1 Access, Methodology, and Ethics

This book builds on a decade of engagement with Sierra Leone. The largest amount of data was collected in 2016 and 2017 during fieldwork in which I aimed to grasp in a grounded way the various forms that violence can take in relationships and how it is negotiated, mediated, and punished. I used ethnographic methods, particularly direct and participant observation. I conducted multi-perspective interviews (narrative, semi-structured, and open) and focus group discussions. I also collected 'love' and life histories and included primary and secondary sources in the form of published work, case files, and statistics. I discussed findings with my research collaborators, who challenged my interpretations.

Initially, the aim of this research was to examine the process of reintegration of Ebola survivors in Freetown after the pandemic there. However, during the early stages of my fieldwork, I was raped by the leader of the group I was studying. For my own safety, I had to withdraw myself from that environment (Schneider 2020c; 2023). After experiencing this sexual violence, I was excluded from my previous site of research and, while my physical injuries were healing, I had to remain in the compound where I stayed. To allow readers to follow the process of this research, I want to be candid about the violence I experienced during my fieldwork and the consequences this had on my research direction, the data I was able to gather, and the relationships that developed between my research collaborators and me during our research.

The sexual violence that I had experienced and my time spent healing in the community led many people to open up to me about their relationships, about gender, intimacy, and violence, and so brought about a reorientation of my research. While I had previously relied heavily on interviews, my research process was now one of 'deep hanging out' (Geertz 1998: 69; see Ugelvik 2014: 472). I observed people's 'everyday practices' (Certeau 1984) and paid attention to the manner in which they acted, interacted, and positioned themselves in the social world that shapes them and which they help to shape. When writing up, I focussed on 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1993): I wanted to capture as

Figure 1.1 The logo of Eat As You Can.

many details of observations and conversations as possible, even those that might at first seem unimportant (Geertz 1993: 5–10).

I concentrated on exploring existing social rhythms and structural conditions. I learnt to unlearn what I thought I had previously understood.[1] I learnt from the silences that permeate companionship. I learnt from the pauses between words, from gestures and facial expressions. I learnt what is spat out frankly in conversations, constantly breaking boundaries, and what is never mentioned, which lines are never crossed, and which hierarchies are never transcended. I learnt about social structures from the way people argue and fight and the ways in which issues are resolved, mediated, or ignored. I learnt from affective, embodied experiences (Anzaldúa 2015). With time, behavioural patterns took shape and the people around me, their actions, perceptions, and ways of giving their lives meaning, became more accessible and intelligible.

Accommodation with Eat As You Can and in Allentown

As for accommodation, I divided my weeks between staying in a room with 14 members of Eat As You Can (EAUC), a social club for young men and their changing partners in Naimbana Street in Freetown's Central District (see Figure 1.1), and staying in Allentown, a community in eastern Freetown. If I needed to sleep, while staying with EAUC, I could do so in a room in Aunty Watche's house close by. Aunty

[1] For a reflection on feminist, embodied (un)learning methodologies, see Fullagar et al. (2021).

Figure 1.2 Aunty Watche's house.

Watche, a stern woman in her late forties, runs her own household with two teenage children and the son of one of her sisters who had moved to the United States (see Figure 1.2). She is an extended family member of Aunty Kadie, the female head of the household of the family I lived with in Allentown.

The social club was formed in 2008 by a group of childhood friends who were disconnected from their families and started sharing food, a place to sleep, and strategies for getting by. Members' socioeconomic backgrounds differ, but most are without familial support and trying to make a living through informal means. Others have found sponsors – so-called adoptive parents – in their church or mosque who fund their education or apprenticeship. Only two members are formally employed. Three members are married, and all but two members are in one or

several relationships, with slightly over half of the members having children. The club's slogan, 'More than a club', captures their aim of sharing whatever little they have with one another.

The division of daily routines, the communal use of food, and the combined effort to gather resources led to deep friendships between members. The clubhouse provides a place of residence for 14 key members of the total of 39 who are formally registered. This room where I stayed with these 14 members for three or four days each week is called 24. It is owned by a member called Pastor or Belly (31) because of his large stomach. It consists of a single room about 8 square metres in size, which is furnished with two worn-out couches, two broken chairs, a huge poster of the rapper 50 Cent (Curtis Jackson) next to a clock with a picture of Jesus on the wall, and a small TV.

The room has an adjacent storage space filled with mattresses. As its name indicates, 24 is open to its members 24 hours each day and most members meet there daily. It is located on a small dirt road off Naimbana Street which is a busy street next to the stream Highbay Brook in the Western Area of Freetown. Here young people from central Freetown meet and hang out in the evenings. Naimbana Ghetto is located here, and several illegal brothels are also found in this area. Traditional masquerades and parades usually pass through Naimbana Street. It is close to Kroo Bay and within walking distance of popular, free nightclubs and bars such as Ivan Hose or WhatsApp.[2]

The club's membership is organised into different positions, which include president and vice-president, executive members, and treasurers. The president calls weekly meetings during which efforts to 'become successful' are strategically planned, activities allocated, and conflicts debated. The social club, EAUC, organises so-called *chillins*. These are outings to a beach or a place to party that is rented for the day. Attendees must buy a ticket, which costs between SLL 100,000 and SLL 500,000 (GBP 9.10–55.11). The ticket includes the bus ride to and from the location of the *chillin*. The more expensive tickets – the VIP tickets – also include drinks, food, and sometimes a club T-shirt. These outings are an important part of the club's efforts to earn money and gain prestige. Whenever they go to one of the popular underground nightclubs in the area, members must wear the club T-shirt – a black T-shirt with the club logo on it – to demonstrate the sense of unity within the club and its importance in Freetown's nightlife.

