

# Plantation Life

Corporate Occupation  
in Indonesia's  
Oil Palm Zone

TANIA MURRAY LI  
and PUJO SEMEDI



Plantation Life

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Corporate Occupation  
in Indonesia's Oil Palm Zone

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**TANIA MURRAY LI  
AND PUJO SEMEDI**

**DUKE**

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# Preface

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PUJO: A plantation is a giant, an inefficient and lazy giant, but still a giant. It takes up a huge amount of space. It is greedy and careless, destroying everything around. It is alien, strange, and unpredictable. It is human, but you cannot form a normal human relationship with it. It can trample you, eat you, or drain your strength then spit you out. It guards its treasure. You cannot tame it or make it go away. You have to live with it. But it is a bit stupid, so if you are clever you can steal from it.

TANIA: A plantation is a machine that assembles land, labor, and capital in huge quantities to produce monocrops for a world market. It is intrinsically colonial, based on the assumption that the people on the spot are incapable of efficient production. It takes life under control: space, time, flora, fauna, water, chemicals, people. It is owned by a corporation and run by managers along bureaucratic lines.

At some point in our collaboration when we asked each other, “What is a plantation?” we came up with these two different answers. Like most of our exchanges, when we talked through the two definitions, we concluded that both were useful for our analysis as they pushed us to reflect. Why the giant? Why the machine? Can it be both? Our definitions were different because they were the products of situated knowledge: our prior experiences, the books we read, the paths we traveled, and the affective hold “plantation life” had on us. Tania spent her teenage years in Singapore. Her family used

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to drive to Malaysia on weekends, taking the old road that passed through rubber smallholdings interspersed with villages. It was a peopled landscape in which productive activities and village life were entwined. Around 1990 the new highway passed through monocrop oil palm plantations: mile after mile of monotonous palm, with no villages or people in sight. Every time she drove along it Tania experienced this landscape as machinic, threatening, and desolate. It also made her curious. How did these plantations come to be there? What happened to the villages that were there before? Someone must be doing the work, but where were the workers and how did they live? Tania also conducted undergraduate research upriver in Sarawak where Dayak farmers were concerned that the arrival of oil palm plantations occupying their land would turn them into wage workers, subject to someone else's command. How to read and navigate plantation landscapes became a theme of our Kalimantan research (figure P.1).

**FIGURE P.1** Dayak Village on the Tangkos River



For our first trip together up the Tangkos River, a tributary of Kalimantan's mighty Kapuas, Pujo organized a boat. The huge trees and small hamlets along the riverbank reminded Tania of the interior of Sarawak circa 1980, but the gentle view from the boat was deceptive. Fifty meters (55 yards) back from the river, just out of sight, were thousands of hectares of monocrop palm. Had we taken the plantation-built road instead of the river, we would have seen no forest and no hamlets, just oil palm all the way. Malay and Dayak hamlets like this one are tiny enclaves excised from the plantation concession where the original landholders continue to live in their riverside homes but have no access to farmland and no guarantee of plantation jobs. PHOTO: PUJO SEMEDI.

Pujo's definition was inspired by the giant metaphors used by Indonesian intellectuals Rendra and Mangunwijaya to characterize the rapacious crony capitalism of General Suharto's New Order rule.<sup>1</sup> It also came from his knowledge of how plantation corporations appear to villagers and low-level workers (as persons writ large, with intention and force), and his intimate knowledge of how plantations work.<sup>2</sup> He grew up on a tea plantation in Java where his father was the head of transport, and his mother taught at the plantation primary school. For him the vast fields of monocrops that Tania found alienating were both normal and good. He noticed that the children of tea pickers came to school in torn clothes, without shoes, and were malnourished; the children of managers lived in better houses and wore better clothes than he did. He felt pity for the one, and a desire to emulate the other.

When Pujo returned to the tea plantation to conduct post-doctoral research, he discovered another order behind the one he had experienced as a child. This was the order of the giant and the thieves. Plantation archives showed the locations of villages that had been displaced when the plantation occupied their land, and he talked to former workers who had retired without pensions, thrown out like old rags. He found out that the plantation had seldom made a profit during a century of operation. This made him curious. What kind of business can routinely lose money yet still survive? A buried clay pipe (figure P.2), together with a hint from a retired foreman—"the plantation was robbed night and day for decades"—set Pujo's inquiry on a new path.<sup>3</sup>

This history from Java opened up for us the question of how a plantation corporation could be an occupying force (like a giant) and enroll differently situated actors (villages, workers, managers) who both support and steal from it. It was a pattern that emerged strongly when we began our joint research in Kalimantan. Pujo recognized it from our first day, when we witnessed plantation workers sitting in the popular riverside coffee stalls from 9:00 AM in the morning: "these people are all stealing." What surprised Pujo was not that workers stole time but their brazenness: the workers were wearing their official uniforms, publicly performing their disregard for plantation discipline.

In the Javanese plantation Pujo studied, theft was routine but somewhat disguised; it was also euphemized and embedded in moral evaluations. Dutch managers paid themselves a lavish salary and bonuses, blaming losses on coffee leaf rust disease. Native foremen marked up the price of low-quality manure, a practice that continued after the plantation was nationalized in 1958. Foreman manipulated labor by sending company workers to their



FIGURE P.2 The Pipe



On a visit to the tea plantation with Tania, Pujo stopped his ancient jeep on a steep plantation road and pointed out a broken clay pipe in a ditch. The pipe was laid in 1882 to flush coffee berries from the top fields down to a processing mill 8 kilometers (5 miles) below. The reason was theft: plantation workers, cart haulers, and surrounding villagers colluded to steal the plantation's coffee berries. Sealed in a clay pipe, the berries would be safe during the entire journey from the top of the plantation to the bottom. Theft continued, however, because thieves broke the clay pipe, and an even more expensive steel pipe did not stop them. The problem of theft was partially solved when the owners converted the plantation from coffee to tea, for which there was no local market. PHOTO: PUJO SEMEDI.

own fields, by adding ghost workers to their work gang (*nggundul*, Javanese for bald heads), or by inflating the number of working days in their section (*ngerol*, acting). They cheated workers by falsifying the weight of the baskets used by tea pickers; pickers also cheated, putting freshly plucked leaves under the rain to increase their weight. Stealing from the corporation was backed by a general sense that the corporation was both rich and wasteful. Workers did not call this practice stealing (*nyolong*) but *ngutil*—Javanese for paring a wart, i.e., removing something that is of no use to its owner but potentially useful to someone else. Managers called theft by workers theft and attempted to police it, but workers only laughed: “Thieves always outsmart police.”

Theft from subordinates was understood by both parties as a natural consequence of hierarchy: a foreman had a right to some extra food, called *pangan mandor*. A foreman's cut caused resentment when it exceeded the “normal”

amount. When workers talked about stealing by managers, they said *angkut-angkut*, Indonesian for “carrying something away.” They called a very corrupt manager *wong rosa*, Javanese for a strong person, someone capable of carrying a heavy load. Among themselves managers did not say corruption but “gathering vitamins and nutritious supplements,” suggesting that their rank entitled them to a diet of high quality. When a colleague was called by the plantation’s internal audit office, they said he had a problem (in Indonesian, *kena masalah*). This meant he had taken too much, causing intense gossip that made the internal auditors look stupid if they did nothing. Most of the time the outcome was light disciplinary action such as a temporary transfer to a nonjob or “dry position” without a flow of cash, or early retirement. Among day laborers with only outright stealing as a way to earn personal benefit, the rule was simply not to get caught red-handed.

Pujo’s ethnographic and historical research on the tea plantation left him feeling very sad, rather embarrassed, and slightly amused. The amusement

**FIGURE P.3** Arrivals



Arrival narratives figured prominently in the students’ field notes, enabling us to see the plantation zone through their eyes. Most of them imagined Kalimantan as a land of exotic tribes and rich tropical forests, but they were disappointed. The eighteen-hour trip on a slow boat up the busy Kapuas River led them into an industrial zone with bauxite mines left and right, cut timber floating downriver in huge log rafts, bustling trading towns, and endless plantations. When the students arrived at our research site, Javanese plantation workers warned them that the native Dayaks could be dangerous, a racialized caricature they had to navigate alongside the unfamiliar terrain. PHOTO: PUJO SEMEDI.

came from the richly ironic language people used to describe their world. The embarrassment came from seeing his friends and informants do improper things. The sadness came from a sense of wasted opportunity: his research forced him to recognize that for more than a century Indonesia's natural wealth had been looted not only by foreigners but also by its own people, a pattern he saw repeated in Kalimantan. But Pujo combined sadness with anger: anger directed toward the giants that occupy people's land, destroy livelihoods, and accumulate wealth while turning everyone who interacts with them into thieves.

Our book explores the forms of life produced by corporate occupation of Indonesia's oil palm plantation zone. We conducted the research in the period 2010–15, together with more than a hundred students from our two universities who each spent one to twelve months in the research site (figure p.3). We describe our collaborative fieldwork methods in the appendix. For now, we invite readers to travel with us into the plantation zone as we attempt to make sense of the forms of life that emerge there.

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# Introduction

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A plantation is a machine for assembling land, labor, and capital under centralized management for the purpose of making a profit; it is also a political technology that orders territories and populations, produces new subjects, and makes new worlds. The enslavement of Africans to work on plantations in the Americas produced novel social formations throughout the Black Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> Slave plantations organized production and processing on an industrial scale and pioneered the “high modern” management of space, time, and task long before northern manufacturing.<sup>2</sup> Sugar, coffee, and tea produced in tropical “factories in the fields” furnished cheap pleasures to working classes in Europe, energizing the Industrial Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Plantations were also the cornerstone of European colonial expansion in Asia and Africa in the period 1870–1940 as monopoly capital went global in search of mega profits.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary plantation expansion is no less world-making and its scale is unprecedented. Since 2000 plantation-based production of sugar has expanded massively in Brazil; and in Indonesia and Malaysia millions of hectares of forest and mixed farmlands have been cleared by plantation corporations to grow oil palm. Crude palm oil, the commodity these plantations produce, is a key ingredient in mass-produced junk food, detergents, cosmetics, and cooking oil as well as biofuels.<sup>5</sup> Half of the products in Euro-American supermarkets contain palm oil, and it makes these products cheaper.<sup>6</sup> Indonesia, the focus of our research, produces 50 percent of the world’s supply of palm oil, and much of it—around 60 percent—is exported to India, where it is popular as an affordable cooking oil.<sup>7</sup> Palm oil produces extraordinary profits

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for plantation corporations and involves around fifteen million people in the “plantation life” that our book explores.<sup>8</sup>

Viewed from afar, plantations serve as icons of modernity and orderly development, sometimes tinged with patriotic pride. Their neatly aligned rows of crops and deployment of land and labor on a vast scale are claims to productive efficiency and technical mastery. In Indonesia, managers who attend the College of Plantation Training (LPP) read works by Max Weber on the virtues of modern bureaucracy and rational planning. As it turns out, the evidence on plantation efficiency is mixed: in much of the world crops that were once grown on plantations are now grown on small farms that are often highly efficient in relation to both land and labor, and much easier to manage.<sup>9</sup> Yet arguments for the superior efficiency of large farms and plantations are endlessly repeated and periodically renewed both nationally and on a global scale. In 2011, for example, a World Bank report argued that half the world’s potentially arable land was unused and much of the rest was underutilized. It backed up this claim with maps and graphs that characterized parts of the world in terms of their “yield gap,” framed as the difference between the dollar value per hectare of the crops small-scale farmers currently produce and the potential dollar value under efficient monocropping. The report argued that inefficient land use was not just wasteful; it was environmentally suspect: concentrating production on efficient farms would create jobs, help feed a burgeoning global population, and protect forest and grassland to mitigate climate change.<sup>10</sup>

Supporters of Indonesia’s oil palm corporations defend their expansion in terms of the globally circulating efficiency narrative: palm oil feeds the world and should be produced on massive, modern plantations.<sup>11</sup> Based on such claims, plantation corporations have been permitted to occupy around 40 percent of Indonesia’s farmland and squeeze out small mixed farms.<sup>12</sup> Yet, we argue, it is not agronomy or productive efficiency that dictate plantation dominance, it is politics: political economy, political technology, and the order of impunity that characterizes Indonesia’s political milieu.

