



A constant, global circulation of commodities and the things made from them connects us to one another around the world, but few of us give this fact much consideration. Increasingly complex supply chains conceal the labor and environmental impacts behind most of the things we consume, causing us to become even further estranged from the processes of production and the people who make our things. *Cotton Road* explores **the idea of transparency** in global supply chains by telling a story about the people and processes behind a typical cotton product. I believe that greater transparency and awareness of the issues that arise from globalized labor and production can enable citizens to better understand, and connect more deeply to, the complex economic, environmental, and social issues of our time.

Mass consumer culture makes it all too easy not to reflect critically on the stories behind our everyday acts of consumption, but growing trends suggest a deep need for serious attention to the way our things are made. *Cotton Road* addresses this need by tracing the global flow of cotton, from fields in South Carolina, to ports in Savannah and Shanghai and to textile factories in China. Evocatively capturing, connecting and moving the viewer between these places, *Cotton Road* foregrounds the people and work beyond our view, from farm laborers in the southeastern U.S. to millions of Chinese migrant workers driving that country's manufacturing economy.

Cotton Road makes visible the lived realities of global consumer culture that we typically never see. *Cotton Road's* stories about the labor behind our "Made In" labels shows audiences the complex and consequential chain of labors and lives involved in any cotton product we purchase, making it possible to identify the larger social and political frameworks within which we live and participate as producers or consumers. As a documentary film it invites audiences to encounter and then reflect upon their roll in this process. And as an educational tool, *Cotton Road* offers teachers a sophisticated and engaging way of expanding upon a range of conversations that twenty-first century students need to be having, about consumer culture, global economies, and the impact of these on everyday lives most everywhere, from Bennettsville, South Carolina to Shanghai, China.

Cotton is the main subject of the film that unites a range of people and industrial landscapes in the global marketplace, and therefore it is the primary image around which people and actions pivot. Rather than a film structure that situates the story around a crisis moment, *Cotton Road* instead reveals an economic story that is constantly in motion, and one which we rarely give attention to: the continuous flow of commodities and goods, and our subsequent participation in that circulation as producers and/or consumers. It is what drives our economies, and even organizes our relationships to one another across the world. The story structure of *Cotton Road* is linear and focused on industrial processes such as planting and harvest, shipping, production of yarn, fabric and clothing, and consumption—but the film foregrounds the cotton commodity and its global movement to convey its constant circulation.

The idea, or theme, that guided me through the film's production is *transparency*. *Cotton Road* lifts the veil on a typical cotton product supply chain and allows audiences to see the labor behind the manufacturing of a cotton product. Mundane acts of consumption are something that each of us performs every day, whether it's through the food we eat or something material we purchase out of desire or need. While traditionally few consumers have reflected critically on the stories behind these acts of consumption, there are growing trends that suggest a deeper need for human connection to the process of production behind the things we consume.

In addition to the film itself, audiences can connect to elements of the film's story on [our interactive supply chain map](#), created in partnership with the company [SOURCEMAP](#), the social network for supply chain transparency. LINK: [Cotton Road Sourcemap](#)

Cotton Road is driven by an ethics of engagement, i.e., an awareness of the larger forces at work in the complex network that makes up our political, economic, social, and cultural lives. Each worker in the film speaks to a unique personal experience, defined in part by their class, gender, education, age, culture, and geography. *Cotton Road* does not impose a singular voice (i.e., argument) about globalization that audiences are expected to adopt. Rather, it leaves room for audiences to reflect on their viewing experience and move forward with a deeper sensitivity and curiosity about their position in our global economy. The point of view of the film is that each of us should reflect upon the realities wrought by our rapacious consumption, which includes poor conditions for workers, pollution that other people have to live in, and meager wages. As the owner of the clothing factory in Shanghai, Mrs. Jiang, expresses in the film, this state of affairs is driven by American and European desire to consume cheap products, and by companies who push her to deliver each order faster and cheaper than the last one. The characters in *Cotton Road* all speak to this, through their personal experience.

Finally, the documentary's visual style strikes a balance between intimacy and observation. The camera is close to people and the physicality of their work, yet it moves constantly between micro and macro views to illuminate the largeness of our global economic systems and the small, private and personal contexts it hides. Intimate scenes with workers along cotton's path are punctuated by visual segments in long take that reveal the massiveness of industrial environments; the machinery of globalization overwhelms our senses and dwarfs the workers who labor within it.