Jerihun was the site of an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp between Bo and Kenema in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. When I arrived there in 2001, the camp was fairly new, having only been in operation for about six months. It was designed as a transit camp for Sierra Leoneans returning from refugee camps in Guinea, mainly Kono people who had been away from their villages for ten years. The camp housed several thousand IDPs in small stick and mud huts built by the occupants themselves. They were completely supported by international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). All of their food, water, education, medicine, and other supplies came from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency), and other subcontracting NGOs. I chose to visit this camp because former child soldiers were being reunified with distant family in the camps—sometimes, ironically, with family they had never met. My goal was to study the reintegration of these former child combatants and their experiences with both Western agencies and their home communities after the war was over.

After clearing my presence with the NGO running the camp, I walked around and greeted people. The NGO staff there was unprepared to help me and, in fact, seemed completely unaware of who the ex-combatants were or where they were staying. I heard from various
residents that things were hard at this camp, that in Guinea they had been much better supplied. More to the point, the Mende people in the neighboring village wanted them out (as a ploy, they surmised, to get more money from the white men for hosting refugees in their locale). There were also complaints that the Sierra Leoneans working at the camp were stealing supplies and that the camp occupants did not have any access to land or tools. This meant that the occupants mainly sat around the camp and waited. They were waiting for their home areas to be declared officially safe and then for UNHCR to take them back. As a result of these problems, the camp was emptying out. I thought that might mean that people were going back to their homes, but I was told, “No, they are looking for other camps.” One Mende woman from Bunumbu asserted that she would like to go back, but there was nothing there. She told me that she had passed overland from Guinea and had actually traveled through her hometown of Bunumbu on her way to the camp. When I asked why she had not stayed then, she said, “There was no food, no buildings, what would I do? So instead I sit in the camp all day.”

After asking around for children who had taken part in the war, I met three “child ex-combatants” at Jerihun Camp. They all had similar stories: abducted approximately seven years prior at around age seven. When I met them they were fourteen, though to me they looked younger. They told me that they had spent their years with the rebels as porters and general help, not really as combatants. They said they never fired guns, though they would often carry them around and follow after the big men, explaining “even rebels like big man business.” That is, the rebel commanders gained prestige for having a number of young followers around them. One of the children, Sahr, indicated that he had received “training,” meaning some form of military training.¹

Sahr is a common name among the Kono people, meaning firstborn male child. Sahr took me to meet his “brother”—actually a member of his extended family whom he had never met until coming to the camp. Since he could remember his village name and the names of his parents, the child protection agency caring for him after demobilization was able to make the connection. Sahr’s brother said he and his family had been in Guinea for about eight years until they were brought back to Sierra Leone by UNHCR. They had to take in the boy, he explained, because
although they did not know him, he is family to them. (Also, there is now an extra name on their feeding card at the camp.) Sahr’s brother had put a lot of effort into making their little house very nice, even planting a flower garden with seeds he brought with him from Guinea.

Sahr had never been to school. At the age of fourteen he was in class 1, the equivalent of the first grade in the United States. I asked him if he minded being in class with little kids. He said, “No. Everything has its stage.” I asked him if he could write his name and he proudly replied, “Yes!” I asked him to write it for me in my notebook. He went to his brother for help with the “S” but his brother refused, urging, “No, you can do it yourself.” So he wrote for me proudly SAHR—all in capital letters, with a backward S.

