

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hustling, cycling, peacebuilding: Narrating postwar reintegration through livelihood in Liberia

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Abstract

Ex-combatant youth originated the commercial motorcycling sector in Liberia and have played a dominant role in its development. This article collates key insights narrated by one of Liberia's young ex-combatants-turned-commercial motorcyclists, Edwin Nyankoon, to build narrative accounts of peacebuilding around conceptualisation of youth livelihood, identity, and politics after war. The article contributes to diverse literatures on youth agency by emphasising the need for narrative and subject-led methodologies that anchor research questions and data analysis to research participants' own language and narrated experiences of post war. It applies insights about everyday peace to interpret hustling as bottom-up peacebuilding, in opposition to dominant top-down peacebuilding accounts of ex-combatants. These latter accounts largely fail to see youth actors as peacebuilding agents, constructing them instead as troublemakers and interpreting their livelihood activities in terms of criminality and threat. Additionally, it argues that hustling also constitutes a peacebuilding *style*. More than a coping *strategy* or an *indicator* of peace, hustling-as-peacebuilding-style is performative: relational, embodied, contradictory, and recognisable to its adherents as peace-promoting even if (and arguably because) outsiders construct it as peace-negating. This analysis problematises agency, social relations, gendered identity, and collective security as they relate to ex-combatant and conflict-affected youth during peace processes.

Keywords: Ex-Combatant Reintegration; Youth; Peacebuilding; Liberia; Motorcycling; Narrative Approaches

Introduction: The motorbike hustle

Edwin Nyankoon¹ started riding as a motorcycle taxi driver in Monrovia in 2005.² When he was ten years old, he was a small soldier³ during the 1999–2003 civil war, fighting with the

¹Participants' full names are used with written consent. This practice follows the approved ethical research protocol, independent pre-interview safeguarding assessment, and, importantly, discussion with participants before and during interviews about how actors recognised as peacebuilders are frequently named while those fixed as conflict actors are often anonymised. Edwin and other interviewees saw naming as a form of witnessing their participation in Liberia's postwar history. They also saw it as a sign of respect and acknowledgement for the time and effort required for research participation. Edwin and numerous other cyclists said their point of view and experiences as peacebuilders and entrepreneurs are ignored and misunderstood. As such, naming can also be 'a form of recognition that works against the violence of appropriation and erasure of ... knowledge and theory production' from below, and visibility can, in some contexts, enhance rather than jeopardise personal and collective security. See Angela J. Lederach, 'Youth provoking peace: An intersectional approach to territorial peacebuilding in Colombia', *Peacebuilding*, 8:2 (2020), p. 198, fn. 1.

²In Liberian English, motorcycle taxi drivers are more commonly referred to as 'riders' rather than 'drivers'. They are also called 'commercial motorcyclists' (to distinguish passenger taxis from private-use motorcycling) or just 'cyclists'. The motorcycle taxi business is commonly called the 'commercial motorcycling sector' or, more colloquially by riders themselves, the 'motorbike field' or 'motorbike hustle', with 'motorbike' and 'motorcycle' used interchangeably.

³'Small soldier' is the Liberian common colloquial term more or less denoting 'child soldier'. I never heard research participants say 'child soldier'. Instead, they used 'small soldier' to refer to the very young (that is, under 12 years of age) and distinguish them from adults or older teenagers who participated in the conflicts.

pro-Charles Taylor militia known as the Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU). His father, an engineer, died during the war and Edwin was separated from his mother at that time. He says that he joined the ATU for personal security reasons. Lacking family protection and support, he felt he could help himself through soldiering. After the war, which ended in 2003, he said,

I decided to come around my friends there, and they decided to put me in the game of motorbike. I decided to get on the motorbike field. I know that the motorbike field was good for me after I disarmed during the war ... because I was not having no job, I was not having nowhere to take money from, no friends.

Like most riders, Edwin has a nickname, or riding name, that he is commonly known by. Edwin's nickname is Hustler Gang, which he explains by saying:

Yeah, my name is Hustler Gang. The reason I name myself that is because I try to hustle. Other friends name themselves, like, Gangster, and the gangster is still following them. As for me, I name myself Hustler Gang because the gang is not there but the hustle [is there]. [I have] [t]o depend on my hustle. That's why I give myself that name.

I later asked him what he meant by 'hustle'. He replied,

Hustle mean by, you can give me anything, you give a water and say go sell it, I'll go sell the water. You give clothes and say go sell, I go sell those clothes. That's the same hustle. It's why I prefer in hustle. Yeah, I wake up in the morning, everything that I hold is what I will go hustle by. Yeah, that's why I named myself Hustle ... because a little child can look at me and say, 'Uncle, please go sell that thing for me.' I will take it from you, I sell it. That's the same hustle.

In this article, I demonstrate that hustling is an integral, important dimension in the lives of ex-combatant and conflict-affected youth. I explore what it reveals about youth livelihood, identity, and politics during postwar transition. And, I use Edwin's conceptualisation of hustling as my point of departure to explore bottom-up, everyday understandings of postconflict reintegration. Based on ethnographic research, comprising participant observation and several semi-structured interviews with Edwin over one month in January 2018 and again in the spring of 2019, I discern multiple aspects to Edwin's definition that narratively ground two arguments.

I argue that hustling is an important, but overlooked, contribution to bottom-up, everyday peacebuilding. I proffer a formulation, *hustling-as-peacebuilding*, to oppose top-down peacebuilding accounts of ex-combatants. These accounts largely fail to see youth actors as peacebuilding agents and construct them instead as troublemakers and interpret their livelihood activities in terms of criminality and threat. International and Liberian actors have consistently evaluated motorcycling in terms of peacebuilding threat rather than contribution since it first appeared as a livelihood activity after the civil war. UN security reporting, for example, labelled parking stations a 'rallying point' where combatant chains of command are replicated.⁴ The UN Secretary-General⁵ and international media⁶ frame Liberian motorcyclists as violent vigilante actors who riot, burn police stations, and kill, seemingly unprovoked. National elite and community leader interviewees emphasised cyclist-perpetrated reprisal killings that take place after roadside accidents. These killings are common, but cyclists are perpetrators and victims of roadside

⁴United Nations Mission in Liberia, UNMIL RRR/JMAC, 'Hotspot Assessment: Ex-Combatants and the Chains of Command' (Monrovia, April 2007), paras 2, 13.

⁵United Nations Security Council, S/2016/129, 'Thirty-first Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia', 22 February 2016, paras 61–3.

⁶Jonathan Paye-Layleh, 'Taxi operators arrested in Liberia after riot', *BBC Africa Live* (2 April 2019); 'Curfew imposed in northern Liberia after ritual killings spark protests', *Reuters* (1 October 2015).

vigilante violence in equal numbers, according to several police officers and cyclists' union officials I interviewed.⁷

Sections of Liberian society perceive cyclists as reckless, poorly reintegrated ex-combatants. Interviews with Edwin and eighty other cyclists, plus additional interviews with passengers, community leaders, and market women frequently returned to this theme of the 'terrible things people say about cyclists'. Views are not monolithic, and increasingly some non-cyclists highlight cyclists' peace-promoting contributions. But, all cyclist interviewees mentioned the negative impact of ongoing stigmatisation, especially the frequent use of derogative labels to describe cyclists. Those labels ('Liberia's Taliban', 'suicide bombers', 'non-living things') reflect the perceived low social status of cyclists and their lack of regard for their own and others' lives on the road. A marketeer and motorcycle passenger I interviewed said, '[They are] "rough riders". They call them "City Current". The bad riders are more than the good riders.' A civil society representative said, '[T]he general perception of many people, that they are "wayward children", is because of their comportment. The way they carry themselves: they are rough, you know, they are violent.' Edwin added, 'The other name that is all over is zogos.⁸ As soon as a cyclist does something wrong, you hear people say, "That's [a] zogo rider.'" Even accounts sympathetic to assisting cyclists perpetuate stigmatising myths about them as predominantly idle youth who gravitate to motorcycling to earn 'fast cash' to buy drugs and commit crimes.

Positioning hustling-as-peacebuilding foregrounds cyclists' narratives as existing independently of, and in opposition to, perceptions of them as peace-threatening and peace-negating actors. For cyclists, including Edwin, see themselves very differently, narrating their essential peacebuilding contributions to Liberia across economic, social, and political spheres. They describe themselves as the 'engine' of Liberia's postwar economy, a generation of 'new youth economic entrepreneurs', connecting otherwise isolated towns and villages, and facilitating postwar trade, providing employment to 175,000 young people, paying to educate themselves and their family members, and contributing to collective economic savings and social insurance through *susu*. During elections, cyclists have taken voters to the polls and votes to counting stations. And, they played a critical role during the 2014–15 Ebola outbreak, taking sick passengers to hospital when no one else would, and disseminating disease prevention strategies within communities otherwise distrustful of official health advice.

Further, I argue that hustling matters to peacebuilding beyond net calculations of its peace-producing effects. Hustling does not only build peace; it constitutes a peacebuilding *style*. Consequently, I propose a second and accompanying formulation, *hustling-as-peacebuilding-style*. More than a bottom-up coping *strategy* or an everyday *indicator* of peace, hustling-as-peacebuilding-style is performative: relational, embodied, contradictory, and recognisable to its adherents as peace-promoting even if (and arguably because) outsiders construct it as peace-negating. The import of hustling-as-peacebuilding-style, however, is not limited to critique (that is, of what passes unseen or unrecognised as peacebuilding). It also has affirmative and additive value because it articulates a complex discourse of hope, joy, ingenuity, survival, stigma, setback, and stasis. Hustling is an embodied and structured set of actions and relations; therefore, it is a transformational but ambivalent peacebuilding style, combining desire and necessity, opportunity, and severe constraint. One hustles because one must, to survive. Consequently, hustling constitutes an important lens through which to see debates about agency and conflict mobilisation and demobilisation, to understand young men's narration and navigation of postwar challenges.

⁷All interviews took place in Liberia in January 2018 unless otherwise specified.

⁸A derogatory term used to describe drug-addicted street youth.

⁹Open Liberia, Inc., 'A Decade without Higher Education: How the Years Have Passed for Liberia's 40,000 Commercial Motorcyclists' (Monrovia, 2018), pp. 7, 16. For a related critique of how urban youth in Nigeria's transport sector are constructed negatively and negotiate and perform oppositional postures in response to negative portrayals, see Daniel E. Agbiboa, 'Informal urban governance and predatory politics in Africa: The role of motor-park touts in Lagos', *African Affairs*, 117:466 (2018), pp. 62–82.

