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Configuring the Qualification of Good Coffee an Ethnography on the Specialty Coffee Industry in Milwaukee

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CONFIGURING THE QUALIFICATION OF GOOD COFFEE
AN ETHNOGRAPHY ON THE SPECIALTY COFFEE INDUSTRY IN MILWAUKEE

by

Yang Liu

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

CONFIGURING THE QUALIFICATION OF GOOD COFFEE AN ETHNOGRAPHY ON THE SPECIALTY COFFEE INDUSTRY IN MILWAUKEE

by

Yang Liu

The University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, 2016
Under the Supervision of Professor Tracey Heatherington

I put qualification at the center of this research, because the intensive emphasis on coffee quality in the Third Wave Coffee Movement is the first thing that drew me to this research. When I talked with people in the specialty coffee industry in Milwaukee, they did not always admit they are part of the movement but they did highlight coffee quality as the core value of the specialty coffee market.

The concept of qualification comes from Michael Callon and his colleagues' (2002) theoretical framework "the economy of qualities." It refers to an economy in which tradable goods in the market are defined by the characteristics attributed to them in successive qualifications and re-qualifications, enacted by producers, marketers, and consumers. This framework helped me to locate my research and initially directed me where to look and to make sense of what I have seen and heard. I asked, What are they actually doing when they provide coffee factory tours, mark coffee flavors, perform a pour over, and meet with producers? Under the framework of

“the economy of qualities”, the question became what marketers are doing to all the other relationships they are embedded in through qualifying coffee.

Nevertheless, this framework has a major problem. It draws an ahistorical picture of commodification. “The economy of qualities” does not deal with politics, at least at its macro level. It presents a synchronous picture in which different groups of people and their agencies all enact through and are connected by a certain commodity, so that the historical relationships, especially inequality, among producers, consumers, and marketers are neutralized and ignored. What the framework does is to capture the moment when commodity connects to different groups of people and pay attention to the dynamics or negotiations on the basis of this network. However, the framework does not talk about what happened before the network of multiple qualifications came into being, for example the history of colonization, and the collapses of international regulations in the global market. Meanwhile, the framework does not concern the social or political consequences of such qualifications, so that it ignores the invisible and the silent ones that are left out in this network of qualification. For example, how to make sense of marketers’ practice of qualification as the signs of gentrification in the urban space? How to think of consumption and marketing patterns as consequential sites of class reproduction beyond the (re)qualifications of the commodity?

I organized this thesis under the framework of “the economy of qualities,” but at the same time reached to theories and ethnographies that consider how social discourses and practices are inexorably linked to hegemonic social relations.

These theories and ethnographies enable me to look at the spatiality of the specialty coffee shops in the context of gentrification and analyze the effectiveness of tastes as a resource for social stratification.

Coming back to my title, “good” in the qualification of good coffee can be interpreted from different perspectives. Good could be ethical, doing good or evil, being right or wrong. Good could be a standard, which sets apart those products that failed to meet the standard as not good enough. Good could also be personal. People think the coffee is good because they like it. Intentionally or unintentionally choosing one perspective over the other to define “good” is embedded in a specific socio-economic context and has its consequences. This ethnography is the case study of how the specialty coffee is (re)qualified by the marketers and why it is important to document and analyze it.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

“Why is there such an emphasis on coffee quality?” Sitting by the window in a brand new café located in the Historical Third Ward in Milwaukee, I started my conversation with Scott by asking this very generic question. It was 10:00 on a Thursday morning. Using white as the key color, the room is refreshingly lucid and lively. Scott took a sip of coffee and answered,

I think it is mostly because of fascination, wonder, and passion.” He paused and waved to one the customers and continued, “People come in here just to tell me, the coffee is the best thing of their day. If you feel that way about coffee, good coffee can be pretty killing. It starts with that love and excitement. It tastes really good. You make it regularly and get surrounded by people like that. I have multiple experiences meeting with famers coming to the U.S., because they literally don’t believe the excitement is real. When the story gets all the way to there, they think no, that can’t be true but you know what, their coffee might be the best coffee in the entire country.

The café fits well with its surroundings. In fact, the neighborhood is iconic and stylish because of the accumulation of boutiques, arts and fashion stores, and restaurants, and bars. With a resurgent interest in living in downtown and a number of public investments and planning initiatives going on, the Historic Third Ward has become one of the most gentrified areas in the city of Milwaukee (Smith 1996). In this neighborhood, several art studios, galleries, and boutique shops are surrounding the café. The Milwaukee Institute of Art of Design is right across the street. According to the statistics provided by the organization of Historical Third Ward, the property values of this area has climbed from \$1 to \$40 per square foot for unimproved buildings over the last 25 years. The rental rates for commercial

space have gone from \$1.50 to as high as \$28 per square foot¹. The café we were sitting at, as well as gourmet restaurants, Yoga center, design studios, and hippie bicycle shops together constitute “a bourgeois playground” (Smith 1996:107). The consumption spaces in the Historical Third Ward are diverse but very tidily organized along the streets, in other words nothing out of the place. This modern landscape indicates a historical transformation in which the “the world of industrial capitalism is superseded by the ideology of consumption pluralism” (ibid). Wandering around the streets surrounding the café, it is almost unrecognizable that this area was used to be an industrial and warehouse district.

On the website of TripAdvisor, one of the reviewers grew up in Milwaukee recommended this area to travelers by highly praising that the Historical Third Ward has gone through “a great gentrification²” which completely changed the neighborhood’s poor, old and decayed looking to a much more pleasant and special one. The review no matter how biased or superficial as it seems, somehow conveys some of the frequent consumers’ perceptions of this area. More importantly, with this in mind, Scott’s language imbued with the fascination, wonder, and passion of consuming a nice cup of coffee, well-dressed costumers with polite smiles, and the decent decoration of the café all come together and make perfectly sense to me at that moment.

¹ <http://www.historicthirdward.org/index.php>

² https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g60097-d655922-r407209472-Historic_Third_Ward-Milwaukee_Wisconsin.html

Nevertheless, revisiting the conversation again and again, it struck me deeply in three different ways, first, coffee farmers who have devoted most of their time and effort in taking care of coffee plants and picking up cherries do not understand why their coffee becomes such a big thing in a city very far away. Second, I am astonished by the fact that the way Scott describes the discrepancy in knowledge of evaluating good coffee and considers it normal. Third, the answer Scott gave to me is far beyond my previous imagination of an industrial definition of “quality,” which is associated with homogenization and standardization of product features.

Coffee is one of the most outstanding commodities, which Arjun Appadurai (1986)³ describes as flowing relatively complex, intercultural, and long-distance and creating the potential for discrepancies in knowledge (Appadurai 1986: 41). Appadurai categorizes the distributions of knowledge to two sorts: “the knowledge (technical, social, aesthetic, and so forth) that goes into the production of the commodity, and the knowledge that goes into appropriately consuming the commodity”. He added that “knowledge at the production locus of a commodity is not exclusively technical or empirical; knowledge at the consumption end is not exclusively evaluative or ideological. Knowledge at both poles has technical, mythological, and evaluative components, and the two poles are susceptible to mutual and dialectical interaction”(Appadurai 1986:42).

³ His chapter Introduction: commodities and the politics of value engage with much broader issue other than what I propose to do in my thesis research. His goal is to understand the creation of value through economic exchange by leaning on the “methodological” perspective by looking at the commodity itself. He asks questions like “what is a commodity” or “what sort of an exchange is commodity exchange.” The major takeaway of his piece for me is to set up my study of specialty coffee on the understanding of the value associated with coffee is not innate. The value of a commodity is not simply as created by production and exchange and finally consumed during consumption.

Instead of following the commodity coffee directly, my research focuses on coffee roasters and retailers in Milwaukee, a Midwestern city in the United States. I consider those coffee roasters and retailers as what Eric Wolf (1957) called “brokers.” Brokers do brokerage, which is about connecting people and bridging yet separating segments of a fractured social field. Brokers are engaged in “translation” by which they bring together and keep apart. “They stand guard over the crucial junctures or synapses of relationships which connect the local system to the larger whole” (Wolf 1956: 1075).

Combining Wolf’s picture of brokers with Appadurai’s ideas on knowledge distribution associated with commodities, I propose that those coffee roasters and retailers are occupying a significant position in the specialty coffee market: they connect to and communicate between coffee farmers in the global south and coffee consumers in the global north. Born and living in the United States, they themselves are coffee consumers; at the same time they also control part of the process of producing coffee: they grade, roast and brew the coffee to transform it from something generic to drinkable variations. Their position enables them to appreciate and utilize the production side of knowledge that is more technical and empirical as well as the knowledge at the consumption end that tends to be evaluative and ideological. Scott’s answer to my question on coffee quality is a rather evaluative and ideological one. He and other coffee professionals can also talk about the flavors of good quality coffee in very technical terms, which I will analyze in detail in Chapter 2.

Coffee travels long distance, cover different culture context, and involves many hands to get to the end. The long and complicated journey of coffee potentially creates discrepancies of knowledge among producers, retailers, and consumers. Despite the disparity on the knowledge dimension, the coffee market like other bulk commodity markets is characterized by instability, structural oversupply, stiff global competition, historic downward price trends, and declining terms of trade for producing countries and regions (Fox and Vorley 2006: 164). Moreover, while coffee shares a lot of similarities with other food commodities, there arguably is no global commodity industry that contains such vast power disparities as the coffee trade.

The crucial manifestation of the power disparities is the coffee crisis that happened in 1989. Prior to 1989, The International Coffee Agreement (ICA) restricted quotas and controlled prices between major coffee producing and consuming countries. This resulted in fairly stable prices for coffee (known as the “C” price on the commodity market) of between US\$1 and \$1.50 a pound. In 1989, the ICA collapsed, partly due to a lack of support by the U.S., which was the largest importing member nation. Under the free market, prices dropped straight down to \$0.49 per pound in 1992. The price farmer received was less than \$0.49 per pound, which far below production costs. Small farmers were devastated by the market volatility. Many of the coffee farmers had to abandon their land and find other ways to sustain themselves. “The end of the ICA regime has profoundly affected the balance of power in the coffee chain. From a fairly balanced contest between producers and consumers within the politics of the commodity agreement, market relations shifted to a dominance of consuming country based operators (including their agents based

in producing countries) over farmers, local traders, and producing country government” (Ponte 2002: 1105).

To solve these inequalities, the global justice movement and producer cooperatives/unions play a central role in the battle to weaken corporate hegemony in the global coffee trade (Holmberg 2011: 10). Polanyi (1958) argued that as relations of production are increasingly obscured within a capitalist system, economic relationships become disembedded. Disembedding as Polanyi saw it, occurred when economic activities, like buying coffee, became increasingly removed from the social relationships in which they had historically occurred and when the objects circulation in the economy came to be seen as fetishes emerging in and of themselves and not from labor (West 2012: 56). As a response, the alternative food movement as well as the fair trade movement propose to change the situation by encourage the connection and communication between producers and consumers.

The Fair trade movement, which promotes labeling, certification, and consumer action and relies on third party organizations to improve market transparency, provide marketplace credibility, and capture the demand and price incentives of a niche market (Moberg 2010; Lewin, Giovannucci, and Vargangis 2004:109⁴).

Scrutinizing fair trade relationship, Paige West (2012) sharply points out that the connections or fair relationships between consumers and producers sometimes create virtual images of coffee farmers (West 2012: 33). West’s critique towards third party certification is that while some people consider it as a challenge to

⁴ <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/a1585e/a1585e01.pdf>

capitalism, “in reality it is the ultimate in contemporary capitalism, because it puts the burden of social and political structural change on the backs of individuals” (West 2012: 241-242). Consumers meanwhile need have no commitment at all. The fair and equal relationship advertised by coffee retailers and roasters in the global north just conjure up a world full of virtual producers and virtual consumers instead of really getting down to the bottom of mutual understandings (West 2012:56). Similarly, other scholars have also expressed the concern on the exploitation of indigenous culture and identity. For example, Hendrickson has argued that the indigenous identity of the Guatemalan producers has been commoditized as part of the discourse of quality of the products (Hendrickson 1996).

West was also worried that the primitiveness of coffee producers in global south once created by the coffee industry will eventually lose its exchange value during capitalism’s accelerating turnover time. She expressed her concern, “The next decade will be the decade of coffee accouterments” and stories on coffee focuses entirely on processes of brewing as “rituals” that are varied, complicated, and create the taste and value in a cup of coffee (West 2012, 249). What West has predicted unfortunately is happening in the specialty coffee industry: accouterments and rituals do play an important role in the specialty coffee scene: for example the fascinations toward rare and expensive vintage espresso machines, pour over setting, as well as the variations of cold brew, nitro brew and so on. Nevertheless, the emphasis on equipment and brewing methods is situated in and influenced by a broader context of the Third Wave Coffee movement, which vigorously pursues the significance of coffee quality.

My research in the specialty coffee industry in Milwaukee focuses neither on the virtual or stereotyped representations of coffee farmers in the context of fair trade nor on the failure of fair trade which is unable to bring social justice, or change the disparate power relationship in the global coffee market. This thesis explores the qualification of good coffee based on my fieldwork among the special coffee roasters and retailers and situated in the broader context of the Third Wave Coffee movement as well as other related contexts like the alternative food movement and the fair trade movement. The definition and the qualification of good coffee thus is not simply a matter of drinkability in terms of flavors and aroma. Referring to Michael Callon and his colleagues' (2002) theoretical framework "the economy of qualities," the concept of qualification means tradable goods in the market are defined by the characteristics attributed to them in successive qualifications and re-qualifications, enacted by producers, marketers, and consumers. This framework helped me to think what the specialty coffee roasters and retailers are actually doing when they provide coffee factory tours, mark coffee flavors, perform a pour over, and meet with producers. Under the framework of "the economy of qualities", I ask, what are marketers doing to all the other relationships they are embedded in through qualifying coffee?

Initiated and promoted by mostly small-scale coffee companies, Third Wave Coffee is one of the latest coffee movements or fads happening in the United States. Its name in chronological manner is based on a rough summary of historical trends in the coffee industry. Third Wave Coffee can be understood as a continuation of the past trends as it is a remarkable break with them. First Wave is represented by

Nestle and Folgers's cheap poor-quality coffee with heavily added sugar while drinking; and Second Wave's major player is Starbucks, characterized by providing different kinds of espresso drinks and selling coffee marked by regions. As metaphorically put by Danny Meyer, "Starbucks may have put an entire adult population through Coffee University, but Third Wave coffee shops and their cuppings are the graduate schools"⁵. This comment is generally accurate in the sense of successfully capturing the meticulous attention to coffee quality and professional standardization in roasting and brewing in Third Wave.

As a movement, Third Wave Coffee has neither a clearly bounded membership nor a standardized qualification system; it is unified in its participants' shared appreciation of the cardinal principles of highlighting coffee quality. These principles generally include first, trading higher quality coffee mostly through direct trade relationship between farmers and roasters, single origin, and micro-lot; second, making higher quality coffee--freshly roasted with full roasting and brewing profile; and third serving higher quality coffee--skillful and knowledgeable green bean buyers, baristas, roasters who will actively communicate with and educate customers on brewing techniques and equipment.

Carefully depicting and underscoring their specific standards in making coffee, the participants of this movement distinguish their practice and product from other competitors by marketing and branding scarcity and specialty. Moreover, once the relatively concealed process of making coffee is partly disintegrated and respective

⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/29/fashion/29Cuppings.html>

values thus can be attributed to each procedure from “Farm to Cup”; finally what constitute good coffee is once again redefined.

