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New Jack African Cinema

Dangerous Ground; *Cry, the Beloved Country*; and *Blood Diamond*

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It is a truism that actions speak louder than words. In the case of film, action cinema has the power to override dialogue and deconstruct plot structure through the shock value of violence, explosion, and conflict. The violence itself becomes an anthropometric narrative actor as well as an agent of change. In this context, New Jack African cinema treats Africa at once as a liminal space, a purgatory from which to escape, and a potential utopia. This genre, which has its roots in Hollywood action films and Hong Kong martial arts cinema, uses the agency of explosive violence to mask genuine African social problems. It has one foot in Hollywood and the other on the African continent, melding a variety of Hollywood cinematic devices with a cinema of resistance. Although conventional plot structures such as quest, vengeance, and coming of age are incorporated into New Jack African cinema, peak events involving violence overshadow all other narrative concerns and devices. New Jack films trace their origin to Mario Van Peebles's 1991 film *New Jack City*, starring Wesley Snipes and rapper Ice-T. As spin-offs of the blaxploitation genre of the 1970s and Hollywood action films of the 1980s, these films are closely related to the larger genre of 'hood films.[1] Manthia Diawara states that 'hood films, exemplified by John Singleton's 1991 *Boyz n the Hood* and other commodities related to the global spread of hip-hop culture, "are an expression of poor people's desire for the good life" (1998, 238). Drugs, crime, and male-oriented popular culture are centerpieces of these films, in which hip-hop and rap stars emerge as cinematic heroes. Paul Smith points out that pulp genres, such as spaghetti westerns and New Jack action films, are mutable (1993, 20). New filmic genres often disguise older ones by making referential allusions to the past or remaking new films in vastly different settings that evoke the superficial appearance of new genre types.[2] Thus, Boer trek films in the colonialist South African genre discussed by Peter Davis operate as disguised westerns (1996, 128-30). Similarly, Ice Cube transports the American New Jack genre to Africa in *Dangerous Ground* (1997).[3]

Although New Jack African films partake of this genre mutability, they are characterized by certain basic operating principles: (1) New Jack African films displace the locus of crime and destruction from the US inner city to African urban and rural sites. (2) Within these sites, the films manipulate time and space to create internal moments of actualization, reconstruction, and reconciliation. Bar scenes are often deployed in this manner. (3) Traditional African communities are presented as twilight

zones within idyllic fantasies and are often iconized through the figure of the African mother. Even the shooting styles, focus, and lighting of village scenes, along with the B-roll intercuts, may be muted in order to convey the impression of a vague and waning traditional community. (4) Conventional social interactions across genders and generations are also muted and manipulated in order to open up new pathways for their transformation. (5) Peak events center on conflict, explosion, and mass destruction so that the possibility of an alternative reality may be introduced to resolve the conflict. (6) After the explosion, this alternative reality may never actually be attained. It remains virtual, but it is alluded to through Hollywood-style cinematic suture devices that allow the antihero to save the day, often through death or extreme sacrifice.[4]

While there are genuine heroes and villains in New Jack films, their identities are flawed, reworked, and transformed through violent peak narrative events. Within these narrative and genre conventions, New Jack films deploy truncated and ironic dialogue, which contributes to the pulp-like quality of the scenario and reinforces the anachronisms and interpersonal conflicts highlighted by the manipulation of time and space. Truncated dialogue may also make characters appear one-dimensional as they navigate the fault lines of New Jack cinematic deconstruction and destruction. However, these one-dimensional characters are actually multilayered, thereby concealing the depth of their cinematic complexity and the essential relationships of their composite identities to the narratively driven filmic explosions. This process of occultation resembles strategies used in popular African painting and music to conceal subversive political messages.[5]

New Jack African cinema deals not only with the destruction of community but also with its restitution.[6] A narrative problem arises, however, because the communities to which order might ultimately be restored exist only in a twilight zone of evanescent stereotypes. The "traditional" African village, which is threatened and eventually comes under fire, is juxtaposed to already exploding urban spaces that are the loci of crime, violence, and disorder, but also the objects of dreams of extraordinary wealth and success. The narrative complexity of the New Jack genre combines multiple subjects and story lines, each vying for a distinct resolution. The resulting tension produces a situation in which the various narrative strands become strained, and they must be snapped or exploded in order to reach resolution. Elements of colonial film are also retained in New Jack African cinema, in particular with regard to the landscaping of lost and idyllic utopias.[7] In *Dangerous Ground* (1997) and the comic film *Yankee Zulu* (1993), Sun City, with its casinos and easy wealth, is depicted as an El Dorado. In *Blood Diamond* (2006), the remote diamond fields of Sierra Leone are the source of wealth. But these utopian spaces, which are the fabric of cinematic dreams, are not venues in which wealth may be spent. They contain objects of desire that promise to transform actual communities, such as traditional villages and burgeoning cities, into utopias. This model of cinematic desire contrasts with the themes of African auteur films (for example, works by Sembène, Rouch, and Mambety), in which El Dorado is fictively located in Europe. New Jack African cinema operates as a mutable genre mediating

across African auteur films and Hollywood cinema. This mediation results in a postcolonial filmic export that introduces controversial images of Africa to an international viewing public. Examples of the New Jack African paradigm will be used to delineate the structure, social context, and appeal of these films in relation to conventional Hollywood genres. The objective here is not to salvage Hollywood cinema, but rather to illustrate the ways in which its narratives change through interaction with other narrative formats and, in turn, generate a syncretic genre that introduces new filmic discourses. Whether the shelf life of African New Jack films coincides with that of hip-hop genres, pronounced by certain pundits to be culturally dead as of 2007, is an open question (Sanneh 2007).

