

Dominican Arts and Culture in Northern Manhattan



Northern Manhattan Arts Alliance (NoMAA)

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Executive Director's Foreword

It is with pleasure that NoMAA presents the following catalogue, which provides an impressive look at the cultural and artistic contributions of the Dominican community in Northern Manhattan, harkening back to the early 1960s and extending until today.

This work grew out of a 2017 Communities of Color Non-Profit Stabilization Fund (CCNSF) grant from the Hispanic Federation. The present catalogue, assembled over a three-year period and concluded before the COVID-19 pandemic, would not have been possible without the thoughtful leadership as well as the broad and meaningful community engagement of former NoMAA Executive Director, Joanna E. Castro. NoMAA particularly wishes to acknowledge the support of Councilmember Ydanis Rodríguez/Immigrant Initiative, Department of Cultural Affairs. We would also like to thank the artists and community activists who have passed, but whose legacies live on: Normandía Maldonado, Tilsia Brenz, and Altagracia Levat. Special thanks are owed to NoMAA Research Fellows, Alexa Mena and Melissa García; NoMAA Executive Coordinator, Michelle Orsi Gordon; and editors Ann Dubin and Karen Okigbo all of whom played important roles in bringing this catalogue to life. Gratitude is especially extended to NoMAA founding board member and current Chair, Luis A. Miranda, Jr.

Finally, we express our thanks to all the Dominican arts and culture organizations whose commitment and talents have informed the dynamism that is Northern Manhattan.

Niria E. Leyva-Gutiérrez, Ph.D.
Acting Executive Director
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Pineda, César. Photograph. Carnival and Dominican Children. 2017
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Quisqueya en el Hudson. Photograph. Marthalicia Matarrita. 2010
Word Up Bookshop|Librería Comunitaria. Photograph. 2017

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INTRODUCTION

In a 2018 feature article, *Vogue* magazine showcased the work of Lucia Hierro, a Dominican-American artist and lifelong resident of Northern Manhattan. Detailed in this article were rich descriptions of Hierro's artistic process of transforming seemingly mundane bodega items into artifacts that critique the tenets of capitalism. In Hierro's hands, a mason jar, magazine, and lip gloss become a way to explore the relationship between personal tastes and mass consumerism.

Although Hierro's art is undeniably impressive, what was rather striking about that article was her loving description of her Dominican heritage and experiences growing up in an immigrant community. As she explained, *"My family has been hustling here since forever. I felt a sense of obligation to stay and make it in New York because my grandmother came to the city via the garment industry. She wanted to be a designer, but she didn't get the chance. She was incredible; I think she could have rivaled Givenchy if she wanted to. So, I feel like I always had a sense of 'I have to make it here. I'm not going anywhere else.'"*

Hierro's story is reflective and indicative of the story of many Dominican artists in Northern Manhattan. Although their medium of choice or artistic field may differ, artists of Dominican ancestry have contributed much to transforming Northern Manhattan into the dynamic neighborhood we know and love.

The story of how Northern Manhattan became the largest Dominican enclave outside the Dominican Republic began in the mid-20th century. By the 1970s, Dominicans had already established a thriving community in Hamilton Heights, Washington Heights, and Inwood. In fact, by 2015, Dominicans comprised approximately 73% of the neighborhood's Latino population.

Just as generations of artists helped transform the neighborhood over time, the neighborhood in turn has served as a creative muse for many artists. Whether through paintings, poetry, ballet, or film, Dominicans and Dominican-Americans have established organizations of artistic and cultural relevance in Northern Manhattan, with several dating back as early as the 1960s.

Listed below, in chronological order, are several organizations that have engendered a sense of community, reflected Dominican cultural norms, imparted communal values, and captured the experiences of Dominican immigrants over time. Thus, even though Northern Manhattan is currently undergoing demographic shifts, due in part to the anecdotal gentrification of the neighborhood, it is worth taking a moment to pause and acknowledge the role of art in transforming the neighborhood. We hope this document serves as a reminder of the myriad, diverse, and notable contributions of Dominican artists over time.