As a fad, Third Wave Coffee carries a celebratory tone among its pioneer figures, who tend to call themselves coffee geeks and often show an extreme love and commitment to coffee tasting and coffee making. Without corporative support, Third Wave Coffee would exist more like a subculture or hobby club for young baristas and roasters working in cafes in major city and would have less influence on general coffee drinkers who are not working inside of the coffee community. Their extensive knowledge on coffee aroma, flavors and timing control, favorable equipment once shared and communicated among coffee professionals is now diffusing beyond the coffee industry.

This insider knowledge has gained more recognition through public tours, classes, and different scales of competitions sponsored by nation wide specialty coffee associations. More broadly, the rise of specialty coffee shops and the niche market of single origin coffee resulted from the deregulation of the global coffee market at the end of 20th century, which enables small coffee business in the global north to join the market. Distinguished from the low quality, homogenous coffee that mirrored the Fordist industrial economy in which standardization and mass production were central goals (Harvey 1990), specialty coffees are often marketed to communicate an evolution in consumers’ discerning palette, and their high prices convey their exclusivity. The specialty coffee market is also a reflection of post-Fordism market

that is flexible, consumer oriented, and specialized (West 2012:4; Doane, 2010; Harvey 1990).

In writing this thesis, I have attempted to move beyond the rhetoric surrounding the Third Wave Coffee movement and use ethnographic research to illuminate how the specialty coffee roasters and retailers qualify coffee and actively manage consumers' qualification of coffee. Nevertheless, categorizing all the ethnographic material under the framework of "the economy of qualities" has its flaws. The concept of qualification unifies and constructs a synchronous picture in which different groups of people and their agencies all enact and are connected by a certain commodity. It does not deal with the historical relationships, especially inequality, among producers, consumers, and marketers. While the framework captures the moment when commodity connects to different groups of people and pays attention to the dynamics or negotiations on the basis of this network, what happened before the network of multiple qualifications is ignored and neutralized. For example how to think about the history of colonization, and the collapses of international regulations in the global market in this framework? What are the social or political consequences of such qualifications? More specifically, how to make sense of marketers' practice of qualification as the signs of gentrification in the urban space? How to think of consumption and marketing patterns as consequential sites of class reproduction beyond the (re)qualifications of the commodity?

Good coffee for most coffee drinkers probably is just a mundane or natural matter.

"Good" indicates personal preference. People think the coffee is good because they

like it and it makes them feel good. Nevertheless, talking about making or defining “good: as it is in the qualification of good coffee, should be investigated from broader terms. Ethically good refers doing good or evil, being right or wrong. Good can be referred to an industrial standard, which sets apart those products that failed to meet the standard as not good enough. It is important to document and analyze how choosing to cope with one kind of “good” over another is enacted by a group of people whose perspectives are embedded in a specific socio-economic context and has its social consequences.

Living in the United States for more than two years, I have encountered people talking about how coffee is necessary as a morning drug, or people referring to themselves as coffee drinker or caffeine dependent. For me, coffee is just one of many accessible beverages. I drink coffee but not frequently and by no means developed a daily demand or passion for it. However, it would be ignorant to not mention that drinking coffee in China, where I grew up, was and continues to be the symbol of the western urbanism life style. It is almost a cliché way of showing-off among Chinese younger generations. They (we) post pictures of beautiful latte arts encountered in stylish cafes or write a few words of mood diaries with marked locations at Starbucks or Costa on social network websites. A cup of coffee is most time more remarkable or presentable than a bowl of ramen as an unordinary representation for an ordinary day. And it is not a coincidence that the encouraging stories of young entrepreneurship getting their support from venture capital are happening in the cafes around China’s major cities’ high tech regions, where gathered the most overseas returnees.

Studying coffee for me is a complicated combination of many fortunate or unfortunate contingencies. I am aware that because I do not have a special habit or attachment to drinking coffee or tasting coffee, most of people with whom I have conversations are more willing to share information. They are curious about coffee culture in China and happy about the fact that I want to study coffee. Without any strong personal preference for coffee, I never feel offended if coffee professionals correct me when I drink coffee the wrong way or when they teach me how to make coffee properly. Coffee professionals' personal stories on their encounters with coffee as children or how their friends and family began enjoying specialty coffee can easily interest and bewilder me, which creates opportunities to ask questions.

Paul Stroller and Cheryl Olkes (2010) illustrate the concept of "tasteful fieldwork," in which "anthropologist would not only investigate kinship, exchange, and symbolism, but also describe with literary vividness the smells, tastes, and textures of the land, the people, and the food" (Stroller and Olkes 2012: 474). My research studies coffee not only in terms of the distribution of knowledge and trade relationship associated with coffee but also the experience of tasting coffee.

Coffee itself is flavorful, the descriptions of coffee flavors are never an instructive or objective account of how coffee tastes, but they invoke other tasting memories. Moreover, the sophisticated and discriminating process of taste is often relative, which is inevitably associated with personal memories, habits, and imaginations. During my fieldwork, I pay attention to how people describe flavors as well as how they talk about themselves' or others' tasting experiences. I also realize that the

familiar aroma of roasted coffee often invokes pleasant and cozy feelings, which not only gives personal conversations and public events a happy atmosphere, but also sets the tone for what can and cannot be talked about in that occasion. Referring to Daniel Miller (2005), I also analyze how through looking at coffee flavor as the core materiality of coffee we can reveal the effectiveness of taste as a venue for producing distinction and enabling social reproduction.

Besides the focus on the dynamic of sensory experience and scientific description of coffee flavors, my ethnography is based on short-term observations in local coffee shops, participating in multiple public classes and factory tours hosted by the coffee companies. I also looked at some of the public texts produced by coffee shops, relevant associations and individual coffee lovers concerning coffee quality and specialty coffee trading relationship. I had interviews with 22 people, most of them working in the specialty coffee companies as coffee shop owners, green bean buyers, roasters, and baristas. During my participant observation, I went to meetings like coffee cupping, throw down, and factory tours, all of which were sponsored by coffee shops and open to public.

Meanwhile, I also reach to anthropological ethnographies that concentrate on coffee farmers' side. These critical works enable me to detach myself from the world of the specialty coffee roasters and retailers to think about the invisible and the silent that are left out in their conversations with me and in their marketing front.

In the following three chapters, I introduce and analyze three different steps that constitute and lead to the significance of higher coffee quality, knowing coffee,

tasting and making coffee, and trading coffee happily and directly. By tackling these three different angles, I think through the following questions: How do the roasters manage consumers' qualification of good coffee? My concern is not so much about whether or not this manipulation or management of value creation will end up with actual consumption but the way in which the significance of coffee quality is justified and normalized. How does this active management of value creation engage with and manipulate some of the core concepts of the alternative food movement as well as fair trade certification program in the U.S? How does the very process of qualification in the specialty coffee market link to the produce and reproduce of hegemonic social relations, such as gentrification and social reproduction through the distinction of tastes? How does the discourse and practice applied by the coffee roasters and retailers correspond to the history and ideology of neoliberalism?

In Chapter 1, I use my participant observation experience in multiple coffee factory tours to think through how the specialty coffee marketers invite their customers to imagine the totality of coffee production through a "farm to cup" journey. The invitation itself assumes consumers as active agents, who no longer merely purchase "offerings autonomously created by the firm, but instead engage in personalized interactions with the firm with the aim of co-creating products and services that realize desired outcomes" (Forster 2007: 715). Nevertheless, the tour is designed to partially reveal the process of importing, grading, roasting, and brewing coffee, which does not necessarily make knowledgeable or conscientious

customers, but it can certainly give customers more repertoires for evaluating coffee. These repertoires then serve to divide and discriminate one kind of coffee from another to create a wider range of coffee consumption choices and also helps to separate consumers who are able to drink and talk about coffee knowledgeably from those who cannot.

In Chapter 2, I present two sets of dichotomies – objective vs. subjective in describing coffee flavors; machinery vs. artisanal in roasting and brewing. By pointing out these dichotomies, I think through how the specialty coffee roasters and retailers manage to manipulate and take advantage of these dichotomies to their advantage. I especially focus on the most outstanding materiality of coffee, its flavors, to look at how flavor has been developed, elaborated, and defined constantly both in a representative sense and in a pragmatic sense. I first demonstrate the coffee marketers lean on sensory science to justify the proliferation and sophistication of coffee flavors appeared on coffee bags but at the same time retreat from this stance to embrace costumers' whatever preferences when it comes to practically selling coffee to potential customers. Then I look at how they commutate the idea that roasting and brewing coffee can both imitate scientific experiments and represent an artisanal style of production.

In Chapter 3, I elaborate the scene of associating good coffee with the good feeling of trading coffee by arguing that the language of passion for coffee, a person caring for another person, and the benign nature of knowing more about coffee is powerful and can have political affects and effects (Sara Ahmed 2008). I arrange my

conversations with coffee roasters and green coffee buyers along with critical insights from anthropologists on the structural inequality in the coffee market. I conclude that the long term, happy, friendly relationships that the retailers and marketers are talking about are built upon the premise that coffee farmers will provide consistent qualified coffee every year. Despite whether the trading relationship with coffee farmers is either fair or direct, the fundamental concern is consumer-oriented and centered around coffee quality.

Chapter 2 Introducing the Biography of Coffee

Walking into a Properly Cool Café

It was Doors Open Milwaukee on September 18th. I decided to join a large group of people to revisit and participate the factory tour hosted by Stone Creek Coffee⁶ in downtown Milwaukee. Early Sunday afternoon, stepping into the café from the street was like entering into a different world, conjured by the aroma of roasted coffee, the sounds of making espresso and the gentle yellow lights combined with early autumn sunshine. You may catch one or two sentences brief conversations between customers who try to specify their requirements, and baristas greeting them and clarifying things. Most of the time the baristas were busy behind the counter, taking grounded coffee from the burr grinder, which is consistently making the noise of cracking beans. Snap, snap! The grounds are transferred from the grinder into the portafilter. Thud! The barista bang the portafilter on the counter to settle the grounds. Then you can hear the clanking as the portafilter is locked into place under the brew group head. Now steaming the milk, this is where the hissing and whistling begins. Then you hear the gurgling noises too as air is incorporated into the milk.

Anthropologist William Roseberry (1996: 762) calls specialty coffee the beverage of postmodernism. Specialty coffee is one of the most prominent archetypes of “a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms” (Harvey 1989: 156). Walking into a

⁶ <http://www.stonecreekcoffee.com/tours>

gourmet coffee shop certainly is the very introduction to the ongoing aesthetic trend swept the global independent coffee stores.

“I love those noise so much, don’t you? It is the best thing you can experience in a café,” a tall young woman standing beside me, holding a book, smiled and said excitedly. I smiled back and was astonished by how loud this process can actually be if you hear it intently. It is true that the grinding, pounding, and humming noise of making an espresso gives the space an ambience or makes it live. Then the silent moment came, the barista slightly tilts the cup and was pouring the milk slowly and gently into the espresso. A heart appeared on the foam, the drink was ready. The cup of coffee will move along and goes well on a wooden table accompanied by a real book or a MacBook.

Coffee shops and coffeehouses like restaurants, are places with “a particular combination of style and type of food, social milieu and social function”(West 2012: 136). I am surely not the only person who notices this, but despite the spatial arrangement and decorative details, the general style of the café does look very similar to other specialty coffee shops in the Milwaukee area: wooden tables, minimalism style bulbs, and elements of coffee origins highlighted here and there. I didn’t realize it was an international trend of luxury minimalism until I read Chayka’s summary (2016). He writes, “All the other coffee shops whether in Odessa, Beijing, Los Angeles, or Seoul...(have) the same raw wood tables, exposed brick, and hanging Edison bulbs.” Chayka termed this international style “Airspace”: which is “a set of design conventions that has spread across the globe thanks to the

homogenization of taste facilitated by social media.⁷ He compared this particular style with international chain coffee shops' decorative style: "It's not that these generic cafes are part of global chains like Starbucks or Costa Coffee, with designs that spring from the same corporate cookie cutter. Rather, they have all independently decided to adopt the same faux-artisanal aesthetic."

The similarity of ornamental style corresponds to the general impression to the specialty coffee movement: special but not unexpected. Unlike International coffee chain's boring duplications, all specialty coffee shops in Milwaukee are different from each other, but they construct a similar kind of environment, which is quite recognizable once you walked in. For example, you may notice Valentine Coffee Roaster Co.⁸'s tasting room⁹ has the burlap sacks (with the information of weight and origin of green coffee beans) framed and hung on the wall, while Anodyne Coffee Roasting Co covers their garbage can with the same kind of bags.

Despite their correspondence to the International decorative style, locally owned specialty coffee roasting and retailing companies in Milwaukee have a very strong customer base and tend to form and open up multiple shops. Rather than most independent specialty roasters in the United States' major cities which normally just have one or two shops locally, specialty coffee companies in Milwaukee tend to open chains of cafés in the region. For example, Stone Creek has 10 cafes in Milwaukee

⁷ <http://www.theverge.com/2016/8/3/12325104/airbnb-aesthetic-global-minimalism-startup-gentrification>

⁸ <http://valentinecoffeeco.com>

⁹ The tasting room is like a conventional café but without automatic drip coffee maker.

and is going to open its 11th café in Madison. Colectivo Coffee Roasters and Cafés¹⁰ has 13 stores in Milwaukee and 3 in Madison.

The Coffee Factory Tour

On the website of Stone Creek Coffee, it introduces this specific store as their headquarters, in which they not only train their baristas but also “offer a series of public classes and tours for anyone yearning to know more about the *intricacies* of coffee¹¹”. As usual, the tour starts from a room called training and education center by the tour guide. The room is located in the center of the café first floor and is surrounded by glass walls. Walking inside of the room, you can notice there is small bar set up like a small café counter equipped with a three-handles espresso machine, a sink, and several beakers on top.

The tour was about to start. There were already approximately 30 people gathering inside. The tour guide, standing behind the bar, is a young white male, working as a middle level manager in the company. He introduced himself as former barista master, who deals with coffee training, customer information, and education. The room we were in is the place where all their retail and wholesale baristas learn about the standards and procedures of making drip coffee and espressos. Now because of the weekly coffee factory tour on every Sunday, this room also became a station of customer education.

¹⁰ <http://colectivocoffee.com/cafes/>

¹¹ <http://www.stonecreekcoffee.com/factory-cafe>

A big jar of freshly brewed coffee was served along with small paper cups. Beside the jar, there are three glass bottles demonstrating green coffee beans in different quality levels. The post on the wall tells people the structure of a coffee cherry and a world map shows coffee producing regions. Besides participating the Doors Open Milwaukee events, the Stone Creek Coffee Factory Tour is open to public every Sunday from noon-1: 30. On their website, it says the tour is designed to let people learn about the company's history, how they operate as well as the so called Farm to Cup journey.

"Farm to Cup" reminds me the related themes in food movement, "farm to table" or "farm to fork." Brad Weiss(2012) studying the local food movement in central North Carolina, puts forward, "Farm to Fork... is a spatial process that incorporates a range of actors, set in motion and so taking place and brought together through productive consumption"(Weiss, 2012: 614). He suggests, "This privileging of linkage and interconnection is vital to contemporary ethics and contemporary materialism" which corresponds to consumers' craving for authenticity. He argues that in order to understand the forms of value generated by multiple actors, one has to recognize the parts that constitute the totality of "farm to fork" are both related to and distinctive from each other. The specificity of these particular parts and the reconfiguration of their proper relationship to one another require both aesthetic and ethical work: "not just any parts will do, and not all relationships are given equal weight" (Weiss 2012:615).

In the case of coffee, “farm to cup” implicates a similar imagination or reconfiguration to capture coffee’s transformation from a plant to a beverage. Informed by Weiss, this chapter aims to think through how the imaginative totality embedded in “farm to cup” is connected to the qualification of good coffee as a product. I propose to use my experience of participating in multiple factory tours as a thread to demonstrate how the specialty coffee roasting company actively manages the process of value production, especially in terms of branding strategy. If walking into a specialty coffee shops gives a brief glance of the spirit of the specialty coffee movement, this factory tour is the very pathway, strategically planed and conducted by the company aiming to invite potential or at least curious customers to recognize and construct the totality of spatial process in which coffee is made ready for consumption.

