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Caribbean Studies, Volume 36, Number 1, January-June 2008, pp.
184-195 (Review)

Published by Institute of Caribbean Studies

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/crb.0.0026>



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Diasporic Dreams: Documenting Caribbean Migrations

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The American Dream: Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in New York. Produced by Frances Lausell and directed by Sonia Fritz. English and Spanish with subtitles. Distributed by the Cinema Guild, 2003. DVD. 30 minutes, color.

Ensnared Dreams: Dominican Migration to New York. Produced and directed by Sonia Fritz. English. Distributed by The Cinema Guild, 1994. DVD. 21 minutes, color.

Puerto Ricans Here and There. Produced and directed by Sonia Fritz. Spanish and English with subtitles. Distributed by Isla Films, 2000. VHS. 27 minutes, color.

Visa for a Dream. Produced & directed by Sonia Fritz. Spanish with English subtitles. Distributed by East Village Exchange, 1990. VHS. 24 minutes, color.

During the past five decades, the Caribbean region joined Mexico as one of the primary sources of migrants to the United States. In particular, the three countries of the insular Hispanic Caribbean—Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic—have experienced the largest and most sustained population flows in their entire history. In the year 2006, more than half of all Puerto Ricans and nearly one out of nine Cubans and Dominicans resided outside their nations of origin, especially in the United States. Other countries of the region with large shares of their populations living abroad include Jamaica, Haiti, Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, Barbados, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. Most of these immigrant communities maintain strong social, economic, cultural, and political ties with their sending societies. As numerous scholars, writers, and artists have documented, Caribbean people have become increasingly diasporic.

Sonia Fritz is an independent Mexican filmmaker who has lived in Puerto Rico for two decades. She has edited, produced, directed, and written more than 20 documentaries, as well as feature-length films such as *The Kiss You Gave Me* (2000) and *An Everyday Story* (2004). Fritz's work has been showcased by public television stations, educational institutions, and film festivals in Puerto Rico, the United States, Latin America, and Europe. Her films have focused on social issues such as

women's history and international migration, and cultural practices such as the visual arts and Carnival festivals. Her documentaries on Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Mexican migrants are well suited for classroom discussion in undergraduate courses in the social sciences, especially on race, ethnicity, gender, class, and identity. All of the titles reviewed here dwell on the American dream of upward social mobility that has driven thousands of Caribbean people away from their homelands. Most reveal the sources of friction among various Latino groups in Puerto Rico and the United States.

Searching for a Better Life

Visa for a Dream is the ironic but well-chosen title of Fritz's documentary on Dominican migration to Puerto Rico. It is ironic because the women interviewed for the film could not obtain an immigrant visa from the U.S. government and were forced to migrate without papers. It is well-chosen because to a large extent these women have achieved the dream of "a better life," as they say themselves, by leaving their country.

Inspired by the work of Luisa Hernández Angueira (1990), *Visa for a Dream* tells the stories of Dominican migrants in their own words. The bulk of the documentary concentrates on four Dominican women who traveled to Puerto Rico clandestinely. Together these individual stories represent the collective drama of the Dominican exodus, from its economic origins and family motives to social adaptation and cultural persistence. Although informed by rigorous investigation, the film covers much ground in an entertaining way within the format of a half-hour video. An essential element of *Visa for a Dream* is the use of popular music, especially the *merengues* of Juan Luis Guerra and his Group 4.40, which open and close the documentary. Furthermore, "Visa for a Dream" is the title of one of Guerra's best known songs. This type of music underlines the proletarian and urban background of the Dominican immigrant community, its Caribbean rhythm, and its optimistic outlook even in the face of adversity.

Fritz's main technique is to feature onscreen the participants in the migration process, without editorial comments or opinions by academic experts on the topic. Only a few basic facts are presented to locate the migration in its socioeconomic context. Most of the documentary follows closely the lived experiences of migrant women, including the recreation of the most traumatic episode in the entire migration process: the trip by boat (*yola*) from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico. Although Fritz tends to adopt the classical models of *cinema vérité*, she clearly sympathizes with the plight of migrant women. In telling their stories,

she is partially talking about herself.

