

Article

# Café Culture as Decolonial Feminist Praxis: Scherezade García's *Blame ... Coffee*

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**Abstract:** This article provides a decolonial feminist analysis of Latinx artist Scherezade García's most recent portable mural, *Blame it on the bean: the power of Coffee* (2019), created for and installed in the café and library of The People's Forum, a "movement incubator for working class and marginalized communities" and "collective action" in the heart of Manhattan. This artwork depicts three allegorical women convening over cups of coffee, one of which has precariously overflowed onto a miniaturized portrait of Napoleon Bonaparte, whose undoing was said to have been facilitated by his excessive indulgence in coffee and other commodities of empire. Historically, coffee production was bound to imperial plantocracies, enslavement, and patriarchal networks; today, the industry remains a continued site of oppression and erasure for female workers around the globe. By placing this mural in conversation with the portable material economies of the Caribbean, the gendered history of coffee production and consumption, and the history of female representation in art, this article argues that the mural dismantles heteropatriarchal conventions precisely by invoking café culture—the very mode of social performance that García's work critiques. In so doing, García subverts the problematically gendered and racialized heritage of coffee with a matriarchal *Afrolatinidad* that, in the artist's words, "colonizes the colonizer."

**Keywords:** contemporary art; Caribbean; feminism; decolonial theory; coffee; colonialism; public art



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## 1. Introduction

This article provides an in-depth analysis of a previously unexamined mural by the renowned Dominican-American artist Scherezade García (b. 1966), *Blame it on the bean: the power of Coffee* (2019; hereafter referred to as *Blame ... Coffee*), which was recently commissioned for the café and library of the New York City community space known as The People's Forum. Through an examination of this portable mural, I argue that García aligns her artistic praxis with the decolonial feminist theory María Lugones defines as the modern/colonial gender system. Amid the homogenous landscape of urban cafes that today populate New York, this mural intervenes to problematize the colonial and gendered values engrained through the history of coffee production and café culture. I suggest that through this work, García maps a feminist lens onto her critical vision of coloniality. As this article discusses, café culture organizes communities but also emboldens exclusionary, gendered tactics that have long afforded privilege to heteropatriarchal society while erasing women of color from the public sphere. By placing García's mural in conversation with the portable economies prevalent in Caribbean arts, decolonial feminist theory, the gendered history and politics of café culture, and the history of female representation in art, this article demonstrates how *Blame ... Coffee* dismantles heteropatriarchal conventions precisely by invoking café culture—the very mode of social performance that García's work critiques. In so doing, García subverts the problematically gendered and racialized heritage of coffee with a matriarchal *Afrolatinidad* that, in the artist's words, "colonizes the colonizer."

## 2. Portable Material Economies of the Caribbean

Against the backdrop of Manhattan's Garment District, in the heart of New York City, resides The People's Forum, a "movement incubator for working class and marginalized

communities.” Established in 2018, The People’s Forum serves as an educational and cultural center, promoting grassroots activism and providing a space for casual convenings in the café the occupies the Forum’s first floor. The People’s Café, as its name suggests, promises a meeting space for the free exchange of knowledge, ideas, and arts, accessible to all in a city where access often comes at a premium. Hanging along the café wall, García’s impressive portable mural, *Blame . . . Coffee* (Figure 1a,b), greets patrons with a grandiose scene of women imbibing both coffee and conversation. Commissioned in 2019 specifically for the café and library of The People’s Forum, García’s painting serves to amplify the visual and historical aura of women, immigrants, and people of color within the context of a site of unfettered access and mobilization for underrepresented communities in New York.<sup>1</sup> As an Afro-Latinx artist born and raised in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and a long-time resident of New York, García’s personal history and heritage resonates with the mural’s revisionist intent and itinerant (portable) medium.



(a)

Figure 1. Cont.

<sup>1</sup> The commission initially emerged after a conversation about coffee as artistic medium and subject matter between García and the artist Reynaldo García Pantaleón, with whom García had collaborated in the printmaking collective Dominican York Proyecto GRAFICA. According to García, it was Pantaleón who facilitated the recommendation that García paint the work for The People’s Forum and that she create a work specifically related to coffee as subject matter (Schezade García, interview with the author, 5 October 2020).



(b)

**Figure 1.** (a) Scherezade García, *Blame it on the bean: the power of Coffee*, 2019, 54 × 134 inches, mixed media, The People’s Forum, New York. Photo by William Vazquez. © 2021 Scherezade García. (b) Scherezade García, *Blame it on the bean: the power of Coffee*, detail, 2019, 54 × 134 inches, mixed media, The People’s Forum, New York. Photo by William Vazquez. © 2021 Scherezade García.

Sited in the café, opposite a wall replete with multilingual books from revolutionary and radical thinkers, the mural reframes the local New York café as part of a global system of liquid—*fluid*—economies of coffee and culture alike. García’s mural portrays a scene that is at once compositionally unassuming yet complex in color, gesture, and narrative. At center, three women sit around a small table, each woman seated with a cup of coffee in hand. Lush, jewel tones of purples, reds, and blues create a nebulous space that flanks either side of the women, like cosmic curtains opening onto a scene. Swirling lines and expressive brush strokes throughout seem to evoke the perpetual motion of hot beverages and political discourse stirring among the people below. The women echo the actions taking place in the café as they hover over the space in monumental form, with each figure, from the waist up, no less than four feet in height. Their demeanors feel equally imposing, stern and resolute, as two of the women breach the membrane of the canvas with a gaze that meets the viewer’s. The women seem to negate the coy reserve historically espoused by lavish portrayals of females in repose, subconsciously signaling the acts of resistance and revolution that fill the pages of the café’s books below.