Starting from political economy, critical research on the so-called land-grab sparked by the food and financial crisis of 2007–9 brought attention to the renewed interest of transnational corporations in extracting profits from rural spaces. Studies showed that national corporations are also involved, and both foreign and national corporations receive ample state support.<sup>13</sup> These studies paid particular attention to the losses that corporations impose on rural spaces: loss of customary lands, flexible rural livelihoods, diverse ecosystems, and healthy forests to mitigate climate change. Complementing

inquiries focused on profits extracted and losses imposed, *Plantation Life* offers a grounded ethnographic account of the social, economic, and political relations that plantation corporations set in place when they transform vast rural spaces into plantation zones, and of the forms of life they generate.

Our field-based research conducted from 2010 to 2015 focused on two plantations in Tanjung, an oil palm-saturated subdistrict of Sanggau, West Kalimantan.<sup>14</sup> One was Natco, a 5,000-hectare unit of the state-owned plantation corporation PTPN. It operated as a semi-enclosed world in which managers exercised tight control over resident workers. To the tasks of production and the generation of profit, Natco added an expansive social mandate of a utopic kind rather like twentieth-century company towns in the United States, Fordlandia in Brazil, and mines of the Zambian copper belt where workers and their families were provided with facilities to lead exemplary modern lives.<sup>15</sup> Space, time, and mentality were taken under a paternalistic form of corporate guidance.<sup>16</sup> The second plantation was Priva, owned by a private Indonesian corporation with a concession of 39,000 hectares. It had more porous boundaries and fewer social goals. Some workers lived in Priva housing while others were recruited from surrounding villages and commuted daily to work. Much of the production was undertaken by local and migrant out-growers who were bound to Priva until they paid off the debt they assumed for preparation of their 2 hectare (5 acre) oil palm plots. Wedged within and between these two plantations were the hamlets of former landholders who eked out a living from tiny residual patches of land and casual plantation work, people whose struggles were central to the plantation zone as we came to understand it.

The site we studied was specific and we embrace its specificity for the insights it offers on the situated workings of corporate capitalism today. While the elements that comprise plantations are generic (land, labor, capital, seeds, chemicals, technology, markets, management, legal standing), their configuration at particular conjunctures is always unique. Globally circulating capital might seem to be the most generic element, but money only becomes capital when it is brought into relation with land and labor in their concrete forms. As Mezzadra and Neilson argue, every expression of contemporary capitalism is specific, making ethnographic approaches well suited to explore the “spatial, social, legal and political formations with which capital must grapple as it becomes enmeshed in dense constellations of flesh and earth.”<sup>17</sup> The dense constellations that both enable corporate profits and generate novel forms of life—plantation life—are the focus of our account.

Our inquiry weaves together two threads of analysis that are often kept apart. One thread drawn from Marx is political economy where the guiding

questions concern the modes in which capital, land, and labor are assembled to generate profit for some and impoverishment for others.<sup>18</sup> We build on the work of scholars who examine the global circulation of capital, land appropriation, agrarian class formation, and labor regimes.<sup>19</sup> The second thread drawn from Foucault is political technology where the focus is on the production of subjects and the government of territories and populations. Political technologies, Foucault argues, are not cut from whole cloth. They comprise “discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, moral and philanthropic propositions.”<sup>20</sup> They are pulled together to meet not one overriding purpose (e.g., corporate profit) but a number of purposes (production, revenue, development, order, prestige, well-being) that do not always align.<sup>21</sup> We draw especially on scholarly work that combines these approaches to study political ecologies and power-laden landscapes where the value of different land uses is under dispute, colonial and contemporary technologies of racial rule, and the making of resource frontiers as spaces full of potential for productivity and profit.<sup>22</sup>

Iterative research, reading, and analysis led us to theorize the constitutive role of corporate occupation, imperial debris, and extractive regimes in the formation of plantation life. In the following sections we introduce these theorizations and outline the traction they offer for our account.

## **Corporate Occupation**

Corporate occupation, we suggest, is the principal political technology that sets the conditions for life in Indonesia’s plantation zone. Here we parse its components, examining first the plantation corporation and its mandates, then the insights afforded by a focus on corporate occupation.

### Corporate Mandates

Economic geographer Joshua Barkan draws attention to the sovereign powers that governments since the Middle Ages have delegated to corporations to enable them to meet a dual mandate: to generate profits *and* serve a public purpose.<sup>23</sup> Corporations have built and run railways and water systems, cities and universities; they have organized imperial trade and the settlement of colonies; and for hundreds of years they have owned and managed plantations. To meet their dual mandate, corporations are delegated the sovereign’s right to privatize public wealth (land, water, forest) and to cause harms to

people and species that stand in their way. Assessing corporate harms, Bar-kan reframes Foucault's crucial question about biopower, "Given that this power's objective is essentially to make live, how can it let die?" to ask, "How [is it that] a global order of corporate capitalism, created and repeatedly justified for its abilities 'to improve life . . .,' results in a system that routinely denies housing, clothes, food, work, and essential medicines; that exposes populations to unsafe living conditions and environmental hazards?"<sup>24</sup> We make the tension between state-enabled corporate profit, purported public benefit, and licensed harm a cornerstone of our analysis.

Indonesia's laws make the public purpose of delegating sovereign powers to plantation corporations explicit. The 2007 Investment Law begins "in consideration of the need to promote a society which is just and prosperous as stipulated by . . . the Constitution there must be continuous national economic development." Hence the law facilitates foreign and domestic investment to meet national development goals. The 2014 Plantation Law number 39) states that "the earth, water and natural resources contained in the territory of the Republic of Indonesia [are] a gift from God Almighty to be exploited and used for the greatest prosperity and welfare of the people." It notes the capacity of plantations to develop the national economy and bring about people's prosperity and welfare in a fair and equitable way (*secara berkeadilan*).

Indonesia's focus on corporate-led growth as the centerpiece of the national development strategy ramped up in 2020 with an Omnibus Bill to Create Jobs which drastically overhauled land, labor, and environmental laws to ease foreign investment. The bill was met with public protests, and many Indonesians read words about corporate-led development and its contribution to the "people's prosperity and wellbeing" with suspicion. Yet there is no sustained national debate on what constitutes the people's well-being or how best to accomplish it. The current maldistribution of wealth in Indonesia is catastrophic: Indonesia is the third most unequal country in the world (after Russia and Thailand), where four men own more wealth than 100 million people.<sup>25</sup> Yet the position of the oligarchy is hardly challenged, and the neoliberal narrative, according to which corporations generate wealth that trickles down to secure "the people's prosperity," generally prevails. Plantation corporations thrive in this milieu.

In the name of public benefit, Indonesia's plantation corporations are granted many privileges. Laws favor corporations and grant them access to subsidized land, credit, bailouts, and other forms of "corporate welfare" that absolve them from the capitalist imperative to operate efficiently or be competitive in market terms.<sup>26</sup> Their privileges and monopolies are embed-



ded in what anthropologist Hannah Appel calls the “licit life of capitalism,” the one backed by laws, contracts, and corporate reports.<sup>27</sup> As we will show, corporations are also supported by officials and politicians at every level of the state apparatus who are officially tasked (and privately compensated) to smooth their path. Government agencies are supposed to regulate corporations, but their activities are ultimately an internal matter—a sovereign supervising its own instrument, a head directing its hand.<sup>28</sup> Crucially, the production of harm is a licensed part of the corporate mandate. Indonesia’s plantation corporations monopolize land and water; they destroy forests and exude chemicals; they burden out-growers (contract farmers) with debt; and they cast aside people and species for which they have no use. These harms are well known but they are normalized as the anticipated but uncounted cost that must be paid to bring prosperity to remote regions.

Building on the work of philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Barkan explores “the paradox of the sovereign ban, in which legal exceptions and the abandonment of populations are justified as vital to the security of political communities.”<sup>29</sup> We examine the workings of this paradox in Tanjung’s plantation zone, where corporations ejected former landholders and abandoned old and injured workers without means of livelihood. For Barkan abandoned people meet Agamben’s criteria for *homo sacer*: they can be killed or left to die, but their death is not recognized as a sacrifice because their lives have no economic or moral value.

In Tanjung, plantation managers selected which people and species to nurture or abandon. To push back, unwanted people used theft and extortion to extract paltry shares of plantation wealth; they also attempted to rework the boundary of the corporations’ moral responsibility and insisted that the sacrifice corporations imposed on them be recognized and compensated. Sacrificing oneself for the common good has value in Indonesia—fighters who sacrificed their lives to achieve independence from the Dutch are one example. But a wasted sacrifice, called in Indonesian *mati konyol* (pointless death), betrays the sacrificiant and leaves a bad feeling. We explore this betrayal as a material, embodied, and affectively charged situation.

## Occupation

At the heart of the betrayal we encountered in Tanjung’s plantation zone was the overwhelming power of corporations that had been installed as an occupying force. The Indonesian term for occupation of land is *pendudukan*; for control of a territory and its population by a powerful alien force without

consent it is *penjajahan*, the term used for Dutch colonial rule. When we heard villagers say, “We are colonized by the corporation” (*kami dijajah perusahaan*), they were flagging illegitimacy: rule without consent that injured them in various ways. They were also noting the reliance of both colonial powers and corporations on an extreme social division that ascribes differential value to people and the places they inhabit. Villagers whose land was targeted for corporate occupation had little or no say in the matter. They were not deemed capable of participating in a dialogue with the officials who issued corporate land concessions, or with plantation managers. As in colonial times the extreme social divide that separated officials and managers from villagers rendered the concept of such a dialogue absurd.

