## Chapter 14 - The Dominican American Experience Onscreen

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The development of Dominican film in the United States is intricately tied to the mass migration of Dominicans in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the political climate in the early and mid-20th century in the island-nation. The culmination of the 31 years of dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (1930-1961) opened up the possibility of democracy and freedom for Dominicans to the extent that democratic elections were held in 1962. Juan Bosch, a social-democrat leader and strong opponent of Trujillo’s autocratic regime who had spent most of the dictatorship in exile, won the election. This significant political shift in Dominican politics was short-lived and after the overthrow of Bosch in 1963 –only after seven months of his term as president–, the prospect of political stability and transition to democracy was compromised. Political chaos and social unrest ensued over the course of the next few years. Among the many insurrections, perhaps the most significant to this day was that of April 24, 1965, when civilian men and women supported by a liberal wing of the armed forces took to the streets to demand the legal and constitutional reinstitution of Juan Bosch to power. Four days later, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent US troops to the Dominican nation which culminated in the second US Invasion of the island-nation (the first invasion took place from 1916-1924). This interference in domestic politics resulted in the establishment of one of the most renowned ideologues of the Trujillo regime, Joaquín Balaguer, becoming president for twelve years (1966-1978). As noted by Ramona Hernández and Silvio Torres-Saillant in The Dominican Americans (1998), Balaguer’s economic policies as well as the violent persecution of revolutionaries and political dissidents in tandem with the promulgation in the United States of the Immigration Law of 1965 were key factors “to propel a massive, growing, and continuous exodus of Dominicans from their native land” (30-31). As such, the emigration of Dominicans to the United States post-1965 also reveals the role of US politics in migratory movements from Latin America and the Caribbean.

The invisibility of Dominicans’ contributions to US cultural expression does not correspond with the abovementioned historical relationship between these two countries. In addition, it does not correspond with the dynamic, prolific, and active cultural production of “the fifth-largest population of Hispanic origin living in the United States, accounting for 4% of the US Hispanic population in 2017” (Luis Noe Bustamante, Antonio Flores, and Sono Shah, [Facts on Hispanics of Dominican origin in the United States, 2017](https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/fact-sheet/u-s-hispanics-facts-on-dominican-origin-latinos/)). We can trace back cultural activity by Dominicans as early as the beginning of the twentieth century in fields such as music, literature, and film. In the area of film, although there was not actual Dominican cinematic production in the US by and about Dominicans/Dominican-Americans prior to 1988, the popularity of María Montez, commonly known as “The Queen of Technicolor”, is indicative of Dominican presence in US cultural consciousness even prior to the great exodus of the 1970s.

Over the last four decades there has been a slow yet meaningful increase of filmmaking that captures diverse Dominican narratives of migration to the United States spanning from the experiences of under/undocumented migrants to the challenges of growing up Dominican in the United States, and the quotidian struggles and challenges to pursue the American Dream of multiple generations of Latinx in the Dominican enclave of Washington Heights. Thus, film is a key artform to counter the invisibility of Dominicans in the US collective consciousness as well as to show fluid portraits of this ethnic community.

### Migration to the United States (1980s-1990s)

In the 1980s and 1990s two films by Dominican-based filmmakers Agliberto Meléndez and Ángel Muñiz focus on the tribulations of Dominican men who, in search for a better life, attempt to leave or succeed at leaving the island to migrate to the United States. These audiovisual stories capture the economic pressures that affect underprivileged sectors of Dominican society and the extreme measures taken to seek better opportunities abroad. In them, both directors develop narratives that capture the experiences of Dominican men who flee the Dominican Republic illegally by ship and plane. Both cinematic depictions of migration serve as critiques of flawed economical structures that increased poverty in the Dominican Republic. Further, they examine the fluid borders between the island-nation and the US.

Un pasaje de ida (One Way Ticket) (1988) directed by Agliberto Meléndez is the first feature film that captures the experience of Dominican migration to the US. The objective of this cinematic piece could be seen as twofold: On one hand, it denounces the structural corruption behind the enterprise of underground illegal trips. On the other hand, it highlights the struggles of Dominican migrants who are desperate to leave the island for economic reasons. The film is based on true events that took place in 1980 when twenty-two Dominican men lost their lives suffocating while stowed away in the containers of the cargo ship, Regina Express. In this sense, Un pasaje de ida (One Way Ticket) can be situated within the paradigm of Third World cinema since it offers a realistic depiction of a social event that impacted the Dominican nation and its diaspora in the United States (Lora 58).