DIRECTORY

A compilation of some institutions, agencies, and organizations that have showcased or supported Dominican art and culture

CENTRO CÍVICO CULTURAL DOMINICANO (CCCD)

YEAR FOUNDED: 1962

One of the oldest formal Dominican associations in the U.S., CCCD's mission is "to enrich and empower [Dominican] youth and adults. To demand a more active role in the empowerment of the Dominican and Latino community artistically, civically, culturally, educationally, politically, and professionally." Today, CCCD continues to be active in the community by hosting a variety of arts and cultural events, such as interactive literary Mondays, an annual concert, poetry readings, exhibits, dance, and wellness classes. Dr. Marilu D. Galván is its Executive Director and has been closely connected to the institution since its founding.

CENTRO CULTURAL DEPORTIVO DOMINICANO DE NUEVA YORK

YEAR FOUNDED: 1966

As one of the last remaining recreational clubs, Club Deportivo is located on 163rd and Amsterdam. It holds salsa nights on Fridays, live bands and karaoke on Saturdays, and traditional *son* dancing on Sundays. On the first Saturday of the month, a live band performs and members bring guests to dance. Club Deportivo has been recognized for its work and longevity in the community.

CLUB CULTURAL JUAN PABLO DUARTE

YEAR FOUNDED: 1966

Also known as Instituto Duartiano de Nueva York, this organization was founded on February 27, 1966 by a group of community leaders. The club hosts social and cultural events. However, one of its major accomplishments occurred on the 165th anniversary of Duarte's birth. On that date, a statue and the triangular park in which it sits were dedicated to Juan Pablo Duarte on the Avenue of the Americas and Canal Street.

CENTRO CULTURAL BALLETT QUISQUEYA

YEAR FOUNDED: 1967

Founded by Normandía Maldonado, Centro Cultural Ballett Quisqueya is one of the first formal Dominican cultural institutions in New York City. Meaning "mother of the earth," the word "quisqueya," is the Taino word for the island of Hispaniola, today formed by the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The Dominican Republic is often called "Quisqueya la Bella" (quisqueya the beautiful); Washington Heights was once fondly nicknamed "Quisqueya Heights."

While no longer officially active, its mission was "to promote Dominican culture, dance and folklore such as the merengue and the mangulina at the international level."

SANTO DOMINGO INVITA

YEAR FOUNDED: 1974

Santo Domingo Invita is the first Dominican television program in the U.S., produced by Ramón Victoriano Rodríguez, a Dominican immigrant who lived in New York City. With over 40 years of programming on the history, culture, and news of the Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo Invita serves as a link to Dominicans residing outside the country.

The show is currently aired by Telemicro Internacional at 5:00 pm on Saturdays, and by Telemundo in New York on Sundays at 9:00 am.

ASOCIACIÓN COMUNITARIA DE DOMINICANOS PROGRESISTAS (ACDP)

YEAR FOUNDED: 1979

ACDP is one of the oldest community organizations providing services to residents of Northern Manhattan and the Bronx. Founded by Guillermo and Evelyn Linares and Marcos Navarro among other community members, ACDP has developed high quality programs that provide direct assistance to 27,000 children and families each year.

ACDP has its headquarters in the historic Audubon Ballroom (located at 3940 Broadway and 165th Street), and has arts enrichment after-school programs that include classes in design, fashion, and dance. By providing after-school programming for neighborhood children, ACDP works to ensure the continuity of Dominican cultural influence in Northern Manhattan.

ASSOCIATION OF DOMINICAN CLASSICAL ARTISTS (ADCA)

YEAR FOUNDED: 1980

ADCA started as an informal gathering of classically trained Dominican musicians brought together by Dominican classical pianist Tilsia Brens, who passed away in 2009. The mission of the ADCA was to play in Carnegie Hall, one of the most important venues for classical music in New York City and the world. That mission has been accomplished several times over.