The tour is very much like a conventional tour: the guide did most of the talking and asked people questions occasionally to generate some short interactions. An hour tour can’t probably engage any issues thoroughly, but it does give audience more information about coffee which might be inaccessible or unthought-of for most coffee consumers. Sidney Mintz has pointed out that the postmodern market “serves to elaborate, multiply and reshuffle products” by “playing upon taste, class aspirations and otherwise” (Mintz 2009: 209). Based on my observation, the elaboration and proliferation of products may not be obviously correspond to the hierarchies of class and distinctions of taste, but rather invented by the marketers and retailers’ actively reconfiguring the product – coffee through selecting and communicating more information and knowledge.

Coffee as a commodity connects to diverse economic actors extending across vast distances. A cup of coffee is the definitive moment where the product ends its travel and belongs to a customer. Michael Callon (2002) and his colleagues define “product” as a sequence of transformations, in which the different networks coordinate the actors involved in its design, production, distribution and consumption. The product singles out the agents and binds them together and, reciprocally, it is the agents who, by adjustment, iteration and transformation, define its characteristics (Callon et al. 2002: 198). Based on their definition of product, Callon et al. propose the concept of “the economy of qualities,” an economy in which tradable goods in the market are defined by the characteristics attributed to them in successive qualifications and re-qualifications, including those enacted by consumers.

The concept “the economy of qualities” provides another perspective with which to dismantle the proliferation of the varieties of products in the specialty coffee market. In the economy of qualities, consumers are realized or imagined as active agents, who no longer merely purchase “offerings autonomously created by the firm, but instead engage in personalized interactions with the firm with the aim of co-creating products and services that realize desired outcomes” (Forster 2007: 715). The companies take advantage of this trend by working with experienced and creative consumers, developing curious new consumers by “tapping into consumers’ intellectual capital.” In return, “consumers got rewarded for being able to say what actually gets produced, manufactured, developed, designed, serviced, or processed” (Trandwatching.com n.d). Callon et al. suggest that in order to make sure a firm consistently stays in touch with the consumers’ qualifications, the reflexive

destabilization of products moves to the center of marketing practice. The reflexive destabilization of products is accomplished by limiting the periods of routine attachment to products that consumers have. Thus new negotiations and adjustments of their requalification can be launched (Callon et al. 2002: 211-212).

Coffee's associations with labor, industry and sobriety, as well as its connections to status and leisure, have allowed it to be legal and widely consumed (Topik 2009:100). Rather than imagining coffee as a daily necessity, the specialty coffee industry represents coffee as a certain kind of status symbol or a declaration of life style as well as a social statement (ibid), the center of which is to acknowledge the ability to consume coffee knowledgeably. In the Third Wave Coffee movement, or the specialty coffee industry in general, the quality of coffee became the center of conversation and has been increasingly underlined. However, the standards and expectations for good coffee are rather ambiguous. Referring to the framework of "the economy of qualities," I consider the factory tour as an example through which the coffee roasting company has the opportunity to actively engage with consumers and has the potential to adjust and reshape consumers' evaluation of coffee. The tour is designed to partially reveal the process of importing, grading, roasting, and brewing coffee, which does not necessarily make knowledgeable or conscientious customers but it can certainly gives customers more repertoires to evaluate coffee. These repertoires then serve to divide and discriminate one kind of coffee from another based on newly developed or more refined categories. A wide range of coffee consumption choices is thus produced.

A brief introduction of the history of the building along with the history of the company gives the tour a patina of temporality. Stone Creek was opened in White Fish Bay in 1993 before Starbucks had come into town. As I mentioned earlier, Milwaukee has its particular specialty coffee tradition. Coffee drinkers here have a relatively strong intention to support locally owned companies, which makes a historical retrospect of the company appealing to older generation customers. As introduced by the tour guide, they are going to open their 11th café in Madison and have more than 200 wholesale partners. They attribute their success to the quality of the beans they sell.

“Where does coffee come from?” The tour guide asked. While no one in the room seemed to have the intention to speak up and answer the abrupt question. He looked around and raised his voice,

Coffee comes from all over the world what we refer to as coffee belt- tropic area, regions that have 800 hundred altitude and 2200 meters above sea level. Altitude and climate are two of the most factors of growing quality coffee. All of the coffee comes from four regions, most Central America, South America, Africa and Pacific area”. Without any pause, he continued: “We are a “Farm to Cup” roaster, which means we are direct trade. 90% of our coffee comes from direct relationships we have with people all over the world who grow coffee and process the coffee for us. The reason we are proud of our farm to cup sourcing model is that it allows us to have transparency between people and us who grow our coffee. We know the journey of coffee from the time it’s planted, cherry was picked, how the cherry was processed, and how the coffee was shipped to us. Most people have to go through importers and have trusted importers to have that information. We know that information directly. C here is our green coffee buyer.” He pointed to another young white male sitting besides the sink.

I am not sure how many audiences are actually familiar with the job title “green coffee buyer” or the concept of “direct trade.” Nevertheless, by first reminding the tour participants that coffee grows in remote tropical areas rather than here in the

United States, then immediately ensuring the audience that Stone Creek is the reliable bridge that connects consumers here with the farmers there, J draws a clear process that how green beans arrived in their factory.

Referring to the issue of fortifying direct social and economic connections with people across their geographic region in food movement, Sarah Lyon has asked, “When we are unable to shake the farmer’s hand or visit the cheese maker, when we cannot watch the butcher at work, how can we alternatively assess the relative “goodness” of the foods that grace our table.” In theory, the answer is by bookkeeping and communicating information. The question itself and the answer require critical consumers, who according to Julie Guthman (2004), rely on a wealth of information to embody a broader sense of agency in the realm of consumption of choices-agency that is reflected in their knowledge-seeking, product evaluation, and discernment in taste (Guthman 2004). Besides, the Internet gives people hope that consumers can overcome many of the information asymmetries that characterize global food supply chains. Obtaining and sharing the information one the one hand pursues and advances the traceability of food, and on the other hand help consumers make informed choices (Lyon 2014).

In the gourmet food market, food producers differentiate products for micro-markets over such attributes as taste, texture, nutritional contents, cultivation techniques, and origin. However, other differences involve credential attributes and characteristics that consumers cannot discern even after consuming the product. Process attributes including country of origin, organic, free-range, dolphin-safe,

shade-grown, earth-friendly, and fair trade (Golan 2003: 18) are part of the issue on of a food's traceability. Lyon puts forward that political empowerment, social justice, and environmental resilience are increasingly upheld alongside flavor and quality as criteria for good foods, which cannot be simply assessed or traced through taste tests (Lyon 2014: 60). In the case of coffee, the specialty coffee market shares similar trend and concerns in terms of what makes good coffee. The higher quality coffee not only tastes good (which is arbitrary and can be subjected to define and redefine), but also meets other standards: credentials, single origin, organic, and fair trade are the most popular ones.

While communicating information and sharing concerns can be an ideal or only remedy for not being able to visit and shake coffee farmers' hand, the hope to "reinvent global commodities and to rediscover the small farmers hidden behind bulk purchasing and corporate branding" (ibid) does not just rely on consumers' agency. Even if we assume useful and enough information leads to conscientious purchase, the process of obtaining, disseminating, and sharing information will never be free of selective highlights and manipulations.

In my fieldwork, tour participants may or may not (want to) know how the coffee farmers plant coffee and pick coffee cherries and how many processes it takes to end up in their cups of coffee. Most of them should know that coffee is not grown in Wisconsin. The tour guide did not give much new information in terms of coffee production region but rather put his focus on how the remote production region should not be a concern of coffee's authenticity and reliability. The direct trade

relationship he mentioned not only assured the audience the traceability of their coffee without giving out any specific bookkeeping information, but also provide the audience a new criteria of evaluating good coffee: direct is better than indirect.

After briefly introducing their direct trade mode, the tour guide put more effort on the materiality of the coffee beans: the quality of coffee. Highlighting coffee quality is nothing new in the coffee market. Starbucks spent most of the 1980s building a loyal customer base and “educating” consumers on the qualities of fine coffee, which happened at the same time as other consumer products moved from mass-production and marketing to being recast as more authentic flavorful and healthy (Micro-brewed beer, specialty breads, organic vegetables). It sold coffee prepackaged with lifestyle signifiers (Dicum & Luttinger 1999: 153). These coffees are mediocre and are bought in bulk. Their selling point is that they are freshly roasted (Ponte 2002: 1111). The success of specialty coffee retailing since 1990s also result partly from their position to stand against mega roasters in the context industrial “consolidation and conglomeration” resulting in a group of powerful international corporation dominating the market and producing a coordinated range of commodities to very large groups of consumers (Lyons 2006).

To distinguish from the previous definition of good coffee, the specialty coffee movement gives good coffee a rather technical definition: the specialty coffee is made of beans produced in special microclimates and have distinctive flavors because of their full cup taste and little to no defects. Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) has its standard to recognize specialty coffee, which scores 80

points or above on a 100-point scale to be graded as “specialty.” Usually, the tour guides would pass around a plate of green coffee bean and let everyone see the defected coffee beans.

The tour guide pointed out, “You never know whether or not you are drinking coffee made of defected beans if the coffee is darkly roasted.” I consider this remark a deliberate effort of distinguishing their standard of good coffee from what Starbucks or other International Chain coffee shops’ definition of good coffee. In doing so, he gave audience members a hint that the coffee they used to perceive as good coffee may not meet the higher standards of the specialty coffee.

The tour guide then pointed the room behind him and said, “That is the coffee lab where we bring in coffee and source coffee. We get samples from coffee production areas all the time. We roasted them up and we cup them to taste them to address their quality. We only source specialty coffee.” He emphasized the process of addressing coffee quality, “Special coffee is coffee that passes two basic tests. First is the green bean test. This is what green raw coffee looks like. And essentially we take 300 coffee beans, we sort it through bean by bean to look for defects. This is an example of defects we find when we are searching through a sample of coffee,” he raised one of the glass bottle on the bar and continued,

Primary defects are acquired when coffee was growing. And secondary defects happen between the coffee is processing and shipping. First defects usually mean overripe beans, under-ripe beans, affected by disease. Secondary defects are going to be over fermentation, under over-drying and under-drying circumstance. Once the coffee is been green graded, it then will be roasted and cupped.

He paused shortly and gestured to C and commented,

Cupping is something C can speak about very knowledgeably, but essentially, we sample roasted the coffee. We grind five samples of the same coffee. Dry grounds will be assessed for the aroma. Water will be put into each of these bowls, the wet aroma of the coffee is be assessed as well, after about five minutes. We break the coffee ground and put into water, and the scoop out. Then you have the sample pools for tasting. Basically, we are tasting for center qualities, in terms of acidity, sweetness and body. Hoping to find unique characteristics and balance.

That was a rather long lecture on how to score specialty coffee. He introduced a lot of technical terms associated with coffee, like sourcing, cupping and the center qualities of beans. I noticed several audience members were bewildered by the long and technical presentation. However, without any pause, the tour guide turned to C and asked him to talk more about cupping. C then took over to illustrate the concept of cupping, C described cupping as a process they reflect to coffee producers for certain qualities they are looking for from coffee. C started by saying, “We don’t want coffee tasting like potatoes.” Some of the participants laughed. C continued and said,

We want coffee that is juicy, as a balance of sweetness and acidity. Cupping guides us to the specific coffee we are looking for. If something tastes really good, we will communicate with farmers saying that what did you do in this process, and this is really good, do it next year. Or this doesn’t work well, why don’t you try another process.

In the specialty coffee market, only certified coffee graders, for example, Q graders (Coffee quality grader certified by SCAA) are able to sort out defects and rank the flavor of different kinds of coffee beans. After C explained how coffee beans are graded by using cupping to taste different flavors and defects, J raised his voice and asked the audience, “How many certified coffee grader are here in Wisconsin?”

There was a short silence in the room, then a middle age male answered, “I would go with three.”

J was a little astonished by him getting the right answer so quickly but soon returned to smile and said, “You’ve been the tour before, right? How can you know this?” He shook his head. Then she turned to whole group and asked, “How many of the three certified coffee graders are in Stone Creek?”

An older female answered, “All of the three would be nice”.

J smiled and answered the question,

There are two out of three certified coffee grader in our company one is our boss X and our green coffee buyer Y.” “Where do you think the other one is? ” The other one is in Madison, John Public House. Then J emphasized, “We don’t need to hire people from outside to do the cupping and grade coffee beans, we have our own people.

The presentation then went back to coffee origins, J showed one of the photos on PowerPoint and introduced to us, “This is a picture that a group of our employees went to XX farm in Guatemala. We founded solid, year-to-year relationships in Guatemala.” I was expecting some details on how these relationship were formed and maintained, however it seems for the tour guide the picture was enough to prove of their direct relationship with the coffee farmers. Soon the topic turned to the roasting process.

After we sourced the coffee beans, it is time to develop a roasting profile. Behind me is our roasting lab, that is our tiny coffee roaster, roasting a kilogram coffee per time. We will develop a roasting profile, a recipe for roasting a specific kind of coffee. Coffee is very different, not all the coffee get roasted the same way. The lab is where we try to figure our how exactly we should roast the specific kind of coffee.

Once we determined a roast profile. We all load that information upon to a computer and transfer that information to our larger CR 60s roaster to roast the coffee.

In the specialty coffee industry, generating a place-specific “commodity biography” (Hall 1992: 278) is a very important marketing strategies for these specialty coffee roasters to generate and destabilize consumers’ habit and expectations on coffee. Nevertheless, the commodity biography produced the specialty coffee marketers and presented in the factory tour is biased and does not necessarily cover every procedure in same level of details from the beginning of coffee cherry to the end of a cup of coffee. One of the audience members raised an interesting question: “You mentioned that farmers also process coffee for you. How do they process coffee exactly?”

Based on my conversations with people working in coffee industry and also by reading through coffee related news and blogs on the different processing procedures in different regions, I knew that the method of processing coffee cherry to green coffee actually is one of the most important procedures that have crucial influence on the flavor and aroma of coffee beans¹². Since the processing varies a lot from region to region, it is roughly divided to dry, semi dry and wet categories.

The tour guide apparently did not want to spend much time in this question he answered, “There is a pretty complicated process they use. There is something simple as mechanical comb. There is something as complicated as chemical. They all have to go through ferment”.

¹² See Appendix 3 The Coffee Value Chain which includes the procedures through which coffee cherries end up in a cup of coffee

Based on my knowledge, however, both mechanical and chemical method belongs to the category of wet process. Technically, processing constitutes an initial and crucial stage in making and adjusting flavorful coffee and should be part of coffee knowledge. Processing is conducted by coffee farmers or mills in coffee origins. Processing does not constitute the roasting and retailing company's own endeavors in making higher quality coffee, which render the knowledge of processing irrelevant for consumers as decided by the tour host. In a word, even though, processing is also a complicated stage of coffee production, the less attention to it in this tour suggests it is the producer not the roasters and retailers who have the responsibility to control or talk much about.

After the brief talk about coffee processing ended abruptly, we were led to upstairs to observe the roasting machine. The aroma of roasted coffee is becoming stronger and stronger. Some people including myself, tried to breath in more coffee aroma by breathing deeply. Each of us was given a cap to prevent our hair from dropping into the roasting machine.

The tour guide started off by seriously emphasizing the significance of roasting process,

The transformation from raw bean to finished product is perhaps one of the most complex stages in coffee production. If you take a lot of green beans and smell it, it hardly has any of the characteristics that we would typically associate with roasted coffee. Yet once roasted, the raw materials within the raw bean undergo a significant transformation to give rise to hundreds of new compounds that we can appreciate."

