Text by Jonathan Morris and Peter D'Sena
Images by Linda Merad

Decolonizing the History of Coffee

The history of coffee is not only of interest to us aficionados; it also constitutes a way to approach broader discussions about 'decolonization' that have achieved prominence in the media over the last few years. Jonathan Morris, the author of *Coffee: A Global History* and co-producer of the *A History of Coffee* podcast series, recently collaborated with fellow historian Peter D'Sena—a leading advocate of the decolonization of education systems—in a bonus episode in the series exploring concepts such as colonialism and coloniality in the context of coffee's past, and their significance to the industry today.

Standart has invited Jonathan and Peter to develop their ideas further in this space to consider how not just coffee's history but the entire industry might be decolonized.

The high profile that the #BlackLivesMatter movement has commanded in the aftermath of the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in the US has finally forced some uncomfortable conversations about race into the open. People across the world made clear their widespread anger at the fact that the daily experiences of Black and minority communities remain defined by injustice and prejudice—attitudes that permeate public institutions and private industries, and not just in the police or the United States. Closer to home, despite its self-image as a repository of liberal values, the specialty coffee movement took a significant knock recently when prominent industry figures were called out on social media for inappropriate language and behaviours.

Universities have featured prominently in these transnational movements. The 2015 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign was originally focused on the presence of a statue of the enthusiastic imperialist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, where students protested against the ongoing memorialization of a man and a system whose legacy continues to discriminate against them, despite the overthrow of the *apartheid* regime. Fuelled by social media, particularly Twitter, #RhodesMustFall soon turned its attention to other memorials and questionable institutional practices including at Harvard and Oxford, Rhodes' *alma mater*, where there is a statue of him at Oriel College, Rhodes having donated money for a building there. Campaigns for the 'decolonization' of universities quickly extended into their admissions systems, curricula, campuses, finances, and the very names of the institutions as contemporary

concerns about institutional racism, societal inequalities, and how to deal with the heritage of the past led to calls for the decolonization of public institutions, private corporations, and cultural organizations.

It's worth stepping back here to ask ourselves: Why has all of this been framed in terms of colonization, when nearly all of the world's colonies were already independent states by the middle of the twentieth century? The answer is that colonization implies far more than the seizure or settlement of new territory by a state; it extends to the occupation, exploitation, and expropriation of a variety of resources—the bodies, land, and even the minds of the colonized. The effects of colonization still reverberate across the contemporary world because it was accompanied by ideologies of justification that frequently rested on notions of racial distinction, and the suppression—and in some cases, eradication—of indigenous values, knowledge systems, languages, and cultures.

In a word, the legacies of colonization are alive and well today in the form of *coloniality*—the ways in which the economic, social, and above all cultural structures established under colonial rule continue to shape the fortunes of the colonized even after so-called 'flag independence' has been achieved—and it is this persistence of coloniality that explains the continued need for decolonization. The keystone of decolonizing is the process of allowing the voices of those affected by colonization to be heard, understood, and appreciated, with a view to identifying and supporting subsequent actions to achieve equity and justice.

So: What has all this got to do with coffee?

Coffee and slavery

On 1 January 1738, the *Leusden*—a ship belonging to the Dutch West India Company—began taking on water in the mouth of the Maroni River off present-day Suriname. The captain assembled his crew on the deck and ordered them to nail down the hatches in order to prevent the hold from being flooded, thereby gaining time for the crew to escape successfully, which they all did. Their cargo went down with the ship—around 680 captive African men, women, and children were condemned to death. Only 16 Africans survived, having been bought up onto the deck to assist the crew with sealing in the rest of the captives. Ten days after they landed in Suriname, the 16 Africans were sold into slavery at public auction, most probably to work on the colony's many coffee plantations.

The sinking of the *Leusden* is the largest single massacre recorded during the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, around 12 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic to become enslaved workers on plantations established by European settlers in the Americas (North and South America and the Caribbean). Most were captured as prisoners of war in conflicts between different African populations, and then acquired by African slave traders who force-marched them in chains up to several hundred miles to ports such as Elmina in modern-day Ghana, from which the *Leusden* departed.

