



# H-Environment

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## H-Environment Roundtable Reviews

Volume 7, No. 4 (2017)  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Publication date: October 27, 2017  
Roundtable Review Editor:  
Christopher F. Jones

***The Land Beneath Our Feet.* Directed by Sarita Siegel and Gregg Mitman.  
Alchemy Films, 2016. 60 minutes.**

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### Introduction by Christopher F. Jones, Arizona State University

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**E**nvironmental historians can look with some pride at the field's ability to speak to wider audiences. Several environmental history books have become part of historical canons not focused on the natural world, and many members have made concerted efforts to write for public audiences and speak in forums outside the academy. Yet for the most part, our expertise lies in the written and the spoken word—not film. In an era of tl;dr (“too long; didn’t read”) and people spending increasing amounts of time glued to screens, perhaps any true public engagement requires historians to think beyond our conventional formats.

For this and many other reasons, the new film *The Land Beneath Our Feet* merits attention from the environmental history community. Created by a team headed by **Sarita Siegel** and **Gregg Mitman**, the documentary examines the contested nature of land rights in Liberia. It draws on two unique resources: the release of footage from a 1926 exploratory mission in Liberia led by Harvard University and Mitman's encounter at the University of Wisconsin with international student **Emmanuel Urey**, who is the central figure in the film. The documentary skillfully weaves the two together to explore contemporary land rights in Liberia and their historical influences. The viewer sees scenes of Liberians watching images of their land and people from nearly a century before and debating their implications intermixed with Urey planting crops on his land and government officials seeking to enact new laws.

Achieving equitable land reform is a daunting task, and the film does not propose easy answers. What may be of greatest interest to environmental historians is the film's attempt to interject historical material into contemporary debates. The Harvard expedition was funded by the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, which had just been granted a 99-year concession of up to a million acres to develop a rubber plantation, thereby disrupting the claims of local residents. While this was not the first nor last time customary land claims were disrupted (conflicts between neighbors and the nation's recent civil wars loom large as well), the filmmakers seek to return this evidence of the country's past to its citizens. For numerous Liberian viewers of the film, it was not only an opportunity to learn about corporate extortion and state complicity, it was also a chance to see landscapes before they were turned into rubber plantations and witness moments of village life from an earlier era. As public history, the footage spoke deeply to many about their cultural and ecological heritage, as evidenced in the photos included in this roundtable from screenings of the film in Liberia.

*The Land Beneath Our Feet* has been shown at numerous film festivals and garnered an admirable number of awards, including “Best Feature, Documentary or Animated Film Award, International Competition” from the Festival de Cine Verde de Barichara (2017), “Best African Film Award” from the San Francisco Black Film

Festival (2017), and “Best Documentary Director Award” from the Harlem International Film Festival (2017).

Within academic circles, screenings of *The Land Beneath Our Feet* have been held at multiple academic conferences recently, and I was delighted that **Nancy Jacobs**, **Finis Dunaway**, and **Edward R. Carr** were willing to submit commentaries on the film based on the remarks they gave at the conferences of the American Society for Environmental History and American Association of Geographers, respectively. Their comments offer hearty praise for the film while also raising numerous points for further discussion, such as how one uses footage from a colonizing project to decenter power relationships, what stories were included and why, and how the film engages with critiques of neoliberalism.

In their collaborative response, Mitman, Siegel, and Urey highlight some of the tensions and challenges of condensing long periods of history, complex issues, and hundreds of hours of footage into a sixty-minute film. They note particularly the difficult editorial decisions to include certain voices instead of others and which narrative themes to pursue. For any historian that has ever struggled to condense a 10,000-word article to 8,000 words for a journal, it is clear that the filmmakers faced a task several orders of magnitude more challenging in its scope.

For access to the Harvard expedition footage, visit *A Liberian Journey: History, Memory, and the Making of a Nation* (URL: <https://liberianhistory.org/>). Educational purchase of *The Land Beneath Our Feet* is available through Passion River Films: <http://edu.passionriver.com/the-land-beneath-our-feet.html>.

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to pause here and thank all the roundtable participants for taking part. In addition, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate.

## Photo Gallery

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Image 1: Emmanuel Urey, his father, Yarkpawolo Taylor, and his stepmother, Korto Yarkpawolo watch footage of road building undertaken by the Americo-Liberian government through the use of forced labor. The footage prompted Emmanuel's father to share his own stories building roads by hand as a young man at the time the Harvard expedition passed near his village of Gomue. Still from *The Land Beneath Our Feet*.



Image 2: At a screening of *The Land Beneath Our Feet* in Queezahn, a Bassa name meaning "white or civilized pushed us away." We were grateful for the stories Queezahn elders generously shared with our team about the loss of their customary land when Firestone was granted a lease in 1926 for up to one million acres of land to grow rubber in Liberia. Some of their stories are included in *The Land Beneath Our Feet*.





Image 3: Filming the film of a film in Gbarnga. More than 300 people turned out for the screening of *The Land Beneath Our Feet* in this interior town, where Loring Whitman, the Harvard expeditions photographer, shot many still and moving pictures of traditional life, including this dance performance in the nearby village of Naama.



