

Oro Negro <> Agüita de Colonia: Overlaying Stories in Borikén Coffee

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Para todos los compañeros,

compañeras

y compañeros,

cualesquiera que sea su geografía, su tiempo y su modo (como dirían por allá en el sur).

Pero sobre todo a las campesinas y campesinos, jíbaros y jíbaras de Borinquén, que luchan contra las garras de la hidra y que me hicieron sentir como en casa.

Libres nos queremos.

Abstract

Keywords: Coffee Industry, Agroecology, Agrarian Geographies, Globalization.

The coffee industry in Borikén, or Puerto Rico, is clouded by complementary, contradicting, and divergent narratives tied up in a history of colonization, globalization, and local cultural movements. In the past three decades, transnational corporations have bought out heritage Puerto Rican coffee brands while local bean production has fallen over 90% due to a legacy of industrialization, climate change and a debt-riddled economy. As a result, large-scale roasters are increasingly more reliant on cheap, imported beans which they blend with local coffee and market as “developed in Puerto Rico.” Small producers struggle to pay U.S. prices for labor and inputs, and either sell their beans green or produce less competitive, expensive “specialty” batches. Meanwhile, NGOs offering fiscal and technical support have emerged from both the local agroecology movement and foreign entities. Over the past 20 years, agroecology has gained momentum on the archipelago as a social movement and means of organizing local production against Empire. However, the question of how agroecology can transform coffee production in Puerto Rico cannot be addressed without first situating coffee in the archipelago’s colonial history and agricultural landscape

This thesis examines the intersections of global coffee trade politics, local agrarian geographies, and social organizations involved in coffee production. Through archival research, ethno-photography, and participatory interviews, I worked with small, medium, and large-scale farmers; local and transnational roasters; NGOs; agronomists; and local government employees. The analysis reveals a complex matrix of influences (1) Oligopolies dominate the industry with intensive agriculture, mass imports, and commercial processing. 2) Some NGOs supporting smallholders are funded by the same companies driving intensive production. (3) Despite receiving NGO assistance, small producers absorb the externalities of transitioning away from an agro-industrial system. 4) Through NGOs, large companies co-opt agroecology as a “business solution to poverty” that serves public-private partnerships but leaves smallholders out.

Resumen

Palabras clave: Industria del Café, Agroecología, Geografías Agrarias y Globalización.

La industria del café en Borikén, o Puerto Rico, está envuelta en narrativas complementarias, contradictorias y divergentes entrelazadas en una historia de colonización, globalización y movimientos locales identitarios. En las últimas tres décadas, empresas transnacionales han comprado marcas tradicionales de café puertorriqueñas, mientras que la producción local de café ha caído más del 90 % debido a la industrialización, cambio climático y una economía orientada por la deuda. Como resultado, los tostadores a gran escala dependen cada vez más en granos de café más baratos e importados que se mezclan con café local y comercializan como "elaborado en Puerto Rico". A su vez, lxs pequeñxs agricultorxs luchan por pagar los precios estadounidenses ligados los insumos y mano de obra, y venden sus granos verdes o producen lotes de café de especialidad, menos competitivos y más caros. Mientras tanto, han surgido ONGs que ofrecen apoyo fiscal y técnico, tanto del movimiento agroecológico local como de empresas extranjeras. En los últimos 20 años, la agroecología ha ganado impulso en el archipiélago como movimiento social y medio para organizar la producción local contra el Imperio. Sin embargo, la manera en la agroecología puede transformar la producción de café en Puerto Rico no puede abordarse sin situarse en la historia colonial del café y el panorama contemporáneo agrícola del archipiélago.

Esta tesis examina las intersecciones entre las economías políticas del café, geografía agraria local y las organizaciones sociales que participan en la producción de café. A través de la investigación de archivo, la etnofotografía y las entrevistas participativas, trabajamos con pequeños, medianos y grandes agricultores; tostadores locales y transnacionales; ONGs; agrónomos; y empleados del gobierno local. El análisis revela una compleja matriz de influencias: 1) Los oligopolios dominan la industria con agricultura intensiva con importaciones en escalas grandes y procesamiento comercial. 2) Algunas de las ONG que apoyan a los pequeños agricultores están financiadas por las mismas empresas que impulsan la producción intensiva. (3) A pesar de recibir la ayuda de las ONG, los pequeños productores absorben las externalidades de la transición agroecológica desde un sistema agroindustrial. 4) A través de las ONG, las grandes empresas cooptan la agroecología como una "solución empresarial a la pobreza" que sirve a las asociaciones público-privadas, pero deja fuera a los pequeños agricultores.

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years, agroecology has gained momentum on the archipelago (McCune et al., 2019) as a social movement and means of organizing local production against Empire¹. However, the question of how agroecology can transform coffee production in Puerto Rico cannot be addressed without first situating coffee in the archipelago's colonial history and agricultural landscape. Coffee is deeply tied to the cultural identity of *Boricuas* (Puerto Ricans), with consumption reaching 12 pounds per capita per year, in comparison to 4 pounds in the United States. There is no social gathering without coffee on the table, and no coffee talk without the classic adage: Puerto Rican coffee was the cup of choice for the Pope in Rome in the old days. However, local coffee production in the archipelago has fallen over 90% in just three decades due to industrialization, hurricanes, pest invasions, unfair labor conditions perceived as labor shortage, and an unstable economy derived from a colonial system. Simultaneously, heritage Puerto Rican coffee brands have been monopolized by transnational corporations in disguise who mix a small amount of local coffee beans with ambiguously labeled imported beans that might come from Vietnam, Mexico, Colombia, and/or Brazil. These monopolizing corporations have been key in converting landscapes, and yet, commonly serve as the face of disaster relief efforts to revitalize the coffee industry.

Originally, the local government purchased coffee from local producers to supply local roasters. Current local production is around 23,000 quintales². However, local demand for coffee exceeds 300,000 quintales, ten times the current production. In response to production declines (Figure 1), to cover the local coffee demand³, the Administration for the Development of Agricultural Enterprises (ADEA) of the Department of Agriculture of Puerto Rico (DAPR) imports semi-roasted coffee from all over the world of both species: *Coffea canephora*⁴ (robusta coffee) and *C. arabica* (arabica coffee). As a result, roasters are increasingly more reliant on

¹ "Empire" refers to a diffuse structure of power coined by Hardt and Negri (2000): a global, decentralized order that governs through law, capital, and knowledge rather than through traditional state power and territorial control. It operates through an immanent network of institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, multinational corporations, and trade regimes which maintain control over life and labor—especially in the case of agricultural production (De la Fuente & Gross, forthcoming).

² Quintal in Puerto Rico is equivalent to 100 lbs. Since Puerto Rico is a commonwealth of the US, it uses the Imperial System.

³ Not to be mistaken with consumption. Some of the coffee in the world is hoarded as big suppliers are waiting for better, higher prices (Talbot, 2012).

⁴ Robusta coffee is considered to be of lower quality. It is a more resistant than Arabica coffee shrubs and can be grown at lower elevations. It is cheaper on the market.

imported beans, which they blend and market as “locally sourced” products. Most Boricuas are unaware that the coffee they are proud to drink and serve, sometimes only contains as little as 0.01% Puerto Rican coffee beans—or none at all.

Es algo bien importante como la cultura, el café, el café es parte de nuestra cultura. Sí, sí, somos cafetaleros. Tomarlo y elaborar un buen café es algo especial. Y sentarse a compartir una taza bien hecha. La próxima vez que venga, lo hacemos ahí con leña y nos sentamos aquí y degustamos.

It's something very important, like culture. Coffee is part of our culture. Yes, we are coffee growers. Drinking it and making good coffee is something special. And sitting down to share a well-made cup. Next time you come, we'll make it there with firewood and sit here and enjoy it.

-Key informant (E-19), Local Grower.

Figure 1: Index of local coffee production, taking production in 1991 as 100%.

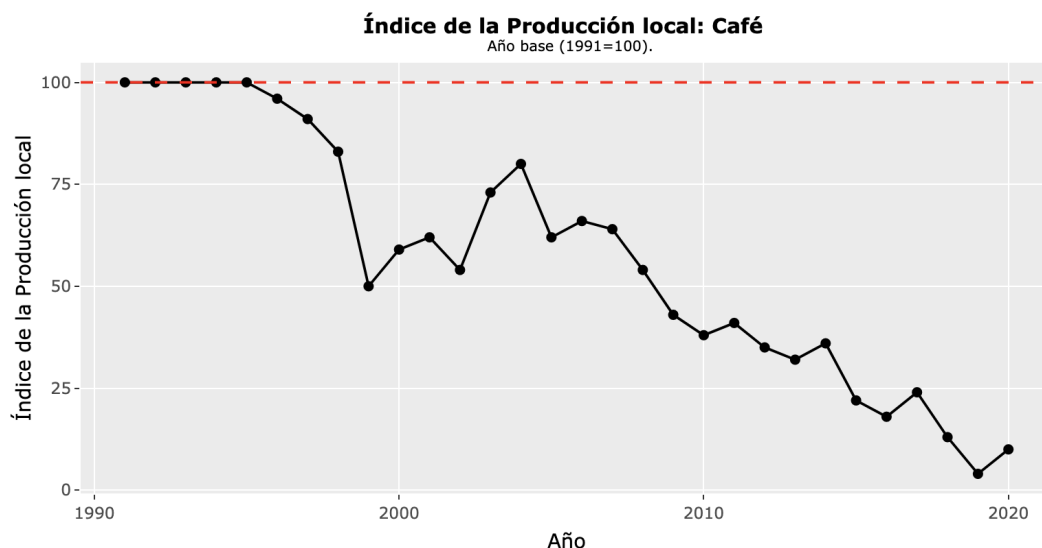


Figure from the Institute of Statistics of Puerto Rico

The gap between small and large producers (for both growers and roasters) has widened, making it difficult for small-scale roasters to remain competitive in the market without securing and blending imported Arabica and Robusta beans. Even before, when small producers controlled more of the market, their outlook was not favorable. Agricultural policies historically have favored large-scale monoculture plantations and a structure that encourages small growers to sell their coffee in cherry⁵ (unprocessed coffee berries) to large processors

⁵ Café en cereza, direct translation from Spanish term.

who capture most of the revenue. Yet against the odds, small coffee growers and roasters have adopted strategies to face this historical disadvantage, including vertical integration, production of specialty coffees, exchanging their coffee on a small scale with their neighbors for other food, or stopping production all together. At the same time, social complexity has increased as actors involved in the production and distribution have shifted globally. Autonomous grassroots social movements, NGOs supported by major philanthropic organizations, transnational corporations once active in the Green Revolution, and various public figures have emerged to support the shrinking population of small-scale growers. These small growers utilize both agroecological and intensive methods to participate in the market.

In Puerto Rico, researchers and practitioners studying coffee are attempting to revive traditional farming methods and boost local production. Specifically, researchers question the role of “agroecology” in Puerto Rican coffee. However, to critically interrogate the role of agroecology as a social movement and a local production strategy against corporate dominance, I first map the contemporary coffee landscape within its various narratives and colonial legacies. Therefore, I examined the different aspects of governmental influences, management, historicity, varieties used, labor, aid, and local identity – as well as their intersections. By interrogating the question of coffee in Puerto Rico, as a colonial crop, a global commodity, and a local cultural symbol, this paper exposes neocolonial and neoliberal legacies that reveal themselves within the relationships between actors in the coffee sector. By weaving the voices of federal government, local government, industrial corporations, non-profits and non-governmental-organizations (NGOs), as well as small scale and large farmers, this paper contributes critical nuanced narratives that entangle the roles of trade, aid, cooptation and the carving out of life-affirming spaces (Gross, 2024) or “livable worlds” (LLoréns, 2021) by coffee farmers in Puerto Rico.

The Researcher in Context

It is challenging for me to choose whether to write first about coffee, the landscape, the actors, or the interactions between the three that prompted this thesis. The work here entails the interwoven tapestry of the coffee industry in *Borikén*⁶—or, as some readers might recognize it, Puerto Rico—and its several actors, histories, stories, geographies and economies. Borikén, an archipelago located in the northeastern part of the Caribbean Sea, is home to millions of

⁶ I refer to Puerto Rico as Borikén, the Taino-Arahuaco native name for the big island. Specific informants prefer naming their land with this word instead of the Spanish.

Boricua people who have existed, resisted, and lived through two colonial ecologies (Whyte, 2018): first, Spain and then the United States. Telling the story of coffee without telling the story of colonialism would be like telling a story without a beginning – like reading *Cien Años de Soledad* without understanding the multigenerational Latin American collectivity in the story, like building a bike with no wheels, like making a friend without knowing their name. On the other hand, writing about coffee without addressing its role in resisting systems of oppression and on the building of liberated zones (Whitfield, 2018) would lead to incomplete stories; ones that omit or even erase what they do not want to name. Coffee farming embodies centuries of knowledge about cultivating and living with agroforests landscapes, which have been a key part of the identity of peoples and commons⁷ of the archipelago. Failing to mention this would perpetuate a colonizer-colonized dualism that objectifies the subject, eradicating all agency and normalizing the very thing researchers are pointing out.

