

Your Mirada. Gracias. Siempre

Afro-Asia, Intimacies, and Women-of-Color Feminisms

Catherine R. Peters

On December 20, 2019, I logged on to Twitter to join the online celebration of Lorgia García-Peña's scholarly and activist work, threaded through the hashtag #LorgiaFest. I witnessed the ways in which my teacher's first book had become foundational for scholars working in the fields of Dominican studies, Afro-Latinx studies, Black studies, Latinx studies, and women-of-color feminisms, among others. Noting that Lorgia had more students than I had ever imagined, I was drawn to a set of posts by the writer and performance artist Josefina Báez under the handle @ayOmbe. Báez had written, "#lorgiafest I must express my joy, honor and gratefulness to Prof. Garcia-Peña [for her] dialogue with my work. Her take on it, extend its meaning (s) and intertwines it with every possibility. In the process, I learn heaps about it. Co-creating communal thought." She continued, "It has taken precious time of our lives, to co-create this life (dialogue/works). I was not a subject dropped after a thesis. And that my friends is quite rare! Lorgia Garcia-Peña your mirada is done from that acute alertness called justice/humanity/joy/chercha.Gracias.Siempre."¹ In characterizing the vitality and longevity of her relationship with Lorgia, Báez highlights their co-production of life, dialogue, and work. Similarly, Lorgia has written that her early encounters with Báez's art became "the seed" that grew into her first book.²

Lorgia's first publication in an academic journal centers Josefina Báez's performance text *Dominicanish*. Her first book, *The Borders of Dominicanidad*, also thinks with Báez's corpus and, in particular, El Nié, a queer embodied in-between site that revises Gloria Anzaldúa's "thin edge of barbed wire."³ In this essay, I consider another space that Lorgia and Báez's braided work has co-created, specifically for connections between Asia and Africa in the Americas.⁴ In *Dominicanish*, Báez forges a new idiom constituted through a multiplicity of cultural elements: accents and wordplay in Spanish and English, Dominican history, African American culture, and everyday migrant experience. She

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also incorporates kuchipudi, a form of classical Indian dance that originated in Andhra Pradesh; teachings from the classical Hindu text *Panchatantra*; and aphorisms by the guru Adi Shankara.⁵ Although most scholarship on *Dominicanish* notes that Báez’s cultural and linguistic code-switching serves to defamiliarize the audience from the presumed linearity of Dominican migration, Lorgia’s work also analyzes the possible functions of an encounter staged between South Asia and the Caribbean via New York City.⁶ In “Performing Identity, Language, and Resistance,” Lorgia writes that Báez’s performance of kuchipudi refuses the appropriation of “Indianness” deployed by European empires in order to justify their claims to the Americas.⁷ This use of Indigeneity later became foundational to discourses of *mestizaje*, or racial hybridity, seeking to expunge the possibility of African and Asian roots for communities across Latin America and the Caribbean.⁸

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, around half a million South Asian and Chinese migrants arrived in the colonial Caribbean.⁹ Most historiography suggests that these individuals were conscripted to replace or substitute for Afro-descended subjects, who also faced legal, environmental, and physical violence upon *de jure* emancipation.¹⁰ However, this imperial project was not strictly a labor solution motivated by metropolitan abolitionism. Instead, the British, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Danish empires sought to conscript a new class of laborers who might also somehow contain the threat of Black revolution. Accordingly, imperial records suggest that they established new hierarchies of unfreedom by attempting to comparatively racialize people located on a shared landscape. That the history of conscripted Asian migration to the Americas is intimately intertwined with movements in Black sovereignty is particularly evident in an early endeavor to transport 198 Chinese men to Trinidad in 1806. When the United Kingdom gained control of Trinidad in 1797, French free people of color, many of whom were landowners, constituted the majority of free individuals on the island. Therefore, imperial actors sought to minimize their influence and protect white British investment by imagining that another population might mitigate tensions between the colony’s white elite and populations of color. As a result, imperial administrators assumed that Chinese migrants would be a model of agricultural efficiency, discipline, and family formation: their loyalty and labor were supposed to safeguard Trinidad’s productivity in spite of ongoing Black insurrection in the region.¹¹