Image 4: Pochano, whose Liberian Hipco song, “Product of a Failed State,” forms part of the soundtrack of *The Land Beneath Our Feet*, performing at a screening of the film in Senii, whose residents have been severely impacted by a recent land concession to a foreign oil palm company. He was one of a number of artists who accompanied us on the Liberian screening tour and had young and old up dancing on their feet.

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**Comments by Nancy Jacobs, Brown University**

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The film *The Land Beneath Our Feet* is a work by historians, about the past and the present. It tells a story of access to land in Liberia over two centuries. In nineteenth-century Liberia, foreign settlers claimed land and political control. In the twentieth century foreign business received concessions for plantations. Through these and other “development” initiatives, rural people suffered political and economic disinheritance. In the 1990s, the country had a brutal civil war, which exacted great psychological, political, and economic costs. Now, the post-war government has opened the country up to agricultural resource extraction and rural landholders feel increasing pressure from global connections. The film’s directors, Sarita Siegel and Gregg Mitman, draw out these stories to explain how land rights became so precarious in Liberia and why the current politics around them are so urgent. While offering this depiction of historical land struggles, *The Land Beneath Our Feet* also reveals the vibrancy of public history in contemporary Liberia. In fact, of the stories within *The Land Beneath Our Feet*, the one of Liberians preserving and recovering their history may be the most important.

The film is expertly shot, scripted, and edited.<sup>1</sup> As deft as the filmmaking is, it is also true that the filmmakers got really lucky, twice, by finding rich and rare avenues into the past. The first fortunate find was the documentary film footage from the 1926 Harvard Expedition to Liberia. The scientists and doctors on the expedition were sponsored by Firestone Tire and Rubber, Co., which had just contracted a 99-year lease from the Liberian government for one million acres of land. Displacement by foreigners taking land dated back to settlement by Americo-Liberians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the size of the Firestone concession and the precedent it created for international capital make 1926 a pivotal point in Liberian history. The long-unseen Harvard footage provides a rich record of that moment, featuring the landscape, ceremonies with masked dancers, and road construction to link the new plantation with the capital and coast.

The Harvard footage was a windfall, but even so, Mitman and Siegel use it with restraint. In a discussion of *The Land Beneath Our Feet* at the American Society for Environmental History annual meeting in March of 2017, Gregg Mitman commented on the limited attention given over to the Harvard film. Harvard, the filmmakers held, had already held ample power, as a historical actor and narrator. In this documentary, they determined, “Harvard would not get a voice.” True, to this conviction, the film offers relatively few direct quotations from the Harvard Expedition. Rather, *The Land Beneath Our Feet* is about the reception of the historical footage in Liberia.

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<sup>1</sup> For my broader reflections on this film, see Nancy Jacobs, review of Sarita Siegel and Gregg Mitman, “The Land Beneath Our Feet,” *Environmental History* 22, 2(April 2017).  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emw112>

This film shows a team from the University of Wisconsin bringing the Harvard footage back to Liberia for viewing. We see Liberians watching and responding to a record of their past that was previously unknown to them. The visuals about old masquerades evoke joy. The scenes of road construction elicit memories of forced labor. *The Land Beneath Our Feet* makes clear Liberians are invested in the history of land and landscapes encapsulated in the newly found footage. *The Land Beneath Our Feet* excels at showing conversations, which include disagreements: one of my favorite scenes is in a little cinema after a viewing of the Harvard Expedition documentary. The different explanations about why Liberia faces the problems it does unfold without commentary from the filmmakers, thus centering historical analysis in Liberia. Appropriately then, the film gives as much attention to local and popular forms of evidence—memories of elders, surveyors' beacons, and the landscape—as to the newly arrived records from Harvard.

*The Land Beneath Our Feet* finds its way to public debates about history through a second auspicious find, in the person of Emmanuel Urey. A graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Urey is passionate about land issues. The camera tracks his journey back to Liberia to show the Harvard footage. Following him and his blue backpack, we encounter his sympathetic extended family which struggles with access to land. His pursuit shows us Liberians as serious and constructive about rebuilding their country. By putting the microphone on Urey, his family, and his colleagues working for land NGOs, the film delivers important voices. If the forgotten video footage was rescued from an American archive, we also realized what a loss it is that these testimonies have been unrecorded among the poor and dying with the elders. The preservation of these memories is at least as critical as that of the Harvard Expedition footage.

Decentering historical narratives is the signal achievement of *The Land Beneath Our Feet*; the filmmakers' interactions with diverse archives provide a model for the discipline. Yet, the decision to tell Liberians' stories rather than Harvard's must have been followed by other decisions about which Liberian stories to include or exclude. How, for example, did they negotiate a local sense that the film would become a resource in the struggles it portrays? The film ends with efforts by NGOs, archivists, and the legislature to strengthen the land rights of rural people holding customary title. It's a laudable national effort, but local interests may not align into one countrywide policy. There are references to violent conflicts between villages over land. Possibly, the filmmakers faced hard decisions if the popular interests and needs they were documenting were contradictory or unverifiable.

I recommend this film for classroom use, in courses on African studies, international studies, and environmental history. Viewers will learn a lot about the history and politics of land in Liberia. More generally, they may be led to reflect on who analyzes the past, with which sources. As audiences take in the lessons from this film, they may wish, as I did, for reflection by the filmmakers about their approach to the subject. To enhance that learning and my own, I look forward to reading Siegel, Mitman, and Urey's comments on the filmmaking process.

