

Activity Two: Dominican Republic

VISA FOR A DREAM

International migration is a multifaceted process involving economic, political, and sociocultural factors. The migration process is dynamic and ever evolving.

—Sherri Grasmuck and Patricia R. Pessar, *Between Two Islands*, p. 3.



International migration is not determined simply by the whimsical decision of individuals choosing to leave their communities to seek a better life in another community. Rather, the movements of peoples are shaped and influenced by forces at the international, national, and local level. There isn't a simple answer to the question, why do Dominicans leave the Dominican Republic? Today the person who decides to board a *yola* (a small boat) and leave for the United States, is part of a process that can be traced back to the period of Dominican history when the United States had a great deal of influence in that country.¹

The social networks that immigrants create maintain the continued migrations. A person aboard a *yola* may be headed to New York where a cousin has a job waiting. The networks created by the first immigrants in a receiving community provide services that support new immigrants.

Three periods in the recent history of the Dominican Republic have had an impact on the process of migration and have shaped the waves of migration. The first period began with the assassination of the dictator Trujillo in 1961, who had dominated the political arena for 31 years. Following his assassination, an exodus from the island occurred because of the uncertainty of who would be in power, who would have control of resources, and who had been allied with Trujillo. In 1965, the United States began a military occupation of the island. The United States was afraid that the Dominican Republic would become another Cuba. The United States eased travel policies increasing the numbers of Dominicans who could obtain visas.

The second period, 1966 to 1978, saw the same numbers of Dominicans leaving the country for New York as during the first immigration wave. During this period high levels of unemployment, underemployment, and political repression in the Dominican Republic contributed to the migration of Dominicans. By this time, the first waves of Dominicans had settled in the New York and New Jersey areas, creating communities that assist new immigrants.

During the third period, 1978 to 1986, inflation, the rise in the value of the dollar, and the decline in Dominican wages encouraged migration from the Dominican Republic. Increased opportunities for higher education on the island had produced a highly educated group of people, but the number of jobs to absorb these professionals did not increase. A

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growing awareness of what existed outside of the country and what was available in the United States were added motivational factors to leave the island.

Bodegas (small grocery stores), the sound of *merengue* (style of dance music originally from the Dominican Republic), and the smell of *sancocho* (a typical Dominican dish) flavor the streets—not only of Santo Domingo but of Washington Heights in New York, of Lawrence in Massachusetts, and of Miami in Florida. The Dominican communities in the United States illustrate the power of the social networks that facilitate migration. For example, a restructuring of the economy of New York City in the 1970s saw a rise of immigrant entrepreneurs in the industrial sector.² The owners of these small businesses relied on a cheap work force that they obtained by sponsoring undocumented workers.

Legal immigration from the Dominican Republic to the United States still remains high, but each year the numbers of undocumented immigrants increases. Some overstay their visas, and others attempt to enter through Puerto Rico by crossing the narrow stretch of ocean between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic known as the Mona Passage in small boats, *yolas*.

Outline of Activity

Students listen to a song called “Visa for a Dream” which describes the sentiments of Dominicans waiting in line at the United States Consulate to obtain a visa. It also touches on how Dominicans, knowing that consulate officials prefer to grant tourist visas to those who are employed and who thereby have an incentive to return, will falsify records to obtain this ticket into the United States. Three short articles give students more information about the methods used to enter the United States illegally through Puerto Rico and about some of the accidents that have occurred in the attempts to cross. The students perform a skit to illustrate to the entire class the reasons people have for leaving the Dominican Republic.

Extension Questions

1. How do people in the Dominican Republic and in other countries get information about the United States?
2. What perceptions do people in other countries have about life in the United States? How do television and radio affect migration from the Dominican Republic to the United States?
3. Discuss other times and places in which conditions like these were present. Have you studied other countries that experienced migration patterns similar to the ones in the Dominican Republic?

Related Issues

- Immigration laws in the United States
- Dominican drug connection
- Immigrant cities: New York, Miami, and Los Angeles
- International laws regarding refugees found on the high seas

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Reference Materials

- Ferguson, James. *The Dominican Republic: Beyond the Lighthouse*. London: Latin America Bureau Ltd., 1992.
- Georges, Eugenia. *The Making of a Transnational Community: Migration, Development, and Cultural Change in the Dominican Republic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- Grasmuck, Sherri, and Patricia R. Pessar. *Between Two Islands: Dominican International Migration*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Endnotes

- ¹Sherri Grasmuck and Patricia R. Pesar, *Between Two Islands: Dominican International Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 19.
- ²*Ibid.* 163.

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VISA FOR A DREAM ACTIVITY CARD

People wishing to enter the United States from another country have to apply for a visa from a United States Consulate, an office which is usually located in the capital of their country. A visa grants permission to go to the United States. There are different types of visas—tourist, student, and work visas. These visas show the custom officials in an airport that the person has permission to enter the United States. Depending on the type of visa the person is applying for, he or she will have to present certain papers to the officials at the Consulate. These documents could be statements that they are not criminals, that they are healthy, or that they are a student wanting to study at a university in the United States. Some people want to get into the United States so much that they will get false documents.