By García’s own account, the distinctive skin tones of each of the three women was a deliberate gesture to the global heritage and history of the coffee around which they gather—the woman at the viewer’s left a reference to coffee’s Ethiopian origins; the woman at center a *mulata* embodying the Afro-diasporic miscegenation wrought by colonialism in the Americas, where coffee became most rigorously tethered to racial capitalism; and at the viewer’s right, a woman of Europe’s intelligentsia invites the viewer into the composition with her foreshortened cup gently tilted toward the picture plane. The somber nature of this visitation is punctuated and undercut by the light blues, gold, and white that dance across the composition, suggesting opulent adornments worn by the women. This is not a clandestine meeting, but rather a public spectacle. At center, the ornate gold worn by the *mulata*—a reference to the colonial riches extracted from the Americas—gently shifts the

eye lower, where the miniature likeness of Napoleon Bonaparte, replete in his imperial attire, sits front and center, waist-deep in a blue aquatic abyss. While the women comport themselves with courtly refinement, Napoleon slouches in near comic defeat, his eyelids heavy, his facial expression forlorn. Above him, a waterfall of coffee cascades down the cup of the woman above, falling in a viscous stream—like thick molasses or tar—onto Napoleon’s garments. In this light, the women’s collective, unrelenting gaze betrays a subversive action, revealing their ironic disregard and repudiation for the imperial prowess of the almighty leader who recoils below them.

This portable mural represents a compelling extension of García’s work to date, which typically engages colonial histories from subaltern perspectives and challenges expectations of Western visuality. In *Blame . . . Coffee*, García pivots to specifically interrogate and revise the genderedness of these historical constructs, refuting the male-dominated discourse of café culture with a collective female presence. In recent years, a robust body of scholarship has emerged on the work of female visual artists of the Dominican diaspora, such as Josefina Báez, Charo Oquet, Joiri Minaya, Firelei Báez, and Scherezade García, each of whom embrace a multivalent practice across varied media (see [Davis et al. 2017](#); [Lapin Dardashti 2017](#); [Valdez 2017](#)). The recent monograph *Scherezade García: From This Side of the Atlantic* (2020) provides a wealth of new essays on the artist’s practice across her career of over three decades, demonstrating the pluralities that inform García’s employment of myriad and mixed media as well as her intellectual frameworks, which while centered on the Americas, extend outward to global contexts.

Throughout her career, García’s work has taken on many manifestations, but it consistently champions Baroque aesthetics and engages in the complexities of diaspora and globalization, particularly as it pertains to her native island of Hispaniola and its history of colonization, revolution, and cultural reclamation. Works such as the collaborative *Postcard Haiti-Dominican Republic Project Action* (2012), in which García sought strategies to address racially motivated killings along the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, demonstrate García’s investment in revisionist histories and decolonial praxis. For that multifaceted collaboration, García utilized postcards—an intimate medium of accessibility and community building—as one outlet for artistic expression and healing. But her investment in connections and community also manifests through large-scale installations, like *Liquid Highway* (2018–2019), a work that enhanced a Brooklyn streetscape with a resplendent microcosm of shimmering golds and blues painted onto plastic life rafts adorned with luggage tags. García enshrined these life rafts, vehicles of portability and mobility, within the work, creating a secular altar to migration, diaspora, and the “liquid highway”—García’s idiom for the sea as conduit of people and resources, both historically and today. The liquid highway is both perilous and promising and García’s work strives to render that complexity visible.

Many artists of color working across the Americas today utilize vernacular media as a strategy to literally and figuratively critique the history and contemporary legacy of racial capitalism. These works exemplify the relevance of everyday consumer practices to the development and persistence of large-scale systems of Eurocentric oppression. In this way, coffee and other comestibles have become particularly resonant objects for artists of the Caribbean, a region profoundly shaped by colonial exploits in plantation economies of crops such as indigo, tobacco, sugar, and coffee. Artists today harness coffee’s global economy and ties to Caribbean landscapes as a way to signify the Eurocentric episteme’s imposition in the region through conspicuous consumption, transatlantic capital and trade, and social order.

Columbian artist Oscar Muñoz’s (b. 1951) *Pixeles* series (1999–2000), for instance, depicts haunting death portraits using coffee and sugar, creating mosaic-like gradations of whites and browns that both literally embody and figuratively signify the neoliberal origins of violence in Muñoz’s home country through its primary exports—coffee and sugar. US-based, Cuban-born artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons (b. 1959) likewise navigates the complexities and paradoxes of her ancestral ties to the traumas of enslavement and

challenges of diaspora in numerous performances and site-specific installations related to foodways, such as *Sugar: Bittersweet* (2012) and *Alchemy of the Soul* (2016; Zavala 2019). Marc Latamie (b. 1952), a Martinican artist known for his sharp critiques of post-plantation economies, directly references coffee in his mixed-media installation *MALDOROR 1 Chant* (2014–2016), an eco-critical work comprising wall-mounted ocean-blue plastic cups alongside empty coffee packages, coffee grounds, and a gold-framed painting. The composition reflects on the disproportionately negative environmental impacts that have wrought destruction and injustices onto the Caribbean—the very region where coffee is heavily cultivated for global consumption. Dominican-American artist Jori Minaya's (b. 1990) *Satisfecha* (2012) poignantly approaches race and gender through coffee and sugar. In this five-minute video performance, Minaya dips fleshy fabric appendages into coffee and sugar and then stuffs them into her mouth, constructing a progressive condition of fullness to the point of discomfort, both for the viewer and Minaya, who audibly winces by the end. She empties her plate and then cleans the mess she has made at the table, a commentary on expectations of female perfection, domesticity, and the complexities of diasporic and racial dynamics. For Minaya, the sugar-coffee dialectic references the epitome of good taste and social refinement while underscoring the sinister realities of labor extracted to produce these commodities. As a work evoking similar feminist and eco-critiques of Caribbean material economies, García's mural contributes to an ever-expanding visual dialogue among artists in and of the Caribbean who harness comestibles, and coffee specifically, as a vehicle for capitalist critique.

