

Transcript for Episode with Ramón Rivera-Moret

SPEAKERS

Joe Aguilar, John Galante, Ramón Rivera-Moret

John Galante

Hi, I'm John Galante, I'm a historian of Latin America who specializes in migration and relations between South America and southern Europe. I also teach history and global studies at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, otherwise known as WPI.

Joe Aguilar

And I'm Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer. I specialize in speculative fiction and Chicano literature. I also teach creative writing and literature at WPI.

John Galante

And you are listening to *Crossing Fronteras*.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

ORIGINS AS A FILMMAKER; EDUCATION IN PARIS; PHILOSOPHY

John Galante

And today we have with us Ramon Rivera Moret, a Puerto Rican filmmaker based in New York. He's also a professor of film at the Rhode Island School of Design, RISD as it's more often known, I think. Ramón, thank you very much for joining us today.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Thank you for having me.

John Galante

So I think we're gonna have a really wide ranging discussion today about film, about your work, about your trajectory as a filmmaker. How do you sort of think of yourself as a filmmaker, like, what type of filmmaker so you consider yourself to be? What's particular to your view, your approach to film and that sort of thing?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Well, I can maybe do can do two things, maybe start by, you know, how I kind of became a filmmaker, or the kind of film education that I had. And then also, the kind of project that I'm doing now. And I think that might tell you.

So I went to film school in Paris. And, and it was a really interesting place. It was, it was, it was at the University of Paris 8. And that was a campus of University of Paris that was, that was established after May 68. And was kind of addressing the issues of May 68. So it kind of brought in many of the intellectuals that were kind of active at that time. And by the time I was there, May 68 was history, but but the campus had that, that energy in it, and, and the department was run by the editors, and the

critic, critics of *Cahier du Cinema*, the magazine that had been really, really influential in the in the 50s, and 60s, kind of bringing a kind of renewal of filmmaking, of film form.

And I think that that kind of really influenced me, that idea that film was something to be thought out, you know, to kind of be reinvented. And there was a kind of political component to it, and a kind of philosophical component to film. So I think that that was really part of my my education.

And then there was the city of Paris, which then it had, you could step into the streets and there will be hundreds of films being shown. And these were films from all over the world, you know, then and, and so there will be films from India, from Japan, from countries in Africa, Mali, Burkina Faso, Latin America, and the US, you know, Hollywood blockbusters. There was, everything was there. And then on top of that, there will be you know films from the history of cinema. And also there will be John Ford westerns and Ernst Lubitsch comedies, and there will be a line around the block to come and see these films.

And so not only the history of cinema was alive, but the whole world of cinema was was there. And for me, what was interesting is that, that seeing all those films, there was no single way of making a movie. You know, all of these different people in different cultures, they're making movies and telling stories in different ways. And and that was to me part of also of my kind of my learning film filmmaking, you know, that there was no standard ways or no format. For me, there were no standard form, but rather, it was something that you invented based on the things that you were addressing the way you were addressing the world.

John Galante

Wow, I didn't know that. And that's super interesting. I mean, I have a few questions about that kind of cinematic milieu, if you will, or even the city itself. What was it like to kind of walk the streets to maybe go past an art house or see the big, you know, theater or to look through maybe the newspaper and see what was playing? I mean, it sounds like outside of the classroom, that must have been an incredible experience and an education.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

It was it was it was. For me, it was really exciting. I was very young, you know, so it was really the city of my youth. And it was, I just remember that just the excitement of, there was this magazine that was published every week that you will have all the listings of all films. And I think there were about 300 or 400 films a day that you could actually watch. And it was so exciting for me. I mean to see, I think new releases came on Wednesday, on Wednesday. So Wednesday, by by late afternoon, I had seen at least two movies. And so what I remember of that time is that is that excitement, actually, having all of that film to, all of the world of film, to explore.

John Galante

Is there any experience or any film that struck you, that sticks with you, when you think about that period of time.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

From that, I mean, there were so many, there's so many I mean, I remember seeing the Taviani brothers, which I didn't know. And there was this film, I think was called *Chaos/Caos*, and I think it was based on some short stories by Pirandello. And I remember, I don't remember what the film was about when I remember just walking the streets of Paris, kind of entranced by the film.

There was another film by Wim Wenders. It was called *Kings of The Road*. It was an old film by the at that time. But to me, it was actually I think it was a film that was really marked in some ways The original title translates as *In The Course of Time*, which is a beautiful title, *In The Course of Time*. And it dealt with these two characters, two men who kind of meet by chance. One is a children's therapist, and the other is fixes projectors, in movie theaters. And they meet by chance, and they kind of find this, form this unlikely bond. And then they just travel. It's a very old film. So they travel along the border of East and West Germany. And that's the film. And what was it was interesting to me is that the filmmakers didn't have a screenplay. They had the situation, and then they just went on the road with with the actors and kind of invented the story as they as they went along the, the border.