* * *

This book is about the reintegration of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone. The international community defines a child soldier, or a “child associated with an armed force or armed group,” as “any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys, and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities” (UNICEF 2007, 7). In Sierra Leone, children were recruited and used by every fighting faction; girls as well as boys were trained to fight and to carry out a full range of other war-related activities. Since 2002 when the decade-long civil war in Sierra Leone came to an end, some forty international and local nongovernmental organizations have worked there to reintegrate an estimated seven thousand former child combatants (DeBurca 2000; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2002). This book is about what happened after these child soldiers demobilized and struggled to return to “normal” life, rather than on their mobilization into fighting forces or what they did while they carried guns. How did they conceive of their time “in the bush”? How did other Sierra Leoneans see them? What was the process of so-called reintegration like? This book examines, from the ground up, children’s and adults’ own experiences of postwar rebuilding. The analysis is based on
eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Sierra Leone in interim care centers for separated children, in schools struggling to integrate children whose education had been disrupted by war, in nonformal apprenticeship programs, and in selected communities where former child soldiers have been reunified with their families.

This book is also about childhood: the childhoods of the child soldiers, but also about the modern conception of childhood, forged in the West and exported around the globe via child rights discourse and practice. What happens when Western models of childhood bump up against various local models of childhood in the struggle to reintegrate former child soldiers? In the West, we understand child soldiers using our own models of childhood, framed by institutions such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), international nongovernmental organizations such as Save the Children, or transnational advocacy organizations such as the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. These organizations’ key proposition is that since child soldiers are, after all, children, they cannot be held responsible for their actions. They should more rightly be seen as victims and every effort should be made to protect them and reintegrate them into normal childhoods. This viewpoint is aligned with our commonsense understanding of childhood, namely that children are innocents in need of protection and should be spending their time in schools, not acting as participants in war. But does this view align with the views of Sierra Leoneans? Of the former child soldiers themselves?

By exploring the meaning of childhood, as it is lived, negotiated, and deployed strategically by multiple actors, this book argues several points. In Sierra Leone, “youth” is best understood as a political category. Indeed, “child soldier” as a category is co-created by Sierra Leoneans and Westerners in social practice, not in the experiences of individual children. The reintegration of former child soldiers is, in many ways, a political process having to do with changing notions of childhood as one of the central structures of society. Struggles over childhood and child rights in postwar Sierra Leone are productive sites in that they become the locus for all kinds of other political struggles. Like feminist scholarship, which can generate insights into the broader structures of society through a focus on the micro-politics of gender, this work of childhood studies reveals the broader structures of society through a focus on the micro-politics of age. Close attention to how
reintegration differs for boys and girls, ex-combatants of different fighting factions, and formal and informal reintegrators, illuminates the contours of these political struggles. In this book, we hear the voices of the former child soldiers themselves, in their multiple social contexts. The most innovative contribution of this work is that it addresses the vast majority of former child soldiers who forego participation in formal reintegration programs and, in the language of NGOs, “spontaneously reintegrate” after war.

Moreover, this book argues that UN- and NGO-sponsored programs for child soldiers have unintended effects as they seek to change the very nature of youth as a political category in Sierra Leone. NGO activities purporting to help former child soldiers are in some ways buttressing the old-fashioned patron–client relationships at the heart of the corrupt postcolonial state and disabling prewar forms of youth power. Sierra Leonean former child soldiers find themselves forced to strategically perform (or refuse to perform) as the “child soldier” Western human rights initiatives expect in order to most effectively gain access to the resources available for their reintegration into normal life. These strategies don’t always work; sometimes Western human rights initiatives may ultimately do more harm than good.

This book provides answers to the obvious question, can former child soldiers return to normal life after unspeakable violence? What does their reintegration look like? What works and what does not work for former child soldiers, both in their own terms and in the terms of the communities into which they are reintegrating? The practical conclusions are that programs for former child soldiers work best when they work within local models of child protection, for example through child fostering and apprenticeship, rather than through excessive institutionalization and reliance on Western child rights–based models. Ultimately, this book concludes that an ethnographic approach to understanding children’s actual lived experience can contribute to more effective policy and programming that will help to support the “best interests of the child.”

