

HAWAII COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES & HAWAII INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL PRESENT



FILM FOR THOUGHT 2020



CANE FIRE | DOWN A DARK STAIRWELL | LANDFALL



LUNANA: A YAK IN THE CLASSROOM | THROUGH THE NIGHT

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FILM FOR THOUGHT 2020

Well before our pandemic hit, the team at Hawai'i International Film Festival suggested we return to our theme of CHANGEMAKERS for our collaborative 2020 Film for Thought program. Now, thrust into tumultuous change, we couldn't be more grateful for the intensity these films dare to hold. Each of our five CHANGEMAKERS films this year show us a world that is exploding apart instead of coming together. And though this is feeling unbearable in real life, watching these films somehow helps. Each hold burning stories with strength and care. They help us feel less lonely when we ask: how can we move forward into a future we really want?

CANE FIRE brings to center stage plantation and Native Hawaiian struggles, against the backdrop of a Hollywood Kaua'i. DOWN A DARK STAIRWELL faces the conflict between Chinese American and Black communities in the wake of Akai Gurley's murder by New York City police officer Peter Liang. LANDFALL insists we remember and listen to a Puerto Rico still in crisis three years after Hurricane Maria. LUNANA: A YAK IN THE CLASSROOM ponders the question of happiness in the tension between material success and yak dung. THROUGH THE NIGHT helps us see the broken nature of our labor and childcare systems and the tenacity of loving hands.

At Hawai'i Council for the Humanities, we find hope in these three central beliefs of the Film for Thought program. One, it matters when we listen to difficult and challenging stories without looking away. Two, it matters that we support this kind of courageous and committed filmmaking. Three, it matters when we come together to not just watch these films, but also talk about them together. What happens to us when we enter deeply and compassionately into another person's story?

Stephanie Castillo, Danielle Seid, Mehana Blaich Vaughan, Simon Seisho Tajiri, and Elizabeth Colwill. We thank our five Film for Thought writers for spending time with these critical stories and sharing fertile reflections that weave their own lives into these films. We are eager to not only share their thought pieces, but invite you to join us in this year's online series of Film for Thought discussion events, or find other ways to talk and reflect together. We invite you to bring your own stories, and feel the spark and depth of new connections, a broadened understanding of "us."

This gives us a lot of hope. We can find our way forward together.

With you,

Aiko, Lyz, and Shannon, from the Hawai'i Council for the Humanities

CANE FIRE



HAWAI'I PREMIERE
UNITED STATES 2020 | ENGLISH | 90M

NOV 5 - 29 | ONLINE

14-NOV 7:00 PM | VARSITY DRIVE-IN

SYNOPSIS

Hollywood productions have utilized the Hawaiian Islands as paradise for their main characters to explore. In this documentary, Hollywood footage and old commercials are gathered to craft a portrait of the economic and social exploitation of Hawai'i's people and their culture. Many working-class people of Hawai'i boast of their small parts in classic Hollywood productions starring Elvis Presley, Bing Crosby, or Charlton Heston.

Others express their joy to work for plantations and factories with low wages and harsh working conditions. But, behind-the-scenes, many individuals struggle to maintain their jobs, their land, and their culture from the imposing tourism industry and Hollywood films that slowly push authentic Hawai'i culture to the sidelines. *CANE FIRE* interweaves four generations of family history, while examining the past and present of large corporations that utilize the people of Hawai'i to craft a story for the tourists rather than casting them as the voices that must be heard. —KANANI LYONS

DIRECTOR	Anthony Banua-Simon
SCREENWRITERS	Anthony Banua-Simon, Mike Vass
PRODUCERS	Anthony Banua-Simon, Mike Vass
CINEMATOGRAPHER	Anthony Banua-Simon

FilmHawai'i.

NICHOLS
FAMILY FILM FUND

THOUGHTS

Documentary filmmakers are tasked with making the real reel. Anthony Banua-Simon's *CANE FIRE* is a 95-minute "kaleidoscopic portrait" of beautiful Kaua'i with some exposure to the current woes of this iconic Hawaiian paradise. Kaua'i is known as "The Movie Island," and Banua-Simon does a good job showing how the sounds and strains of *SOUTH PACIFIC*, *BLUE HAWAII*, *JURASSIC PARK* and other iconic cinema have made filmmakers and audiences see this island as "anywhere" that's beautiful, exotic, and natural.

