In this chapter, I address the structure of the temporal deferrals and delays that characterize the translation of an experience of violence, or an instance of its witnessing, into ethnographic narrative. I examine the eyewitness accounts (official reports and two books published some ten years apart) by T. J. Alldridge, a British colonial officer in Sierra Leone, of an event that took place toward the end of the nineteenth century. A century later, I witnessed an event bearing some resemblance to what Alldridge had described in reports and manuscripts, and I explore Alldridge’s and my experiences in parallel to shed light on the ways, over time, various displacements or refigurations—between image and textuality—make possible alternative representations of violence, and of their political implications. Work on trauma shows that the full impact of traumatic events cannot be assimilated in the present moment but is often experienced only after a period of latency, often by means of a second traumatic event (Freud 1939, 84; 1922, 34–40). Similarly, writing about violent and traumatic events that one has witnessed often can happen only in elliptical forms: “Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (Caruth 1996, 91–92). The act of bearing witness to a violent event (often even in the context of staging performances) does not lead to cumulative knowledge of the event; on the
contrary, it leads the subject into a state of not-knowing that is not far from the epistemic status of rumors mentioned earlier. What blocks the full assumption of “knowledge” is an excess of vision, the bursting into view of an aspect of experience that cannot be assimilated in the present. The more one “sees,” the more knowledge of the event takes the form of deferral and delay, or what Caruth calls “belatedness.” Thus trauma is a “double wound,” because it “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again” (Caruth, 4). Bearing witness to violence is so shocking for consciousness that it cannot be subsumed under the categories of experience. This paradox within the structure of the traumatic event (even in performance) immediately presents the impasse of testimony: what one truly bears witness to cannot be fully “known,” at least not immediately. What is apprehended in testimony is a gap, an impossibility to communicate. To reproduce the witnessed event for the clarity of consciousness, and for speech, needs the work of time. This belatedness also marks a critical shift from the register of vision—an excessive seeing, or witnessing, of a traumatic event—to that of voice and narrativity, which makes it communicable, transmissible. Deprived of transmission, bearing witness falls into the vacuum of self-reference and fails to produce knowledge. This shift is of special interest to me because T. J. Alldridge was an amateur photographer who, during his time in Sierra Leone, took many pictures, with which he illustrated reports to his superiors and his published work. Like Alldridge’s, my own experience of bearing witness to a violent event, through its depiction in a performance in the same region involved a photographic camera and was also belatedly remembered in film footage of the most violent episode of the 1991–2002 civil war. In both cases, the movement from excessive vision to voice is critical to the possibility of speaking about the event and handing it over for ethnographic narration.

Claiming a traumatic experience—being able to assimilate it—according to Caruth (1996, 111), follows a kind of “awakening” that makes remembering and understanding possible, albeit sometimes in fragmented ways, or through reassembling the memories of a violent or shocking event in a different way (Williams 2006, 322–23). In what follows, I draw parallels between two different accounts of the same event in nineteenth-century Sierra Leone by T. J. Alldridge, and a frightening event I witnessed only a few days after arriving for the first time in Sierra Leone. The event I witnessed was similar to performances I was to see many times in the course of my fieldwork in Sierra Leone, in con-
connection with the secret societies into which most rural Sierra Leoneans are initiated. Those initiations often involve painful ordeals, veritable forms of torture, in some cases, which are ways of unleashing and inscribing the full force of society’s laws on the body (e.g., Clastres 1989, 177).

Until the outbreak of civil war, ordinary, ritualized forms of violence such as those performed during initiations were not discussed much in the contemporary scholarly literature. This was in part a reaction to exoticizing accounts and representations from earlier writings, primarily during Sierra Leone’s colonial history, including T. J. Alldridge’s and others’ (e.g., Alldridge 1901, 124ff.; Thomas 1916, 145; Wallis 1903, 234–35). But during the civil war, the resistance in the scholarly literature to representations of violence in contemporary initiation rituals broke down. Thus the spectacularization and performance of bodily mutilations and other forms of inflicting pain in public, mostly carried out with cutlasses and other tools of ordinary farmwork during the civil war, were the most widely advertised types of harm. The reasons these mutilations were so powerful and shocking for the population at large must be loosely linked to the more routinized, ritualized, and staged forms of inflicting pain on the body during initiations, which they sometimes mimicked.