And it was interesting to me, because I I, I was a philosophy, I had been a philosophy student as an undergrad, and the film had sort of this existential theme in it. And, and what I, it was the first time that I thought, you know, there is this theme that happens in the events of the story, no?, in the sort of openness that the film has to chance, you know, in terms of how the story evolves. But then there was also, those themes were also embedded in the way the images were constructed. And that to me was kind of illuminating that there is this existential theme that is being constructed by how the characters move within this space, how the spaces are photographed, how the camera kind of goes from them and opens up into into the world with a sense of chance. And, and so that film to me, it was one of those other films that I just remember being kind of drunk on the film for some time. Yeah,

Joe Aguilar

And one other question about that period of time that I've been thinking about too. I find it interesting that you came from philosophy to filmmaking too and I think about one of my favorite filmmakers, Terrence Malick. I don't know a ton about the field, but you know, he also came to filmmaking from philosophy. And you can see that in the way, you know, sort of existential questions that his films ask and the the long sort of pure shots of landscapes have this deep, numinous quality to them. And I see that in your, in your film *Dirección del cielo*, for example. And I'm wondering what philosophy, coming from that background, what it brought to the visual aspect.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

You know, at Paris 8, Gilles Deleuze was was teaching there at the time. And, and the department was really, really influenced by, by his ideas, you know. And he was a philosopher at the time that I, he wrote books about cinema, and that's why his connection to the department there, and he wrote *Cinema: Image Movement* and *Image Time*, two volumes on cinema. And those I didn't find as, as kind of moving as I found *A Thousand Plateaus*, which I thought was a really interesting book for me. And it was kind of influential in the way I kind of think about about films and moving images and stories and kind of an approach to life.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Terrence Malick was also an influence. And there was a film, what is it called, *Days of Heaven*. It was a film that I saw in Paris, in Paris, and it was an old film then. And I remember coming out of it, again, so really, really excited about it. And I remember there was somebody who was telling me well, this is just a melodrama. And it's the first fight that I ever had. I felt, no, that's, it's so much more than that.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

LA DIRECCIÓN DEL CIELO; ASTRONOMY; LAKOTA COMMUNITIES

Joe Aguilar

I was thinking of *Days of Heaven*, specifically, when the the two women in South Dakota were moving through the fields, gathering flowers for the Sundance ceremony, just those long shots of waving. So maybe if you could tell us a little bit about the film.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

La dirección del cielo? It was originally conceived as a series of films. I don't have a translation, you know, *La dirección del cielo*, I don't have a kind of English translation yet. But because *cielo* in Spanish means both heaven and sky. Sometimes I just say *Sky Stories*, because it's kind of descriptive of what it is.

So it started because I was really interested in astronomy. I've always been interested in astronomy. And this is like, the largest context to think of ourselves. And, and I was first reading astronomy books, and just fascinated by what the universe is. After while I started reading about traditional astronomies and among traditional communities. And I then became really, really interested in how The Lakota or The Navajo, or the communities in Central and South America, observe this sky and the ideas that come from those observations. And so I had the idea of kind of traveling across the Americas sort of filming stories and traditions of this sky, both from scientific communities and from traditional communities.

And so I started the project at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in Long Island, And they were recreating the conditions of the universe, fractions of a second after the Big Bang, to sort of understand the, the evolution of matter in the universe. And I thought it was fascinating. So I started filming with them, I spent about a year filming with them.

And the way they do it, there is a particle accelerator. It's the, and they so the collide heavy ions, ions, nuclei, gold nuclei, gold is heavy element. And so they make these collisions that kind of recreate the density and the temperature of the Big Bang, and to really study what how the universe was behaving or how matter was behaving at that time. And then from that, kind of understand how, how the universe evolved. And so I started filming with them. And I was just fascinated by all of the ideas that come off of quantum mechanics. And, and in the experiment, they discovered that the universe at that time was behaving like a liquid. So the universe was liquid at this, at this moment in time.

And I haven't edited that material. And I'm kind of glad that I didn't because now the film is not will not be about the experiment, only about the experiment. But it'd be kind of a larger reflection about science

and that kind of need that we have to understand things. And I think it'll connect with the other stories in the series.

But then I went on filming, So I film with, with in the Lakota reservation, I visited the Navajo reservation, I spoke there with a man who was an astronomer a Navajo astronomer. The family that participates in the film lives at the Lakota reservation. And then I filmed in Peru in northern Peru with a fisherman that used to navigate by the stars. And then I was able to film in the Cusco region with, with these young filmmakers who were kind of documenting their ancient traditions there. And so I went along with them to film a farmer who cultivates by the stars, guided by the stars. And I went to the Q'eros Nation, and filmed there with a shepherd who is a kind of shaman from the Andes.

So those are stories that I filmed so far. And then there are stops that I would like to do. There's a community in Guatemala that has stories about the moon, and they call it *la abuela luna*. And there are, I would love to go to the observatories in the Atacama Desert. And it also wanted to, through an astronomer who had done some research in among the mapuche community in Chile, I would like to visit that. And the project, hopefully, will end in Antarctica. There is a laboratory, a Neutrino Observatory in Antarctica that I think it's kind of contributing information to the search for dark matter. So that will be you know, and end to, traveling from north to south, or south to north.