Hustling also reflects and responds to gender norms. It is deeply intertwined with young men's conception of self and of society's expectations of them *as young men* after the war. Of course, women also hustle, and their hustling is similarly reflective of contextual, contingent, and gendered norms and expectations.¹⁰ Under patriarchal norms and because of hegemonic masculinity, however, it is more likely that predominant forms of women's hustling (such as sex work and market selling) will be more estranged from achieving recognition as everyday peacebuilding, and yet women's hustling is intricately enmeshed within peacebuilding processes and economies.¹¹ While I will explore gendered differentiation of hustling's forms and (mis)coded meanings, my focus on the motorbike hustle should not be taken as an indication that hustling by women does not also involve the adoption of livelihood strategies and cultivation of complex peacebuilding styles. Moreover, the motorbike hustle does not passively reflect static gender norms. It is a practice where young men and women shape and reshape gendered expectations, and react to society's gendered (under-)estimation of their contributions to peace.

The article now turns to a brief history of the motorcycling sector in Liberia, tying its formation and development to processes of ex-combatant reintegration. Then, I collate key insights and identify gaps from diverse literatures on youth agency and postwar reintegration and peacebuilding to establish how hustling matters to everyday peacebuilding. From there, I explicate the article's narrative methodology, examining the contributions and challenges of centring narrative voice of research participants. The principal narrative sections follow, where I develop the argument that hustling constitutes peacebuilding and peacebuilding style through engagement with Edwin's articulation of livelihood, identity, social relations, and structural challenges within the motorcycling sector. The final section before the conclusion analyses how the motorbike hustle reflects and responds to gender norms.

'They were a product of the war': War, DDR, and motorcycling in Liberia

Successive conflicts in Liberia dating back to 1980 were fought over political representation and security in the context of a long history of oppression of indigenous Liberian groups by an Americo-Liberian elite descended from freed slaves in the United States.¹² Conflicts resumed and intensified during 1989–1997 and 1999–2003, killing an estimated 200,000 Liberians and displacing many more.¹³ The UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) arrived in October 2003 to separate the warring factions, monitor a ceasefire, and ultimately implement the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. UNMIL also led disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) efforts, which usually provide short-term cash and in-kind assistance programmes to support ex-combatants' transition to civilian life. In Liberia, DDR comprised two rounds of cash payments (totaling US \$300) and a choice of educational benefits, vocational training, or agricultural assistance. Liberia's DDR also included monthly stipends of US \$30 for eight months for the vast majority of ex-combatants who opted for vocational training.¹⁴

¹⁰Silke Oldenburg, 'The politics of love and intimacy in Goma, Eastern DR Congo: Perspectives on the market of intervention as contact zone', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 9:3 (2015), pp. 316–33.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 328–9; Kathleen M. Jennings, 'Service, sex, and security: Gendered peacekeeping economies in Liberia and Democratic Republic of the Congo', *Security Dialogue*, 45:4 (2014), pp. 313–30.

¹²Morten Bøås, 'The Liberian Civil War: New war/old war?', *Global Society*, 19:1 (2005), pp. 73–88.

¹³Actor-led accounts of Liberian conflicts include: Morten Bøås and Anne Hatløy, "'Getting in, getting out": Militia membership and prospects for re-integration in post-war Liberia', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 46:1 (2008), pp. 33–55; Republic of Liberia, 'Preliminary Findings and Determinations', Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report, Vol. I (Monrovia, 2009); Jonny Steinberg, *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York City* (London, UK: Jonathan Cape, 2011).

¹⁴For more on Liberia's formal DDR programmes, see Kathleen M. Jennings, 'Unclear ends, unclear means: Reintegration in post-war societies – the case of Liberia', *Global Governance*, 14:3 (2008), pp. 327–45; Jareme R. McMullin, *Ex-Combatants and the Post-Conflict State: Challenges of Reintegration* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 197–232; Jairo Munive, 'The ex-combatant ID card: Peacebuilding and bureaucratic identity in Liberia', *Peacebuilding*, 2:3 (2014), pp. 336–50; Andrea

Liberia's motorcycle sector emerged during formal DDR programmes, around 2005, and is inextricably bound up with the legacy of war. A prominent civil society leader in Monrovia explained,

Motorcycle is really new to Liberia. It's what happened in the last 12, 13 years, that you see motorcyclists on our street. It's not a norm that we've had before. So, it started after the war and it became a way that these young people could earn a living, especially when they did not have, they didn't have any kind of degrees, any kind of school, any kind of training. How were they going to earn a living? And there were a lot of them and they were a product of the war.

Thanks in large part to the disarmament cash payments, the over 100,000 ex-combatants who went through the DDR process were some of the few citizens in war-affected communities who had cash on hand. Many used the payments to purchase motorcycles to use as passenger taxis. Now, it is estimated that there are over 175,000 commercial motorcyclists in Liberia, and motorcycle taxis have become a vital part of economic and daily life throughout Liberia.

Initially, the sector was comprised almost exclusively of ex-combatants. Now, the composition of the motorbike field is mixed. Estimates based on my interviews with eighty cyclists, spanning several urban and rural sites, confirm what many parking station managers and motorcyclists' union leaders said in interviews: that about half of cyclists in rural areas and about 25 per cent in Monrovia are ex-combatants. What has not changed, however, is that commercial motorcycling is still a young man's sector. That means that continued ex-combatant involvement these days is mostly from those who were small soldiers during the war, between 5–15 years of age in 2003. Ex-combatants continue to be involved in the sector's unions and within the ranks of the cyclists' Task Force, a self-policing force of about 4,000 men who enforce traffic rules. The previous generation of ex-combatant cyclists, involved in the sector during its formative years, has mostly moved on to different activities, although a few continue to ferry passengers and many continue to lease bikes to younger riders. To say that cycling is a young man's sector is also to say that all but a small handful of riders are men, with fewer than ten women riders based in Monrovia.

Towards youth-centred reintegration narratives

This article builds on a rich research legacy that collates the narratives and experiences of young people to critique ideas about conflict mobilisation, youth participation in armed groups, and postwar reintegration outcomes. That research has developed and applied several concepts to theorise youth agency before, during, and after war, including: 'tactic agency',¹⁵ 'social navigation',¹⁶ 'social becoming',¹⁷ 'victimcy',¹⁸ and 'waithood'.¹⁹ These concepts all relate to each other and build on the language that young people themselves use to describe liminal living, caught between

Tamagnini and Theresa Krafft, 'Strategic approaches to reintegration: Lessons learned from Liberia', *Global Governance*, 16:1 (2010), pp. 13–20.

¹⁵Alcinda Honwana and Filip De Boeck (eds), *Makers & Breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

¹⁶Henrik E. Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau* (New York, NY and Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, 2006).

¹⁷Catrine Christiansen, Mats Utas, and Henrik E. Vigh (eds), *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: Social Becoming in an African Context* (Uppsala, SE: Nordic African Institute, 2006).

¹⁸Mats Utas, 'Victimcy, girlfriending, soldiering: Tactic agency in a young woman's social navigation of the Liberian war zone', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 78:2 (2005), pp. 403–30.

¹⁹Alcinda Honwana, "'Waithood': Youth transitions and social change', in Dick Foeken et al. (eds), *Development and Equity: An Interdisciplinary Exploration by Ten Scholars from Africa, Asia and Latin America* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2014).

agency and structure, opportunity and precarity: for example, *dubria* (to be shrewd and dynamic in freeing oneself from difficulty) in Guinea-Bissau;²⁰ *disenrascar a vida* (to eke out a living) in Mozambique;²¹ *se débrouiller* (to make do; cope; make the best out of a situation) in Cameroon;²² *to get by* in South Africa;²³ and, *to hustle* in Kenya²⁴ and West Africa.²⁵ I synthesise these diverse contributions and draw from research participants' own conceptualisations of hustling to theorise it as a critical and structured set of peacebuilding actions and ideas.

Political science and International Relations (IR) literature has also employed diverse methods, usually surveys²⁶ and qualitative interviews and life histories²⁷ to build accounts of child soldiering and its aftermath. These frequently seek to build knowledge about the efficacy of formal DDR programmes and the variables that impact on successful postwar reintegration. Of course, not all of this work sees peacebuilding as security: much of the qualitative and ethnographic research aspires to change how IR scholarship understands ex-combatant and conflict-affected youth agency during and after war.²⁸ Still, IR scholarship remains dominated by approaches that *securitise* youth actors after war. Youth agency and livelihood are evaluated less in terms of their peacebuilding contributions than as variables that determine or explain conflict recurrence.²⁹ I do not use 'securitise' in relation to 'classic securitisation theory', which, inadvertently or not, casts 'Africa' as 'irrationally oversecured, making it a foil to "civilised

²⁰Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War*, pp. 128–9.

²¹Honwana, "Waithood", p. 34.

²²Trond Waage, 'Coping with unpredictability: "Preparing for life" in Ngoundéré, Cameroon', in Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh (eds), *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood*, p. 61.

²³Honwana, "Waithood", p. 34.

²⁴Tatiana A. Thieme, 'The hustle economy: Informality, uncertainty and the geographies of getting by', *Progress in Human Geography*, 42:4 (2018), pp. 529–48; Tatiana Thieme, "'The ghetto will always be my living room': Hustling and belonging in the Nairobi slums', in M. Lancione (ed.), *Rethinking Life at the Margins: The Assemblage of Contexts, Subjects, and Politics* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016), pp. 120–35; Tatiana Thieme, 'Turning hustlers into entrepreneurs, and social needs into market demands: Corporate-community encounters in Nairobi, Kenya', *Geoforum*, 59 (2015), pp. 228–39.

²⁵Basile Ndjio, 'Overcoming socio-economic marginalization: Young West African hustlers and the reinvention of global capitalism', in Ebenezer Obadare and Wendy Willems (eds), *Civic Agency in Africa: Arts of Resistance in the 21st Century* (Woodbridge, UK: James Currey, 2014), pp. 85–103.

²⁶Bernd Beber and Christopher Blattman, 'The logic of child soldiering and coercion', *International Organization*, 67:1 (2013), pp. 65–104; Macarant Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, 'Demobilization and reintegration', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51:4 (2007), pp. 531–67; Oliver Kaplan and Enzo Nussio, 'Explaining recidivism of ex-combatants in Colombia', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 62:1 (2018), pp. 64–93.