In my forthcoming dissertation, provisionally titled “A Free Race of Cultivators,” I examine the multifaceted imperial project usually collapsed in the notion of replacement. Although the term would appear to indicate succession, I argue that it has been historically structured through intimacies between Asian migrants and Afro-diasporic people. Consequently, I consider replacement an anti-migrant, anti-Black imperial regime that exposed both groups to differential violences while insisting on their divergence, separation, and even antago-

nism. My archival research embraces Lisa Lowe's proposal that intimacies might serve as a heuristic, or method, for tracing "relation across differences" or "the convergence of asymmetries" through imperial and capitalist processes.¹² This approach resonates with women-of-color feminisms in their attention to intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in order to build coalition across historical and material difference.¹³ For example, in *Pedagogies of Crossing*, M. Jacqui Alexander expresses the challenge of becoming educated toward solidarity:

In order to *become* women of color, we would need to become fluent in each others' histories, to resist and unlearn an impulse to claim first oppression, most-devastating oppression, one-of-a-kind oppression, defying-comparison oppression. We would have to unlearn an impulse that allows mythologies about each other to replace *knowing* about one another. We would need to cultivate a way of knowing in which we direct our social, cultural, psychic, and spiritually marked attention on each other. We cannot afford to cease yearning for each others' company.¹⁴

In this passage, Alexander characterizes women-of-color feminisms by their extension of a particular kind of care. This consideration is rooted in learning those histories that are not one's own, and it is motivated by desire for companionship. It is the kind of attentiveness that Báez describes in her tweets honoring Lorgia's "mirada," which, she writes, "is done from that acute alertness called justice/humanity/joy/chercha." Moreover, in accord with Alexander's challenge for women of color to "become fluent in each others' histories," Báez and Lorgia have created a dialogue that engages diasporic subjects who have historically been positioned in antagonism. Through such chosen ties, diasporic subjects of Asia and Africa actively reject the imperial and capitalist actors that have sought to divide and separate them.¹⁵

In her understudied collection *As Is É*, Báez features two poems that narrate the convergence of two migrant families, one Dominican and one South Asian, in the waiting room of a Harlem Department of Motor Vehicles. The first poem, written primarily in Spanish, is called "Ana y Anand," and the other, written mostly in English, is called "Ana and Anand." Both poems tell the story of a girl called Ana and a boy called Anand, who are depicted with parallel lives. Both children are seven years old and have related names. Their mothers share similar names and concerns. While both families wait to be recognized by the state, Ana and Anand devise other plans. Although Ana speaks Spanish and Anand speaks Telegu, their mother tongues do not matter as they begin to play. Together, they pretend to be airplanes soaring through a sky of many colors. At the end of both poems, the reader comes to understand that Ana and Anand

have accompanied their parents in order to serve as interpreters, a responsibility that seems incongruous with their games of pretend flight. Báez's emphasis on these children might suggest a kind of innocence lost between South Asia and the Caribbean, the so-called East and West Indies. Nevertheless, she positions both poems in the past tense, which would seem to indicate that they convey actual, particularized events rather than being strictly parables.

In the Spanish version, the poetic voice sets the scene by highlighting the sound of many languages and locating herself among other people of color in the waiting room. She writes, "Y somos todos de / colores. De variados colores, como los / pajaritos que vienen de afuera."¹⁶ Directing the reader's attention to the many colors of humans and birds, Báez implies resonance between the earth and the sky. In particular, she shows that the sky fosters the children's collaborative imagination as they share with each other their respective words for red, yellow, green, and blue. Just like birds of many colors, Ana and Anand spread their arms, becoming literal intersections upon the horizons they envision.¹⁷ Finally, as the children are summoned to perform the duties of family interpreter, they demonstrate that, through exuberant exchange, they have actually learned how to say the colors in each other's languages: "Anand en ese momento dijo los / colores en español. / Ana en Telegú."¹⁸ Ana and Anand's easy mutual understanding throughout the poem, particularly when juxtaposed with government bureaucracy, draws a distinction between two forms of communication: interpretation is what occurs with bureaucrats, while translation, on the other hand, is forged through friendship.

