

“La Batalla de Bodegas: Displacement of Dominicans in Washington Heights,” Transcript

Podcast Group: Talia Goldberg Bicas, Maddy Liberman, Eidry Estevez

[Opening theme music]

Guest speaker 1 (GS1): I’m getting tested; times are tough on this bodega. Two months ago somebody bought Ortega’s.

GS2: Our neighbors started packin’ up and pickin’ up. And ever since the rents went up.

GS3: It’s gotten mad expensive, but we live with just enough

Maddy Liberman (ML): In the heights.

Those lyrics are from Lin-Manuel Miranda’s breakout musical, “In the Heights,” whose movie adaptation will be in theaters this summer. For those who might be unfamiliar, “In the Heights” is about a Dominican bodega-owner, or *bodeguero*, trying to make ends meet as Washington Heights changes around him in the late 90s and early 2000s.

Eidry Estevez (EE): Our setting today is Washington Heights, a neighborhood in the northern tip of Manhattan, bordering Inwood to the North and Harlem to the South. Washington Heights has become synonymous with the abundant store fronts, the bustling music, its food and undoubtedly the culture of its people. It has earned its name as little quisqueya, a home away from home for many Dominican immigrants.

Talia Goldberg Bicas (TGB): Nearly every New Yorker runs to their local bodega for snacks, coffee, or a sandwich, but rarely do we look any closer at the history of these small grocery stores. In fact, bodegas have a deep history tied to the migration of Dominicans to New York City. Bodegas represented a sustainable source of income for Dominicans arriving in the city. In the 1990s, Dominicans similar to Miranda’s fictional character Usnavi owned 77% of the corner stores in Washington Heights. So how did all these Dominican bodegas end up here?

EE: The modern adaptation of “In the Heights” sparked our interest in learning more about the presence of Dominican immigrants living in Washington Heights and their claim to this space through bodegas in the late 20th century.

TGB: Hello, I’m Talia! I’m a junior at Barnard College studying Economics and History and I’m excited to dive into personal narratives relating to Dominican residents of Washington Heights and bodegas.

EE: Hi, I'm Eidry, also a Junior at Barnard, studying Education Policy and Economics and hoping to further understand the role of bodegas in relation to the lack of affordable housing within the Heights.

ML: Hey there, I'm Maddy. I'm a sophomore studying Urban Studies at Barnard and I'm looking forward to learning about what New York City's policies did to those bodegas in the 90s and early 2000s.

EE: So how were there so many Dominican-owned bodegas in Washington Heights by the 90s? In 1961, the assassination of then dictator Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic prompted a large influx of Dominicans to the United States, specifically New York. By 1970, 100,000 Dominican immigrants had made it to the United States. The campesino, or known as a lower-class citizen, saw New York as a new land for new opportunities. Working-class Dominican immigrants who arrived began to establish small businesses such as bodegas.

ML: That same sentiment is echoed by many Dominican immigrants, like Mercedes Santos.

Mercedes Santos (MS): In the 60s I don't know what happened, I haven't looked into that. That the economy wasn't doing well so my mom decided she needed to leave the country to come to New York to help support her family in the Dominican Republic.

TGB: From there, things took off. To get a feel for what it was like growing up in Washington Heights in the late 90s and early 2000s, we spoke with resident Luis Batista, whose family immigrated to the neighborhood in the 80s and 90s.

Luis Batista (LB): I didn't really grow up with the mentality that I wasn't part of the dominant culture. Just because everywhere I saw, everywhere I looked, everyone sounded like me, everyone looked like me, we all shared this cultural history, this cultural background.

ML: One way in which Dominicans achieved this tight-knit community feel was through bodegas. They became spaces of community where people gathered to talk, drink, and play music.

[Audio of people talking and eating]

These bodegas weren't just businesses; they were also social spaces where conversational exchanges were just as important as monetary transactions. The community atmosphere also made these stores friendly to lower-income residents, who were able to purchase items on credit. By the 1990s, Dominicans owned over 3/4 of the corner stores in Washington Heights. While they faced marginalization in other avenues of employment, this did not deter them from developing their own physical space and capital in the city.

