

# BOOK REVIEW

**Mariane Ferme. *Out of War: Violence, Trauma, and the Political Imagination in Sierra Leone*.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018. 318 pp. Photographs. Map. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780520294387.

In *Out of War*, Mariane Ferme gathers together the threads of her decades of ethnographic experience in Sierra Leone in a thoughtful exposition of how a civil war that has been “officially” over for more than fifteen years continues to haunt the everyday in communities. She considers how political shifts, humanitarian activities, and the changing diaspora, among other topics, are part of a historical palimpsest—the past can be declared over, but its events are never truly erased, even as other layers sit on top of them. Past events have a way of emerging in the present in the most unexpected guises. Ferme weaves together a careful analysis of archival writings and photos with participant observation, personal meditations, and reinterpretations of war tropes to illustrate how violence flares up in popular anxieties and then dies down, or how it continues to live on in traumas, deaths, and breakages in the social world. The book opens with the powerful, tragic story of an inexperienced teenager who was caught in a bush fire, which was a direct result of the war’s having interrupted intergenerational knowledge transmission. The book is largely a collecting and rethinking of material that Ferme has been working on for many years, and as such provides a rich, persuasive argument about why scholars of war should rethink the popular argument among transitional justice advocates and scholars, including anthropologists, that Sierra Leoneans habitually engage in a process of “social forgetting”: that merely agreeing to never talk about the war or to work actively to repair old wounds is what allows healing to take place. Rethinking and arguing against trauma tropes has been a central focus of the anthropology of violence in the past twenty years, and Ferme’s book provides an important caution as to why we should not discount deep-seated anxieties, traumas, and intergenerational differences so easily. The war was never “don don,” the local expression for “over,” the way scholars hoped it would be, and merely invoking public silence on the matter does not make it so.

Ferme draws the reader into the agonizing experience of trauma—which can subside for a while but then reemerges at moments of unexpected rupture—with a brutal confrontation that she herself experienced

early in her fieldwork. She does a brilliant job of ushering the reader through an event where the young, naïve anthropologist had her life threatened in a moment that was completely out of her control. Here we see the process of social remembering, as Ferme had to piece together an event that echoed in the corners of her memory—and was almost completely absent from her notes—by reconnecting with her companion from that day, and confronting how these emotions can be carefully suppressed but still exist as part of her experience. Equally compelling is her careful examination of the “messy terrain” of conjugal relations in light of the Special Court for Sierra Leone deciding to consider “forced marriage” a war crime. Legal practitioners and human rights activists waded into uncertain territory when they settled on a definition of what constituted unlawful intimate contact, even as this bore no relationship to the relative roles of individuals and communities in acts of social and physical reproduction. In toying with terms such as “sexual slavery” in their definition of unlawful relationships, the Special Court also reactivated pre-colonial and colonial echoes, defining and redefining them in the grain of international law. Ferme treads delicately in these tensions, articulating that instead of resolving them, we must see these struggles as indicative of how the past, even before the war and redefined by the war, occupies the post-war political imagination.

One weakness that emerges in the book is its disjunctures. As a gathering up of fragments of trauma, echoes of the pre-war past, and breaks in the continuity of the social world it is, necessarily, a project that shines light where it makes the most sense to do so. However, the book was generated in part from Ferme’s pulling together and reconfiguring previously published material, and it feels that way, as one is reading a series of related thoughts but not a cohesive project. In this same vein, her broad embrace of topics as diverse as hunters and militias, the political economy of the chieftancy, and child soldiers invites conversation with the scholars who have written extensively on these topics—at least at first, before she moves her argument in its novel direction. These conversations were mostly dismissed in the introduction and thus were conspicuously absent from the body of the text, and I was left thinking that perhaps her contribution would have been even more pronounced and profound had she taken part in them. This would have given the reader a sense of precisely where in the landscape Ferme travels with her analyses, rather than wondering if this ground has not been broken before.

Catherine E. Bolten  
*University of Notre Dame*  
*Notre Dame, Indiana*  
*cbolten@nd.edu*

doi:10.1017/asr.2019.8

**For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Gershoni, Yekutiel. 1997. "War Without End and An End to A War: The Prolonged Wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone." *African Studies Review* 40 (3): 55–76. doi:10.2307/524966.
- Newbury, Catharine. 2002. "States at War: Confronting Conflict in Africa." *African Studies Review* 45 (1): 1–20. doi:10.1017/S0002020600031528.
- Richards, Paul. 2006. "Rebels and Intellectuals in Sierra Leone's Civil War." *African Studies Review* 49 (1): 119–23. doi:10.1353/arw.2006.0088.