



JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL FILMS

VOL 09 NO 01

Earth Day Editorial. April 22, 2025

Alyssa Grossman (University of Liverpool)

Leonard J. Kamerling (University of Alaska Fairbanks)

Åshild Sunde Feyling Thorsen (University of Bergen)

Gregory Gan (Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg)

Martha-Cecilia Dietrich (University of Amsterdam)

The release of our current issue on 22 April, coordinated by a new editorial team, coincides with Earth Day 2025. We present here five films that take a close look at natural resource extraction around the world, involving gold, oil, sand and stone. The films were not prompted by a specific call but emerged as a common theme from the submissions we received, reflecting the heightened concern with ecological issues amongst many ethnographic filmmakers and anthropologists today.

The directors all employ detailed processes of ethnographic observation to consider the complex social and economic disparities sparked through the effects of climate change and the ongoing destruction of the planet. Exploring mining (as well as forms of community resistance to mining) as a social practice, critically examining its manifestations across a range of cultural contexts, these films offer nuanced and empathic analyses of these practices, challenging simplified characterisations of them as merely 'good' or 'bad'.

In our contemporary era that is profoundly characterised by anthropogenic environmental impact, these films highlight the social inequalities and power imbalances that cause certain populations-- often those within the global majority-- to experience the effects of environmental devastation more directly and acutely than others. The films featured here do not portray such groups as passive victims; rather, they illuminate creative and impassioned forms of community resistance. They demonstrate people's determination to educate themselves and mobilise against these larger forces, to assert their own rights and agency while fighting for a fundamental sense of respect and accountability towards the natural world we all share.

JAF's editorial team is in the midst of its own fresh beginnings and endings. We warmly welcome Åshild Sunde Feyling Thorsen, Gregory Gan and Martha-Cecilia Dietrich as new editors. We also extend our gratitude to Leonard J. Kamerling on the eve of his retirement for

his long service to the journal. Len has played an instrumental role in enriching the quality and scope of the ethnographic films *JAF* has circulated to the academic community and beyond. We would also like to extend our special thanks to Maria Eugenia Ulfe, who was invited as a guest editor for the current issue to address a conflict of interest concerning one of the films in the line-up.

Our new team is currently in the process of updating *JAF*'s conflict of interest policy. When authors submit their films to the journal in the future, they will see an option to declare any personal or professional competing interests with our journal or its editors. In such cases, the editorial staff will take measures to ensure a fair and transparent review process, which will be discussed in *JAF*'s next issue.

We are also currently developing plans to introduce a new, experimental section to our journal, called the Open Dialogue Initiative. This initiative will incorporate into each issue one film in its final stages of editing. A specialist reviewer will be invited to give a written commentary on the form and contents of the film, to which the filmmaker will provide an extended written response. This exchange will be published in the form of a dialogue, to be read alongside a working cut of the film, giving audiences the chance to witness a key part of the creative process of ethnographic filmmaking that is not ordinarily made public. It will also crucially offer directors an opportunity to receive feedback that could significantly impact the direction of their project. If you are interested in submitting a nearly finished film to this new section of our journal, please state this at the time of your submission. We have adjusted our review process to enable respondents to review films that fall into this category. If you have any questions or would like to participate in this initiative, either as an author or a respondent, please email the journal at jaf@uib.no.

***Tindaya Variations*, directed by Isaac Marrero Guillamón, 2018, 43 min.**

Tindaya Variations dives into the heart of questions surrounding the social, cultural and ecological implications of the exploitation of natural resources. The film sympathetically conveys the reverberations of a conflict that has been playing out both above and below ground in the Canary Islands. On the outskirts of the town of Fuerteventura looms Tindaya Mountain, a source of public controversy and debate for over five decades. This impressive, pyramidal structure was declared a natural monument in the 1980s by the Spanish government, partly because of its hundreds of prehistoric carvings and archeological remains. At the same time, mining companies were granted licenses to extract its stone, and it became the site of multiple quarries. In 1995, the architect Eduardo Chillida proposed to hollow out the mountain's interior, with the utopian idea of creating a massive space for 'people of all races', dedicated to human tolerance. The work never progressed, though to this day nearly 30 million Euros have been spent on test drilling and architectural plans. In the meantime, scholars have been uncovering new findings about the mountain's geomorphic properties and its sacred history, and locals have been organising protests against the continued monopolisation of public funds to turn Tindaya into a tourist attraction and destroy what activists argue is already an invaluable monument created by nature.

The film captures the tensions simmering in this landscape through skillfully layering present-day scenes of the mountain, the town of Fuerteventura and its inhabitants with extracts of archival footage, including audio recordings from the 1980s of parliamentary debates about Chillida's proposal, documentary films and promotional videos from the 1990s, footage of museum exhibitions about the project and political manifestos and responses from residents and protesters. Through a quietly inquisitive gaze, Marrero Guillamón shows us the complexity of Tindaya's evolving entanglements with the state, community members and the surrounding natural environment.

Dragging Chains, directed by Emil Victor Hvidtfeldt, 2024, 29 min.

