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China's Involvement in Jamaica. Socio-Ecological Consequences of a Huge Infrastructural Project,
An Interview with the Filmmaker Esther Figueroa about her Film
"I Live for Art - An Ecocide Romance"

Abstract

Esther Figueroa is a Jamaican independent filmmaker, writer and linguist. She has degrees in History, East Asian Languages and Literature (Chinese) and a PhD in Linguistics. With over thirty years of media making including television programming, documentaries, educational videos, multimedia and feature film, her work focuses on the environment, local knowledge, indigenous cultures, social injustice and community empowerment. Her films include the award-winning feature documentary "Jamaica for Sale" (2009). Her publications include "Sociolinguistic Metatheory" (1994) and her recently published environmental novel about Jamaica, *Limbo* (2014). Anne Tittor interviewed Esther Figueroa in October 2015 via e-mail about the twelve-minute video "I Live for Art – An Ecocide Romance", released in 2013. The film is an experimental short about the Palisadoes Shoreline Protection and Rehabilitation Works Project in Jamaica – and how the government and a Chinese company involved in the project try to use environmental and developmental arguments to defend large-scale infrastructure construction that is destroying the local ecosystem.

Keywords: protection of nature, Caribbean, Chinese influence, development projects, infrastructure, transformation of nature, socio-environmental consequences

Anne Tittor (A.T.): Why did you choose the topic of Chinese investment in Jamaica in this film?

Esther Figueroa (E.F.): Firstly, I would not use the word investment. It is a word that is overused, without critical consideration of its use, and a word that does not apply. Large scale infrastructure projects whether publicized as “aid” or “gifts” or “investments” funded by “loans” and “grants” from foreign governments, multi-lateral or multi-national entities are not investments but continuities of the colonial project, including means by which governments, companies, products and workers have access to markets outside of their local sphere, and often part of expansionist policies, which in some cases include settlement.

A.T.: Then, what is the core of “the project” and what exactly is China’s role within it?

E.F.: The subject of my film is the Palisadoes Rehabilitation and Shoreline Protection Works Project (2010-2013). It was one of its most expensive parts of the Jamaica Development Infrastructure Programme (JDIP), which was funded through a loan from the People’s Republic of China through the China Export-Import (Ex-IM) Bank and implemented by the Chinese government’s subsidiary China Harbour Engineering Company, Ltd (CHEC).

JDIP was the beginning of the full scale Chinese dominance of the Jamaican political economy. There was no bidding for the contract, the company CHEC was granted sole source and continues to retain that status through 2015, contracted to complete the North South Highway (now a toll road it owns) and proposed a transshipment port in the Portland Bight Protected Areas. This includes a long term lease of the Goat Islands, and recently signing a MOU with the University of West Indies to do all construction expansion for the Mona campus having already built the new Medical Faculty building and the Vice-Chancellory (more on this dominance below).

A.T.: Why is the Jamaican government in favor of this project? What is the government’s role?

E.F.: Large scale infrastructure projects are beloved of states and politicians because they are highly visible, come with large price-tags, and are wonderful opportunities for crony capitalism; the dispensing of favors and patronage as well as direct theft and personal enrichment. (Patrick Wong, the CEO of the National Works Agency, the Jamaican government arm of the project, eventually was forced to step down towards the end of the project because of corruption, but, to my knowledge, he was the only high profile casualty.) The then newly elected Jamaica Labour Party came to power promising “Jobs! Jobs! Jobs!” They had been elected (in an extremely close election) through the lavish spending of money (in Jamaica buying votes is the signature of our electoral democracy) much of which had been funded through the Olint Pyramid Investment Scheme. JDIP was the means by which the government could get the cash to run the government, shore up patronage, as well as have ongoing displays of Your Government At Work. There were JDIP signs all over Jamaica from the smallest road repavement to the largest bridge and highway projects, and most of these signs are still standing! With the defeat of the JLP and the return of the People’s National

Party, in 2013 the government changed the name from JDIP to Major Infrastructure Development Programmed (MIDP) but continued the same debt relationship with the People's Republic of China and the same construction relationship with CHEC, though actual road repair work is now minimal.

A.T.: Why did you choose this topic for the film?

E.F.: The Palisadoes Rehabilitation and Shoreline Protection Works Project is also an example of disaster capitalism. The funding for earlier Palisadoes road work (the partial construction of revetment walls to protect the highway, since apparently the dunes weren't doing a good enough job) came out of disaster preparation funding in response to the South Asian tsunami. One of the claims for the Palisadoes project is that it will protect our capital Kingston and surrounding areas against damage from category 5 hurricanes and tsunamis - both completely specious claims. Climate change is the latest excuse for disaster capitalism, and the government of Jamaica (and other governments in the region) is receiving and will continue to receive funds for infrastructure projects in the name of climate change mitigation and resilience.