In and Out of Hollywood: Mutable Genres and New Jack Cinema

Much has been written about colonial cinema in Africa. The perpetuation of stereotypes and the reaffirmation of rigid social boundaries are the hallmarks of colonial cinema. This approach is also reflected in neocolonial cinema, which thinly veils the stereotypes and continues to reinforce social, economic, and racial barriers. Neocolonial cinema may contain pertinent information and salutary messages. Films such as Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa* (1985) and Zoltan Korda and Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1951) are docudramas describing the limitations of restrictive colonialist settings as seen through the eyes of reluctant reformers. These films rely on aesthetic conventions and plot structures characteristic of Hollywood cinema, and they deploy a Western commercial film language.[8]

Teshome H. Gabriel considers "point of view" to be a distinguishing feature of revolutionary, third world, and African cinema in which the spectator is exhorted to political action (1979, 7). This type of cinematic process is not characteristic of the colonial genre, which seeks to maintain a social and political status quo. More than stereotypes and plot structure are involved. If we contrast Korda and Paton's 1951 version of *Cry, the Beloved Country* with Darrell Roodt's 1995 film by the same name, it becomes clear that cinematic adaptations of the novel with identical characters and plot structure convey very different messages in relation to the period and social context of their release. In both films, as in the novel, Reverend Stephen Kumalo departs in search of his wayward son Absalom, who has become involved in a life of crime in Johannesburg. Absalom's participation in the murder of Arthur Trevelyan Jarvis leads to a litany of tragedy and redemption on the parts of both Reverend Kumalo and Arthur's father, plantation owner James Jarvis. In the 1951 version, Stephen Kumalo, played by Canada Lee, is portrayed as a naive and passive seeker who stumbles upon the world of crime in which his son is implicated. However, in the 1995 version, Reverend Kumalo, portrayed by James Earl Jones, becomes a prophetic religious figure whose source of strength issues from his solitary meditations on a mountaintop.

James Jarvis's redemption may be interpreted as a forecast of the crumbling of apartheid in the 1951 version of the film, but it becomes a strong metaphor for "truth and reconciliation" in Darrell Roodt's 1995 version. Roodt is a cosmopolitan director and

producer whose other credits include *Sarafina* (1992), *Dangerous Ground* (1997), *Blood Diamond* (2006), and *Winnie* (2012). In these films, Roodt applies Hollywood-style musical and docudrama approaches to the social and political issues of apartheid and the African diamond trade. His vantage point of working across South Africa, Europe, and Hollywood gives him a unique perspective, and his postapartheid adaptation of *Cry, the Beloved Country* offers a precursor to his later New Jack–styled films. In describing the 1995 adaptation of Alan Paton's novel, Roodt states:

I was able to approach the film with massive hindsight, to look back and shake my head. . . . It is the pain of remembrance with which I have imbued the picture. . . . We are trying to understand the past, and for me, the new direction of films in South Africa will be about retelling history. (Beittel 2003, 82)

Based on the social context of the film, and the reinterpretation of the plot in 1995, Stephen Kumalo emerges as a silent revolutionary rather than a passive victim. Sidney Poitier's portrayal of the priest Theophilus Msimangu overshadows Stephen Kumalo in the first film. Activism is represented by Stephen's brother John, who works as a laborer in Johannesburg, where he has also become a local antiapartheid leader. While John is depicted as insincere and conniving in both films, his role is more nuanced in the second version, in which Stephen emerges as a political victor and survivor in the style of Nelson Mandela. In 1995, Theophilus is played by Vusi Kunene, a South African actor, whose portrayal is more sage and passive than that of Poitier. Davis states that although Poitier's character appears passive, his demeanor and posturing are aggressive.

Just as there may be a distortion of memory about exactly what Poitier did, films can carry messages that even contradict what is being said or done. Here was a black man whose body language carried lessons not intended by the film-makers, possibly not even recognised by them, and the implications of which Poitier himself may not have realised. Poitier's movements, his behaviour, his demeanour, said, "Here is a black man who as a hero is the equal of any white man you have hitherto seen." (1996, 43)

This comparison suggests that shifts in filmic genres are not driven exclusively by plot structure. They also depend on the subtleties of character portrayal and the historical contextualization of the film (Beittel 2003, 72). In the closing sequence, or the fifteenth day scene, Stephen Kumalo climbs to a mountaintop to pray for peace and reconciliation on the day of his son's execution. On the way up, he encounters Jarvis on horseback. At first glance, Jarvis conducts a conversation with Kumalo from this superior position, indicating his status as a white South African landowner. Mark Beittel criticizes Roodt's 1995 retelling of the history of apartheid at the final meeting between Kumalo and Jarvis based on the signifier of the horse and the use of camera angles (2003, 85–87). However, the power of Jarvis's transformation and the potential future of

South Africa after Absalom's climactic death are apparent in this scene. The camera focuses on Jarvis in mid to long shots on his horse four times in the conversation sequence, which also includes fourteen shot-reverse shot intercuts with Jarvis and Kumalo at eye level, or nearly so. Cinematically, these eye-level close-ups represent the potential for emerging equality and respect between the two men after the explosive deaths of their sons.

