Back There: Finding Polity in *New Jack City*

Fallen Matthews, IDPhD Candidate, Dalhousie University 2021

Keywords: New Jack City; textual analysis; neoliberalism; polity

Intro/Context

New Jack City belongs to a cinematic tradition associated with 'hood' as a genre: a cultivation of narratives which express the disenfranchisement, abject poverty, and hustle that distinctly afflict African-American youth and adulthood. I can attribute these adversities to be the legacy of two factors. One, the high unemployment in the 1970s resultant from the shift in labour demands, locations, and industries in which Black peoples were prominent (i.e. agriculture, commercial fishing, etc.) in addition to being unable to find work in growing economic sectors due to discrimination and untenable minimum wage (Fairlie & Sundstorm, 1999, p. 253). And two, the opioid and HIV-AIDS epidemics of the Reagan Era in the 1980s (Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2006).

Ronald Reagan himself embodied conservatism invoked through cinematically instituted ascriptions of Classical Hollywood: impersonal-productive labour and interpersonal-reproductive labour respective to men and women; the former likened to careerism, sexual agency, and indifference with the latter likened to maternity, sexual chastity, and romance (Jordan, 2003; Pravadelli & Meadows, 2015, p. 129). As an actor, Reagan also appealed to a nostalgia for spectacles and values associated with Classical Hollywood like continuous, linear, uniform temporal spaces; personae whom accentuate the individual psyche over the collective social; narratives of canonical cause-and-effect as opposed to random events (Ray, 1985; Ross, 2011; Walsh, 2015). His successful campaigns and ensuing presidential terms comprised a sentimentalist rhetoric that beseeched nostalgia for a time that never was, a time of an idyllic Americana contingent upon white supremacy and a gender binary—omitting the reality that white supremacist aspirations of racial segregation or political and cultural dominion of whites did not prevail over the emancipationist pursuits of the abolishment of slavery, suffrage, citizenship, and constitutional equality for racial minorities (Scott, 2014, p. 147).

Although the Reagan Era lasted from the 1980s to 1990s, the militant romanticism and apologia which underpin partisans like Reagan and their acolytes is timeless. It counterposes reality. Just as it championed slavocracy in opposition to abolitionism, it fostered neoliberalism consigning an inherent competitivity to humanity and redefines people as consumers whose agency—and merit—is a matter of buying and selling; wherein bootstrapping is avowed and public services are privatized lest citizens become idle or too dependent upon the state apparatus. A sense of nihilism consequently arose from the low-wage stagnation, poverty, social exclusion, and systemic violence which ensued for marginalized positionalities in urban spaces (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1986; Geronimus & Thompson, 2004, p. 256; Tabb, 2007).

Historical stereotypes saw African Americans as Mammies[1], Uncle Toms[2], Sapphires[3], and Mandingos[4]. Contemporary hegemony confers a status of gangdom in line with circumstantial behaviours from the stigma of race, poverty, epidemic drug usage and trafficking, and a respective lack of hope for the future (Phillips, 2008, p. 59, p. 120; Venkatesh & Levitt, 2000, p. 428). Gangdom onscreen serves as a means and end that exalts the vigilantism thematic to Blacksploitation films of the 1970s wherein white supremacy and bureaucracy render judicial systems to be injudicious to Black peoples (Haywood, 2013, p. 53; Phillips, 2008, p. 120, p. 125; Reid, 2005, p. 39, p. 41). The African American gangster is a casualty of hegemony whose only reproach and refuge against the system are street codes. Their behavioural repertoires shift for the worst—higher rates of substance abuse, violence, and criminality—during the Reagan Era due to increased unemployment and the decline of public services in the wake of rampant neoliberalism. This gangster is painfully aware of how everyone else and they themselves are

[1] Caricature of African-American women as maternal figures whose "wide grin, hearty laugher, and loyal servitude were offered as evidence of the supposed humanity of the institution of slavery" (Pilgrim, 2000)
[2] Caricature derived from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that posits African-American men as docile figures who is "a dependable worker, eager to serve…[and] often old, physically weak, psychologically dependent on whites for approval" (Pilgrim, 2000)
[3] Caricature of African-American woman as a hypersexual figure who is "a shrill nagger with irrational states of anger and indignation and is often mean-spirited and abusive" (Pilgrim, 2000)
[4] Caricature that ascribes insatiable, animalistic sexual prowess to African-American men as a result of disproportionately larger genitalia and smaller brains (Richeson, 2009, p. 105, p. 117)

deprived which is why they are distrustful, always on guard, and competitive in an effort to seize whatever there is of scarce resources. They are reckless and indulgent not because they have accepted the impermanence of conditioned things, but because precarity and mortality prevents them from seeing beyond their immediate adversities. Moreover, this gangster embraces street justice unequivocally in an effort to exercise control. Street justice comes with codes that govern private and public behaviour. These codes engender conflicts in an approved way for those whom are inclined to violence. Whomever violates these codes faces penalties.