Coffee has a very different history and story depending on the standpoint of the reader. I approached Borikén with my Mexican eyes; with the experience of someone that has been deeply connected to the struggle of maize and autonomy, against the privatization of seeds, and close to the agrarian territorial defense. Before I had even stepped foot in the coffee landscapes of Puerto Rico, I wanted to study the ecological and political dimensions of the coffee seed supply chain. From afar, in the comfortable privilege of a global north university that was founded on stolen land of the Anishinaabeg (including Odawa, Ojibwe, and Boodewadomi) and Wyandot Peoples, I spent a lot of time reading about Puerto Rico's coffee industry. I was interested in understanding the relationship between the ongoing industrialization of Puerto Rican coffee since the 1950's, as well as the importation of sun-resistant varieties and agricultural models from nearby countries. This question was interesting, but it was not until I made community with campesinos in the mountains of Lares and Utuado that I understood that the lead for this thesis had to be reframed, *in common*. In one of many talks with friends, Aixa, Gustavo, and Coralys—three Boricua campesinxs who embody and champion the local food sovereignty movement—it became clear that the materialities of this crop were complementary, contradicting, and divergent. As my peer informants⁸ would say, coffee was both *Oro Negro*

⁷ The term Commons stands for “El Común” or “Colectividad”. Collective labor and care of the socio-ecological fabric that is lived in plural. The term can vary between localities. To learn more about my interpretation of the term, visit <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2023/12/20/vigesima-y-ultima-parte-el-comun-y-la-no-propiedad/>

⁸ Throughout this work you will see the concept of “informants” rather than interviewees. Their invaluable knowledge shared, shaped, oriented and re-oriented the thesis. They are, by nature, researchers too.

(black gold) and *Agüita de Colonia* (water of the settler). We then re-built the framework of this research based on our questions, seeking to interrogate how colonial histories and contemporary actors engage in the coffee industry.

Para nosotros el café es el oro del país. Porque tú sabes, esto es lo único que deja un par de pesos, porque tú siembras yautías, siembra plátano, siembra guineo.

For us, coffee is the country's gold. Because, you know, it's the only thing that brings in a few pesos, because you plant yams, you plant plantains, you plant bananas.

Key Informant (E-15) on the tensions between coffee as a tool for development and coffee as a colonial crop.

The aim of this thesis is to engage in a critical conversation about the contemporary coffee industry by examining its connection to Puerto Rico's colonial and neo-colonial history as a coffee-producing region. This historical framework enables us to ask: Who controls the coffee market? Who are the actors in the coffee industry, and what are their roles? What role do aid, disaster relief, and NGOs play in the coffee systems of the archipelago? Central to this analysis is agroecology within the neoliberal context. What role does agroecology play in coffee production for both small-scale producers and the larger agro-industrial-nonprofit complex?

To understand the entangled narratives of coffee, one must recall the different histories, stories, and geographies of Puerto Rico. In other words, it means letting multiple voices speak: the jíbarx⁹ and campesinx, the intermediary, the processor, the roaster, the coffee shop seller (whether in the archipelago or the United States), the scientist, the pages in the archive, the corporate representative, and the agroecologist grower, while understanding their ontologies and epistemologies. Of course, this story is written by someone. Someone who grew up on the southern hillside of Mexico City within the tension between milpas—Mexican polycultures that are central to food sovereignty—and the encroaching displacement of agricultural land. This someone does not inhabit Puerto Rico, but left that territory with a caffeine addiction. That said, be warned, reader, as you will read their ontologies and epistemologies through these lines.

⁹ Jíbaro, Jíbara, Jíbare. The term has been contested through hundreds of years in Puerto Rico to name the worker in the countryside of the mountain, sometimes in a derogatory way and in others as a figure of resistance and identity against the different colonial ecologies in Puerto Rico. However, it has been co-opted by governments (PPD – Partido Popular Democrático) and the “pava” (a type of hat) as performance attire. I use jíbarx within the complexity of its definition referring to the political campesinos that were key informants in this research and name themselves like that.

These ontologies and epistemologies are guided by values such as reciprocity, justice, respect and solidarity. I am accountable to my communities back in México. I am accountable and responsible of my privilege, too. Beyond it all, I am responsible and accountable to the Boricua and US people I worked with. I believe that every single person that has a position of privilege such as mine is responsible for dismantling and resisting the colonial ecologies we are immersed in and replicate. I am responsible of resisting and dismantling systems of oppression.

Nobody's free until everybody's free

Fanny Lou Hammer. 1917.

Theoretical framework

To interrogate the coffee question in Puerto Rico as a colonial crop, a global commodity, and a local cultural symbol, I draw from Indigenous Epistemologies, as well as Decolonial Philosophies and, Agroecologies. Drawing from the work of philosophers Kyle Whyte, Frantz Fanon, and Achille Mbembe, I trace the neocolonial and necropolitical legacies that reveal themselves within the relationships of actors in the coffee sector. Additionally, I draw from the theories of disaster and racial-colonial capitalism developed by Boricua scholars to better understand the narratives surrounding the role of aid and cooptation. Finally, I draw from agroecology as an emancipatory framework and social movement involved in carving out of life-affirming spaces (Gross, 2024) or “livable worlds” (LLoréns, 2021).

A. Colonial Ecologies

Settler colonialism is approached in this paper through the lenses of the Potawatomi Nation philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte, the Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe, and the Martinique philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon - all of whom examine settler colonialism as a system of power and domination.

According to Whyte, settler colonial ecologies involve a rupture in the components of a group of people's collective continuance (interdependence, systems of responsibilities, and migration) by another society that “seeks to move permanently onto the terrestrial, aquatic, and aerial places lived in by one or more other societies who already derive economic vitality, cultural flourishing, and political self-determination from the relationships they have established with the plants, animals, physical entities, and ecosystems of those places” (Whyte, 2018,

p.135). In this relationship between the two societies, one society exercises parasitic domination over the other, enforcing its moral principles of their own ecology which involve activities of extraction, commodification, and labor exploitation (Whyte, 2020). As a Spanish colony, then a territory of the United States, and finally an *Estado Libre Asociado* or a commonwealth, Puerto Rico experienced multiple ruptures in the nation's collective continuance and right to self-determination.

Mbembe's historical recollection and Fanon's conceptualization of democracies serve as foundations for understanding the mythological structure of liberal democratic societies, which are formed by their solar (the ideal Nation-State in which there is justice and equity) and nocturnal (places of externalization of violence, such as the plantation, the prison) bodies (Mbembe, 2020; Purewal, 2021). To consolidate power, these democratic societies require colonies or places of extraction. Nocturnal bodies are places where the sovereign exercises necropolitical power, determining who may live and who must die. Through the articulation of racial, neoliberal, capitalist logics with concepts such as the state of exception (where the sovereign justifies transcending the law) and the state of siege (where the military institution does not distinguish between external and internal enemies) (Mbembe & Meintjes, 2003, p. 30), these spaces become death worlds (Mbembe, 2020; D'Cruz, 2025).

The colony is not external to democracy and is not necessarily located outside its walls. Democracy bears the colony within it, just as colonialism bears democracy, often in the guise of a mask (Mbembe, 2020, p.27).

Nocturnal bodies, or colonies, are places where "the law that originates in non-law and that is established outside of law" (Mbembe, 2020, p. 27) exist. Borikén, as many more islands and territories in the world, is the nocturnal body of the United States of America's democracy. Puerto Rican decolonial scholars such as Hilda Lloréns and Maritza Stanchich (2019) argue that the federal government's imposition of austerity politics "through an unelected body" (p. 92) (known as La Junta¹⁰) clearly demonstrates a colonial ecology. They describe the archipelago as a "necropolis" where neoliberal policies lead to the exploitation and commodification of the territory and the adoption of extractive logics (p. 82). La Junta decides who is able to live and who must die (Mbembe, 2020). On the other hand, Rocío Zambrana (2023) explicitly describes

¹⁰ Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico (PROMESA), commonly known as La Junta. It is a federal government entity in charge of overseeing the local government and budgets in Puerto Rico (Cabán, 2018). More information about La Junta will be discussed later.

how debt in Puerto Rico is an expression and embodiment of coloniality in the colony. As she describes, “debt as an apparatus” (p. 154) reinforces the racial hierarchies, anti-blackness and plantation logics established and inherited from the colony.

B. Disaster Capitalism and Racial-colonial Capitalism

When colonialism and neoliberalism intersect, the grounds for extractivism, commodification, and financialization become fertile. As Naomi Klein points out in her book *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists* (2018), Puerto Rico is an example of how socially constructed crises such as the aftermath of hurricanes (Bonilla, 2020) are exploited to implement neoliberal policies, such as privatization, marketization, deregulation, re-regulation, and state withdrawal, which aim to extract more capital (Klein, 2018). She calls it the shock after shock doctrine (Klein, 2007). However, Yarimar Bonilla, a Puerto Rican decolonial scholar, argues that in the archipelago of Borikén disaster capitalism has a special component that goes beyond the conditions caused by the crisis. “The accelerated forms of extraction and dispossession evident in the wake of modern disasters are conditioned by the subjectivities and technologies of the colonial encounter” (Bonilla, 2020, p.3). She argues that disaster capitalism in Puerto Rico, appears as “racio-colonial capitalism” “that emerges directly out of the capitalist incubator of plantation slavery” (Bonilla, 2020, p.3). According to Bonilla and Lebron (2019), Naomi Klein’s shock after shock doctrine is reinforced in Puerto Rico as a trauma doctrine. In the colonial territory, “corporate and political interests take advantage of deep-seated colonial traumas that have left the population vulnerable to exploitation” (Bonilla & Lebrón, 2019, p.19). As theorized by Partha Chatterjee (2004) and described by Azmat (2025), socially constructed disasters in the contemporary neoliberal capitalism “displace and dispossess” while “simultaneously enable new forms of governance rooted in transnational investment, NGO-led development, and technocratic planning” (p.767). The presence of NGOs in the archipelago of Borikén, particularly around coffee relief efforts that push for a renewal of sustainable, resilient, and agroforestry (or agroecological) practices, raises the question of who benefits from this revival.

C. Agroecology

Agroecology is commonly referred to as a science, practice, and movement that originated in peasant collectives and communities in the Global South that reject the industrial agriculture model and neoliberal economy (Wezel, 2009; Rosset and Martinez-Torres, 2012; Rai and Chaidhary, 2023). While a fundamental aspect of agroecology consists of achieving food sovereignty through production *in common*, and stewardship of the *tierra-territorio* (land) and the agrobiodiversity, equally important is the care, protection, and transmission of practices and knowledge through the logics of cooperation, solidarity, justice, sustainability, and affection (Moreno Ponce, 2025, p.129). Other definitions, such one from La Via Campesina define it as a tool, or a “technological focus guided by deep political objectives that must be oriented by collectivity and solidarity, and grounded in the local conditions” (LVC, 2018). As Vandermeer and Perfecto (2024) have defined it, it stands as a platform for research, practice and political action “associated with small-scale (or peasant) agriculture, with a strong rejection of the well-known harmful practices of industrial capitalist agriculture” (p.15). “Agroecology is a real actually practiced practice” (p.13). Therefore, scholars evaluating questions of agriculture and food sovereignty in Puerto Rico turn to agroecology as a useful framework. Moreover, local grassroots movements such as Organización Boricuá and IALA-PR¹¹ have adopted agroecology to mobilize the growing farming communities.

Coffee landscapes have played an important role in the agroecological movement in Mesoamerica and the Caribbean. Traditional shaded polycultures not only sustain biodiversity, increase yield (Soto-Pinto et al., 2000) and the ecological complexity of the landscape (Vandermeer & Perfecto, 2017), but also provide a diverse diet as well as “medicine, fuel construction materials, manual tools, fibers and dyes” (Soto-Pinto et al., 2022) for peasants and semi-proletarian families who manage the agroecosystem (Soto-Pinto et al., 2022; Benítez-Kánter et al., 2020; Perfecto et al., 2019). Nevertheless, as Soto-Pinto et al (2022) describe agroforestry systems (AFS) in current socio-economic conditions pose some an “important contradiction and conflict between the remarkable value of AFS to human livelihoods and the advancement of *modernity*” (p.2). AFS by themselves, cannot be a solution to other *modern*

¹¹ Organización Boricuá is a grassroots non-profit association that brings together people doing ecological agriculture in Puerto Rico. They have political objectives rooted in food sovereignty and family farming. They are members of La Vía Campesina. Instituto para la Investigación y Acción en Agroecología de Puerto Rico (IALA-PR) is a local non-profit that “supports and promotes agroecological initiatives in Puerto Rico by providing access to and support in the areas of administration, finance, physical resources (land, laboratories), and training” (IALA-PR, 2025).

problems, such as migration, labor exploitation, neoliberalism, and agricultural industrialization policies that drive peasants and semi-proletariats out of these systems. As a science, praxis, and movement, agroecology aims to understand, foster and mobilize actors towards just agrarian practices and the right to self-determine what is grown. However, scholars have argued that agroecology has fractures in conceptualizations not informed by colonialism, markets and policy (Worsdell et al., 2025). These apolitical views of agroecology (or Lite Agroecologies) (Holt-Giménez & Altieri, 2006) need to be dismantled and interrogated as they do not contribute to the struggle for social justice.