Joe Aguilar

Yeah, one thing I was thinking about as I was watching the film was there there are a lot of intimate spaces like homes, there's traditional ceremonies being performed and it seemed as though you would need to, really win these communities trust. And how did you, you know, get to know these folks and get them to open up and follow them around? And it just seemed like a lot of stuff was happening behind the scenes to even get to that point.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Yeah, no, that's really, thanks. That's really important to me, because I, you know, I don't start filming until there is a relationship with the people who are going to participate. So with the Lakota family, I met them through through a friend. And I went to visit with no cameras just to meet. And then, you know, I met all the family. You know, I met this woman, Rachel, who was in the film, and she sort of was interested in the, in the, in the project that I was proposing to her. And so she brought me to her mother and her sisters. And we talked, I mean, and I, I spent a few days with them.

And then out of those conversations, kind of a relationship started and we kept in touch. It was in November, we kept in touch all through the winter and the spring. And then we thought that the Sun Dance was coming in June. So they said, why don't you come? They invited me to come. And I was invited to the Sun Dance, but not to film. I mean, this is a sacred ceremony. So I don't think it was. It should not be filmed and I was I wasn't that interested in filming it. So you know, I came and I stayed, I think about close to a month with them, filming with them.

So it is. And it is like that. I mean, there was another film that I made in Queens. It's called *On Calloway Street*. And it was in a in a in a building in Queens that is filled with families from all over the world, immigrants from all parts of the world. And I went to the building through friends, friends. And the

minute stepped into the building, I realized there's something really interesting happening here, there's people, all of these people from different parts of the world going up and down in the elevators. There are children playing all over the place. And I thought there is a film here. But to me, the idea was to kind of make a connection first. And, and so I met the family of this friend who had told me, they brought me there. And I spent two years in the building filming. But it was that, it was sort of establishing relationships. And slowly the film grew from one family to another family so I got to meet people. So that idea of kind of meeting someone and really establishing a relationship before the cameras are on, I think it's really important to me. So the film comes out of that exchange.

John Galante

Yeah, what did you, what did you learn from being with the Lakota? You know, from the film, I can see, the environment is quite important. Spirituality. I was waiting for the Sun Dance when I was watching it. They're preparing for it, you know. But I can appreciate why it wouldn't be filmed.

But one of the things that struck me the most is the women and how kind of calm they were, like, there's a tranquility to this, to the environments, but also to the people within this community, even when they're talking about tragedy. When she was talking about the forced removal of children from indigenous communities, Native American communities, you know, in the early 20th century. The extraordinary resolve and, and calmness and clear headedness, and not just in among the Lakota, really across the three films. But, you know, I don't want to stretch us too far, right, in terms of the question. But, you know, what, what did you learn from these people and their environment in the Dakotas?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

I mean, I feel like I learned a lot. One of the things that brought me there was, I mean, there's so many ideas that are that are kind of run contrary to our western tradition, which I find really, really important and really urgent, you know, that that that. What you said is actually true, the sense of calm that they have in the face of such horror, that they were not allowed to practice any other traditions until very recently. Actually, that's something that I didn't know. It was until I think 1978.

There is this idea that they have of all my relatives, you know. And that all my relatives means everything in the world, and not just my family, but everything, you know, the sky that I see, the clouds, the trees that are next to me, the rocks, the river, the mountains, everything is my relative. And when you see the world from that perspective, it's quite different than when see it from the Western tradition in which that puts man at the center, that puts humans in the center. So the earth and the planet become something to be exploited, for our benefit. For them is quite different, you know that this poses a very different relationship to the world, since it is my relatives.

When I was there was not long after the pipelines were gonna be placed. You know, for them to see from this perspective, it's, it's absurd, because you're killing yourself, you're actually destroying yourself. And that idea, which is a very ancient idea seems to me very urgent for the present, you know, politically for the present. I mean, we look at the world from that perspective, there are many things that we wouldn't be doing in terms of environmental crisis that we're facing right now. So that to me, was one of the major things that I learned there.

John Galante

Yeah I mean, I love the mention of like, the tree nation.

Joe Aguilar

The star nation as well.

John Galante

And also, we don't, we don't have orphans. We don't have widows. Because they perceive family in such a way.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Yes. It is. I mean, I think it's really kind of turning things upside down from from the perspective of Western tradition.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

LA DIRECCIÓN DEL CIELO; PERU ASTRONOMY; LAKOTA

John Galante

The idea of kind of looking at an indigenous community in a place like the Dakotas or North America versus, or alongside maybe, indigenous communities in in Peru. That conception is quite interesting. That was intentional, in some way?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

It was. And then as I was visiting, I visited Lakota, I mean, I think they were very much interested. And they have, you know, indigenous communities here have communication with other indigenous communities in South America. And they speak about, in ancient times, having kind of connections and an idea kind of kind of exchange of ideas back, even back then. Some of them are very, very interested in what's happening elsewhere. And part of the goal of the project is to actually go back and screen the films in different communities and have the kind of exchange between between the communities. So yeah, I'm very much interested in that.

