



Figure 1. Still from historic footage, ca. 1926, of scientific expedition to Liberia by Harvard University's Department of Tropical Medicine, sponsored by the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. *The Land Beneath Our Feet*, dir. Sarita Siegel and Gregg Mitman. Alchemy Films, 2016

The Land beneath Our Feet

An Interview with Gregg Mitman

David Serlin

In the early 1920s, the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company successfully realized its dream of exponentially increasing rubber production by leasing up to one million acres of land in the African nation of Liberia. Harvey Samuel Firestone's desire to establish a vast rubber plantation was emboldened by collaboration, beginning in 1926, with Harvard University's Department of Tropical Medicine, headed by Richard Strong. Like many early twentieth-century scientists, Strong's team produced hours of expeditionary film footage, much of it taken by Loring Whitman, then a first-year medical student and previous chair of the photography department of the *Crimson*, Harvard's student newspaper.

In 2001 Gregg Mitman, the Vilas Research and William Coleman Professor of History of Science, Medical History, and Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, first encountered Whitman's film footage—held not in Harvard's special collections or in Firestone's corporate archives at the University of Akron in Ohio but in the personal collection of Randal Whitman, Loring's son, who had preserved the film as a part of his father's professional legacy. Mitman had initially regarded Whitman's footage as visual evidence of neocolonial technoscience in situ, a parallel to Henry Ford's corporate misadventures in the Brazilian rainforest as documented in Greg Grandin's 2009 book *Fordlandia*. But in 2012 Mitman met Emmanuel Urey, a graduate student from Liberia, who was attending the University of Wisconsin on a scholarship to study land tenure issues in Liberia. Mitman showed Urey footage from the Harvard expedition. While the footage had been shown at

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public lectures and private gatherings in the United States during the 1930s, and later at Whitman family gatherings, it had never been seen in Liberia.

Mitman had not anticipated what the Harvard footage might mean to a Liberian national. Urey's reaction, however, and his subsequent insight and eloquence about the film footage as it was shared among Liberians across the country, had the effect of reconfiguring Urey as one of the project's critical interlocutors. This enabled Mitman and his collaborator, Sarita Siegel, to reckon with Whitman's footage in relation not only to Firestone's neocolonial corporate presence but also to the systematic erasure of national memory in Liberia—a fundamentally vexed topic for any African nation in the postcolonial era but exacerbated in the past few decades following Liberia's first and second civil wars (1989–96 and 1999–2003) and the outbreak of the Ebola virus (2014–15).

The Land beneath Our Feet, Mitman and Siegel's documentary film, which weaves together the 1926 Harvard expedition footage with the journey of Urey as he seeks to understand how Firestone's arrival and fourteen years of civil war have shaped contemporary land rights issues in Liberia, was officially released in the fall of 2016. David Serlin spoke with Mitman via Skype in April 2016, exactly ninety years after the first Harvard expedition to Liberia.

David Serlin: *How did you become interested in Liberia as a research site, and how then did you become interested in making a documentary film about it?*

Gregg Mitman: This project actually started a long time ago when I was approached by a nonprofit media organization to serve as a scholar-consultant on a film about the roots of international conservation in colonialism in the twentieth century. They had footage from three different expeditions, which Harold Coolidge, a Boston Brahmin, Harvard primatologist, and a mover and shaker in international conservation circles in the 1940s and 1950s took part in. The earliest of these was the 1926 Harvard expedition to Liberia.

I had some problems with the way in which they were conceptualizing their project, particularly in relation to issues of race, but I became quite interested in the Liberian expedition footage and started working with that material. I was thinking about the place of industrial plantations in the early twentieth century as a site for work on disease ecology, which then connected me to Harvard's Department of Tropical Medicine and what they were doing was in Liberia. This would have been around 2001. I had just begun working on my book *Breathing Space*, and this looked to me like the next project because it brought together my interests in ecology, film, and issues of social justice.