Childhood Studies and Situated Practice

The Western model of childhood is most clearly articulated in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). In the
West, this model is almost common sense: children are innocent, children should not work, children should be in school, children should live with their families, and children should be allowed to express themselves. Within this framework, child soldiering is wrong because it contravenes the notion of an ideal childhood. This version of childhood did not appear out of the blue; it has a history and politics of its own. The model of youth specific to the Western industrialized nations was worked out in the colonies and recirculated in the metropole (Stoler 1995) and is now upheld and perpetuated by global institutions such as the United Nations. As senior anthropologist of childhood Jo Boyden puts it, “The norms and values upon which the ideal of a safe, happy and protected childhood are built are culturally and historically bound to the social preoccupations and priorities of the capitalist countries of Europe and the United States” (Boyden 1997, 192). The spread of this global model—that is, its application in parts of the world far from its creation—has to be understood as part of the history of colonialism and of colonialism's offspring, development. Indeed, the spread of the Western ideal could be seen as the colonization of childhood, one of the central ideas of what is now known as childhood studies (James and Prout 1997; Burman 1994; Pupavac 2001; Stephens 1995). Children’s participation in war is not a new phenomenon (Marten 2002; Rosen 2005); what is new is the international child protection framework that has constructed the identity “child soldier” where it previously did not exist, through techniques from the fields of education, psychology, and social welfare. How do young people learn to enact or embody the identity “child soldier”? During the war they learn to fight and to survive, and they learn a factional identity, but while “in the bush,” they generally do not know the term “child soldier.” They learn to apply the term to themselves by going through and between a series of institutions after their participation in war.

Often questions about child soldiering have been framed in terms of structure and agency (Coulter 2009, Denov 2010). Practice, or, more completely, social practice theory, is a potential way out of this dead-end duality. What do I mean by practice? First, it is not just the opposite of theory, as in the oft-decried divide between theory and practice; and second, it is not just a description of what people do, as in their actions instead of their thoughts or feelings. Instead, practice theory is a theoretical tradition that allows for a new relationship between mind and
body, and between structure and agency. Social practice theory does not place the social in mental qualities, nor in discourse, nor in interaction (Reckwitz 2002, 249). Practice theory can be defined through two distinct but complementary motives or research programs. The first is an empirical program, ethnographic in its sensibility, for understanding social and organizational life. The second is a theoretical one aimed at “transcending perennial problems in philosophy and social sciences, such as Cartesian dualism and the agency-structure problem” (Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, and Yanow 2009, 1312). That is, instead of conceiving of social reality as made up of structures that individual agents move within and against, practice theory sees social life as the sum of practices, where practices are habits of thought, or action, or body.

Thus, the kinds of knowledge with which practice theory is concerned are located in lived action (competence of acting, style, practical tact, habituations, and routine practices), in the body (gestures, demeanor, corporeal sense of things), in the world (in being “at home” with what one does, dwelling in it), and in relations (encounters with others, relations of trust, recognition, intimacy) (Forester 1999, 102). Practice theory requires describing a “field” in all its complexity, while simultaneously noting that the field itself is made by the practices of social reproduction. “Child soldier” is produced in practice—partially determined by institutional structures, and partially as a result of children’s own strategizing—in various social, historically and geographically situated sites.

In order to carry out a practice theory analysis, one’s point of departure cannot be the reflexive (and unreflective) condemnation of child soldiering as an egregious child rights violation. Adopting a critical approach allows an understanding of child soldiering from the perspective of social practice. We must ask how former child soldiers and other Sierra Leoneans themselves understand and employ child rights discourse and the construction “child soldier” to serve their own motives. What are the strategies—in Bourdieu’s (1977) sense of the word—of children and adults in response to global ideology? Anthropologist of childhood Sharon Stephens argues that more research is needed on how global discourses such as “the rights of the child” are worked out locally, in practice. In her groundbreaking work on children and the politics of culture, she attests,
The crucial task for researchers now . . . is to develop more powerful understandings of the role of the child in structures of modernity. The historical processes by which these once localized western constructions have been exported around the world and the global political, economic, and cultural transformations that are currently rendering childhood so dangerous, contested, and pivotal in the formation of new sorts of social persons, groups, and institutions (1995, 14).