²⁷Abby Hardgrove, *Life after Guns: Reciprocity and Respect among Young Men in Liberia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017); Walt Kilroy, *Reintegration of Ex-Combatants after Conflict: Participatory Approaches in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Alpaslan Özerdem et al., 'Identity, ideology and child soldiering: Community and youth participation in civil conflict: A study on the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mindanao, Philippines', *Civil Wars*, 12:3 (2010), pp. 304–25.

²⁸Especially, Lederach, 'Youth provoking peace'; Erin Baines, *Buried in the Heart: Women, Complex Victimhood and the War in Northern Uganda* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Myriam Denov, 'Social navigation and power in post-conflict Sierra Leone: Reflections from a former child soldier turned bike rider', in Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder (eds), *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration* (New York, NY and Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 191–212; Johanna Söderström, *Living Politics after War: Ex-Combatants and Veterans Coming Home* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2020); Guðrún Sif Friðriksdóttir, 'Ex-combatants as social activists: War, peace and ideology in Burundi', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 18:1 (2018), pp. 1–16; Enzo Nussio, 'How ex-combatants talk about personal security: Narratives of former paramilitaries in Colombia', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 11:5 (2011), pp. 579–606; Leena Vastapuu, *Liberia's Women Veterans: War Roles and Reintegration* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2019).

²⁹See, for example, Roos Haer and Tobias Böhmelt, 'Child soldiers as time bombs? Adolescents' participation in rebel groups and the recurrence of armed conflict', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:2 (2016), pp. 408–36; Patricia Justino, 'Poverty and violent conflict: A micro-level perspective on the causes and duration of warfare', *Journal of Peace Research*, 46:3 (2009), pp. 315–33; P. W. Singer, 'Turning a soldier back into a child', in *Children at War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 183–207; Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1999), p. 5. For a critique, see Lorraine Macmillan, 'The child soldier in North-South relations', *International Political Sociology*, 3:1 (2009), pp. 36–52.

politics”³⁰ What I mean instead is the cluster of practices by which the research and policy gaze, when locating young men after war, remains fixed on binary assessments about *whether or not* young men pose enough of a threat to insecurity to jeopardise the postwar statebuilding project, and *whether or not*, from an internationally adjudicated security standpoint, more or less assistance to young ex-combatants is warranted.³¹

Even language critically exploring the extent to which youth are ‘time bombs’³² and ‘spoilers’³³ underscores how studies are less interested in *what youth do* than in binary assessment of *whether youth threaten*, and where ex-combatants are to be ‘dealt with’ rather than listened to or recognised as peacebuilding actors. Meanwhile, peacebuilding praxis, although engaging in self-critique about how to provide more youth-centred and context-appropriate interventions,³⁴ is still built around a model of providing limited, short-term assistance to ex-combatants, just enough to neutralise ex-combatants as threats – or at least insofar as ex-combatants are *assessed to be threatening* by mostly international actors located *externally* to the given context.³⁵

In contrast, a robust literature uses the concept of the everyday to disrupt how liberal peacebuilding processes privilege external ideas and solutions, securitise ex-combatant and youth actors, and misunderstand and overlook their agency and contributions after war.³⁶ This work ‘seeks to interpret experiences of peace from the margins’ and to conceptualise peace beyond ‘simply ... the absence of violence’.³⁷ Importantly, everyday peace literature centres problems of – and quests for – recognition: ‘not only why and how certain people chose to act towards peace but also whether their actions are positively recognized, or not, and by whom’.³⁸ In an important example, Maya Mynster Christensen analyses how Sierra Leonean ex-militias ‘experience being reduced to mere bodies rather than recognized as labourers’,

³⁰Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit, ‘Is securitization theory racist? Civilizationism, methodological whiteness, and antiblack thought in the Copenhagen School’, *Security Dialogue*, 51:1 (2019), p. 3. My use of ‘securitisation’ is therefore more reflective of critical Foucauldian approaches to the security-development nexus, such as Mark Duffield’s, yet is nevertheless consistent with anti-racist readings demonstrating how securitisation framing of less powerful Black subjects by international and national elites is mutually constitutive with racist processes of othering. See Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007).

³¹See, for example, Humphreys and Weinstein, ‘Demobilization and reintegration’.

³²Christopher Blattman and Jeannie Annan, ‘Child combatants in northern Uganda: Reintegration myths and realities’, in Robert Muggah (ed.), *Security and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Dealing with Fighters in the Aftermath of War* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009), p.114.

³³Stephanie Schwartz, *Youth and Post-conflict Reconstruction: Agents of Change* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010), pp. 14–15.

³⁴Siobhan O’Neil and Kato Van Broeckhoven, *No Research About Us Without Us* (New York, NY: United Nations University, 2019); United Nations General Assembly, A/65/741, ‘Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration: Report of the Secretary-General: Comprehensive Review of the Whole Question of Peacekeeping Operations in All Their Aspects’, Sixty-fifth Session, Agenda Item 53, 21 March 2011, para. 22.

³⁵For examples of success focused on removing ex-combatants as threats, in contrast with their long-term economic livelihood, political recognition, and social inclusion, see Robert Muggah, ‘Introduction: The emperor’s clothes?’, in Muggah (ed.), *Security and Post-Conflict Reconstruction*, p. 15; Robert Muggah and Chris O’Donnell, ‘Next generation disarmament, demobilization and reintegration’, *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 4:1, Article 30 (2015), pp. 1–12; and Mark Sedra, ‘Afghanistan and the folly of apolitical demilitarisation’, *Conflict, Security & Development*, 11:4 (2011), p. 478. For alternative portrayals, see João Gomes Porto, Chris Alden, and Imogen Parsons, *From Soldiers to Citizens: Demilitarization of Conflict and Society* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), p. 143; McMullin, *Ex-Combatants and the Post-Conflict State*, pp. 29–35.

³⁶Lederach, ‘Youth provoking peace’; Helen Berents and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, ‘Theorising youth and everyday peace (building)’, *Peacebuilding*, 3:2 (2015), pp. 115–25; Roger Mac Ginty, ‘Everyday peace: Bottom-up and local agency in conflict-affected societies’, *Security Dialogue*, 45:6 (2014), pp. 548–64; Laura A. Ring, *Zenana: Everyday Peace in a Karachi Apartment Building* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

³⁷Philippa Williams, *Everyday Peace: Politics, Citizenship and Muslim Lives in India* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), pp. 2, 4.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 5.

which results in young ex-combatants feeling ‘stuck’ and constantly on the move for survival and recognition.³⁹

Influenced by this work, this article aspires to contribute to anthropology and IR – as well as to African studies, peace studies, youth studies, urban geography, and sociology – by showing how cyclists’ own narratives build *alternative* knowledge about peacebuilding. They establish the partiality and blind spots of peacebuilding knowledge claims that presume to provide complete accounts of peace based on the short-term absence of direct violence. This partial knowledge also demarcates actors in binary terms, as either peace-negating or peace-contributing agents. And, it assumes that sufficient conditions for peace and security are those that relate to the individual behaviour and comportment of ex-combatants; that is, that giving up arms, and not engaging in criminality and violence are the principal or even the only prerequisites of successful reintegration.

Cyclists’ articulation of their own contributions to peace reveals how rigid and fixed the peacebuilding gaze can be, seeing ex-combatants mostly as an obstacle to peace that can be removed through external intervention, and recognising only those peacebuilding actions taken by international actors or national elites. The result is that young ex-combatants are largely excluded from participation in decisions about the contours, duration, and assessment of their own reintegration.⁴⁰ And, their long-term livelihood trajectories, peacebuilding strategies, and peace-promoting ideas get overlooked, with most reintegration evaluations occurring immediately after formal DDR programmes end.

Narrating ex-combatant voice: Promise and pitfalls

Having established why cyclists’ narratives matter, this section explains how narrative methods contribute to the study of postwar peacebuilding, identifies how narrative methods diverge from other approaches to the study of ex-combatant reintegration, and argues for the significance of narrative methods while also exposing the challenges of implementing them.

I interviewed Edwin four times in January 2018 and once again in 2019, and also followed him around while he went about his daily routine and his afternoon cycling business.⁴¹ I also interviewed eighty ex-combatant and conflict-affected motorcyclists in Monrovia, Ganta, Tubmanburg, and Bopolu over this period, and conducted successive interviews with six key informants (including Edwin) from this larger group. Periodic reference to this larger set of interviews helps to establish the ways in which Edwin’s narration and experiences are simultaneously representative and unique. Interviews were semi-structured, combining an open-ended narrative approach with a series of adaptable set questions that probed key issues: *ambivalence* (‘Is motorcycling a good thing for you? What are its opportunities and challenges?’); *stigma* (‘Sometimes people say terrible things about the cyclists: what do you think?’); *social relations and social reintegration* (‘Riding together, what do you get?’); and, *narration of peace and peacebuilding* (‘How have motorcyclists contributed to Liberia after the war?’).

In focusing this article mostly on Edwin’s narratives and experiences, I was inspired by similar ethnographic collation of individual portraits ‘to uncover issues of youth and political change’ by emphasising how young actors ‘actively and creatively shape the world around them’.⁴² My goal

³⁹Maya Mynster Christensen, ‘The underbelly of global security: Sierra Leonean ex-militias in Iraq’, *African Affairs*, 115:458 (2016), pp. 23–43.

⁴⁰Jareme R. McMullin, ‘Reintegrating young combatants: Do child-centred approaches leave children – and adults – behind?’, *Third World Quarterly*, 32:4 (2011), pp. 743–64.

⁴¹I also filmed these encounters and produced a documentary short film about the Jallah Town riders. See Jareme R. McMullin, *Best Man Corner*, documentary short film (2019), available at: {<https://cpcs.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/research/liberia-legacies-of-peace/best-man-corner/>}.

⁴²Craig Jeffrey and Jane Dyson (eds), *Telling Young Lives: Portraits of Global Youth* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), p. 1.

in centring the individual level of analysis is to conceptualise ex-combatant reintegration away from short-term, securitised understandings in which the voice of external and privileged practitioners dominates, instead orientating analysis towards experiential and narrative presentation. Prioritising research encounters with a single participant is not intended to suggest that I can present the totality of Edwin's experiences and ideas within a single academic output, or that Edwin's narratives and experiences are essentially singular.⁴³ Epistemologically, I see debates about whether individual ex-combatant narratives and experiences are generalisable or particular as less productive, reflective of mimetic regimes of truth in which logics of aggregation and accuracy seek to confirm the world as is.⁴⁴

Important work on why and how to collect and analyse narrative voice has come from sociology,⁴⁵ feminist politics and IR,⁴⁶ ethnographic and auto-ethnographic accounts of war and postwar,⁴⁷ and anti-colonial approaches to the study of violence.⁴⁸ Narrative interviews can facilitate how participants' life experiences, in their own words, can challenge the ways in which their identities have been 'pre-constructed by others'.⁴⁹ Narrative social theory stresses the equal value of knowledge claims and insights 'from below',⁵⁰ where analysis of actors' vernacular and everyday actions constitute methodological opportunity rather than detriment (that is, seeing singular accounts as biased or unrepresentative). Voice reveals that *all* data are intrinsically partial, temporally, and spatially bounded. Voice draws attention to who is speaking, how, and why.