Methodology

Drawing on the work of Latin American epistemologists Lu Ciccía and Siobhan Guerrero McManus (2024), I take a second-generation feminist epistemological approach to research. This approach utilizes the toolkit of first-generation feminist epistemology developed by authors such as Donna Haraway (1988), Sandra Harding (1988), Helen Longino (1994), and Chela Sandoval (2019) but diverges in some points from it. While the first generation brings into conversation situated knowledge and highlights the point of view of every epistemic agent and the conditioning factors that influence knowledge production (McManus & Ciccía, 2024, p. 121), this second epistemological turn acknowledges that subjects can transition between different epistemic and social positions, and therefore, generative dialogue can bloom from the movement between different positionalities. Another aspect that the second generation brings to the conversation is the idea that discourse and narratives, as well as materiality, are interconnected in an indivisible continuum and therefore must be considered as empirical evidence themselves.

“In second-generation feminist epistemologies, discourses are not products of experience, but rather the body, experiences, and beliefs are an interrelated and indivisible continuum” (McManus & Ciccía, 2024, p. 131).

This concept is similar to Haraway’s notion that none of these elements precedes the other, and that what must be addressed is the dialectic between them (Ciccía, 2023). The analysis also draws from David Harvey’s (1996) epistemologies of space and territoriality influenced by Haraway (1988), Wittgenstein (1922) and Whitehead (1916). He argues that in order to understand “place” we need to both reject relativism and totalitarization. “Spatiality, however

constructed, simultaneously unifies and separates. Working out what the connections are, he writes, “is as crucial politically as it is theoretically” (Harvey, 1996, p. 285; Miller, 1998, p.779). These connections exist between time and space, “and it is *in these connections* that the basis for collective political action is to be found” (Miller p.779).

The methodology of this thesis draws from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003), an analytical approach to qualitative research that does not involve testing preconceived hypotheses or fitting data to them (Miller, 2023). The process (Figure 2) involves data collection, analysis (coding, writing memos, among other), and theoretical sampling. Data collection and theoretical sampling are iterative processes that culminate in theory formation, or knowledge production.

In line with these theories, the Puerto Rican coffee industry was examined through a historical, literary, and empirical analysis. These three forms of analysis rely on a mixed-method approach, utilizing literature review, archival analysis, corporate landscape analysis, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and photography.

A historical analysis and literature review of coffee systems in the archipelago was conducted, along with an examination of the broader history agriculture. This process included reading published books, gray literature from universities and research stations, and peer-reviewed articles. While in the archipelago, several university archives and libraries were visited, including those at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) in Utuado and Río Piedras, as well as the archives at the Botanical Garden. Archival research was also conducted by reading local agricultural magazines, magazines of the University and of the Department of Agriculture of Puerto Rico (DAPR).

In order to understand the complex network of coffee brand privatization and the contemporary state of blended coffee, an in-depth analysis of the corporate landscape was conducted. Coffee bags surveyed in 10 grocery stores and local markets, as well as in online databases, were systematized by brand, blend type, and owner, based on information found on the packaging or online.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using snowball sampling with a wide range of stakeholders in the coffee industry. These key informants included non-profit organizations active in the coffee sector, governmental agencies involved in agricultural policy, coffee shops, coffee processors, grassroots agroecology organizations, investors, government agents and

other stakeholders. Additionally, coffee producers such as small-scale coffee farmers in the agroecological movement, small-scale coffee farmers not in the agroecological movement, large-scale coffee producers, as well as industrial, large-scale producers were interviewed (Table 10) (Appendix 1).



Photo taken while working in the *cafetal* and having conversations with farmers.

Figure 2. The grounded theory process

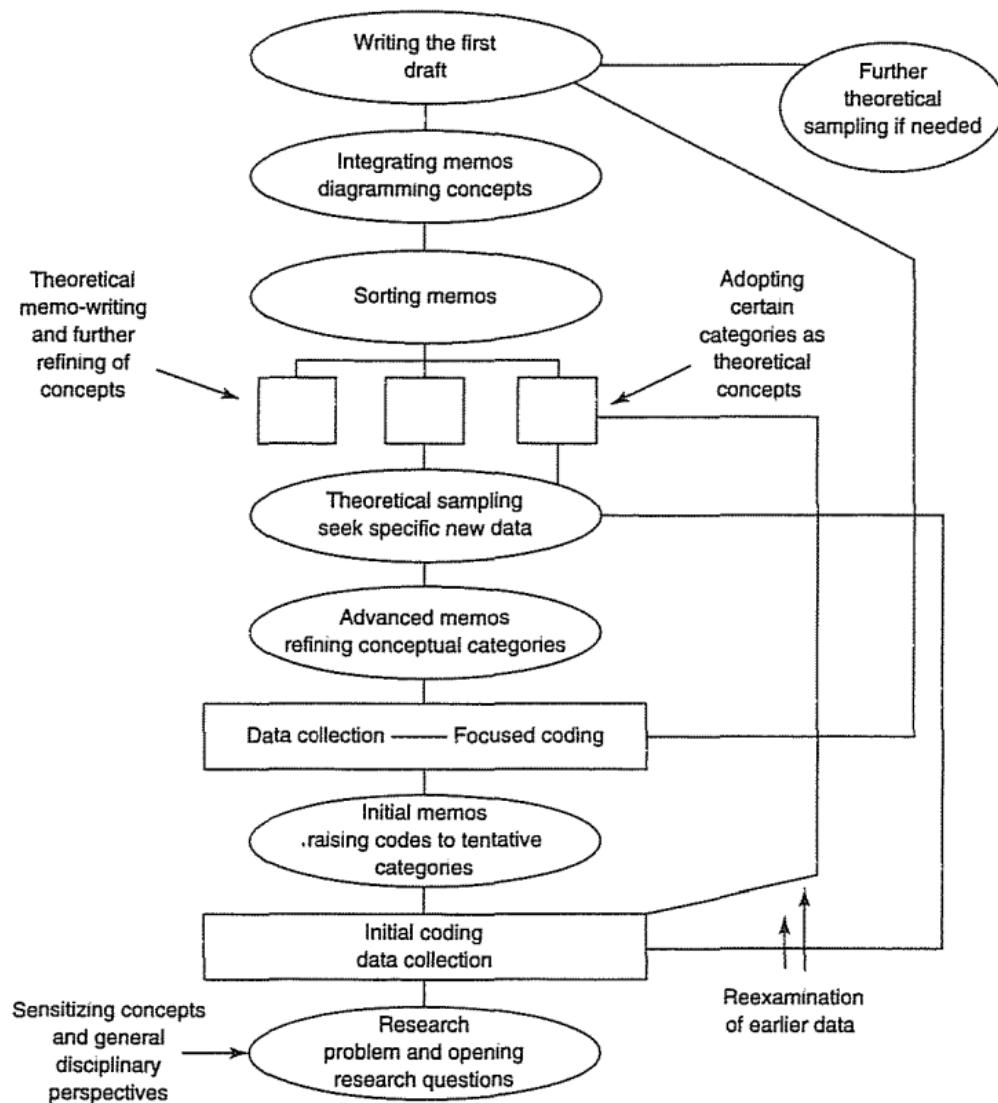


Figure taken from Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis by Kathy C. Charmaz (2006). Page 11

Table 1: Actors Interviewed in the Coffee Industry			
Type of Actor		#	Brief description
Non-profit organizations active in the coffee sector		3	Local and international 501(c)(3)s that are involved in the coffee industry. Either with goals aimed at resilience, sustainability, environmental justice, social services and education.
Governmental agencies involved in agricultural policy		1	DACO, ADEA, DA-PR, Government Warehouse.
Coffee Shops		2	Coffee shops in San Juan and Utuado specialized in premium coffee. They have their own brands.
Coffee processors		5	People who own coffee processors, they can either sell it to other people or have their own brand. They do not grow their own coffee, they buy it.
Grassroots Agroecology Organizations		5	Local grassroots efforts with goals and objectives aimed at food sovereignty. They can also be 501(c)(3)s.
Investors, government agents and other stakeholders		2	People with economic and state power influence decision-making in the coffee sector and its policies.
Coffee producers	Small-scale coffee farmers in the agroecological movement	9	Coffee farmers that have a farm smaller than 15 cuerdas ¹² of land. They are part of the agroecological movement.
	Small-scale coffee farmers not in the agroecological movement	4	Coffee farmers that have a farm smaller than 15 cuerdas of land. They are not part of the agroecological movement.
	Large-scale coffee producers	4	Coffee farmers that have a farm bigger than 15 cuerdas of land. They do not own big brand/s of coffee and commercialize it.
	Industrial, large-scale producers	3	Coffee processors and/or farmers that have a farm bigger than 15 cuerdas of land. They own big brand/s of coffee and commercialize it.

¹² A cuerda of land accounts for 0.9712 acres.

Participant observations were also made at community events to which I was invited, such as work brigades on different farms, La Via Campesina's First International Encounter, meetings of the agroecological land trust managed by the Institute for Research and Action in Agroecology (IALA-PR), and sessions at the Escuelita Rural (the Rural School) which is an autonomous, self-organized effort to teach various topics to campesinos in the Lares area. There, I presented my work and led a workshop on identity and crops with Boricúa people.

A photographic documentation composed in collaboration with key informants was accomplished through film photography. Through the grounded theory approach, I combined corporate landscape analysis and photographs as testimonials to move beyond the “linguistic imperialism” of text in academia (Mirzoeff, 1999; Cleland & MacLeod, 2021) and achieve polyphonic storytelling (Tsing, 2015, p.25). A total of 216 black and white (B&W) frames were developed which will be organized in a book about the industry.

Analysis of the Contemporary Coffee Industry in Puerto Rico

1. Understanding coffee in its landscape

a. The Colonial Ecologies in Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico, like every other nation under colonial rule, has experienced a history of capital accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004), which has significantly influenced its governmental decision-making processes (Worsdell, 2024). The construction of a territorial geography is not neutral (Madera, 2020) and is constantly socially constructed (Harvey, 1996). Colonial passing of acts, laws and decisions have re(and)constructed, re(and)shaped, re(and)configured, and re(and)molded the territory.

As with many colonies, its territory and food system was shaped around the cultivation of export crops – commodities. During the Spanish colonial period in the Epoca de Oro (1860-1890), Puerto Rico was the sixth largest exporter of coffee in the world. Small farmers were responsible for coffee production which was integrated into diversified crops that maintained year-round diets, according to some historians (Picó, 1981). These small-scale farmers would sell their surplus produce to the *hacendados* (or the estate owners), who would then hoard the commodities and speculate on the price. However, the small farmers' polycropping practices built in more economic flexibility for themselves, whereas the *hacendados* depended on credit

or sales to the state. Unlike in other coffee regions, in Puerto Rico the minimum price of coffee cherry is fixed. Fixed prices make the industry of the archipelago unique as beans from large-scale coffee activities cannot be sold at a markedly cheaper price than small-scale ones.

Subsequently, in 1900 the occupying United States military government passed the Foraker Act, which enforced the Dingley Tariff Act in Puerto Rico. The Foraker Act established a governor, a House of Representatives, a judicial system, and a non-voting Resident Commissioner in Congress, all of whom were appointed by the federal government. In consequence, the Dingley Tariff Act applied a 15% rate tariff from any product moving between the continental United States and the archipelago (Zhang, 2024; Library of Congress, n.d.). This legislation also affected and reduced trade with Europe, the largest buyer of coffee by the end of the nineteenth century, tariffs had in consequence increased by more than 47-52% of the original price. After the United States imposed control following the US-Spanish War, it began importing Puerto Rican coffee, which was then blended with other well-known brands (Pumarada, 1990), paying less than European buyers did. According to Pumarada, United States corporations would not create or promote a Puerto Rican brand using pure Puerto Rican coffee beans due to the high risk of hurricanes. Similarly, Puerto Ricans could not establish their own coffee brand for export using their own beans either, the United States wouldn't pay a fair price for them.

As tobacco and sugarcane were favored by credits given by the State, credit shifted from the mountains (where coffee was grown) to the coast (where sugar cane was grown). Coffee production declined sharply during this period, with the confounding factor of Hurricane San Ciriaco in 1899, which devastated coffee production on the island.

Interestingly, according to the Boricua historian Fernando Picó (1981) coffee as a crop became creolized,¹³ meaning Spanish descendants born in the Americas took control of its production. There was a distinction between the *cañaverales* (cane fields) owned by US companies on the coast and the small coffee plantations owned by criollos in the mountains. The idea that coffee production was a traditional activity in the archipelago and an integral part of the Boricua identity emerged during this time (Picó, 1981, p. 30).

¹³ Direct translation from *criollizada*. Criollo (descendant from Spanish people, born in the Americas) people take control of the main production.

Today, the nation exports less than 0.01 to 1% of the coffee consumed worldwide. Within a linear, simple, and straightforward narrative, this is somehow expected: the archipelago has a smaller area compared to the “big players of the coffee industry” and the demand worldwide has increased substantially. However, as we add more layers of evidence, we understand that low exportation is a consequence of nonlinear interactions between colonialism, government management, aid politics, and externalities absorbed by someone/something, and all of these happen between a multiplicity of actors. To understand the contemporary coffee industry in Puerto Rico, it is essential to understand the effects of the United States colonialism on Puerto Rico.