The goal of this book, then, is to uncover the political content of what is often presumed to be the apolitical construction of childhood. The volume compares the experiences of formal and informal reintegrators, boy soldiers and girl soldiers, and children affiliated with two different fighting factions: the rebels (the Revolutionary United Front, or RUF) and the local militias (the Civil Defense Forces, or CDF). Its central question is: How does “modern childhood” function as an ideology? How does modern childhood frame the possibilities for debate and analysis of a range of issues, including youth culture at the local and global level, the war in Sierra Leone, issues of gender and of the postcolonial?

How to Study War: Placing War in Social and Historical Context

The first violence is the decision where to start telling the story. Do we start with the incursion of the rebels into Sierra Leone? With the corrupt system that caused them to rebel in the first place? With the colonial legacy that allowed the corrupt system to come in to force? For some in Freetown, Sierra Leone’s capital, the war did not start until it came to their front doors, many years after the first attacks. For others it started much earlier.

There are several ways to break down the various schools of thought about the war in Sierra Leone. There are those who emphasize external causes—the international diamond trade, international gun runners, the rapacious nature of extractive global capitalism, the history of colonial domination and its impact on political forms—and those who emphasize internal causes—such as the breakdown in the patrimonial system, the collapse of the educational system, the corruption of the
local elites, and underlying ethnic tensions. Most scholars acknowledge both external and internal factors as important and admit that they are inextricably linked. Thus, the corruption of local elites is due, in part, to the legacy of the colonial system, and illegal international diamond trading is only possible because of the internal breakdown of the state.

The first book-length exploration of the war by an anthropologist was Paul Richards’s (1996) *Fighting for the Rainforest*. Richards sees the causes of the war in a general “crisis of youth” pointing to the breakdown of a patrimonial system and the reactions of “excluded intellectuals.” He posits rationality, organization, discipline, and calculated visions of social change by a movement that is led by “quite highly educated dissident” intellectuals. Richards says in his conclusion: “I am more than ever convinced that the (Revolutionary United Front rebels) must be understood against a background of region-wide dilemmas concerning social exclusion of the young. . . . (T)he increasing resort to violence stems from past corrupt patronal manipulation of educational and employment opportunities” (Richards 1996, 174).

A set of Sierra Leonian scholars—historians and political scientists mainly—have taken issue with Richards’s theses (Abdullah 2004a). These scholars support the centrality of youth to any explanation of the war but deny many of Richards’s more extreme assertions about “excluded intellectuals.” The Sierra Leonian scholars are much more likely to point to internal causes for the war. We can leave aside the various arguments about whether youths were responsible for the war, or whether they were dupes of powerful political forces outside their control. What is important here is to acknowledge the belief, among both outsiders and Sierra Leoneans, that the situation of youth was a central driving force behind the conflict. This analysis fits well with the current popularity of demographic and economic explanations for war, citing in particular the “youth bulge” in sub-Saharan Africa as a cause for much conflict as vast cohorts living in poor economies fail to find work and resort to killing each other. Indeed, in this theoretical atmosphere, policy makers increasingly see youth as a dangerous segment of the population, requiring urgent programming in education and livelihoods (UNDP 2006; Urdal 2004). On the other hand, youth are “the future,” and policy makers greatly desire their participation in civil
society. A rash of recent book titles lay out the dichotomy: Are youth in Africa *Vanguards or Vandals?* (Abbink and van Kessel 2005), “Makers” or “Breakers”? (see Honwana and De Boeck 2005), *Troublemakers or Peacemakers?* (McEvoy-Levy 2006). Professor of African Studies Mamadou Diouf puts it this way, “Today, young people are emerging as one of the central concerns of African Studies. Located at the heart of both analytical apparatuses and political action, they also have become a preoccupation of politicians, social workers, and communities in Africa” (2003, 2). This means, finally, that understanding the war requires understanding the various meanings of “youth” in Sierra Leone, including youth culture, patrimonialism, and everyday practice surrounding youth.

