A Conversation with Danny Glover & Joslyn Barnes

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Danny Glover is well known as an acclaimed actor in blockbuster movies, in films that focus on the African American experience, and in numerous television and theater projects. Joslyn Barnes is a writer, producer, and former programme officer for the United Nations. Intrigued by their work with African filmmakers, their desire to facilitate the telling of stories by people whose voices are often unheard, and their commitment to supporting economic and social justice efforts in the global South, I traveled to New York recently to interview them specifically about their work as co-founders of Louverture Films. The interview spotlights the creative vision of Louverture Films and how this is reflected in current projects. It also puts on display relationships of mentorship, support, and mutually enriching collaborations with filmmakers in Africa, elsewhere throughout the world, and the United States. Danny Glover and Joslyn Barnes are intensely aware of the impact of globalization on the lives of people whose stories have been the focus of several of the films produced by their company and globalization's impact on the film industry itself, and they are committed to making a difference via films that are not only beautiful and intelligently conceptualized but that remind us of our connectedness and our humanity. An excerpt from our conversation follows. (To read the full two-hour transcript, consult the March issue of WLT *online at worldliteraturetoday.com.)*

PREVIOUS PAGE Photo by Andreas Gursky titled "Paris, Montparnasse" (1993)

PREVIOUS PAGE: PHOTO: TATE GALLERY, LONDON / ART RESOURCE, NEW YORK. THIS PAGE: PHOTO: JAN BARACZ / WWW.BARACZ.COM

You started Louverture Films in 2005. Why did you believe such a film company was needed?

Joslyn Barnes We started the company because we were not seeing the kinds of films we felt should be in the marketplace. Danny and I met in 1999 on a film set in Senegal, actually, for a film that I had written for a director named Cheikh Oumar Sissoko from Mali, and which Danny had elected to accept a supporting role in, because he felt the story was important and he liked the director's work. We started talking about African films and filmmakers whom we admired and who had influenced us over the years. Then we started to collaborate on a couple of projects, and as the relationship evolved creatively, we started thinking, "Why are we not seeing more African films and other films from the global South in the United States. Or why is it only in New York or Los Angeles that you get a week's screening time for a film by as significant an artist as Ousmane Sembène, for example?"

So, we thought, this is something that really needs to be further supported. Perhaps it would be useful for filmmakers in the global South to have a lifeline of authentic partners in the North, to help build a bridge to create and augment an audience. Perhaps we could find some financing that we could then invest on the ground in Africa, in Latin America, in Asia, in the Middle East, and that money would go to local producers, so the next time those producers wanted to make a film they wouldn't have to come to the United States or Europe to get financing for their next film. And then you just keep building infrastructure and capacity and helping support filmmakers and talent locally everywhere you make a film, rather than the standard northern model, which is to say, "This director is a great director, why don't we invite him or her to come to Los Angeles or New York to make an American film?" So rather than just poaching talent, you actually help support talent where it is so that that point of view reaches the marketplace. That, we felt, was the point—to shift the perspective and empower the artists and producers—and that's why we created the company.

Why did you select Louverture Films as the name of your company?

Barnes The project that Danny and I first started working on together, and with the co-writer on the script Vijay Balakrishnan, was about the Haitian Revolution and the story, in particular, of Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the revolution. This was a story that Danny had been working on for two decades, from very early influences like C.L.R. James's *Black Jacobins* and stage plays. So when we created the company, we decided, hey, who's a better example of someone who really faced all the odds than Toussaint Louverture? All the imperial forces were defeated during the revolution. The name Louverture is reputed to have been given to him by a French general who later became his friend: the general once remarked about Toussaint that he always found an "opening" (*ouverture*) in battle, and so that's when he took the name Louverture, in order to be rid of his slave name, which was Bréda. So we thought that would be a great name for our company, which is designed to create an opening.