Like Hernández Angueira, Fritz underlines the assertiveness and independence of Dominican women in Puerto Rico. Despite the sexual, national, racial, and class discrimination they have suffered, most of the interviewees display a high sense of dignity and pride. As Hernández Angueira has pointed out, “Dominican migrant women contradict in practice the macho ideology that assigns them passive, dependent, and insecure roles as women” (1990:86; my translation). Fritz’s informants constitute a small sample of Dominican women in San Juan, particularly in Santurce and Río Piedras. However, their testimony articulates the beliefs and values of many women who migrated “searching for a better life” for themselves and their families. The protagonists of *Visa for a Dream* gesture, dance, and smile frequently, even when asked about sensitive topics such as whether they miss their country. Fritz does not present a romantic portrait of the migrants; rather, she focuses on her informants’ perceptions of migration as a subsistence strategy.

Visa for a Dream shows that the motivations and experiences of migrant women differ significantly from those of men. Some women come “behind their husbands,” as one informant stated; others come first and remain alone temporarily or indefinitely. Once in Puerto Rico, most Dominican women find work in domestic service or retail trade, especially in bars and cafeterias. The men generally perform more skilled and better paid tasks as mechanics, carpenters, or tailors. The few Dominican men who appear in the film occupy more powerful and prestigious positions than any of the women—including a male diplomat, a radio announcer, and a professional musician. The notable differences between migrant men and women justify the documentary’s concentration on women, who are much more disadvantaged than men.

Visa for a Dream avoids the predominant clichés about Dominican migration to Puerto Rico. Thus, the film deliberately skirts such sensationalist themes as the alleged predominance of Dominican women among local prostitutes and the so-called “invasion” of Puerto Rico by undocumented migrants. Instead, Fritz demystifies several aspects of the migrants’ public image, such as the unfounded stereotype that they abuse food stamps and other government services. Moreover, the film shows graphically that the immigrants have revitalized several rundown neighborhoods of Santurce and Río Piedras, especially Parada 15 and Barrio Obrero. Overall, the film characterizes the Dominican community as humble but hardworking.

Visa for a Dream was the first cinematographic approach to a difficult issue in Puerto Rico. Wherever it was exhibited, the documentary generated ample discussion and sometimes opposing reactions among different sectors of the audience. I have often shown the video in class

and it invariably invokes students' thoughtful comments on racism, migration, and gender in Puerto Rico. The most interesting reaction has been that of the Dominican community residing in Santurce, particularly the women. After the film's 1990 premiere at the University of the Sacred Heart, the director received prolonged applause from an audience that looked very much like the film's protagonists. Apparently, many of those present identified with the women interviewed in the documentary. In my judgment, this has been Fritz's finest accomplishment: to rescue the marginalized experiences of poor, dark-skinned, and undocumented immigrant women.

Migrant Dreams or Nightmares?

Judging from its title, *Ensnared Dreams*, Fritz's second work on the Dominican exodus seems less optimistic than her earlier treatment of the topic. On a closer look, the two films have much in common. As in her previous documentary, Fritz constantly juxtaposes images of daily life in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and the United States. This film incorporates footage from *Visa for a Dream* showing undocumented Dominicans being detained by U.S. immigration authorities. The last scene of *Ensnared Dreams* features an overcrowded *yola* sailing the Mona Channel between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Furthermore, the soundtrack of *Ensnared Dreams* uses several songs written by Juan Luis Guerra and performed instrumentally by the Santo Domingo Philharmonic Orchestra. In both cases, the director concentrates on dirt-poor women with a strong desire to advance economically. As one of them asserts, "I keep on going."

Ensnared Dreams introduces several Dominican women who have made undocumented trips to Puerto Rico, Aruba, St. Croix, and eventually New York City. Some of them were detained and deported back home, where Fritz interviews them in their miserable surroundings. The first half of the film explains the exodus as a result of uneven, dependent development in the Dominican Republic. The inability of the Dominican economy to generate sufficient jobs for an expanding labor force is considered the root cause of continuing outmigration. The informants emphasize the high cost of living, low wages, and lack of employment opportunities as their primary reasons for leaving their country. Not even the much-touted industrial free trade zones provide enough work for Dominican women. One of them complains that "men here are very chauvinistic (*machistas*)." "You have no choice," states another woman who migrated without a visa. "There's no way out," says another. Several admit that they had to toil as "bar girls" or "streetwalkers" once they moved abroad because they had no employable skills.