Shot 1: *Jarvis on horseback. Mid-range.*

Jarvis: For I knew that you would go up to the mountain on the fifteenth day.

Series of intercuts between Jarvis and Kumalo, ending with Jarvis from his horse.

Jarvis: I have here a letter for the people of your church. The letter asks if you desire a new church. . . .

Series of intercut close-ups between Jarvis and Kumalo as dialogue continues.

Jarvis: You will know what to do. Perhaps there could be a stone with the name of my son who had the brightness in him.

Cut to close-up of Kumalo.

Kumalo: It shall be done, umnumzana.

Jarvis: Go well, umfundizi.

Closing of dialogue sequence and fourth shot of Jarvis on the horse as he leaves the frame.

After the meeting, Stephen continues up the mountain, and the emotional tone of the final sequence sets up a juxtaposition between conflict and quiescence more fully developed in Roodt's New Jack films. The rapid pace of the intercuts and parallel editing linking Absalom's death, his wife's labor pains, and Stephen's prayer implodes the space of the three events. In a culminating moment of violence (Absalom's death), the idyllic home of the traditional community, which is shot in soft focus, gives birth to the hope of a new South Africa.

Darrell Roodt directed the 1995 version of *Cry, the Beloved Country* just two years before he released *Dangerous Ground* (1997). The plot structure of *Dangerous Ground* bears a striking resemblance to *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In both films, an errant son has become involved with criminal activity in Johannesburg and is sought out by his family. Vusi, the film's hero played by Ice Cube (O'Shea Jackson), is both a father figure and an older brother. His return from the United States for his father's funeral establishes the parallel between Vusi and the farmer James Jarvis as cultural outsiders to the South African black community. Karen, portrayed by Elizabeth Hurley, the girlfriend of Vusi's lost brother Stephen, replaces Absalom's wife. But unlike both versions of *Cry*, in which racial stereotypes remain fixed within the model of apartheid,

Dangerous Ground unfolds within a "new South Africa" in which the oppression of apartheid is replaced by multiracial crime.

As a New Jack film, *Dangerous Ground* explodes stereotypes and addresses political conflicts with subtle inversion and humor. This challenging of stereotypes creates "a liberated space" in which film can explore new social forms and narrative structures (Gabriel 1979, 7).[9] Quest narratives, such as those involving the search for a hidden treasure, take place within a closed universe in which a subject and an antisubject may vie for the same valued object. A. J. Greimas explains: "This treasure is often kept and sometimes given by a supernatural being who does not belong to the society of the subject of the quest. Be he keeper or giver of the treasure, this character plays the role of mediator between the universe of transcendent values and the immanent universe into which the new values are introduced into circulation" (1987, 93). Several solutions are possible in this type of narrative. In one instance, the subject, or group of subjects, may in fact obtain and retain the valued treasure. The simplest form of this resolution is represented by colonial films such as *King Solomon's Mines*, in which the hidden treasure is not conceived of as belonging to the indigenous population but instead to the mythical figure of King Solomon. This narrative construction allows colonial adventurers to appropriate the treasure without guilt or social conflict. Another version of this narrative simply removes the hidden treasure, if conflict arises, by demonstrating that the treasure was truly mythical, never existed, or has been destroyed.

In New Jack films, however, the multiple subjects and antisubjects compete for the same valued object, for example diamonds. No subject is endowed with moral superiority in the quest, and the proliferation of subjects complicates and overextends the narrative to the point of rupture. Once again, a viable solution to this narrative problem would be the destruction or removal of the treasure itself. More generally, narrative resolution is achieved through an explosion in which the valued object may remain intact for whoever is left standing after the dust settles. The subject who eventually acquires the treasure does so through a morally questionable show of force rather than moral superiority. As a result, the value of the treasure may be transformed. According to Greimas, the objects of value become "polarized" in microuniverses in which the narrative inverts their perceived values (1987, 93-94). The positive value of the treasure (that is, money for diamonds) is thus inverted into a negative value (that is, blood for diamonds). This inversion of values distinguishes New Jack cinema from colonial narratives, traditional Hollywood images of Africa, and African auteur films.

In colonial films, adventurers claim and extract the treasure from an indigenous landscape in which its value is unrecognized. In African auteur films, such as Djibril Diop Mambety's *Touki Bouki* (1973), the object of value shifts from a hidden African location to a foreign European landscape, and the object recedes from the African subjects seeking to acquire it. Although the subjects and meaning of the quest differ

across these two forms, the narrative structure remains in place. If the treasure is ultimately lost, this loss is explained by the transgression against a moral taboo.

