correlation between demographics and war (Urdal, 2004). Liberia had a high percentage of young people in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>27</sup> There are several countries which until quite recently, maintained youth bulges without experiencing civil war (UN, 2008). Egypt and Syria are examples of such cases. The association continues to pop up. It is what we do with that association that requires great care. The way in which we make sense out of this correlation is important as it can easily be used to support quite pejorative and essentialising notions about developing nations and youth. For example, in his work, Singer (2010) refers to youth as enablers of war. He explains youth as naturally aggressive males, and suggests that they are likely to take up arms on a mere whim (Singer, 2010; 2006). Nearly two decades ago Kaplan (1996) asserted that African youth, uneducated and out of work, were like loose molecules in an unstable social fluid. Their gender and their socio-economic circumstances rendered them uncontrollably combustible. Singer (2010, p. 97) echoes this view, noting, “once the ratio of young males grows too far out of balance, violent conflict tends to ensue.” They are by nature more psychologically aggressive, he continues. Thus, it is in their biological make-up to be violent. A fine distinction between youth causation and youth involvement should be made, however. High numbers of youth make it more likely that more youth will be involved in wars, but this should not be confused with actual causation (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Ginges, 2005). It is worth noting that under this theorisation young men are naturally more violent, we have no explanation for why so many young men are *not* involved in armed conflict. Nor do we get any explanation of possible social, political or cultural contributions to the onset of conflict (Henderson, 2008).

Richards (1996) refers to this view as “the New Barbarism.” It is an interpretation that reduces young people to anarchic and irrational actors (Bangura, 1997) who commit mindless and amoral violence (Hoffman, 2011b). He observes, “Unable to perceive the practical rationality of war caught on the wing, New Barbarism assumes that the conflict makes no sense according to outsider’s rules and must be a throwback to some African ‘Dark Age’” (Richards, 1996 p. xxi). Such theory reduce youth, their societies, and their conflicts to the practice of mere barbarians.

A similarly reductionist—though admittedly less racist—point of view comes in rights based analyses, most noteworthy in the Machel reports (1996, 2001) and in the advocacy

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<sup>27</sup> Census data is not available for this period of time. A report by Global Security ([http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1985/liberia\\_2\\_pop-growth-age.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1985/liberia_2_pop-growth-age.htm)) contains an estimate of 44 per cent of the population under the age of 15 years old, and only three per cent over 65 years of age. If this is even somewhat close to the actual numbers, we can assume the proportion of youth in the population was fairly substantial.

research turned out by groups like Human Rights Watch and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. This is the polar opposite of New Barbarism. Youth and children are not prone to violence but instead, victims to it. Research from rights based perspectives highlight the intrinsic vulnerability of young people swept up into violence by “evil abductors” (Shepler, 2011). Upon this stance, they focus on the victimhood of young people involved. Smaller and not fully mature, children are “easy prey.”<sup>28</sup> Children are in many instances undeniably vulnerable. They are victims of horrendous atrocities perpetrated by armed groups who forcibly recruit and use them. Yet to reduce the representation of children and young people as *always* vulnerable and victimized appears as logically reductionist and essentialising as Singer’s claims about violent males. To suggest that causes for youth participation are only due to evil abductors who exploit young, powerless victims fails to recognise youth agency (Abramowitz, 2009; Boyden, 2007; Hart, 2008a), as well as the broader social, economic, and political landscape that may greatly influence how, when and why young people become involved with armed groups.

### *Structural Inequality*

Economists have suggested that the majority of civil wars waged in recent years are the product of failed states and weak economies (Collier, 2009; Collier & Hoeffler, 2002; Collier, Hoeffler, & Rohner, 2006). These conditions cause developing countries to become especially susceptible targets of greedy warlords and political leaders (Collier et al., 2006). Liberia easily fits the criteria of a failed state. I argue throughout the history chapter that economic mismanagement and dependence coupled with political exclusion led to growth without development and conflict eventually broke out. By 1989 the country was quite susceptible to Charles Taylor’s military campaign for state control.

In Kaldor’s (2006) “New Wars” analysis she suggests that warfare has changed fundamentally. New Wars are not conflicts over territory or ideologies. Instead, they are about private greed more than collective grievance. Liberia is a prime candidate for such an assessment. There was no collective grievance that gained popular support for Taylor’s military agenda. In fact, Kieh (1992) points out that Taylor gained support from groups with competing grievances. He certainly took over a number of resource rich areas, and was able to negotiate business with foreign firms even in the midst of fighting war (Johnston, 2004; Reno, 1998). The wars in Sierra Leone have been attributed to conflict over natural resources (see Keen, 1995; Peters, 2011b). It is evident

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<sup>28</sup> This is the title for one of the early reports from Human Rights Watch (1994) concerning Liberian children’s involvement in the civil war.

that natural resources helped to sustain conflict in both countries, particularly through cross border movements in the Mano River region (Hoffman, 2011b). However, to boil a war down to mere greed for wealth and power seems simplistic. Certainly in Liberia, there was more at work. Critics of the 'greed' approach contend that it objectifies war as a thing in and of itself, largely ignoring broader societal problems (Keen, 2008; Richards, 2005; Zeleza, 2008). As such, they argue that the emphasis on greed disregards the motivations of those who fight. It also de-politicises and oversimplifies complex social realities that may contribute to conditions that make conflict more conducive or likely to occur. Collier et al. (2006) suggest that grievances related to inequalities in weak states are merely tools in the hands of greedy rebel warlords, used to manipulate citizens into taking up arms. Though Collier (2009) continues to assert the statistical power of the "feasibility hypothesis," Taylor's ability to mobilise thousands against Doe suggests the significance of genuine grievances in Liberia.

The greed approach overshadows the underlying structural realities that have been at work in a society like Liberia. There are two grievances that are particularly important for the Liberian war. They are grievances formed around ethnicity and neo-patrimonial rule. As the historical account will highlight, Liberia is a country in which there were very deep-seated grievances over what have become known as horizontal inequalities (e.g. horizontal grievances between groups versus vertical grievances between individuals) (Stewart, 2008). These had to do with the centralisation of power among the elite Americo-Liberians in Monrovia. Samuel Doe effectively displaced a large number of these powerful elites during and after the 1980 coup. Rather than reduce or eliminate the exclusion of the indigenous community, Liberia's first indigenous head of state continued the exclusion of the majority of ethnic groups. Ethnic grievance has been suggested as a cause for the war (Arnold, 1991; Scott, 1998). In the case of Liberia, it seems most appropriate to distinguish between ethnic grievances as causes for the war, and ethnicity as a mobilizing factor emerging as a result of the war (Joireman, 2003). The grievances remained the same. Doe merely shuffled the horizontal inequalities between ethnic groups.

As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, social, political, and economic inequality played a significant role in the outbreak of war. As such, neo-patrimonial rule has been invoked as a cause for the Liberian war (Boas, 2001b). In neo-patrimonial regimes, the chief executive maintains authority through personal patronage rather than ideology or law (Mkandawire, 2002). This approach to governance can be clearly seen in the heads of state throughout Liberian history (Boas, 2001b). This interpretation draws structural links between failing states and civil conflicts, though it is not always a determinant of

violence (Mkandawire, 2002). When the majority of a nation's resources are managed to meet the needs of a minority of "big men," impoverishment and exclusion ensue.

Ellis (1999) effectively renders the structural inequalities that led up to the war. He, as with many other scholars of West Africa, has also observed a number of curious spiritual practices that have been integral parts of rural and to some extent urban social practice. He has attempted to render for us the "spiritual dimension" of the war (Ellis, 1999). I contend, as others have (Richards, 2001; Utas, 2008b), that he has been less effective in this effort. He says that his aim is to explain the spiritual dimension of the war so that we can understand the changes in distribution of power in Liberia. (1999, p. 266). He appears to indicate that Poro practices were used in the war, thus, the ritual ceremonies engaged in by armed fighters. This is understandable. It is a conclusion that others have come to by observing the parallels between ceremonies and dress in Poro Society, particularly bush school (Moran, 1995; Shepler, 2005). He also seems to be trying to connect this spiritual and ritualistic expression in war with the root causes of the war itself—despite having made a rather articulate and coherent case for structural dimensions leading to war in the previous half of his book. This causal link with spiritual forces is where it gets difficult to find a logical and substantive line of reasoning. He rolls religion, witchcraft, and cannibalism together and haphazardly applies them as causally meaningful to Liberians (Richards, 2001; Utas, 2008b). In the end, what comes through is a construed religious interpretation of the war that fails to produce internal coherence on the one hand, and to speak back to the structural issues he discusses on the other. Cultural construing in interpretations of fighter experience will be picked up and discussed in Chapter Seven.

It is with an eye on structural inequalities that Hoffman (2011b) advances his analysis of "war machines," a theoretical interpretation inspired and based on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987). Wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia can be understood as productive forces. This approach understands states as interior, fixated on what is inside and how it can be managed. War machines are collective initiatives positioned on the exterior. Their goal is to challenge the chaos of the state, to keep at bay the power structures that risk descending into despotism. War machines are only occasionally engaged in actual war. They are in the business of inventing and experimenting. We find war machines "uncoding" discourses that configure power relations in particular ways. Political opposition groups discussed in Chapter Four are examples of war machines. As collective initiatives, war machines develop and progress through what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as four "plateaus" and in the end, are always recaptured. Hoffman uses the four plateaus to draw out an analysis of the development of wars in

Sierra Leone and Liberia, though it is noticeable that there is disproportionate attention given to Sierra Leone (Utas, 2012).

### *Mobilisation*

We must somehow account for the mobilisation—the organised grouping of large numbers of people (Stewart, 2005). There is consensus across the literature regarding the factors that trigger youth participation in armed conflict. They become involved in order to survive, protect their families, they are coerced, forced, and in some cases willingly volunteer (Boas & Hatloy, 2008; Gates & Reich, 2009; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2004; Özerdem & Podder, 2011b; Pugel, 2007). These descriptive generalizations provide a cursory overview about why young people fight in wars. There is far more contention in the literature regarding the theoretical explanations that link local and global, personal and public factors that contribute to youth participation in conflict. I discuss these competing and sometimes conflicting interpretations in the following discussion.

Though there is an increasing focus upon youth and particularly youth participation in violence (Durham, 2000; Sommers, 2006), it is worth bearing in mind that youth involvement in war is not a new phenomenon. Though youth participation in conflict has much to tell us about the societies in which they live—local and global—youth involvement in violence is neither recent nor exceptional.<sup>29</sup> In this section I discuss a number of theoretical interpretations for why youth become involved in warfare. My aim is to provide a clear overview of causes for participation, so that my informant's own motives (see Chapter Seven) can be conceptually situated.

Young people fight in wars for different and converging reasons. If we reject the reductionist interpretations of the New Barbarism or rights based approaches as a-structural and oversimplified then we must attend to mobilisation some other way. In Sierra Leone, Hoffman (2011b) and Richards (1996) are in consensus that resistance in the form of armed violence was mobilised and directed at the Sierra Leone's state's failure to protect its citizens. There is a clear disregard for any broader set of factors outside of the individual in the New Barbarism and the rights based approach. In response to the rights based approach, Hart (2008a) calls for a focus upon young people as initiators and contributors to violent political and social landscapes. He argues that youth mobilisation cannot be reduced to the immaturity of young individuals. In contrast, he asserts that the socio-political circumstances in areas of conflict and forced

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<sup>29</sup> See Marten's (2002) historical anthology for examples of children and youth involved in conflict around the world.

displacement are primary influences upon youth mobilisation. The politics of participation is at the crux of Richard's (1996) seminal work on youth and conflict in Sierra Leone. Responding to the New Barbarism at the centre of Kaplan's pronouncements, Richards (1996) labours to bring us the socio-political circumstances Hart calls for. He raises the substantial grievances youth held toward gerontocratic and patrimonial power structures in a dysfunctional and disappointing post-colonial state. A global recession and a decreasing ability to meet the needs of a growing generation through patrimony meant that young people found themselves socially and economically immobile.

It is the immobile social, economic, and political position of young people that inspired his phrase "crisis of youth." A crisis of youth (Richards, 1995) is about a generational push-back against a pervasive feeling of injustice. Richards sees the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia as instances of generational retaliation against an ineffective and corrupt political and gerontocratic rule. Richard's work is predominantly focused upon the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), and the young people who participated in their ranks. Hoffman's (2006, 2011b) research with the Civil Defence Force (CDF)—who were fighting *against* the RUF—concurs with Richard's. The young men in his research agreed with the RUF stance evidenced in Richard's work—greedy elders had failed to pass to youth their rightful due. Similar observations have been made in other West African conflicts in Guinea-Bissau and Liberia, where young combatants who were not participating so much for ideological reasons, against ideological foes (Hoffman, 2011a; Vigh, 2006a). There was no radical vision of the other in these wars. Rather, these were wars in which young people fought not against an enemy, but *for a possibility* (Vigh, 2006a). "Youth combatants are clear about the specific circumstantial reasons they fight *against* each other," Richards writes (1996, p. 197). "But they are even clearer about what they are fighting *for*—namely, education and jobs."

It is with statements like this one that cause *to keep fighting* may become conflated with causes *to start fighting* in the first place. Richards has received searing criticism for imposing sense and reason upon the senseless and unreasonable Sierra Leonean youth (Abdullah, 1997). As I see it, there is an important distinction to draw between initial and often individual *causes* to fight war, and the socio-political *conditions* that led to the onset of war itself. It is apparent to Richards and others (see Humphreys & Weinstein, 2004) that most youth were forcibly recruited to fight for the RUF. They did not join in solidarity against the Sierra Leonean state. They were kidnapped, their schools were raided, and they were taken by force to serve and fight for the RUF. Similar findings have been gathered in Liberia. In a large, cross-faction survey, only 10% of ex-

combatants named political motivations as initial and primary reasons to fight (Pugel, 2007). However, as Richards observes in the quote above, young combatants in Sierra Leone were explicit about why they were fighting and what they hoped to achieve. Socio-political conditions that fuelled the ignition of conflict did not in fact ignite the interest and investment of young men. However, once in, it seems likely that personal grievance and the grievances of the armed group might be integrated into youth motivations to fight war. Conflict participation is not as straight forward as some have suggested. In the West African literature discussed here, it is evident that young men were not fighting because they were inherently violent, nor were they drawn in by some individual or collective cause or ideal. This said they certainly had clear ideas about why they were fighting. There is much we do not—and perhaps cannot know about the evolution of youth motivations and ideation in conflict. Hoffman (2011b) argues that factions developed their own sense of institutional logic, and with them, so did young men. It seems a useful corrective to consider that ideation around reasons to fight would change and morph over the course of the war and through experience.

One important way that ideation developed for the young men in this study was through distance and disconnection from their families and communities and their initiation into fighting forces. Though there may be circumstances in which youth participate in armed conflict alongside friends or family (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994), many young people fighting in wars across the Global South are removed from their primary networks of support when they are incorporated into fighting forces (see Cheney, 2005; Honwana, 2006; Maclure & Denov, 2006; Peters & Laws, 2003; Richards, 1996; Utas, 2003). This was the case for my informants. Before continuing, I would like to pause to make a note about “loss” and the value or harm of losing connection and interdependency in families or communities.

It would be all too easy to assume that being removed from one’s habitus by an armed group would always be worse than remaining embedded within it. This is a normative assumption that I do not wish to imply. Being involved in an armed group might very well expose a young person to immense amounts of violence and risk. But that does not mean that the inverse would be true—that if left in one’s village, for example, one would experience less violence or risk. To be cut off from one’s family is likely to be horrific. Beah’s (2007) recounting of his own experience of losing family to death and separation in Sierra Leone is clear testament to the pain and difficulty that such events can trigger. Families, kin, and communities are usually the networks of support that enable survival and promote well-being. This may not always be straightforward however. Mann’s (2003) research in Dar es Salaam illustrates how difficult and unsupportive some family

and kin networks can be. It is unlikely that *all* youth who participate in conflict have left a “better” social network for a “worse” one, and best not to assume that everything prior to conflict participation was rosy and wonderful, while everything during it is dark and sinister. This is a point that Zack-Williams (2001) has made in Sierra Leone, particularly about street youth. What I would like to emphasize is that involvement in conflict often means being cut off from a proximate and influential network.

Disconnection takes different forms. Several scholars have suggested that armed groups take special measures to insure that young people’s ties to families or village are severed. In Sierra Leone, Richards (1996) suggests that scarification (which will be discussed in detail further on) marked young soldiers as rebels, insuring that communities would not want to accept them. Cheney (2005) presents the experience of children who were taken because they were young enough that they would find it too difficult to escape and make their way back through the forest, as older children might. These observations point to the strategic practices that armed groups use to cut former ties and to increase their recruits who will carry out their campaigns. Young people may be victims of capture, taken away because they are vulnerable, or initiated in offensive ways. In other cases, youth join to protect themselves or their families (see Chapter Seven). Some young people join because they cannot afford to remain unarmed (Brett & Specht, 2004). When the environment is charged with uncertainty and violence it is necessary to become affiliated with a group who can offer protection. In my research for this thesis I found that many youth were, as those reported in Uganda and elsewhere, captured by armed groups. After war, they like young men in other wars, found it difficult if not impossible to return home (see Chapter Eight). Others took up arms for groups like Taylor’s Government Militia. This reserve group was called for on an as-needed basis, allowing youth to stay with families, and to protect them as armed men. Thus, while many young people were captured and entirely cut off, this was not the universal experience of all young people in the Liberian civil war.

### *Incorporation*

In the same way, incorporation takes different forms in different conflicts. How and to what extent young people are incorporated into armed groups has been a topic of keen interest for ethnographers studying African wars. Numerous authors have noted the similarities between initiations into the Poro bush schools in West Africa (detailed in Chapters Four and Seven), and initiation into fighting forces in civil wars like Sierra Leone and Liberia (Ellis, 2003; Richards, 1996; Shepler, 2005). Scholars have suggested that traditional rites of passage have been incorporated into a military structure for the purposes of organisation and mobilising young people (Ellis, 2003; Murphy, 2003). Ellis

(2003, p. 2) suggests that forms of initiation into conflict resemble traditional initiation school “used to manage transformation of children into adults.” Shepler (2005) makes a similar observation in Sierra Leone. There is growing evidence that points to social terrains of conflict as alternative grounds for achievement of adulthood (Utas, 2008a; Vigh, 2006a). However, the preoccupation with traditional initiations, particularly in secret societies, tends toward an overemphasis upon socio-cultural structures to the neglect of the lived experience of young people involved. Bragg (2006, p. 6) makes an illustrative example of this imbalanced perspective when she notes that “fighting forces in Liberia co-opted traditional rituals and scarification for the express purpose of giving their fighters a sense of prestige as adults, and enhancing a sense of loyalty to their fighting groups.” Wessells (2006a) concludes that armed groups “exploit” cultural practices to suit their needs. There is no question in my mind that this occurs. However, the danger in this line of reasoning is that young soldiers are reduced to mere objects of exploitation. It represents them as gullible victims of a ploy designed to “trick” them into conscription through ritual practices. While young people and adults alike were certainly fooled and exploited throughout the Liberian civil war, this representation of institutional and individual transformations appears oversimplified and imbalanced.

The connection to culture is dubious for several reasons. Where Shepler stops with an observation of a cultural ritual, others push further to assume that reconfigured traditional practices have particular meanings for young combatants. My concern is that the assumptions made may be spurious at best and speculative at worst. There is no primary data that I can find to support these cultural claims in the literature. Ellis (1999, 2003) relies heavily upon newspapers which he fails to acknowledge as part of the public domain and thus strategically pitched (Utas, 2008b), and on interviews that he neglects to quote from.<sup>30</sup> From his work in Mozambique, Boothby (2006a) makes passing reference to rites of passage without elaborating or offering empirical data or analysis. Perhaps these claims of cultural conferring of adulthood in conflict are very near the mark. Without clear evidence from those organising and participating in such reconfigured traditional practices—evidence that is difficult to obtain—such conclusions are of little use. In these instances, they seem to do more to distract than to inform.

Bullet proofing was an initiation experience that arose as central to combatant’s experience of the war (see Chapter Seven). This is another socio-cultural practice that has been observed across West African contexts in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone (Hamer, 2011; Hoffman, 2011b). Hoffman (2011b) argues that bullet proofing is an

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<sup>30</sup> He also fails to situate his own research and analysis amongst other Liberian ethnographies (see Richards, 2001).

inventive and experimental practice that has taken shape in the civil wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone. He presents bullet proofing as an innovation for fighters, a new magic conjured by witches and medicine men for recent conflicts. Though his thoughtful analysis avoids the cultural essentialism for which Ellis has been criticised (see Mkandawire, 2002; Richards, 2001), his framing of the ritual implies that it is a *new* practice. Though bullet proofing may invoke an association with modern bullet proof vests, the use of medicine for invisibility is not new at all. In Liberia, there is a long tradition of using medicine for protection during warfare. Individual warriors could have medicine prepared by a Zo (also known as a medicine man), in the form of various objects such as skins, teeth, beaks and so forth, to ward off blows, to cause invisibility, and invincibility to arrows and gunfire (Schwab 1947).<sup>31</sup> Rather than a new spiritual invention for guerrilla warfare, it seems more accurate to regard bullet proofing and other forms of protective medicines as established practices applied to current circumstances.

While I am not convinced by Hoffman's analysis of innovative spiritual practice, I do feel that he makes a useful distinction about the relationship between medicine men or witches and the armed groups that elicited their expertise. In Schwab's earlier work there is a clear sense of unity between the elders who call the warriors to battle and the medicine men who conjure charms and medicines for them. They serve the same group of people—a village, or a town—and work together to accomplish their purposes in war. In contrast, it seems that the service of protective medicines was “contracted out” to medicine men or witches who served an armed group. This is significant because it emphasizes the disconnection between armed groups and local traditional communities. They were not united in solidarity but rather hired as a means to an end.

Incorporation into structured systems of relationships in fighting forces has been represented in different ways. These differences are not trivial. Some scholars of conflict suggest that commanders are seen as “father figures” by young initiates (Peters, 2011a; Vermeij, 2011). From her work in Mozambique, Schafer (2004, p. 92) argues that “the image of the leader as ‘father’, soldiers as kin,” utilizes familiar language to organise power relations and social interaction. She suggests that military groups in Mozambique set themselves up in this way in order to manipulate young recruits. Boothby et al. (2006) report similar observations. In contrast, in her work in Angola and Mozambique, Honwana (2005) presents young people as much more removed from commanders. She talks about how they found ways to ‘create spaces’ to talk about home,

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<sup>31</sup> Schwab (1947, p. 233) recounts the story of a man who rubbed medicine all over his body. Although he was shot several times during the Sapa-Liberian war of 1924, no bullet harmed him.

to play games, or to plan escapes. They might also work hard to win the approval of a commander. In either case however, she frames these relationships as if it were children versus commanders. In either case children are manipulating circumstances to insure survival and well-being, more so than being coerced or “duped” into relationships with abusive, fictive kin. I will not venture criticism or challenge of either of these framings, as each is taken from specific contexts with children incorporated for specific reasons and in specific ways. However, it is important to note that while coercion and violence was certainly a part of the conflict experience among young men in this study, there was more than just abuse or manipulation.

It has also been argued that West African youth link themselves to militia leaders through patrimonial ties in order to increase their life chances (Hoffman, 2011b; Murphy, 2003; Utas & Jorgel, 2008; Vigh, 2006a). Patrons are significant to mobility in West African societies like Liberia, and this theme contributes a significant theoretical strand to my analysis throughout this thesis. In Chapter Seven and Eight we will see illustrations of patronage at work among commanders and combatants. They establish and maintain wealth in people during the war. Richards (1996) and Sommers (2007) have observed similar relationships between young Liberian soldiers and their commanders. Their interactions were marked not with abuse but rather affection, loyalty, and trust.

Finally, a simple but important point to remember is that war provides work for young people (Debos, 2011; Hoffman, 2011a; Utas, 2003; Vigh, 2006a; Wessells, 2002). For some youth whose social roles and transitions were frustrated by the economic crisis, combat participation offered an alternative. Incorporation into war provided violent life chances (Vigh, 2006b). Sommers (2007, p. 102) observes, “From suicide bombers and spies to field commanders and frontline warriors, there seems to be no end to what ever-younger boys and girls can do in the service of war and political violence. At the same time, the social role of youth in war-affected states seems to be narrowing.” In Liberia, participation gave young people positions of dominance, responsibility, and authority over their peers as well as their civilian elders (Utas, 2005a, 2005b, 2008a).<sup>32</sup> Utas concludes that at least some of the Liberian youth involvement was the result of their marginalization. Young people were denied social mobility. He contends that joining a militia was less about ethnic hatred (Utas, 2008a), and much more to do with the gain of modern material goods (Utas, 2005b), and with transitions to adult status in fighting factions (Utas, 2008a). He cites the inability of young men to achieve adulthood in an

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<sup>32</sup> For further theoretical discussion, see Hoffman’s (2011a) unusual interpretation of war as work, in which he uses post-Fordist mode of production to understand the labour market of armed conflict.

economic context where instability made it near impossible to acquire the needed resources to support a household—a necessary requirement for social recognition as an adult. In this work, as I will show in Chapter Seven, I observed that such motivations were not causes to *begin fighting*, but rather, were instrumental in young soldier's desires to *continue fighting* while war was being waged. Militia involvement provided socio-economic possibilities that were unavailable elsewhere.

There are numerous reasons for youth involvement and they are not mutually exclusive (Maclure & Denov, 2006). Regardless of what reason or influence a Liberian youth might recall for participating in warfare, no one made decisions in the absence of the threat of violence. Young people in this conflict did not choose military career paths as though they were feasible options along with other vocational or professional tracks. Nor were the informants to this study recruited as mercenaries. They did not go looking to fight in wars beyond their borders. They made decisions to fight knowing that to do so today might enable them to save their own lives, or to protect their families tomorrow (see also Boås & Hatløy, 2008; Jennings, 2008a). All of them were presented with the presence and aggressive capacity for violence that groups like the NPFL possessed. Ultimately, my aim is to take “what fighters say” (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2004; Pugel, 2007) after war and do my best to situate their agentic choices and actions within an analysis of specific structural conditions.

This thesis contributes to a growing social science interest in youth throughout the Global South. My aim is to position my analysis of young people as embedded within structures that constrain and enable agency in different ways. Youth agency in the midst of conflict has been a hotly debated subject in recent years. It is my hope to avoid singularity in my interpretation about why fighters fight, while maintaining a focus upon ways in which their choices are limited. The following section presents an overview about how the post-war life chances of ex-combatants have been understood in the literature to date.

### **Ex-Combatant Life Chances after War**

In this section I discuss literature that has informed the way that ex-combatant life chances are understood. I complicate notions of “reintegration.” There are difficulties with the term that make it ultimately unsuitable for this work. Subsequently, I engage with the literature. My aim is to present trends in the literature and to demonstrate why an analytical focus on social process is useful.

*Conceptual Complications with “Reintegration”*

This thesis could be thought of as a study about reintegration at least in part because of the analytical focus of post-war trajectories of ex-combatants. I have chosen not to use the term reintegration. There are several reasons for this decision. First, “reintegration” of ex-fighters often implies an assumption that the physical and social structures of communities exist in static form (Boersch-Supan, 2009). “Reintegration” implies a 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. In this instance, Vigh’s (2009a) “motion within motion” is an apt description. Reintegration also assumes that society is a homogenous “field,” unitary, whole, and *different* from ex-combatants. Reintegration 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.

Further reintegration is an elusive and ambiguous term. It is difficult to define and harder still to operationalise or measure (Jennings, 2008b). There is no clear set of indicators that designate “successful” reintegration (Denov, 2011; Jennings, 2008a), which has become a notable problem for DDR programmes (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2005). Even if it is broken down into categories often used to designate “integration”—social, economic, and political—these are interdependent of one another (Boersch-Supan, 2009), and leave us to wonder at what point have individuals or collectives successfully achieved “reintegration”? In essence, where is the bar?

In this work, I find that drawing lines between people who were “reintegrated” or not proves far too difficult and incongruent with the empirical material contained here. As Chapter Six illustrates, many of the street youth in this study could be prime candidates for “reintegration” as they exist outside of the dominant social norms and values proscribed in post-war society, and engage in risky and criminal activities—all of which are reasons that ex-combatants are said to warrant “reintegration,” whether driven by formal programs or informal initiatives. With all of this said, some of what “reintegration” is trying to accomplish as a concept *does* have merit. Chapter Eight will make it abundantly clear that 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 has subsided. 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 non-combatants. War is a social project (Richards, 2006). Leaving war is a further project of social becoming outside of the structural parameters that factions established during the fighting. Thus, I prefer to discuss social incorporation and wealth in people as integral to the life chances of ex-combatants without drawing hard and fast lines around being “in” or “out” of a “reintegrated” position within society.

### *Ex-Combatants and DDR*

There is a growing, critical literature that levies numerous critiques of the actual use and implementation of the UN driven DDR intervention (Jennings, 2008b; Knight & Özerdem, 2004; McMullin, 2007; Muggah, 2009). Muggah’s (2009) stinging reference to DDR as “The Emperor’s New Clothes” captures the message in this body of material. Though expensive and much talked about, the benefits of the program are often difficult to see.

I will not belabour the point, as this study is not an evaluation of DDR in Liberia, nor has my research focused on specific implications of DDR participation among my informants. However, what these studies do indicate is that *transitions* from war to peace are not necessarily shortened or smoothed by the programmatic emphasis on “guns, camps and cash” in the general DDR program offered by the UN (Knight & Özerdem, 2004). Offering short term encampment and almost exclusive focus on arms collection as “reintegration” is at best, overselling the program’s efficacy (McMullin, 2007; Pugel, 2009). It may be enough to disarm potentially volatile people, but it is not enough to transition them into society where they can make contributions to social, economic and political growth. The empirical material in this work informs and contributes to these critiques. Although some ex-combatants in this study did feel that they benefitted from components of DDR in Liberia, most felt it was a “flash in the pan” and all agreed that it was not a stand-alone solution. With optimal social circumstances, vocational training and psychosocial interventions appeared to be helpful. Without them, the education and resources provided through the short-term programmes offered during DDR were lost or unused (see Chapter Eight).

As worthwhile as a critique of a limited and costly intervention is, this literature is also limited. The security studies focus on DDR looks to critique a short term intervention’s failure to generate long-term, sustainable solutions. This seems a misplaced endeavour. It seems more effective and congruent to try to understand the root of the conflict—the reason things became insecure—and to consider the post-conflict processes that are unfolding in the aftermath as a response to conflict and insecurity. As I look at it, the ways in which youth fit into these societal projects has much more to tell us about

conflict, post-conflict, and insecurity than does an analysis of a short-term UN operation. In Liberia it took more than a century of exclusion and differential incorporation of the nation's majority before conflict erupted. It seems most congruent to focus our analysis on the progression of the structural realities that led up to war if we are to draw congruent and nuanced interpretations about the post-conflict environment and about those who live, produce, and reproduce social relations within it.

### *Ex-Combatants and Social Process after War*

There are a number of social processes that have emerged as important for ex-combatants in the literature, particularly young ex-fighters. "Socialisation" into fighting forces has been linked violent behaviour during but also after war (Boothby, 2006b; Vermeij, 2011; Zack-Williams, 2001). As Denov (2010, p. 3) puts it, "the violent actions of child soldiers are assumed to continue in the war's aftermath. Perceived to be lost in a cycle of unrelenting violence and iniquity, children who have participated in armed conflict have generally been assumed to be permanently damaged." Providing us with a harrowing case in point, from her work on the Ugandan conflict, Vermeij (2011) links socialisation of young soldiers in the LRA to one young person's murder of her father after leaving Kony's forces. It was because she was socialised into violence that she chose to kill a family member afterwards. How socialisation occurs is unfortunately missing from her analysis, which is entirely a-theoretical, and as such, I would argue, intellectually irresponsible. Socialisation retains an important position in numerous fields of inquiry, though none of these theories have been engaged in her work, or that of others who assume such.<sup>33</sup>

To theorise aggression of any kind, we need to be able to explain how aggressive patterns are developed, what provokes people to behave aggressively, and especially in the instance of ex-combatants, what is involved in *maintaining* their aggressive actions outside of war and armed groups (Bandura, 1980). What we have in the literature concerned with child soldiers and ex-combatants at present is a consistent observation that young people are taught to act and behave in certain ways through instruction, ritual and experience in armed environments. There is an a-theoretical link drawn about their socialisation into violence, however. This is highly problematic. Without the ability to do research during this process of socialisation in armed groups, such observations are as far as we can expect to go analytically. To push further into

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<sup>33</sup> To name only a few, see work on Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961; Sutherland, 1956), Social Control (Hirschi, 1969; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1995) violent and impoverished environments (Stewart, Simons, & Conger, 2002), and socialisation for aggression, war, and violence (Bandura, 1980; Ember & Ember, 2007).

assumptions about implications for violence and aggression after war is overreaching. We need to understand how aggression is *maintained*, something Vermeij fails to do. Without some kind of conceptual underpinning, sweeping conclusions like hers actually promote theses like the New Barbarism because they represent young people as barbaric, programmed killers. In Chapter Eight, we will hear from an ex-combatant who talks about how people expect the ex-combatants to “kill at any time.” Having killed before, ex-combatants were presumed to be loose molecules that were highly and unpredictably combustible—they could kill again any time. To blame what appears to be senseless violence on socialisation ultimately feeds these kinds of assumptions on a local and international scale. Mere incorporation into an armed group is assumed to be enough to turn young people into programmed killers, contributing substantially to the “moral panic” surrounding youth involvement in armed conflict (Boyden, 2007).

Now, if I assume, as I have suggested in previous sections, that structures establish and imbue meanings for daily practice, it is logical to conclude that ritual experiences and daily routines *would* influence young fighters thoughts and actions. They would shape agency. My contention with assumptions like the one outlined in Vermeij’s work is that violent behaviour would continue seamlessly after removal from structures in fighting forces. If it is the structure of an armed group like the LRA that enables and facilitates certain conduct, would not the immersion into a different structural context outside that group have some influence? Ex-combatants certainly continue to perpetrate violence after war. I do not question that their actions are linked to wartime experience. I do question how much we can draw links between some form of ambiguous socialisation (which most researchers are not able to observe) with violence afterwards. In a study with ex-combatants in Sierra Leone, former fighters were surveyed for their tendency toward aggressive behaviour, (i.e. getting into fights) (Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, Williams, & Ellis, 2010). Hostility was strongly associated with environmental input. The more discrimination ex-combatants experienced over time, the more likely they were to express hostility. Conversely, community and family acceptance were correlated with pro-social behaviour and inversely related to hostility. Though this is only one study, it offers at least some degree of inquiry regarding the circumstances surrounding ex-combatants, and does not assume that all of them are perpetrating violence. Their findings are telling. Aggressive behaviour consistently corresponded to social input after they were removed from social structures in armed groups.

One strand of literature focuses on the need to address the implications of socialisation into violence during war. This literature highlights the significance of reorienting ex-combatants to post-war social positions, which requires accommodation of different

norms and values for social practice outside of armed groups. Program analysis and assessments highlight the need to teach former fighters how to behave “appropriately” without aggression, abuse, or drug use (Boothby et al., 2006; Peters & Law, 2003; Wessells, 2006b). Group activities and games are often used to teach pro-social behaviour and engagement. In Liberia, soccer has been used in this way (Armstrong, 2004). These kinds of activities are thought to be useful for some former fighters who have to “re-learn” how to behave in social environments outside of war (Beah, 2007; Boothby et al., 2006). Some of my informants were involved in psychosocial interventions like these. They felt that such programs helped them to learn not to be “rude” in social situations after war, and to think about how to act differently in post-war society. Interventions that were useful helped them to act acceptably, hence giving them a better chance to integrate into contexts that were different from their factions.

Reconciliation and reintroduction to society is also considered vital to ex-combatants' life chances after war. For instance, ex-combatant youth in Mozambique report that traditional cleansing rituals were particularly important for helping them to feel different about themselves, and for their communities to accept them (Boothby et al., 2006). Similar findings have been reported in other post-conflict situations (Alexander et al., 2000; Green & Honwana, 2001; Zack-Williams, 2006). This appears useful for young people who left home for war, and perhaps without the blessing of family or communities. That is not the case for all ex-combatant young people. Community's justifications for the necessity of war may also be a factor in whether such rituals are needed or useful for social cohesion.

In contrast to these instances of social acceptance and cohesion, some ex-combatants feel that the conclusion of war means “re-marginalisation” (Utas, 2005a). If war has been an alternative experience of social mobility—and it is not for everyone—then the absence of structures established in conflict may mean a loss of the respect (honour and prestige) that soldiers earned through fighting (see Keen, 2002; Nilsson, 2005). In Utas's work, and in this thesis, it is clear that participation in armed conflict allowed *some* young people to move very quickly from social positions as small boys to big men in war. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven.

Regardless of whether war facilitates and enables sharp rises in social status, participation in conflict is a source of livelihood for young fighters (Debos, 2011; Hoffman, 2011a). In some conflicts, former fighters have been allowed to join the state military or police after conflict was fought (Alexander & McGregor, 2005; Kamare, 2009). Skills and training as soldiers could continue to provide for families. In the wake of other wars like the one in Liberia, soldiers from warring factions were not given the

option to remain or move into state troops. If this is the only source of human capital a young ex-fighter has—and many have little or incomplete formal education or vocational skills—then taking the guns away suggests economic re-marginalisation at least. Lack of sustainable livelihoods has social implications as well. Young people who cannot find work cannot provide for themselves or families who may have been depending on their support. This does not mean that all demobilised, uneducated ex-combatants are “down and out” or getting into trouble. For instance, in Sierra Leone, ex-combatants have been very successful at generating income through motor-taxis (Denov, 2011; Peters, 2007). We have a lot to learn about why some ex-combatants are successful at making a new start outside of armed groups. Chapter Eight informs and contributes to this topic. In short, re-marginalisation is not a given for all young people who fought. However, as Chapter Eight illustrates, loss of authority over dependents, and subordination under elders were clear signs that being incorporated into families and communities would mean re-marginalisation for some.

### *Ex-Combatants, Abjection and Stigma*

Stigma after conflict participation is considered one of the primary influences on reduced life chances among ex-combatants. For instance, some ex-fighters go on to establish successful businesses after war (Munive, Wisner II, & Lakovitz, 2006). Others struggle to find employment and their businesses are not patronised (Boersch-Supan, 2009; Schultz, 2004). The reasons for “success” or “failure” seem to be associated with stigma, yet further development is often missing from such conclusions.