I made this film as part of my ongoing documentation of the destruction of Jamaica by government sanctioned actions, as well as to expose the idiocy and corruption, given that the government made ridiculous claims as to the purpose of the project, its necessity and national importance, its cost benefits, and made design, economic and environmental promises that have never been met. I documented from the beginning to the end of the project so as to create an archival record.

A.T.: Is it the first Chinese involvement in Jamaica and does it differ in any dimensions from other projects funded from abroad?

E.F.: JDIP begun in 2010, but it was not the first infrastructure project funded through Chinese loans. Already in 2007 the Cricket World Cup hosted by the West Indies brought with it new stadiums funded through loans from the Peoples Republic of China and built by Chinese construction companies and Chinese workers, and was then followed by the bargain basement purchase of government owned and divested sugar plantations and factories in Jamaica). But JDIP, as I told you, was the beginning of the full scale Chinese dominance of the Jamaican political economy.

China is now the most economically important actor in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America. The power and influence of China is a reality that earlier colonial powers are just starting to wake up to. In April 2015, US president Obama made a quick (non-state) visit to Jamaica, meeting with both Jamaican and CARICOM leaders, and made some passing promises of Caribbean development money for entrepreneurship and the like. Most recently in October 2015, British Prime Minister Cameron showed up for a state visit to announce money for the construction of a new prison (we haven't built any since the British) and for Caribbean development money for "roads and bridges". And the same day Cameron made a speech to parliament, (telling us to get over slavery and move on) that made most Jamaicans feel insulted and disgusted, the Prime Minister of Japan was in Jamaica promising development money for technology, culture and

education. Without the fear of Chinese hegemony, no North American, European, or Asian leaders would be visiting Jamaica.

A.T.: Does it make a difference that it is not the old colonial powers, but China who is involved?

E.F.: Chinese economic and political interests are no different than previous colonial world powers. They have the cash, the reach, and the plans for what they need: natural resources, land, geo-political influence, military power, and settlement. Jamaica is an island with a history of over 500 years of colonial rule and extraction, highly indebted, ruled by oligarchy, a deeply traumatized and unequal society with a brutal history of genocide, enslavement, displacement, and cultural replacement. A government under yet another IMF austerity regime with no money to spend on anything but debt servicing is now dependent on China and has made deals with China and CHEC that it refuses to make public. However, some are known, for example in return for completing a small portion of the North-South highway (now a toll road it owns and just over a mere month after opening hiked the toll by 80%), CHEC has been promised 1,200 acres of land wherever they want to do whatever they want. That they have chosen the Roaring River, watershed that amongst other things feeds our icon Dunns River Falls, has most Jamaicans extremely upset.

But this is just the tip of what is really going on and without any transparency rumors fly. There is rumor that the Chinese government will be granted settlement for hundreds of thousands of Chinese nationals in return for debt that Chinese citizens can become immediate Jamaican citizens to get around the pesky problem of Chinese nationals doing jobs that unemployed Jamaicans supposedly can do. The efforts to stop China getting the Goat Islands in the Portland Bight Protected Area to build a transshipment port has included trying to get the agreement between CHEC and the Jamaican government made public, but these are state secrets that cannot be shared with Jamaican citizens.

Before the Chinese it was Venezuelan Petro Caribe dollars that kept the government afloat (it is now “buying back” its Petro Caribe debt in a move applauded by IMF and World Bank), but the government never felt the need to show slavish devotion to Venezuela and was instead bowing to Spain because of Spanish tourism developments on the island, but that turned out to be extremely short lived as Spain went bust in 2008. So, Jamaica apparently desperately “needs” China, but China has so many options in the world to have its needs met and like every other colonial power once bored, loses interest, annoyed by too many obstacles by pesky environmentalists, nationalists, unhappy natives, better prospects elsewhere, downturns in domestic economy, problems at home etc., China will move on and who then can or will fill the cash void of the Jamaican government?

A. T.: In your film we hear government representatives arguing that the project will respect the environment. Do you think this objective is impossible in the context of such massive infrastructural works?

E.F.: The Palisadoes tombolo is supposed to be protected under Jamaican law (the Natural Resources Conservation Act) and is an internationally protected RAMSAR wetlands site. However, the government of Jamaica went ahead with the destruction of the dunes, the mangroves, the wetlands, etc. so as to protect nature from itself. The argument given was that the Palisadoes natural environment is subject to damaging storms and hurricanes and seas and therefore must be protected through man-made engineering from potential natural disasters. This is a case of “we must destroy the village to save the village” - we must destroy nature to save the environment. Given this attitude there is no way that the project could “respect the environment” and the claims that Patrick Wong was making as to environmental oversight and the careful adherence to environmental best practices are shown to be absolute nonsense by my footage. You can see that simple environmental requirements such as the use of silt protection floatation devices to stop debris going into the harbor failed because they were not deployed properly nor were they maintained despite Wong’s claim to 24-7 environmental oversight. One can look at the permit requirements for the project and see that the project was always in breach of its requirements.

