

Environmental History

Visual Tailings

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Visual Tailings

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In 1969, the Liberian-American-Swedish Minerals Company (LAMCO) commissioned a series of twenty-one watercolors from Swedish landscape painter Roland Svensson. LAMCO had been extracting iron ore from the Nimba mountain, in the northern reaches of Liberia, since 1963. Half a century later, four of those paintings are framed on a wall of the Nimba Ecolodge's restaurant, which opened in 2024 inside the nature reserve that replaced the mine.

One painting depicts the location of today's tourist site in 1969. Watercolor brush strokes of green, grey, and blue fade into geometrical strips of pink, yellow, and rust beneath a glorious dark lavender sky. Acts of destruction, including wholesale clearcutting of tropical forest on the mountain's slopes, have been erased to lay bare the color palette of the Liberian underground (Figure 1). The open pit mine abandoned by LAMCO in 1990 became a lake, now part of the scenery that attracts middle-class weekenders from Monrovia. Nostalgia is harnessed to support a new configuration of capital, channeled into a promised future of ecotourism built upon mining remains.

<<**Figure 1 about here**>>

Mining is fundamentally about managing waste. To extract ore, overburden—topsoil and rock deemed of little or no value—must be removed. Tailings result from the physical and/or chemical ore extraction process. They pose significant dangers: the heavy metals they contain seep into and contaminate water bodies and soils, while toxic particles go airborne and accumulate in flesh and bone. Tailings are emblematic of the residual governance of mining—violent, minimalist, myopic, hubristic—colonial in its essence.¹ To minimize damage, tailings need to be contained. But containment structures, such as dams, may fail, resulting in widespread environmental disasters.

Archives are also structures of containment, meant to safeguard valuable data and control information.² In the Swedish National Archives, researchers can access the holdings of LAMCO, which contain geological maps of Mount Alpha's iron ore body, technical blueprints of planned civil engineering works, brochures advertising LAMCO's amenities for its Swedish expatriates, and handwritten meeting notes documenting railway derailments. These are the monumental self-representations of a corporate project, one dominated by Swedish banking and mining interests, eager to secure natural resources in Africa amid Cold War realignments. LAMCO's image of "responsible capitalism with a human—primarily Swedish—face," was built on a technopolitics of efficiency, discipline, and proceduralism bent on extracting the mineral riches of the Nimba massif.³ The era of high modernism in which the company emerged produced a flurry of photographs, films, and drawings, regarded by their makers as testaments to the power of science and industry in transforming the natural world for the benefit of humankind.⁴ LAMCO was no exception. The National Library of Sweden holds a visual archive where Svensson's watercolors are catalogued alongside postcards, documentaries, and the home movies of expatriate employees.

But the eating of Mount Alpha also generated, like the physical tailings of the mine, an abundance of visual “waste” not so easily contained in a company’s effort to curate its past. As the environmental sociologists Sebastián Ureta and Patricio Flores note, “tailings, like any other chemical entity, entangle in multiple ways with other entities. Some of these entanglements are toxic, even deadly. Others are vital, allowing the proliferation of multiple forms of life.”⁵ It is this vitality of visual waste that we call attention to. Thousands of pictures, stored in drawers or shared on the web by the children of LAMCO’s Swedish and Liberian employees, make for unruly remains.

We follow the traces of visual tailings to the sites they connect, to people and places that reanimate them, and to meanings multiplied by our own method of tracing.⁶ The affective relations and socialities that come to life through the circulation of polaroids and visual matter born of industrial extraction fuel memories of the past, critiques of the present, and future hopes and dreams. They hold power beyond the reach of corporate technopolitics. And the affects and socialities they generate mutate at different speeds and with different repercussions in Sweden and Liberia.

The watercolors were donated to the Nimba Ecolodge by Ann H., the daughter of a Swedish business manager who came to Yekepa as a toddler and left as a teenager. Like other expats, she uploaded some of the hundreds of photographs from her family’s time in Liberia on social media and blogs with names such as “Our Beloved Liberia.” The expat retirees share in the nostalgia of things gone: the taste of pepper soup, the celebration of Swedish midsummer in the rainforest, the babies tottering on manicured lawns, the weekend passenger train to the beach in Buchanan – the delights of endless tropical summers serviced by domestic staff.

Many more memories were produced by LAMCO's corporate enclave. When Swedish employees moved in, the regulated life of the mine reminded them of a *brukssamhälle*, the rural industrial towns founded in Scandinavia by steel and textile manufacturers in the nineteenth century. A 1963 LAMCO documentary, *Swedes in Nimba*, shows the expat management and their families enjoying free housing with 24-hour electricity, running water, a telephone, and a television.⁷ The *Swedes in Nimba* have houseboys to iron their clothes, and their children say they are quite good friends with Liberian kids. LAMCO's corporate archive is a profuse record of the gendered and racialized domesticity that propped up overseas capitalist ventures in the twentieth century.

