

Euzhan Palcy: Resistance and Empowerment through Film

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Abstract: Director Euzhan Palcy continually challenges conventional ways of seeing the struggles of African Diaspora people in films like *Sugar Cane Alley* (based on Joseph Zobel's book *Black Shack Alley*) and *A Dry White Season* (Andre Brink's novel of the same title). Palcy brings an understanding of the depths and dignity of collective resistance in Martinique and South Africa respectively during the colonial and post-colonial eras. Rather than essentialize female characters from these novels, Palcy draws from gender relationships to construct new visions of empowerment for men and women. This paper uses intersectionality theory and comparative historical analysis to explore Palcy's process of converting books-to-films, how her films present new ways to frame female experiences, and how they expand female visibility and inclusion. This is accomplished by comparing four other books-to-film examples to legitimize the fidelity of the films to its source material since it is often unlikely that the viewers of the films have read the books.

KEYWORDS: African, black life, books-to-film, diaspora, females, films, gender, intersectionality theory, historical comparative analysis, oppression.

There are few times that films arising from books add new dimensions for a viewer. When it does occur, it is due primarily to creative use of a filmmaker's tools to enhance the book's major themes. Director Euzhan Palcy continually challenges conventional ways of seeing struggles of African diaspora people in films like *Sugar Cane Alley*¹ (based on Joseph Zobel's book *Black Shack Alley*) and *A Dry White Season*² (Andre Brink's novel of the same title). Palcy brings an understanding of the depths and dignity of collective resistance in Martinique and South Africa respectively during the colonial and post-colonial eras. Rather than essentialize female characters from these novels, Palcy draws from gender relationships to construct new visions of empowerment for men and women.

Intersectionality theory and comparative historical analysis can be used to explore Palcy's process of converting books into films, how her films present new ways to frame female experiences, and how they expand female visibility and inclusion.³ Intersectionality theory is useful because it provides a theoretical foundation for situating the experiences of groups ordinarily confined to the margins of societies. Similarly, historical comparative analysis, influenced by the writings of film scholar and sociologist Pierre Sorlin, affords a foundation to study the merit of films in not only a historical/era perspective, but also in how film communicates to viewers' meanings of cultural attitudes, biases and understandings of populations and atmospheres. Said another way, it helps to understand the historical realism conveyed in visual and audible cues given in films.⁴ Combining these two approaches provides readers with tools for dissecting the complexity of marginalized experiences, while at the same time understanding the historical economic plights, geographic spaces and diversities of being black and female. Based on these aforementioned premises, such tools offer constructive channels for considering how Palcy's films interpose male-dominated narratives to shed light on the different ways that women experience violence and oppression, as well as on the transformative power of female roles.

Palcy's films can be used as templates for critically viewing struggles within African diaspora settings. They reveal attention to four areas: a) systems of racial inequality, b) centering the role of gender in struggles against injustice, c) exploration of landscapes as elements of oppression, and d) use of the body as a text for understanding and reacting to oppression. Palcy offers engaging stories about individuals struggling against domination, but each of those characters is

¹ This was Euzhan Palcy's first film. It was made in 1983 and won 17 international awards (Demissie 2008, 101).

² This was Palcy's second film made in 1989 where actor Marlon Brando, the lawyer, Ian McKenzie, seeks justice for a murder by the police labeled a suicide. It was nominated for several best supporting role awards (*A Dry White Season*). What makes this film a feather in Palcy's cap is that it won her recognition as the first black female to direct a film for a major American studio—*Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. (MGM)*.

³ This is part of Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality theory in "Why Intersectionality Can't Wait."

⁴ French sociologist Pierre Sorlin has written seven books on film history and numerous articles and chapters on history and criticism of the performing arts. While much of his work focuses on Europe, he does address many films made in the United States and their reception by American audiences.

symbolic of broader relationships. Also, in her films, women and girls, even when playing secondary roles, are indispensable for explaining systems of oppression. Thirdly, Palty uses different landscapes to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of inequality, as well as to explore reactions to it. Fourth, she exhibits the body, in all of its ages, genders and physical conditions, as a text for revealing and resisting oppression. Overall, the complexity of Palty's films invites reimagining of emancipatory possibilities across diaspora communities.

