Education and Cultural Identities in *Sugar Cane Alley*
Issues of Education

- For self-development:
  - Choices made among Education, Gang (Violence), Farming, or Entertainment ("Music of the Violin," *Sugar Cane Alley*)
  - Access to education

- Colonial Education = Canonization (What has been taught?)
  - Afrikaans or Bantu languages
  - Interpretation of Afrikaner’s roles in SA history
  - British lit., nursery rimes, or relevant knowledge

- Teacher as authority (*Sugar Cane Alley*)
One Example

- "Dan is the Man in the Van" – about how colonial education turns students into fools
  - Calypso is a style of Afro-Caribbean music originated in Trinidad and Tobago
  - a way of spreading news around – some quite critical—so that the British rule had to enforce censorship

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGNI7TTPCe8

According to the education you get when you small,
You will grow up with true ambition and respect from one and all.
But in my days in school, they teach me like a fool,
The things they teach me ah should be ah block-headed mule.
Sugar Cane Alley

1. Introduction: Background
2. Exploitation
3. Education and
4. Cultural Identities
Sugar Cane Alley (1983): A Filmic Adaptation of Novel

- **Black Shack Alley**
  (French 1950, Eng 1980) by Joseph Zobel

- Assimilationist + Negritude *

- Euzhan Palcy (1983—creolité valued)

- enhancing the role of Médouze as the guardian of popular memory (ref. Ebrahim 147; 149)
Assimilationism in Martinique

- Martinique – an “oversea department of France since 1946.
- 3 class-levels in 1930s: white, mulatto, blacks
- “The early years of departmentalization which occurred when the novel was written, brought with it a hope that assimilation into French society would bring escape from racial discrimination. The politics of this assimilationist approach, and resistances to it, would come later. Nevertheless, within the context of Martinique, Frenchness has always been considered a path to upward social mobility, with French schooling and fluency in-and use of-the French language being crucial to self-advancement (Burton)” (Ebrahim 148).
Palcy’s changes of the novel

- the roles of Médouze—
  - In the novel, he dies before Jose goes to school.
  - In the film, he
    - tells the history of slavery and emancipation
    - teaches the role of nature

- the folk elements (storytelling, a work song making fun of the whitey.)

- Leopold – an added character (partially based on a character who only rejects racial hierarchy) → Leopold sides with the blacks

(Ebrahim 148-49).
Palcy’s changes of the novel (2)

- **Women**
  - *Tortilla* as one of the two children winning the scholarship.
  - Women taking care of Jose (*Madame Léonce, Mam'zelle Delice, Madamc Fusil*)

- **Omissions**
  - Jose’s mother
  - Carmen – bothered by the mistress’s sexual advances

(Ebrahim 150-).
Sugar Cane Alley production

- worried about the white creole elites’ responses
  - use French, but not Creole French
  - first shown in Martinique but not in France; several awards in Venice film fest and French Cesar
Sugar Cane Alley: background (1)

- **Setting:** Martinique in the 1930s; Black Shack Alley, Port-de-France

1. **Emancipation as the false door to freedom;**
2. **Toils on the sugar cane plantations**
3. **Slums of the Empire**
**Sugar Cane Alley: background (1)**

**Toils on the sugar cane plantations:**

- **Season:** right after X’mas to August.
  1. Working hours: 10-11 hrs a day, six days a week.
  2. The traditional planting method: hoe (instead of plough); dung basket (instead of cart)
  3. Cutting: in a dry season, sent to the factory right away. Bend down to cut at the bottom, and then stand up to strip trash or dry leaves. (Gilmore 91)

  e.g. “[Cutting cane] has given me a house and helped me raise six children, . . . but [cutting cane] can take everything out of you.

  e.g. The grandmother –uses salt to keep away worms, knee pains on rainy days
Sugar Cane Alley: Major Themes & Questions

0. Exploitation of the black laborers
--examples --covered in Introduction

A. 5 Education --Who gets educated and by whom?
1-1 Jose vs. the other kids in the school system
1-2 Jose and MaTine and Madouze

B. 4 Cultural identities -- different senses of black/creole/white identities; what contrasts or oppositions are portrayed in the film?
2-1 Carmen; Ms. Flora
2-2 Leopold and the ending

