

# MASSACRE RIVER

THE WOMAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY

WRITTEN BY SUZAN BERAZA DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID GARRETT BYARS EDITED BY CHERIE DILLON + SUZAN BERAZA + CASEY NAY  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS SALLY JO FIFER, ABIGAIL E. DISNEY + DINI RETICKER PRODUCED BY SUZAN BERAZA + DAVID GARRETT BYARS  
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID GARRETT BYARS CO-PRODUCED BY CASEY NAY, TIMBERLY KENNEDY + MICHELLE MAUGRAN  
ORIGINAL SCORE MUSIC BY KIRK DROGTVOLD

ITVS

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## DIRECTOR STATEMENT

### What happens when you are left stateless due to a reverse in birthright citizenship?

*MASSACRE RIVER* takes place in the Dominican Republic and Haiti (Hispaniola), one of the Caribbean islands of my childhood. I am Latina and was looking for a story that would allow me to spend time with family while rediscovering the places where I was raised.

During research for the film, which was initially going to be a project about sex tourism, the Dominican Constitutional Court reinterpreted its constitution and reversed birthright citizenship stripping Dominican nationality from more than 200,000 Dominican-born people of Hai-

tian descent, including one of the characters we had been following, Pikilina. I then realized that this was a much bigger and more important story and shifted the direction and focus of the film to examine what appeared to be a racist change in policy.

Being a lighter-skinned Latina growing up in the Caribbean, I regularly witnessed disturbing prejudices against those who are darker-skinned. It felt as though this policy was one of ethnic cleansing, purging those who are darkest, and exposing a deeply rooted discrimination that has long been prevalent not only on the island, but worldwide.

Pikilina's story is a haunting example of what happens when a government decides to deny an entire race or nation of people. With nationalism rising globally, what is unfolding in the Dominican Republic has become another illustration of the alarming and abhorrent impacts of xenophobia and hatred and fear of the "other." >

## SUZAN BERAZA PRODUCER/DIRECTOR

Born in Jamaica and raised in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, social and environmental issues pervade Suzan's work. Her films have appeared on National Public Television, Pivot TV and on the Documentary Channel, at Lincoln Center, and have won over twenty festival awards. Her first film, *Bag It*, was honored as a winner

of the BritDoc Impact Award in Berlin, and has been televised in over thirty countries. Her latest project, *Uranium Drive-In*, was a recipient of Sundance Institute and Chicken and Egg funding and was featured at Good Pitch and at Hot Docs Pitch Forum. The film is currently being broadcast on Pivot TV (Participant Media) and was honored for

documentary excellence by the Alliance of Women Film Journalists. Her current project, *Massacre River* (working title), was recently selected for the Camden International Film Festival Points North Fellowship, and was featured at this past IFP Spotlight on Documentaries, Hot Docs Deal Maker, and the Latino Media Market. >



## ONE LINE SYNOPSIS 30 WORDS

Pikilina is a Dominican-born woman of Haitian descent. Violence erupts when the country of her birth, the Dominican Republic, reverses birthright citizenship and she and 200,000 others are left stateless. >

## MEDIUM SYNOPSIS 117 WORDS

*MASSACRE RIVER* is a character-driven documentary that takes place in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, two ethnically and culturally distinct countries that have been forced to share an island since colonial times. The film follows Pikilina, a Dominican-born woman of Haitian descent, and her family. Racial and political violence erupt when the country of her birth, the Dominican Republic, reverses its birthright citizenship law and she is left stateless, along with over 200,000 others. This sets Pikilina off on an epic journey as she struggles to regain her Dominican nationality. Pikilina faces the choice of fighting for her rightful citizenship and exposing herself to danger, or fleeing with her family to Haiti, a country she barely knows. >

### FILM TITLE

Massacre River:  
Woman Without a Country

### CONTACT INFO

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### TECHNICAL INFORMATION

TRT: 56 minutes  
Exhibition Format: HD Cam,  
Blu-ray, DVD  
Aspect Ratio: 16:9 or 1.85  
Shooting Format: HD  
Color, English Subtitled

### FESTIVAL + COMMUNITY

#### SCREENINGS

Contact Suzan Beraza at  
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### EDUCATIONAL DISTRIBUTER

New Day Films  
www.newdayfilms.com

# LONG SYNOPSIS 500 WORDS



For generations, the Dominican Republic has had a significant Haitian population, but after the 2010 earthquake, hundreds of thousands more Haitians crossed the border into the Dominican Republic seeking refuge and a livelihood. In an already small country, this has led to an increase in anti-Haitian sentiment. In this environment, the Dominican courts passed a controversial law that stripped over 200,000 Dominican-born people of Haitian descent of their citizenship. The D.R., like the U.S., formerly utilized the concept of “jus soli” to determine citizenship—that is, anyone born in the D.R. was automatically granted Dominican citizenship. Now, children born in the D.R. of Haitian parents are considered to have been born “in transit” and many face deportation.