### 3. Mapping Coloniality through Coffee: Establishing a Decolonial Framework

Although coffee is today a ubiquitous crop across the Western hemisphere, it is not native to the Americas. As its name suggests, the popular *Arabica* species of the coffee bean originated from the northeastern region of Africa off of the Arabian Sea, known today as Ethiopia. The Dutch are attributed with some of the first colonial efforts to transplant the bean, cultivating it in the East Indies as a cash crop in the 16th century; by 1715, the French had established coffee plantations across the island of Hispaniola (Wild 2005, Kindle loc. 1985–1989; Colás et al. 2018, p. 177). Introduced to the Americas over 200 years after initial European contact, in an age of institutionalized plantations with enslaved labor by the millions, coffee cultivation spread rapidly across the hemisphere, particularly across the mountainous, tropical terrain of the French, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese colonies (Siegel and Alwang 2004, p. 30; also see Galeano 1997, p. 65). While sugar grows best in lower, coastal regions, coffee grows best at high elevation, making it not a competitor, but rather a complement to the behemoth sugar crop. Coffee thus quickly rose in importance as a colonial commodity and it continues to significantly bolster many national GDP's across the Americas today. García renders visible coffee's globalization through the figural grouping depicted in *Blame . . . Coffee*, in which Africa, the Americas, and Europe together imbibe the drink of their *terroir*. Coffee thus paradoxically embodies connections across vast continental and cultural divides, even as García implicates it in extractive capitalist economies that reside at the literal root of cultural and environmental displacement.

Unlike its counterpoint sugar, coffee's ideal climate of wet, mountainous terrain has rendered it a crop suited not only for elite pockets but also, and certainly in recent years, for small landholders and family farms (Gross et al. 2014, p. 1086). In this way, coffee stands as a material artifact of colonial labor systems as well as a crop that embodies the heterogeneity and syncretic evolution of ecologies and economies across the multifaceted landscapes of empire. Nonetheless, coffee production suffers from exclusion and erasure in the arena of coffee consumption—scholars have described this dissonance in the commodity chain as the “coffee paradox” (Daviron and Ponte 2005; Topik et al. 2010, pp. 7–8), a paradigm defined by the privileging of coffee consumption as a refined practice of leisure while coffee producers receive low wages and have no access to the sites of consumption they help to cultivate. I suggest, however, that this dynamic is not a paradox, as previously argued, but rather that this coffee paradigm embodies the foundational exploitations and

extractions of land, labor, and sovereignty that compose the very bedrock of colonialism and its legacy today.

The critique that García's work leverages against Eurocentrism demonstrates the ways in which the visual arts can be harnessed as decolonial stratagem to dismantle the "colonial matrix of power" (Quijano 2000) that has historically (over)determined and naturalized the global social order. Following Quijano, decolonial scholars strive to de-link from Eurocentric forces that have overdetermined epistemic and ontological knowledge and being across the globe. Indeed, García's work persistently resists Eurocentric narratives, while acknowledging the *idea* of the West as an organizing, if oppressive, paradigm (see Hall 1992); *Blame . . . Coffee* newly shifts, or perhaps attunes, García's critique through a gendered lens. While decolonial scholarship has been a domain primarily occupied by male voices and patriarchal perspectives (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2000; Maldonado Torres 2008; Moraña et al. 2008), the reality is that decolonial feminisms have been evolving in dialogue with, and in resistance to, this critical discourse for decades.

The work of Argentinian scholar María Lugones stands as an especially prominent and profound response to Ánibal Quijano's foundational concept of the "colonial matrix of power." As critical race feminists have demonstrated, these structures particularly and uniquely oppress women of color, whose erasures have been doubly yoked to race *and* gender. Lugones re-aligns Quijano's critical matrix toward a pluralist axis that positions race and gender as co-constitutive forces of coloniality (Lugones 2008; Lugones 2010). Lugones subsequently redefines this framework as the "modern/colonial gender system" (2008, p. 1), in which axes of power become entangled through the relationality of gender. In so doing, Lugones complicates the heteropatriarchal veil that has long been the standard bearer of the academy, even within decolonial spheres. As Emma Velez (2019, p. 393) writes, Lugones's framework resists the categorical outcome of thinking from a purely "intersectional" place; Lugones instead positions race and gender as *inter-relational* and thus unfixed facets of individual and collective productions of knowledge and being. Of course, Lugones's "modern/colonial gender system" does not stand alone in decolonial feminist discourse; rather, it resides within the evolving frameworks of women of color feminisms as articulated by groundbreaking authors such as Emma Pérez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sylvia Wynter, and bell hooks. Lugones's voice profoundly dialogues with these scholars while uniquely mapping their frameworks onto a Latin American, and arguably hemispheric, perspective. In this way, Lugones's approach suits García's parallel motivation to critique the Eurocentric social order. Lugones and García actively refute linear and singular meaning in their work, instead interpreting cultures, temporalities, and geopolitics through multiple lenses—a pluralistic decolonial strategy of "connections and correlations" defined by Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh as *vincularidad* [relationality] (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, p. 2), a point to which I will return later.

While the arts promise one avenue to begin dismantling systems of Eurocentric oppression, the reality is that the arts have also long been complicit in these very systems of subjugation. Anthropologist Arlene Dávila has shown how, even today, the pronounced "white-centrism" of the contemporary art world raises discursive barriers, excluding Afro-Latinx artists, such as García, from mainstream consideration.<sup>2</sup> As a result, these marginalized artists are persistently compelled to confront and resist the overdetermined and homogenous whiteness that today defines Latinx identities. By refusing to cater to this imposed identity, artists like García, who proudly espouses her multiethnic and global roots, compromise their own viability and visibility on the commercial art market (Dávila 2020, p. 46). For Dávila, García's struggles to accurately locate herself in today's art world illustrate the depths of colorism in the field, which precludes the understanding for, or inclusion of, Afro-Latinx artists (130).<sup>3</sup> In Lugones's terms, the "modern/colonial gender

<sup>2</sup> García's artistic training includes attendance in the then-newly created Altos de Chavón School of Design in La Romana, Dominican Republic in 1984, then continued her arts education at Parsons School of Design in New York beginning in 1986, where she received a BFA in Illustration.