One can appreciate the artifice employed in performativity relative to race, gender, and kinship through the discourse of representation. Representation is performative. It seeks to 'diversify' populations in terms of appearances. Those who represent or advocate for representation seldom analyze or strive to amend the colonialist institutions and distinctions which were historically ascribed and perpetuate ongoing disparities.

Consider the distinction of Black peoples in relation to diagnostic errors and injustice: Samuel A. Cartwright (1851), a physician who practiced in the antebellum south, pathologized the desire of Black enslaved peoples to escape their captivity and their alleged lack of work ethic as *drapetomania* and *dysaesthesia aethiopica* respectively during the Reconstruction and Emancipation era (p. 331). These pseudoscientific diagnoses alleged that the Black psyche was not innately *immoral*, but *criminal*. The ascription of criminality to the Black psyche was a means to justify Jim Crow laws and mass incarceration, the latter of which included psychiatric hospitals in addition to prisons (Smith, 2019). Civil Rights activism was later pathologized as a schizophrenic "protest psychosis" by psychiatrists who characterized such to include "hostile and aggressive feelings" and "delusional anti-whiteness"—whereafter the American Psychiatric Association changed the definition of schizophrenia to specifically include *aggression* (Metzl, 2009, p. xiv, p. xv, p. 96, p. 98).

Researchers note that "Black and African American people are more often diagnosed with schizophrenia and less often diagnosed with mood disorders compared to white people with the same symptoms" (The Dorm, 2020). Black-African American medical history remains an under-researched

area which correlates to the lacking accessibility and healthcare for past, current, and prospective Black patients in comparison to white ones (Nelson, 2006; Oh, Cogburn, Anglin, Lukens, & DeVylder, 2016; Scharff et al., 2010, p. 2; Taylor & Richards, 2019). However, it is clear that there is a positive correlation between the pathology and criminality likened to the Black psyche as the historical ascriptions have cultivated and continue to uphold disparities in judicial, medical, and other systems (Gamble & Blustein, 1994, p. 175; Holttum, 2020; Keaton, 2004; Metzl & Roberts, 2014; Nazroo, Bhui, & Rhodes, 2019).

I Am My Brother's Keeper

New Jack City follows drug tycoon, Nino Brown, (played by Wesley Snipes) and his gang known as the Cash Money Brothers, whom have monopolized the New York City narcotics trade. Under Nino's brutal leadership, his gang cultivates a multimillion-dollar empire. On the other hand, Scotty (played by Ice-T) is a police officer who goes undercover to take Nino down. The film concerns the fictive kinship—a type of bond based on neither blood or marital ties—between African American gangsters. In particular, this fictive kinship concerns siblingship as characters are mainly 'brothers' whose rivalry evinces strong bonds, street codes, and betrayal. Although pain and violence are constant, it is their incomprehensibility—a lack of clear motive or rationale—that engenders fear. The cudgel of each character in *New Jack City* is that they engage in a game of optics, not power shifts. Resolute carnage and binary models serve as means and ends in accordance to the behavioural codes which coalesce through eurocentrism, capitalism, and criminality. What ensues are narratives which impart that liberation cannot—and never will—occur through 'besting' or assimilating into malignant institutions yielded from the aforementioned.

The producers and director of *New Jack City* assert the film depicts how street justice serves to aid rather than subvert colonialist, institutional status quos (Antonio, 2002, p. 23). They say it serves as a "vivid and informed warning, a stylish cautionary tale about the daily devastation caused by drugs and crime in many such communities throughout this country" (p. 23). This distinction is significant as I am

cognizant of how the concept of street justice may be purposed to reflect BIPOC [Black-Indigenous-People-of-Colour] autonomy and empowerment in opposition to a colonial, hegemonic surveillance state. Street justice can also span protest in the wake of vain or discriminatory judicial sanctions that afflict marginalized positionalities worst which is evinced in the conjectural misgauge of ailments, actions, and experiences of BIPOC whose adversities are borne of and exacerbated by systemic oppression (Halpern & Dal Lago, 2002, p. 273; Matthews, 2018; Metzl, 2009).