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**Comments by Finis Dunaway, Trent University**

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The headlines announce: “Harvard Party Reaches Monrovia” and “Firestone Declares Door Is Open in Liberia.” These flickers of the past—historic newspapers overlain with black-and-white footage of an expedition party in Africa—signify a moment far removed from our own time. Yet the images soon transition to color footage of recent violence and civil war. From the beginning, *The Land Beneath Our Feet* deploys a strategy that will recur throughout the film: moving back and forth in time to evoke the links between then and now. After reading the title screen, viewers are immediately thrust into the present. Emmanuel Urey, a contemporary Kpelle man, appears in vivid color shots, planting coconut trees with his family. As Urey explains how Liberian culture is tied to the land, it is clear that *The Land Beneath Our Feet* will not be a conventional historical documentary.

In an interview clip, the historian and co-director Gregg Mitman recounts how this project originated when he learned of newly-available scientific expedition films produced during the early twentieth century. *The Land Beneath Our Feet* includes striking examples of footage from one such journey: the 1926 Harvard African Expedition, a project sponsored by the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. These images indicate the values and identity of the expedition group, especially their faith in the colonization of nature. The Harvard team viewed the Liberian landscape as a place brimming with productive potential, an area to control for the benefit of American capitalism. The footage shows roads being constructed and forests being cleared to make way for a linear path of change—of science and progress financed by capital, of customary land rights ignored, of rubber planted and extracted, of Liberian bodies laboring for Firestone—all to ensure, as the company letterhead audaciously proclaimed, that “Americans should produce their own rubber.” Even if the expedition party had its eyes on the future, the cameraman still recorded some practices that could be seen as signs of a fading past. These images bear some similarity to the project of salvage ethnography—documenting cultural traditions before they are obliterated by the onrush of modernity. Whether they were looking backwards or forwards, whether they were motivated by a desire to fix the past in an image or to prophesize landscape change, these two views of Liberia nevertheless reinforced one another. They were part of the same imperial identity framework that discounted indigenous voices, marginalized local knowledge, and displaced traditional communities.

What is so innovative and surprising about *The Land Beneath Our Feet* is that the film does not even try to rehearse this type of reading—although it does give viewers enough context and evidence to interpret the footage in this way. Co-directors Mitman and Sarita Siegel refuse to let Harvard and Firestone dominate the narrative. Viewers learn very little about the Harvard scientists or the purposes of the expedition. Rather than telling the story through their voices, *The Land Beneath Our Feet* emphasizes the perspective of contemporary Liberians.



This novel approach was inspired by Urey's response to the Harvard footage. A few years back, Urey was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, where Mitman teaches. After the two met, Mitman shared the footage with him and quickly realized that the images held powerful, unexpected meanings to a Liberian viewer. Urey says that "words are inadequate to express" what he felt when he encountered the footage. "I was just really overwhelmed when I saw it. This was my first time to see how life was in Liberia at that time." According to Urey, the Harvard film offers a glimpse into a previously hidden environmental past. He says, for example, that he did not know that a large rubber plantation was once a vibrant forest ecosystem where people used to live. For him, the footage is not merely a colonialist souvenir and should not be consigned to history's dustbin.

*The Land Beneath Our Feet* follows Urey and the expeditionary footage back to Liberia. The footage takes on a completely new life when it is seen by people who were definitely not part of the cameraman's intended audience. The Harvard team was far from objective in their rendering of Liberian land and culture, yet contemporary viewers emphasize how these images provide them with unprecedented access to the past. In one scene, Urey speaks with former Bassa Town community members and their descendants, who were displaced long ago by Firestone. Surrounded by a multi-generational group of spectators, an older man is visibly moved upon watching a cultural performance filmed by the expedition. The imagery of devil dancing, he says, "reminds me of what we used to do, but Firestone came and destroyed everything." In another scene, Urey shows clips of road building to his father, who then describes the arduous labor—digging the ground with long sticks—he and other men performed as the Harvard team traveled near his village.

The Harvard footage not only opens a portal to the past but also resonates in the present. Some of the most compelling scenes in *The Land Beneath Our Feet* feature Liberians talking about how the imagery casts revealing light upon contemporary struggles. "The footage is important to Liberia," one man comments, "historically and in the contemporary turn right now, because the footage gives us a deeper understanding as to what we are dealing with today—it started way back." Urey takes the footage to a community meeting, where viewers debate its meanings. They argue over the question of responsibility—over whether Firestone or the Liberian government should be blamed for the reckless exploitation of the country's resources. "Are these guys working in the interests of Liberians?" one man asks. "Or, are they working in the interests of the West?" His questions echo throughout *The Land Beneath Our Feet*: Firestone appears as precursor to the social and environmental challenges facing contemporary Liberia.

Indeed, the erosion of land rights decades ago seems to be eerily repeated in concession agreements today—a tragic replay of the past in which the rights of foreign companies run roughshod over traditional subsistence practices. Within this framework, Firestone provides a fitting historical analogy, a promised path of progress that does not meet the cultural and nutritional needs of the Liberian

people. Since the end of the Liberian Civil Wars in 2003, the narrator observes, “the government has accelerated grants of Liberia’s land to agricultural, logging, and mining concessions.” The catastrophic effects of large-scale clearance are catalogued by one man who laments the loss of local fish populations and land crops, and then concludes: “Everything we had here is gone.”