In the Spanish version, Báez constructs the families' stories in parallel, making clear formally what she means semantically. For example, she writes:

*Los padres de Anand eran de
Hyderabad.
Los padres de Ana eran de Higüey.*¹⁹

In the English version, however, she presents this passage as a chiasmus, which formally establishes an intersection like the crosses that Ana and Anand enact with their bodies as they pretend to fly:

*Anand's parents are from Hyderabad,
AP, India.
Ana's parents are from Higüey, PA,
Dominican Republic.*²⁰

Subsequently, the poetic voice makes an explicit appearance as she passes in front of the two families and experiences racialized criticism by both sets of parents, who consider her dreadlocks "dirty" and "ugly."²¹ In situating an embodied

avatar of herself in the waiting room, Báez suggests that both Dominican and South Asian migrants must contend with anti-Black racism upon arriving in the United States. To counter their commentary, by which the migrant parents attempt to distance themselves from Blackness, Báez presents herself as already entwined with their respective points of origin: “In their wildest dreams, / they could not imagine that I have just / returned from Hyderabad. And that / before the journey, I went to Higüey.”²² Through this passage, which is unique to the English version, Báez implies that the intimacies constituted through one migrant’s experience might not be legible to other migrants. She also indicates that anti-Blackness may be a problem that prevents migrant communities from finding common ground.

When I stepped into Lorgia’s classroom during my second year of graduate school, I had not yet studied her scholarly work. I did not know about Freedom University or her journey to Harvard. I simply thought that she was teaching the most interesting course I had taken in my doctoral studies and that I would be lucky if I could continue to learn from her. I began studying for qualifying exams in 2017 as the United States grappled with the executive branch’s violent designs for the ensuing four years. One year after we first met, Lorgia attended my qualifying exam wearing a Defend DACA shirt. Afterward, we marched to join a campus protest. I am a white student from the geographies that helped to elect President Trump, and I have not known how to navigate the shame I have felt regarding my complicity in his election. Yet, as I departed for archival research abroad, I began to develop my dissertation as though directed to Lorgia. I carried her first book with me, and, while traveling, I wondered how I could have shown her more support during those first few years of graduate school. During our time at the university together, she was the first professor who took me to lunch and the first to lend me books from her personal library. I only later came to understand the excessive labor that had fallen onto her shoulders as a Black Latina on the tenure track at Harvard. Yet, in spite of the distance between her histories and my own, I carry M. Jacqui Alexander’s words: “We cannot afford to cease yearning for each others’ company.” Naming this desire to stay connected to my teacher also conditions my responsibility to co-create a present and future in which she can continue to write, breathe, play, and educate. I cannot wait to see what she will make and do next.

NOTES

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1. Josefina Baez, Twitter post, December 20, 2019, 3:58 p.m., <https://twitter.com/ayOmbe/status/1208144588227121152>.

2. Lorgia García-Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), xi.

3. *Ibid.*, 173; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 13.

4. There is a vast literature, especially in the form of edited collections, that explores Afro-Asian connections in the Americas. This scholarship has been spurred by midcentury decolonization and the 1955 Bandung Conference. See, for example, Luisa Marcela Ossa and Debbie Lee-DiStefano, *Afro-Asian Connections in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019); Pamila Gupta, Christopher J. Lee, Marissa J. Moorman, and Sandhya Shukla, “The Global South: History, Politics, Maps,” *Radical History Review* 131, no. 2 (2018): 1–218. In spite of robust historiographies on individual groups, Lisa Lowe argues, contemporary scholars still know relatively little about the entangled lives of colonized people. See Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 1.

5. I draw from a 2005 version of *Dominicanish*, published by Alexander Street Press. Josefina Báez has continuously revised the performance text, both before and after its publication in 2000 by Ay Ombe Press.

6. See, for example, Liamar Durán Almarza, “‘At Home at the Border’: Performing the Transcultural Body in Josefina Báez’s *Dominicanish*,” in *Transnationalism and Resistance: Experience and Experiment in Women’s Writing*, ed. Stephanie Young and Adele Parker (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 45–68; Emilia María Durán-Almarza, “*Ciguapas* in New York: Transcultural Ethnicity and Transracialization in Dominican American Performance,” *Journal of American Studies* 46, no. 1 (2012): 139–153; Emilia María Durán-Almarza, “Chewing English and Spitting Spanish: Josefina Báez Homing Dominican New York,” *Camino Real: Estudios de las Hispanidades Norteamericanas* 3, no. 4 (2011): 73–94; Emilia María Durán-Almarza, *Performerías del Dominicanyork: Josefina Báez y Chiqui Vicioso* (Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2010); Camilla Stevens, “‘Home Is Where Theatre Is’: Performing Dominican Transnationalism,” *Latin American Theatre Review* 44, no. 1 (2010): 29–48; Douglas Hundley, “Travelling the Guagua Aérea: The Transnational Journeys of Dominicanyork Performance,” *Performance Research: On the Road* 12, no. 2 (2007): 102–13; Roberto Irizarry, “Traveling Light: Performance, Autobiography, and Immigration in Josefina Báez’s *Dominicanish*,” *Gestos* 21, no. 42 (2006): 81–96; Ramón Rivera-Servera, “A Dominican York in Andhra,” in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity*, ed. Susanna Sloat (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 153–161.

