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The 2020 Boston Latino International Film Festival: Continuing the fight for social justice virtually

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Amidst violent police killings of people of colour, a global health pandemic, and a grassroots surge in activism calling for social justice in the US and abroad, the Boston Latino International Film Festival (BLIFF) was more crucial than ever in 2020. Launching virtually from 23-27 September 2020, the community festival continued with its nearly twenty-year commitment: ‘using the power of film to break stereotypes, bring cultures and communities together and reveal the complex issues that affect the Latinx community in the United States, Latin America and Spain’.[1] This pledge points to on-going multi-pronged efforts of cultural institutions using art broadly, and in this case film specifically, to expose, and challenge the deep inequalities and systematic violence in the US and beyond while fostering the slow and constant work of social change.

Originally created in the wake of 11 September 2001, this festival is well-versed in rising out of tragedy and continues to use film to share in global and local humanity beyond racialised stereotypes. Given this background, it came as no surprise that BLIFF Executive Director Sabrina Avilés and their team decided to forge ahead with the festival, albeit virtually, during the 2020 global pandemic to offer a sense of continuity in challenging times to their surrounding community. BLIFF is part of Boston’s cultural landscape in a city that is often overlooked in terms of its diversity. With substantial populations of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Haitians, Brazilians, and a smaller number of Cubans, among many other ethnic and racial groups, BLIFF is attuned to the many people that make up the Boston area and to fostering local/transnational connections through the small festival. Small festivals

such as BLIFF play an important role in both serving their community's need for representation as well as contributing to the field of filmmaking. As film festival scholar Roya Rastegar explains, 'community-based festivals are like incubator labs, places that nourish ... filmmakers to develop their voices in dialogue with eager audiences from specific communities who are hungry for images and stories that present a different vision of the world (and themselves) than that of a dominant order of representation'.[2]

Annually, the festival moves throughout the Boston area with various screenings at the Boston Public Library, Northeastern University, Emerson College, Harvard University, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, to name a few. Partnering with these institutions, the festival makes private forums public spaces, albeit temporarily echoing Bourdieu's concepts of the cultural field and capital made up of 'interactions between institutions, rules, and practices (22)'.[3] The de-centred showings encourage audiences to enter spaces where not all Bostonians feel at home while also bringing contemporary and dynamic dialogue to sites associated with past archives. While a key part of BLIFF's exhibition practice, the virtual festival made these spatial exchanges impossible.

To attract audiences, the 2020 festival offered films at a reduced \$5-10 price per film for 24-hour streaming access through the online Eventive platform. Despite the virtual exhibition, with a less-than-intuitive streaming platform, BLIFF continued to have full-length fictional film, documentary, and short film juried competitions, as well as an opportunity for viewers to vote directly for the audience prize. In addition, the festival held post-show virtual question and answer sessions with the filmmakers and audiences.

Amidst the uncertainties of the pandemic, I asked BLIFF's Executive Director, Sabrina Avilés, about the 2020 festival theme, and she explained that this year the festival did not have one. Instead, she said the 2020 pandemic

has reshaped and redefined who we are as a people and as a nation. These 2020 films have the power to generate discussion and make a difference in our society, by bringing relevant topics to the forefront; they raise awareness of injustices being committed and demand our attention to listen, reflect, stand up and speak out.[4]

Despite not having an official theme, I would argue that there was a reoccurring focus that surfaced throughout the programming: capturing systemic struggles hidden in plain sight before COVID-19. These films examine elder residential facilities (*El Agente topo / The Mole Agent*, 2020), over-night child care centres (*Through the Night*, 2020), stateless people facing institutionalised

racism (*Apátrida / Stateless*, 2020), and the fight for recovery from natural disasters coupled with neo-colonialism (*Landfall*, 2020). The films appeared to create an active refusal of the erasure of these overlooked stories. Watching them left me with one question: how are these communities surviving during COVID-19?