*The Land Beneath Our Feet* uses cinematic techniques to reinforce Liberian voices and to register the troubling similarities between then and now. “In the footage,” Urey notes, “we see Firestone is clearing large amounts of land, and today we see that land in being cleared through for concessions now.” Just as the Harvard imagery features wide-angle shots of road-building, Mitman and Siegel filmed wide-angle views of a massive monoculture of oil palm, vast fields controlled by the Sime Darby Plantation corporation. The black-and-white panoramic vision projected by the Harvard footage is replicated by Mitman and Siegel—this time in color—to convey the enormous scale of change. From black and white to color, from Firestone to Sime Darby, from rubber to oil palm, the current transformations resemble past upheavals and suggest disturbing continuities across time.

While the Harvard footage offers visual evidence of the colonization of nature, *The Land Beneath Our Feet* also depicts examples of grassroots efforts to decolonize nature: communities documenting their customary ownership of land, using maps as weapons to assert that land use decisions should start with local people themselves. The film shows one community that has mapped land within a logging concession. The participatory mapping project appears as an empowering exercise to lay claim to a more positive, life-affirming future. As one protest sign announces: “The survey project is our future hope.” Although *The Land Beneath Our Feet* offers a brief look at this project, more attention to community mapmaking would have strengthened the film’s treatment of visual politics. Maps, of course, have long been used as instruments of colonialism. In this case, though, community residents are creating their own maps to counter state and corporate authority, to advocate for control over their own lives and landscapes. How do they represent these claims in graphic form? What information has been gathered to depict customary uses of land? How widespread has this practice become, and has it proved effective?

Mitman and Urey have played crucial roles in repatriating the Harvard footage so that it can recirculate in contemporary Liberia. “It belongs to us,” Urey says at one point. “We should bring it back.” The repatriation of the Harvard film represents an effort to decolonize visual culture, to return the images to the descendants of those subjected to the photographic and filmic gaze.

Urey suggests, though, that recirculating the images today is sensitive and needs to be handled in a careful, respectful manner. *The Land Beneath Our Feet* implies that the devastating effects of the Liberian Civil Wars—including the contested memories and fractured relationships within the country—explain the fraught nature of recirculation. Yet the film does not adequately explore this issue, nor does it focus much on the ruptures wrought by the civil wars. To be fair, this somewhat

cursory look at military conflict no doubt relates to issues of editing and length—*The Land Beneath Our Feet* covers an impressive chronological and topical range in only sixty minutes—as well as to the filmmakers’ effort not to let the civil wars overshadow the narrative of land history. Still, some viewers may feel that the filmmakers glossed over this topic and may wish for a clearer explanation of the links between land and war in recent Liberian history.

*The Land Beneath Our Feet* will likely prompt viewers to want to know more about the production history of the Harvard footage: What motivated the expedition leaders to invest so much—including all the equipment that had to be transported across difficult terrain—to document their journey? What kind of interactions took place between the cameraman and the people he photographed and filmed? Were the Liberian subjects asserting a form of agency in being filmed and in posing and performing in certain ways? Did this footage contribute to material change in Liberia?

Although the film does not consider these issues, it provides powerful evidence of how the footage is being received today. The recirculation of this footage creates new relationships between past and present, and between image and identity. For Emmanuel Urey and other Liberians, the footage does not celebrate a one-way, linear path of development, but instead offers a more complicated glimpse at the relationship between then and now. The footage, Urey argues, connects contemporary Liberians with their land and with their past. He sees the images as directly relevant to present political dilemmas and global power relations. Even if Firestone and the Harvard Expedition disregarded local peoples’ customary ties to the land, Urey believes that this footage can help preserve their land-based culture and identity. The narrative structure of *The Land Beneath Our Feet*—moving back and forth between past and present—reminds viewers of why history matters and invites us to consider how pictures have agency in the world.

In addition to offering an engaging portrayal of Liberian land history, this film also joins cutting-edge scholarship in visual culture studies in pondering the multiple lives of images. Indeed, the documentary deserves our praise not only for its accessible treatment of crucial themes in environmental history, but as a work of scholarship in its own right. *The Land Beneath Our Feet* models a collaborative, community-based approach to visual images. This method moves beyond questions of content and style to consider how images work in the world and how they acquire new layers of meaning over time. In working to repatriate the images, the filmmakers have launched a democratic form of public history that may also shape the future.

After watching *The Land Beneath Our Feet*, I can only marvel at the logistical challenges, thorny political dilemmas, and other complications that Mitman and his collaborators must have faced in producing this documentary. I wonder how much this project has changed Mitman as a historian. He has published outstanding work on visual culture and environmental history, and I am curious whether becoming a

filmmaker has altered his understanding of images and his approach to scholarship. I am also intrigued about what was left on the cutting room floor and about the difficult editing decisions he and Siegel had to make. Finally, I am interested in learning more about the current status of the image repatriation and how the Harvard footage is being received in Liberia.