Ships at the time took around six weeks to cross the Atlantic, and during the voyage, the captives would be held for the

vast majority of time below deck in holds equipped with berths of around 170 x 27 x 69 centimetres (67 x 10.5 x 27 inches) per person—meaning they could not stand, but were forced to spend the voyage in a lying or seated position, with little to no room to move. They were usually secured in pairs with ankle chains, and although there were large barrels for use as toilets in the centre of the hold, they likely performed most of their bodily functions in their berths. They were occasionally brought up to the deck under supervision for exercise or feeding. The area on deck that was used for this was secured within iron bulwarks that separated the ship into various sections, overlooked by mounted swivel guns, and netted to prevent the captives from jumping overboard (many would seek to commit suicide in this way). Women and children (usually a third of the captives) were held separately. They were not usually shackled but, like the men, had been stripped naked upon embarkation, and were frequently subjected to sexual violence by the crew, who often referred to their quarters as the 'whore-hold'.

The Dutch colony of Suriname was established in 1667 as a result of the Treaty of Breda, when the Netherlands gained the area from England, ceding in return New Amsterdam, which would go on to be renamed New York. With hindsight it seems an unfair swap, but at this time territories in the Caribbean were considered far more lucrative than those in New England. Sugar cane plantations were established in which the Dutch imitated the methods introduced
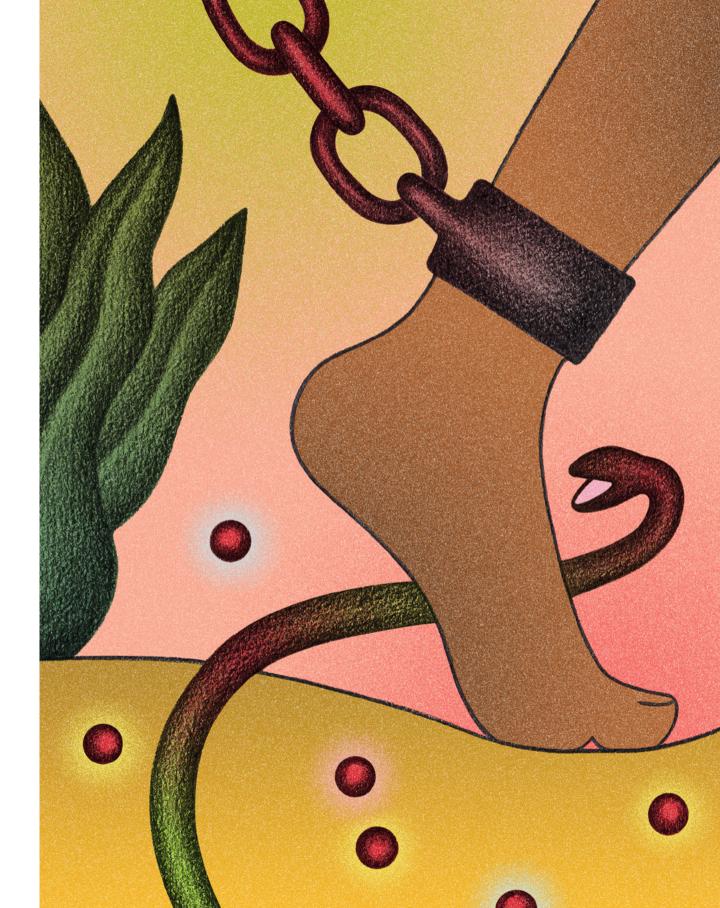
by Portuguese settlers in Brazil, notably the use of enslaved labour. These extended along the courses of the major navigable rivers, while the interior remained largely untouched, occupied by indigenous peoples. Coffee was first planted in Suriname in around 1712 and by the middle of the eighteenth century, it had become the colony's principal export. By 1745, there were around 140 coffee plantations in operation, which would rise to 295 by 1770. During the 1760s, Suriname was the source of almost half of the coffee available on the European market.

Suriname's coffee plantations each employed an average of 90 enslaved people. The word 'employed' here is, of course, somewhat of a misnomer. The enslaved workers were certainly kept fully occupied with agricultural tasks, but all they received in return was a meagre ration of foodstuffs and a minimum of clothing; as late as the 1850s, the normal weekly food ration for a slave was two bunches of bananas and about 1 kg of dried fish per week, which they were allowed to augment with produce from allotments and poultry that they tended in gardens behind the wooden barracks in which they were housed. There were no shoes included in the clothing ration, despite the fact that many of the illnesses and accidents that occurred were due to unshod feet coming into contact with snakes, insects, or plants in the field; shoes were strictly the preserve of free people. Plantation households were run on strictly racial lines, with the slave master's domestic servants deliberately drawn from among those enslaved peoples with lighter complexions.