As I started doing archival work, I was initially unable to get access to the Firestone corporate archives which are held at the University of Akron in Ohio. I tried for about five years. Then I got in touch with the International Labor Rights

Forum because, at the time, there was a class-action suit against Firestone for labor abuses on the plantations today. I told them that there was an archive that could be useful to the case that they were then compiling. A judge initially ruled in our favor. “Why,” the judge asked, “is the University of Akron, a public institution, maintaining a closed corporate archive at taxpayers’ expense?” I even found a pamphlet written by Harvey Firestone Jr. in the 1950s or 1960s that made it clear that the archive was clearly intended to serve as a public record for American business history. Unfortunately, the case was thrown out for different reasons, and to this day the archive remains closed. So I had to figure out other ways of approaching this project. Around this same time, Kelley Wilder and I were working on *Documenting the World: Film, Photography, and the Scientific Record* (forthcoming), so I was thinking a lot about the social lives of photographs and of photographs and film as material objects.

In 2012, just as I was embarking on my first trip to Liberia, I met this graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Emmanuel Urey, who grew up in Liberia during the civil war. At age eight, he fled to Guinea with his family and lived in a refugee camp. Emmanuel first learned to read and write at the age of fourteen. I met with him and showed him some of the documentary material, and he was pretty blown away by it.

Serlin: *In your film we see scenes of Emmanuel sitting among the village elders and showing them footage on his iPhone or on his laptop, which is quite a powerful sequence.*

Mitman: Emmanuel accompanied me on my trip to Liberia, and as we started showing this material to people in Liberia it became clear that there was a whole other way to think about this material. Previously, when I had been giving talks about this footage at academic meetings or at universities, members of the audience would say to me: “You can’t show this material. You’re reinscribing its racism.” And when I’m in Liberia, people will look at the footage and say, “Look! That’s my dad!” [*Laughter.*] Such completely different meanings made me start thinking about the many different lives that films have.

Serlin: *Let’s talk about where this footage came from. How did Harvard get involved with Firestone in the first place?*

Mitman: Richard Strong was chair of Harvard’s Department of Tropical Medicine, established in 1913. Previously, Strong had been head of the Philippine Bureau of Science’s Biological Laboratories during the US occupation there. Strong reached out to Harvey Firestone in December 1925 and offered to go to Liberia and conduct a complete biological and medical survey of the country at the time that Firestone was trying to negotiate with the Liberian government for access for up to one million acres of land to establish a rubber plantation.



Figure 2. Member of the Harvard team inspecting Liberian child's ear while crowd watches. Still from historic footage, ca. 1926, of scientific expedition to Liberia by Harvard University's Department of Tropical Medicine, sponsored by the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. *The Land Beneath Our Feet*, dir. Sarita Siegel and Gregg Mitman. Alchemy Films, 2016

Serlin: *Strong reached out to Firestone first, rather than the other way around? We're accustomed to hearing about entrepreneurialism in the twenty-first-century neoliberal university. Strong seems very much ahead of his time in that sense.*

Mitman: Strong had established early on a subscription model for Harvard's expertise in tropical medicine, for which emerging US multinational firms would pay a certain amount to the department every year. The funding and the experience helped train company doctors at, for instance, companies like United Fruit or the American Chicle Company that had plantations in Central and South America. Strong developed working relationships with these companies. In exchange, Harvard scientists would get free transport on company steamships and access to patients in company hospitals and to biological specimens. At the same time, the Harvard scientists would share with these companies knowledge about diseases that were threatening healthy labor forces in the tropics.

Someone who has been written out of the expedition record but who really helped broker Firestone's expedition on the ground for Harvard was a man named Plenyono Gbe Wolo, the son of a Kru paramount chief in a region in southeastern Liberia. Wolo was educated by American missionaries and received his undergraduate degree from Harvard in 1917. He went back to Liberia in 1922 and established a day school in Grand Cess, but meanwhile he had developed a working relationship with Abbott Lawrence Lowell, who was president of Harvard through the early 1930s, and so Lowell reached out to him to help the Harvard team. There's a fleeting image of

Wolo in one of the film clips, and there are a couple of photographs of him and his family. He was very active in defending the rights of the indigenous people of Liberia to the American government. In 1915, for example, the US government was involved in the suppression of a Kru rebellion, and Wolo spoke out strongly against that.

