FILM REVIEWS

DOCUMENTARY

Julia Dahr, dir. *Thank You for the Rain*. 2017. 90 min. English and Kamba, with English subtitles. London. Banyak Films. €15.

In his influential study of writer-activism in the global South, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon discusses the problem of representation posed by environmental destruction that occurs on a different temporality from that which is most commonly associated with "violence." He asks how we might "bring home—and emotionally bring to life—threats that take time to wreak their havoc, threats that never materialize in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene?" (Harvard University Press, 2011:14). For Nixon, the writings of activists hold a particular privilege in so far as they "can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses" (15). But this also raises questions surrounding the relative visibility and representational power of other, non-literary forms of activism in the global South and their relations with "mainstream" debates around climate change in the global North. *Thank You for the Rain*, directed by Julia Dahr, is a documentary portrait of Kisulu Musya, a Kenyan farmer and environmentalist. The film documents an important instance of local climate activism and explores the apparent disconnect between such grassroots projects and global environmental discourse.

Kisulu's agricultural livelihood has been dramatically affected by a lack of seasonal rainfall that he attributes to climate change. Early in the film, Dahr's voiceover tells the viewer that upon seeing Kisulu speak to a group of locals about the dangers of climate change and the need to plant trees, she asked if she could film him. Kisulu agreed, on the condition that she give him a camera to record his own footage, the result being that he and his wife Christina are listed as "video diarists" in the film's credits. The documentary can be roughly divided into three acts. The first sees Kisulu and his family anxiously awaiting the delayed rainfall that they need to water their parched crops. Their initial joy at the arrival of the rains is short-lived, as a violent storm soon blows the roof off of their house. Kisulu's response, from which the film takes its name, demonstrates his considerable pragmatism: "This is very much terrifying. Thank you for the rain, but then to me

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it means migrating from the rain problem to the house problem. Now I'm left with no house."

In the second act, Kisulu visits Norway on Dahr's invitation to address activists there and, on his return, begins pursuing his activism more intensely in his rural community. Although he successfully organizes a network of "farmer's field schools" to teach ways of reversing and limiting the impact of climate change, the time spent away from his family and farm begin to take a heavy personal and financial toll. In the final third of the film, Kisulu travels to France for the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (also known as COP21), where the Paris climate accord was negotiated. While Kisulu's presentation about the effects of climate change upon his community appears to be very well received, the viewer soon sees him and Dahr becoming frustrated with the slowness of the negotiations and with the apparent disregard shown by governments for those most affected by the outcome of the talks.

The decision to include a large amount of Kisulu's handheld footage means that he is allowed an interiority that he might not otherwise be granted as a documentary subject. The viewer gets a real sense of what motivates his activism and of the heavy burden that his activities place upon his family life. The kind of activism in which Kisulu is engaged is therefore shown to be not merely a question of commitment, but indeed a major personal sacrifice. The interviews with his wife, Christina, raise important issues of gender in relation to Kisulu's voluntary actions, his absence from the farm and lack of financial contribution to the household causing her serious concern. Kisulu's handheld-footage is—particularly in the first part of the film—juxtaposed with wide cinematic shots of the rural Kenyan landscape and with close-ups of dehydrated vegetation and the dry earth. The viewer therefore gets a real sense of the physical effects of climate change in rural areas. These wide-frame shots—often containing beautiful natural light—also serve to place Kisulu's human struggle in its environmental context.

The final part of the film, focusing upon the Paris conference, demonstrates the often fraught nature of relations between climate activism in the global South and the "official" international conversation. Invited to speak at the event by the United Nations (following the intervention of the activists whom he met on his visit to Norway), Kisulu delivers a well-received speech to a packed room. He emphasizes the necessity of the fight against climate change being a cooperative one, concluding that "I've come to know that everybody is a climate fighter." Reflecting on his visit to Paris soon after, he says that he feels like "a new Kisulu. A strong one this time." Elation, however, soon turns to frustration as the negotiations between state powers drag on and on behind closed doors. Dahr, in her voiceover, reflects that in contrast to Kisulu's seriousness, many of those involved in conference appear to see it "more as a game." The footage of Kisulu walking around the large conference venue as he anxiously awaits news serves to highlight the mismatch between the negotiations and the people affected

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by their outcome. Asked by a television interviewer whether he feels that he has been listened to at the conference, Kisulu replies: "They never wanted to listen to me. They have not experienced it practically." The fast string music used as background during this sequence and the inclusion of archival footage of international climate protests that occurred at the time emphasize the gravity of the situation. Furthermore, a short clip of an interview with Donald Trump—filmed from a television screen—in which he complains about then President Obama's attendance at the conference throws a further shadow over the proceedings when watched in the aftermath of the U.S.'s recent withdrawal from the Paris accord. The film's ending is jarringly pragmatic without being overly pessimistic. While the final on-screen text—which states that Kisulu's network is "bigger than ever" and, importantly, now allows him to sustain himself financially—emphasizes the persistence of grassroots projects despite their apparent disconnect from state-level discourses, some of Kisulu's final words to his camera remind the viewer of the uncertainty of the future: "I am still afraid. Are we to fight the climate change, or will climate change fight us?"

Thank You for the Rain is a compelling, engaging, and complex portrait of an environmental activist. Clearly intended as a piece of politically committed filmmaking, the film deftly illustrates the global structural imbalance in contemporary climate discourse and the importance of local movements such as Kisulu's. Throughout, the mutual respect that Kisulu and Dahr hold for one another is clear and, in this sense, the film does itself promote one particular model of transnational cooperation. The relatively small amount of framing material relating to the place in which Kisulu lives and the technical aspects of the impact of climate change is advantageous in so far as it allows the film to foreground the human dimension of climate change's disproportionate impact upon the African continent, especially its rural communities. The film would be an excellent addition to undergraduate and graduate courses on the environmental humanities or on postcolonial ecocriticism and would certainly complement the works of writer-activists such as Wangari Maathai, Arundathi Roy, and Ken Saro-Wiwa.

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Onyeka Nwelue. *The House of Nwapa*. 2016. 85 Minutes. Igbo and English. Blues and Hills Productions. No Price Reported.

Onyeka Nwelue's documentary chronicles the life and times of Flora Nwapa, ostensibly the first black African female author to have written in English. (This is a point that Mabel Segun, who is also a major first-generation writer, contested vehemently during the course of her interview,