The voice of research participants, communicated through direct reference to their vernacular and everyday worlds, is a voice of embodiment. Edwin does not just talk about hustling; he narrates it as something studied. In nicknaming himself Hustler, Edwin embodies it. He has *stylised* it. Embodied voice contrasts with disembodied, spectral voice – the voice of putative authority that stalks each page of text without the benefit of quotation marks to alert the reader to its presence. Disembodied voice haunts embodied voice through erasure,⁵¹ behaving as if it did not exist or matter. But embodied voice can haunt back, destabilising putative authority, revealing that the voice of the outside expert or the flawless research design is subjective, too: not the stable voice of rigour postulated within positivist social sciences, nor the presumed stability of accuracy

⁴³On the importance of anchoring individual narrated experience to the specific, contextual social relations that inform that experience, see Chandra T. Mohanty, 'Transnational crossings: On neoliberalism and radical critique', *Signs*, 38:4 (2013), pp. 967–91.

⁴⁴Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Enloe is similarly interested in teasing out the differences and complementarity between uniqueness and generalisability, seeing in the collation and analysis of individual experiences an opportunity to understand individuals' experiences for their 'own sake', while also discussing their wider implications and meanings. See Cynthia Enloe, *Nimo's War, Emma's War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

⁴⁵Jane Elliot, *Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (London, UK: Sage, 2005); Roberto Franzosi, 'Narrative analysis – or why (and how) sociologists should be interested in narrative', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998), pp. 517–54.

⁴⁶Enloe, *Nimo's War, Emma's War*; Jane L. Parpart and Swati Parashar (eds), *Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency in Contested Gendered Terrains* (London, UK: Routledge, 2019); Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); Annick T. R. Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

⁴⁷Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Elizabeth Dauphinée, *The Politics of Exile* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Peter Uvin, *Life after Violence: A People's Story of Burundi* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2009).

⁴⁸Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London, UK: Zed Books, 1999).

⁴⁹Gediminas Lesutis, 'The politics of narrative: Methodological reflections on analysing voices of the marginalized in Africa', *African Affairs*, 117:468 (2018), p. 511.

⁵⁰Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

⁵¹Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 63.

and comprehensive coverage, but the voice of authority unveiled as a performance that relies on excluding voices that would challenge it.

Incorporation of ex-combatant voice draws attention to *which voices* narrate *what* about ex-combatants after war. After war, it is assumed that ex-combatants, because they have access to weapons, power, and military know-how, continue to speak in *a voice of war*, extending war's vocal range by suggesting its omnipresence. Such an assumption, paradoxically, does not speak 'reintegration' but its opposite: perpetual violence and return-to-war. It is true that some ex-combatants continue to voice violent aspirations and iterate war's violence through criminality, banditry, mercenarism, reprisal killings, violent protest, and abusive resource extraction.⁵² But, the authoritative voice of DDR scholarship maps a binary path for ex-combatants: *either* they contribute to peacebuilding through participation in prescribed DDR *or* they threaten the postwar order through non-participation. Ex-combatants are peaceful *or* they are threatening. They comply *or* they don't. To critique and move beyond DDR discursive frames, the ex-combatant narratives I collate and interpret here *exceed* DDR.⁵³ Hustling is a narrative of simultaneous compliance and non-compliance, of aspirations that transcend and oppose stories scripted for ex-combatants by outsiders. It is an experiential point of view that makes clear that formal DDR assistance is a blip on subjects' reintegration radar.

The multidisciplinary work on narrative, however, also explicates the pitfalls of academic efforts claiming to speak through the voice of research subject-participants. If voice means to 'theorise up', then questions about directionality are implied: up *from where* and up *to where*? These directional prompts frame a dilemma for research purporting to incorporate research participants' voice: voice risks acquiring import and utility only in the journey 'up', with 'up' implying that authentic knowledge from below gains status as vaunted and useful knowledge only in 'translation, mutation, conversion, catch-up',⁵⁴ and only when accompanied by researcher chaperones. My own narrative voice risks ghostwriting, 'ventiloquising', crowding out, or competing with the voice of subjects.⁵⁵ The themes I isolate and arguments I develop are always interpellations that bestow excess identity on participants.⁵⁶ To acknowledge and minimise these risks, I follow advice from narrative methodology: I identify and contextualise principal narrative interpretation choices and focal areas (that is, on practices of (mis)recognition in the passage from hustling to peacebuilding); I include extended narrative excerpts from interviews; and, I foreground how the agency of hustling is always structured. Foregrounding the structuration that underpins hustling-as-peacebuilding-style (for example, emphasis on the ambivalence, contradictions, and reversals within narrations of hustling) 'renders it complex' and so helps to guard against fetishisation of agency and romanticisation of the research encounter.⁵⁷

The best way to address the risks of ghostwriting subjects through authorial narration is to link hustling to peacebuilding via the notion of everyday peace.⁵⁸ The everyday establishes that individual lived experience is already doing this work of translation. Cyclists are already navigating the micro-processes that make hustling necessary and are already resisting the discursive

⁵²For a nuanced view, see Mariam Persson, 'Demobilized or remobilized? Lingering rebel structures in post-war Liberia', in Mats Utas (ed.), *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2012), pp. 101–10.

⁵³An important text that also centres ex-combatants' life trajectories and argues for reintegration narratives that exceed DDR is Nikkie Wiegink, *Former Guerrillas in Mozambique* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

⁵⁴Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa* (London, UK and Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), p. 2.

⁵⁵Roxani Krystalli, 'Narrating violence: Feminist dilemmas and approaches', in Laura J. Shepherd (ed.), *Handbook on Gender and Violence* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), p. 184; Sophia Dingli, 'We need to talk about silence: Re-examining silence in International Relations theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:4 (2015), p. 730.

⁵⁶Godfrey Maringira and Lorena Núñez Carrasco, "'Once a soldier, a soldier forever': Exiled Zimbabwean soldiers in South Africa', *Medical Anthropology*, 34 (2015), p. 322.

⁵⁷For fuller explication of these strategies, see Lesutis, 'The politics of narrative', pp. 516–18.

⁵⁸Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 'Theorising youth and everyday peace(building)', p. 119.

processes that distance hustling from peacebuilding. The resulting challenge for academics and policymakers, then, is to catch up by supporting grassroots navigation already taking place and recognising the peacebuilding contributions of this labour. Catching up is also about acknowledging what the grassroots cannot do when academics and policymakers disallow recognition of hustling-as-peacebuilding.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the everyday insists on making space for the seemingly 'routine', 'unexceptional', 'mundane' practices of peace,⁶⁰ and to prioritise the perspectives and experiences of grassroots actors directly impacted by external peacebuilding interventions. In this sense, academic and policy concerns that the term 'peacebuilding' risks being stretched too far ('if it is everything, is it nothing?') are not just misplaced but work to extend rather than challenge the colonial rationality of peacebuilding.⁶¹

I am not interpreting Edwin's narratives because they are inchoate but because they are frequently miscoded and unrecognised by actors external to the motorbike hustle. Hustling might require interpretation because of how it is always stigmatised and a response to stigmatisation. It is a type of labour that outsiders do not see in terms of societal benefits or societal constraints (that is, society necessitates hustling because of inequity). Rather, they see it as labour outside the bounds of society, and at its expense. Nor are my interpretive efforts far-fetched; they are anchored to cyclists' own recognition of and resistance to these discourses. To assert that hustling is peacebuilding accords with cyclists' own recognition of how hustling is embedded within and reflects this discursive inheritance. To assert that hustling is also a peacebuilding style means acknowledging how it is additionally a narrative motif that augments complex, contradictory understanding of postwar livelihood, security, and reintegration.

The risk of ghostwriting also problematises the relationship between Edwin's and my own conceptual vocabularies, particularly in the passage from hustling to peacebuilding and peacebuilding style. These latter categories are the concepts I employ to interpret the broader significance of what Edwin says for my article's presumed audiences of academics and practitioners. Narrative methodology acknowledges that narratives are the researcher's 'conception of the whole', a site of 'negotiated meaning'.⁶² Below, I attempt to make transparent the movement from Edwin's words to my own. Acknowledgement of that movement entails my reference throughout this article to a broader community, in which I am embedded, that has been engaged in (mis)interpreting ex-combatant youth narration.

A related concern with interview research is the risk that participants tell the researcher what they think the latter wants to hear, and postwar contexts have sometimes structured incentives for participants to 'self-stage as victims'.⁶³ I have followed Mats Utas's advice to spend extended periods with key informants ('deep hanging out'), combining participant observation with interviewing. To 'allow the knowledge of the other'⁶⁴ to influence research interpellation additionally requires improvisation,⁶⁵ which for me has meant a loose question schedule that allowed for surprise and built on the language of participants. So, a question like, 'Which factors impact on social reintegration after war', undergoes a process of translation and alteration, eventually becoming, 'Riding together, what do you get?'⁶⁶ Acknowledging and prioritising Edwin's own

⁵⁹Christensen, 'The underbelly of global security', p. 25.

⁶⁰Cynthia Enloe, 'The mundane matters', *International Political Sociology*, 5:4 (2011), p. 447.

⁶¹Vivienne Jabri, 'Peacebuilding, the local and the international: A colonial or a postcolonial rationality?', *Peacebuilding*, 1:1 (2013), pp. 3–16.

⁶²Lesutis, 'The politics of narrative', p. 516; Tami Jacoby, 'From the trenches: Dilemmas of feminist IR fieldwork', in Brooke A. Ackerley, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True (eds), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 171.

⁶³Utas, 'Victimcy, girlfriending, soldiering'.

⁶⁴Das, *Life and Words*, p. 17.