Banua-Simon's lifting of this beautiful illusion and the selling of a laid-back "plantation" life gives a glimpse of the island's deeper angst. No one I know of has put together this perspective of "The Garden Isle," except perhaps the recent film, *POISONING PARADISE*, which unlocks the horrors of pesticide contamination on Kaua'i. The frames, sequences, and scenes of Kaua'i Banua-Simon assembled are evocative of survey documentaries that tend to scrape the surface, but *CANE FIRE* pays attention to something deeper — a Hawaiian Island paradise headed for "an island wide revolt."

- While its stunning beauty hides the stench of an island in economic crisis, is it, perhaps, at a tipping point?
- Just how much can Kaua'i take, and can it afford the illusion of a South Seas idyllic life as its identity when so many are suffering?

These are key questions I asked after viewing *CANE FIRE*.

I am from Kaua'i with family roots going back to the early 1900s when my grandparents settled here and chose the life of gamblers — cockfighting and card players — instead of the hard labor of the sugar and pineapple plantations. Three of my documentaries explore Kaua'i through family stories, including *STRANGE LAND*, which tells of my mother's coming to Kaua'i from the Philippines. I have lived on Kaua'i off and on all my life (30+ years) as a vagabond filmmaker, always coming home to my family here, thus I could watch Anthony Banua-Simon's film and relate to the stories he tells and the people he portrays: a retired uncle, remembering times past with vivid recollection; a union boss, recalling the days of hard labor on the plantations; Banua-Simon's cousins, struggling to make ends meet. They are among the thousands who have remained on this island, while so many others have moved to California, Utah, or other parts beyond Hawai'i.

Banua-Simon, whose family left Kaua'i when he was a young boy, lives in Seattle but often visits his cousins and stays in touch with the family here. This film is his introspective personal essay of how Kaua'i has grown and changed through the last century. Statistics are not prominent in this film, nevertheless, it is worth re-stating and noting a few here.

- More residents than ever left Hawai'i last year — a record 13,817; overall, more than 60,000 Hawai'i residents have left since 2011, the first-year data was kept.
- Wealthy people (including billionaires) move to Kaua'i, where median home prices climbed to \$700,000 this year, while Kaua'i's unsheltered homeless numbers skyrocketed (Volunteers counted a total of 443 homeless people on Kauai compared to 293 the year before.)

Hawai'i's biggest import has become other people's leisure! wrote one Hawai'i realtor. No wonder it feels like Kaua'i continues to have a feudal economy, begun long ago by the sugar planters in the 1800s, and Banua-Simon touches on how local residents are struggling with a service industry that pays minimum wage, stress-related meth drug issues, and Native Hawaiians being pushed off lands and properties.

Although Banua-Simon's film is pre-COVID, it gives a glimpse of the grim realities of Kaua'i today, but there are more stories he can tell. Among the top issues needing exposure are:

- affordable housing vs vacation rentals and time share units
- the decline of the standard of living for the working class
- the sudden hike of property taxes into higher brackets for locals as millionaires and billionaires buy up land and estates
- the growing homeless/houseless populations settling in at Kaua'i parks and beaches.

Anthony, more stories invite your telling; episodic TV is waiting for you.

STEPHANIE J. CASTILLO

STEPHANIE J. CASTILLO is a former Honolulu newspaper reporter and an EMMY Award winner who has made independent documentaries for local and national TV for 30 years. Her eight-hour documentary box set COCKFIGHTERS: THE INTERVIEWS explores the "sport" of rooster fighting as part of her desire to understand her grandfather. Now based in Hilo, Hawai'i, she is working on her 11th film, also to do with Kaua'i — The Hanapēpē Massacre Mystery of 1924.