For the Firestone expedition, Strong arranged a team of eight parasitologists, bacteriologists, physicians, botanists, mammalogists, and medical entomologists. Max Theiler, who would go on to win the Nobel Prize in 1951 for the development of yellow fever vaccine, began that work on the Firestone expedition. Strong also commissioned Loring Whitman, a first-year medical student and former photographer for the *Crimson*, the Harvard student newspaper, to take the motion picture record and photographs. That's how this material came to be. It was in the Whitman family for many years. Randal Whitman, Loring's son, told me that his father would bring out the films in the 1950s to screen them as "Dad's home movies." In fact, this material only exists in its current archival form because Randal agreed that it rightfully belonged to the Liberian people. Thanks to Randal's generosity, the material is now available through the website, *A Liberian Journey: History, Memory, and the Making of a Nation*, a collaborative project between the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Indiana University's Liberian Collections, George Mason University's Center for History and New Media, and the Center for National Documents and Records Agency (CNDRA) in Liberia.

Serlin: *Did Whitman's footage ever make its way into any other film contexts, such as anthropological studies or newsreels?*

Mitman: Strong did have hopes of making a film like Martin and Osa Johnson's 1928 blockbuster *Simba: The King of the Beasts*, which was based on footage shot in Kenya during the same period. Strong reached out to Terry Ramsaye, the editor of *Simba*, who looked at the material and basically said, "You don't have anything here." It was originally shot on 35 millimeter film, but we only had access to the 16 millimeter prints that had been used by Strong in the 1930s in conjunction with talks he had given on disease ecology in Africa.

What's interesting is that, when you compare what Whitman chose to photograph and what he chose to film, the photographs document tropical diseases straight out of nineteenth-century anthropology and anthropometrics, whereas he used film to capture the life and movement of a people. There's a great deal of footage of women weaving and spinning and men working on roads.

Serlin: *Why was Strong, and by extension Whitman, so interested in documenting indigenous labor in Liberia, since this was ostensibly an expedition about gathering data for Harvard in the field of tropical medicine and also for Firestone in the field of industrial hygiene?*

Mitman: Firestone needed to recruit a labor force of fifteen thousand people. You have to remember that Liberia is a country composed of sixteen different ethnic groups in addition to the descendants of the freed blacks who had come from America in the 1820s and lived on the coast as Americo-Liberians. So Firestone was trying to evaluate which of the ethnic groups would be best suited as a labor force. You see this clearly in the official published expedition record, where scientists are clearly trying to assess physical diversity among strong, agricultural people within the different groups living in Liberia. Film offered a tool to help determine which bodies would be strongest and most adaptable to the work ahead.

Actually, Strong became quite incensed by practices of forced labor that Americo-Liberian ruling elites had imposed on interior ethnic groups in Liberia. When Strong returned to the United States, he met with Calvin Coolidge to alert him about what was happening. Within a year, the League of Nations launched an investigation into slavery in Liberia, and Whitman's footage was used as material evidence. Strong went public and published a number of photos in some of the Boston newspapers in the late 1920s, so a number of the images did make their way into the public sphere.

Serlin: *A common gut reaction to the Harvard expedition footage, as many of the academics you've described demonstrate, is to see it as evidence of early twentieth-century racist science. Yet you've discovered some aspect of it that moves beyond the politics of representation. This is no apologia for Firestone's brand of corporate colonialism, but the Whitman footage seems to function on multiple levels.*

Mitman: One thing that is important in the context of Liberia is that much of Liberia's history has not been written from indigenous perspectives. It's been written largely from Americo-Liberian perspectives. Following Liberia's two civil wars in the late 1980s and 1990s, part of the reconciliation process has been to try and rewrite Liberian history to make it a more inclusive history. So what's great about the expedition footage is that it documents part of the past of a number of Liberia's indigenous ethnic groups.

