Teaching Robert Rossen’s 1957 *Island in the Sun*

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Historical Context

The mid-20th century marks the shift from British to US power in the West Indies, and this film, with the capital coming from Hollywood and the directors coming Britain, operates as a metaphor for the exchange of power happening politically and even culturally in the area. As the Britain sought to remove itself from its Caribbean obligations, it sought to instate a West Indian federation in 1958. The clash between Britain extraction, West Indian independence, and American political presence came into conflict when the new site for the federation was planned for the American controlled Chaguaramas.

The novel itself arrived at an interesting and critical intersection of the flourishing of mass tourism in the Caribbean and the simultaneous movement to self-government. The 1950’s was a period of transition in the Caribbean from imperial rule to self-government, and the novel addressed that issue. Reacting to the granting of universal suffrage given to people in West Indies in 1944, the book written in 1955 (an international best seller) dealt more with the political movement in the Caribbean than race issues. When the book was translated into film, however, the issues were complicated by the race-politics in the United States during the 50’s and 60’s (segregation, miscegenation laws, Civil Rights movement, etc.).

In his essay on miscegenation in Hollywood films, Alan Marcus contextualizes this moment of film within an American social context. With the arrest of Rosa Parks and lynching of Emmett Till in 1955, the desegregation movement in Little Rock in 1957, and the 1963 Civil Rights march on Washington, the legitimacy of the interracial relationship remained a hot topic in the American cultural discourse. Marcus points out that at this time 16 states at this time still prohibited miscegenation, and it wasn’t until June of 1967 that the Supreme Court ended such legislation during its ruling of Loving v. Virginia.

*Island in the Sun,* then, comes at a particular moment in American racial politics, negotiating a dynamic of interracial marriage within the cultural dialogue of film, joining *Pinky* (1949), *Band of Angels* (1957), *Kings Go Forth* (1958), *Touch of Evil* (1958), *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959), *Imitation of Life* (1959), *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959), and *Diamond Head* (1963), not to mention the plethora of films wedding whites with other races, such as Native American, Mexican, and Asian.

The film caused a great deal of controversy upon its release. The Chicago Defender’s article “Nation Awaits Film ‘Island In Sun’” on May 4, 1957 projected that despite the well-known cast, the cast would “hardly expect a hearty welcome south of the Mason and Dixon Line.” The American Film Index (AFI) outlines various protests to the film which fulfill the Chicago’s Defender’s prophecies. According to a July 1957 news item, *Island in the Sun* was banned in Memphis, TN, because of its "frank depiction of miscegenation, an offense to moral standards and no good for Whites or Negros." A July 1957 *New York Times* news item adds that in New Orleans, the American Legion launched an unsuccessful campaign to halt the film’s screening on the grounds that it "contributes to the Communist Party’s aim of creating friction between the races." Another *New York Times* news article on August 17, 1957 “Film Picketed in Florida”
outlines the Ku Klux Klan’s protestation of the film in Jacksonville, Florida. There was also a
discussion in the media centering on Harry Belafonte, a calypso start at the peak of his
popularity. Not only was Belafonte black and spent part of his childhood in Jamaica, he was
married to a white woman at the time. In one interview reported in the Daily Defender on June
10, 1957 “Belafonte Says Studio Requested His Silence On Interracial Role,” Belafonte admits his
frustration with 20th Century Fox’s policy that he not discus his interracial romanced depicted
between Joan Fonataine and him.

Additional reviews:
Today’s Cinema. 89.7810 (03 July 1957): 10.
Daily Film Renter. 74.15 (03 July 1957): 3.
Film Daily. 111.117 (18 June 1957): 6.
Motion Picture Herald. 207.11 (15 June 1957): 417.

Plot

Two almost competing elements weave throughout Island in the Sun: a simultaneous
movement towards self-government and political independence and interracial
romances. It centers around the dynamics of the Fluery family that owns a plantation on
the fictional West Indie island of Santa Marta and the dynamics between a local black
leader, David Boyeur, and a member of the white elite, Mavis Norman.