If we understand stigma as an essentialising and negative view of another person based upon some trait or characteristic (Goffman, 1963), then it seems that there are many aspects of conflict, and conflict participation that must be unpacked. The reasons for stigma may vary from conflict to conflict and among conflict participants according to gender, region, reason for joining, or atrocities committed (Peters, Richards, & Vlassenroot, 2003). For example, across the literature, scholars have found that women are unwilling and less likely to be identified as ex-fighters (Boersch-Supan, 2009; Coulter, 2005; Jennings, 2008a). The consensus is that as women, they have broken a greater social taboo by participating with fighting forces (Peters, et al., 2003). Public acknowledgement of fighting history, through participation in DDR programs or research contexts, could compromise their ability to be accepted by families and communities. There is a general dearth of evidence or interpretation to inform assumptions about *how* stigma is manifested and experienced, and for what reasons.

Furthermore, there appears to be a conflation of stigma toward African male youth and stigma toward young ex-combatants. As I discussed in the previous section on youth, young men have been monolithically labelled as inherently prone to violence. Similarly, ex-combatants are constructed in policy, popular consciousness, and research as potential “spoilers” who embody conflict recursion waiting to happen. The two appear to reinforce each other without substantial evidence to confirm such a position. For example, Bøås and Hatløy (2008) observe that idleness was not behind young men’s decisions to participate in the Liberian civil war, and yet male youth idleness is a substantial cause for concern among policy makers in the aftermath. In the absence of clear evidence it seems that pejorative assumptions have been constructed based upon a set of indicators and outcomes that have been linked in an ad hoc fashion.

It seems apparent to me that there is a clear connection between stigma and abjection that we ought not to miss. Abjection is a concept that has been used to describe the social condition of ex-combatants after war (Utas, 2008a). Here Utas has leaned on other work to understand abjection as being cast off or cast down (see Ferguson, 1999).<sup>34</sup> This gives us a sense of social inequality and prejudice. Abjection is constructed as an experience of social demotion in a sense. Authors such as Ferguson (1999) have borrowed this term from Kristeva’s (1982) essay on abjection. She traces examples of abjection through literature and draws evocative comparisons of abjection as experiences similar to the repulsion directed at rotting food and dead bodies. It is a degrading and humiliating experience of losing personal worth or position through objectification and oppression. A sense of abjection comes with a “pervasive indifference, endemic oppression...that can make a person feel as though he or she is a mere object, nameless, of no count, ground down in a world where agency seems to be entirely in the hands of others” (Jackson, 2006, pp. 43-44). Abjection understood in this way is more than an experience of demotion. It is an experience of being reviled. This deeply cutting and personal experience of objectification was wrapped up in experiences of stigma among my informants (see Chapter Eight).

### *Ex-Combatants and Trauma*

One final point must be addressed concerning the role of trauma. There is a large body of psychological and psychiatric literature that tracks the psychological implications of exposure to, and participation in violence (see Berman, 2001; Gear, 2002; Yule, 2000). Quantities and qualities of exposure to violent acts, or commission of violence have been

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<sup>34</sup> Much theorisation of minority experience has drawn on her work and the concept more broadly, including work on critical race theory (Anderson, 2000, 2002), feminist theory (Fletcher & Benjamin, 1990; Tyler, 2009), queer theory (Butler, 1993; Gordon, 1999).

associated with depression, anxiety, and PTSD among other psychological disturbances (Bayer, Klansen, & Adam, 2007; Derluyn, Broekaert, Schuyten, & De Temmerman, 2004; Kanagaratnam, Raundalen, & Asbjørnsen, 2005; Khort et al., 2010; Kuwert, Spitzer, Rosenthal, & Freyberger, 2008; Medeiros, 2007).<sup>35</sup> These psychological implications may deeply inhibit social, emotional and mental capacities, and thus reduce life chances.

This “biomedical” approach has received criticism from scholars who cite Western cultural bias, limitations in reporting, and universalism in the discourse as clear limitations in much of the trauma research conducted with war affected people across the developing world (Bracken, Giller, & Summerfield, 1995; Eyber & Ager, 2004; McKay & Wessells, 2004; Summerfield, 1999). On the other hand, there is clear evidence that links participation in violence to social and emotional disturbance after war. Young ex-combatants in Mozambique reported flashbacks in which graphic, violent images were emotionally disturbing and interpersonally inhibiting within their social life (Boothby et al., 2006). It is not *just* ex-combatants who might be exposed to violence and subsequently suffer from psychological disturbances. However, in a comparative analysis of ex-combatants and non-combatants, Blattman and Annan (2010) report that increased exposure to violence was accompanied by the highest levels of psychological disturbances, and this was disproportionately reported among ex-combatants.

Psychological disturbances in many forms can have significant influence on a person’s ability to attend to social cues, to concentrate, to hold commitments to work. I have not chosen to measure psychological phenomena in this work. However, I recognise that intrusive memories, nightmares, depression or anxiety may have been at work in the lives of my ex-combatant informants. I knew many non-combatants who talked about the disturbing thoughts and memories that kept them awake at night. I think it is safe to assume that experience in the war may have implications for the life chances of the young men in this study. However, this is one pocket of literature that this study can neither challenge nor inform.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the core concepts that I will use to describe and explain the empirical material in this work. I have tried to situate each of these within discourse and debates that shape the study of young men in the Global South, and especially in post-conflict contexts. My aim in this study, at its broadest sense, is to understand the

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<sup>35</sup> These references represent only the tip of the iceberg in this vast literature.

relationship between structures and agency. A situated analysis of the decisions, motivations and actions of young people must take structure and agency into account. Failing to do this results in misguided, reduced, and essentialising caricatures like the New Barbarism. Such interpretations project onto phenomena perhaps more than they draw from it. Attending to the ways in which structures are reproduced or altered through agency helps to avoid reading preconceived and biased ideas onto the actions of the young people at the centre of this work.

I have argued that wealth in people provides a useful conceptual lens through which to understand the community of dispositions that enable and constrain the agency of my informants. Wealth in people (following Bledsoe) takes into account the specific conditions under which relationships are formed and maintained. It directs our attention to kin-based and hierarchical organisation of social ties. On the one hand, it would be appropriate to speak of patrimonial relationships and leave it at that. I have chosen to refer to wealth in people because it directs our attention to the necessity of having dependents and of being a dependent. Social and economic as well as political possibilities come through asymmetrical power relations based upon obligation and dependency in Liberia. These are the kinds of social ties my young informants require if they are to achieve upward mobility.

The relationship between structures and agency becomes particularly crucial in situations of armed conflict. There is a good deal of theorisation about why young people fight in wars and about the implications of their experience. Researchers of armed conflict are put in precarious positions from which they must attempt to make sense out of the usually retrospective accounts of young fighters' experience. Where there are gaps or ambiguities, it is all too easy to assume or place disproportionate emphasis upon phenomena like motivations to fight, or rites of passage in armed groups. What I have tried to do is to challenge arguments that slip into assumption, or are based upon patchy empirics sutured together with speculation. I have also tried to attend to diversity across research and theory about youth participation in different conflicts. The underlying causes and expression of wars across Africa are diverse. Part of my task in this chapter has been to attend to difference, so that the conclusions I draw can be cast against and in the midst of converging and conflicting analyses in the literature.

Finally, because this work is in part, a study of ex-combatant life chances and trajectories after war, I have provided a conceptual discussion regarding reintegration. I presented an overview of the primary topics of inquiry concerning ex-combatant reintegration. This work will contribute to lines of inquiry directed toward understanding social process. I have highlighted the significance of family and

community relationships for ex-combatant's positions and possibilities in post-war contexts. Ultimately, I will argue throughout that it is relationships and the terms on which they are established that shape the life chances and trajectories of the ex-combatant and other post-war youth in this study.

## Chapter Four: History

In this chapter I discuss a number of reoccurring patterns in the social, economic, and political history of the Republic of Liberia. What I have tried to show in this chapter is the manner in which inequality and exclusion were developed and maintained between the indigenous people of what is now the Republic of Liberia, and the settlers who founded the state. The staying power of inequality and social exclusion, despite some change over time, created a fault line that eventually caved into civil war. My aim is to capture some of the most significant events and developments and to draw from them important insights which inform the current state of the nation as well as the lives of the young men in this research.

### Dilemmas in the United States

What has become Liberia began as a solution to a number of dilemmas in what was then the recently liberated United States of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Shortly after the American Revolution several socio-economic and politically charged issues surfaced with regard to the slave trade. Samuel Johnson captures well the irony of the slave trade in colonial America with his question, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for Liberty among the drivers of negroes?" (quoted in Shick, 1977, p. 2). This irony became a hotly contested issue not long after America won independence from the British.

The founding fathers of America were not blind to the inconsistency in their society. Though for some time black men and women were only considered three fifths human being, this was not a sustainable value (Beyan, 1994). In England, movement toward abolition of the slave trade was under way, and it was clear that the US would have to address the inequality between blacks and whites. The abjection of blacks produced a racial tension that did not appear solvable through emancipation alone (Sanneh, 1999). To remove the abject blacks appeared a far more durable and efficient option than to address the social inequality and to integrate as equals those had had been cast down for so long. To remove the problem would be much more efficient than to deal with it. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe among others advocated for colonization of blacks outside of white America (Beyan, 1994). As early as 1787, Thomas Jefferson appeared in print, advocating a move toward emancipation to some distant location (Shick, 1977). He produced a legislative bill that outlined the rights of slave born children to grow up and be emancipated to a colony in another land (Innes, 1831). Though it was never passed in Congress the effort drew political attention to the issue of slave emancipation and colonization.

By colonisation, Jefferson and others meant *only* a colony in the sense of a settlement. What became the US initiated settlement in West Africa did not have the political or economic ambitions that European colonialism did. Expulsion, rather than exploitation, was the primary goal. Exploitation did occur on many counts and will be addressed in following discussions. While the United States was willing and eager to facilitate the removal of unwanted people, the government was not interested in extending any official recognition of Liberia as an American political appendage (Liebenow, 1962).

The anti-slavery movement in New England gathered a large part of its momentum through the Protestant Christian church. This support contributed to the narrative that became significant to the colonisation and establishment of the Liberian nation. Evangelical preachers saw the wickedness of slavery ended with the freedom of Blacks. Reverend Samuel Hopkins promoted colonisation for decades in his pulpit, envisioning the freed slaves sharing the gospel of Jesus with the strange people of another land (Shick, 1977). It was a civilising mission, in which more enlightened, more educated and religiously devout people would reform the native Africans. Evangelical preaching, along with other public awareness campaigns and political debates, finally culminated in a conference for intellectuals and public leaders who were interested in the development of an African colony for emancipated slaves. The result was the formation of the American Colonization Society (ACS), officially founded in 1816 (Sanneh, 1999; Shick, 1977). At the first annual meeting of the ACS, a letter from Thomas Jefferson was read, in which the former president encouraged the new society to create a colony,

I have ever thought that the most desirable which could be adopted for gradually drawing off this part of our population. Most advantageous for themselves as well as for us; going from a country possessing all the useful arts, they might be the means of transplanting them among the inhabitants of Africa; and would thus carry back to the country of their origin the seeds of civilization, which might render their sojournment here a blessing, in the end, to that country.<sup>36</sup>

The public narrative the ACS adopted followed on from these sentiments. The movement was represented as a win-win situation in which all parties concerned would benefit. The members of the ACS believed that a colony would rid America of the social and moral problem of slavery. They could simply “draw off” the unwanted part of their

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<sup>36</sup> Jefferson, T. (1811, January 21). [Copy of a letter from Thomas Jefferson, Late President of the United States, to John Lynd]. African American Perspectives: Pamphlets from the Daniel A. P. Murray Collection, 1818-1907, Library of Congress, Digital ID: lcrbmrp t1503 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/lcrbmrp.t1503>

population. On a more benevolent note, the emancipation project would allow Africa to receive somewhat “civilised” Christians and give Blacks an opportunity for true freedom and opportunity. Idealists for colonization gave spiritual significance to the venture. They believed that an African colony would be a “promised land” for freed slaves, much like the land of Israel in the Bible (Shick, 1977).

Not all of those involved were so benevolent, however. A large portion of the early ACS members were slave owners themselves. Colonisation of freed slaves was a strategy to preserve the slave trade for many southern slaveholders. These men saw an African colony of freed slaves as a social alternative to the abolitionist movement. In light of the growing political debate around slavery they hoped that emancipating a mere few would ultimately preserve the slave trade as a whole (Beyan, 1994). If the government chose to back a proposition for colonisation of slaves, they hoped that slavery itself would not be outlawed.

Despite the appeal for many people, the colonial movement had its opponents. There were many anti-colonist thinkers who saw through the philanthropic rhetoric of the ACS. Giles Stebbins produced a volume of compiled criticisms offered to the debate on colonisation. In the following passage, published sometime after the colony transitioned into a formally established nation, Stebbins eloquently points to the abjection of blacks in America, and to the superiority, separateness, and disdain that persisted through the colonial movement. Writing of the ACS he argued (Stebbins, 1853, p. 80),

Its highest form of philanthropy toward the coloured man is to send him to Liberia. As for treating him as a man here, that is a different matter—the obligation to do so it repudiates—for slavery has created a stern and cruel prejudice, forbidding such treatment, and the easiest way to keep up this prejudice is to talk about African civilization.

What was shrouded in a rhetoric of generosity and goodwill was in fact an agenda that would maintain a separation from black people.

Socio-political arguments and awareness developed into advocacy. The ACS lobbied President Monroe persistently about a colony for freed slaves. His cabinet was unsupportive. Monroe finally agreed to begin work on a resettlement program, but only after the ACS agreed to fund the purchase of land (Shick, 1977). The colonisation efforts finally came to fruition on April 3, 1820, when 86 men and women set sail on the *Elizabeth*, bound for the African coast. The majority of those aboard were former Southern plantation slaves, while others had lived and worked as slaves in the urban

industries. Only a small portion of these men and women had received any formal education.

An elitist mentality permeated the movement. Notions of civilised superiority were at the root of the effort to draw off an unwanted group. It was a narrative that shaped the founding of the nation of Liberia, contributing to a structural class divide that was beneath the eventual eruption of civil conflict over a century later. The slaves were meant to “enlighten” the indigenous people with the doctrines of Christianity and Western education (Gershoni, 2001). They were in effect, to bestow a higher form of social engagement upon the less civilised tribes of the wild West African coast. This contributed to the social psychology of the movement in two ways. First, the blacks were given a mandate, a “higher calling” as it were, to produce a social transformation that would be meaningful for themselves and the indigenous Africans. Second, the Americans were relieved from the social and moral obligation to incorporate blacks into society as equals. There was no attempt to reconcile the inequality between blacks and whites. Instead, the agenda was to remove it.

#### *First Settlements in Africa*

The first attempt to establish a colony met with abysmal failure. A swampy settlement on Sherbro Island was physically and socially difficult to live in. Infighting between the freed blacks and the Euro-Americans from the ACS who had come to “help” establish the settlement was a perpetual irritation. Additionally, unsuccessful negotiations with the indigenous people accompanied by a shortage of food and supplies, and was accentuated by an outbreak of malaria, and the subsequent death of several colonists (Sanneh, 1999; Shick, 1977).

In America, President Monroe was unwilling to accept failure. He authorised the use of whatever means necessary to ensure that the Africans agreed to sell land. What followed was an early contribution to a long history of conflict between the indigenous Africans and the settlers from America. Monroe again deployed a group of freed slaves under the leadership of naval officer Lieutenant Robert Field Stockton (Sanneh, 1999). Upon arrival in 1822, Lieutenant Stockton and his associate Dr. Eli Ayres engaged in several fruitless land negotiations with a native chief, King Peter. When King Peter failed to appear for further discussions, the Americans stormed into his village. They held him at gunpoint and demanded that he meet with them to negotiate the selling of his land. Given the circumstances, King Peter promptly appeared to concede to the Americans’ wishes. He sold them a selected area of land for a payment made in guns,

beads, tobacco, gunpowder, rum and various other goods. There were numerous conflicts between the African tribes and settlers subsequently.<sup>37</sup>

Early fighting between the settlers and the indigenous communities is often represented as a relationship characterised by resentment on the part of the indigenous groups. Boås (2005; 2001b) refers to early settlement of Liberia by the freed slaves as a process in which the “seeds of hatred” were sown between the settlers and indigenous tribes. This is an understandable narrative, as the settlers and their white American escorts forcibly confiscated land. A relationship characterised by resentment on the part of the indigenous community is assumed. Oral histories among ethnic groups do not support such a perspective. D’Azevedo (1969, p. 18) relates,

Gola historians seldom interpret hostilities between themselves and surrounding groups—or with the Liberians for that matter—as motivated by a desire to force their removal or destruction...Warfare was always a function of competition for status and economic advantage between chiefdoms or clusters of chiefdoms.

Likewise, from her historical and ethnographic work with the Glebo, Moran (2006) describes how the arrival of the American settlers was likely to be perceived. She argues that it would not have been a unique or a defining moment in history, but rather, the coming of a new group who were pushed out of their old territory and were now making a new start in a new place.

It is essential that we bear in mind the diversity of the indigenous tribes. Interpretations like Boås’s tend to imply a homogenous indigenous population that was opposed and overrun by a minority of outsiders. The emerging ruling settler class did exclude and exploit the indigenous tribes over the course of Liberia’s pre-civil war history. This is undisputed. It is important to point out that there was *more than one*. The settlers from America did not confront and negotiate with a singular indigenous group. Rather, a diverse and heterogeneous population of indigenous collectives—some of whom were at odds with one another—met a small and unusual band of foreign settlers. These groups engaged with the settlers from America on different terms and with their own agendas.

The colony established itself despite frequent bouts of conflict with indigenous tribes. Cultural differences were pronounced. From the outset, the settlers established what Ferguson (1999) refers to as “cultural style.” He uses this phrase to designate practices

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<sup>37</sup> See Levitt (2005) for a thorough and analytical review of the conflicts between various tribes and the American settlers in Liberia.

that signify difference between social categories. I find it useful to incorporate Bourdieu's (1986) forms of cultural capital in order to think specifically about the expression of difference in cultural style. Bourdieu breaks cultural capital down into three forms: the embodied dispositions of the mind and body, objectified forms of material goods such as art, books, machines, and the institutional forms such as educational qualifications. Taken together, these forms of cultural capital combine to present a cultural style that expresses social difference. The culture within this new society took on an elitist persona that Shick (1977) describes as pompous sophistication. It was an antebellum emulation that one informant referred to as "that top-hat mentality."<sup>38</sup> An air of superior sophistication characterised the settlers in contrast to the indigenous "country people," as did their Western names. The settlers arrived with identities that reflected their American origins, such as Allen, Benson, Carey, Thompson, Warren (Shick, 1971).<sup>39</sup>

Cultural style was important for indicating how civilised one was. This was significant in the early years of settlement, and continued to have relevance at the time of this research. Recall that the narrative around the colonial movement in America was built on the ideal of bringing a more civilised way of life to the wild and untamed people of West Africa. Western style of dress and spoken English were primary forms of cultural style that expressed social difference from and superiority above the indigenous West African people (Breitborde, 1988; Shick, 1977). This theme will be picked up again later in this chapter, and bears particular relevance to the post-war material discussed in Chapter Five.

In the following sections I present some of the ways that separation between the settlers and the indigenous people of Liberia became entrenched. I discuss how financial mismanagement and dependence on foreign aid and investment ultimately crippled the Republic. I look at political developments and show how the ruling settler class in Monrovia maintained political dominance through indirect rule over the indigenous majority. I also discuss how social relations within and between the Americo-Liberians and indigenous groups enabled and facilitated the sort of political and economic deterioration that led to the civil war.

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<sup>38</sup> Interview, January 26, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> See this work by Shick for a full list of the emigrants to Liberia between the years of 1820 and 1843.

## National Legacy of Exclusion and Differential Incorporation

Initial fledgling settlements were governed by the ACS. National sovereignty was officially established in 1847. The constitution and model of government were fashioned after the US. It was, as Boley (1983) observes as “a constitution from *without*” (emphasis added). However, unlike the US Declaration of Independence, which became the grounds upon which slavery was contested (Beyan, 1994), the Liberian Declaration of Independence interestingly retained cultural, political, religious and social differences between the settler state and the indigenous inhabitants of the shores they settled upon (Boley, 1983). The Liberian Declaration of Independence notes a substantial, qualitative difference between the settlers and the indigenous people groups. It states that the company of settlers who accumulated on the West African coast to “expatriate themselves from the land of their nativity and to form settlements on this barbarous coast” (in Huberich, 1947, p. 828).

### *Economic Mismanagement and Dependence*

From the founding of the Republic, Liberia was plagued by a series of economic crises that were alleviated through increased dependence on external sources. The early settler economy proved dysfunctional. During the initial settlement, immigrants were given land to cultivate (10-25 acres) upon arrival. However, the distaste for agricultural work, and the unsuitable tools provided by the ACS led most settlers to engage in two forms of economic activity: trade and politics. Trade was lucrative enough for a time, though many Americo-Liberians found themselves out-competed by European companies, and experienced a decline in former European trading activities as a result of changed trade patterns and nationalism among European traders with their respective West African colonies (van der Kraaij, 1983).

One early challenge that the settlers faced was competition to trade with European traders. The indigenous tribes had a long established relationship with Europeans traders. The Americo-Liberians could not compete with indigenous communities who met traders all along the coast. The Ports of Entry Law was enacted in 1864 as a solution to the competition and a means of generating more revenue. It limited the number of ports accessible to foreigners so that taxes could be enforced. This also limited the amount of trade that could be engaged in by indigenous tribes with the Europeans. Further uprisings ensued as a result (van der Kraaij, 1983). Internally, corruption and embezzlement thwarted the economic capacity of the government (van der Kraaij, 1983). By the turn of the century, the new nation was faced with a depleted

budget and little manpower to oversee expanded government administration in the interior. The government was so destitute that it had already been forced to take out two loans, one in 1871 and 1906. Another two were taken out in 1912 and 1917.

It was against this backdrop of severe economic insufficiency and dependence that the infamous Firestone agreement came about.<sup>40</sup> Harvey Firestone was in the market for rubber in the late 1920s and early '30s. He found it in Liberia. His company leased one million acres for a period of 99 years at a rate of six cents per acre per annum. Perhaps a more serious decision, Liberia chose to indebt itself even further to the Americans by agreeing to a loan taken out with the Finance Corporation of America. The government of Liberia required a sum of five million dollars to run the country. Firestone offered a loan. The government refused as they insisted that too much power would be granted to one hand. Harvey Firestone then created the Finance Corporation of America with the help of some US congressmen. The government of Liberia subsequently received pressure from the US State Department. They also received considerable encouragement from their own President King and former president Arthur Barclay and Senator William—both of the latter having been hired to serve as Firestone's company lawyers in Liberia (van der Kraaij, 1983).

The Liberian government accepted the loan of five million US dollars. With this agreement, Liberia was a country "virtually under control of American administrators appointed by a Government on the other side of the Atlantic" (van der Kraaij, 1983, pp. 49-50). As a part of the agreement, it was forced to become dependent on an American financial advisor who was appointed by the US government to serve in Liberia.<sup>41</sup> This particular person was given the responsibility of approving the annual budget. No money could exchange hands without his consent (van der Kraaij, 1983). Suffice it to say, with the Firestone Concession, Liberia conceded a significant amount of economic and political control to corporate authorities in the US. It was an *international corporation*, backed by the US government that held a crucial amount of power over the development of the political economy.

### *Indirect Rule*

Given the financial constraints and the pressure, the expansion of governance outside of Monrovia was relatively unfeasible. The Government of Liberia ultimately adopted a system of indirect rule (Hlophe, 1979; Osaghae, 1996). The effort to incorporate the

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<sup>40</sup> "The Planting Agreement of 1926" can be found in its entirety in Buell's (1947) Appendix 5.

<sup>41</sup> See the full loan agreement in Buell's (1947) Appendix 6.

interior tribes required a new bureaucratic office and administration. The Department of Interior was formed in 1869 (Rinehart, 1985). The aim was to achieve some measure of jurisdiction over the indigenous majority in the hinterland through indigenous leaders who were co-opted into government service. To make things more manageable, the hinterland was carved up into five administrative districts. The Liberian Frontier Force (LFF) was a 500 man outfit created to keep control of the government's interior agenda. The LFF was put on patrol in the hinterland, and became known for its brutality (Osaghae, 1996). A tax on huts was instigated.

What transpired was the incorporation of the indigenous tribes beneath the governance of the elite, central government in Monrovia *without* equal representation within that body. Indigenous leaders agree to the terms on the understanding that they would have better leverage with the settler government. The result was not at all what they had hoped for. Chiefs could be sent to present problems to the legislature. They were required to pay a \$100.00 US delegate fee for the privilege to present their case. However, they were given no voting rights in the legislature. Renegotiations on the matter were futile. The evolution of the political economy through the 20<sup>th</sup> century culminated into what one lawyer described appropriately as “incorporation without representation.”<sup>42</sup> Tribal authorities were offered some degree of jurisdiction over matters of justice and commerce in the interior. They saw this as a useful way to improve links to the central government in Monrovia while maintaining certain degrees of authority in their own regions (d'Azevedo, 1969). By the 1930s, during the President King's term of office, the transition to incorporation was acutely felt. One Gola elder explained (d'Azevedo, 1969, p. 55):

We old men were treated no better than small boys in the time of King. He overlooked us, and untrained young men and strangers were made into chiefs over us. Commissioners could place us in stocks before our own people and bad men from Monrovia could take our wealth with the help of such chiefs. We were helpless and our people wept.

The exploitation and manipulation d'Azevedo captures in this elder's sentiments reflects a common theme in Liberian history. Over the course of more than a century the social divide between urban Americos and rural majority underwent a slow but persistent transformation, typified by practices of exclusion and differential incorporation. However, it is important to point out that social and political relations were never one-sided arrangements imposed by the Americo-Liberians. Levitt (2005) reminds us that

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<sup>42</sup> Interview, February 21, 2010

indigenous decision-makers were just as involved in the nature of settler-indigenous relations as the settler politicians. Wealth in people was important to these developments for the Americo-Liberians and for the indigenous communities. Relations between the Americos and the indigenous people were mutually desirable. In the initial colonial establishments and development of the republic, this was mainly for economic reasons. The native communities held valuable resources, and the Americos held the lucrative link to trade with the United States. From the early years of settler occupation, intermarriage and fosterage served to link the settlers to the natives. The indigenous Liberians began “pawning” their children to the settlers to be educated (Shick, 1977). The practice has remained a staple social exchange in West Africa. Children could be sent to live with relatives in times of crisis, but also for apprenticeship, domestic labour, to receive education, or to form political alliances between families or communities (Bledsoe, 1980; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985).

Indigenous peoples sent their children to be reared as wards or apprentices in Americo-Liberian households and thereby, establishing family and community alliances between the two social groups. It is important to note that wards were *received* by settlers—not given. Similarly, settler men married indigenous women, which entitled them to land. In Chapter Five we will see a contemporary example of this practice. It is difficult to find an instance in which an Americo was given as a ward or wife to an indigenous household. The two groups were operating from imbalanced and unequal power relations, with women and children being fostered or married out to urban elite—increasing their number of dependents.

Bledsoe (1980) provides an illustrative example of the purpose for these kinds of social transactions in the case of a man named Dumu. Dumu was taken from his village in the interior to live with a high ranking national leader. He lived in the household and was educated in exchange for his contribution of labour. He increased his status by becoming educated and having strong ties to the “civilised world.” Politically, his father gained a useful relationship with the central government that could benefit him in the interior. Within the central government, he became an insider in the affairs of the region. This was a common way that settler-indigenous relations developed. It was not, as Levitt notes, a one-sided exploitation. Rather, it was an arrangement that increased the wealth in people for both households albeit from unequal positions.

## **Social and Economic Transitions during the Tubman Years**

William V. S. Tubman was elected in 1944 and remained president until he died in 1971. As a nation, Liberia experienced perhaps the most significant transformations as a country during his long tenure as the nation's leader. Two policies defined his presidency and for the sake of brevity I will confine my discussion to them. They are The Unification Policy and The Open Door Policy. With them, Liberia experienced tremendous growth and structural integration between the urban elite and indigenous majority, though by the time of Tubman's death in 1971, it was apparent that the nation had achieved neither unification nor lasting development.

### *The Unification Policy: Structural Adjustment and Social Transitions*

Under The Unification Policy, Tubman sought to formally integrate the indigenous majority, ending a long tradition of indirect rule. He extended suffrage to all property owners and those who paid their hut tax (Rinehart, 1985). The Unification Policy brought about structural adjustment that had significant implications for indigenous social transitions. With this initiative, Tubman reinvigorated the civilising mission his forefathers were sent with a century prior. In his first inaugural speech he announced (Townsend, 1959, pp. 21-22):

In the administration of our population inhabiting the Hinterland, our aim and purpose shall be to educate them into good and useful citizens, capable of knowing their duty, status and rights as citizens...For it is to these fellow citizens of ours, inhabitants of the Hinterland, that we must look very largely for the future maintenance and perpetuity of the State; for we are aiming at developing a civilized State, the civilization of which will be as weak as its weakest pagan link, if due precaution be not taken.

Unsurprisingly, this section of the speech was immediately followed by proclamation of intent to expand education nationwide. With The Unification Policy the minority elite sought to assimilate the indigenous Africans—including them on the basis of their cultural and educational similarity to the Americo-Liberian minority, rather than accommodate them as equals in their differences.

The emphasis on being civilised was a primary theme at the very beginning of the colonial movement in America. Here we see it as a central narrative in the expansion of services and social integration during the Tubman years. Given how urban-centric the

Americo-Liberian settlers chose to be in their new environment, and how socially and culturally distinct they strove to be from the indigenous majority, a very overt rural-urban divide emerged and remained throughout the development of the republic.<sup>43</sup> What I want to avoid is a fixed depiction of social hierarchies regarding what is urban, modern and civilised. From her fieldwork in Monrovia, Fraenkel (1964) constructed a social hierarchy of Liberian society. Using a pyramid she placed the elite and “honourables” (senior offices in the government, their families, and some heads of government, doctors and lawyers) at the top, and the tribal, uncivilised people at the bottom (labourers, fishermen, petty traders). While this may have been a congruent representation of her informant’s views, I would like to take care in how distinctions between people who are rural and urban, “civilised” and “uncivilised” are conceptualised in this thesis. Fraenkel has received pointed criticism for presenting “civilised” social and cultural status as relatively static positions that result from ascriptions and assertions of Western cultural style (Brown, 1982; Shack, 1966). Brown (1982, p. 289) observes,

On such a view, a school-teacher might well be regarded as ‘civilised’ and a fisherman as ‘uncivilised’ (and possibly, ‘tribal’), with the domestic servants of the elite and semi-skilled workers in the ‘modern’ sector consigned by the logic of the classification to an intermediate category. But to reduce the meanings of the term to this alone is to ignore all those contexts in which formal status criteria do not define the basis of its attribution. For the same fisherman – or labourer, farmer, etcetera – who might be considered as ‘uncivilised’ in one context, as per Fraenkel’s classification, might equally be considered as ‘civilised’ in another.

We must attend to the inter-subjectivities of cultural style as an expression of difference and status that are ascribed and achieved in a dynamic social and cultural terrain. As will be illustrated in Chapters Five and Six, urban street youth are often stigmatised as less educated and cultured by other members of society, and yet they still find a great deal of distinction between their levels of urban sophistication and that of the rural poor.

The civilising mission bound up within the national unification agenda had significant implications for social transitions among rural, indigenous communities. Incorporation into the elite Americo-Liberian society was accompanied by a slow but steady shift in

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<sup>43</sup> This divide persists in the post-war period. What will appear in the narratives of young men in Chapter Five is a clear comparison and contrast between what was urban, civilised, and of higher value, and what was rural and “traditional.”

social values and norms. Participation in educational and religious institutions was among the most significant implications of this structural adjustment that shaped the mid-1900s in Liberia. Assimilation into the urban elite society meant that rural children became increasingly exposed to Christianity. At the same time, there was an influx of missionaries who trickled into the interior with a dual role of educating the young and converting the indigenous people to Christianity (Hlophe, 1979).

Prior to the infiltration of elite political and economic involvement in the interior, male elders held authority over the political and economic aspects of rural life. The Poro secret society was the primary mode of administering this authority. Spanning across tribal lines, Poro secret societies were regionally based. There might be men from one or more tribes involved in a given Poro cluster (Bellman, 1984). The elders and the Zoes (medicine men) came together to decide on courses of political action, to negotiate land issues, and also to train up young men in the way of Poro. Poro functioned as a social, political, and economic institution that organised and structured rural life (see Bellman, 1984; Bledsoe, 1980; Little, 1965, 1966; Murphy, 1980; Welmers, 1949). The following summary of bush school may appear long in relation to previous discussions. It has important implications not only for our understanding of structural adjustment in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, but also for cultural rites of passage which are significant to the material on incorporation into armed groups discussed in Chapter Seven.

Bush school was the Poro institution through which young boys were trained to become men. Entrance into “bush school” was a time marking the end of childhood. Bush school provided the necessary preparation for young boys to become contributing adults within society. Boys could be initiated as young as five or as old as 12 or 14. When the time came to begin their initiation, young boys were brought into the forest to engage in a symbolic battle with the “forest thing,” portrayed by someone dressed in dramatic clothing and a mask. They were then “eaten” by the forest thing, and cut so as to form scars identifying their particular Poro group. These were usually placed on necks, shoulders, and backs. After scarification, young initiates were led behind a fence that has been constructed for the purposes of bush school. They remained there, secluded from their families and communities, for a period of time proscribed by the elders—traditionally four to five years. During this time of seclusion with the elders, young boys are instructed in the “secrets” held by their mentors. They are sworn to secrecy themselves, and are threatened with severe punishment should they reveal any of what is imparted to them during rites of passage. They were not allowed to engage with the opposite sex. They were also taught to adhere to social hierarchies and respect for elders. Once they had completed the allotted time in bush school, young men are given a

new name. They are returned to their villages and families as “newly born” young men. They are accepted mature members of society, and expected to contribute to their villages and to the Poro society as responsible adults. They also learned practical skills that could “protect their advantage,” as one man put it.<sup>44</sup> It was knowledge that would enable them to protect and provide for their families. They were taught to make herbal medicines to protect their health (Welmers, 1949). They also learned how to maintain sustainable livelihoods. They were given instruction in fighting and farming. They learned to use conjured medicines to make and prepare traps that would successfully catch their prey.<sup>45</sup>

“Actually, the boys who went through Poro were better husbands,”<sup>46</sup> a neighbour noted to me over the afternoon’s washing. “They teach them how to hunt, how to fish, how to build their houses. When they come out of the Poro school they are considered men. They are treated differently, even by their mothers. Their mothers don’t treat them like little boys anymore, they treat them like men. They’re not supposed to cry anymore. They go, they build their house, and then they can marry.”

It also functioned as a transitional ground in which rites of passage insured that boys became men. Poro provided an education and a social, political, and economic incorporation into adulthood. They went into bush school as children and emerged as men. Unlike the liminality experienced by urban youth in the present time, rural youth of the previous generations were given straightforward, structured pathways into adulthood—at least as these transitions were remembered locally and recorded ethnographically. Bush school was an institution that facilitated the onset of adulthood while ensuring that young people could make an acceptable contribution to their respective communities.

A number of political, economic, and social transitions took place during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and these changes made inequalities between the indigenous majority and the minority of urban elites became increasingly apparent. These shifts also altered social horizons for young men in particular, opening new pathways to higher social status. Western educational institutions began to take precedence over the traditional rural education of young men in Poro society. This was facilitated in part through the accommodation of Western Christian missionaries and educators in the interior. Their cultural and educational influence enabled and facilitated young people’s assimilation

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<sup>44</sup> Interview, March 26, 2011

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Interview, March 11, 2011

into the Westernised urban elite society in the city. What was modern, urban, and Western became valued as the best way to increase one's life chances. One of the primary ways that urban residents distinguished themselves from their rural counterparts was by pointing to the differences in education. "They are uneducated," I often heard.

The socio-political division between the elite minority and everyone else was further established with the economic developments that came in conjunction with these political developments. By the end of the Second World War, a port had been built in Monrovia, an international airport had been completed, and the very notable Firestone Rubber plantations had been established. These were the first large-scale employment opportunities that incorporated indigenous Liberians into the wage economy. Wrubel (1971, p. 193) concludes, "Given access to a great many elements of western culture (a hallmark of the settler group), the large numbers of tribal people who had left their traditional villages would clearly become increasingly conscious, during the 1950s of the evidences of differential incorporation."<sup>47</sup> Although President Tubman spoke frequently on the importance of unification and equality, these statements were more symbolic than substantive. During Tubman's long tenure between 1944 and his death in 1971, public services expanded, revenue increased, and the number of resources for distribution grew. None of these advances however, were significant in equalising the two major social groups. Privileges and opportunities—social, economic, and political—continued to be accessible only to the dominant minority (Wrubel, 1971).

In the 1940s, education became a primary source of socio-economic mobility. Moving to Monrovia for educational attainment became a growing trend among the indigenous people. The population of Monrovia doubled between 1963 and 1972.<sup>48</sup> The educated people who had integrated (as much as possible) into Americo society strongly believed in unification. Those who were loyal to Americo society received low-level political leadership (Hlophe, 1979). By 1972, education received the highest percentage of government spending. At that point in time, President Tolbert had come to office with a rhetoric that valued achievement and training over favouritism and networks that had characterised access to socio-economic mobility in previous governments. His tenure as

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<sup>47</sup> In fact, the awareness of differential incorporation was so much the case that Fraenkel (1964, p.225) includes the attitudes of a non-Americo university student who related a vivid illustration of the social divide. She recalled, "We students had to elect a class president. Some of the Americo-Liberians got together and said they didn't want anyone from the tribes. So we interior students got together, and we agreed to elect a Gio boy. We felt we had a majority. These people are too hard in their hearts, they cannot change... There will be a civil war. They think so much of themselves, and who are they."

<sup>48</sup> Taken from a census quoted in Reno (1998).

president saw a rise in equality of educational opportunity, though a high level of illiteracy remained an issue countrywide (Hlophe, 1979).