In 1752, Suriname had a population of 37,835 enslaved persons and just 2,062 free ones, with ratios of one white person to 45

slaves being common on the plantations. The Dutch, like plantation owners throughout the Americas in this era, believed that the only way to 'maintain order' in such circumstances was through fear and terror. It was imperative that the enslaved believe that no alternative existence was possible, and any acts of disobedience would be severely punished. Whipping was commonplace, notably for those considered to be shirking or who had failed to observe the servility required towards their supposed superiors. The overseers entrusted with discipline were the lowest-status, poorest-paid members of white society, who used this power to take out their own frustrations on those who ranked below them.

The biggest threat to Suriname's settler society was perceived to be *maroonage*—the possibility of slaves running away and then organizing themselves into independent bands within the sparsely populated and uncharted interior. If escape was held to be possible, then the premise that there was no hope for the enslaved would collapse. Considerable resources were mobilized in hunts for escaped slaves led by Suriname's army garrison, and brutal punishments were meted out to recaptured individuals. Escapees were frequently sentenced to decapitation, and those also found to have incited rebellion (often on flimsy pretexts) were often subjected to horrific additional cruelties, such as having all the bones of their body broken prior to beheading or garrotting. Despite this system of terror, substantial *maroon* communities were established in Suriname, whose geography made it somewhat easier for enslaved peoples to evade capture and survive, in comparison to the Caribbean islands.

Race

The experiences of enslaved people in Suriname were replicated on coffee plantations across the Caribbean and most of the Americas, whether in French colonies such as Martinique and Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), Spanish ones in Cuba and San Domingo (now the Dominican Republic), and the British West Indies, notably Jamaica. Brazil's declaration of independence from Portugal in 1822 did not result in any change in the position of enslaved persons, who continued to be employed on coffee plantations in the Paraiba Valley right up to the final act of abolition in 1888.

The plantation economy institutionalized notions of racial superiority in legal codes. These both addressed the acts that the enslaved—usually described or defined as 'black'—were not allowed to commit and sanctioned the use of private violence against them by their white owners and overseers. Codes stipulated the kinds of punishment that were permissible, and although they imposed some obligations regarding the treatment of slaves upon slave owners, they effectively removed any legal recourse available to the enslaved to protect themselves through the courts. This led to some convoluted legal positions. The French *Code Noir*—the corpus of legislation governing slaveholding in the French Empire, which began with a decree in 1685—simultaneously defined a slave as an item of property, the equivalent of a tradable fixed asset, and endowed them with legal personality with regard to offences committed against the code. It permitted owners to perpetrate acts of violence against their slaves, including specified mutilations for running away, yet made it a capital crime for enslaved people to physically strike their owners. Sexual politics were similarly inequitable: The *Code Noir* required that the mixed-race offspring of unions between male plantation owners and female slaves be recognized by their fathers and granted citizenship, whereas it was a crime for a male slave to engage in sexual relations with a white woman, punishable by death.

The complexity of racial politics within coffee-producing colonies is well illustrated by the position of mixed-race persons, usually referred to as 'mulattoes' or *gens de couleur*. Their lighter skin tone marked them out within the communities, and their citizenship meant that they too could acquire property, including their own slaves. Many acquired coffee farms, most notably in Saint-Domingue, which usurped Suriname's position as the leading source of European coffee in the 1770s. While whites continued to dominate the large-scale sugar plantations established in the coastal regions of Saint-Domingue, ownership of the smaller coffee farms that sprang up in the higher lands of the interior was more mixed. Inspired by the enlightened ideas of the French Revolution, *gens de couleur* and former slaves joined a rebellion to overthrow the colonial authorities, led by Toussaint Louverture, a freed man who had once leased a 16-acre coffee farm along with 13 slaves, but who in 1801 declared the complete abolition of slavery.