In *New Jack City*, we see how peoples of marginalized positionalities whom hold a materialistic worldview that discursively favour eurocentrism may cultivate a *trope* of street justice—which is then marauded as a means of resistance to the American penal system. An impetus of 'resistance' is projected upon street justice in *New Jack City* which is instrumentalized through the pathology and criminality ascribed to the Black psyche. Street justice in *New Jack City* depicts how kinship embodies a neoliberal parity. Siblingship stems from a pragmatic nihilism lower social stratums assume in the wake of this parochial dynamic. Fraternity and sorority demarcate a caste: those whom financialize necessities and proliferate disparities have termed and defined ways they implement the transfer of capital into their own pockets from ignoble judiciaries and insolvent people. Urgency inclines a resolve in characters to make the most of precarious resources until there is nothing left. Temporal and lateral dimensions relate as long term objectives and equanimity is beyond hope or belief. Due to the constant struggle for value and bare necessities or some semblance of order, caprice and immediacy persist in perpetuity. Fictive kinship in *New Jack City* is a mechanism employed to cultivate and denote mutuality which illustrate the marginalized positionalities that fall prey to *structural* violence, not indiscriminate violence. While likeness is derived through shared positionalities to purport solidarity and reciprocity, siblingship itself arises through characters' failure to sincerely, if at all interrogate the systems of domination from which they benefit and in which they reside.

While shared interests in law enforcement yield institutional kinship, systemic violence fosters a convenience kinship. Institutional kinship manifests not only in the resolve of police officers and judiciaries to incriminate Nino's gang, but additionally in their professional—and consequently, personal

insulation—from society at large. They cast themselves as the 'good guys.' They believe there to be a constant power struggle between 'good guys' and 'bad guys'; and that social order requires that the 'good guys' always win, no matter the cost hence their every means justifies the ends. Although Scotty and his [law enforcement] colleagues are posited to embody a moral high ground in their ambition to dissolve Nino's gang and avenge its fatalities, they are also ultimately bound by a shared interest to enforce authority and control. While Scotty shares a racial and some class positionality with Nino and respective gang members, he is still entrusted to go undercover because his brothers-in-blue share have cultivated a stronger bond of loyalty through their praxes which ensure allegiance.

In contrast, Nino and likewise gangsters are bound precariously even as they ardently proclaim to be "[my] brother's keeper" as an avowal of loyalty; a conviction that we bear the responsibility to watch out for our siblings by blood, marriage, choice, or other conditions should the lack care or wisdom. 'My brother's keeper' is a figure of speech derived from the infamous siblingship of Cain and Abel in the Book of Genesis.[5] While the Book of Genesis does not explicitly ascribe responsibility to Cain given his birth order as eldest, it does somewhat foreshadow the formulation by Alfred Adler (1929), a psychoanalyst and contemporary of Freud, which posits that birth order affects personality; notably, that elder children tend to assume responsibilities associated with guardianship over youngers in response to feeling displaced—and devalued—by the arrival of another sibling (p. 101). Moreover, this generally speaks to how one can liken their *sibling* as a distinctive threat to their place in the world as opposed to parents, peers, or others (Ennis, 2010, p. 121). This ensues in *New Jack City* as the convenience kin of gangsters inevitably devolves. Brothers and sisters project their own distrusts and insecurities which culminate in a sense of betrayal, then bereavement as they are augmented by violence and murder. Siblingship magnifies perceived slights or disparities as failures to fulfill responsibilities of honesty,

[5] Cain is the eldest brother, a farmer, who begrudged his younger brother, Abel, a shepherd because the Lord favoured the latter's offering of produce. Cain then murders Abel in a fit of jealous rage. Thereafter, the Lord asks him: "Where is Abel, your brother?" To which Cain replies, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" The Lord affirms this when He curses Cain: "You are under a curse driven from the ground, which opens its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hands." (*New International Version,* 2011, Gen 4:9-10) In asserting that Cain is responsible for Abel's death, The Lord denotes that he was also responsible for Abel's life.

import[ance], and protection. In the absence of actual constancy in conjunction with the marginalized positionalities at play, siblingship here becomes an accelerant for boundary erosion. This siblingship may be coded as something positive in opposition to the undue processes of yore, but this is purely aesthetic. That animosity and carnage is a first resort shows that the siblings in the gang never truly put their money where their mouths are. Which reflects how siblingship may be utilized to obfuscate the transactional and hierarchal nature of particular cultures, norms, or value systems; because loyalty and complacency—however precarious—are most assured if those are convinced not to see the culture, norms, or value systems as transactional or hierarchal at all.

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