A new social class of technocrats emerged. These were educated indigenous Liberians who had established themselves in mid-level management positions in the urban sector. This said, family affiliations with the Americo elites remained important social and economic links, despite the President's emphasis on education. What the indigenous people could not seem to obtain were upper level political positions. These remained firmly in the grasp of the elite families in the ruling class (Hlophe, 1979).<sup>49</sup>

### *The Open Door: Growth without Development*

Prior to The Open Door Policy the government of Liberia had failed to establish a productive internal development plan. They had also failed to make development happen through foreign loans (van der Kraaij, 1983). In the following years further economic growth was facilitated through the Open Door Policy, introduced by President Tubman in his second term in 1952. The Open Door Policy continued a pattern of growth without development (Osaghae, 1996). With the policy, Liberia opened to foreign business of a particular kind. The policy allowed foreign businesses to invest. However the constitution in Liberia forbade citizenship to white people. The Tubman administration refused to provide investment incentives to black investors from neighbouring countries while granting them to foreign white investors. This insured that any economic development achieved would not be accompanied by stake-holders who could become citizens and thus involved in internal politics.

This strategy had two further implications. As in the case of Firestone, it further tied the economic growth of the country to the interests of foreigners, rather than to Liberians. It also thwarted the entrepreneurial efforts of what was becoming a rising middle class of indigenous Liberians. Foreign investors could come in with business plans and access to capital the likes of which few of the middle class could rival. Tubman was so ruthless in his zeal for foreign investment to the exclusion of Liberians that he boasted of dismissing Liberian merchants who contested foreign traders right to out compete local enterprise in the hinterland. In a public speech he recalled that a group of merchants had come to him complaining that foreigners were able to offer prices they could not match. He asked how many merchants in the area. They replied about 15. He asked how many people in the area. They replied about 150,000.

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<sup>49</sup> For example, see Boley's (1983) long list of Tolbert's appointments of family members to public office. See Liebnow's (1962) chart for an earlier example of the kinship ties that crossed extensively through local and national level political positions.

I then finally asked if they suggest that Government, by restricting foreign merchants from trading in the hinterland, should place one hundred and fifty thousand of her citizens living in the area at the mercy of fifteen Liberian traders who would sell goods and commodities at excessive and higher rates than the foreign merchants to their own fellow citizens up there...the answer, of course, was obvious (in Townsend, 1959, p. 173).

In short, the policy isolated economic opportunities away from the indigenous community as well as from other surrounding African nations. Thus, the Americo-Liberian elites were able to maintain dominance by displacing economic growth to the work of foreigners. The majority of companies and corporations involved in lucrative enterprises like mining and rubber were either solely or jointly owned by the foreign businesses and/or the government of Liberia (van der Kraaij, 1983). This meant that there was a severe lack of privately owned *Liberian* business to contribute to national economic growth and development. The country was run by an elite minority who offered the resources of a rich land to the pockets of international investors.

In this section I have traced some of the most important developments within the political economy prior to the war. My aim was to show how the Liberian government maintained an outward focus which resulted in internal underdevelopment. It was the political and economic development 'from without' that led Horton (1994, p. 2) to reflect,

The buildings, bridges, communication and transportation facilities, rubber and mining operations, and everything else that indicated development to me were not true development. They were mere installations, not representative of the Liberian people's creativity and inventiveness. They could not be sustained without white foreigners and were certain to crumble.

Internal underdevelopment in the political economy was deeply connected to the maintenance of a social divide established in the very founding of the Republic.

### **Political Discontent and Opposition**

The 1970's were a time marked by political consciousness and mobilisation for change. Two opposition movements were formed to create change. The Movement for Justice in

Africa (MOJA) was one, the Progressive Alliance of Liberians (PAL) was the other. MOJA was a Pan-Africanist movement founded by Togba Nah Tipoteh among University of Liberia students. The group was committed to working toward social equality in the long term, but were not as aggressive in their political rhetoric as the PAL (Rinehart, 1985). The PAL, organised in the United States by Gabriel Baccus Matthews, was supported by disaffected Liberian students and expatriates who were committed to critique of their class based society. They demanded more immediate and drastic change in the government (Matthews, 1980). The PAL did become quite instrumental in the downfall of the Americo-Liberian government, though the course of events took an unfortunate turn they did not foresee.

### *The Rice Riots*

In 1979, the Minister for Agriculture proposed an increase in the price of rice. A 100 pound bag of rice, currently sold at a subsidised price of 22 USD should be increased to 26 USD. This would increase the profit for farmers, encouraging them to continue to work the fields rather than leaving their farms to look for wage labour in the city or on rubber plantations (Rinehart, 1985). However, Tubman's successor President Tolbert had come under increasing criticism for corruption. That Tolbert's family was in the business of large-scale rice farming and stood to benefit substantially from the price increase did not escape the notice of the PAL. A march on the Executive Mansion was organised. Some 2,000 unarmed students and other citizens turned out. The government panicked and sent police to stop the march. The protestors would not stand down. When tear gas failed to stop them, the police opened fire. Rioting and looting ensued (Liebenow, 1985). The 1979 Rice Riots turned out to be the tipping point after more than a century of exclusion and differential incorporation. Two days before the trial of the opposition leaders, Tolbert's rule came to an abrupt end.

A successful coup attempt saw Samuel Doe become the first indigenous head of state. Doe's regime was characterized by fear, suspicion, and liberal use of the machine gun (Sawyer, 1992). Unfortunately, Doe continued the pattern of favouritism and exclusion of his elite predecessors. Krahn and Mandingo ethnic groups received privileged access to economic and educational opportunities denied to others. These and other events precipitated multiple coup attempts by excluded ethnic groups, which ultimately failed. The subsequent discrimination against these tribes caused an abundance of interethnic tension within Liberia (Outram, 1997).

## Civil War

This era of “unparalleled brutality” (Levitt, 2005, p. 205) was brought to a close by a man who claimed ethnic and elite origins (Harris, 1999) and an army who espoused no ethnic agenda (Outram, 1997). Charles Taylor and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) began a new phase of intensified armed conflict when they invaded Nimba County on Christmas Eve, 1989. They attacked government troops, and from there, quickly recruited hundreds of Liberians for the cause of overthrowing Doe’s government, initiating a new phase of brutality that was to last for over a decade. When war did not end with the assassination of President Doe, it became apparent that Taylor was waging war not to overthrow a corrupt leader, but to establish himself as the country’s head of state (Moran, 2006). Numerous groups sprung up to challenge Taylor’s quest for state power. The Economic Community of West African States agreed to deploy the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), a joint military intervention force. ECOMOG moved in to protect parts of the city and the government administration in Monrovia.

Taylor was successful in 1997, when after multiple ceasefires and peace negotiations he was democratically elected President of Liberia. His election did not bring the peace so many had hoped for. Multiple factions armed against him, waging war against his military from 1999 to 2003. Finally, in 2003 Taylor relinquished his power in Liberia and accepted asylum in Nigeria (Levitt, 2005). An interim government was put in place in Liberia. In 2005, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was democratically elected Africa’s first female president. She is currently serving a second term as Liberia’s head of state. A woman of indigenous origins, her Americo connections provided educational, economic, and political opportunities that have laid the foundation for her current position as Liberia’s “Iron Lady” (Johnson Sirleaf, 2009). To date, the country remains in peace.

There is a small but important note to make about how I have referred to the years between 1989 and 2003. Some authors choose to divide this period, referring to the first civil war, and the second civil war (Podder, 2011; Utas, 2008b). This makes good sense, as the years from 1989 to 1996 saw Taylor in hot pursuit of state power. When the conflict resumed again from 1999 to 2003, it was waged to remove him from the position he had won. I have chosen not to refer to these as separate wars. Unrest and violence continued during the “interwar years” during 1997 and 1998 (Levitt, 2005). Though there were many contributing factors to these 14 years of civil conflict, Charles Taylor was always at the centre. The war began with his invasion of Liberia, and it did not come to a sustainable cessation until he had left for exile. It was Taylor’s quest for

state power that fuelled the early years of conflict. It was only after his removal that war ceased. My Liberian informants sometimes referred to the war as “14 unbreakable years.” With this in mind, I’ve chosen to refer to all 14 years as the Liberian civil war.

## **Chapter Five: Social Reproduction through Imagined Post-War Trajectories**

In this chapter I consider the ways in which structures were being reproduced in the post-war period with implications for young men's social navigation. I have argued that the civil war was not a revolution intended to bring about structural changes. It was not instigated to challenge the established order. Rather it was a war fought by a number of factions who were vying to replace the current big man with another. The dominant minority elite have—at least to some extent—re-established positions of dominance in the social order of Liberian society. What we will see in this chapter is continuity between young men's means to mobility prior to war, and their perceived options for mobility afterwards. *Doxa* does not appear to have been challenged. The taken-for-granted structuring of everyday life and of future opportunities was not interrogated or reimagined through the war. If anything, the damage to institutions and infrastructure seems to have heightened the necessity of increasing one's life chances through former means to mobility—namely through assimilation to the more “civilised” class and migration to the US. Lubkemann (2008) argues that war can be transformative for social conditions in post-conflict countries. It provides a space for creativity, imagination, and interrogation of structure. It is too early to make any assessment of Liberia. However, what I observed in this study was reproduction much more than creativity in the imagined trajectories of young men.

This chapter is about the perceived pathways available to the urban, post-war youth in this study. It presents voices of informants who contributed to this study throughout my fieldwork. Whereas the following chapters focus almost exclusively upon street youth or ex-combatants, this chapter incorporates a broader range of informants that include university students, unoccupied youth, parents, youth workers, and others. In it, I argue that young men's social pathways are bounded by class, a divide that is being reproduced in the post-war period. The socio-cultural, economic, and political trends of elite dominance that were raised in the history chapter resurface in the narrative accounts of young men's imagined futures. My informants saw what was rural and “traditional” as also uneducated and uncivilised. Similar to urban residents in Fraenkel's (1964, p. 196) pre-war study they spoke of ‘civilised’ as “more or less synonymous with ‘Westernized’...by virtue of their residence in Monrovia, all sections of the population were to some degree Westernized.” On the contrary, to be urban was to be modern and these qualities coincided with being civilised and educated.

In short, this chapter is about reproduced structural barriers to youth mobility. In it I discuss the schemas that inform separation of rural from urban and non-elite urbanites from the elites. In doing so, I present broad categories of people who are by no means entirely homogenous within “non-elite” or “elite” groupings. The Liberians have certainly used stark categories to distinguish “tribal” from “civilised” in the past (Fraenkel, 1964). Some continued to express these general distinctions at the time of this study. However, as Fraenkel (1964, p. 196) notes, “Broadly speaking, these terms may be said to refer to two social classes, differentiated by their style of life, and, to a limited extent, by their consciousness of corporate class identity. But to describe social stratification in Monrovia as a two-class system would be an over-simplification.”

I highlight some of these markers of corporate class identity that still persist in post-war Monrovia. I argue that the post-war political, economic, and social structures were being reproduced to favour the dominant minority of the urban elite. Youth from non-dominant backgrounds in the interior, and those of non-elite backgrounds in Monrovia, felt they must assimilate, conforming to the norms and values of the dominant cultural fraction (Mahar, 1990). The highest positions in society were reserved for those whose family relations and Western cultural capital has been acquired through experience in the US. It is only with great effort that non-elite youth might acquire some level of socio-economic status in lower positions of government. In this chapter I present the structural barriers that limit the options on non-elite youth.

To do this I present a number of pathways young people perceive as available to them. I discuss their perspectives about how best to chart their life trajectories. This chapter contains five sections. In the first, I discuss life chances in the interior, rural political economy and highlight social distance and distrust that act as deterrents to youth migration out of the city or to economic involvement in their rural communities of origin. Next, I turn to urban pathways, focusing on rural-to-urban migration as a historically established pathway to socio-economic mobility. I also discuss the keen interest for trajectories into government, grounding my analysis in both the evolution of the political economy in Monrovia and current post-war constraints on the private sector. I argue that assimilation into elite culture was a crucial element for socio-economic mobility that requires an accruelement of cultural capital. Third, I discuss youth desires to travel to the US. This was an established elite pathway. It was also a youth escape from the deprived socio-economic conditions in Liberia. With these three possibilities put forward I then discuss modes of mobility as primarily generated through patrons, what I have termed “saints,” and the US Diversity Visa. In all of these, the element of chance features prominently in young people’s ability to acquire the

necessary helping hand. Finally, I look at return migration. I discuss the perception that to go abroad and return is an almost certain guarantee of increased status as a big man. Socio-economic mobility upon return is a function of acquired human and economic capital, but also a function of cultural capital and elite affiliation.

### Youth and Rural Pathways

The first contribution to social reproduction of the class divide concerns the social distance and distrust that characterise young people's reticence to pursue future endeavours in the interior.

"Would you ever go back?" I asked Stephen one afternoon. "Even to visit?" <sup>50</sup>

"Who am I going to?"

At 32, Stephen worked every day changing money and selling scratch cards (phone top-up) on a corner near my house. After listening to him expound upon the number of limitations that urban life presented to young men like him, I wondered if he would consider going back to his home village in the interior. "I would like to go, at least to visit, but who am I going to? My parents were killed in the war. The rest of the family is in Monrovia—who am I going to?"

As we will see in greater detail in the following chapter, everyday survival was maintained in the company of others. Accordingly, people weighed their decisions to go and stay, to strike out in new directions, or maintain a known position, based upon *who* they are with and *who* they are going to. Many youth like Stephen had no one in the interior to go to and thus the city was their only option by default. Others had family and kin in the rural interior. Despite having someone to go to, they chose the stress of uncertainty in the city over the prospects they perceive in the rural countryside.

Terry explained some of the limitations of settling in the interior. His family lived in a small village in Bong County. He told me about how his father had encouraged him and his brother to make their way in the world. The first thing I learned about Terry's father was that he was the first literate, educated man in the village. It was a mark of immense pride and a subject he often returned to in conversation about his interior origins. He said that his father discouraged him from being initiated into the Poro Society in the village. He felt that attending would actually hinder his children. Terry explained that if he had gone through "society" (by which he referred to Poro Society),

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<sup>50</sup> Fieldnote, February 13, 2010

he would have been socially limited in the village. Society would ensnare him as a social member of the village. He would have to meet the expectations of the village elders. Reciprocal relationships of indebtedness within a rural community would constrain his ability to invest the time and social energy into options for socio-economic mobility outside of the village. He said it was not necessary for him and it seemed a waste of time. Society was good for the village, he noted, but not the city.

His younger brother made a different choice. He chose to go through the bush school. “Why?” I asked. His father had discouraged them from doing so. What would make his brother disregard his father’s wishes? Terry explained that his brother’s fiancée was the daughter of a very distinguished village elder. He needed this initiation in order to please his future father-in-law. “But for me, it’s not necessary,” Terry emphasised. His brother lived a life of striking contrast to that of Terry, and most other urban young men in this study. His rural life was embedded within a social structure where the will of the Poro society elders and the needs of his family and village community made up a significant set of obligations. There was a rural household to attend to. There were rural elders to answer to. In short, he had wealth in rural people. The possibilities available to him were a function of his position in his rural community.

#### *Envy, Jealousy, and Distrust*

Rural society did not present a merely pragmatic barrier to mobility for young men. It did not simply tie them down to obligations that took precedence over other plausible opportunities in the city. Rather, it ensnared them. It was a site of danger that should be avoided at all costs. “Traditional culture” as most referred to it, and of which secret societies played an instrumental part, had become viewed by many urban residents as a source of divisiveness and destruction by the time of this fieldwork. It was associated with darkness and negativity. When young men and adults discussed their views about bush school, the consensus was straightforward and unanimous—though Poro society had at one point been an important institution in the lives of young men and their rural communities, it had become a divisive and destructive institution in recent decades.

The reasons beneath these harmful qualities were thought to be rooted in feelings of exclusion and differential incorporation that were hallmarks of the nation from its very foundation. The divisiveness and destruction it facilitated and enabled was often attributed to envy and jealousy. Envy and jealousy were amongst some of the primary motivations attributed to danger and causes for harm experienced. Use of witchcraft, which found its roots in rural “traditional culture”, was a prime suspect when misfortune struck a successful person. Though the two words have virtually the same definition—

“to feel displeasure and ill-will at the superiority of (another person) in happiness, success, reputation or the possession of anything desirable” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989, p. 316)—Liberians often used both words together, which added emphasis to their appraisal of a given circumstance. Ill-will was often assigned to the motivations of a jealous person who had “put something” (witchcraft) on another.

Secret societies empowered people to turn on one another rather than teaching skills and encouraging people to live together harmoniously. The interior was presented as synonymous with the threat of unwanted spiritual attacks. Fear of being attacked was enough to keep some youth away altogether. Jake’s situation illustrates this sentiment clearly. Like Terry, Jake had family land in the interior. Jake was concerned enough about witchcraft to stay out of the interior completely. After the war, he received agricultural job training, but chose not to use it. “Presently [I have] property in the country right now. My grandmother has so many acres of land. Yeah, but no development.”<sup>51</sup>

“Now that’s interesting,” I replied. “You have land that’s available to you. And you also have skills in agriculture. But you didn’t go to your grandmother’s land to work.”

“Okay...I’m a Bassa man, my county is Grand Bassa. Where they (grandmother and kin are) at. The people believe in the African way of living,” he said, his voice taking a different tone. “The witch, whatsoever... I’m in Monrovia, and I’m not used to it. So even though I graduated from [an agricultural training programme] I decided to come back here.”

“What’s African culture like?”

“They see one another and they try to de-brighten their future. Yeah, shorten [your] life. Maybe you haven’t experienced it over there (in the West), but they have it here.”

“Wait, they would try to make your life short?”

“Yeah, they can kill you. They witch the person. Common thing.”

“They witch you?”

“Mm-hmm...You go back there and say that you going to bring farm in, you know, do something like that...You will find that a grandmother will have more than 15, 16

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<sup>51</sup> Interview, April 26, 2010

grandchildren, that will depend on that property. So that hatred built among all of them.”

Such efforts to undermine those ahead resemble “crab antics.” In his ethnography of the social structure on the Caribbean island of Providencia, Wilson (1973) refers to similar attitudes of covetousness and contentiousness in *Crab Antics*. As he relates (p. 58) “Crab antics is behaviour that resembles that of a number of crabs who, having been placed in a barrel, all try to climb out. But as one nears the top, the one below pulls him down in his own effort to climb. Only a particularly strong crab ever climbs out—the rest, in the long run, remain in the same place.” This is a somewhat essentialising framework that reduces people to agents who usurp one another in a vicious fight for social position. I do not bring this framework in as a theoretical explanation, but rather, as a congruent metaphor for how Liberians felt about one another. In situations of scarcity and unequal opportunities, displeasure and ill-will were directed toward the one who had advanced. Harm was presumed to have been inflicted against a successful, more prestigious person.

“There is a serious problem,”<sup>52</sup> Alex explained. “Liberians have developed a mind-set such that they...always try to undermine one another.”

Envy and jealousy on the part of rural family and kin were the source of distrust among their urban relatives. The rural *others* could not be trusted to support or celebrate the success of their urban kin. Rather, like crabs in a barrel, they were expected to undermine the more prestigious. Daniel was as clear as anyone about the use of witchcraft to satisfy envy and jealousy. A young father in his 30s, Daniel was originally from Nimba. He was displaced to Ghana during the war. Like many others, when the war ended, he returned not to Nimba, but to Monrovia. As with Terry, he said his father had been involved in Poro society, and told him that he did not want him to go in. “Why not?” He said that Poro society used to be really good. It used to be educational. The elders would teach the young men how to live and relate well socially and politically with the rural community. He said by the time he was coming up in the mid-1980s, it had turned mostly into witchcraft.

“Wasn’t there some element of witchcraft always?”<sup>53</sup> I asked. He agreed, but noted that witchcraft was not used to the same extent, nor for the same purposes that it was being used at present. He said Poro society prepared warriors with medicine. There were other, practical purposes for medicine that were a part of everyday life. Such uses of medicine had served the community. Now, it was something used to witch (curse)

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<sup>52</sup> Interview, February 17, 2010

<sup>53</sup> Fieldnote, March 25, 2011

families, to satisfy envy and jealousy. He said his kids would never be a part of it. “No way.” Daniel like many others believed secret societies no longer provided the education and training needed to become a contributing adult in the community. Rather, rural life under the authority or influence of secret societies hindered them from achieving socio-economic mobility. The reason for this apparent decline was not made clear. Daniel was not sure why there had been such a shift in the society’s influence. If we think back to the structural transitions that led to an erosion of indigenous political authority in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is abundantly clear that the expansion of government activity and the economic and educational advances that resulted from the Unification Policy reduced the participation and influence of rural authority structures. It seems likely that exclusion and abjection of the “traditional” may have instilled bitterness and resentment. However, without specific data I am unable to argue this, and will not speculate further.

Terry told me on several occasions about how he too was afraid of his relatives, referring mainly to his rural kin outside of his immediate family. I began to understand this fear after I spent a weekend with him at his family home in the village.<sup>54</sup> He invited me to a family celebration and took me on a tour of the family dwellings and gravesites scattered over several acres. Like Jake, he had family land that could be farmed. During the tour we walked by his plot of land. Motioning to a dense section of bush, he told me of his plan for this piece of property. Here he would build a farm. It would not be his personal home, however. Instead, he would pay family members or other hired workers to work his land. He would make day trips to check the farm’s progress and bring payments and supplies. He had no intention of staying there overnight or sharing any food or drink while he was there. Instead, he would bring everything he needed for the day and then leave. The chances of being harmed or cursed were too great to risk it.

Terry explained that it was common practice for kin and family members to seek to harm those they viewed as being more prosperous than themselves. They will, for instance, “put something” on the successful one (e.g. witchcraft). In Terry’s family, there was an uncle who was suspected of using witchcraft by everyone in the village community. Terry was convinced that if he moved into the village and set up a successful farm, his uncle or some other jealous person would attempt to harm him.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Fieldnotes, January 31 and February 1, 2010

<sup>55</sup> Ferguson (1999) has observed the same expectation of witchcraft being inflicted by the envious in Zambia. Porter et al. (2010) observed similar sentiments in South Africa. Youth were encouraged by their parents to leave their rural roots. To stay and become successful in the community would only put them at risk of envy and the spiteful use of witchcraft.

There are two points of significance I would like to draw from the fears expressed by youth like Terry and Jake. Each has to do with socio-cultural divides and distrust. The first has to do with a general association made with the rural interior—particularly the bush—as the seat of power for secret societies and their Zoes. These Zoes, like Terry’s uncle, were thought to be crafty, untrustworthy, and dangerous. Also there was evidence of a fear of malicious family members who will harm their own kin out of jealousy.

In the next chapter, I will discuss family and kin as the primary source of intergenerational reciprocity, as a helping hand. In this section, I have highlighted distrust in extended kin. There is an important distinction to make. Indebtedness, trust, and reciprocity are built up in relationships over time. My informants had no long-term exchange with rural kin. The helping hand was helpful because of an on-going, reciprocal exchange. Rural kin were not known well, and by virtue of their perceived use of witchcraft, they were avoided.

The specific distrust of rural kin reflected a wider distrust of rural society as a whole. People who participated in the rural, traditional culture were regarded with suspicion and distrust by many of the urban residents. Many felt that they were demanding, jealous, and crafty—people not to offend, and not to trust. Such distrust of rural kin and communities made life in the interior undesirable to the elderly as well as to young people. Urban relatives faced what they felt were enormous expectations from rural kin when they returned to visit their families in the interior. Many felt that they were incapable of meeting the anticipations of gifts and money from their rural family members who expected them to distribute freely from the wealth they believed that their urban relations had accrued in the city.

A group of elders expounded upon these expectations in a focus group. “I never go in the country,”<sup>56</sup> Mustapha remarked. “The same country people, they will find way. They will witch you.” He described a situation in which urban relatives could be taken advantage of by their rural kin.

You take a whole trunk (of things), you give it to them. A person will come but they will not come on time. They will come and say ‘I come for my part in what you take from Monrovia.’ [You tell them that you gave everything to the family]. They say, ‘but I like that T-shirt. I like it.’ And that T-shirt you got on is the only one you got left. So you say, ‘this one I got on, but what will I wear to Monrovia?’ They say ‘I want it’ and you say no. They

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<sup>56</sup> Focus Group, May 25, 2010

say ‘okay, but wear your T-shirt and go.’ You can’t even reach Firestone (a midway point) before the people will witch you and you will die.

Other men voiced similar feelings and chose not to go back to their rural family members.

Though the two were often presented as completely different, there was no clear divide between the rural traditional beliefs and the urban, modern experience. Though the bush was considered the seat of the spiritual world from which medicine men and witches draw their power, traditional spiritual power was exercised in the city as well. A family I lived with for several months moved into my house because the mother believed she had been poisoned by relatives who wanted the property she had inherited.<sup>57</sup> She recalled finding powder sprinkled in a line across her doorframe. Immediately afterwards she felt hot all over and “swelled up” with an unknown sickness. She showed me a picture from the months she was swollen with fluids. Doctors were unable to diagnose the cause and provide treatment. She moved into her church, where pastors and friends prayed for her for weeks before the swelling subsided. When she was restored to health, she and her children moved from that home and rented with me. They were convinced that someone in the extended family was envious of her property and had tried to kill her in order to get it. Thus, neither witchcraft, distrust, nor envy was actually rurally confined. All were experienced by my urban informants. However, the source of such powers was always attributed to “the bush.”

The prevalence of distrust of rural society and of one’s own family was instrumental in the decisions of many young people to remain in the urban centre. However limited these networks might be, if they were considered more trustworthy, they were chosen. However difficult it might be in the city, rural life chances pale in comparison with the possibilities in Monrovia.

### **Youth and Urban Pathways**

Youth commitment to settle in the urban centre was apparent. In the following discussion, I illustrate two social pathways that were being reproduced in the post-war period. One was a rural-to-urban migration pattern which we observed in the history chapter. The other was an imagined future, a possible self as a government employee. Chapter Six will illustrate some of the challenges urban youth faced in Monrovia. The life chances for street youth were limited due to an impoverishment in people—particularly immediate family and extended kin that could offer a helping hand. In this

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<sup>57</sup> Fieldnote, April 3, 2010.

section, I discuss young men's social pathways in the urban centre. I look at rural-to-urban migration as an established route for socio-economic mobility. I also discuss their primary focus on trajectories set for positions in government as a function of historical patterns of social, economic, and political practice and post-war constraints on the private sector. In this and the following sections, assimilation to the dominant class is of utmost importance. A clear and persistent social and cultural divide existed between the elite minority and everyone else. This divide shaped a great deal of the political and economic opportunities young people might or might not have. To emphasize the divide that remains between the elite minority and the majority of everyone else, I begin with an encounter I had shortly after arriving in Monrovia.

I met a government employee for lunch. We met at a restaurant in Sinkor that was owned and run by a Lebanese man. It featured satellite television projected on flat screen televisions. Wireless internet was available throughout their opening hours. We sat on cushioned chairs in air conditioned comfort. It was a regular "spot" for elite businessmen and ex-pats. A friend of his joined us. He asked why I was in Monrovia. I gave him a short description of my research and where I was living. He registered an expression of shock and amusement. It was quickly followed by a pelting spray of comments about how he could not imagine that I actually took bucket baths, lived without air conditioning, and ate "their food." "You know I have Starbucks," he commented. "I can get you Starbucks. A latte'll cost you ten bucks, but I can get you Starbucks."<sup>58</sup>

His demeanour of condescension was more overt than most of the elites I knew. However, his degree of separation from everyone who did not run in his elite circle was common. One of the primary distinctions between elites and everyone else was their possession of cultural capital associated with the United States. "I can get you Starbucks." The degree of opulence one would have to have to get Starbucks lattes was the likes of which none of my neighbours or youth informants could touch from their positions in the post-war social strata. His identity was not merely different; it was based *against* the majority of urban and rural poor in his country. It seemed that the "top hat" mentality of elite antebellum origins had been reproduced in the present to a "Starbucks mentality," a cleavage to the modern, urban cultural style of the "civilised" who hailed from the US. It was assimilation into his circle that the young men I interviewed were striving to achieve.

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<sup>58</sup> Fieldnote, January 27, 2010.

*Established Pathways of Assimilation*

Recall the rise of educational institutions and a middle class of technocrats that emerged in the 1950's and 60's. It was at this time that a pattern of urban migration developed. The incorporation of the rural indigenous communities under the jurisdiction of the central Americo government in Monrovia was completed. It controlled the economic and political developments. Under Tubman, educational facilities and economic growth was on an upswing—mainly through foreign companies like Firestone. This transition in the political economy brought about increased options for socio-economic mobility among young people. Urban migration for education became a desirable and frequented pathway. “I’m a native,” an elderly gentlemen related. “When I went to school—my home is 555 miles from here—yeah, in the East. So I started coming from there. They got no college. When you finished with high school you have to come to the only city to come to college. So I came here, and you know—I started.”<sup>59</sup>

Hlophe (1979) observes that along with the desire for education came the necessity to assimilate into the urban elite. Affiliation with the dominant class of the minority elite was necessary for upward mobility among young people coming to the capital. The example of Dumu in Chapter Four is a case in point. “You had to change your name, including myself,”<sup>60</sup> another elderly man explained. He dropped his indigenous name, taking on the name of a prominent family who helped him in Monrovia. “You have to change your name...It was like, if you wanted to be here, you had to pretend to be somebody else.” Success in Monrovia required acceptance by the dominant, minority elite. *Acceptance was achieved through assimilation.* Identities might need to be reassigned to patrons who facilitated advancement. Identities stemming from indigenous backgrounds and cultures were less likely to be accommodated. What was rural and traditional was also considered uneducated and uncivilised—neither of which held any value, and might well evoke disdain.

A “traditional” wedding I attended illustrated the legacy of urban migration and assimilation that these men were pointing to.<sup>61</sup> The bride and groom wished to have a “traditional” wedding as well as modern, Christian wedding in a church. However, once the guests had arrived there was a great deal of confusion over how the traditional ceremony was to take place. The female friends and family members of the bride sat in a back room and argued for a long time about how the event should begin. Eventually they decided that several other women should be draped in a lappa (a fabric wrap) which

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<sup>59</sup> Interview, February 4, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Interview, February 21, 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Fieldnote, March 16, 2011.

covered them from head to toe. They should then be presented one-by-one to the groom. If he was fooled into thinking that this imposter was his bride he would be forced to pay money. The whole scenario proved to be enjoyable and amusing for the guests. Everyone liked watching the groom look over the covered woman, and shrieked with laughter when she was unveiled as an imposter. The arguments in the back room were over whether to present imposters to the groom came from their lack of cultural experience in traditional weddings. All of the women had a different opinion about how it should be done, about which tribes had chosen to do it this way or that. Eventually, one of the women took the initiative and walked out to present herself to the groom, leaving the rest before the disagreement was resolved. He was also confused not recognising what his role was when a young woman, covered in cloth, stepped out in front of him and the guests. The elderly guests then began calling instructions to him and he caught on.

As we were leaving, I asked a friend if her daughter would have a traditional wedding as this couple had done. “No,” she responded. “It is a shame. We Liberians are losing where we came from. Sedia would not appreciate this because it’s not something she knows. If she were at the church wedding we just went to the other day, she would like that far better because it’s what she thinks of when she thinks of getting married.” The church wedding we had attended earlier in the week featured tuxedos and dresses bought in the US. We were given a program of ceremonies printed on expensive paper which included a photograph of the bride and groom. The wedding attendants processed down the centre aisle of the church as they do in Western weddings. There was a striking difference between the cultural performance and expression.

There was also a striking generational progression in terms of assimilating into the urban, modern cultural fraction in Monrovia. The traditional wedding had been put on in part to please the elders in the family. Yet the generation beneath them had not acquired the cultural knowledge to know how to put such a traditional ceremony together. Beneath them, Sedia’s generation of young adolescents were not expected to appreciate such affairs at all. The cultural heritage of the rural indigenous communities was withering away through the generations as young people were reared to value what was urban, modern and Western.

Further, what the man above described was still important for young men when I was in the field. Western, Americo names were still used to associate with more privileged people. The lack of incorporation was a sensitive topic. Underprivileged social positions could be identified by surnames. The apparent inequalities were a tense and emotionally

charged topic. I asked Tee about Western names one night over beers.<sup>62</sup> It was difficult to tell if someone was elite based on their name, I began carefully. So many people, elite and impoverished, went by names like Johnson, Williams, or Carey. “Edwin, for instance,” I suggested, calling to mind a mutual acquaintance who carried a Western surname. One of the most powerful and influential families in Liberia had the same name, but I did not have any reason to believe that Edwin was closely related. He had a decent job in one of the ministries, but it was not a powerful one. He had been able to purchase a car from America, another fine step toward increased prestige, a sign of socio-economic mobility. Still, having spent some time in the resorts, restaurants, and homes of the more powerful elites in the city, I knew that Edwin did not possess the patronage to be intimately connected to elite, inner circles.

“His father was,” Tee replied. “His father was Americo. He had Edwin by an indigenous woman who could not speak English. Now Edwin uses his Western name to get the kind of job he has at the Ministry.”

I do not know the circumstances surrounding Edwin’s acquisition of his position in the ministry. The subject was too delicate to raise with him. It was far too personal. What is important in this example is Tee’s perception. His surname was his bargaining chip in her mind. His affiliation through an elite father was the connection that ultimately mattered.

Samuel’s social position provides a useful contrast. Samuel was working on a year-long contract with one of the ministries. He had been recruited to return to Liberia by the President’s office. There was no question that he had strong links to powerful and elite people in Monrovia. His grandfather, a man he expressed great admiration for, had been involved in politics at some point. Yet Samuel’s surname was indigenous. I cautiously broached the subject. He dropped his voice but delivered a direct answer. He had family on both sides of the class divide. “If you look at my name, it’s African, but ah, I was raised on the Congo [Americo] side.”<sup>63</sup>

Being raised on the “Congo side” had afforded him the patronage needed to be noticed by the President’s Office. Edwin could use his name to affiliate with his father’s elite origins, and that was valuable enough to influence his mobility into a modest government position. Samuel had grown up with an African surname in an elite network. The wealth in people that had accrued over his life meant much more than Edwin’s Western name ever could. These contrasting examples illustrate how the class

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<sup>62</sup> Fieldnote, February 16, 2011

<sup>63</sup> Interview, April 16, 2010

divide was being reproduced. Affiliation and assimilation were considered essential to upward mobility, and yet the networks of family elites continued to provide the access to the highest positions in the government.

#### *Navigating Life Trajectories into Government*

The desirable pathways in the city were through the government. Historically, most of the elite had chosen to go into government rather than private enterprise (Liebenow, 1962). This does not mean that elites did not have private businesses, but rather, that private businesses were not their sole or even primary focus. The majority of economic investment took the form of foreign or co-opted government/foreign corporations (van der Kraaij, 1983). Money and power could be found in positions within the government. These established socio-economic pathways continued in the post-war context. “The city is where we expect people to come,” Leroy explained. “We expect things to be fine because we have a sea port, we have airport, and things in the city are very advanced compared to things in the interior. You might have the opportunity to go to school in the interior, but it will not be as fine as in the city.”<sup>64</sup>

The table below shows how urban-centric provision of education was at the time of this research. Notice that as the educational level increases, so does the percentage of educational institutions. Montserrado County, in which Monrovia is located, was home to just under a third of pre-primary and primary schools. This is relatively proportionate, as about one third of Liberians resided in Montserrado County (LISGIS, 2009). The numbers become more disproportionate with higher grade levels. Nearly half of the nation’s junior high schools were located in Montserrado County, and well over 50 per cent of high schools.

| Education Level           | Total Ed. Institutions<br>Montserrado County | Total Ed.<br>Institutions<br>Nationwide | Percentage of<br>National<br>Total |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Pre-Primary               | 1069                                         | 3989                                    | 27.0%                              |
| Primary (Grade 1-6)       | 1086                                         | 3925                                    | 27.7%                              |
| Junior High (Grade 7-9)   | 548                                          | 1176                                    | 46.6%                              |
| Senior High (Grade 10-12) | 189                                          | 328                                     | 57.6%                              |

(taken from Ministry of Education, 2008)

Monrovia clearly held more educational opportunities. It was also home to a disproportionate amount of employment possibilities. Much like before the war, jobs in the government made up the majority of desired trajectories for young men in this study. Unlike pre-war Liberia, there were fewer corporations and opportunities outside

<sup>64</sup> Interview, May 1, 2010

of government. Post-war Liberia has yet to re-establish an economic infrastructure to facilitate job growth. Government was one of the few employers. The most recent figures available listed the government as employing 46,355 people (Bureau of Government Affairs, 2007). The total number of private sector employees in all other sectors combined was 66,862 (Ministry of Labor, 2010). This is approximately two thirds of the proportion of private sector jobs. Importantly however, these figures do not include the number of jobs held by Liberians working for NGOs, most of which were international. This number was not available to the Ministry of Labor or the Ministry of Planning and Economics, so I was unable to verify the percentage of jobs created by NGOs. What I can say is that observation, as skewed as it may be, suggested to me that if there were a re-emerging middle class, it could be found among the office staff and lower-level management positions held by Liberians working for international NGOs and the government.

Nearly all of my informants aspired to jobs in the government. The elite minority of settlers established a clear pattern of choosing government opportunities rather than private sector employment. As the twentieth century progressed, the trend continued. Assimilation into urban elite culture meant looking for opportunities in the government rather than the private sector. “We feel that the best way to success is to get to government by any means possible,”<sup>65</sup> Alex commented of his countrymen. “Steal from government, and get started. We don’t feel that if you work hard in the private sector or in our own businesses, we can succeed. The only way to succeed is to force ourselves into government.”

Alex’s comments were made from the outside looking into the government. However, an upper-level employee of the Finance Ministry described the benefit of working for the government in similar terms. It was an as the opportunity to steal.<sup>66</sup> There were ways of stealing gas money on the government’s tab, claiming expenses under the guise of state business. It was not that government jobs paid so well. It was that government jobs came with clear opportunities to freeload on state money. This is how people who worked in the higher positions of the government were able to pad their own pockets.

### *Big Men in Government*

It was in the government that people held prestigious positions in society. Youth saw this and set their sights on achieving such places in government agencies and bureaus.

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<sup>65</sup> Interview, February 17, 2010

<sup>66</sup> Fieldnote, May 18, 2010

Jake's imagined trajectory is an illustrative example of this preference.<sup>67</sup> One of Jake's best friends had been involved in the war. When his friend completed DDRR he and Jake invested the 300 dollar compensation he received into a shoe business. They bought shoes from a Lebanese tradesman and sold them in a local market. The business was successful on a number of counts. One was that Jake's friends respected him a great deal for having carved out a livelihood in such a difficult economic environment. Also the business was successful enough that Jake had even worked out a plan to expand it with a small loan from a bank in town. Despite a successful, entrepreneurial business endeavour, what he wanted to do was to go into government. That was the way to "change my country" for the better, he had noted.