John Galante

And did you find, those communities can be so diverse among one another, and we put them into this box of an indigeneity, right? Nevertheless, right, what do you see that maybe connects these communities to one another potentially.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Well, definitely the horror that they've experienced, you know, that I think it's links links many of the communities. But I think it's the these ideas, you know, this way of existing in the world and this understanding of our relationship to the world. I think it's, it's, it's common, at least in the communities that I that I've visited. You know, it is really common, that sense of kind of an ethical vision of our, our existence in the world, a kind of connection to the environment, that I think that translates among many of these many of these communities.

And I see it I mean, I'm researching other communities that will go in the future, I see the similar ideas kind of happening across. And that's something very curious. I mean, I wonder how I mean, it's something that I'm still interested in researching, how is it that this very different perspective, kind of.

John Galante

And then also this notion of like the Milky Way, like you mentioned the liquid thing, and then there's like the Milky Way which we refer to it as. But was his name Antonio, who talked about the river. And they refer to the Milky Way as the river, right, which is also liquid, right? It's super interesting.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

And he's really interesting because the Milky Way is, is connected. They see it as the connected to the river that runs through their community. Wow. So it is a way of being connected to the larger.

Joe Aguilar

I was really, I really enjoyed the dynamic too of the young group of filmmakers. And I was really interested in that crew. I wasn't completely sure because of the way it was presented what they were up to, at first, with the camera equipment and such. And I was, I was wondering if you could talk about their project and how you got to know them, and I love their energy.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

They were great. Actually, I met them through this organization that helps provide supports to rural communities in the Cusco area. And I they they were in Cusco and they helped me connect with this, with these young filmmakers. And at first they were just going to help me go and up to Paru Paru the community where this was filmed. And they were going to go with me so I could film with Antonio, the farmer, but they were also going to film because that's what they do. They're going around communities filming. They call them *comunidades originarias*.

So they traveled kind of rescuing knowledge, because for them is something quite quite urgent. You know, it's something that is disappearing, you know. I think they talk about that, in the film how Quechua, how even the language is being looked down upon. And, and so they are, they're documenting these traditions.

And so we, the four of us went up, this around, I think it was about 11,000 feet above sea level. And so all of us went to, and we were all going to film him. And, and then it was as I was filming, I was looking through my sight and I seeing how carefully and how they were setting up the shot, and how much knowledge they have about what they were about to film and how much care they had. That I thought that this is actually the story, the relationship between them and Antonio, was what to me was really beautiful. And then as I kind of turn the camera to the side and continue filming with them as they were filming him. And that's how that began.

John Galante

It's one of the I think relationships with technology that's really interesting in these films as well. And what was Antonio's impression of the cameras.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

I think he was he was really he was willing to help. You know what, I think that he he saw the value of it. You know, he was I think it was happy to talk about the knowledge that he had.

John Galante

Because he could see the value of preserving, preserving. So he's aware of the speciality or the uniqueness, maybe not entirely unique, but the the kind of extraordinary type of knowledge that he possesses. and that he is in some ways a vector, right for that knowledge to be preserved.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

And it is a special knowledge because it's being lost and actually we came to the community, they didn't know him yet. And I remember the day they met him, they were super excited. They came back to me and said, we've, you know, there is this man who has all of this amazing knowledge and all this story. So, so we all went in to talk to him.

John Galante

Yeah, I think the other side of the technology thing is definitely the piece that's on Northern Peru, and this navigational kind of tools, where there's erasure or maybe because of the technology. I don't know if you want to talk about that at all, and, and we can maybe kind of try and bring these together in some way.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Well in northern Peru, I was filming with Bernardino, who is a fisherman who grew up and from very early age, he sort of learned to navigate by the stars. He was really interested in that. And it was really, I mean, I met him as, as it's in the film, through friends, and then he invited me to come and go on his boat with him in the Pacific.

And it's interesting, because he no longer navigates by the stars. He has a GPS and, and he's aware of that. But he said something that was really powerful to me, he said that, you know, with the GPS it's very precise. I mean, he's not, he doesn't deny that I mean, the technology allows you to go and it takes you where you want to go. But he said, but it doesn't teach you anything about where you are. And to me that was really, really a powerful message. And I think it kind of sets the tone for for this series of films, this idea that, yeah, there's a technology that we can't deny, I mean, it has a power that helps us but on the other hand, there's this kind of this thing that it separates us from from from our surroundings, no?

Because observing, I mean, the way he observes the stars, I mean, when you navigate by the stars, you are aware of the color of the sky, you're aware of the temperature of the of the of the wind, you're aware of the tides, you're aware of all of your surroundings in a way that you're you know that when you use your GPS, you're, you know, you're completely disconnected from your environment. And that sense of being present in the environment, he thinks is lost among the younger generations who don't, don't have that, that knowledge anymore.

And, to me, it is a different way of existing in the world, you know, that that kind of keen awareness of what your surroundings are. And these are, these are observations from from life that are, you know, that are tested. you know, when they say, you know, we won't go out tonight, because the stars are dancing. I mean, it sounds very beautiful. But it also is a clear observation there are, you know, atmospheric disturbances, and that, that day they shouldn't go out, you know, the tides might be high and things like that.