The second half of *Ensnared Dreams* zeroes in on New York City, the core of the Dominican-American population, and specifically on Washington Heights in Upper Manhattan. The narrator notes that Dominican-owned businesses have thrived in this area, while the camera registers many Spanish-language commercial signs in the streets. The director then introduces several Dominican seamstresses in New York's garment industry, as well as a taxi cab driver and a travel agent. Their testimonies emphasize their "struggle to survive" and to "find a better life" in the United States. Although one of the women notes that "life has not been easy for me in this country," most have improved their socioeconomic situation vis-à-vis their country of origin. The narrator comments that sending money back home is a common practice among Dominican immigrants.

Throughout the documentary, sociologist Ramona Hernández, who now heads the Dominican Studies Institute at the City University of New York, provides the film's main analytical perspective. She is critical of President Joaquín Balaguer's development policies in the Dominican Republic as well as the possibility of women's liberation through migration to the United States (see Hernández 2002). Later, Fritz features Guillermo Linares, the first Dominican elected as a New York City councilman in 1991, who describes his election as a "historic moment." Ruth Messinger, then President of the Manhattan borough, warmly welcomes Linares and the immigrant community he represents. In another scene, the film portrays a Dominican family sharing an abundant meal in their dining room. The children dance happily while the adults sit on the table. Overall, the documentary stresses the collective efforts and successes of New York's Dominican diaspora.

Both *Visa for a Dream* and *Ensnared Dreams* attempt to raise public awareness of the great difficulties that force thousands of Dominican women to migrate without U.S. government authorization. *Ensnared Dreams* illustrates those difficulties, especially extreme poverty and gender inequality, more vividly than *Visa for a Dream*. Both documentaries follow female migrants as they attempt to incorporate into the receiving societies. Despite countless hardships, most of the women interviewed have increased their economic independence by joining the paid labor force. Some have established more egalitarian relationships with their husbands and male companions in the United States. While not all have reached the American dream, many have made significant gains.

So why did Fritz entitle this film *Ensnared Dreams*? Perhaps the director was responding to critics who claimed that her earlier documentary represented migration as a viable alternative to widespread poverty in the Dominican Republic. Fritz was also taken to task because she had

privileged the positive aspects of women's experiences and neglected such problems as prostitution and labor exploitation (see Azize Vargas 1994; Negrón-Muntaner 1993). *Ensnared Dreams* directly addresses both issues, as well as sexual abuse of undocumented migrant women by human traffickers. Moreover, Dominicans in New York seem caught in a mirage of progress and wealth, while remaining one of the poorest ethnic groups in the city. At the time Fritz was filming there, Dominican women were rapidly shifting from the decaying manufacturing sector toward the low-paying service sector. The prospects of a better life looked increasingly elusive for lower-class immigrants from the Dominican Republic.

A Working-Class Dream Realized

After completing two documentaries on Dominican migration, Fritz turned her attention to the Puerto Rican and Mexican diasporas. *Puerto Ricans Here and There* depicts the little-known history of Puerto Rican migration to Lorain, Ohio. Here, as in her other documentaries, Fritz narrates the everyday experiences of ordinary men and women under exceptional circumstances. The protagonists of these stories—the Riveras, Arias, Torres, Rosarios, and Carrións—acquire almost heroic dimensions in their struggle for self-improvement. As in *Visa for a Dream* and *Ensnared Dreams*, Fritz weaves together personal and family anecdotes around the common thread of the diaspora. On this occasion, she focuses her ethnographic gaze on three generations of Puerto Ricans in a small industrial city of the Midwestern United States. Illustrated with evocative images from old movies, family albums, and newspaper clips, the informants' oral histories portray a collage of pioneering migrants who did not suddenly stop being Puerto Rican when they settled abroad. Even the younger members of the community, despite their difficulties to express themselves in Spanish, feel proud to be Puerto Rican. Bilingual and bicultural, they “maintain [their] Puerto Rican customs” in food, music, language, and religion. This documentary constitutes a heartfelt testimony of respect for common people who are capable of great accomplishments, such as prospering in a cold northern place dominated by steel factories.