Adapting a book to film may seem straightforward, but seldom, if ever, is it a simple linear process. Books and films use different methods for telling stories, and the strengths of one don't easily translate to the other. A book may use shifts in narrative voices or points of view, while moving easily back and forth between action and interior exploration. Filmmakers often face the challenges of compressing 300 or more pages of a book into two hours of film, or around 120 pages of screenplay. A film relies on imagery, dialogue and action, all of which necessitate abbreviation of the book. Moreover, the costs of making films are so much higher, and engage configurations of finance, labor, technical expertise, promotion and artistry that can breakdown at any moment. Some of the risks are offset when either the book or film contain substantial equity that might enhance the prospect that portions of the films budget can be recouped, if not make a profit. Equity dividends pay off when the loyal followers of the author of the book, or the fans of the director or actor/s, have vested interests in a successful merging, thus forming a built-in audience for the film. While the anticipations of those respective audiences can rationalize adaptation, there is no guarantee that one, or both of them, will not be disappointed when the final product materializes.⁵

Book-to-film translations take on even greater risks when the subject matter and its central characters emerge from stories conventionally marginalized by mainstream film industries. The presentation of characters that defy stereotypes, shedding light on unfamiliar landscapes, exposing parallels between legitimate and illegitimate practices, as well as detailed description of violence, may prove difficult to keep within the boundaries of conventional cinematic production. As a result of these effective narrative strategies, numerous books remain "in development" with major movie studios, indicating that a movie project is highly unlikely to be completed. And for those that make it through the gauntlet of marketability, the final project may entail significant revisions made for the sake of simplicity and pacing that make it unrecognizable to devoted readers of the book, and frequently to its author. Examining four African American-themed films illustrates the challenges of framing black life in ways that can increase the likelihood of box office or television success.

Four films of interest are: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005), *A Raisin in the Sun* (2008), *Precious* (2009) from the book *Push* (1997), and *For Colored Girls* (2010) from the book *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide: When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1977). A common theme in each is the intersectionality of black women's struggles that offer windows into how they are constructed and interpreted by mainstream film industries. Additionally, storylines revolve around black women characters who struggled to overcome institutionalized barriers within the household, as well as outside.

⁵ Keaton 2012, 123-24.

The differences center on the timeframes of the book's settings, along with common challenges facing black communities in each era. For example, *Their Eyes* was based on the classic 1937 book. Similarly, *A Raisin* and *For Colored Girls* emerged from popular plays of the early 1950s and early 1970s respectively. *Push*, the only twenty-first-century book, deals with a teenager's coming of age, as opposed to the other films that focus on women in their early 30s. The common thread in all of these books is black women at different stages of finding voice and agency. This speaks to the complexity of black women's experiences.

Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is widely accepted as a seminal work for giving voice to black women and gender issues. Hurston's masterpiece celebrates the rich diversity of black experiences incorporating race, class and gender. Its use of multiple narrative voices enables readers to understand how the past and present were intertwined in shaping the early twentieth-century rural southern landscape negotiated by black women. The 2005 two-hour made-for-television American Broadcasting Company (ABC) film of the same name adheres to the plot of the novel, but its omission of major characters and events denies the audience opportunities to appreciate its social and political complexity. Emphasis on the love and marriage of Janie, the central character, glosses over significant issues of race, class and gender that frame Hurston's book. The focus on her personal growth as a human being leaves little room for considering how Janie's journey through the rough terrain of obstacles reflects black women's efforts to develop agency and voice. For example, marriage is culturally constructed expectation of women and an aspired destination, but for Janie's marriages are more connected to isolation and suffocation of her life journey.

Similarly, the 2007 remake of *A Raisin in the Sun* for ABC, replicates the themes of Lorraine Hansberry's play, as well as the 1961 film. As with its predecessors, the film illuminates the competing visions of pursuit of the good life, along with the accompanying defenses of those preferences by blacks in the first few decades of the post-World War II era. Walter Lee Younger,⁶ the man of the house, wants to use the anticipated money from an insurance policy to open a business, while his mother Lena wants to buy a house for the family to escape their cramped apartment, and Beneatha, his sister prefers to put some money aside to pay for her medical school education. The 2007 film adds a few scenes set outside the Younger's Chicago apartment to illustrate how pervasive racial discrimination is on black life. However, the updated version fails to shed light on key dimensions of Hansberry's play that would likely resonate more with contemporary audiences than with those of the early-1960s. The first is the rising voice of black feminism. Each of the lead female characters strategically challenges Walter Lee's forcefully argued, yet ill-conceived notions of progress.