The programming for the 2020 festival showed a commitment to featuring diverse voices both in front of and behind the camera. In the exceptionally gendered and racialised world of film, female-identifying and Latinx directors continually face abysmal representation in US films with strong distribution. A National Association of Latino Independent Producers and University of Southern California partnered study on Latinx filmmaking in Hollywood reveals that from 2007 to 2018 there was only one Latina director and three male Latino directors amongst the top-grossing 1,200 films in the US.[5] BLIFF's programming consciously challenges those numbers annually: for 2020 Latinx/Latin American female-identifying directors directed over half of the festival's program and Latinx/Latin American non-female-identifying directors directed the remaining works. The 2020 festival took film representation a step beyond its film selections, to create an open panel titled 'The Gaps in Representation' free to audiences through livestream on Facebook on 26 September. Moderated by Cristina Kotz Cornejo, the panelists – filmmaker Paloma Valenzuela, filmmaker Alecia Orsini, and film critic Monica Castillo – examined the recent film industry's proposal for inclusivity in light of the fight against social injustices for 2020. They debated if the film industry's actions would live up to their recent proposals and if 'these initiatives inspire filmmakers and executives to reflect on how they hire and manage their own teams?'[6] This commitment to diversity in its many forms explicitly guides audiences to think about the less visible professionals that shape the films on screen. A festival's programming can also provide communities with opportunities to question who makes the films we see while contemplating the possible voices missing from the program.

While some of the diverse film programming included works far from Boston-area audiences such as from Argentina (*Lucía*, 2020) and Chile (*The Mole Agent*, 2020; *Ema*, 2019), it more often included works with deep local connections. Reflecting close ties to communities in the metro area, the program included Cecilia Aldarondo's 2020 documentary *Landfall* on post-hurricane María Puerto Rico, Haitian director Michèle Stephenson *Apátrida* (*Stateless*, 2020), as well as Dominican director Paula Cury Melo's *A la Deriva*

(*Adrift*, 2019). Even more local, the programming included showings of shorts such as Latinx film *Boston Latin Quarter* (Mónica Cohen, 2019) among others.

Winning the 2020 BLIFF Best Documentary award, Cecilia Aldarondo's film *Landfall* combines breath-taking cinematography with a poignant look at Puerto Rico since Hurricane María in 2017. The camera artistically crosses the island to document the layers of devastation that the hurricane caused, and the underlying debt crisis mostly ignored by continental US media. With the Trump administration's blatant disrespect of Puerto Rico's people, the camera connects these insulting gestures with centuries of abuse and abandonment. As one woman in the film notes, 'the real disaster ... came after María because of the lack of action of the government'.^[7] Through an influx of US companies eager to take advantage of the natural disaster, coupled with venture capitalists arriving to convince islanders of cryptocurrency as a new promised land, the documentary reveals a continuation of attempts of domination and oppression. Weaving the past with the present, *Landfall* created a majestic archive against invisibility and neglect – rooting Puerto Rican agency in resistance and the island's future. Given the decades-long Puerto Rican population that has shaped the greater Boston area, coupled with the 7,000 Puerto Rican people who escaped the hurricane and were living in temporary housing in Boston in 2017, this film was crucial for BLIFF audiences.

Also working against invisibility is Michèle Stephenson's powerful 2020 film *Apátrida* (*Stateless*) which won the best documentary BLIFF audience prize. *Apátrida* examines the Dominican government's 2013 legislation stripping citizenship from people born in the Dominican Republic of Haitian parents. This 2013 legislation officially left 200,000 people stateless and continues to function retroactively to 1929. Through separate storylines, the camera connects the past with the present showing this law as a continuation of Dominican dictator Trujillo's attempt at ethnic extermination of Haitians decades before. Instead of a physical Haitian massacre, the film documents an ethnic erasing of their identities via paper. Through a second storyline, the camera follows Dominican-born bilingual Haitian-Dominican lawyer, activist, and politician, Rosa Iris, who fights against this law. The audience accompanies her as she helps her Dominican-born cousin Juan to legally return to live in the Dominican Republic and re-join his children. Despite his Dominican birth to a Dominican father and Haitian mother, Juan loses his battle to regain his Dominican citizenship, forcing him to leave his children behind and return to Haiti.