The term “occupation” usually refers to foreign military seizure of a territory and the subjugation of its resident population. We stretch the term to theorize corporate presence in the plantation zone because it enables us to explore three key relationships. First, it draws attention to novel spatial and political arrangements: the forceful seizure and occupation of territory by a corporation, the presence of armed police and guards tasked with protecting corporate property, and the reorganization of rule over people and territory. As scholars examining occupied Palestine have noted, the spatial and political formats of occupation are plural.<sup>30</sup> In Tanjung plantation cores comprise a continuous space with a single boundary and a resident population governed by corporate management intensely and directly. Out-grower areas where farming households produce oil palm fruit to feed corporate mills are governed indirectly through a political and material infrastructure imposed by the corporations (block layout, roads, co-ops, credit schemes, harvest schedules, and so forth). Interstitial areas and remnant hamlets (called enclaves) look superficially like ordinary villages and have had no formal change in their legal status, but they too are occupied in quite specific ways.

The patchwork spatial arrangements of the plantation zone make occupation by corporations quite different from occupation by haciendas, a difference recognized in a comparative study by anthropologists Sydney Mintz and Eric Wolf. The hacienda format grants landlords formal control over huge areas of land and state-like powers over the entire resident population.<sup>31</sup> Production is secondary. With plantations the priority is reversed. In Indonesia it is *only* the state’s production mandate that is formally delegated to plantation corporations. Other public purposes such as the extension of territorial control, the management of populations, and the development of remote regions are treated as by-products.<sup>32</sup>

The novel political arrangements set in place by corporate occupation are undeclared. Plantation corporations have no legal responsibility or jurisdiction outside their concession borders. Nevertheless, they curtail villagers' access to land, water, and livelihood and remake their political institutions to conform to corporate requirements. Like villagers in occupied Palestine described by Saree Makdisi, villagers in a plantation zone are subjected to a ban without a ban—an exclusion from “normal citizenship” that is not legally inscribed. Corporations and their state allies engage in what Makdisi calls the “denial of denial”—denial that an occupation occurred or that an occupied population is present or that anyone has suffered a loss.<sup>33</sup>

The implications of denial are especially profound in Indonesia because of the way citizenship works. Villagers living outside plantation boundaries are classified as ordinary citizens (*rakyat biasa*) who enjoy “normal” legal rights under the constitution including “human rights” upheld by a national commission (Komnas HAM). Yet ethnographic research has shown that effective citizenship in Indonesia is not primarily a matter of law.<sup>34</sup> The term *rakyat* flags both legal rights and a relationship of acute hierarchy (sometimes called feudal) in which ordinary people must rely on the mediation of people in power (*orang besar, orang kuasa*) to advance their projects or provide protection when their survival is under threat. People in power are expected to help “small people” (*rakyat biasa, orang kecil*) to solve problems. No ordinary Indonesian, rural or urban, would approach a site of higher authority (a government or corporate office, a court) without being accompanied by, or bearing a letter of recommendation from, an official or person of power who can vouch for them.

The language of Indonesia's constitution confirms hierarchy. It does not focus on the rights and entitlements of citizens but on the duty of the state (politicians and officials) to furnish benefits such as peace, prosperity, and development. It is a state modeled on the family in which parents have duties but children have few rights.<sup>35</sup> It is intrinsically infantilizing and it leaves “small people,” who are shorn of protection, radically exposed. Under corporate occupation, government officials, politicians, and local leaders back the corporations and “small people” are on their own.

Second, theorizing corporate presence as occupation helps to account for the novel social positions, subjectivities, and moral evaluations that emerge when people are conscripted to a form of life—a plantation life—the conditions of which they cannot control. It is well known that in zones of military occupation government officials and village leaders collaborate with the occupying force; ordinary residents become complicit; people who

are initially intent on removing the occupier settle into modes of coexistence; and uprisings have limited goals. Moral evaluations morph as stealing from the occupier becomes routine. Theft may take the multiple forms James Scott identified as the “weapons of the weak,” but predatory practices that target neighbors are also defended on the grounds that everyone needs to hustle. Wealth, and the practices people use to acquire it, become a domain of contention in which the boundary between the licit and the illicit is prized open and allegiances fracture and realign.<sup>36</sup> Our research in Tanjung indicates that military occupation and corporate occupation operate in a similar way. Workers and villagers in the plantation zone did not mobilize to remove corporations; local elites both collaborated and stole from them and ordinary people took what they could. Corporate giants were firmly installed yet beset by thieves from all sides.

Third, conceptualizing corporations as an occupying force resonates with the dual mandate of both colonial and military rule. Occupying powers often present themselves as a benevolent force intent on improving the lives of the subject population and treat the seizure of assets and profit-making as secondary. As an occupying force, plantation corporations are supposed to bring prosperity and introduce the subject population to new and improved ways of living. Like the colonial technologies examined by David Scott, corporate occupation is “concerned above all with disabling old forms of life by systematically breaking down their conditions and with constructing in their place new conditions so as to enable—indeed, to oblige—new forms of life to come into being.”<sup>37</sup> In the idiom of Talal Asad and David Scott, residents in Tanjung’s plantation zone were “conscripts of modernity”: their previous ways of organizing their landscapes and livelihoods, their families and communities, were thoroughly disabled and they were obliged to develop new ones under conditions the occupiers imposed.<sup>38</sup>

To trace the contours of subject formation under corporate occupation we pay attention to the emergence of novel desires, dispositions, and institutions. We attend to the futures that workers and villagers in the plantation zone imagined for coming generations, and the pathways they saw as open or closed. We ask what they considered to be a “rightful share” of plantation wealth—the share due to them as original landholders, workers, or neighbors of a plantation.<sup>39</sup> Unsurprisingly, we found that the benefits of the promised modernity were unevenly distributed, as some people enjoyed a full package of modern facilities while others were deprived of access to even basic means of livelihood. People who were excluded from benefits did not accept their relegation to a permanent waiting room, or to the peculiar temporality

identified by Elizabeth Povinelli as “the future anterior tense,” in which problems will have been dealt with “from the perspective of the last man.”<sup>40</sup> But their non-acceptance of relegation was not heroic. As Povinelli observes, for people who have been seriously harmed survival is an accomplishment. They may disappear from public discourse but they persist in living, they endure; hence the form taken by their “plantation life” is a crucial part of our analysis.

## Imperial Debris

Imperial debris is the second pillar of our theorization of plantation life. *Imperial debris* is Ann Stoler’s label for “the rot that remains” from the political technologies of colonial rule.<sup>41</sup> Behind the dual mandate extended to plantation corporations past and present is a racialized proposition that has been embedded in Indonesian law and political discourse since colonial times: corporations must make land productive because Indonesian farmers are not capable of doing this on their own. Racialism, defined by Cedric Robinson as “the legitimation and corroboration of social organization as natural by reference to the ‘racial’ components of its elements,” was not eradicated with the removal of Indonesia’s white colonial masters.<sup>42</sup> Rather, it looped around remnants of Indonesia’s version of feudalism, was entrenched in law, and continues to be enacted in the everyday comportment of “big people” toward people they regard as social inferiors.

Robinson theorized “racial capitalism” as a format that both builds on and produces race-like divides as it marshals land and labor to generate profit. He noted the “immense expenditures of psychic and intellectual energies” that were required to create the figure of “the Slav,” “the Irishman,” and “the Negro” as persons naturally suited for brute labor, and to produce “Ireland” and “Africa” as wild spaces available for appropriation.<sup>43</sup> His insights continue to have global traction. In colonial Southeast Asia the production of empty spaces ripe for corporate occupation and the selection of bodies suited to manual labor centered on the “myth of the lazy native” famously explored by Syed Hussein Alatas.<sup>44</sup> According to this myth, whichever natives were present on the spot were sure to be incompetent farmers and unsuitable workers. Colonial officials used these racialized assessments to justify the installation of plantations and the importation of migrants to do plantation work.

The myth of the lazy native continues to embed an extreme social divide at the core of Indonesia’s plantation life today. Government officials, plantation managers, and many ordinary plantation workers whom we met in

Tanjung were convinced that they were utterly different from and superior to local villagers. Education and concepts of ethnocultural pluralism may modify the social divide to some degree, but a rot remains.<sup>45</sup> Indonesians do not usually call this deeply hierarchical social divide racial; they call it feudal or colonial, terms that recognize the divide as a social fact but hint that in modern Indonesia where the constitution declares all citizens to be equal, such a divide is not quite legitimate. Beyond everyday comportment, it is in the fields of land law and assessments of productivity that the imperial debris of racial rule is most deeply entrenched.

## Land Law

As Brenna Bhandar has shown, racial (or race-like) divisions are constitutive of colonial and contemporary land regimes in which the association between a kind of person, a kind of land use, and the inferiority of customary property rights is circular.<sup>46</sup> In Indonesia the chain of reasoning goes like this: the national land agency grants concessions to plantation corporations on the grounds that they can utilize the land efficiently; implicitly, customary landholders cannot use land efficiently; hence their customary land rights do not qualify as full property rights; their low productivity and incomplete property rights confirm that they are people of low value; as people of low value they cannot be expected to use land efficiently, and they can legitimately be displaced by corporations.<sup>47</sup>

Drawing directly on the colonial land law of 1870, Indonesia's 1960 land law (which is still in force) treats much of the nation's land mass as state land that can be granted on concession to plantation, mining, and timber corporations. The law offers very weak protection for customary land rights that may be recognized only if they do not interfere with national economic development. Vigorous campaigning by activists has pressured the Ministries of Forestry and Land Affairs to create procedures for the formal recognition of customary land rights, but the conditions are difficult to meet and require decades of NGO facilitation and significant funds. By 2020 such rights had only been recognized for a tiny portion of the 40 million hectares of state-claimed forest land that activists argue should be returned to the jurisdiction of indigenous or customary communities (*masyarakat adat*).<sup>48</sup>

Villagers who do not claim membership in customary communities are also exposed to land seizure. Circa 2015 formal individual land titles issued by the national land agency covered only 20 percent of rural farmland parcels; for the rest, tenure continues to be based on custom.<sup>49</sup> Villagers have a clear

sense of what is theirs; they have customary processes to resolve disputes that arise among themselves; and their land rights may receive vague and partial forms of state recognition in formats like tax receipts, but their rights are not strong enough to prevent a corporation bearing a government-issued concession from occupying their land.<sup>50</sup> Officials acknowledge that corporate land acquisition is often handled incorrectly: consent is falsified or coerced, compensation is inadequate, prices are manipulated, and corporations make promises they fail to keep. But they do not recognize the colonial basis of the land law that discounts customary land rights and turns all corporations into vehicles of occupation. As Christian Lund points out, corporations complete the “primitive accumulation” that was already accomplished in law in 1870; they make the legal seizure real as their bulldozers clear homes and farms from land to which the state laid claim long ago. “Theft,” Lund writes, “was laundered in advance.”<sup>51</sup>

### Productivity

In Indonesia official assessments of who is or is not a productive farmer continue to be replete with imperial debris. Colonial officials acknowledged that farmers in Java and Bali were skilled at producing rice in their intricately terraced fields, but they had no respect for farmers who grew rice by the extensive forest-fallow or swidden method that they saw as wasteful. Their assessment was entrenched in transmigration, a program of internal colonization initiated in the 1920s when the colonial government sent land-short farmers from crowded islands to settle on the so-called outer islands where land was said to be underutilized. After independence, state-sponsored transmigration continued and new policies supplemented the goal of population distribution with an explicit mandate of social and economic development.<sup>52</sup> Contemporary transmigrants sent to remote areas are supposed to model modern farming techniques for emulation by local farmers who are still defined as backward. Unsurprisingly, when transmigrants arrived in Tanjung, local Malay and Dayak villagers regarded them as elements of the occupation: they occupied villagers’ customary land and their presence, together with their presumed superior farming skills, embodied an insulting claim that villagers native to Kalimantan are social inferiors.