J pointed up at a screen to teach the audience about how to read the curve graph. He was almost shouting, since the roasting machine is so loud,

This is our production area. This is our machine Diedrich CR 60. The Cloud system helps us track different variables, including environmental temperature, temperatures of the bean itself. This is the load; basically, the green coffee gets to dumped in the loader here. Once the coffee done roasting, the drum door opens up, dumps the coffee in the cooling tray. This fancy thing is called Agitator, moving coffee around and cooling the coffee. Pretty cool. And this is to shoot the beans up to this tube, stones typically heavier than coffee stay in the bottom and got filtered out.

As put by Paige West, “The way the employees roast, and the way they talk about their roasting, adds value to the coffee. Their roasting technique incorporates a unique artisan form of labor that they argue is unlike that of corporate roasters (West 2012: 216). Their roasting practices, carefully represented as three stages: sample roasting, roasting profiling, and normal roasting control highlighted their time and effort put into roasting which indirectly make the beans more valuable and desirable than other beans.

In the last section of the tour, we headed downstairs to see the storage room of green coffee beans. The basement was temperature-and-moisture controlled to keep the beans fresh. Standing near the green bean bags, J began to lecture on the price of beans of different qualities. He said,

Unprocessed specialty coffee bean cost 2-3 dollars per pound, which is much higher than poor quality coffee bean which has price around 1 dollar per pound.” He especially mentioned one of their experimental products Colombia La Angela (called lab coffee on their website). “Stone Creek Coffee gave the producer (Hugo) 12.59 dollars for a pound of green coffee beans.

Some of the audience were surprised and said, “That is very expensive!”

“And,” J continued “Stone Creek wants to provide high quality coffee to our customers and also provides financial stability for the producers. Our coffee buyer travels to Colombia to export and forge long lasting partnership with famers. We work directly to pick, process and make best coffees.”

Other audience members seem to be distracted by the astonishing high price he mentioned and paid less attention to J’s statement about their company’s ethics.

An older lady asked, “Did you taste the coffee that cost 12 dollars? How was it?”

J hesitated and said, “I did. Of course I did. It was awesome”.

“It’d better be good,” someone in the group said and people laughed.

While leading us back to the training lab where we started, J said, “Don’t forget roasting reduces the weight of coffee beans to 75%. We are not making any money, really.”

While the prices of retail coffee seemingly have continued to rise in the specialty coffee market, coffee farmers still have been receiving prices below the cost of production (Daviron and Ponte 2005 xvi). As a plant vulnerable to disease and drought, providing higher quality coffee beans costs more investment and labor which may not be compensated by higher price provided by those coffee retailers.

The tour guide describes their payment for the higher quality specialty coffee bean as if coffee farmers have earned all the extra profit. Without talking about the actual investment and intensive labor that have been put into the production of coffee

beans, the description is misleading. Daviron and Ponte argue that instead of interpreting this juxtaposition as simply a disparity in who controls market share, it is better understood in terms of the ability to “define the ‘identity’ of a coffee, in other words to set the language and the reference values that determine production norms and quality standards. (Daviron and Ponte xvii in Holmberg 2011).

The information introduced by the tour guide is not made of objective operational procedures or mere statistics, but powerful knowledge in which the higher price of specialty coffee and the investment in the “farm to cup” project can be rationalized and appreciated by potential customers. The factory tour did cover the total journey of making coffee, importing, grading, roasting, and brewing coffee. However, not each procedure was paid same level of emphasis and attention. They highlight their section of the coffee production chain and emphasize the necessity and importance of their labor and money that have been invested by their market front, while downplaying the hardworking and investment happening in the coffee farms and mills.

In emphasizing the importance of studying materiality, Daniel Miller points out that “the study of material culture often becomes an effective way to understand power, not as some abstraction, but as the mode by which certain forms or people become realized, often at the expense of others” (Miller 2005: 9). Under the framework of “the economy of qualities”, specialty coffee is qualified and re-qualified from coffee cherries to coffee beverage. Nevertheless, qualification is not only dynamic but also uneven and consequential. The effectiveness of qualification enacted by one group

of people, in this case the specialty coffee roaster and retailers, can end up with ignorance of the other groups of people, such as coffee farmers and workers who work in the farms and mills. These people have also devoted their time and energy to the production of coffee but get underrepresented in the factory tour. This requalification and redefinition of specialty coffee are made possible by highlighting, as Miller puts it above, “certain forms or people at the expense of others” (ibid: 9). In other words, the coffee farmers and workers working on the remote side of production, their labor and knowledge get downplayed in the representation of coffee production chain in the coffee factory tour.

The active and selective communication of product related information and knowledge, does not necessarily make knowledgeable or conscientious customers, but it clear suggests that “direct is better than indirect,” “fresh is better than pre-roasted,” and at the end “everybody needs good coffee.” The coffee factory tour claims to let customers know more about coffee by introducing coffee knowledge. Nevertheless, knowledge has never been neutral. While it sounds positive that these coffee shops and coffee professionals know more and are willing to share knowledge with the public, but what speaks volumes is what they haven’t talked about.

“Specialty coffees taste better than mass-market coffee. They offer pleasure in many ways: the aroma, ambience and experience of the coffee shop... the identification with particular places through consumption through which one can cultivate and display taste and discrimination” (Roseberry 1996: 764). The coffee factory tour

works as a training session for such consumption and the cultivation of taste and discrimination. Customers and tour participants are those who not only drink coffee regularly, but also are attracted to the knowledge oriented tour to learn more about how to buy coffee. Although I cannot assess the causal relationship between economic and class status and the action of buying higher quality coffee in higher price, what is clear is that an effective coffee tour can increase the recognition and attention that each participant can give to coffee.

The attention to the proliferation of coffee varieties and a more sophisticated recognition of coffee knowledge produce class orientation. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) claims that class differences in tastes lead necessarily, through the unintended consequences of everyday interaction, to social reproduction. In the field of consumption, the differentiation and effectiveness of taste are enacted not only when people consume a particular good or engage in a particular leisure activity, but also when they communicate about such cultural objects which is a routine aspect of conversation at home, parties, the workplace, schools, churches, and so on (ibid: 172-173). In this factory tour I presented, what the marketers have done is to teach their costumers the language and categories to consume coffee and talk about the consumption of coffee in a more informed way. The information provided is used to convince consumers that the much more expensive coffee deserves its price.

Most people in the tour drove to the store with their friends and families. Among the tour participants, half of them are young people; several of them are international students. The others are mostly local white seniors. Although most of them dress

rather casually, none of them look shabby. After the tour, some of them immediately went up stairs and lined up to get a cup of hot coffee, while some others surrounded the tour guide eagerly to know more. The tour itself has already attracted certain kind of consumers while excluded some others. These tour participants at least have consumed specialty coffee before to have the access to know there is such a factory tour exists and find themselves comfortable in the specialty coffee shop's atmosphere and environment. In other words, they are already potential consumers targeted by the marketers. The welcoming and open-to-public presence of the factory tour caters to the existing classes. More importantly, the tour invites, educates, encourages, and validates these potential costumers' curiosity and aspiration toward coffee and makes them the very customers they want to be. Thus, the social reproduction is not only realized in the differentiation of tastes toward specialty coffee but also actively shaped by the marketing strategies that attract and create certain kind of consumers. The coffee factory tour hosted by Stone Creek Coffee exemplifies the procedure of educating costumers by giving out knowledge or information, including what specialty coffee is, how it is processed, and why it should be appreciated. More importantly, the tour implicitly encourages the image of ideal customers who are knowledgeable and care about coffee quality, which makes them able to join the celebration of the coffee company's effort in developing the product.

Chapter 3 Materiality: In Discriminating and Making Coffee Flavors

What is good coffee? The simplest answer is that good coffee tastes good, if we put aside the inescapable socioeconomic consequences and moral commitments, such as social justice and environmental sustainability. Talking about coffee flavor in its own terms is slippery, because that it can be easily trapped in either the manipulative market terms or unexamined common sense analogies. Nevertheless, the importance and power of coffee flavor come from its evident and experiential nature. Whenever coffee flavor is brought up, it resonates with individual's visceral feelings and substantial memories.

Daniel Miller (2005) talked about the power of materiality in general. He said "objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not 'see' them. The less we are aware of them the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge" (2005:5). In the case of coffee, flavor constitutes its material core. It is through the materiality of flavor, the visceral expectations, the habitats of drinking, and the distinction of taste is instantiated and represented. More importantly, in the specialty coffee marketing front, the marketers destabilize consumers' previous expectation of coffee flavor and introduce new ways of appreciating coffee by dismantling and manipulating coffee flavor directly.

In this chapter my focus is on one of coffee's most prominent material features: flavor. It is been 20 years since William Roseberry (1996) published his important

paper on “Yuppies coffee.” Although Roseberry’s piece suggests more on the correlation between consumption of specialty coffee and capitalism, he did briefly but vividly describe the specialty coffee scene in New York back then. I will refer to his account on specialty coffee and compare it with my ethnography on what I’ve experienced and learned here and now. I hope that the comparison can both continue Roseberry’s critical perspective in scrutinizing coffee’s broader socio-economic meaning as well as draw attention to the material dimension of coffee.

In the specialty coffee industry, flavor has always been developed, elaborated, and defined constantly both in a representative sense and in a pragmatic sense. This ever-changing process requires coffee marketers and sellers lean on different narratives and technologies to justify their language and professionalism. In the following ethnographic account, I first demonstrate how the standards of discriminating coffee flavors are represented differently in two spaces: in the professional space, talking about coffee flavor constantly refers to scientific research; while in retailing or marketing space, the emphasis is put on customers’ subjective experience and personal preference. This inconsistency is manifested in a different way when it comes to roasting and brewing coffee. Roasting and brewing coffee requires specific equipment and digital programs to mimic scientific experiment but at the same time, human control is also particularly valued by the industry’s highlighting on “artisanal”¹³ process and “craftsmanship”.

¹³ I consider the emphasis on human control in the settings of brewing and roasting coffee as a shared trend in the broader slow food movement, in which “artisanal” suggests commodities are small scale hand made, personalized, local, and most time without additional artificial ingredients. Artisanal process is often emphasized in the sphere of cheese, bread, chocolate, beer, olive oil, and ice cream. In the case of making coffee, the specialty coffee roasters and baristas use “artisanal” to

Tasting Good Coffee: Refer to Sensory Science

The experience of tasting, like other sensory experience, is rather subjective and intricate. While a cup of coffee must have its definitive chemical components that attribute to certain distinctive flavors, perceiving and experiencing those flavors are always mediated and modified by individual palate. Moreover, the sophisticated and discriminating process of taste is often relative, which inevitably associated with personal memories and imaginations. Michael Herzfeld (2001) argues that the relative absence of sensory experience study in anthropology can partly be attributed to the difficulties of preserving, recording, and replicating smell and taste (2001: 431). In the specialty coffee industry, assessing flavor and quality is developing toward a commensurable and objective direction to enable coffee tasters record and exchange their sensory experience.

I talked about flavor notes on coffee bags with Scott Lucey, one of the co-founders of Kickapoo café¹⁴. If you buy a bag of Kenya Gathaithi¹⁵ from Kickapoo, you may notice the tasting notes read lemon juice, honey and mandarin. On the bag of Organic Ethiopian Yirgacheffee Charbanta coffee¹⁶, you will find that the description of coffee flavor is written as “intensely sweet and fruited with notes of melon and flowers with a crisp, lemony finish.” I asked, “How is that possible, can you really taste watermelon or orange from a cup of coffee?” He said “Yes, that’s the actual coffee flavor.” He quickly stood up, walked away from our table and came back with

implicate similar connotations, whereas the practice of roasting and brewing coffee as I show in the following ethnography does not necessarily fit the usual expectation of “artisanal”.

¹⁴ <https://www.kickapoocoffee.com>

¹⁵ Gathaithi is the name of the coffee farmers cooperative in Kenya.

¹⁶ Charbanta is the name of the coffee farmers cooperative in Ethiopia.

a colorful flyer—Coffee Taster’s Flavor Wheel¹⁷. The center of the wheel demonstrates nine basic categories, including nutty/cocoa, spices, roasted, sweet, floral, fruity, sour/fermented, green/vegetative, and other. Each of these basic categories has two levels of advanced specificity. The outmost circle, which is also the most refined level, has more than 90 kinds of different flavors presented including watermelon and orange.

I looked at the well-designed wheel, while part of me is assured that people must achieve certain agreement on naming their coffee tasting experience to produce this flavor wheel, part of me was still quite suspicious about how to relate this wheel to actual tasting experience. After all tasting watermelon flavor from a cup of coffee is still a farfetched thing for me to imagine. Scott seemingly has noticed my suspicion; he explained, “SCAA [Specialty Coffee Associate of America]¹⁸ has invested a lot of money to work with scientists to get very objective analysis of flavors. The previous version has two wheels, which is highly scientific. Too scientific. Even people in the coffee community don’t understand what’s going on in that wheel. Now people can use this wheel to describe all kinds of flavors in coffee.” He then pointed at the “Chemical” category on that wheel, which is one of the two categories under “Other” along with Paper/Musty. Its subcategories suggest that the coffee may taste rubbery, skunky, petroleum or medicinal¹⁹. He said, “This is because of the defect.

¹⁷ See Appendix 2: SCAA Coffee Taster’s Flavor Wheel

¹⁸ Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) is established in 1982. It aims to set “quality standards for the specialty coffee trade”. Nowadays, the organization develops professional courses and protocols of operation for baristas, roasters, and business managers. It also organizes trips to coffee farms, public events, and competitions. Most of the people I interviewed have taken courses, obtained certifications, or involved in the organization in other ways.

¹⁹ See Appendix 2: Coffee Taster’s Flavor Wheel.

Just like you go to farmer's market, you see all these fresh sweet apples. However, if you go to the farm, there are a lot of bad apples. Bad apples taste like chemical stuff." Perhaps it is easier to invoke listener's tasting memory by talking about the unpleasant range, which considered unacceptable by "common sense."

Nevertheless, my question was more about the indexical relationship between the refined flavor wheel and actual tasting experience, than the validity or objectiveness of the flavor wheel.

I asked again, "But how can a cup of coffee taste like watermelon?"

Scott seriously explained it to me,

When people think about watermelon characteristic, most people associate it with candy type, but if you really taste a watermelon, it is actually very watery. It is not concentrated. It is not watermelon juice you should think about. It reminds you the flavor in your mouth when actually eating a watermelon.

I told him my understanding, "So you mean the intensity is quite different. It does not taste exactly like watermelon but shares a little amount of subtleness."

Scott nodded and said "Yes, pretty much. We do tasting practice now and then. Just put Pink lady, Baldwin, and other different kinds of apple varieties in front of us.

Tasting them one by one. It is quite exciting. It is mind blowing."

His eyes suddenly kindled with happiness and said,

And you know what? This is the perfect timing to answer your question. I was doing my garden yesterday. I have a bunch of carrots. I've been ignoring them. I don't

want to harvest them because if you do it too early, they will be small. So, I still have carrots on the ground. I was eating carrots, bought from the store, eating them for lunch. Then I compared these two different kinds of carrots, my own 'artisanal'²⁰ (with mocking expression) carrots from the garden have flowery quality in it, while the carrots from the store taste more like paper and cardboard. You may think I make this up, but actually because my soil is really good and I have flowers in my garden. That might explain. Same with coffee, it is all about the agronomy, the climate, the soil and the care.