DOWN A DARK STAIRWELL



HAWAII PREMIERE

UNITED STATES 2020 | ENGLISH, MANDARIN, CANTONESE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES | 83M

NOV 5 - 29 | ONLINE

FFT DISCUSSION WITH URSULA LIANG

15-NOV 2:00 PM | ONLINE | FREE

SYNOPSIS

When two peoples of color are pitted against each other in the gruesome coliseum that is the uneven criminal justice system of the United States, who wins? In 2014, Chinese American police officer Peter Liang killed Akai Gurley, an innocent, unarmed black man in an unlit stairwell of a New York City housing project. Peter Liang became the first New York cop to be convicted in 20 years, and the Chinese American community protested how Liang seemed to be used as a scapegoat. On the other hand, the African American community, still reeling from the unwarranted deaths of Tamir Rice and Michael Brown, among others, are demanding for police accountability. This heart-wrenching documentary, directed by Ursula Liang, is all the more important and relevant to watch today, as we reflect on how black lives matter.

"Down a Dark Stairwell tells a crucial American story of how divisions among racial minorities ultimately serve white supremacy." —JOHN RAPHLING, SENIOR RESEARCHER, US CRIMINAL JUSTICE, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

—ADRIAN ALARILLA

DIRECTOR

Ursula Liang

PRODUCERS

Ursula Liang, Rajal Pitroda

THOUGHTS

Directed by journalist and filmmaker Ursula Liang, *DOWN A DARK STAIRWELL* centers on the story of Akai Gurley's murder by NYPD officer Peter Liang (no relation to the filmmaker) in the stairwell of a public housing project in Brooklyn, NY, and the subsequent criminal prosecution of Liang. On November 20, 2014, Gurley, a twenty-eight-year-old Black man, partner to Kimberly Ballinger and devoted father to daughter Akaila Gurley, visited Melissa Butler at her apartment in the East New York Pink Houses. His chance encounter in the stairwell with rookie police officer Liang, who was carrying out "vertical patrol" in the building, resulted in tragedy when Liang, who would later claim that his gun misfired, shot and killed Gurley at point blank. "The cop shot him," a neighbor says calmly to the 911 operator in the audio recording that plays over the opening sequence of the film. Later in the film, audio of Butler's courtroom testimony reveals that Liang and fellow officer Shaun Landau stood by silently, offering no assistance whatsoever, while Butler tried desperately to resuscitate Gurley. These are examples of the powerful and damning evidence in the film, and yet, the heart of the documentary lies not in Liang's trial but rather in its intimate look at racialized communities organizing for social justice. While Black community activists and a handful of Asian American allies organize to seek justice for Gurley's murder, a galvanized Chinese American community, in NYC and across the U.S., rallies around Peter Liang, embracing him as a kind of Chinese American "first son"—a boy-child protected by his ethnic kin. With journalistic sensibilities, Ursula Liang casts a critical yet compassionate gaze on these communities, filmed in the unglamorous spaces of community halls, restaurants, apartment homes, and the streets.

This is a timely and important documentary film that explores the profound difficulties of building multiracial and multigenerational coalitions for social justice. In a moment of life imitating art, John Chan, a Chinatown leader who helps organize community support for Peter Liang, asserts, "We are the same [Black and Chinese]. We're walking side-by-side..." words that could have been plucked directly from Spike Lee's cinematic masterpiece *DO THE RIGHT THING* (1995); in the explosive final sequence of that film, a Korean American shopkeeper attempts to fend off an angry mob that has just witnessed the police murder Radio Raheem, a Black man, by claiming

"We're the same!"—a sentiment that elicits confusion and laughter from the film's Black characters. Alternating between footage of Chinese and Black communities in NYC, *DOWN A DARK STAIRWELL* ponders what it would mean for Asian and Black communities in the U.S. to walk side-by-side. In 2020, after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked discussions about the complicity of another Asian American police officer, Hmong American Tou Thao—who, like Liang, stood by silently while a Black man took his final breaths after a murderous encounter with a cop—*DOWN A DARK STAIRWELL* assumes added urgency. The film quietly but insistently asks Asian Americans, who have their own complex history as a minority group excluded from and marginalized within U.S. society: which side are you on?