This is one of the things that Emmanuel talks about in the documentary. So many elders were killed during Liberia's civil wars that it has resulted in a generational loss of memory. By the end of the second civil war in 2003, the average life expectancy in Liberia was around forty-seven years, so you really get a sense of how skewed the demographic is to young people. When you have this tradition of oral history passed down from elders, that's a real issue. A good anecdote that bears this out concerns Plenyono Gbe Wolo. There's a school named in Wolo's honor in southeastern Liberia. When we traveled there and started talking to people, they said, "If you had been here in 1995, people could've told you lots of stories about Wolo," but all the elders that had that knowledge were killed. Meanwhile, some young people suggested that Wolo was just a myth fabricated by elders as an inspirational symbol

for them to achieve higher education. Some expressed disbelief that somebody from a remote part of southeastern Liberia could have gotten out in 1913 and gone on to be educated at Harvard. That shows you the kind of impact that a civil war can have on history and memory.

Every time I watch the footage, I see something new of life in Liberia in the 1920s. But what's even more valuable about it is that when local people see it, it jogs their memories and it really generates stories. You can see this with Emmanuel's father as he watches the footage. When he sees that material, he is reliving those experiences of working on those forced labor crews on the roads. We found that time and time again. It becomes this incredible ethnographic probe, if you will, in eliciting people's memories.



Figure 3. Still of Emmanuel Urey (second from left), showing historic film footage to members of his family, from *The Land beneath Our Feet*, dir. Gregg Mitman and Sarita Siegel (Alchemy Films, 2016).

Serlin: *Over your career, you've moved from analyzing photography and film as primary materials for scholarship to coproducing and codirecting your own documentaries. For you, how is film a different scholarly or expressive medium? What makes it different than a monograph full of compelling photographs?*

Mitman: Film is to me a medium about building worlds. Through juxtapositions and relationships, there's an ecology that enables the filmmaker to create worlds for the viewer that are visually and aurally rich that can't be captured by a book. It's one of the reasons why we use a lot of Liberian hipco music: to get a sense of place, both in past and present.

After I got back from my first trip to Liberia, I realized that the only way to treat this kind of topic would be to make a documentary. I reached out to my film-making partner, Sarita Siegel, and asked if she'd be willing to collaborate on this project together. We've been codirecting and coproducing it over the past four years.

On the other hand, one of the dominant tropes in the film is that of silence. There's very little about the Harvard expedition itself in this film. The scientists don't get a voice. Instead, I wanted to be able to capture the voices and perspectives of Liberians because we had heretofore only known about the project through the eyes of Harvard scientists like Strong. So in crafting the film, all we want the audience to know is that there was an expedition, but we learn nothing about the people behind that expedition.

Serlin: *It's interesting to think about these different voices or these different forms of silence and their effect on the viewer. They reflect what seems to me to be one of the film's other dominant tropes, which is about the loss or erasure of local history as well as its recovery.*

Mitman: One of the things that we were trying to really do in the film was capture different moments of land rupture in Liberia. Western notions of private property and land alienation were quite alien to the paramount chiefs and ethnic groups already living there. These ruptures are still happening today, when 25 percent of land has been sold off to multinational concessions. Emmanuel talks about this: when your stories are so embedded in the land and you lose that land, it becomes another erasure of memory.

By the 1950s, Liberia was basically a company town of Firestone. The amount of rubber export that was coming out of those plantations is staggering. Even the local diet was affected by Firestone. Traditionally, in the Liberian interior, people would grow upland rice, which is very wholesome and nutritious. But the upland rice was fairly labor-intensive, so when you're trying to feed fifteen thousand laborers you need a different agricultural model. Firestone began importing milled white rice, and in Kpelle it actually has a name—*pussava*—which means “thirty.” Thirty cups was the monthly ration in rice given to Firestone workers, which they still do even today. So rice is an index of the way in which multinational corporations completely transform the economic, cultural, and social relations of people living in these areas.