In 1947, Lorain's National Tube Company, owned by United States Steel, began recruiting workers from the Island's central mountainous region, especially from the towns of Lares, Utuado, Caguas, and Jayuya. According to Eugenio Rivera, the community's unofficial historian, the selection process took into account the workers' physical condition, public conduct, racial composition, education, sex, and age (see Rivera 2005). The migrants' socioeconomic profile, together with postwar demand for industrial labor, helps to explain the relative success, sta-

bility, and community organization of Puerto Ricans in Lorain. By the 1960s, the city's Puerto Rican population had attained a comparatively high living standard, as measured by family incomes and educational levels. According to the 2005 American Community Survey, almost 17 percent (or 10,833 persons) of the city's population was of Puerto Rican origin (U.S. Census Bureau 2007).

The basic question posed by Fritz's documentary is why Puerto Ricans incorporated more successfully in Lorain than in larger cities such as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. At first sight, the migrants' racial composition was a key factor. Most of the video's interviewees are light-skinned and few have visible signs of African origin. According to the 2000 census, nearly 40 percent of all Hispanics in Lorain classified themselves as white, almost 45 percent as "some other race," about 12 percent as "two or more races," and less than 4 percent as black (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). As suggested before, the low proportion of Afro-Puerto Ricans reflects selective labor recruitment by skin color and region of origin. Nonetheless, Fritz's informants vigorously denounce an anti-Puerto Rican campaign mounted by the *Lorain Journal* and the local police during the 1950s. "They didn't want us," stated one informant. A police lieutenant persecuted the newcomers and did not allow them to congregate in public. As in other parts of the United States, Puerto Ricans in Lorain suffered stigmatization, at least during the first two decades of settlement. Apparently, many of those ethnic barriers crumbled down over time.

Puerto Ricans Here and There underlines another factor that favored the immigrants' swift socioeconomic adaptation: the prosperity of the host community, dominated by two large corporations—U.S. Steel and the Ford Motor Company. Until the mid-1970s, these companies provided a stable source of well-paid and unionized jobs for thousands of factory workers, including Puerto Ricans. On that basis, many residents bought and renovated their homes, especially in South Lorain, a neighborhood close to the steel factory. *Puerto Ricans Here and There* pans several newly painted, two-storied dwellings, with ample gardens and back yards, in which working-class families lived. Such housing conditions contrast sharply with the dilapidated inner-city *barrios*, which concentrate much of the Latino population in the United States. In Lorain, most Puerto Ricans escaped the vicious circle of poverty, racial segregation, and social marginality. Many managed to return to the Island and some retired there.

Furthermore, Fritz highlights the multiple organizing efforts by Puerto Ricans in Lorain. Since 1952, the Chapel of the Sacred Heart has been one of the principal centers of the predominantly Catholic community. Other self-help organizations mentioned in the documentary include

the Club Benéfico Estrella de Borinquen, El Hogar Puertorriqueño, the Centro de Servicios Sociales, and the Coalition for Hispanic Issues and Progress. These voluntary associations helped to articulate the collective needs and interests of Puerto Ricans in Lorain. Above all, they served to promote a strong sense of shared identity between Puerto Ricans “here” (in the mainland) and “there” (on the Island). Fritz painstakingly documents the persistence of Island traditions in Lorain, such as freezing *sofrito* (condiment), frying *bacalaítos* (codfish fritters), playing dominoes, singing *aguinaldos* (Christmas carols), playing the *cuatro* (a smaller Creole version of the guitar), and waving the Puerto Rican flag. The film opens and ends with a group of Lorain Puerto Ricans singing nostalgically about their homeland.