We feel that, in the history canon in the United States at least, we learn about the American and French Revolutions. We learn about the Declaration of Independence, we learn about the Declaration of the Rights of Man, but we never hear about the third revolution that happened around the same time, which was the Haitian Revolution. And that revolution, we felt, was perhaps the most important one because that was the revolution that tried to actualize the ideals enshrined by the earlier revolutions for *all* men, not just wealthy white men, but in fact every man—women still didn't count back then, at least not officially! And so we asked, Why is this third revolution the one that's erased from history? There are many answers to that question, and some very obvious ones, but that's why we felt it was critical to have this story told. There are many people who have tried to tell this story throughout history—including towering figures like Paul Robeson, Sergei Eisenstein, Bertolt Brecht, Aimé Césaire—to little avail. Considering how interesting this story is, and how important it is to world history, this difficulty in getting the story told is truly representative of the many structural problems that Africans and people of the diaspora have experienced and continue to experience. The film business is no different.

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Let's talk a little bit about the films that you have already made with Louverture Films. Could you talk a little bit about *Bamako*, which dramatizes how the IMF and the World Bank have exacerbated rather than alleviated poverty in the developing world?

Danny Glover I think *Bamako* was the first realization of our vision, our first idea of how we could have an ongoing relationship with someone

ABOVE A still from *Bamako*

who, we think, is not only one of the most important filmmakers on the continent, Abderrahmane Sissako, but perhaps one of the most important young filmmakers in the global South and world. To have a collaborative relationship with him and to begin to build something . . . understand that it's not us trying to dictate the story; this is being supportive of an effort, being able to identify stories and filmmakers and encouraging them, being able to facilitate in some way, in our small way, their own growth. We not only talked about the concept, but we were willing to put our energy and resources behind it.

When we think about stories, when we look at the global South and communities of color and other marginalized groups in the North, we begin to identify stories we want to be a part of. In every case we've been able to find filmmakers who are serious and who want to do something, and with whom we share similar convictions. I thought *Bamako* was a real test, and we learned a lot of lessons from the experience. As producers, you've got to believe that what you're doing is important. I don't care if you have sixteen films on the slate or if you have two films on the slate—you have got to believe that what you are doing is important. We want to leave a legacy that people will then use in some way. More than anything else, I want to see the next generation of filmmakers say, "These people tried to do something, how can we take this to the next level?" The one thing that I learned when I first began acting—I had never been on stage before—but the first thing I felt out of all the inhibitions and everything that I had in the world was that I could be of some use. Then when I found out, when I realized that if I was onstage and I worked really hard, that people would say, Something's happening here, then that would impact the way I feel about myself—that's the next transition. I think that's the model of this kind of company: that this vision might be of some use. It resonates with what is happening in the world, I think, and resonates with the voices that are often voiceless in this world.

When I saw the documentary *Cuba: An African Odyssey*, by the great Egyptian filmmaker Jihan el-Tahri, it brought back to me the memory of watching Amilcar Cabral's face, or of seeing Fidel

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Castro's face, of seeing Agostinho Neto and Fidel embrace, or seeing the role that these men and women tried to play in constructing their own history. I still feel that. When I look into the eyes of Martin Luther King or Malcolm, there is something that still resonates. I think that it's alive in all of us, you know. If our film company can support that kind of vision, and we can begin to center the world around the way in which people see themselves, and honor themselves, then the work that we do is beautiful and meaningful.

It's been said that *Bamako* puts globalization on trial. Can you describe that?

Barnes Well, in the film specifically the World Bank and IMF are put on trial in the middle of a household courtyard, in the middle of the city of Bamako, which is the capital of Mali. What was interesting to me in talking to Abderrahmane about conceptualizing this film was the decision not to present a verdict per se in the trial. The point of the trial really is to allow Africans to testify, to give witness, and to say, Look, decisions are being made in Washington D.C. and in other parts of the North that affect millions and millions of lives in the global South, and those people—we people—who are directly affected have no part in making those decisions! These decision-making structures and their resulting policies need to be reexamined. That is the point of the trial.

What about *Trouble the Water*? Can you talk a little about that?