The assertiveness of these women raises questions about who should control three areas of black life: the family, a woman's body and relationships with the diaspora. Hansberry's exploration into the latter issue was best illustrated in Beneatha's contrasting suitors, George Murchison, the son of a wealthy business owner, and Joseph Asagai, a Nigerian student who supports

⁶ Comb's approach toward the character was one-dimensional as an angry, driven black man. By contrast, Phylisha Rashad, Audra McDonald and Sana Lathan, were outstanding in their roles, and in refining aspects of the 1961 characters to heighten the centrality of gender in family relations. The 2007 version allows too much space for Walter Lee at the expense of telling a fuller story about the black family, which can be viewed as a surrogate for the community.

Beneatha's efforts in challenging Western myths about Africa. George simply wants to continue the assimilationist-driven wealth accumulation path of his father, while Joseph endorses Beneatha's aspirations to become a doctor and invites her to return to Africa as his wife. Despite the problems with the film, it succeeds in its depiction of the early-postwar frontiers of racial conflict. Yet, more sensitivity to gender relations could have yielded a more far-reaching film.

In 1982, American Playhouse released Ntozake Shange's play version of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide: When the Rainbow is Enuf*. This production features many up-and-coming black actresses, including: Alfre Woodard, Lynn Whitfield, Trazana Beverly, Laurie Carlos, Crystal Lilly and Sarita Allen. It is the story of six women, in poem form, that opened on Broadway in 1976 as a choreopoem before the book was released in 1977. Each of these women is identified by a color instead of a name (e.g. lady in red, lady in brown, lady in yellow, etc.). By using colors instead of names, viewers associate the obstacles the women face, such as domestic violence, rape, loss and abandonment, with their color and are able to envision effective responses. For example, in one scene, the lady in blue went through the trauma of an abortion. By using the blue color, instead of a name, the intensity of the experience is heightened and allows the viewer to focus on the multiple dimensions of a life-changing—before, during and after.

The film *Precious*, based on the novel *Push*, was praised as the “Best Picture of 2009” by *Rolling Stone magazine*. It tells the story of Precious Jones, a Harlem teenager who faces the tragedies of sexual, physical, and verbal abuse from her mother and father. The incestuous relationship between Precious and her father led to two children – the first, a female with Down syndrome and the second, a male who may be infected with the HIV/AIDS virus. In spite of these obstacles, Precious overcomes illiteracy, homelessness, and incest recovery, while battling the HIV/AIDS virus transmitted by her father.

One major difference in Sapphire's book *Push* from the film is that, in the former, Precious is forced to perform sexual acts on both her father and mother, on separate occasions. Made clear in *Push*, Precious' mother chastised Precious for “taking her man” and thus Precious is required to please the Mother sexually – instead of the father. Viewers cheer on Precious as she finds the courage to leave home and raise her children away from her mother, courage that she gets from her enlightened alternative high school. Filmmaker Lee Daniels does an excellent job of helping viewers see the obstacles confronting Precious in battling morbid obesity, incest survival, and using journaling as a means of gaining inner strength.

Underscoring the rough subject matter in these films that emerged from books is a segue toward understanding strategic interventions in the books-to-film process, as well as to highlight the importance of intersectionality theory and historical comparative analysis as tools for reading films. What one can see in the comparison of the four films, and what serves as the groundwork for understanding the reading of Palcy's films is to legitimize the fidelity of the film to its source materials, when is it highly unlikely that the viewers of the films have read the books.⁷

⁷ *A Dry White Season* was first released in the United States as a book in 1980 and then reprinted in 2006. At the time of its initial release, the *New York Times* gave the book a “Notable Book of the Year Award.” But the movie was not released until 1989 and the DVD version later in 2005. In addition, *Black Shack Alley* was initially written in French and translated into English in 1980 and is the inspiration for the film *Sugar Cane Alley*, which premiered in

Intersectionality Theory and Historical Comparative Analysis

Intersectionality theory emerged as a way of understanding the overlap or intersections between social identity development and systems of oppression. It is widely used in the social sciences and cultural studies to explore how different power structures interact in the lives of marginal groups, specifically black women (Thornton Dill and Zambrana 2009, 2; Adewunmi 2014). Another explanation constructs intersectionality as a system of study whereby race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and age are examined to see how the intersections of any social status meet and impact individual lives (Castiello Jones, Misra, and McCurley 2013). Yet another way of defining intersectionality is as a tool for analysis, advocacy, and policy development that addresses multiple discriminations, and helps one understand how different sets of identities impact on creating access to rights and opportunities (Symington 2004). All of these approaches help to challenge overly simplistic ways of examining race as a category by emphasizing the complexity of all identity categories. The choice to highlight intercategorical complexity of intersectionality affords readers insight into the complicated nature of lived experiences.