Asian American documentaries have long explored racial grievance, injustice, and trauma "intra-ethnically." In *DOWN A DARK STAIRWELL*, racial consciousness and racial solidarity are front and center. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, incidents of anti-Asian violence have been on the rise across the U.S. One especially horrific case in this year's spate of violent anti-Asian attacks involved two 13-year-old boys setting an elderly Chinese woman on fire in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, an incident that inspired a solidarity march in NYC's Chinatown. Within the context of a contemporary U.S. political culture marked by fervent expressions of white supremacy and nationalism, *DOWN A DARK STAIRWELL* puts pressure on Asian American desires for representation and inclusion, challenging its viewers to ponder the cost of representation and inclusion in the inherently violent institutions of white supremacy.

DANIELLE SEID

DANIELLE SEID is an assistant professor of English at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa where she teaches courses in film, media, and narrative studies. Some of her research areas include Asian American film and media history, trans representation, TV genre and feminism, and the histories of race and moviegoing. In her research, she aims to continue the work begun by her Chinese American immigrant grandparents who produced a documentary entitled Forever Chinatown (1960) and nurtured Chinese American film community in southern California.

LANDFALL



HAWAI'I PREMIERE

UNITED STATES 2020 | ENGLISH, SPANISH WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES | 91M

NOV 5 - 29 | ONLINE

FFT DISCUSSION WITH CECILIA ALDARONDO

9-NOV | 12:00 PM | ONLINE | FREE

SYNOPSIS

In 2017, Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico, killing thousands and causing billions of dollars in damage. As homes and livelihoods were lost, existing cracks in the US territory's politics and economy erupted to the surface, bringing to public attention a 72-billion-dollar debt crisis crippling its people. Two years on, protests erupt against Puerto Rico's governor, with its citizens desperate for transformation and change.

LANDFALL examines the kinship of these two storms—one environmental, the other economic—juxtaposing competing utopian visions of recovery. Featuring intimate encounters with Puerto Ricans as well as the newcomers flooding the island – from locals trying to rebuild their shattered lives to Silicon Valley trying to make a quick buck out of the disaster – LANDFALL reflects on a question of contemporary global relevance: when the world falls apart, who do we become?

"...an exquisite film, by turns tender and compassionate, cinematically adventurous and self-assured" —*FILMMAKER MAGAZINE*

—DUNCAN CAILLARD

DIRECTOR

Cecilia Aldarondo

PRODUCERS

Cecilia Aldarondo, Ines Hofmann Kanna

THOUGHTS

"Connections are made during tough times, and they happen for a reason."

LANDFALL begins on a beach. The ocean whispers, voices whisper, and shadows flicker over the faces of two women. Their voices grow stronger, as their friendship has, in the two years since Hurricane Maria. The camera flashes to the blue glow of their cell phones as they look at footage of the recent protest march of over 10,000 people to remove Puerto Rico's territorial governor in response to the neglect and suffering . . . post-Maria.

"It was not the storm that was the tragedy. It was what came after."

Shards of the storm's devastation punctuate the film: over 5,000 dead, many of their families never able to bury them; standing for hours in a line of 60 people for food only to have the food run out; medics needing to choose between rescuing a pregnant mother or her children, as they can't save both; expired bottled water sits in an overgrown vacant lot two years after Maria, unused; making four packages of noodles last a week; no gas; no federal aid; no ice; no food; no water. No water. Each glass fragment, sharp, piercing, and pieced together into one truth: the feelings of the people of Puerto Rico, that they, their lives, their families . . . don't matter.

"An opportunity to reimagine a completely new Puerto Rico."

Puerto Rico is a tourist mecca, marketed similarly to our Hawai'i. After Maria, luxury gated fortresses materialize, while families still huddle in their bathroom to stay dry when it rains. American billionaires who look like surf groms tout bitcoin business bonanza brainwash, while tight wiry women cry foul in their faces. And we feel how that takes everything. We visit villages where the young are leaving, and New York, where some end up. We tour Vieques, where a community lives between live fire training grounds and toxic military dump sites, bombing that continued until just 16 years ago, as families call their children . . . home.

"You must survey the land with tools, not with your own eyes as you've always done."

LANDFALL takes us through many views of Puerto Rico; covering a jarringly contrasting map of the island, city to country, pasture to night club, rainforest to resort. The voices of the film are as varied, telling their stories as they feed chickens, organize a center to house people and teach them new job skills, or sit around a sumptuous table drinking wine. Their voices and faces—in sorrow, in dance, anguish and joy, make landfall . . . in our na'au.