Barnes This is such a powerful, powerful film by filmmakers Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, about a young couple from the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans who, because of their economic circumstances, were not able to evacuate before Hurricane Katrina hit. Kimberly Rivers Roberts had a video camera that she had bought for twenty dollars the day before the storm and started to just talk to people in the neighborhood about what they were going to do about the storm: were they leaving, were they going to stay? In a way, her initial takes unfold like a horror movie because you know what happened, but while she's taping she doesn't know what's going to happen. The story very much gets inside the experience of people living on the margins who, through a terrible crisis, actually came to understand their own self-worth and were able to step outside their immediate circumstances and see their lives in a different way, and be transformed by that experience. You can see this as a "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" situation, or you can see it more deeply, I think, as a journey of transformation. That kind of transformation in the face of structural obstacles like racism, poverty, lack of education, and otherwise is very subversive and empowering. Kimberly and Scott Roberts rose above every circumstance, they were kept down and also kept themselves down in every way in their lives, and at the moment where everyone else who was in a position of power and authority dropped the ball, they stepped in and saved people's lives from the generosity of their own spirits. When you see that, and the power of that, you start to think about all the structural injustices you see in life every day, and you start to think about it in a different way. Mainly you start to think—it doesn't have to be this way. And that's hopefully when you start to take responsibility and act. And that's precisely what Tia Lessin and Carl Deal are doing in making this film.

Glover I remember looking into the faces of Kimberly and Scott and thinking that their ancestors would be proud of these two. I remember one time looking at the film and thinking about how that transformation was connected to various other heroic transformations that people make which go unannounced, or unrewarded, or they're not anointed in some sort of way. I think that is what the story says a lot because, like Joslyn says, a story much larger than that plays out with the opportunity to do something heroic, and to see how that plays out at that particular moment but also to understand its historic significance, it's so wonderful. If you place them in the pantheon of all the people—the mothers, the fathers, the children—who come of age and do something extraordinary, this story reminds me of how people are transformed in crisis and are transformed themselves. It's about redemption, transformation, healing. My grandparents were heroic to me, and consequently as a result of that, their daughter, my mother, too. Just to see them in light of that, you know? I'm watching people on film as they go through their lives and wanting to get to know them, and being proud of them at the same time.

I think when viewers see this film that they are going to want to know these people, and maybe some others in similar circumstances are going to want to feel as if maybe their lives have those kind of transformative aspects as well. Certainly

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we need stories like this, we need people who are a step beyond what we imagine they could do who become heroic. And then we have a chance to anoint our own heroes.

Barnes There is something that is common with all these films: you can talk about issues, the African debt crisis, you can talk about the structural causes of racism and poverty in America, but you must have stories that connect to people at a human level. We had a investor who came in here to watch *Trouble the Water* who was a commodities broker and who had made some money in natural gas during the storm. After seeing the film, he came into my office and said, "Not only is this a good film, it's life-transforming." And he had tears in his eyes. The same thing happened with *Bamako*, as we saw hard-boiled people—who had worked on these issues and fought in the trenches—just crying. They were so relieved and so moved to see their own experiences presented in a truthful way, in a way that wasn't complicated, in a way that just said, "Look, this is the human cost. This is how my life is affected by these decisions made ten thousand miles away from me. This is how it's affected my family." It's the same thing with *Trouble the Water*. We were talking about globalization earlier, and it's the exact same thing. These lives have value, every life has value. We can each learn from every single other person, and unless you understand how you're connected, you have no idea who you are. That's the power of film, and any art actually, that's the point of art, to open us to realizing that truth.

As we think about issues of race and oppression in the U.S., what comes to mind, what have you touched on in your films?

Glover I think if we go beyond issues, we have to have some sort of movement here that actually changes the paradigm and the way the government deals with its citizens—it goes beyond a particular issue in itself. Every single issue falls within the particular framework of how we have dealt with each other historically. Whether we're talking about race, education, health care, etc., we're talking about something much larger than something that's issue-connected.

How do you address some of these things with film—how do *you* address them? Because you're obviously involved so much in social action . . .

Glover I think one of the things you do is you attempt to tell stories, as we try to do. Film is just one aspect of it, it's one aspect of a way in which we re-create and re-imagine what cultural work is, the work that we do, its value and its importance. I think that is the beginning. We attempt to link one film to another film by creating a plethora of stories that give some sort of embodiment to who we are as human beings in a much larger sense—that becomes part of it. Are we capable of discussions, able to build movements behind a particular story? Certainly that's the power of film, as we witnessed with *Bamako*, which makes a statement about creating another relationship, another dialogue, or creating a space for that dialogue to be even more dynamic.

We were talking earlier about globalization. Thinking about your films in relation to globalization, how has this phenomenon affected the film industry?

