The Disappeared: images of the environment at Freetown’s urban margins

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‘The Disappeared’ is a small collection of images documenting the deforestation of the mountain range outside Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. Aesthetically these images are inspired by West African photographic practices and represent an alternative ethnography of the recent war’s impact on this region. The article outlines the dynamics of deforestation in the region but argues that the traditional realist aesthetic of documentary photography is no longer a compelling way to represent this issue. Beginning with a West African (particularly Yoruba) notion of the ‘truth’ of the photographic image, ‘The Disappeared’ charts a different path for engaged visual ethnography and for intervening in the politics of visual representation.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROJECT

From the hills above Freetown, the view is expansive. Below, stretched to the horizon, lie the vast plains of the coastal city and the sea. It is a jarring sight – less for what it reveals than for the very fact of its existence. The mountain range surrounding the Sierra Leonean capital was, until recently, densely forested. The thick tangle is now largely gone, and the pressures of a city shaped by ten years of war show on the slopes: the war’s refugees need firewood and building materials; the city’s elite are seeking less crowded quarters; and foreign governments are erecting more easily fortified embassies outside the city centre. The limits of the city are rapidly and devastatingly pushing into the hills.

The vanguard of this upward, outward flow lives along a network of trails beyond the last concrete buildings. They are pioneers of the new colonization, inhabiting tin lean-tos and shacks, squatting on land claimed by wealthy patrons, breaking rocks to build their sponsors’ future houses and fending off rival claimants to the new frontier.

Like many ex-combatants and their dependents, Mada Mohammed has found the post-war period in Sierra Leone to be one of intense poverty. Having come to Freetown from the far south-east in a deployment of pro-government militias, Mohammed has only a handful of contacts in the city. His girlfriend Adama is also a refugee from the east, and her few local relations have long since abandoned the couple and their child (Figure 1). And so they have joined the ranks of those living, literally and figuratively, at the margins.

I met Mada Mohammed and Adama while researching the Civil Defense Force (CDF) militia during Sierra Leone’s civil war, when he and a few hundred other irregular combatants were barracked at Freetown’s Brookfields Hotel. Over the years I have interviewed and photographed him and other fighters as they move across the Liberian border to work as mercenary labourers; as they join the ranks of young men labouring in the diamond, gold and timber extraction industries of the region; as they find creative and often quasi-legal ways to ‘dreg’ a living in urban centres such as Freetown and Monrovia.

The series of conflicts in and around the Mano River region (Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and now the related fighting in Côte d’Ivoire) are so often narrated in terms of ‘resource wars’ that any work in the area becomes by necessity a kind of environmental anthropology. As a result, I spent time in late 2003 with Mada Mohammed and Adama researching the political economy of militarization, including the way it is inscribed on the landscape around Freetown. Many of the images from this research explored the manual labour in which ex-combatant squatters and their families were engaged and the conditions under which they laboured (Figures 2 and 3). But one of the most challenging aspects of the project has been finding ways to represent the impact of the expansion of the urban periphery on the surrounding forest.

The visual tropes of clear cutting and deforestation are by now so familiar that they lack any explanatory or interventionist authority. Images of felled trees and environmental destruction have become visual clichés. They also misrepresent as one dimensional what is in reality a complicated relationship between Sierra
Leoneans and the forest ecosystem. By contrast, what I present here is a modest effort at an alternative visual ethnography.

‘The Disappeared’ began as a collection of six small black-and-white photographs printed and collected as a limited edition handmade book. My intention at the time was to experiment with representational strategies. I was looking for a creative alternative to the documentary realism in which I was trained and which made up the majority of my (and others’) photographic archive of the region. It was a project born on the light table. In late 2003 when these images were made I did not set out to create an unconventional body of work. It was only in the process of editing that I realized the material existed from which to put together a more experimental ethnography. For the most part these were images shot for my own pleasure, a creative act that at the time felt like a diversion from the primary ethnographic work. However, after initially conceptualizing ‘The Disappeared’ as an art alternative to the more scholarly ethnography, I grew more intrigued by how those images suggested challenging combinations of the aesthetic and the ethnographic.

Since that initial artistic foray, ‘The Disappeared’ has become part of a larger body of work on alternative ethnographic aesthetics of West African conflict zones. The project of which this collection is a part will ultimately exist in multiple forms: as a conventional text; as an online, hypermedia archive; and as a physical photographic exhibition. It is comprised of multiple sketches of which ‘The Disappeared’ is representative: small collections of images inspired by the visual cultures of contemporary West Africa.