When it came to global market crops, colonial authorities readily dismissed native production as inefficient. Yet scholars have shown that Indonesia’s small-scale farmers have been adept and enthusiastic producers of global market crops for three centuries. As Clifford Geertz and many

others have recognized, colonial agrarian policies were not designed to pull reluctant villagers into the market economy; their purpose was to confine villagers to subsistence pursuits and protect state-backed corporations from local competition.<sup>53</sup> Circa 1700, farmers in Java eagerly planted coffee to take advantage of a new export market. They were successful until their production was suppressed by the Netherlands East Indies Corporation (VOC, 1602–1799) that imposed a monopoly on trade in coffee and set prices so low that farmers burned their coffee bushes in disgust. From then on they had to be coerced to meet quotas for coffee and, later, for sugar, but wherever they were paid a fair market price their productivity doubled.<sup>54</sup>

In the 1870s when the colonial government started to grant plantation concessions to foreign investors, the rationale was again productivity, but planters were nervous. In Sumatra planters lobbied colonial authorities to forbid local villagers and former plantation workers from producing tobacco for fear they would outcompete plantations. In Java planters insisted that local farmers be discouraged from planting tea. In the 1920s farmers in Sumatra and Kalimantan adopted rubber cultivation so eagerly they put the less efficient rubber plantation corporations into decline. During the 1930s Depression smallholder rubber production was deliberately suppressed, this time to sustain the market price for struggling corporations.<sup>55</sup> As Michael Dove has long insisted, the privileges and monopolies granted to contemporary oil palm corporations at the expense of willing and productive smallholders continue this colonial motif.<sup>56</sup> Plantation corporations are not especially efficient producers nor do they bring development to remote regions, but they are very effective technologies for generating and extracting streams of revenue and profit, the topic to which we now turn.

## **Extractive Regimes**

Our theorization of extractive regimes as constitutive elements of plantation life hinges on the recognition that extractive regimes are plural. One purpose of plantations is to extract a global market product from natural elements such as soil, seeds, water, and human labor. Another is to extract profit for corporations, their shareholders, and the banks that finance them. A third is to extract revenue to fill state coffers and generate foreign exchange. A fourth, of particular relevance in contemporary Indonesia, is the extraction of unearned income (rent), which is funneled to diverse parties both within and far beyond the plantation zone. These four elements work together in different configurations. Here we outline the contours of the extractive regimes



that were set in place through Indonesia's plantation history and the violence of 1965–66, contemporary practices of illicit extraction and the order of impunity in which they thrive, and the impressive profits that draw transnational and national corporations into oil palm production.

### Plantation Histories

In Indonesia's so-called liberal period that began in 1870, the colonial government granted concessions to plantation corporations so they could generate revenues to pay for colonial administration and yield profits for shareholders in the mother country. Yet as the colonial historian Furnivall observed the revenues collected were outstripped by planters' demands for infrastructure to support their enterprise. Hence shareholders profited handsomely, but state coffers remained bare, and there were never sufficient funds for native development, a problem that still continues.<sup>57</sup> Java's late colonial plantations were dedicated to sugar, coffee, and tea. They covered 1.3 million hectares by the 1920s and recruited workers from surrounding areas on a "free" (untied) basis.<sup>58</sup> In Sumatra by 1930 the plantation belt covered almost a million contiguous hectares. The primary crop was tobacco, followed by rubber, which was introduced around 1910.

Labor law in the form of Coolie Ordinances bound workers to corporations through contracts backed by a system of debt and coercive enforcement. Workers were recruited initially from China and later from Java. Managers were licensed to mete out physical punishment, backed by penal codes that classified worker actions such as insufficient effort or attempting to abscond as criminal. Colonial laws permitted plantation corporations to make their own rules and protected them from interference in their "internal affairs." Colonial officials, Dutch politicians, and other critics who were concerned about the fate of contract workers or land-squeezed native farmers struggled to make headway against corporations that held sovereign powers as the designated production machines of colonial rule.<sup>59</sup>

State support for plantation corporations wavered for a period. During the Japanese occupation in 1942–45, foreign planters were interned, and workers started to plant food crops and build dwellings on concession land. Planters who attempted to return during or after the independence war (1946–49) faced stiff opposition from these workers-turned-farmers. Sukarno, president of the new republic, saw foreign-owned plantations as vehicles for continued (neo)colonial extraction. Under his rule the struggle over plantation land and plantation workers' demands for better pay and conditions grew in strength,

organized in part by the Communist-linked plantation workers' union Sarbupri and the Peasant Front (Barisan Tani Indonesia).<sup>60</sup> The situation changed radically in 1957 when Sukarno nationalized foreign-owned plantations. His goal was to reassert national sovereignty and stop the outflow of Indonesia's wealth. He envisaged a state-owned plantation corporation supervised by the Ministry of Agriculture that would harness the productive powers of corporate agriculture for public purposes. But due to the urgency of restoring plantation production to generate foreign exchange, and as a tactic to satisfy the economic demands of the army, he placed the nationalized plantations under temporary military management. He was outmaneuvered by the army, which turned these plantations into a source of funds for military operations and private enrichment and established the order of impunity that supplies both a precondition and incentive for expanding corporate presence today.<sup>61</sup>

From 1957 onward, army officers allied with bureaucrats, politicians, and entrepreneurs to entrench their control over nationalized plantations, take what they wanted, and attack or intimidate their opponents. The military-crony-corporate cabals that formed at this time consolidated their hold in 1965–66 when the army and its allies ousted Sukarno and massacred an estimated half-million Communists and union members, eliminating the most significant counterforce in the plantation sector and in society at large. Intellectuals were jailed or silenced and from then on, writes historian Geoffrey Robinson, “an entire tradition of leftist thinking, writing, and political action” that had been formative of Indonesian culture and public debate since the 1920s was “decimated and rendered illegitimate.”<sup>62</sup>

Since 1966 there has been no labor movement, farmers' organization, or political party capable of checking the power of the military-crony-corporate cabals that continue to operate both within and outside the law.<sup>63</sup> These cabals work closely with transnational corporations that seek access to Indonesia's resources. Within a year of the massacres and the commencement of General Suharto's New Order rule, the government restored relations with foreign corporations by compensating them for nationalized plantations and declared the country open for fresh foreign investment (figure 1.1). The World Bank and IMF promptly offered the government financial support to build the infrastructure that corporations require, a policy they justified in terms of an expanded corporate mandate that included the provision of jobs and national economic development.<sup>64</sup>

In the 1980s the Indonesian government adopted increasingly “neoliberal” policies to encourage foreign and domestic investment in plantations. It was pushed further in this direction during the Asian financial crisis of

FIGURE 1.1 Rubber Plantation Workers, 1967



In stunning archival footage from 1967, an NBC reporter speaks to a Balinese academic who offers candid justification for killing communists, then cuts directly to footage of the Good-year rubber corporation that is back in business with former union members now prisoners, working its fields at gunpoint. In the reporter's words, "Bad as things are, one positive fact is known: Indonesia has fabulous wealth in natural resources, and the New Order wants it exploited." Source: "Indonesia 1967: American reporter for NBC speaks to a genocidaire in Bali." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI4zTICZcik>.

1997–98 when the conditions of the IMF bailout required Suharto and his successors to open more sectors to foreign investment.<sup>65</sup> Laws governing mining, plantations, and labor were revised to favor corporations. The IMF and donors also pressed the government to decentralize powers to district level where elected politicians were supposed to be more accountable to the people.<sup>66</sup> The result was an intensified grab for land and timber and "the replication ad infinitum of the predatory pattern of state–business relations" at every spatial scale.<sup>67</sup>

### The Political Milieu

A constitutive feature of the extractive regimes that have been entrenched in Indonesia since 1966 is the capacity of government officials, politicians, and their corporate allies to take what they want because they can. Their

impunity is “ordered” in the sense that is pervasive, institutionalized, and hierarchically arranged: people of high status are expected to take the most. The order of impunity is similar to the one Achille Mbembe describes in postcolonial Africa, which is grounded in privilege, petty tyranny, predation, the “privatization of public prerogatives,” and the “socialization of arbitrariness.”<sup>68</sup> For Southeast Asia scholars Jacqui Baker and Sarah Milne, Indonesia falls into a category they dub “dirty money states” in which officials and politicians harvest revenue from corporations, cronies, and ordinary people through rents, tolls, and extortion, and distribute a portion of the spoils to neutralize opponents and cultivate clients.<sup>69</sup> These are not “failed states” but states that run along particular lines. They thrive on obscurity, on laws that contradict one another, on spatial plans that overlap, on interdepartmental secrecy and competition, and on minimal public accountability. Their massive compendia of state-sanctioned statistics do not produce legibility; they produce “domains of incalculability” because no one quite knows what the numbers represent.<sup>70</sup> Unsurprisingly, there is little public trust in bureaucrats and politicians.<sup>71</sup>

Rent seeking—the attempt to capture unearned wealth through the exercise of power—is a practice so pervasive in Indonesia’s public sector that neither businesses nor individuals can avoid it. Studies by political scientists, anthropologists, and investigative journalists have exposed the tight links between politicians and corporations in all branches of government and industry, and the widespread privatization of public office. Officials and politicians rate ministries according to their capacity to generate private revenue streams: public works, forestry, and the judiciary are notoriously wet or lucrative. Officials and politicians pay to obtain lucrative positions, with the cost adjusted to the revenue the position is expected to generate.<sup>72</sup> State-owned enterprises—a category that includes state-owned plantations—are veritable money trees, both for the directors and managers who run them and for the many politicians and cronies who tap into their wealth.<sup>73</sup>