<sup>3</sup> García has often discussed the many facets of her global heritage, including Sephardi Jewish, African, Santee Sioux, and Scottish ties (see Herrera 2020, p. 34).

system” prevents artists of color from fully owning the pluralities of their perspective in the eyes of mainstream consumers. In response to this erasure, García proudly and deliberately claims the subaltern identification “Dominicanyork,” a traditionally disparaging term used to describe a working-class, Afro-Latinx New Yorker with Dominican roots (García-Peña 2016, p. 192; Torres-Saillant 1999, p. 22). García, who is represented by the New York-based Argentinian gallery Praxis, thus confronts and resists myriad mainstream (mis)conceptions about her identity at all levels of art world discourse. García’s *oeuvre* stands as a thoughtful testament to her desire and willingness to harness these challenges for creative ends. In short, the problematics of her own position within the art world have become folded back into the critical discourse García visualizes. In this way, I suggest that García’s mural, *Blame . . . Coffee*, embodies the artist’s racially and culturally inclusive vision of Afro-Latinx feminisms.

#### 4. (En)Gendering Café Culture—Locating Coffee’s Heteropatriarchal Gaze

While García’s work can be positioned broadly within a decolonial feminist artistic praxis, *Blame . . . Coffee* uniquely situates its pointed critique within the heteropatriarchal café, a site that, like the visual arts themselves, both liberates and oppresses. The café is a sphere that collapses private and public domains; it flirts with intimacy while also inviting the consumer to feel seen, to integrate with a larger consuming body. In recent decades, the Starbucks Coffee Company keenly recognized the potency of these slippages, developing the notion of the café as a “Third Place”—a corporate iteration of Homi Bhabha’s articulation of the post-colonial condition known as the “third space” (Bhabha 2004, pp. 53–56).<sup>4</sup> The Third Place policy centers on respect and accountability to one another in the communal site of the café: “We expect everyone in our third place community to treat others with respect and dignity, free of bias and discrimination.”<sup>5</sup> María Lugones might have challenged Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson on the blanket assumptions of this premise, asking, how and to what ends do Eurocentric notions of race and gender co-constitute this “third place”? By taking stock of the assumptions of the Third Place policy, one recognizes the ways in which Starbucks, in its efforts to monopolize global café culture, has quelled the original logic and politics of the café.<sup>6</sup>

Historically, the café emerged as a dynamic site of politicized discourse—a site of hyper-masculine bourgeois visibility. As Jürgen Habermas (1989) famously suggested, 18th-century English coffeehouses (among other emergent sites of bourgeois encounters) became flash points for a new form of public organization and consciousness in Europe. These public spheres, available exclusively to men, were mediated through the consumption of coffee—a beverage that literally stimulated one’s senses and thus one’s political susceptibilities (Wild 2005, Kindle loc. 1446–1517). For this reason, cafes have been some of the most vital spaces for revolutionary thought in modern European and American history. In the late 18th century, the Declaration of the Rights of Man was conceived within Parisian cafes. As Steven Topik and Mario Samper note, however, the politically progressive discourse unfolding in European coffee houses never extended to consideration of the enslaved and oppressive conditions of the coffee growers toiling overseas—a dynamic veiled by the Orientalist allure of the foreign beverage (Topik and Samper 2006, p. 118; Colás et al. 2018, p. 13; also see Gillaspie 2020). In this way, coloniality became a silent, if

<sup>4</sup> Abigail Lapin Dardashti has suggested that García’s site-specific works in the Dominican Republic as part of the *Border of Lights* Project (2012–2014) can be seen as a way to “visualiz[e] Third Space within public space” (Lapin Dardashti 2016, p. 261). Additionally, Chicana scholar Emma Pérez has notably argued for the entangled nature of third space discourse, feminism, and decoloniality, stating, “third space feminist practice . . . can only occur within the decolonial imaginary” (Pérez 1999, p. xvi).

<sup>5</sup> Starbucks Coffee Company Third Place Policy: <https://www.starbucks.com/responsibility/learn-more/policies/third-place> (accessed on 1 November 2020).

<sup>6</sup> We have become conditioned to see the modern café as a site of order and quietude—a place of controlled *civitas* (Lejeune 2005, p. 32). Lejeune’s analysis of the Spanish interventions on space and place in the colonial Americas takes literal shape in the site of the café, where linearity and gridded tables comprise these corporate spaces, thus rendering them legible regardless of their location. In short, the modern café chain constructs its spatiality on a logic harkening back to tactics used by the Spanish to colonize the Americas.

ubiquitous, partner in the evolution of the so-called public sphere, entangling café culture with the modern/colonial gender system.

An historical counterpoint to heteropatriarchal café culture can be located in the intellectual sphere of the *tertulia*—a casual salon of literature, arts, and politics performed in domestic settings across the Spanish-speaking world and which continues to be practiced today. *Tertulias* historically granted membership to female participants, thus providing a foil to the exclusionary nature of the public café and affording women space to negotiate ideas and ideals, albeit from the margins. The People’s Forum harnesses the political heritage of the *tertulia* and café alike to challenge historical silences and erasures of subaltern voices through its mission as a “movement incubator,” deliberately inviting participation from “visionaries and organizers who believe that through collective action a new world is possible.”<sup>7</sup> The People’s Forum’s commission of García’s mural stands as an important intervention—the women in the composition literally mirror the actions of café-goers—that further bolsters the café’s commitment to collective mobilization. Reflecting on the three women in her mural, García states, “I am inspired by the fact that a conversation, a sharing of ideas, a simple act of social contact can be the seed for a revolution” (Scherezade García, email correspondence with author, 26 May 2020).

In her scholarship on Afro-Latinx Caribbean literature and culture, Yomaira Figueroa argues that the notion of relationality, first defined by Édouard Glissant (1989), epitomizes a “decolonial feminist imperative” through its centering of exchange, linkages, and everyday struggles within oppressed communities (Figueroa 2020a, p. 25). These strategies, Figueroa notes, become activated through the “hallowed quotidian space” of the kitchen table, a site Figueroa suggests is replete with the complexities and contradictions of “politics, poetics, kinship, and sustenance,” as well as “violence, revelation, and revolt” (Figueroa 2020b, p. 4). Likewise, for García, the idea of coffee conjures notions of kinship as well as revolt and rebellion. García’s formative years in the Dominican Republic instilled in her the notion of coffee production as a “family endeavor,” with memories of her paternal family in the central Dominican region of La Vega, where the lush mountains yield ample shade-grown coffee on small family-owned plots of land (*conucos*).<sup>8</sup> According to García, small coffee farms across La Vega historically emerged from Spaniards and *criollos* who claimed land in the remote, interior mountains as a way of gaining independence from Spanish colonial oversight, which was far more rigid along the island’s coast (Scherezade García, interview with author, 5 October 2020). Thus, for García, coffee represents a complex social order, rooted in colonial imperial exchange, but also rife with possibility as a means of familial survival and sovereignty.

