

An EAA Interview with the 2020 Franklin R. Buchanan Prizewinners

Gary Marcuse, Jason A. Carbine,
and Rebecca Overmyer-Velázquez for
The Global Environmental Justice Collection
(Focus on Asia/Spotlight on North America)



Gary Marcuse.



Jason A. Carbine.



Rebecca Overmyer-Velázquez.

This is our twenty-fourth consecutive interview with the winner of the recipient of the Franklin R. Buchanan Prize. This year's winners are Gary Marcuse, Jason A. Carbine, and Rebecca Overmyer-Velázquez for *The Global Environmental Justice Collection* (Focus on Asia/Spotlight on North America) at <http://globalenvironmentaljustice.com>. The documentaries in the collection were selected by faculty from Whittier College, Yale, Bates College, Brandeis, and NYU, who also wrote teaching guides for these films. The project is designed primarily for use at the undergraduate level and these documentaries can be used in a wide range of subject areas, from Asian, environmental, religion, and indigenous studies to law, geography, anthropology, global health, policy, conservation biology, and more. The project is supported by Face to Face Media (Vancouver, Canada), The Global Reporting Centre at the University of British Columbia, The Henry Luce Foundation, Whittier College, and The International Documentary Association.

Gary Marcuse, Producer, Director, and Writer for Face to Face Media (Vancouver, Canada) is the project director and filmmaker. Jason A. Carbine, the lead author of the project, is Associate Professor and C. Milo Connick Chair, Religious Studies at Whittier College; and Rebecca Overmyer-Velázquez, the writing team leader, is Associate Professor, C. Wright Mills Chair, Sociology, at Whittier College.

Lucien Ellington: Congratulations on winning the 2020 Franklin R. Buchanan Award for *The Global Environmental Justice Collection* (Focus on Asia/Spotlight on North America) and thank you for agreeing to this interview. Many of our readers will probably appreciate a brief description of the origins and meaning of “Global Environmental Justice” since the concept constitutes the substantive foundation for your website.

Jason Carbine: We're delighted by the win and happy to share information with you. It was always our goal to bring to light a collection of underreported environmental stories from Asia. So we were pleased to see the majority of the first fifty-plus subscriptions coming from Asian studies programs.

Gary Marcuse: There are many definitions of environmental justice offered by the United Nations, the EPA, the Vatican, the NAACP, NGOs, and others. They all boil down to basic principles: share the planet and protect it; all people have an equal right to a clean environment. In addition, no group should have to bear an unjust share of the negative environmental consequences that stem from a long history of badly regulated industrial, governmental, colonial, commercial, and racist development. Confronting these issues encourages students to explore the long history of activism on these issues dating back forty years under the leadership of scholars like Dr. Robert Bullard and others.

Environmental justice originally emerged as a movement in the United States in the 1980s to address the disproportionate number of polluting industries, power plants, incinerators, and mines located near low-income and minority communities, and the impact these industries have on the health of local residents. If it wasn't before, it is now clear that these issues are global, and the damage to the environment, worldwide, is closely associated with the abuse of human rights.

Achieving environmental justice means, first of all, exposing and understanding these abuses and seeking solutions that respect human rights and protect the environment at the same time. The need for environmental justice—and climate justice—is urgent. As the young activist Greta Thurnberg warned adults (including college students) when she spoke at the 2019 United Nations Climate Summit: “The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say—we will never forgive you.”

Documentaries have a special role to play in bringing these stories to light and encouraging action. Documentaries have a special capacity to bring complex global stories into the classroom. Filmmakers address these stories with a kind of intimacy and cinematic storytelling that capture emotions as well as facts. They take students behind the news to hear hopeful, concerned, and determined voices.

Lucien: *Although often academics, educators, and filmmakers work together, your curated documentary film collection has the breadth, supported by individual teacher's guides, to be a self-contained course, but also prove useful for undergraduate and high school survey-level instructors and students in a wide variety of academic disciplines. In addition to the three principal project developers, by my count, over thirty additional people contributed to the project in various ways. Please comment upon the origins of your collaboration and major factors you considered in planning, developing, and implementing the pedagogical site.*

Gary: For my part, I'm a journalist with a background in environmental planning, and I've been making films for broadcast about the environment and human rights for thirty years. In between making films, I've produced several successful collections of films and teaching guides for use in class. In this case, I was inspired by the faculty at Whittier College, and in particular by one of the students, to develop a collection of films that focuses on environmental issues in Asia.