*The Land Beneath Our Feet* is a subtly subversive film. It does not offer blanket condemnations of colonialism or corporations; it does not dwell on the racism of the Harvard footage or the imperial hubris of Firestone. Instead, the documentary allows Urey and other Liberians to narrate a history of the present. As they reflect on the presence of the past, they find colonial traces all around. As they emphasize customary rights over short-term profits, they press for a people's history of land. Early in the film, Urey remarks, "some voices have been silent for a long time." *The Land Beneath Our Feet* challenges the silencing of indigenous voices and fosters new ways of seeing Liberia's environmental past, present, and future.



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**Comments by Edward R. Carr, Clark University**

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Watching *The Land Beneath our Feet* made me miss the Geography of Sub-Saharan Africa class I used to teach, and the opportunities this film presents to illustrate so many of the issues I tried to convey in it. At the broadest level, this film successfully conveys the ways in which historical patterns of colonialism have a contemporary impact on the lives of those in Liberia. In so doing, it grounds these challenges in the arena of land tenure and extractive industries, while placing these challenges into the context of specific agricultural systems and the experience of rural life in what is left of the Upper Guinea Forest. In short, it is tremendously ambitious in a deeply geographic way, and it lives up to that ambition.

Questions of land tenure in development, like most development challenges, are all too often presented ahistorically. As the film illustrates, in Liberia this challenge is particularly pronounced because the war did much to sever people from their families and land, and the important historical legacies that proceed from both. But *The Land Beneath our Feet* also powerfully demonstrates that the war was not a societal reset button that erased or rendered irrelevant the forces of history that are still evident in the lives and landscapes of those in Liberia. Instead, the film's focus on land tenure allows for a focused presentation of the large historical issues that shape the West African world today, ranging from slavery and its "solutions" to the global circulation of capital to a national government that was extractive before it was "failed". As the film unfolds, it becomes clear that current land tenure challenges are bound up in the very ideas and logic often presented to resolve them. Formalized tenure doesn't fix a government that does not respond to the people, it makes people legible to that government and facilitates extraction and dispossession. Formalized tenure doesn't fix a government that is not accountable to the people, it makes them legible to the flows of global capital to which the government responds. With an unaccountable government, this legibility tends to end badly for those rendered legible. Instead, it pushes agrarian populations into cash cropping and wage labor, removing the escape hatches they have built into their livelihoods. Where populations once could "deglobalize" strategically when markets turned against them, formalized tenure can set in motion changes that remove such options, and introduce new forms of vulnerability to these populations.

The rendering of livelihoods in *The Land Beneath our Feet* captures their complexity, and the challenges to their resilience that issues of land tenure are now introducing. The film demonstrates how livelihoods decisions are not only about material goals and outcomes, but about setting the world on a path that is as social as it is material. For example, in the film the decision to cultivate oil palm is clearly one as social as it is material. Oil palm is a cash crop, but it is also an insurance policy, a food source, a marker of land ownership, and a crop that offers an escape hatch in that it can be eaten or sold, depending on markets.

In its weaving of livelihoods and land tenure, *The Land Beneath our Feet* demonstrates that land tenure is not an input to livelihoods, it is deeply and complexly implicated in questions of how people live in particular places. In Liberia, as in many other places, the “modernization” of land tenure is producing new subjects. In the film, some of the voices sound like those of fully produced neoliberal subjects who extol the wealth production upsides of such formalization. But this is not universal, and perhaps one of the most interesting parts of this film is the ways in which Emmanuel, its central figure, gives voice to the experience of being a subject aware of his (re)production through the process of tenure formalization. His discomfort, his sense of being between worlds, makes agrarian transformation as embodied in tenure formalization far more than a technical decision, but one in which people are transformed in ways they are not fully comfortable with. As a result, the larger transformations of livelihoods and economy that seem to be proceeding from tenure formalization are very indeterminate and take on worrying timbre. Watching this is unsettling, but hopefully productive of a decentering that development continues to need, even after decades of critical scholarship, to get us to think about development as much more than apolitical, technical interventions.

All this said, the movie does not *overtly* address the production of subjects through land tenure, which leaves open the question of whether the neoliberal subject is the only one produced, or if there are *multiple* neoliberal subjects that are being produced. Is Emmanuel on an inexorable path to his production as a particular kind of subject, or does his discomfort point the way to something different, a degree of agency in his own production? In leaving this question open, I wonder if *The Land Beneath our Feet* has inadvertently retold the popular, but perhaps too-simple, story of neoliberal development at the expense of the complexity of such production. I also wonder where the development donors are in this film – Liberia is a state dominated by such donors, who through funding decisions, political pressure, and personal connections seek to guide the policies of a government already significantly divorced from its people. Were such donors inaccessible, or did the director assume that donors, like the government, were too divorced from “on the ground” reality to matter?

These are important questions, but not of the sort that amount to significant flaws in the film. It speaks to the quality of *The Land Beneath our Feet* that I can ask such detailed, picky questions. Indeed, such questions might be useful jumping-off points for student discussions that link this case to much larger themes in the history, political ecology, and development of sub-Saharan Africa.