The history of continuous reconfiguration by a colonial ecology is reflected in the territory's imposed legislative decisions. Notably, the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, also known as the Jones Act, prevented Puerto Rico from participating in international trade by only permitting U.S.-built and -operated ships to enter U.S. territorial waters, which include Puerto Rico (Rivera, 2018). The law also granted investors a triple tax-exemption, and the federal government the power to veto any law in Puerto Rico (Library of Congress, n.d.). Afterwards, in 1952, marking the 50th anniversary of the colonial imposition, the U.S. Congress granted Puerto Rico a greater degree of autonomy over local affairs by allowing the nation to draft a constitution, although the U.S. remained the ultimate authority. The constitution, drafted by Luis Muñoz Marín, the first democratically elected president, declared Puerto Rico an *Estado Libre Asociado* (Associated Free State), or a commonwealth of the United States (LeBrón, 2019, p.7), while simultaneously reinforcing its economic ties with the United States. Foreign corporations were reassured that they could operate virtually tax-free, which undermined the domestic employment rate as domestic operations were taxed (Puerto Rico: Junta de Planificación 2016, p.30) (Cabán, 2018, p.19).

Luis Muñoz Marín shifted the direction of the nation from an agrarian society to an industrial economy. The *Operación Manos a la Obra* (Bootstrap Operation) was implemented with the goal of industrializing the archipelago. This initiative displaced nearly all peasants and land stewards, relocating them to urban centers to work as factory workers. Consequently, emigration rates rose. With industrialization, colonial Puerto Rico shifted from being a big exporter of coffee, to an exporter of tobacco, sugar, and eventually its own people (Cabán, 2018, p.31). Between 1950 and 1960, 47,000 Boricuas migrated to the US every year (Rosario et al., 2023). Muñoz Marín's *Manos a la Obra* relied upon capital from US corporations for its development. When laws granting corporations tax exemptions expired, the corporations left.

This forced the government to borrow money to sustain the economy, leaving the Puerto Rican government in profound debt. By 2016, the debt had grown to over 76 billion dollars and was declared “unpayable,” threatening the stability of foreign corporations and investors in the territory (Cabán, 2018). In response, the Obama administration enacted the Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico (PROMESA), commonly known as *La Junta*. This signified the endurance of US imperialist relations to the territory, by imposing control from outside. I argue that the US intervention of La Junta is an example of a technology that Haraway refers to as the “god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (1988, p. 582), or a surveillance mechanism that maintains the imperial, objective, god-like gaze while increasing distance between the surveillor and the surveilled (Kroth, 2025). Rather than solving debt and enabling the archipelago to flourish, La Junta reinforces epistemic injustice of the governance of Puerto Rico (Fricker, 2007) by perpetuating the imperialist relationship with the U.S. and denying Boricuas the right to self-determination. These 7 non-elected members of the board “have nearly absolute powers over Puerto Rico’s finances and can overturn local laws that may interfere with the implementation of fiscal austerity measures” (Brusi & Godreau, 2019). La Junta dismantled public education and healthcare by implementing fiscal austerity measures, which also made public services nearly inaccessible due to increased costs.

A couple of months after La Junta began operating, Hurricane Irma, followed by the category 5, history-writing storm Maria, hit the archipelago in September 2017. The damage caused by these hurricanes demonstrated the consequences of what Zapatista Subcomandante Marcos describes as “el mal gobierno” (the bad government) (Worsdell, 2024). In Puerto Rico and in other colonial contexts, top-down disaster relief efforts have been shown to be part of what is described as disaster capitalism: the accumulation of capital through the instrumentalization of disasters for privatization and deregulation (Klein, 2018). The government’s initial refusal to acknowledge the estimates of hurricane-related deaths¹⁴ which reached at least 4,645, reflected the state and corporations’ inhumane response (or neglect) to this socially constructed disaster (Dazzo, 2025).

¹⁴ 64 deaths was the initial number of people that had deceased due to the hurricanes by the Government of Puerto Rico, but a later report from the Milken Institute of Public Health estimated fatalities to be between 2658 and 3290 (Ascertainment of the Estimated Excess Mortality from Hurricane María in Puerto Rico. Milken Institute of Public Health. August 29, 2018).

b. Governmental aid and management recommendations in coffee

According to Borkhataria et al. (2012), the persistence of coffee in the archipelago is directly linked to government support. I would contend that it is a far more intricate dialectic relationship among other actors, encompassing factors from local identity to international market pressures. Nevertheless, this research contends that government assistance has proven to be instrumental. Reading ethnographies about the geography of coffee written before 1950 makes it clear that nearly all coffee plantations were shaded or partially shaded before industrialization (Campbell, 1947). Beginning in 1960, just a decade after *Manos a la Obra*, at the same time as the Green Revolution in Mexico, the Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez (UPR) began informing (or perhaps better said, *dis*-informing) practitioners that sun-grown coffee produces higher yields than shade-grown coffee^{15,16}. By taking a close look at who was working at the Agricultural Experiment Station of the UPR we can find out that they were mostly USDA stationed agents.

There is a clear connection between recommendations to grow *café al raso* (sun-grown coffee) and the US-led Green Revolution. According to Timothy Lorek (2020), Puerto Rico served as an agricultural laboratory and training center oriented towards large-scale agribusiness and capitalist ventures, and its expansion to the rest of Latin America. Carlos Chardón, a Puerto Rican mycologist trained at Cornell University, was a key actor in the push for these models as the chancellor of the UPR from 1931 to 1936. During that time, he wrote the Plan Chardón, a New Deal-style agricultural modernization plan that later influenced Operation Bootstrap (Lorek, 2020). What is less known about Chardón is his ideas on racial strife¹⁷ and an

¹⁵ The papers are very clear and upfront with their results, showing no doubts about their assertions. For example, they conclude that:

The data presented in this paper show that intensively managed coffee growing under typical conditions in the Coffee Region of Puerto Rico produces much higher yields when grown in full sunlight than under partial shade provided by trees (Abruña et al., 1965, p252).

And then the UPR advised, economically and culturally speaking (according to them) that:

The best alternative to increase farmer's income is to improve yields by adopting the modern cultural practices recommended by the Agricultural Experiment Station (Gonzalez-Villafane & Zapata-Acosta, 1981, p269).

¹⁶ Interestingly, the studies were only performed over a three-year period, which introduces a significant bias since coffee production in the sun decreases over time.

¹⁷ Chardón wrote a paper in 1947 with Raymond Crist in which they theorized about *mestizaje* and agriculture. Timothy Lorek (2020) writes that “In the article, the authors suggested a social prescription based on agricultural science that now looks like an alternative vision of modernization contrasting with the eventual ascendance of a US-directed Green Revolution” p109. For them, engineered seeds were like the new mestizos.

agrarian solution: seed hybridization and modern agriculture (Lorek, 2020). Following Chardón's steps, Rexford Tugwell, who worked for the USDA, became chancellor of the UPR from 1941 to 1946 and eventually became the last US-appointed governor of the archipelago. As a strong proponent of racist neo-Malthusianism, birth control, and the modernization of agriculture, he allied himself with his successor, Luis Muñoz Marín, and supported the Manos a la Obra plan (Lorek, 2020). The US-led Green Revolution was supported by xenophobic and racist figures in Puerto Rico, which provided fertile soil for its testing and expansion.

From 1960 to 1980 the coffee landscape in the island radically changed. The Puerto Rican government offered incentives to transition to sun coffee, including payments for removing shade trees, subsidies for pesticides and herbicides, and subsidies for fertilizers. As reported by Borkhataria et al. (2012), shade-grown coffee farms decreased by 70% from 1982 to 2007. Up until now, the Puerto Rican Department of Agriculture (DAPR) has incentivized sun coffee monocrops (Department of Agriculture Puerto Rico, 2025) and supports green revolution models. Their recommendations involve copying intensive models from other countries that have completely different geographies and socioeconomic conditions, including a push for dwarf varieties which can be planted more densely. Several authors (Borkhataria et al., 2012; Walker, 2021) agree that coffee farmers in Puerto Rico have become dependent on these "monocrop-oriented sun coffee" government subsidies.

[Antes] cultivaban hasta maní, cultivaban papa, cultivaban de todo. ¿Y qué pasa? Que no estamos viendo esto como una operación... Yo creo que cogieron el modelo de la caña, lo metieron en café.

[Before] they grew peanuts, potatoes, everything. And what happened? We're not looking at this as an operation... I think they took the sugarcane model and applied it to coffee.

Key informant involved in the coffee industry as an investor and has links to the local government (E-17).

However, I argue that coffee as an export commodity has always had a strong regulation by the state, ever since it was brought into the Americas. Drawing from Polanyi's critique on market liberalism (Polanyi, 2001), the self-regulating market is a "utopia." A farmers' productivity in capitalism does not arise of its own accord; it stems from a complex interplay of support and reciprocity with land, communities, and policy. Therefore, dependency on the government in Puerto Rico is not necessarily the problem. Instead, the problem is what types of agriculture the government subsidizes. Resilient, agroecological food systems must be supported. Another example of that "dependency" mentioned by academics can be the 2014 USDA Natural

Resources Conservation Service-Caribbean Area (NRCS) program that incentivized shade coffee systems and soil conservation with payments in exchange. This foreshadows modern day neoliberal conservation strategies in which there is an emphasis in finding market win-win solutions articulated into commoditization (Durand, 2014).

c. Coffee varieties used

Very little has been written about the *Coffea arabica* varieties used in Puerto Rico. However, farmers remember with nostalgia the variety that made the nation the sixth exporter in the world. Some farmers still have the *Typica 401* variety, also known as the Selección Puerto Rico. This is an heirloom variety that has had a long history in the archipelago since it arrived in 1736 as the first introduction of coffee to the island. The *Typica* variety is a tall shrub that is susceptible to rust infection with a larger bean size that fairs better in high altitudes (WCR, 2024) Around 1800, a mutation of the *Typica* variety, the *Bourbon*, was introduced to the region by the government. *Bourbon* is also tall and rust- susceptible, but produces smaller beans (WCR, 2024). Afterwards, the *Caturra* variety was introduced. There is no documentation around when and how, but it was found as a natural mutation of *Bourbon* in Brazil. This is the first dwarf variety to enter Puerto Rico (WCR, 2024).

Within the industrialization of Puerto Rico, and the investment in the two USDA's Agricultural Experimentation Stations (EEA), *Frontón* and *Limaní* were imported and evaluated through planting trials. These are two introgressed varieties that are more resistant to rust than the previous introductions. A selection of a Timor Hybrid and a *Villa Sarchi* was made in Brazil and then introgressed (WCR, 2024) in the Estación Experimental Limaní (*Sarchimor*) produced the *Limaní* variety. On the other hand, *Frontón* (Catimor) was made from a selection of Timor Hybrid and *Caturra* made by the Instituto Agronómico de Campinas (IAC) in Brazil and the selection was made by the Estación Experimental Agrícola in Ciales (WCR, 2024). Robusta (*Coffea canephora*), another species of coffee, was introduced in the 1970s. Catuaí was introduced around the 1980s, which is another variety produced by the IAC by crossing a *Mundo Novo* with *Caturra*. As explained by the World Coffee Research database, the plant is highly productive; being a dwarf, "it can be planted at nearly double the density" and "the plant's shape makes it relatively easy to apply pest and disease treatments" (WCR, 2024). Following these introductions, two new varieties were introduced by private entities in the 2000s. *Obatá*

was introduced in 2015 by Puerto Rican Coffee Roasters (PRCR) and the Agricultural Department of Puerto Rico. *Obatá* is also a dwarf, with high production and resistant to rust. It has a bigger bean than *Limaní* and *Frontón*. It needs a lot of inputs. After Hurricane Maria and Irma, Starbucks and PRCR worked together on the introduction of the *Marsellesa* variety as a disaster relief effort. *Marsellesa* was developed in Nicaragua and is a dwarf variety with high yield that needs lots of inputs.

While genetic diversity is needed in the landscape, I argue that, with the introduction of these varieties, the government has pushed neoliberal models heavily influenced by the Green Revolution, which incentivize industrialization and sun coffee. These models have not improved either coffee yield or farmers' livelihoods in the area, as reported by key informants. Puerto Rico's geography is extremely diverse, coffee is farmed in the mountainous areas, and it is unlikely that machinery can access these regions¹⁸. On the other hand, it is extremely expensive to use industrial inputs and technological packages because of the Jones Act. So, the government promotes industrial, imported dwarf varieties that are privately controlled, subjecting Puerto Rico to Green Revolution-style dependency on expensive industrial products. Dwarf coffee varieties are well known to require "heavy inputs of fertilizers, herbicides and fungicides, as well as the attendant technologies" (McCook & Montero-Mora, 2024, p1071). In Puerto Rico's contemporary coffee landscape, austerity measures have enabled the private sector to take control of what the state had formerly managed, effectively neoliberalizing the industry. An example of this is the introduction of the *Marsellesa* variety by private entities: a dwarf variety with high needs for input disguised as a disaster relief effort. As Justina Walker (2021, p.65) reports in her thesis "the selection of the *Marsellesa* variety echoes broader processes of U.S. environmental, agricultural and disaster colonialism in Puerto Rico". Policies oriented towards industrialization benefiting private entities would be worth analyzing in future research.

¹⁸ Key informants shared a lot of stories involving tractor accidents and motorized machinery in coffee farms.

2. Which actors weave the landscape? Which dynamics do they thread?

During the months I spent doing research in the archipelago, I investigated who the current actors were in the coffee sector, and how themes of government dependency, neoliberalism, NGOs, and modern production were woven into the landscape.