So, there is a kind of a very precise knowledge of, of our surroundings. that I think, also leads him to, as you see in the film, I mean, he's also for years and years and years, he's battling these large commercial ships that come and are destroying the bay. And I think all of that, you know, that sense of that kind of way of being in the world, that connection to the world around him, it kind of leads him in this kind of political fight against this commercial fishing industry that is really destroying the environment.

John Galante

For me when I was looking at Bernardino's experience, that this is a very functional use of the sky, right?, that this is a this is, in a way scientific, right, knowledge to produce and generate ultimately some kind of income even or at least subsistence, in a very material way, right? Versus, and there may be some spiritual connection that people in northern Peru must have, certainly traditionally, to the sky and the stars, but it's not that visible there, which is quite different from say, the Lakota is, what you're highlighting about the Lakota's experience, which is very much religious, spiritual, kind of prayer-like, right, in some in some ways engagements.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

And that, to me is interesting as well, because with him, it was more of that, of a way of existence, a kind of presence that he has and awareness of the surroundings. And that kind of keen observation, kind of bringing in another perspective of how we relate to the sky and what this sky kind of gives to us in some way.

Joe Aguilar

Yeah, so thinking about the larger scope of the project, did you so you said you wanted to end in Antarctica? Is that right?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

That's the plan. It's complicated but that's the goal. I've researched the work of the lab there, but I don't know them yet. I know of them because of the scientists that I met at Brookhaven in Long Island, their colleagues. They were the ones who suggested the research that was going on there, but I haven't, I haven't met them yet. So it's a kind of long distance goal to finish there. But to me, it's interesting to bring both perspectives to this, the scientists that are working now and as well as the traditional community, and I see them as different perspectives. I mean, I am not, you know, there's no hierarchy in here.

John Galante

Yeah. Right, so then what might, I guess the film, the larger project offer to a viewer, if they're seeing the juxtapositions and connections that maybe you've seen so far in your work?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

You know, that's something that really interests me, you know, the multiplicity of stories and how they inform each other. Yeah. And that has been something that I've, from when I was a kid, you know, my favorite book was *The Arabian Nights*, *The Thousand and One Nights*. It was a small town. So underneath the mayor's office, there was a, a little library. So I would go there and read and I was just fascinated by stories and *Arabian Nights* was up there. And I just loved the fact that one story would lead to another would lead to another would lead to another until you are lost in this world of stories and you didn't know your way back.

And so that structure of stories within stories, or stories that are a multiplicity of stories that are connecting to each other informing each other, is something that I continue to explore in all of the films that I'm doing.

The film that I was making, that I told you about, in Queens. It's called *On Calloway Street*. In the building, to me was like the Thousand and One Stories of Queens, because it was that, it was the stories of all of these people that were kind of cultures that were not naturally together, were they together. So the stories were connecting in ways that were interesting to see.

And the same thing with another film that I did in Queens, it was in a park in Queens. It is called *The Ordinal Directions*. And I spent a year in Flushing Meadows, Corona Park, I don't know if you're familiar, it is a huge, sprawling park that is surrounded by communities from all parts of the world as well. So I spent the year there, right after I was in the building filming people's stories. And so, and to me, what was interesting is that the connections that those stories have, or how they point in different directions, I felt the park was like an airport, with airplanes flying in all kinds of directions.

Joe Aguilar

I was curious about that choice to not provide exposition as a narrator to have it a little bit more nonlinear to to put the viewer in a position where they had to bridge those connections and figure out who these folks were in relation to each other. And I enjoyed that.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

To me that that idea that you kind of enter a film and you kind of have to put it together, is sort of like my experience of life. You're constantly sort of trying to make sense of it and to organize. And to me that that idea in a film, as a narrative structure, is interesting. But another thing that that to me is interesting is that each story kind of suggests its its own formal structure. Each story is sort of narrated in different ways. Bernardino has that voice over, then the Lakota it's voices, it's kind of like a layering of voices from all the different participants. And then in the, with the with the in northern Peru in Paru Paru, with the young filmmakers, they kind of addressed the camera, everyone's addressing the camera. And all of that came out of the process of making the making the film, you know. It felt like with them, you know, it was there's something so nice about them kind of seeing them kind of addressing the camera at some point, that I felt that that was the way that story should be told.

Joe Aguilar

I also really admire how you allow the subject that you're filming to dictate the form. A good bit of writing advice that I give my students is if it doesn't feel like an adventure on the page for the writer, it doesn't feel that way for the reader either. And I think I'm seeing that come true in the form of your film too. Like each piece felt like its own adventure that you were discovering something that dictated the form of the film itself.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

That's a beautiful idea. Exactly that sense of adventure and discovery that you have. I remember coming back from from the Lakota, from being with the Lakota family, and I think I don't have anything, this is not going to work at all. And then looking at the footage and then kind of discovering things. So that sense of adventure is there.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

PUERTO RICO (AGUADA; INDUSTRIALIZATION; FILM)

John Galante

How have you sort of approached your interest in Puerto Rico, or your filmmaking in Puerto Rico, over the years. Like, what what types of projects have you been involved in? And what have you tried to show about the places that you find interesting or the elements of society, culture, politics, etc., etc., that have kind of drawn you back to that?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Yeah I was really excited when back then, this was many, many years ago, after art school, I was very excited to come back to Puerto Rico and really come back to my town. As I say, it was a tiny town.

