

other moments in the film Rawlings seems unaware of the camera (or is he still playing up to it?) and is captured in moments of raw emotion: whether it is the shot of him watching the news at his residence two nights before the election, head in his hands, wiping tears from his eyes as he listens to Mills thank him publicly for his help with the campaign; or whether it is the close-ups of him in profile as he is driven to a nighttime rally in Tamale during the runoff election, where the strain begins to show and he is almost catatonic as his vehicle is mobbed by local youths, the ex-president overwhelmed (intoxicated?) by his own celebrity. Indeed, in some ways Rawlings is a microcosm of Ghana in this film. He desperately wants the democratic process to succeed, yet he is suspicious of it, and becomes frustrated by it when the election goes awry. Like Ghana itself, he seems to be struggling, as the film goes on, to resist the lure of the past—of strongman politics and the cult of personality. And in the end, like Ghana, he buries that past, and democracy triumphs.

It was once said, in a statement sometimes attributed to Mark Twain, that “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” Such was the case as this review was being written. In Accra, the 2012 NDC candidate, John Mahama, was just sworn in as Ghana’s president in the wake of a disputed election against the repeat NPP candidate, Nana Akufo-Addo. Although there was no need for a runoff this time around, since Mahama received 50.7 percent of the vote, the NPP has now filed a petition to the Supreme Court challenging the election result—Ghana’s own version of *Bush v. Gore* (2000). And so like the Americans, it looks as if Ghanaians will just have to get used to two-party politics and split electorates.

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**Frank Bieleu.** *The Big Banana*. 2011. Cameroon. French, with English subtitles. 85 min. ArtMattan. \$295.00

Frank Bieleu’s *The Big Banana* critiques the human and environmental impact of banana plantations in Cameroon. The documentary’s opening voice-over introduces the viewer to the Njombe-Penga community where the banana wealth goes to the multinational company, Plantation du Haut Penja (PHP), while most members of the community remain poor. We see PHP workers as they labor to cut down the bananas and transport them to the processing station amidst the voice-over’s reminder that Cameroon is the highest producer of bananas and principal supplier to Europe, and that PHP’s income for 2009 alone was \$106 million. This profit, of course, comes at the expense of the workers, who are paid paltry wages in contrast to the high salaries and benefits of the expatriates. It is not surprising, then,

that European consumers of the bananas are appalled upon hearing the actual wages of the laborers who produce the commodity. A consumer aptly calls the situation “slave labor,” while another expresses her “disgust” at the laborers’ working conditions. These workers are not only underpaid; their health is at risk from exposure to toxic chemicals (pesticides, fungicides, fertilizers, and other agro-chemicals). The film indicates that four out of five farmers suffer from eye problems due to PHB’s toxic materials and features a former worker who has become blind. He was fired by PHP because of his disability and without adequate compensation.

The health of members of the larger community is also endangered by PHP’s operations, specifically, the aerial spray of chemicals, which is detrimental to humans, plants, animals, and bodies of water. One community member recalls having been sprayed and admitted to the hospital for some days; unsurprisingly, PHP refuses either to pay the hospital bill or compensate the victim. Another laments how the aerial spray contaminates their food. The banana processing system washes off the chemicals, but the soiled water is not disposed of properly and contaminates the people’s water supply.

Displacement of the people is another consequence of the plantation’s procedures. As a multinational corporation, PHP succeeds in stifling competition from smaller companies. The company’s low-cost production and export-friendly incentives enable it to crush the local farmers. While some of them are pressured to sell or lease their lands to PHP, the more resilient ones witness their lands being forcefully expropriated by government officials colluding with PHP. Chief Daniel Nsuga epitomizes the corrupt elite evoked here. Throughout the film, he downplays the adverse consequences of the plantation, while indicating that the community is happy with PHP. Leaders like Nsuga are no exception in the postcolony; we see them depicted in Tanure Ojaide’s novel *The Activist* (2006) and other texts in which community leaders collaborate with the multinational companies to defraud their people.

*The Big Banana* embraces a business model that offers a positive alternative to the exploitative situation created by PHP. This is seen in the co-operative relationship developed between local farmers and Partners for Just Trade (PJT), an American company that offers an alternative model of sustainable development and involves the local producers in pricing and similar business decisions. In the final moments of the film, Partners for Just Trade encourages consumers to stop patronizing stores whose products are produced by companies that underpay the local laborers. Bieleu’s film demonstrates the consequence of globalization by depicting what James Ferguson describes as “globe hopping” in *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Duke, 2006:38). Proponents of globalization are wont to celebrate the multiple flows of goods and services from across the globe, but this occludes the impact of the capital flow on the many Njombe-Pengas in Africa and elsewhere. The film shows that poverty and sickness are the rewards for the local people, while PHP posts high profits by selling the cheaply produced goods in Europe.

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon discusses environmental violence as “slow violence,” that is, “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Harvard, 2011:2). But the film indicates that certain environmental violence is not really slow. The blindness of PHP’s ex-workers and the sickly condition of others who need medical attention suggest that environmental violence can be immediate as well. As *The Big Banana* concludes, the viewer is left to wonder if Cameroon and its global partnership with PHP enable “fast violence” by exposing Cameroonians to the vicissitudes of neoliberal capitalism.

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