Current actors involved in the industry are: producers/growers/farmers (which include small-scale coffee farmers in the agroecological movement, small-scale coffee farmers not in the agroecological movement, large-scale coffee producers and industrial producers), coffee processors and roasters, coffee shops, non-profit organizations active in the coffee sector, governmental agencies involved in agricultural policy, grassroots agroecology organizations, scientists from both Archipelago and other countries, investors, and other stakeholders (Table 1) . Their relations are non-linear, particular, and context dependent; they cannot be universalized. However, some patterns emerge, contouring a narrative of aid whose complex web of relationships between these actors reveals both neocolonial and neoliberal tendencies.

a. Who owns coffee?

The survey performed in grocery and convenience stores, interviews, and on brand websites found a total of 97 brands of coffee in the archipelago. When clustering brands with their owners, I found that Puerto Rican Coffee Roasters (PRCR) is by far the largest corporation in the Puerto Rican coffee industry, owning 22 brands. Coquí follows with 6 brands, and Oro and Pan American Grain follow with 5 brands each (Figures 3 & 4). PRCR is a subsidiary of CC1/Coca-Cola Puerto Rico Bottlers (in other words, connected to Coca-Cola Vendors LLC), and bought most of all the 22 brands in July of 2008, consolidating an effective monopoly. At that time, it was estimated that PRCR controlled 60% of the coffee consumption in Puerto Rico (Rodríguez, 2010). Due to limited access to information, it is difficult to determine the current percentage of consumption but based on interviews and journal articles online (Mercado, 2025), I would say it has increased and outnumbers that original 60% and could even reach to the 75-80%.

Out of the 97 brands found in the survey, only 37 (38.14%) were branded as “pure” Puerto Rican Coffee. However, only 12 of those “pure” Puerto Rican coffee brands are available at grocery stores, and of those brands, only 4 come from non-industrial coffee entities¹⁹. Most of

¹⁹ Many family farmers, including some that have small farms, have their own processing and roasting facilities and have their own registered brands.

the "pure" Puerto Rican coffee seen in grocery stores is produced by large corporations, not small-scale farmers. These "pure" Puerto Rican brands, owned by large corporations, are marketed under names such as "Premium", "Supremo", "Super Supremo", "Intense" and "Gold". These are more expensive than other brands sold by the same corporations and therefore less accessible to people of moderate to low income. Assigning brands to their respective corporate owners and clustering smaller brands together, Figures 5 & 6 illustrate how large corporations mostly use a blend of imported and Puerto Rican coffee, while smaller family-owned brands use 100% pure Puerto Rican coffee. It is worth noting that key informants consistently reported that corporations use less than the amount of pure Puerto Rican coffee explicitly stated on the product label—sometimes using none at all.

*Casi la mayoría de la gente dice que [su marca de café] es 100% boricua.
Embuste. Ellos vienen aquí.*

Almost everyone says that [their coffee brand] is 100% Puerto Rican. That's a lie. They come here.

Worker in the Government's Warehouse and Program for Purchasing Imported Coffee (E-28).

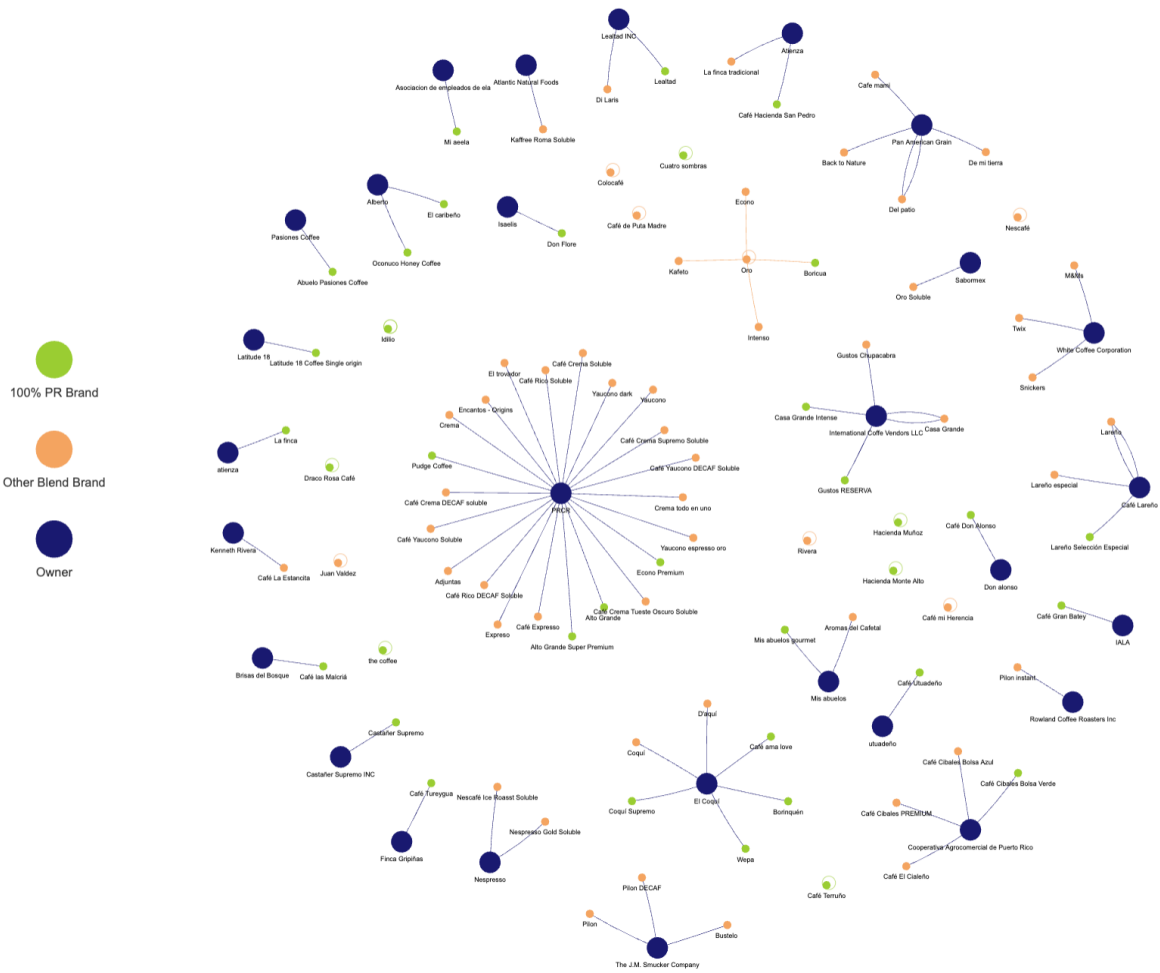




35-millimeter photos taken in the Yahuecas warehouse where all imported coffee arrives and is stored.

Figure 3

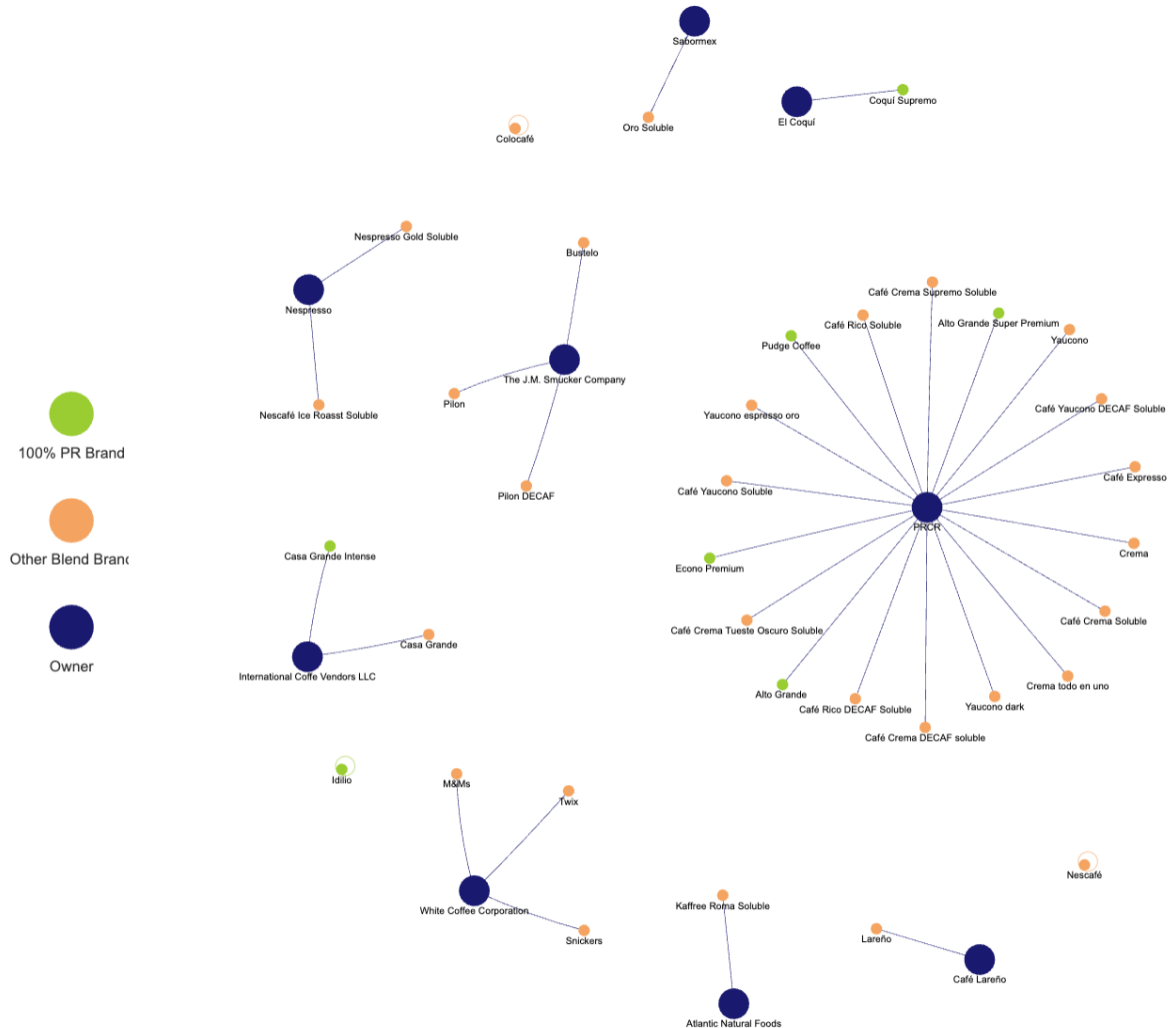
Network of all Puerto Rican Brands involved in the survey



Each color defines the type of coffee blend: 100% Puerto Rican coffee (green), Blends (orange). The owner is colored in blue and as a node of the brands. PRCR is the biggest owner composed mainly by “other blend” brands.

Figure 4

Network Puerto Rican Brands involved in the survey that you can only find in grocery stores



There is a central node to show relationships easier, each color defines the type of coffee blend: 100% Puerto Rican coffee (green), Blends (orange). The owner is colored in blue and as a node of the brands. PRCR has its own node in the right composed mainly by “other blend” brands.

Figure 5

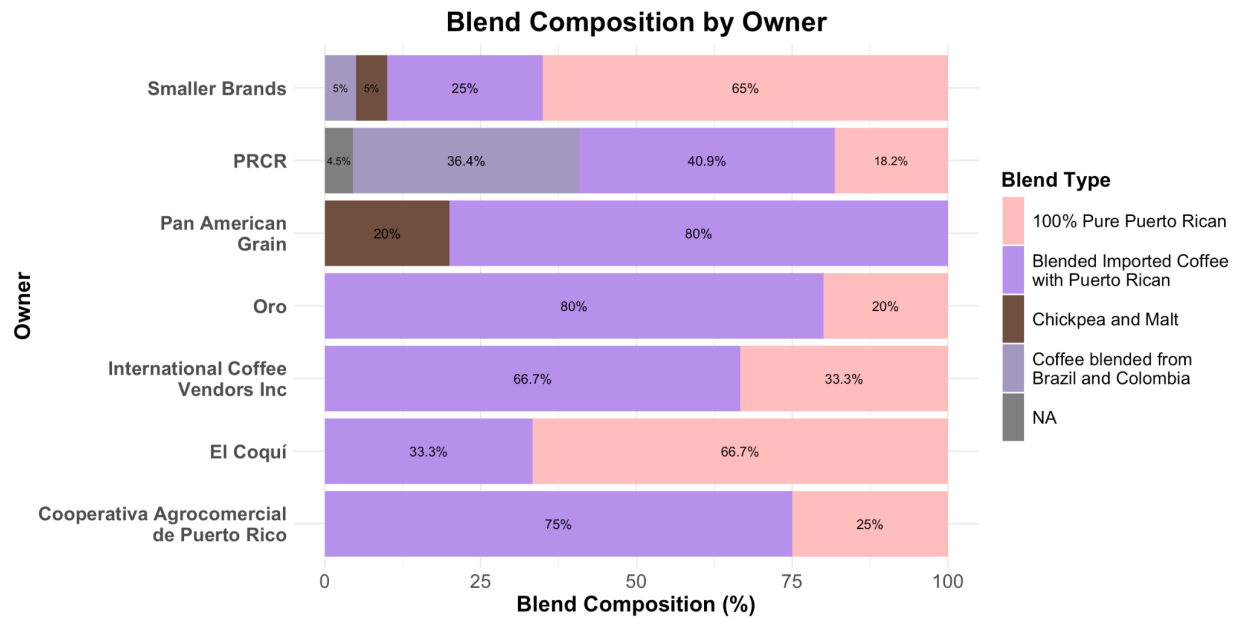
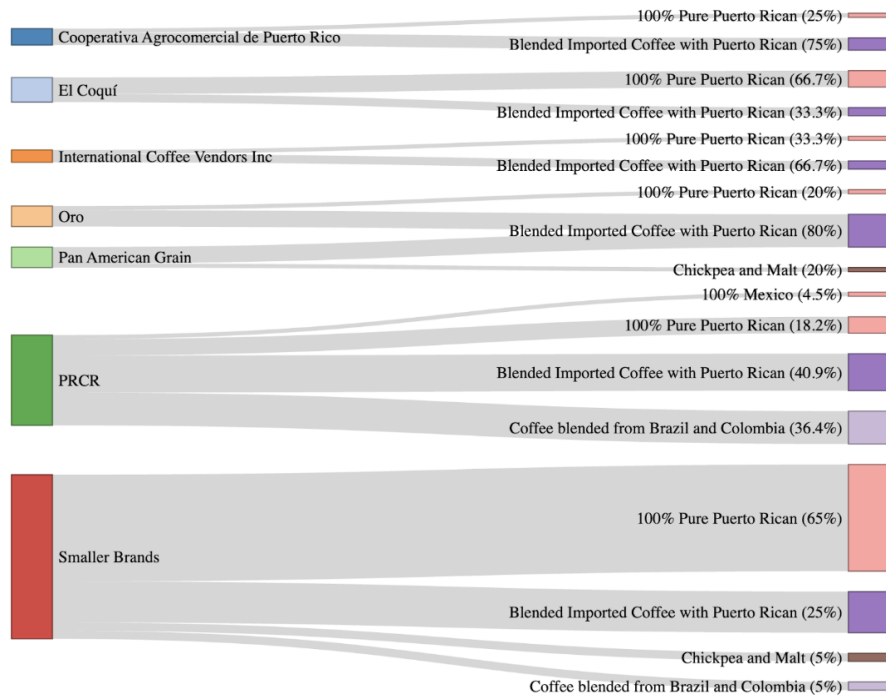