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**Response by Gregg Mitman, Sarita Seigel, and Emmanuel Urey**

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**G**REGG: It is a rare gift when one's work becomes the focus of critical reflection by generous and thoughtful scholars from quite different fields, reflections which touch upon the making of *The Land Beneath Our Feet* in important ways. The essays by Nancy Jacobs, Finis Dunaway, and Edward Carr offer a useful and timely springboard for part of our film crew to regather, having spent considerable time together over eight shoots in Liberia over four years, to collectively ponder the experience, directorial decisions, intentions, and shortcomings behind the making of the film. We would like to express our gratitude to the authors and to H-Environment editor, Christopher Jones, for making possible this opportunity.

Jacobs, Dunaway, and Carr, each in their own way, draw out a major theme that we sought to foreground, visually and narratively, in the film: the sedimentary layers of Liberia's past land ruptures that shape its present and future. It is gratifying to learn that this deliberate intent to interweave the past and present came through. At the same time, we found ourselves constantly pushing against the impulse of nostalgia.

Sarita, we talked a lot about how to use the archival and contemporary footage to prompt viewers to reflect on, as Dunaway notes, "continuities across time," but in ways that didn't romanticize the past or suggest that indigenous culture was somehow frozen in time. Can you speak a little about how you went about trying to achieve this as the film's cinematographer and editor?

SARITA: One of the most striking shots to me when I began working with the footage was of a boy surrounded by friends, peering intently into the film camera. Watching this filmed moment from 1926 you get a sense that you are being confronted by a curious and confident boy who peers through time to the present day. This image stayed with me as an example of how we must keep the people of Liberia's past front and center of the present.

While filming *The Land Beneath Our Feet* over several years, young children with a similar curiosity as the small boy who was filmed by Loring Whitman, gathered and peered into my digital camera's inky lens, fascinated by its huge unblinking gaze. I could easily imagine Whitman filming, my recording of contemporary footage, as well as the townspeople watching the archive film, to all exist as an interconnected multi-directional regard. I wondered at times, might our own filming of the present be stored away, forgotten, then rediscovered and used to reflect down the years? I embraced this feeling in the edit choices so that scenes had a feeling of everyone watching each other across time. It certainly helped how I approached the archive and contemporary footage, as something alive and having agency, rather than lost, frozen or irrelevant material that the nation has left behind.

With the intention to make a film that blended a multitude of past and present points of view, it was both essential and serendipitous as Nancy Jacobs remarks, to work with Emmanuel Urey to engage audiences in thinking about the contemporary pressing land issues that emerge in *The Land Beneath Our Feet*. Being a Liberian who undertakes international post-graduate study, Emmanuel is ideally positioned to respond to Harvard's expedition across the world to see and record 'traditional' life as it was in Liberia in 1926. More than 90 years later, our film's voice, through Emmanuel, was that of a man who himself journeys across the world and regards the lives of others in the USA. Emmanuel added layers to our story by drawing from both this international experience and his intimate knowledge of Liberia's remote hinterland. He easily reflected on ongoing cultural and resource appropriations in his homeland by international and domestic actors. Emmanuel also assumed culture was dynamic and ever changing, so with that caveat we were never going to build a film that had a static view of indigenous culture.

During the edit some continuities across time emerged very naturally. Perhaps by a stretch of the imagination, the scene in Queezahn that depicts elders who could have almost been watching themselves as children when they watch the archive footage. Time had moved on, place had not; yet place had been irretrievably altered. However, in the edit I did not choose dialogue that spoke of mourning, loss or nostalgia from the interview material, but rather candid and outspoken comments that portray the loss to the community and a continuing expectation for compensation. As an editor who had also shot the footage, I placed utmost importance on editing a scene as authentically as possible while still trying to weave the elements together to serve a story arc.

GREGG: Both Dunaway and Jacobs comment on our decision not to give Harvard a voice in the film. Indeed, Jacobs argues that "decentering historical narratives is the signal achievement of *The Land Beneath Our Feet*." Dunaway points to the collaborative, community based approach to visual images as a model for scholarship. We are thankful for such high praise. But credit for this needs to go to Emmanuel and the many Liberians we interacted with in the making of the film. They opened our eyes to different ways of thinking about this footage and the stories that it might tell in ways that were subversive of the imperial and colonial structures of power, from Firestone, to Harvard, to the Americo-Liberian government, that were duplicitous in its collection. Dunaway's suggestion that the film is "subtly subversive" resonates with what we hoped to achieve.

Dunaway asks how the film has changed my approach to scholarship. For me, the collaborative nature of film is quite alien to the way we often think about scholarship in the humanities, which is so focused on the single author/researcher. And I find myself ever more attracted to collaborative modes of scholarship as a result of making films. But, as Jacobs points out, decisions had to be made about which Liberian stories to include or exclude, as well as which people and institutions to collaborate with. We, ourselves, were very conscious of our positions of privilege. The decision to work with the Liberian national archives in the digital



repatriation of the footage was certainly looked upon by some in Liberia with suspicion, given the lack of trust in government that exists in Liberia. And, as much as we sought a more democratic approach to the gathering of stories, we faced differential power relationships—both as Western filmmakers and within Liberian society—at every turn.