According to Fritz, the last decisive factor in Puerto Ricans’ adaptation to Lorain was their growing political participation. Such participation began when Tomás Arias became the first Puerto Rican candidate for assemblyman in the late 1950s and Evelio Rosario was elected to the Lorain City Council in 1963. As several informants proudly claim, Puerto Ricans have acquired a high degree of representation in several spheres of local politics, including the Lorain Board of Education, Board of Elections, and Police. Compared to other Puerto Rican populations in the United States, Lorain’s has had a larger impact on municipal affairs, partly due to its geographic concentration in some electoral districts. Its political influence is comparable to that of Puerto Ricans in Hartford, Connecticut.

Despite its social, economic, and political achievements, Lorain’s Puerto Rican community faces several challenges. With the deterioration of the steel and automobile industries, employment opportunities in the area have shrunk. Constant personnel cuts have hurt working-class families which relied on those industries for their sustenance. In 1997, for example, the Ford Motor Company eliminated 1,800 jobs from its assembling plant in Lorain. The rise of a postindustrial economy has undermined the infrastructure of “one of the wealthiest Latino communities anywhere in the United States,” as the Democratic activist Richard Romero boasts in the documentary. Under such adverse conditions, the old guard worries about the future of young Puerto Ricans in Lorain. Attending Harvard University, as two of the informants hope, requires much personal effort, family support, and material investment. (Eugenio Rivera’s daughter, Petra, later graduated *Magna Cum Laude* from Harvard.) The third generation of Puerto Ricans born and raised in Lorain may not be able to repeat their parents and grandparents’ accomplishments, at least not in Lorain. Many will have to migrate anew to Florida or Texas, or return to the Island, looking for better jobs and living conditions. Like thousands of their compatriots, many of Lorain’s Puerto Rican residents will circulate incessantly between the Island and the mainland.

Interethnic Fissures in the American Dream

In *Puerto Ricans Here and There*, Mexicans were briefly mentioned as friendly neighbors and shop owners in Lorain. In *The American Dream*, Fritz appraises the complex relations between two of the largest Latino groups in New York City, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. The main theme is interwoven through powerful visual images and interviews with community leaders, politicians, artists, writers, scholars, and ordinary migrants, as well as a constant musical background of popular genres such as *plena*, *bomba*, salsa, and rap. Thus, the film raises, in a sensitive and open manner, the issue of how recent Mexican immigration has affected the more established Puerto Rican community, especially in Spanish Harlem and the South Bronx; the lack of social integration between the two Latino groups; and the newcomers' limited access to political power and public services. (For an academic treatment, see Dávila 2004, especially chapter 5.) The director approaches these delicate subjects with an evident sympathy toward her interviewees, both Puerto Rican and Mexican. The *American Dream* is an eloquent, thought-provoking, and well-researched testimonial of every immigrant group's hope to forge a better future for themselves and their children. Appropriately, the film's last image is a young girl holding a banner that reads, "It's our American dream too."

Fritz's documentary begins with a brief visual sequence, along with a musical background, that provides basic statistical data on Hispanics in the United States. Then it compiles several scenes of New York's Puerto Rican Day Parade, where the Island's national flag figures prominently. Contrary to the other films reviewed here, this one relies on well-known Puerto Rican authors and artists in New York, including Arlene Dávila, Marcos Dimas, Juan Flores, Miriam Jiménez-Román, Tato Laviera, Félix Matos, and Raquel Z. Rivera. Other interviewees include Adolfo Carrión, the Puerto Rican President of the Bronx County; Robert Smith, a sociologist who specializes in Mexican migration to New York; the Director of the Head Start Project in East Harlem; a Puerto Rican musician and a poet at the Centro Cultural Julia de Burgos; the Mexican President of the Asociación Tepeyac; the Mexican consul in New York; two Mexican-American legislators from California; and several Mexican immigrants, especially from Puebla, including some who work as seamstresses in New York's sweatshops.