In case of wrongdoing or failure to fulfil club activities, members may be fined, suspended, or in rare cases lose their membership. Except for

[2] Other nightclubs where I conducted research were Asis and Agal.

me and one other woman, membership is strictly reserved for men. Gas, the president (26), said:

> We can only have men because while it is women that bring us together, it is women that will draw us apart. You know how men are. The second a woman is present, the brotherhood's unity is in danger. Women bring gossip, and men get distracted, and then they fight. No. Our members' girlfriends and affairs and wives and baby-mamas are important to us and always invited. We respect them very much, but they can never be members if we want the club to survive.

Although fights with other clubs occur frequently, the club has a strict philosophy that allows for informal business but no money may be gained from underhand or illegal dealings (Mynster Christensen and Utas 2010). Members must not participate in organised crime and may not be affiliated with the flag movements, which are the most popular gangs with political affiliations in Sierra Leone today. Within universities, there are the black and the white flags; and in the city there are the bloods/the red flag (MOB or Movement of Blood), the blue flag (CCC, or Cent Coast Crips), and the black flag (So-So-Black) (see Mitton 2018). EAUC members may belong to any religion, may support any political party, and may be from any ethnic group, as long as they do not try to encourage one another to follow a particular movement.

Allentown is situated on the hills in the far east of Sierra Leone's capital city, Freetown, with Calaba Town to the west and Jui to the east. It is 238 metres above sea level. The family house I stayed in was located within the community of Upper Allentown, just off the 'pipeline' – the dirt road on the mountaintop. It is a stone house painted yellow with two rooms and a parlour, which housed 11 people besides me (see Figure 1.3). With its veranda reaching out in front, it allows a view across the community to Tagrin Bay, the swamps, and the Atlantic Ocean. On good nights, sitting on the narrow wall that separates the veranda from the dirt road, and the compound from the community, I could see what someone told me were the lights of the mines of Port Loko.

Staying in Allentown and Naimbana Street was possible because some of my research collaborators, whom I have known since I had first conducted research in Freetown in 2012, acted as guarantors and intermediaries for me (Gobo 2008: 122–3). In Allentown, the family I lived with had hosted me during several research stints previously,[3] and many of the members of EAUC have been associated with my work for years.[4]

[3] They previously lived at Kissy Road, and I stayed with them there during previous sojourns in Freetown.

[4] Some have close ties to the under-resourced communities of Kroo Bay and Susan's Bay, where I did research previously.

Figure 1.3 The compound I shared with 11 others at Allentown.

I went to parties and soccer games and on outings with EAUC. I experienced their struggles to make ends meet. I became familiar with the many different relationships that connect the young women and men in Naimbana Street, and the ebbs and flows of disagreements, fights, reunions, and ruptures that structure them. I became acquainted with the particularities of nightlife and saw members hustling in and around the clubs in Freetown.

In understanding my association with EAUC, Henrik Vigh's concept of 'rhizomatic fieldwork' becomes highly relevant. Vigh (2006a) explained how he followed his research collaborators around, his primary place of fieldwork being their meeting places rather than a traditionally localised setting. Fieldwork thus becomes 'an interconnected set of horizontal and vertical … orderings' like a rhizome that 'doesn't begin and doesn't end, but is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*' (Deleuze and Guattari 2002: 24–5 cited in Vigh 2006a: 18, original emphasis). While in Allentown my research was based in the community, and most research collaborators' lives were organised around that geographical location, other focus groups, especially EAUC, were 'all over the city', as Suge (34), their former leader, said.

Hence, their activities defined the localities of the fieldwork, and the interconnected webs spun by their movements constructed the site. As well as moving with EAUC through the city, I accompanied people involved in disputes or legal cases to the different places of their hearings: a market woman from her home to the shops where she bought her produce and then on to her stall; girlfriends when they tried to visit their imprisoned partners; and so on.

At Allentown, I engaged in chores with people; I observed how resources were distributed, who was controlling what, who was included, and who was left out. I attended community festivities, masquerades, funerals, and different *rites de passage*. I sat in on mediation processes when conflicts between neighbours arose (and they always did). I spent hours listening to life histories. I learnt about people's dreams and desires, their pains and failures. I collected their narrations of love and loss, of success and failure. And I listened to the community's stories about the fortunes of the local soccer team; disputes over resources; the disappearance of chickens; relationships that formed and dissolved; experiences of disaster, war, displacement, and sickness; and beauty pageants. The community opened its doors to me. I learnt how to braid hair, teach kids, cook, and do laundry. I learnt what 'masculine domination' (Bourdieu 2001) means and why in Allentown it is the women who secretly control the resources. In this manner, I learnt about violence in relationships and the various ways it is mediated by the criminal justice system and by household and community systems.