While *Un pasaje de ida* (*One Way Ticket*) depicts the failed and tragic journey of 30 Dominican men to the United States, *Nueba Yol* (1995), focuses on the journey, arrival, and failed process of adaptation of Balbuena, a Dominican migrant who, with the help of his Puerto Rican friend, Fellito, manages to obtain a tourist visa to enter the US. In his debut film as director, Ángel Muñiz makes a social critique of the dire economical reasons that motivate Dominican emigration to the United States through the comedy film, *Nueba Yol*. In it, there is an attempt to demystify the American Dream through the experiences of Balbuena even before his arrival to New York City. In the opening scene, while Balbuena is reflecting upon the dire socio-economic circumstances of life in the Dominican Republic on the grave of his late wife, Natalia, he sees his friend Fellito, who assisted with the funeral preparation of a Dominican who died in New York City under questionable circumstances that seem to indicate he was involved in drug dealing. A few days later, Fellito shows up in Balbuena’s house and tells him that he could get him a legal visa if he pays him 5,000 dollars which Balbuena ends up doing to pursue the dream of a better life. Prior to encountering his family at JFK airport in Queens, NY, he and his friend Fellito bump into “El Flaco,” a Dominican man who has achieved success and prosperity in US America through illicit means.

<Fig. 14.1 here> *Fellito tries to convince Balbuena to pursue a visa to travel to New York in* Nueba Yol.

The film presents an ambivalent perspective of Dominican transnational subjects where the image of Balbuena, a hard-working, naive, and kind migrant who is very much attached to his cultural roots (García-Crespo 160), is juxtaposed with americanized Dominican migrants who either lack family and moral values or who would go through any means to attain the American Dream. Said juxtaposition becomes quite evident immediately upon Balbuena’s arrival to New York City. While staying in the living room of his cousins’ two-bedroom apartment in the Dominican enclave of Washington Heights where there are already six tenants, he encounters decaying family values in a household where the three children do not respect their elders, prefer American food, and mock his Dominican ways. In the streets of New York City, his experiences are similar: he struggles to find a job and his dreams of prosperity begin to fade shortly after his arrival to Manhattan. Nonetheless, he never engages in illicit drug trades led by fellow compatriots to whom drug dealing becomes a means to economic success. In the end, Balbuena returns home after being shot in New York City. With the return to the Dominican Republic, on the surface, *Nueba Yol,* “debunks the notion of the American dream and suggests that Dominicans would be better served by struggling for a better life at home” (Goldman 183). As such, the film still holds a romanticized view of the homeland in spite of the economic difficulties Dominican subjects may face there.

### Coming of Age Dominican in the United States (2000s)

Whereas Dominican/Dominican American cinema of the 1990s focused more on the experience of first-generation migrants, their journeys and processes of adaptation to life in the United States, in the 2000s there is an increase of coming-of-age audiovisual narratives of first US-born generation Dominicans in the New York City area created by directors of non-Dominican ethnic background. Four films depict diverse experiences of young Dominicans growing up in various neighborhoods of NYC: My American Girls: A Dominican Story (2001) directed by Aaron Matthews; Washington Heights (2002) directed by Alfredo Rodríguez de Villa; Raising Víctor Vargas (2002) directed by Peter Sollett; and Mad Hot Ballroom (2005) directed by Marilyn Agrelo. The two fiction films, Washington Heights and Raising Victor Vargas take place in Washington Heights in upper Manhattan and the East Village, respectively. Both offer insight into the struggles, challenges, and quotidian lives of first US-born generation Dominicans as they are caught between their aspirations and those of their immigrant families. In Washington Heights, Carlos Ramírez, a comic book illustrator who works in the East Village is caught between family responsibility and the pursuit of his dream to leave the barrio and become a successful comic book artist. Throughout the film, he discovers that these two aspects of his life do not have to be at odds, and that in order to be successful, he must infuse the soul of his neighborhood into his artistic creations. On the other hand, Raising Victor Vargas, offers an intimate depiction of Latinx families from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean—Dominicans and Puerto Ricans—in this case. The film’s portrayal of Victor Vargas as he navigates his journey from adolescence through adulthood in the streets of the East Village, is a meditation on the impact of family and social factors in shaping gender roles.

In the same vein, the non-fiction documentary films, *Mad Hot Ballroom* and *My American Girls. A Dominican Story* highlights the experiences of prepubescent girls and boys and three sisters, respectively. *Mad Hot Ballroom* documents the experiences of young girls and boys from Public School 115 in Washington Heights as they compete in the yearly ballroom dance competition sponsored by New York’s Public School system with youngsters from more financially stable school districts in the Bensonhurst neighborhood of Brooklyn and Tribeca in lower Manhattan. The documentary shows how the dance competition awakens the kids’ class and gender consciousness as well as how ballroom dance becomes a way to cross borders between three communities that would have otherwise remained isolated from each other. Moreover, the non-fiction documentary, *My American Girls. A Dominican Story* is a window into the lives of a Dominican family in Brooklyn and the ways in which daughters and parents negotiate their intergenerational tensions.