TGB: For example, Miriam Mejia, a social activist rooted in the neighborhood, sees bodegas as part of the quintessential fabric that has long strengthened the Washington Heights community.

Miriam Mejia (MM): Las bodegas dominicanas, que tenían sus voces [...] fue generando un tejido comunitario, de lo que es el tejido necesario para que las comunidades se fortalezcan y reconozcan su potencial.

EE: For our English speakers, Miriam is saying that “the dominican bodegas, which had their voices, played a part in creating a communal fabric, a fabric necessary for communities to grow stronger and to recognize their potential.”

[Transition music]

ML: Scholar Christian Krohn-Hansen also highlights how bodegas solidified a sense of community in this space away from home; he writes that “since a number [of customers] live in the neighboring streets, the bodeguero sometimes knows almost the whole family—the mother, the father, their children, aunts, uncles, nephews, and nieces. Sometimes he asks a customer, ‘And how’s the family doing?’”

TGB: Luis also told us more about his personal relationship to bodegas.

LB: Growing up, everyone was in the bodegas, like it was always packed. There were always people there talking and gossiping and doing all these kinds of things, and during the summer like you'd see the old man outside of the stores, playing dominoes. I do feel like um it's still a place of social interaction, like it's kind of a place that brings us together. I definitely just by the virtue that most people, there's people that spend most of their day there or most of their free time there I definitely do feel like, to some extent, it is an extension of the home.

EE: So...this podcast is about housing. Why are we talking about bodegas and not apartments?

ML: Luis is right- homes and bodegas were closely tied in the Heights. Structurally, bodegas were often right below apartments. This was strategic for the stores' landlords who wanted to take advantage of the higher rent in residential zones. But it also meant that nearby residents would frequent the grocery stores- creating that community feel.

EE: Our conversation is also centered on bodegas over apartments because small businesses were the primary source of local employment-- employment that provided the necessary income to afford housing in this space. Bodegas accounted for almost one quarter of employment in Washington Heights. On average there were 12 Dominican businesses per block between 157th and 191st Streets in the 90s-- this translates to over 20,000 businesses in New York, many of them bodegas. The Bodegas as a source of employment is evident in the late 90s when unemployment of Hispanics fell from 53% in 1990 to 49% in 2000.

TGB: Dominicans built a network of small businesses that turned into a local economy, as observed by Latin American scholar Jorge Duany. These businesses legitimized Dominicans' presence in Washington Heights. Dominicans' ownership of these stores directly translated to their ability to afford housing in the neighborhood.

ML: The increase of Dominican presence and establishments in the Heights did not go unchallenged, as a crackdown on so-called "illegal businesses" emerged. According to the *New York Times* in 2002, there were 30 bodegas and over 75 other businesses along the neighborhood's Audubon Avenue that were considered illegal because they were operating in residential zones. And this had been happening for years. Zoning laws are dense and not very accessible, especially for immigrants who are newer to the city and possibly to the English language.

TGB: New York's Zoning Resolution was adopted in 1961 and includes regulations on city planning, but it's dense and full of legal jargon. To make things even more confusing, the city actually gave permits to businesses even if they were in the wrong zone because the certification was only for the business itself and not its location. So in the 90s and early 2000s, you had hundreds of Dominican-owned businesses that technically should not have existed. There's been an ongoing argument about whether these unauthorized mixed residential and commercial neighborhoods are an asset or detriment in urban spaces.

EE: Some individual Dominicans preferred having bodegas on the corner rather than along a large avenue. One resident, Ellen Ortega, said in 2002 that these businesses are "family-oriented" and liked sending her own son to the corner store. That's just like what the scholar Krohn-Hansen said about the relationship of bodegas and nearby families.

TGB: Let's see what Luis can tell us about living near bodegas today.