ADCA supports the Washington Heights Community Conservatory of Fine Arts, which is a full scholarship fine arts conservatory for Washington Heights, Inwood, and Harlem youth (satellite schools include IS115, IS143, Alianza and George Washington High School), that offers private instruction and college prep. In addition, the chamber ensemble La Camerata Washington Heights, a professionally trained troupe, is part of ADCA. ADCA has presented four concerts annually for the last several years, including an inaugural gala concert. The concert series is used to promote lesser-known artists from Latin America or artists of Latin American origin.

DOMINICAN DAY PARADE

YEAR FOUNDED: 1982

Dominican community activist Miguel Amaro was determined to create a parade celebrating Dominican heritage, at the same level as other ethnic parades celebrated in New York City. The first Dominican Day Parade, which marched up Audubon Avenue for nearly a mile, was held on the second Sunday of August 1982. The parade commemorated the Independence War from Spain and culminated at George Washington High School in a large scale festival that featured music, dance, poetry readings, speeches, and other performances.

BROADWAY HOUSING COMMUNITIES (BHC)

YEAR FOUNDED: 1983

BHC is a community-based nonprofit organization that is recognized nationally for pioneering high-impact solutions to inequality and homelessness in the underserved New York City neighborhoods of West Harlem and Washington Heights.

In addition, BHC has three galleries under the direction of Ana Ofelia-Rodríguez - Rio I, Rio II, and Rio III - where artists can exhibit their work. It has had 12 exhibits since 1999, for a total of 210 exhibits by 2016. The exhibiting artists, who are both emerging and established, cover a wide range of disciplines.

ALIANZA DOMINICANA CULTURAL CENTER

YEAR FOUNDED: 1985

Founded by Moisés Pérez and a group of community volunteers, the founders' philosophy prioritized community empowerment from a holistic perspective by working with the whole family and incorporating the arts as a key component.

The Conjunto Folklórico is the dance ensemble of Alianza. Additionally, Alianza created a gallery that was led by Dominican artist and entrepreneur Oscar Abreu and has also commissioned murals, which adorn the walls of I.S. 143.

Today, Alianza Dominicana Cultural Center's mission is "to produce literary, performing, and visual arts programs; to support and strengthen community cultural programs and institutions in Washington Heights and Inwood; and to serve as a home to local artists committed to enriching the lives of Northern Manhattan residents through the arts."

QUISQUEYA EN EL HUDSON

YEAR FOUNDED: 1993

Following political and social unrest in Washington Heights in 1993, the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation (NYC-DPR) entered into an agreement with the ACDP to operate and organize programs at the Highbridge Recreation Center. Quisqueya on the Hudson is a major presentation of the Ethnic Folk Arts Center's Cultural Initiative in the Dominican community.

Originally, this 2-year project began with seed funding from the Folk & Traditional Arts Program and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The project involved research into the practice of Dominican traditional arts by student researchers at Lehman College, under the direction of primary researcher Dr. Martha Ellen Davis. In 2004, the Ethnic Folk Arts Center released a CD called Quisqueya en el Hudson through Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Their musical styles ranged from Afro-Caribbean religious music to the rural merengue typical of the Dominican rock-and-roll genre. Such recordings are preserved in the Smithsonian's archives, making Quisqueya en el Hudson's contribution a lasting one despite its limited timeframe.

JUAN PABLO DUARTE FESTIVAL

YEAR FOUNDED: 1999

The Juan Pablo Duarte Festival is an annual street carnival with a variety of cultural performances including Dominican folkloric dance and musicians, among other activities. Like the Dominican Day Parade, the carnival is an important opportunity for the community to showcase its arts and culture, thus, fostering a sense of pride in Dominican heritage.

CULTURARTE

YEAR FOUNDED: 2000

Poet and psychoanalyst Dr. Jorge Piña founded the arts and cultural organization Culturarte on June 20th, 2000. Offering piano, fine arts, and design classes, Culturarte shared its location with the former Interboro Institute, a two-year college. The organization received many grants, which allowed for Culturarte to have robust programming.