To further put off my doubts, Scott added, "I will email you a document after our conversation that explains all those flavors." After our conversation, I received a file named World Coffee Research Sensory Lexicon²¹. Here it is, I am looking at the fifty-page file that explains the definition, reference and intensity score of each flavor attribute. In the introduction of the file, it says, "The goal of the World Coffee Research Sensory Lexicon is to use for the first time the tools and technologies of sensory science to understand and name coffee's primary sensory qualities, and to create a replicable way of measuring those qualities."

Scott's explanation is consistent with Sensory Lexicon's basic understanding of coffee flavors, in which coffee is described as a "chemically complex thing," its aroma and flavor originated from its coded complex molecular and genetic information and influence by "how and where the coffee was grown, and by everything it has experienced since leaving the tree." To decipher and describe the flavor of coffee, coffee professionals have to refer to sensory science to establish and demonstrate the reliability and objectiveness of their knowledge.

²⁰ We were having conversations on artisanal roasting. He joked about the concept of artisanal roasting, because unlike cheese or bread, there is no way you are roasting coffee with your bare hands.

²¹ World Coffee Research Sensory Lexicon, 2016 World Coffee Research First Version

Other coffee professionals working in Milwaukee's the specialty coffee industries also have noticed the trend of institutionalization. Colectivo's lead espresso trainer Mickey Comerford has worked in the coffee business for 17 years. I asked him, "What is the major trend of making coffee in the coffee industry nowadays?"

He answered, "Making coffee is becoming more and more scientific. It is not a word of month matter anymore. There are exact procedures of how to do things." The "exact procedures" he referred to are the protocols and guidelines produced by SCAA.

Al Liu, the vice president of Colectivo sitting opposite us added,

There is a lot of shared knowledge in this specialty coffee industry. It is a large community, but also very small. So there is a strong community. People are very often very willing to share. Now there are many courses you can take to learn to learn all kinds of different things in SCAA. You can take roasting courses; you can take barista course. The industry works very hard on standardizing. "

Scott, Mickey and Al all express their notice on the process of standardization prevalent in the specialty coffee industry. The conversations I had with coffee roasters and café owners suggest that the coffee assessing and tasting practice in the industry increasingly relies on the institutionalized and specific standards and protocols of grading and tasting coffee produced by SCAA. In fact, technically specialty coffee is defined by SCAA's scoring system, which refers to coffee beans that are graded higher than 80 points out of 100, which distinguishes them from low quality commercial coffee. Certified coffee tasters or licensed Q Grader (Coffee Quality Graders) assess a coffee's score through cupping and determine whether or not it is qualified. They are also responsible to make decisions on purchase coffee

and present tasting notes and flavor descriptions²². This scenario is quite different from what Roseberry described back in 1996 New York city, when “Maxwell House and A&P have joined the specialty trend” (Roseberry, 1996: 762), whose coffee is not only pre-grounded but also uses commercial coffee.

I talked with James about his experience as a Q Grader. Because he did not take the recalibration test, his license has already passed the three-year validation limit. He explained to me that as a Q Grader, farmer cooperatives sometimes sent a sample of green coffee to him.

If it needs to get Q graded, we sort the green coffee to check for moisture content, defects, and size. Based on how the coffee cups, we decide what kind of, or whether or not it is a fit for the purchaser. After the sample gets roasted, there is a very specific Coffee cupping protocol, I think you can find it on the SCAA website. Anyway, we use a score sheet to break coffee apart to ten parameters. If I remember right, they are fragrance, aroma, flavor, aftertaste, acidity, body, and balance, sweetness, uniformity, and cleanliness. We do blind cupping, trying to be as unbiased as possible.

After James told me the general procedure of Q grade coffee, he added,

Buyers don't have to listen to the Q grader. Getting coffee Q graded maybe can give farmers a little bit leverage that they know their coffee is good, but anyone can buy coffee based what they like. Q grading is set up to calibrate the quality inside the industry. You have to have some standards. Otherwise, people will just claim the coffee is 95. Some companies can buy coffee that is not very good but they don't know that coffee is bad.

I asked James “ Does that mean Q-grader has the authority to mark coffee’s quality?

What if two Q-graders contradict with each other since what flavor gets tasted is rather a relative perception.”

James said,

²² <http://www.scaa.org/?page=resources&d=what-is-specialty-coffee>

I would not say it is authority. It is just a calibration based on protocols. And disagreement can happen. I tend to grade things (coffee) lower, the owner of the roasting company normally grades things a little bit higher. If you go to a cupping competition and do cupping coffee with other judges, it is always interesting to notice who calibrates to who. People who went through the calibration process—their scores cluster closely.

“How can you get gustation calibrated?” I asked.

James laughed and answered,

They do pretty crazy stuff. I remembered I took a one-week-long eight-hour-per-day test. One of the things they require me to do is to match organic acid²³. I believe they are acetic, citric, malic and phosphoric. Each of the acids has three different [levels of] intensity. You kind of work through with it and put them in order. The triangulation test is very difficult too. Three cups of coffee, grounded, sit in separate cups in front of you. The room is dark, so you basically cannot use any visual differences to help. Let’s say all of them come from Columbian. One of them comes from a different farm. You just smell the ground and decide which one is different (Also see ²⁴).

James’ experience speaks to phenomenon that the specialty coffee industry in the United States encourages young coffee professionals to learn and pursue professional credentials like becoming a Q Grader or participating national or international barista championship competitions to become star baristas. These professional occasions along with the increasing publications of universal language and protocols on grading, making and tasting coffee help to formulate a hub of the specialty coffee network among roasters and retailers. As Scott has suggested, “Part of the excitement of working in the coffee business is because I have been involved with the industrial core—SCAA. There are a lot of things going on. The barista branch used to have hundreds members. Now it is thousands and thousands. They

²³ Acid is also one the nine basic categories in the Coffee Taster’s Flavor Wheel

²⁴ <https://www.coffeestrategies.com/q-grader/organic-acids/>

come from all over the world.” Under these circumstances, more and more coffee professionals are pursuing the extreme and precise descriptions of coffee flavor, seeking and obeying the universal language of description, and looking forward to the unification organizations (the unification of Speciality Coffee Association of Europe SCAE and SCAA)²⁵.

The increasingly institutionalized definitions and categories of coffee flavor on the hand legitimize the coffee flavor mark that appeared on the specialty coffee bags, on the other hand constitute part of coffee professionals’ culture capital. Here “culture capital” refers to informal academic standards, tastes, educational certification, and technical expertise. Equipped with these professional knowledge and jargon, the specialty coffee roasters and retailers distinguish themselves from ordinary coffee drinkers who are not able to discern or talk about the discernment of coffee flavor. Here is what Bourdieu called “the binary oppositions that organize hierarchical tastes (e.g., between rare and common, brilliant and dull, light and heavy)” come into play (Bourdieu 1984: 468). Their familiarity with coffee flavor wheels and relevant lexicons enable them to join the club of coffee professionals and connoisseurs.

Bourdieu also points out that class hierarchies of taste are an unintended consequence of the rational cultivation of those tastes that are readily acquired and have purchase in one's social class milieu. Based on the difference of intentional

²⁵ Found out based on a podcast Scott sent to me.

and unintentionally, Bourdieu identifies elites who engage in consumption practices that reflect an ineffable sense of what is right, appropriate, and tasteful with petit-bourgeois habitus: conscientious "followers of fashion" who express a very studied approach to style and in doing so to seek upward mobility. In the case of the specialty coffee marketers, they are talking about taste deliberately not so much for the sake of following a consumption trend that represents higher class habitat, but to create and backup a new trend in coffee consumption. In order to make sure the creation of new consumption trend successful, they are trying to be inclusive rather than exclusive, as least on discourse level. As I presented in the following ethnographies, the specialty coffee marketers themselves while surrounded themselves with coffee professionals and coffee connoisseurs, when it comes to actually run their business, they are rather reluctant to make their business look or sound elitism.

Other than the scientific register in the professional space, the discourse of coffee flavor turns into the discourses of providing more choice for customers and celebrating personal palate or preference in the marketing and retailing space. While consuming coffee knowledgably is part of the Third Wave Coffee Movement's propose, the coffee roasting companies and cafes generally don't risk consumer loyalty to chase the latest fad by pushing their customers to appreciate coffee flavor in a precise scientific fashion and burdening them with excessive amounts of coffee information. It is ironic that while those coffee professionals go through such difficult and strict learning experiences to be able to discriminate, or at least

articulate, the subtle distinguished flavors in a cup of coffee, they are very tolerant of customers' insensitivity. Actually, they never would use the word of insensitivity or unlearned. Instead, they recommend costumers with/without coffee related knowledge should do whatever their sensory preferences tell them.

Tasting Good Coffee: Bow to Customers' Preference

The Third Wave encourages people to fully experience a cup of coffee instead of drinking coffee with milk and sugar. The tasting notes that appear on coffee bags are part of the encouragement. Especially in terms of single origin, light roasted coffee, the idea is to appreciate the uniqueness of the coffee grown in a specific microclimate and special soil, and taken care of by a group of farmers who have their life stories carried in coffee. In contrast, the old habit of adding milk or sugar is considered by many Third Wave baristas to undermine or disappoint the specialness and purity embedded in the coffee. As a person who did not grow up with coffee culture and can't take much (or a normal dose from an ordinary coffee drinker's perspective) caffeine, I would like to ask a seemingly ignorant question every time I talked to a coffee professional, "Should I add milk?" or "Does adding milk ruin the coffee flavor?"

Al and I were sitting outside at Colectivo Café on Humboldt Blvd. Humboldt Blvd is among one of the several gentrified, "nice" streets in the Riverwest neighborhood in Milwaukee, which means it is okay to live there and wander around. Riverwest is located west of the Milwaukee River. In Milwaukee, which is one of the most

geographically segregated cities²⁶ in the United States, crossing the river and going west means enter into a different world from the east side. As a residential neighborhood, Riverwest is a diverse and mixed community, mostly black and white. With its relatively affordable rent, Riverwest has been growing as a neighborhood for college students to reside in²⁷. Nevertheless, the neighborhood also invokes uncertain, edgy, dangerous, and sketchy feelings²⁸. As the process of gentrification moves along, on the edges of segregation, there are unique bars, cafes, shops, and art studios. Colectivo café is one of them.

Different from Stone Creek's endeavor of attracting potential customers by disseminating coffee related knowledge through factory tour, Colectivo employs a strategy that emphasizes the importance of visceral experience. The headquarter location of Colective coffee roasting company in Humboldt Blvd. has an open space for its roasting facility. Customers can drink a cup of coffee while watching coffee roasting process at the same time. It is not only that you can witness the multiple procedures of roasting and cooling coffee beans, but also if you sit by the bar facing the roasting area, you may as well feel the heat and hear the sound and rhyme of beans flowing out of the roasting machine and moving in the cooling tray. As put by the current vice president of Colectivo, "The space is just giving customers a chance to actually experience the process of roasting coffee, that coffee does not come from nowhere to end up in your cup."

²⁶ <http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2016/08/milwaukee-shows-what-segregation-does-to-american-cities.html>

²⁷ <http://onmilwaukee.com/myOMC/neighborhoods/Riverwest>

²⁸ <http://www.city-data.com/forum/milwaukee/106124-riverwest.html>

Al offered me a cup of coffee from the Democratic Republic of Congo named Kawa Maber, which is the name of the farm they featured in September. I looked at my coffee and asked, “This coffee from Congo is single origin right? Should I add milk?”

Al looked at my cup that has already had milk added and said,

The idea is that to really, fully experience a cup of coffee, it should not be added—any milk or sugar. When we evaluate the quality of coffees, we have a very specific ritual. We call it cupping. It is just the coffee nothing else, but ultimately a customer needs to drink coffee the way he or she wants it. So, I think no matter if coffee is blended or single origin, if customers want to add sugar or add milk, or add milk and sugar, that’s their right. We don’t tell them not to do that. I think in the Third Wave Movement, some cafes try to push their customers into this direction, pursue purity; or tell you, you can’t do this or you can’t do that, because this is the right way. We don’t do that.

Al’s answer makes me to question the offline existence of the Third Wave Coffee movement, because clearly the online community of coffee professionals provocatively claim to rewrite the history of drinking coffee, explore the potential of coffee itself, and teach people how to enjoy coffee²⁹. Therefore, I asked, “Is Third Wave a real thing?”

Al smiled and answered,

It is a real thing, because it generally describes companies like ours that approaches coffee in a similar way. But I feel like most time that term is manipulated, and people try to use it to their own advantage, or try to define it their way. We are Third Wave, you you and you are not. And it becomes very elitist. We’ve never been elitist. We want everyone to feel comfortable to come into our store and ordering coffee. We make the experience very approachable; we do not put coffee up on palate tone. We do not make coffee elite; we want our customers to discover very high quality coffee. We want them feel comfortable through it.

²⁹ <http://www.eater.com/2016/1/8/10733218/third-wave-coffee-history>
<https://www.craftbeveragejobs.com/the-history-of-first-second-and-third-wave-coffee-22315/>
<http://en.ilovecoffee.jp/posts/view/189>

Mickey added “Sometime it (Third Wave) is not even a positive word. You know people say that Third Wave baristas are too cool to make eye contact and talk. We should look coffee in an unbiased and scientific approach.”

While both of them do not want to judge or push other coffee drinkers to an “elitist” direction, they do suggest a hierarchy of drinking coffee in different ways.

Interestingly, they both use their mothers’ experience of drinking coffee as an example. Mickey said,

Before I started working in this company, my mom just had commercial coffee, pre-ground. After I was learning more at this café, she would ask, should I add milk, should I do this or that? I always say that do whatever you want but try it without milk or sugar first. Even nowadays, I would bring coffee back home, and she would say, ‘This is really good coffee, but I do add a little bit of sugar or milk to it.’ You’re gonna do whatever you want you know.

Al described his mother’s changing coffee taste from instant coffee to a special kind of coffee grown in a specific farm in Ethiopian, which then gets naturally processed.

My mother, when I grew up, drank instant coffee. That’s what I remember being in the kitchen when I was a kid. When I started working for Alterra³⁰, I would give my mom different coffee to try. She decided her favorite coffee is natural processed Ethiopian, particular from the east. These days it is pretty hard to find the specific coffee in US specialty coffee market. Most of it goes to Saudi Arabia, from what I’ve heard. I know exactly what kind of coffee she likes, very specific: one region, one process, in that one country. And she used to drink instant coffee back to eighties. So you see how a lot of people have evolved, even my mother, who did not grow up drinking coffee in China, or Taiwan, so and this is happening around the world. Specialty coffee movement is international.

The “evolution” from instant coffee and pre-ground commercial coffee to specialty coffee, for Al is an irresistible trend all over the world. People will drink specialty coffee as long as they have the chance to taste it. It does not require the coffee companies to push customers to try something they are not ready, instead

³⁰ Colectivo used to be called Alterra <http://colectivocoffee.com/alterra-now-colectivo-coffee/>

customers will be there eventually as long as more choices are provided. Similarly, when I asked Scott, “Does adding milk ruin a cup of good coffee?”

He answered,

Ruin is an aggressive word. Even when coffee has milk in it, it's still somehow unique. Some people also claim that the darker coffee is roasted, the less the coffee you taste it. I did this experiment with two kinds of dark roasted coffee. I took two single origin coffees: one from Sumatra, the other from Guatemala, both dark roasted and let people taste it. You can still taste the difference. If taste it side by side, people are very opinioned. To answer your question, coffee is not ruined; it is just different. Whether or not you like something, is relevant to what you compare to it.