A.T: How much protest and resistance has the project generated in Jamaica so far?

E.F.: There was a great deal of protest and efforts to stop the project, with arguments against the costs, the debt burden, the unproven economic claims as to the benefits to Jamaica and Jamaicans, and the environmental damage. These efforts went on through the entire project including a law suit by the Jamaica Environment Trust against the government for not following its own public consultation guidelines.

In the newly minted Jamaican constitution Article 13(3) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, guarantees to all persons in Jamaica:

“(l) the right to enjoy a healthy and productive environment free from the threat of injury or damage from environmental abuse and degradation of the ecological heritage, (...)”

Though this right has never been tested in the courts, it seems to be primarily in reference to the effects of environmental abuse and degradation on residents in Jamaica (such as negative effects on health). Individuals and communities who suffer from the degradation of the environment such as those living in proximity to mining and quarrying have very little to show for their efforts at redress. The government has laws protecting the natural environment, and government agencies that are supposed to enforce these laws, at the same time the government promotes the destruction of the natural environment through other laws (such as the mining, quarrying and fishing acts) and other agencies whose purpose is to allow the destruction of the environment. For example, under the mining act (from colonial era 1947) all minerals are vested in the state so you do not own your land and the government can lease or sell your land without your consent. Bauxite mining is one of the greatest destroyers of agricultural land and rural ways of life in Jamaica, yet the government continues to promote the slogan “Grow what we eat and eat what we grow!”

A.T.: In this issue of *fiar* we put emphasis on different meanings of nature in the Americas. What is the investors' and the government's understanding of nature? How is nature politically negotiated and socially constructed in Jamaica?

E.F.: Nature in Jamaica is equivalent to "bush" - unused, unproductive, uncivilized spaces that must be brought into the sphere of human production, consumption, and, most importantly, development. Though the government pays lip service to "sustainable development" and the "ecological heritage", as expressed in my film by then Minister of Transportation Mike Henry (paraphrasing) - we must come to the understanding that concerns over the conservation of the natural environment must be subsumed under the greater need of the country to "develop" and "move forward." Progress, i.e. development and moving forward, is the obsession of all Jamaican governments and all international donors and development agencies. But what is development? It is synonymous with industrial landscapes - "roads and bridges", human consumption of goods and services (GDP) and the dominance of humans over all other species. The only role that "nature" has in development is as "natural resources" that can be extracted or used by humans in some sort of way. That humans are completely dependent on the natural environment (air, water, land, soil) is arrogantly set aside and that "natural resources" have intrinsic value (including economic value) is not part of the development equation. Nature therefore is something that simply must be sacrificed until we reach our development "goals" and then we will have the "luxury" to consider such matters. For example, in arguing for coal as a form of energy production it is posited that since all advanced (i.e. developed) countries used coal, it is unfair for us to not also have that opportunity.

A.T.: Why did you choose the title "I Live for Art - An Ecocide Romance"? Why "ecocide", why romance, and what can be the role of art in those kind of struggles?

E.F.: I chose the title "I Live for Art" because in my film I use the aria "Vissi d'arte" from Puccini's opera "Tosca". Floria has been offered the impossible "bargain" by the grotesque Scarpia to have sex with him and he will free her revolutionary lover that he is torturing within her hearing. In this heart breaking aria Floria sings plaintively about all the things she has done right: "I lived for art, I lived for love, I never hurt a living soul"... and begs "perche perche Signore, perche me ne rimunerai cosi?" "Why, why, Lord, why do you reward me thus?" All Jamaicans have been bequeathed impossible "bargains" of varying degrees of humiliation and degradation and we may as well call out and ask "Why?" No one comes to her rescue and Floria ends up murdering Scarpia. Jamaica has one of the highest murder rates in the world.

I also chose the title as a satire. I don't "live for art" nor do I consider my media work "art" and find most discussions about film as art pretentious. I don't reject art as a fundamental and powerful part of the human experience. I myself have curated many art events, am a collector of visual art, and can't live without music, visual art, and literature. But I find the notion of the striving individual artist pompous and resist myself in that narrative. I was once on a film panel where the question came up

about our filmmaking as art and the other two filmmakers identified themselves as artists whose vision and artistry was the most important thing. They had no need to consider the purpose of their work or the audience - it was all about them: The Artist. I have always tried to not make my films about me, but since this film is extremely personal I gave it a title with a satirical personal statement. And since I am an activist filmmaker who does primarily non-fiction work, especially documentaries, I made it stylistically more like something one would see in an art forum or museum than the documentaries I normally make. (More on style below.)