Dr. Piña had greater aspirations for Culturarte. He wanted to turn it into a for-profit clinic that would treat youth suffering from mental illness using art therapy, and in turn, its profits would run the arts and cultural center. However, Culturarte had to close its doors in 2010 due to increased rent. That same year, Dr. Piña was honored for his work, during the IV Dominican Book Fair in New York City, which took place at Boricua College. Though the center is not currently active, Dr. Piña continues to work toward acquiring the funds to create the clinic and cultural center.

ALLIANCE OF DOMINICAN AMERICAN VISUAL ARTISTS (ADAVA)

YEAR FOUNDED: 2004

ADAVA is dedicated to enhancing the general public's understanding of, interest in, and appreciation of the art produced by local artists of all ethnicities or cultural backgrounds, but predominantly those from the Washington Heights and Inwood neighborhoods of New York City. In addition, ADAVA provides local artists with technical support, venues for exhibits, assistance when organizing exhibits, and opportunities to have their work presented to the public at large.

Created by artist Ezekiel Jiménez, ADAVA is considered one of the first formal Dominican visual arts groups established in New York City.

CAYENA PUBLICATIONS (EDITORIAL CAYENA)

YEAR FOUNDED: 2004

The mission of Cayena Publications is to preserve Dominican oral history and promote community development through a culture of peace and humanism. Cayena published children's stories such as *Dreams*, *Flora*, & *Magic*, and works that captured the immigrant experience, including *Voices of the Diaspora* and the documentary *Los Rostros Detrás de las Muñecas*, which is considered the first documentary featuring Dominican women working in the United States.

Cayena Publications was entirely funded by Ms. Peña Grateraux. She published eighteen books and two documentaries. As a permanent record of Dominican arts and culture, Cayena Publications serves as a tool for memorializing and preserving the Dominican influence in Northern Manhattan.

COMISIONADO DOMINICANO DE LA CULTURA EN LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

YEAR FOUNDED: 2004

Originally named La Casa de la Cultura, this organization is an exterior office of the Dominican Ministry of Culture. Its purpose is to disseminate Dominican culture and to promote the Dominican artistic and literary community in the U.S.

The Comisionado is considered one of the founders of the annual Feria del Libro in New York, one of the few Spanish-language festivals in the city. Because the Comisionado has its own offices and a small theater and conference room, it is a physical space that serves as a hub for Dominican organizations in the city and often hosts exhibits or similar gatherings. Most recently, the Comisionado's venue was used to host the 8th Annual Dominican Film Festival in July 2019.

TEATRO LAS TABLAS

YEAR FOUNDED: 2006

Founded by Actress and Director Yolanny Rodríguez, Teatro las Tablas is a not-for-profit corporation that works with individual artists, artists groups, individual residents, and groups of residents in Washington Heights and Inwood to organize and create theatrical plays and performances. The methods are based on the Brazilian theatrical form Theatre of the Oppressed, a performing arts company that collaborates with community groups to form theatrical groups.

The theater group is produced in Spanish. Their first show was a production of the *Vagina Monologues*, which ran for several years. The group often does benefit productions to support other local organizations such as the Dominican Women's Development Center (DWDC) and the Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation (NMIC). In 2011, the group created The Heights Theater Festival, which took place at the United Palace for Cultural Arts.

KIDCINEMAFEST & DOMINICAN FILM FESTIVAL IN NEW YORK (DFFNY)

YEAR FOUNDED: 2009

When Armando Guareño moved to New York, he saw that there was a need in the Washington Heights community for more cultural programming at an international level. Understanding that need, he created the KidCinemaFest Film Festival in 2009, an annual event produced by Cine Art Entertainment Productions. The Festival presents works of children's cinema, and aims to contribute to the public knowledge of and the need for educational cinema. It serves as a tool to engage children in discussions with filmmakers and to help them to think critically about the filmmaking process.