This proved unacceptable to Napoleon, who by now was in charge in France and whose racist convictions made it impossible for him to accept the notion of Black self-governance. He despatched a force to the island to seize Louverture, resulting in a war that culminated in Haiti's independence in 1804. However, Haiti was never able to reclaim its dominant position in the world coffee trade, partly because much of the infrastructure was destroyed during the conflict, but also as a result of the antipathy among coffee importers towards the prospect of trading with a Black republic, even those operating in countries opposed to Napoleon.

The legacies of colonial racism extended well beyond the eventual abolition of slavery. Within post-slavery settler societies, ruling elites continued to define themselves by skin colour and to bolster their positions through racialized policies and practices. In Brazil, for example, where a massive expansion of the coffee industry took place immediately following the abolition of slavery, state-sponsored schemes encouraged European and later Japanese immigration in order to lighten the skin tone of the agricultural workforce, further marginalizing the descendants of the enslaved Africans in society. Culture reinforced these distinctions, developing highly racialized notions of beauty that in turn encouraged the development of products such as skin-tone lighteners.
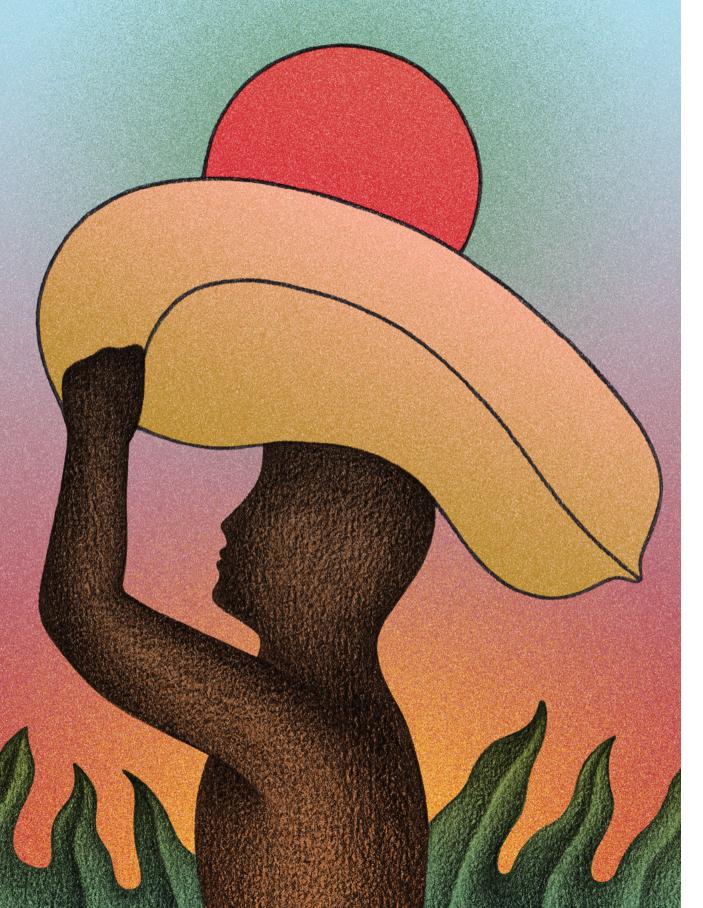
Epistemicide

Inspired by the success of Brazil, other Latin American settler states began to increase their coffee production during the nineteenth century, resulting in the emergence of new forms of exploitation centred on the appropriation of land and the coercion of labour. The extension of the so-called coffee frontier was achieved by bringing uncultivated land into production—land that had often previously been used by indigenous peoples to support themselves through a combination of pasturing, hunting, and foraging. In effect, it was common land that was open to all, but authorized by their governments, settlers were encouraged to enclose the land and turn it into their private property, excluding its indigenous users.

In the Chiapas region of Mexico, for example, the so-called Law of Colonization of 1883 parcelled up tracts of public land and turned them into private property for sale to individual settlers of predominantly European or North American extraction. These then needed to obtain labour for their estates, so despatched contractors up into the highlands to recruit indigenous workers on the basis of offering advance payments of part of their salaries, and their food and travel costs on the way to the farm. Once they got there, however, they were forced to pay these debts off through work, meaning that they had effectively become indentured labourers tied to the farms. Such injustices were a common practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Guatemala,

coffee farmers colluded with local governors to require indigenous communities to supply them with seasonal labour, and in El Salvador, the state used vagrancy laws to force indigenous peoples off their lands and turn them into a labour force on coffee plantations. On one occasion, James Hill, an English estate owner, destroyed the fruit trees surrounding his land in order to ensure that the force of hunger would compel indigenous inhabitants to work as pickers in order to obtain the meals that were provided to them at the beginning and end of the day.