In a country already rife with racism, this contentious law has further stoked an atmosphere of distrust and animosity between Dominicans and Haitians, and given tacit support for xenophobia. A series of retaliatory incidents have grown increasingly violent, including flag burnings, riots, kidnappings, and the recent lynching of a Haitian man in a public plaza. In addition to burgeoning racial violence, the Dominican authorities officially began deportations on a large scale in August of 2015. Tent cities are growing on the Haitian side of the border where abruptly deported persons of Haitian descent wait in limbo, unsure of what course of action to take, as the Haitian government has not welcomed them either. Many have lived in the D.R. all of their lives. Some speak no Haitian Creole.

They have effectively become stateless—citizens of no country.

As the film opens, we see the status quo: Dominicans and Haitians living in close proximity to each other in relative harmony. The streets are teeming with life—it’s too hot to be indoors. Pikilina washes her daughter’s hair in an outside courtyard, while her mother Kokota, and sister Liliina play dominoes with a group of Haitians, loudly slapping each domino down when it is their turn.

Pikilina, 23, is a fierce survivor and does all she can to get by—from buying and reselling clothes, to occasionally even selling herself. She turned to sex work when she was 15, as it was one of few options for a woman of Haitian descent. Even though she was born and raised in the Dominican Republic, she has no legal documentation that would allow her to find work in the official sector. A long scar runs down the left side of her face, an injury she received in her teen years from a fight with a Dominican woman. Pikilina has two children: Ani, 6, and Ricardo, 7. Their father abandoned the family when Pikilina was 17, an extremely common occurrence in the Dominican Republic. Pikilina smiles broadly as she talks about her children. Her Spanish is Dominican, and she easily flows between her native tongue and the language of her parents—Haitian Creole.

Through a montage of news clips we learn of a new law that has overturned birth-right citizenship. This moment is monumental, as from this moment on Pikilina’s life will never be the same. She is now a stranger in her own country, and is faced with several terrible choices: fight an uphill battle for her rightful Dominican nationality, or either flee or possibly be deported to Haiti. Bowing to

**Continued on next page**

# LONG SYNOPSIS Continued



international pressure, the Dominican government agrees to provide an avenue for Dominican born people of Haitian descent to register and remain in the D.R. Pikilina is initially excited to register with the new regularization plan, but soon struggles with the process, and it begins to feel to her and others that they are intentionally doomed to failure, with insurmountable financial burden and unending bureaucratic paperwork.

With the news that deportations have begun, Pikilina, Lilina, and Kokota are hiding out in their homes. Mass deportations begin in earnest with thousands being rounded up and deported in the first few weeks. They are afraid to walk the streets of their neighborhood, as violence towards Haitians reaches a fever pitch; they fear brutality and deportation daily. Many of

their Haitian neighbors have left, deciding to self-deport rather than risk being picked up by police and deported without their families and belongings intact. Lilina shows recent footage that has been forwarded to her by a friend on her cell phone from a violent raid in the nearby town of Moca. The footage is startling—Dominican zealots are beating Haitians, cutting their hair, destroying their homes and belongings. Over the course of the film, we see the fabric of a family, community, and country slowly unravel, as xenophobia against Haitians and violence become the new norm.

Pikilina has been struggling to get her nationality for over a year when she learns that she has been granted a residency card that will allow her to temporarily stay in the country. As she and her sister Lili-

na look over the documents, Lilina points out that under Pikilina's citizenship, she is listed as Haitian. There is a moment of frustration as they look at each other in disbelief. All of this work to still be considered Haitian instead of Dominican. Pikilina is still not able to legally work or vote and she will have to reapply in the following year as her document is valid for only one year. Kokota and Lilina, as they were born in Haiti, find that they have been granted two-year extensions to their visas.

Pikilina, Kokota, and Lilina attend the 80th anniversary of the Parsley Massacre along the banks of the Massacre River at the Dominican-Haitian border. The massacre was a genocide in which the Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo, engaged in a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing that resulted in the brutal murders by machete of nearly 20,000 Haitians in 1937. Haitians were differentiated from Dominicans when soldiers asked them to say the word "perejil," the Spanish word for parsley. If they pronounced it with a Creole accent, they were killed. Pikilina, her mother, and sister, along with hundreds of peaceful protesters, carry candles and sing songs as they walk towards the border. The lead up to the Parsley Massacre and the rhetoric and violence surrounding current events draws dark parallels and portends of another potential bloody crisis.