PEOPLE'S THEATRE PROJECT (PTP)

YEAR FOUNDED: 2009

In 2009, Mino Lora and Bob Braswell, both theatre artists and educators, co-founded People's Theatre Project in Northern Manhattan, with the simple goal of making theatre accessible to their community. NoMAA awarded PTP one of its first re-grants for capacity building. Coinciding with its 10th anniversary, NoMAA named Lora a 2019 Uptown Arts Stroll Honoree.

PTP works around a writing and speaking curriculum with children in schools throughout the city and uptown, in collaboration with Alianza Dominicana, WordUp Community Bookshop/Libreria Comunitaria and other community partners. Through this organization, Mino hopes to help "create the next generation of leaders in the United States."

COLECTIVO DE ARTISTAS VISUALES DOMÍNICO-AMERICANOS (CAVDA)

YEAR FOUNDED: 2010

The co-founders of the group are Dio-génes Abreu, Hector Ureña, Ismael Checo, Maximiliano Medina, and Ana Burgos among others. The collective currently has 12-20 members who exhibit together.

Although some artists are not from uptown, their key venues include group exhibitions at the Rio Gallery/Broadway Housing Communities and Comisionado Dominicano. Programs include "Hablamos de Arte." In 2018-19, they produced an exhibit showcasing young artists with the goal of presenting work by students from Escuela Libre Juan Bravo. In 2019, a year before the group's 10th anniversary, CAVDA produced an itinerant exhibit that travelled to different venues in the Dominican Republic, and included local artists as well as Dominican artists living in the US.

DOMINICANYORK PROYECTO GRÁFICA (DYPG)

YEAR FOUNDED: 2010

DominicanYork Proyecto Gráfica is a printmaking collective founded by twelve artists of Dominican descent who live and work in New York City. DYPG's first portfolio, *Manifestaciones*, which has twelve prints, one from each founding artist, is part of the Smithsonian Museum's collection in Washington, D.C. An exhibition of *Manifestaciones* inaugurated the Dominican Studies Institute Gallery in 2010, and was also featured at the NoMAA Gallery from September to October 2012.

As a collective, DYPG created a second portfolio titled *Here + There*, a multi-part print project. *Community|Comunidad* is the third portfolio the collective created in 2014. DYPG still continues to exhibit and generate work today.

GAGA PA'L PUEBLO

YEAR FOUNDED: 2011

Gaga Pa'l Pueblo was founded by Génaro Ozuna in 2011. The group's stated mission is "re-defining Dominican identity through music and dance in a time of globalization." Gaga Pa'l Pueblo primarily plays gaga and palo, among other Dominican and Haitian folkloric music. They usually meet on Sundays during the summer at three in the afternoon in the Anne Loftus playground on Dyckman Street. However, they recently moved their activities to a small park adjacent to the Dyckman subway station of the 1 train. Without a physical space of their own, Gaga Pa'l Pueblo's members perform purely for the pride and joy of lifting up and valuing art forms that are not always visible in the community.

PLUMA POÉTICA DEL ARTE

YEAR FOUNDED: 2011

Maricela Reyes Martínez is a Dominican writer, Executive Director and founder of Pluma Poética Del Arte (Spanish for Poetic Quill of the Arts). The organization's mission is "to instill art in children, youth, and adults so that the Latin Culture stays alive in the next generation." In addition Pluma Poética Del Arte supports the development of Latin American artists in New York City, aims to improve their quality of life, and promotes all aspects of art and culture.

Since its founding, Pluma Poética Del Arte has provided the Latin American community in New York City with various programs and activities including literary gatherings, writing workshops, anti-bullying workshops, and theatrical performances. Some events, such as the Family Bilingual Creative Day Art Camp, have occurred in public spaces like Inwood Park. This organization works to provide intellectually stimulating programming for the youth and the public in general, while also preserving Latin American culture through the arts for generations to come.