I had been invited by Jason to show some of my films about the emergence of a green movement in China to a wide range of classes, not limited to environmental studies. I remember showing one of the films to an upper-level business class. The film was about a green NGO that was fighting pollution in China. After the class, a student from China came up to me with something on his mind. It wouldn't be long, he said, before he took over the family business from his father, who owns a coal mine in Africa and another one in Indonesia. He wanted me to understand that he meant to contribute to reducing pollution, to be a better person. What could he do? I said I never owned two coal mines, but we talked for twenty minutes.

That discussion, at a potentially important turning point in his life, reminded me of what I love about getting documentaries into classrooms at a time when students are laying foundations for a life's work. Documentaries open a window on a complex and challenging world. They tell intimate stories and promote dialogue at the same time.

In years past, when I've screened some of my earlier environmental documentaries in the US and Canada, I've had the sense that the students were feeling overwhelmed by bad news. The future was bleak. But over the course of a decade, something changed. Now students in a variety of fields want to be active, to contribute to solutions from their own fields. And they are equally passionate about human rights and environmental issues and climate change. There's a sense of urgency and a conviction that something can be done.

Faculty are searching for films that support and promote these discussions. But documentaries can be hard to find and expensive to license. When I asked my hosts at Whittier if a collection of films that explored environmental justice worldwide at an affordable price would be useful, they formed a working group and the project was launched. In order to achieve some depth, the project would initially focus on underreported stories from Asia, balanced with a spotlight on North America. From an initial list of 1,500 titles, the faculty curators chose twenty-five they would like to teach and write guides for.

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Introducing the Global Environmental Justice Documentaries Project: a curated collection of 25 documentaries and teacher's guides

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The GEJ Documentaries project provides educators and students with a critical collection of films that explore under-reported stories at the intersections of human rights, environmental degradation, colonization, industrial development, and climate change. Curated by faculty and supported by the Henry Luce Foundation, the Global Reporting Centre and Face to Face Media. 25 films for the price of 3. Now available at 50 colleges and universities.

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Front and back of a promotional postcard for the Global Environmental Justice Collection (Focus on Asia/Spotlight on North America).



Screen capture from the trailer for *Waking the Green Tiger* on the GEJ website at <https://tinyurl.com/y624ubxj>.

We then tested the concept at a workshop at an ASIA-Network conference and received a strong response to the concept. The project was then developed with support from the Luce Foundation and the Global Reporting Centre at the University of British Columbia. We obtained nonprofit standing through our fiscal sponsor, the International Documentary Association. A few thousand emails later, the collection was launched in the spring of 2019 with its own website at globalenvironmentaljustice.com.

Jason: This is the first time I've heard Gary's narrative about his encounter with the Chinese business student mentioned above. It points to just how many chance encounters and conversations with students, faculty, and others led to envisioning the scope of this project. Gary, along with Ms. Shi Lihong and Mr. Liu Jianqiang, had been invited to Whittier College campus as part of our

inaugural activities related to a Henry Luce Foundation Initiative on Asian Studies and the Environment grant (LIASE). Both Shi Lihong and Liu Jianqiang have played significant roles in environmental awareness and action in China. We were particularly eager to have them screen Gary's documentary *Waking the Green Tiger: A Green Movement Rises in China*, meet with students, and participate in a range of campus activities. Planned months in advance, the events were extremely successful, and one of the outgrowths of those first LIASE events was a working group of faculty and a couple of librarians who began to brainstorm with Gary about what the scope of an environmental justice documentary collection might look like. We also discussed how it might fit

within Whittier College's library collection and potentially other collections. Since I was already directing the LIASE grant, it wasn't feasible for me to also lead the GEJ writing team, which would require a significant focus on its own. As the discussions ensued and as we wrote the grant proposal for the GEJ, Rebecca agreed to come on board as the campus team leader.

As the writing group coalesced at Whittier, Gary reached out to Dr. Amity Doolittle, who teaches a range of environmental justice courses at Yale. She and her graduate students selected six films about environmental justice issues in the US and Canada, and wrote teaching guides that paralleled the ones being written about Asia. This gave greater scope to the collection, as it helped showcase how environmental justice issues affect different indigenous, racial, ethnic, and working-class communities in North America as well as in Asia.

Rebecca Overmyer-Velázquez: Jason and I have taught classes together, and we also happen to have our offices right across the hall from each other, so our collaboration on this project came easily. In terms of faculty participation, and with major implications for the structuring of content on the project website, we strove for an interdisciplinary team with representation across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. We sought to work with diverse documentaries, from multiple perspectives and fields of inquiry, from religious studies to biology, business, environmental science, and more. Many but not all of the faculty writers were also part of the faculty working group for the LIASE project, so the initial rooting of the project in Asia emerged also from that focus. It was important as part of the guide-writing process that faculty could choose the films to write about based on their interests and then test them out in their classes before finalizing each guide. This testing added another level of quality control to the overall project: instructors looking for films to use in their classes can be assured that each film in the collection has already been used effectively in at least one course.

