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According to the Truth and Reconciliation Act of 2000, Sierra Leone’s TRC is:

“to create an impartial historical record of violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law related to the armed conflict in Sierra Leone from the beginning of the conflict in 1991 to the signing of the Lome Peace Agreement; to address impunity, to respond to the needs of the victims, to promote healing and reconciliation and to prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered.”

With a view to this mandate, Commissioner William Schabas asked me to research the origins and influences of amputations and the degree to which capital punishment was used as a political tool during Sierra Leone’s armed conflict. Since he knew I was also doing work on the relationship between memorials, human rights and justice, he asked me to prepare a report on memorials and transitional justice in Sierra Leone. As part of my research on amputations and capital punishment, I looked through hundreds of statements and related documents collected by the TRC and UNAMSIL and conducted interviews with victims, perpetrators and commentators on these topics, including human rights activists, journalists and members of government. Simultaneously, I presented the power point I created for the ICTJ, “The Power of Memorials: Human Rights, Justice and the Struggle for Memory”, to local and international human rights activists, members of the TRC and the Special Court, members of government and the diplomatic corps, the National War Memorial Committee, religious representatives, leaders of youth groups, victims, perpetrators and academics. Official presentation venues included the Sierra Leone State House, the Conference on Recommendations to the SLTRC (National Forum for Human Rights, Law Reform Group, ICTJ), the Conference for Youth Serving Organizations (UNICEF), the National War Memorial Committee and the TRC. I was also interviewed on Youth Radio (Skyy 106.3) and UNAMSIL Radio (103) and my presentation at the State House, organized by the Minister of State for Presidential Affairs, was aired on national television.

I had excellent relations with the majority of the staff at the TRC, and, more generally, with members of the Freetown community. As concerns Sierra Leonians, my initial investment in several hours of Krio lessons on arrival was an invaluable asset, both personally and professionally. When on investigation with members of the TRC staff, I was often able to get information that others could not –
I attribute this mostly to the fact that I talked to people in Krio, while the rest of the international staff spoke only English. I came to know several of the staff at the TRC very well, through extensive conversations on our research topics; I worked together with two researchers to ensure that the work and the relationships that I forged with victims, perpetrators and others during that time would be continued after my departure.

Life in Sierra Leone is incredibly intense. The intensity of work is constantly coupled with an intensity of living that never subsides; one is constantly privy to the elements, especially in rainy season: whether it will rain; whether the electricity will be working; whether the generator will have enough fuel; whether the laundry will survive the last washing/beating; whether the run-down and overloaded 5-seat taxi will take a seventh passenger and/or break down in the potholes; whether you put on enough deet to survive the mosquitoes; whether the lettuce you just ate was boiled in hot water before being served...Living itself in Sierra Leone is a school and it was the most incredible experience I have had so far.

I have no hesitation in saying that my summer in Sierra Leone has helped me grow in significant ways and has left me with the feeling that I have invested a part of myself in the future of that country. I am still very much in touch with members of the TRC and others in Sierra Leone, including some of my interviewees, and I have the feeling that I will be in touch with them for a long time still. My experience, greatly enhanced by the constant support and companionship of my two colleagues and co-travelers from Yale, way, by far, more fulfilling and formative than I could have imagined.

Now, back at Yale, I have begun to prepare for my dissertation which will be on comparative systems of justice. Tentatively called “Four Methods of Transitional Justice”, the dissertation will include one chapter on Sierra Leone’s transitional justice mechanisms. I feel that my 10 weeks in Sierra Leone – working at the TRC, talking to Sierra Leonean fruit sellers and members of government at the State House and living every day in a country just now emerging from a traumatic past – have given me a unique insight into Sierra Leone that will greatly inform my work on that country and, to a degree, on other countries experiencing transitional justice.