Camera techniques reinforce these narrative structures. Hollywood constructs action sequences in such a way that they unfold around multiple cameras. Audiences enter the world of the film rather than watch it from afar. This approach differs considerably from the narrative structure of conventional colonial cinema, where stories play out on African soil. Africa provides the setting and backdrop for a foreign story, and the camera views African scenes from a distance (Rouch 2003, 56). Auteur filmmaker Jean Rouch used innovative camera movements to modify the conception of colonial subjects and stories.[10] Rouch positioned his camera within the center of the action and opened new avenues for ethnographic and filmic representation of African ritual, modernity, and change.[11] In New Jack films such as *Dangerous Ground* and *Blood Diamond*, the landscape and tensions of Africa swirl around the camera. The viewer is transported to the center of unresolved African dilemmas, in which social tension, colonialism, crime, and violence have lasting legacies and chaotic consequences for characters and locales. These issues remain open filmic and narrative questions, unanswered by the organizing gaze of colonial administrators or the best intentions of multinational NGOs.

Both Teshome H. Gabriel (1979, 7) and Peter Davis (1996, 2) compare the eye of the camera to the barrel of a gun, suggesting the political use of film as a weapon for African liberation. But the camera may also open on a field of dialogue and shared dreams, as Rouch so fervently argued.[12] Via a rain of bullets and explosions, New Jack African cinema bridges the cultural and geographic divide separating Los Angeles from Johannesburg. The action genre inserts audiences within an African landscape where the all-too-familiar tale of destroying a criminal menace replaces the grand colonial quest for wealth and power. Audiences encounter a story unfolding within and across Africa rather than a morality play about Africa. Instead of becoming a gun, the camera focuses on the gun. As buildings and characters explode on screen, stereotypes implode. New Jack African cinema utilizes a Hollywood exaggeration of action and violence, but it redirects and refocuses these tropes through a display of Africanized wealth, the cosmopolitan negotiation of African identities, and the flow of global capital in and out of Africa.[13] Channeled through a cinematic lens, the perils and possibilities of Africa are exposed.

The "Dangerous Ground" of New Jack African Cinema

Darrell Roodt's *Dangerous Ground* (1997), which was produced by Anant Singh, superimposes a plot reminiscent of Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City* (1991) on the landscape of a "new South Africa." Both films revolve around the violent takedown of a drug ringleader as a means of social redemption. But in the African adaptation, the streetwise police officers have been replaced by Vusi Madlazi (Ice Cube), a South African student who returns from California for his father's funeral, and his brother Ernest (Sechaba Morojele), an ex-freedom fighter and antiapartheid activist. Following

the funeral, Vusi heads off in search of his errant brother Stephen (Eric Miyeni) and eventually confronts the crime lord Muki (Ving Rhames) in order to free his brother of an outstanding debt. Throughout the film, reference is made in dialogue and visually to the "new South Africa." Both black-on-black crime and interracial violence are addressed as Vusi weaves his way through this labyrinth. The contested meaning of multiculturalism in the reconstructed South African state is problematic, and its scaffolding is fragile. The oft-repeated phrase "Welcome to the new South Africa" simultaneously identifies, effaces, and purifies all that accompanies the postapartheid transition: violence, crime, drugs, prostitution, and global capital. As Ice Cube explores this imaginary homeland, he demonstrates that some of the closest multicultural bonds may be found in an underworld of crime and violence that mutes economic and ethnic differences.

Interestingly, both the leading protagonist and villain in this film are portrayed by African Americans. The casting of African Americans as Africans has a long history, which may be traced to the arrival of minstrelsy in South Africa in the 1880s and the roles played by early African American performers, such as Josephine Baker in her 1935 film *Princesse Tam-Tam* and Paul Robeson in the 1937 version of *King Solomon's Mines* (Jules-Rosette 2007, 92–94; Davis 1996, 16; Lipsitz 1994, 43). More recently, African American performers including Sidney Poitier, Canada Lee, James Earl Jones, Danny Glover, Whoopi Goldberg, Denzel Washington, Derek Luke, Dennis Haysbert, Terrence Howard, and Jennifer Hudson have played the roles of South African blacks, including Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Steve Biko, and African freedom fighters. An interesting cultural and performative question centers on why African American performers have been selected to play these roles, and how their performances reflect diasporic transnationalism, identity construction, and global capitalism. In the apartheid era, the use of African American actors allowed production companies to sidestep many of the legal and political problems accompanying the employment of black South Africans (Davis 1996, 43–44). As foreign nationals, African Americans could not be victimized for portraying outspoken political positions, and they were less likely to be prosecuted for participation in antiapartheid productions.