John Galante

What's the name of the town?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

It's called Aguada. It's on the northwest coast of Puerto Rico, by the, othe coast is the Mona Canal, that connects the Atlantic with the Caribbean, so the waves are really high. And all that, it's a very dramatic coast.

So I was really happy to go back. I mean, I grew up in that town, and there was something about the life of that town growing up that I wanted to bring to life again. And, and there are many stories that I would like to tell that happened there. And one of the things I wanted to tell me, I grew up with my grandmother who was there. And she was a great storyteller. She used to tell tons of stories, and she actually wrote diaries. I didn't know, I mean, I grew up with her in the afternoons, you know, she'll, you know, she'll have coffee, and I'll have hot milk, and she'll tell me stories about growing up in the town, or when it was not, when it was even smaller. And, and they were fascinating.

And then when I was actually going to go to France to study film, I went to say goodbye to her and she gave me this envelope. And I opened it, it was the stories that she had told me about, but they were written. And the title of the manuscript was *Above All, Do Not Forget The Stories*. And I thought that I mean, and they're stories of her the community around her and about her growing up in, in a farm by the coast. And they're really, really fascinating stories.

But then I found out actually, though, they were letters to the editor that she would write. And recently, a relative told me that actually they were published, that she actually had a connection to, to the editors of newspapers, and she would write about things that concern her, you know, that were happening in the country at the time. So there, there is that manuscript that I would like to turn into a film because there was a sense of community in in that manuscript that it's I find really interesting.

And, and they're all kinds of stories. I mean, it was a, it was interesting, because at the time the town and the farm were kind of disconnected with the rest of the island, because there were hardly any roads. But there was a port. The town is Aguada, north of the town is Aguadilla. There was a port there to export sugarcane. And boats from different parts of the world will stop there. And I think it was an entrance to the Caribbean. So boats, ships coming from Europe, well, they're going into South America, would stop there. And she said that sometimes like theater troops or circuses would stop and then they would perform there and then leave. So they had a connection to the world, that that more of a connection to the world thatnactually connection to the rest of the island in some ways.

John Galante

You know, I wonder how else you've maybe approached kind of your filmmaking in Puerto Rico.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

That's, that's a project I'm working on right now. And it started actually, as a kind of borrowed borrowed memory, memory of a memory. Going back to my grandmother, she loved movies like I do. And she used to tell me about the movies that she saw, when she was young. And she also told me about movies that her brother made. Her brother was a DP, a director of photography, I think he worked at the Paramount Studios in Astoria, Queens for some time. And then in the 40s, he came to Puerto Rico, and was making these films for a government or organization called Divedco, the Division of Community Education. And so she used to tell me about those films. Growing up, they were hard to see they were not in distribution. And I actually saw them at the Cinémathèque in Paris for the first time as a student there.

And to me, they were amazing. There's something really beautiful the way the capture you know I come from a small town, so that we would capture the small towns rural. They're all in rural communities in Puerto Rico. And just the way that capture the time, the time passing, was actually really, really beautiful

John Galante

So could you talk a little bit about those films?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Yeah so, it was interesting. So I knew right away that I wanted to do something with these films. And at the time, they were really well known around the world. They had won prizes in festivals around the world because of the how, how they were made. You know, they were fiction films, but they were made in rural communities, sometimes with actors from the community. This was part of, of a government project of the Luis Muñoz Marín administration. And they were part of that period of transformation from the 19, late 1940s to early 60s.

And the film that I'm doing kind of tries to capture that. The reason I say this, like a borrowed memory from my grandmother. I wasn't alive during the 1950s, this, but from my parents and from my grandparents, I got a sense of what that was. And there was a spirit of kind of renewing the country in the 30s and 40s. And there's a sense among those generations that we're going to transform the country and.

And there was a change in the economy, the country went from a kind of agricultural economy to an industrial economy. And this was sort of like, orchestrated by the administration of Muñoz Marín, who first brought the programs, the FDR programs, the New Deal programs into the island to really combat poverty. And then eventually the sort of the status change from to Commonwealth -- in Spanish it's called the *estado libre asociado* -- and the economic model was to bring American investment into the island, and the country was industrialized. And that, in the moment, generated money and really transformed the country, many things were done. There were schools were built, there were hospitals that were built, every town had a hospital, and there were waterways and electricity. And all of those were government programs, were government owned. Now that wouldn't be considered kind of socialism.

But it, so the films were, were part of that program, Muñoz Marín had. There were two poles to the program. There was something called Operation Bootstrap, which was meant to industrialize the country. And there was also Operation Serenity. I'm translating. It's *Operación Serenidad*. And *Operación Serenidad* was to democratize the country, or to invest in the culture, and to invest in education, and all these things. And the films were part, this division was created by Muñoz Marín himself, the division of community education. And the idea was to go into rural communities and bring democratic ideals, or deal with issues that affected the community.