"Maria was like a big mop or broom, with bleach, it swept everything away."

Though our struggles with the same colonizer pale in comparison, so much in this film resonates with Hawai'i nei. The bombing of Kaho'olawe. Community organizing of neighbor-to-neighbor response after floods ravaged my home community on Kaua'i in 2018. Economic loss of our children. Being pushed off the coast. Stoic state militia lines readying behind sunglasses to arrest protesting relatives. Real estate . . . Resilience.

"Many would say that this struggle has been going on for a long time, but we feel like a baby, in diapers."

We are not American.
 We survive because of other survivors.
 We know that cultivating the land is security,
 that water is life.
 We laugh in the darkness
 and put our children to work.
 We are not going back,
 we are living into a rooted future.
 We rise . . . like a mighty wave.

MEHANA BLAICH VAUGHAN

MEHANA BLAICH VAUGHAN grew up where the districts of Halele'a and Ko'olau meet on the island of Kaua'i. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Management, and the Sea Grant College Program and Hui 'Āina Momona at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

LUNANA: A YAK IN THE CLASSROOM



HAWAI'I PREMIERE

BHUTAN 2019 | DZONGKA WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES | 109

NOV 5 - 29 | ONLINE

FFT DISCUSSION WITH PAWO CHONYING DORJI

10-NOV 5:00 PM | ONLINE | FREE

SYNOPSIS

Musician Ugyen struggles to excel in his teaching career, despite having one of Bhutan's more coveted jobs. He is in fact so unmotivated, that his superiors decide to give him a special position - teach at the country's most remote school for a year. After an arduous journey to get there, upon arrival in Lunana, Ugyen can hardly believe his bad luck landing in such a backwater.

However, the charm of the village, its people, and the majestic Himalayas, start to win him over, and the teacher in him begins to shine. In this process, Ugyen ultimately becomes the student, experiencing a journey that will impact him for a lifetime. Starring the actual villagers from the town of Lunana in Bhutan, director Pawo Chonying Dorji's LUNANA: A YAK IN THE CLASSROOM is a beautiful, engrossing, and uplifting film.

—ANNA PAGE

DIRECTOR	Pawo Chonying Dorji
SCREENWRITER	Pawo Chonying Dorji
PRODUCERS	Pawo Chonying Dorji, Stephanie Lai, Steven Xiang
CAST	Sherab Dorji, Kelden Lhamo Gurung, Ugyen Norbu Lhendup, Pema Zam
CINEMATOGRAPHER	Jigme Tenzing

THOUGHTS

As an elementary school teacher in the small island community of Lānaʻi, I felt an instant connection to director Pawo Choyning Dorji's LUNANA: A YAK IN THE CLASSROOM. Sent to the "the remotest school in the world," the main character, Ugyen, struggles with the great dilemma of this generation: navigating globalization while remaining true to who we are and where we are from; and before that, finding our identity in a world where so many are displaced from their ancestral land, culture, and language. Ugyen is confronted with a choice: becoming a voice in an urbanized, global community, or remaining rooted in the dirt of his own country, fulfilling a small but important role, true to the traditional values espoused by his grandmother.

In his December 28, 2015 TEDx Talk, "Seeing the Sacred," Pawo Choyning Dorji says, "... I like to capture images and stories that remind me, and connect me with my own inner sacredness, my own virtuous qualities." LUNANA opens with one such image.

The wind heard travelling through a great expanse. An extreme wide shot of a vast mountain range. The dark, flowing black hair of a woman, her back to us. The mountain side echoing with the oldest of instruments: a single human voice.

For us in Hawai'i, the land is alive. The worldview of the kanaka ʻōiwi teaches us that akua are embodied by trees, plants, and clouds, by the sun at its zenith, by the sea. We learn from them that essential forces within the natural world are alive and conscious, and there is in fact a way we can speak to and be heard by this living environment.

After a long day of work on Lānaʻi, I have a simple practice. I step outside, cross the empty two lane "highway" behind my house, and climb up the hill of Pūlehuloa, where I can see the open plains of our caldera, and watch the kakehau mist settle in the lands below. I can speak words no one but the wind will hear and so connect to that sacredness within us all.