After all, it is customers' coffee as soon as they buy it. Based on my conversations with other baristas and coffee roasters, there is a shared idea that even though coffee professionals they prefer black coffee, they are reluctant or refuse to employ a didactic position to tell customers how to appreciate coffee. They talked about the hundreds flavors embedded in a cup of excellent single origin, light roasted coffee during factory tour or on the website that introduces different kinds of coffee, but at the same time they claim to defer to customer's personal choice and individual palate. In terms of other coffee knowledge, especially coffee varieties and terroir, one of the coffee professionals confess that he is quite confident that there is a lot of interest for baristas to be that knowledgeable but customers don't care. He said,

No one is buying coffee, like they are buying wine but during the economic recession, this industry saw that people who drink specialty coffee may change the way they buy it during economic recession if their personal finance is not doing good. But normally they don't switch. They will not go to commercial coffee. So people who come to store everyday, may stop doing it. But they will buy the coffee and make it at home or at work.

The contradiction between professional sensitiveness and expertise on coffee flavor and customers' rather various and habitual taste is resolved by the discourse of providing more choices for customers to discover or explore. I asked Al, "As a customer, I feel it is difficult to describe the specific flavor that appeals to me, how do you then know which kind of flavor that customers will like?"

Al answered immediately,

Well, we don't. That's why we have different kinds of coffee we offer. Some people like blended coffee, but others like single origin. We have this kind of customers just decide a kind of coffee they like and they keep getting them. We also have customers like to try different things". He then raised his coffee cup and said, "What we are drinking now is coffee from Democratic Republic of Congo. It is a country that a lot of people—coffee drinkers—don't think of, because they never had coffee from there. They think war and violence when the country is mentioned and don't know that country that actually produces coffee. But, there is really good coffee from there. You never know whether or not you like it until you taste it. Palate is for everybody.

As Al said, "Palate is for everybody." However, not everybody buys fresh and expensive coffee beans or frequent specialty cafes. As put by Miller, "We are brought up with the expectations characteristic of our particular social group largely through what we learn in our engagement with the relationships found between everyday things (2005: 6). For frequent coffee drinkers, coffee is one the most mundane everyday things that have the power of social reproduction, however it appears idiosyncrasy and consequential, the consumption and appreciation of certain coffee flavor educates people into the normative orders and expectations of their society (ibid :6-9).

A single cup of specialty coffee is affordable for most people, an individual buying action does not necessarily associate with income level or class, but there is definitely a link between frequently consuming higher price specialty coffee and socioeconomic status. I did not cover enough customers' perspectives in this research, but I do see those professional knowledge is not commutated to the market as the form of neutral scientific knowledge, but contributes to the creation of "varieties" and aspirations. Roseberry argued, "Roasters and retailers are able to create criteria of variability and quality that are removed from the natural characteristic and qualities of coffee beans themselves" (Roseberry 1996:770). What I've noticed is that specialty coffee roasters and retailers not only continue their flexibility in creating more varieties and choices by roasting, blending, and brewing coffee beans in different ways, they also use their knowledge on the diversity of planetary feature to distinguish coffee through which the choices of end products are multiplied.

With little or no effort to acquire coffee knowledge, customers can still engage in active choice making, which Arjun Appaduria (1990) has called the fetishism of consumer... [where] the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser" (Appadurai 1990:307).

Incorporating temporality into the scenario, consumers as "choosers" are encouraged to participate in consumption exploration in a timely manner. As Al told me, Colectivo even has a coffee calendar.

We have opportunity to buy small volume coffee, higher quality, as higher cupping score, traceability, we know exactly where does it come from, we can tell the story

of the producers and I do a featured coffee every month. First week of the September, we have a blend called the endless summer. It was something we created just for that week. Sold it. It was gone.

Thus, the materiality of coffee flavor not only affords social reproduction through the distinction of tastes, but also by going back and forth between strictly scientific categories and subjective preferences invites consumers to upgrade their consumption habits and reshape their subjective as active choosers.

Roasting Good Coffee: Artisanal Exploration vs. Scientific Experiment

The second inconsistency is manifested in the sphere of roasting coffee. I noticed a similar statement on specialty coffee companies' websites, in which they emphasize the process of roast profiling. They object to using a single roasting procedure or automatically programmed roasting machine to roast different kinds of coffee in the same way. They represent the roast profiling process like a scientific experiment, which means to "let the coffee speak for itself." The limitation is that although a Q grader can tell you what a cup of coffee taste like, it is not possible to control the production or elimination of flavors through the process of roasting. It is a trial and error process to achieve a general balance of flavor.

I asked James, a coffee roaster, "why roasting profiling is important?"

He said that roasting profiling is a specialty coffee thing.

A lower quality espresso is better for something that add tones of milk to it. Someone is going to make really large 12 oz. latte and add chocolate, blueberry source to it, it does not make sense to use higher quality coffee with all those additives to the end product. To fix that, you kind want to use something have really bold flavor, dark roasted that cut through it, so it still has some coffee flavor in it." He paused for a while and continued, "To get some fruit and flower flavor out of

coffee that is not dominated by chocolate or smoke that sort of thing. That's what generally drives the roasting profiling."

Anthropologists studying other drinks, especially wine, have noticed that the focus on quality as opposed to quantity, as well as the value of artisanal production has become an important issue in the food and drink industry (Jung, 2016: 281). Based on the research I've done in coffee roasting companies, the term "artisanal" is rather used out of the historical context, when "artisanal" or "craft" conventionally refers to people's experience and skill before the pervasive use of machine. Chaia Heller (2007) notes, "*techne* (Greek word *technion* which is associated with the term *craft*) echoes with James Scott's *metis*, which he defines as local "premodern" forms of knowledge and practice often marginalized by modern state and capital formations (Ibid: 604). Nevertheless, the roasting machine is a crucial part in coffee roasting. Even though there might be an old good time of roasting coffee by hands, none of the specialty coffee companies will go down that road. The language of "artisanal" and "craft" emphasizes roasters experience and skills in controlling or monitoring a semi-automatic machine as opposed to the operation of completely automatic facilities.

Jason Antrosio and Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld's ethnography (2015) focuses on the artisans living in North Andes. They realize that while there is romantic imagination of artisans as those who do not work with industrial capitalism, in fact artisans have an intertwined relationship with risk, uncertainty, capitalism, and invasive trade (2015: 32). They ask, does a worker work on computerized sewing machines constitute an artisan? To solve this dilemma, they come up with several facets of

artisan work, which include artisans are members of household; they participate in cottage industry which gives them certain degree of autonomy; Their working skills are more important than their tools; They respond to the demands of tradition and community; Their products usually have underdetermined value (ibid: 33).

Compared with Andes artisans' work, these specialty coffee roasters' roasting practice has nothing to do with an artisanal labor. Their business is by no means based on households. Moreover, they even open up chains shops in nearby cities. Their roasting activity does not respond to any roasting tradition. There is not a so-called roasting community existing. Nevertheless, when it comes to the importance of the workers' skill, a coffee roaster does have to have relevant knowledge, skill and experience of roasting coffee beyond the part taken care by automatic machine operations. I think this is one of the most important reasons that these coffee marketers choose to use "artisanal" to describe their work. Using it can provoke some vague feelings of community, small scale, tradition, and authenticity, and more importantly, "artisanal" highlights their labor and skills that have been put into the production of a bag of coffee beans, which adds value to the commodity.

In popular culture, artisan are imagined by some people as a trendy prescription to fix contemporary capitalism, but in the scene of coffee roasting, it is just another label the marketers use to make their business look trendy and special. Thus, a bag of "artisanally" roasted beans bought from a specialty coffee store is distinguished from a jar of pre-grounded Folgers' coffee from supermarket. Consequentially,

customers who can afford and appreciate the unique, authentic, and artisanal production of specialty coffee is produced and validated by the marker “artisanal.”

“Can you get whatever flavor you want out of roasting?” I asked. James said, “The director of coffee usually decides what’s the company’s coffee is going to taste like. For example, directors of coffee in Starbucks they like it very very very dark roasted stuff. They feel the pressure from the specialty coffee industry and start some light roasted, call it blond or whatever, which is darker than anything we offer.”

I said, “So the difference between light or dark is based on time and temperature?”

James answered,

The main things are time and temperature but there are some other factor, like airflow through the roaster. You kind of think like grilling something, you can open up the ports, to let air flow, dry things up. You get caramelization of thing and get them sweetened. You can speed up or slow down the drum. The real science is that coffee has all those organic acid 380 different organic components, but these things change, when coffee gets heated at different levels, it breaks the molecular chains in different ways. If you are a hard-core chemist, you will have analytical account of the coffee before even roast it. Most people in this world do not have that kind of lab or knowledge.

It turns out the concept of “artisanal” roasting in the specialty coffee world is relative rather than definitive. It is difficult to discern how small the production scale should be and how much human control should be involved in the process to make it “artisanal”. As pointed out by Paige West, “Their roasting technique incorporates a unique ‘artisan’ form of labor that they argue is unlike that of corporate roasters”(2012: 248). The boundary between the dichotomy of artisanal and industrial made is never clear. The specialty coffee companies take advantage of the dichotomy not only by manipulating the concept of “artisanal,” but also through

describing their roasting machines and digital programs as “scientific” instead of “industrial.” As put by West, “The way the employees roast, and the way they talk about their roasting, adds value to the coffee” (ibid: 248).

The manifestation of manual brewing: Pour over

The process of providing more varieties for customers does not stop at roasting. In the following part, I present my participant observation at Valentine Coffee Company’s tasting room to further explore how the specialty coffee industry take advantage both from the preciseness of technology and the specialty of human beings’ operation.

After a quick trawl through the drink menus written on a blackboard right facing the entrance of Valentine’s tasting room and I pointed it and asked the young female barista, “What do you mean by ‘coffees brewed by the cup?’”

She immediately smiled and answered, “It shows all the coffees that are available now and we will use pour over cup to make it.”

After I paid the order of two cups of Bali Blue Moon at the right side of the bar, I stepped over to the left side to watch the process of pour over. For the sake of preparing and initiating conversations during research, I’ve watched more than 10 videos of pouring over on YouTube. I was expecting a conversation between me as a customer and the barista just like it shows in those videos. Besides, a three-minute pour over is really a long time to wait for a cup of coffee with a stranger in total silence. A male barista with bright curly hair seemed so concentrated on his work,

even though I really wanted to come up with some questions while he was rinsing the filter with hot water, I did not ask anything. Then he dumped that water and filled the Kone with freshly grounded coffee. After gently tapping the edge to even the bed, he poured about a small amount of water, perhaps 10 percentage of the total, evenly across the coffee, then he was just waiting. For about 40 seconds, I was quiet and invisible. Although it might have be a good chance to ask questions, I did not, maybe he was counting time, I thought. Also, I know this period of time is called “blooming” during which gases that built up during roasting are released, which means I have nothing to ask. Immediately afterwards, he continued pouring in a slow, circular, in-and-out motion for about one minute, then poured the rest of water directly into the Kone. I wondered who developed these procedures for baristas all over the world to perform in front of their customers. When my drinks were ready, another customer was stepping over to wait for a cup of coffee specifically made for him. With two cups of freshly manually brewed coffee in hand, I slowly walked toward my table. My friend glanced at me and asked since when did getting a cup of coffee become so complicated and awkward.

Pour over is a resurgence of manual brewing method initiating in specialty coffee shops. For customers who are used to choosing between a cup of pre-brewed coffee made by electric drip coffee makers and espresso drinks, waiting for a cup of manually and freshly brewed coffee does complicates the experience of drinking coffee. The process of waiting and witnessing in order to get a cup of coffee elongates and complicates the experience of buying coffee. You got a cup of coffee

made specifically for you and may never be duplicated, which sounds special; meanwhile in return you pay attention to how it is made and by whom.

The fascination with the manually made and craft always demand people's attention. Baristas who make pour over coffee fit into the picture of craftsmen. Baristas who identify themselves as coffee geeks are able to make a claim to have superior craft knowledge, consider themselves skilled workers, and take pride in their work. Part of their skill is displayed in their command of manually making a cup for an individual customer and sharing part of the power to control the quality of coffee making. At the same time, the specialty coffee companies emphasize the significance of giving customers more choices to explore and appreciate the once concealed "inherent truths about coffee, such as what's fresh, what are crop to crop variations... and what constitutes a real espresso extraction³¹."

Meanwhile, there is an opposite force out there that is trying to automate espresso making as much as possible. Third Wave Coffee participants usually accuse the major international coffee chains like Starbucks of using super-automatic machines that require little or no human effort or control. Third Wave Cafes' preference for artisanal roasting and brewing not only follows a tradition of gourmet production in the food and wine industry, but also converges with the hipsters who celebrate the escape from global brands and distinguish themselves from ordinary customers by seeking out better/special quality coffee. While it sounds attractive to have access to specially and freshly "hand-made" coffee, opponents may raise the point that

³¹ <http://coffeageek.com/opinions/bgafiles/04-02-2005>

automation both in tiny pod-based machines for home production and commercial machines that pump out multiple kinds of espresso drinks often produce more consistent coffees.

For me, the dichotomy between craftsmanship and electronic equipment only resides in rhetorical sense, which is not absolute. While manually brewing method requires more human control, it is by no means random or purely idiosyncratic. Almost all the specialty coffee shops or home brewers in the United States share a similar procedure of making pour over. The ratio of the amount of water to the amount of coffee to be used, the temperature of the water, and the interval time between three times pour are common knowledge shared among people who practice pour over. In a word, although it is the person who performs pour over, all the crucial factors including timing, temperature and ratio that may affect the flavor of a cup of coffee are measured. The measurement itself requires technical help for example a timer and a measuring glass. As put by Manning, in post-modern era, “Modernism itself is out of fashion, modernist technologies must be reassigned to the human world of artisanal craftsmanship to retain favors” (Manning, 2012: 56).

The resulting contestations over representing and making coffee that tastes good reveal how the specialty coffee companies manage the qualification of coffee’s materiality. The trend of standardization in the specialty coffee industry produces guidebooks for scientifically discriminating coffee flavors and roasting and brewing coffee under measured control. Through knowledge sharing and referring to the SCAA, individual specialty coffee company is able to validate and demonstrate their

professionalism. The professional talk adds to their ability and opportunity to create more varieties for costumers to choose. More importantly, the risk is minimal. If you would rather stick to your own choice, coffee professionals won't laugh at you, after all, your preference is the ultimate priority.

Chapter 4 Fair Feelings and Fair Trade

Fair Feelings

“I hope you enjoy the food and enjoy the baleadas³². I feel happy. I really appreciate this opportunity. For me it is the first time to meet customers directly and to understand more about the supply chain and understand the labor behind the coffee. All the teams here are important. For our community, we appreciate that you value the coffee; you are interested in knowing more about coffee. We are very proud. I enjoy all the cafes and all the universities here. Thanks for bringing me here.”

This is the opening remark made by Mr. Ormar. He is the general manager of Cooperativa Cafetalera Capucas Limitada (COCAFAL Cooperative) in Honduras, who was invited to Milwaukee by Colectivo Coffee³³. The event is called “Meet the Producer.” The poster at the Grind Café in our university library reminded me this event. When I rushed into the location, the room was half full. Under the dim decorative lights, people sat or stood around together chatting and laughing mostly with a cup of beer or coffee at hand. I found a table at the back of the room and sat down with other guests. A young white woman was sitting beside me, she was singing along the background music. I looked at her and asked her surprisingly, “Do you speak Spanish? You know this song!”

She smiled, still following the body swaying melody, and answered, “Yes, and I also know some of the people from Honduras. This is a very popular folk music. A lot people know it. What brought you here? Are you a food study student too?”

I replied, “Food study? No, I am studying anthropology. My thesis is about coffee”

³² Baleada is a traditional Honduran food. It is mashed fried beans folded by tortilla.

³³ See <http://colectivocoffee.com/meet-producer-omar-rodriguez-cocafal-honduras/>

“Oh, that’s great. The other girl came here because her professor will give extra credit if they come here. I guess she’s already left.”