In daily discourse rent-seeking is referred to with euphemisms such as cutting, circumcision, pruning, collection, contribution, or donation. A common term for such transfers is *tahu sama tahu*, which roughly translates as “Let’s keep it simple because we both know how the system works.” A popular term for everyday extraction is the “mafia system,” which in the Indonesian context does not denote the activity of a criminal family or violent gang but rather the use of choke points in bureaucratic structures to install toll booths and collect rent. Enforcement by thugs is a possibility, but violence is not the principal modus operandi; extraction is built into the system since

toll booths prevent movement until payment is made. A toll booth is a position of monopoly, however petty; hence there is a school mafia that operates to extract tolls from parents before children can sit for their exams, a land mafia that extracts tolls whenever a signature is needed for a land transaction, and so on.<sup>74</sup> Mafia practices are not usually referred to as corruption, a word Indonesians reserve for officials who “misuse public funds” (*penyalahgunaan uang negara*). Corruption, when exposed, provides an opportunity for the judicial mafia (police, court officials, judges) to squeeze the accused into paying tolls to have the case handled in a “family way” (*secara kekeluargaan*) or in a “peaceful way” (*jalan damai*), which minimizes the public shame, the cost, and the lengthy process of formal prosecution.<sup>75</sup>

Mafia practices were rampant within Tanjung’s plantation zone, as our ethnographic analysis will show; but they were also integral to the processes by which the two corporations we studied came to occupy village land. To operationalize their state-granted mandate and the privileges bestowed on them, all plantation corporations need the support of particular politicians and bureaucrats who supply signatures, issue business licenses, and solve problems. The cost of obtaining this support escalated after 2000 when responsibility for issuing business and location permits shifted from the national to the district level. Circa 2015 the tolls corporations paid to obtain these two permits for a 10,000 hectare oil palm plantation were around IDR3 billion (USD300,000), with an additional IDR3 billion if a forest release permit was required.<sup>76</sup> Securing the release of the designated land by dislodging its occupants and obtaining an environmental assessment report require additional payments. Only after these steps are complete can corporations obtain a formal plantation concession license (HGU) issued by the Land Bureau in Jakarta. In turn, a concession license furnishes corporations with two essential elements: a legal right to land to put into production and a document they can use as collateral for bank loans to finance their operations. Viewed sequentially, the capital corporations invest is primarily used to pay tolls; clearing land and planting palms is paid for by loans subsidized by the concession license.

Extractive practices that route through concession licenses were strikingly revealed by investigative journalists in a 2017 series called “Indonesia for Sale.” The focus was district election financing: district heads in Kalimantan had issued location permits for thousands of hectares to shell corporations that were set up overnight in the names of their friends and family members. The owners of these shell corporations quickly sold them to national and transnational plantation corporations for millions of dollars and channeled

the funds back to the candidates to finance their reelection. Issuing and selling location permits in this way falls outside the definition of corruption according to Indonesian law. Plantation corporations bought “clean” permits to which they would not have had access without the district head’s need for funds.<sup>77</sup> The enabling context for these murky corporate-crony transactions has two parts. One is the corporate mandate: politicians are entitled to issue location permits on the grounds that plantations bring prosperity to their regions; the second is the absence of counterforces to hold corporations or politicians to account. As we noted earlier, since the genocidal massacres of 1965–66 and the suppression of critical debate there has been no effective labor movement, political party, or other organization capable of checking the power of these entrenched crony-corporate cabals.

Indonesia’s order of impunity does not make law irrelevant, but as we will show, the role of law in a plantation zone is deeply ambiguous. Managers in Tanjung referred to law when attempting to defend corporations against crony predation and villagers’ protests. Local officials, villagers, and workers referred to law when attempting to hold corporations to account. But the role of law was weakened by the degradation of citizenship under corporate occupation. Our analysis pays attention to how law works both to favor corporations and to limit them; to mixed mandates that require officials to protect corporations on one side and protect “small people” on the other; and to mafia practices that channel wealth, together with the sense of unease these practices generate.

### Corporate Profit

Corporate profit is a key element of the political economy of Indonesia’s plantation zone since it is profit that attracts corporations. It is also crucial to the political technology of corporate occupation and the order of impunity that enables it: without money to pay diverse claimants, corporations could not secure the necessary political support. According to industry analysts Indonesia’s oil palm corporations are fantastically profitable. When the price of crude palm oil (CPO) is above USD770 per ton (CIF Rotterdam), production is profitable for efficient producers, while “at higher prices, palm oil production businesses are quite literally ‘money pumps.’”<sup>78</sup> For the period 2010–20 the average price was USD809, well above the money pump threshold.<sup>79</sup> Even in 2015 when the price for crude palm oil dropped to USD600 the average gross margin for eleven publicly listed plantation corporations with operations that were upstream only (i.e., a plantation with its onsite mill)

was 27 percent.<sup>80</sup> Put differently, in 2015 an investor who purchased high quality ready-to-harvest oil palm for USD9,000 per hectare could expect to make an immediate return of 16.5 percent per hectare per annum; no global bonds paid anything close.<sup>81</sup>

Significantly, it is the upstream end of the palm oil business that is the most profitable. A few vertically integrated global corporations handle much of the “downstream” refining of crude palm oil and its marketing, but these processes are not especially lucrative. In 2015 the Wilmar Corporation refined 35 percent of the CPO produced in the ASEAN region, owned fifty-four bulk carriers, and conducted specialized processing, but its margins downstream were low; hence its gross margin across the supply chain was only 8.3 percent compared with an average margin of 27 percent for corporations with only upstream activities.<sup>82</sup> Upstream profits give corporations a huge financial incentive to occupy land and engage directly in growing oil palm, and the banks that finance them together with the cronies who support them share in that incentive.<sup>83</sup> It would be much less lucrative for corporations to focus on downstream refining and leave oil palm growing to smallholders.

As in colonial times plantation corporations and their allies have an incentive to suppress smallholders’ autonomous production because it challenges their monopoly over land and labor, and threatens the narrative that only corporations can produce efficiently. Contra this narrative, multiple studies confirm that smallholders can produce as much palm oil per hectare as plantations, and “no agronomic specificity of oil palm justifies the necessity to resort to an estate [plantation] dominated development regime.”<sup>84</sup> Cultivating the palms is not complicated, and even on plantations there is no mechanization and hence no technical economy of scale. Workers weed, fertilize, and harvest palms manually. Independent farmers with access to high quality seedlings and fertilizer who tend their fields assiduously not only match or exceed plantation productivity per hectare; they produce at a much lower cost per ton because they do not need to pay for administrators, supervisors, and guards.<sup>85</sup>

The main technical challenges with oil palm are milling and transportation. The palms yield fresh fruit bunches that must be harvested every two weeks and processed at a mill within forty-eight hours before the oil quality drops. Good roads and sufficient mill capacity are essential. Although small mills suited to five hundred hectares of palms can do the job, the model favored by corporations is to build large mills and link them to plantations of between ten thousand and twenty thousand hectares to keep the mills

supplied with fruit.<sup>86</sup> Giant mills conjure the need for giant plantations and serve to legitimate giant profits, while alternative ways of growing palms and milling palm fruit receive no political or corporate support.

According to official statistics, circa 2015 the total land area planted with oil palm was at least 12 million hectares; around 8 million more hectares were held in unlicensed plantations, unrecorded smallholdings, and corporate “land banks.”<sup>87</sup> Nationally, the industry has five components. (1) The state-owned plantation corporation (PTPN) controls around 9 percent of the planted area. (2) Publicly listed national and transnational corporations control around 23 percent.<sup>88</sup> (3) Private unlisted corporations (mainly Indonesian owned) control around 23 percent. Smallholders control around 44 percent, with significant variation by province.<sup>89</sup> Smallholdings are divided between (4) out-growers bound to corporations that are legally obliged to provide out-grower plots to compensate villagers for their loss of land, and (5) independent smallholders.<sup>90</sup> The latter include migrants who buy land from customary land holders or encroach on primary forest with corporate-crony backing; government officials, plantation managers, urban professionals, and entrepreneurs who buy land and hire managers to run unlicensed plantations; and customary landholders who plant oil palm on their own land as a lucrative part of their livelihood portfolios.<sup>91</sup> A diversity of corporate and smallholder enterprises was present in Tanjung, and we explore the stakes of different models more fully in that context.

### **Inside Plantation Worlds**

Extractive regimes are constitutive of plantation worlds, but they are not the only elements in play. Our interest is not limited to what can be extracted from plantations (palm oil, profits, revenues, rent) or what corporate occupation impairs (customary land rights, mixed farms, diverse ecologies, “normal” village citizenship). We are interested in the forms of life that plantation corporations install, a topic that is already the subject of a rich body of scholarship. Here we draw out some key insights from this prior work while being alert to the risk that the use of a single label—plantation—may suggest a false equivalence. Like the key word “proletarian” examined by anthropologist James Ferguson, the word “plantation” comes with “residues of prior uses [which] create analogical associations through which prior historical instances or paradigmatic sociological cases can set the terms (quite



literally) with which we describe and compare other cases.”<sup>92</sup> Hence we do not attempt to compare plantations as variations on an ideal type but focus on a few key elements and their resonance across different conjunctures.<sup>93</sup>

Slave plantations in the Americas shared some organizational features with Indonesia’s contemporary oil palm plantations (monocrop production, task-based division of labor, orderly layout, tight surveillance), but the cradle-to-grave social provisions enjoyed by workers at the state plantation Natco had more in common with twentieth-century company towns. The shared political milieu gave Tanjung’s plantation zone much in common with the site of Newmont’s Batu Hijau gold mine in eastern Indonesia, skillfully examined by anthropologist Marina Welker, although the spatial arrangements were very different: the Batu Hijau mine occupied a consolidated, well-guarded site of 400 hectares, while in Tanjung subdistrict five adjacent plantations covered 65,000 hectares in an almost-continuous block.<sup>94</sup>

Oil palm plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia are technically similar, but the surrounding context is distinct. In Malaysia rural youth have good prospects for education and urban jobs, hence the occupation of their parents’ land does not necessarily rob them of desirable farming futures. Indonesian migrant workers do most of the work on Malaysia’s plantations. In Indonesia young people struggle to find paid work of any kind, so holding on to family or community land coveted by corporations may be their best option.<sup>95</sup> As geographer Michael Watts stresses the commodity does not determine other arrangements, and the political and ecological dynamics of the site of insertion shape the forms that technical systems take on the ground.<sup>96</sup>

The relationship between plantations and surrounding social, economic, and political formations is a classic theme of plantation research. Economist George Beckford highlighted the “persistent poverty” and regional underdevelopment that plantation corporations generated over the centuries in the Caribbean as they funneled products and profits quickly overseas.<sup>97</sup> His finding has a much broader resonance that continues to be overlooked by plantation supporters who repeat a globally traveling mantra that equates the arrival of plantations with prosperity and rural development. At a finer grain, research by anthropologists Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Julian Steward, Eric Wolf, and Sydney Mintz exposed diverse connections between plantations and surrounding populations variously engaged in seasonal plantation work or farming, an insight we build on with our concept of the plantation zone as a variegated space.<sup>98</sup>

Highlighting the co-constitution of plantations and their social milieu, sociologist Edgar Thompson argued that slave plantations of the US South

did not survive alone but as elements in a constellation of institutions such as church, state, and school that were laced through with concepts of race.<sup>99</sup> Sydney Mintz built on Thompson's work as he traced a trajectory from sugar plantations through patterns of consumption and on to the history of global capitalism.<sup>100</sup> Contemporary scholars attentive to black geographies such as Katherine McKittrick, Deborah Thomas, and Michaeline Crichlow argue that the effects of racialized plantation systems continue to resonate in the United States and in Caribbean social orders centuries after the end of slavery, albeit in diverse and uneven ways.<sup>101</sup> As these scholars show, the new worlds that plantations make stretch not only into surrounding areas, our main focus in this book, but far beyond their spatial and temporal boundaries.