The big men, those with prestige to command attention and the power to make changes had historically and currently held positions in the government. The most attractive "possible selves" were those men in coats and ties and government issued vehicles. These were the men who were "up to standard,"<sup>68</sup> as Jake put it. "A big man has position."

"What does that mean to 'have position?'"

"It means that you have a job. You have money. You have a television in your house. You have your own machine generator, you know? You are living up to standard, you are living well. That's what they mean [by] big man."

"Is that something that you hope on achieving?"

"Yes. That's everybody's dream."

"What does a big man look like?"<sup>69</sup> I asked Timothy and some of the street youth on an afternoon in Red Light. "When you see him, how do you know it's a big man?"

Pieced together from several interjections they responded, "Big men ride in cars. They live in the fence. They don't want to expose what they have. Their house, maybe they have two or three cars...They hold position. Most of them work in government. Other people work for them. They serve them...When they come into the community (like Red Light), they come to be known. They want to be popular in the community. If they are good, they will help."

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<sup>67</sup> Interview, April 17, 2010 and Fieldnote, April 28, 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Interview, April 26, 2010.

<sup>69</sup> Group discussion, February 23, 2011.

It was everybody's dream, as Jake noted, to be a big man. The chances of achieving that dream appeared relatively small without the appropriate affiliations with elites. Subordinates, dependents to serve one went along with wealth of cars and houses.

*Insufficient Wealth in People*

Young people came to the city for numerous diverse and personal reasons. Many of the informants in this study were either from Monrovia originally, or were internally displaced within Monrovia during the war and had chosen to stay. Chapter Six will illustrate how life in the city fostered rural social horizons that held little if any desirable options.

"I don't know if you've been to the countryside, but it's totally empty there,"<sup>70</sup> a Liberian youth program director noted to me. "It's just old people and children." I laughed at his bluntness. "It's true! It's just old people and children. And most of the youth come and seek opportunities in Monrovia where there are no opportunities in the first place. People leave fertile farm land and come to Monrovia in search of the urban dream. But they quickly find that the urban dream is not—it is just that—a dream."

Young men faced a number of challenges while pursuing vocational and professional careers goals. Patronage played an essential role. Stephen explained how formal positions in education or employment come through informal family connections. "I just need the opportunity," he said. "That's the problem—one of the problems in this society. You know, some people they get a job, and then they get their families jobs there too. It's difficult. You don't have a job, and you don't have family to get you in."<sup>71</sup> Alex referred to the whole process of trying to find a job as a "big charade". "Most of the time they are just interviewing to satisfy the Labor Office. Really, they often have a candidate already picked out."<sup>72</sup> Often, as Stephen pointed out, those in charge look to employ someone they know and that someone is often a family member.

Extending opportunities to family and kin makes good sense in a society that runs on reciprocity. Through patronage those with power and influence want to be able to pass on goods, resources, and favours to those most likely to reciprocate, and to whom they have obligations—namely, their relations. Youth required wealth in people who had connections to job possibilities or who could sponsor education. Timothy will illustrate an attempt to do this in the next chapter. The ethnographies, historical accounts, and reflections of the elderly in this study suggest that youth migration to the city in the

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<sup>70</sup> Interview, January 26, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Interview, February 9, 2010.

<sup>72</sup> Fieldnote, February 17, 2010.

'50s and '60s was facilitated by a pre-arranged agreement with urban kin. This seemed to be much less the case in the post-war period. There were a lot more young people looking to stay in the city than there were patrons to offer the necessary helping hand for mobility.

### **Outward Bound: “Going on that Side”**

Liberian young people in this study along with many others in the Global South dreamt of migrating to the US, and to a lesser extent to other destinations in the Global North. They expressed desires to go for education and work. They imagined returning to Liberia with improved life chances. In this section I discuss some of the primary contributors to their aspirations for international migration, particularly to the US. Liberians used a phrase “on that side” to refer to being across any number of divides. Working or living across town could be referred to as “on that side.” Family in the interior might be referred to as “on that side.” The phrase was used nowhere more frequently than when referring to America. People had relatives “on that side.” I was often given “lectures” about the differences between life in Liberia and life “on that side” where I came from. Perhaps most of all, people talked and dreamed about “going on that side.”

#### *An Established Elite Pathway of Going on that Side*

There is a long tradition of elite migration to the US for education. A large proportion of the ruling minority of elite men received university degrees from colleges and universities in the United States (Liebenow, 1962). Elite money and wealth in people in the US made these options possible. The same pattern was evidenced in government officials and repatriated elites I knew during fieldwork. They hailed from universities such as Columbia, George Mason, University of Wisconsin, and Harvard. Many in this group were displaced with their families when Samuel Doe took over in the coup in 1980. In their case, forced migration laid the foreground for pursuing American education.

As we saw in the history chapter, reference, resemblance, and affiliation with the US produced a significant cultural capital among the elite. To have a US credential was of significant worth among the ruling class. What was on that side in America was considered more civilised. What was civilised was considered more sophisticated, and hence more valuable.

“Yeah, on that part of Liberian history,”<sup>73</sup> Jake noted. “What I read and what I see, only those that came from over there with degree, from Harvard University, from Oxford University, you know? England, Germany, you will find most of them working. But you come from University of Liberia with BSE or master’s, no one will see you [and] carry on serious—any of them you see. Any of them you see going and coming back have position.”

Those who were not of elite origin themselves often benefitted from elite connections to the US. President Johnson Sirleaf has said her education in the US was one enabled through the elite affiliations she possessed through family (Johnson Sirleaf, 2009). Her own education includes a bachelor’s degree from University of Colorado Boulder, and a graduate degree from Harvard University. I met other, far less famous individuals who pursued bachelor and graduate degrees in a similar fashion. Although not all of them could boast the Ivy League clout of Harvard or Yale, what was primary was a State-side degree more than an Ivy League credential. A state side degree was a rite of passage. One’s position was appropriated with a US degree and possibilities were expanded.

My point in these brief paragraphs is to highlight a further degree of assimilation. Just as urban elite ties and lifestyles became essential for upward mobility in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the acquisition of an educational qualification from America was the next step. Such an achievement had as much to do with cultural capital as with human capital. For these reasons international migration for education remained an established pathway to socio-economic mobility.

### *Afro-Pessimism*

The necessity to “go on that side” coincided with very explicit Afro-pessimism. One of the most apparent cultural beliefs in Liberia was a sense that nothing good happens in Liberia specifically, or Africa more broadly. I gained an appreciation for afro-pessimism after hearing the story of Old Man Beggar.<sup>74</sup> It is the story of how Santa Claus came to Africa. As a neighbour related,<sup>75</sup>

Santa Claus was a jolly old man who gave gifts on Christmas to the children in America. Well, Santa Claus thought to himself, ‘I must give gifts to the poor children in Africa.’ So, he began collecting gifts. There were gifts,

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<sup>73</sup> Interview, April 26, 2010.

<sup>74</sup> Utas (2008a) notes a similar, humorous example of a joke one of his informants related. The man said that when Jesus first arrived on the planet, he first tried to land in Africa, but he bounced!

<sup>75</sup> Fieldnote, February 17, 2010.

gifts, gifts! Finally, it came time to set sail for Africa. He loaded all of these loving gifts onto a ship and set off for Africa. As he neared the African coast, the turbulence of the water, the African tide and the current were too much for his heavily weighed down ship and it sank before reaching the shores of the continent. So, Santa Claus arrived in Africa a penniless beggar.

On Christmas, Liberian children parade about the streets dressed in fat clothes begging for money like Santa Claus. Despite the good intentions, wealth and effort, Santa was unable to settle into the harsh and untamed African context.

Everyday challenges and difficulties received frequent sentiments along similar lines. When goods and services were slow or faulty, the explanation was often that they were problematic because they were *African in nature*, or cast-offs sent to Africa. Terry offered to drop me off in town one morning after agreeing to drive a neighbour's wife. I got in and fastened my seatbelt at the beginning of our journey. When he stopped to drop me, the belt was stuck fast. The button lock refused to release. Terry reached around from the front seat to offer help. After straining, huffing and puffing to get me out he exclaimed matter-of-factly, "Sorry about this. It's an African car! It's an African car!"<sup>76</sup> I was forced to slip beneath the lap belt in the end, resolving *never* to use the safety features on that vehicle again. In this, and so many other instances it was clear that Africa was understood as passed-by from the rest of the world—at least the world of the Global North. Africa received the world's left overs. It was not a place where the people prospered, but rather, where the prosperity of people—like Santa Claus—could not penetrate in such a way as to transform the deprivation and impoverishment they experienced.

This general, pessimistic view of Africa took on a more pejorative connotation when Liberians discussed their own country specifically. I purchased a pair of sunglasses on my way through Red Light to spend time with Timothy and Washington.<sup>77</sup> Anxious to get out of the traffic and congestion of the main market, I had negotiated quickly with the tradesman and tried the sunglasses on in a rush. Once behind the chaos of the market stalls I realised the lenses were cloudy. Upon inspection, I could see that they were already scratched. What had looked like a smudge was actually a permanent abrasion.

"I bought these just today," I told Timothy. "I thought it was just dust but they're scratched. Not good, already."

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<sup>76</sup> Fieldnote, February 14, 2010.

<sup>77</sup> Fieldnote, March 7, 2011.

“Nothing good comes to Liberia,” he concluded soberly. The implication was evident. What was sent to or made in Liberia was expected to be of poor quality in comparison to what others enjoyed “on that side.”

The quality of local goods and services was considered so menial that most youth were convinced that nothing worth having could be purchased or achieved in Liberia. This perspective was heavily informed by the dominant class’s insistence upon so many things being from abroad—preferably America. No matter what vocational skill or material good might be useful in Liberia, the most elite and valued skills and materials were found only in the US.

Such assessments were transposed to education, job training, and employment opportunities. Liberia could not produce the quality or choice that could be had “on that side.” Pursuing a university degree or vocational training certificate in Liberia was better than nothing, but not good enough to become a big man. The likelihood that it would provide lasting improvement to one’s situation was dubious in the minds of youth. University of Liberia was not a place that could provide the possibility for achieving the dream of “holding position” in the government. It was better to “go on that side,” where your chances were more certain afterwards. “We don’t even respect our own degree,”<sup>78</sup> a young man explained to me in a taxi. “If you come with a degree from University of Liberia and someone else comes with a degree from America they will give it to the man with the degree from America.” He said that was something pressing on the young people in the country. It was better to leave the country and go somewhere else than to remain, because their progress would be slower than those who went to America and came back. A degree from Cuttington College or University of Liberia would not open the doors that a US degree would.

Most youth were intent on pursuing avenues to “go on that side” for work and education. The opportunities were considered better in quality and quantity abroad, especially in the US “People believe that in America, it’s better education, better place to live. Some believe that you will make better progress in America,” Moses explained. “Because when you come back here, American degrees are preferred. For example, if you go for a job. You have a degree from the University of Liberia. You have ten years work experience. Another person goes for the same job. They have a degree from America, and maybe two years’ experience. They will give the job to the man with the degree from America. It’s preferred.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Fieldnote, March 2, 2011

<sup>79</sup> Interview, February 24, 2011

I could understand why Liberians did not respect education received from local universities in the same manner that they did the degrees from the US. Education at university level was a hectic experience to pay for when I was there. Classes were overcrowded. Many were held in outdoor pavilions that were separated by thin sheets of something that looked like particle board. During a visit to the University of Liberia, a professor took me down to the outdoor classrooms. He introduced me to his class. "Tell them about your study,"<sup>80</sup> he said. I began. The noise converging from the other make-shift classrooms was deafening. I shouted as best I could to the front half of the class. Then I was moved to the middle where I repeated myself to the back half. Upon finishing, I returned to the front to find the professor gone. "Where is he?"

"He left." I left as well and the class disbanded. A few days later I made a return visit to the professor. "Professor, I turned around the other day and you were gone!" I exclaimed, somewhat amused and very curious.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I had to go to my class."

"I thought the one you took me to was your class."

"It is." The instructor had been double scheduled to teach two courses in the same time slot. Though the students clearly attended, it was equally clear that the instruction they received could be minimal to nil on any given day.

"Going on that side" was thought to be the only way that young men could advance their status. It was an established elite pathway to upward mobility. Young people from elite families that journeyed abroad and back again could establish comfortable lives in Monrovia. Their achievements abroad were as much about accruing the necessary cultural capital to maintain elite cultural standards as they were about education or professional training. Accordingly, non-elite youth aspiring to upward mobility saw travel abroad as the means to that same end.

There are two further observations to make concerning migration to the US. One is that the war opened a pathway for migration to the US for a large cohort of non-elite Liberians. What had been an elite privilege became a possibility for others. My informants knew many people who had gone over to the States because of the war, and some had done well, gotten jobs and education, and were able to send remittances back to family. There were far fewer stories of family coming back to Liberia, and especially of non-elite Liberians taking jobs in higher positions of the government. I heard of a

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<sup>80</sup> Fieldnote, April 26, 2010.

few. However, most of those who came back as big men to “hold positions” were from elite backgrounds. On the other hand, it was very common to find non-elite young men who had gotten into trouble in the US and been deported. In short, the notion of going to the States to achieve something to return with was prevalent. However, the ability to achieve the privilege of prestige as a big man in the government appeared to remain with those of elite pedigree.

### **Modes of Mobility: Patrons, Saints, and “Playing the DV”**

Liberian youth expected their life chances to improve through other people. In this section, I discuss the social option they perceived in patronage of “big men,” “saints” (a term I have coined and will discuss further), and finally the Diversity Visa (DV) offered through the US State Department. Though institutional in nature, I argue that the opportunity to apply and win a Diversity Visa is every bit as embedded in wealth in people as the other social options through patrons and saints. Each of these pathways through people relied in large part upon chance.

#### *Patrons*

Patrons in kin networks such as Timothy’s uncle were the most obvious port of call for opportunities to improve options locally and abroad. “There’s a very important word, Abby. ‘Interest,’”<sup>81</sup> Moses noted. “Let’s say you and I go for a job in the government. There is a big man there. Let’s say you and I are equally qualified, or even, you are more qualified than me—but he says, ‘I know the man. I have interest in him.’ I will get the job, because he will say, ‘I know that fellow.’ That’s how it works...they’re protecting their own, individual interests.”

In the midst of a discussion with a street youth in Red Light, a youth interjected something about how he and young men like him needed somebody.

“You looking for someone to help you?”<sup>82</sup> I asked him.

“Thank you!” he replied, a common way of affirming a correct response.

“Big man?”

“Thank you! Someone who can help me [so] I can sustain myself. In the future, I help him.” Notice his coupling of dependency upon a patron in the immediate—“so I can

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<sup>81</sup> Interview, February 24, 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Interview, February 25, 2011.

sustain myself”—with reciprocity in the future. Without the help of a big man, most felt they had little hope of improving their life chances. To find a big man who had no previous obligation to one was not an easy thing however, and relied on a good deal of chance. With job prospects as scarce and as unrewarding as they often were, it seemed more likely that a big man could bring a greater opportunity for securing work than institutional channels in the state or even private enterprise.

In Liberia there are, as Hoffman (2011a) writes, stories of the lucky ones. One day they are walking down the street and the next moment they're working with someone. To what extent these “out of the blue” opportunities really were purely coincidence is not a point I wish to speculate upon. What was clear was the general belief among the youth that it was the reality. They found it necessary to find a patron to whom they could become indebted. Through their dependence on someone more wealthy and powerful, they could rise above their own immobilised positions in society.

### *Saints*

A second social option could present itself at any time. Numerous young people spoke with me at length about the prospects of improving life chances through what I refer to as “saints.” Saints are usually white foreigners. Male or female, young or old, they come from “on that side” with NGOs or mission organisations. I have referred to them as saints because they are perceived as powerful, well-intended persons who might bestow their good will and fortunes upon anyone at any time. Like the saints portrayed in Christian stories, they might appear at any moment in one's life. This acquaintance could bring with it enough power to transform one's circumstances in that very moment.

Saints, unlike Santa Claus, had been known to successfully “rescue” poor Liberians from their plight in post-war impoverishment or in displacement during the war. Much like the stories of saint encounters, everyone I met during fieldwork seemed to know someone who had been miraculously rescued from their poor fortunes—on small and large scales—by all manner of saints. Some received funds for education from saints who sponsored them. For instance, I knew several Liberians who were able to complete university education because they were sponsored by saints who had visited their churches in refugee camps during the war. This was a fairly platonic way of receiving help from saints. Others talked about the possibility of forming romantic interests that might become legally binding. Everyone seemed to know or have heard of someone who had established relationships with a saint, usually someone from an NGO. The result was a marriage and eventually a dependent visa that could get them “on that side.”

It was important to keep one's eyes open and to be ready to "pounce" when opportunities presented themselves (Hoffman, 2011a). Opportunities missed might be forever lost. Charles related an exemplary illustration of the tactical strategy one must have to optimise on chance occurrences.<sup>83</sup> Charles expressed more anger than I was accustomed to with the majority of my informants. He was upset because, in his mind, his family had missed a clear opportunity to be rescued by a saint. An American actually asked to adopt his younger sister. He was angry because her mother declined. She felt that his sister was too young to leave.

"I was so vexed!" he said.

"Why were you vexed?"

"That was our connection on that side!" he exclaimed. "And she threw it away!" Once the little girl was on that side, he continued, it could have paved the way for him and other family members to go to America as well. His step mother had turned down a rare chance and let opportunity slip away.

I was seen as a potential saint from those with platonic and romantic aspirations alike. A woman I interviewed in Slipway was certain that I had come with the purpose and ability to change things for the better in her community. She said to me, "aren't you coming to our rescue?"<sup>84</sup> Numerous young men attempted to court me—the majority of whom were complete strangers. I was asked out to clubs in nearly the same breath as "hello my name is..." The most humorous of efforts came from a young man who had fabricated an affiliation with a youth organisation after hearing about my research. Given his alleged experience and expertise with urban youth, I had given my number to him. What followed was a persistent onslaught of invitations to go out. A final text message expressed his priorities in no uncertain terms, "Hi girl. I hope you are fine as usual. Abby pls accept my proposal as a boyfriend. Since we met my heart has been in worried abt u. pls I love u and accept me, together we can make it and even have the next obama. Best wishes."<sup>85</sup>

### *Playing the DV*

The Diversity Visa was a third option for getting out and "going on that side." Though it appeared to be a more equal opportunity to leave Liberia, it was clear to me that patronage was essential even with this mode of mobility. It was set up to offer random

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<sup>83</sup> Fieldnote, March 16, 2010.

<sup>84</sup> Interview, May 31, 2010.

<sup>85</sup> Fieldnote, February 15, 2010.

and equal chances for immigration from countries that have sent fewer than 50,000 immigrants in the previous five years.<sup>86</sup> Liberians commonly referred to it as “playing the DV.” As the phrase suggests, the US Diversity Visa is a lottery. For example, in 2010, over 13 million entrants from around the world applied for Diversity Visas.<sup>87</sup> Only 50,000 were awarded invitations from the State Department. In that year 68,022 of those applications were Liberian.<sup>88</sup> Only 2,172 received invitations.

To play the DV requires some level of socio-economic status at the outset. The application must be filled out online, which requires computer knowledge and either a personal laptop, or a fee to use a computer in an internet café. Further, the DV is only granted to those who can prove that they have achieved a high school education, or have obtained training as a skilled worker. The most crucial eligibility requirement is enough means to prove that the applicant will not become a dependent of the state once they arrive in the US. This means showing evidence of personal assets, an affidavit of support from relatives or friends residing in the U.S., an employment offer, or some combination of all three.

As most of the informants in this study had neither the personal assets nor an offer of employment, an affidavit of support was the most significant hurdle. Again, the importance of wealth in people was paramount. Connections to someone willing to write the letter and often host the applicant were essential to success. In other words, here again was the need for a patron. Even if such wealth in people was available, through kin or friends in the U.S., there was a significant amount of chance in playing the DV. The table below illustrates the small number of Liberian applicants who have “won” the DV in recent years.<sup>89</sup>

| Year | Liberian Entrants | Total Selected | Percentage |
|------|-------------------|----------------|------------|
| 2010 | 68,022            | 2,172          | 3.2%       |
| 2011 | 64,245            | 1,826          | 2.8%       |
| 2012 | 82,497            | 2,101          | 2.5%       |

There is a combination of chance and patronage in each of the modes of mobility. What I want to emphasise with this discussion has to do with how social reproduction has implications for young men’s agency—for their social navigation in the post-war period. To achieve prestige, it was necessary to leave Liberia and to journey to the US,

<sup>86</sup> See the Diversity Visa (DV) Program <http://travel.state.gov>

<sup>87</sup> Diversity Visa Program(DV-2010) - Selected Entrants at [http://travel.state.gov/visa/immigrants/types/types\\_4574.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/immigrants/types/types_4574.html)

<sup>88</sup> Ibid

<sup>89</sup> Table compiled from information taken from the State Department, [http://travel.state.gov/visa/immigrants/types/types\\_1322.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/immigrants/types/types_1322.html)

preferably. As they saw it, there was no internal socio-economic “ladder” in Liberia that could take young men to big man status, living “up to standard,” as Jake said. Their attention was not on working hard in Liberia to a way life for themselves but rather, with positioning themselves in the hopes of “pouncing” on an opportunity to leave.

### **Bouncing Back: Youth Trajectories of Return Migration**

Most of the post-war youth in this study talked about coming back from “on that side.” They were not going to stay. They were going to improve themselves in order to return. Vigh (2009b) observes that many of the young men in his work saw international points of migration much like metaphoric trampolines. Each destination was a springboard to somewhere else. For instance, Portugal could be a point from which to bounce to Ireland. For the youth in this study, patrons, saints, and the DV were the necessary means for initial migration. For most, the aspiration was to “bounce back” to Liberia. The object was to accelerate transitions to adulthood, to establish increased status in the eyes of those in Liberia. Going to the US provided the opportunity to receive a superior education that could be translated into viable livelihoods and cultural capital of the dominant cultural fraction in Liberia.

It seemed that nearly all of my informants dreamed and talked about “going on that side.” I got a surprise one day in Red Light, or so I thought. “I not thinking of going on that side, coming back, and everything will be fine,”<sup>90</sup> a young man piped into a conversation. He had been listening from a lean-to positioned against the public toilets, where he cut hair. He had summarized the sentiment I heard over and over during fieldwork. If young men could just get the chance to go on that side, they would be able to find the means to mobility through education and/or employment—then things would be better when they came back to Liberia. “I not thinking on that,” he reiterated. “If everyone leaves, how will the country be fine? The country will not develop if everyone leaves.” This was a new perspective to be hearing from a young man. Young women were far less interested. They usually had children or relatives to look after. Their expressed interests were only in a short visit. In contrast, most young men could not see how they would “go further” in life if they did not leave the country to improve themselves by staying and achieving in the US. This young man’s perspective ran in contrast. His view appeared to hold a long-term investment in the interest of his nation. “Of course,” he added, “if I could go to America, I would like to. I could go, stay for five years or so and then come back.” My surprise extinguished. The trend had indeed persisted.

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<sup>90</sup> Fieldnote, March 3, 2011.

Young men in various places within the social strata in Monrovia, and at various points along life trajectories were convinced that the way ahead was *by way of* the US. Youth on the street, younger youth in high schools, university students, and even some ex-combatants had their sights set on “improving their status” by going on that side and coming back. If we think of the US like Vigh’s trampoline, the objective was to bounce back after establishing the necessary human, cultural, and economic capitals that would enable upward mobility upon return to Liberia.

*Cultural Capital and What’s in a Name*

To improve your status, a young civil servant explained, “you have to leave the country.”<sup>91</sup> It was important to better yourself outside, he continued. It was important to go outside for education, as Liberia could not offer the quality education needed to obtain higher paying jobs in the government. It was also important to become “more cultured,” he noted. Going to the US was about more than getting a degree or learning a skill. It was about accruing a certain cultural capital that was needed for success among the dominant class who remained in control of the much coveted government positions. From fieldnotes,<sup>92</sup>

*I think one thing that’s important to note is that I’m beginning to see a pattern in terms of young men who want to go to the States. It seems to be the ones who are educated through a high school or bachelor’s degree... They really want to improve themselves. They don’t see a way to “go further” without going to the States—sometimes Europe, but usually the States. They’ve said to me in interviews and casual conversations that the respectable degrees come from on that side. The people who come from that side, those who were displaced or just went for education, get good jobs. They don’t see (whether they are there or not) people getting good jobs in government without a degree from the States.*

*I think there’s something in there that’s important to note, further. People want jobs with NGOs (because they pay better due to donor money from the outside, and international standards and all of that), and people want jobs in the government (where you can rise in status and power). I haven’t had one person tell me that they’d like to go into the private sector—on any level. I’m sure that part of the reason for that is that there is no capital for the young people. Where would they get the investment to start a business? Jake’s looking at getting a loan from the bank,*

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<sup>91</sup> Fieldnote, April 25, 2010

<sup>92</sup> Fieldnote, April 28, 2010

*five hundred dollars. But I think ultimately he doesn't want to stay in the shoe business, he wants to go into government and 'change the country.'*

Utas (2008a) and Bledsoe (1990) have argued that knowledge gained abroad is perceived as possessive of mythic, medicinal power that enables the bearer to establish himself in society and to do impressive things. This might very well be the perspective of rural, relatively (un-Western) educated people in contemporary Liberia. However, for my young informants in the heart of the urban centre, to “go on that side” was a chance to accrue the much needed Western and “civilised” cultural capital.

Young men set their sights on cultural capital in its institutionalised state (Bourdieu, 1986). A US degree conferred a certain amount of cultural competence highly valued by the dominant class, but it would also insure that youth could *embody* certain cultural capital. To speak with an American accent was an immediate sign of sophistication, or a more elite, civilised, Western frame of mind and attitude. Such capital was considered essential for upward mobility in the government.

To what extent this was actually enough to apprehend government positions was unclear, though certainly debateable. An elite man who worked in one of the government ministries—a man with a Western last name—dismissed the aspirations of young people who were not intimately connected with elite families.<sup>93</sup> A young man from the street who was able to go to America would not necessarily come back to build a small kingdom, he contended. Without the family and kin networks in the elite class in Liberia, they would be far less likely to succeed in government. I will not speculate as to the validity of his contentions except to say that I did not meet a single upper-level government employee who did not appear to have significant wealth in elite people. Everyone had significant relations of one kind or another in the government. Young people, whether actually related or not, would need to have relations of significant indebtedness in order to achieve the places of prominence that they desired.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have highlighted a number of pathways that young men believed would lead them to improved life chances. The first was to come to the urban centre. The second was to go to the US and then return to the opportunity for government positions. The US was a rite of passage in that way. It was the gateway to achieving a coveted position of power in the Liberian government. To get to the US, young men looked to patrons, saints, and the luck of winning the DV in order to get the chance to

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<sup>93</sup> Fieldnote, May 27, 2010

go there. Positions of higher status and power could only be achieved through these channels. Getting there took significant wealth in people capable of furnishing the necessary resources for the accrual of human and cultural capital to make this kind of power an achievable reality. To achieve upward mobility, young people had to first go out. As they saw it, there was no way through.

Listening to the imagined futures of the young men in this study provides us with a glimpse of how they perceive the constraints on mobility within post-war Monrovia. Assimilation was the key to advancement, and that meant trajectories that were directed toward the US. In this way, the structural conditions that were in place prior to war appear to be re-establishing themselves. Reproduction of the class divide is evident. To get ahead one must become urban, educated, and civilised. One must undergo the rite of passage in going on that side and bounce back.

In the same vein, what was equally notable was that government appeared to be the only interest. There was no interest in making a living outside of government. Such jobs were for the people on their way to the top. Private enterprise was not the end game. In the past it appears clear that the pre-war elite government under President Tubman made the strategic choice to limit the ability of Liberians to become upwardly mobile by incentivizing foreigners over their own citizens. In the post-war context, foreign businesses were the only investors with enough capital and interest to establish medium or large scale enterprises within the country. Those who did, the Chinese for example, were well-known for bringing their own workers in to do the building labour or the road work. So while the constraints on availability of work or job training may have shifted from the pre-war to the post-war context, the result is the same. Non-elite Liberians found themselves pressed, unable to find work, or to generate the upward mobility to achieve the heights of high status in the government. They were systematically shut out.

## CHAPTER SIX: STREET Youth and Impoverishment in People

This chapter is about the life chances of post-war youth who did not fight in the civil war. It is about young men who spent their days living and hustling “on the street.” In it I trace the life trajectory of Timothy, a young man who sold marijuana behind the market stalls in Red light—one of Monrovia’s largest market areas. Timothy’s story begins with return from exile after the war ended. We follow his post-war experience from his migration to the city, his efforts to complete his education, and his eventual resignation to a life sustained by dealing drugs on the street. His personal trajectory is unique. However, the themes that emerge from his life story are illustrative of the structural constraints and possibilities faced by many of his peers. With support from their voices, Timothy guides us through the challenges of maintaining and losing wealth in people after the war. The ways in which his life is bounded by post-war opportunity structures will set the foreground for my discussion of ex-combatant positions and possibilities in Chapter Eight. Most of the urban ex-combatants in this study were also making life outside of their family homes and households. Similarly, young people on the street had varied levels of human capital in education or skills training. More often than not, it had been interrupted by the war and remained unfinished. Again, this is similar to the situation many ex-combatants were in at the conclusion of war. One’s possibilities are a feature of social position in hierarchical networks. In this chapter, I argue that wealth in people diminished during the war. Young men’s opportunities were limited to survival on the street in large part because their intergenerational indebtedness has diminished and lost value as a result of the war.

### *A Helping Hand*

“Now, due to the poverty now, that affected the parents, it make it that we cannot meet up with our children’s needs. And because of this, and they too are trying, one way or the other to sustain theirselves.”—Flomo, Elders Council, West Point<sup>94</sup>

Before moving to the congested, muddy market where I spent long hours with Timothy and his friends, I begin with a conversation I had on Bernard’s Beach. “Tell me about the condition in the country for youth,”<sup>95</sup> I said to Leroy. He obliged. He sat back, joint in hand, and delivered a passionate and articulate analysis of the opportunities available to his peers. It included a descriptive account of the implications of poverty, an evaluation

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<sup>94</sup> Focus Group, May 25, 2010.

<sup>95</sup> Interview, May 1, 2010.

of the government's failure to meet the needs of the people, and the reasons beneath local crime and violence. These are themes that are addressed throughout this thesis. However, in the midst of his oration he put one point down which will be at the crux of this chapter. "The helping hand is not there," he emphasized. I heard this phrase often during my fieldwork in Monrovia. This chapter, and to a great extent this thesis, is an attempt to understand what it means for a young person's life when "the helping hand is not there."

A young person's perceived options, those of immediate survival as well as long-term plans and endeavours, were largely determined by who was in their social network, and more importantly, how relationships were organised and functioned to constrain and enable agency. Survival as well as socio-economic mobility rest in interdependent, reciprocal relationships. Wealth in people enables and facilitates mobility. The majority of this chapter is committed to understanding how young men's possibilities were shaped once they were positioned outside of their parent's homes and care. As Leroy pointed out, they were on the street because the helping hand was not there. To understand the implications of having no helping hand in their lives, it is important to first establish how the helping hand was expected to support the trajectories of Liberian youth.

### **Reciprocity in Family and Household: An Ideal Type**

In this section I present wealth in people as my informants *would like and ideally expect* it to support their life trajectories. It is an ideal type, drawn from interviews, observation and ethnographies. What is depicted and discussed is the manner in which my informants would like for their lives to be organised within networks of gendered and intergenerational indebtedness. In other words, it is the ideal model *against which* they measure their own circumstances.

#### *Intergenerational Reciprocity in the Household*

I begin with structured relationships that bound agency in particular ways. Much has been written about gerontocracy in Liberia, often with specific focus upon village or Poro clusters (Bledsoe, 1980; Murphy, 1980). Intergenerational hierarchies are also vital to household functioning. In this work, I have understood family and household in particular ways. I understand households to contain various combinations of relatives who form a clearly defined residence group (d'Azevedo, 1962; Fraenkel, 1964). Households may include husbands and wives, their siblings, their married and unmarried children, children born by others outside the family, foster children, parents,

grandchildren, or fictive kin—those who are not biologically related, but function as mutual contributors to a household as a family member. Family is distinguished as only those who are immediate, biological relations: children, parents, and siblings. Kin are extended relationships such as cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and in-laws. Liberians tend to use the terms “family” and “kin” interchangeably. I have made these distinctions to clarify differences in household composition. This distinction will also be important later in the chapter, as I observe that obligations to one’s family were usually more important than those to extended kin, though this was also variable, particularly if an obligation was established between generations.

The household is the most basic and significant social unit (Gibbs, 1965; Lancy, 1996). It is at the level of the household that one’s most basic needs were met. Food, shelter and numerous other daily necessities were met through gendered and generational divisions of labour. Though household members function as a unit, reciprocity and obligation was usually the strongest among and between the most immediate family members.

As they grow up they are responsible for household tasks of increasing importance to the functioning of the members and the unit as a whole. In the immediate and every day, children begin with small, simple tasks such as fetching water or sweeping the yard. They learn to wash clothes, how to purchase items at the market, and to mind younger children. Children perform a wide range of tasks that perpetuate the household functioning for members. Their tasks become notably gendered as they age.<sup>96</sup>

“What about children?—Girls?”<sup>97</sup> I asked a neighbour.

“Girls do the cooking, cleaning, washing.”

“Boys? Sedia told me the other day that boys don’t do anything.” Sedia was a 14 year old girl who lived next door to me.

“Yes,” my neighbour smiled. “Boys do the more masculine things. They cut the grass, do the heavy lifting. Some boys help with the washing.”

Much of the children’s everyday life was spent tending to basic needs of the household, particularly girls. Younger children have to be bathed and dressed for school and usually need to be accompanied to and from. It was the children who went to the market

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<sup>96</sup> See Lancy’s (1996) study of child development among the Kpelle of Liberia for a more rural focus on children’s work. See also Mann’s (2008) work with youth in Dar es Salaam for a comparison of similar tasks.

<sup>97</sup> Interview, March 11, 2011.

to buy food for the day. It was the children who scaled and gutted the fish, cooked the soup, and made the rice. They ironed their own school uniforms and often ironed the adult's clothes as well. It was the children of the house who swept the yard, the children who ran errands. Children washed the dishes and the clothes, and made sure that while they dried, no one stole them from the line.

The domestic training of boys was however, far less essential to the upkeep of the household. Although they were expected to come and go at the beckon of any adult member of the household, their "masculine" tasks do not hold the same degree of necessity as tasks assigned to girls. These gendered tasks were directly linked to the roles and responsibilities men and women are expected to take on as adults. Andrew explained, "I think there's a lot more grooming of girls. You want to make sure she will be a woman who can...[take care of the household]...Yeah. Because boys, I think, parents feel like education is enough. If a man is educated, he will get a wife, and she can take care of those things."<sup>98</sup>

Children's obligations to parents and parents to children are apparent in the most mundane of daily tasks. Bledsoe (1980) writes that Liberian parents in her work would withhold food from children who had not fulfilled their obligations to household tasks, and remind them verbally of the care they received. I saw this happen in my own fieldwork. Mothers, who were almost always at the forefront of household management, would recall the amount of money they spent on children's clothes or school fees, and in so doing, remind slow or complaining children that their elders had taken care of their needs. It would be shameful if they did not fulfil their duties to their elders. In the same way, children had the right to request help or assistance with certain things. Parents or aunts and uncles had obligations to fulfil their requests at the other end of the reciprocal relationship. As an older guest, I was tended to by one of the children in my household. She prepared my food every day. She earned the right to request reciprocity from me—occasionally requesting phone credit or chocolate from town. I did my best to oblige and always felt a twinge of regret and shame if I did not meet her request. It is through these kinds of interdependent and hierarchical relations that everyday tasks of survival were enabled. One's needs were met because there was some form of debt that another was obligated to fulfil.

Intergenerational reciprocity was evident in the immediacy of everyday life, but also extended into the long-term future of elders and children. In return for their service to their elders, parents and elders were expected to care for the needs of the children under

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<sup>98</sup> Interview, March 16, 2011.

their care. As we saw in Chapter Four, education became of utmost importance to an increasing number of Liberians in the 1960s. The significance of education for a child's "bright future" has remained a primary value and concern to urban parents. Education is part of equipping children for adult life.

*Extending Reciprocity through Fosterage*

One of the most prevalent forms of wealth in people within the household can be seen in the intergenerational reciprocity of child fosterage. This was a long established and common practice across West Africa (Bledsoe, 1993; Goody, 1982; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985). Children have been fostered out of the household, usually to kin, for a variety of reasons. The most common were to free parents to work; to provide domestic labour for other family members experiencing a crisis such as death or separation from family of origin; to build alliances with another family; or for apprenticeship or education (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985). In Sierra Leone, Bledsoe (1993) relates the importance of being fostered out to a guardian for social mobility. Children were sent to higher status and/or urban based guardians, which would facilitate better education as well as becoming more culturally "civilised."

Fosterage and other forms of patronage and intergenerational reciprocity are contingent on the fulfilment of roles and responsibilities given to the child as well as the care and attention offered by the receiving household. Households without foster children were rare in my field experience. Most homes with room and resources hosted one if not several foster children at once. Many received children from outside the city. In some cases, parents were deceased or unable to pay for children's education, and so they were sent to wealthier relatives in the city. In other instances, parents were alive, but looked to relatives who had access to better schools, and could improve their children's life chances through better education.

There were two benefits to fostering children that are of note to this analysis. Foster children contributed to household functioning. By receiving foster children, heads of house—usually mothers and fathers—increased social respect and elevated their social standing both in honour and prestige. By caring for and promoting well-being of kin, they fulfilled obligations to their relatives. They also increased the number of people under their control, which increased their social status in terms of prestige.

Recall that reciprocity operates on a conditional basis. During my fieldwork, I saw multiple foster children turned out of households where reciprocity had broken down in one way or another. In one instance, a young girl did not want to attend the school she

was sent to. She stopped going and was turned out. In another, a boy was considered slow and disobedient by his aunt and was sent away. In both of these examples, the foster children lost the educational benefits their kin were providing, and in both of these instances, they were quickly replaced by children of other relatives, preserving the number of dependents and thus the household labour and social respect for household heads.