Lucien: *Spending most of the morning before I composed these questions exploring the site, in my opinion, it is well-organized and easy for instructors and students to utilize. It was gratifying to learn that the influential publications ACRL Choice and ccAdvisor gave your work favorable attention. From the first discussions to the online release must have taken a couple of years. How do you know if you're on the right track?*

Gary: Once we launched the collection of twenty-five films, we knew that the first test of the collection would be the reception it received by environmental and Asian studies programs—the core of the collection. If we didn't get the mix of films, the navigation of the website, and the online delivery just right, the project would flop. So we were immediately relieved to receive the Franklin R. Buchanan award from the AAS, recognizing the GEJ as an innovative and welcome resource.



Cover of the teacher's guide for *Waking the Green Tiger* on the GEJ website at <https://tinyurl.com/y6bbj7xz>.

And the good reviews kept coming. Recently, we were shortlisted for the UK Online Education Resource Award in competition with the BBC and the Open University now to be announced in 2021. This was followed by sterling notices in the Association of College and Research Libraries in their publications *Choice Reviews*, and *ccAdvisor*, where the reviewer commented: “These carefully chosen films, each with something different to offer in discussion, collectively show promise of providing the dramatic catalyst that will awaken the urge to advocacy in viewers and ultimately lead to action. These documentaries bring the neglected stories of marginalized communities to light. Even people in difficult circumstances are shown exploring legal remedies and creative solutions.”

Choice Reviews also named the collection one of the Outstanding Academic Titles for 2020 and one of the Top 75 Community College Resources this year and wrote: “Given its curated focus and supplemental resources, Global Environmental Justice Documentaries is truly a unique product . . . rich in the diversity of perspectives and multifaceted ideas presented.” On the strength of these reviews, and our own efforts at contacting and connecting with librarians and colleagues, we now have fifty-seven colleges and universities subscribing to the collection. If that increases to a steady 100 subscribers the project will be self-sufficient when our underwriting runs out in two years. Adding more films at no cost to subscribers will help us to keep the collection ‘evergreen.’”

Lucien: *Readers who visit your site will learn that the scope of your work transcends Asia, but given our readers’ interests, do you have specific plans to expand your Asia documentaries and if so, please provide our readers with a preview of what Asia-related topics and/ or specific Asian cultures might be included in your future efforts?*

Gary: When we launched the project, we had twenty-five films—twenty of them related to Asia. Now the collection has grown to thirty-five films, twenty-seven of them related to Asia. With so many underreported stories coming from that part of the world, I’m sure we’ll add more of them to the collection even as we add stories from Africa, Latin America, and Europe.

One of our new films this year is *A New Moon Over Tohoku* by Canadian filmmaker Linda Ohama, who spent two years gathering stories in the region where the tsunami and nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima destroyed villages and uprooted survivors. This film was curated by Justine Wiesinger, an assistant professor of Japanese at Bates College. We also added *RiverBlue*, curated by Rajashree Ghosh at Brandeis. This film examines the little-known pollution of key rivers in Asia by the fast-fashion industry and the efforts by activists to clean it up.

We’re also looking forward to another feature documentary by award-winning director Kalyanee Mam. *A Fire in the Bird’s Nest* will expand on the efforts of the Chong community seeking to protect the Areng Valley on the edge of the Cardamom Mountains in Cambodia.

Beyond that, we welcome suggestions for films and curators, and for new directions to explore.

Lucien: *Do you have any specific plans to increase the number of secondary school and community college subscribers and perhaps utilize secondary school teachers in working with your project?*

Gary: We’re delighted to hear that *CHOICE Reviews* highly recommends the films for community colleges. So our task is to get the word out and to find out what sort of pricing would work best for these institutions.

We are definitely interested in making the films available at the secondary level, grades 7–12. We know that some films already work well, as we have screened a number of them in high schools. We also have an experienced curriculum developer working with us, looking over the collection to see which films are ready to use and which might need a different kind of guide. We also need to identify the relevant national standards for science and social studies that secondary teachers need to keep track of. Then, if we have the resources, we may also add supplementary questions and activities suitable for this age group to the guides. An example of this can be seen in the teacher’s guide for *Fight for Areng and Lost World*.

All of this is a kind of grand experiment to see if we can work with filmmakers, educators, and foundations to open up a new kind of distribution channel: one that brings more documentaries into the classroom at a much lower low cost to libraries, while still paying a fair share to the creators.

Lucien: *Thank you again for agreeing to the interview!* ■

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Cover of *A New Moon Over Tohoku* Teacher's Guide PDF on the GEJ website at <https://tinyurl.com/y38es4vg>.