**WRITING, DOUBLING, AND THE STATUS OF IMAGES**

T. J. Alldridge was an Englishman who spent almost two decades as a trader on the Atlantic coast adjacent to the Sierra Leone Colony, before being appointed traveling commissioner and being sent through the hinterland to sign “friendship treaties” with neighboring chiefs (Abraham 1978, 96, 99–101; Fyfe 1962, 486–87). Earlier that year, the British had settled a boundary dispute with the French, who were encroaching in this region of competing commercial interests in oil palm and other natural products. The colony administration was eager, therefore, to secure its influence in the region through alliances. In 1896, the relationship was formalized further with the establishment of a protectorate adjacent to the colony.

That same year, Alldridge had an opportunity to witness the installation of a new sokong of Imperri (a title later equated by the British administration with that of paramount chief), which bordered with the Sherbro coastal strip that had been part of the colony territory since 1825.¹ He reported observing “an important and exceptional meeting,
the installation of a chief, after several years of interregnum” (Alldridge 1901, 131). The new Imperri ruler was taking up a post that had been vacant since 1870 (Fyfe 1962, 556), a circumstance resulting from lingering conflicts fueled by competition over trade with European businesses from different countries, land disputes, and the suppression of the domestic slave trade. As we shall see, the 1991–2002 civil war similarly resulted in power vacuums and a decade or more of vacant chief-taincies throughout Sierra Leone. However, a reader of Alldridge’s account might easily miss the fact that the twenty-six-year “interregnum” in Imperri had been the result of violent political conflict, including accusations of ritual murder. The latter provoked dozens of summary executions of those suspected of what the British referred to as acts of “cannibalism,” because the killings aimed at securing human fat and body parts for making powerful secret societies’ medicines. A few years before he witnessed the installation of the sokong, Alldridge himself had reported to the colonial secretary on the increasing incidence of “human sacrifice” in Imperri (quoted in Kalous 1974, 36–37).

But in his 1901 book, Alldridge mentions the “Human Leopard Society,” which was associated with these murders, in a chapter devoted to secret societies, without linking it to the troubling narratives of rumors of murders during the long interregnum. He notes in a later chapter that “the Imperri was the great center of this institution,” but he did not think it had been in existence for more than a few decades. In a 1894 report to the colonial secretary, Alldridge had suggested that assassinations by the Human Leopard Society had been practically unknown around 1871, when he first arrived in Sierra Leone as a trader. According to a local chief, however, the notion of a powerful “fetish” medicine that needed to be prepared with human substances took hold some five years later, in the midst of a conflict that broke out between Imperri and a neighboring chiefdom (cited in Kalous 1974, 36–37). In the 1880’s, after a rapid increase in the incidence of ritual murders, British colonial courts began to investigate and bring these cases to trial (Fyfe 1962, 442). In 1898, in large parts of the protectorate territory, the “Hut Tax War” broke out against British control and fiscal regulation over the region, and its suppression also drove the Human Leopard Society into dormancy, though isolated, sporadic ritual murders were reported up to Alldridge’s day (Alldridge 1901, 153–56; Governor Leslie Probyn, cited in Kalous 1974, 48).

The cycles of expanding violence were partly set in motion when a chief found evidence of human sacrifices in the territory under his or her
control, by the practice of calling in “Tongo players” to expose the perpetrators. These were ritual specialists who carried divining objects with which they sought to identify the murderers, from a list drawn up with the help of local spies. The punishment for the individuals singled out by the Tongo staff was death, often by burning alive (Alldridge 1901, 158).