Goody (1982) argues that the act of rearing a child creates a debt that the child is expected to pay back. Children's obligations to their elders extend well into later life. They are the primary form of social security for parents and kin in their old age (Bledsoe, 1980; Harrell-Bond, 1975). The significance of having children to care for one in the later years of life was clearly illustrated in a conversation I had with William one afternoon.<sup>99</sup> A married man with several children, he explained that he and his wife had disagreed about how to manage his stepdaughter. She did not listen to him, and was disobedient. He had gotten vexed at his stepdaughter's behaviour, and had left the household. He and his wife left their disagreement unresolved for the next four months. He decided to resolve things with his wife shortly before he spoke about it to me. His primary reason had to do with long term intergenerational debt he needed to maintain with his children. He said it was important that he take care of his children again. If he did not, they would not look after him in his old age.

William's circumstance illustrates the reciprocity that bind the generations together through mutual obligations and dependency which extends across the life course. Further, what was evident from this fieldwork is that such reciprocal patron client relationships have implications beyond survival and well-being. They had implications for social respect and recognition, as well as political and economic security.

#### *Gendered Transitions into Adulthood*

Transitions to adulthood were as specifically gendered as children's household tasks. Here I discuss urban transitions specifically, as they are the focus of this research. Traditionally, young men's transitions to adulthood have been longer than young women. As with young people in many societies (Sommers, 2006), young girls had little if any "liminal" youth experience. They remained in the care of their parents or kin until they are married. They were expected to transition directly from their parent's home to the home of husband. "It is the responsibility of the father in the African system to take care of his daughter until she leaves his house and gets married," Cyrus explained.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Fieldnote, February 17, 2011.

<sup>100</sup> Interview, January 26, 2010.

Girls were trained to manage the household while boys were essentially expected to continue their education with the aim of getting a job. Once boys had a sustainable income they could be considered ready to get married and to fulfil the role of the male breadwinner. In other words, young men were expected to live independently as part of their movement from parent's home to a family home of their own.

Young women were not expected to live independent, self-sustained lives before having families of their own. One primary reason for this was that women were considered more vulnerable. "Even if they (young women) have a job, a lot of them would prefer to stay in the home. They can protect themselves," Moses explained.<sup>101</sup> The father of several children, boys and girls, I had asked him to walk me through the social transitions he expected his children to make. "If they are on their own, there is the danger of drugs, of rape. You know, somebody comes to her, befriends her, and then forces himself on her. So to protect herself, a lot of girls would prefer to be in the home. That way their parents are there, they know what is going on." Young men were not considered as vulnerable to exploitation.

Transitions to university education were an illustrative example of the difference between expectations for transitions to adulthood among men and women. Young men who wanted to work toward professional careers (versus skilled labour like carpentry or plumbing), needed to attend university and acquire a job before they were considered suitable for marriage and life as respectable men. Young women did not need to achieve these educational or employment related benchmarks. They needed to be good caretakers of a household. Having children was a significant marker of womanhood. Most of the women I knew who were attending university already had one or more children. University education was a pursuit they could undertake after they established households and families of their own. For young men, university education was a precursor.

The best case scenario was for young men to live with their parents through university, and then move out to establish their own homes when they were employed. Titus was one of the very few young men that I encountered who experienced a sustainable and smooth transition to university that was supported through the intergenerational assistance that came through his family.<sup>102</sup> His grandfather was an instructor at the University of Liberia, and was able to provide a place for him through a benefit program the university had for family members of faculty. Both of Titus's parents were still living. He lived with them, and when he needed money for school supplies or other

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<sup>101</sup> Interview, February 24, 2011.

<sup>102</sup> Interview, February 8, 2010.

necessities, they were able to provide them. At the conclusion of his university degree, he would be well prepared to transition out of the house into a life on his own. This is the ideal for young men. It stands in sharp contrast to the situations that most of the youth in this study were faced with.

In these opening sections I have advanced a discussion of intergenerational reciprocity as an ideal type within Liberian families and households. The helping hand in the form of support from family and households. I have tried to show how family and kin are expected to engage in obligatory roles and responsibilities that facilitate survival and well-being of members. When interdependency is working as it is intended to, intergenerational reciprocities enable young people to survive and transition into adulthood.

### **Wealth in People Diminished and Devalued**

With an ideal type established, the remainder of this chapter is focused upon how young men negotiate their life circumstances when wealth in people has been diminished and devalued. I argue that the disempowerment of their parent's generation has greatly affected youth options and possibilities in the post-war context. As an introductory point of clarity, I am not arguing that having an intact family unit will guarantee better possibilities for young people. What I am emphasising is that families and kin networks are the first port of call for support. It is their social obligation to attend to the needs of the younger dependents. If these people become unavailable or unable to assist young men in the way that Titus's family could, then patrons far less obligated to assist must be sought after. We observed patronage outside of family and kin in Chapter Five. In this chapter, I present the implications of diminished and devalued wealth in people for the street youth who have transitioned out of their parent's houses and into the street. Much of this discussion is advanced by following Timothy's post-war trajectory. His experience, from the time of his return from exile, to his current position on the street during my field research, illustrates many of the primary themes found among other street youth.

Timothy was 26 years old when I met him. He spent every day in Red Light, one of the busiest market centres in the Monrovia area. Timothy and several friends passed the time at a small shelter behind the market stalls, just beyond the congestion and noise of the main market area. Days were passed talking, sleeping, smoking cigarettes and marijuana. They wore dirty, often tattered clothes. They sustained themselves through informal means. Some occasionally found day labour hauling sand or laying blocks. Several, like Timothy, bought and sold small quantities of marijuana. Though their

personal life stories were all unique, what brought them all to the street was their impoverishment in people. As Leroy stated so emphatically at the beginning of the chapter, the helping hand was not there.

“What does it mean to be on the street?”<sup>103</sup> I asked Timothy one afternoon.

“It means that you don’t have parents in your life. They might be alive, but you have left their house, their care. When you get up in the morning, you go on the street, and your activities probably revolved around drugs. You doing small jobs to support the habit, or dealing to support your habit and that of your friends.”

The central role of drugs in life on the street will be discussed in later sections. First, I would like to discuss his opening line, “you don’t have parents in your life.” Most of the youth were on the street because of breakdowns in intergenerational reciprocity after the war. As I argued in Chapter Three, youth is not just a transitional category. It is an intergenerational one. In the previous section I illustrated that intergenerational relationships could enable smooth transitions for young people. Many of the youth in this study struggled to survive and advance themselves because they did not have the intergenerational support needed to achieve independent responsibility for themselves.

#### *A Generation Disempowered*

What has happened for many Liberians since the war is that their initial social endowment in family and kin has been reduced or removed. In the years during and following the war, families and households were disrupted. They were disconnected by death or separation during fighting and displacement. Youth in this study were internally and externally displaced. Some were displaced to areas within Monrovia, where Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) set up secured camps. Others were taken across borders to neighbouring West African countries that included Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. Timothy’s mother took him and his brother to the Ivory Coast. There, as a refugee, he completed his high school education. When the war ended, the family moved back to Liberia, to Nimba County in the northeast. His mother and father were separated during the war, and afterwards, his father was not able to support the family. A few years later, his father died.

There were a number of reasons that the generation of parents like Timothy’s found themselves without means to support their children. Many families were dismembered

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<sup>103</sup> Fieldnote, March 1, 2011.

by death or separation. “Our parents die...The war carry them,”<sup>104</sup> Bo said flatly in a group discussion one afternoon. Others were lost in the chaos and not heard from again. Joe’s father disappeared.<sup>105</sup> “This war make many of us fatherless, motherless. I know that I am one. From [1990], since my father left, I don’t know his location. I have not even heard from him by telephone. I don’t know whether he’s dead or living.” Nearly all of the young people in this study were affected by the separation or death of significant family members. Parents were always the most important. In this way, wealth in people was diminished through loss by separation or death.

To be clear, what I do not want to convey is that the war was responsible for all of the hardship and poverty that the families and young people experienced in this study. Poverty was prevalent before the war. Hardships can deeply affect the poor without the coming of a war. Many young people leave home for the streets because of hardships in contexts *not* affected by war (see Raffaelli et al., 2001; Rizzini & Butler, 2003). However, what we can acknowledge is that the war undeniably compounded the experience of many deprivations. People were permanently removed from families through death. The economy was unable to provide jobs to those who had formerly been employed. The infrastructure was badly damaged, making it difficult to travel for work or enterprise. In short, the war should not be blamed for all adversities faced by youth in post-war households. It is impossible to know how lives might have developed if the war had not occurred. We cannot assume how things might have been better or worse. We can see that there was a great deal of damage to the social, economic and political landscape of the country and it has changed the possibilities for everyone.

Many other youth had parents who were living but unable to generate a sustainable income. At the time of this writing, it was estimated that less than 20% of adults were employed in the formal sector (Twereforu & Kwar, 2008). “There were jobs before. There aren’t jobs,”<sup>106</sup> Andrew commented one evening in the yard. “It wasn’t like that before the war, Abby. Really, it wasn’t like that. Like for myself, my dad worked at Bo mines. We had a big compound. Everybody’s parents were working there. They had what they needed...But now, parents aren’t able.”

As I argued in Chapter Four, the Liberian economy grew through international and multinational corporations, leading to “growth without development” (Bonaparte, 1979). Many people like Andrew’s parents were employed by companies like Firestone and Liberian-American-Swedish Minerals Company (LAMCO). Shortly after the war

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<sup>104</sup> Group discussion, February 23, 2011.

<sup>105</sup> Focus Group, May 25, 2010.

<sup>106</sup> Interview, March 16, 2011.

erupted in 1989, economic activity came to a virtual standstill (Government of Liberia, 2001). The vast majority of the international and multinational companies shut down or severely reduced operations in Liberia. Though the post-war government of Liberia has solicited investment from foreign companies once again,<sup>107</sup> such efforts cannot provide the resources to meet the immediate livelihood needs of the country.

Many families lost property and money as a result of the damage done during the conflict. This is a point that was immediately emphasized in a focus group with youth in the urban slum of West Point. “Some of our parents put their money in the bank. And then the war came, and they destroyed the bank. They destroyed a lot of things. After the war, our parents can see that they need the money, but they can’t get it,” Solomon explained.<sup>108</sup> The destruction that was levied on the country resulted in significant losses for families and households. Money, material possessions, and property were damaged, destroyed, or taken during the years of conflict.

What emerged as so devastating in these losses goes back to the interdependence I discussed at the beginning of the chapter, every adult is a patron to a lesser person (d'Azevedo, 1962). If we think about the gerontocratic hierarchies and reciprocity within families and extended kin, then the removal or disempowerment of one or more elders in the kin network could have a significant affect upon many subordinate dependents. So for example, if a youth is dependent upon his aunt for school fees, and she is dependent upon her husband's income for household finances and that husband's job is suddenly ended and not replaced, the young man will look for someone else to pay his fees. Everyone in the household will be in need of a new patron to attend to their needs. They will be looking for others who are obligated to them. In the case of prolonged devastation that claimed so many lives the implications are compounded. The more patrons who are removed or made inconsequential, the fewer “back up” patrons there are to meet the needs of those who have lost their benefactors. The more scarce the patrons, the more people there are who go unaided. People like Timothy and his friends find themselves wedged out of their primary networks of care. They have difficulty indebting themselves to others because everyone has so many relations to attend to.

#### *Life Chances in Kin Networks*

Timothy's trajectory into the street illustrates this point. Death, disconnection or disempowerment of parents, meant that the remaining family and kin had to fill a

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<sup>107</sup> The Government of Liberia has set up a National Investment Commission, which is responsible for encouraging, promoting and co-ordinating investment initiatives in Liberia (see <http://www.nic.gov.lr/>).

<sup>108</sup> Focus Group, May 25, 2010.

significant gap. Like so many young people, Timothy looked to a relative to sponsor his education. “In Liberia, we like the family business,” he noted. Those who were able to meet the needs of a child or youth were obligated to assist family and relatives who were less able. When a young man like Timothy requested assistance from an older relative, he was staking his need against that person’s social honour. To deny a request from a younger member of kin would evoke social shame upon the older relation. As Tee put it, “You won’t easily say no.”<sup>109</sup> Youth had a right to ask. Elders had a duty to provide when possible. The elder’s honour depended on their fulfilment of that intergenerational obligation.

Because so many families and households faced similar challenges of disconnection and disempowerment, the chances of having relatives who were based in Liberia and able to assist with a significant amount of support were slim. Nearly everyone was facing depreciated circumstances with immediate and unrelenting needs. Many people looked to relatives abroad. The ruling class always had connections in the US (Liebenow, 1962). When the civil war began the United States became the primary overseas location to which Liberians fled during the war.<sup>110</sup> This meant that other Liberians could also establish lives in the US and that greater numbers of people in Liberia were likely to have a relative living in America. I met very few Monroviaans who did not “have people” (family and kin) or know people who were in the United States.

Family and kin based in the US presented the opportunity to access remittances for school fees, business ventures, and basic necessities. Timothy had an uncle who lived in the US. His uncle agreed to send money back to sponsor Timothy’s education at a technical school in Monrovia. With the means to continue his education, Timothy moved from Nimba County to a community outside of Monrovia to begin an engineering course.

### *Mundane, Everyday Stress of Urban Life*

The challenge that surfaced immediately was that Timothy did not “have people” in Monrovia. There was no kin relation with whom he could request to stay, no household within which he could embed himself. As an isolated individual, the mundane, everyday stress of living alone in the city quickly became difficult to manage. The challenges of daily survival coupled with school attendance were a daunting balance to maintain. “He (his uncle) was paying my fees, but not my bills. As a young man, I went to school, I got

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<sup>109</sup> Fieldnote, March 16, 2011.

<sup>110</sup> Estimates vary as to how many Liberians journeyed to the U.S. for refuge during the Liberian civil war. See Victor (2004), who provides two approximations of 16,094 and 27,075 based upon different figures released by the US Government reports and UN figures.

plenty necessities...Clothing, shelter, food and things—yeah, and you know it was kind of tough on me...The man don't understand it from that perspective. He want me to just go to school. Going to school now, there are plenty things involved in school. You won't just pay the fee and enter the classroom just like that.”

There were many hidden costs associated with attending school. Basic necessities like notebooks and writing utensils were only the beginning. Many instructors sold their lectures notes, without which it was often difficult to pass exams. There were few textbooks. Most instructors required their students to make copies of reading material. This too, required additional money. It was also common for teachers and professors to take bribes, commonly referred to as “small money” for grades. All of these expenses added to the cost of education.

Furthermore, the everyday routine tasks of surviving in the city posed a significant challenge for a young man living on his own. Aside from these monetary costs, commuting back and forth to town takes a toll in time and stress. Unable to find a place to stay close to the school, Timothy had a thirty minute commute each way. In Monrovia, there are two primary forms of transportation, taxis and motorbikes. There is a high demand for taxis, which drive set routes around the city. Motorbikes will go anywhere, but they are twice as expensive. Hence, for most Liberians in need of transportation, “you have to fight for car!” This is an apt description of the experience. During peak times in the morning and evening, large clusters of expectant people stand at heavily trafficked junctions. When taxis drop a person, small hordes of eager and sometimes aggressive persons rush to the door, calling to the driver to confirm his route. They elbow and push each other to obtain the empty seat. It was a fight and one that could take an hour or more during peak hours.

“I started dropping on my grades, and I couldn't study on time because you go and come from school—when you come from school, no food. You won't study.” Without the household support that someone like Titus had living with this family, the time consuming and routine tasks of finding and preparing food would have to be done by himself. The only alternative would be a cook shop or “street food.”<sup>111</sup> Either would be convenient, but more expensive options.

Timothy's ability to meet the demands of daily life by himself, while commuting to and from school, became too much. He was staying on his own, with no family to help

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<sup>111</sup> Street food was usually small amounts of food like roasted corn or fried chicken wings that were sold from grills by street vendors on the side of the road. Though sold in small, affordable portions by the time I was there (e.g. 20 LD for an ear of corn), to buy enough to satisfy one's hunger quickly became costly.

support his needs for shelter, clothing, or food. Living alone meant that there were no gendered or generational reciprocities at work to facilitate everyday survival. There were no younger sisters or cousins to do the washing, the buying, and the cooking. “I couldn’t cope. When I call [my uncle] I try to explain things to him. You know, things are hard on this side in Liberia. We’re just from war and no work for me. So if he really want to be helping me, let him send me some money...so I can be sustaining myself while going to school. But he never understood it from that point of view.” Timothy eventually dropped out.

### *Distrust and “Confusion”*

In the opening section I presented household and family reciprocity as an ideal type. This is how the helping hand was meant to be manifest in young people’s experience. Families and kin networks are never ideal, however. In the post-war political and economic circumstances, these less-than-ideal social units faced especially less-than-ideal conditions. Wealth in people could be easily diminished further by “confusion” (explained below), and breakdowns in trust.

When he heard that Timothy had dropped from school, his uncle resolved to try a new strategy for sponsoring his education. His uncle encouraged him to return to school and began sending money again. The way that his uncle chose to send money in this second attempt to sponsor Timothy highlights the crucial role of trust in the informal social exchanges that are transacted between people. What transpired was a very particular situation, but the result illustrates a common theme of distrust. I observed breakdown in trust among families and households throughout my research and across different community and family contexts, and most often over issues to do with money.

The uncle’s strategy again illustrates the significance of kin networks. Unable to monitor Timothy’s educational activity or his day-to-day spending, his uncle chose to send the money through a male relative who was entrusted to mediate the monetary transaction between the two. The man sent Timothy’s school bill to his uncle in the States and received the money from his uncle to pay for his fees. “His only responsibility was to tell the man. Say, ‘this is the man’s bill.’ And when he pay it (the school fees), say ‘here is the receipt.’ Scan the receipt and send it. I would tell him, I’m a technical student, I need so, so, and so tools. He would tell me ‘it much.’ When he writing [my uncle], he won’t tell him these things...So when he not [telling him], I kept my uncle informed. He sent 150 dollars. He said ‘take 20 dollars for transportation, keep the balance.’”

Timothy's communication with his uncle was seen as disrespectful to the mediator's position in the family hierarchy. When the man became aware of Timothy's direct communication with his uncle, he became angry. He called a family meeting. He questioned Timothy's honour in front of his relatives. "He said that I can even be killing. Why? Because I can be doing something behind him. So you see, it got me downhearted...He started saying plenty things about me to people. How in fact, I had undermined him...Problems started coming from the family...so I myself decided to stop school."

Timothy's experience of family conflict was a very specific situation. However, his experience of family conflict reflects a common occurrence that Liberians often referred to as "confusion" over distrust. "Confusion" was interpersonal conflict that usually arose from misunderstandings or misgivings. Often, confusion stemmed from failure to do what another expected. Confusion was regularly about a breach, breakdown, or lack of trust. In Timothy's situation, he did not trust his relative to communicate honestly and to advocate for him to his uncle. When Timothy broke the hierarchical chain of family communication, his integrity and his own trustworthiness was called into question. Conversely, Timothy exposed his relative's untrustworthy conduct. In retaliation, the man accused him of dishonesty in front of his extended family.

To lose the trust of one's relations was no small matter. Goods, services, support or help of any kind were acquired through informal social exchanges, the most significant often transpiring between indebted and obligated family and kin. Therefore, to lose the trust of anyone in one's social networks puts a significant dent in available options, in the possibilities that can be accessed through others. As family and kin were the people who held the primary obligation to assist, losing their willingness to support hit Timothy where it hurt the most.

#### *Transitions without Advancement*

The loss of his uncle's support was a turning point in Timothy's life. It rendered him unable to go to school or to support his everyday needs. The loss of this patron prompted his transition out of dependence and into a life of independent subsistence on the street. Under ideal circumstances, transitions out of direct family support would signal advancement of a young man's social status. It would mean that he had found means to support himself. For Timothy, the loss of his uncle's support made for a forced transition *out* rather than a facilitated upward transition into manhood.

With no other advocate and his integrity tarnished, Timothy's chances of good standing with the remaining relatives on that side of the family were greatly diminished. "I went to my mother in Nimba. I went there and explained things to her. I spent two months with her and I came back." Why hadn't he stayed? I asked. Things had not gone well in Monrovia. His mother was a source of emotional support for him. Why go back to the city? "You know, she's a poor woman. She has nothing much. And you know...it's like I was a burden on her too. Yeah, so I gotta come back to town...leave her with other kids. She got three children with her. But that's other people's children she's catering to."

Often, parents were not able to cater to their older, male children. Younger siblings, girls who were considered more vulnerable, and foster children needed the support more. As Timothy noted, his mother was caring for three smaller children. With no ability to contribute to the household in Nimba, he was "a burden on her." Inability to engage in reciprocities within the household meant that young men like Timothy become financial drains to their families. It was difficult to justify staying in a household without the ability to contribute. The difficulty for young men like Timothy was that they made transitions out of their family homes without sustainable means to support socio-economic mobility. They were unequipped to advance further in life. It was a move out, not a move ahead.

In Timothy's case, when he left his mother's house in Nimba, he returned to Monrovia with few prospects and no money. "From Nimba, I came back...Really, at the time, I had nothing doing. And you know I never wanted to find myself in the streets jacking (stealing) phones. Once you on the streets you just gotta do something to get money. You're forced to get money to sustain yourself. Yeah, so one of my friends encouraged me. He had a little money. He took me, he carry me. That's how I started selling [marijuana] at first. From there, that's how I started selling for myself."

Liberians talk about parents "turning their children loose" because they do not want or care for them. They speak regretfully about impoverished parents who allow their children to run rampant in the streets. A young man named Clarence explained the prevalence of neglectful parents like this: "There are parents who don't care. They just born the child. That's a problem in Liberia."<sup>112</sup> Clarence's view is a common one. There certainly were neglectful parents. However neglect was not always the reason young people end up on the street. Many young men like Timothy still had an open connection to family. They did not leave because they were put out or because they were not cared

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<sup>112</sup> Interview, May 7, 2010.

for. Often, their reasons were related to the financial strain on their families and with their own transitions to manhood.

“When do you start feeling like, as a young man, it’s time to go?” I asked Andrew.<sup>113</sup> He summed it up for me. “If you’re, maybe 25,” he estimated, “and your parents are still catering to you, still paying for things that are helping you to get somewhere, you might stay with them. But otherwise, they will probably be concerned about supporting younger ones...You are older now. So you will probably want to move from there.” This was the case for many of the street youth I knew.

### *Premature Transitions to Parenthood*

Transitions out of the household were, under the circumstances, the honourable thing to do. Many of the street youth in this study also transitioned to parenthood, which was not honourable. I have chosen to refer to “premature” parenthood because youth had literally created dependents before they were financially able to care for and support them. Clarence expressed an equally adamant explanation about how problematic parenthood was when it was initiated before young men and women were ready to support a child.<sup>114</sup>

I don’t have a child now. I have friend in the community; they have two or three children. They ask me why you don’t want to have a child?...But I don’t want my child to be born in a state of poverty, where I am not doing anything, the mother is not doing anything. And then we lay down and produce a child. We produce a child and the child have a right to go to school. But the child not going to school...I graduated from high school. In three or four years I graduate with a [bachelor’s degree], I will be able to work for 2 or 300 United States Dollars. Life will change for me completely. I will live in a decent place that I wish to live. And my own born baby will come to see money. You see?

This scenario was parenthood under the best of conditions. It was the respectable way to begin a family. In contrast, premature transitions to parenthood resulted in shame and stress. It was shaming because honourable manhood was based primarily upon providing for and protecting one’s dependents. To produce offspring that one could not care for was irresponsible and costly to family who felt obligated to fill in the gap. It

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<sup>113</sup> Interview, March 16, 2011.

<sup>114</sup> Interview, May 7, 2010.

meant that others would have to provide for a life and a situation you were responsible for initiating.

“Okay, for now, your younger sisters, early pregnancy is a problem,”<sup>115</sup> Mercy commented in a focus group. “We tell them not to get pregnant. They become young parents. At the end of the day, your parents are struggling to support you, you get pregnant. The man can’t support the child. He refuse the pregnancy. It brings the whole family down. We tell them to keep out of it. Unwanted pregnancies causing problem. The family is unable to maintain, the whole society is affected.”

I would like to draw attention to what Mercy has said about the young man who fathers the child. She says “the man can’t support the child. He refuse the pregnancy.” It is the father’s *obligation* to financially support a child. Many times, the men who do not want to, or are unable to support a child will simply refuse to accept that it is theirs. During fieldwork I was invited to come to a baby’s christening party.<sup>116</sup> When I arrived with several other friends of the parents we were told by a number of the guests that this was a particularly celebratory event because the father had not wanted to accept that the child was his. In the end, he chose to accept the baby and pledged in front of the guests to support the child. In doing so, he preserved his honour as a man.

Many of the street youth in this study had become premature fathers, and though they had not denied that the children were their own, they had little ability to support them. This situation produced stress in addition to the shame they endured for not supporting children. Mothers, and sometimes the families of the mothers, would come to put pressure on the baby’s father to provide some sort of support.

“There is no agreement,”<sup>117</sup> James noted. He had a daughter with his girlfriend who had left him when he could not support them. His now ex-girlfriend was coming to collect money from him in a few days. “I used to give, give, give. But there is no agreement because I couldn’t give on time. You know?...We go to the [police] station and the people say every month you will be able to afford 500 [Liberia] dollars for the child, for her every month. And I told her (the child’s mother) I say ‘I not working. How will I afford that money?’” Though it was not necessarily common for young women to go to the police, it was common for them to find social means of applying pressure to reticent fathers. James clearly felt the stress of having to deal with the pressure of the police and with the mother who was persistent in her demands for child support.

“Yeah, your leg’s been shaking since you sat down,” I observed.

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<sup>115</sup> Focus Group, May 25, 2010.

<sup>116</sup> Fieldnote, April 6, 2010.

<sup>117</sup> Interview, May 15, 2010.

“Yeah, the month coming to an end. Pretty soon they will be coming to me.”

“Who will be coming to you, the police?”

“No, not the police, the mother will come. If I don’t get [the funds together], the police will come.”

“The police will come, and straight to jail if he does not pay child support,” Washington piped in.

“So that’s life for you right now, huh?”

“It’s very difficult. It’s hard in life.”

Those who were not attempting to satisfy the requests or demands for child support from the mother were often leaning on the willingness of others who, as Timothy’s mother was doing, raised their children for them. The inability to provide for and protect their children meant that young men became indebted to others to whom they fostered their children. Siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, were called upon to rear children that they were unable to manage. This meant that young men were increasingly under the weight of outstanding obligations to family members or extended kin for taking over the responsibility they could not fulfil. It was a premature position was both shaming and stressful. It was a position of insufficiency on two fronts. Their networks of support were unable to assist them into independent adulthood, and in their prolonged youth, they had created a situation in which their insufficiency to parent their children meant relying on the very relations who were too overextended financially to help them in the first place. From these socio-economic positions youth like Timothy hustled for subsistence.

This inability was a blatant reminder of their socio-economic immobility. In his work in Bissau, Vigh (2006a) suggests that immobility of young men indicates that “youth” is becoming more of a social category than a generational one. He is reflecting on the age of some of his informants, who were well into their 30s and 40s and still no further along in their status than when they were 20. Parenthood suggests something similar in this study. Most of my informants were a generation ahead of their children, and yet their intergenerational obligations were unfulfilled. They were still living lives of social “youthhood”, despite being generationally placed as parents.

## Livelihoods in the Street

“Poverty makes it hard for us to achieve our potential, We’re tryin’ to make ends meet, and so we’re out there hustlin’. What I make? A penny, stretch it. Every day’s a strugglin’.” –Emmanuel Jal<sup>118</sup>

### *Making Life on the Street*

Timothy was fortunate to have a friend in the city who was willing to help him make a sustainable living. I will discuss the economic benefits and social drawbacks of selling marijuana in later sections. First, I would like to focus on youth with “nothing doing” and no friends to help them out. Washington was one of many young people who came to Monrovia with nothing doing, and no helping hand. His story highlights the inconsistency and insufficiency of “hustling” to find labour in the city. When he had exhausted any chance of support from his relatives, Washington began “making life on the street.” This was his phrase. It is a fitting description, as it emphasises the active agency exhibited by himself, and others like him. They generated means to survive despite significant constraints.

Washington started in the market. “When we see a coal car come, we go unload it. Then they give us small thing, you know?...It was very small. There are more than 500 bags of coal and four men. They give us 300 dollars (LD, which is less than four and a half US dollars). Four persons, 300 dollars, so that money was not really enough to sustain me for the day.”<sup>119</sup> When there was no one to offer a chance to work, youth hustled for the chance. The Liberians often referred to this as looking for their “daily bread.” This phrase was a reference to the lived experience of survival in the city. “Daily bread” is just that—food for the day. The hustle is the struggle to meet immediate needs of everyday survival and one that is experienced in the context of uncertainty. They are *looking* for basic provisions.

Many youth fought for opportunities that yield insufficient gains. James related the way that he was hustling to find his daily bread in the market. “Everybody sweep the market. Take the broom, and sweep the market. Okay, in the morning when the people come, we take plastic and we carry it around and say, ‘oh, oh let me clean the table.’ Yeah, that how we were doing things.”<sup>120</sup> In a similar manner, heavily trafficked street corners where the taxis frequently stop were peppered with young men who call out and “fight” for cars on behalf of waiting bystanders. Whether requested to do so or not, they would

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<sup>118</sup> From the (2008) album “War Child.”

<sup>119</sup> Interview, May 15, 2010.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

push their way through the congested streets and sidewalks to find an empty seat, save it for a passenger, then ask and sometimes demand a fee of five Liberian dollars. Youth who hustled in such venues were literally fighting to push their way onto other people, hoping that they would be offered something in return for a service that was not requested. There was no guarantee that passengers will give five LD for a saved seat. There was no certainty about how many tables might be cleaned for small money. Making life in such a way meant immediate working through uncertain condition with inconsistent returns on often frenetic and on-going efforts.

*Accommodated but Independent*

What was more, being out on the street alone made youth extremely vulnerable. It increased exposure to harmful experience. The street exposes young men to a number of risks. As James pointed out, even if you have not committed a crime, being alone made it easier to be accused or taken advantage of. There would be no relative, no employer or patron of some kind to advocate for you. James continued,

Like, we're sitting here, in the market building. We're sitting here doing different thing. In the night, someone steals. Pow! They run. Then, [others] don't see the person running. They come and call two or three persons sitting down and say that was so and so man...When they call that man. It will be problem. [They can blame you for stealing instead]. They will start beating you...

Being on the street instead of in the care of family or kin increased the vulnerability of young people. If there was no one to depend on, then there was no one to offer protection. The "rogues" (thieves) and armed robbers come out at night. They would harass, steal, break and enter. To be out alone at night was to chance the exploitation of dangerous persons.

The street was dangerous enough that no one who could find an alternative would remain exposed overnight. This meant that youth sometimes bounced from location to location, staying with friends or relatives who would allow them to shelter overnight. Joshua and I walked out of the market one afternoon. In the midst of our conversation, he interjected twice, "I used to live here,"<sup>121</sup> motioning as we passed to one area of houses and later another. Neither was his current place of residence, nor his home of origin.

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<sup>121</sup> Interview, February 28, 2011

Most of the youth I came to know were not sleeping on the street. Most were sleeping elsewhere, even if in temporary situations with people. Timothy, James, and others were living with relatives. They took shelter under the roofs of extended kin or family, but could make no further requests or demands upon them. They did not eat with them, for example. Having lost the family ties to support himself, Timothy was still able to stay with a relative, even though the man would only allow him shelter. Timothy was responsible to feed and clothe himself, to do his own washing, and take care of his own needs. "I'm only sheltering here, that's all," Timothy noted on an afternoon when he had taken me to his uncle's small block house. It was a 45 minute walk from the place where I usually met him and his friends in Red Light. "So you see for me, usually when I leave from here I go with my friends. I spend the whole day in Red Light...I come right back to my house. I sleep." In all other ways street youth were unincorporated.

Such circumstances took me by surprise at first. Based upon the way in which households and families functioned through interdependence, I wondered aloud to James and Washington about whether younger siblings, nieces and nephews, or cousins were at least helping to wash their clothes. "You see...when you get a little brother, and you don't provide for them, they will not work for you,"<sup>122</sup> James explained.

"Yeah, they don't respect you if you don't have anything to give them," Washington chimed in.

James continued, "The first thing [you say to] a little brother, 'come give me water, let me take bath.' But little brother will say, 'every day I can bring you water what you do for me? What you have for me if I give you water?' It looks shameful [if you have nothing to give]. So we get up and we do our own thing by ourself."

Reciprocity was needed to receive the benefits of household functioning, whether it be cooked food or washed clothes. If there was no means to reciprocate, there was little young men like Timothy could ask or demand from the households in which they sheltered. As both young men attested, it was shameful to make requests one could not reciprocate. To do so would detract from one's social honour.

### *Youth Stigma and Criminal Activity*

Stress came through more than just the fight for survival. Stigma also contributed to mundane, everyday stress on the street—in large part because of how it influenced young men's social and economic options. Recall Kristeva's (1982) work with substances

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<sup>122</sup> Interview, May 15, 2010

as having literally gone bad, become repugnant and Goffman's (1963) conceptualisation of the stigmatised as having some natural quality that made it unfit and worthy of disdain. The war is often blamed for "spoiling" the young people. Flomo, who was quoted at the beginning of the chapter, noted further, "Some of our children, some of them they were vulnerable. During the war there were a lot of children who engaged themselves in war activities, child soldiers and other things. And within that, they began to take drugs. That not used to happen. Now, right now we're not fighting the war. But the remnant of the child soldier is still in our midst, polluting our children."

Notice the conflation of the stigma against child soldiers and stigma against youth in general in Flomo's remarks. He attributes participation in the war to the drug and "war activities" that young people were involved in during the conflict. Yet the "remnant of the child soldier is still in our midst," he says, "polluting our children." The problematic nature of young people's engagement in the war carries over into a *problematic generation* of young people—former child soldier or otherwise.

These comments illustrate the stigma directed at male youth on the street. They were heavily laden with negative stereotypes that functioned as social barriers between young people and others in society. It ascribed to them a social identity as both deviant and dangerous, and therefore, untrustworthy. Such stigma worked to cut them off from others, and in so doing, diminished their social options. "Anything, anything that happen, the people will say 'oh it the youth again,'" Timothy explained. Youth became notorious after the war. Whether ascribed or achieved, they are often cast as delinquent if not dangerous. Such was the experience of the abject.

There is a marked, gendered distinction to highlight regarding street youth. In terms of stereotypes and assumptions, young men were assumed to be stealing and engaging in "dirty" behaviour such as smoking and selling marijuana. Girls were assumed to be selling their bodies. Many of them were. "The girls, all in the street, selling themselves for little bit of nothing...Some of them can sell themselves for 50, 75 LD [for] 15 minutes,"<sup>123</sup> James related. While Liberians throughout my fieldwork lamented the plight of many young girls who resorted to selling sex to survive, there was a different quality to their perspective about young boys. It was often one of fear and suspicion.

Though such stereotypes were oversimplified and often misapplied, there were many youth who achieve such social identities. Joshua commented, "You know you see those guys there (referring to an area near Timothy's place in Red Light). They look common in the face but they do many things. They hijack. They pick pockets in the market when

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<sup>123</sup> Interview, May 15, 2010.

people are busy. For true.” Some young people operated on their own, independently. They roamed through communities stealing batteries from parked cars, light bulbs from porches, phones from pre-occupied people in the market. Others become part of organised gangs. Timothy explained a common trajectory into gangs and criminal activity that he and several of his friends experienced,

They follow friends. Some people steal...A typical example... A teenager, yeah, around fifteen, sixteen, he start coming in the community, seeing people of his age playing with some kind of huge amount of money, 2000, 3000 and he really does not know how he can get the money. Yeah, but he will go with them. At times they will share with him...if you follow someone who is doing things for you all the time, it's like the person keeps helping you. And you don't have nothing. At the end of the day, you will be encouraged to follow the person. The way in which the person can use to find money, you gotta follow the person to do [the same thing]. If the person is a rogue, one day he might initiate you, and you will become a rogue. They won't continue doing it for you all the time. So once you with them, at a certain point in time, you gotta pay. And you know you gotta do likewise for them too. So, they will force you, they will encourage you now to [start] stealing. That's how you [start] stealing. You're among your peer group. You are doing certain things that you know that—you don't like it at the time, but you want to maintain that relationship. And you know, for the maintenance of the relationship, you will be forced to do it.

Timothy's explanation of initiation into gangs and criminal activity highlights the degree of desperation young people experience and again the significance of indebtedness. Relief from the burden of the hustle to find daily bread was followed by the obligation to reciprocate and contribute to the gang's activities. Young people like Timothy, James, and Washington had experienced the relentless strain of hustling to find daily bread. The helping hand was not there. Many people blamed peer pressure for “bad behaviour” among youth. There were peers and there was pressure, but as Timothy notes, it was a pressure of a particular kind. There was pressure to fulfil social obligations of indebtedness. Reciprocal participation was required in order to “maintain the relationship.”

Once associated with a group known for criminal activity, young people were often ostracized from certain arenas of everyday life. “A typical example,” Timothy began. He gave me a hypothetical situation. There was a young man who was accustomed to helping his older sister to sell things in the market. The young man in his story began

to hang out with a group of people who had lots of money, and shared it with him. He got involved in their thieving activities, much like his explanation of initiation to gangs. “When he go in the market they (the market vendors) will say he can’t sell again. And that’s the truth, because the boys that he started following, when they go at times they are successful in their stealing.”

Some of the youth in this study were, as Joshua pointed out, still actively involved in criminal activities and violence. Others, like Washington and Joshua had uncomfortable experiences that compelled them to find alternatives to crime, violence and gang involvement. Joshua was arrested. “They took me into the Police Depot. My mother came. She left me there. I spent three months in jail. She said it was better that I suffer and learn my lesson. So she didn’t get me out. Since then, I have not done anything. I don’t want to concern her.”<sup>124</sup>

Joshua, like Timothy and many of the other youth maintained a relationship with a parent, in this case, his mother. His wealth in intergenerational relationships had been diminished by the loss of a contributing father in the family. His father left the family to go to the US during the war, and was seldom heard from. His mother could no longer support him. Yet, his mother, like Timothy’s mother, was a source of interpersonal support.