The reason the word “Ecocide” is in the title is because that is what is taking place, and I think we need to call it what it is and stop speaking in euphemisms. I believe that ecocide is the greatest wrong in the world. My use of the word “Romance” is a shout out to Michael Moore’s “Capitalism - A Love Story”, and again is meant satirically, referring both to the meaning of romance as a heroic narrative and to the romantic notion of living for art and film making as art. There is nothing romantic about ecocide.

And there is nothing romantic about beaches and bays covered in garbage which is the case in Jamaica (much to the distress of the Tourism Enhancement Fund). We have a serious solid waste disposal crisis. We allow items for consumption to come into the island without any means of properly recycling and disposing of them. Our tropes of modernity include excess, the more you have to waste the more prosperous you are, and our mimicry of other nations’ excesses and examples of modernity mean that supermarket practices of putting everything into plastic bags has been formalized by the public health authorities. And now, in addition to supermarkets, the informal sector, which sells on sides of roads and in the traditional markets, puts everything in plastic bags, even fruit with skins on them. In addition, a high percentage of Jamaicans don’t have adequate cooking facilities and/or have occupations that make it easier and/or more cost effective to buy prepared food and beverages which inevitably come wrapped in plastic, in plastic bottles, in plastic and styrofoam containers, and then all placed in plastic carrier bags (called “scandal bags”). In addition, many don’t have proper disposal for human feces and that goes in scandal bags as well. Our garbage collection is few and far between and that which is collected ends up in mismanaged official dumps and unmanaged illegal dumps. Most people burn their garbage and/or fling it into bushes, rivers, pits, sinkholes, road sides, and gullies. When it rains, the gullies wash into the sea and end up on beaches, shorelines, wetlands, and floating in bays and harbours. This in addition to garbage dumped at sea. We have a strange unfathomable attitude to garbage. We are impeccable about cleaning ourselves, our homes, our yards, our vehicles, but the public sphere for which we have no ownership is outside the realm of our personal responsibility and therefore someone else’s business.

A.T.: Why did you opt for dividing the screen in many sequences of the film? What effect did you want to provoke for the audience?

E.F.: Returning to the style of my film, the reasons for split screen/multiple imaging were numerous. I had shot the footage in standard definition not high definition and therefore the size and resolution of the images were small. I shot a great deal of footage over three years and split screens were ways to maximize the footage, to show the same process/scene over time - multiple activities of the same process - multiple views of the location. It was also a way to show the disconnect between words and reality and the fragmented nature of the experience. And I wanted to have the eye not rest so changing the size of the image was one way to keep the viewer alert to the visual content.

A.T.: What did you intend by hearing voices speaking and singing without seeing the speakers or singers?

E.F.: I chose not to show anyone as they were speaking (all the players are on screen at some point if you know who they are, for example Minister Mike Henry in his macho posturing is pretending to operate large machinery which of course he doesn't know how to do) because I want the visuals to dominate and because these politicians and government officials are completely unaccountable for what they say and do. Though they are some of the most powerful people in Jamaica (in terms of decision making and implementation), they are invisible/hidden.

A.T.: Anything else you want to tell the readers about the film and the ongoing transformation of nature in Jamaica?

E.F.: Jamaica is in a crisis where schools do not have water, working sanitation facilities, furniture, teaching materials, proper teachers; where health clinics and public hospitals don't have the basic medical supplies, equipment, or procedures for overworked doctors to do a safe, sanitary, and careful job; where because of IMF strictures, the wages of the public sector have been frozen; where teachers, nurses, police, traffic controllers and others have had to go on sick outs, strikes or threaten strikes to be taken seriously at the negotiating table, and have been offered minuscule raises which will not cover the rate of inflation while the Jamaican dollar continues to sharply devalue (another IMF imposed condition though they deny it). The government has an IMF target to meet that will require extensive cuts in public sector employment. The government then has to waste large amounts of money and increase Chinese debt on unnecessary infrastructure projects, such as Palisadoes roadworks at approximately USD\$70 to USD\$100 million for under five kilometers of road and the Christiana Bypass which cost approximately USD\$90 million for one kilometer of roadway, that stand as monuments to particular politicians (then JLP ministers Mike Henry and Audley Shaw respectively), which is simply foolhardy and criminal. In addition, these projects do maximal damage to the natural environment, raising the temperature and adding to our ongoing problems with drought. Therefore, there is no way the government of Jamaica should receive any climate change funding while deliberately exacerbating existing conditions.

A.T.: Thank you very much for the interview.



Esther Figueroa at work (Foto: Heidi Savery)

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