My presumed interlocutors for this work are those for whom the political realities of the postcolony are no great surprise. In the case of ‘The Disappeared’, the crisis in question is environmental. I presume that while most photographers, visual anthropologists or other members of the academic community likely to see this work may not agree on the particulars of forest ecology, they do not need to be persuaded that environmental challenges exist. The modest intervention I would hope for from a project like ‘The Disappeared’ is therefore primarily around what Corinne Kratz (2002) has referred to as ‘the politics of representation’. In other words, the engaged anthropology at work here is one of exploring with other image producers and activists how best to rethink our representational strategies.

These six black-and-white photographs of trees on the Western Area hillsides draw inspiration from a distinctly West African visual sensibility. Departing from the realist, literalist aesthetic which dominates both politically engaged visual anthropology and documentary reportage, these images draw their meaning from a different understanding of the truth of the photograph and the aesthetics of commemoration. At a time when scholars of Africa are calling for new...
modes of understanding the continent and disseminating that knowledge, 'The Disappeared' is an effort to de-centre the conventional tropes of African destruction by seeking out an unfamiliar ethnographic lens. The aspiration is similar to that which Anna Grimshaw has voiced for observational cinema: to find 'a different theoretical space', one that privileges the discourses of contemporary art over those of the hard sciences (2005, 24). In what follows, I locate these images in relation to writings on the war and the environment, to various documentary aesthetic regimes and to the current state of ethnographic practices in Africa and still photography generally.

THE FATE OF THE FOREST

Like any war, Sierra Leone’s recent conflict was both shaped by and in turn shaped the nation’s landscape. The resources of the forest – diamonds, timber, gold – helped pay for the weaponry with which the war was fought. Occupying armies and militias seized the opportunities presented by insecurity and a wartime economy to dig pit mines in the forest floor. Bush paths facilitated the movements of combatants and arms, refugees and spoils, while major roads became impassable as ambushes and road blocks altered the logic of transit and terrain. And in the aftermath of war, refugees and ex-combatants such as Mada Mohammed and Adama reconfigured the physical environment according to the needs of a populace displaced and struggling at the margins of an already marginal state.

Both popular and scholarly representations of the Mano River and other African conflicts have alternately attributed the fighting to a scarcity of environmental resources (too few trees, too little water, too little arable land) and to an environmental surplus (too many trees, too many diamonds, too much gold). But the relationship between fighting and forest was never one of simple cause and effect, as a number of anthropologists working in the region have shown (Fairhead and Leach 1996; Richards 1996; 2001; Fithen 1999).

There is no question, however, that the rainforests of the Guinea forest belt represent a valuable, exploitable asset for a variety of actors capable of profiting from a relative lack of regulation. One of the principal backers of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels in Sierra Leone, former Liberian president Charles Taylor, financed the movement in part through the illicit trade in timber from both Sierra Leone and Liberia. The rebel movement which eventually overthrew Taylor raised capital by promising its European backers unfettered access to natural resources in the post-Taylor period. Subsequent timber sanctions have not stopped wealthy Lebanese and Liberian dealers from creatively exploiting a loophole that allows ex-combatants to sell timber on the domestic market.

The forest also facilitates the everyday existence of many in a region with high petrol prices and without widespread electrical service. Mada Mohammed, for example, earns a modest income supplying charcoal and wood for cooking fires to other urbanites in the Freetown area. Lumber and zinc dwellings are cheaper and faster to construct than brick, meaning much of the urban expansion is being facilitated by the resources of the forest.

Estimates of the resulting rate of deforestation in the region vary widely. Popular websites list the rate of forest clearing at anywhere from 0.7% to 2.9% between 1990 and 2000,7 while the Sierra Leone government’s Central Statistics Office claimed a 10% rate of deforestation between 1994 and 1997.8 A July 2001 study by the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that over the next two decades the rate of deforestation in Sierra Leone will continue at between 1.5% and 2% per annum (Aliou 2001). While such estimates tend to overlook ways in which local populations simultaneously cultivate as well as clear the forests, and tend to misrepresent the history of forests in the region (as argued by Fairhead and Leach 1996; Richards 1996), they do point to a long-term threat to high-growth, closed canopy environments in the region.