This paper takes an intercategorical approach to intersectionality theory, similar to what Leslie McCall explains to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimension (McCall 2005, 173). One way of understanding intercategorical complexity is looking at black communities during Reconstruction. For example, since black men had the right to vote, but black women didn't, debates, conventions, and conferences consisting of males and females explored how the men should exercise their votes, which effectively transferred ownership of votes from individuals to the community (Austin 2015, 25). Men acquired some degree of power because, as legal possessors of votes, their civic and personal value increased within their communities.

An example of intersectionality theory is seen in the works of *Fog*. Filmmaker Chelsea Woods uses social media as a follow-up in educating the audiences on topics presented in her short films. For example, *Fog* focuses on the mental health issues (specifically depression and anxiety) of Valerie, a black attorney, who attempts to balance and make sense of her career, parenting, and daily existence. Valerie's story of living through a fog speaks to the obstacles that many blacks face in battling mental health issues and not seeking support, and/or rebuffing the social stigmas attached to mental health labels. Woods compliments her film with the blog websites "Crowned Leader of Defective Cybermen," (Woods n.d.) and Facebook.com®, to educate the audience on mental health myths, facts and resources steered directly to blacks. A change agent in her own right, Woods acknowledges that being a black female filmmaker is a challenge in attempting to secure funding. But fortunately for her, being a student at the American Film Institute (AFI) Directing Workshop for Women⁸ opened some doors for her initial film production.⁹ *Fog* fits into intersectionality theory in that it shows examples of mental health

1983 and the DVD version later in 2004.

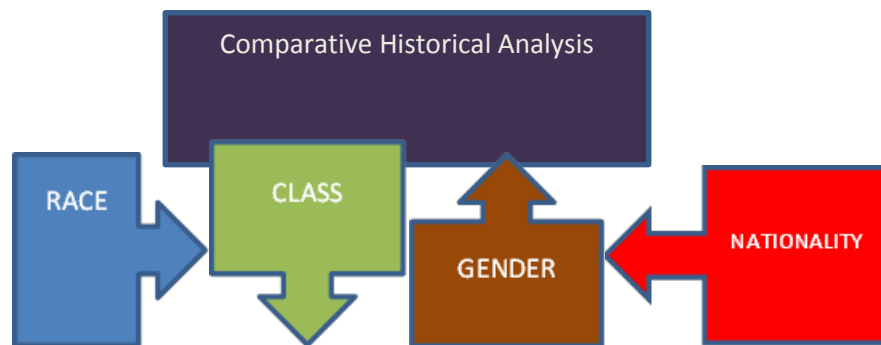
⁸ For more information on the history and mission of the American Film Institute (AFI) Directing Workshop for Women, go to the website <http://www.afi.com/dww/>.

⁹ Chelsea Woods, personal interview with the authors, August 25, 2016.

obstacles in black communities that go untreated, and how this failure cripples so many black women in their efforts to do other things.

A comparative historical analysis, used frequently in the social sciences/cultural studies, is a means of explaining substantively important outcomes connected to cultures. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer explain that such a process involves looking at the situation as a puzzle and understanding what were some of the underlying causes that formulated the puzzle and resulted in defragmentation (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003, 4-6 & 8). And when one understands the complexities of the puzzle, one can better understand the constituent elements of daily life. An illustrated example is given in Figure 1 to explain the complexities of the puzzle and comparative historical analysis.

Figure 1



More specifically, Pierre Sorlin explained that the steps needed to complete a comparative historical analysis of film involves understanding the originality of the film, its relationship to current events, its favorable reception by the public and the fact of its being produced and distributed during a time of crisis (Sorlin 1980, 36). Media and film studies scholars use comparative historical analysis because the objective is not to present ideas of the fictional films from a theoretical perspective, but rather assess a film's historical value by exhausting the paradigms, or by concentrating upon syntagms (narration of successive events) (Sorlin 1988, 4).