A Brief History of the War, and the Fighting Factions

The goal of this overview is not to offer a full accounting of the war. Political economist David Keen (2005) and investigative journalist Lansana Gberie (2005) each give an excellent overview, and the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is exhaustive in its detail (Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2004). Here I merely introduce the main fighting factions and provide a broad sense of the timeline and issues involved.

*The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) Rebels*

Starting in 1991, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) made incursions into the south and east of the country from neighboring Liberia, which had been in the throes of its own rebel war for the previous several years. There has been a great deal written about the character and origin of the RUF (Richards 1996; Abdullah 1997; Ellis 1999; Zack-Williams 1999; Peters 2011). The RUF initially enjoyed some support from the population, as there was great dissatisfaction with the prevailing system, and talk of the need for a violent overthrow had been around for a long time in student circles and elsewhere. In my experience, most Sierra Leoneans agreed that the RUF may have begun with a core group of politically oriented revolutionaries, but their activities soon devolved into terror and banditry. They were an unpredictable group with a
shared amorphous revolutionary language, but without a well thought out plan of how to achieve their ends. Different commanders had different styles, with the worst overseeing murder, rape, child abductions, amputations, and torture. The RUF sometimes made gestures of solidarity with the people only to turn against them the following day.

The RUF abducted people into their ranks, both children and adults. But in some cases there was a kind of natural association between rebel occupiers and the young rebellious sectors of society. Some Sierra Leonean scholars describe three types of youth involved in the movement: “the urban marginals (or ‘rarray man dem’); . . . the ‘san-san boys’ (or illicit miners), who live very precarious lives in the diamond mining areas, and who joined the rebel movement in large numbers when mining towns and villages were overwhelmed by the RUF; and socially disconnected village youth . . . who are contemptuous of rural authority and institutions, and who, therefore, saw the war as an opportunity to settle local scores” (Abdullah et al. 1997, 172).

The RUF’s leader was Foday Sankoh, a former army member and northerner, previously convicted of participating in a coup attempt. RUF members were scruffy, and lived and trained in the bush. They drew on a superficial pan-Africanism without the associated historical consciousness (Abdullah 2004b, 2002). Their costume included elements of military dress, sunglasses and bandannas, and also, at times, wigs and other elements of cross-dressing (see Moran 1994, for a description of Liberian cross-dressing fighters). They sometimes looted nice clothes and shoes in order to dress well. They smoked marijuana and listened to Bob Marley and Tupac Shakur. Their imagery drew on reggae music, sometimes explicitly critiquing the “Babylon system.”

The “system” can mean anything from the system of capitalism to the power of local chiefs; it can mean the corrupt educational system or the system of patronage.

The RUF and some portions of the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) joined forces and were known as “sobels”: soldiers by day and rebels by night (Richards 1996, 6; Ferme 2001b, 223). This is perhaps not completely surprising since the same types of youth who were drawn into the RUF were heavily involved in the Sierra Leone military as well. According to Sierra Leonean historian Ibrahim Abdullah, the ranks of the government army multiplied more than fivefold during the course of the war.
Introduction

War came to be regarded as a survival strategy for youth who had suffered high levels of social exclusion (Abdullah et al. 1997, 172).

The Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC)

In May 1997 the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), an alliance of the RUF and a portion of the SLA led by Major General Johnny Paul Koroma, staged a coup, and the elected government went into exile in neighboring Guinea. The advent of the AFRC made public what many had known or suspected for years: that an alliance existed between the RUF and at least some portion of the SLA. The alliance was based on political expediency and on the continuation of what had become a very profitable war economy based primarily on the export of diamonds (see Reno 1997a and 1998).