García’s understanding of coffee as vital to Dominican domesticity and autonomy also manifests through *Blame . . . Coffee’s* subversion of imperial, masculine power in favor of female claims to agency, resources, and visibility. Most notably, García depicts Napoleon Bonaparte as a trivial, unfit leader who has succumbed to the gluttony of empire. No longer depicted in the “grand manner” of portraits by Jacques-Louis David, Napoleon instead appears comically helpless, gradually submerged in a sea of coffee that was cultivated under his imperial watch. Napoleon’s renown as a zealous coffee drinker gained him ample, if anecdotal, notoriety as an imperial leader at the mercy of the beverage—even a 19th-century recipe for coffee preparation was popularly known as “Napoleon’s Way” (Law 1850, p. 31). Napoleon had a predilection for coffee “at all hours of the day, to revive his spirits and invigorate his body,” which in turn was perceived as a tool aiding in the “buoyancy of mind and energies” that led him to myriad military victories (34). García subverts the relationship between Napoleon’s perceived prowess and his desire for coffee, revealing coffee as Napoleon’s weakness and vice—his persistent striving for excess has here mired him in an abyss of his own obsessions.

<sup>7</sup> The People’s Forum Mission Statement: <https://peoplesforum.org/about/#mission> (accessed on 5 November 2020).

<sup>8</sup> The majority of shade-grown coffee farmers in the Dominican Republic manage between one to three hectares of land. These small-scale operations necessitate the participation of all family members for labor and thus yield collective, rather than corporate, structures of coffee production in the interior of the island (Gross et al. 2014, p. 1086).

This critical passage in García's mural conjures the words of Martinican writer Aimé Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* (Césaire 2000, originally published in 1950): "We must study how colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word" (35). In this text, Césaire provocatively reconfigures notions of agency within the colonial matrix. For Césaire, it is colonialism's paradox, its inherent vice, that it must first dehumanize the colonizer in order to dehumanize the colonized. García dialogues with Césaire in her visual work through her desire to subvert conventional depictions of colonized subjects. In her compositions, García utilizes splendor as a vital tool to complicate the relationality of subject and object. She harnesses aesthetic beauty as the theater within which to stage her seditious compositions: "It is a beauty that conquers the oppressor, and with an enticing seduction, colonizes the colonizer" (Herrera 2020, p. 33). For García, beauty becomes the vehicle for rebellion and the conduit for the dismantling of the colonial matrix of power.

While the dark humor of García's mural centers on the miniaturized likeness of Napoleon, this humor compounds through Napoleon's imminent downfall, which is facilitated by three female counterpoints whose comportment refuses to pander to Napoleonic wantonness. In her foundational book on critical eating studies, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century*, cultural historian Kyla Wazana Tompkins theorizes that eating—or, in García's case, *drinking*—allows the consumer to temporarily, and thus playfully, make oneself vulnerable to worlds and ideas that might otherwise be considered terrifying or taboo (Tompkins 2012, p. 3).<sup>9</sup> Building upon feminist scholar bell hooks' concept of "eating the other" (Hooks 1992), Tompkins demonstrates the potency of indulging in racialized images of foods coupled with the embodied act of eating. She illuminates the lasting power of this visually and viscerally fleeting act of consumption by way of the repeated "internaliz[ation] and obliterated[ion]" (Tompkins 2012, p. 90) of the racialized other through the destructive and assimilationist act of gustation.

This strategy—eating the other—has long been a vehicle for oppressing women of color within the modern/colonial gender system, particularly by aligning exotic female seduction with the gustation of exotic comestibles, like coffee (see Thompson 2006; Sluis 2016). The 20th-century Italian illustrator Gino Boccasile's poster design for the Chilean-based Café Haiti Coffee Corporation stands as a particularly explicit and enduring example (Figure 2; Báez 2020). A voluptuous woman sits casually, hand on hip, as she smiles in delight at the cup of coffee she holds. Her eyes closed, she invites the viewer to gaze at will. Although the liquid coffee in her cup remains flirtatiously hidden, her black skin, amply exposed at her bust, becomes a surrogate for the allure of the drink. The poster was designed circa 1948, yet the seductive woman remains an icon of the company today, continuing to adorn retail packages of Café Haiti coffee.

García acknowledges this fraught convention in her work, perhaps even engaging such tactics at first glance in *Blame . . . Coffee*, using seductively curvaceous lines, pops of luxurious golden hues, and fleshy forms with seemingly visceral weight and depth. García's aesthetic is, indeed, deliberately seductive, but the critical distinction, what transforms her work from an act of "eating the other" to an act of decolonial feminist reclamation, is, in the artist's own words, the "elements of struggle" that emerge from the work. The tensions within García's composition are myriad and complex. Like many female artists of color working against the canon today, such as Kara Walker, Ebony G. Patterson, or Alma López, García deliberately and masterfully engages art historical conventions as a decolonial tool for resignification. In *Blame . . . Coffee*, García supplants the trope of the beguiling Black woman whetting the viewer's appetite through sexual innuendo to instead give these women a literal seat at the table.

<sup>9</sup> Food Studies scholar Krishnendu Ray likewise pivots his examination of "ethnic" eating around the notion of playfulness and taboo, stating in his introduction to *The Ethnic Restaurateur* that while we may be tempted to align food and sex as similar activities, we must remember that eating is a limited, and more fleeting, mode of engagement: "Eating allows intimacy but not too much of it, which is why we can afford to feed every guest, while it is hardly advisable to sleep with them" (Ray 2016, p. 6).



**Figure 2.** Gino Boccasile, poster for Haiti Coffee Corporation, c. 1948. 19 2/3 × 13 in. Image source: Cambi Auction, <https://www.cambiaste.com/uk/auction-0407/gino-boccasile-19011952-1.asp/> (accessed on 15 November 2020). Public domain.