An example of a historical analysis is the work done by Candace Ming at Chicago's South Side Home Movie Project. Ming shared the digitizing of still photos, slides, and 8 mm film from Jean Patton's personal collection.¹⁰ Patton, a longtime resident of Chicago, captured images of family, community and national events dating from 1950-1980. In the presentation, Ming narrated the process of reviewing such precious and personal archival material that enlightened the audience on black, Chicago and gendered histories. Since many people learn history from visual sources, the work that Ming completed for this University of Chicago project, serves as a changing agent to how people may construct past and present Chicago, and more importantly, how women's film history can teach the world.

¹⁰ Candace Ming, e-mail message to the authors, September 10, 2016.

The Euzhan Palcy Method in *A Dry White Season*

While Euzhan Palcy's most marketable films were done in the 1980s, to reduce her body of work to measures of box office success devalues her career, especially as one whose cinematic visions are guided by a diaspora empowerment outlook. Her path breaking films *Sugar Cane Alley* and *A Dry White Season* not only explored topics marginalized by the mainstream, but also have stood the tests of time in providing foundations for altering representations of diaspora people and issues. Palcy's films speak to audiences, especially those around the diaspora, in ways that force them to contest constructions of spaces and relationships that underwrite established systems of race, class and gendered oppression.¹¹ Her illumination of specific landscapes draws from historically-documented systems of exploitation that transcend particular places, thereby enabling viewers to become more active consumers of the film.¹² For example, female characters in her films are more than targets of violence. They also act as sources for resisting, or even deflecting the intensities of violence. In doing that, Palcy forces viewers to examine the multi-layered structures of oppression and to identify those potential emancipatory spaces. She makes concerted efforts to depict the black body as text, resistance and emancipation in the above-mentioned films.

This strategy is illustrated in the beginning of *A Dry White Season*, where two kids, one black and one white, are playing together. Later on, viewers see the black child, Jonathan Ngubene (Bekhithemba Mpofu), arrested at an anti-apartheid protest. Jonathan's bruised body, like those of other black children, becomes the text for viewing the intense violence of apartheid, especially later when lying in the morgue after his murder by police. Here, Palcy shows viewers a historical context of racial injustice, though they may be unfamiliar with South Africa's apartheid structure. She presents the puzzle pieces of white supremacy that include the brutality of institutionalized racism, to lay a foundation for comparative historical analysis. Again, Sorlin reminds readers that comparative historical analysis of films is valuable.

Films, like historical novels and history books, concentrate upon a period, in other words a more or less defined time with its beginning and its end. They narrate and, in order to make the narrative more thrilling, they seize upon some sort of climax—the turning point of a war or the height of a crisis (Sorlin 1998, 209). When audiences see these scenes, it invokes historical parallels of racial oppression, such as Jonathan's disfigured body being similar to Emmett Till's 1955 lynching in the United States. Thus, Palcy can be seen as a cinematic historian in the sense that her films make a significant impact on public perceptions of history (Toplin 1998, 6).

An additional element in using Jonathan's body is that it compels viewers to extend views of childhood vulnerability to invasions by the broader society, and thereby envision the body as a catalyst for change. In a few short scenes Jonathan has evolved from an innocent playful child to

¹¹ This point is also affirmed with Paul Weinstein's comments, "Filmmakers often feel that despite some factual deviations they have effectively and honestly captured the spirit of history" (Weinstein).

¹² Pierre Sorlin deals with film and history by noting: "In Europe, as well as in the United States, about ten percent of the films made during the first half of our century dealt, be it indirectly, with a period which, because it was remote or because of its cinematic treatment, could be labeled 'historical.' It has often been noted that the tendency of Americans to see their history in terms of images derived from films creates a virtually impenetrable barrier to seeing the events on which they are based in verifiable historical terms. They are seen as 'metahistory,' that is to say as a contrived but very effective reconstruction of the past" (Sorlin 1998, 206).

a body whose life (and death) acquire meaning because it uncovers the limits to oppression. By slowing down how systems of oppression operate, Palcy enables audiences to see their constituent elements, their weaknesses, and how acts of resistance enhance prospects for change.

Similarly, Palcy uses an intertextual approach to frame white violence. Contrasting scenes of the disparities in the quality of white and black lives challenges the normalization of meanings, thereby forcing the viewer into deeper interrogation of the apartheid structure. The ease in which whites enjoy their exclusive schools, clubs and social gatherings is framed by institutionalized state efforts to constrain the mildest of black efforts to organize and assert their basic human rights. Images of black bodies piling up are routinized as well-meaning whites consistently rationalize violent destruction of black aspirations. And, after one such episode of white violence against blacks, Palcy shifts to a scene in a school where white students recite propagandistic lessons on how the Afrikaner people were victimized, not only by the British, but also by indigenous Africans.