Figure 6

Proportion of Coffee Blend Type for each producer
Flow of producer to product composition



The width of the rectangles on the left represents the number of brands owned by each producer. The width of the rectangles on the right represents the proportion of production directed to each type of blend. Elaboration: Fime de la Fuente.

b. Pillars that support asymmetric structures in the industry

Beyond the big corporations involved in controlling most of the consumption mentioned above, accessory actors also perform key roles. By accessory actors I refer to the government agencies, as well as local and international non-governmental organizations. These entities have a big influence on the industry through policymaking, regulation enforcement, subsidies, and capital for investment.

Government agencies

There are several government agencies involved in the coffee sector: the Department of Agriculture of Puerto Rico (DAPR), as well as the Agricultural Enterprises Development Administration (ADEA) and the Puerto Rico Department of Consumer Affairs (DACO). Each of these agencies has different responsibilities and mechanisms. DAPR is primarily responsible for granting bona fide status to farmers²⁰, managing the ecological landscape (distributing seeds and shrubs, and providing pest management advice, providing inputs at subsidized prices for free), and creating policies that support the crop industry. ADEA, on the other hand, manages the coffee purchase and sale program for local demand (buying coffee at worldwide auctions, testing its quality, importing it, and selling it to local roasters), as well as providing incentives for industrial agriculture (making payment checks for the purchase of supplies). DACO, on the consumer side, regulates the price of coffee on the archipelago by setting a maximum price for coffee in the supermarket aisle. They also set a minimum price for green coffee produced locally, as well as imported semi-roasted that processors can buy in the warehouse that ADEA manages. Price is fixed two times in Puerto Rico: minimum, when processors buy from producers and maximum for consumers once is roasted.

It is essential to call out that Puerto Rican conventional coffee is more expensive to produce than in any other country. Since Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States, and has a cabotage law in place with tariffs, all inputs are extremely expensive since they are imported to the archipelago. Additionally, all labor must be paid at or above minimum wages set by the US federal government and in dollars, unlike every other coffee-producing country in Latin America. One of my key informants in another interview published in a newspaper (Tark, 2018) calculates that it costs 355-365 USD to produce one quintal of commercial coffee in Puerto Rico

²⁰ Bona fide status implies having more than 51% of gross income coming from agricultural production. Farmers are subsidized with a 90% tax exemption with revenues from agriculture.

and 425 USD for a specialty one. This translates to 3.55 to 4.25 USD per pound to produce coffee. However, to produce coffee in Latin America it costs 1.05 to 1.90 USD per pound (Guerrero, 2021). In sum, Puerto Rican coffee is 238% more expensive to produce, in other words, it is 3.38 times as expensive.

Labor has been reported as one of the main challenges in Puerto Rico's contemporary coffee industry. During the 2025 harvest season, an estimated half of the coffee harvest was lost because there were not enough hands to pick it up (Rodríguez, 2025; Escobar, 2026). An informant joked that those who attend Bad Bunny's concerts and romanticize the jíbarx-campesinx lifestyle would be better off lending a helping hand to the coffee farmers in the mountains. While this problem is extreme right now, it is important to note that most of the discursive approaches in which this challenge is addressed need to be reexamined. Many large landowners and corporations (and some small-scale farmers) believe that Puerto Ricans are lazy and simply don't want to work. In one statement, they erase centuries of struggle around land dispossession, gentrification, precarious wages, exploitation, and racism, as well as resistance. I argue that, beyond being apolitical and inaccurate, this narrative itself perpetuates the labor shortage. Federal and local governments play a key role in creating and reinforcing this narrative. Their solutions address the perceived "laziness," but they do not address the actual root of the problem²¹. This manifests as the constant segregation of Puerto Rican laborers from safe, profitable, and fair work by not encouraging equal wages and compensation but instead bringing migrant workers with H2A visas²². This does not address the root causes of the problem. Some of the biggest corporations, such as Puerto Rican Coffee Roasters, are facing lawsuits for underpaying workers and violating the Fair Labor Standards (US Department of Labor, 2015).

According to the key informants I spoke with at the ADEA-managed warehouse, the coffee purchase and sale program for local demand has been managed by ADEA since Hurricane George in 1998 when the archipelago was unable to supply local demand. Previously, they used to sell local coffee to larger processors. Now, they have a network of 70 buyers and apply rules regarding the amount of Arabica coffee they can purchase. They adhere

²¹ It is very complex and has numerous dimensions. Many Puerto Ricans receive federal assistance, such as the SNAP program and WIC, which they would lose if they worked. Since farm labor is not well-paid, they are better off financially if they don't officially "work" and do other informal jobs.

²² These workers experience the same conditions, or even worse, as the Boricua workers. Since they live in other countries with other currencies (mostly pesos) it is more profitable to them.

to a sale ratio of 80% arabica and 20% robusta. They attribute this ratio to the claim that Puerto Ricans are already accustomed to the intense flavor, and it is important to make the blend “efficient” as Robusta is sold in the market as a lower quality coffee, and the mix makes it cheaper. According to their data, from 2025 until the day of the interview (7/15/2025), they imported 174,653 quintales²³ of arabica and 45,386 quintales of robusta. They had a strong view that coffee and agriculture are businesses in which you must be as efficient as possible to make as much money as you can.

Pero yo siempre he dicho esto. Siempre se tiene que ver como un negocio. Sí, sí, sí. O sea, tú tienes que ver esto como un negocio. Sí. Y tienes que sacarle el máximo a tu negocio.

But I've always said this. You always have to look at it as a business. You have to look at this as a business. And you have to get the most out of your business.

Government worker in ADEA (E-31)

Get your customers used to drinking a certain type of roast, and you'll get them there.

Key Informant owner of a coffee shop and brand (E-31)

Sí. Y es el café que ya, cómo él te dice, nosotros como, como sociedad, como puertorriqueños, estamos acostumbrados a ese café fuerte.

Yes. And it's the coffee that, as he says, we as a society, as Puerto Ricans, are used to drinking that strong flavored coffee.

Key informant that works in ADEA (E-31)

However, even though these governmental agencies regulate the price of the blend of imported coffee, there is a huge difference between the price of local coffee and the price they offer in their semi-roasted coffee program. It is clear, then, that big industries will always lobby for a reduction in the cost of production, so they have a preference in buying imported coffee. Another key informant, a producer and processor, stated it cost him 500 USD to produce a quintal of unprocessed coffee beans (café verde), and in contrast the price of imported coffee is 375 USD per quintal.

A mí, como empresa de café, no me conviene ser beneficiado [de café local] porque tengo la obligación de comprar ese café más caro para entonces ir a competir con uno que compró un café [importado].

²³ Quintal in Puerto Rico is equivalent to 100 lbs. Since Puerto Rico is a commonwealth of the US, it uses the Imperial System.

As a coffee company, it is not in my interest today to be a processor because I am obliged to buy that [local] more expensive coffee in order to compete with someone who bought [imported] coffee.

Key informant who owns one of the biggest industrial coffee brands (E-36)

Both, the Department of Agriculture and ADEA generate revenue from the imported coffee program. This revenue is supposed to go back to the coffee industry in the archipelago. However, it seems that the agencies responsible of strengthening coffee production in Puerto, benefit financially when local farmers do not produce enough coffee.

Local non-profit organizations

In the archipelago, local non-profit organizations are also organized towards the betterment and change of the industry. However, a major presence is held by PROCAFE (Productores de Café de Puerto Rico, Coffee Producers of Puerto Rico). They self-define as a nonprofit created from local coffee growers, for local coffee growers, “defend[ing] their rights” and “rebuild[ing] Puerto Rico’s coffee sector sustainably” (PROCAFE, nd). Founded after Hurricane María in 2017, they are the largest coffee grower association in the archipelago. PROCAFE’s main program “Café del Futuro” is financed by USDA and The National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA International (NCBA CLUSA). The project is described by PROCAFE a “flagship agroforestry conservation initiative, focused on restoring Puerto Rico’s mountain ecosystems while supporting smallholder farmers” ... PROCAFE “distributes native and shade trees, promotes sustainable farming practices, quantifies carbon capture, and provides technical assistance to help farmers adapt to climate change and reach better markets for their coffee” (PROCAFE, nd). Yet, there is some dissonance between what they state they do in their website and what they actually stated in interviews with me.

PROCAFE is a non-profit organization that helps small farmers, in particular, to access various aid programs.

Key informer working in PROCAFE (E-25, E-27)

PROCAFE states that they are a “leading voice in resilient agriculture, environmental conservation, and rural economic development” (PROCAFE, nd). However, PROCAFE works closely with Puerto Rican Coffee Roasters (PRCR), a major coffee company subsidiary of Coca-Cola LLC which control at least 60 percent of the coffee market. PRCR has three large coffee

farms which are managed as monocrops, including one located at sea level, in the municipality of Vega Baja, a region where Arabica coffee is not normally grown. In this farm coffee plants are protected from the intense sunlight by applying a sunblock (kaolin clay) to the leaves.

PROCAFE, as an entity, sits at the same table with a wide range of producers, from small-scale farmers to industrial scale farmers. Although they claim to be particularly concerned with and working for small-scale farmers, they allow asymmetrical structures in the industry to permeate the organization. In my interviews with them, three topics emerged: how coffee is a business, how coffee improves the economic lives of farmers, and the idea that coffee exportation will result in better payments for farmers.

Ahí volvemos a lo que te mencioné ayer de que el café es un negocio, sabes? O el café de especialidad de Puerto Rico. Mi punto de vista, y es obviamente bien personal, es que donde lo puedas vender, ahí el lugar sabe si tú lo puedes vender a buen precio dentro de Puerto Rico y que el dinero provenga del puertorriqueño y se quede en el puertorriqueño. Aleluya! Sí, sí, el dinero está en que viene y de Rusia quieren comprar café de Puerto Rico. Pues lo enviamos para Rusia, ya sabes. Para mí lo importante es que el agricultor a la hora de la verdad. Porque el puertorriqueño va a seguir tomando café de especialidad, o sea, de góndola, o sea puertorriqueño, va a tomar café. Sea como sea, sea bueno o sea malo, lo va a seguir tomando. Lamentablemente, o sea la cultura, ja pero, pero el que quiera tomar un café especialidad, si eres puertorriqueño y vive aquí en Puerto Rico, pues mira, tenemos mucha gente produciendo café especialidad. Si eres de otro país, pues mira para otro país. Y de hecho los agricultores participantes del proyecto de Café del Futuro y que muchos de ellos son socios de aquí de Procafe también, o si no todos, que son productores de café especialidad ellos si te venden cierta parte aquí, pero ellos, la gran mayoría de su mercado está afuera, o sea, lo venden la gran mayoría por internet Y lo envían.

This brings us back to what I mentioned yesterday about coffee being a business. My point of view, which is obviously very personal, is that wherever you can sell it at a good price within Puerto Rico and that the money comes from Puerto Ricans and stays with Puerto Ricans. Aleluya! If the money comes from outside, and Russia wants to buy coffee from Puerto Rico, we send it to Russia. For me, the important thing is the farmer. Because Puerto Ricans are going to continue drinking coffee, either that is specialty or from the supermarket **whether it's good or bad**, they're going to keep drinking it. Unfortunately, that's the culture, ha. And in fact, the farmers participating in the Café del Futuro project, many of whom are also members of Procafé here, or if not all of them, are specialty coffee producers. They do sell a certain amount here, but the vast majority of their market is outside the country. In other words, they sell most of it online and ship it.