The different romantic relationships are as follows:
1) Maxwell and Sylvia Fleury: Maxwell’s inferiority complexes cause him to suspect
Sylvia to be in an affair with Carson, whom he eventually murders.
2) Jocelyn Fleury and Euan Templeton: a sexual relationship put into question by
Jocelyn’s ambiguous racial inheritance ultimately ending in marriage
3) Mavis Norman and David Boyeur: complicated by and ultimately ended because of
racial and class differences because of Boyeur’s political aspirations
4) Margot Seaton and Denis Archer: met at governor’s ball; he eventually gets
released from duties because of the relationship

These stories arguably overshadow the other main discourse of political independence
(the more prominent of the two in Alec Waugh’s book upon which the movie was based). David Boyeur, as a black, young politician rising out of the lower class, threatens to
disrupt the power of the white ruling class by running for local government. Tensions
arise between Boyeur and Maxwell Fleury, who is convinced to oppose Boyeur in the
election by other members of the white elite in order to keep the political status quo.
Major themes

- Interracial romance
- Interracial politics
- Class conflicts
- West Indian independence

Teachable concepts

- Carnival as trope
- Politics of interracial romance
- Private vs. public spheres
- Appropriation of Caribbean culture
- Expectations of gender roles
- Music as a social cue
- Masculinity crisis of the 50’s

List of main characters

Maxwell Fleury (James Mason): plantation’s owner’s son, convinced by Carson to run for local government although discouraged by his parents
Jocelyn Fleury (Joan Collins): younger sister of Maxwell; falls in love with Euan Templeton
Sylvia Fleury (Patricia Owens): wife of Maxwell
Mavis Norman (Joan Fontaine): member of white elite, strikes romance with Boyeur
Margot Seaton (Dorothy Dandridge): black drug store clerk
Hilary Carson (Michael Rennie): character Maxwell suspects affair with his wife
David Boyeur (Harry Belafonte): young black man emerging as a political leader
Mrs. Fleury (Diana Wynyard): Plantation owner’s wife
Colonel Whittingham (John Williams): head of police
Euan Templeton (Stephen Boyd): son of Lord Templeton; proposes to Sylvia
Julian Fleury (Basil Sydney): Plantation owner; Maxwell’s father
Denis Archer (John Justin): assistant to governor; interracial affair w/ Margot
Governor Templeton (Ronald Squire): Local government head; Euan’s father
Bradshaw (Hartley Power): American journalist who reveals race history of the Fleury family

Critical Reception


This article, released two years after the film, outlines the treatment of race in several films of the 1950’s, including the 1956 *Edge of the City*, the 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life*, and *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959), along with an extended discussion of *Island in the Sun*. Johnson characterizes the film “made solely for sensationalistic reasons” and “became simply a visually fascination document without a real sense of purpose” (38). Johnson notes the double standard of the
tame Boyeur-Mavis sequences, in which the relationship between a black man and a white woman was kept platonic, as compared to the more sexualized relationship between Margot and a white English civil servant. Johnson also states that the financial success of the film sparked a movement in Hollywood to cover similar themes of miscegenation.


Marcus addresses the trend in Hollywood to portray interracial relationships during the 1950’s and 1960’s, focusing on two bookend films of Touch of Evil (1958) and Diamond Head (1963). After giving a brief explanation of why he considers miscegenation films so-called “primal dramas,” Marcus then develops the racial atmosphere in the US during the 50’s as a context for the Hollywood productions proliferating during that time.


Courtney’s work contextualizes Island in the Sun’s miscegenation as part of a larger dialogue in the American 1950’s over segregation and gender roles. In Chapter 5, especially, she outlines the film’s contemporary mixed reception. She also counterposes the ending of the film—in which David Boyeur refuses to have a relationship with a white woman—to Belafonte’s real-life marriage to a white woman.


This work outlines the transnational implications of Carnival’s role in Trinidadian culture worldwide. It covers a wide variety of Carnival’s relationship to various elements of Trinidadian culture including women, the politics and poetics, cultural memory, tourism, and music. Chapter 8, entitled “‘Will Caypso Doom Rock’n’Roll?’: The U.S. Caypso Craze of 1957,” outlines the so-called Calypso craze of 1957, spawned with Harry Belafonte’s album Calypso. It rehashes Belafonte’s musical career, beginning in the jazz circuit but quickly moving to folk music, i.e.e Pete Seeger. With the release of his Calypso album (his third release), Belafonte carved the way for the craze which took over both the radio and the nightclub. Though it eventually conceded to Rock and Roll because it couldn’t appeal to younger audiences, it still impacted American culture and continues to maintain its presence on the world music scene.
Supplementary Texts for the Teaching of the Film


While the entire book would be a useful extension of the course’s content in relation to the music of the Caribbean and its affect on American music (through reggae, hip-hop, and rap), the chapter entitled “The music of Trinidad” offers a particularly apt introduction to the role of Calypso in Trinidad’s history and relates it to American involvement and exploitation. This chapter provides a brief outline of Trinidadian occupation and the role of carnival and calypso in that history. Its discussion of Calypso’s tie to rebellion will help shape discussion of the appropriation of a rebellious Trinidadian folk.