⁶⁵Allaine Cerwonka and Lisa H. Mallki, *Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁶⁶The role of research brokers – assistants, translators, gatekeepers, and facilitators but also numerous others from drivers to civil society interviewees and academic colleagues – is central to all research improvisation and interpellation. See Mats

motivations for participating in the research are salient, too. He framed his participation in terms of hope: that is, informing people about cyclists, a group not commonly represented as important peacebuilding agents, could bring understanding, social recognition, and change. He said,

I just like for people to know about motorcyclists. Some of the way people are treating us in this country is not good. When motorcyclists die, they can treat us like we are not human beings. So, it is good for people to understand some of these things.

‘Doing the right road’: Hustling as peacebuilding

Near the junction of Old Matadi Road and 21st Street is the Jallah Town parking station that cyclists refer to as ‘Best Man Corner’ – because ‘we believe we are the best’, one veteran cyclist tells me when I ask about the origin of the name. A large brown umbrella with the Orange cellular logo shades riders from the sun, and is where they also keep the petrol cool that they sell to each other and to other customers in need. During the busy hours of commuting, cyclists pick up and put down passengers. During the other long stretches of the day when passengers are sparser, Best Man Corner is a social hub for the few dozen men who ride almost exclusively from this particular parking station. They talk, tease each other, listen to music, nap, and wait. Set back from the umbrella is a relatively disused, concrete space enclosed on three sides with no roof. The walls look like an inkblot canvas where blue paint flirted with creating a discernible shape on the white backdrop but then changed its mind. Large but faint yellow letters on the white upper half of the far wall spell out ‘Motorcyclists Intellectual Forum’, signalling that, on special occasions, cyclists gather there at the end of the day to discuss strategies to improve relations with the police, elect union membership, or more formally debate political and social issues.

Cyclists broadly fall into two groups at parking stations across the country. For one group, cycling is suffering, just a means to survive, not a career. This group would rather be doing anything else. ‘I’m here because there is no other means to get myself out’, one rider at Best Man Corner says. The other group is exemplified by Best Man Corner’s parking station manager and union leader, Trokon G. Gray, who accepts and understands the many downsides of the sector – mainly, risks of serious roadside accidents, frequent police harassment, unpredictable income, and societal stigma – but emphasises its opportunities. ‘I’m very proud to be a motorcyclist’, he says,

I know where motorcycling has taken me from ... I know what motorcycling has done for me personally, and not only me ... Sometimes I go around some of my colleagues and, you know, and they say, ‘Oh, my man, you are architectural draughtsman, what are you still doing on the bike field?’ And you know what I say? ‘If you want to be my friend you have to like my habit’ ... all of what I have achieved today is through this bike and I am proud to be a motorcyclist.

What tends to unite the two groups? Nearly all cyclists view their involvement in the sector as better than ‘just sitting down’ (that is, unemployed without any livelihood activity) and few see it as a stable, long-term career path unless they are able to earn enough to become an owner of multiple bikes to lease to other riders.

When I first interview Edwin, it is clear that he shares Trokon’s sense of pride in cycling and sees it as a stepping stone to what he would like to do eventually, to become an engineer. Unlike other riders at Best Man Corner who prefer not to talk openly about their ex-combatant backgrounds, Edwin talks without prompting about that period of his life, believing it to have formed

Utas, ‘Research brokers we use and abuse while researching civil wars and their aftermaths: Methodological concerns’, *Civil Wars*, 21:2 (2019), pp. 271–85; Ilmari Käihkö, ‘On brokers, commodification of information and Liberian former combatants’, *Civil Wars*, 21:2 (2019), pp. 179–99.

who he is today. Many cyclists are caricatured for aggressively pursuing passengers and for gregarious outbursts of over-the-top emotion, said to deterministically flow from their presumed combatant backgrounds. Even other cyclists describe it in such terms: ‘If you are a rebel, you behave like a rebel’, one says. But Edwin’s demeanor is relaxed, his confidence quiet, his speaking manner methodical. He stands out for another reason, too. Most riders refer to the motorbike hustle, but do so obliquely, leaving most of its practices and contours unspoken. In contrast, Edwin repeatedly takes conversation back to his ideas about hustling. All riders practise the motorbike hustle, but Edwin narrates it.

In 2018, Edwin had achieved modest economic success through motorcycling. He reported making enough money to pay his rent and his daughter’s school fees, cover their living expenses, and deposit some earnings in a monthly community savings account (*susu*). I ask him what counts as a good day in the sector, and he framed a good day in economic terms:

A really good day is a day when I go and ride the whole day. Maybe somebody can bless me with 75 or 80 dollars charter [fare]. Then I can come to my people and say, ‘Yeah, today is a happy day. I brought over 75 dollars charter. And I carried a man and he decided to give me a job slip. He told me that I should check on him, to be driving for him, and he will be able to give me this so and so percentage.’ It’s the good message I can carry to my family home.

A good day includes a combination of factors he can control (‘I go and ride the whole day’) and those over which he has little control (whether or not he is blessed with a high fare passenger or a passenger that contracts him for regular work). He frames most of the answer as a hypothetical but later confirms that such charters and job slips have come his way although not often. Most days he aims to make 2,500 Liberian dollars (In 2018, almost US \$20) and most days, he says, he succeeds if he works long hours.

Interestingly, the day is a good day only in the sharing of good news with others, carrying the message home. Again and again over the days we spend together, Edwin emphasises motorcycling’s socially integrative dimensions. Right from his entry onto the motorbike field, it was the sector’s social, more so than its economic, benefits that attracted Edwin. He reports being lonely during the war, and afterwards says people were afraid to associate with him because of his status as a demobilised ATU small soldier. ‘I was only having one friend’ at the time, he reports: Daddy Boy, whom he knew during the war. ‘He was the only man that brought me on the motorbike, showed me my friends. Then and there. I decided to make friends with other men ... We work together, we do things together.’ Daddy Boy facilitated an introduction not just to the livelihood activity of motorcycling but to other motorcyclists.

During our last interview in 2018, Edwin wears a pink, purple, and grey camouflage shirt that blends him into the vertically stacked dwellings on the hills of Jallah Town. He starts to narrate the benefits alongside the challenges of motorcycling, and returns to the necessity and elements of hustling. He distinguishes motorcycling ‘just to survive’ from seeing the motorbike hustle as a way to make a better life for himself and reintegrate economically and socially after the war:

Some cyclists are doing [motorcycling] just to survive, but some are doing it to secure a better future. All of us are not the same. Some men, they’re doing the motorcycling to do a lot of things. Some men, they’re doing it there to maintain their future. Some of them, they are only getting there to get to eat in their stomach. But some are there, not to eat in the stomach, but it’s to think for the future of tomorrow. As for me, I think of my future for tomorrow. I don’t ride motorcycling just for the name. The way that some of my friends, then, some of them can jerk [steal] people’s phones, some of them go in a car, see the car slowing down, they jerk your phone, they jerk your waist bag. As for me, I don’t participate in this because I know what the motorcycle is doing for me is very good. So, I got nothing to do with some of these things.

In this narration, hustling is not just about individual economic survival. It entails a moral code of practice that is future-orientated and peace-contributing.

This synthesis underpins my argument that hustling is a form of peacebuilding, broadly recognised to be so by its labourers but largely unrecognised as such by Liberians and international actors. The first way that Edwin narrates the sentence, 'Hustling is peacebuilding' is in its inverse grammatical form: if there were no motorbike hustle there would be no peace. He contrasts motorcycling as the 'right road' and criminality as the wrong one that ex-combatant youth would be compelled to follow without motorcycling. He says,

Nobody will point finger at me and say, 'Oh, yes, that man was a former rebel leader.' Maybe, maybe they say, 'That man was a former rebel leader, but he changed. He doing the right road. He taking the right road' ... You will never [hear them] say it because, you know, I come in the morning, I take bath, I come to my job site. In the evening, I park my motorbike, I go home, I find food to eat if my jue [girlfriend] got food for me to eat, I eat it, I lay down and sleep. And in the morning, I take my bath, I have my morning lunch, I come back to my working place. So now, I'm very happy for where I'm at.

It's a common refrain among ex-combatant riders: if it were not for motorcycling, ex-combatants would have had no choice but to resort to violent criminality to make ends meet. Lawrence S. Kromah, a rider on Peace Island in Monrovia, explains to me,

If Liberia is set free today from war under United Nations [interventions] into Liberia it's only because of motorbike. It's only because of motorbike! If it was not for motorbike, I swear to God in heaven, while we are still discussing you couldn't stand here with me. You would be in the midst of fire and bullet sound!

In a subsequent interview, Edwin clarifies that hustling does not entail using violence to support oneself, but rather implies the ability to get by under very challenging circumstances by relying on and then actualising what is in one's own head:

One of the good things, I think, about Monrovia is hustle. As a man, you gotta hustle. When you not hustle, you can never get a daily bread for life. You can never get what you want for life, if you're not able to hustle. Hustle, you know, some people can feel that hustle [means that you go and steal but] no. [It means being] able to do something that is in your mind, your head. Something that you know in your head that you'll be able to show someone, that you'll be able to get one or two money to be able to sustain your family.

The second way Edwin narrates hustling-as-peacebuilding is as social reintegration after the war. He was excluded from receiving formal DDR assistance. Common for many of Liberia's small soldiers, Edwin's exclusion from cash payments and other DDR benefits resulted from his commander leaving him off DDR enrolment lists (many commanders replaced bona fide young fighters with their own family members or acquaintances, at a price). Edwin explained, 'But the [DDR] money, the big big people there, they all step on us. Few got it. Few got some, few not got some.' He disarmed believing that 'the UN were coming to help me with my school, with my education side that I would be able to help my family for tomorrow.' But, he went on to explain,

All the big big people felt that we were so small so they were not able to help us. They felt that we were small soldiers and they were not able to help us with what they [doing to help] the other big big people ... They only take our particulars down, take our names down, then said they were coming back to help us, but since that time they have not come back to help.

The exclusions and failures of formal assistance uncover the short-term temporalities of the peacebuilding gaze.

In contrast, Edwin establishes the motorbike hustle, and not DDR, as the site of his long-term economic and social reintegration. He says,

For now, since I got in the bike field, everybody is fine with me, everybody is happy with me because they feel that I've changed. Yeah, but during the time I was holding an arm [weapon] lot of people was not fine with me.

He framed social reintegration in terms of how cycling facilitates free movement, friendship opportunities, and postwar reconciliation and redemption. 'I feel that the motorcycling is doing well for me,' he said, and then proceeded to explain:

I think I'm in a good position that I feel I can live for a better life for tomorrow. That even this motorbike I ride, it will be able to carry me for a future tomorrow and I will never forget about it for what it did because it is my second step. Because the war is the first step that make me to know the difference between life and death. For me, now, I know why they call [it] life and death. I experienced war, I experienced lotta things, but since I got in the motorbike game everything is going on fine with me.

