

“We’re in This Together”

An interview with Danny Glover

2008 marks the 40th anniversary of the struggle to institute Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State. What do you see as some of the similarities between your work then and your current efforts to get African American history represented in films?

Danny Glover: I was a student and an activist in the Black Student Union (BSU) at San Francisco State in the mid-60’s. We were doing a lot of outreach into the community—tutorial programs with students who were not doing well in public schools, and trying very hard to make what we were learning in college relevant to the issues and problems confronting our communities. We were also engaged in protests on campus and raising issues around race and racism and the need for greater inclusion on campus.

When Imamu Baraka (Leroi Jones) came out to San Francisco as part of the Black Arts movement, he needed somebody to act in one of his plays. He challenged us by saying something to the effect of “Can any of you so-called revolutionaries act?” Since nobody else seemed willing to take the challenge, I timidly stepped up. So my introduction to acting was as a social medium. As my work progressed, I came to see activism and art as integrally linked.

As a student, I, along with a group of other young people from various backgrounds, ethnicities, and experiences, was involved in bringing together what would become a powerful movement for transformation and change. The coalition at that time was very broad: visionary and progressive white students involved in organizations like Students for a Democratic Society, black students from the Black Student Union, Hispanic students from La Raza, and The Third World Liberation Front.

The successful struggle for these programs resulted in the longest strike on a college campus in United States history. We were committed to creating a

larger sense of democratic possibility in which everybody’s voice, culture, and history was honored and valued equally. As a diverse community, as a diverse group of students, we were trying to learn about the world and how and where we fit individually and collectively. In attempting to do that we kept running into these institutionally constructed divides—that privilege some realities and marginalized others.

It was a hard-fought struggle that would forever alter the educational landscape in the United States. It resulted in the creation of the first black studies program and the first College of Ethnic Studies in the country. Forty years later, it remains the only College of Ethnic Studies in the country.

We came together and we struggled together to create something that did not previously exist. The campus was closed down for several months as we organized to challenge the fundamental assumptions of the educational model that we were being required and forced to participate in. One of our most important demands, which sometimes gets lost, was to increase community access to education—particularly greater access for students from underserved communities. So, in addition to the content of the education that we were receiving we were also attempting to create a much more level playing field in terms of access. Who is allowed the privilege of participating? Whose stories? Whose voices? Whose vision? Whose interests?

And as you know, in the work that you do at Urban Habitat, those issues are as relevant today as they were then—perhaps even more so.

One other thing about how and why I got involved, even before I got to college. I remember seeing images of young people who were not that much older than me being beaten at lunch counters. Their dedication, their courage, their heroism in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles made an enormous impression on me.

Q. And how do you see all of this related to your current work in film?

Glover: For me—as you can imagine—it’s extremely related. For me, the personal and the political don’t represent separate realities. Who I am as a human rights activist is as important to me as who I am as an artist. Perhaps other people are able to separate those realities and those roles, but I’m not able to. I have difficulty with being described as an activist. What I strive for is to be a better citizen. And my definition of citizenship isn’t limited to the geographic confines of the United States. Whether we like it or not, the earth is our collective home and I believe that our responsibilities as citizens (whatever country we happen to reside in or whichever block our house happens to be located on) is to protect and sustain (in whatever way we can) this small fragile blue planet that we call Home (with a capital H).

A lot of the work that I do as an actor and filmmaker is about grounding and affirming a broadly re-imagined and re-envisioned sense of what we mean when we say community. And within that space, what are the stories that need to be told?

The kinds of projects that I’m interested in spending time, energy, and money on (at critical junctures) are films that are beautifully executed, intelligently conceived, and more importantly, films that remind us of our connectedness as human beings. The geography might differ, the issues and themes might differ, but the underlying connectedness is what really matters. And at this point, for me, much of that work is collaborative. At Louverture Productions, for instance, we’re dedicated to collaborating with, mentoring, and supporting filmmakers from around the globe—including the United States.

The third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and the devastation of New Orleans, also marks the



release of a wonderful film that Joslyn Barnes and I are the executive producers of called, *Trouble the Water*. It’s an empowering film from the perspective of a young woman (and her husband) who basically became internal refugees after the levees broke. Kimberly and Scott Roberts, with a video camera they bought for \$20, document their harrowing struggle for survival against both the natural elements and the government’s appalling ineptitude. But what starts out as a story of two people stuck in New Orleans riding out the storm because they didn’t have money to leave, quickly turns into a story of towering heroism as people join forces to help each other.

When the film premiered at Sundance, the audience stood and cheered. They recognized their own humanity and their own connectedness. They were able to see themselves and they were able to do that across the “divides” of race and class. That’s art that inspires.

Q. What can United States residents and particularly, African-Americans learn from Haitian history? Why are you making a movie about Touissant L’Ouverture?

Glover: Bringing Touissant and the Haitian Revolution to the screen is a dream that I've been working on for the last 20 years. Touissant led the only successful slave rebellion in history and in the process defeated Napoleon's army, as well as the imperial armies of Britain and Spain. It's an amazing story in part because it rounds out what we know about the United States and French Revolutions. The United States revolution brought us the Declaration of Independence, the French, the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

The Haitian Revolution represents the third leg: universalizing these principles to all men—not just privileged, landed, wealthy men of European ancestry.

In terms of world historical movements and revolutions, it was actually the most important of the three because it extended the ideals enshrined in the American and French Revolutions. The Haitian Revolution successfully established a republic based on more broadly inclusive universal principles. Unfortunately, women were not part of any equation back then.

A critically important question for African-Americans is, "Why has this monumental achievement been so erased from our history and from our consciousness?" So, that for me is why it so important and has been such a passion.

What about a film like *Bamako*?

Glover: *Bamako* is, as you probably know, a film that graphically dramatizes how the IMF and the World Bank are actually exacerbating poverty in the developing world—rather than eliminating it. It's also important because it represented an opportunity for us to collaborate with Abderrahmane Sissako, a Mauritanian filmmaker who is not only one of the most important filmmakers on the African continent but we believe, one of the most important filmmakers in the world.

The film is imaginative and exciting on so many levels, beginning with the setting. The action takes place in the courtyard of a walled house in Bamako—the capital of Mali. The courtyard—rife with chick-



ens and goats, as well as the personal drama involving a couple on the verge of break-up—provides the backdrop for a very public drama aimed at putting the World Bank and the IMF on trial. It's beautifully shot, culturally rich with a great deal of inspirational music. And in terms of story, again it's inspirational and touching and powerfully transformative.

One last note, we recently released a feature documentary co-produced with the Marley family about the life of Bob Marley, *Africa Unite*, which focuses on issues related to African unity and youth empowerment, filmed in Ethiopia.

Well, I think you have a sense of where I am at this stage in both my creative and my personal journey—recognizing that we're in this together, and it's part of a powerful process of re-imagining the future and future possibilities. And that's true whether we are trying to re-imagine the future of our cities or of our planet. It's important that we each recognize that our voice matters and that our vision of hope and possibility is a critical piece of the puzzle. ■

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Photo:
Francois-Dominique
Touissant L'Ouverture

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Museum, London,
United Kingdom

Danny Glover has worked as an actor, producer, and director in dozens of films and television shows. In addition to many other activist commitments, he is the chair of Trans Africa Forum and president of the Vanguard Foundation.

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