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# The Land Beneath Our Feet: Filmmaking and History in Liberia

by Gregg Mitman



Gregg Mitman. Submitted Photo.

Fifteen years ago Gregg Mitman learned of a private collection of digitally restored film chronicling the exploits of a Harvard University expedition to Liberia and the Belgian Congo in 1926. Nearly four hours in length, the raw footage records Liberia's landscapes, peoples, diseases, and commodities, revealing a deeply contested path to development. The Harvard expedition traveled to Liberia to investigate the human and natural environment on behalf of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. In 1926, Firestone secured a 99-year lease from the Liberian government for up to one million acres of land to establish rubber plantations. The biological and medical surveys taken by the Harvard scientists demonstrated the numerous challenges that Firestone faced as it tried to impose a new industrial order onto the rainforest. Nevertheless, the company plowed ahead, irrevocably transforming the social and economic future of the nation.

The film footage of the Harvard expedition was a rare find, not only for its early vintage, but also as some of the first moving pictures revealing life in Africa. In 2012, Mitman met UW graduate student Emmanuel Urey, a graduate student from Liberia. Mitman knew the Harvard film footage had been screened privately in the United States in the 1930s, but it had never been shown in Liberia. Urey was astonished by what he saw—political leaders, cultural practices, landmarks—all familiar, but radically transformed by generations of change. Mitman subsequently enlisted Urey as an interlocutor, consultant, and intellectual partner. The two of them took six trips to Liberia together between 2012 and 2015, sharing the footage with a broad cross-section of Liberians.

Working with filmmaker Sarita Siegel, Mitman set out to make a documentary film utilizing the raw footage from 1926, alongside contemporary histories of Firestone and other multi-national companies, in an effort to understand issues of land rights in Liberia.

Today, multi-national companies own concessionary rights to one-quarter of Liberia, and land disputes are the source of frequent confrontation and violence. In the midst of filming the documentary on land rights, Mitman and Urey were caught up in the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Liberia. This prompted yet another short film, *In the Shadow of Ebola*, detailing the ways that Urey's family and country were torn apart by the epidemic. Mitman's short film on Ebola aired on PBS/Independent Lens in 2015 (<http://intheshadowofebola.com>.) Since that time, Mitman has been completing the documentary on land rights in Liberia. The result is *The Land Beneath Our Feet*, which will be officially released this fall. You can find the trailer at (<https://vimeo.com/166601524>.) Mitman is also the curator of an online, public history web site, "A Liberian Journey: History, Memory, and the Making of a Nation." Here, you can find documents, photographs, and films related to the 1926 Harvard expedition (<http://liberianhistory.org/>.) Finally, Mitman is completing a book tentatively titled *Forgotten Paths of Empire: Firestone and the Remaking of Liberia*.

**1) You have described your work on Liberia as a "multimedia" project. Do you envision the documentary film, website, and book as a single project? What will the whole tell us that the individual pieces cannot?**

Yes, I see the films, website, and book as all related to one another. I came to this project through the expedition film and photographs. I knew little about Liberia when I started and nothing about Firestone's history in Liberia. I was fascinated by the question of why a Harvard team of scientists would go to great expense and effort to film such an expedition. And I was intrigued by what could be gleaned from these materials, and what value they might have in post-conflict Liberia, despite the troubling ethical and political issues the footage and photographs raise in relationship to representation, race, and colonialism.

When we saw people's engagement with the photos and footage in Liberia, it became clear to us that we needed to find a way to digitally repatriate this material to Liberia so that people there could debate, discuss, and tell their own stories about this transformational moment in Liberian history. Hence, the website. The oral histories that we've begun to include on the website begin to add other voices and meanings to this material.