The Civil Defense Forces (CDF)

Through the mid-1990s, to people in Freetown, and in the north, the war seemed like a southern and eastern problem. To people in the south and east, it seemed as if no help was forthcoming from the capital. Many of them were living in refugee camps in Guinea and in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Sierra Leone. Partly in response to the informal alliance between the RUF and the SLA, the Civil Defense Forces (CDF) were organized (Muana 1997, Leach 2000, Ferme 2001a, Ferme and Hoffman 2004, Hoffman 2011) out of existing hunting secret societies.14

Hunting societies are formed around the knowledge required to hunt, namely knowledge of weapons and the ability to move quietly through the forest in search of prey. Historically, hunters have controlled herbal medicines said to render one invisible or even bullet-proof. The Kamajohs15 are the best-known group of the hunting society–based militias that made up the Civil Defense Forces. These were not strictly hunters, but a new kind of fighting force grown out of the hunting society, making use of preexisting secret society iconography and use of local plants for mystical purposes, but essentially a new creation.16 Children and young men were initiated into the society as fighters in order to help the force grow. The Civil Defense Forces (including the Kamajohs and other ethnically organized fighting groups), like
secret societies, have a public face and a private (secret) face. In media images, they often appear dressed in “traditional” locally woven clothes covered with leather charms, but paradoxically carrying very modern arms. They draw on long-standing understandings of the secret societies’ control of powerful magical forces in their public representation. However, there is also a more mundane aspect to the forces. When you see a CDF fighter in everyday life, he is usually dressed as any other man—with only a small charm around his neck, sometimes called a “safe,” to distinguish him. But even that is not very distinguishing as non-CDF men, women, and children sometimes wear similar charms.

The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL)

In mid-1999, the Government of Sierra Leone in exile and the leadership of the RUF met in Lomé, the capital of nearby Togo, to work out a peace deal. The agreement involved an amnesty for members of the RUF and a power-sharing agreement under which Foday Sankoh would become vice president and minister of mines and the elected politicians would return from exile. After the Lomé accords, the UN sent a military force of its own, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). Slowly, UN troops were stationed throughout the country (for example, Kenyans in Kenema, Indians in Mile 91). In 2000, the accords fell apart as Foday Sankoh’s followers again became violent, taking UN peacekeepers hostage and violently engaging with protesters in Freetown. Foday Sankoh himself went into hiding, and was eventually arrested and placed into UN custody. In January 2002, President Kabbah officially declared peace, and his Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) government was reelected in May 2002. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission came and went in 2003, with most Sierra Leoneans taking little notice. The Special Court has concluded its trials of all defendants, including Charles Taylor, the onetime president of neighboring Liberia. Johnny Paul Koroma is missing and presumed dead, and the two most high profile defendants, Foday Sankoh of the RUF and Sam Hinga Norman of the CDF, both died in custody while awaiting trial.

Today, although most agree that peace has been achieved, there is widespread concern that most of the issues that led to the conflict still remain. Although people have seen what war can do and never want
it to return, they are worried that unless something is done to address issues such as corruption, development, education, and the plight of youth, another war could happen in the future.

My Approach

It is necessary to understand the war within multiple frameworks, partly because it is a complicated story and partly because Sierra Leoneans use that complexity as a cultural resource. As education expert Antoinette Errante (2000) reminds us, a postwar period has its own political logic, quite different from that before or during. Child rights are part of the landscape of competing postwar narratives, all partially constitutive of social reality. The way people talk about and frame the war is crucial to understanding how the global child rights discourse is vernacularized in Sierra Leone (Merry 2006).

Of course, research is not a neutral exercise, and, especially in the context of armed conflict, it has considerable potential to infringe on the privacy, well-being, and security of its subjects. Jo Boyden cautions scholars conducting research with children confronting adversity to be aware of informed consent issues, expectations, accountability, the protection of children from harm, and the need for respect for the research subject. She concludes that “ethnographic research, based on a mix of observations (participant, unstructured and structured), personal testimony and other forms of narrative, has an important role to play, not least because of its potential in harnessing children’s own understandings and views” (2001, 5).