Key informant working in PROCAFE (E-25, E-27)

Key farmer informants have expressed that PROCAFE's work feels unfair to them, because it follows a patriarchal structure, they have fired workers because of their irregular access to funds and does not provide help to farmers that do not have land titles.

[PROCAFE] En su mayoría benefician como a los beneficiados. A los que ya tienen.
[PROCAFE] pretty much benefits those who have already been benefited.

Key informant, small coffee grower and processor (E-35)

International aid organizations

“Disaster capitalism found a beautiful paradise in Puerto Rico” (Key informant)

As Murray and Overton (2016) have described, aid became a key tool for exporting the neoliberal system to the global majority via Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and institutions such as the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and United Nations (UN). According to Castree (2008), neoliberalism is characterized by the privatization of resources and services that were previously socially owned, the deregulation of the state and re-regulation with policies aimed at privatizing and expanding markets (Durand, 2014). Following Polanyi's double movement (2001), when the state is absent from regulation, a social force emerges to push back against the total marketization of society. I argue that some (but not all) of that social power presents itself in NGOs. This element brings relief efforts, but, due to their often reinforcement of imperial strategy (Petras, 1999) and neoliberal solutions in a capitalist society, the result is often accumulation and dispossession. They extract further capital from already marginalized communities and do not address the root of the problem. According to Petras (1999), NGOs, by using the concept of “civil society,” erase a profound division between social and economic classes. Petras claims that NGOs see themselves as:

A third way against "authoritarian statism" and "savage market capitalism": they describe themselves as the vanguard of "civil society" operating in the interstices of the "global economy." The common purpose that most resounds at NGO conferences is "alternative development." (1999, p.430)

However, I find Crn Blok's description of NGOs in Skopje, Macedonia to be more comprehensive.

In opposition, we believe it has a very different role: to become a mediator between the government and the people, thus suppressing people's anger; to convert the potential uncontrollable dissent into a calm, peaceful, legal, controlled, institutionalized and completely harmless discontent; to support capitalism, by creating a good image for the

corporations and by propagating the ruling ideology; and finally, to create an illusion of struggling for a change. (Crn Blok, 2014, p.3)

After every colonial disaster (hurricane or financial crisis), extremely profitable- international nonprofits identified Puerto Rico as fertile soil for their next venture. A set of articulations allows this to happen. For example, Law 22 (2012) was consolidated into Law 60 (2019). Its name explains itself: “Ley Para Incentivar el Traslado de Individuos Inversionistas a Puerto Rico” translated to “Law to Encourage the Relocation of Individual Investors to Puerto Rico.” This law encourages non-resident investors to move into the archipelago by providing tax exemptions. However, residents of Puerto Rico are not eligible for these benefits.

Amidst all of the philanthropy that followed the hurricanes and 2019 earthquakes in Puerto Rico, “aid was stuck in ports of entry and left to rot” (Roldán et al., 2025, p.7). With aid, or without it, people organized themselves into mutual aid brigades and “organized spaces of joy and resistance” (Roldán et al., 2025, p.7). This turned out to be an example of the famous Latin American saying that is used time and time again in response to crises: Solo el pueblo salva al pueblo, which translates to “only the people can save the people”.

Disaster relief efforts

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, a five-year relief effort was launched by a cluster of non-profit and for-profit organizations and public figures, which received multimillion-dollar donations. The non-profit organizations that participated in the program were the Hispanic Federation (A US based non-profit founded by Luis Miranda, a New York resident that migrated from Puerto Rico in the mid 1970 and father of Broadway star Lin Manuel Miranda) which donated 1,000,000 USD to the program, The Rockefeller Foundation, which donated \$500,000 USD, and the World Coffee Research. The private enterprises involved were Nespresso which donated 475,000 USD, Starbucks, which donated 475,000 USD plus 2 million “climate-resistant seeds”, and Puerto Rican Coffee Roasters, which oversaw the nurseries where the coffee seedlings were produced. The program also featured two celebrities (or faces of *aid*): Broadway star and son of Boricuas, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and the actor and Nespresso ambassador, George Clooney. The money was administered by Technoserve, an international non-profit organization. As a result, the “Cafecito de Puerto Rico” was launched, a product within Nespresso's Reviving Origins line which is only sold in European countries and the US.

Technoserve is known for its slogan “Business Solutions for Poverty”, as well as for working in countries of the global majority²⁴ where it aims to better the economy and livelihoods of farmers and people in general. They have a strong relationship with coffee, as they are involved in 16 countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia by training farmers to use better²⁵ practices and to export their products. In other words, improving the livelihoods of people means exporting and selling their coffee in international markets. South Sudan is another geography where Technoserve has worked in collaboration with Nespresso, George Clooney, and his non-profit Sentinell. This public-private partnership had the aim of pacifying the region by encouraging coffee production for export (Gunther, 2015; Rudincová, 2020).

Since 2006, Technoserve has partnered with Nespresso and collaborated in the Nespresso AAA Sustainable Program²⁶ in which agroforestry is placed as a solution for “long-term systemic risks within the high-quality coffee supply chain” (Nespresso, nd). However, Nespresso, as a premium brand of Nestlé, has had a long history of not being transparent with what they are selling and passing their coffee as fair and sustainable when it is actually not. Nespresso’s AAA Sustainable Program has been denounced for engaging in modern slavery in two different working sites of Brazil (Hoinkes & Blumer, 2025) despite selling their coffee in the Global North as fair trade. They claim to be paying price premiums to farmers and do ethical sourcing, but this is not the case. Technoserve was also part of Nestlé’s Plan Nescafé in Mexico (2022 - currently). In this program, farmers were recruited to adopt regenerative agricultural practices in exchange for premium payments. This approach did not increase farmers' income; instead, it raised production costs above the price paid by the Swizz corporation (Blumer et al., 2024), leaving farmers unable to cover their livelihood costs. The Nespresso-Nestlé cluster states that over 90% of their purchases come from ethically sourced and agroforestry systems worldwide (Nespresso, nd). However, even if data of the percentage of this sourced coffee is not accessible or verified, it is evident that their claim is unattainable. For example, consider the size of the purchase: 1.3 billion pounds of green beans yearly to sustain their production (Lewis, 2024). Consider the countries from which they source their coffee: mainly Brazil, where more

²⁴ Known as Global South countries too.

²⁵ As they frame it, more ecological and more sustainable.

²⁶ The triple A in the AAA Program makes an appeal to the focus in quality, sustainability and productivity (Nestlé Nespresso SA, Corporate Communications, May 2016).

than 90% of coffee produced comes from monocrops (Science Societies, 2016). Technoserve's presence in partnership with the Nespresso-Nestlé cluster seems to be *problematique*²⁷.

Technoserve began working in Puerto Rico six years ago. As their employees have shared in interviews, the project had several phases. The first phase, which lasted for three years and a half, focused on revitalizing the coffee industry through seed production and training farmers in regenerative agriculture practices. These involved reducing plot sizes and increasing productivity, with the aim of making farms more profitable, improving quality of life, and being more sustainable and responsible with the environment (Key informant, E-12, 2025). The current phase, as to 2025, involves only continuing with technical support and training towards agroforestry management.

Yo diría que las prácticas de nosotros están bien alineadas a lo que es la agroecología [agroforestería]. Por eso los talleres de nosotros son de manejo integrado de plagas y enfermedades, sombra, cobertoras y composta.

So, I would say that our practices are well aligned with agroecology [agroforestry]. That's why our workshops cover integrated pest and disease management, shade, mulching, and composting.

Key Informant, worker in Technoserve (E-30)

Technoserve employs only Boricuas for this project and envisions the project as an example of how agroforestry in coffee systems can actually be more productive for coffee farmers and have a domino effect in the archipelago. An aspect that is unique about the Puerto Rico coffee program is that producers are not required to supply coffee to its donors. Technoserve workers explained to me that this is the case because the funding comes from multiple sources; if it only came from Nespresso, the producers probably would be required to supply coffee to Nespresso. Nevertheless, they shared with me that the broker of Nespresso has a list of the coffee farms that are transitioning with their help to agroforestry systems. Additionally, it is confirmed that containers are shipped yearly to Belgium and Switzerland.

From what I've seen and from what we've been told, since this NGO and its buyer are mainly in Europe, Europe has become very demanding about where the coffee comes from and what practices are used. So they're trying to focus on coffee that comes from farms that are as ecological and sustainable as possible. I think that's what they're looking for. Are they

²⁷ Problematique as In Foucauldian terms. The concept of problematization involves asking “how and why certain things (behavior, phenomena, processes) became a problem.” (Foucault, 2001), “in which one tries to see how the different solutions to a problem have been constructed; but also how these solutions result from a specific form of problematization” (Foucault, 1984; Barnett, 2015). The non-profit industrial complex's presence is problematique on its essence.

looking for a specific niche or under forestry? Yes, of course. Like selling it as organic coffee from Puerto Rico.

Key Informant, Technoserve technician (E-30)

Technoserve's impact creeps into many different facets of the community with positive and negative reception. For some farmers, the workshops offered by Technoserve technicians have been useful for better understanding the ecological processes that take place in their managed agroecosystems or for conceptualizing their existing knowledge. The nonprofit technicians have also helped them with practical techniques such as pruning. Distinct from other organizations, they work with people that do not have land titles, which means they can serve farmers who are not qualified to receive governmental aid. Yet, other farmers either do not understand or do not perceive the nonprofit's impact on the industry, and some even have a negative view of it.

Ajá. Y otra gente por ahí también vinieron después de María porque vieron que habían cinco o seis milloncitos ahí, que estaban buscando a quién donárselo pa' que llegaran a los agricultores.

People came after María because they saw that there were five or six million dollars left there, and they were looking for someone to donate it to so that it would reach the farmers.

Farmer that sells their coffee to Nespresso and does not receive help from TechnoServe (E-24)

Key informants shared that they felt the nonprofit was taking advantage of them. This ranged from exploiting their labor without any sort of exchange back or using their already-transitioned agroforestry coffee farm for their advertisements. Even technicians acknowledge that farmers are disappointed with how these programs work. Therefore, even though some farmers reported learning useful techniques or walking away with other knowledge, some agroecological farmers perceive that perhaps the organization is extracting knowledge from them.

¿O sea, es utilizar la información que tú tienes o utilizar la información que yo tengo? Mhm. Estás sacando o tú me estás dando.

So, is it using the information you have or using the information I have? Mhm. You're taking it out or you're giving it to me.

Agroecological producer on Technoserve (E-29)

When farmers are advised to transition to agroforestry systems, they have to absorb externalities associated with shifting from a subsidized production model. These include labor, energy, time costs, reduced crop yields during the transition period, and as other farmers do losses due to disasters. While farmers carry out the transition, NGOs and donors get to

advertise the number of hectares they *helped* transition towards more sustainable and agroecological practices in the region. In other words, the coffee exported with a prime by these corporations does not benefit or even pay back to these producers. Instead, the revenue goes directly to the sponsors of the NGOs: corporations performing agroforestry; green washing.

*Pues fíjate que ha sido una experiencia de crecimiento y también concientizarnos un poco más ... [sobre] la decepción que sí que tienen los agricultores con estos programas, porque a veces se venden como que mira, te vamos a ayudar y tenemos esta ayuda y al fin y al cabo pues todo se queda en la nada. ¿Y también pues muchos me dicen pero por qué yo te enseño [mi finca]? ¿Para qué te voy a recibir? ¿O cuál es el beneficio inmediato? Y pues yo digo el que me recibe porque verdaderamente sí, pues tiene un corazón y dice pues está bien, pero es por ahí. Pero, pero hay mucho que se puede hacer con ellos. **No es mucha la ayuda que yo les puedo facilitar.***

Well, it has been an experience of growth and also of raising our awareness a little more... [about] the disappointment that farmers do feel with these programs, because sometimes they are sold as, look, we are going to help you and we have this aid, and in the end, everything comes to nothing. And also, many people ask me, “Why should I show you [my farm]? Why should I welcome you? What’s the immediate benefit?” And I say that those who welcome me do so because they truly have a heart and say, “Okay, fine,” but that’s about it. But there’s a lot that can be done with them. **I can’t offer them much help.**

Technoserve technician (E-30)

Several scholars have argued that coffee aid oriented toward premium payments for farmers can undermine food security because it does not push farmers to enhance their livelihoods in the agroecosystem they have inhabited for generations (Bacon et al., 2008). Although Technoserve has helped some farmers, it cannot be argued that they have a purely positive or negative presence in the archipelago. Their presence is kaleidoscopic and needs a nuanced view to understand it. Foreign NGOs and multinational corporations in Borikén working in the coffee industry often strategically deploy the language and practices of sustainability and agriculture not to foster local food sovereignty, but to develop agendas that reinforce existing power structures and dependencies. The question of coffee in Borikén is entangled in complementary, contradicting, and divergent narratives that highlight its complexity. On one hand, “Café no es comida”—coffee is not food— it is a business and a commodity crop with a colonial legacy. It has been allowed to shape local livelihoods by governments and global markets; as one farmer put it “*los commodities se mueven al son que les pongan*” “commodities dance to the rhythm that is being played”. On the other hand, coffee is important to Boricuas’

identity and cultural heritage and also serves the agroecological movement. The non-profit industrial complex, in addition to governmental subsidies, plays a dual role when it comes to sharing information and practices: on one hand, they provide technical assistance, and on the other, coopt agroecology as a business solution to poverty that serves the image of their funders (including Coca-Cola, the IMF, USAID, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, among others) and their public-private partnerships (for ex: with Nespresso). All of this raises questions about who the coffee industry is actually oriented towards. Why should farmers, who allow the non-profit industrial complex to advise them, have to absorb all the externalities caused by transitioning to more “agroecological” practices to better suit the demand for organic coffee in the Global North?

c. Strategies: Vertical Integration and Agroecology

Under increasingly unfavorable conditions for smallholders seeking to remain in the industry, some producers are pursuing strategies such as developing their own brands and vertically integrating their operations—selecting beans and managing processing, roasting, and packaging. These approaches can increase producers’ autonomy over pricing, target markets, and the blends they offer. They also enhance transparency about where their coffee is sold and expand producers’ agency in deciding whether to export (e.g., via USPS) or sell domestically through supermarket aisles (“la gondola”) or coffee shops. Nevertheless, vertical integration entails significant complexities and should not be idealized or romanticized. Establishing a brand can be especially challenging without access to bank credit or sufficient capital to purchase the necessary equipment.