Directed by award-winning documentary filmmaker, Aaron Mathews, *My American Girls. A Dominican Story* offers an intimate portrayal of a Dominican family composed of two immigrant parents and their US-born daughters. Although some of the experiences captured by the documentary are specific to Dominicans, you will notice that many of the underlying issues depicted are relatable to Latinx communities at large and immigrant communities from other ethnic groups. Such is the case of the intergenerational clashes between immigrant parents and their children as the former are fighting to preserve their cultural roots and yearn to return to the homeland whereas the latter become more Americanized and see life in the US as their only alternative. Yet, the film also shows how the process of Americanization is different for each of the daughters, presenting in this way diverse experiences of Dominican-Americanness within the same family unit.

Throughout the film, it is evident that hard work is equated to different kinds of success. In the case of Sandra Ortiz and Juan Bautista Ortiz, mother and father of Mónica (21), Aida (16), and Mayra (13), success means to provide a better life for their daughters, help their families back home, and build a house where they will retire in their rural homeland. Although the price to accomplish these goals means they have to spend their days working two jobs and away from their children most of the time, they are willing to pay it in pursuit of better opportunities. In one of the scenes, Sandra says that she can’t wait to go to her country, but she can’t do so until she saves more money to finish building their house back home, and until the last two of her three children graduate from high school.

<Fig. 14.2 here>. Mónica prepares to attend her undergraduate graduation at Columbia University in *My American Girls: A Dominican Story.*

For the eldest of the daughters, Mónica, success means to do the best with the opportunities her parents have provided to her. On her shoulders rest the fact that she is the first one to graduate from college. While the other two sisters remain in the three-story house they share with extended family in the Sunset Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, upon her graduation from Columbia University, Mónica moves to the Upper East Side and continues to uproot herself geographically and emotionally from her family and their traditions to become in the words of her mother, “a real American girl.” Aida, the middle sister, seeks success by slowly breaking away from family expectations by pursuing a job in McDonalds while she is still a junior in high school and by assuring her mother that she is not going back with her to the Dominican Republic to go to college. Although both Mónica and Aida yearn to remove themselves from family traditions and expectations, respectively, in the film they both express how proud and grateful they feel towards their mother for all the sacrifices she made on their behalf. In this sense, the film goes beyond merely presenting the intergenerational shift of values, to also show the appreciation of the first US-born generation of Dominican children for their immigrant parents. This is even more evident in the case of the youngest sister, Mayra, the most defiant of the sisters who does worst in school and often rebels against her mother. During the trip to the family's rural homeland, she expresses how much she appreciates the communal values of the family and friends in the town. Although it is clear that she wants to stay in the US, towards the end of the film she exclaims, “I always miss this place when I leave” referring to the rural homeland of her parents. In other words, she longs for the birth place of her mother, creating in this way an emotional connection to the land, the people, and the memories that keep her mother’s hope of return alive.

Noteworthy is the fact that *My American Girls. A Dominican Story* begins and ends with two celebrations: a wedding and a baby shower. Both events celebrate family in their particular ways. The documentary is just that, a celebration of life, unity, and love in spite of the many contradictions of immigrant life depicted in the film.

### Women Filmmakers of the Dominican Diaspora in New York City (2010s)

Until the second decade of the 2000’s, Dominican-American filmmaking was mostly dominated by men filmmakers with a few exceptions such as *Mad Hot Ballroom*, the documentary film mentioned in the previous section directed by Cuban-American director, Marilyn Agrelo. The end of the decade of 2010’s saw an increase in films directed by Dominican-American women based in New York City —a significant change in direction from previous decades. Such is the case with the short documentaries *Mami y Yo y mi Gallito* (2015) directed by Arisleyda Dilone; *Buhoneros/Street Vendors* (2016) and *Layers of a Baker* (2019) directed by Carla Franchesca; and the feature-film *De lo mío* (2019)directed by Diana Peralta. These young women directors gear their attention to matters related to gender and sexuality, the struggles of first-generation immigrants to survive in the United States, and the return to the island of first-generation US born Dominican women. They narrate intimate tales of Dominican migration in a sublime yet poignant way. In *Buhoneros/Street Vendors* and *Layers of a Baker*, director and founder of Rayoelú Films, Carla Franchesca, records the stories of two first-generation immigrants from Ecuadorian and Dominican descent to show the struggles of women and men trying to prosper economically in the United States. In *Buhoneros/Street Vendors*, Carla Franchesca takes the streets of upper-Manhattan to follow “the daily life and challenges faced by several of New York City’s 20,000 street vendors, most of whom are immigrants and people of color” (<https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/news/bmcc-alumna-and-documentary-filmmaker-carla-franchesca-robles-highlights-voices-of-the-unheard/>). Similarly, in *Layers of a Baker*, she examines said struggles and challenges through the story of a Dominican small business owner.