Young people, like Flomo pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, were trying to sustain themselves one way or another because of the poverty that affected their parent’s generation. Joshua sold marijuana. Selling marijuana was one way to avoid the stress of the daily hustle without getting into the reciprocities of gangs and the risk of run-ins with the law. Joshua explained,<sup>125</sup>

One ex-general for Taylor. He was an ATU man. There’s one big place where he can get it in the bush. He brings it. Last time he brought it in big bags. I just buy a little bit to sell in our area...You can make a little money. This Christmas I went up to see my mother in Buchanan. I took [a gift] and 500LD. She was pleased. She doesn’t care if I sell the marijuana. She says she doesn’t mind, as long as I’m providing for myself and staying out of trouble.

Selling marijuana was technically illegal. However, most dealers found it relatively easy to operate without running into trouble with the police. What is far more important

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<sup>124</sup> Interview, February 28, 2011.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

than the illegality of the livelihood is something Joshua touches on above. He says, “she doesn’t mind.” He mentioned this because smoking and selling drugs was considered dirty and unrespectable. Respectable mothers would not accept their son choosing to deal drugs. As Timothy put it, “A real mother will not accept her child doing drugs. So you won’t be with your parents and be doing it.”<sup>126</sup> This is why Joshua chose to interject the comment about his mother not minding that he sold drugs. It would not be okay with most parents. There was a stigma attached to drug use. It would not bring honour to the family, nor to the individual, if others knew that a young man was selling drugs in the street.

Though smoking and selling drugs was not an honourable way to make a living, in the street selling drugs enabled some youth to elevate their socio-economic status above others. Cheap and addictive, it provided an on-going, consistent means of small cash flow. Consistent users meant that young men who sold marijuana could count on the cash flow in ways that youth who struggled for day labour could not.

Making life on the street encompassed a number of uncertainties and vulnerabilities. A highly visible, large proportion of the youth in Monrovia were trying, in one way or another, to sustain themselves without the helping hand of their parents. Some found a way to make life on the street through day labour. However, many became overwhelmed by the immediacy of their needs, the inconsistency of the work, and the returns on the work. They became involved in gangs, crime, and sometimes violence. For youth like Timothy and Joshua, selling drugs provided a way to maintain a small but sustainable livelihood.

*“Nothing Doing”: Active without Advancement*

*Today I was in Red Light again. The day is reduced to little more than a mundane rhythm of slow, hot hours, spent smoking and sitting, locking and unlocking the place, haggling over who owes the other what thing or amount of money. They are not complaining. They are not striving. The boys there don’t even seem to be waiting. They’re just there. They’re just living, existing. “Nothing doing,” they say. It resembles Terry’s frequent comment, ‘just sitting down.’<sup>127</sup>*

Male youth were highly visible on the street corners, in the road, or clustered beneath available shade. They appeared unoccupied. Many of them were. They had nothing to demand their time and energy. Some of my earliest observations were of youth doing

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<sup>126</sup> Fieldnote, March 1, 2011.

<sup>127</sup> Fieldnote, March 7, 2011.

seemingly nothing at all. *“There are lots of youth you see sitting around, two or three to a little stand of oranges and Cokes—far more than are needed to sell them. There are often three or four sitting in the shade behind Stephen while he and his mates are selling scratch cards. They just sit and watch the day go by.”*<sup>128</sup> As with the urban youth in Mains’ (2007, p. 659) study in Ethiopia, these young men appeared to have little else to do than to watch the “contours of the shade from one side of the street to the other with the passing of the sun.” They themselves talked about having nothing to do, or “nothing doing” as they say.

Though it was clear that youth were out of school and unemployed, they were not as inactive as it might appear. Instead, young men like Timothy were active in reciprocal networks with others. They contributed in small ways to each other’s survival and well-being. Though their involvement in everyday life on the street was not enough to generate socio-economic advancement, they were not entirely inactive. During the slow, hot hours of a morning in Red Light, I asked Timothy about a local pastor who had been visiting him and his friends. He had come to offer spiritual encouragement in the past. Timothy said the man had become busy, and no longer came out to their area in Red Light. Instead, the man had told them to come by his house, where they could read the Bible and pray together. Timothy and his friends refused. “We can’t just be leaving like that. We have busy schedules, things to do. We can’t just leave.”<sup>129</sup>

I looked around the area. Everyone was sedentary. The steady flow of petty traders continued, but none of the youth moved. They were just “sitting down,” “nothing doing.”

“What would you miss if you left and went to see him?” I ventured carefully.

“Someone might come with something for me. How can I get it if I am not around?”

Nothing about Timothy’s schedule—or any of the youth in Red Light—appeared “busy.” None of them had much to do at all, in fact. However, his follow-up point was helpful, as it directs our attention to the reciprocity that has been discussed throughout this chapter. Reciprocity was essential to their survival, but it was also inconsistent. They could never be sure when a favour might be returned.

I had watched a clear example of this just a week prior. “Darus, you can’t pay my money?”<sup>130</sup> Timothy had playfully harassed a youth who had walked up into the shade one afternoon. The young man owed him money. “Darus where my trouser?” he

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<sup>128</sup> Fieldnote, February 14, 2010.

<sup>129</sup> Fieldnote, March 17, 2011.

<sup>130</sup> Fieldnote, March 7, 2011.

continued. “I see used clothes...” Darus had not delivered the remaining trousers that would settle his debt. He eventually pulled out a pair of jeans from a bag of used clothes he was peddling in the market.

“We use the barter system a lot here. Something for something. That’s how we can do it,”<sup>131</sup> Timothy explained. “We share everything. If I don’t have, maybe you do, and you will help me today. Tomorrow, maybe it will be me that has, and I will share with you.”<sup>132</sup> Borrowing small items, a friend’s phone, paying for another’s cigarette, were all exchanges that merited reciprocation over time.

Indebtedness and obligation were only as good to young people as their access to those who owed them or could help them. They needed to be available and accessible. One consistent difficulty is that most young people did not have cell phones. Their remaining family, friends, or potential employers could not merely call up when opportunities arose. Those who did have phones often had no credit to make calls of their own. Because it cost money to charge their phones at local charging spots, those who possessed phones often had them switched off. This meant that anyone who “had something” would have to find the person, or send a message to them through someone else.

Though young people were often sitting still, they were constantly on the watch for opportunities to make good on a debt or an opportunity to indebt themselves to someone who could help them. They were perpetually “scanning the environment” as Vigh (2011) recalls of his own informants on the streets of Bissau. When Darus walked through the area by Timothy’s place, Timothy began calling to him immediately, and did not let up until the young man acknowledged his debt and repaid it with the trousers. Opportunities missed might not present again for quite some time.

Making good on debts to one another was significant to survival on the street. Reciprocities made it possible to survive when, as Timothy noted, “if I don’t have, maybe you do, and you will help me today.” Repayment of debts also insured that one’s social honour among peers was not diminished. The social honour, earned through reciprocity, strengthened trust, and the worth of wealth in peers on the street.

These street youth were able to sustain themselves by being indebted to each other. To do so meant to engage in reciprocities among one another. Social hierarchies of obligation and dependence emerged even in the small groups of youth at the margins of

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid

<sup>132</sup> Fieldnote, March 1, 2011

society. Young men like Timothy and Joshua rose high enough above their peers that their small amounts of cash and resources meant that others were often coming to them for help.

However, the reciprocities that these young people maintained among one another could not provide the helping hand that was needed to get them out of the street and onto a pathway of achievement and advancement. They were active in relationships and economic endeavours that sustained survival, but could not support socio-economic advancement. Their impoverishment in people of higher socio-economic status meant that they were unable to achieve the upward mobility that parents and kin were ideally expected to enable and facilitate.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have demonstrated how wealth in people enabled and facilitated advancement. Survival and socio-economic mobility rested in interdependent, reciprocal relationships. Yet, as Flomo pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, due to the poverty that affected a generation of parents, there were many young people who were forced to meet their own needs in some other way. Young people experienced an impoverishment in patrons who could support their transitions and socio-economic mobility through intergenerational reciprocities. Without the helping hand of family and kin, many young people found themselves on the street. The street youth in this work moved out of the house without achieving the advancement that was expected to accompany such a transition.

Once on the street, making life without a helping hand meant vulnerability and uncertainty. In the mundane everyday stress of making life on the street, crime and gang activity were viable options in circumstances where there were few alternatives. Young people survived through reciprocities amongst themselves. They indebted themselves to peers. Their lack of wealth in people of higher social status meant that their life chances were more likely to remain as they were. Without the support of those in higher social standing, there was little chance of upward mobility.

This chapter sets the stage for the material contained in Chapter Eight. In that chapter we will observe a number of post-war trajectories navigated by young ex-combatants who were attempting to increase their life chances through maintaining wealth in people from the war, or re-establishing wealth in people outside of their networks from the conflict. The objective was to avoid—at all cost—the predicament Timothy and his friends were in on the street. While Timothy's life represents a life that has yet to be

empowered into independence as an adult, to transition from war into a life such as Timothy's was seen as a *disempowerment* for young ex-combatants. That chapter presents a discussion about how young men attempted to preserve the prestige they have achieved through social terrains of war, even after the structural conditions of war itself have been removed. Before turning to post-war disempowerment I turn to some of the structural shifts that enabled empowerment and mobility for young people who fought with armed groups.

## **Chapter Seven: Life Chances and Trajectories in Armed Groups**

The street youth can help us understand the structural constraints on agency after the war. War is more than just violence, though the predominant analytical focus is often turned to the ways in which violence is organised and handled (Lubkemann, 2008). I do not shy away from the commission of violence in this chapter. However my objective is an analysis of something else. This chapter addresses the means by which relationships of interdependence in families and communities were disconnected and how new ones were formed in armed groups. My aim is to demonstrate how incorporation with fighting forces empowered young men. I argue with others (Maclure & Denov, 2006; Utas, 2003) that socio-economic options were altered through participation with armed groups. These options were very much bound up within the habitus of war and with holding a gun. Once war was over the very systems that structured empowerment for ex-combatants were disbanded, resulting in disempowerment for many of them. This chapter provides an analysis of the war-time experience and empowered alternative life trajectories with fighting forces, and will help us to understand how agency was limited or expanded differently for young men who fought the war. I discuss how their positions in armed factions provided different socio-economic possibilities for the present and the foreseeable future. The chapter is broken up into two main parts. In the first, I discuss how my informants entered armed groups. In the second, I discuss how involvement in an armed group changed the possibilities available to youth, and provided alternative routes to higher social status as “big men.”

### **Entering Armed Groups**

In this section I consider my informant’s experiences of entering armed groups. I discuss the causes for their participation. I conclude that for those who contributed to this study, if they were not outright captured, it was immediate and individual or family needs that were most often at the root of their reasons for incorporation into an armed group. I then turn to initiation experiences. I focus on spiritual rituals designed to render young fighters invincible. I engage debates about the cultural significance of such practices, and argue that while initiation rituals may resemble “traditional” practices, we cannot assume that rituals that transitioned young men to lives as combatants also signalled other social transitions to do with social status. Finally, I discuss the use of medicines (witchcraft) and drugs. These substances were primary indicators of an alternative habitus for ex-combatants. Time in the war was time spent protecting one’s

self with medicines, and with using substances like marijuana or cocaine that would alter one's perspective. I argue that substance use (medicine and drugs) were markers of a break with life as they had known it prior to entering armed groups. It reminds us of how different life was during involvement with armed groups—different both from life before the war, and life once the war ended.

### *Causes for Participation in the Liberian Civil War*

In this section I look at the causes for participation in the war. No two young men recounted the same scenario of incorporation. Some were captured. Some were harassed until they gave in. A few of them volunteered their services. Most were members of the NPFL, though I had contributions from other factions. I have chosen to discuss the primary themes that emerged across their experiences. These themes will then inform the experiences of ex-combatants discussed in Chapter Eight. In what follows, I draw a distinction between the structural causes for the war itself, and the causes for my informants' participation as fighters. Chapter Three provided a discussion of the causes for the Liberian civil war. The social, economic, and political struggle that led to the war have made it clear that there were structural forces behind the organisation and instigation of that war. In other wars, grievances to do with inequality or party politics have featured centrally in the interpretations of young men's motivations to fight (see for example Alexander & McGregor, 2004).

In this research I found that grievances to do neither with structural inequalities nor group solidarities were primary among motivations to join armed groups. Feelings of differential incorporation and of inequality were certainly present for decades leading up to the war (Fraenkel, 1964; Wrubel, 1971). It is difficult to know to what extent certain feelings of abjection may have surfaced and crystallised as motivations for violence. However, they do not appear at all as primary to initial reasons for joining. What I can conclude from my informants is that neither "strategies for turning the tables, getting even, and reclaiming the Being" that had been taken (Jackson, 2006, p. 44), nor the potential lure of mobility were primary in young people's motivations to join. Instead, most were coerced or captured and trained to fight. They fought because "the war came." Armed men came to their schools and took them away. A truck of fighters arrived in their village and demanded their services. Where there was some semblance of choice, it was most often based in immediate, usually threatening circumstances which they hoped to alleviate through joining.

One of the striking aspects of my informant's narratives was the degree to which the transition to a warscape rearranged the bounds of their agency, in most cases drastically

reducing their immediate options and foreseeable possibilities. That is why I would like to preface my discussion of several incorporation experiences situating how I have understood their capacity to choose to fight. When academics and policy makers write about recruitment, it is often broken down into neat and tidy categories like “forced,” “captured,” “coerced,” or “voluntary.” These distinctions are informative, and I will discuss instances of several. Before I do that, I would like to make a note about freedom of choice. The juxtaposition of “forced” recruitment next to “voluntary” can make it dangerously easy to slip into the notion that young people make decisions to join from within a vacuum, unprompted and of their own accord. For instance, Singer (2006, p. 67) suggests that in the end “children may join such groups simply because they are kids, and the slightest of whims or appeals may suffice to impel them to enter war.” Actually, once the war had begun all of the participants took decisions to join from within what became a “habitus of war” (Shaw, 2001). Nearly everyone’s daily lives were directly affected in some way by the presence of armed groups waging war in the country.<sup>133</sup> As the conflict developed, patterns of everyday life and recipes for action would be produced and reproduced to adapt to the life in the midst of armed conflict. Young people who chose to join did so under circumstances altered by road blocks, invasions, occupations and combat.

Morris was one of the few ex-combatants I spoke with who was not captured or pressured by an armed group in some way.<sup>134</sup> He wilfully chose to present himself to an armed group as a new recruit. His reasons for joining up were deeply rooted in a violently charged and dangerous habitus of war. His family were horrifically killed by an armed group. He watched from a hiding place in the bush as his parents and other members of his village were forced to dig their own graves. The rebel group buried them alive. Morris escaped and spent days on the run. During a river crossing, some armed fighters spotted Morris in a canoe. “The rebel see me, they start firing. That whole canoe, it was torn.” Morris dove into the water and swam away. Eventually a fisherman pulled him out and helped him to safety. “That man help me. The man carry me in the town...He give me food to eat, give me tablet and all. During that time, we can’t see war... Stray bullet kill him. We were not expecting it, nothing. It just bust his whole head. We were not expecting. He just die.” After the sudden death of his friend and care-taker, Morris went straight to Taylor’s forces and joined.

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<sup>133</sup> In Sierra Leone Hoffman (2006) observes that the war was so long and widespread that he asserts that nearly every aspect of life was affected. Having not conducted research during the Liberian conflict—as Hoffman did with his research—I cannot assert the same confidence about such a total change in all areas of life. However it was abundantly clear that the presence and constant threat of violence dramatically altered everyday life in terms of mobility.

<sup>134</sup> Interview, May 13, 2010.

He experienced violence against loved ones in two ways that are important for situating an analysis of “voluntary” participation in the Liberian civil war. The first was instance was against his family. An armed group intentionally, and for reasons he did not understand, chose to kill his family. In the second instance, someone who had helped and protected him was unexpectedly killed by a stray bullet. Morris was emphatic about the shock of the man’s death. “We were not expecting it,” he says twice. In both of these tragic experiences Morris could not predict the onset of a harmful situation, and was powerless to stop it. He joined Taylor’s forces to change that. Whether young men initiated their willingness to fight with an armed group, or responded to presented threat such as those discussed below, what was common to all was the environment that Morris’s story so vividly portrays. Once the war was on there were people firing guns, and they could come at any time.

Most of the informants to this study were captured and taken away from schools or villages. Others were placed in pressured situations of constrained and excruciating choices. Immediate and individual or family needs were pitted against their conscription. Alhaji’s experience illustrates the abuse and pressure that young people were place under.<sup>135</sup> A rebel leader took and repeatedly raped his sister. The family was unable to go about their daily routines safely because of the rebel presence surrounding their home. They were unable to obtain and prepare food. His mother became desperate for his sister. Their family was hungry. He eventually joined Taylor’s forces in order to relieve the strain on his family and get his sister back. Other ex-fighters referred to similar situations in which family members were humiliated or harmed until they agreed to fight.

For others new possibilities were mixed in with the immediate needs to protect oneself or one’s family. Some did not have to react tactically in an immediate situation. They had at least a small amount of distance from which to prepare for an outcome. Peer referencing was one way this occurred.<sup>136</sup> Boima was an ex-combatant who began by explaining that there were many small boys brought into the war early on. He remembered that social referencing played an important part in young boy’s decisions to join. “As for the NPFL” he began, “when they came into the country, when they invaded and came within the country, they brought a lot of small boys with them. So you would see yourself and say ‘oh yes I am a small boy and I see my friend who is a small boy holding arm (gun). And I know within myself that I capable of holding arm too. And I

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<sup>135</sup> Interview, April 28, 2010.

<sup>136</sup> Interview, April 22, 2010.

can do more than that man. I will be forced<sup>137</sup> to go and join.” Seeing other small boys toting guns presented a “possible self.” It gave young people an image of a future life outcome for themselves.

This future self was never-the-less imagined within the violence of a habitus of war. Boima couples this social referencing with the need to protect and survive.

Because why? Because as a civilian I don't want to suffer. As a civilian somebody can come and even bust the house and loot, take a whole lot of goods from there, and use you the small boy to tote it on your head and carry it for them. And you yourself will not see corridor open for you where they got base, to train the small boy unit. And you see your small boy friend and come and abuse you? You will be forced to go on that base because you won't want for somebody to [abuse] you. That [how] all the little boys go on base [to] become a small boy, which is a child soldier.

Yeah, because once you a soldier, nobody can embarrass you. They can't embarrass your family. But if you not a soldier, they will embarrass you and they will embarrass your family. They will continue to use you and your family. So you will look at that and say 'no, I won't sit there and let this man who will know that I can do more than he to come and use me and my family.' So it would be better that I what? That I go and join to protect me and my family. So that what encourage more child soldier to go and join the revolution.<sup>138</sup>

The threat of violence was almost always present during the period when young boys were captured, coerced or pondering the possibility of joining a group. That is what makes the social referencing he describes so important. Young boy's social horizons began shifting prior to entry into conflict participation as did their strategies for navigating their life trajectories. They could see a way to alleviate potential danger while simultaneously navigating an alternative trajectory into social recognition among their peers.

A habitus of war shifted everyone's position in society, altering both options for survival and socio-economic mobility. Some authors have drawn upon de Certeau's (1984) work to note the difference between tactical and strategic agency during situations of armed conflict (Honwana, 2005; Utas, 2005a). This makes for victimising representations of

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<sup>137</sup> In this instance he was using “forced” to describe a sense of being compelled to join rather than being made to join.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

young recruits. It seems more congruent to think of young people as operating from a power base that was severely restricted. Most of the young men in this study were acting from positions of very limited agentive capacity. Their options were few, and the implications of their choices were enormous, often fatal.

It seems more helpful to me to think about coercive methods and forced recruitment in terms of power to and power over. These young men were faced with armed groups who had power over them. They came in uninvited and held the means to life and death. Youth had power to choose fates that were *imposed* upon them. This was the allure of joining for Morris and Boima. If they joined they believed that they would no longer be in a position where their lives could be placed in these dominated positions. Joining a group and holding a gun would give them both power to act in a less constrained scope of possibilities, and power over others through their possession of weaponry and their incorporation with a mobilised group.

Peter put emphasis on this decision making process when we talked about his work with ex-combatants. A psychosocial counsellor during the DDR process, he agreed to talk to me about his experience of working with ex-combatants after the war had ended. What he emphasised most was young people's insistence that their incorporation into an armed group was a decision that would render them more control over their lives and their families, which were vulnerable to the exploitation of others.<sup>139</sup>

They knew their own stories... The kids were keen about how they joined these guys (armed groups)...they were keen in the sense that people were always asking them question. Many times they were asked that question, 'why did you join these people?' They had their different stories. From angle to angle, they all had their stories about how they joined these guys. Some of their reasons were really life saving. They wanted to save their lives. Some of them would say 'when I got into the army I was able to rescue my family—took them across, into Guinea'—into a neighbouring country, you know, 'before I came back.' So that why, you know, I'm stressin' how keen they were; because they felt that it helped them to save their families as well.

It is almost certain that during the months following the final ceasefire young people were keen to justify their involvement in armed conflict to those who had suffered much devastation as a result. Peter's explanation was about something more, however. Loyalty and commitment to a fighting force meant being incorporated into an armed

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<sup>139</sup> Interview, February 4, 2010

collective, rather than imposed upon by such a group. It was “really life saving,” as Peter puts it. Incorporation into fighting forces empowered young people in various ways. In the following section I turn to a discussion of initiation rites and spiritual protection given to young fighters.

*Initiation: Symbolic Rites of Passage*

Once brought into the ranks young men had varying experiences of initial training with armed groups. I do not have sufficient data to offer analysis concerning what kinds of training was used in certain groups or to what extent it may have varied. Some young men were put through a boot camp-like training program in the early months of the NPFL’s campaign in Liberia. Others were merely placed with a more experienced soldier until they were deemed fit for combat. Beyond this I can only speculate, and will refrain from doing so.

While training experiences varied, consistent across my informants were experiences of initiation rituals. There has been a good deal of academic consideration of cultural experiences in the war for young people’s social transitions. My informant’s narratives have given me cause to question some of this literature. What I argue in this discussion is that preoccupation with cultural symbolism tends toward speculation about transitions to manhood and that rather than illumine our understanding about young soldiers or masculinities, what we have are distracting discussions about socio-cultural symbols that may or may not be relevant for the young people we study.

In West Africa there are noticeable similarities between the initiation rites experienced by young soldiers in recent conflicts, and traditional rites of passage in socio-political institutions like the Poro (Ellis, 2003; Peters, 2011a; Shepler, 2005). Becoming a fighter is certainly bound up with notions of masculinity, with initiation into fighting intertwined with initiation to manhood (Hoffman, 2006). Some have argued that initiation rites gave young men a sense of transition to manhood (see Bragg, 2006; Ellis, 2003). In this section I unpack this notion. I provide a summary of Poro initiation and compare it with an account of initiation into conflict that was given by an informant. I then conclude that initiation rites inducted young men as fighters. Beyond this, we can only speculate about their feelings of transition to manhood. What seems more clear is that the performance of combat was reserved for men, and that the responsibilities and benefits that came with being a soldier reflected social maturity as an adult—a discussion I will provide in the second part of this chapter.

The experience of initiation into the Poro of Liberia was meant to be a transformative experience for young boys.<sup>140</sup> There are very clear similarities, particularly concerning the journey into the forest to see the Zoe. This is how Michael described his experience of initiation in Charles Taylor's NPFL:<sup>141</sup>

In my experience, they took us to someone we call a Zoe. He's a person with special power. Yeah, he has special power. And they take us to a particular place, into the forest where he has his power. We slept there, and in the morning we had to take off all our clothes. They brought this bucket around. It had water in it with some kind of leaves from the forest. We had to drink it. And we had to bath in it as a way of cleansing ourselves. Then they brought around this dust. They had this dust and a sharp object. They cut us with it and put the dust inside. (He lifted up his shirt sleeve to show me four small marks on his right bicep). It's inside of us, in our bodies. Then they began to sing, and it was a kind of chanting back and forth. They brought out this gammon seed. It's a white seed. Sometimes you will see women braid the gammon seed into their hair. We tied the seeds around our head, our waste, and our wrists. Then they brought out this kind of traditional jacket. It covers your head, and down just below your neck. After we put that on, they lined us up. You may not believe it, but it worked. We saw them empty the gun, put the ammunition in, load the gun. And then they come around to the first person. They tell you when they fire on you, to give a response (he called it, and it sounded like "zangaduwe!"). The first person, 'Pop!'—"Zangaduwe!'. The next person, 'Pop!'—"Zangaduwe!' all the way down the line.

When you were doing the ritual, or in actual conflict?

When you're coming from battle.

There are clear parallels between this experience in an armed group and the experiences of youth who had gone through bush school in Poro society.<sup>142</sup> The youth were scarred. They were put through a ceremony in the bush. Once they began fighting, many took on new names for themselves, such as "General Next to God," "General Kill the Bitch." Ritual practices were however always represented as avenues that provided spiritual protection from physical harm. Going to the Zo, receiving cuts

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<sup>140</sup> Please refer back to the summary in Chapter Four.

<sup>141</sup> Interview February 28, 2011.

<sup>142</sup> Shepler (2004, 2005) has drawn attentive comparisons between bush school and initiation to conflict in Sierra Leone.

and medicine for invincibility was about entering into a new social system of armed warriors and armed conflict.

It is important to distinguish between initiation into faction and into roles as fighters, and initiation to manhood. War is certainly an activity that has been traditionally reserved for those socially recognised as adults (Moran, 1995; Schwab, 1947). Certainly, young people came to see themselves as having achieved a social standing as adults. They became men of power and stature. It is my contention that they achieved this status through experience and performance in armed groups more than through ritual ceremony. Similarities between ritual practice in war and ritual practice prior to war can be seen. However, to delve into further interpretation quickly leads us down a road paved with assumption and speculation. We cannot know what meanings young men assigned to initiation rites at the time. I have engaged in this discussion because the preoccupation with cultural practice is as I see it, more distracting than helpful. It pulls attention away from phenomena that we can more aptly interrogate and does little to bolster a substantive analysis. Concentration on spiritual rituals like bullet proofing quickly leads to exoticising youth experience without the data to support claims about ritual meanings. Meanwhile, there is substantial evidence to suggest that life as a fighter provided the opportunities necessary to perform the roles and responsibilities of a man.

### *Medicine and Drugs*

What we can be sure of is the significance that young men placed upon the spiritual protection of bullet proofing and other medicines and also their heavy reliance upon drugs in combat. Medicine and drugs were the most consistently discussed elements of life with armed groups among ex-combatants in this study. This blend of traditional and modern substances signified the drastic difference between life experience in pre-war society, and the alternative nature of participation in armed factions. Both were instrumental in preparing small boys to become men of war. Young combatants are often portrayed as mindless killers. Consideration of the use of medicine and drugs helps to challenge and inform such notions. Through belief in protective power of medicine, and the perception altering effect of drugs it becomes possible to imagine how young people might respond to combat with reduced fear or heightened aggression that would appear unnatural or even “crazed” to observers. The following discussion provides at least some degree of qualification to assumptions about young people being turned into

killing machines. With their emphasis on the mental and physical alterations these substances created, we can see how their perception and behaviour would also shift.<sup>143</sup>

“Medicine,” as it is referred to in Liberia, is the invocation of spiritual power, conjured through the art of witchcraft by a witch or medicine man and contained in a substance. Schwab (1947) describes medicine as anything with hidden power. Medicines are often made up in packages of skins, teeth, and other objects. Welmers (1949) offers a broader definition of medicine in Liberia. A student of languages, he observes that the word “sále” which is usually translated from Kpelle to mean “medicine,” has a wide range of meanings. It includes (p. 209), substances, utterances, actions, and even organisations which are believed to possess unusual powers. The power may be curative; thus imported drugs and even operative techniques may be called sale. Poisons may be called “sále.” In this research, medicine was generally kept to a more narrow reference to actual substances, often carried with a person, which were conjured for a particular purpose.

Combatants carried such medicines with them. Matthew described a valuable ring he carried during the war.<sup>144</sup> He rose to the rank of general while fighting with the NPFL. The ring warned him when danger was coming. He explained how it would begin to hurt his finger, signalling the approach of something bad. If food was offered to him, he knew to abstain as it was likely to be laced with poison. If it was hurting him while with his men, he knew it was time to pack up, and he would order them to break camp and leave.

A variety of charms, rings, and necklaces made of teeth or other materials were worn or carried to render protective services to the possessor. Having medicines that would protect young soldiers from physical harm emboldened them to step out onto the battlefield. Bullet proofing is perhaps the most notorious and significant way that young people were prepared to be brave in combat in Liberia.<sup>145</sup> Matthew explained how it happened when he entered the NPFL.

They force you to go to the medicine man. They do different, different things to you. It is to help make you to be brave...The medicine man marks

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<sup>143</sup> This is one significant reason to question notions about permanently altered or youth who are irrevocably socialised into violence. Once sober, detoxed, unarmed and unprotected, it seems quite likely, as this research suggests that many youth would not be nearly as violent. This is a discussion I will pick up in Chapter Eight.

<sup>144</sup> Interview, April 23, 2010.

<sup>145</sup> The most famous case in Liberia is General Butt Naked, who went into battle stark naked, fearless and fearsome, and fully reliant on his invisible protection during combat. Yet bullet proofing was also common for soldiers of lower rank.

you, he gives you medicine. You have to take the medicine. Then they stand you up against a palm tree. You know Arnold? You see Terminator? They stand you up. They fire automatic weapons at you (he motions to indicate big guns like AK-47s). It's just like Arnold. The bullets do not penetrate. It feels like someone is chunking small rocks at you, or like rain hitting you. The bullets cannot hurt you. It makes you brave.

Bullet proofing medicine was a significant agent of empowerment to young soldiers in battle as they believed, and many still believe, that this spiritual protection rendered them almost invincible. We can reasonably assume that nearly all soldiers in all of the fighting forces were given some ritualistic protection. It was definitely used by the NPFL, and has been observed in other wars in the region. Hamer (2011) reports the use of anti-bullet medicine in the Ivory Coast. Though I can only report the use of bullet proofing among former NPFL soldiers in Liberia, it seems that this is a prolific practice throughout the West African region. My informants were convinced that their foes had also received spiritual protection.

Unfortunately for some, much like Achilles' heel, even such a powerful and spiritually endowed form of protection could be penetrated under certain conditions. There were different medicines administered and each was accompanied by its own set of stipulations. For some, a promise might have to be made which, if broken, would render the medicine ineffective. For others, certain requirements would need to be met. For instance, the possessor of the medicine or bullet proofing could not eat certain foods such as pumpkin. In many cases, medicines given for invincibility would most assuredly be broken if the person was killed by a "friendly bullet." If a man's own friends turned against him or if a stray bullet from his own faction caught him, the medicine would not hold. General Next to God is a prime example. Morris recalled his story like this:<sup>146</sup>

"I was fighting with General Next to God. That was my general, Next to God. He could walk on water to go and fight."

"No way."

"You not [believe] it?"

"No way. Walking on the water like Jesus?"

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<sup>146</sup> Interview, May 13, 2010.

“Ask that man! (pointing to a friend several paces away) Ask that man [about] General Next to God. But they killed him.”

“They killed him? How?”

“You know how they killed him? [His own brothers set the arm (gun) in the car]. After trying to open the door, his own arm kill him.”

“His own people?”

“His own people, because of jealousy.<sup>147</sup> Because when we go to fight, that man would walk on the water. That’s why we called him Next to God.”

“Did you see it? Did you see it? No man!” I objected, playfully trying to wind him up.

“I see it, I see it!” He said, laughing.

“Now how did he get the power to do that?”

“How can he get the power? He get a fish for himself. Afterwards, he go to a medicine man. The medicine man say you should not do so, so, and so thing.”

“So he had medicine?”

“Yes. He do it. He do it. He walk over the water. Everybody witness. Everybody witness... But our own boys kill him...I can speak it. I riding in the back seat.”

This and many other similarly broken conditions explained why some soldiers, despite ample protection, were killed during the course of battle. The assumption was that the promise or conditions must have been broken. If a soldier was certain that all requirements for the medicine had been kept, the only thing that could penetrate his invincibility was the betrayal of his friends or stronger medicine from the opposing side.

“Was this just in your group, or in other groups?” I asked Michael concerning his bullet proof protection.

“All of them! They all used it.”

“But then you’re all fighting each other with bullet proofing...?”

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<sup>147</sup> Refer back to Chapter Five for a discussion of envy and jealousy as it relates to undermining others.

“Yeah, but some of them have more power than others. Like, some of the Zoes are more powerful than others. So if you are hit by someone who has more power than you, you will die. And there are some guns that you can’t stand up to. It won’t work on a 30 calibre or 50 calibre rifle. If you get hit with it, you will die. And there’s another American rifle. If you watch WWII movies from the 1940’s you will see it. That rifle takes the same bullets. It won’t hold against those. If you get hit with it, you’re finished.” This is another long held understanding of spiritual protection in Liberia (Schwab, 1947).<sup>148</sup>

If medicine could prepare soldiers to face the guns, drugs were what empowered them to use guns of their own. Drugs were a powerful source of mental separation from conscience and emotion. “Anybody can understand why they did what they did,”<sup>149</sup> Michael observed about his ex-combatant peers. “In order to numb their fear, in order to do what they did, you get what I’m saying? The humiliation—they must take something to remove that sense of normalcy, that sense of consciousness.” Substance use among soldiers enabled them to distance themselves from the emotional response that would ordinarily occur in strenuous and violent situations where their lives could be taken from them and where they were under orders to take the lives of others.

Drugs not only altered young people’s sense of fear it also quite literally altered their perception of the enemy. Because drugs chemically modify a sense of reality, the lived experience of fighting was literally changed, and enabled to become a less emotional or familiar human experience. “When I was given gun, I take drugs. I take cocaine...Real cocaine, that if I see you, I see you like an animal. I shoot you good. I kill you, and I don’t think, because I was in drug,”<sup>150</sup> Thomas explained. A former NPFL soldier, he had access to cocaine during the war. “I was addicted to drugs. If I don’t take drug, I won’t eat, I won’t do anything. Every day the President buy drugs. Charles Ghankay Taylor, he buy drugs for the generals, and the generals bring the drugs to the teenagers—child soldiers. Give it to the child soldiers to make the brain brave for us to do things.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> In his travels through Northern Liberia, Schwab learned of medicines for invincibility. Similarly, a gun-proof protection was explained as having saved the life of a village elder. However, as Schwab points out, “It must have been effective against gunfire only, for he was wounded by a machete” (p. 232).

<sup>149</sup> Interview, March 31, 2010.

<sup>150</sup> Interview, February 28, 2010.

<sup>151</sup> I cannot verify Thomas’s claims about Taylor shipping drugs to his men with this degree of frequency. However, most fighters were taking one or several substances as part of their conflict participation.

Drugs helped to turn young men into combatants who responded not just from fear of authoritarian commanders or of the enemy, but out of a separation from emotion or human connection. Sorsor, an ex-ULIMO-K fighter, remembered, “The soldier was under the influence of drugs. Yeah, he was under the influence of drugs. Yeah, their mind was set, not alright. So they would do anything. When the commander say, you, go kill the man! You will do it without hesitating. You will carry him straight and you will kill him. You will do more killing all the time.”<sup>152</sup> Drugs were, as these men indicate, a very strategic element of mental control as well as empowerment. Cocaine, opium, sleeping pills, gunpowder, marijuana and alcohol were all used to alter a soldier’s psychosocial connection with his enemies and his victims. Drugs were a mentally fortifying agent that enabled young people to perpetrate acts of violence in terrains of war. Just as the medicine offered them spiritual protection from bodily harm, drugs provided mental suspension of social norms and human connection.

Medicine and drugs were two of the most highlighted aspects of soldier life among the ex-combatants and non-combatants in this study. These substances signified a drastic difference from civilian life. Young men were participating in a violent way of life that required supernatural protection as well as mental and emotional distance from foes and victims outside of their armed groups. Medicine and drugs indicated the vast amount of difference between life as a small boy in a town or village, and life as a young soldier in fighting forces. The following section offers a discussion about how young men’s possibilities shifted through their experience and performance as fighters.

### **Alternative Pathways, Accelerated Trajectories**

This section is about how participation in armed groups created alternative pathways that provided “violent life chances” (Vigh, 2006a), and how these in turn enabled young men to accelerate their movement into higher social status. If they could survive in war, there were opportunities to move very quickly from social standing as small boys to positions as bigger men in war. This was made possible in part because youth were incorporated into an alternative system of social hierarchies in which patronage facilitated basic survival and performance could result in promotion. They could achieve positions of prestige with authority over other fighters. Positions of dominance over conquered foes and captured territories also facilitated sustainable livelihoods.

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<sup>152</sup> Interview, April 17, 2010.

*New Wealth in People: Redirected Allegiance*

During participation in the war families were no longer the relational systems that provided for survival and supported social advancement of young people. Instead, social hierarchies in a chain of command made up a system of authority and accountability that positioned and supported young people in specific ways. There is a strand of literature that presents young soldiers as relatively separated from intergenerational relationships in armed groups (Cheney, 2005; CSUCS, 2008; Honwana, 2005; Machel, 2001). They are victims of abuse, or perhaps the receptacles for factional propaganda (Vermeij, 2011). They are portrayed as obeying “evil abductors” (Shepler, 2011) to survive, or planning escapes to get away (Honwana, 2005). What comes through in such narratives is a sense that children are used as pawns to be strategically managed and relationally, quite disconnected from their leaders. In contrast, Murphy (2003, p. 63) nudges us to pay attention to relationships of dominance and dependence during war. He argues that this can help us to “avoid the mistakes of exoticising, decontextualizing, or essentializing child soldier behaviour.”

In this work I heard about a different social experience in armed groups. Young men talked repeatedly about their relationships with other fighters, above and beneath them in their chains of command. Though not a universal experience, most spoke about meaningful relationships with their fellow fighters. Recall that wealth in people organises relationships along patrimonial hierarchies, and that security and advancement rest in networks of interdependence (Bledsoe, 1980). Though situated in an armed environment much of the patrimonial structure of relationships appears to have persisted in young men’s experiences within armed groups. Many young men formed strong attachments to their comrades and commanders, in part through relationships of dependency and reciprocity. Despite the violence there was opportunity to form relationships based upon reciprocity and even affection.