The machinic quality of plantations, their species reduction, replicability, and scalability are the world-making effects emphasized by Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and interlocutors who suggest that the past five hundred years could be named the "plantationocene." In "their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sugarcane plantations in Brazil," writes Tsing, "Portuguese planters stumbled on a formula for smooth expansion. They crafted self-contained, interchangeable project elements, as follows: exterminate local people and plants; prepare now-empty, unclaimed land; and bring in exotic and isolated labor and crops for production. This landscape model of scalability became an inspiration for later industrialization and modernization."<sup>102</sup> Tsing's description captures a core feature of plantation formats but as Tsing recognizes, and as our research in Tanjung confirms, the operations needed to establish and run plantations are more complex than the model suggests. People and plants are not quite exterminated; land is not quite emptied; labor is not quite isolated; and plantations are welcomed and opposed by different social forces and nonhuman associates that render them fragile on multiple fronts.

Our ethnographic analysis attends to the material fixity of plantations and the formidable powers that support them, and to their fragility and the ongoing challenge of holding apparent settlements in place. We take inspiration from Alexei Yurchak's account of Soviet people's experience of socialism before it collapsed, a mood captured in the title of his book: *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*. Yurchak argues that the collapse was

completely unexpected by most Soviet people and yet, as soon as people realized that something unexpected was taking place, most of them also immediately realized that they had actually been prepared for that unexpected change. . . . For years that system managed to inhabit

incommensurable positions: it was everlasting and steadily declining, full of vigor and bleakness, dedicated to high ideals and devoid of them. None of these positions was a mask. They were each real and . . . mutually constitutive.<sup>103</sup>

The incommensurability identified by Yurchak is manifest in the contradictory spaces, practices, and affective states that are readily encountered in a plantation zone. From one perspective Indonesia's plantations are exemplary sites of modernity. They begin with the production of a tabula rasa and the use of bulldozers to remove trees, carve terraces into hillsides, and obliterate signs of former cultivation. The replacement of diverse species with uniform rows of crops, together with landscaped and guarded offices, housing complexes, and massive mills, make plantation professionals proud. From other perspectives, a plantation landscape is a site of ruination and vehicle of loss. There is no single spatiality dictated by state and corporate plans.

Following Donald Moore, we attend to the "consequential materiality of milieu" while recognizing that plantations are "entangled landscapes" in which "multiple spatialities" mingle and diverge across axes of inequality, identity, and power.<sup>104</sup> We draw further insight from Yael Navaro-Yashin, who shows how architectural forms, objects, and administrative practices come to have affective force. She examines "the eeriness discharged" by abandoned or looted objects; fear or anxiety due to "what might happen to you if you step outside your proper polity"; and melancholy experienced as "a loss of a sense of moral integrity."<sup>105</sup> In this spirit we dwell on photos to explore the affects generated by spaces, objects, and practices based on our own experiences and those recounted by interlocutors (figure I.2).

Attending to the "materiality of milieu" leads us to consider how plantations' spatial boundaries and corporate boundary-making practices (e.g., the recruitment and retirement of workers, the distinction between residents and visitors, and the difference between the physical layout of a plantation and surrounding farms and villages) produce a differentiated sense of belonging. We identify practices that alternately bind workers and managers to their employer and drive them away. We ask which engagements with humans, nonhuman species, and technology become sources of pride and which generate alienation or revulsion. We track how bureaucrats, managers, workers, and villagers become complicit in the production of harms and the unease their complicity generates. In the contexts examined by Navaro-Yashin (a "make-believe space" of unrecognized nationhood) and Yurchak

FIGURE 1.2 Dead Palms



Multiple spatialities with different affective resonance are well illustrated in this photo of dead oil palms. Oil palms dominate plantation landscapes but do not eliminate other life forms: there are insects and fungi, ferns and lichens, grasses and shrubs that compete with palms for light, water, and nutrition; rats that eat palm fruit; snakes that eat rats and disturb plantation workers; and cattle that workers raise to supplement their incomes. The palms in this picture were injected with herbicide to kill them because they were too tall to be harvested by men using a scythe attached to a long pole, the industry's preferred low-cost technology. To Pujo the dead palms looked like zombie soldiers, tragic figures awaiting new marching orders that would never come. For workers nearing retirement the dead palms were a scary reminder of their own disposability. To former landholders the killings signaled disrespect for mother nature; more alarmingly, the new palm seedlings that workers had planted underneath the dying palms indicated that the corporation planned to renew its concession. For managers the dead palms were as they should be, but the seedlings were an embarrassment: they were overgrown with weeds and the "horseshoe" terraces on which they were planted were undersized. A young man hired by a contractor to dig the terraces told us that the contractor had colluded with the manager to bill Natco IDR60,000 (USD6) per terrace, yet he only received IDR17,000 (USD1.70) for backbreaking work in the heat with a hoe. Offended by what he saw as managers' excessive greed, the young man made his terraces smaller than required but just big enough to keep his job. PHOTO: STÉPHANE BERNARD.

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(late Soviet rule), people who did not necessarily articulate explicit critiques nevertheless experienced the discomfort of living a life in which nothing was quite (or only) what it claimed to be. These were worlds of hypocrisy, betrayal, theater, public secrets, and living lies as well as hope and high ideals. The plantation life we encountered in Tanjung had the same doubled character: the rational bureaucratic machine was also a marauding giant; managers were both technicians and thieves; promises of prosperity were both true and false; the environment was both clean and crawling with parasites; everyone sensed that something was quite wrong with plantation life, but it was a form they knew how to navigate.

Jamaican novelist and scholar Sylvia Wynter offers critical insights on the doubled character of plantation life and its profoundly ambivalent affects. She locates a fulcrum of ambivalence in the dyad of “the plantation and the plot.” While the plantation furnished the official narrative of slave plantation life, Wynter argues that it was the plot—the patch of ground allocated to slaves for self-provisioning—that furnished its “secretive histories.” Crucially, she recognizes the life-affirming character of the plot without evading its contradictions. Farm plots that enabled slave survival, creativity, and sociality also increased plantation profits by reducing the cost of food slave owners needed to supply. Building on Wynter’s work, Katherine McKittrick suggests that the plot “illustrates a social order that is developed within the context of a dehumanizing system,” an order that is both dissident and complicit.<sup>106</sup> Workers in Tanjung were not allocated subsistence plots, but they did engage in theft and predation as modes of survival and protest. Theft bound workers to plantations but left them with a bad taste; becoming a thief had elements of victory, but it was hardly a cause for celebration.

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We approached our research and writing with a sense of urgency. City dwellers in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore know plantations mainly by the smog that can torment them for months on end: thick acrid air from forest fires, usually attributed to plantation land clearing. Indonesian media seldom cover rural areas that seem peripheral to the country’s economic and political dynamics. Land conflicts, corruption, protests, and blockades are familiar newsmakers in cities close to plantation zones, but only the most egregious cases involving injury or death cause a stir.<sup>107</sup> Decades of critique by differently positioned observers have challenged but not dislodged the claim that plantation corporations bring prosperity to rural areas. The debate over oil palm is especially polarized. On one side are politicians, officials, and cor-

porate supporters who stress the oil palm industry's contribution to national prosperity. On the other side are critics who highlight the ecological risks of monocrop production, forest and species loss, and violations of human and labor rights.<sup>108</sup> Many observers are unsure how to weigh benefits and harms.

In 2012 the district head of Sanggau opened a seminar we organized to present our research findings with an upbeat message: Sanggau was booming because of oil palm. Pak Jaelani, a prominent Dayak elder who attended the seminar, was skeptical. He proposed a program of ground-checking. "Three times I have proposed to the provincial parliament that we need a team of politicians, officials, intellectuals, companies, farmers and NGOs to go to the field together, after we prepare a questionnaire, to find out for sure: can oil palm provide for our wellbeing into the future? If so, then we can all agree but if not, why do we continue?" The massive presence of oil palm in Sanggau District makes the question Pak Jaelani posed fundamental: Can oil palm provide for people's wellbeing into the future or not? He accurately noted that there is very little data with which to answer the question.

In Kalimantan most of the oil palm is grown by plantation corporations whose presence continues to expand on the basis of promised benefits that have not been confirmed, while many reported harms are not addressed. Our book delves deeply into the processes and practices that produce both benefits and harms in the plantation zone and distribute them unevenly. Its primary purpose, however, is to explore how plantation corporations remake landscapes and livelihoods, produce new subjects, and generate novel forms of life.

Our examination proceeds by posing a series of questions.

In chapter 1 we ask: *How did Natco and Priva become established in Tanjung, and what novel sets of relations did their presence generate?* We examine the premises embedded in land acquisition, the tactics used to acquire and hold on to land, and the fragilities that resulted for both the occupiers and the occupied Malay and Dayak population.

In chapter 2 we ask: *Who worked in these two plantations and why?* Contemporary plantation workers are not bonded, hence workers' presence is an indicator of how they assess bodily, financial, and moral risks and rewards. We examine how Natco and Priva hired and expelled workers, the political technologies that secured a fragile compliance, and the predatory relations that emerged.

In chapter 3 we ask: *What did it mean for farmers to be bound to a corporation?* We develop our analysis by contrasting the extreme fragility of oil palm outgrowers whose livelihoods depended on Priva with the relative robustness

of independent Malay and Dayak farmers who controlled their own land, labor, and investments.

In chapter 4 we ask: *What were the forms of life that emerged in the plantation zone?* We examine the everyday operation of law as it both enabled and constrained corporate operations, the hierarchies and tensions engendered by the modernity-project at Natco, and the daily struggles of former landholders living in tiny enclaves that were both occupied and abandoned.

In chapter 5 we ask: *Why are corporate oil palm plantations still expanding across Indonesia?* Twenty years of critical scrutiny have failed to dislodge the argument that plantation corporations bring prosperity to remote areas, and reforms to make plantations more “sustainable” are giving corporate occupation new life. We explore the limits of reform agendas and the powers deployed to support corporations at smallholders’ expense.

Our conclusion highlights the role of corporate occupation in extending the reach of global capital and conscripting millions of rural Indonesians to a plantation life the terms of which they cannot control.