These measures and their outcomes are best captured in the notion of 'epistemicide'—the (usually deliberately brought about) extinction of indigenous beliefs, practices, values, and, ultimately, identities. Think about the alien practices and structures that were forced upon indigenous communities such as the imposition of the notion of private property and the destruction of alternative notions of collective trusteeship of the land, the measurement and divisions of calendar time, and the ways that these were related to concepts such as 'work', which might be understood very differently in indigenous societies. On top of this should be factored in the undermining of languages and religions, with their subordination to the state-sanctioned status enjoyed by those of settler society, and perhaps most importantly, the codification of all of this in a European-style legal system, itself an alien concept among enslaved and indigenous peoples, and one which rendered continued adherence to alternative values a threat to the new order that needed to be overcome.

Enslaved peoples and their heirs were also victims of epistemicide. They had come from many different African peoples, held many different beliefs, and spoke many different languages, yet were treated as a single, undifferentiated social group that was classified within a society solely by colour. They were required to speak in their owners' language, observe the practices of the settlers' religion, and to take on new names. Even the oppositional countercultures that developed among the enslaved peoples had to take their diversity into account, hence the creation of an amalgam of religious beliefs and practices from different origins that came to be derided as 'voodoo'.

Coloniality

The consequences of the colonial and settler patterns of exploitation embodied in the conduct of the coffee trade over the centuries still exercise considerable influence over the structures and nature of the industry today. These legacies can be considered expressions of the coloniality exercised by coffee's history, which we can divide into four main components.

a) Trading structures. It is worth remembering that colonization reversed the original value chain structures within the coffee trade. Up until the 1700s, the global coffee trade was entirely controlled by Muslim

merchants operating under the political aegis of the Ottoman Empire, centred on the port of Mocha in present-day Yemen. The overall value generated by the coffee trade was largely retained within these regions, and while this did not necessarily result in high prices being paid to Yemeni farmers or Ethiopian foragers, it was certainly in their economic interests to produce coffee.

Subsequently, these dynamics were reversed. The bulk of the value generated by coffee was retained in Europe, while producers (those who actually cultivated and processed the coffee, as opposed to settler landowners) received little to no reward for their labour. Few would argue that in terms of the big picture, a similar distribution of value between the Global North and South remains the case within the coffee trade today. By the time of their 'flag independence', many coffee-producing states such as the Ivory Coast or Uganda, for example, were so locked into this system that they felt they had little option but to expand their coffee exports to generate foreign revenue, while holding down the prices they paid to their own producers.

b) Racial divisions. The long-term economic and cultural damage deriving from the capture, relocation, and enslavement of peoples on the coffee plantations of the Caribbean and Latin America hardly need stating. Coffee was far from the only commodity produced under this system, but this does not make it any less implicated. In the nineteenth century, the British organized the large-scale import of indentured labourers from Tamil Nadu in India to work on the coffee plantations they established in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), while in the early twentieth century, the Belgians employed pseudo-scientific notions about

race to justify installing Tutsis in positions of authority over Hutus in coffee production in Rwanda and Burundi. These racial policies laid the foundations for post-independence ethnic conflicts that continue to haunt these countries today.

c) Political instability. Many of the political conflicts in Latin America that have at times exploded into violence can be traced back to the ways in which the expansion of the coffee frontier came into conflict with the lives of indigenous peoples. The late-twentieth-century civil wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador often saw the settler descendants of farm proprietors and their indigenous workers urged to take positions on opposite sides of the divisions by the combatants, with violence inflicted upon both. The 1932 Matanza massacre of some 30,000 coffee farm labourers in El Salvador, the vast majority of them members of the indigenous Pipil community, following the killing of 100 or so settlers by communist rebels is perhaps the most tragic example of this. Since the 1990s, the Mexican state of Chiapas has been the site of an at-times violent rebellion against the central authorities led by the Zapatista movement, which generates its support and some of its finances through coffee-growing cooperatives established among the indigenous Mayan population.

d) Consumer culture. Coffee growing first spread around the world in order to meet the demand of consumers in Europe and North America. The value of the beans was realized through export, so the producers themselves rarely got to sample the final beverage; the only producer origins with long-standing consumer cultures are Ethiopia and Yemen. The economic dependency that developed under colonialism meant that some

independent states even banned the roasting of their own green coffee in situ, insisting it should all be sent for export. Ironically, much of the coffee that is currently consumed in producer countries takes the form of soluble products manufactured externally by corporate giants from the Global North such as Nestlé.