Such relationships are essential to our understanding of life chances and trajectories in armed groups. Randall, a former truck driver for the NPFL, provided an illustrative and articulate example of peer relations and intergenerational patronage from his time during the war. He spoke about a commander, remembering,<sup>153</sup>

We been together during the crisis. During the crisis we were friends. He can’t leave me. When I in problem, he in problem. So he was more like a

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<sup>153</sup> Interview, April 22, 2010. Others have observed similarly relationships between Liberian fighters and their commanders, which were marked with loyalty, trust, and affinity for the other (see Richards, 1996; Sommers, 2007).

brother. We were all together. We move like that, like a brother. Yeah, that how we live together...Serving each other' life...[It was] the same man (commanding officer) that been with every one of us...He brought us up during the crisis. We work for him. He like a godfather for us. That the man that take care of us, do everything for us.

Soldiers like Randall accrued a new and different wealth in people during the war. They became indebted to others in their factions. They were engaged in reciprocal relationships that developed over time. When the war concluded many soldiers maintained their friendships and patrimonial relationships with those among whom they had fought. Hoffman (2011b) finds similar patrimonial relationships were at work among armed groups in Sierra Leone. He explains (p. 133),

As a patron, a “commander” would be responsible for his “clients” in ways not defined by military necessity or protocol. In addition to providing food, shelter, weapons and ammunition, a patron-commander would be a resource in family emergencies or an arbiter for disputes among equals. He would be expected to stand for those beneath him in cases where allegations were made by local authorities or other within the movement. In return, the patron-commander’s dependents would be expected to offer security for the “big man,” share a portion of whatever wealth they might accumulate, and tend to his needs as necessary.

Though I cannot provide the war-time empirics that Hoffman offers, my informants reflected back to relationships that were very much in keeping with the patrimony he describes in this paragraph.

Some authors conclude that fictive kin relationships in armed groups are at their core, manipulative and lacking in shared and meaningful exchanges on the part of coercive commanders (see Boothby et al., 2006; Schafer, 2004). I do not contend with the conclusions drawn by scholars in other conflicts. However, I found evidence to the contrary in my work with Liberian ex-combatants. In this research it seems that combatants often became connected within patrimonial networks that were helpful and meaningful to them during and after the war.

Patronage persisted in armed groups. Young people’s life chances continued to be accessed through interdependent and hierarchical relationships. In this way structure was reproduced in armed groups. One obvious but important shift in these social systems was the heightened experience of rewards and punishments within the ranks. Disobedience received swift and violent punishments. Matthew described one of his

punishments for disobedient soldiers in the NPFL. The soldier at fault would be called out and laid on the ground, “like a snake,”<sup>154</sup> he noted. Then they were lashed fifty times with barbed wire. “You can’t sit down [after that]” he assured me.

In other cases disobedience could easily warrant death. Morris described such a situation that occurred when he was fighting for the Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU). After a friend disobeyed the order of their commanding officer:<sup>155</sup>

“The general gave us an order to kill our friend. I said ‘I will not do that.’ The general beat me.”

“He beat you?”

“Yeah.”

“He beat you for not killing your friend?”

“Yeah, because I was the general for my little friend, because I was too wicked. If anybody will do bad I will kill you. But I decide [not to do it, not to kill my friend]. So they beat me and all. Then the general end up killing the man.”

Morris’s story of punishment illustrates both the relational spaces for friendship and interdependence that were accessed within armed groups, as well as the harsh and unforgiving methods they used to maintain order. His story also offers an important contrast to the point I made above. While many young men like Boima experienced meaningful relationships of reciprocity within their units, not all relationships were marked with the kind of loyalty, obedience, and trust Boima described.

My objective in raising these illustrations is to point our attention to the redirection of young people’s allegiance and accountability. They were embedded in and answered to a new system of social hierarchies. My informants described their involvement with such groups as neither completely abusive experiences, nor were they social landscapes marked with total trust, mutual respect and loyalty. None-the-less, for those who survived, there were violent life chances to be found through interdependency during the war. Power given through positions in armed groups enabled survival. It also facilitated promotion, through relationships, and through performance as a soldier. These are the subjects of my analysis in the following discussion.

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<sup>154</sup> Interview, April 23, 2010.

<sup>155</sup> Interview, May 13, 2010.

*Accelerated Transitions: From Small Boys to Big Men*

In contrast to the liminality, the social moratoriums, or dead ends of youth experience in the literature (Jeffrey, 2010a; Vigh, 2006b), participation with armed groups provided the means to rapid mobility. Small boys, a phrase used to describe young boys who are still quite dependent, could quickly move into higher social status, engaging in adult-like performances as authority figures and big men. Transitions to higher social standing occurred over time and in manifold ways. Guns could provide material possessions through looted goods or stolen property. Promotions through the ranks could happen quickly, and were often given for performance rather than time served. What transpired as a result were transitions into adult roles, and achievement of higher social status.

“They would say to us, “the gun is your mama and your papa.” The gun was your mother and your father,”<sup>156</sup> Michael explained.

“What did that mean?”

“It meant that the gun could give you everything you need. If you have the gun, it can give you the money you need, the power you need, the car you need.”

Being a part of a fighting force replaced the role that households fulfilled in the lives of young people. In the NPFL, basic rations of rice, farea, drugs and liquor were provided on a regular basis. This meant that the basic necessities for life were taken care of. “As a soldier I eat on time,”<sup>157</sup> Nathaniel emphasised. There was much less need to worry about finding food for the day—a common stressor among many Liberians during and after the war. In addition to basic provisions, anything that could be taken from the frontlines as spoils of war would add to soldiers’ wealth. Michael explained further, “Some people love the operation where they go on attack. When you go on attack, and your enemy retreat, whatsoever in that environment comes to you: looted materials, arms, you know whatsoever, water, soap, rice, yeah the drinks.”<sup>158</sup>

Within this vein I would like to draw particular attention to the independence that guns facilitated. Michael says, “the gun is your mama and your papa... the gun could give you everything you need.” Guns gave young men positions of dominance to do things they had not been able to do prior to participation with armed groups. Young men did not have to ask parents to buy them things. They were placed in positions where they were

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<sup>156</sup> Interview, February 28, 2011.

<sup>157</sup> Focus Group, April 17, 2010.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

able to apprehend certain goods by simply taking them, either because their outfit was moving into enemy territory that could be looted, or because they could demand that resources be handed over by civilians.

Advancement was also foreseeable. Promotion in the ranks could happen quickly, to very young people. Peters (2011a) observes that in the civil war in Sierra Leone, promotion in the RUF was often given to fighters based upon ability and performance. Again, my informant's experience in Liberia reflects similar trends. "When I was 15 years old I started the battle,"<sup>159</sup> Amos interjected into a focus group. "My first day on the frontline I killed 17 persons. That's where I got 17 arms (guns). I brought 17 arms. I brought 17 arms myself. When I brought 17 arms that's when my commander said, 'you, from today you are now called Battle Group Commander.' I said 'thank you sir!'" At the age of 15 Amos achieved the responsibility for other young men.<sup>160</sup>

Podder (2011, p. 59) argues that the "gerontocratic and patrimonial nature of Liberian society underwent a reversal...violence and symbolic power of the gun became a source of power and authority over parents and elders, often at the behest of obedience, compliance and respect which for generations had been inculcated into youth to perpetuate a gerontocratic hierarchy." This is an understandable position to take. She is making note of an explicit break with social norms. In my work, however, this break does not appear to be as complete as she suggests. Children commonly served their elders. Age-hierarchies were not entirely done away with. The very term "small boy unit" is indicative of some retained notions of chronological age and social hierarchies. The small ones, or younger boys, were put in their own unit with their own set of military responsibilities—much like children were set apart for particular household tasks within households. Unlike the civilian society they were reared in, it was possible to be promoted above an older person.<sup>161</sup> Peters (2011b) suggests that the RUF introduced a system that was at least partially meritocratic. They allowed young people to earn advancement based on performances such as Amos's in the above example. However, Peters notes that survival and advancement through patrimony was by no means abolished.

Guns did allow those who would ordinarily be considered children to command the labour of their elders in some instances of promotion in the ranks. It was almost assuredly more common to have instances of young fighters commanding the labour of unarmed civilian elders. Elders remembered vividly their encounters with young,

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> See also Lemasle (2010) for similar promotion experiences among the RUF in Sierra Leone.

<sup>161</sup> This has also been observed in Sierra Leone (Peters, 2011a).

disrespectful combatants who pushed them around and made demands of them during the war. “I walk by small child, like my grandchild, holding arm (gun),”<sup>162</sup> Elijah recalled. “They killed 57 people. But the day before they killed 60 people. They ‘pop-pop-pop-pop!’ (gunfire sound) ‘Papé, you will move!’”<sup>163</sup>

There were breaks with social norms and values. The evidence suggests a less complete break than the one Podder asserts, however. Rather than a total reversal of gerontocratic norms, it seems that many young fighters experienced a more fundamental break with social life outside of their factions. It appears evident enough that social hierarchies in factions retained some generational organisation. Young soldiers had no obligations to respect or submit to the authority of elders outside of their group, however. Prior to the war, young people would not have been able to speak to Elijah as they do in the above quote. With the gun and with the position in an armed faction, young men were given dominance over unarmed elders. This seems to indicate a sharper break with society outside of armed groups, rather than a universal inversion of gerontocracy.

With livelihoods established during the war, it was common for younger men to have girlfriends or to take ‘bush wives’ (Coulter, 2009; Utas, 2005b). Armed groups enabled sustainable livelihoods and prospects for starting families, or at least maintaining relationships with girlfriends. “Quite frankly, many of the youth of Liberia became adult before their time,”<sup>164</sup> Joseph reflected. Peter explained further, “Because of looting properties, looting cash, they (young fighters) began to establish families. They began to live on their own, earn money during the war by using gun during the war to earn money. They began to behave like men. They began to behave like a man and take responsibilities.” Armed groups made the performance of adulthood an achievable possibility. Command structures offered young people an alternative pathway to higher social status. In this way, involvement in armed group offered an alternative pathway into social recognition as “big men.”<sup>165</sup> They achieved prestige above their peers and above civilian elders. Sumo explained, “When we had the arm (gun) we feel we had power that we carry. So we felt that we was mature.”

Armed groups also offered young men the chance to achieve aspects of “big man” status through the use of power and authority wielded largely through use of guns. Big men achieve and maintain their status through patrimonial ties that link them into reciprocal

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<sup>162</sup> Focus Group, May 25, 2010.

<sup>163</sup> See Hampshire et al. (2008) whose elderly informants echo the sentiments of this gentleman.

<sup>164</sup> Interview, March 27, 2010.

<sup>165</sup> Vigh (2006a, p. 137) makes similar observations among his informants in Bissau, quoting one who explained that through fighting “we can quickly become someone big.”

networks based upon dominance and dependence. Many people are indebted to big men. They command the labour of others. They usually make public use of finances and resources, driving fancy cars, or giving money away.

Performance of adulthood or expressions of big man status came in large part through carrying a gun. Guns enabled youth to command the labour and resources of unarmed civilians. They had power over others, often elders. “A soldier man have authority,”<sup>166</sup> David stated. “He violate at any time against the civilian. You understand? He do his will at any time. So that is a simple example. A soldier man can choose, because he with gun. You know, what he want [he get] because he got gun against the civilian, so that he got authority. Civilian are much afraid.”

The power to command the labour of others is often considered a social indication of adulthood (Durham, 2000). “Youth they are people that we can remit to”<sup>167</sup> as Sumo explained it. “[Say] ‘oh, little brother I have to go to so-and-so place, you have to bring your friends to,’ and so— Yeah, they are the youth I’m talking about. We’re talking about the adult, okay...this generation is responsible to supervise, to supervise the other generations. They are the adult.” To be an adult is to supervise the activities of young generations. Youth have no formally recognisable dependents of their own (Hoffman, 2011b).

Another “big man” characteristic that could be achieved in war can be summed up in the phrase “fast cash,” or “easy money.” Because the gun could be used to take advantage of civilians at any time, money and material things could usually be made available very quickly. “When I was a soldier, I could go anywhere,”<sup>168</sup> Jacob remembered. “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 an arm (gun)].”

Looted money could be spent freely, and replaced with relative expediency. Use of the gun as livelihood also facilitated a lifestyle of extravagance most young soldiers were unlikely to achieve before the war came. Ex-combatants remember, almost wistfully at times, their experience during the war when they were “just enjoying.” They spent money freely and acquired material goods and resources that were far outside their reach. Music, movies, and clothes were easily acquired. Cars and trucks were possessions that were especially valued by young soldiers. These symbolised higher social status.

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<sup>166</sup> Focus Group, April 17, 2010.

<sup>167</sup> Interview, February 28, 2010.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

Utas (2005b) has discussed the extravagance of young soldiers as an experience of modernity achieved by the marginalised. He argues that the war enabled young men to achieve the “modernity” they were denied in civilian society. They went from primarily rural existences in villages and on farms to toting automatic weapons, driving motorbikes and trucks, possessing material goods that had only been enjoyed by an urban elite up to that point. There is relevance to this argument. The acquisition of easy money and material possessions also afforded extravagant lifestyles that, when coupled with the level of power and authority soldiers possessed, allowed them to exhibit some of the roles, as well as the appearance of “big men.” It enabled them to achieve a greater prestige.

Social respect as a big man in the war could be seen through one’s material possessions and through authority over dependents. Emmanuel was a commander for MODEL during the war. He explained,<sup>169</sup>

I was a commander. I had my own car in my care. I having 20 men power, assigned with my—I assigned Grand Gedeh. So really, now, after the war, people carry us to the [cantonment] site so they can take the arms and give us education. And I get upset, in the condition of the peace we get. And if I sit down, and my mind go back on that day, I can miss it really, because I know what I used to get.

Emmanuel’s sentiments signals a strong sense of abjection that will feature prominently in Chapter Eight. Incorporation into armed groups presented the option to rise in status. Once armed groups were disbanded after war, the status they enabled was also in danger of being dismantled.

## Conclusion

My objective has been to sketch out and discuss the means through which ties to communities and families were predominantly severed. Removed from the social worlds they grew up in, young combatants were introduced and assimilated into alternative social systems in armed conflict. A number of authors have argued that aspects of initiation in secret societies were invoked to give the “pretence” that young men had achieved social recognition as adults. It is possible that this was the perception of young recruits who were taken into the bush to see the medicine man. Without solid empirical data, I can neither contribute to nor refute this stance. What was abundantly clear was the sense of achieved maturity and dominance that was earned through participation in

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<sup>169</sup> Focus Group, April 17, 2010.

conflict. Fighting forces offered alternative pathways that enabled young people to accelerate life trajectories into adulthood and prestige as big men—or at least bigger men. What young men had been unable to earn and acquire prior to the war, they were able to achieve and to take because of the positions they held and the guns they carried. To be a big man became a legitimate possibility.

The emphasis ex-combatants placed upon drug use, witchcraft, and weapons invokes much of the journalistic stereotype of child soldiers as red-eyed drug addicts toting automatic arms, wearing nothing more than T-shirts and camouflage. This is indeed part of the story. However, amidst the spiritual rituals of bullet-proofing, violence and looted wealth, there were also human relationships. Friendships developed over time and through shared experience. Reciprocal relationships based upon provision, dependency and obligation were forged between commanding officers and their men. Attachments were formed in place of the families and friends they had left behind. This chapter has set out several aspects of conflict participation that have important implications for post-war trajectories. Young soldiers were presented with a social structure that was established and experienced as alternative and separate from the pre-war society they were reared in. The disconnection from relations, norms and values outside of the armed groups had implications for their life chances and trajectories when those units no longer organised and supported their lives. Such implications are the topic of the next chapter.



## Chapter Eight: Ex-Combatants and Life after Guns

Other works have considered the ways in which ex-combatants are economically and politically situated in post-conflict countries (Alexander et al., 2000; Blattman, 2009). In Utas's (2005a, 2008a) work we get a clear sense about how transitions from war to post-war can result in a social demotion, a casting down from status achieved in fighting forces. This theme emerges in the lives of my informants as well. My aim in this chapter is to illustrate how significant micro-level social processes are to survival and respect.

This chapter draws on the themes established in Chapter Seven to provide an interpretation about how my informants survived, retained or lost social respect. Achieved status as big men in war, and patron-client relationships between commanders and their men feature prominently in this chapter. I argue that wealth in people from their time during the war, as well as non-combatant friends and family, contributed to different life chances and divergent trajectories. There are three primary pathways discussed in what follows. One is a pathway forged from war by young men who were unwilling to leave the prestige and livelihoods they held during the conflict. On this social pathway we follow the post-war trajectory of Sumo. A former NPFL general, Sumo formed a gang in order to reproduce much of the structural qualities of his armed group. In particular, it preserved the prestige he had earned among his men. The second pathway was taken by young men who were caught between the people, norms, and values from armed groups, and those that were slowly and steadily becoming dominant in the months and years after the war ceased. Randall's post-war story illustrates the difficulty and discomfort of attempting to keep a foot in each social system in a time of social, economic, and political transition. Finally, I look at social pathways into livelihoods and family life accepted by the dominant social majority. I argue that social honour among non-combatants could be restored through fulfilling expected roles and responsibilities as husbands and fathers. Boima's post-war experience provides a case through which I consider the implications of embeddedness within a family system. In each of these sections, we see the essential role of wealth in people, and the vital importance of understanding how respect—both social honour and prestige—are significant to young men's navigation of post-war life trajectories. This chapter is about the social and economic process of negotiating positions and possibilities years after the reintegration programmes had ended.

There were many initiatives associated with the Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DDRR) process in Liberia. The informants to this study had diverse experiences with these programmes. The final cease fire occurred in

June, 2003. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed into action in August, 2003. Charles Taylor accepted asylum in Nigeria, and by December of 2003, the United Nations supported disarmament and demobilisation of armed groups was under way in Monrovia. Disarmament and demobilisation continued in other parts of the country later in 2004. Ex-combatants who participated received 150 US dollars for their weapon. Most were taken to cantonment sites where they spent five days undergoing “psycho-social support” activities (see NCDDRR, 2006). Ex-combatants recalled being told not to take drugs and how to live in “normal” society. They were issued ID cards, which they could use to identify themselves at vocational and educational programs set up specifically for ex-combatants. If training was completed, another 150 US dollars was given to enable them to start businesses of their own. Young people under the age of 18 were taken to Interim Care Centres where they received counselling and some education for what ranged from between a few days or up to three months.

By their own admission, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and the Joint Implementation Unit (JIU) were unprepared to conduct a thorough DDRR process. The primary emphasis was placed upon disarmament and demobilisation. “Rehabilitation” and “reintegration” were never properly defined, prioritised, or implemented in an effective way (NCDDRR, 2006). NGOs were in some cases able to continue programmes that aimed to re-orient ex-combatants to the norms and activities of civilian society, and to reunify them with families (see Williamson & Carter, 2005). Most of the ex-combatants represented here were involved in at least disarmament and demobilisation. Some sat through group counselling sessions or participated in programs sponsored by NGO’s. None of them were currently involved in any assistance programs targeted at ex-combatants. I have made mention of such programmes because they were part of ex-combatants early post-war experience. This study cannot measure or evaluate the influence they may have had. What it can do, is point to some of the persisting issues ex-combatants faced, despite participation in these interventions.

The DDRR initiative attempted to demobilise their armed groups, and “send them home.” In some cases there were homes to go to or to begin anew. In other cases this was not possible. Or, as we will see, there was reason to choose not to go home. Some ex-combatants chose to stay together, maintaining elements of their daily lives and livelihoods from the war. They continued to loot, steal, and smoke drugs in more informal groups or gangs. Rather than discuss how reintegrated (or not) these young men were, I offer an analysis about how they embedded themselves in post-war relationships, and draw conclusions about how those relationships had implications for post-war trajectories.

*Wounded Leopards*

In Chapter Seven we saw how participation in armed groups structured the lives and livelihoods of young fighters. When the war ended in 2003, the purpose for and means of sustaining those groups was removed. Incorporation with a community of others soldiers, socio-economic mobility, and respect could no longer be experience as a member of the LURD or NPFL. Alex, who did not fight in the war, made an insightful observation about the implications of the ceasefire for Taylor's young fighters.

When the war ended, people were confused...What made them confused was because they were used to one person who had authority. That was Charles Taylor. Then Charles Taylor left...So you know, most youth, you know most of them were fighters. After the war, the person who gave them the authority was no more. So you could just find young people roaming the street not doing anything, not having any sense of direction.<sup>170</sup> –Alex, a youth, Bernard's Beach

The majority of this chapter is about ex-combatant experiences of being embedded in existing relationships or with the incorporation into new or renewed ones. That is because all of them were trying as Flomo noted in Chapter Six, to sustain themselves one way or another. No one wanted to remain in the situation Alex described so first, I would like consider the implications of isolation for young soldiers after war. Life chances are accessed in and through other people. So, as we observed in Timothy's experience in Chapter Six, when wealth in people diminishes or becomes less valuable, socio-economic options decrease. Many ex-combatants faced this situation. Their factions were demobilised. Some ex-combatants were not able to retain networks from their armed groups. As the war economy was no longer offering provisions to their commanders, they would be, at least temporarily, unable to provide the support and security to the same degree that they had during the war. If families were not available to re-incorporate their ex-combatant children—because of death, absence, or rejection—there might be no one else to turn to. Some ex-combatants became so impoverished in people after the war that they were isolated on the street, hustling to survive. Such circumstances represented the most extreme form of disempowerment I observed in this research.

Ben was one of many ex-combatants who talked at length about the difference and difficulty of life after war. He gave one of the most agitated interviews I heard during fieldwork. He expressed deep frustration with the removal of former NPFL/ATU

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<sup>170</sup> Interview, February 8, 2010.

soldiers from the state military, most of whom had nothing to fall back on. Ben struggled to sustain himself after the war. There was no helping hand. His family had all been killed and he had no one to go to. “We praying for work to come. But now there no work at all,” he emphasised. “So we say we’re angry. And we’re sad. And we’re just looking like wounded leopard.”<sup>171</sup>

He remembered his time during the war as one in which his life chances had been significantly better. The armed groups had provided an alternative structure and with it prestige and provision. The gun could give you everything you needed, as Michael put it. They were empowered in the war. Life after war had been an experience of disempowerment. Ex-combatants had been thrown down from the status they achieved in war and relegated to hustling for their daily bread. Without the armed factions in place, and with no family to turn to, being expelled from military service meant being cast out into isolated struggle for survival. Ben’s recollection of having a pick-up truck was particularly illustrative of his sense of demotion and disempowerment but also his feelings of being abject.

We frustrated. Since then, a young boy like me, since [daybreak], I not eat nothing...I get up, wash my mouth with toothpaste, from there water, water, nothing. So we’re frustrated in the country. No job! The whole day we gotta walk that line from area to area...They calling us rebels. So we’re frustrated in life, that’s what I’m speaking here...They know who our people. They know the kind of car I was having, but now nothing like that [now].

What kind of car was it?

A Nissan pickup.

Ben lost the pickup truck when the government vehicles Taylor had given to his units were confiscated during the transitional period. The truck was a symbol of prestige. It was removed when the system that supplied it was removed and replaced by a different leader, and a different structure. Losing the Nissan pickup was a symbolic moment of being brought low.

Ben was acutely aware of being stigmatised. He “walked the line” as he says, through communities where he was no longer respected as a big man, but rather disdained as a “rebel.” He had been a member of the military force under the leadership of Liberia’s

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<sup>171</sup> Interview, April 27, 2011.

head of state. Yet when Taylor left, he was abhorred as a member of a violent illegitimate rebellion. It is a sense of abjection that “can make a person feel as though he or she is a mere object, nameless, of no account, ground down, in a world where agency seems to be entirely in the hands of others” (Jackson, 2006, p. 43).

The military structure that incorporated them and enabled alternative pathways to prestige was no longer there to provide such positions. The exclusion from service to the state military or police meant that the structure that had facilitated and enabled *basic survival* was also removed. Factions replaced the helping hand that usually came from parents and kin networks. Now there would be no more bags of rice from Taylor. There would be no more payment of any kind. The ability to “eat on time” was now very uncertain. David’s life story illustrates these points. After the war his faction disbanded. He was unable to get a job. His parents would not take him back into their home. He was forced to live on the street, sleeping in doorways at night, and looking for any means possible to sustain himself during the day. “No job,”<sup>172</sup> he related. Throughout our discussion he conveyed a potent sense of living with a vacant social horizon in front of him. “Because of the war, you know. Because after war business, people take me to be a bad guy...People say I’m a rebel, you know. All kind of stuff. [I wound up] on the street, making my own way through, yeah...I cannot go home. They will not take me...So I call to talk to them [parents], make them understand, and they just left myself on the street.”

Eventually, like Timothy he made friends with someone who was willing to let him sleep inside their room. When I met him, he was still struggling for daily subsistence. There were times when he could get day labour. There were some days I found him drunk early in the morning, lazing about in the community, ‘nothing doing.’

Young men like him had been empowered during the war. It was empowerment enabled and sustained through factional structures that provided the means to sustain livelihoods, progress through the ranks. Life after guns was not nearly so facilitated. The removal of military structures that had enabled improved life chances was not replaced with similar options after war. Instead, there was a small amount of job training and little bit of cash. However, as we have seen in the previous chapters, it is the wealth in people that enables such resources to develop into improved life chances. Without the connections and indebtedness to others, job training would be of little use in the informal job sector. Informal networks was the means through which people were able to access resources and opportunities to work. In Chapter Seven we saw how un-

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<sup>172</sup> Interview, May 11, 2010.

empowered non-combatant youth were because of how diminished and devalued their wealth in people became through the course of the war. They were socio-economically immobile, *unable* to advance. Ex-combatants, on the other hand were empowered during the war and subsequently *disempowered* at its conclusion.

Isolation was the circumstance that everyone avoided at all costs. In attending to the disempowerment of ex-combatants I do not wish to invoke a sense of a completely “lost generation” (Cruise O'Brien, 1996), stereotyped as abandoned and left behind by society. This representation relegates youth to victims who disproportionately bear the brunt of socio-political changes. However due to a significant loss of wealth in people some youth, like Ben and David were facing isolated circumstances with few prospects in a damaged country. In the following sections, I discuss several social pathways that emerged from the life stories of my informants. Each of these post-war trajectories was an attempt to avoid the circumstance of becoming a wounded leopard in the way that Ben and David discussed.

### **Social Reproduction after War**

This section is about young men who did not put the gun down in their minds after the war was over. In it I discuss the experience of young men who retained many of the structural schemas that they had established and developed during the war. They kept the social hierarchies, the livelihood methods, and the drug habits that made up much of their lives during conflict participation. Though factions were disbanded, and the money and goods were no longer structuring their lives at a macro-level, retained social structures from armed groups could operate as gangs on the margins of society. Utas (2003, p. 248) notes that “ex-combatants remained part of a subculture with distinctive social codes and standards” based out of their war experience. In my work, the young men who talked about being in gangs after the war highlighted some of these social codes and hierarchies Utas observed in the 1990's. The factions themselves were disbanded on a macro level, forcing ex-combatants to preserve or renegotiate social process in a shifting socio-economic and political environment. Schemas operating in the practice of everyday life were reproduced as much as possible at a micro-level.

This first social trajectory is about the less studied strategies ex-combatants implement to get or keep power that Denov noted in the opening paragraph. Their gangs—like their military factions—were not institutions of ideological opposition to the state. Rather, they were vehicles for preservation of social recognition as big men. The retained social structures from fighting forces organised gangs of ex-combatants and enabled continuity of socio-economic practice. Livelihoods through violence could

continue. Also, as importantly and intimately connected to post-war livelihoods, retained military structures meant that respect was not lost. Prestige was preserved among peers and patronage networks in which the schemas that informed life in armed groups could be retained. To go home to civilian families would require (most) of them to forfeit status they had earned during conflict. Themes of demotion and prestige play a central role in young ex-combatants choices to remain separated from families and to continue using violence and violation to sustain livelihoods and drug habits. I use Sumo's post-war story as a starting point to discuss young men's life chances and choices of social navigation.<sup>173</sup> Sumo spent five days in one of the UN disarmament camps. When he left, he had no plans to go home to his family.

Well, when I was taken out of the [cantonment site], after five days I came out. I was given 150 USD...If you come and take the gun from my hand, and just send me, to whom are you sending me to?...When we had the arm (gun) we feel we had power that we carry. So we felt that we was mature. So when the war subsided, and they took the arm from us, we felt shame. We felt too big to return to our parent' houses to be called 'baby.'

Many ex-combatants perceived return home as a re-entry into a family system and kin network that did not recognise them as the authority figures they became during war. They had not earned positions of prominence through adherence to civilian values and lines of action accepted by their families and communities. Rather, they had killed to make a living, committed acts of violence and theft to sustain themselves. Such conduct was unacceptable outside of their armed groups. Thus, to return home would require adherence to difference social values and behaviours. This would mean subjection to family structures of authority within gendered, generational and sibling hierarchies. It would mean a signal reduction of social status.

A pastor and former psychosocial counsellor gave a very clear, illustrative example of this dilemma for young ex-combatants. A young man, no more than 15 years old, had been taken to an Interim Care Centre after the cease fire. He refused to be returned to his family. Isaac was called in to negotiate with him. He remembered,

He told me, he said 'I was a whole squad leader.' It meant he was a big man. 'I was a squad leader and if I go back to my parents they will ask me to go wash dishes, ask me to scrub the floor, ask me to wash their clothes.' And he said that he could not see himself going that road again. Out of the status that he had come from, out of the Colonel rank, then seeing himself to go

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<sup>173</sup> Empirical material is taken from interviews on February 27-8, 2010 unless otherwise noted.

back to work to wash dishes, he said no. He could not see himself to go back to it.<sup>174</sup>

Washing the dishes offers a compelling juxtaposition to being a Squad Leader. Return home would mean doing the tasks that would have been assigned to others beneath him during the war. That kind of subjugation was too constraining for someone who had learned to be seen, and to see himself as a big man.

In Liberia Utas (2005a) has suggested that some former fighters choose not to go back to lives as civilians because this would “re-marginalise” young men who had achieved significance and prominence through their acquisition of modernity during the war. Forfeiting the socio-economic practices from the war meant forfeiting the modern image and material things that they had enjoyed. It also meant demotion from social status as adults and as powerful authority figures. This was the reason that rejection *of* the family by ex-combatants was common.

#### *Continued Post-war Violence*

Popular conceptions of ex-combatants often feature assumptions about their having been ‘programmed killers’ during the war, and nothing more afterwards (Denov, 2010).<sup>175</sup> Vermeij (2011) argues that “socialisation” during war causes unthinking and persistently violent behaviour afterwards. Her a-theoretical argument about socialisation fails to describe or explain how such continuity from conflict participation to post-conflict behaviour is enabled. Rather than think about “socialisation” as a catch-all cause, it appears useful to think back to the practices ex-combatants discussed in Chapter Seven, and to the performance of fighters who earned recognition in armed groups. In that chapter I argued that ex-combatants experienced a disconnection from society outside of their fighting forces. A habitus of war reconfigured power relations. Armed groups and soldiers carrying guns were able to dominate elders who would have, prior to the war, held positions of dominance and authority in their lives. With the power of guns, these norms could be disregarded. Fighters had obligation to their units, to their commanders and their comrades. They were disengaged from relationships of interdependence in hierarchies outside of their armed groups. This appears to be a much more situated and evidence-based point of departure for interpreting ex-combatant solidarities and actions after war.

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<sup>174</sup> Interview, March 2, 2010.

<sup>175</sup> Fears that ex-combatants will continue to commit acts of violence will be picked up in the section below on stigma and abjection.

In this section I discuss how ex-combatants conceptualised their life chances after war based upon their structured positions during and after the fighting. My aim is to offer a situated understanding of the schemas and resources that informed their social navigation after war. Many young ex-combatants who did not reunite with families and households maintained much of the way of life they had experienced during war. They based themselves in various locations from which they ran “operations,” used drugs, and took shelter.

In the previous section, Sumo noted that he and his peers did not want to go home to be called “baby” because they had achieved a level of status as adults and authority figures. To go home would require subordination. To avoid demotion and subsequent disempowerment other trajectories had to be charted. What came out in many of their life histories was the persistent use of drugs, violence, and violation as means of maintaining the status they had achieved during the war. Sumo explained,

The money they gave us, during the war we took a lot of things to make us brave in order to do a lot of things that are not necessary (referring to acts of war). To give us five days and then the money, we look at it as an opportunity to go, to go and buy drugs. And this is what we did. We brought the money, and—for me, I didn’t even reach my own, my house...I was in the ghetto. I already finish all... The habit of drugs—we didn’t need too much light...Despite the mosquitoes and other things that were about, we were still living there. We used to go there, smoke. We take the place as our base.

The physical need for substances like cocaine was urgent. Sumo’s sole mission after the disarmament was to feed his drug habit. With factions disbanded in the months following the cease fire, warlords like Taylor were no longer supplying their men. The ex-combatants were obliged to acquire drugs themselves. From their “base,” ex-combatants like Sumo ran gangs that supported their drug habits and sustained their livelihoods through violence and criminal activity.

I resulted to a high class criminal...I was head of the armed robbery group here in Liberia. As a matter of fact, I controlled the entire Freeport at the time...It was already known to me that police is nobody to me. Yeah, the police, other people, I consider them a subordinate. It was a vast power...The police take other thing, and I treat them like a toy. And so I wasn’t afraid to carry out any other clandestine act...My recruit, we move here and there...I never remember [carrying out operations] in the night.

All is broad day. I even remember some four years ago, I remember I arrived on Broad Street it was from in the morning to 12:00. Yes, and I wasn't arrested by any of the police. I always resisted. And under the Gyude Bryant government, two, three police were killed from me...Ah, under this present government under which we are here, ah two got killed.

Drug addiction alone was a significant reason to maintain faction-like social structures, even if cutlasses (machetes) and knives would have to substitute for AK-50s. Supporting themselves through violence and theft meant that ex-combatants could survive, and support their habits, while maintaining at least some of the social status they achieved in the war. Gangs like Sumo's could retain elements of military hierarchies from command chains in armed groups. As Sumo recounts, they went on "operations" to hijack cars, or raid certain areas. They were, in essence, able to see a way of retaining positions of power and authority by continuing to exert force and control over others. Dominance, violence, and theft were essential to their survival and everyday activities. Continuation of such practices enabled ex-combatants like Sumo to maintain the prestige and the wealth in people that he had accrued as a fighter.

Gangs were able to operate in part because of the depreciation of the post-war political economy. Aside from being socially ostracized, the political and economic situation in the months and years just following the DDRR process enabled if not encouraged social reproduction. The president dissolved the remaining government troops and the police in hopes of providing a neutral security force untainted by faction politics and affiliations to Charles Taylor. With this done, many ex-combatants faced a depreciated job market with few skills, and little formal education. Most of the urban dwellers in Monrovia engaged in informal livelihoods, selling small quantities of items like soap, razors, or used shoes. Chapter Six illustrated how vital wealth in people was for survival in the city. Most of the opportunities to work in the informal sector took place through reciprocity, the relationships maintained on the basis of loyalty, obligation, and dependency. In Monrovia, small household businesses duplicated themselves over time as one entrepreneur passed his or her knowledge on to another. Families are usually at the centre of the web of networks that provide opportunities to establish livelihoods. Without these networks, most young people, ex-combatants or not, faced severe challenges to their survival.

Further when the Sirleaf administration came into power, the military was disbanded to keep former allegiances to the Taylor administration from causing instability. UN troops were the stand-in security forces, and were not able to quell the criminal activity of gangs like Sumo's. Even as of 2006, when President Sirleaf took office, the police

force had no guns to carry on duty (Junge & Johnson, 2007). With the roads in disrepair and the security forces unequipped, it was difficult to get to scenes of violence and crime. Gangs were at liberty to do as they pleased in many areas of town. As Sumo related, the police were no match for him and his “recruit.”

In essence, during the first several years following the cease-fire, the post-war political economy could offer no incentive to transition from retained faction-like structures, and it imposed few constraints on their violent ways of life. Were they to move from these units, most would do so with few capabilities or connections that could maintain or improve their life chances. Meanwhile the lack of capable security forces gave ex-combatants the freedom to maintain the violence of war.

In this section, I have tried to unpack how a formative history of violence is carried into a post-war context by young ex-combatants. Rather than programmed killing machines, ex-combatants in this study were presented with clear options, and navigated their life trajectories in order to avoid reducing their life chances. My argument is not that young ex-combatants acted on pure rationality. Drug addiction alone was enough to prompt many into maintaining lives of violence and violation. What I am suggesting is that these young men valued the positions of status that they had achieved in the war. As long as there were gangs that could maintain a semblance of the schemas that functioned through the hierarchies established during the war, these young men could maintain the prestige they had built for themselves during the war. For young men like Sumo, to move outside of retained structures from war would mean losing their social positions, and with little foreseeable chances of getting them back.

### **Social Cross-Roads**

Others in this study talked about an uncomfortable in-between. The war was over. Factions had been demobilised. Some ex-combatants attempted reunification with families and households with varied outcomes. Others remained with former faction leaders and comrades. With life chances situated so prominently in other people, much of their social navigation was informed by former relationships from war, with family's ability and willingness to incorporate them, and with stigma and abjection.

In this section I take Randall's post-war story as a starting point for much of the analytical discussion of the positions and possibilities for young men who were situated in between relationships from war, their families, and non-combatant peers.<sup>176</sup> Randall's story highlights the incongruity between the two, and the discomfort and uncertainty

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<sup>176</sup> The empirical material on Randall comes from an interview conducted April 16, 2010.

ex-combatants experienced when they were unsure about their options in either social environment and thus, attempting a social navigation somewhere in-between. There was no social script to follow, and Randall's experience sheds light on the confusing and difficult process of negotiating a trajectory in a time of social, economic and political transition. Competing norms and values contended and converged with one another when conflict was over. The dilemma of negotiating where one stands amidst them can be confusing and difficult to tease apart. As Randal illustrates, in the midst of uncertainty other people may be quick to make judgments about one's social position.

### *Stigma and Social Separation*

Stigma is thought to be a pervasive and significant issue that reduces life chances for ex-combatants. How stigma is expressed, the attributions asserted, and the implications of it are sometimes more implied or assumed than defined and explained (see CSUCS, 2008; Roberston & McCauley, 2004; Schultz, 2004). I understand stigma as an essentialising, negative appropriation of another person or group that is made based upon a trait or aspect of another's identity (Goffman, 1963). "On this assumption," Goffman writes (1963, p. 5), "we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances."