For example, working in partnership with the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, the Indiana University Liberian Collections, and the Center for National Documents and Records Agency in Liberia, we built a digital public history and community-sourcing website, *A Liberian Journey: History, Memory and the Making of a Nation*, for people to gain access to and interact with the Harvard expedition footage and photographs. The website is intended as a companion to *The Land Beneath Our Feet*. Despite our best efforts to make the digital platform accessible via mobile phones in Liberia, where the internet penetration rate is approximately 8 percent of the population, the limited use of the crowd sourcing function of the site to generate additional stories speaks not only to the digital divides that exist, but also to the need for deepening community engagement with the site in Liberia, which we plan to do in the coming year.

The issue of whose voices to include was also shaped by the constraints of film as a medium. Nowhere, perhaps, was this more acute than in the ways that issues of land tenure have impacted women's lives in Liberia.

Sarita, I'm wondering if you could speak to the relative absence of women's voices in the film, given how outspoken women are on land rights issues in Liberia? What constraints, both within Liberian society and the storytelling structure of film, resulted in so many women's voices being left on the cutting room floor?

SARITA: As Nancy Jacobs comments we have the power in the edit to give screen time to the various parties in the film whether they are Harvard, Firestone, elders, youth, women, multinationals or government. There were so many collected points of view that at times some hugely important voices were lost in an effort not to lose the audience. It is well known as a filmmaker that if you try to address too many different story threads or themes you will lose the interest of those watching. It is this fear that led me at times to pare away the sub plot of women's issues as I felt that there was more than enough to make another whole film about the subject. At times, it seemed that every scene where I began a discussion on the issue of women's rights to land I felt that I could never do the issue justice as we had not gone out to shoot for this storyline. Nor could I satisfactorily dovetail this discussion back on to the broader land rights subject. For this reason, sadly I did lose many threads that were rich; such as female chief Suakoko, who ruled an important axis of the interior counties, the voice of a young female theology student who had views on land rights history, or including more material from Emmanuel's wife Vivian. I settled with Emmanuel's Aunt who spoke directly about women's contributions to the land economy and Vivian on national identity, not merely because they were

women, but because they were saying things that added to a story about rights to the land beneath their feet.

GREGG: Just as we were determined not to give Harvard a voice in the film, we similarly were adamant not to make another film about war in Liberia that traded in ruin porn. Emmanuel, I remember a moment when you almost left the project, disgusted by the amount of time we were spending filming decaying and dilapidated buildings in Monrovia. We also spent a lot of time interviewing you about your own experiences growing up during Liberia's civil wars, which we ended up not including. Do you feel we perhaps glossed over the war too much in the final version of the film, as Dunaway suggests?

EMMANUEL: First, I really want to thank Nancy Jacobs, Finis Dunaway, and Ed Carr for critically engaging our documentary in a significant way.

Dunaway's critique about glossing over how the loss of land may have contributed to the war is an excellent point. I do, however, think the documentary touches on this link in a nuanced way. The precursors of war such as the loss of rural lands, the displacement and marginalization of certain populations, the creation of a plantation economy and minority rule are perfectly laid out in the documentary.

The stories of the Liberian civil wars have been told in various forms and manners. There was so much media coverage during and after the war, a war that greatly impacted my life and those around me, that I am glad that war did not become a major storyline in *The Land Beneath Our Feet*.

As Gregg suggests, I almost left the project in its early days and I told our security officer James Bayogar about my dissatisfaction with the way the camera crew spent so much time filming bombed-out buildings and nasty places in Monrovia. I could not imagine the crew standing in 95-degree Fahrenheit temperatures trying to capture the scene of a small filthy street corner on Camp Johnson Road for more than 30 minutes. It was even more annoying that the crew wanted to capture my image in those places. At that time, my feeling was that if this film was another film that reinforced stereotypes of Liberia, and Africa, to a larger extent, as a place of poverty, disease, suffering, and war, the story would not be told using my personality. I could not agree to be the central character in such a narrative.

My point was not to portray Monrovia and Liberia as a beautiful city and country. Liberia, like other African, Asian, European and American countries, has its own ups and downs. All I wanted was to be certain that the film highlighted these ups and downs. For example, I wanted the film crew to capture both decaying buildings and beautiful buildings, dirty places and beautiful landscapes. In other words, I never wanted a one-sided story. I wanted us to capture the diversity of places and lives that make up Liberia.

In the end, I think *The Land Beneath Our Feet* beautifully highlights the struggles of Liberia as the country grapples with complex land rights issues. Despite my initial misgivings, I am quite happy with the final product.

GREGG: In his critique, Carr asks an intriguing question about whether the film plays into a simple story of neoliberal development with a singular subject that is produced or whether there might perhaps be multiple neoliberal subjects that are in the process of becoming in Liberia? One of our decisions to return multiple times to Gomue was because we felt the experiment that Emmanuel and his family are undertaking there is an interesting contrast to where the World Bank, multinational companies, and the Liberian government are pushing development in Liberia. Gomue vs. Sime Darby serves as a contrast, as Donna Haraway remarked at a film screening, between the multispecies garden and the monoculture plantation. Emmanuel, you often spoke to us while filming about feeling like you were someone who inhabited multiple worlds. So how would you respond to Carr's question about your discomfort? How do you find yourself navigating between these different worlds? In what ways are you trying to assert your own agency in the future lives of you and your family in Gomue?