One reason the selection of African American performers continues during the postapartheid era may be that they are popular international box-office draws. Ice Cube's portrayal of Vusi advances this tradition through incorporation of what Diawara labels "homeboy cosmopolitanism" (1998, 246–48). Throughout his journey of return and redemption, Vusi confronts the social tensions of the new South Africa via anecdotal philosophizing. Commenting on this performative strategy, Diawara states:

Ice Cube . . . embodies the Homeboy both on screen and off. He combines an ordinary appearance and a scruffy style of dress with the musical flair of a fiery preacher. . . . His antihero persona—flamboyant, yet capable of getting the job done—binds him to segments of the Black community that identify with lawbreakers. Ice Cube's critical cypher treats

both African-American and the dominant society as equal culprits in the destruction of African-American culture. (1998, 269-70)

In *Dangerous Ground*, Ice Cube transports his persona and critical stance from the streets of Los Angeles to an African terrain. As a political refugee returning to South Africa from California, Ice Cube's character Vusi experiences the culture shock typical of diasporic transnationalism. Diawara refers to this type of transposition as "transtextuality," or the fluid movement of expressions from one character and subculture to another across films, literary texts, and musical genres (1998, 271). He goes on to discuss how this transtextuality exemplifies a particular form of "black maleness," or gender stereotyping.

In *Dangerous Ground*, Ice Cube problematizes gender issues and violence with ambivalence and value conflicts amid a shower of gunfire. He raises issues of moral and political responsibility in the contexts of immigration and social change. Ice Cube forcefully voices the challenges and identity problems facing South Africa in his opening dialogue and confrontation with Ernest. In response to his younger brother's call for continued armed revolution as a means of liberation, Vusi tersely replies, "What you need to do is get yourself back in school. That's how you fight a war, with education." With these lines, Vusi distances himself from his brother's call for justice through violence, shifting political action from the frame of a military movement to a quest for social, educational, and economic equality.[14] Ironically, it remains violent gunfire, albeit divorced from military organization, that eventually answers the needs of Vusi's family and enables the return of the lost brother Stephen.

Women are important narrative actors as both mother figures and partners. The mother iconically represents the promise of communal values. Women also participate in New Jack violence as active partners. In Diawara's discussion, homegirls constitute the diegetic opposite of homeboys and reaffirm male-dominated narratives (1998, 267-70). There is, however, another type of homegirl who challenges the philosophies and outlooks of homeboys and destabilizes their discourses, not only through criticism but also through an aggressive attitude. This type of homegirl does not rely on the agency and actions of the homeboy for her responses but is, instead, an initiator of action and a source of narrative change. A parallel may be drawn between Karen (Elizabeth Hurley) in *Dangerous Ground* and Absalom's common-law wife Katie (or Mary, as she is called in the 1951 adaptation) in *Cry, the Beloved Country*. [15] As played by Lelita Khumalo in the 1995 version, Katie is a passive-aggressive mother figure. Her silent agreement to marry Absalom further unveils his transgressions and both potentially destabilizes the Kumalo family and offers the possibility of a new generation. Katie's decision to leave the city and return to the rural home of the Kumalo family parallels Karen's trajectory, which similarly results in relocation to the rural village of the Madlazi family. Both Karen and Katie are active figures that contribute to narrative transformations. They are semiotic adjuvants whose presence is essential to moving forward the development of the plot and the other characters.

In *Dangerous Ground*, Karen portrays an active homegirl cosmopolitan. She is an ambivalent and ambiguous figure—a downwardly mobile white South African whose origins and identity remain mysterious. At the same time, her “critical cypher” targets Vusi’s assessment of South African society and enlightens him about the behavior and circumstances of his brother Stephen. Her knowledge of the new South Africa surpasses Vusi’s and becomes a source of narrative complication. During the scene where Vusi finds Stephen stranded in a Sun City hotel, Karen asserts her active role.

Vusi: You’re pathetic, man. *Throws the syringe and lunges for Stephen who darts across the room.* I thought you was a man. *Stephen gets behind Karen.*

Stephen: I am a man.

Vusi: I thought you was a man! *Vusi strikes Stephen over Karen’s shoulder.*

Karen: If you hit him again, I’m gonna hit you, okay!

Close-up of Vusi.

Vusi: Get out of the way before I break your little ass in two. This is family business.

Reverse shot past Vusi’s arm to Karen looking up at him from Stephen’s lap.

Karen: Well, I’m a part of this family. *Karen glances at Stephen, then back at Vusi. (In a reproachful tone.)* You’ve got a lot of catching up to do, Vusi.

Vusi: Give me this shit! *Throws drugs across the room.* I thought you was going to help me. Look like you’re just helping yourself.

A series of shot-reverse-shots between Karen and Vusi.

Karen (*quietly*): I’m sorry.

Close reverse shot of Vusi.

Vusi: Could you at least pack his bags, please?

After a pause, Karen slowly moves out from between them, glancing back and forth at them as she goes.