I looked around and indeed noticed several student-like audience members. With more and more people coming, the line in front of the food-serving corner was getting longer. I asked my table companion, “I am going to taste some Honduras food. Anything I can bring back for you?”

“Yes!” she answered happily and advised me, “Bring the platanos fritos. It is the fried banana. And the baleadas!”

It was in this room full of cheerful and light-hearted music, delightful murmurs and the pleasant smell of coffee, Mr. Omar gave the speech I presented at the beginning of this chapter. His speech added even more joy to the already cozy atmosphere.

Although it is quite understandable for an opening speech to communicate appreciation and happiness, I am still surprised by the fact that Mr. Ormar’s speech is peculiarly harmonious with the registers through which roasters and retailers’ presenting their pleasant relationships with coffee farmers. The language of friendship, long term partnership, coffee passion, coffee pride, learn about the other half of supply chain and mutual support are so common in description made by coffee roasters and retailers during their interviews with me. It looks like the producer’s speech can be mutually utilized by both sides.

Before I went to this event, one of my friends,³⁴ also in anthropology has once asked me critically, “What do they mean when they say their business is ‘farmer focused’³⁵? What’s that supposed to mean for having direct relationship? Why it is always them go down there and have a good relationship with the farmers? Why don’t the farmers come and visit?” She encouraged me to tackle those questions during my research, “Ask them when you have the chance,” she said.

I did ask those questions several times, but not in as provocative a way. That’s actually how I knew this event at the first time. The answers are always similar: either people are too busy or the travel budget is limited. Immersed in anthropology, we ask the questions from a perspective that acknowledging the structural and historical inequality underneath the disparate mobility between farmers and retailers in the coffee industry. This perspective is often not realized when my informants answered my question.

Participant observing this particular scene, my concern is less about the disparate mobility existing between the coffee farmers in the global south and the coffee roasters and retailers in the global south, but what they do when they come to the United States, or what we are expecting them to do by questioning why we can't meet the producers? It is not likely that coffee farmers will bring us some shady truth about the unpleasant trading relationship they had with the exact group of people who invited them all the way to Milwaukee. That is exactly what I was

³⁴ She is Monique Hassman.

³⁵ “Farmer focused” is written on the coffee bag of Kickapoo Coffee

debating with myself when I stood up and asked the producer questions during the later Q&A session. I am aware that doing a research on the issue of specialty coffee market without actually going down to the production area makes it impossible for me to compare how the discourse or imagination of two sides are empirically different from each. Nevertheless, I do want to take this chance to get a glance of what's going on the other side in this occasion of "meeting the producer."

When it was my turn, I stood up, like others first thank him for coming and asked, "Do you like drinking coffee?" As soon as I asked the question, I began thinking I asked a rather simply or seemingly superfluous question. Why did I do that? I knew the answer. Despite the reality of whether or not he likes coffee, he was giving a talk inside a café and surrounded by coffee professionals and their families or friends, how could he say no?

There were some happy laughter and cheerful voices when the audience heard my question. One of them turned around and said to me, "That's a very good question."

"Yes, I like drinking coffee. I like it very much." Mr. Ormar answered, unsurprisingly.

People laughed again. Then the host from Colectivo grabbed the microphone and added, "I took him to many cafes in the city today. He enjoyed it a lot. He even tried nitro cold brew. He has a plane to catch tomorrow morning at 6:00. I am not responsible for that." Audience members laughed and applauded one more time.

After this short interaction, I kept thinking that I could have chosen to ask a more meaningful question, for example, asking him the difficulties the farmers have to

face to provide higher quality coffee, or raised the concern about what are the practical benefits of fair trade for him and the cooperative. Instead, I asked a question that only makes sense in terms of making the atmosphere even more pleasant. My concern was that people come here to have fun, meet new people, and enjoy food and drinks instead of listening to or thinking about some pessimistic or critical thoughts.

Actually, even during my face-to-face interviews with coffee roasters and retailers, I did not have the kind of deep discussions I expected with them on the ethical concerns embedded in coffee trading relationship. The concern is not so much about whether or not direct trade is actually fair trade, but whether or not and why a fair trading relationship is meaningful. Anthropologists who have done their research by following coffee from coffee farmers' hands to the market front point out the failure of fair trade as it fails to achieve its ethical promises and the whole system as a product of neoliberalism³⁶. What I've witnessed is the superficial claim of ethical commitment but rather the absence of talking about "good coffee" in ethical terms. There are multiple reasons or difficulties for me to efficiently deal with the social justice dimension of coffee trading in these conversations. One of the reasons struck me is the realization that I am reluctant or unable to dismantle people's narrative during immediate interaction, especially when they talk about their passion for

³⁶ Carolyn Fischer (2007) points out that fair trade promises a consumers-producers relationship that includes moral obligations. She refers to world system theory to argue that locating the relationship in contemporary global market which has been transferring surplus profit to core nations and declining terms of trade for primary commodity producers, consumers in global north do not need to have any actual obligation. In her ethnography, Paige West points out third-party regulatory systems export liberal morality and assume that coffee producers' ethics are the same as "ours" (Carrier 2010). In reality, it is the ultimate in contemporary capitalism, because it puts the burden of social and political structural change on the backs of individuals.

coffee, their love for coffee knowledge, and how interesting it is to travel to the origin to talk and work people there. One of them even made an analogy between his passion for exploring the coffee world and my passion of looking at coffee from an anthropological perspective.

I asked myself, why it is so hard to bring up ethical questions and introduce the instantiations of neoliberalism that are so thoroughly talked by anthropologists and other critical thinkers? David Harvey states that “neoliberalism... has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2007:3). He provides a historical perspective for understanding the origins and process of neoliberalism become hegemonic in our world. Paige West (2012) borrowed Harvey’s framework to analyze how the collapse of International Coffee Association which indicates the deregulation of global coffee market, has enabled the alternative nevertheless neoliberal regime of fair trade to come into being.

However, this historical and the global structural inequality perspective does not help me dismantle the face-to-face conversations with coffee professionals. It is not enough to only realize that the specialty coffee industry in which they work is made possible by and benefit from the neoliberal hegemony, which refers to the collapse of international coffee price regulation, the pervasiveness of privatization, and the rationality of market competition. Nevertheless, my question is how to critically engage with conversations that filled with language of passion for coffee, love for coffee knowledge, interests in traveling, and emphasis on coffee quality without sounding like me as the

anthropological researcher and they as coffee professionals live in entirely different worlds. The person-to-person conversations I've had with coffee professionals are the same ones that lead me to forget and downplay some other social relationships and inequalities in the coffee production chain. The discourse of taste, the social context where I conducted my fieldwork, and the specific atmospheres of these coffee shops actively coproduce class configuration by highlighting meaning of their effort, and neglecting meaning to others' contributions.

In fact, the language of passion for coffee, a person caring for another person, and the benign nature of knowing more about coffee itself is so powerful and overwhelming that makes me feel that raising the issues of the "coffee crisis"³⁷ and the global structural inequality looks like a hostile disruption. Sara Ahmed (2008) points out that it is very important to realize feeling as a narrative strategy with political affects and effects. Sophie Sunderland (2012) does her research on the ways in which the practice of direct trade between coffee roaster and coffee growers are represented on the websites of select western roasting companies. She suggests that the friendly and intimate narratives of direct trade experience across the globe between roasters and plantation owners despite vast distances and cultural difference are by no means superfluous but central to the way in which coffee is produced, represented, and consumed in western mass culture³⁸. She draws from

³⁷ What is coffee crisis, and when did it happen?

³⁸ No page number, because it is a webpage:

<http://journal.mediaculture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/473>

Ahmed's argument to conclude that, "The politics of good feeling is tied to colonial nostalgia³⁹. The direct trade (narrative) is haunted by discourse of colonization".

The narratives produced by coffee roasters and retailers usually focus on travel journals that highlight interpersonal relationships and telling family stories of individuals. Emotions and shared appreciation of food and drink are often underlined, while the broader cross-cultural context and power disparities are disarticulated or downplayed. In the particular social event, "Meet the producer," food and drink are freely served. People sat around small tables with a candle centerpiece, which created an atmosphere of comfortableness and refinement. The host introduced Mr. Ormar as the friend of Colectivo and warmly recalled their first encounter in Minneapolis twin cities during Specialty Coffee association of America annual meeting many years ago and talked about how he suggested Mr. Ormar to wear a jacket in the snowing April.

The narrative of their memorable encounter and the growing friendship tells a story about reciprocity and mutual benefit. This kind of personal story telling does not

³⁹ Sophie Sunderland uses the term "colonial nostalgia" in the context of culture study. She does not explain the particular historical and spatial contexts where the coffee related colonial nostalgia is shaped. In an anthropological sense, colonial nostalgia evokes a social memory of "distance and disjuncture and utilizes these diacritics of modernity as a means of critically framing the present" (Bissell, 2005:216). William Bissell (2005) points out that "the marketing of colonial chic", "recycling imperialism as the stuff of consumer desire" and "mass media's depictions of postcolonial Africa as a space of crisis and lack in the west are derived from the logic of colonial nostalgia (Bissell 2005: 217). The remark of "colonial nostalgia" is also related to Paige West (2012)'s critique on the specialty coffee roasters and retailers in the global north create virtual pictures of coffee farmers in Papua New Guinea as primitive and poor, which I will engage with in the second part of this chapter.

necessarily preclude the possibility of talking about the disturbing fact that for much of coffee's history, coffee-growing countries have been rural and illiterate while coffee-drinking countries and urban coffee-drinking intellectuals led the world into the Age of Enlightenment (Cowan, 2005; Topik, 2009). Nevertheless, it certainly predisposes the keynotes of what can or cannot be talked in such an event.

Nowadays, coffee enthusiasts' appreciation of long distance friendship, along with their fascination in brewing devices as part of the exploration of coffee connoisseurship (Manzo, 2010: 141) in privileged Western online and urban culture seem to intensify the existent gap. Sunderland sharply concludes that "Western mass cultural associations of coffee with ease, intimacy and pure intentions invite consumers to join a neocolonial saga through partaking in imagined communities of global coffee friends" (Sunderland, 2012).

From an anthropological perspective, Molly Doane (2010) in her work on the fair trade market in the U.S. Midwest makes a comparison of the structures that condition feelings between the global north participants and the global south farmers. She focuses more on the feeling of fairness than friendship. She draws attention to Raymond Williams (1975)'s analysis in *The Country and The City*. Williams points out the virtuous heroine regularly makes her charitable round of visits to the poor and needy, whereas those poor and needy are the renters and cottagers, and peasants who were dispossessed at the first place and now whose rents and taxes support the great houses in Eliot's novels. For Williams and Doane, "The sum of one's actions does not equal the structure. Good deeds do not make a

good society, but they do make up a structure of feeling in which each lived reality makes moral sense to each person” (Doane, 2010: 253).

As Williams explains, structures of feeling are “social experiences *in solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available” (Williams, 1997: 133–34). His use of “feeling”, as he explained is different from “more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’”(Williams, 1997:132). My understanding is that the significance of “structures of feeling” enable us to pay attention to “feeling” not as something purely subjective, particular, idiosyncrasy, immediate, and temporary, but should be investigated in historical, social, and structural terms. In the specialty coffee industry, the pervasive discourse of happiness, exploration and friendship used by coffee roasters and retailers, sometimes cooperative leaders, while looks like intimate and personal, conceal the broader inequality of power relationship both in the past and at the present.

For Paige West (2012), this kind of invitation of imagination is itself insidious: She uses her rich ethnographic account to demonstrate the social world of Papua New Guinean (PNG) coffee, which is messy and thick and complex. She argues, “Third-party certification and marketing strategies that rely on images of permissivity and poverty flatten the social world of PNG coffee to create value” (West, 2012: 239). In her critiques, she says, “The images of permissivity and poverty lowers expectations of what producers are entitled to receive, even under a fair trade” and “naturalizes the disparities of wealth not by denying them but by valorizing them” (West, 2012:

248). She concerns that this kind of message does not “create a desire among nascent socially conscientious consumers demand greater social justice but to satisfied in the knowledge that they have done their part to improve the world” (West, 2012: 248).

During my fieldwork among the coffee roasters and retailers, the invitation of imagination is not made through the valorization of coffee farmers’ poverty or primitiveness but through the telling of happy and cheerful stories. On occasions like “Meeting the Producer,” the stereotypical images of the poverty, violence, and crime in coffee producing countries can be temporarily alleviated. During the Q&A session, one middle age male audience member stood up and asked Mr. Ormar how he thinks about the violence and crime in Honduras and how it relates to his coffee business⁴⁰. Mr. Ormar took over the microphone and answered,

First thank you for hosting Honduras people. Our country has a lot of problem. For my generation, we are trying to fix that problem, try to change that situation. It's very difficult to try to impact the political system. We are no focused on it. Our place is pretty safe. We have beautiful place, beautiful people, great products; we only need opportunity to show that, to change that image. The county [Honduras] does not mind the bad news. There are countries that might have the same problems but they just hide. We unfortunately only have bad news. That's why it is very important for us to have relationship with Colectivo. That means alot. You are supporting the country. The name of the producers is on this bag (He pointed at the burlaps bags behind him as decorative background). Our name: Cooperativa Cafetalera Capucas Limitada (COCAFAL). We try to do the best. We have the validation from them, Colectivo. Every year they came. They see the difference year by year. We invest the money first to the family then to the facility, the farm... The farmers are not thinking about the market going up or going down, they are thinking about [if] Colectivo will buy their coffee next year if they have the consistent quality.

⁴⁰ The question is my own summary based on memory. The original question is much longer and the recording is not recognizable.

Mr. Ormar's answer does not explain how the situation in his country influences his business, but suggests that producing coffee could be way to overcome the negative images of their country and make a change. Planting coffee is not just a matter of personal or family accomplishment. "We live in beautiful place, have beautiful people but only lack of opportunity" is a very affecting and powerful narrative. It resonates with audience members' identification with their nationality and effectively inspires empathy and invite customers to imagine with him and to consume to make a change.

In the slow food movement, Carlo Petrini (2010) urges eaters and food producers to join together in food communities outside the usual distribution channels, which typically communicate little information beyond price and often exploit food producers (Petrini, 2010). "Food communities" in Petrini's sense is not physically local, but rather a local feeling. It means practicing local economics on a global scale, becoming neighbors with the producers living far away, and encouraging and enriching the kinds of information can be exchanged in the market transaction. While the information communicated by Mr. Ormar is very limited and what was said is also confined to the specific atmosphere of that event and short time, the event constitutes one of the effective channels.

Nevertheless, in my conversations with coffee roasters and retails, some of them are rather critical about the relationship or friendship they've built with the coffee farmers, which suggests "food communities" proposed by Petrini is idealistic. As a

coffee roaster and also a small farmer, James compared the difference between working in craft beer business and coffee business. He said,

It is a lot easier to have localized agricultural relationship. Coffee relationships are all long, long distance. You know the coffee growing regions are so far removed from Wisconsin. Whereas in craft beer business, I can pretty much go and meet farmers as often as I want to meet people who are creating ingredients. Especially in Midwest, it is in our backyard. I did get to go two trips to the origin of growing coffee, which is great. I met with the farmers and talked with farmers but there is always this language barrier. I am sure you are familiar with. You know you just miss out a lot of things. I know a little bit of Spanish, but I don't know enough to catch jokes or other nuances. Most of my vocabulary would be industrial specific. Like what kind of coffee you grow this year, and how many acres there are this sort of thing. I don't know it is not fulfilling enough to feel like you are building a long-term relationship. You are losing something. People like to talk about this relationship thing. You buy a lettuce; they will let you know who grew this thing. It is selling a relationship. It makes consumers feel better about our consumerism. If we feel we are connected to some people in the other end, I think that help us validate how much we consume. That is not like it is the agenda that's just the process.