In this important work, Bakhtin analyzes Renaissance social systems through two subtexts: carnival and grotesque realism. Carnival, as a moment of both democratic equality and inversion of social structures, offers a rupture point to existing social structures. The carnivalesque, the spirit of carnival, involves what Bakhtin calls a “material bodily principle” which focuses on lower forms of expression representing “images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life” (18). Focusing on these aspects rather than the kind of principles of beauty depicted in traditional “high” art, the carnival destroys hierarchies and allows for a social vortex.


This chapter outlines the development of mass media in Trinidad and Tobago. In particular it examines the dynamics between historical-cultural pattern of development in a media atmosphere with competing systems: exogenous (coming from outside cultures, namely British and American) and endogenous, or the folk media. Focusing mainly on newspapers, this historical trajectory reveals the interplay between mass media and political objective of different disparate groups within Trinidad especially during the political volatile years of the 1930’s until the 1960’s. A particularly pertinent discussion is the shift between an Anglo media structure to an American one.

This section deals discuss calypso as both an “expression of participatory democracy and a means of preserving it” (426), and outlines its role in the politics of the West Indies. The especially applicable to the discussion of Island in the Sun comes in the discussion of calypso’s role between 1956 to 1962, as Manning quotes Winthrop Holder, “a celebration of the faith of a predominately African sector in the new political movement led by Dr. Eric Williams. They (the calypsonians) legitimated the party and its leader” (416). This concept has implications in terms of how calypso is used in Island in the Sun, both as the title song and also as the calypso is used to silence Maxwell in the political demonstration.


This chapter addresses the calypso in terms of Carnival, presenting calypso as a means of empowerment. Calypsonians, Hollis argues, use the song to “send volleys of protests into the ranks of the privileged” and was “an instrument that the upper class elites did not possess, and this fact gave it greater power and gained for the singers greater status in the eyes of the lower classes” (451). This particular observation brings calypso into a discussion of class dynamics (rather than just race). He also continues to discuss. He also notes that the steelband movement of the 1950-1962 era was a “movement to freedom” (474), inasmuch as the PNM employed it as a national symbol and a unifying agent. This era contained attempts to both nationalize and Americanize Carnival by emphasizing European costumes and fair-skinned beauty contest (486).

Another important element of power and rebellion that Hollis discusses is the particular ability of Carnival to unite elements that are typically separate as well as create an inversion of sexuality. He argues that “girls [...] who have been denied opportunities by the society or who because of their colour, status or economic standing have been debarred from attending upper class dances and functions, use Carnival to show off their sexual power” (479).

Other Resources:


Development of Two Specific Course Contexts

I would use this movie in two different courses, one focusing on the American consumption of Caribbean culture and products. The other would focus on America’s cultural appropriation of the folk in mid-20th Century as a method of re-authenticating American culture. These courses fit into an American Studies model, addressing the larger context of American culture through literature, film, economics, and history. Because they examine American culture through literature, art, music, and film, they can also fit in an interdisciplinary literature or humanities department.

America’s Cultural Consumption of Caribbean Culture

This course on Caribbean culture will look at how American culture represents and subsumes particular manifestations of Caribbean culture, specifically in terms of how race and culture relates to material consumption, gender constructions, and music. We’ll focus on the mid-century since it marks an imperial transition from British to American influence. It will examine the material consumption of the Caribbean’s raw products, specifically focusing on the banana in which we will read Peter Chapman’s *Bananas: How the United Fruit Company Shaped the World* along with Claude McKay’s *Banana Bottom* as a way to view consumption through a particular product. We will also examine primary texts produced by the United Fruit Company which package the Caribbean culture in the form of the banana, such as recipe books, commercials, and other advertising agents. There will be a significant portion discussing the give-and-take representations of gender, focusing on the sexual consumption of Caribbean femininity and masculinity. We will look at pop-culture manifestations, such as Ricardo in *I Love Lucy* and the 1961 film *West Side Story*. These particular instances also set-up the introduction of *Island in the Sun*, which while raising interesting questions about how an American-British film produces and reflects gender, also introduces the third element of the course’s focus: music.

We will start off with a general discussion of American consumption of Caribbean music and use calypso and its relationship to carnival as a case study. We will discuss the “Rum and Coca-Cola” scandal, and how American music markets treated that calypso. Then, we’ll read and watch *Island in the Sun* we will examine the
intersection of representation of race and gender situated within carnival, and discuss how the American-British production uses carnival and calypso to deal with racism and sexuality. This movie, in particular, works rather well because it’s an American and British joint production with a primarily American cast. Harry Belafonte, though he lived for several years in Jamaica, is essentially an American serving as the spokesman for the Caribbean people. Also we’d examine its representation of calypso and carnival as a site for inversion of normal racial and sexual expectations.