Apátrida offers an otherwise unimaginable dialogue between Dominican and Haitian people beyond geographic and linguistic borders. This is a film where we see the unique positioning of some documentaries in their relationship with legal frameworks as ‘a platform for the vindication of rights, to launch complaints in the public sphere’.[8] Sharing a Haitian point of view of these racialised injustices in Spanish with English subtitles allows the film to serve as a political intervention in the Caribbean and in Boston itself – a city that is home to significantly large Dominican and Haitian communities. As festival scholar Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong explains, ‘film festivals provide audiences and sites for debate’, as such Boston could have served to re-examine this legalised racism among the communities themselves.[9] Yet, the *Apátrida* virtual post-screening sessions limit the multiple entry organic audience comments which are central to the festival experience.

In the post-screening session, *Apátrida* director Michèle Stephenson, shared that the Spanish-language film from a Haitian perspective on Dominican law was meant to create a previously non-existent dialogue. Despite traveling the international cinema festival circuit, as of September 2020 the film had yet to premiere in Haiti or the Dominican Republic. Stephenson explained that, while created for debate, she feared an in-person screening if the film were ever shown on the island.

Building on the unwritten theme of fighting against erasure, Chile’s quiet and at times humorous narrative documentary *El Agente topo (The Mole Agent)* offers a look into a Santiago elder home. Hired by a concerned daughter of one of the elder residents, the 80-year-old Sergio is sent to inquire about suspected abuse. The film highlights that the residents’ greatest threat is not the suspected mistreatment within the home but instead is elder isolation. This film’s quirky exploration of elder isolation is even sharper through a COVID-19 lens, where these residences have faced high mortality rates as well as even more profound loneliness.

A final standout at BLIFF was the documentary short *Adrift (A la Deriva)*, (2019) by Dominican director Paula Cury Melo. In thirteen minutes yet another epidemic upstaged by the current COVID-19-crisis emerges: pregnancy in the Dominican Republic. In a country without a separation of church and state, sexual education is absent from school and all forms of abortion are illegal. Through informal interviews, women as young as eleven years old look into the camera while blaming themselves for ‘failing’ by getting pregnant.[10] It is these women alone that contemplate what they could

have done better which makes the larger systematic failures even more blatant to audiences, leaving young Dominican women paying for the state's inadequacies for the rest of their lives.

While these films challenge multiple layers of racialised, gendered, and economic epidemics in the current climate, the move to the online platform did not equate with increased access for small and community-based film festivals such as BLIFF. Instead, the virtual platform meant competing in an already crowded streaming market that was not an equal playing field. BLIFF joined an international film festival movement lobbying for the use of geo-blocking technologies during the pandemic, 'to protect the commercial potential of the films, and the ability of other festivals to stage local premieres'.^[11] Restricting access to film showings based on location attempts to foster fairness in a streaming festival landscape. Further complicating geo-blocking, Avilés shares

we were also competing with 12 other Latino film festivals who decided to host their festivals during Hispanic Heritage Month after postponing them earlier in the year. And many did not geo-block their films. So, this definitely presented a challenge to us this year.^[12]

Also contributing to lower sales was BLIFF audiences' significant screen fatigue after seven months in the pandemic.

BLIFF 2020 resulted in a paradox with films this year resonating in particular ways because of the pandemic – enabling a transnational dialogue beyond geographical boundaries, and refracting diverse forms of crises. However, annually relying on in-person ticket sales, events, and partnerships, the festival directly suffered from COVID-19 closures, as well as the inequalities of a virtual landscape. In its next offering, the festival will continue its work connecting with local communities and their diasporas, while providing deliberate spaces for debate in an on-going fight for social justice.

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Notes

- [1] Boston Latino International Film Festival 2020.
- [2] Rastegar 2016, p. 182.
- [3] Webb 2002.
- [4] Avilés, personal communication with the author, October 2020.
- [5] Smith 2019.
- [6] 'Livestream' 2020.
- [7] Aldarondo 2020 (author's translation from Spanish to English).
- [8] Arenillas & Furtado 2019, p. 5.
- [9] Wong 2011, p. 188.
- [10] Cury Melo 2019 (author's translation from Spanish to English).
- [11] Barraclough 2020.
- [12] Avilés, personal communication with the author, October 2020.