Karen’s physical position in relationship to the brothers reinforces her mediatory role linking Vusi with his family, country, and culture. Although she spends the bulk of this scene physically looking up at Vusi, she also exerts control over the situation. She removes herself to the side of the room only when it is clear that Vusi will not hurt his brother. Reluctantly, Vusi concedes that he cannot succeed in his quest without her help. The unstated possibility that Karen, as Stephen’s girlfriend, may also be pregnant deepens her attachment to Vusi’s family and introduces a source of disruption and reconciliation.[16]

Vusi's initial meeting with Karen in a Johannesburg bar and strip club is a pivotal scene of identity construction and a cosmopolitan encounter. As with the persona of Ice Cube's archetypal homeboy, the character of the bar itself has traveled, replicating both form and function from South Central L.A. to Johannesburg, S.A. The Hollywood and cinematic daydream of the darkened bar as a gangster's paradise renegotiates the filmic journey, and the plot shifts from a story of diasporic return to one of underworld encounters and unbridled action. The bar provides a training ground for learning and understanding life in a global South Africa, where new encounters, identities, and fantasies are available to anyone willing and able to pay the price. The bar itself is a "dangerous ground," organized by the seamless logic of the gangster movie genre, where every encounter hides the possibility of danger and sinister motivations. Even the dancing carries an ulterior motive, and the sharing of a drink buys more than just alcohol.

After the pivotal bar scene, the logic of the New Jack genre reorganizes the motives and meaning of Vusi's quest, pulling loose ends into place. Stephen crossed the wrong man (West African crime lord Muki) and, for this reason, he disappeared. Muki's criminal reign needs to be dealt with—one way or another—in order for both Stephen and his family to be redeemed. But this shift complicates the narrative by introducing multiple subjects in search of a similar treasure. Although Muki is clearly the villain of the story, his attributes are not all negative. In the economy of the new South Africa, he maintains a level of material wealth and social status to which Vusi and his brothers aspire. In contrast, when Stephen is located in the global megabar of a Sun City casino, he is a broke and hunted victim. Stephen, Vusi, and Karen attempt to achieve redemption by repaying the money that is owed. But Muki rejects the monetary offering, and Stephen is killed at his hand. This leaves Stephen's family in need of justice and retribution. The answer to their predicament rests no further away than Ernest's cache of military weaponry. To obtain the promised gifts of the hidden treasure, they adopt the morally questionable means of their adversaries. In place of redemption through moral transformation, Vusi, Ernest, and Karen obtain their goal with a New Jack show of weaponry.[17]

Vusi takes the lead in charging into Muki's apartment, guns blazing. As a barrage of gunfire kills Muki's henchmen, fast-paced electronic music chants the lyric "the brothers gonna work it out." This violent resolution also destroys a collection of art and ritual objects that have been appropriated and desecrated by the drug lord. The explosive destruction of traditional objects and of the corruption represented by Muki and his thugs sets the stage for future growth and rebirth. Both elements are redeemed as Vusi slays the drug lord with the symbolic spear of his father. The success of the film, like the success of the brothers, arises from the vision of a new South Africa exaggerated and channeled through scenes of explosive action.

Conflict Diamonds and Conflict Narratives in *Blood Diamond*

Blood Diamond is a redemptive New Jack African film that explores how conflict diamonds fuel civil war in West Africa. Unlike *Lord of War* (2005), a Hollywood take on diamonds, wealth, and violence starring Nicolas Cage, the diamonds and conflict of *Blood Diamond* are viewed from various perspectives, and Africa remains the major terrain of action. The morality and consequences of the climactic events are sustained by the conjoined subplots of smuggling and survival. Diamond smuggler Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Sierra Leonean fisherman Solomon Vandy (Djimon Hounsou) represent the two poles in this struggle. Solomon seeks to protect his family and the integrity of the mother figure by reclaiming his lost son. As in *Dangerous Ground*, bar scenes play a pivotal role in character development and identity construction. The bar scenes are also markers for transitions in the filmic narrative. At a beach bar in Freetown, journalist Maddy Bowen (Jennifer Connelly) meets Danny Archer for the first time and questions his motives.

Danny approaches Maddy. Mid-range.

Danny: Can I offer you a cigarette?

Maddy: I'm fine. No Thanks. Are you listening to this? [*Shot of Bill Clinton on CNN apologizing for the Monica Lewinsky affair.*] The world is falling apart and all we hear about is Blowjobgate.

Series of intercut close-ups between Danny and Maddy as dialogue continues.

Danny: When was the last time the world wasn't falling apart?

Maddy: Oh, a cynic. Why don't you sit down and make me miserable?

Danny: Danny Archer.

Maddy: Maddy Bowen.

Both: Pleased to meet you.

Danny: American?

Maddy: Guilty.

Danny: Americans usually are.

Maddy: Says the white South African.

Danny: (*clicks no*) I'm from Rhodesia.

Maddy: We say Zimbabwe now, don't we?

Danny: Do we?

Maddy: (*Laughs*) Last time I checked.

Danny: So don't tell me you're here to make a difference.

Maddy: And you're here to make a buck.

Danny: I'm here for lack of a better idea.

Maddy: That's a shame.

Danny: Not really. Peace Corps types only stay around long enough to realize they are not helping anyone. Government only wants to stay in power until they've stolen enough to go into exile somewhere else. The rebels, they're not sure they want to take over, otherwise they would have to govern this mess. But T.I.A., right M'ed?

M'ed: T.I.A.

Maddy: What's T.I.A.?

Danny: This is Africa.

In this scene, Maddy plays a conventional role in which she reaffirms stereotypes about diamond smuggling. Her idealistic observations contrast with Danny's cynical and ambivalent remarks. The slogan "T.I.A." codifies his moral stance on a wide range of experiences of deception, corruption, and violence.