The integration Edwin ascribes to the motorbike hustle transcends rote calculations of earnings. He said, '[Motorcycling] makes me to serve good along my friends. Anytime I'm with my friends, I feel fine. I walk with them fine, talk with them fine. And before, during the war, I never used to do it. I never used to walk with friends.' He contrasts this memory with his present, asserting that people see him 'doing the right road'.

Other cyclist interviewees asserted motorcycling to be an integrative and peace-promoting livelihood activity in other ways, too, such as the psycho-social benefits derived from mutual support, friendship, independence, self-respect, economic solidarity, and promotion of collective security. Edwin's framing thus corresponds to similar representations across the sample of eighty cyclists that I interviewed, and with research on the integrative benefits of cyclists' unions in Sierra Leone⁶⁷ and the DRC.⁶⁸ Moreover, his portrayal of motorcycling as integrative and peace promoting is *alternative* to how international and national elites construct spaces and moments of hanging out involving ex-combatant and conflict-affected youth. These latter accounts construct hanging out as threatening, purportedly evidence of the continuation of wartime identities and affiliations.⁶⁹

Youth-centred narratives are needed to expose the sleight of hand whereby the DDR accounts of international and national elites 'responsibilise' ex-combatant youth with doing the work of peace but without concomitant reference to the material, institutional, and structural forces that undermine their best attempts. As a conceptual-theoretical category, hustling encapsulates the possibilities and contradictions of peacebuilding and ex-combatant reintegration. Hustling achieves meaning not through building new ontologies but through emphasising voice; that is, by reclaiming the 'familiar', 'seemingly prosaic' vernacular of subjects⁷⁰ and anchoring insights to everyday experiences of the simultaneous opportunities and challenges of the motorbike

⁶⁷Krijin Peters, 'From weapons to wheels: Young Sierra Leonean ex-combatants become motorbike taxi-riders', *Journal of Peace, Conflict & Development*, 10 (2007), pp. 1–23.

⁶⁸Tatiana Carayannis and Aaron Pangburn, 'Home is where the heart is: Identity, return and the Toleka Bicycle Taxi Union in Congo's Equateur', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, online (2020), available at: {DOI: 10.1093/jrs/fez105}.

⁶⁹United Nations Development Programme, 'Practice Note on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Ex-Combatants' (New York, 2005), p. 43; United Nations Mission in Liberia, 'RRR & JMAC Hotspot Assessment: Ex-Combatants and Chains of Command in Liberia' (Monrovia, August 2008), pp. 2, 5.

⁷⁰Thieme, 'The hustle economy', p. 530.

hustle. Tatiana Thieme provides an elegant elaboration of the etymology, conceptualisation, and theorisation of hustling as an economic and social strategy of making do.⁷¹ What Thieme calls the ‘prototypical figure’ of the hustler⁷² – its initial etymology and early meaning as a term associated with the deviant identity and sexualised, deceitful, ‘dirty work’ of urban youth⁷³ – is at odds with its contemporary meaning and use, where subjects’ own self-understandings appropriate and reclaim the hustler label. She defines hustling as

a constant pragmatic search for alternative structures of opportunity outside formal education, employment, and service provision. It assumes a continuous management of risk associated with living and working beyond formal institutional norms.⁷⁴

Several elements emerge from her definition: hustling is *constant* (a neverending search, ‘continuous’ risk management), *informal* (‘alternative’, located ‘outside’ of formal economic modes and structures), *pragmatic*, and *precarious*. Edwin’s articulation of hustling as an activity and identity fleshes out these four definitional elements in rich, additive detail.

Finally, hustling is necessary to everyday conceptualisations of peacebuilding as a counter-stigma manoeuvre. Hustling-as-peacebuilding juxtaposes a rubric of recognition alongside cyclists’ narration of repeated failures to recognise ex-combatant and conflict-affected youth as peace actors who are contributing to postwar Liberia. And, they narrate that recognition failures have negative impacts on their well-being and postwar integration; principally, entrenched marginalisation resulting from ongoing social stigmatisation of the sector. They also allege direct and violent harms: that their stigmatisation makes them the victim of ritual killings by opportunistic murderers who target them because their low societal status means that the police will not investigate thoroughly. Many such unsolved ritual killings of cyclists have been reported in the media and confirmed by police, and many more are alleged to have occurred.⁷⁵ These murders are what led to cyclist-led riots in Ganta in 2015 and Weala Town in 2019, which resulted in burnt down police stations. Ongoing stigmatisation is a necropolitical form that subjects the stigmatised to precarious conditions of life and to ‘social death’.⁷⁶ It suspends conflict-affected Liberian youth between war and postwar, and between subjectification and objectification in peacebuilding narratives. Downward mobility for ex-combatants gets explained as lack of opportunities or as the effects of bad agency, when in reality such downward movement reflects how ex-combatants are economically, politically, and socially devalued after war.⁷⁷

Edwin thinks that hard work can inoculate him from the epithets used about the cyclists. He said,

The best thing about living in Monrovia is work. If you living in Monrovia you are working, you will get what you need. But if you’re not working, you not get what you need. That’s the time they can call you zogo, and zogos are the dirty people. People who are not able to afford something for themselves. That them they call zogo, yes.

But, no matter how many Ebola patients cyclists transfer to hospital, no matter how many civil society representatives proclaim them the ‘engine of the economy’ or the ‘new youth

⁷¹de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

⁷²Thieme, ‘The hustle economy’, p. 538.

⁷³Barry Krisberg, ‘Gang youth and hustling: The psychology of survival’, *Issues in Criminology*, 9:1 (1974), pp. 115–31; Ned Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats and Others* (Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 1967).

⁷⁴Thieme, ‘The hustle economy’, p. 537.

⁷⁵‘Angry protesters burn down police stations, magisterial court in Margibi County’, *Front Page Africa* (2 April 2019); ‘Liberia: Our people are frightened’, *allAfrica* (4 December 2015).

⁷⁶Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture*, 15:1 (2003), p. 21.

⁷⁷Christensen, ‘The underbelly of global security’, p. 27.

entrepreneurs', no matter how indebted to them the Liberian president ought to be for propelling him to victory in the 2017 elections, the numerous epithets that establish them as lesser still circulate.

They don't always turn cheeks. They kill and injure in retaliation for roadside accidents that kill and injure their own. But, most cyclists seem to share Edwin's sense that the slow grind and long game of the motorbike hustle can effect change. Lassana Theal, a former small soldier and long-time cyclist in western Liberia, said,

You know, they say a lot of things about the cyclists in Tubmanburg, but still they will still come to us for help. And we don't mind that. Human beings say a lot of things about our fellow humans. So we don't take that one into consideration. We will still help them. They are our parents and they are our sisters.

Their own counter-stigma efforts also constitute peacebuilding labour, aimed at promoting social inclusion. And, it is arguably through recognition that 'peace is political' because the 'practice and articulation of citizenship is an important concept for interpreting the scalar politics of everyday peace and the role of agency and practice from within the margins'.⁷⁸ The parking manager in Tubmanburg, Alexander T. Devine, offered this optimistic assessment:

They tell you that you're not important in society. You're a 'suicide bomber', you know, or 'non-living thing'. But this time around, the story changed. Now they're calling the cyclists good guys.

A quest for status is also a struggle for political recognition.⁷⁹ Hustling-as-peacebuilding is therefore about sweat equity, making the labour of peacebuilding visible.

'Our future spoiling, time passing': Hustling as peacebuilding style

In addition to obstacles of securitisation and stigmatisation, cyclists face high risks of death and serious injury from road accidents, theft and violence from passengers, and numerous other health threats, like serious burns, scrapes, foot and leg injuries, eye damage, and decreased fertility from long-term riding. Edwin has experienced his share of dangers and setbacks in the sector. He has been in three accidents, although none serious enough to cause severe injury. His most constant *bête noire*, however, is the police. Indeed, most cyclists told me police harassment is their biggest challenge. 'We tussle and tussle with the police; they don't give us a chance', Edwin complains. By 2018, Edwin had been arrested numerous times for traffic infractions, real and falsely alleged.

Then, between my first and second interviews with Edwin, the police seized his bike for a new offense. Offenses range from wearing open-toed shoes, picking up or dropping off passengers in prescribed no-go cycle zones, or speeding. In many cases, cyclists allege that no infraction occurs and the police are just looking for money or to beat up the cyclists. In this case, Edwin admitted that he was illegally driving on the main highway, but that the police were extorting a bribe on top of the lawfully prescribed fine, so he refused to pay and they arrested him and impounded the bike. He spent three nights in jail. Once released, he tried to argue that the imprisonment should count as the fine, but the police refused to release his bike.

Edwin identified various strategies that cyclists can attempt to get impounded motorcycles returned. They can try reasoning with the police, or begging them. Sometimes, the union or Task Force will intercede, but Edwin said that these intermediaries will sometimes demand

⁷⁸Williams, *Everyday Peace*, pp. 5, 23.

⁷⁹Christensen, 'The underbelly of global security', p. 28.

their own side payments, which Edwin said also happened in this case when he had travelled to the police station with a Task Force officer after he was released. Finally, they can relent and pay the fine. It had been four additional days (seven days since the initial infraction and imprisonment) and still no bike, meaning seven days without income, too. Without income, the fine becomes more and more difficult to pay.

The police said Edwin needed to pay \$3,500 Liberian dollars to free the bike, but since this was double what he understood the lawful amount to be, he refused. Various friends lent him their motorcycles or tricycles (the three-wheeled transport vehicles not quite as ubiquitous as motorcycle taxis) so he could continue to work. This was still the situation he found himself in several weeks later when I left Monrovia. He thought if he paid the fine, it would make it easier for the police to extort him again. ‘You straining my family, next man can do the same thing to you’, he says. ‘If you do it to me, another man can do it to you. That’s how I feel.’

Edwin’s next brush with the law was devastating to his fortunes. It was initially difficult to locate him for a follow-up interview in the spring of 2019. Trokon said Edwin left Jallah Town in early 2019 after he was accused of stealing someone’s tricycle. We eventually found him in a small town not far outside of Monrovia, and arranged to have a Task Force leader in the area conduct the follow-up interview. Edwin denied the theft allegation, saying,

Things not easy, you see, I have to come here to hustle, about three months. When I was in Town [Monrovia] I was hustling in the bike field. But someone lied on me and said I stole their bike, so because I don’t have power, they wanted to catch me and put me in jail. I have to come on this side until the situation quiets down. Now, I have no bike and no job. I am helping one of my old friends, we were all small soldiers during the war. But God is helping him now to be someone who helps other people.