WORD UP COMMUNITY BOOKSHOP (LIBRERÍA COMUNITARIA)

YEAR FOUNDED: 2011

Operating since 2011, Word Up was intended to be a one-month program in an empty storefront on Broadway at 176 Street. Veronica Liu, founder and current director, worked with NoMAA in preparation for the Uptown Arts Stroll to use space donated by the landlord. Word Up is not only a bookshop but also a hub for artists in the community and can be booked for community events as well. It hosts spoken word, play readings, musical performances, and exhibits. The organization is run entirely by volunteers and offers bilingual programming in English and Spanish, as well as after-school programs.

UNITED PALACE OF CULTURAL ARTS (UPCA)

YEAR FOUNDED: 2012

The United Palace of Cultural Arts, housed in an elegant 1930s theater in Washington Heights, is not a Dominican or Latino-specific organization, but it is the only theater space of its kind in Upper Manhattan. Reflecting its neighborhood, UPCA has intentionally brought acts like Juan Luis Guerra, Milly Quezada, and Fefita La Grande to its stage. It staged a 5th anniversary production of Lin-Manuel Miranda's Tony-winning musical *In the Heights*, as well as a screening of *West Side Story* with Mr. Miranda and Rita Moreno and the 2018 musical film *Mary Poppins Returns*.

UPCA hosts the annual Danza Highbridge Festival at the drained Highbridge Pool in Washington Heights; the festival showcases myriad traditional and cultural dance styles and features local dance groups.

WORD AT 4F

YEAR FOUNDED: 2012

Word at 4F is an arts organization that was founded by Angela Abreu, a writer, artist, and community activist in the Washington Heights community. It is essentially a traveling open mic program with the mission to cultivate an appreciation for poetry and a literary community in Northern Manhattan. Word at 4F exemplifies the grassroots, collaborative nature that defines so much of Dominican artistic, cultural, and civic life in Northern Manhattan.

DOMINICAN WRITERS ASSOCIATION

YEAR FOUNDED: 2015

Dominican Writers Association is a "platform dedicated to supporting and promoting works by writers of Dominican descent." Founded by Angela Abreu in 2015 (who also co-founded Word at 4F), this organization provides Dominican writers with the tools and resources needed to hone their craft and contribute to the literary canon.

In support of their mission, this group created the Dominican Writers Conference, which was inaugurated in May 2019 at City College of New York under the title "Dominicanish." During this conference, the group honored Josefina Baez, the Dominican storyteller, performer, and theater director. The conference served as a networking opportunity for writers, and also featured writing workshops, manuscript reviews, and panels addressing issues faced by writers in the diaspora.

Throughout the year, literary events are held in collaboration with WordUp Community Bookshop/Libreria Comunitaria and Alianza Dominicana. This organization continues to collaborate with talented writers to support Dominican artists in their non-fiction, fiction, and poetic works.

LA CASA DEL ARTE

YEAR FOUNDED: 2015

La Casa del Arte, like Word at 4F, started and continues to be run from a private home. It was founded by Melissa and Kevin Guzmán in 2015. La Casa del Arte emerged from the Guzmans' desire to foster communal spaces for art. They were looking to open a larger day care center, and Francis McGyver, who had long lived in the Washington Heights community, sold her house to them.

LA CASA DEL ARTE CONT...

Though they purchased the house in 2011, they did not start hosting exhibitions and artists until 2015. They initially held holiday concerts and hosted parents of the children in the day care, many of whom were musicians.

Leslie Jiménez, a neighbor and local visual artist curated a show in the first floor of the house. Since then, La Casa del Arte hosts cultural events on a monthly or bimonthly basis. They also offer studio space both in their main house on 165th Street and their cottage in upstate New York. La Casa del Arte's mission is to be an accessible space for local artists and community groups. Much like Word at 4F and other organizations in this study, La Casa del Arte illustrates the grassroots and community-oriented nature of much of the Dominican arts and culture scene in Northern Manhattan.