### 5. A Seat at the Table: Subverting Art Historical Conventions

At first glance, the three seated women in *Blame . . . Coffee* appear to be representations of refinement and repose, yet as discussed above, their subversions resist conventional portrayals of women in the history of art. Gestural brushstrokes evoke jewels, ornate textiles, and elaborate hairstyles that imbue these women with conventional beauty and means. They are poised and elegant. The female trinity brings to mind the European art historical convention of the Three Graces, a representation of three virginal females seen to embody the Classical ideals of beauty and *joie de vivre*.<sup>10</sup> These visual muses serve as a prominent motif throughout the history of European art, occupying renowned paintings and sculptures by the likes of male artists Sandro Botticelli, Raphael, Peter Paul Rubens, Jean-Baptiste Regnault, and Antonio Canova, among countless others. As seen in *The Three Graces* (1630–1635; Figure 3) rendered in oil by the 17th-century Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens, these figures are celebrated as alluring embodiments of transcendental ideals (Mac Carthy 2020, p. 2). Individually, the figures convey grace, their forms fleshy yet delicate; collectively, they attain far more visual command than their component parts. The trinity thus generates a compelling synchrony and complementarity that activates the composition. Even though the figures literally rely on one another to achieve their aesthetic potential—their gentle caresses on the others’ flesh becomes the guidepost steering the viewer’s eye across the composition—the viewer ultimately holds the power, limitlessly gazing upon their beauty.

Unlike the dancing graces, García’s figures in *Blame . . . Coffee* reject harmonious movement and subjugation of self. Instead, the fully clothed women occupy seated poses, restricting viewers’ access to their bodies. García’s depiction of individualistic and resolute women at the table speaks to the idea of “*machista*” women that the artist conjured in her mind as she created this mural: “I never think about males—I always think about warriors as women, because women are the ones who keep everything afloat. That force is invisible, but that keeps everything going” (Scherezade García, interview with author, 5 October

<sup>10</sup> The Three Graces emerges from Greek mythology, which recounts the lives of the three daughters of Zeus and Euryoneme, Euphrosyne, Aglaia, and Thalia—goddesses who served and were associated with Aphrodite.

2020). The composition indeed makes visible the notion of *invisible* female labor through the revisionist, and humorous, juxtaposition of the women sitting in repose while they effortlessly overpower Napoleon, depicted here as a man resigned to his fate. García says she deliberately represented Napoleon as a “toy,” a plaything, a figure explicitly designed for objectification, which suggests a crucial subversion of the visual order of European art. The mural thus unravels the modern/colonial gender system through global and feminist terms and, in so doing, unveils the problematic Eurocentric armature that has long undergirded this system. The force driving these women thus comes not from their sensuality or objectification, but rather from the subtle chaos and power that manifests from their participation in the discourse of café culture. These figures gesture to the history of female representation but do not cater to its expectations. In this way, García ascribes beauty to the female artist’s commanding act of creation, not to her body. In short, García decolonizes the trope of the Three Graces, reframing virtue and femininity through action, invention, and destruction of the heteropatriarchal order.



**Figure 3.** Peter Paul Rubens, *The Three Graces*, 1630–1635. Oil on oak panel, 87 × 71 in. Image in public domain.

García’s decolonial feminist praxis relies not only on motifs and content, but also on the materiality of pigment and paint. An academically trained artist, García is known for her adept use of early modern European visual techniques, including the monochromatic paint application known as *grisaille*, which renders her figures in the seemingly “neutral” tone that the artist calls “cinnamon”—a composite of all skin tones.<sup>11</sup> For García, the power behind the cinnamon hue emerges from the process of mixing all of the colors on her palette—bringing the figures to life thus becomes a literal, and political, act of inclusion. García often invokes this process and its intersection between artistic praxis and political discourse with the phrase “the politics of color.” Camila Maroja suggests that García’s use of monochromatic skin tones lends “opacity” to her figures, rendering them simultaneously universal and enigmatic (Maroja 2020, p. 21). In *Blame . . . Coffee*, García paints her politics of color in new light, deliberately articulating the racial distinctions among the three

<sup>11</sup> The discourse surrounding the color cinnamon in Dominican-American arts extends to artist Joiri Minaya, whose 2014 performance, *Canela*, draws from a popular song about “Piel Canela” [cinnamon skin] as a commentary on desire for the feminine Other. During the performance, Minaya lounges on a beach chair in a gallery while she applies a sunscreen made of ground cinnamon.

women in the image, imbuing each with a distinguishing skin tone, though all share a mixed palette that materially and metaphorically recalls the miscegenation wrought by colonialism, a reality underscored by the *Afrolatinidad* embodied by the *mulata* who sits at the literal and figurative center of the composition. García's figures retain the balance of universality and mystery quintessential to her aesthetic, but together, the varied skin tones add layers of cultural and visual critique that distinguishes this work from the majority of García's *oeuvre*, which repeatedly conjures the "cinnamon" hue. *Blame . . . Coffee* thus features the simultaneous distinctions and entanglements among each of the women.

García's provocative use of the color palette also lends complexity to our reading of the colonization of the gustatory *palate*. García deliberately evokes the history of colonial crops, such as coffee and sugar, by suggestively pointing to the ways in which they are innately entangled with the evolution of colorism in the Caribbean (Ramírez 2018; García-Peña 2016). Just as shades of sugar became a vehicle to negotiate racial order (Mintz 1985; Kriz 2008), so, too, did coffee, particularly in the Dominican Republic, where race remains a heavily charged discourse in which Blackness has been filtered through the nation's contentious relationship with Haiti. This dynamic, the "political construction" of the coffee market (Colás et al. 2018, p. 178), is especially pronounced in Dominican coffee sectors, which often entice Haitian migrants to cross the border for work without social protections or mobility. This disparity holds true for female coffee workers in particular, who struggle more than their male counterparts for agency in the coffee production chain.<sup>12</sup> In conversations about her work, García has remarked on Spanish-language correlations between references to coffee and terms to indicate skin tone, such as *café* or *café con leche* (Scherezade García, interview with author, 5 October 2020). These slippages, expressions of "eating the other," socially encode coffee consumption habits in the Dominican Republic through the fraught history of racial hierarchies on the island.