Despite these challenges, ethnography is still the best approach to studying the lived experiences of children. Ethnography can reveal the life worlds of children from their own perspectives and illuminate alternate indicators of well-being.17 In my fieldwork I experienced directly the challenges of ethnography with children affected by war. I found that I was most successful in gaining insight into their lives when I did not approach their experiences of violence directly; indeed, questioning a former child soldier about his or her time “in the bush” often yielded one of a set of stock answers, a script I came to recognize well. I found that the most revealing times were those spent simply “hanging out” with children participating in their activities.
During eighteen months of research in Sierra Leone in 1999, 2000, and 2001, I followed social and spatial networks as children moved through the supposed stages of reintegration. Anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom describes this method as “ethnography of a warzone”—“an experimental methodology based on studying a process . . . rather than a study based in a circumscribed locale” (Nordstrom 1997, 10).

I spent at least six months in various interim care centers for former child soldiers, meeting the staff and participating alongside children in their daily activities. I also investigated formal and informal apprenticeships, foster care arrangements, schools attended by former child soldiers, the meetings of the national Child Protection Committee, and various local and international child protection NGOs. During the second half of my fieldwork I lived in five different communities in which former child soldiers were reintegrating. In addition, many of my most interesting discussions happened in bars, markets, or on public transportation. The presence of a white woman speaking Krio was always a cause for amused curiosity, and after I explained the purpose of my presence, Sierra Leoneans almost always had something they wanted me to hear. Finally, I kept an eye on the local media—radio and newspaper mainly—for representations of child soldiers in the public sphere.

I selected the five primary field sites with a view toward representing various axes of differentiation in the population of former child soldiers. I documented the views and experiences of both the ex-child combatants and the members of the communities in which they were being reintegrated. I designed the research so that I could study a small number of individuals in their social context, essentially a cross section of ex-child combatants in several select communities, rather than performing a statistical study of these groups throughout the society. This represents a kind of purposive sampling, chosen to reflect a range of experiences across a number of axes. In each location, starting from the few former child soldiers identified for me by an NGO worker, I located all of the former child soldiers in each location, many of whom I would not have been able to find through NGO assistance alone. In particular, this method allowed me to identify large numbers of informal reintegrators, a population of child soldiers at that point inaccessible to researchers at UNICEF and other program-based organizations.
Table I.1 summarizes some of the differences in the five sites. This mix of locations allowed me to compare urban and rural experiences, regional differences, ethnic differences, and factional differences. It allowed me to study both boys and girls, as well as children who were affiliated with the fighting factions for just a short time, and those who spent their entire childhoods in the bush.

Chapter Outline

We cannot understand child soldiers in Sierra Leone without understanding the Sierra Leonean model of childhood and youth. Chapter 1 describes aspects of the practice of childhood in Sierra Leone—child labor, secret society initiations, child fosterage, and education and apprenticeship—that are continuous with the participation of children in armed forces. Sierra Leoneans have their own culturally specific reactions to child soldiering that are not reflected in global child rights discourse. What is disturbing to them is not a lost innocence but a separation from family and training and the idea that the nation loses a generation.