In her directorial debut documentary film, *Mami, y Yo y mi Gallito,* Dominican-American, queer **intersex** filmmaker Arilseyda Dilone takes the audience on a journey through her story as an intersex body and their relationship to womanhood. This emotionally charged, intimate 16-minute documentary film examines the ways in which a Dominican migrant family navigates issues of gender and sexuality. Through conversations, confrontations, and constant interrogation of the intentional silence about her intersex body in the family narrative, Dilone tries to find a path to healing intergenerational traumas caused by lack of communication and acknowledgement of her being a woman in an intersex body.

<Fig. 14.3 here> *Dilone and her mother have a conversation about Dilone’s gender identity and sexuality in* Mami, y Yo y mi Gallito.

Whereas Carla Franchesca and Dilone use the camera to document non-fiction, intimate tales of the struggles and challenges of diasporic Dominican subjectivities, Afro-Dominicanyork writer and director, Diana Peralta, creates a visual fiction narrative of growing up between the borderlands of New York City and the Dominican Republic in her debut feature film, *De lo mío* (2019). The film explores universal themes of longing, separation, death, loss, and family dynamics through the story of three siblings who are dealing with the demons of their pasts, the loss of their father and grandparents, and the imminent demolition of the family house and all the memories it holds in their native Santiago Province in the Dominican Republic. Throughout the almost 1.5 hours of the film, you will appreciate the complicated relationship of US-born Dominicans with the homeland as they are perceived both as foreigners and natives by their Dominican counterparts on the island-nation. When the two US-born sisters, Rita and Carolina, who have lived with their father in New York until his death, arrive in the Dominican Republic to meet their brother, Dante, who was born and raised on the island by their grandparents, their sibling welcomes them with a Presidente beer and exclaims “Welcome home.” Yet, in other instances, he treats them as outsiders who do not know the social norms of the island. The scene where Carolina leaves the door of the house open and burglars ransack it instantiates Dante’s view of his sisters as tourists. When Dante pulls out a gun to inspect the house, Rita yells at him and questions his choice to own a gun and naively says: “We could have called the cops” and Dante reponds: “First of all, you guys are tourists. You don’t know how shit works over here.” This fluctuating sense of acceptance and rejection of Carolina and Rita as Dominicans is further exacerbated by the constant changes in the sisters’ attitudes towards a home-island that is equally packed with ancestral memories, the resentment of a brother who begrudges them for having better opportunities in the United States than he had on the island, and their constant exoticization by fellow islanders.

<Fig. 14.4 here> *Tension between the siblings about Dante’s choice to carry a gun for protection in* De lo mío.

The film presents a complicated yet realistic picture of what it means to be first generation US-born Dominicans. Although some of the dialogues where the sisters either romanticize or fetichize the island may seem reductionist, there is an intention there to dig into the open wounds of migration stories. By depicting the constant changes in attitudes towards the sisters, the island, the United States, the deceased father, and the soon to be demolished house, Peralta creates a nuanced and humanized Dominican-American story.

### Final Considerations

Since its beginnings in the late 1980s, Dominican-American cinema has taken various directions and has become a useful archive to explore the intricacies of borderland Dominican identity. The last two decades have seen a thematic shift as well as a wider array of experiences related to the Dominican/Dominican-American community. Further approaches to Dominican cinema could include the sequel to *Nueba Yol*, titled *Nueba Yol 3: bajo la nueva ley* (1997), which takes a critical stance towards US immigration policies. Further, the film *La Soga* (2009) directed by Josh Crook looks at narratives of return as they relate to criminality and the forthcoming feature film, *Y este cuerpo también/This Body Too* directed by Arisleyda Dilone will continues to explore and challenge notions of womanhood and femininity in her Dominican/Dominican-American family. By now, you might be wondering, “what about *In the Heights*?” The recent release of *In the Heights* (2021), adapted from the musical play of the same name, directed by Jon M. Chu and written by Quiara Alegría-Hudes and Lin Manuel Miranda, is a love letter to the Latinx community in the neighborhood of Washington Heights —mostly populated by Latinx of Dominican heritage. In spite of the incontestable criticism it received for its shortcomings in casting more Afro-Latinx actors, *In the Heights* brings the dreams of a tight-knit community in the ethnic enclave of Washington Heights to Hollywood. It also makes a political statement by showing the resilience of various generations of Latinx in Uptown Manhattan amid their struggles with racism, discrimination, and the gradual gentrification of their community. Finally, by foregrounding the trope of return to the Dominican Republic through Usnavi de la Vega, *In the Heights* reflects upon the ways in which the longing for return to the Caribbean homeland informs and shapes Dominican diasporic identities in the United States.

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