Pikilina and her family, along with the gathering of peaceful protesters, arrive at the border and share a rare moment of sober reflection while a crowd of Haitians across the Massacre River call out in solidarity. Even with all of the conflict between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, there are those who aspire to ignite a positive connection between them, visualizing a future of peace, justice, and reconciliation. ➤

## PRESS

### VARIETY

#### HOT DOCS FILMS FIND DIFFERENT WAYS TO EXPLORE MIGRANT CRISIS

... One example is Suzan Beraza's "Massacre River," which examines the fallout of a 2013 constitutional court ruling in the Dominican Republic that effectively rescinded citizenship rights for more than 200,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent. Against a backdrop of rising populism and the spread of mob violence, Beraza uses one woman's struggle to prove her birthright as a way to look at "how systems and politics and agendas are being used to turn us against each other," according to Smith. "It's painting on a broader canvas, it is a bigger-picture story." ...

[READ MORE >](#)

<https://variety.com/2019/film/global/hot-docs-migrant-crisis-1203203144/>

### Lattin MAGAZINE

#### ALL THE LATIN AMERICAN ACCENTS AT HOT DOCS 2019

Yet another year, Latin America is present at Hot Docs, one of the most important documentary film festivals in the world, and the largest one in Canada and the US. Here is a list of all the movies and short films from and about the region.

Hot Docs, North America's largest documentary festival, offers an outstanding selection of over 200 films from Canada and around the world to Toronto audiences of more than 200,000. In this year's edition, the Latin American presence ...

[READ MORE >](#)

<https://lattin.ca/2019/04/28/all-the-latin-american-accents-at-hot-docs-2019/>

### IN THE SEATS

#### HOT DOCS 2019: OUR REVIEW OF 'MASSACRE RIVER.'

Anyone who has taken a high school history class at some point has heard the phrase: "those who fail to learn their history are doomed to repeat it." It is a cliché that, more routinely than not, draws a fair number of eye-rolls, smirks, and snickers. It is a cliché that is, until faced with very real examples of moments where awful history seems to be repeating itself.

Suzan Beraza's Massacre River looks at the Dominican Republic some eighty-years after Rafael Trujillo's infamous paisley massacre, where similar anti-Haitian nationalist sentiments have again reached a boiling point. ...

[READ MORE >](#)

<http://intheseats.ca/hot-docs-2019-our-review-of-massacre-river/>

### REALSCREEN

... Suzan Beraza's Massacre River, detailing how thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent were left stateless after their citizenship is ruled invalid ...

[READ MORE >](#)

<http://realscreen.com/2019/03/19/tasha-hubbards-we-will-stand-up-to-launch-hot-docs-19/>

### WE ARE MOVING STORIES

#### HOT DOCS 2019 – MASSACRE RIVER

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR/  
PRODUCER SUZAN BERAZA

#### Congratulations! Why did you make your film?

Initially, it was out of self-interest as I wanted to spend more time with my family in the Dominican Republic so was looking for a good story. Five years later I have a very different film than I started out making.

#### Imagine I'm a member of the audience. Why should I watch this film?

With rising nationalism and xenophobia throughout the world, this story serves as a model as to what happens when a country does away with birthright citizenship (and reinterprets their constitution to do so).

[READ MORE >](#)

<http://www.wearemovingstories.com/we-are-moving-stories-films/2019/1/17/massacre-river>

### Telluride Inside... and Out

#### BERAZA'S "MASSACRE RIVER" TO SCREEN AT HOT DOC PRE-PBS

The headlines spell out in no uncertain terms how centuries of racism and fear have shaped the people of two proximate nations, echoing the current crisis at our own borders.

The anti-immigrant rhetoric in the media and in the streets should sound all too familiar: They rape. They murder. They steal "our" jobs. They exploit the laws of our nation.

Their biggest crime? They are not us. They are The Other. ...

[READ MORE >](#)

<https://www.tellurideinside.com/2019/04/berazas-massacre-river-to-screen-at-hot-doc-pre-pbs.html>

# PHOTOS

[MORE PHOTOS > http://www.massacreriver.com/stills](http://www.massacreriver.com/stills)



(Clockwise from top)

1 Pikilina at Dominican Republic/Haitian Border.

2 Pikilina dancing with her daughter.

3 Pikilina

4 Refugees that have fled to Haiti.

5 Pikilina