LB: Within a five minute walk, I have maybe four of them. It's definitely a huge positive that you don't have to take the subway to get food that's affordable, it's just beyond convenient, in my point of view.

ML: But not all residents liked the informal feel of neighborhoods of businesses mixed with apartments. In Corona, Queens, another neighborhood with high numbers of Latinx immigrants, there were complaints from residents who lived across from a so-called illegal bodega that too many teenagers were hanging out outside the store drinking.

TGB: In fact, this delinquent trope was all too present in Washington Heights. Media reinforced racist stereotypes of Dominicans as criminals, with headlines like "Bodega Terror: Dominican Gangs Rape, Rob and Torture Their Own in City" in 1992.

EE: In addition to the media, the government also reinforced this negative reputation and we hope to explain how this reputation was a deliberate tactic to shut down Dominican enterprises

and to supposedly improve the neighborhood. Dominican bodegas became synonymous with drug distribution and crime.

[Audio of siren]

ML: The city employed these stereotypes when it started to crack down on businesses in residential zones. In 1993, the City Council passed a law that declared those businesses a “public nuisance” and allowed the Commissioner of Buildings to close them.

[Audio of padlock]

With that, there was an enormous uptick in closures of Dominican-owned businesses in Washington Heights.

TGB: To make matters worse, Mayor Rudy Giuliani entered office in 1994 and began a whole string of zero-tolerance policies. Many people only think of this in relation to policing, but Giuliani also used zoning as a tool to crack down on so-called illegal or unsavory commerce.

EE: So how exactly did the city carry out this crackdown on “public nuisance” buildings, and how did it affect Washington Heights?

ML: The city said that it would only shut down an illegal business if someone called in a complaint to the Department of Buildings. But as we said, bodegas had been operating informally for years, and getting complaints for years as well. Only now were these complaints being enforced: according to Jose Fernandez, president of the Bodegueros Association in 2000, “the closure of certain commercial businesses [was] part of the persecution of the Mayor Giuliani administration against minorities.”

TGB: It’s crucial to note that commercial businesses in residential areas lower property values, so suppressing these unauthorized businesses would allow the city to increase property values and attract wealthier residents. This went hand-in-hand with gentrification issues that we’ll touch on later.

ML: To figure out the scale of these closures, we went digging through the Department of Buildings records and found some of these violations and complaints that closed so many Dominican businesses.

[Background music]

Between 1995 and 2005, 62 businesses in Washington Heights and Inwood were padlocked temporarily or permanently for violating the city’s zoning laws, and over 300 were padlocked in all of Manhattan. Washington Heights and Inwood make up 13% of the area of Manhattan, but they had 17% of these business closures. To clarify, Inwood is a neighborhood north of Washington Heights, but the border between them is very fluid, so it’s useful to include it here.

EE: Let's take a specific look at the bodega 'Family Grocery' at the northern end of Washington Heights. This bodega was padlocked by the Department of Buildings in February 2000. We don't exactly know which building La Familia Bodega was in, because every building on the corner of Post Avenue and West 204th Street has a violation for illegal operations of a store. Any of the following complaints could potentially have led to their closure:

ML: "June 11, 1992: GROCERY STORE IS BEING ERECTED IN A RESIDENTIAL BUILDING.

November 25, 1997: RESIDENTIAL CHANGED TO COMMERCIAL STORE AT FIRST FLOOR." And so on.

TGB: This was devastating for co-owners Jose Rodriguez and Ariel Acevedo. Rodriguez said in 2000, "I made a mistake, because when I rented the place I did not realize that there was a clause that said that it was not a commercial premise. Because of that little paragraph, I lost everything, I fell." Rodriguez estimates that he lost about \$90,000, or about \$137,000 today.

EE: Amid all of these closures, Washington Heights was also experiencing a stark shift in housing accessibility in the late 90s for the low income community. The era of crime seemed to have been pushed aside; the mood had shifted. In the book *Crossing Broadway*, real estate agent Gus Perry exclaims: "The cat's out of the bag... We've been discovered. People come to the neighborhood and realize it's a diamond in the rough"

ML: The media no longer criminalized Washington Heights. Instead, newspapers began to air stories that capitalized on a charming neighborhood welcoming new residents.