A later scene features a nighttime party at the same bar just before the invasion of Freetown by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Danny receives a gun from the bartender M'ed (Ntare Mwine) for cash they exchanged in the initial bar scene. He asks if M'ed will be evacuating his family due to the imminent threat of invasion, and the bartender replies that he will stay: "This is my country, man. Be here long before you came, long after you're gone." Unlike Danny who has just returned from business in South Africa, M'ed is settled in Freetown. His life, like that of the majority of Sierra Leone's population, will adapt to whatever political situations arise after the explosion. M'ed states: "Half the people who be soldiers today, be out of work tomorrow." The beach bar appears a third and final time after RUF rebels take the capital. The bar is burned as part of a riotous victory celebration, and M'ed is briefly shown lying on the bar, presumably dead. Danny and Solomon view the bar from a distance and skirt the area unnoticed during their escape from town.

The use of the bar to bookend the invasion and rebel takeover of Freetown highlights its filmic role. Not only does the African street literally explode during the invasion sequence, it is also the key event that focuses Danny, Solomon, and Maddy on a shared narrative quest for the lost diamond and Solomon's missing family. Prior to the invasion, the stories of the three protagonists are parallel but not fully intertwined. Once the city explodes during the rebel invasion, the three narratives implode. Like the film itself, the bar is consumed in violence and flames. From the moment Danny and Solomon begin to run, their purpose crystallizes.

Between the invasion of Freetown and the closing sequence, the characters are united in a search for lost treasure, and the film follows them like fugitives on the run. Their quest continues to be interspersed with dialogue and banter covering a host of

Africa's problems—from child soldiers to diamond smuggling, the complicity of the press, and the failure of education. But these problems remain unresolved, as dialogues are truncated and punctuated by increasingly regular intervals of gunfire and violence. Although the morality of violence remains uncertain for the film's characters, the filmic logic no longer questions its necessity during the final shootout on the diamond fields. Even Solomon, who is synchronically positioned as a peaceful fisherman in counterpoint to Danny's mercenary lifestyle, beats both rebel leader Captain Poison (David Harewood) and South African Colonel Coetzee (Arnold Voslo) with a shovel. In doing so, he reclaims his lost son, who unlike Arthur Jarvis and Stephen Madzalai is ultimately spared from death. More important, however, he escapes with the promise of future wealth, prosperity, and moral vindication, symbolically represented by the reclaimed diamond.

Bookending the pivotal invasion of Freetown between New Jack-style bar scenes creates parallels in the narrative structure of *Blood Diamond*. Between an early scene depicting the meeting of diamond executives in Belgium and the unresolved coda, in which Solomon arrives in Europe, the entirety of the film occurs on the African continent. Africa is the site of action. The international discussions influence the African conflict, but those meetings remain intact and free of explosion. Africa, in contrast, hides the lost treasure, violently explodes in the foreign removal of that treasure, and offers the hope of future redemption. The political and social commentary of *Blood Diamond* frames this New Jack story line without pronouncing an airtight solution. Smugglers may in fact be heroes, and the foreign buyers of diamond engagement rings remain complicit with African military regimes. Danny Archer's final sacrifice does not redeem the continent, and Solomon's story is ultimately never heard. Instead, the explosion and implosion of multiple African story lines destroy simple answers and provoke the imagination of alternative futures.

Exploding Genres

New Jack African cinema transfers the tropes of Hollywood and hip-hop blockbusters, such as homeboy and homegirl cosmopolitanism, racial tension, drug running, and exaggerated gangland violence, to the landscape of Africa. A preview of this shift can be glimpsed through the subtle Africanization of Kumalo's religiosity in the fifteenth-day scene in Roodt's 1995 production of *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Although the religious quest and moral attitude of the film remain consistent with the 1951 version, the story shifts from a colonial perspective to metaphors of African Christian syncretism. But Roodt's New Jack cinema does not simply extend or alter the quest narrative; it explodes the narrative. There is a sense in which New Jack African cinema is "postapocalyptic." It combines the combats and conflagrations of the world's end with a glimmer of hope for new beginnings. The final blow-out scene of *Dangerous Ground* depicts the crime lord Muki's ejection from a window, destroying a source of corruption, drugs, and crime in South Africa. Vusi's brother Ernest, the rebel without a cause, helps Vusi exterminate the source of crime. Through the use of strategic intercutting, African

soccer fans depicted on a nearby television become cheering spectators of Muki's death. In *Blood Diamond*, Danny Archer dies in a violent shootout with corrupt diamond thieves. His death leads to their potential extermination and a revindication by the forces of justice in Europe. Even though these forces are, in fact, compromised, their control over the decriminalization of blood diamonds foreshadows hope for the future.