So the division was, would send people to the communities to talk to the people in the communities and see what things that were problems that were happening, or things that were affecting them, or needs that they had. And then they would come back to San Juan. And they would decide which films to make that will address some of those issues. And, and in San Juan, there was a team of artists. There were not many filmmakers at the time. So there were writers and playwrights and poets and painters that were part of this community, of this group of this group at the *División de Educación de la Comunidad*. They were in charge of making the films and also in charge of posters for the films and books, posters to advertise the films and books that accompany the films. And my great grandfather was one of those people, one of those people who made some, some of those, some of those films. So that's how I came to know the film.

So to me, what was interesting is that they capture that period of transformation. And it was interesting to me also because the filmmakers and the people involved in this process, the members of the division of education, were not aligned necessarily with Muñoz Marín's agenda. And they were actually in many ways very critical of what was happening. And they were understanding this process of industrialization, very early on, I'm actually really surprised, how early they were seeing, you know, that this might not lead to the result that the administration was sort of, like, advertising.

It is a model that eventually failed, no?, because it kind of that transformation to industrial society caused a bit big migration from the mountains to from the rural areas into the cities. And eventually, in the in the 60s, there were all kinds of urban issues, there was unemployment, you know, urban poverty. And people who were not able to get integrated into this new economy were sent to the US. Even during the 50s, that caused that huge migrations, hundreds of thousands of people left for the US. And, and so it was a model that eventually kind of failed. And that led to, to, in some ways to the situation that the country is in now.

So the project that I'm doing now is kind of weaving the stories of those films into a kind of film essay about that time, about that period of transformation, and the hope that it had, as well as how they see it. Because to me, what's interesting is that, that they see all of these transformations. and they are aware of this is not going to lead where this could lead. And eventually it did, you know, They're very critical, there was actually one, it was interesting, because the administration of Luis Muñoz Marín didn't censor many of their films, although they were critical of them, except one that dealt with urban poverty. And that film was never finished at the time. And that's something, I have that film as well.

Joe Aguilar

What's the composition process look like weaving those films together and into your own form in some way.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

It's interesting, because it goes back to that idea that I have for mixing stories. So that that to me was exciting about it, how to kind of weave them together. And so it has been an interesting process because at some point, I thought, well, how do I talk about the context as well, no?, and I could bring other firms into it. And then it's been a process of kind of weeding those out, and kind of really remaining a lot of the time with the films themselves, with the stories themselves, because they speak about the context. They are responses, the stories are responses to the context. Now there is a change in the culture, there's consumerism comes with, you know, along with, with sort of this industrialization process. And they're talking against that, you know, they're warning the communities against, you know, this consumerism. They are warning the communities about what immigration can be coming to another country. So you understand the context also by seeing the stories that are being made about about the period.

But there's something also very interesting, at the same time that these films were being made, the Muñoz Marín administration hired a private company. And those were purely propaganda films, they were really sort of, you know, filming, you know, this company is coming to Puerto Rico, and these executives are the gods and the companies as this heaven that's going to change our world. And

there's this sort of, it was a modernization process, and so modernity, was this, the Promised Land, and, and those films deal with that.

So I've used some of those films to see how, to kind of provide a context to what was happening and how they kind of clashing, you know, they are visions that are clashing. There's one, there's a kind of utopic vision of the country of the democratic, egalitarian society, versus this other films that are kind of promoting this process of industrialization and seeing it as the future. You know, there's a film that shows how many televisions are being bought. Puerto Rico is going to be one of the countries with the most cars in the world and things like that.

John Galante

So So what is your objective in some way for for this project?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

To me is to rescue that spirit of transfer, the spirit of transformation. There were problems with the model of transformation that was. But I see in the generation that lived through that period, that sense of that positive spirit of transforming a country of building a country new and I think that's something that it's really valuable for the present, you know? I mean, there were things that were happening. I mean, there was, it was a generation that had the tools to transform the country. And they were some transformations that happened. As I said, you know, schools were built, you know, the University of Puerto Rico was, you know, was a major, at the time, the government invested in the university, and it was a major research center in Latin America. There were all of these things that were happening there were all of these successes, along with, you know, all of the failures.

John Galante

I was in Puerto Rico once and I saw a bumper sticker that said, *Donde estaríamos sin ella?*, in reference to the United States? And I couldn't tell what it meant, exactly. You know what I mean? Like, I think it was pro US, based on like the image that was on the bumper sticker. But it's still like an open question that is really interesting in a lot of ways, which maybe these films can speak, I mean this is...

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Yeah, no, I think it has. I mean, there's something that is important to me and important to the film, but I really want to approach it through kind of the lived experience. It is at the core a political film, but seen through the stories of the this kind of intimate stories that the filmmakers tell. Yeah. And then, you know, sort of like the recollections of my grandmother who lived through that period.

Joe Aguilar

I keep thinking about what you said about your grandmother's manuscripts that you would like to make a film out of. And I I'm, what, what would that look like in terms of, you know, making a film out of a text? It's like thinking about *Dirección del cielo*, it seems like the subjects give you the text that you then shape it to. But if you have this text already, it feels to me like it might be a different process. So what, you know, how do you envision making that into a film?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Yeah it is a different process. And I made already a screen, I wrote a screenplay, about it based on it. And I really didn't like it, so I stopped. Because I was kind of making the story fit some kind of format that I wasn't happy with. Because the manuscript has all kinds of things. It has, like I said, letters to. It has stories, but it has letters to the editor, it has descriptions of like gardens with spices and different herbs. And it has, it has stories, but also has asides and reflections and, and my goal is to find a form that can bring all of that in. You know, that a bring the stories but, but can accept those asides. And that kind of breaks into the in the narrative, you know, and I haven't found it yet.