One of the strongest impacts of Palcy's intertextuality is demonstrating that the systematic violence of apartheid represents a threat to the most basic of human institutions, the family, in its white, as well as black manifestations. Ben du Toit (Donald Sutherland), a central white character, initially expresses disbelief when informed about the brutal treatment of his black gardener's son at the hands of police and security forces. Palcy allows this façade of fairness to break down as the tolls on black life mount, but uses it to show white willingness to overlook the violence of apartheid that underwrites their privileges. Subsequently, Ben's expression of the mildest sympathies for black victims leads to separation from his wife and adult daughter, ostracism from the teachers at his school, and later dismissal from his teaching job. Even his young son cannot escape the association of his father's support for black rights as bullies beat him at his school.

Another strategy employed by Palcy is the shifting the narrative to give prominence to ordinarily marginalized voices. In *A Dry White Season*, Stanley Makhaya's (Zakes Mokae) entrance into the film during its first act effectively shifts the narrative from concern with how whites experience the rough edges of apartheid to how blacks are repeatedly subjected to its brutalities. Stanley is detached from the routines that subject blacks to daily control by whites, which affords him opportunities to navigate the gray areas of the apartheid system. He occupies an array of landscapes from the black township to white suburban enclaves, and even state courtrooms, to give viewers a sweep of how pervasive are the structures for upholding white privilege. Even though he is well-aware of the limitations of his independence, Stanley's range of observations disrupt conventional white narratives on apartheid.

This is an example of intersectionality theory as Palcy constructs Stanley's role as a transcendent character, rather than one defined by simple linearity. His assertiveness in seeking justice for black victims is far from fantasy, but grounds the narrative in black life, and legitimizes black resistance as essential for destroying apartheid.

Palcy's elevation of a black narrative voices is similarly demonstrated by omitting from the film the romantic relationship between the two major white characters in Andre Brink's novel. A love story between two American stars, Donald Sutherland and Susan Sarandon, might have

expanded the movie's box office appeal, but Palcy chose to avoid it to instead heighten the film's focus on its black characters (Collins 1989).

The film's broadening of narrative possibilities allows women's voices to emerge in critical stages of the story. Early in the film when a young black student witnesses her sister being shot to death by a soldier, she confronts the soldier and tells him to kill her as well. In addition to establishing that some of the victims of apartheid's brutality are young girls, the scene depicts women as agents rather than mere victims. Later, this same student offers critical testimony to be used in generating a legal and public media campaign against the South African state. Likewise, Emily Ngubene (Thoko Ntshinga), the wife and mother of victims tortured and killed by the security forces, emerges to actively resist state efforts to silence her, even as it leads to her own death. Symbolic of wives and mothers of martyrs, Emily justifies her continued vigilance in the face of overwhelming odds by saying: "The dead will open the eyes of the living." Another critical woman's voice is that of the white journalist Melanie Bruwer (Susan Sarandon), who not only helps educate Ben du Toit (Donald Sutherland) on the harsh realities of South African state violence, but also risks her own safety in spreading news about the violence to the international media.

The film effectively uses images that resonate throughout diaspora political struggles. For example, the heroes are the common people, who perform heroically in giving face and voice to the brutalities of apartheid. Early in the film a small demonstration of student protest gathers steam and gradually morphs into a wide-angle shot of hundreds of boys and girls marching for justice. Later, an anonymous black woman hospital worker provides information to document the medical condition of prisoners before they were executed. Relatedly, a black man testifying at an inquest as a witness for the state, rips off his shirt to reveal the violence that the state has inflicted upon his body to force his signed testimony. These individual courageous acts gradually transform into the foundations for collective resistance.

The Euzhan Palcy Method in *Sugar Cane Alley*

As in *A Dry White Season*, Palcy again uses childhood as important political terrain in *Sugar Cane Alley*. The film is set in 1930s Martinique, where Jose (Garry Cadenat), grandson of M'Man Tine (Darling Légitimus), resides on a former sugar cane plantation. The focus is the coming of age and struggles that Jose encounters seeing education as an opportunity for economic and social advancement. Rather than allowing this film to be a simplistic story of an individual's determination to overcome obstacles, Palcy uses the boy's story to show Martinique's collective experiences struggling against colonialism. For example, M'Man Tine and Jose's relocation from a rural area to the town to be near the school that he wants to attend evokes the larger issue of colonized people being forced to migrate to cities to improve opportunities. This is an enduring reflection of the diaspora and the continual search to escape domination.