The more time we spent in Liberia, the more I also came to understand how central issues of land are to Liberia, both in the past and in the present. Firestone played a major role in transforming the country into a plantation economy, which is being duplicated again in post-conflict Liberia with the arrival of large oil palm concessions. Most Americans have little knowledge or understanding of Liberia; they either know it was "founded" by free blacks from the US in the 1820s (which isn't actually correct) or that it went through a brutal civil war. We wanted to get beyond these simple characterizations and stereotypes. *The Land Beneath Our Feet* offers an opportunity

for viewers to see a different picture of Liberia—one not about war, violence, and disease—but the beauty of its landscape, the importance of land to Liberia’s rich cultural heritage, and the struggles of local people to retain their community rights and access to land in the face of global economic forces pushing toward privatization. Film enables us to tell this story in a much more evocative, visceral, and visual way not possible in a book.

Finally, the book offers an opportunity to tell a largely forgotten history about the transnational ties between Liberia and the U.S. that were not only important to the development of American business, science, and medicine but also to the careers of African-American professionals, whose opportunities were limited in the U.S. during the Jim Crow era, but who rose to positions of power as U.S. diplomats, physicians, and technical experts in Liberia. We cannot understand why the Ebola crisis unfolded the way it did in West Africa without understanding the deeper history of U.S.-Liberia relations over the course of the 20th century.

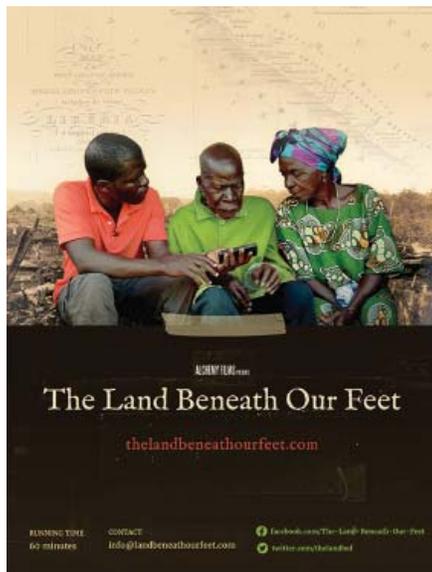
So, while the Harvard expedition materials link the website, films, and book, the projects use these materials in quite different ways to reveal different facets of the history of Liberia in relationship to the history of American empire.

## 2) Tell us about the relationship between Harvard and Firestone. Why would Harvard scientists put themselves in the position of doing Firestone’s bidding in Liberia? Has Firestone been cooperative with you during your research?

Richard P. Strong, head of Harvard’s Department of Tropical Medicine, lived through a period when U.S. firms like United Fruit and Firestone were expanding their global economic reach. He was an expert in tropical diseases and one of the pioneers in disease ecology. Strong created a savvy business model whereby members of his department would get access to free transportation on company steamships and a ready supply of patients and parasites in company hospitals in exchange for medical advice. One of the greatest impediments to Firestone’s success in Liberia was disease. Maintaining a healthy labor

force of 15,000 workers and keeping a rubber plantation the size of Los Angeles free from disease was a huge undertaking. Strong and his colleagues, as well as experts from the Yale School of Forestry, were eager to help.

Firestone has not been exactly cooperative. They did permit us to film on the Firestone plantations. But the Firestone archives, which were given to the University of



Akron by Harvey Firestone, Jr. as an important resource for American business history, have, to this day, been closed to researchers. Only one historian to my knowledge has ever been granted access to the collection. It is a shame because it is an incredibly important archive for Liberian history. Incidentally, some of the best early work done on the history of Firestone in Liberia came out of this department. Frank Chalk, working under the eminent diplomatic historian William Appleman Williams wrote a fantastic dissertation on the subject in the 1960s that has been important to my own research.