Between 1961 and 1990, 493,900 people from the Dominican Republic came to the United States legally. Many other Dominicans have entered the United States illegally. Notice on the map how close the Dominican Republic is to Puerto Rico. Some Dominicans cross on boats to Puerto Rico, from where they try to enter the United States.

Juan Luis Guerra, a songwriter from the Dominican Republic, is popular in Latin America. The song you will be listening to is an example of a merengue, a dance song. In this song, he describes the situation that exists in the Dominican Republic with people seeking visas to go to the United States.

Listen carefully to the entire song, following along with the lyrics provided. Read the articles that are included. Discuss the following questions with your group:

1. Why do the people in the song and in the articles want to travel to the United States?
2. What do these people know about the United States? How do they find out about life in the United States? How does this information influence their decision to leave the island?
3. What dreams might these people have that they would risk their lives?
4. What factors contribute to migration?

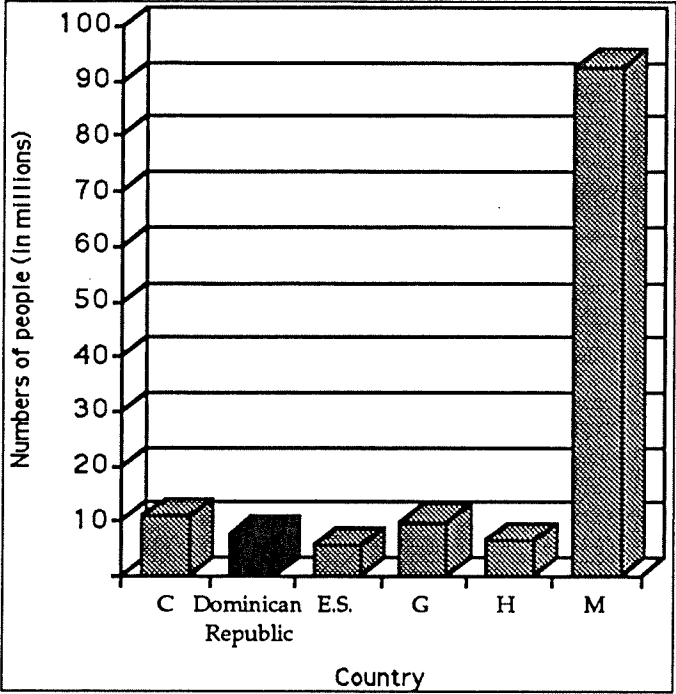
GROUP TASK

As a group, write a skit that shows the feelings and the dreams a group of people might have while standing in line waiting to obtain their visa to enter the United States. In addition to the people standing in line, another role to include could be the person who accepts or rejects visa applications. Make sure all the people applying have reasons and the necessary documents.

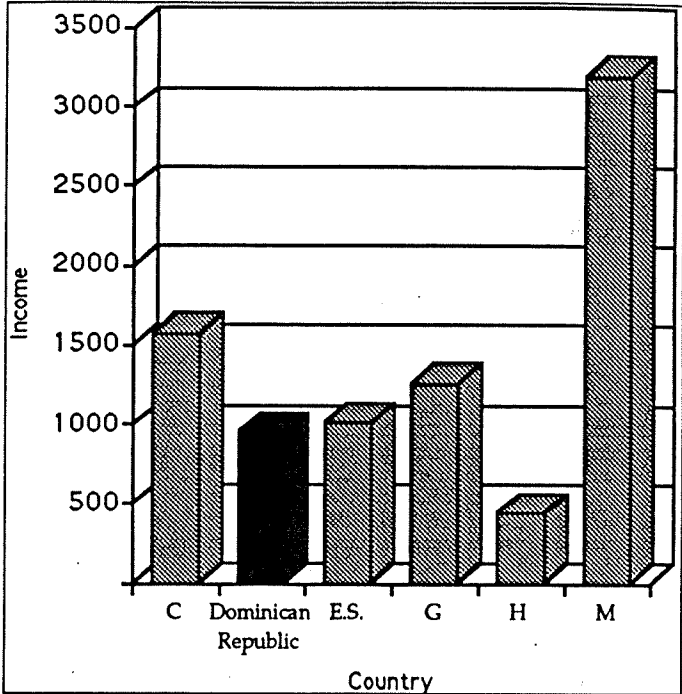
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VISA FOR A DREAM
DATA AND MAP CARD

POPULATION



PER CAPITA INCOME



MAP OF DOMINICAN REPUBLIC



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VISA FOR A DREAM RESOURCE CARD 1 (THIS ONE IS RECORDED)

Visa for a Dream

It was 5 in the morning,
a theology student and a worker,
with a thousand solvency papers
that don't allow them to be honest.

It was 7 in the morning,
and one by one to the slaughter house.
Everyone has their price.
Looking for a visa for a dream.

The sun is burning their most inner self;
a consolation form with a 2x4
photograph that melts in the silence.