Este proyecto nace porque mi papá, mi abuelo, siempre. Siempre ha sido caficultor de toda la vida. De toda la vida. Lo que pasa que él no. Yo quise terminar el sueño de él, que fue empacarlo, tostarlo y empacarlo, hacerlo harina.

This project came about because my dad, my grandfather, has always been a coffee grower. All his life. All his life. The thing is, he... He didn't... I wanted to fulfill his dream, which was to pack it, roast it, and package it, turn it into flour.

Key Informant, vertically integrated farmer (E-8)

Agroecological coffee farmers are aiming towards vertical integration to secure independence from exploitative business. Other strategies include continuously regulating a fair price for coffee suppliers and acknowledging that this is a short-term solution. Selling specialty

coffees is another strategy as they get almost double for a pound of coffee, however farmers raise the question of whether selling a coffee that is unpayable for the 95% of the population of the archipelago. Another strategy is to stop selling coffee to supermarkets. Grocery stores pay in a 60-day window, this long time period without revenue puts producers under economic pressure. Another strategy is to organize cooperatives. This last strategy has only recently begun to flourish with the establishment of the first all-women-run coffee cooperative. In this space, women recognize that even if they do not have the financial resources to acquire the machinery needed for vertical integration, they have kin relations that allow them to share resources, education, technical support and process their coffee. They process their coffee collectively by renting equipment and infrastructure for roasting, all while maintaining their own brands and collaborating at farmers' and *mercados familiares*²⁸. As they shared in the interviews, one of the biggest motivations for forming this cooperative was to carve out a space free of misogyny experienced in the coffee industry and in other cooperatives.



35mm photography of a coffee pulper in Jayuya.

²⁸ Mercados familiares are monthly markets in which farmers sell their produce. It is an initiative of the local Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Family. People can attend and pay with money from social assistance.

However, not all coffee producers in the archipelago have been able to adopt these strategies. Some smallholder farmers either continue producing and selling their beans because it is a well-established practice for their livelihoods, or they have left the industry and either produce only for themselves and their kin; or not at all. Some farmers have even called María a chance to clean their plots and start from scratch: as a perfect moment to clean their cuerdas of -bad- coffee and -bad- practices. Yet, there are still many obstacles in the coffee industry, as corporations that produce blends with imported coffee, satisfy most of the island's demand. Corporations seem to *help* smallholders, but their aid framework can construct an insidious loop that is based in vicious sedimentation (Whyte, 2018) which responds to the dynamics of colonial ecologies. Small holders are encouraged to produce without engaging in understanding the system that perpetuates their exclusion in the benefits of the industry.

[Después del Huracán] el campesino no salió corriendo a organizarse. No, no, porque Coca-Cola vino con no se preocupen, no salgan de sus fincas, tenemos todas las soluciones y hay una cultura de asistencialismo.

[After the hurricane] the farmers did not rush to organize themselves. No, no, because Coca-Cola came and said, don't worry, don't leave your farms, we have all the solutions, and there is a culture of assistance.

Key informant, agroecologist (E-2)

Conclusions

Ultimately, coffee in Puerto Rico is neither the Oro Negro (black gold) nor the Agüita de Colonia (colonial water). Both, context and the way that narratives manifest, are important. As I have illustrated, coffee landscapes and coffee as a whole are a rich part of local identity with multiplicitous manifestations in Boricua culture. At the same time, colonial legacies bleed through modern coffee network assemblages, from NGO-supported agroecological transitions to the presence of big corporations such as Puerto Rican Coffee Roasters (PRCR), and dependence on importation from exploitative coffee agriculture in other countries. Therefore, to really understand coffee you have to trace its cultural, colonial, and neoliberal lineages through time and across geographies of production and consumption. Coffee in Puerto Rico has both a rich ecological history and a contemporary landscape of small-scale producers. However, their entanglement with neoliberalism through agroecological co-optation can benefit large-scale

coffee producers more than their own vitality. This dynamic is particularly obscured by narratives of *aid* in the archipelago.

Looking to the future, it seems like there is some effort to recover traditional, agroecological and agroforestry local coffee for local people. However, one of the many efforts that facilitate this might just be serving the corporations that support the deterioration of agroecological networks. We should keep a critical pulse on the operations and development of NGOs in the coffee sector in agroecology. Most importantly, Puerto Rico—its ecologies and its people—is not a market to exploit, and pushing back against that narrative and the organizations that feed off it is crucial for scholars who conduct research in its name.



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Appendix 1: Interview guide

The interviews were semi-structured, and in some cases unstructured. As the project and the questions evolved, some of them changed. Here is the original revised interview guide.

Revised Interview Guide (translated from Spanish)

Introduction:

Thank you again for joining me for this study. I am Fime de la Fuente Ramírez, a graduate student in the University of Michigan (U-M) School for Environment and Sustainability studying Agroecology, principal investigator of this study, and an intern for the Institute for Agroecology Research and Action (IALA-PR). IALA-PR is a collaborator on this study. My U-M faculty advisor, Professor Ivette Perfecto, also serves as an officer on the executive board of IALA-PR. As I mentioned in [our email/in-person conversation], I am conducting interviews with people that can share information with me about the local varieties of coffee plants and the way the industry has changed in the previous years.

I asked to talk to you because [reason for reaching out to the person to establish why their contribution is unique and important]. This study is a part of my dissertation, the purpose of which is to trace information around local varieties of coffee in Puerto Rico and to trace historical shifts in varieties of coffee usage. [explains better and in detail the project]

We have about twenty minutes to half an hour, and any time you can ask for the interview to stop, and you can always choose to not answer a certain question. Before we get started, is there any clarification you would like from me about this project or the interview?

Great! So to begin with...

Objective 1: Understanding Local Varieties:

1. What specific varieties of coffee do you cultivate on your farm?
2. How have these varieties changed over the years, if at all?

Objective 2: Production Practices:

3. What are the main practices or techniques you use in growing coffee?
- ... Make more questions that come from techniques and management to understand the management on the farm.

Objective 3: Understanding the Relation of Pests to Farm Management

Management and decision-making

- 4.1 Tell me about a decision you made regarding pest management and how it impacted your farm.
- 4.2 How do you decide what varieties to plant next season, considering potential pest challenges?

Strategies

- 5.1 Describe a stressful pest-related event on your farm and how you recovered from it.
- 5.2 What would you say are some of the strengths of your current pest management practices? What about the weaknesses?

Objective 4: Supply Chain and Relationships:

6. Who do you buy seed from?
7. How much is it?

8. Are there local seed suppliers in your area?
9. Who would you say are the key actors in the supply chain of coffee plantules?
10. Have things always been like this or have they changed?
11. Can you share with me how you managed seeds or how you got seeds before?

Objective 4: Challenges

12. Do you have different varieties in your farm? If so, what are some of the biggest challenges you face in maintaining seed varieties?
13. Have you noticed any benefits of using some variety, particularly in terms of pest control or ecological health? Which one?
14. Do you have a preference of a certain variety in particular?
15. In what ways have market demands or regulations affected your seed management decisions, and how have you responded to these pressures?

Future:

16. Which seed varieties do you see people using more in the future?
17. What shift would you like to see?

Conclusion

So again, the purpose of this interview was to trace information around local varieties of coffee in Puerto Rico, as well as trace historical shifts in varieties of coffee usage.
What would you have asked if you were conducting this interview? Anything else you want to add?

Thank you so much for your time and energy!

I really appreciate your time and all of the insights and stories you shared with me today. When I have completed the analysis and report sometime in xx, I will share the results back with you. [Will be more conversational in-person].

Appendix 2: Consent Form

Universidad de Michigan CONSENTIMIENTO PARA SER PARTE DE UN ESTUDIO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

1. INFORMACIÓN CLAVE SOBRE LOS INVESTIGADORES Y ESTE ESTUDIO

Título del estudio: Las semillas y la industria contemporánea de café en el archipiélago de Puerto Rico.

Investigador principal: Fime de la Fuente, Candidato a Maestría, School for Environment and Sustainability, Universidad de Michigan. Estudiante Interno en IALA-PR, colaborador en el estudio.

Consejero de la facultad: Ivette Perfecto, profesora colegiada James E. Crowfoot de Justicia Ambiental, School for Environment and Sustainability, la Universidad de Michigan. Forma parte de la Junta Directiva de IALA-PR.

Está invitado a participar en un estudio de investigación. Este formulario contiene información que le ayudará a decidir si participar o no en el estudio.

La participación en esta investigación es **voluntaria**. No tiene que participar y puede parar en cualquier momento. Tómese el tiempo para leer este formulario completo y hacer preguntas antes de decidir si desea participar en este proyecto de investigación.

Información clave: El propósito de este estudio es entender el contexto actual de las semillas y variedades de café en el archipiélago de la isla: su uso y los beneficios de las distintas variedades, así como la cadena de suministro; así como la industria del café. Si elige participar, se le pedirá que programe una entrevista en la que se le harán preguntas sobre lo mismo. Esta entrevista será grabada y tomará aproximadamente 1 hora. Puede elegir si realizar la entrevista en su finca (para su conveniencia) o en el lugar de su preferencia. No hay riesgos anticipados de esta investigación. Si siente alguna incomodidad con alguna de las preguntas, podemos omitirlas o detener la entrevista en cualquier momento. Los beneficios indirectos incluyen aportar conocimiento que ayudará a reducir las barreras a los recursos para los agricultores de Puerto Rico.

2. PROPÓSITO DE ESTE ESTUDIO

Estoy realizando este estudio para completar mi tesis de maestría para obtener mi título en Justicia Ambiental en la Universidad de Michigan.

3. INFORMACIÓN SOBRE LA PARTICIPACIÓN EN EL ESTUDIO

¿Qué me sucederá en este estudio?

Si acepta participar, yo programaré una entrevista en persona y, si es necesario, le pediré permiso para hacer un seguimiento de las preguntas que se me ocurran después de la entrevista. Todas las preguntas son opcionales. Esta entrevista será una conversación entre usted(es) y yo, la entrevistadora, y toda la información se anonimizará para su privacidad. Guardaré todos los datos del estudio en unidades encriptadas y protegidas con contraseña bajo un código específico para su entrevista, de modo que su identidad no se asocie con ninguna de sus respuestas. La hoja de códigos se almacenará en un documento separado en una ubicación separada.

Después de la entrevista, transcribiré la grabación. **No lo incluiré sin tu consentimiento.** También puede modificar o eliminar partes de la entrevista. Si no está de acuerdo con mi interpretación, podría pedirle que programe una entrevista de seguimiento o que modifique mi interpretación para que coincida con sus comentarios. No soy dueño de la grabación, es nuestra igualmente.

4. FINALIZAR EL ESTUDIO

Si quiero dejar de participar en el estudio, ¿qué debo hacer?

Usted es libre de abandonar el estudio en cualquier momento. Si decide abandonar el estudio antes de que finalice, comuníquese conmigo a través de mi información de contacto en la Sección 5.

¿Qué sucederá con los resultados de esta investigación?

Los resultados de este estudio podrían publicarse en un artículo o presentación, pero no incluirán ninguna información que les permita a otros saber quién es usted.

5. INFORMACIÓN DEL CONTACTO

Investigador principal: Jimena de la Fuente (Fime)

Correo electrónico: fime@umich.edu

Teléfono: +1 (734) 277-3229

Consejero de la facultad: Ivette Perfecto

Correo electrónico: perfecto@umich.edu

6. SU CONSENTIMIENTO

Consentimiento/asentimiento para participar en el estudio de investigación

Al darme su consentimiento verbal, usted acepta participar en este estudio. Asegúrese de entender de qué se trata el estudio. Le daré una copia de este documento para sus registros y guardaré una copia con los registros del estudio.

He escuchado y comprendido la información presentada sobre el estudio, y doy libremente mi consentimiento para participar en esta investigación.

¿Tiene alguna pregunta antes de empezar?

¿Le parece bien continuar con la entrevista?

Consentimiento verbal dado: ____ Sí ____ No

Firma del entrevistador que obtiene el consentimiento verbal

Fecha

Appendix 3: Photoetnography

A booklet will be published in the incoming months and can be found here:
<https://archive.org/details/pr-cafe>