The approximately 17 500 hectares of the Western Area Peninsula Forest surrounding Freetown are particularly vulnerable. The population of Freetown swelled from under 500 000 in 1985 to approximately 800 000 according to the 2004 census, turning a once sleepy coastal capital into another nodal point in an exploding metropolitan belt stretching from Senegal in the west to Nigeria in the east. Though much of the forest is technically a reserve, lumber and charcoal harvesting, slash-and-burn agriculture and the expanding perimeter of the city proceed more or less unchecked. Since the forest houses the major watershed for the capital, its health is of primary concern. Soil erosion could, for example, threaten both the freshwater sources on the peninsula and the coastal waterways. Furthermore, given the city’s perch on the lower reaches of the hills, those at the urban periphery are at risk from mudslides should the heavy rains wash out unsecured hillsides.

Sierra Leone’s forests occupy a critical place in the social imaginary as well. The forest and its denizens are often
considered to be volatile and dangerous in comparison to the relative civility of the human habitats in the village and the city, embodying an important dichotomy in the social imaginary (see, for example, Jackson 1989). Among the Mendes of the heavily forested southeast of the country, the origins of human settlements are generally traced to the conquests of famous hunters who founded villages on the site of elephant kills and other spectacular feats of conquest in the thick, inhospitable bush (see Leach 1994; Little 1967 [1951]). Even among urban youth, as Richards has noted (1996), the forests help to define Sierra Leone itself. And the growing market in eco-tourism promises a possible post-war economic boom if the high, old growth forests can be protected and marketed internationally as a travel destination.

Manipulating the relationship between the high forest canopy and farmable bush, plantations, or habitable plots has of course been part of West African social and political practice for years (Fairhead and Leach 1996; Leach 1994). But at least in the Western Area around Freetown and the peninsula on which it sits, the shifting demographics and effectively deregulated exploitation of the war and postwar periods are altering the forest landscape in a manner that would appear to be unsustainable.

PICTURING A LANDSCAPE

The ‘drama’ of both the dire statistics and the loss of a potent cultural symbol are visually evident all around the periphery of the capital. The paths across the hills are littered with stumps and the bodies of felled trees; stark evidence of an encroaching urban populace and its incompatibility with the dense vegetation of the forests. Yet the global circulation of images of deforestation – the heavy machinery of logging, the denuded landscape and most poignantly the prone forms of downed trees – mean that photographs which simply repeat those tropes lack complexity, impact and meaning (Figure 4). The forms are too familiar at this point to allow for any subtlety of interpretation or to provoke much thoughtful engagement. The ethnographic challenge of rendering the familiar strange seems foreclosed by the overwhelming preponderance of images of devastated landscapes. Except perhaps for those experts whose vision is skilled enough to read the species type of trees from stumps and trunk fragments, there is nothing about photographs of one cleared landscape which would distinguish it from any other. The power of these images has been largely sapped by their predictability and by their lack of specificity.

The literalist renderings of denuded landscapes face an obstacle to effective mobilization parallel to what the critic Susan Sontag identified as the mistaken promise in war photography: that literal images of the dead would automatically serve as an indictment of violence (Sontag 2003). The presumption behind this aesthetic – the realist aesthetic of most photojournalism and documentary reportage – is that the dire content of the image propels it beyond the conventions of interpretation and serves as an unmediated and irresistible call to action. Yet as John Berger (1972) points out, these images are at once too familiar and too ambiguous to convey meaning or to provoke engagement. Like the ‘photographs of agony’ Berger examined from newspaper coverage of the war in Vietnam, the shock of images of a ravaged landscape give no clues as to how to respond and become numbing with time and repetition.

This resistance of the image to real engagement is doubly problematic in an African context. Visual tropes of violence and ravaged landscapes so thoroughly dominate the reportage of Africa that they have ceased...
to carry any explanatory or interventionist weight whatsoever. From the outlandish dress of Liberian militiamen to the camel mounted janjaweed in Sudan to the broken skyline of downtown Luanda, the realism of most documentary images from Africa serves as confirmation of Africa’s absolute Otherness. They reinforce a literal negative image of Africa as the inverse of a functioning people, place or polity.