Just as we settle into our awe of this breathtaking opening shot, we're yanked into the city. We see Ugyen for the first time fast asleep. Traffic, horns, and

cars replace the wind.

In Pawo Choyning Dorji's film, Ugyen is sent to Lunana as a teacher, but in the end, he is the one who needs to learn, and it is Lunana that helps him reconnect. There is something to be learned from a place like Lunana, a community where everyone can tell your story, where the arriving traveler may be greeted by the entire town.

On Lāna'i, our youth grapple with the same things. They (as I do) obsess over their phones and like Ugyen do not even look up when greeted in the street. A family owned business is replaced by a sleek grocery store with polished wood floors; interpretive signs tell indigenous stories to visitors; and the remoteness and quiet that drew so many of us to Lāna'i is now a shallow-focus advertising tool to draw Four Seasons guests. When I am old will Lāna'i be so changed that I can no longer recognize it? And when that happens, will I still be able to remember the wisdom only small, remote communities know?

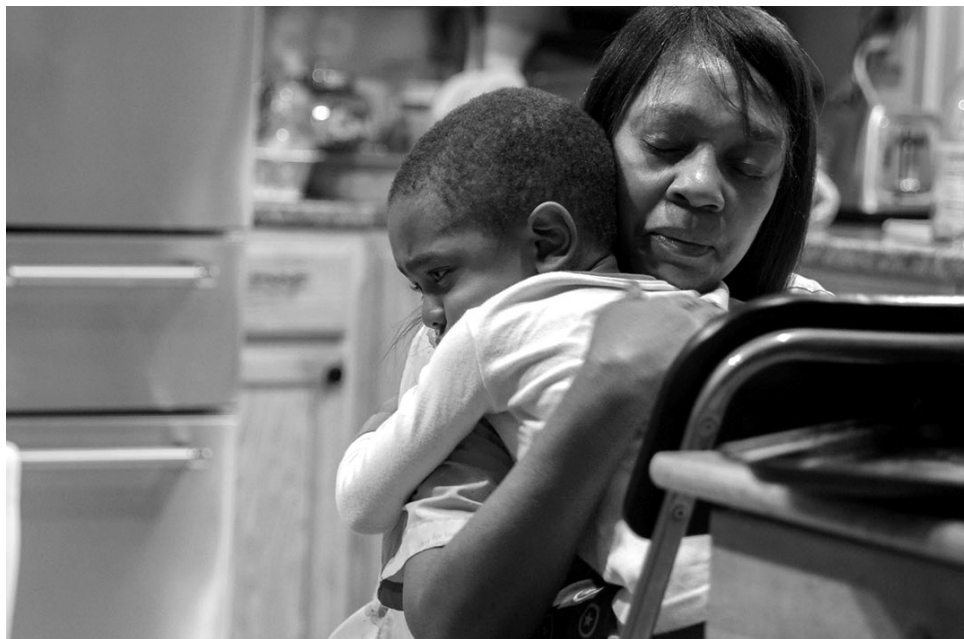
The subtitle of the movie, *A YAK IN THE CLASSROOM* is a suitable metaphor for this dilemma. Each day we are educated, and American ideals, culture, and language take the place of chants that speak to and are heard by the land. And we, like Ugyen, must carry this absurdity in our hearts, so we are left with more questions.

Should he move to a far-off place, can Ugyen carry with him the wisdom he learns in Lunana? Even as we become more adept at navigating a manmade environment, can we remember lessons that ring in the far-off mountains, a voice in the wind's great expanse?

SIMON SEISHO TAJIRI

SIMON SEISHO TAJIRI is thankful to belong to Lāna'i, an island perfect in the calm.

THROUGH THE NIGHT



HAWAI'I PREMIERE
UNITED STATES 2020 | ENGLISH | 72M

NOV 5 - 29 | ONLINE

FFT DISCUSSION WITH LOIRA LIMBAL
13-NOV 12:00PM | ONLINE | FREE

SYNOPSIS

To make ends meet, people in the U.S. are working longer hours across multiple jobs. This modern reality of non-stop work has resulted in an unexpected phenomenon: the flourishing of 24-hour daycare centers. *THROUGH THE NIGHT* follows three women whose lives intersect through the shared need of caregiving: Shanona, a single mother and pediatric nurse; Marisol Valencia, a supermarket attendant forced to work three jobs; and Deloris "Nunu" Hogan, the loving operator of a daycare centre out of her home. As the film progresses, each woman must confront the growing challenges of work, caregiving and health, all the while neglecting the one person they can afford to let down: themselves.