Palcy effectively uses landscapes and lighting to reflect the obstacles and opportunities confronting the central characters. Throughout much of the first half of the film, as workers toil on the sugar cane plantation, the camera angles are very tight and dark with little in view except the harsh conditions of servitude. However, as the prospects for Jose acquiring an education

begin to improve, the camera moves back to allow a bright panoramic view of the landscape. Similarly, a later scene features a group of black kids innocently swimming in a pond. A wealthy white landowner drives up in his automobile and attempts to discipline the boys, but he slips and falls into the water, suffering what will later prove to be fatal injuries.

Similar strategies are used to convey multiple dimensions of the inhumanity of the colonial system. Colonial oversight and control is seemingly everywhere: pressing sugar cane workers to increase their production in the fields, doling out meager wages that will immediately be spent at the plantation store, and utilizing a range of black workers from pre-school age children to old, frail adults. Even the pursuit of education is depicted as another process which can re-enforce race-class stratification. An elementary school teacher informs the students that the school certificate exam given at the end of the year will separate those eligible for further education from those who will return to the sugar cane fields. Each stage of Jose's pursuit of education is met with challenges, such as his receiving only a partial scholarship, which forces his elderly grandmother to take in laundry to help pay his school fees, or, later, being accused by his teacher of plagiarizing an essay.

While not as overt as in *A Dry White Season*, Palcy again uses the body as a site for exhibiting the cruelty of colonialism in *Sugar Cane Alley*. The harsh lives and deaths of the old man Medouze (Douta Seck), and later Jose's grandmother M'Man Tine, are written all over their broken bodies. In a later scene Palcy shows the harshness of the color line when the French father of Leopold (Laurent Saint-Cyr), the mixed-race boy, is on his deathbed, but refuses to give the boy his last name. Leopold, who on several occasions has disobeyed his parent's advice to avoid socializing with black children, flees his home, but not before taking his father's ledger to prove to the sugar cane field workers that they have been grossly exploited. After his capture, Leopold is led to jail like a captured animal, having lost all access to near-white privileges.

Lastly, Palcy draws from and elaborates on common themes in African diaspora resistance. Jose is drawn to the old man Medouze, who tells him stories about Africa, the ruptures generated by the slave trade, and about slave revolts in Martinique. Medouze serves as the spiritual mentor who provides Jose with a platform for imagining himself beyond his present circumstances. Similarly, M'Man Tine refuses to allow Jose to work in the fields, even when all of his peers have been drafted. She is committed to not allowing Jose to be consumed by the forces that limited her life and the life of his deceased mother. Although poor, uneducated, and in bad health, M'Man Tine moves beyond her limitations to advance life prospects for her grandson. In one of the last scenes in the film, Jose questions a black woman cashier who despises other blacks by claiming that, "Her character is white." The young boy, expressing intelligence far beyond his years, reminds the woman that the colonial system, not race, shapes the behaviors that she so thoroughly detests.

Such movements going on across the diaspora are analogous to historical comparative analysis. Jose's puzzle of how to acquire access to education breaks down, necessitating a search for an alternative route. The movement is a response to the broken puzzle. Palcy uses Jose and his grandmother to show that they too must move to pursue visions of progress. The film's focus on the individual can be viewed as a reflection of broader struggles colonized groups confront in trying to use education as a tool for social advancement. While pursuing an education, Jose

experiences European cultural biases from the school administrators, from the teacher, and from some of his peers. Yet, in overcoming those obstacles, he reflects on the stories told to him about Africa by Medouze, the old man on the sugar cane plantation. Memories of these stories give Jose a cultural foundation that he can draw from to challenge the status quo, white supremacist worldviews. Palcy uses the strength of the African diaspora to help Jose navigate the barriers to his quest for an education. His summoning of strength from an African identity enable him to reject European standards and put him on a path toward empowerment.