C. 6 Filmic Techniques: Narrative frames and use of colors
Sugar Cane Alley: Major Themes

- **Exploitation**
- of -- the laborers: Ti Coco, Twelve-Toe, Medouze
- By -- the colonizers and overseers: Mr. de Thoral, Mr. Whitley, Carmen’s mistress.
- By -- in-group exploitation: Mme. Leonce
Inequalities

- Economic & Class structure
  - Exploiter\ affluent\ White
  - Flunky\ advantaged \ Mixed or Black
  - Slavery\ poor\ Black

- Plantation Owner
- Overseer-Foreman
- Worker
The Overseer -- discontent with the harvest

The bundles must be thicker and the cane is too short.
Workers’ smallest delinquency & injury—>fine

- Ticoco and
- Twelve Toes
Sugar Cane Alley: Exploitation of Children

- Exploitation Seen from the children’s perspective
  - the broken bowl episode (lack of sugar; fear of overseer)
  - the rum-drinking episode child laborers
- Mme. Leonce’s using Jose
The Educational System

- Education is the road to liberation.
- Not fully supportive.
- In need of creole/white teachers’ guidance
Education of Jose – not only from school

- **Medouze**
  - Teaching about Nature (clip; 38:45) \(\rightarrow\) M’s death 50:00
  - Black self-identity (clip; 19:39)

- **Grandmother**
  - Does not let him work as a laborer
  - Supportive and Persistent, working hard to support him

- **The teachers**
  - 1) Sends him to take tests
  - 2) After the suspicion of plagiarism gets cleared up, gives him full scholarship.

- **Self education/discipline**
  - Genuine sensitivity in language 42:00)
  - loving to his elders;
  - Endure hunger
  - Asserting his right (Leonce episode) and aware of his cultural dignity (e.g. Flora episode)
Jose’s use of words

Grandma sing… We also say that animals sing: turtledoves, pipits...
And mountain larks... Things can sing too: the wind in the cane, the falling rain...
the rivers, even the wheels of carts.
Some other words describe the type of singing: a toad is said to croak... Cart wheels... Squeak...- They squeak. When a hen lays an egg... it sings to announce it. That's called cackling.
Education of Jose –

- Major turning points in the film and his helpers:
  - Rum drinking – grandmother
  - Medouze’s death – his learning from [M]. 50:00
  - [Mme. Leonce] → grandmother moving to the town 53:24
  - [teacher] grandmother Being chosen to go to Port-de-France
  - [Jose] [teacher] Being suspected of cheating. Getting full scholarship
1:21 "Although I like to chew the ends of sugar cane, a cane field will always be an accursed place to me. Where blacks are doomed at age 8 to weed and hoe, in withering storms, and the devouring sun. Blacks in rags, stinking of sweat and dung fed on a handful of flour and 2 cents worth of rum, who collapse miserably one night, in a row of cane, and die on a grimy plank on the ground, in an empty, filthy shack!"
Sugar Cane Alley: Cultural/Gender Identity

Who else (besides Jose) gets education or “liberated”?

- Self-Hatred (or Black Skin, White Mask): M. Flora (clip; 1:29)
- Affiliated with white power: Cross-Cultural Gender relations:
  - Black women’s position: Leopold’s mother (clips 45:00-47:00)
  - Carmen (clip: 1:19; 1:24)
- Not having a chance: Jose’s friends
Education and Leopold

Leopold’s mother — subservient and assimilated (playing the song of Josephine Baker, a black American singer popular in Paris then) 45:00 -47:00

1) Quarrel with the school children, defending the whites 33:40
2) not getting the name de Thorail 1:03
3) Siding with the black workers, stealing the leger.
Education—Carmen

"I seem to recall you like the ladies."

For years, I've wanted to be an actor.
Sugar Cane Alley: Education

How do you read the line at the end--"Take my Black Shack Alley with me"? Will he return there?

Does Jose's "success" suggest that things are changing? That there will be justice? Or is he simply an exception?
Sugar Cane Alley: Filmic Techniques

1. Structure: the post card views at the opening, before entering the world of sugar cane field

2. Colors:
   - the use of different color tones for different settings (Black Shack Alley—dark and sepia, Leopold’s house & Port-de-France--bright)

3. Shots:
   - no scenery shots
   - Many close-ups
References


- “*Sugar Cane Alley*”
  <http://www.library.american.edu/subject/media/aufderheide/sugar.html>