THROUGH THE NIGHT is a compassionate yet heartbreaking portrait of the women left behind across America, and the challenges they face to make a better life for their children. Directed by Loira Limbal in collaboration with a team of extraordinary women filmmakers, *THROUGH THE NIGHT* shines an essential light on the people and issues that are too often ignored but who cannot be forgotten.

"Politicians like to talk about "family values," but often it's a hardworking woman down the street who turns a nice idea into meaningful action. Limbal's film is an up-close look at just what it takes, the relentless hard work and the unwavering love." —*THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER*

—DUNCAN CAILLARD

DIRECTOR

Loira Limbal

PRODUCERS

Loira Limbal, Jameka Autry

THOUGHTS

In the documentary “Through the Night,” filmmaker Loira Limbal turns a loving gaze on the intimate labor of Deloris “Nunu” Hogan who, with her husband Patrick, nurtures children in their 24-hour daycare in New Rochelle, New York. It is a tender film about personal relationships—between children and the beloved caretakers whom they know as Nunu and PopPop. It is a fierce film revealing love as hard labor: the exhausting, depleting physical and emotional labor of sustaining children in a world of ceaseless wage work that provides mothers no time or respite.

The camera pans the rooms of the blue clapboard house, an entire wall blanketed with photographs of children. It fastens on intimate details: the whispered conversation between Nunu and little Noah, the arm that tenderly encircles a child, the sweet peace of early morning as a child burrows into her blankets, while Nunu begins the morning routine. As light falls on the rapt faces of children, mostly Black and Latinx, the film reveals these as lives that matter.

Caretakers are in perpetual motion in this film, whether braiding hair, supervising math, or stirring a pot while cradling a child. No external narrator intrudes; the words are those of caretakers, mothers, and the children themselves. When one preschooler names Patrick “king of the house,” another pipes up, “Nunu’s the queen of the house too!” and Nunu shoots back: “Actually I’m the king and the queen. He’s the prince.” The film conveys the humor, patience, and unwavering gentleness that sustain children and their mothers through job loss, divorce, and financial hardship. It’s apparent in every gesture that these children are loved and that their mothers leave them as an act of love, in order to provide. It need not state, because we can see, that it is society that has failed the mothers.

“Through the Night” does not speak directly of gender or race, inequality or injustice. Instead, it follows Nunu through her day, greets one exhausted mother coming off the hospital night shift, and meets another whose three part-time jobs don’t make ends meet. In one scene, the camera hones in on a mother’s exhausted face, her whispered response to the query “Who takes care of you?” “At this point, me.” Such shots bespeak the brutality of a system built upon ceaseless work, and the disregard of an indifferent government for children and their caretakers.

As the women's stories unfold, we learn that employers refuse women full-time work to avoid the cost of insurance and that minimum wage jobs cannot support a family. The film exposes the untruth that hard work leads to success. It reminds us that the labor of childcare is essential to the well-being of society as a whole.

Government has long turned a blind eye to the facts. In the US, the benefits of the 1993 Family Medical Leave Act are available only to those of means. Even before COVID-19 transformed our lives, most mothers worked outside the home, childcare was insufficient and always costly, work hours inflexible and government subsidies inadequate. COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Black, Pacific Islander, Native American, Southeast Asian, and Latinx communities, with women, more often than men, in the front lines of medical care.

In its sensitive focus on working mothers, their children, and their caretakers, "Through the Night" leaves us with a lingering question: Who are we as a society to value so little what is most precious? Deloris Hogan is guided by a vision: a society in which care—educational, loving, community-based care—could lift every family. "Watch everyone's children as you watch your own." Enfolded within this film's visual embrace, we begin to envision a world in which every child receives the loving care that we'd wish for our own.

ELIZABETH COLWILL

ELIZABETH COLWILL is Associate Professor of American Studies and Affiliate Graduate Faculty in the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She takes inspiration from many generations of activist women—including working mothers.



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