Though scholars have long been critical of the way all manner of discourses have ‘invented’ Africa (Mudimbe 1988), the calls for a thoroughly re-conceived representational praxis have become more urgent and more daring over the past few years. In mapping the current proclivity toward pessimism and simplification in popular and scholarly treatment of the continent, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall write that ‘as the African predicament becomes ever more complex, the manifestations of the crisis [of representation] are to be found in a loss of the virtues of curiosity and astonishment at what the (African) world might be’ (2004, 350). In response, they propose the following:

In an attempt to overturn the predominant readings of Africa, we need to identify sites within the continent, entry and exit points not usually dwelt upon in research and public discourse, that defamiliarize commonsense readings of Africa. Such sites would throw people off their routine readings and deciphering of African spaces. Identifying such sites entails working with new archives – or even with old archives in new ways . . . Moreover, identifying many such sites at times implies drawing on new critical pedagogies – pedagogies of writing, talking, seeing, walking, telling, hearing, drawing, making – each of which pairs the subject and the object in novel ways to enliven the relationship between them and to better express life in motion (2004, 352, original emphasis).

For engaged visual anthropology, this is a call first and foremost for experimentation; experimentation not only with the subject matter to which anthropologists turn their ethnographic lens, but with how they see and how they represent those subjects. With this in mind, ‘The Disappeared’ is a first attempt at a different ‘critical pedagogy’ – one inspired by a particularly West African understanding of what images are and what they do.

‘THE SUBSTANCE OF THE IMAGE’

Following Mada Mohammed as he returned home after a day spent breaking rocks for gravel, I was struck not only by the absence of thick vegetation on the hillsides but by what that absence revealed. The twisted forms of those few trees which remained were now starkly visible in a way they could never be when part of a thick forest environment. They were available for inspection as they had not been before. Even more than the bare patches of hillside or the now visible open sky, the vertical presence of those few trees which remained served as evidence of what was gone.

Photographing the absence of a thing is largely antithetical to an approach to the image which stubbornly refuses to give up on the truth of visible presence. Even after accepting that vision is culturally constructed and the photograph is a subjective record, there persists ‘the comfortable idea that the photograph shows what we would have seen “had we been there at the time”’ (Wright 1992, 19; see also MacDougall 1997, 281; Bowden 2002, 14). Whether referred to as a Western, Enlightenment, or rational scientific gaze, the dominant framework for understanding the truth of the image remains its ability to make visible a presence. Conversely, what cannot be imaged remains open to question. What does not exist cannot be imaged at all.

Yet the possibility of rendering visible the truth of a thing with no visible presence is very much a part of an alternative, West African history of the photographic medium. The writings of the artist and critic Olu Oguibe and Stephen Sprague’s ethnographic work among the Yoruba are the basis on which the images here attempt a vision of the disappeared that avoids the standard visual tropes of environmental degradation. Sprague and Oguibe’s work on Yoruba photography offers instead an alternative aesthetic for the transmission of ethnographic knowledge.

As Sprague observed in his study of Yoruba photographic practices, the purpose of the photograph was not to present an identical likeness of its subject but to represent its essence. Photography fits within an artistic worldview dominated by jijora [‘mimesis at the midpoint’] – the notion that a representation is accurate if it contains not only indexical fealty to its subject but also embodies the desired characteristics of the thing. As Sprague puts it of formal portraiture, ‘It should resemble the individual and at the same time embody all the ideal Yoruba characteristics without overemphasizing any one’ (Sprague 2003 [1978], 246). The truth in portraiture resides in its ability to render visible social networks and imaginaries, and to locate the sitter within that wider frame. This is the subject of much of the commentary on celebrated West African
portraitists such as Seydou Keïta and Philip Kwame Apagya, as well as on the more routine photographic practices of the region. While the photographic studio is no longer the dominant site of photography (see Werner 1999; Mießgang 2001), portraiture remains the principal genre (excluding perhaps advertising). Whether inside the studio, on the beach, in the street or during a wedding, West African photography’s logic remains a portrait logic.\textsuperscript{12} Photography is about ‘locating the individual in their wholeness’ (Oguibe 2001, 11). This mapping of the social landscape is perhaps most important when the individual represented is physically gone.

Yoruba images of twins, known as \textit{ibeji}, typify the aesthetic. With the availability of photography, Sprague found that Yoruba families which lost one of a pair of twins replaced with photographic images the carved statutes which had previously signified the departed. If the child died before its picture could be made, families used photographs of the remaining sibling, printed twice, in contexts in which the dead demanded representation. While the living twin might be cross dressed to mark gender differences, no functional distinction was made between the image of the departed twin and its representation by its surviving sibling. Either one served its purpose – to visualize the place of the dead in the social life of those who remained.