Focussing on research collaborators' interests and letting them participate in the process of my research allowed me to reach out to other groups and visit other areas with their support. In this way, it became much easier to develop fruitful networks. Within a few months, I had contacts with focus groups from diverse economic, social, cultural, ethnic, and professional backgrounds all over Freetown. I involved different age groups (from 14 to 88) and demographics, so as to be attentive to intergenerational changes and questions of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; see also hooks 1983; Collins and Bilge 2016), especially around gender and class. Among the research collaborators from households and communities were boys and men working at garages, welding shops, carpentry shops, and coffee shops; market women and girls; women and girls working in beauty salons; traders; caterers; drivers; businessmen and women; journalists; social and humanitarian workers; politicians; men and women belonging to social clubs; sex workers; elders; people frequenting the streets; families; high school and university students; members from the 'Ghetto'; imams; pastors; traditional people; and individual members of secret societies.

I followed court proceedings involving violence in relationships in the Magistrate's Court and occasionally the High Court. I also conducted research in Pademba Road Prison, and I visited the East End Police Station and the CID (Criminal Investigation Department). I interviewed policymakers, law enforcement officials (police, lawyers, judges, and prison staff), activists, and NGO and media personnel. I spoke with politicians and businessmen who were instrumental in designing, lobbying for, promoting, or opposing the 'gender justice laws', and those tasked with the handling and documentation of cases and their various repercussions. I interviewed 'Don Bosco' workers, who accompany survivors of sexual violence to court. The Salesians of Don Bosco are a Roman Catholic religious congregation and charity, founded by Saint John Don Bosco, an Italian priest, at the end of the nineteenth century, with the mission of supporting underprivileged children globally. In addition, I interviewed staff of the Rainbo Centres, where survivors of sexual violence receive free treatment and psychosocial and legal counselling, and where medical examinations are conducted that serve as the main form of evidence in court. Furthermore, I interviewed employees of Family Support Units (FSUs), which are independent units of the Sierra Leone Police that are attached to 42 police stations across the country. They are responsible for investigating cases of child abuse and gender-based and domestic violence and are specially trained to settle matters before they reach court. I visited NGOs and IOs, journalists, legal practitioners, and researchers and experts working on violence. In 13 months, I conducted 464 formal interviews, sampled case files, accumulated crime statistics, and analysed social media chats from 17 groups. These data accompanied my participant observation, the main foundation of my research. Interviews and conversations were sometimes in English, sometimes in Krio, the lingua franca in Sierra Leone, depending on the preference of the research collaborators.

Main Focus Groups

King George's Old Age Home

I have known King George's old age home in the Grafton area since I started conducting research in Freetown in 2012. Aunty Kadie (52), one of my closest friends and main research collaborators, works there, and during most of my research stays I spent several weeks living at King George's and participating in the home's activities. Whenever I was at King George's, I was struck by the depth of the residents' perspectives and by how much their experiences and insights could add value to an

otherwise fragmented picture. I therefore started to systematically include their perspectives in my research. I collected the life and love histories of 23 elders – 15 men and 8 women – between the ages of 51 and 88 who lived at King George's.

The Garage Focus Group

A second focus group was located at Star Motors Garage in the Cline Town area in constituency 103, East II, Freetown. Led by 'Boss Kay' (53), the chairman of the garage, it specialises in panel beating and spraying, automatic transmission, and electricals. According to the secretary, Mr Tennyson Saidu Momoh (42), the garage employs 73 men and boys: 12 specialised bosses, 23 senior boys, and 38 junior boys. Even though seniority is based on the level of experience attained, the bosses are usually between 45 and 60 years, senior boys between 30 and 40, and junior boys between 12 and 20. To become a member, a fee must be paid, and each apprentice must bring with him a few tools and have a guarantor vouching for them. Young boys often sleep in cars in the garage. Garage workers engage daily with girls who sell goods from the baskets they carry on their heads. Relationships often develop and, not infrequently, customer and seller disappear into one of the cars at the back of the garage – sex in exchange for purchasing the 'entire market', which means all the items the woman or girl carries in the basket on her head.

The Market Focus Group

The Kennedy Street market is located in constituency 104, East II, Freetown, and is commonly referred to as Upgun Market because it is believed to have started somewhere in the Upgun area before moving to its present location. According to a plaque on the wall, it was opened on 14 November 1995. The market consists of about 500 stalls, tables, and trays. Ownership of a stall or table is obtained by registering with the Freetown City Council. The daily market fee amounts to SLL 500 (GBP 0.05) per table or tray. Goods commonly for sale include rice, vegetables, spices, fish, and meat, as well as building materials and household electricals. Unlike the garage with its purely male membership, the market is predominantly run by women. Street markets are usually run and stalls usually owned by women, while regular stores located within buildings are often owned by men. Most of the businesswomen are between the ages of 20 and 60, and many are assisted by children aged 6 and older. Children sell goods by going around with small trays, or they

sit by the tables of their parents or guardians. Some of them do not attend school, while others sell before or after they go to school, depending on whether they go to school in the morning shift, which starts at eight, or the afternoon shift, which starts at two. Most of the women who manage their stalls have not gone to school; the few who did go had dropped out after two or three years.

I also spent time with street traders around the intersection of Ecowas and Lightfoot Boston streets in Freetown's business district. Here, I observed the exchange relationships that formed between businessmen and the women and girls selling foodstuffs, snacks, and drinks to them.

