

NOTE ON PHOTOGRAPHY

I am a reluctant photographer, but the images that separate the chapters in this book are mine. I have reproduced them here in seemingly anachronistic black-and-white, which immediately brings to mind the colonial archive and its racialized oppositions. This manipulation is deliberate. It points at the uncanny reappearance of a past in the present. And it visualizes how, for many people in this book, the present itself was felt as always almost over: as a world that could simply disappear overnight.

The aesthetic trick of black-and-white troubles linear temporalities and blurs firm separations between past and present—not, as Johannes Fabian (1983) put it, to deny the “coevalness” between ethnography and what it makes into its object, but to foreground the messiness of history, the ephemerality of the present, and the synthetic nostalgia for a remembered colonial past that pervaded the logging concession.

Moreover, editing to black-and-white is a useful technique for evoking the subdued hues and damped tones of a rainforest world where light is often scarce, as well as for showing the sharp shadows and blinding boundaries that emerge in forest clearings. It is also a device for reproducing the texture of timber and vegetation and for suggesting the poetic force of bulldozers and chainsaws.

In contrast to the portraits of Congolese workers, there are no images of white loggers. Although a substantial part of this book is about them, their visual absence remains problematic. Yet it is the product of a different relationship to photography. Among the European managers, taking pictures was not a common practice. In the labor compounds, however, pictures were everywhere. Workers paid photographers to document their achievements and dreams. And my small camera was merely taken up by what was already there.