As mentioned earlier in the discussion of *Fog*, Woods, as a female filmmaker, models many of the patterns explored in Palcy's films. An example is the camouflaging of mental stresses and strains that the grandmother exhibits in *Sugar Cane Alley*. M'Man Tine experienced performativity¹³ demons in fighting for opportunities for her grandson to the point that she gets physically sick. Suppressing mental anguish and anxieties lead to her being bedridden for a time. The mask of compliance often conceals larger problems that can have long-term debilitating effects. What Palcy and Woods do as filmmakers is help the audience see that something is real and that such events happened in history (Sorlin 1980, 37). The underlying logic of history is what makes many films a valuable historical tool because they select facts, develop them, and show the connections between them (Sorlin 1980, 38). Such can be said about facts of blacks that are brought out in the films by Palcy and Woods. Their films select facts about black culture, develop them, and show the connections and contributions to the lives of all people.

Every culture in Palcy's cinematic universe has an element where contributions are made by individuals who go beyond themselves and understand that life is bigger than just the self. For example, M'Man Tin wants her grandson, Jose, to receive an education (selected fact) so that he will not have to repeat the cycle that she, her daughter, and many others of that generation had encountered (developed those facts). The way that Palcy makes the connection is that she establishes the relationship between facts or situations and offers a pan-African view of the struggles that they engender (Sorlin, 1980, 38). Palcy tells historical stories that make viewers think about situations that go on today. She is a filmmaker, but also a historian with a camera. She tells facts about the past that comment on our present and future understandings of the black experience. While Palcy's work dates back over 30 years, her attention to details help us think about Diaspora women today.

Palcy's work has a feminist outlook that illuminates the storylines of her films. Women have seldom had opportunities to direct films, even when black women are the focus of the story. One recent survey indicated that only 10% of the world's film directors are women, as are only 15% of screenwriters.¹⁴ Without question, American male filmmakers like Oliver Stone, Alan Parker, Edward Zwick and Steven Spielberg are given credit as being cultural historians, but seldom is such attention given to women (Toplin 1998, 5). Palcy's films expand female visibility and inclusion, and, at the same time, show her to be a cinematic historian. Her work has the ability to challenge the viewer. Her films show stories unfold and invite you to become part of the story through your own diaspora experience. This speaks to her vision and to how she tells the story.

¹³ Performativity speaks to putting a band-aid over problems by going through the motions as they are expected to do in the role one is expected to play.

¹⁴ Women Make Movies (WMM). "Film & Entertainment Industry Facts." Accessed December 25, 2017. http://www.wmm.com/resources/film_facts.shtml.

Critical to these new angles is not simply a vision of women as the opposite of men, but one that highlights the varied experiences of what it means to be a woman, along with how that role is very dynamic and not static.¹⁵ Palcy said, “I’m not trying to make films just for the money and I don’t want to make a film, just to make a film.”¹⁶

Conclusion

What can we learn through an analysis of the book-to-film translation? John Tibbetts argues that such a process allows one to “reconsider the relationship of visual media to historical representation and supports visual discourse as a uniquely relevant and valid enterprise” (Welsh 2005, 88). Such statements are the rationale for publications like *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film*, which serves as a reference for volumes of essays that meet such demands. Though Palcy’s films have never appeared in this reference book, such inclusion would fit in a historical and social science analysis of her films on a global level, since watching films is how many viewers learn about history.

This paper has examined Palcy’s process of turning books into films to explain how she is a filmmaker of resistance and empowerment for black viewers.¹⁷ If we can agree that film is a form of literature, Paul Weinstein’s argument that film has a tremendous cultural impact that has unpredictable and unintended effects on audiences becomes more understandable (Weinstein 1–2). We see *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Precious*, from the book *Push*, and *For Colored Girls* as books-to-films that speak to communicating the lives of black women amidst adversity. So too do Palcy’s *Sugar Can Alley* and *A Dry White Season*. All of these books-to-film offer a diaspora focus, rather than just a story about one person in one country at one moment. In addition, these books-to-film offer the imperative of re-examining how women experience oppression, and how their experiences can be transformed into spaces of power.

¹⁵ In the introduction of *Celluloid Ceiling: Women Film Directors Breaking Through* (2014, 9–10), Gabrielle Kelly and Cheryl Robson explain the struggles of many international female filmmakers (on six of the seven continents) – both independent and feature films.

¹⁶ Euzhan Palcy, personal interview with the authors at the University of Chicago, May 27, 2015.

¹⁷ Similar to Palcy’s work, the novels of Walter Mosley and the plays of August Wilson not only chronicle black experiences, but offer new perspectives on the meanings of freedom from differently-situated people.

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