Edwin was helping this friend at a repair shop and the friend occasionally lent his motorcycle to Edwin so he could use it to take passengers. Edwin’s ambition to study to become an engineer was consequently on hold. He incorporated these setbacks into his conceptualisation of hustling, explaining,

Our future spoiling, time passing. We were thinking things coming to be all right for us, but it is not easy. We are just looking for small, small things. Day breaks, you look for food to eat. Before I was wanting to be an engineer, but things not going on fine. Maybe, things will be all right, for us to be able to do something.

He attributed his change in fortune to forces beyond his control, saying, ‘I told you right now, things are tough in Liberia. Nowhere to go hustle like before. Everybody complaining of things hard.’ And, he was not alone. Four of the project’s six key informants, selected in part because of their relative success in the field in 2018, told very similar stories about how reversals of fortune (bike theft, bike malfunction, economic hardship, false allegations, and loss of family support) had driven them out of the motorbike field altogether by 2019. With respect to the police, although most cyclists report that relations initially improved under the new Weah presidential administration compared to the Johnson Sirleaf presidency, the added discretion given to the police to enforce coronavirus restrictions has meant the return of their worst abuses.⁸⁰

Several studies of motorcycling and ex-combatant reintegration, mostly in Sierra Leone, have framed motorcycling as a liminal activity that places combatants in between integration and its

⁸⁰These observations come from focus group discussions that Liberian partners at Platform for Dialogue and Peace (P4DP) and I convened in 2020 and 2021, including police-cyclist dialogue groups we held in 2020 thanks to successive SFC ODA GCRF grants.

opposite.⁸¹ Others have stressed motorcycling as a site where ex-combatants exercise postwar agency but within an overarching context of severely limited opportunity.⁸² This section conceptualises the motorbike hustle as an ambivalent opportunity for young cyclists, bringing postwar dynamics of agency and structure into focus. An ambivalent opportunity signals that individual ingenuity and labour can yield socioeconomic benefits to those who, like Edwin, see themselves as having perfected the art of the hustle, but that structural inequalities and precarious work environments erect numerous obstacles along the way, limiting the scale and scope of such benefits. As a social navigational mode, hustling is necessarily alert to the uncertain and precarious environment where movement is inevitably both ‘forwards and backwards’, and where ‘reversals of fortune’ are common.⁸³ Ambivalence also imbues the motorbike hustle with meaning and impact as a peacebuilding *style* because it captures subjects’ own articulation of their ‘paradoxical subjectivities’⁸⁴ in resistance to societal stigmatisation of them: peace-contributing *and* threatening, creatively entrepreneurial *and* stuck because of structural obstacles beyond their control. These subjectivities resist mostly externally authored caricatures of them (as threatening, as criminal) and transcend the usual temporal horizons of peacebuilding that see youth actors *only if* they are threatening and *only during* the immediate aftermath of war.⁸⁵

Agency-structure debates about combatant and ex-combatant young men have tended to focus on their wartime mobilisation and grievances⁸⁶ rather than their postwar livelihoods, trajectories, and ambitions. Consequently, subjects’ own narratives about economic deprivation, social marginalisation, and political exclusion capture the interest of academics and policymakers only insofar as they determine young men’s recruitment into armed groups or modulate their culpability as conflict actors. A burgeoning empirical literature on child soldiering, however, has contributed complex understandings of the impact of *both war and postwar* on young adults, showing that the behaviours of young combatants are essentially political because they are largely driven by pursuit of individual and collective security.⁸⁷

⁸¹Michael Bürge, ‘Riding the narrow tracks of moral life: Commercial motorbike riders in Makeni, Sierra Leone’, *Africa Today*, 58:2 (2011), pp. 58–95; Anne Menzel, ‘Between ex-combatization and opportunities for peace: The double-edged qualities of motorcycle-taxi driving in urban postwar Sierra Leone’, *Africa Today*, 58:2 (2011), pp. 96–127; Lourdes Diaz Olvera et al., ‘Earning a living, but at what price? Being a motorcycle taxi driver in a sub-Saharan African city’, *Journal of Transport Geography*, 55 (2016), pp. 165–74.

⁸²Andie Buccitelli and Myriam Denov, ‘Youth reintegration, power, and Okada riding in post-war Sierra Leone’, in Tracey Skelton, Christopher Harker, and Kathrin Hörchelmann (eds), *Conflict, Violence and Peace* (Singapore: Springer, 2017), pp. 129–48; Sukanya Podder, ‘The power in-between: Youth’s subaltern agency and the post-conflict everyday’, *Peacebuilding*, 3:1 (2015), pp. 36–57; Will Rollason, ‘Youth, presence and agency: The case of Kigali’s Motari’, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20:10 (2017), pp. 1277–94.

⁸³Waage, ‘Coping with unpredictability’, p. 85.

⁸⁴Thieme, “‘The ghetto will always be my living room’”, p. 109.

⁸⁵Critical studies have previously highlighted the disconnect between the Western idea of a child soldier and child soldiers’ actual lived experiences, and how life histories need to supplement outsider accounts of how combatants are made and unmade. See J. Marshall Beier, ‘Shifting the burden: Childhoods, resilience, subjecthood’, *Critical Studies on Security*, 3:3 (2015), pp. 237–52; Helen Berents, “‘This is my story’”: Children’s war memoirs and challenging protectionist discourses’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, 101:911 (2019), pp. 459–79; Susan Shepler, *Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014); Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure, ‘Turnings and epiphanies: Militarization, life histories, and the making and unmaking of two child soldiers in Sierra Leone’, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10:2 (2007), pp. 243–61.

⁸⁶Ibrahim Abdullah, ‘Bush path to destruction: The origin and character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36:2 (1998), pp. 203–35; Yusuf Bangura, ‘Understanding the political and cultural dynamics of the Sierra Leone war: A critique of Paul Richards’, in Ibrahim Abdullah (ed.), *Between Democracy and Terror: The Sierra Leone Civil War* (Dakar: CODESIRA, 2004), pp. 117–49; Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford, UK: James Currey, 1996).

⁸⁷Boås and Hatløy, “‘Getting in, getting out’”; Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004); Chris Coulter, ‘Female fighters in the Sierra Leone war: Challenging the assumptions?’, *Feminist Review*, 88 (2008), pp. 54–73; Danny Hoffman, *The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Richard Maclure and Myriam Denov, “‘I didn’t want to die so I joined

As a peacebuilding style, hustling is both *agentic* and *non-agentic*. It signals *creative experimentation* ('[It means being] able to do something *that is in your mind, your head*') and a bricoleur's resourcefulness ('everything I hold is what I will go hustle by'), but also implies lack of choice ('As a man, *you gotta hustle.*') because it is *necessary for survival* ('When you not hustle, you can never get a daily bread for life'). It is necessary not just to survive economically but also because it underpins identity ('That's the same hustle. *It's why I name myself Hustler.*') And, in signalling resourcefulness, hustling is conceptualised in *opposition to laziness and entitlement*, and so challenges racist tropes, prevalent in development discourse, about black urban youth. Hustling is an identifiable, tangible, urban *good*. 'One of the *good* things about Monrovia', Edwin thinks, 'is hustle'. It is tangible because it is not just something in your mind but something you can show someone and depend on. As an identifiable good, it is reliable: Edwin can 'depend on his hustle'. Yet, hustling is simultaneously a *variable* and *finite resource*, both *learned* and *innate*. Not everyone can hustle to the same extent or with the same results even if everyone finds themselves in the same structures of limited opportunity and marginalisation. Likewise, even the most ingenious hustlers can succumb to forces beyond their control.

A style mediates between self and world. I use the word in opposition to 'strategy' to capture how the meaning and qualities Edwin attributes to hustling transcend coping strategies. A peacebuilding style suggests that the everyday work of peace is fluid, embodied, and diffuse but still identifiable to the practitioners of the style that what they are doing goes beyond livelihood and survival and also represents peace contribution. And, it emphasises that peace work is *work*: it is labourious, oppositional, and incomplete. Style, more than peacebuilding *strategy* or everyday *indicator*, coalesces with the oppositional dynamics of youth as the peace actors most likely to have their actions reinscribed as troublemaking. And, style and hustling are linked to urban street culture. Both are uniquely 'contemporary' postures that are 'untimely' and 'out-of-joint'⁸⁸ with the peacebuilding present.

Edwin's narration also contributes new insights to the precariousness of hustling. Hustling connects the precarity and temporality of the everyday to the sustainability, permanence, and hopefulness of futurity. It allows one to acquire *daily bread for life*. Edwin's acknowledgement of his liminal positioning between flourishing and precarity also reflects how hustling has long-lasting impacts on his identity and structures his postwar memory. During a follow-up encounter, I asked about his daily routine and he spoke about the impact of motorcycling on his life, saying,

... since the war stopped, it's motorbike doing everything for me now. It's motorbike. I started riding motorbike since 2005 and up 'til now I'm still riding motorbike. And, I don't care if motorbike can move from this city, I will never move from behind it. It will be in my house with me. I'll be able to tell my children, 'That's the motorbike I survived on.' Even now, my first child born, she's seen it with her own eyes. She can see all the money I've been giving, all the money I've been sending her to school with, it is motorbike.

Even if motorcycling were to disappear from Monrovia as an income-generating activity, or cease to deliver dependable benefits, he would keep a motorcycle in his home as a reminder of its lasting impact on his identity and life. Interestingly, four other cyclist interviewees, in different locations who do not know each other, asserted the same thing: that they would eventually keep their disused motorcycle inside their home as a material reminder of its impact on their lives.

Edwin contributes two new insights to Thieme's work on 'hustle economies': firstly, that Liberian cyclists' 'norms of adaptation'⁸⁹ are not just about navigating economic uncertainty

them": Structuration and the process of becoming boy soldiers in Sierra Leone', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18 (2006), pp. 119–35.

⁸⁸Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 10, 16.

⁸⁹Thieme, "The ghetto will always be my living room", p. 106.

and precarity but are also adaptive modes of peacebuilding and postwar reintegration unique to Liberia's postwar context. Differently to Thieme's Kenyan research participants (scrap metal and junkyard scavengers in Nairobi), Liberian cyclists' identities and trajectories are shaped indelibly by the simultaneous postwar opportunities and challenges that the motorbike hustle presents. In other words, hustling possesses postwar content and meaning that exceed conceptualisation tied to urban economic activity alone.