Nonetheless, when Swedish employees came to Yekepa, they hoped to experience the thrill of "life in Africa" as they disclosed to the reporters in 1963.⁸ And they loved to document what was "African" about their surroundings and their expat lives. The swimming pool, with its purified water and interracial mix of Swedes and Liberians, clearly was a favorite of camera-owners (Figure 2). Such pictures bring into question simplistic narratives of a corporate-controlled life lived apart from locals. In Yekepa, gender and racial segregation operated in less rigid ways than on many other corporate concessions in Africa.⁹

<<**Figure 2 about here**>>

Domesticated wildlife is also a fixture of home movies that suggest rules were often broken. Management may have forbidden owning animals other than cats and dogs, but many families seem to have delighted in the company of duikers, squirrels, goats, snakes, and, especially, chimpanzees.¹⁰ In the archive, one finds much disturbing footage: of mongooses frolicking in prams, of baby chimpanzees, antagonized by dogs, anxiously reaching for a bottle of beer. These tailings tell a story of interspecies proximity, even if species companionship was

troublingly anthropocentric and abusive by today's Western animal welfare standards. These tailings rarely circulate online. Once considered humorous, the images are now toxic liabilities, given an international movement towards animal rights, and so, like many corporate archives and the toxic risks they contain, they remain hidden from public view.¹¹

The memories largely shared on Facebook and Flickr are those of an idealized multiracial society of advancement, friendship, and leisure made possible by mineral wealth. School class and office photos intercalate smiling black and white faces. A Liberian manager shows a pineapple plantation to a hiking party of Swedes in flashy hotpants. These ephemera contradict the official archive and offer a convivial, though messy, image of enclave sociality — one that elicits nostalgia among the Swedish, who look upon them as benign byproducts of an idyllic youth.

But nostalgia can be an elision of a more fraught past. In Sweden today, LAMCO is remembered for the visual coverage of a confrontation between striking Liberian mine workers, Swedish management, and the Liberian military in 1966. The resulting television documentary, *Black Week in Nimba*, juxtaposed images of hand-cuffed strike leader Henry Monger with those of Swedes basking in the sun and cavorting in the water at the famed swimming pool. The TV episode sparked a national conversation as Swedish journalists for the first time turned a critical eye toward the neocolonial practices of Swedish firms abroad.¹²

Like physical tailings, visual tailings seep out and affect political critique depending on different landscapes of exposure. Most former Liberian workers have no pictures of LAMCO, some of which, no doubt, were lost or destroyed during displacement of Nimba's population during the upheavals that followed the outbreak of civil war in 1989. The footage of a still forested Mount Alpha, Liberian workers blasting tunnels and removing rock by hand, or of

Scottish geologist Sandy Clarke who “discovered” iron ore in the Nimba mountains in 1955, have rarely been seen in Gbapa, where the men, upon whose labor and knowledge LAMCO was built, reside. Such visual tailings, when returned, spark stories, like those from Clarke’s cook and guide, Johnny Gba, who tells of how Clarke called him “Johnny Boy,” and how the geologist secretly captured and removed djinns, known to live in the mountain. They also conjure up fond memories of the days of LAMCO, when the company provided water, electricity, schooling, and healthcare to the families of salaried Liberian employees.

Today, Yekepa has a quite different feel. In 2005, the Mount Nimba concession, abandoned since 1990 by LAMCO, was taken over by ArcelorMittal Liberia (AML), a majority Indian-owned steel company, the second largest in the world. Mining companies no longer invest in expansive company towns populated by expat families. Instead, a rotating cast of single men from South Africa, India, and other countries employed by a host of sub-contracting companies has turned Yekepa into something of a rotating camp of the sort that has become common in the resource extraction industry since the end of the twentieth century.

Nostalgia can also be politically subversive, “a potent form of subaltern memory,” as literary scholars Nadia Atia and Jeremy Davies have argued.¹³ Reminders of the past speak to a more precarious present as reminiscences of the “good life” by retired LAMCO workers turn into harsh critiques of AML. Strikes around wages and salary disparities, and complaints related to illegal sewage dumping, are symptomatic of widespread feelings that AML is not “doing enough” for the country. Those who stayed in Yekepa are forced to live with the toxic repercussions of mining anew, and cope with the bitter legacy and the decaying matter of neoliberal abandonment, made even more real by visual tailings of what had once been.