7. Lorgia García-Peña, “Performing Identity, Language, and Resistance: A Study of Josefina Báez’s *Dominicanish*,” *Wadabagei: A Journal of the Caribbean and Its Diaspora* 11, no. 3 (2008): 28–47.

8. García-Peña advances related arguments in “Being Black Ain’t So Bad . . . Dominican Immigrant Women Negotiating Race in Contemporary Italy,” *Caribbean Studies* 41, no. 2 (2013): 137–161. For engagement between diasporic Blackness and Indigeneity, see especially Shona Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Shayna Cordis, “Forging Relational Difference: Racial Gendered Violence and Dispossession in Guyana,” *Small Axe* 23, no. 3 (2019): 18–33; Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

9. Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838–1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Silvio Torres-Saillant, *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Kathleen López, *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013). I would also argue that Asian migration to the Americas during the early modern period cannot be addressed without attending to Indigeneity and Blackness. As part of the Manila Galleon trading route, approximately eight thousand individuals of Filipinx, Southeast Asian, and South Asian descent were transported to Mexico and eventually recategorized as “Indian.” As they became legally classified as free Indigenous vassals, the Atlantic slave trade grew due, in part, to the perceived racial fixity of people of African descent. See Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

10. Early scholarship on nineteenth-century Asian indenture followed the interpretive grain of its first official historians, who were metropolitan abolitionists of the period. The usual reference here is Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920*, 2nd ed. (London: Hansib, 1993).

11. These ideas draw on chapter 1 of Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. I explore them further in my dissertation, “A Free Race of Cultivators.”

12. Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 11.

13. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

14. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 269. The study and practice of feminist intimacies have a complex history, but here, following Alexander, I locate them in the desire to support and be with friends. See also Camara Brown’s forthcoming dissertation, currently titled “The Intimacy They Were Looking For: Black Women Theorizing Feminism and Friendship, 1901–1988” (Harvard University). Although not explicitly feminist, Walter Rodney enacted a similarly rooted exchange of knowledge, which he describes in *The Groundings with My Brothers* (London: Verso, 2019).

15. Black and Asian feminist solidarity has seen renewed dialogue in response to assaults against Asian and Black subjects in a historical moment conditioned by the global pandemic and state-sanctioned murder. I refer particularly to a conversation co-hosted by Black Women Radicals and the Asian American Feminist Collective in late April 2020. See Black Women Radicals and the Asian American Feminist Collective, “Sisters and Siblings in the Struggle: COVID-19 + Black and Asian-American Feminist Solidarities,” April 30, 2020, <https://www.blackwomenradicals.com/blog-feed/black-and-asian-feminist-solidarities-a-reading-list>.

16. Josefina Báez, *As Is É* (New York: I Om Be Press), 101. Quotations reprinted with permission. In English, this line might read as follows: “We are all of color. Various colors, like the little birds that come from outside” (translation my own).

17. The trope of body as cross or intersection also occurs in Báez’s *Dominicanish*. After slowly walking toward the audience in the first two minutes of the performance, Báez extends her arms out, making her body a literal intersection. See Ay Ombe Theatre, “Dominicanish 1st Performance 1999,” YouTube video, September 2, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=41&v=OpFY7GM0WGU&feature=emb_logo.

18. Báez, *As Is É*, 106. “Anand, at that moment, said the colors in Spanish. Ana in Telegu” (translation my own).

19. *Ibid.*, 104. “Anand’s parents were from Hyderabad. Ana’s parents were from Higüey” (translation my own).

20. *Ibid.*, 159.

21. *Ibid.*, 160.

22. *Ibid.*, 161.

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