A third market focus group drew on girls and women between the ages of 14 and 29 who carry goods for sale on their heads. They are usually given a specific quantity of groundnuts, boiled eggs, yoghurt, ice, or water at the beginning of each day, which they carry in buckets or baskets on their heads. They walk around offering their goods to passers-by, drivers-by, and garage workers. Once they have sold everything they had brought with them, they return home. I followed these girls and women mainly around the Upgun Turntable (roundabout), in Abacha Street (central Freetown), and in Calaba Town (east Freetown, next to Allentown).

Puku's Ataya Bes

Another important focus group consisted of *ataya bases*. In an article in *The Economist* entitled 'Caffeine overload: Sierra Leone is worried that its young people are becoming addicted to tea', the author stated: '*Ataya bases* are to Sierra Leone what Starbucks and its ilk are to Western countries. The makeshift cafés are everywhere on the dusty streets of Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital. They serve *ataya*, or strong, hot tea, to a mainly young and male clientele' (T.T. 2013; see also Kamara 2011). Originating in Senegalese tea culture (*ataya* is a Wolof word), *ataya bases* have become popular but controversial hang-out spots for men and boys across Freetown and throughout Sierra Leone. At these places, *ataya*, a Chinese green tea, is served. This 'gunpowder tea' is brewed together with mint leaves over a charcoal stove, becoming bitter and strong. It is then poured into small glasses, mixed with sugar, and poured again from glass to thermos and back to produce a foam. The higher up the mix is poured from, and the thicker the foam, the better the tea.[5] *Ataya* is customarily brewed and drunk by men, and *ataya bases* are male spaces.

[5] See Saveur editors (2017) for an explanation of the Senegalese *ataya* ceremony, which has similar characteristics.

Except for market women who occasionally pass by selling groundnuts, women and girls stay away from these spaces. Many men and boys spend several hours daily at an *ataya base*, where they meet their friends, drink *ataya*, chew groundnuts, and discuss politics, football, family life, or whatever else comes to mind. The number of *ataya bases* has reportedly been growing in conjunction with increasing unemployment in Sierra Leone (Remoe 2013; T.T. 2013). At King George's old age home in Freetown, *ataya* tea has been criticised for leading to addiction and psychosis (Remoe 2013; T.T. 2013). My female research collaborators, who often wait for hours until their partners return from an *ataya bes*, said that they are 'worsening idleness'.

For my research, these *bases* were interesting, because it was here where men and boys spoke freely and openly about their world views, the pleasures and pains of their lives, their relationships, and their aspirations. I was welcomed at an *ataya bes* owned by and named after Puku, a Fula man in his late fifties, because (in the words of a regular) I was considered a 'researcher not woman'. After having visited four other *bases*, I was drawn back to Puku's because it was here that the liveliest debates took place.

Hair and Beauty Salons

I also conducted research in hair and beauty salons, for instance at Aleksal/Alexsal Beauty Salon, near Upgun Turntable, and Sannish Favour Beauty Salon, located on Fourah Bay Road towards the Savage Square junction. Both salons have predominantly female customers and offer hairstyles ranging from Afro-kinky to Brazilian hair and dreadlocks. While *ataya bases* are by and large male spaces, beauty and hair salons are predominantly female spaces, where women and girls meet and talk. Early in the morning, I often joined the women and girls who met under the mango tree in front of the house in which I stayed in Allentown to braid hair and discuss news. Another female space that was important during my research was the catering apprenticeship school in central Freetown, where I participated in several baking classes.

The University Focus Group

The campus of Fourah Bay College (FBC) is located at Mount Aureol, Freetown, in East II of the Western Area. After I secured permission from Professor Alfred A. Jarrett, former Head of Department of the Social Work Programme, several focus group discussions took place in the course of seminars with first-year students (they numbered 277 in

all). Afterwards, some of the students opened a group on WhatsApp called 'Oxford PhD Research', where 30 or 35 students aged 19 to 25 discussed questions around violence in relationships.

Kroo Bay

I also conducted many interviews and observations in Kroo Bay, an informal settlement located on a swampy piece of land on the coast in front of old, run-down but nevertheless majestic colonial houses. The settlement of Kroo Bay is home to about 11,000 dwellers (Shack Dwellers International 1992; Winnebah, Brewah, and Francis 2006). Kroo Bay is the product of a process of artificial land creation. In their search for a place to live, socio-economically marginalised people began reclaiming parts of the foreshore of Freetown by dumping garbage into the sea, thereby adding to the collections of the city's waste that filled the waterfront. They then converted the trash beds into land by fencing them off with dirt, sticks, raw garbage, and cloth. Time and water turned the materials into a rotting mass on which shacks made of corrugated sheets (so-called *pan bɔdies*), cloth, plastic and the like were built. The settlement was born in colonial days. At the beginning of the twentieth century, 'crews from ships of the Kroo tribe settled there' (Shack Dwellers International 1992). Today, there is a Temne majority, but the settlement houses various groups from different ethnic, political, and social backgrounds, many of whom either fought on different sides during the civil war or were captured during the insurgency. Occupants lack adequate access to sanitation and health services, and there are little or no economic prospects. Various gangs have established themselves along the lines of previous civil war groups. The social club EAUC plays football against teams from Kroo Bay more or less weekly, and on almost every occasion one or two knife fights can be observed between dwellers.

The Court and Police Focus Groups

Here, I focussed on cases involving violence in relationships (such as domestic violence, sexual offences, battery) at Magistrate's Court no. 1, where Abu Bakarr Binneh-Kamara (Dr Binneh) was the magistrate, and at the High Court. To protect people's anonymity, I refrain from referring to names when writing about the High Court.