Decolonization

Current debates about decolonization are less a response to a sudden awareness of these issues than a weariness that they have not been addressed sooner. How can it be that so long after the civil rights movements in the US and anti-apartheid struggles that produced such globally renowned figures as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, we are still at a point where the killing of George Floyd seemed like nothing so much as a reprise of the 1991 police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles?

In part, it is frustration at the lack of underlying change that has driven the demand for decolonization, yet it is striking that it is now being articulated by a far broader constituency of protesters from around the world who see themselves as allies engaged in a global struggle against intolerance, and couched in language that suggests the need for a more confrontational approach than in the past. This has been manifested in the direct attacks on symbolic targets such as statues and the use of social media to call out unwelcome behaviours, as we have seen in the specialty coffee community.

Decolonization, however, is primarily a rallying call for equitable change, rather than a single set of prescriptions for action; it is about ensuring that the voices of those who have been affected by colonization are heard

and addressed. Outcomes and processes will vary, according to the nature of the field under discussion.

So how might the coffee community take these issues forward? We have identified three directions that have emerged within the debates on decolonization and present them here as points of departure for discussions about achieving justice across the industry, putting front and centre those whose voices have all too often been ignored.

a) Acknowledgment and apology. Although the history of coffee and its connections to slavery, colonialism, and coloniality is hardly unknown, there is a surprising reluctance to acknowledge it, let alone apologize for it. It often seems that successor enterprises to institutions that were first developed during the colonial era or built upon the legacy of its outcomes wish to avoid the admission of these inconvenient truths, even while promoting their present-day commitments to sustainability and ethical trading. This perpetuates the sense that the suffering that has shaped the sector remains unvalued and unseen.

b) Retribution, reparation, and redistribution. The need for these is self-evident when perpetrators and victims can easily be identified, but they are far more difficult to achieve after lengthy periods

of time and changes of circumstances. There is only one coffee plantation left in Suriname, for example, although debates are ongoing about the Dutch state's moral obligations to its former colony. The coffee industry's focus should be on how to address the structural biases entrenched within the current value chain. Initiatives such as certification and fair- and direct-trading systems are all very well, but the real questions here are more fundamental. For example, given improvements in techniques of the preservation and transportation of manufactured and roasted coffee products, including specialty ones, are there really still reasons for not attempting to add this value in at source?

c) Integrative pluralism. Despite its African and Arabian origins, for most of its history coffee has been overwhelmingly a beverage consumed by white, Western-orientated consumers. This remains particularly true for the specialty sector because much of the market in non-traditional destinations is for precisely those kinds of coffee products that specialty eschews. While the competitors at barista championships may have become more diverse and employee policies more liberal, specialty coffee's consumer base has remained far more homogenous. Part of the success of the contemporary café lies in its attraction for groups of people who have been excluded from traditional hospitality venues such as women, teetotallers, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. These environments continue to remain overwhelmingly white, however—something that is off-putting in itself, but also indicative of the intersection between race and class, given that coffee shops tend to attract a clientele with larger disposable incomes. A commitment to openness in the abstract is not enough; there is a need for a form of integrative plurality that respects and accommodates differences in taste and dispositions across communities.

Further reading

1. Leo Balai, *Slave ship Leusden: A story of mutiny, shipwreck and murder*, 2014.

2. Pepijn Brandon, 'Between the plantation and the port: Racialization and social control in eighteenth-century Paramaribo', *International Review of Social History,* vol. 64, no. S27, 2019, pp. 95–124.

3. Tamira Combrink, 'Slave-based coffee in the eighteenth century and the role of the Dutch in global commodity chains', *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2021, pp. 15–42.

4. Philippe Girard, *Toussaint Louverture: A revolutionary* life, 2016.

5. Jonathan Morris, *Coffee: A Global History*, 2019.

6. Augustine Sedgewick, *Coffeeland,* 2020.