## 3) When you and Emmanuel Urey traveled around Liberia sharing the 1926 footage, how did people react?

There have been so many different responses. In Queezahn, a Bassa place name meaning “the civilized or whites pushed us away,” elders—upon watching traditional dances performed by their great grandfathers and grandmothers on film—spoke painfully of the still-open wounds sustained when Firestone displaced them from their ethnic homelands. In Gbarnga, Chief Flomo Barwolor, seeing his father dancing in the footage, remarked that his face was like his heart, smiling. We met women educators, like Reverend Yatta Young, who are eager to use the only known footage and photographs of the great chief and Zo healer, Madame Suah Koko, to recollect memories of this mythic hero, now an inspiration and symbol of women empowerment in post-conflict Liberia. And still others looked to the footage and saw ways in which it might help post-conflict reconciliation or, in contrast, projected lingering ethnic tensions back onto the footage.

## 4) You were in Liberia in 2014 during the Ebola outbreak. Describe your experience. How has that experience shaped your thoughts about the country and its people?

When I came back to the U.S. in early July of 2014, after the first Ebola deaths occurred in Redemption Hospital in Monrovia, I was very dismayed by the Western media coverage. It reinforced so many Western stereotypes of West Africa going back to 18th century depictions of the region as the “white man’s grave.” Much of the initial coverage focused on the alleged irrationality and superstition of West Africans for attacking international healthcare workers, without any historical or cultural understanding of why people in Liberia may have acted initially with disbelief and suspicion. That is why we made *In the Shadow of Ebola*. We felt it was important to have a film that told a story of the Ebola outbreak from Liberian voices and perspectives. And what I’ve come to appreciate is the resilience and fortitude of local people in Liberia, who came together and organized at the community level to combat the epidemic. If you look at the epidemiological curve of the outbreak, you will see that such community efforts began to have an impact before the large-scale arrival of international aid.

(continued on page 8)

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5) The issue of land rights is one of the most vexing in Liberia's history. Do you see a solution in the near future?

If you asked me a year ago, I would have been optimistic. The Land Rights bill, which would for the first time in Liberian history recognize customary rights to land, was being debated in the Liberian legislature and it looked like it was going to be quickly passed. Unfortunately, it has come to a grinding halt because of corruption, despite the fact that there is a groundswell of support for passage of the bill within Liberian civil society, particularly among women's civic groups. Many people in Liberia believe the land issue is a "time bomb" waiting to explode. I worry about Liberia's future if community rights to land are not recognized at a moment when the Liberian government is giving away massive tracts of land for large-scale palm oil concessions, taking away local people's access to land, which is so important for their food security and livelihood.



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## Historians at Work: Recent Alums Join the Job Force

Farha Tahir



Farha Tahir holding a sign surrounded by youth leaders from around East Africa at a training cosponsored by the African Union.

At first glance, my job looks like any other office job. I sit at a desk, go through emails, and spend much more of my day in meetings than I probably should. And, in some ways, my job can be fairly "normal." But the fun part of my job isn't what I do, but what I get to do. I work for an organization that advises governments all over the world on how to be more democratic and better respond to citizens' needs. The real fun rarely happens at my desk, but when I go abroad: training

government officials and political parties, talking to youth leaders, and meeting with citizen groups. It's in those settings where I get to roll up my sleeves and support them in creating the governments they want. Whether preparing for an election, advising political parties, or facilitating greater women's participation in politics, my history major comes in handy almost every day.

To step into another country with sensitivity and credibility, one must understand its history. It's about more than just knowing what has happened in that country's past, but understanding how it got them to today: what shaped the political, ethnic, and social dynamics that govern their lives, their collective goals, and their conceptions of government. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "we are made by history." And I see it every time I study and work in a new country: age-old grievances and cultural forces shape how people think and act to this very day. Knowing about and appreciating those forces helps me work more effectively.

I knew I wanted to be a history major when I stepped onto campus over a decade ago. I've always been fascinated by what's happened in the past and what we learn, and fail to learn, from it. In addition to shaping the regional focus of my college education, my history major prepared me for the foreign policy career I began after college. It provided a framework for how I approach each new country I work in. It contextualized the people and governments I work with.