Chapter 2 describes Western interventions in Sierra Leone on behalf of child soldiers: demobilization, interim care, psychosocial activities, schooling and skills training, family tracing and reunification, follow-up visits, and community support. The identity “child soldier” in Sierra Leone is made as young people move through these institutions
designed for their rehabilitation and reintegration. Their postwar identities are partly structured by these institutions and partly made in overlapping arenas of social practice as individuals react to and negotiate with the system for their own needs. In particular, children sometimes use discourses of abdicated responsibility—“It was not my fault that I fought with the rebels. I was only a child!”—to help ease their postwar reintegration. But this same notion of child innocence in some ways makes reintegration more difficult, since Sierra Leoneans want children to return to their normal place at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

The “child soldier” is made in and around institutions in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. The ideological underpinnings of these institutions is a Western, individualistic framework, yet the actual effects are found in Sierra Leoneans interacting with (making and remaking) the institutions in social practice. In Chapter 3 I show how the system-as-designed broke down as a result of the maneuverings of individuals who participated in it in unanticipated and unintended ways that both helped and hindered their “reintegration.” Generally, rather than one predetermined circuit from normal life, to the bush, through an ICC and back to normal life, it was possible for individual children to move from any state to any other. Throughout this process the identity “child soldier” became useful in a number of ways.

Many child ex-combatants bypassed the institutions designed for them and simply went home on their own. The child protection NGOs called this “spontaneous” or “informal” reintegration, a sort of residual category for all the children affected by war not participating in NGO activities. Chapter 4 examines the different trajectories of so-called formal and informal reintegrators to further understand how communities organize “reintegration” in the absence of NGO programs. Although the so-called formal reintegrators have better access to various benefits, they must be “out” to their communities as former combatants. This means they cannot use the strategy of secrecy to ease their reintegration and that they sometimes become the target of community anger. So-called informal reintegrators lose out on some benefits, but in general they more easily blend back into their communities than formal reintegrators do. Some informal reintegrators strive to get registered as child soldiers after the fact of their reunification in order to access benefits. Communities collude in this activity, sometimes even fabricating
lists of child ex-combatants in order to maximize the community benefits that come with a population of child soldiers. These activities are to some extent undoing the distinction at the local level between formal and informal reintegrators.

Struggles over childhood and child rights are productive sites in that they become the locus of all kinds of other political struggles. Chapter 5 takes up two important distinctions in the population of child soldiers in Sierra Leone: the RUF and the CDF, and boys and girls. The child ex-combatants of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels and Civil Defense Force (CDF) militias have very different postwar experiences and are understood quite differently by child protection workers and policy makers, even though on the face of it they experienced similar traumas. NGOs argue that because CDF fighters stayed close to home during the war they do not need the same reintegration help as RUF fighters. The other effect of this is that boys of the CDF have a harder time escaping the wartime bonds of membership in locally based militias. This means that children of different factions have different access to the resources of “child soldier,” both discursive and material. The CDF boys are in some ways in a worse position than the RUF boys, because the CDF is a hierarchical institution that places young men at the bottom of social hierarchies. Ex-combatant benefits tend to come through still-existing wartime command structures, and in order to access these benefits boys must stay within a patrimonial system rather than adopting the “child soldier” identity based on modern constructions of youth.

Across another axis of differentiation, although many girls were abducted by the RUF—by some estimates as many girls as boys were abducted—they are even less likely than CDF boys to access the benefits that come with the identity “child soldier.” Their postwar experiences are quite different from those of boys. Only a handful of girls went through formal demobilization and reintegration programs. There are many reasons for this. Girls are subject to an explicitly moral discourse about their participation in the conflict and hence are less able to take advantage of the same discourses of abdicated responsibility as boys. Girls’ strategies for reintegration are more likely to include seeking anonymity. The chapter concludes by placing girls’ experiences of war alongside the everyday structural violence in girls’ lives.
In Sierra Leone, new definitions of youth are being forged in contradictory and extremely political ways. By adopting the modern notion of youth, young people gain one type of political power and lose another. The techniques behind the creation of “child soldier” as a postwar identity have serious and surprising political effects. Hence, the concluding chapter takes up the politics of childhood and youth and extends them to a politics of knowledge creation. It ends with a plea to policy makers and child protection programmers everywhere to take ethnography seriously, and reflect on what a from-the-ground-up critical study can reveal about the impact of their interventions.