This profit-driven change of narrative has been extremely painful for residents, including Luis.

LB: It's kind of frustrating to see how we're kind of treated as disposable you know like no one gave a crap about the neighborhood, like we were probably the least desirable neighborhood for decades. And then to see that as soon as it becomes convenient, The city kind of like focuses back on us or is kind of come back to us, or eyes come back to us and we're kind of portrayed now as this exotic neighborhood with community feel, only to just have us displaced by people who want to like, live here.

TGB: Luis is talking about gentrification-- he speaks directly to the removal of his compatriotas, or neighbors, for the appeasement of the wealthy newcomers. Among the newcomers in the area was the historian Deborah Dash Moore. In 1986, Moore moved into an apartment on upper Fort Washington Avenue and found her neighborhood "rough." Her friends considered the neighborhood dangerous and avoided visits. Only years later, Moore's same friends began inquiring about apartment hunting in Washington Heights. As the late 1990s approached, the strong presence of middle class families confirmed the trend of gentrification.

Miriam Mejia confirms this:

MM: El efecto que ha tenido el desplazamiento es muy importante. Y ese desplazamiento no viene por el aire, tiene que ver con que ha sido la penetración del poder económico.

ML: In Miriam's words, "the effect that displacement has had is very important. And the displacement hasn't come out of nowhere, it has to do with the penetration of economic power".

TGB: Luis also gave us some more context of the recent effects of gentrification on the community.

LB: I would just see more and more people gone, more of my neighbors were gone. And just more stories of people trying to get bought out. A real estate developer would knock on doors and offer people like \$20,000. So when my parents separated, my mom moved out, um and even at that time, this was back in like 2002 or 2003, we were already priced out. Mind you, we had just gotten here, or my family had just gotten to this neighborhood in about 1996 or 97 or so. So, in less than a decade, my mom literally couldn't afford her own neighborhood.

EE: This change in narrative directly correlated with the city's efforts to increase the property value of Washington Heights.

TGB: Michael Lappin, who worked for the city's government, believed that the so-called "decaying" northern Manhattan area needed to be improved. His vision was to acquire existing establishments and renovate them, a strategy that erased the presence of many bodegas.

ML: Remember how we said that bodegas were lowering property values? Among these ventures to improve upper Manhattan was the Pathmark Project of 1991, led by the city's Economic Development Corporation in upper Manhattan. The Pathmark venture introduced a large chain grocery store to the neighborhood, sending local commercial rents soaring and putting smaller stores at risk. The Pathmark supermarket represented a bid to displace Dominican businesses such as bodegas in favor of modern establishments. It goes hand in hand with the zoning crackdown.

EE: This sentiment can be traced back even further to the 1950s, the time of the first wave of Dominican immigration. The 1954 Amendments to the Title I of the federal Housing Act of 1949 called for getting rid of the so-called 'decaying housing' by using public capital to "acquire, demolish, and clear blighted areas." The ultimate vision was to provide new homes for all-American families. Congress asserted that this program would result in the "growth, wealth, and security of the nation."

TGB: And the wording there is important, "American families." These programs were not developed with Dominican immigrants in mind.

ML: The policy predominantly benefited the wealthy, while the burdens of its discriminatory policies fell on marginalized groups. Among them were Dominican bodegueros and residents who were displaced in order to make room for new developments. Bodegas were an important source of income for these immigrant families. The removal of this income heightened income insecurity, which directly impacted the ability to afford the rising rents following the influx of white middle class families.

TGB: The income disparity among racial and ethnic groups in the neighborhood was drastic. While non-Hispanic whites' median household income was \$50,227 in 1999, Dominicans' median household income was roughly half of that value.