Oguibe expands on Sprague’s analysis by suggesting that what is at work here is a different understanding of the truth of the image. Rather than the objective, indexical meaning of the image in Euro-American discourses of the truth of the photograph, Oguibe elaborates a Yoruba approach which finds that the ‘essence’ of photography ‘resides not in the details and mechanics of reproduction but in the significatory possibilities of the emergent form’ (2004 [1996], 88). The truth of an image cannot be independent of either the context of its use or the intention of the image-maker (see also Pivin 1999, 26–27). As he writes of the \textit{ako} funeral portraits of Nigeria’s Owo, the purpose of image making is to represent the dead in ways pleasing to those ancestors who remain capable of actions affecting both the deceased in the afterlife and the living in this one:

\begin{quote}
In Ako . . . we find a different manner of portraiture: we find representation as anticipation. The verisimilitude which we are introduced to is a mediated gesture between faithfulness and faith, between reflection and projection . . . As a sign Ako is prolegomenal, and the essence of its verisimilitude is not indexicality or transparency but efficacy, the fulfillment of an intent beyond the materiality of the image.
\end{quote}

This understanding fits within a broader aesthetic of essence, where the image is ‘true’ as long as it efficaciously attends to the specifications of its application within an intricate matrix of cultural expectations. (Oguibe 2004 [1996], 82)

This, then, is the ‘substance of the image’. Photography is a medium of commemoration and mourning not for its faithfulness to a moment that has passed. It is, rather, a ‘gesture of semblance’ (Oguibe 2004 [1996], 83) – the realities it portrays are oriented to the past and to the future, toward what the image can do and the context in which it can be deployed. It is an understanding of photography in which the image ‘imagines’ possible futures, not because of its fealty to the past but by evoking both aspiration and ideal. As Pivin notes, this is more than simply a statement of desire. The photograph does not evoke a possible future – it is intended to ‘\textit{be} the future’ (Pivin 1999, 28, original italics; see also Pinney 2003, 213–214).

I have taken that understanding of the truth of the image – which, as Oguibe also points out, is not unique in Yoruba but is found across Africa (2004 [1996], 83) – as one of tremendous political and ethnographic possibility. Landscape as a photographic genre has little purchase in West Africa given the dominance of portraiture (Behrend and Werner 2001, 241). Nevertheless, I find the aesthetic possibilities inherent in this reading of the image to be provocative and productive. It lies at the heart of the images reproduced here. These are photographs of mourning, and yet they are deliberately ambiguous. The twisted forms revealed by the loss of the surrounding forest are strangely beautiful. And they are available for inspection only because they stand alone. Like the \textit{ibeji} or Ako funerary effigies, they document a death. But they do so in a way that invites inspection rather than nostalgia. If they succeed as interventionist ethnography, it is because they eschew the literal depiction of destruction in favor of a more open signifier. They are evidence of what has disappeared. By the very fact of their continued existence, however, they are meant to imply the open possibilities for what remains. They are, in effect, the living twin. Those who have gone must be reckoned with. But whereas the trope of devastated landscapes that dominates environmental reportage suggests that intervention is too late and hopeless in any case, the image of the disappeared (like the \textit{ibeji}) shifts the emphasis toward the impact of that disappearance on those who remain.
There is, of course, nothing in the exhibition which points toward a specific mode of engagement or explicitly maps for viewers what form of intervention might at this point be necessary or possible. Nor do they directly depict the human agents who interact with this landscape and the social, political or economic processes of which the forest is a part. In that sense, these images are no different from those of the clear-cut landscape or from the ‘photographs of agony’ Berger surveyed from Vietnam. But by existing at the intersection of the visible and the invisible they are meant to keep open what the overly familiar, literalist representation forecloses. It invites a reading of the photograph not as a document of an event but as an icon of a social context (Pivin 1999, 26–27). The tension between the visible and the invisible, the present and the absent in these images is meant to make palpable both the openness of the future and its importance for those who remain.

IMPLICATIONS

‘The Disappeared’ is a very specific intervention. I conclude, however, by tracing how it points toward two more broad concerns within visual anthropology. The first is an effort to rethink the possibilities for anthropological still photography that has been going on (albeit on a limited scale) for at least the past decade. The second concerns a more recent call to recognize the place of the aesthetic in visual studies.