Emil Victor Hvidtfeldt's film *Dragging Chains* documents Grenada's Jab Jab masquerade during the 2023 carnival season. It opens as a traditional, talking-heads documentary contextualizing the history of slavery and its contemporary resonance in Grenada. A short interruption— one that inverts the gaze— introduces a new chapter in the film, where a double inversion occurs: on the one hand, the film becomes more observational, working to convey a cinematic reality with little outside commentary. On the other hand, the events convey a field rife with symbolism, which expose the poetic qualities of Caribbean *Mas*, a celebration that seeks to reclaim the weapons of the oppressor. Interviews interspersed through the film convincingly consider the impact of the Jab Jab tradition, all from an emic perspective.

The masquerade involves masses of people dancing in the streets, chains dragged across asphalt, oil poured over Black bodies. The movements of the dancers are complemented by the film's rhythmic editing, and participants enter and leave the film, much like a carnival attendee would weave in and out of *Mas* on the streets of Grenada. The strong visuals coupled with sounds of celebration provoke questions concerning how cultural practices are intimately tied with Caribbean histories of labour exploitation and resource extraction. The physicality of the ritual, in which the camera becomes an active participant, removes any abstracting qualities of the film, and beckons viewers to consider their own positionalities and situated histories. The close of the film brings us back to our respective realities, changing us in the process. Read through the context of its opening scenes, this film viscerally conveys the weight of the history of slavery, which continues to exert its weight on Caribbean identities.

Ouro surpreende a gente (Gold Surprises Us), directed by Júlia Morim and Marjo de Theije, 2023, 21 min.

This film explores life in Suriname's goldfields, which is characterised by a high level of precarity and insecurity. Its gaze is refreshingly anti-voyeuristic. Instead of objectifying the poverty that fosters artisan extractivism in South American rainforests, it reflects the deep friendship that has developed over the years between Marjo, an anthropologist, and Pretinha, a woman running a controversial small-scale gold mining venture. We learn about the family lives of these two women, their hardships and their moments of alignment and support.

As viewers, we are offered a valuable glimpse into the story of their personal connection in an environment where its inhabitants often struggle to maintain their humanity. Another aspect that adds to the uniqueness of this film is the gendered gaze of these two women in a world dominated by men, machismo, and toxic masculinity arising from environments characterised by violence and trauma. These women's stories of care and friendship not only complicate the survival tropes that often narrate lives situated in and around gold mines, but they also demonstrate the resilience and beauty that coexist in these environments. *Gold Surprises Us* evokes the intricate politics and poetics of small-scale gold mining, as well as the distinct challenges of conducting anthropological research in this field.

***One Gram of Gold*, directed by Anna Frohn Pedersen, Patrik Jude Mkai, Robert Mwenda and Raphael Msuya, 2021, 20 min.**

The search for gold— that historically coveted commodity— has driven boom-and-bust economic cycles that have shaped cultures, livelihoods and landscapes globally. In the northern Tanzanian mining village of Nyarugusu, local small-scale gold mining helps provide essential income in a challenging economy. The risks are great and the profit small.

One Gram of Gold brings viewers starkly into the domain of small-scale gold mining where we see workers laboring in a makeshift extraction operation as they relate their stories. The film critically weighs the ambiguities of a local industry that is endangering lives and degrading the landscape but at the same time offering the promises of economic survival. Rather than taking an observational perspective of the miners and their work, the film follows two reporters, miners themselves from Nyarugusu, who interview the working men and guide us through the dangerous, labor-intensive process of extracting and processing gold. The filmmakers refer to this approach as participatory ethnography, one that challenges the roles of researcher and participant.

The reporters' conversations with the miners provide important context about the economy of small-scale gold mining in northern Tanzania, revealing the uncertainties that are entrenched in this risky occupation. Throughout these on-camera interviews we also see a resilient optimism as the miners express their hopes for economic stability and dreams of opportunity.

***Minding Sand*, directed by Laura van Erp, 2024 30 min.**

Whereas mining for gold and other precious minerals is often associated with symbols of wealth and luxury, Laura van Erp's film explores the mining of a resource that has more of an everyday, practical character. In this instance, sand is being excavated from the beaches of Sierra Leone, where it is then mixed with cement and used to create building blocks to construct houses and other elements of the urban environment.

This film is set in Lakka, on the outskirts of Freetown. Though these surrounding landscapes are never explicitly shown, *Minding Sand* demonstrates the challenges brought by this intensive

form of mining, including the rapid erosion of the seashore, as well as threats to local fishing economies and other forms of livelihood. The film's recurring dreamy *Yo La Tengo* soundtrack reminds the viewers of the seductive appeal of the beach as a pristine tourist destination, but this music is continually overshadowed by the rhythmic soundscape of mountains of sand being shoveled and shuffled from one place to the next—ominously reminding us of the irreversible forms of devastation inevitably triggered by such large-scale quarrying operations.

Copyright © 2025: Grossman, Alyssa; Kamerling, Leonard J.; Thorsen, Åshild Sunde Feyling; Gan, Gregory; Dietrich, Martha-Cecilia.