But that's, that's, that's my goal. And it's exciting for me to see. I mean, I have that connection to her. And that was a really important moment for me when she gave me that. And so, my goal is to find a form that can bring all of those stories alive. And it's interesting because she rarely talks about herself. So she's like a camera looking at the world and talking about what's happening around around, you know, in her house, as well as in, in the community surrounding surrounding her and.

I mean, it's really very much the point of view for young woman and I think she, many of the stories happened when she was like between 12 and 13-14 years old. And so she was talking about the world of women and, and, and, and accompanying her mom to you know, assisting births and, or making different kinds of spices and mixing spices to treat illnesses and things like that. And then she talks about her father. There were no doctors, then, and he was not a doctor, but he kind of taught himself to be a doctor. So like, stitch fingers, and things like that, and cure people, get medicines to people. So a lot of the stories are about that.

To me it was interesting. There was a sense of community as a kind of political entity that connects to the film's of the *Divedco* of *Divedco*. And that's why I felt that her bringing her into this film that I'm doing now, it's more of a film essay.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++ **INSPIRATION; FILM TECHNOLOGY**

John Galante

Yeah, I mean, what what films are you potentially looking at for inspiration?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Another filmmaker that I like is Pier Paolo Pasolini. He actually did an adaptation of *The Arabian Nights*, and did an adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* and an adaptation of *The Decameron*. They were books that I've read, before I was interested in film, there are books that I like, again, because the mixture of stories And so I've been looking at his films recently. And I find them really, really beautiful.

There's another film called *The Hawks and Sparrows*, I think is a translation in English. And that is, that is an interesting film in terms of the narrative and how it breaks the narrative structure. And that has been also an inspiration to me.

And also the films that from *Divedco* from the Division of Education, they were done in the 50s. And I think there was a kind of Zeitgeist at the moment. So there are many things that connect to Italian

neorealism. And I don't know if, I mean, they were influenced. I mean, I know that they were very aware of international cinema. The artists that were making these films are very aware they talk about that. I mean, they like Eisenstein. And they really were interested in international cinema. But I, but I don't know what the connections were to Neorealism.

But I've been looking at the films and when you see them, you know that you can see that there was something in something happening in the world, that that they were approaching film in similar ways. Like I said, they were made in the communities where the actual stories happened, and with members of the community. So they were not actors, many of them were not actors. And I think all of that kind of related to neorealism. So I've been looking at those things as well.

John Galante

So how are you connecting, if you are, you know, your, these, these two really wildly different projects that you're working on? You know, one rooted in the cosmos than the other in your hometown. Right? Is it just that, you know, this is these are your interests and you're following them? And these are the materials that you're being presented with? Do you ever intellectualize that, that?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

You know, they're connected formally because that structure of stories within stories and the multiplicity of stories. So that's one way in which they connect that makes me really excited to edit and to, to. This, this project of Puerto Rico is really about editing, and about, you know, imagining how things come together. So that's an exciting part. So that is, so I see it as part of kind of, as you said, following my interests, both in science and astronomy, but also the politics from where I come from.

John Galante

And do you feel enabled by technology to be able to work on those things in ways that you might not have previously?

Ramón Rivera-Moret

Oh, definitely so. Definitely so. I mean, I think there's a freedom that we have now. I actually don't tell my students that because, now you just need a laptop, you can edit and create a feature film, you know, with very little, or little money, or, or as I was telling, we have this small cameras are not, you know, they're relatively inexpensive. And, and, and the quality of the image, the way they respond to light is, is, is wonderful. I mean, you can work under all kinds of light conditions. And, and so there's a freedom that we have now to work in film. And you don't need to have you ever need a lot of money to do these projects.

John Galante

And does that change storytelling? Do you think? Or does it just change the process?

Ramon Rivera-Moret

I think both. I mean, I think the freedom that you have. I mean, there's a freedom to experiment and to explore, you know, that that I think comes from, you know, the way that technology has evolved.

John Galante

Well, thank you so much for taking us on this journey from from your hometown to the cosmos and many places in between and speaking about your work, but also your experiences and your point of view. It's been a really enriching conversation. So thank you so much, Ramón, for being here.

Joe Aguilar

Thank you.

Ramón Rivera-Moret

And thank you to both of you.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

CREDITS

John Galante

You've been listening to *Crossing Fronteras*. I'm your co-host John Galante, a historian of Latin American and an Associate Professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute as well as the creator and executive producer of the podcast series.

Joe Aguilar

And I'm your co-host Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer and an Assistant Professor at WPI, and an executive producer of the podcast series.

John Galante

This show surveys the unique ecosystem of contemporary scholarship and art being generated by scholars and creatives in New England who are working in Latin American and Caribbean Studies.

Joe Aguilar

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