The female figures converging around the coffee table in *Blame . . . Coffee* thus render legible the migratory, diasporic, and globalized paradoxes and pluralities wrought by racial capitalism. The trio of women, sitting amid a nebulous blue "sea," become a personified and relational map of the "Triangle Trade"—the colonial institution designed to increase imperial wealth through the trafficking of enslaved Africans to cultivate crops in the Americas, which are in turn exported for European refinement and sale. In *Blame . . . Coffee*, the poised figures act as subversive agents who both embody and resist the modern/colonial gender system. In her book, *Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction*, Afro-Latinx scholar Lorgia García-Peña references García's penchant for allegory in her compositions, suggesting that García's allegorical images ultimately become supplanted "with a level of confrontational reality that breaks these tropes of their fictionalized histories" (García-Peña 2016, p. 14). In this light, I suggest that García's depictions of historical discord unites her with a growing body of counter-visualities produced by female artists with ties to the Americas. These feminist artists seek to de-link from the heteropatriarchal imaginaries traditionally mapped onto the female form.

Like García, British curator, photographer, and filmmaker Leah Gordon (b. 1959) often explores transatlantic dynamics through historical entanglements between Europe and Hispaniola. In Gordon's words, "The turbulences of the epochal capitalist accumulations of the 18th and 19th centuries help me to gather an internationalist understanding of where we find ourselves in the 21st century" (artist website, <http://www.leahgordon.co.uk> (accessed on 21 February 2021)). Gordon best visualizes this dynamic in her digital photograph *Europe Supported by Africa and the Americas—A Prophecy* (2014; Figure 4). The composition conceptually and formally parallels García's mural, in which three women who, as the title suggests, embody distinct continents and races—an African woman at left, a European woman at center, and a Native American at right—capture the viewer's gaze. As is generally true of Gordon's *oeuvre*, the figures feel at once out of time and imminently

<sup>12</sup> In recognition of the gender gap in the coffee sector, the International Women's Coffee Alliance (IWCA) was founded in 2003, with initial partnerships across Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and the US. The alliance seeks to empower and connect women across the coffee industry as a means of providing economic mobility and sustainability for women across the globe. The IWCA now also includes a chapter for women in the Dominican Republic.

present. The three women connect to each other through compassionate gestures, the woman at right gently grasping the central figure's waist, the central figure reaching out to hold the hand of the woman at left. While serene at first glance, the image's uncanny details slowly give way to a scene rife with cynicism and artificiality. These women do not operate in concerted grace, but rather stand dutifully bound to one another through the bonds of coloniality.



**Figure 4.** Leah Gordon, *Europe Supported by Africa and the Americas—A Prophecy*, 2014. Fibre-based photographic print from medium format b+w negative, hand-tinted, scanned and printed as giclee print mounted on aluminum dibond, 100 × 72 cm. Image courtesy of Leah Gordon. © 2021 Leah Gordon.

Gordon's composition directly references the widely circulated 1796 engraving of the same title by British artist William Blake (1757–1827; Figure 5), who produced the work as an allegorical repudiation of enslavement in the then-Dutch colony of Suriname. Blake's image shows the allegorical figures in the tradition of The Four Continents, an early-modern practice of visualizing and imagining Africa, Europe, the Americas, and Asia as embodied female forms who epitomized emergent globalization of the time. Gordon reimagines Blake's original commentary through the jarring transformation of Europe, at center, from her supple, youthful form to an elderly woman now reliant upon the flanking figures of Africa and America to help her stand. Gordon's work thus dialogues with García's through their shared efforts to critique the modern/colonial gender system by way of relationality (*vincularidad*)—relationality between past and present representations in the art historical record; relationality of the female figures within the composition; and the geopolitical relationality among the continents these allegories signify.

Chicana artist Judy Baca (b. 1946) stands as another crucial link in this decolonial feminist genealogy. Baca's renowned triptych *Las Tres Marías* (1976), a formative Latinx artwork, demystifies the criminalized stereotypes of *pachuca* and *chola* women that historically defined Chicana identity in East Los Angeles. This holy trinity of Marías (a reference to the Virgin Mary) intimately positions the viewer—her gaze reflected back through a central mirror—as an embodied subaltern figure, conveying complicity and humanity through the feminist triptych. Similarly, photographic triptychs by María Magdalena Campos-Pons, such as images from the series *When I am Not Here/Estoy Alla* (1997), show the artist fractured into three disparate versions of herself, each of which references the paradoxical

liminality and overdetermined identities she must negotiate as an Afro-Chinese Cuban woman and an émigré to the US. Campos-Pons uses her body as a visual signifier of the confluences of place, access, and objecthood that have long characterized discourses of race and gender in the Americas. Finally, Peruvian artist Claudia Coca (b. 1970), whose paintings frequently portray empowered females subverting the Western artistic canon, likewise adopts the trinity motif in *Las Tres Gracias (d'après Rubens)* (2004), a composition that pays homage to an early, monochromatic version of *The Three Graces* (1620–1623) by Peter Paul Rubens in oil on wood panel. Coca perfectly restages the composition, from the putti hovering above to the fruit basket at the women's feet. Coca intervenes, however, by supplanting the white European women of Rubens's composition with her own brown body in triplicate—a gendered and racialized subversion of the art historical motif that raises questions about the artifice of the canvas, colonial hierarchies, and female agency (Buntinx 2009).



**Figure 5.** William Blake. *Europe supported by Africa and America*, 1796. Engraving, 7 2/3 × 5 1/2 in. Image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

By invoking the examples above, I seek to both underscore the feminist praxis permeating García's mural and to situate her work as part of a larger dialogue with, and network of, decolonial counter-visualities. For these artists, female relationality—to one another and to the art historical canon—becomes a vehicle to critique and resist the modern/colonial gender system. The very act of convening together, of bringing differences to the table, and bridging distinctions, generates the circumstances that instigate Napoleon's demise. By refusing to cater to the silences and erasures that the modern/colonial gender system has long relied upon, *Blame . . . Coffee* advocates for a new kind of public sphere that acknowledges the entanglements among race, gender and coloniality, while supplanting those modes of knowledge with the vast, pluralistic universe that Latinx artists, such as García, have learned to traverse.