In 1892, Alldridge had been sent to investigate an incident in Imperri, in which an estimated eighty people were burned to death as a result of Tongo players’ “cannibal-finding” practices. “The pyramid of calcined bones that I saw at the junction of two roads just outside Bogo was about four feet high,” he wrote, also noting that the very chief who had been responsible for calling in the Tongo players had been “one of the first to be condemned and burned by them” (Alldridge 1901, 159).

Thus ritual murder and its punishment displayed a circular chain of events similar to that of witchcraft crimes and accusations, and of witch-finding sessions in their aftermath, which also periodically traversed these areas: the very gesture of trying to put an end to the harm could bring suspicion upon the person calling for a remedy (e.g., Geschiere 1997, 57). It also shared with witchcraft the strange intimacy between victim and perpetrator: testimony and evidence collected by British medical examiners, district officers, and local chiefs in the wake of Leopard Society attacks often pointed to close kinship ties between them. Fathers “offered” one of their own children as sacrifice for their membership in the society (see Kalous 1974, 63), sometimes with the complicity of other relatives. This intimacy helped ensure that the phenomenon was slow in coming to the attention of British authorities when it first emerged, as it was easier to suppress knowledge of the disappearance of a family member when he or she was dispatched in secrecy, and with the collusion of other relatives. Finally, the events in Imperri of the 1890s also point to the links between the activities of human leopards—so called because they wore leopard skins and used a five-pronged metal contraption in attacking their victims that left marks similar to the claws of these wild animals—and times of heightened political insecurity and conflict (Pratten 2007, 9–14). Indeed, the phenomenon went beyond Sierra Leone: in 1945, Nigeria witnessed a similar case, which was investigated over the following three years by British colonial authorities (Pratten 2007).

More violence was to follow the 1896 chiefly installation witnessed by Alldridge, which put an end to the rampant insecurity and paranoia of the Leopard Society attacks and Tongo player raids. In 1898, after the Hut Tax War broke out across the protectorate in response to the
imposition of British rule, the sokong was convicted and hanged by the British for an especially brutal murder that took place during that conflict and involved the mutilation of William Hughes, a British subject and native assistant district commissioner (Fyfe 1962, 574; Kalous 1974, 6). This was in Bogo, the very same location where the “Tongo player” sessions took place that had resulted in all those deaths six years earlier. Alldridge, who after the establishment of the protectorate had become district commissioner for the Sherbro, accompanied a punitive expedition to the area after Hughes’s murder, burning and destroying several villages (cited in Kalous 1974, 44–45). Neighboring chiefs were also implicated in this and other massacres carried out during the war and were executed or exiled, thus leaving Imperri and the surrounding region once again without paramount chiefs, and in a state of insecurity.

One of my key concerns in some of the following chapters is to analyze analogous moments during the 1991–2002 civil war in Sierra Leone, when spates of violence linked to distinctive collective obsessions and anxieties about rumors of atrocities and violence began to take form and unfolded. Sometimes they faded away, while at other times they marked irreversible changes. It is a problem with which historians and anthropologists of war are familiar, particularly those focusing on the details of conflicts and their lived experiences as they unfold (e.g., Bloch 1921; Geffray 1990; Loëz 2010; Simons 1995). Some of the events and figures I examine in later chapters were grounded in a longer contested history of conflicts in the region, including the Human Leopard Society outbreaks of the late nineteenth century, which offered cultural blueprints and folk traditions that informed popular understandings of the civil war one century later.