I concentrated on the Eastern Police Station, the Calaba Town Police, and the FSU of the CID. I spoke to police officers and was able to observe when reports were made and statements collected.

Other focus groups included the Old School Ghetto in Black Hall Road, the Kissi Municipal Senior Secondary School, Culture Radio, BBC Media Action, and Galaxy Radio. I also included commercial sex workers from a brothel around Peace Market, where they spend the day before they make their moves to the nightclubs in search for customers. Nightclubs like Ivan Hose or WhatsApp were other locations. In Naimbana Street, I also spent much time with the girlfriends and lovers of EAUC members.

Data Collection

Informal Discussions and Life Histories

I sought to reach an understanding of my subject cooperatively with my research collaborators, taking seriously the myriad imaginative ways in which they reflected upon their actions, desires, emotions and affects (Hendriks 2016: 231). Because I lived with them, I could often discuss my findings, challenge my own understanding of them, and find answers to my many questions. The places where I stayed, Allentown and Naimbana Street (no. 24), were the key centres where I could think through the data with my main research collaborators. In the evening, it was there that I reflected on and digested the happenings of a day of fieldwork, and it was they who helped me to process and fine-tune my research methods, questions, and approaches. Discussing my research with them helped ensure that I thought *with* my research collaborators, rather than *about* them, just as I did not aspire to study them from an (arguably impossible) objective stance (Hendriks 2016: 231). I believe in a vulnerable, engaged ethnography that prioritises lived experiences and aims to reach an understanding by thinking with research collaborators through the fieldwork process and the findings. When I drafted explanations of certain processes or procedures, I shared and discussed these drafts especially with Darren (29), Issa (33), Eleanor (43), Mammie Zainab (64), a community elder from Allentown, Papani (55), the elder from the compound at Allentown in which I stayed, and Oki (37) from EAUC. Sometimes, I also presented my thoughts to EAUC members, who then gave me feedback and additional explanations.

My research assistant was Mr Mohamed (35), whom I had met in 2012 when he was studying at Fourah Bay College; he lived partly in Allentown and partly in the city centre. Our work together consisted in me teaching him about qualitative (especially anthropological) research methods and him sometimes accompanying me to a new site. Mr Mohamed, who was deeply interested in relationship dynamics, kept

a diary in which he noted down all things connected to intimacy and violence. His notes were the basis of deep discussions between us. Later on, he also led focus group discussions at some sites, including Star Motors Garage, Fourah Bay College, Puku's *ataya bes*, and Aleksal/Alexsal Beauty Salon, where he took extensive notes. These findings, as well as our dissection and analysis of them, helped illuminate the dynamics around gender, age, class, and race. As I remunerated him for his work and also offered him tutorials on research methodologies, data collection, and analysis, he was able to continue his studies and secure an additional income for his wider family too.

Life and Love Histories and Focus Group Discussions

To understand the significance of violence in relationships against the personal historical, and biographical background of each research collaborator, I conducted retrospective narrative interviews and collected 'life' and 'love' histories from them. This helped me to understand how research collaborators had come to be where they were, how practices had changed over time, and 'to situate the living present within myriad references to the past' (Sarró 2009: 10). According to David Pratten, 'to account for the contingencies of life trajectories requires ethnography bent to the biographical'. Adapting C. Wright Mills's phrase, he argues that 'these perspectives place ethnography at the intersection of biography and history' (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 13). Through their focus on 'the making of social life through time' (Connell 2005: 80), life histories allow an investigation into social change. According to Raewyn Connell, they provide insights into 'personal experience, ideology and subjectivity … But life histories also, paradoxically, document social structures, social movements and institutions. That is to say, they give rich evidence about impersonal and collective processes as well as about subjectivity' (Connell 2005: 89). 'Love histories' (Porter 2017), on the other hand, focus specifically on a person's relationships and romantic experiences. Focus group discussions on love, relationships, and violence and its mediation further enhanced my understanding of the way various positions, narratives, actions and opinions generate a meta-story.

Everyday practices do not just burst into existence and insert themselves into the world. Rather, they are formed and shaped, and can be better understood as lingering repercussions of the past as well as symbols of aspirations that manifest themselves in the present (Geschiere and Jackson 2006; Sarró 2009: 11). Sherry Ortner (1984; 1989: 12) and Holly Wardlow (2006) view people's actions as being influenced by cultural norms, social relationships, and historical events while also being

a part of shaping these aspects of society. Using the lens of everyday practices, and following an approach of integrating observation, participation, life histories, and discussions, I sought to take seriously people's perspectives and make visible important and often neglected aspects of how they operate and position themselves in their encounters with social realities. This process does not understand structure and agency as opposites but pays attention to their constitutive relationships.