## 6. Portability and Belonging in the Dominican Diaspora

Before concluding, I wish to further situate García's decolonial feminist praxis within a distinctly Dominican-American discourse by turning to the work of Dominican New York artist, performer, and writer Josefina Báez (b. 1960). Báez, a contemporary of García's, stands as another formative voice in the evolution of feminist artistic praxis in the Dominican diaspora. By briefly examining the artistic frameworks articulated by Báez's work, I

seek to clarify and specify my application of María Lugones's scholarship to the distinct interstices that comprise Dominican diasporic female belonging. Báez's renowned work *Dominicanish*, first performed in 1999 and published as a "performance text" in 2000 (see Durán-Almarza 2011), profoundly demonstrates the perpetual struggle of diasporic belonging—being neither from here nor from there. Báez stands alone on the stage, darting between various accents and pronunciations of mundane words like "comfortable" and "vegetable," whose socio-cultural utterances seem to shift with each inflection. As the performance progresses, Báez's words and movements become increasingly removed from any locus of enunciation. As she layers the dialog with choreography from across the globe, Báez wholly confounds the impetus to lay claim to points of origin.

Báez makes known her ability to inhabit a syntactically pluralist being, never embodying any singular self for too long before traveling onward to the next voice, the next consciousness. As Lorgia García-Peña writes in her analysis of Báez's work, the artist identifies the diasporic state of being and belonging through the term *El Nié*, an abbreviation for the phrase "*ni es una cosa, ni es la otra*" [it is neither one thing, nor another] (García-Peña 2016, pp. 172–73), which Báez first used in her performative text *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork* (2011). Akin to Gloria Anzaldúa's Chicana border gnosis of *nepantla* (Anzaldúa 1987), García-Peña defines Báez's notion of *El Nié* as a self-aware embodiment of the modern/colonial gender system: "The symbolic space of *El Nié* expands our understanding of borders; it displaces the location and polarity of the nation-border, instead proposing the body as the location that contains and reflects national exclusion (borders) across history and generations" (García-Peña 2016, p. 5). In short, Báez's conception of self and community, subject and object, emerges not from geopolitical parameters, but rather from the technology of the body itself, and from an understanding of the body as an itinerant, *portable*, vessel.

The concept of *El Nié* lends Dominican-American specificity and consciousness to Caribbean discourses of "archipelagic thinking," (Glissant 1989; Benítez-Rojo 1992; also see Paravisini-Gebert 1997), but it also complicates these frameworks through the feminine perspective that María Lugones identified as "world-travelling" (Lugones 1987). For Lugones, the practice of migrating across various "worlds" serves as a gesture of love, care, and enrichment both at the level of the individual woman—in the writer's words, "I am a plurality of selves" (14)—and as the fabric of a generative interpersonal and female-centered network. Like Báez, Lugones brings archipelagic thinking into the feminine realm by writing her personal narrative into the framework and, by extension, making space for émigré women of color who struggle to locate sites of belonging. By reimagining her being as the occupation of multiple worlds, Lugones finds a path for love of oneself and love of another through the shared understanding that diasporic women of color can neither wholly inhabit nor lay claim to any singular world; rather, one must claim citizenship to a complex universe of worlds. According to Lugones, affirmation of these matriarchal worlds becomes a tool to resist racism, which "has a vested interest in obscuring and devaluing" its construct (4). In this way, Lugones's "world-travelling" framework operates as a strategy to combat, critique and ultimately de-link from the modern/colonial gender system. As a portable mural designed for its current site but also imbued with the technological potential to pivot to another context, *Blame . . . Coffee* literally and conceptually embodies the world-traveling ethos. The mural adamantly resists geographic and cultural fixity in all aspects of its material and conceptual being, a fact heightened by the oceanic, liquid interstices in which the figures of García's composition appear suspended. The composition is not just portable in medium, but in concept. García rendered the work as such by design, stating that she desired the mural to be movable, and thus without an "absolute" site (Scherezade García, interview with author, 5 October 2020). By evading any singular narrative or interpretation, the work belongs everywhere and nowhere at once, but also, in many ways, is uniquely of the Americas.

## 7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article argues that Scherezade García's recent portable mural, *Blame . . . Coffee*, commissioned for the collective incubator and café The People's Forum, utilizes the fraught histories of coffee and café culture as vehicles to disrupt and subvert the heteropatriarchal social order that has long dominated the public sphere. In so doing, this work gives visibility and agency to a matriarchal vision of *Afrolatinidad* that remains all-too-often excluded from, or veiled in, contemporary visual arts. The mural depicts three allegorical women who not only signify the colonial history and heritage of coffee, but also collectively dominate the miniaturized figure of Napoleon Bonaparte who languishes, without regard from the women above, into a liquid abyss of his own imperial excess. By emphasizing the seemingly mundane, but highly gendered and politicized, act of conversation as a tool to bridge differences and make change manifest, García privileges decolonial feminist strategies of relationality—a kind of embodied portability that evokes García's Dominican diasporic heritage as well as the mural's portable medium. This artistic praxis, I suggest, renders visible the problems and possibilities set forth by María Lugones's notion of the "modern/colonial gender system," which she defines as the entangled nexus of coloniality, race, and gender. García's work brings to light the importance of the café as a flash point for communal feminist resistance. She challenges fundamental assumptions about belonging in the public sphere, subverting expectations about how women should be presented in the public eye and allowing complexity and multiplicity of matriarchal *Afrolatinidad* to live unresolved in the mind of the viewer. García's practice thus firmly resides within the sphere of her artistic contemporaries who strive to dismantle art historical conventions, but it also distinguishes her diasporic vision of ways that movement and migration shape knowledge and being. Suspended in the nebulous "third space" of the café, García's mural thus becomes a prophetic interlocutor, centering these allegorical, Baroque women as world and time travelers.

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