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# Notes

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## Preface

- 1 Rendra, *Potret Pembangunan Dalam Puisi*; Mangunwijaya, *Durga/Umayi*.
- 2 Indonesian has one word, *perusahaan*, for corporation and company. We use the term *corporation* for the formal legal entity and *company* for everyday references to the embodied presence of a plantation: its infrastructure, activities and staff.
- 3 For the history of the pipe, see van Schendel, *Djolo-tigo*. Leaky pipes that transport oil, fuel insurgencies, and damage ecologies in the Niger Delta are discussed in Watts, “A Tale of Two Gulfs.”

## Introduction

For purposes of comparison, 1 hectare = approximately 2.5 acres.

- 1 See C. L. R James, *Black Jacobins*; Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*.
- 2 On high modernism see J. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.
- 3 On the global transformations plantations wrought see Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*; Wolf, *Europe*.
- 4 See Daniel, Bernstein, and Brass, *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants*.
- 5 For an excellent overview of the oil palm industry in Indonesia and Malaysia see Cramb and McCarthy, *Oil Palm Complex*.
- 6 Tania watched a French TV show in which two environmentally conscious families went to buy the same list of groceries. The family who deliberately avoided products containing palm oil was able to find substitutes, but their basket of groceries cost twice as much.

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- 7 Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS), *Indonesia Foreign Trade Statistics*, 13. After petroleum exports declined in the 1980s palm oil became the biggest contributor to Indonesia's foreign exports at 16 percent with an annual value of around USD20 billion.
- 8 Our estimate of 15 million includes people who work on plantations and live nearby. Oil palm cultivation employs around 3.2 million people, supporting 12.8 million household members. See Hawkins, Chen, and Wigglesworth, *Indonesian Palm Oil Production Sector*, 8. This calculation assumes one worker per 4 hectares; labor ratios are discussed in Cramb and McCarthy, "Characterising Oil Palm Production," 66n9.
- 9 Byerlee, "Fall and Rise Again."
- 10 Deninger et al., *Rising Global Interest in Farmland*. For critiques of this report see De Schutter, "How Not to Think"; Li, "Centering Labour" and "What Is Land?"
- 11 See "Hasil Studi IUCN, Pencerahan Untuk Kampanye Hitam Kelapa Sawit." *Kompas*, February 4, 2019; for a critique see Colchester, "Indonesian Government."
- 12 Hawkins, Chen, and Wigglesworth, *Indonesian Palm Oil Production Sector*, 8.
- 13 For an overview of the extensive literature on landgrabs see B. White et al., "New Enclosures." On corporate incentives to acquire farmland see Fairbairn, *Fields of Gold*.
- 14 The names of the two plantation corporations, personal names, and place names below district level are pseudonyms.
- 15 See Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*; Dinius and Vergara, *Company Towns in the Americas*; Grandin, *Fordlandia*.
- 16 Mintz and Wolf argue that on modern plantations bureaucracy replaced paternalism, which was more characteristic of haciendas; but paternalism and "delegated despotism" are important themes in studies of plantation labor in Africa. See Addison, *Chiefs of the Plantation*; Du Toit, "Micro-Politics of Paternalism"; Rutherford, *Farm Worker Labor Struggles*.
- 17 Mezzadra and Neilson, *Politics of Operations*, 3. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson stress the imaginative dimension of capitalist projects and the work it takes to implement them. See also the feminist agenda for grounding studies of capitalism in the specificities of place, race, culture, kinship, and the multispecies affordances of particular milieu in Bear et al., "Gens." Much research in the fields of political ecology, environmental anthropology, and human geography is deeply attentive to space, materiality, and meaningful practices.
- 18 Marx, *Capital*.
- 19 On land appropriation, primitive accumulation, and "accumulation by dispossession" see Harvey, *New Imperialism*. For studies of land-grabbing in Southeast Asia see Baird, "Problems for the Plantations"; Kenney-Lazar, "Relations of Sovereignty"; Hall, "Land Grabs, Land Control" and "Primitive Accumulation, Accumulation by Dispossession"; Schoenberger, Hall, and Vandergeest, "What

- Happened.” On labor regimes see Arnold and Campbell, “Labour Regime Transformation in Myanmar”; Li, “Price of Un/Freedom.”
- 20 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 194.
- 21 Foucault, “Governmentality.”
- 22 See, among others, Cooper and Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*; D. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*; Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*; Li, *Will to Improve*; Moore, *Suffering for Territory*; Bridge, “Material Worlds”; Watts, “Tale of Two Gulfs”; Peluso and Lund, “New Frontiers of Land Control”; Eilenberg and Cons, *Frontier Assemblages*; Robbins, *Political Ecology*.
- 23 For discussion of the dual mandate for colonial rule in Africa enunciated by Lord Lugard, see Moore, *Suffering for Territory*, 13.
- 24 Barkan, *Corporate Sovereignty*, 161.
- 25 See Oxfam, *Towards a More Equal Indonesia*, 8; World Bank, *Indonesia’s Rising Divide*, 18.
- 26 On corporate welfare see Hall, “Rethinking Primitive Accumulation,” 1197; Harvey, “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction.” Laws, policies, and development narratives that favor plantations are discussed in Susanti and Maryudi, “Development Narratives”; Cramb and McCarthy, *Oil Palm Complex*; Byrlee, “Fall and Rise Again”; Dove, *Banana Tree at the Gate*; Pichler, “Legal Dispossession”; Paoli et al., *Oil Palm in Indonesia*.
- 27 See Appel, *Licit Life of Capitalism*.
- 28 On challenges to regulation, see Barkan, *Corporate Sovereignty*.
- 29 Barkan, *Corporate Sovereignty*, 7.
- 30 See Weizman, *Hollow Land*; Makdisi, “Architecture of Erasure.” On oil and uneven topographies of extraction and rule in the Niger Delta, see Watts, “Tale of Two Gulfs.”
- 31 Wolf and Mintz, “Haciendas and Plantations.” See Krupa, “State by Proxy,” on private indirect government in Latin America; on Africa, see Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*.
- 32 The role of concessions in diverse projects of state territorialization is explored in Hardin, “Concessionary Politics”; Vandergeest and Peluso, “Territorialization and State Power.”
- 33 Makdisi, “Architecture of Erasure,” 555.
- 34 Everyday citizenship is discussed in Berenschot, Nordholt, and Bakker, introduction to *Citizenship and Democratization in Southeast Asia*.
- 35 On state familism see Bouchier, *Illiberal Democracy in Indonesia*.
- 36 On moral evaluations see Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish*. On moral economies and peasant insurgency see J. Scott, *Moral Economy and Weapons of the Weak*. On illicit versus illegal, see Roitman, “Ethics of Illegality”; Harriss-White and Michelutti, introduction to *The Wild East*; Gupta, “Blurred Boundaries”; Appel, *Licit Life of Capitalism*.
- 37 D. Scott, “Colonial Governmentality,” 193.

- 38 D. Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*; Asad, “Conscripts of Western Civilization.”
- 39 On the concept of a “rightful share” see Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish*.
- 40 See Povinelli, *Economics of Abandonment*, 77.
- 41 Stoler, “Imperial Debris”; see also Stoler, *Duress*.
- 42 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 2.
- 43 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 4.
- 44 Alatas, *Myth of the Lazy Native*.
- 45 *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Diverse but one) is the national motto. The association between a culture (*budaya*) and an ethnic group (*suku*) is everyday talk in Indonesia. Indonesian anthropology was shaped by concepts of “culture and personality” via the prominent scholar Koentjaraningrat, who trained in the United States in the 1950s. See Koentjaraningrat, *Masyarakat Terasing Di Indonesia*.
- 46 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property*.
- 47 On narratives of native backwardness used to justify plantation expansion see McCarthy and Cramb, “Policy Narratives, Landholder Engagement”; Dove, *Banana Tree at the Gate*.
- 48 Activists devised the term *masyarakat adat* (customary community) to align with the global category Indigenous People, although the question of who is indigenous in Indonesia is subject to debate. See Li, “Articulating Indigenous Identity in Indonesia” and “Epilogue”; Willem van der Muur et al., “Changing Indigeneity Politics in Indonesia.”
- 49 On Indonesia’s land regime see McCarthy and Robinson, *Land and Development in Indonesia*. On the limited coverage of land titles, see World Bank, *Towards Indonesian Land Reforms*, xxxvii.
- 50 Gray zones and partial recognition of property rights are discussed in Sikor and Lund, “Access and Property”; Lund, *Nine-Tenths of the Law*.
- 51 Lund, *Nine-Tenths of the Law*, 14.
- 52 Brazil and Vietnam have similar internal-colonization programs to settle “frontier” areas; see De Koninck, “Geopolitics of Land”; Slater, “Justice for Whom?”
- 53 Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*. See also Li, “Involution’s Dynamic Others,” “Price of Un/Freedom,” and sources therein. On market proclivities in rural Southeast Asia more broadly, see Hall, “Rethinking Primitive Accumulation” and “Land Grabs, Land Control.”
- 54 On the use of quotas to coerce the cultivation of coffee, see Breman, *Mobilizing Labour*; Li, Pelletier, and Sangadji, “Unfree Labour and Extractive Regimes.”
- 55 Li, “Price of Un/Freedom.”
- 56 Dove, *Banana Tree at the Gate*.
- 57 Furnivall, *Netherlands India*, 216, 223–25.
- 58 Netherlands Indies Government, *Landbouwatlas Van Java En Madoera*.
- 59 See Pelzer, *Planter and Peasant*; Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation*; Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast*; Houben, “Profit versus Ethics.”

- 60 See B. White, "Remembering the Indonesian Peasants' Front"; Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation*. There were 553 reported labor strikes in foreign-owned plantations in the period 1951–55; see de Groot Heupner, "Palm Oil Plantation," 12.
- 61 On military rule in plantations in the 1950s see Mackie, "Indonesia's Government Estates."
- 62 G. B. Robinson, *Killing Season*, 301. Geoffrey B. Robinson notes that estimates of the number of people killed range from 78,500 to 3 million, but among scholars 500,000 is the broad consensus (315n1).
- 63 See B. R. O'G. Anderson, "Indonesian Nationalism Today"; Eickhoff, van Klinken, and Robinson, "1965 Today"; Cribb, "System of Exemptions"; G. B. Robinson, *Killing Season*; Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation*; Hadiz, "Capitalism, Primitive Accumulation"; Hadiz and Robison, "Political Economy of Oligarchy"; Aspinall and Gerry van Klinken, *State and Illegality in Indonesia*.
- 64 See N. J. White, "Surviving Sukarno"; Toussaint, *World Bank and the IMF*.
- 65 Bullard, Bello, and Mallhotra, "Taming the Tigers."
- 66 Silver, "Do the Donors Have It Right?"
- 67 Robison and Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia*, 234; see also Casson and Obidzinski, "From New Order." Investment in the recovery of manufacturing remained stalled; see Wie, "Impact of the Economic Crisis."
- 68 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*.
- 69 Baker and Milne, "Dirty Money States."
- 70 J. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*; Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 114–19.
- 71 For New Order damage to principles of public service and the creation of "floating politicians" without a constituency see Bouchier, *Illiberal Democracy*, 242; G. B. Robinson, *Killing Season*; Dick and Mulholland, "Politics of Corruption in Indonesia."
- 72 Predatory political-bureaucratic practices, oligarchy, and illegality are discussed in two excellent collections: Aspinall and van Klinken, *State and Illegality*, and van Klinken and Barker, *State of Authority*. See also Hadiz and Robison, "Political Economy of Oligarchy." On the distinction between the *pays légal* and *pays réel*, see Jean-Bayart and Ellis, "Africa in the World." For comparable crony-corporate cabals in India, see Harriss-White and Michelutti, introduction to *The Wild East*; in Pakistan, see Akhtar, *Politics of Common Sense*.
- 73 Apriliyanti and Kristiansen, "Logics of Political Business."
- 74 On mafia as an emic term, see Aspinall and van Klinken, "State and Illegality," 26–27; "Amien Rais Sebut Indonesia Dikuasai Mafia, TKN: Dia Hanya Suudzon." *Tempo.co*, January 29, 2019, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1170129/amien-rais-sebut-indonesia-dikuasai-mafia-tnk-dia-hanya-suudzon/full&view=ok>. For similar uses of the term *mafia* in India, see Harriss-White and Michelutti, introduction to *The Wild East*.
- 75 Butt and Lindsey, "Judicial Mafia."