Serlin: *This emphasis on the political economy of landscape in Liberia dovetails nicely with much of your previous work, such as Reel Nature, in which you explore what it means to think about landscape as a historical entity, as something that can be historicized. How does landscape function for you in this film?*²

Mitman: Film is appealing as a medium because in a project like this one it can be used to try and convey the scale of these corporate operations. When we visited the huge Sime Darby oil palm plantation in Grand Cape Mount County, we shot using wide frames to show the endless monoculture. We were really trying to capture the scale and what kinds of displacements must have happened in terms of being able to create that monoculture. In some ways, the film is very much a political ecology of land and the ways in which people's relationship to land, their livelihoods, and their cultural meanings have been continually altered and changed through the changing political economy that happens in Liberia. The arrival of Firestone completely reordered the economy of nature and a nation.

The other thing is that, what do people in the West actually know about the history of Liberia? They know about its civil wars or about Ebola. So we wanted to use film to portray a different picture of Liberia that wasn't just about war, disease, and poverty. The vibrancy of the landscape, the hues, the colors, all of that was deliberate in terms of our choices for the cinematography.

Serlin: *Toward the end of the film there's a sequence in which we see you talking with the people at the CNDRA in Monrovia about the Harvard footage and how it can be made accessible. There's a brief discussion of how best to preserve it given available technology. How is the preservation or exhibition of the expedition footage different or similar to other kinds of digitization projects you've used?*

Mitman: If you go to the website *A Liberian Journey* you'll find pretty much everything: the original documentary footage; all of the expedition photographs; one virtual exhibit that we created about Madame Suah Koko, a mythic woman paramount chief who has become a symbol of female empowerment in contemporary Liberia; and some of the oral histories that we did for our film. The next thing that the CNDRA wants to do is to digitize the recently discovered founding documents of Liberia dating back to the nineteenth century—land deeds and so forth—and start building exhibits out of that material that will begin to give a much more inclusive picture that combines both Liberia's indigenous history and its Americo-Liberian history.

The other component of *A Liberian Journey* is that there's a share function. People can watch the Harvard footage and then add their own stories and memories that will then become a part of this archival record in the process. This is reflected in the system architecture; there are many modes of access built into it. You can access the footage through a map. You can access it through the collections. You can access it through the oral histories. You can access it through the virtual exhibits. All of these underscore the website as a project of collective memory.

Serlin: *Will there be an on-site version of this exhibit so that if you don't have access to a computer or you're not necessarily familiar with how to navigate an online database that you can go to a physical place look at these materials in person?*

Mitman: Well, we did have a pilot exhibit of some of the expedition photographs at CNDRA in Monrovia. And we are hoping to launch a mobile cinema, touring with the documentary film, archival footage, and photographs along the former Harvard expedition route. We have also worked hard to make the materials as digitally accessible as possible in Liberia, which was a challenge in the website design. Thinking about the digital divide and how we address it in a project like this was very much at the forefront of our minds during its development. When I first started this project in Liberia in 2012, typical Internet speeds in Monrovia were sixty-four kilobytes per second. In the past year, 4G cellular networks have arrived in Liberia, and the majority of visitors in Liberia are accessing the site via their mobile phones. We designed the website to be mobile-friendly, knowing how rapidly the mobile phone market is growing in Africa. We've tested it in Liberia, and it's working fine.

Just as film allows you to mobilize all of these different perspectives, all of these different kinds of competing claims, we wanted these differences to be reflected in the accompanying website. We wanted people viewing it to know that there's no master narrative. Anybody can take this material and make it their own.

David Serlin is associate professor of communication and science studies at the University of California, San Diego. His books include *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (2004); *Imagining Illness: Public Health and Visual Culture* (2010); and *Window Shopping with Helen Keller: Architecture and Disability in Modern Culture* (forthcoming). He is a member of the editorial collective for the *Radical History Review* and a founding co-editor of the online journal *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* (catalystjournal.org).

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