Modernist dramas make Africa a land of fantasy in which colonial domination displaces the indigenous "other." In contrast, New Jack African cinema levels the playing field, imbuing heroes, antiheroes, and villains with equal culpability for Africa's plight. It challenges Hollywood conventions through violence and resistance. Yet, New Jack cinema continues to exploit Hollywood's narratives, audiences, and resources. With its ambivalent conclusions, the struggles between capital and community, identity and domination continue to unfurl. When the present is exploded, the future becomes full of possibility. Avoiding moralistic and documentary solutions, New Jack African cinema conveys the feel of explosive changes in Africa without assessing the relations of power and the social conditions that generate these changes. It is interesting to speculate about future transformations of New Jack cinema in which a rapprochement between action narratives and international audiences could either widen the gap or bring Hollywood closer to what Jean Rouch has described as the "ciné-truth" of African cinema and its social realities.

Notes

This essay draws on a symposium on Dangerous Ground and African action cinema organized by the Art, Culture, and Knowledge (ACK) group of the African and African-American Studies Research Center (AAASRC) at the University of California, San Diego.

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[1] Diawara (1998, 268–73) analyzes *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) as a key example of American 'hood films. African filmmakers such as Djibril Diop Mambety have also dealt with scenes and travails of urban life. These works could be seen as related to American 'hood films. The South African production *Tsotsi* (2005), directed by Gavin Hood, offers a more recent example of African 'hood films. What distinguishes New Jack cinema from both American and African 'hood films is a reliance on violence to explode social problems and offer hope for the future.

[2] Paul Smith (1993, 20) describes *Casablanca* as a "disguised Western" that uses the narrative structure of a western transported from the nineteenth-century American West to twentieth-century Morocco but invoking the same primal conflicts.

[3] The New Jack genre has also been transported to France in banlieue cinema, exemplified by Pierre Morel's film *Banlieue 13* (2004).

[4] In this discussion, the term "virtual" refers to A. J. Greimas's (1987, 91) semiotic distinction between the realization and virtualization of narrative elements rather than a description of digitally animated virtual realities. For Greimas, virtual values are values that either remain unrealized or are yet to be realized in a narrative.

[5] Tricia Rose (1994, 39) and George Lipsitz (1994, 36–38) describe the process of layering, through which rappers establish beats, sounds, and dialogues in which hidden messages are transmitted. Bogumil Jewsiewicki (1991, 130–51) describes similar processes of layering and occultation in popular African painting.

[6] Paul Smith (1993, 42–44) discusses the importance of similar processes of destruction and restitution in spaghetti westerns. In these westerns, the community may be restored by a lone gunfighter who leads the community to the brink of destruction but also restores its moral order.

[7] Peter Davis (1996, 17–18) describes the early colonial films focusing on a search for fabulous wealth and hidden treasures. He parallels these films with Hollywood westerns in terms of the themes of the exploitation of an indigenous population. See also Nixon (1994, 31–36) for discussion of the influence of classic Hollywood gangster films on black South African popular culture.

[8] See Christian Metz (1982, 37–39) for a discussion of spectators' responses to conventional Hollywood film language.

[9] Teshome H. Gabriel (1979, 6–7) discusses liberated cinematic spaces with regard to revolutionary African cinema. See also Robert Stam's analysis of theories of Third Cinema (Stam 1993, 233–53).

[10] Although there is ongoing discussion of Rouch's role in African cinema, Rouch situated himself as a companion of the African filmmakers with whom he collaborated or trained (Rouch 1968, 523–37).

[11] "Ciné-Trance: A Tribute to Jean Rouch (1917–2004)," ed. Jeff Himpele and Faye Ginsburg, presents a series of reflections commenting on the openings made possible by Rouch's pioneering work in visual anthropology and film. The tribute appeared in the March 2005 issue of *American Anthropologist* (107, no. 1).

[12] Commenting on the relationship between his work and cinematic fiction, Rouch (2003, 185) states: "For me, as an ethnographer, there is almost no boundary between documentary film and films of fiction. The cinema, the art of the double, is already the transition from the real world to the imaginary world, and ethnography, the science of the thought systems of others, is a permanent crossing point from one conceptual universe to another."

[13] The exaggeration of violence distances New Jack African cinema from the pseudorealistic depictions of African docudramas. This prevents New Jack films from falling victim to the cinematic pessimism of some docudramas (Dargis 2007) and frees them to imagine new identities, social alternatives, and new visions of Africa.

[14] In the 2005 University of California San Diego Dangerous Ground film symposium, Jonathan Markovitz discussed the ambivalent role played by Vusi's brother Ernest as a postapartheid revolutionary without a cause. The crumbling of apartheid also diminished the impact of antiracist organizations in South Africa.

[15] Alan Paton does not name Absalom's girlfriend in his novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. As a result, her name varies across cinematic and theatrical productions. Her name is Katie in the 1995 Darrell Roodt film. In the *Korda* 1951 version, however, her name is Mary. And she is listed under the name Irina for the musical adaptation *Lost in the Stars*.

[16] In the 2005 University of California San Diego Dangerous Ground film symposium, Lea Marie Ruiz-Ade introduced the possibility of Karen's pregnancy, which is reinforced by cinematic cues such as her return to the rural Madlazi home and her incorporation as a member of the family.

[17] It is interesting to note that Ernest's cache of weapons was buried in the forest. The act of retrieving the weapons is in itself an act of finding buried treasure. In the Scene Selections menu of the *Dangerous Ground* DVD, that scene is referred to as "Buried Treasure."

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