Police Stations, Courts, and Pademba Road Prison

As the research progressed and I was confronted more and more with what anthropologists call 'weak legal pluralism' (Griffiths 1986; Sezgin 2004) – different dispute mediation systems which exist under the umbrella of state law including, in the Sierra Leonean case, household and community mediation systems, religious systems (sharia and church), and state laws – I started to include research in police stations, courts, and prisons. By this means, I sought to understand how citizens' informal mediations and the state's legalistic practices influence and shape each other, and how violence is mediated and responded to by state institutions. I followed cases from the time of their reporting at the police stations to conviction or dismissal, I heard them at the Magistrate's Court and sometimes at the High Court, and I conducted research with people imprisoned at Pademba Road Prison. Furthermore, I viewed statistics and case files that have been assembled by Don Bosco. These case files and the ones I viewed in court were seldom complete and often inconsistent. I was told that no reporting statistics were available before 2011, and I had to rely on the interpretations of legal enforcement officials. From 2011 until 2015, only an aggregate number of reported cases was available. The outcome of the cases as well as the age of the alleged perpetrators and victims were unknown. After 2015 (because of the Ebola pandemic), more detailed statistics became the norm. Yet, individual case files were still hard to track down, and those I accessed were full of missing data. Together with additional research I conducted involving journalists as well as numerous organisations and institutions, these different sources allowed me to combine an analysis of legal, institutional, and governmental frameworks with lived realities and mediation strategies at the local level.

This study is thus a 'project ethnography' in a double sense. It shows how laws 'enter into existing life worlds and both shape and are shaped by them' (Evans and Lambert cited in Parikh 2012: 1776). It also shows how the legal reforms were enabled by specific historical processes and gendered practices and perceptions, even if they are now in friction with

them, and how they were perceived by research collaborators. Following Shanti Parikh, I used a 'dialectical framework' which 'moved between analysis of the macro-level' legal reform, 'critical investigations of everyday experiences with the law', and mediation practices that took place away from state law (Parikh 2012: 1776). Courts, police stations, and prisons are highly controlled and formalised environments. For practical, analytical, and ethical reasons, they require a different set of methods from those for households and communities. The people who move within these places are either professionals, or they are implicated in cases and thus in a vulnerable position.

Observations, Shadowing, and 'Going Along' with Research Collaborators

To be able to follow what litigants and legal personnel 'do' (Bierschenk and de Sardan 2014), I applied the tactic of 'shadowing' (Czarniawska 2007) – following people who navigate highly formalised and complex settings. Barbara Czarniawska emphasises that shadowing requires an attitude in which the ethnographer keeps in mind their outsidedness in relation to the field of study. This is for ethical reasons; it is also a constructive method to discover things which research collaborators may consider irrelevant and which might not be the topic of an interview (Czarniawska 2007: 20–2). The presence of a single, white woman in a police station, a male prison, or a courtroom – especially during sexual offences cases, which are held in private chambers – is not a 'natural' presence. It proved impossible for me to 'hang out' there. Rather than trying to 'blend in', I became a visible 'shadow' who observed (Czarniawska 2007). I found it important to clarify my specific position and limitations in order to minimise trigger reactions, trauma, and the nurturing of false hopes, both for research collaborators and for myself.

In my focus on alleged victims of violence, I supplemented the method of shadowing with go-along interviews. I accompanied them from their homes or shelters to police stations, court hearings and medical examinations, workplaces or schools, and their households. Margarethe Kusenbach (2003: 463) has argued that the value of the go-along interview 'is that ethnographers are able to observe research collaborators' spatial practices in situ while accessing their experiences and interpretations at the same time'. Sometimes, informal discussions took place while I accompanied people; sometimes silence prevailed. While movement was part of these processes, 'waiting' and 'returning' played a much bigger role. I would wait in hospital waiting rooms, courtrooms, and cramped busses stuck in traffic or at bus stops. After accompanying

somebody to an appointment and waiting for them to be attended to – such as a court hearing, a medical examination, or a visitation – we were often turned away and told to return another time. After experiencing this several times, it was almost as though there was a certain routine, a circular movement of ever-repeating 'almost happenings'.

I also spoke to lawyers from the Legal Aid Board – an organisation offering free legal assistance to people experiencing poverty – in particular to Cecilia Tucker (30s), who usually handled over 20 cases at any given time. Many of the imprisoned people I spoke with at Pademba Road Prison had been represented by her. She detailed her movements between holding cells, court hearings, and her office and discussed the intensity of her workload. Workload was also the leading theme in my interviews with two police officers at Eastern Police Station who worked through piles and piles of reports daily.

Interviews in Courts, Police Stations, and the Prison

To record what litigants and legal personnel 'say' (Bierschenk and de Sardan 2014), I used various forms of interview. At the shelters of Don Bosco and at the FSU, I spoke mainly to women and girls who were survivors of (sexual) abuse or trafficking. In prison, I spoke to men and boys who were alleged to have committed sexual or domestic violence or had been convicted for this. They had been sentenced to between five years in prison and life imprisonment. Such interactions require one to critically examine potential repercussions for research collaborators, both practically and emotionally (see Enria 2015).

In the prison, I was subject to restrictions imposed by prison officials. I was permitted to enter the building between one and four in the afternoon. I was instructed not to speak about incidents of torture, maltreatment, or sexual violence in the holding cells and the prison more generally. On any given day, I had one hour to speak with one research collaborator. But after the first few days, I usually spoke to three or four people who were imprisoned. It was always unclear whether and under what circumstances I might see a prisoner again.

Being confronted with a stranger from outside the prison walls and being encouraged to speak about one's case and about one's experiences of violence (both committed and endured) can trigger difficult emotions. Many of these research collaborators were extremely traumatised, and quite often they were also violent. To give them as much control of the process as possible, I started interviews only after a rigorous consent procedure. I explained my research, gave an overview of the questions I would ask, and explained that the interview could be ended or paused at

any point, and that consent to use the information given could be withdrawn up to two months past the interview. I told them that I intended to write about them and publish my results. I discussed anonymity. I also stated that my presence would not have any direct benefit for them. I was transparent about the restrictions imposed upon me by prison staff, and I explained that I would not appear as a witness, would not contact kin or loved ones, and not take sides or interfere in their case in any way.