Folk in America during the 50’s and 60’s

The second course examines America’s search for an authentic culture during a pivotal moment of American cultural identity: the 50’s and 60’s. The texts and discussions will center on how American pop-culture exploits, subsumes, and also bows to sub-culture through its appropriation of the folk. We will also examine how the folk is used politically and socially as a mechanism of internal rebellion and a return to authentic purity. Using W.T. Lhamon’s concept of “lore cycles,” which he develops in Deliberate Speed, we will approach American culture as a cultural recycling program that rejects Hegel’s notion of the gradual rise to truth and beauty in favor of a re-discovery of culture through new contexts. The invocation of folk, as used in these contexts, attempts to recover authenticity to validate a culture.

We’ll study a series of artists including so-called “high” artist Jackson Pollack as well as the so-called kitsch artist Norman Rockwell. We’ll then examine how these folk artists give rise to pop-art, and the negotiation that happens within that movement. We’ll then turn to a series Western film, examining how they react to the masculinity crisis of the 50’s. A return to folk here represents an attempt to recover manhood, but does it in different ways (as manifested in disparate films such as Rio Bravo and High Noon). We’ll then turn to the music, examining how different musical movements (including be-bop, folk revival, rock) both incorporated and produced the cultural “folk,” especially examining the process of “covering” artists, such as Pat Boone and Peter, Paul and Mary, as well as the process of using folk as a political tool, in the case of Bob Dylan and the folk revival’s use of folk to protest the Vietnam War.

Using Island in the Sun in this course will be part of a larger discussion of America’s use of other folk cultures to appropriate a sense of authenticity. Like the other course, we will begin with a general discussion of American consumption of Caribbean music and use calypso and its relationship to carnival as an interesting examination of another culture developing a sense of their national identity out of their folk. Using the US occupation of Trinidad as a jumping off point, we will use the “Rum and Coca-Cola” incident to show the historical precedence of American use of Trinidadian folk. Then, with Island in the Sun we will examine how the tourist culture developing after WWII viewed, used, and projected onto America’s search for the authentic.
Theoretical Concepts and Discussion Questions

1) Bakhtin and the Carnivalesque

Bakhtin analyzes Renaissance social systems through two subtexts: carnival and grotesque realism. Carnival, as a moment of both democratic equality and inversion of social structures, offers a rupture point to existing social structures. The carnivalesque, the spirit of carnival, involves what Bakhtin calls a “material bodily principal” or grotesque realism, a mode which focuses on lower forms of expression representing “images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life” (18). Focusing on these aspects rather than the kind of principles of beauty depicted in traditional “high” art, the carnival destroys hierarchies and allows for a space of social rebellion. While this rebellion challenges the existing hierarchies, however, this rebellion is organized and promoted by the very institutions it challenges. Bakhtin argues that because the Catholic church allowed for carnival as a temporary subversion of power, it can more fully rule after the social structures returns to normal.

Carnival plays a large role in Island in the Sun, both its material presence and also its ideological implications of rupturing and perhaps reestablishing social hierarchies. Though the actual carnival makes only a cameo, its presence pervades the film. Throughout the film carnival disrupts, in various ways, the colonial social existence through its dress, music, and sexual promiscuity. The following questions are designed to examine how the carnival operates within Island in the Sun and also explore how the power structures are created and destroyed.

1. Compare the two social structures built in the governor’s party vs. carnival.
   a. How does the opening scene set-up social dynamics?
   b. How is dress different between the two? How does the attire at carnival demonstrate Bakhtin’s material bodily principle? Consider especially the way that Margot is dressed.
      i. There is an interchange between Margot and Denis at carnival. Why is Denis upset?
   c. How does music function in each scene? Compare the orderliness of the band at the party to the drums at carnival. How does the music function as a way to disrupt normal social structures?

2. How does the movie incorporate the white elite into the bodily carnivalesque?
   a. How does the carnival create a space of rebellion against normative social obligations?
      i. Margot and Denis:
ii. Euan and Jocelyn: Their sexual relationship is materially facilitated by the tricksters of carnival. How does
carnival function as a metaphorical enabler of the
sexuality? In other words, how does carnival create a
space in which they can achieve a sexual relationship?