Stigma about former fighters separated them from others. Sumo's story illustrated a situation in which ex-combatants rejected the option of returning to their families. Other ex-combatants returned home to experience rejection *from* their families. Because this field research did not include data collection with families of ex-combatants, it would be misguided to speculate about the specific motivations underlying their rejection of their children. My discussion here is confined to the ways that ex-combatants made sense out of their experiences with stigma. From the perspective of the ex-combatants themselves it was quite clear to them that they were seen as unacceptable and as people to be feared.

Ascribed and achieved social identities as deviant and dangerous were amongst the ex-combatant experiences of social interactions with families and communities. The idea that they had become programmed killing machines was present at the local level. Ex-combatants were expected to continue perpetrating acts of violence and violation. Esther, one of the few female fighters I spoke with remembered what it was like for her and her peers to go home or to move into a new community. She recalled,<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Interview, March 27, 2010.

Their parents refuse them. After everything they went home. Their parents say 'no. You will not live with me my son. You are a killer. You are a rebel...If you ex-combatant, you live in any community, for me—I will always give an example of myself. Where I live, people don't know that I fought war. Nobody know...because if they know, I will feel embarrassed. People won't want to come around me. People won't want to feel free with me because they will feel that I ex-combatant. I killed. So anytime I can kill anybody. I can harm anybody. So you see?

Her assessment though it cannot be generalised to everyone, was certainly congruent with the fears of many people who lived through the war, and feared ex-fighters afterwards. I heard the assumption she described, "I killed. So I anytime I can kill anyone" from non-combatants one morning in Red Light.<sup>178</sup> In the midst of a discussion, someone related the story of a man in the community who had recently beaten a three year old boy to death. He was a former combatant. "A three years old child," Gibson kept repeating. "The man was a former fighter," another youth reasoned. "They get used to killing like that. They just like to see blood." The only explanation appeared to be some kind of blood lust.

Stigma may have been heightened, at least in part, because of the inconceivable motivations behind the war itself, and the means of violence and violence exercised to dominate civilians as well as enemies. Young soldiers committed heinous violations against other people and against the infrastructure and physical terrain of the country. Many civilians found it difficult to explain either. It was certain that young people exhibited serious "blemishes of individual character" (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). In the face of unexplainable behaviour, theories about how "spoiled" young people were during the war were tossed into social dialogues like the one above. "They just like to see blood." Being a former combatant meant finding pleasure in taking life.

A second cause for fear stemmed from achieved social identities as deviant and dangerous after the war was over. As Thomas recalled, his family was unwilling to take him back because of his continued involvement with drugs. "After I disarmed, I was still a drug addict. When I go back to my parents, they say 'we cannot keep you in this home. You are a drug addict. And in fact, you fight war. You killed, so we don't want to see you.'" <sup>179</sup> Recall Timothy's explanation about drugs—"a real mother" would not approve of it. Further, here too we see the reference to being a person who killed, and for no acceptable reason.

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<sup>178</sup> Fieldnote, March 3 2011.

<sup>179</sup> Interview, February 28, 2010.

Even families who attempted to incorporate their children from war often found that they were unwilling or perhaps unable to live by the norms and values they were expected to adhere to in post-war society. One night in my yard Terry began to speak about his experience with a brother who had been recruited to fight with the NPFL as a small boy of 12 or 13.<sup>180</sup> While we were sitting in front of his porch, he said, “My brother fought...my brother fought.” I felt I should be very delicate about prodding further. He had not looked up when he said it, eyes downcast at the ground, voice trailing off. He had been energetic in conversation, informative about all kinds of things to do with the community and with Liberia after the war. This subject was different. There was clear discomfort.

“He fought in the war,” I ventured carefully.

“Yes, he fought in the war. He is not encouraging us.” He was referring to his family, particularly his siblings. He said his brother didn’t want to do anything productive. He just wanted to take things. He did not care about anybody else. He said his brother drank a lot, and they were afraid of him. As he continued to speak I learned that the brother had stolen repeatedly from the family. He had taken his sister’s laptop and held it for ransom. He returned it only after she agreed to pay him 100 US dollars. He had been put in jail once over allegedly beating a small child. I met the young man while visiting Terry’s family. I slept with my own laptop in the bed with me that night; afraid myself that he would break in and attempt to steal my things.

It is possible that some ex-combatants were rejected out of family honour—a sense of shame that their children would have been involved in committing the atrocities of war. However, informants in this study, ex-combatants and non-combatants alike, made more consistent references to assumptions of deviance or danger. Young ex-combatants had achieved reputations for violence and violation after the war. In Randall’s case, his family made a considerable effort to help him re-establish his life with them. Despite efforts he genuinely appreciated from them, stigma from the surrounding community played a significant role in getting him into trouble. “I was to an entertainment centre,” He explained.

Someone was passing; they beat on a woman’s daughter. While they were making palaver (conflict), the woman say we always act rude in her area...When we come and eat, we can disturb her area. Yeah, and she say we are ex-fighters, and she don’t like ex-fighter business. Yeah, at that point we started talking rough, and we left. After three days, she saw me and she

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<sup>180</sup> Fieldnote, January 26, 2010.

brought police, and she say we rape her daughter. After three days, after three days, at that point I want to put up violence and the people said no. That was where I arrested, carried to Jacob Town Depot.

Loud arguments, gruff demeanour and disrespectful speech were behaviours that ex-combatants were notorious for. During the war they were not required to interact in the kind of “civilised” manner that civilian young people learned to exhibit. Appearance alone served to set ex-combatants apart from others. Clean, pressed clothes and neat hair were of the utmost importance if one was to be respected outside of armed groups or gangs. Michael described the stereo-typical impression of ex-combatants in the Monrovia area to me one morning. They were notorious for unkempt appearance. Long hair, particularly dreadlocks distinguished them from more “respectable” people. “Their appearance look so different. They have no regard for hygiene and these kinds of activities. And when you see them you get afraid of them. Even if you get to interact with them, not too freely. But even here in their midst, you gotta be afraid for your things to be stolen. You get what I’m saying?”<sup>181</sup> These were physical and embodied signals that indicated that a person belonged to a morally and socially polluted group of people.

Another contribution to stigma and the social distance kept from ex-combatants had to do with their achieved identity as deviant and violent *during the war*. Negative impressions of ex-combatants were often coupled with sharp memories of painful experiences that lay just beneath the surface of casual conversation. Liberians quickly lapsed into memories of the war during conversation over meals or on the sidewalks and market places in town. Many could remember the soldiers who hurt them or their loved ones. On occasion, perpetrators and victims ran into each other. Memories of the past were carried into present exchanges resulting in immense discomfort for both parties. Experiences of fear in the past could turn quickly to resentment in the present. My housemate recalled one such instance:<sup>182</sup>

During the early years of the crisis soldiers were going house to house, killing anyone they suspected to be Congo [Americo]. Suspicion was enough reason for the soldiers to fire on the spot. She and her aunty fled the house, her small son strapped to her back. On their way up the street, they were stopped by a young soldier with a gun. He threatened them at gunpoint. Her aunty dropped the things she was carrying. Feeling faint, Josephine nearly fell backwards. Her son began to slide from her back. She

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<sup>181</sup> Interview, March 31, 2010.

<sup>182</sup> Fieldnote, June 24, 2010.

caught him by his leg. Seeing her struggle, a man rushed from behind to help her with her son. The soldier boy shot him in cold blood. Eventually he allowed them to pass.

Years later, after the war, the very same young man occasionally passed through her yard to go to a shop on the other side of her property. One day she stopped him as he and some friends were passing through. “Do you know me?” The young man said no. She asked him again, “do you know me?” He replied no, again, adding that he met lots of people. She recalled to him the day he threatened her, the woman with the baby on her back, and the man he shot. He asked her to please put it in the past. Things had changed. His friends encouraged him to be nice to her, telling him that if she were a wicked woman, she would find him and poison him. He never passed through her yard again.

Josephine’s story illustrates the strength of feeling that could be harboured towards former perpetrators. The way that she acted upon her feelings tells us something about why ex-combatants often re-grouped among themselves. In this example, the power relations were reversed. In her memory from the war it was the young boy who held power over her, because he had the gun. After the war when she encountered him in her yard, it was she who held power over him and he who was afraid. Such encounters worked to push the resented and stigmatized into sequestered social spaces with others who shared their stigma and experience. In Monrovia there are pockets of ex-combatant communities scattered throughout the city. They were commonly known to Monrovians. Zawoo listed them for me. “They are criminals. They are [getting off] into particular areas in Montserrado [County]. There are concentrated areas like Logan Town, Duala, Red Light, Center Street, West Point...”<sup>183</sup> While ex-combatants walked the sidewalks and rode motorbikes through town just like everyone else, they often chose to live among each other.

“The issue of stigma always making them to come together, to live together,”<sup>184</sup> Mary observed. A Liberian who worked as a psychosocial counsellor with ex-combatants after the war, she gave an empathic interpretation that articulates much of what I observed among the informants in this study. “If you feel stigmatised, you always look for where ever you can find ex-combatants who will be somebody like you. I will tell you, ‘at least I am safe to where I am.’ You will want to join me. And I will start to call others from out there who will come and join.”

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<sup>183</sup> Interview, March 31, 2010.

<sup>184</sup> Interview, March 27, 2010.

In the ex-combatant communities where I worked for this research, I found this to be very true. What is more, having been a fighter in the civil war was enough to draw ex-combatants together. While faction affiliations were common, groups often clustered around a big man from war. Young men from different, opposing factions became members of the same ex-combatant communities. In one community alone I worked with a number of ex-combatants who held previous positions in LURD, MODEL, and NPFL. Shared social identity as an ex-combatant even from opposing factions became the tie that bound them together. Clumped together in the ghettos, living separately from others reaffirmed the distinction between themselves as men from war and others who were not a part of their lives or experience.

Stigma was often very instrumental in establishing social distance from former fighters. Here I would like to draw out a distinction between stigma experienced by the ex-combatants and stigma experienced by other youth. Recall Timothy's discussion of being stigmatised in the market. Once associated with thieves, youth would be ostracised from market areas they had previously been accepted in. They had lost the trust of people that community. With the ex-combatants, the "spoiling" effect of the war ran much deeper in the minds of many. While it may have somehow encouraged drug use among youth like Timothy or Washington, it had instilled an unexplainable blood lust in the youth who fought. They might "kill at any time." Timothy and Joshua could still maintain relationships with families, despite engaging in unacceptable livelihood strategies. The perceived effects of the war participation were far more serious for ex-combatants. They were young people to reject because they were a threat if nothing else. They were more than socially unfit. They were unsafe.

#### *Demobilised Intergenerational Reciprocity*

The break-up of factional networks is considered vital to post-conflict security (see Spear, 2002). If left together, armed groups are considered potential "spoilers" for post-conflict peace. Frustrated ex-combatants who remain armed and organised may upset a fragile peace agreement. From her research on ex-combatant networks in Liberia, Cheng (2011) concludes that maintained relationships among ex-fighters presents a hindrance to peaceful post-conflict transitions.<sup>185</sup> Her work affirms an established macro-level assertion with security studies and policy formation. Additionally, Lemasle (2010) demonstrates that there was significant breakdown in patron-client relationships among Liberian factions after the war. She cites a number of factors to do with the political transition from war to peace to make a case for widespread erosion of

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<sup>185</sup> Her research focused on ex-combatant groups who took resource bases like plantations or mines, and established control over them and over the surrounding community.

patrimony. What I discuss here concerns very micro-level, proximate relationships with former big men from war. I found that at a local, small scale, many young fighters remained with, or returned to men who had been patrons during the war.

Patrimonial attachments to big men from war could be life sustaining without involvement in crime and violence. Randall's position in post-war society is illustrative of many ex-combatants' social ties to comrades from the war, and to non-combatant families. He returned to a family who clearly cared a great deal for his well-being, but were not in a position to provide for his material needs and personal development. The commander he spoke about in Chapter Seven remained valuable wealth in people for Randall's life. This former commander, who was like a godfather to Randall and his comrades, was the big man who supported him after the war. This attachment to a big man from the war improved his life chances. Randall related,

I came back to the man I was with in the war time. Because I don't have anybody, so he was assisting me. I used to drive for him also. During the war time I used to drive for him, so he called me, and I was doing it—he do everything for me. He feed me, giving [to] me...[It was] the same man (commanding officer) that been with every one of us...He brought us up during the crisis. We work for him, he like a godfather for us. That the man that take care of us, do everything for us...I was not his son, nothing. But we had been together, serving one another life, and up to now we were able to live, to see the end... I fall into trouble, he advise me. He said you are not my son, but we fought war together. You must take time with yourself. Don't get into problem. When people get in trouble, you go to jail.

A grade school dropout, Randall's position in post-war society exemplifies many of the constraints faced by ex-combatants. His situation provides a clear example of the reciprocity many ex-fighters still engage in with their former commanders. They spent years developing relationships during the war. With no family to support them, they choose to remain with friends and commanding officers who help to sustain one another through reciprocal relationships kept from the war. Patrimonial attachment to a big man also facilitated acceptable lines of action outside of armed groups or gangs. He turned to a man who had been with him during the conflict. He could apply his driving ability in post-war society, for a person who had interest in him.

There is another observation to make. In Sumo's case, attachment to former faction members was a significant part of maintaining the structured and violent way of life from war. Randall's story offers an important contrast. A former commander was

actively helping him to establish himself as an acceptable civilian in society after the war. He gave him a conventional livelihood opportunity, a chance to commit to accepted lines of action in society. He counselled Randall against maintaining values and behaviours from war. Similar circumstances emerged in numerous interviews with former commanding officers and soldiers. If a former leader chose to relinquish use of violence and violation in retained structures from war, the young men who maintained attachments to him were encouraged and supported to forge new or renewed connections to post-war society through involvement in everyday tasks, and commitment to non-violent or violating livelihood strategies.

Randall's situation is different from Sumo's but also from the young men discussed in Chapter Six. They were all in need of patrons, and unable to advance without them. Young men who maintained reciprocal relationships with others from the war were, in instances like Randall's, afforded patrons. Though the helping hand was not there in the form of family—for whatever reason—some continued to receive support through relationships from the war.

The contrasting stories of Sumo and Randall point to important distinctions to draw about maintained relationships from war. They cannot be fit neatly into categories of good or bad, harmful or helpful. Cheng's (2011) work illustrates how combatant networks from war were mobilised to control resource rich areas that did not belong to them. Sumo as with others, established a gang that terrorised communities in Monrovia. Randall and many others found a refuge in former leaders and comrades. While it is certainly the case that ex-combatant networks *may* become threat to peace or security, an all-encompassing discouragement of ex-combatants networks appears unwarranted and unhelpful. Former commanders can be sources of patronage and support that keep ex-combatants invested in livelihood activities and off of the street.

### **Survival and Respect in Families**

In this final section I draw from Boima's post-war story.<sup>186</sup> Boima's life trajectory after the war represents some of the primary trends among young men who put the gun down in their minds. His experience provides an example of a man who came home from armed groups, and has reoriented his life trajectory away from retained structures from war to those schemas and modes of social practice accepted by non-combatants in post-war society.

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<sup>186</sup> The empirical material on Boima's post-war story was drawn from an interview conducted April 28, 2010.

*Transitions and Turning Points*

What sets Boima apart from so many others in this study is his ability to generate consistent income and his position in his family system.

During those years [before the war ended in 2003] my life was alright, because I was depending on the arm (gun). And after then, we had properties that we looted, and we were sustaining ourselves with it. So I was living good life. But for now we know that the life we were living was not a good life. Because we forcibly take things from people, we did things to people, and you know, to make people feel bad. And we discouraged people. And we ourselves, we were discouraged in life too.

We came for disarmament [in 2005]. That how the UN came into the country. When the UN came, that how they disarm us. So some of us decided to go for disarmament. I was disarmed in Buchanan. I was disarmed and they compensated me 150 US. People came. People came to counsel us. We had a counsellor who came to us from the UN. Some people who hold gun, they came to talk to us, to convince us that what we were doing was not good. And we ourselves began to realize, our own knowledge began to open, we began to realise that what we were doing was not nice. So we decided to desist from it.

After three months when they call, we get another 150 US. That three hundred dollars. They asked everybody if they wanted to go to school, if you want to learn trade. Anything you decide to do, you can do it. I decide to do trade. So now I do general construction. Yeah, that what I decide to do. Yeah, so I can build house [it can repel or keep out water], I can bring it up to level. Roofing, plastering, I can do it, and you can pay me what I ask you. That what I learn after the war. That how I living now.

He, like many other ex-combatants, spoke well of the counselling he received, and the vocational training he obtained through the DDR program. Boima's early post-war trajectory resembles Sumo's he continued to loot and to hurt people to sustain himself. In his case, there was a turning point during the disarmament that we did not see with Sumo. Whereas Sumo left and went straight back to the ghetto to smoke drugs and form a gang, Boima remembers listening to UN counsellors and former soldiers and receiving their insight. He says, "our own knowledge began to open, we began to realise that what we were doing was not nice." How that realisation sunk in for him I cannot

say. I spoke with numerous counsellors and program staff about interventions with ex-combatants. They all noted the diversity of responses to programmes designed to “rehabilitate” and “reintegrate” ex-combatants. Some were willing and able to reorient their lives. Others like Sumo or the young boy Isaac talked about were not. The reasons for the differences in responses and outcomes are unclear, and likely to be complex and diverse. In Boima’s narrative we get a picture of a clear turning point. If we think back to Randall’s story, his transition from the recipes for action in an armed group to his willingness to change was much more subtle, and appeared to happen over time. When I met him he was polite, sensitive, and aware of how his behaviour and his decisions had consequences for others. Yet by his own admission, his initial post-war experience was marked with rudeness to others, inconsiderateness, and a desire to “put up violence” when he felt threatened. There was no counsellor or ex-combatant who offered insight that affected his mentality immediately. How the transition occurred is not clear in the data from most of my informants. Boima is one of the few who had a clear memory of a realisation, an “ah-hah” moment if you will. This may have been expressed as more immediately influential in the re-telling. However, it appears that for many of my informants, experience over time was important. Though stigma played a central role in Randall’s being imprisoned in Jacob’s Town, it was he and his friend’s unacceptable behaviour in the entertainment centre that got him into trouble. I can only tentatively suggest that for at least some former fighters, the realisation that what they were doing “was not nice” as Boima says, was from bumping up against constraints to their agency that they had not experienced in armed groups. It is highly unlikely that a civilian could have accused him of raping her daughter as the woman did during the war. In the post-war period the police—who would have previously worked under the same leadership as Randall—had the power to take him to prison. Schemas that had been produced and reproduced in the habitus of war were not necessarily effective in the post-war period. How this realisation came to ex-combatants and why it did not for others is a topic for further research.

#### *Intergenerational Reciprocity and Respect in Family Relations*

Returning now to Boima, it was clear to him that he should stop hurting people. Notice he also talks about acquiring a skill. Many ex-combatants had not completed high school education, nor did they have skills outside of their military training during the war. That is one reason that made their ineligibility to work in the government forces or the police so upsetting. As Ben related at the beginning of the chapter, there were no other jobs. Formal institutions were not available to provide job facilities for the survival and development of former fighters. Skills training was offered to empower ex-

combatants to sustain themselves without the gun. However, as many young men explained, the acquisition of skills, and the participation in counselling was not enough to ensure that their lives could be sustained. Many of them continued to live stigmatised lives as outcasts, hustling for daily work loading cars or hauling sand, much like Washington in Chapter Six. Despite sincerity and effort, many remained unable to re-establish sustainable livelihoods that did not incorporate crime and violence as means of survival. Boima's story helps to explain at least some of the reasons why this is the case. His experience illustrates the importance of relationships with family and extended kin which significantly influenced his post-war life chances and social navigation.

The presence and role of his children and family in his life was central to Boima's post-war experience because of the way it structured his everyday life and opened his social horizon for the future.

I got four children. I even got my woman living with me, my father, everyone...For now, everything I'm doing for now, it's for my children. I'm not doing it for myself. For me now, I got my own place. I'm not depending on anybody now. I'm only depending on myself. I lose my mother three years ago. I only got my father now, living. I supporting him now. Now, I have learned something to sustain my family...The life we are living today is a good life, because now we sweat for what we get at the end of the day.

The first thing to note is the implications of having a family with him. Recall the discussion of the family in the beginning of Chapter Six. When families and households were working as they should, women managed the household while the children saw to the routine tasks that kept it going. As a contributing adult member of a functioning household and family, Boima's basic needs were taken care of. His clothes would be washed, and there would be food and shelter. Contrast this experience with those of Ben and David at the beginning of the chapter.

Being incorporated into families also positioned ex-combatants into intergenerational relationships that have important implications for the future. Boima was fulfilling his role as a head of house as well as a son to and elderly father. He talked about how everything he was doing now was for his children. His purpose was to provide for their well-being. "Everything I'm doing for now is for my children's future," he says. The kind of provision he supplied to his three children, all of whom were in school at the time of this fieldwork, garnered social honour from others in the society. He was fulfilling his role, his responsibility as the breadwinner. It also garnered social honour of his children. As we saw in Chapter Six, children respected parents who catered to them.

In a focus group, a young girl noted that a father must “send you to school. He need to pay attention to you. You respect him. When he not pay attention to you, you will not respect him. And if he not care for you, if he [puts his attention elsewhere] you won’t respect him.”<sup>187</sup> The ex-combatants who were involved in their family systems were proud of their relationships, roles and responsibilities. I was introduced to parents and children. They proudly emphasised their accomplishments within their families, be it supporting elderly parents, or paying for children’s school fees.

For those whose parents were in the household there was a further commitment to support and care for aging parents. As Boima points out, he was responsible to care for and support not only his wife and his children but also his father. He was fully lodged within the accepted intergenerational hierarchies that organised reciprocal relationships within respectable Liberian families. Boima’s allegiance and his obligations were invested into interdependent relationships that structured his survival and mobility the way that an armed group had once done. His needs were met. He had acquired respect once again and there was a sense of possibility for the future.

This post-war trajectory presents a notable contrast to the other two. There was a settled commitment to life outside of the violence and war-time schemas as well as an achievement of position and respect in society. This is significant, but my ability to provide insight stops here. I was unable to get a clear sense about how ex-combatants like Boima came to their positions as family men.

#### *Ex-Combatants and Imagined Trajectories*

I would like to offer one final observation concerning ex-combatant’s imagined futures, and how these map onto those that we observed in Chapter Five. Boima talks about wanting to provide for his family in the future, and this was ultimately a desire of nearly all of the young men in this research. One curious qualification to make is that I rarely heard ex-combatants discuss going into government. The reasons for this are not clear. Despite watching former warlords like Prince Johnson go into government positions, most ex-combatants were more concerned with business or educational endeavours.

The reasons for this are not altogether clear, but I would like to make a couple of observations in reference to the difference. What I have argued thus far is that ex-combatants were empowered to achieve social status as adults and as big men during the war in ways that youth outside of armed groups could not be. The gun was a means to accelerating social trajectories. Holding guns disconnected them from the structural

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<sup>187</sup> Focus Group, May 25, 2010, see also Porter et al. (2008) for an elderly generation’s reflections about their inability to provide for—and thus earn the respect of—their children.

contexts where cultural assimilation and positions in government were socially valued for status as a big man. In contrast they became big men through other means.

In the post-war period, their imagined trajectories reflected the structural differences in their wartime experiences from those of other young men. They were interested in livelihoods that would turn over a consistent or profitable income. They talked about starting or building up businesses. They had not taken on the social value for cultural assimilation, as many of them had spent significant time achieving mobility in alternative ways. Other youth continued to imagine mobility through cultural assimilation and by achievement in the government. The way to live up to standard was to come to the city, find a way to the states, and return with the cultural and human capital that would achieve a position in the government.

I will not speculate as to how much influence this may have on their contributions to the post-war economy. What I would like to point out is the disconnection to such a strong social value for assimilation into “civilised” and educated positions in the government that we saw in Chapter Five. This difference between their navigation of the immediate and the imagined from that of other youth is noticeable and congruent with very different structural experiences during the war. They remained distinct in this way.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Seven highlighted a number of social processes that were significant to young men’s survival and development during war. In this chapter, Sumo, Randall, and Boima’s post-war experiences highlight again the significance of wealth in people for improved life chances. For Boima and others who have re-established relationships with families, possibilities in post-war society had a greater chance of improving. Perhaps as important as anything else, being responsible for and attentive to the needs of one’s family garnered a significant amount of social respect for Liberian men. Though for many, transitions from armed groups did mean a setback in wealth and resources, social relationships, particularly within families, provided a renewed social pathway upon which they could see clear potential to advance their social status.

I have highlighted some of the structural constraints and social processes that influence ex-combatant social navigation after conflict. This study cannot speak to all of the motivations, conditions or reasons why some ex-combatants transitioned from violent ways of life while others maintained schemas from armed groups through collectives like gangs. I have tried to illustrate the primacy of interdependent relationships. Job training, education and counselling were not enough to equip former soldiers to achieve

survival and mobility after war. Patrimonial relationships were necessary not just for survival but also for respect. Social honour and prestige were earned in hierarchical relationships of dependency and obligation. The abjection young ex-combatants were working to avoid would result from leaving the network hierarchies established during the war. Without this wealth in people, youth would have to begin anew among families and communities who would not recognise them as adults or as the big men they had come to be during their experience in armed groups.

Boima's post-war life story helps to illustrate the significance of involvement in family systems for ex-combatants who wish to navigate life trajectories away from structured ways of life established in war and maintained by some through crime and violence afterwards. Being engaged in reciprocal relationships within and between generations not only improved the social standing and life chances of ex-combatants in the immediate, it also expanded their perspective to future possibilities and responsibilities. My informants offered clear evidence for Nilsson's (2005, p. 4) observation that "ex-combatants, their families, and local communities are the ones who do most of the reintegration work."



## Chapter Nine: Conclusion

This is a modest piece of empirical research. In many regards, I have found results that concur with others working on issues concerning young men and ex-combatants. In this final chapter, I draw together the arguments I have made throughout this work with the aim of providing a conceptual contribution to knowledge. In this last discussion I reiterate what I set out to accomplish with this research, what I found, and what implications these results have for theory and future research.

### What I Set Out To Do

I identified two limitations in the literature that I attempted to address with this research. One was empirical, the other was theoretical. I found with Nilsson (2005) that work being done on issues to do with “reintegration” was, by and large, theoryless. In fact, reintegration tended to be a term associated more with poorly defined program aims and outcomes than with the actual process of leaving a life lived in war and concerned with the project of war to one positioned in any other kind of way. Along these same lines, it was also apparent that little work had made empirical inquiry about the society in which ex-combatants have to situate themselves in after war. I began by arguing that without some understanding about how post-war society is working, it would be all too easy to make assumptions and to draw spurious conclusions about why ex-combatants do what they do or face the challenges that they face. Therefore, I invested half of my empirical inquiry into a focused investigation of how youth agency was constrained and enabled. My aim was to have a very situated knowledge of the social terrain in post-war Monrovia so that I could distinguish post-war experiences that were that were common to young men from any specific challenges or options that were experience by ex-combatants *because* they were ex-combatants. As there was no substantiated theory of reintegration that would help me describe and explain social process for ex-combatants and others after war, I chose to think about and work with an analysis of the relationship between structure and agency.

### What I Found

#### *Reproduction of Social Imagination*

Chapters Five and Six presented a picture of depletion and reproduction. Through the post-war experience of Timothy and his friends on the street, we can see how significant wealth in people is for survival and development. In the years during and after the war

many young people lost their wealth in people. Significant relations diminished or became unable to provide the support that they were obligated as parents and elders to provide. Reciprocity through the life course is meant to create a bond between parents, foster parents, patrons of all kinds (Goody, 1982). However, as Flomo explained, “due to the poverty now, that affected the parents, it make it that we cannot meet up with our children’s needs. And because of this, and they too are trying, one way or the other to sustain themselves.”

One of the most significant contributions in this work was the consistent emphasis placed on what Timothy referred to as “family business.” In the midst of a growing interest in the “crisis of youth” across Africa, the emphasis on a “marginalised majority” (Sommers, 2003) is understandable, as many of Africa’s youth are highly visible, out of school, and unemployed. Liminality has been understood as a function of macro-level structural developments such as global recessions and political and economic mismanagement (Richards, 1996; Utas, 2008a), of failed neo-liberal development policies that promise more than they deliver (Mains, 2007), and of conflict and forced displacement (Eyber & Ager, 2004; Mann, 2008). These are useful interpretations. What young people were so adamant about in this study were the social means to mobility—namely intergenerational relationships within family, kin, and big men. Relationships of dependency and reciprocity were important for advancement. If we look only at the lack of jobs for youth, we miss this significant intergenerational piece of the puzzle. It was not just that youth were unable to find work or training. It was a compounded situation of disempowerment among the generation above them as well. The helping hand was not there. Their families and kin networks were unable to provide the social and economic support needed to launch them into jobs or education that would facilitate mobility toward sustainable livelihoods.

Does this mean that young men like Timothy are part of a “lost generation” (Cruise O'Brien, 1996; Singer, 2010), that they are a generation who will experience all of detriments of post-war society and miss the slow-coming development later generations will enjoy? It would be hasty to assume so. It is evident however that there are tremendous numbers of young and old people engaged in subsistence livelihoods, hustling in the informal economy. The economic growth does not appear nearly swift enough to absorb the demands of a vast cohort of young people. They may continue to live immobile lives—much like the Ethiopian youth in Mains’s (2007) study. Much depends on the extent to which development can be achieved in the economy.

Without the patronage that would be expected through parents and extended kin, other patrons would have to be found. In Chapter Five we saw important themes coming through in terms of young men's perceived position in society, and how they believed that they could generate mobility. It was through other people, through patrons and "saints," and ultimately by way of the US. There were clear signs of social reproduction, Bourdieu's (1994) "doxa," the taken for granted, the motions and meanings of doing life everyday appeared to be re-establishing the social hierarchies that were in place before the war. Socio-economic mobility was imagined through cultural assimilation which would require cultural capital achieved through to the US and brought back. There was evidence of continuity between the social condition in pre-war and post-war Monrovia.

Lubkemann (2008) urges us to think of war not as an event that suspends "normal" social processes. Rather, it is transformative of social relations and cultural practice, which introduces a complex collective and individual experience of renegotiation, creativity, bewilderment and argument in its aftermath. His argument is useful, as it pushes to consider the ways in which war creates change rather than as a temporary substitute for the established structural order which continues on seamlessly in its aftermath. In Chapters Three and Four, I argued that the Liberian civil war was not a revolution brought about to check the chaos of an ineffective state. It was not a social or political project of redefinition, but rather a "rebellion" (Vigh, 2009a) that was meant to replace one big man with another. The civil war *displaced* the dominant elite. It was not a project of reconstituting the manifestation or functioning of structural hierarchies but rather one of replacing them one for another. The war did not challenge how their legitimacy was constituted. In the aftermath, it appears evident that the young men in this work were continuing to look for modes of mobility that were established prior to the war. I do not mean to suggest that all things will return to how they were in the 1970's. Liberia has much to recover from socially, economically, and politically. It will be difficult to make any assessment of transformation for some time. What is apparent in the initial years of depletion and deprivations of many kinds is that the few who still have significant wealth in people are the ones who are doing well. It is those elites who have returned from the states who are once again "holding position." Young men see their way ahead by assimilating, by "going on that side" and bouncing back. In this particular instance of social mobility, it does appear evident the social condition of pre-war Liberia has been reproduced in the social imaginations of urban young men.

Does my observation about social reproduction point to a return to conflict? It is too early to tell. This research is very small, and positioned only a few years after the war ceased. It does appear evident that the structural inequalities that led to the war have

been addressed (Kieh Jr., 1992). If a strong contingent of elites return and re-establish the oligarchy of the previous generations it seems very likely that conflict could reoccur. Much depends on the current government and the next. Will they choose differential incorporation by continuing to make choices that will promote economic growth that inhibits the mobility and restricts potential growth of the majority? Will the positions in politics continue to be limited to those who have come from on that side? Or will there be acceptance, integration, and *equal value* for those who do not come from previously dominant families with US degrees? It appears evident from this research that those who have been abject historically must be “raised up” in the minds of those “big men who hold position” and considered equal, and worthy of dignity. There must be a reimagining of the structural order of society by those who have been oppressed. Social discourse, the political and economic developments in the coming years will be significant for the national growth *with* development or for continued dominance of the few over the many.

#### *Repositioning Combatants and Ex-Combatants*

That structures undergo shifts during war is evident in the literature. It is apparent that war re-orders social relations, economics, and politics in different ways (Johnston, 2004; Keen, 1995; Lubkemann, 2008; Reno, 1995, 1998), and that factions waging war provide alternative options for those who fight with them (Utas, 2005a, 2008a). Equally, the cessation of war brings about further structural shifting in different forms. How former combatants negotiate these changes in the social terrain have been far less investigated (Denov, 2011; Nilsson, 2005). The three trajectories presented in Chapter Eight help us to see how ex-combatants negotiate these shifts. Conflict offered young men alternative pathways for mobility. It did so in a very confined space, in military factions that provided livelihoods through violence, violation, and exploitation—often of the unarmed and vulnerable. What this meant was that achievements of mobility and of prestige were bounded within factions and would not readily translate to a life outside of them. Families and communities did not recognise or appreciate their accomplishments as honourable, nor were they prepared to accept them as men of responsibility or authority. Rather, many ex-combatants were feared and unwelcome by many. They could not return as heroes, but were considered instead as harmful and “spoiled” by their experience. Their achievements were not valued. Objectified and “thrown down” they went from previous social positions of prestige, of “holding position” to one of abjection. That is why at least some young men like Sumo chose to remain detached from those outside of their own social systems that continued to reproduce the structure and practice they had experienced during the war. Prestige could be maintained in gangs.

We have seen how detrimental isolation can be. Others are needed for basic survival, for protection, and for opportunity. Some, like Randall have attempted to re-negotiate their position in post-war society and to accommodate the social schemas that were accepted by the majority. It meant changing the motions and meanings of everyday life. It meant choosing not to take or hurt as a means of survival and mobility. We saw the discomfort and difficulty of attempting some form of transition. One conclusion to draw from his experience is that former comrades and commanders may make the difference in a young person's survival in ways that others are unable to do. The emphasis on demobilisation is there in DDR initiatives because it is thought to be an essential part of maintaining a peaceful and secure post-war context (Spear, 2002). Ex-combatants' networks are considered a significant threat because of the ease with which they can remobilise while together. However, as this and other work has shown (Hoffman, 2011a; Utas, 2003), ex-combatant networks are sustained after war anyway. Further, as Randall's experience shows, patrimonial ties to former fighters enabled him to make a living. That reciprocal and hierarchical relationship improved his life chances in ways his family was unable or in the case of other ex-combatants—unwilling to do.

With Boima we saw a young, former fighter who had reclaimed social respect by other means and through alternative schemas to those he had known in war. He accommodated the dominant, acceptable way of making a living. He put the gun down in his mind. He picked a different trade and contributed to his family's subsistence. He was able to support them with the gun before the DDR. By putting the gun down in his mind as well as with his hands Boima earned the acceptance and trust of his community. Boima was able to establish life on the terms of his post-war community, outside of his armed group. "Nobody got problem" with him. That is in large part because he has established a life of honour among his community and with his family. He was fulfilling his role as a male head of house. He was working for his children's school fees, attending to his father. Though it may not have been the command of the number of dependants that ex-combatants boasted of having during the war, having a family and household under his direction could afford him social respect as an honourable man in a post-war context where there could no longer be tens and hundreds of soldiers under his direction.

### **Implications for Theory and Research**

What do these findings mean for theory and future research? If nothing else, this study has found substantial evidence to support what Nilsson (2005) concludes—that the real work of "reintegration" takes place in relationships. Life chances are embedded in other

people who are related and affiliated in hierarchical and interdependent ways. Life trajectories of all young men emerged from the ways in which relationships constrained or expanded their viable options (Klocker, 2007). With this research I demonstrated the crucial significance of having wealth in people for life chances and trajectories of post-war young people—whether they are ex-combatants or not.

It is important to look at what I have not done as well, and what could be done to provide a more detailed and intricate interpretation of the social process undergone in the months and years after the war. One lingering question for me concerns how young men transition to acceptance of a different way of life after war. When Boima tells his story, his realisation that what he was doing “was not nice” appears very immediate, as though UN peace workers and former combatants were able to “flip a switch” for him, to enlighten him in some way. There appeared to be critical moments (Thompson et al., 2002) that were turning points for his life course. For others like Randall, it does not sound so immediate. My hunch is that some began to experience negative social or economic repercussions—like Randall—that challenged them to reconsider their conduct. There are significant implications for post-war theory—about security, and about social reconciliation—that my data cannot speak to.

Another related area has to do with those who accept and reject ex-combatants. My data cannot speak to their processes of accommodation or refusal of their ex-combatants children or relatives. I have only the perceptions of ex-combatants but their experience is only half of the phenomena of incorporation or rejection from families. This aspect of their post-war trajectories—the experience of those with whom their viable options expand or contract—has not been well explored. Along these lines, it appears very helpful to know how non-combatants bring meaning to the condition of their ex-combatant family, children, or neighbours, and how these narratives are constructed and translate into acceptance, rejection, or ambivalence. In Alexander and McGregor’s work (2005), we see how former fighters were understood through remembrance of the liberation war that preceded the one they fought in during the 1980’s. This reflective evaluation informed the way that they were subsequently treated in the aftermath. They were judged as having failed to conduct themselves according to norms of the war that preceded the conflict just fought. In Liberia there had been no previous war—at least in living memory. “We never seen war before,” I was often told. The meanings that mothers and fathers and siblings and neighbours give to youth participation would be helpful to our understanding of their engagement with ex-combatants afterward.

This study points to the significance of having and maintaining reciprocal relationships. I have argued that such relationships are essential to survival, mobility, and respect in post-war Liberia. I have pointed to family relationships and patrimony as particularly significant. What I cannot do with this work is to draw out more specific relational processes that take place when ex-combatants return to parent's homes or wives. I cannot say what kinds of intergenerational exchanges or spousal experiences they had over time which may have led to more sustainable settlement after war—such as in the case of Boima. Nor can I offer insight concerning how families of ex-combatants negotiated the stigma that many of them carried. This study suggests that integration into families and kin networks is significant for ex-combatants' ability to survive and to establish respectable lives in their societies. Other work with ex-combatants points similarly to the importance of family after war (Betancourt et al., 2010; Boothby et al., 2006). This study has made it clear that life chances and trajectories are enabled and advanced through wealth in people. With this work, I argue that social processes are vital to any theorisation about life after war.



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