Only after gaining oral consent for each of these points would I start interviews. Sometimes interviews did not take place, sometimes they were stopped prematurely, and occasionally consent to use the interview was later withdrawn. It was difficult to adhere to this rigid procedure, but I never wavered because my situation was uncertain. I wanted research collaborators to speak to me on their own terms rather than because there was the possibility of an added benefit. Never knowing whether I would be allowed to return for the next hearing or prison visit, I found it unethical to try to influence cases, and I tried not to nurture hopes which might later be crushed. Unlike informal discussions, this tactic created a barrier between me and the research collaborators, which led to interviews being stiffer than they would be in the fluid settings of the city. But it also was meant to limit false hopes, at least as far as possible, and minimise adverse effects on both sides.

During the interview, I asked the imprisoned person a few open questions about their case and then left them to direct the conversation. Some 25, 15, and 10 minutes before the hour was over, I indicated how much time was left so that they could prepare appropriately. While I conducted semi-structured, problem-centred, and structured interviews in these settings, I did not push research collaborators to speak about their life histories, their backgrounds, or their families if they did not initiate these topics. While speaking about the life they had prior to prison can be positive, asking about loved ones can also cause distress. Hence, it was they, not I, who made such choices. My ability to provide background stories for many of the research collaborators in this book has therefore been determined by their willingness to disclose such information to me. Often, simply discussing their cases and their circumstances was enough.

I interviewed 53 men and boys in Pademba Road Prison accused of or convicted for sexual and gender-based violence. These interviews shed light on the perspectives of the alleged perpetrators and complemented the data on men and boys who were never officially accused or whose cases were settled informally.

When speaking to women and girls who were alleged victims, I was often able to stay with them after the interview, if they wanted my

company, or to visit them frequently. For those research collaborators – such as young girls – for whom there are support structures in place in Freetown, I also had referral and information forms with me, which helped direct them to appropriate sources of support. While psychosocial services for men and boys are almost non-existent, there are several organisations which cater to women and girls who have experienced violence and who need emotional, psychosocial, or medical support.[6] I had reached out to these organisations prior to starting interviews to make sure that they would be able to accommodate my referrals.

Partiality and Mosaics

Because court cases often take years to pass through the entire system, it was not possible to follow all state cases from beginning to end. I therefore applied a mixed-methods approach, combining case studies, analyses of court records, and ethnographic fieldwork with those involved. I gathered in-depth information on 98 cases, interviewing the alleged victim, the legal representative (if any), and the judge, and I was present during the course of several court hearings. In over 100 additional cases, I was present during only one hearing. For ethical reasons, as well as conditions of availability and access, it was often not possible to interview both the victim and the perpetrator. For these cases, I gathered information and interpretations from law enforcement officials, media personnel, and involved actors (sometimes from communities, sometimes from NGOs).

With the household and community cases, however, I either followed only the proceedings and conducted no interviews, or I conducted interviews with those directly involved who took the stand but did not follow the proceedings closely. Each approach depended on the specificity of the case. In some cases involving accusations of infidelity, talking outside the official sittings is considered an offence, so I could not conduct any interviews without interfering in the case.

Personal Consequences, Safety, and Ethics

Fieldwork and theory-generation can never be complete, straightforward, uncontested, or neutral. They are always partial, controversial, and shaped by the presuppositions, assumptions, political motivations, world views, and choices of the researchers, research collaborators,

[6] This emphasises the embeddedness of gendered victim–perpetrator perceptions.

universities, funding bodies, publishing standards, and reviewers. The process is also affected by gender, age, class, origin, socioeconomic background, profession, and framework of reference as well as 'the influence of prejudice, conditioned by historical circumstances, on interpretive stances' (Kinsella 2006). And as Elizabeth Kinsella, drawing on Sandra Harding (1991), said: 'Within such a view, we are called to account, to the extent that we are able, for the situated location of our subjectivity' (Kinsella 2006). In fact, 'emancipatory social science can only be achieved through analyses that contain an element of autocritique, which attempt to examine how the conditions of research defined in the widest sense determine the research conclusion' (Karp 1986: 135).

In her work on solitary confinement, Lisa Guenther said that 'access to the written word, as well as access to interview opportunities or any other form of interaction, is shaped by race, class, gender, and geographic location' (Guenther 2013: xiv). The intersectionality of identity and subject positions shaped my positioning in the field, my access, and certainly also my analysis and interpretation. My gender, for example, allowed me to gain access to both male and female research collaborators, while my relationship status – not married – meant that on occasion I had difficulties speaking to those who were married and experienced harassment with others. In other situations – for example, when speaking to elders – I was considered, because of my unmarried status, to be insufficiently knowledgeable to say anything about marriage. Interestingly, these conversations generated rich material because elders then explained everything to me in detail, starting with the basics, much as if teaching a child.

