

Synopsis

SLAVES IN HEAVEN

« *Uncle Tom's Cane* »

Every year, a little more than two hundred thousand Haitian cross the frontier of the Dominican Republic to work for a season to gather the sugar-cane called the *Zafra*. Most of those crossings happen illegally and results from an organized process known by the authorities and perpetrated under the benevolent look of the Dominican migrations canters and police. Pretexting to pay for official immigration documents, the sugar companies pay approximately 30 dollars to the Haitian government to own a man, added to a lump sum assigned to the pimps. Once the groups are made, the sugar companies' buses take the Haitian workers to wretched shanty-towns called the *bateys* where they are then shared out in hutments.

As the *braceros* (sugar-cane cutters) are seeking for a better life, they find themselves quickly in an infernal brutifying atmosphere. In the sugar-cane fields, the workers bustle about in a submissive dullness and the scene stays still. The men work about 15 hours a day with no guarantee of being paid. They earn between 45 and 80 pesos for a ton of cut sugar-cane. The most experienced and the strongest ones can barely cut a ton and a half of sugar-cane a day. Rationing tickets replace the salaries and only allows the sugar-cane cutters to pay for the food in the grocery shops called *colmados* in the *bateys*. Those tickets aren't enough to satisfy their hunger. Without any judicial structure, the only law that prevails in the sugar-cane fields is the sugar company's overseers' called the *capataces*. If all the sugar-cane cutters are sub missed to inhuman conditions of work and are ill-treated by the *capataces*, they rarely try to escape. As they are frightened of their wards and deprived of their ID card and passport and of all means of communication and as they are too poor to save money, the sugar-cane cutters are quickly made keep silent. The *braceros* become seasonal workers imprisoned for life and maker bigger the rows of the sugar-cane cutters that have been living in the *bateys* for over 30 years called the *viejos*. « The ones who try to escape are quickly recaptured by the wards. They are hit with machetes », say the *braceros*. Many are the ones that we don't hear from anymore since their attempt of escape. Many are the ones that don't know anything of their status of free men. Enlisted by the *buscones* (pimps), the *braceros*' ID card is replaced by a worker's notebook issued by the sugar Council of State. Although a peso is withdrawn from their salary, the sugar-cane cutters are deprived of social security and cannot be given the benefit of any help except within some public *bateys* in case of accident or sickness. In those cases, the non-paid workers don't get any rationing tickets and depend on the other one's fellowship for food. Many suffer from malnutrition, muscular pains, diseases, sores and exhaustion. When the weather keeps the sugar-cane cutters from the fields, they don't get a rationing ticket. Simply to survive, many have to face the danger of the muddy and slipping fields due to the rain.

I lived five months in the *bateys* with the Haitian sugar-cane cutters. I couldn't be noticed as a photographer by the exploiters and the *capataces* so I went along with two Catholic mission priests. Spanish Father Christopher Hartley and Belgium Father Pierre Ruquoy made this report possible. After my staying, Father Ruquoy was sent back to Belgium within three days after sharing his life for 30 years with the sugar-cane cutters. He was accused of mediatizing too much the *bateys*' situation. I added to this report records of self-composed Haitian songs on God and slavery and records of the sonorous environment of the *bateys* and the cutting of the sugar-cane and the symbol of this work, it's burning.

This report was published in *Courrier International* in December 2005 in a four page portfolio. I am actually working on a book matched with CD of Haitian songs.

Céline Anaya-Gautier