As Deborah Poole (2005) notes, visual anthropology’s theoretical engagement with still photography has largely been limited to critique since the 1960s and ’70s, when film and cinema seemed to promise more reflexive, experimental ethnographic possibilities. Where ethnographic filmmaking has grappled with non-realist modes of representation and treated the image as more than positivist document, the fixedness of still photography presents a challenge for many anthropologists: the medium by definition appears to reify, dehistoricize and decontextualize its content in exactly the ways the way the medium circulates among the subjects it documents. This is not, in other words, experimentation for its own sake or without boundaries. It is informed by a specific and relevant aesthetic regime. This is a slight variation on Anna Grimshaw’s account of her filmic practices, which are ‘not driven by the notion of some kind of cultural expertise informing technique’ but by a desire to ‘work filmically with a certain way of exploring the world embodied in fieldwork’ (2005, 21). As Grimshaw indicates, a more compelling visual anthropology cannot be made simply from more precise ethnographic knowledge, as though ethnographic depth equates to better ethnographic imagery. Nevertheless, one possible future for still photography in anthropology may very well lie in considering how specifically visual cultural expertise can inform the techniques by which we encounter the world through fieldwork.

My second concern is broader. Visual anthropology today is part of a wide conversation about scholarship and the image. Whether cast in terms of visual culture, cultural studies, visual studies, art history or media studies, image work is being more thoroughly and productively investigated across disciplines at this moment than at any point in the past.

The art historian James Elkins (2003) points out, however, that one of the more difficult – and largely
absent – elements of that conversation is aesthetics. Scholars have achieved a certain fluency in discussing how images work, how they travel, how they communicate and even what they want (Mitchell 2005). But as interdisciplinary visual research increasingly includes visual production, and as the scope of what informs visual scholarship crosses ever more disciplinary borders, it is not hard to imagine Elkins's call for a turn to the aesthetic becoming increasingly prominent.

There are productive and counter-productive versions of that conversation. It is here that visual anthropology can play a unique and critical role. On the one hand, a greater attention to aesthetics in visual analysis could devolve into facile taxonomies of 'good' and 'bad' visual production. This is aesthetics read narrowly as synonymous with style and implying value judgments of greater or lesser quality.

What visual anthropologists have long understood is that aesthetics as a universal category of judgment is ultimately, as Eric Michaels put it, 'a fraud' (1994 [1988], 163). Aesthetic regimes are social constructions. Reading aesthetics in a limited way as stylistic evaluation inevitably erases a whole range of histories, intentions, and possible interventions. Exploring those erasures has always been one of visual anthropology’s mandates.

What I have attempted to do in the work presented here is deploy a different visual regimen as a mechanism for the ethnographic project of rendering the familiar strange and the strange familiar. This is, I would argue, a more productive and important way to understand the aesthetic turn. Like all visual ethnography, the value in these images as an aesthetic exercise should be judged by what spaces they open for critical engagement – with photography, with the politics of representation and with Freetown’s forest environment.

NOTES

[1] For more on the Brookfields Hotel, see Hoffman (2005).
[2] Dreg is a Krio term roughly equivalent to the English term ‘hustle’.
[3] At the time of this writing I am editing and printing images from Sierra Leone and Liberia for the book and web ethnography, tentatively titled Mano River Sketches. These images will be paired with text exploring the uses of photography in West Africa and the aesthetic practices of a number of West African photographers. A set of larger exhibition prints is planned once the manuscript and webpages are complete.
[6] Members of the large Lebanese population residing across West Africa are key players in the region’s resource trade. Both observations are drawn from the author’s own work in the region.
[9] These figures are drawn from the national government’s reported results of censuses conducted in 1985 and 2004. In reality, the current population of Freetown is probably much higher – by some estimates as high as 2 million.
[10] This dichotomy resonated during the war as well. The RUF utilized forest pathways to move between villages and towns and encamped in forest enclaves, contributing to their association with uncontrolled, threatening and pseudo-mystical forces. See Henry (2000); Richards (1996).
[11] There are now a number of excellent ethnographic and art history studies of West African photography. In addition to those cited elsewhere in this article, useful works can be found in the anthologies and volumes edited by Vogel (1991); Bell et al. (1996); Saint Léon and Fall (1999); Behrend and Werner (2001); Matt and Mießgang (2001); Enwezor (2006); and Werner (2006). I draw primarily on Sprague and Oguibe here not because their work is definitive on the subject of West African photographic practices, but because they spur for me a certain line of inquiry into aesthetic possibilities. For a critique of Oguibe’s essay ‘On the Substance of the Image’, see Krak (2002, 245, n.62).

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