Sierra Leoneans themselves, both past and present, in the press and in other public contexts, disagree about the extent to which ritual murders actually take place. This contrasts with the overpowering work staged by the frightening discourse about this form of violence—the suspicions, accusations, counteraccusations, rumors, and “confessions” that sometimes circulate during tense political conflicts. Scholars, too, have focused their attention on the political, cultural, and historical logic shaping the discourse and accusations of ritual murder (see Beattie 1915; MacCormack 1983; Kalous 1974; Richards 1996). Periodically, moral panics involving such cases have spread across the country, and in modern times these have been amplified by the national media and popular culture. One widely discussed case happened while I was in Sierra Leone in 1990 and involved the suspicious murder and mutilation of a young
pregnant woman. The victim was the niece of one and the daughter of the other of two main defendants named and found guilty of her death: respectively, a prominent Muslim man seeking the speakership in Panguma Chiefdom, where the position could lead to wealth through licensing of diamonds and precious tropical wood extraction in the territory, and his sister. The case went to trial in Freetown and was the subject of popular songs by two of the best-known performers in Mende-speaking Sierra Leone, Amie Kallon and Salia Koroma. The songs were played daily on national radio and sold briskly at the many cassette-duplicating shops in the country’s urban areas (see Ferme 2001b, 183–85). My point in bringing up these events is that, in the colonial and postcolonial histories of Sierra Leone, times of great political insecurity and crucial succession struggles for power in the chiefdoms sometimes saw outbreaks of ritual murders involving mutilations—or increased rumors about such events—and the fear they generated could set in motion moral panics and a climate of general paranoia (e.g., Ferme 1999). The panics were by no means rhetorical. People were put on trial, when named, and found guilty by the national courts as in the case of the candidate from the Panguma chiefdom. Traces of this history in the collective memory helped set the stage for similar events during the 1991–2002 civil war, during which the phantasm of colonial forms of inflicting pain returned more powerful than ever.

I now turn to the discrepancy between Alldridge’s multiple accounts of the 1896 events, and his use of images in them, which points to the fragmented, nonlinear workings of individual and collective memories of violence. As pointed out earlier, there was a gap between Alldridge’s professional reports and his first published book. His reports and letters to his superiors told of violent upheavals in Imperri during and after the “interregnum,” when the area had no settled political leadership. In these reports, the vacuum of signifiers of political leadership and power is the immediate reason for the atrocities. Alldridge never changed his mind about the fact that what he had witnessed were violent upheavals. What changed was his way of visualizing, of narrating, and therefore of understanding the reasons for the violent outbreak. Alldridge was not a naïve colonial spectator. On the contrary, he had on various occasions been directed to mediate or exact punishment in the ensuing conflicts as an agent of the British colonial government. Yet in his first published book, Alldridge did not link this vacuum of political power to the human leopard attacks and the “Tongo player” incident in Bogo. A photograph accompanying Alldridge’s reference to the “installation of
Belatedness

a chief” in his 1901 book portrays a large group of standing people, posing behind two seated figures—the new sokong and his speaker—and powerful leaders from neighboring territories with their retinues (fig. 4). The image’s caption singles out for special mention “four Tassos,” heads of the men’s secret Poro society, who “took a prominent part in the ceremony” (Alldridge 1901, 131), and whose headdress was made up of “human skulls and the thigh-bones . . . of defunct Tassos” (132). Alldridge then discussed the Poro and other key officers in the society in detail, and after the following page inserted another photograph, a close-up of the four Tassos who had presided over the chiefly installation ceremony (fig. 5).

In his second book, published in 1910, subsequent to a return visit to Sierra Leone after his retirement in England, the Imperri episode received a more detailed and sustained treatment in a whole chapter dedicated to “The Making of . . . a Sokong of Imperri.” Indeed, the dif-
ference is mapped visually on the photographs that this amateur photographer placed in each of the two books, as I discuss below. The title of Alldridge’s second book, *A Transformed Colony*, points to his perception that the country that he had first encountered in 1871 was, by his final visit, after the turn of the twentieth century, well on its way to developing into a modern, “civilized” nation. Structured as a journey into the interior on the newly built railway, Alldridge’s second book has much to say about the positive impact of roads and railroad in “opening up” the country and bringing produce to markets, about the progress in tapping the country’s “undeveloped wealth,” and about the ways in which the establishment of the British protectorate had freed the population of what he called the “shocking terrorism” of its prior existence (Alldridge 1910, vii).

The chapter dedicated to the making of the sokong describes the links between his selection and the Poro Society, in whose secret enclosure elders gathered for the chiefly election, and whose masquerade appears in public to announce the event. Over several pages, Alldridge