Glover I think the current paradigm in terms of globalization is not a paradigm that services this quite extraordinary idea that we're all related, we're all connected, and all our stories are valuable. The paradigm as it exists now is that one story is the primary story and all the other stories are, in some way, abstractions from that story, in terms of whether they matter or not. And that's clear in how American films have overwhelmed the national film industries of every country they touch, even countries that could be considered cultural allies. If we look at what has happened to Canadian, Italian, French, and other film industries, let alone the other industries in the global South, they have basically gone belly up because of this onslaught of America's uni-culture. And because this culture is predatory, in the sense that it digests and assimilates everything alive, and there's no real substantive base to this culture, it just goes there and tastes everything. And really it's not to complement it, or supplement it, but to absorb it into its own. That's what globalization looks like in terms of film, because it takes so much money to recoup on a film. You limit the access in terms of screens when only 33 percent of the revenue of a film comes from domestic distribution and the rest of it comes from foreign and DVD. So what do you do? You begin to usurp and control and take over those particular markets. So not only do you take over the space that's created, it becomes a process that's undemocratic as well, where the biggest dog on the

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corner, with the biggest bite, comes in and eats up everything else that comes around.

But look at what's happening on another level in places like Lagos, Nigeria, which is known as Nollywood, or what has continued to happen in other small ways. In China and India, to take two examples, filmmakers have basically declared "this is our culture, this is our story, we're going to sustain ourselves and to continue to allow ourselves to say who we are and not have who we are manufactured by somebody else." In other parts of the global South, they have been less fortunate in doing that as their populations are smaller. But I think something else is happening in that process as well. When you talk about films, you're talking about how people see themselves in relationship to their fiction, their history, and their identity. And as we embark on this world where the question of identity—whether that has some sort of cultural underpinning or whatever—for all of us is a very important thing. If we're talking about elevating and sustaining ourselves and our lives, film itself, as an extension of culture, can become an important element in that.

Who have served as your role models or your heroes in life, in general, and in the film/entertainment world?

Barnes In the film world, among African directors, certainly Djibril Diop Mambéty and Abderrahmane Sissako. Mambéty, from Senegal, was, for me, probably the most important influence. His films *Hyenas* and *Touki Bouki* are some of the greatest films I've ever seen from the continent. I also very much like Safi Faye, who is a woman filmmaker from Senegal who I think is very underrated, an artist who has not been able to break out, who has not had as many opportunities as some of the male filmmakers, who is an extremely strong talent. And of course the enormously important Ousmane Sembène, whom we didn't get a chance to actually work with as a director before he died, though Danny worked with him on *Moolaadé* by helping him to finance the film. We will be producing the screen adaptation of his epic novel, *God's Bits of Wood*, however, which was a co-production that we agreed with him and is a project that he wanted to see us make into a film. And I am very inspired by the next generation of filmmakers as well, from all over the continent, including the Maghreb. And by my partner Danny Glover, whose example of service, patience, and compassion I am humbled by each and every day.

Glover Clearly, my first role models were my parents. There was something about their gentleness, their quietness—and certainly their own level of activism where they came from—that is pretty remarkable. The other kind of people who have played some role were people I never met and wish I had. Most notably Paul Robeson—I wish I would have been able to meet Paul. Or Malcolm—I wish I would have been able to meet Malcolm. Or Martin. I wish I would have been able to meet the great Mary McLeod Bethune. When I was about nineteen years old, I remember being blown away when I bought an album by Miriam Makeba that Harry Belafonte had produced (1965). Also, when I listened to Harry talk about meeting Father Huddleston in London, just before the South African treason trials (1956), it just boggled my mind. When Amiri Baraka came to San Francisco State, we said we want to do his work so people could see themselves. We wanted to do community theater where people could look at themselves as a platform for their own growth. People like Katherine Dunham, Julie Belafonte, Harry Belafonte, and so many others had an enormous influence on the collective thinking of the time in terms of the relationship between art and who we are, the importance of art and movement, building those kind of relationships, and resuscitating our own collective memory. ◘

LEFT A still from *Bamako*

In January, *Trouble the Water* won the Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. To learn more about forthcoming features from Louverture Films, visit their website at www.louverturefilms.com/ss.