I was deeply affected by the research topics, and by the precarious circumstances in which many research collaborators found themselves. These conditions also influenced my approach to analysing the data. At times, life and love histories were emotionally challenging to listen to, and hearing how families were separated, relationships broken, and people violated often left me feeling helpless and in pain. Moreover, it was difficult to hear about the research collaborators' encounters with violence. I lack the training of a qualified psychologist to provide the emotional support that many of them were seeking, and I had difficulty listening to stories of violence without being personally impacted (Schneider 2017). It took me about one month to establish a referral network through which I could connect vulnerable research collaborators with qualified people and institutions available to assist them. It has taken me several years to process my own experiences, and I am still actively working on this (Schneider 2017).

When speaking to those involved in a court case, as well as to imprisoned people and alleged victims, I aimed to keep what Luisa Enria termed an 'empathetic distance' (Enria 2015; Schneider 2023b). Such research requires empathy as well as a recognition of difference. In some ways, my research collaborators and I shared experiences of hardship, violence, and pain. In her work on rape and its aftermath in Uganda, Holly Porter reiterates this point by saying:

> When I talk of a shared experience, I mean one that we experienced together and yet, not in the same way. Put in more anthropological language, what I mean by shared experience is that I engaged in 'interexperience'; I explicitly do not claim that the empathy that I feel for my informants has in any way qualified me to talk as if I 'relived the experiences of the human beings who were being studied'. Rather, this fieldwork, and the intersubjective encounters that it has involved allow me to hear stories of rape and not just hear a tragic event, which happened to a stranger, but to hear it as a part of this rhythm of life that I participate in and observe. It allows for an existential interpretation of the phenomena. (Porter 2013: 29)

Empathy does not mean categorising research collaborators simplistically as victims or perpetrators (Enria 2015). Rather, it is an attempt to appreciate the complexity and multi-sidedness of experiences and reactions while carefully reflecting upon 'the incompleteness of intersubjective understanding' (Enria 2015: 41). And it was also an attempt at protecting myself. While I sought to put research collaborators in control and made every effort not to cause them further harm, I also needed to be attentive to my own well-being. Anthropological research does not allow for an examination of violence from a position of safety. As I wrote elsewhere: 'Research on sensitive topics in precarious environments is often accompanied with a complex and demanding appendage. Researching violence can lead to experiencing various forms of violence' (Schneider 2017: 36). While many research collaborators and friends went out of their way to accommodate and protect me, and most of my experiences were positive, certain vulnerabilities remained. Challenges came from the sites of my research, especially ghettos, settlements, and nightclubs, as well as prison, my living circumstances with EAUC, and my research topic. On several occasions, I had difficult experiences. In prison, there were no protective mechanisms. Nothing could safeguard me from the secondary trauma which followed from hearing some stories of unspeakable violence and suffering repeatedly, first personally, then in recordings or in my notes and, later, on paper. These stories became uneasy companions and a part of me.

As I have indicated, I used an adaptable methodology. Hence, the choice of conversation, whether an informal discussion or open or structured interview, was dependent on the conditions of the field setting, the

research collaborator in question, and the ethical and moral requirements of the encounter. Making these elements visible allows for an enhanced contextualisation of the data (Bosire 2012: 55–6).

Many of the people I conducted research with and the communities I frequented were familiar to me from 2012, when I did my first stretch of research. They are now key research collaborators of mine as well as close friends. In addition to openly stating my role as an anthropologist and rendering visible my standpoint, motivations, and struggles as much as possible, my positioning was a matter of continuous critical reflection. The different places my research collaborators and I occupy on the socioeconomic, racial, and structural spectrum called for great sensitivity, as did the fact that other people's lived experiences and stories were serving as the foundations of my career.

Most of the research collaborators included in this research come from vulnerable communities and low socioeconomic backgrounds. Throughout my ten years of engagement in Freetown, I tried to mitigate the exploitation that occurs when researchers 'collect' information and then disappear, by discussing my research with the research collaborators, by sharing my research findings, and by building stable relationships with them. While this rendered my research more reciprocal, it also meant that I needed to be very careful to separate interviews from private conversations. I felt that neither my curiosity nor my access justified that I make all narratives the subject of my research. At Allentown and in Naimbana Street, I lived in households which kept very few secrets from me. I hope that I can honour this trust by writing only about events which I was given permission to describe and to do so in a respectful manner. However, in courts, police stations, and the prison, this kind of relationship building is impossible. When speaking with litigants and criminal justice personnel, I encountered research collaborators in that specific subject position. Often it was impossible to ask about their backgrounds, families, or life histories without transgressing rules I was given to follow. Police officers, lawyers, and judges had to be treated in their professional capacity. When I was talking to them, they shared their professional and sometimes their personal opinions, but I could not blur the boundary between these and other roles they occupied – for example, a police officer I interviewed later appeared at a party as the husband of someone I knew.

The field research was approved by the University of Oxford's Ethics Committee and the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford (Ref. No SSH_SAME_C1A_16_006). I was granted a research permit in Sierra Leone and was affiliated with the Department of Sociology and Social Work of Fourah Bay College in Freetown. All participants learnt of the aims and objectives of the

research and gave oral consent. When asked, I removed the identifying characteristics of research collaborators to protect their identity, and often they chose pseudonyms for themselves. This is also the reason why some research collaborators are referred to by their forenames only, while others appear with both their names. Anonymising certain political and legal figures is close to impossible, and so I do not refer to them unless they gave me permission to do so. To protect research collaborators and make them unidentifiable, in several cases I also had to change certain details.