It was 9 in the morning, in the
Dominican Republic,
on January 8th, with a patience that ends because
there are no more visas for a dream.

Looking for a visa for a dream
Looking for a visa of cement and lime
and who will find me in the asphalt.
Looking for a visa for a dream
Looking for a visa, the reason to be
Looking for a visa not to return
Looking for a visa, necessity
Looking for a visa, that life gives me
Looking for a visa, a hit of power
Looking for a visa, what more can I do
Looking for a visa, to be shipwrecked
Looking for a visa, in the afternoon in the sea.

Visa para un sueño

Era las cinco en la mañana,
un seminarista y un obrero,
con mil papeles de solvencia,
que no le dan para ser sincero.

Era las siete en la mañana,
y uno por uno al matadero.
Pues cada cual tiene su precio.
Buscando visa para un sueño.

El sol quemandoles la entraña,
un formulario de consuelo,
con una foto dos por cuatro
que se derite en el silencio.

Era las nueve en la mañana,
Santo Domingo, 8 de enero
con la paciencia que se acaba
pues, ya no hay visa para un sueño.

Buscando visa de cemento y cal y en el asfalto
quien me va a encontrar
Buscando visa para un sueño
Buscando visa, la razón de ser
Buscando visa, para no volver
Buscando visa, la necesidad
Buscando visa, que la vida me da
Buscando visa, golpe de poder
Buscando visa, qué más puedo hacer
Buscando visa, para naufragar
Buscando visa, tarde de la mar.

(The sound of a helicopter and a voice saying: "Climb onto the ladder, get out of the water!")

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VISA FOR A DREAM
RESOURCE CARD 2

NEW YORK TIMES

Excerpts from *Caribbean Exodus: U.S. Is Constant Magnet*
by Howard W. French
May 6, 1992

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic — Before dawn on many days, in a ritual repeated across the Caribbean, long lines of people anxious to build new lives in the United States begin forming outside the high white walls of the American Consulate here.

Inevitably, many fail to clear the barrier before the building's sprawling courtyard is filled and no new applicants are admitted. But for those turned away there are touts outside buzzing like eager ticket scalpers, offering illicit passage aboard small boats to Puerto Rico, the perilous first stop for many on the way to New York or Miami.

"You'll never get the visa," said a recruiter who identified himself as A.A., explaining that he had adopted the initials of American Airlines to help drum up business. "Don't be an idiot. Ride with us and your chances are much better."

Scenes like this occur daily throughout the Caribbean, a place affected perhaps more than any other by the gravitational pull of the United States.

Hit by hard economic times and seduced more than ever by influences like mass tourism and satellite television, this region of 15 independent countries and a smattering of dependencies of the United States and European countries, with a total population of only about 33 million, has been consistently exporting more of its people in percentage terms than any other area of the world.

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VISA FOR A DREAM
RESOURCE CARD 3

NEW YORK TIMES

Excerpts from 5 Drown as Boat with Dominicans Capsizes
April 20, 1991

BOQUERON, P.R., April 19 (AP)— At least five people drowned today when a 20-foot motorboat loaded with more than 70 Dominicans capsized and sank in rough seas off the coast of this small western Puerto Rican port.

A police rescue boat that hurried to the scene, eight miles from Boqueron, overturned when survivors caused it to rock by clinging desperately to its side. But both police officers aboard were later rescued, and it did not appear that any of the casualties has resulted from this second accident.

The police said passengers on the sunken vessel were Dominicans who had been trying to enter Puerto Rico without immigration papers. Scores of people fleeing poverty in the Dominican Republic drown each year trying to ride flimsy boats across the hazardous 90-mile trip across Mona Passage, separating their homeland from Puerto Rico.

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VISA FOR A DREAM
RESOURCE CARD 4

NEW YORK TIMES

Excerpts from *Brief Voyage to a Better Life, or a Watery Death*
by Howard W. French
July 2, 1990

Higüey, Dominican Republic— For José Castillo and his small band of friends, a shimmering life of comfort and fast money lies just across the narrow, perilous strait that separates this country from Puerto Rico.

"My family tells me I am crazy," said Mr. Castillo, a stocky, fast-talking 28-year-old truck driver. "But life is easier in Puerto Rico. Those who return say there are plenty of dollars over there."

"I think about the danger of the *yolas*, how they are overloaded and take on water," he said, referring to the wooden boats, while he leaned on his motorbike in the shade. "But I think of a better life, too."

The lure to go is made stronger at Boca de Yuma and other places in the east by the clear reception of Puerto Rico's numerous radio and television stations, which serve up tempting images of material abundance and cosmopolitan sophistication that many find hard to resist.

Juan Julio Santana, 30, a fisherman, repainted his boat in bright reds and greens as he talked about the voyagers. "We have an idea why people go," he said. "There is nothing but misery in this place. No work, no opportunity, not even electricity."

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VISA FOR A DREAM INDIVIDUAL REPORT

NAME _____

1. Why do people leave the Dominican Republic?

2. Describe some factors that influence people to migrate.