3. Turn to the scene in which Maxwell Fleury gives his political speech.
a. How are power structures set up in this scene?
   i. What are the implications that race in conjunction—but
      also in opposition—has with culture considering that
      Fleury claims to be one of the working class based on
      race?
b. Does calypso or folk music provide a space for social rebellion
   or inversion of power structures? Is it ultimately successful?
c. How does the calypso, a trope of the carnival, manifest the
   relationship Boyeur has with the working class? Is it important
   that Boyeur uses and has control over specifically folk music?

2) Gramsci and Adorno’s Theories of Dominant and Sub Cultures

The neo-Marxist theories of Theodor Adorno and Antonio Gramsci deal with the
concept of incorporation and the dynamics between the dominant culture and
subcultures. Both thinkers identified cultural hegemony as a mechanism to
control the public. Adorno argues pop-culture is a mechanism of the dominant
culture to subsume authentic sub-culture products into itself, thereby flattening
and consequently destroying the critique it held. Gramsci, while he argues for
the same kind of hegemonic rule of the dominant culture, also allows for a sort of
resistance built into the system of sub-cultures which makes room for a certain
amount of negotiation between the dominant culture and the sub-cultural
products incorporated into the hegemony. So while the dominant culture still
subsumes the sub-cultural product, it’s flattening is not complete. The dominant
culture, in fact, is changed by the nuance. In this way, sub-cultures have the
ability to critique and affect the dominant culture.

No doubt Island in the Sun dramatizes such an interaction between dominant
and sub cultures, but does it follow Adorno’s model in which the subculture (in
this case West Indian culture) is flattened by the dominant culture (America
and/or Hollywood)? Or does the exchange mirror Gramsci’s ideas more closely
in which the West Indian culture(s) while being subsumed into the dominant
culture, leaves, so to speak, it’s mark? The following questions are designed to
stimulate such a discussion.

1. The movie opens with a visual tour of the island with a calypso
   introducing island life.
   a. Compare the kind of calypso that Island in the Sun chooses to
      represent island life with as opposed to the bodily-saturated
      lyrics of “Rum and Coca-Cola.” Consider how the Hollywood-
produced calypso differ from “Rum and Coca Cola”? How do these differences emphasize different material objectives of the two calypsos?

b. Does this incorporation into American pop-culture subject calypso to the kind of flattening (in which critical tendencies or potentialities are eliminated) or does it retain some of its political potency? In other words, has the calypso portrayed by the movie lost its political edge during its packaging for American consumption?

c. After the visual tour of the island accompanied with the folk song, there is a British man giving a more empirical history. How do these two histories compare? Do they contradict or invalidate each other?

2. Although the book Island in the Sun by Alex Waugh focuses heavily on political independence and self-determination of the West Indies, the romantic miscegenation plays a more prominent role in the movie.

a. As a joint American and British production, does the film’s exploration of miscegenation as an American cultural preoccupation supplant West Indian politics (see Historical Context)?

b. How does the emphasis on American racial issues flatten the politics of the West Indies? Does it manage to retain some of its folk or sub-cultural elements—as in Gramsci’s model—or does it completely lose its political potency once it enters the American culture via the film?
“Island in the Sun”
Artist: Harry Belafonte (peak Billboard position # 30 in 1957)
Words and Music by Harry Belafonte and Lord Burgess

This is my island in the sun
Where my people have toiled since time begun
I may sail on many a sea
Her shores will always be home to me

CHORUS
I see woman on bended knee
Cutting cane for her family
I see man at the waterside
Casting nets at the surging tide

CHORUS
Oh, island in the sun
Willed to me by my father's hand
All my days I will sing in praise
Of your forest, waters, your shining sand

As morning breaks the heaven on high
I lift my heavy load to the sky
Sun comes down with a burning glow
Mingles my sweat with the earth below

CHORUS
I pray the day will never come
When I can't awake to the sound of drum
Never let me miss carnival
With calypso songs philosophical

CHORUS

“Rum and Coco-Cola”
If you ever go down to Trinidad
They make you feel so very glad
Calypso sing and make up rhyme
Guarantee you one real good fine time

Drinkin' rum and Coca-Cola
Go down Point Koomahnah
Both mother and daughter
Workin' for the Yankee dollar

Chorus

From Chicachicaree to Mona's Isle
Native girls all dance and smile
Help soldier celebrate his leave
Make every day like New Year's Eve

Chorus

It's a fact, man, it's a fact
In old Trinidad, I also fear
The situation is mighty queer
Like the Yankee girl, the native swoon
When she hear der Bingo croon

Chorus

Out on Manzanella Beach
G.I. romance with native peach
All night long, make tropic love
Next day, sit in hot sun and cool off

Chorus