- 76 For “informal costs” in Central Kalimantan, see Setiawan et al., “Opposing Interests,” 477; for West Kalimantan, see Prabowo et al., “Conversion of Forests.” See also McCarthy and Zen, “Regulating the Oil Palm Boom,” 558; McCarthy, Vel, and Afiff, “Trajectories of Land Acquisition.”
- 77 Gecko Project, *Indonesia for Sale*; on election finance and plantation expansion in West Kalimantan, see Tim Liputan Mendalam, “Kelapa Sawit, Antara Kepentingan Politik”; in Aceh, see Lund, “Predatory Peace”; see also Varkkey, “Patronage Politics as a Driver.”
- 78 Hawkins, Chen, and Wigglesworth, *Indonesian Palm Oil Production Sector*, 32.
- 79 Average calculated from Indexmundi.com.
- 80 Calculation based on Hawkins, Chen, and Wigglesworth, *Indonesian Palm Oil Production Sector*, 27.
- 81 Hawkins, Chen, and Wigglesworth, *Indonesian Palm Oil Production Sector*, 3–4.
- 82 Hawkins, Chen, and Wigglesworth, *Indonesian Palm Oil Production Sector*, 27–28.
- 83 On sources of capital for plantation corporations see Cramb and McCarthy, “Characterising Oil Palm Production,” 36, 46–48; TuK Indonesia, “Banks behind Indonesian Palm Oil.”
- 84 Feintrenie, Chong, and Levang, “Why Do Farmers Prefer Oil Palm?” 394. See also Cramb and McCarthy, “Characterising Oil Palm,” 32; Byerlee, “Fall and Rise Again.” Cramb and Ferraro, “Custom and Capital,” compare rewards to corporations, government, and villagers under different production arrangements.
- 85 Cramb and McCarthy, “Characterising Oil Palm Production,” 32; on farm size and productivity see Carter, “Inverse Relationship”; see also Bissonnette and De Koninck, “Return of the Plantation?”
- 86 On mill size regulations, see Cramb and McCarthy, “Characterising Oil Palm Production,” 34–36.
- 87 Indonesia’s richest tycoons hold major shares in transnational oil palm corporations listed on stock exchanges in Singapore, Malaysia, and London, so “transnational” does not necessarily mean “non-Indonesian.” See TuK Indonesia, *Tycoons*. On land banks and “virtual” land grabs, see McCarthy, Vel, and Afiff, “Trajectories of Land Acquisition.” Newspapers report millions of hectares of unlicensed plantations. See Butler, “Half of Riau’s Oil Palm”; “Hasil Studi IUCN, Pencerahan Untuk Kampanye Hitam Kelapa Sawit,” *Kompas*, February 4, 2019; “Perkebunan Sawit Tanpa Ijin Marak,” *Kompas*, February 22, 2010. Despite official moratoriums on new plantations in primary forest or peatland, expansion continues; see “Effectiveness of Indonesian Palm Oil Moratorium Disputed,” *Bangkok Post*, October 1, 2018.
- 88 Hawkins, Chen, and Wigglesworth, *Indonesian Palm Oil Production Sector*, 10, 23; TuK Indonesia, *Tycoons*; see also Pichler, “Legal Dispossession,” 522; Dwyer, *Trying to Follow the Money*, 15.
- 89 Data computed from Statistik Kelapa Sawit Indonesia show that in 2017 the four main oil palm producing provinces in Sumatra (Riau, Jambi, North Sumatra,

South Sumatra) had a total of 7 million hectares of oil palm, 53 percent in plantations, 47 percent in smallholdings. Three Kalimantan provinces (West, Central, East) had a total of 3.9 million hectares, of which 77 percent were in plantations and 23 percent in smallholdings. The province with the highest percentage of smallholdings (69 percent) is Riau.

- 90 A range of out-grower schemes is described in Cramb and McCarthy, “Characterising Oil Palm Production.”
- 91 For smallholder typologies, see Zen, Barlow, and Gondowarsito, *Oil Palm*; McCarthy, “Processes of Inclusion”; McCarthy, Gillespie, and Zen, “Swimming Upstream”; Molenaar, *Diagnostic Study*; Jelsma et al., “Unpacking”; Potter, “How Can the People’s Sovereignty”; Daemeter Consulting, *Overview of Indonesian Oil Palm*; Rist, Feintrenie, and Levang, “Livelihood Impacts of Oil Palm”; Feintrenie, Chong, and Levang, “Why Do Farmers Prefer Oil Palm?”; Serikat Petani Kelapa Sawit, *Karakteristik Dan Definisi*. Holdings over 25 hectares are legally defined as plantations and require a plantation license.
- 92 Ferguson, “Proletarian Politics,” 4.
- 93 On conjunctures and relational comparisons see Hart, *Disabling Globalization*.
- 94 Welker, *Enacting the Corporation*, 131. On different spatial arrangements in extractive zones, see Ferguson, “Seeing Like an Oil Company”; Côte and Benedikt Korf, “Making Concessions”; Watts, “Tale of Two Gulfs”; Appel, *Licit Life of Capitalism*.
- 95 Differences between the national context for oil palm in Malaysia and Indonesia are explored in Cramb and McCarthy, “Characterising Oil Palm Production.”
- 96 Watts, “Tale of Two Gulfs”; see also Hall, Hirsch, and Li, *Powers of Exclusion*, 88. For a sample of ethnographies of contemporary plantations producing different crops, see the following: on tobacco in the United States, see Benson, *Tobacco Capitalism*; on tea in India, see Besky, *Darjeeling Distinction*; and on bananas in Ecuador, see Striffler, *In the Shadows*. For seminal comparative research on colonial plantations in Asia, see Daniel, Bernstein, and Brass, *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants*.
- 97 Beckford, *Persistent Poverty*.
- 98 Steward et al., *People of Puerto Rico*; Mintz, “Rural Proletariat and the Problem” and *Worker in the Cane*; Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital*.
- 99 Edgar Tristram Thompson, *Plantation*.
- 100 Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*. Mintz wrote a preface to Thompson’s book.
- 101 See McKittrick, “Plantation Futures”; Crichlow and Northover, *Globalization and Creole Identities*; Thomas, *Political Life in the Wake*.
- 102 Tsing, *Mushroom at the End*, 39; see also Haraway and Tsing, “Reflections on the Plantationocene”; Davis et al., “Anthropocene, Capitalocene.”
- 103 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 282. Thanks to Andrea Muehlebach for suggesting this resonance.
- 104 Moore, *Suffering for Territory*, 22–24.
- 105 Navaro-Yashin, *Make-Believe Space*, 20, 75, 174.

- 106 McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” 11; Wynter, “Novel and History”; see also Hawthorne, “Black Matters Are Spatial Matters.”
- 107 Jong, “Study Puts a Figure.” Military forces and armed police are deployed in land conflicts and linked to the death, injury, and imprisonment of protesters. See Sri Palupi et al., *Industri Perkebunan Sawit*; Komnas HAM, *National Inquiry*; Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria (KPA), *Catatan Ahir Tahun 2018*.
- 108 On oil palm as a source of development benefit, see the Palm Scribe at <https://thepalmscribe.id/about/> and the Indonesian industry association GAPKI at <https://gapki.id/>. For critical perspectives, see Sawit Watch at <https://sawitwatch.or.id/>; WALHI at <https://walhi.or.id/>; Mongabay at <https://www.mongabay.co.id/>; the Forest Peoples Programme at <https://www.forestpeoples.org/en/about>; and Down to Earth at <http://www.downtoearth-indonesia.org/>.

## Chapter One—Establishing Plantations

- 1 Managers’ perceptions of native backwardness are well described in Dove, *Banana Tree at the Gate* and “Representations of the ‘Other.’”
- 2 Perusahaan Negara Perkebunan 7, “Pertama Di Kalimantan Barat,” 17–18.
- 3 Project Sanggau, PTPN’s contentious land acquisition, and local resistance to the transmigration scheme are discussed in Dove, “Plantation Development in West Kalimantan II” and “Plantation Development in West Kalimantan I”; Potter, “Oil Palm and Resistance”; Colchester et al., *Promised Land*; Forest Peoples Programme, *Dayak Leaders’ Memories and Dreams*. Dove reports that the government’s original plan was to require 3,308 locals to vacate 31,500 hectares and move elsewhere. At the time Dayaks were also being coerced to abandon their longhouses in favor of single-family dwellings. See Marti, *Losing Ground*; Forest Peoples Programme, *Dayak Leaders’ Memories and Dreams*.
- 4 Brinkgreve, *Nota over Den Landbouw*, 9; Semedi, “Palm Oil Wealth and Rumour,” 5.
- 5 For discussion of indigenous concepts of property and their morphings see Li, *Land’s End*.
- 6 “Uang Ganti Rugi Banyak Tidak Sampai Ke Rakyat,” *Kompas*, April 7, 1980; “Harus Ditindak Tegas Oknum Pemda Sanggau Yang Terlibat Dalam Manipulasi Ganti Rugi Tanah Adat,” *Kompas*, April 8, 1980.
- 7 “Manipulasi Ganti Rugi Tanah Rakyat Diduga Didiamkan,” *Kompas*, February 18, 1985; “Mengecewakan, Proses Manipulasi Uang Rakyat Di Sanggau,” *Kompas*, April 7, 1985.
- 8 See Dove, “Plantation Development in West Kalimantan II,” 10.
- 9 See Forest Peoples Programme and Sawit Watch, *Ghosts on Our Own Land*.
- 10 See van Klinken, “Blood, Timber, and the State”; Peluso, “Political Ecology of Violence”; Davidson, *From Rebellion to Riots*. Madurese were evacuated from Tanjung without injury but they did not return.