Visual tailings are drawn into a discard economy: they connect people who feel forgotten – by a company long gone, by a failed development promise – and create present communities (Figure 3).¹⁴ When Ann, the Swedish girl from Yekepa, returned to Liberia in 2003, the country looked nothing like the one in which she had grown up. The Second Civil War had killed many of those she knew from LAMCO times. Her childhood home was a rubble of walls and foundation. So, she took pictures, a souvenir and reminder of what once was and now is. To preserve the photos from the child soldiers manning roadblocks who threatened to confiscate them, she screamed “I’m an ancestor of this place!” Back in Sweden, she began arranging charity lunches and field trips for the older generation of LAMCO employees. The photographs of her post-civil war trip helped raise funds for a development organization, created with a Liberian friend, that sponsors students and aims to “promote accountability in the governance of natural resources extraction within mining communities.”¹⁵

<<**Figure 3 about here**>>

Like earthen dams built to house mining residues, corporate archives are meant to govern corporate image and memory. Yet, tailings, both physical and visual, belie such efforts to contain (Figure 4). AML’s construction of a Tailings Storage Facility in a new wave of iron ore mining has already permeated Facebook posts. Tailings bring to the fore the precarious control of fractured lives and waste borne out of extractivism. In the twenty-first century, where digital sharing and streaming platforms proliferate, one can hardly predict how the dispersion of LAMCO-era visuals documenting the extraction of the subterranean may affect memories of the past and thereby differentially shape relations to the present mining moment in Liberia.

<<**Figure 4 about here**>>

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Notes

¹ Gabrielle Hecht, *Residual Governance: How South Africa Foretells Planetary Futures* (Duke University Press, 2023).

² See the introduction to this forum by Matthew Schutzer and Robyn d’Avignon.

³ Nikolas Glover, “Between Order and Justice: Investments in Africa and Corporate International Responsibility in Swedish Media in the 1960s,” *Enterprise & Society* 20 (2019):

417, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26642905>; see also Karl Bruno, “The Government’s Business?: Swedish Foreign Policy and Commercial Mineral Interests in Liberia, 1955-1980,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 43 (2018): 624-45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2018.1479214>;

⁴ Gregg Mitman and Kelley Wilder, eds., *Documenting the World: Film, Photography, and the Scientific Record* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁵ Sebastián Ureta and Patricio Flores, *Worlds of Gray and Green: Mineral Extraction as Ecological Practice* (University of California Press, 2022), 18.

⁶ Paul W. Geissler, Guillaume Lachenal, John Manton, and Noémi Tousignant, *Traces of the Future: An Archaeology of Medical Science in Africa* (Intellect Books 2016).

⁷ Erik Forsgren and Å. Karlström, *Svenskar i Nimba: från Lamcoprojektet i Liberia*, SVT1 Report, 1963.

⁸ Fosgren and Karlström, *Svenskar i Nimba*.

⁹ Hannah Appel, *The Licit Life of Capitalism: U.S. Oil in Equatorial Guinea* (Duke University Press, 2019); Gregg Mitman, *Empire of Rubber: Firestone's Scramble for Land and Power in Liberia* (New Press, 2021).

¹⁰ LAMCO J.V. Operating Co., *Living in a LAMCO community*, undated.

¹¹ Gregg Mitman, "Let Us See It: Why companies with long histories should open up their archives," *Slate*, November 2, 2021, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/11/corporate-archives-lack-of-access-problems-for-historians.html>

¹² Glover, "Between Order and Justice."

¹³ Nadia Atia and Jeremy Davies, "Nostalgia and the shapes of history: Editorial," *Memory Studies* 3 (2010): 181, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698010364806>

¹⁴ Pablo Jaramillo, "Mining Leftovers: Making Futures on the Margins of Capitalism," *Cultural Anthropology* 35 (2020): 48-73, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca35.1.07>

¹⁵ COPDA Sweden, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://copdasweden.org/2023/03/>



The Twelve Ranges
Watercolor by Willard Van Dyke 1917





Figure 4

[Click here to access/download;Figure;RothMitmanFIG4.tiff](#) 



Figure captions

Figure 1: LAMCO contracted Swedish painter Roland Svensson to produce a series of watercolors offering picturesque depictions of the eating of Mount Nimba. Credit: Roland Svensson, 1969. Courtesy of the family of Roland Svensson.

Alt text: Colorful watercolor of a terraformed mountain towering above a lush tropical forest.

Figure 2: Blogs are prime tools for former LAMCO workers to socialize and reflect nostalgically on their time in Yekepa. Credit: LAMCO Reunion.

Alt text: Screenshot of the heading of blog “LAMCO Reunion” showing a large group of middle-aged Swedish people wearing African wax prints.

Figure 3: The LAMCO swimming pool was a favorite subject of amateur expatriate photographers. Credit: Ann Huber.

Alt text: Swedes and Liberians enjoying the LAMCO pool with the forested peaks of Mount Nimba in the background.

Figure 4: ArcelorMittal Liberia is building a Tailings Storage Facility to try and contain waste materials produced through the concentration of lower-grade iron ore now being mined. Credit: Environmental Protection Agency of Liberia, 2025.

Alt text: Muddied waters lie in an artificial depression whose laterite walls are partially covered with black tarp.