Secondly, Edwin's narration and experience of hustling adds several significant elements to its import as a peacebuilding style. This excess significance is tied to the embodied nature of hustling. As Edwin explained, hustling entails translating into bodily action that which is 'in your mind, in your head'. The materiality of the motorcycle also inscribes meaning onto the bodies of the cyclists. Its associative speed and danger are used to police and stigmatise cyclists. And, the motorcycling sector's specific development in Liberia gives hustling a particular postwar ambivalence as a peacebuilding style. As a livelihood, it can be effective ('you'll be able to get one or two money to be able to sustain your family') but also stigmatising because it is a livelihood that is always legible to others *as hustling*. Trond Waage notes similar dynamics in Cameroon, where cyclists were put in a position of being judged by identities that they do not believe are relevant to their roles.⁹⁰ They see themselves as serious entrepreneurs engaged in honest work, but are judged as criminals. Finally, Edwin's 'one or two money' comment is telling: hustling is tempered ambition, where realistic and incremental benefits can be derived. As a peacebuilding style, it is creative but limited. Edwin summarised the essential ambivalent standpoint with which most cyclists described their sector, saying, 'I know motorcycling can do some but not all.' Hustling straddles opportunity and stuckness⁹¹, a signal of the broader 'protracted liminality' of youth.⁹²

Notwithstanding hustling's limits, its creative and hopeful elements linger and shape it as a peacebuilding style. It shifts peacebuilding narratives away from carceral and militarised conceptualisations of peace – where militaries, police forces, and other martial methods root out the negative aspects of wartime society.⁹³ Equally important, it shifts narratives away from neoliberal forms that collapse peace into measures of economic growth and foreign direct investment. In terms of this latter shift, reading the motorbike hustle as a peacebuilding style implies a theory of change that goes beyond narratives of economic success. The economic setbacks of the last two years have not led Edwin to abandon his faith in hustling or give himself a new nickname. The first shift, away from the carceral, is really about who reintegrates how, and whether livelihood or formal DDR affects transformative security. Edwin distinguishes the lifelong, transformational impacts of the motorbike hustle on his own postwar reintegration from the minimal impact of formal DDR.

'As a man, you gotta hustle': Reintegration trajectories as gendered projections

The motorbike hustle is both ambivalent and transformational when it comes to gender norms, too. Edwin's narration of hustling as survival is gendered in its expression: '*As a man*, you gotta hustle.' In follow-up interviews, I asked all key informants (comprising five men and one woman) a series of questions about gender. For the young men, these questions were: What does being a man mean to you? What about being a good man – what does that mean to you? How does cycling affect your notion of being a good man? What challenges would you face on the motorbike field if you were a woman? And, why are most cyclists men?⁹⁴ In his responses to this set of

⁹⁰Waage, 'Coping with unpredictability', p. 62.

⁹¹Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁹²Thieme, "'The ghetto will always be my living room'", p. 109.

⁹³Alison Howell, 'Forget "militarization": Race, disability and the "martial politics" of the police and the university', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 20:2 (2018), pp. 117–36.

⁹⁴These questions were formulated with the assistance of Roxani Krystalli, inspired also by Krystalli, 'Narrating violence' and Sylvester, *War as Experience*, p. 51.

questions, Edwin linked manhood and ‘good’ manhood with responsibility, saying that being a man ‘means having your own family, working and making money.’ He added that ‘good manhood’ entails responsibilities, mostly familial, to pay children’s school fees and care for one’s family. Politically, ‘good manhood’ signals lack: he equated it with good leadership, which he says is absent in Liberia because ‘our leaders don’t care’.

Furthermore, and like several of his fellows, he lamented a gendered paradox. On one hand, he believes that he has achieved good manhood via motorcycling. But, on the other, he is aware that his self-perception is at odds with dominant societal perceptions of the cycling field, characterising it as a site of spoiled and bad manhood, a space of imagined criminals and ex-combatants. Yet, the lived experience of cycling, for him and numerous other cyclists, is that of transformation where good manhood is formed:

You know, the whole cycle riding business, people feel that as soon as you join the field you have become bad. No, some of us are good guys in the field ... Everyone has changed and doing different business [through cycling].

Another Jallah Town cyclist, Bacchus Saydee Jr, referred to the parking station name where he and Edwin choose to ride: Best Man Corner, itself emphasising gendered transformation. Good manhood is aspirational and future-orientated, with Bacchus going on to say,

For me, I don’t ask anybody about their past, whether they are ex-combatant, because that is not important now. The important thing is that everyone is going to move forward. So, I don’t ask whether you are ex-combatant or not. As a team, everyone is achieving their goal, that’s it.

Debates about damaged versus rehabilitated manhood thus turn on cyclists’ hustle: their ability to model self-perceptions to change societal perceptions about them. Motorcycling is consequently an important site where young men communicate ‘desire for recognition and a presence’.⁹⁵

If motorcycling is a young man’s hustle, where do young women fit in? Women riders exist but in very small numbers. Yet, many young men mentioned women they knew who would like to join the sector, but cited lack of sponsors to lease women bikes or teach them to ride as the main entry barrier. A 2014 UNDP gender mainstreaming project gave 14 young women in Monrovia motorcycles to lease at low cost. A few of the women were ex-combatants but the rest did not fight in the war. The women reviewed the programme positively, but fewer than ten women remain in the field. Two failures stand out. First, the project bikes were expensive models, meaning parts were costly and difficult to source when the bikes broke down, which they frequently did. Second, in providing a robust programme of support and training for the women, UNDP and its local Liberian partner removed the need for the women riders to integrate successfully within parking stations and local unions or to forge closer working relationships with the men. The plan to expand the project beyond Monrovia was put on hold indefinitely.⁹⁶

Edwin and many other cyclists, in juxtaposing self-understandings of cycling as something that enables good manhood and non-cyclist perceptions that remain stuck in presentations of cyclists as bad men, show that masculinity frames often rely on Manichaean, stark presentations, pitting ‘good guys’ against ‘bad guys’.⁹⁷ They underscore that contrasting narrations of

⁹⁵Mamadou Diouf, ‘Engaging postcolonial cultures: African youth and public space’, *African Studies Review*, 46:2 (2003), p. 5.

⁹⁶For more on this programme’s successes and failures, see Jareme R. McMullin, *Pink Panther*, documentary short film (2019), available at: <https://cpcs.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/research/liberia-legacies-of-peace/pink-panther/>.

⁹⁷Adam Baird, ‘Dancing with danger: Ethnographic safety, male bravado and gang research in Colombia’, *Qualitative Research*, 18:3 (2018), pp. 342–60.

masculinity must be contextualised, and that the victimcy and violence of hustling are always complicated.⁹⁸ If peacebuilding assistance is to assist men and women ex-combatants after war, it will need to distinguish between violent and non-violent configurations of masculinity – including societal extensions of epistemic and structural violence through tropes about bad men – and between societal and structural exclusions of women.⁹⁹

Si(gh)ting reintegration, seeing (ex-)combatants

In this article, I have argued that subject-led narration within Liberia's motorcycling sector conceptualises hustling-as-peacebuilding and hustling-as-peacebuilding-style. Narration of postwar reintegration anchored to lived experience troubles dominant assumptions and practices of peace, exposing knowledge gaps about medium- to long-term reintegration trajectories of youth. That narration – along with the structures that make hustling a necessary livelihood strategy and yet frequently fail to see it as peacebuilding – additionally reflects and responds to gender norms.

The article's principal contribution to scholarship on youth agency and peacebuilding after war is to broaden ideas of what counts as (trust)worthy knowledge about what reintegration is and who ex-combatants are, recentring youth voices of/as reintegration. It additionally contributes to scholarship on urban youth livelihoods by a focus on the postconflict context and on long-term youth trajectories after war, rather than on youth mobilisation, grievance, and agency during conflict and its immediate aftermath. And, it argues for the benefit of situating young men's agentic capacities in terms of their self-understandings of peace promotion and socio-economic integration. Doing so suggests the need to retheorise ex-combatant reintegration, away from its mostly internationally formulated knowledge practices that tend to 'see' ex-combatants only when they are threatening and to 'site' reintegration narrowly as only the subset of internationally assisted, short-term reintegration programmes.

Edwin's conceptualisation of hustling rejects its common, securitised meaning, that to hustle denotes the resort of one of low social standing to theft, violence, deception, or manipulation to survive. His embodiment, narration, and experiences of hustling additionally establish that it possesses postwar meaning that exceeds conceptualisation tying it to urban economic activity alone. An agentic concept like hustling is not just a potential conceptual tool but a theoretical necessity: it reframes participation in the commercial motorcycling sector as an integrative, peaceful opportunity for conflict-affected youth, but also a doubled-edged opportunity that simultaneously erects significant and sometimes dangerous obstacles for youth participants. And, it comes with frequent, sudden reversals of fortune. But, the article explores how hustling is a peacebuilding style precisely because of how hustling is simultaneously an ambivalent and transformational mode. In emphasising performativity, 'style' goes beyond the tendency to see peacebuilding agency as merely a coping *strategy*, and evades efforts to distill or fix hustling as a peace *indicator*. 'Arts of doing' are creative practices of resistance even when their effects are not total.¹⁰⁰

Importantly, narratives about hustling actively reject and resist tropes about youth as sitting around waiting. As youth actors claim peacebuilding recognition and render dominant and securitised understandings of their long-term reintegration trajectories irrelevant and obsolete, they might expect international peacebuilding interventions to engage and consult them more meaningfully. And, they might anticipate financial support for their own counter-stigma

⁹⁸Baines, *Buried in the Heart*; Kimberly Theidon, 'Reconstructing masculinities: The disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants in Colombia', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 31:1 (2009), pp. 1–34.

⁹⁹David Duriesmith, 'Engaging or changing men? Understandings of masculinity and change in the new "Men, Peace and Security" agenda', *Peacebuilding*, 8:4 (2019), pp. 418–31; Maike Messerschmidt and Hendrik Quest, 'Peacebuilding measures and the transformation of masculinities: Looking at Liberia and Uganda', in Manuela Scheuermann and Anja Zürn (eds), *Gender Roles in Peace and Security: Prevent, Protect, Participate* (New York, NY: Springer, 2020), pp. 79–100.

¹⁰⁰de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

initiatives, livelihood and educational development, and mediation in their struggle against police harassment.

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