The first half of *The American Dream* sketches the history of the Puerto Rican diaspora in New York City, while the second half concentrates on the contemporary influx of Mexicans. As Flores argues, Puerto Ricans established the city's bilingual infrastructure that later attracted immigrants from other Latin American countries. Several informants

mention the demographic sea changes in New York's Latino population, particularly the increasing number of Dominicans and Mexicans. These transformations have been especially contentious in El Barrio, the traditionally Puerto Rican enclave of East Harlem. During the last two decades, newly arrived Mexicans have replaced Puerto Ricans who have moved out of that inner-city neighborhood. In the year 2006, only 35 percent of El Barrio's residents were Puerto Rican. Even El Museo del Barrio, a community institution founded by Puerto Ricans, is now headed by a Mexican curator and has redefined its mission to promote Latino and Latin American art.

Fritz's basic concern is to understand the growing tensions between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. As a *New York Times* article noted, the two groups have "little but language in common" (Feuer 2003). According to several informants, racial and class distinctions compound cultural discrepancies between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. Jiménez-Román attributes the conflicts to the "abysmal ignorance" of each other's cultures. Dávila thinks that they stem largely from racial differences between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. According to Flores, Mexican immigrants in New York constitute a "subproletariat" in the low-wage service sector, including delivery boys, restaurant workers, and street cleaners. According to Carrión, Mexicans in New York now face the same challenges that Puerto Ricans faced two decades ago, among them lack of power, access to jobs, education, and health care. In her last series of interviews, Fritz asks what can be done to improve the lot of New York's Mexican population. The main response is that the immigrants must organize themselves, mobilize as a community, and empower themselves through voting.

The American Dream poses the thorny question of whether Latinization is bringing together people from various Latin American countries in the United States. Here as in the first two documentaries under review, Fritz suggests that Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Dominicans remain deeply split by legal status, cultural practices, and mutual stereotypes. Many members of these groups perceive each other in largely negative ways. For instance, some of the Puerto Ricans interviewed in New York characterize Mexicans of rural origins as "more conservative" than themselves. That statement seems like a polite reflection of much deeper antagonisms. One woman holds that "there is more affinity between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans." Yet, in Puerto Rico, Dominicans are often discriminated because of their foreign "accent," skin color, undocumented status, and lower class. Linguistic and cultural similarities do not shield immigrants from prejudice and discrimination by established residents. Unfortunately, interethnic rivalry often prevails over solidarity among Latinos in New York, San Juan, and elsewhere.

Conclusion

The massive displacement of people to the United States and other metropolitan countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands is one of the main social forces affecting the contemporary Caribbean. At the same time, several population flows continue to take place within the region itself, such as Dominicans to Puerto Rico and Haitians to the Dominican Republic. Numerous social scientists have established the causes and consequences of the Caribbean diaspora, which have been dramatized in literary and artistic works. Since the end of World War II, millions of citizens have moved abroad in order to move up the socioeconomic ladder, because of limited opportunities at home. Although many have not achieved their goals, most have secured employment, higher wages, and better working conditions in the receiving societies. Some have fulfilled their dream of going back home after long periods of living elsewhere.

Through her films, Sonia Fritz has given voice to the shared aspirations and modest gains of ordinary Caribbean migrants, especially women. She has scrutinized why poor people are expelled from their home countries and how they struggle to advance in their new places of residence, despite their disadvantages as largely lower-class, racialized minorities, often with an undocumented status. One of the recurrent themes of Fritz's work is to insist on the human rights and worth of all migrants, regardless of their legal situation in the United States. To convey her message, Fritz has plied several tools of her trade, such as interviewing common citizens and academic experts, blending images of sending and receiving societies, and using popular music to accompany her narrative sequences.

Fritz's films raise key questions for further reflection. What are the broader causes and consequences of the Caribbean exodus? What are the human costs and benefits of massive migration, both for the individuals involved and for their places of birth? How do diasporic people nurture their national identity, even when living abroad for decades? Why do women suffer disproportionately from the challenges of settling in another country? Why do Caribbean migrants do better in some places than others? What are the best ways to organize an immigrant community to combat exclusion from the host society? How can Latinos overcome their differences in the United States? Such questions have multiple theoretical and practical implications, which Fritz's work examines in entertaining, instructive, compassionate, and accessible ways. I enthusiastically recommend her documentaries on Caribbean migrations to teachers, students, and librarians interested in developing audiovisual resources on the topic.

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