EE: With this in mind, Dominicans were inevitably the most vulnerable group affected by rent increases. We can see that bodegueros and their families, as well as other Dominicans, were forced out of Washington Heights by the loss of their livelihood. While we don't know as much about the bodegas that closed due to illegal zoning, the displacement of other Dominican-owned bodegas suggests a similar story. In one case, Socrates Vallejo and Elvin Ocana's bodega on 191st and St. Nicholas had been operating for 25 years. By 2002, rent had shot up by 40% and the bodegueros had no choice but to close their doors.

TGB: Another bodega run by two Dominican immigrants closed after their landlord demanded double the original rent. This shift toward modern developments and richer families priced the couple out of their bodega and then out of the neighborhood.

Luis noticed bodegas he grew up with disappearing as well.

LB: There's definitely less bodegas than we had before. I remember we used to have this really well-known one called La Paloma for some reason, I have no idea why. And that location, that location has been closed now for I think almost 10 years. There aren't as many Dominican owned bodegas as there used to be, now they're all like very modern and renovated and definitely not owned by Dominicans.

ML: In addition to financial hardships imposed by gentrification, residents also lost places and people that felt like family. One former Washington Heights resident said that as a child, his mother would leave him and his siblings alone, saying, "If you need anything you go over [to the bodega], we'll make sure to take care of it when we get back because they are family." People who lived near unauthorized residential bodegas had unique relationships with their local grocery stores. That all changed with the stricter enforcement of residential and commercial zones.

[Transition music]

TGB: All this goes to show that bodegueros and residents supported and relied on one another. Homes and bodegas were built together and thrived together, and unfortunately dealt with displacement together too. Luis also noticed this trend.

LB: Wherever there are Dominican bodegas, you will find Dominican people living close by. Had that bodega not been there, I guarantee you, I can tell you with 99% certainty, those Dominicans would not be there. So I do feel like there's something to be said about the presence of bodegas and how that and how that translates to, like, Dominican presence as well, on like a larger scale.

TGB: Before we go, let's clarify something: the terms “legal” and “illegal” that we’ve been using could be misleading. Is it legal to displace communities who have established themselves in a neighborhood? Bodegas allowed residents to make a living by bringing business practices from the Dominican Republic to their new neighborhood. Not to mention how delicious these Dominican snacks are! How can that be illegal?

EE: To help answer these big questions, the geographer Ananya Roy’s ideas about urban informality versus state power can be very useful. Roy marks the distinction like so; “Informalized spaces are reclaimed through urban renewal, while formalized spaces accrue value through state-authorized legitimacy.” In other words, urban informality allows residents and workers to create their own housing and business structures outside of state-sanctioned borders and restrictions. But urban renewal can threaten these informal structures because they are not deemed valuable.

TGB: Roy calls urban informality a “heuristic device that uncovers the ever-shifting urban relationship between the legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized”. When we consider these bodegas within the realm of urban informality, we can begin to question the basis of the state’s power to wield tools such as zoning laws and maps to undermine community creations. Miriam Mejia eloquently illustrates this idea, emphasizing the community’s strength over the state’s:

EE: What strengthens us, in the general sense? I think that in order to return to what made us strong to begin with, we need sensibility in understanding that it is not our own community’s weakness which has caused all of this.

ML: And we might add, it’s the city of New York that used zoning laws to weaken a community that was strong to begin with.

[Theme music]

TGB: In Luis’s perspective, Washington Heights will always maintain a Dominican presence.

LB: Pase lo que pase, este barrio siempre va a ser de nosotros.

No matter what happens, this neighborhood will always belong to us, Luis says.

ML: In the end, Usnavi, the bodeguero from “In the Heights,” decides to stay in the neighborhood and keep his bodega, even though the Heights are changing. That wasn’t an option for a lot of people who had to leave their homes. But thankfully, Dominican culture and bodegas are still alive in New York and everywhere Dominicans have gone. Thanks so much for joining us in discussing la batalla de las bodegas-- the battle of the bodegas.