EMMANUEL: I do think of myself as being between multiple worlds. I was born and raised in Gomue where I learned Kpelle tradition and culture. It is a culture for complex reasons in which women do not possess the same land rights as those of men. Then I spent time in Monrovia working with the Land Commission and discovering how statutory forms of land tenure had historically clashed with customary land tenure, with the latter being marginalized in the name of development. Furthermore, I am studying in the US where land tenure systems are somehow clearly defined and demarcated but such clear definition and demarcation came at a huge cost to the lives of Native American populations. A major issue I am working on is how to use my experiences from these multiple worlds for the betterment of inhabitants of Gomue and Liberia.

That was the reason why I started the oil palm project in Gomue. Unlike multinational companies such as Sime Darby that first clear-cut the land before replanting it with oil palms, we did not clear-cut the 25 acres before replanting it with oil palms. We first made a rice farm where we cleared the bushes leaving important trees species including naturally grown oil palms. We intercropped the rice with the commercial oil palm seedlings. After the rice harvest, we cleared the rice straws and intercropped the palms with plantains, eddoes, and many other garden crops. This way, we continue to harvest the natural oil palms and other food crops while awaiting the commercial oil palms to mature.

I understand that such farming method described above poses a challenge to large companies such as Sime Darby, whose main interest is profiteering. But such profit-making mechanisms of monoculture plantations not only destroy the livelihoods of rural populations, they also destroy local culture and in many instances, people are much worse off than before, as I have discovered in researching large-scale land

concessions in Liberia. As I finish my study at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I plan on returning to Liberia to help deal with these complex issues.

GREGG: Space does not permit addressing all the interesting queries, comments, and insights offered by Jacobs, Dunaway, and Carr on *The Land Beneath Our Feet*. So, we end our response by reflecting on a recent tour of the film in Liberia, where Emmanuel and I, along with Liberian musicians Pochano, Royal de Busta Pain, and XO, who all helped compose the film soundtrack, along with narrator Miatta Fahnbulleh, traveled to the places where we have been filming over the past four years. In remote rural villages, like Senii and Queezahn, the palaver hut was packed, with children sitting on the rafters, as people came out in great numbers to watch the film. In Gbarnga, the seat of Bong County, more than 300 people turned out for the screening. People took out their cell phones, filming the film of a film. The screenings sparked vigorous discussion and debate, particularly in rural areas, around past and present land rights issues in Liberia. We distributed all the free copies of the film we took with us; we could have handed out many more. Seeing the reception of the film in Liberia, among people who generously gave of their time and their stories in its making, was the greatest reward our team could have asked for. And it suggests to us the value of film, and the importance of approaches informed by the environmental humanities, in advancing publicly engaged scholarship.



## About the Contributors

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**Edward R. Carr** is Professor and Director of the International Development, Community, and Environment Department at Clark University, where he also directs the Humanitarian Response and Development Lab (HURDL). His work focuses on livelihoods and their use as means of governing social, economic, and environmental change in agrarian contexts. This broad interest is embodied into numerous projects that translate new theoretical framings of livelihoods into donor-funded projects that engage implementation and policy related to vulnerability, resilience, and climate change adaptation.

**Finis Dunaway** is Professor of History at Trent University in Canada, where he teaches courses in US history, visual culture, and environmental studies. He also serves as the Gallery and Graphics Editor for *Environmental History*. He is the author of *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* and, most recently, of *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images*, which received the John G. Cawelti Award from the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, the History Division Book Award from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and the Robert K. Martin Book Prize from the Canadian Association for American Studies. He is currently researching the history of environmental and Indigenous campaigns to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

**Nancy J. Jacobs** is a Professor of History at Brown University. Specializing in the environmental history of sub-Saharan Africa and South African social history, she is the author of *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge University, 2003), *African History through Sources* (Cambridge University, 2014), and *Birders of Africa: History of a Network* (Yale University, 2016). Presently, she is writing a global history of the African Grey Parrot.

**Christopher F. Jones**, Associate Professor in the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies, studies the histories of energy, environment, and technology. He is the author of *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America* (Harvard, 2014) and is currently working on a project examining the relationships between economic theories of growth and the depletion of non-renewable natural resources.

**Gregg Mitman** is the Vilas Research and William Coleman Professor of the History of Science, Medical History, and Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His most recent books include *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene* (coedited with Marco Armiero and Robert S. Emmett) and *Documenting the World: Film, Photography, and the Scientific Record* (coedited with Kelley Wilder). Together with Sarita Siegel, he directed and produced *The Land Beneath Our Feet* (2016) and *In the Shadow of Ebola* (2015), an intimate portrait of a family and a nation torn apart by the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

**Sarita Siegel** established Alchemy Films in San Francisco in 1994 and later moved to London where she works as a self-shooting director, producer and editor. Siegel's documentary films include titles such as *The Disenchanted Forest* (2004), *Fire Burn Babylon* (2010), *In the Shadow of Ebola* (2015) and *The Land Beneath Our Feet* (2016). Siegel is currently in production on *Outspoken*, a feature documentary that highlights an explosion of rap 'activists' who step up to the mic to voice protest and demand change.

**Emmanuel K. Urey** is a PhD Candidate in Environment and Resources at the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison. His dissertation research focuses on the impacts of large-scale agriculture concessions on rural people in Liberia. He is the main protagonist in *The Land Beneath Our Feet*.

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