James considers the highlighted relationship between coffee buyers and coffee farmers as a form of “selling relationship,” whereas thinking that working with local farmers in craft beer business constitutes more fulfilling relationship. His comments suggest that the so-called friendship in coffee trading is different from the friendship that one would expect in real life.

As one of the pioneer third wave coffee companies in Midwest, Intelligentsia identifies itself as direct trade. “Direct” for them means that “there must be a true and tangible relationship between the growers of the coffee and Intelligentsia. A couple of emails and a phone calls just won't cut it. We usually visit every farmer or cooperative at least three times per year: before harvest to plant, during the harvest

to monitor quality and after harvest to recap and celebrate the successes” (Intelligentsia Coffee 2008). For James, visiting the coffee farmers three times per year does not necessarily constitute a “true and tangible relationship”; it is what you communicate, how often and how well you communicate with each other matter most in a connection.

Fair Trade vs. Direct Trade (Fairer Trade?)

As put by the event host, “Meet the Producer” was happening in a special month, October, which is the month of fair trade. It is noticeable that even though the company engages in fair trade, they do not emphasize a lot on explaining what fair means, instead they end up demonstrating their direct relationship with the coffee farmers. While in some other coffee roasting companies, direct trade is part of their most important branding strategy, which appears both on their websites and also on their bagged coffee products.

Julia Smith (2010), by looking at the general trend of fair trade market and specialty coffee market, suggests, “The fair trade market has effectively come to be part of the specialty coffee market, adopting its quality standards. At the same time, the fair trade market has influenced on the terms of trade and the rhetoric of the specialty coffee market”(Smith, 2010:28). In the following part, I will clarify the definitions of fair trade and direct trade and consider how they are related to the specialty coffee market in general. Following Smith, the incongruences between activism fair trade and market-oriented fair trade are not my major concerns, so I will not talk about the success or failure of fair trade in terms of fulfilling its ethical promises. Instead,

based on my ethnographic research among coffee marketers and retailers in the Midwest of the United States, I pay attention to how those actors manipulate and utilize the conflicts as well as the overlaps between different kind of trading mechanisms and discourses to their advantage “in the marketplace of coffee rather than the marketplace of ideas”(Smith, 2010: 28).

My research shows that both in fair trade and direct trade, coffee quality become the inarguable baseline in the specialty coffee market. For me, this quality orientation does not only demonstrate the inequality in coffee market between coffee farmers and coffee marketers and consumers in the global north, but also reveals the pervasive rationality of neoliberalism. Trading relationships in the specialty coffee market are more and more depending upon whether or not coffee famers can provide high quality coffee. Thus, coffee farmers are subjected to open competition, in which successful farmers are identified through their qualified product and get sorted out by green coffee buyers who work in the specialty coffee industry in the global north. No matter how the specialty coffee roasters and retailers describe their relationships with farmers, successful trading relationships only refer to the successful deals which both sides of the participants survive market competitions.

On the website of Fair Trade USA, fair trade is defined as such:

Certified products were made with respect to people and planet. Our rigorous social, environmental and economic standards work to promote safe, healthy working conditions, protect the environment, enable transparency, and empower communities to build strong, thriving businesses. When you choose products with

the Fair Trade label, your day-to-day purchases can improve an entire community's day-to-day lives ⁴¹.

This is a rather activist version of the definition, which highlights the intention of fair trade. The intention is to use voluntary regulation system to “re-embed global agriculture- a set of commodity circuits that have become ecologically and socially destructive in a set of equitable and sustainable social relationships” (Raynolds, 2000: 29). Fair Trade International, which is another third party organization, defines fair trade as an alternative trade distinguished from conventional trade, from which “farmers can sell on fair trade terms, it provides them with a better deal and improved terms of trade. This allows them the opportunity to improve their lives and plan for their future⁴².” Based on those two definitions given out by fair trade third party organizations, fair trade in theory promises to correct the impersonal exchange dominating the global commercial market and allows for the negotiation of value and price between producer and consumers (Doane, 2010: 229).

Before the fair trade market came into being, the majority of small coffee farmers had to compete with large corporations in the conventional coffee market, in which the prices are set through a small number of well-organized commodity markets (the most important is in New York), in which sales of coffee and coffee futures were traded on the large scale. In this market, coffee was largely treated as a uniform good, with only minor differences in price based on the type of coffee, its country of

⁴¹ <http://fairtradeusa.org/what-is-fair-trade>

⁴² <http://www.fairtrade.net/about-fairtrade/what-is-fairtrade.html>

origin and the altitudes at which it is grown and the amount of damage to it (Smith, 2010: 32). Now there are still large amount of low or medium quality coffee traded through this channel. With the proliferation of specialty coffee companies in the global north, more and more coffee farmers participate in the specialty coffee market where they can get higher price for their products.

In practice, the “social, environmental and economic standards” is guaranteed by third party certification organizations that have the authority to decide whether or not a coffee produce cooperative can be certified as fair trade. As Al explained the mechanism of fair trade to me, he said,

Fair trade is a certification that only applies to coffee cooperatives. Cooperatives have to go through a process to get certificated. The system guarantees a certain price. You can go above but not below that level. We do fair trade. We pay a fee for that⁴³. If we do not pay the fee, we can still buy coffee from a fair trade system, but we can't label it. So, some roasters use the label. Others don't but maybe they still buy the coffee from fair trade cooperatives. Fair trade cooperative may not sell any of their coffee under fair trade system. They can sell whatever price the commercial market has.

I asked, “Does that mean people who do not go through Fair Trade USA to get a fair trade license but buy coffee from a certified cooperative, they are still practicing fair trade?”

Al answered,

⁴³ Fair Trade USA is the leading third-party certifier of Fair Trade products in the United States. The Fair Trade certification model is designed and audited to ensure equitable trade practices at every level of the supply chain. To earn a license from Fair Trade USA to use the Fair Trade Certified™ label on their products, companies must buy from certified farms and organizations, pay Fair Trade prices and premiums and submit to a rigorous supply chain audits. This process entails a high level of transparency and traceability in their global supply chains. Today, our partner companies range from small, mission-driven coffee roasters to some of the largest transnational corporations in the world. See <http://fairtradeusa.org/certification>

Yes. In the specialty coffee industry, some people do not like the concept of fair trade as a certification. Direct trade emerged as a response to fair trade. A lot of it has to do with financial problems. We can go to the farmers directly and we can negotiate a price too. You can do both (fair trade and direct trade). You can have direct relationship with a fair trade organization. We do. But we don't need to call it direct trade. It is a third wave thing that says that it is better than fair trade. It is more complicated than that. There isn't right or wrong way to purchase coffee. They are trying to make customers think this is good or bad, black or white.

I commented, "So the basic difference between fair trade and direct trade is that whether not you pay the license fee for a fair trade label."

Mike, who joined the conversation later, said, "Our fair trade can also be called direct trade too. It depends on how you advertise it. We do not advertise it, because we've done it for so many years. It just like it is relationship. We know what they have. We go down there frequently."

For Al and Mike, fair trade or direct trade are just two ways of buying coffee. As Al said, "There isn't right or wrong way to purchase coffee". The proliferation of fair trade and direct trade, help those relatively smaller-scale coffee roasting companies locate and secure their supply and provide higher quality inventory. Doane has pointed out that from a political economy perspective fair trade markets are a "a complex and well-organized system of privatized regulation that help to stabilize the smallholding coffee sector as well as the world' supply of gourmet coffee"(Doane, 2010:229). It is true that fair trade as a market mode can give some coffee farmers better price for their product, nevertheless, it is also important to realize that the existence of the small scale farms and the multiple trading relationship makes relatively small scale of specialty coffee roasting and retailing possible.

Based on our conversations, it shows that fair trade market is not the only approach to “stabilize the smallholding coffee sector as well as the world’ supply of gourmet coffee.” Direct trade, as part of Third Wave Coffee’s proposal, is getting more and more attention. Some coffee companies practicing fair trade at the same time claim that their relationships with coffee farmers are by no means less direct and they just don’t market it.

I asked people who are in charge of coffee companies practicing direct trade what they do when they say they are doing direct trade. They are also aware that the term of “direct trade” does not have an unambiguous definition. The suggestion is that the company should be able to explain to its customers what it is when the question is raised. James told me what they generally do when they go down to the producing regions,

We go to the farm every year. Most time we talk with them about the quality, like coffee was much better this year than last year, what did you do about it. Do you have any barriers that keep you from doing things better? What can we help? Sometimes it is a small piece of equipment. In Ecuador, imported stuff is very very heavily taxed. So we buy something here and send it down there. It is a lot easier for them to alleviate their difficulties this way. That’s part of the advantage of going down there. But there are also limitations. How many trips can you afford to do each year? It is about time and economics.” He paused a little bit then added, There isn’t any industrial standards for that terminology (direct trade). Some companies use the term more loosely than others. It is up to the consumers to go to the café and ask the baristas, Hey your product says direct trade on it what exactly are you doing?

While certain companies do not do fair trade, they all know fair trade is an option and they admit that they do buy green coffee beans from fair trade cooperatives but they do not necessarily go through the process monitored by a third party organization. The bookkeeping record procedure is actually missed in the process. I

talked to Matt who also works for the same company and asked him, “Why don’t your company do fair trade?”

Matt answered,

There is a corporation. I believe it is called Fair Trade USA or something. They sort of bought the name fair trade in the U.S., so if you want to have fair trade, you have to pay them to do it. We refuse to do it. We don't like it to become kind of monopolized terminology. But we buy fair trade coffee, more than 95%. Another reason is that fair trade is a little murkier. For example organic is controlled by the US Department of Agriculture, so there is a lot of infrastructure and bureaucracy to police that. Same thing does not exist on fair trade. Fair trade is great. It can be better. For better, I mean more money. Fair trade decides the lowest price of coffee is 1.6 dollar per pound. We pay more than that. If that's the case, it is not necessary to pay the fee to get a label.

I asked Matt, “Does that mean you’d rather call your trading relationship as direct trade?”

Matt gave me a complicated answer. He said,

The direct trade thing is also more complicated than what people tell you, because the type of coffee farmers go on a broader spectrum. Some of them are very savvy business people who do not live a stereotypical farmer's life. Once you say direct trade, people quickly go down that road of thinking you meet with people who don't have a TV, who need to walk miles to get on a phone. You know what? A lot of farmers, they do roast their coffee, they do analyze their coffee just the same way as we do. Because they know that will give them the competitive edge. Those farmers are very successful. There are other farmers too. Then it comes the joy of finding great coffee that's unknown of. I am totally imagining. There is maybe some sense of selfishness in a green buyer. That joy of oh man! I just find this person's coffee! It's amazing! I am going to make him famous! That does happen.

Here, Matt actually points to two stereotypical imaginations that are associated with direct trade. The first imagination is what Paige West called the virtual image of primitive farmers. This kind of imagination implicitly suggests that the project of social justice can be simply accomplished by the coffee roasters and retailers going

down there and making a deal. The second imagination is associated with the romantic and cheerful journey of coffee buyers, who explore the unknown specialty coffee that is so obscure and unique, which added more exchange value to their product and personal esteem to her/himself.

James explained to me,

We don't call it fair trade or direct trade. Isn't the point is to have connection with farmers? That's what we do. One of the bigger reasons to work with small farmers is to make living condition better for rural famers. People who operate in smaller scale agriculture, the struggle could be to make the choice of which kids get to go to school. We have seen farmers who grow hector by hector down in South America. While some farmers inherit a large chunk of land, they start looking at yields, spreadsheets, and numbers, and less attention to organic method. Same here. In southwest Wisconsin, that's kind of farmers we are trying to support too. People buying eggs, try to get them from smaller operation. For one, it is easier to have a relationship, compared with buying from a huge-out of state-operations. They may have tendency to pollute or exploit their labor force and all sorts of things, but we don't know. The biggest reason is that smaller scale agriculture produce better product.

I told him my concern, "I would think in terms of quality, bigger farmer has more standardized consistent products. Small farms can be very fragile when the plants have disease. They may end up producing poor quality coffee."

James said,

Probably. This is the good thing for them to be in a fair trade cooperative. If one smaller farmer yields poor quality, they can pull up better quality coffee from other members from the coop to homogenize a larger blend. All specialty coffee is rated 80-100 points. Let's say some of the farmers are sending coffees lower than 80 points, to blend with many other farmers' coffee. The mix probably would be 83 or something, which still meets the requirement of contract. This allows some farmers to have problem. They may not get paid as same as farmers who are doing well. Different coops have different mechanisms on how the farmers are going to be compensated. The Beautiful thing about fair trade is that when there are people have difficulty, they are still be able to sell their coffee as specialty coffee. Whereas

selling coffee on their own, they will have to sell it on commodity market. It is just not a feasible pursuit for small scale farmers, because that price is dictated by the commodity market on New York and will fluctuate up and down that will bankrupt people.

Since James mentioned the requirement of the contract, I asked, "Is there an obligation to establish long term relationship with coffee farmers? Something like even though the coffee is bad this year, you are still going to buy it. "

James relied,

There isn't any obligation, neither in fair trade nor in direct trade. We sign contract with farmers for one agriculture year. I know, it doesn't look like a lot of long-term relationship there. But what we plan to do is to set a minimal price for 2.6 dollars per pound. We guarantee we will not buy coffee under that price. In the specialty coffee business, we've developed long-term relationships. It is not on the contract, but we are going to support you. If quality comes into lower than expected, we will deal with it. It is a mutual understanding we will buy your coffee regardless of what happened next year. We can also negotiate the price. We will pay a quality incentive more than the price written on the contract. Whatever they put effort into their farms; we will give them more money. If we can actually taste the differences in quality, it helps us to invest more on their farms and to have better living condition for rural folks.

James's account on how they trade coffee with coffee farmers and why they support small farmers shows that the informal forms of fair trade are taking place in the specialty coffee market. Specialty coffee roasters and retailers use some of the standards set by fair trade to set up and talk about their trading relationship. The most obvious standard is the minimal price paid to coffee farmers. In terms of long term relationships, some specialty coffee companies tend to elaborate it and use it as a branding strategy, while others consider it as a quite natural thing in doing coffee business. After all, the supply chains of coffee connect many people. No one is moving around like totally free agents.

However, it is very important to realize that the long term relationship and consistent cooperation is built upon the premise that coffee farmers will provide consistent qualified coffee every year. As Mr. Ormar put it, “The farmers are not thinking about the market going up or going down, they are thinking about Colectivo will buy their coffee next year if they have the consistent quality.” Benoit Daviron and Stefano Ponte (2005) argue that instead of interpreting the phenomenon as simply a disparity in who controls market share, it is better understood in terms of the ability to “define the ‘identity’ of a coffee in other words to set the language and the reference values that determine production norms and quality standards” (Daviron and Ponte, 2005: xvii). The power to identify and qualify good coffee certainly resides at the hand of coffee roasters and retailers in the global north. As I analyzed in the previous chapter, consumers are now provided the choices of hundreds of combinations of coffee variety, origin, brewing, and grinding methods, flavoring, packaging, “social content”, and ambience. Those choices are made possible not so much by coffee variations provided by coffee farmers but by coffee roasters differentiating and creating products for micro-markets over such attributes as nuances of flavors, roast intensity and brewing facility and method.

According to Julia Smith (2010), in the early days, the fair trade coffee market, which was mostly organized around outlets with a special concern for social justice, such as food cooperatives, church organizations, and the like, did not compete directly in the specialty coffee market. Coffee quality was not a major concern. These initiatives aimed to draw coffee consumers mainly from the conventional coffee

market; people who might otherwise buy inexpensive supermarket coffee could be convinced to buy fair trade coffee for altruistic reasons. However, it became clear that fair trade now is more and more overlapped with the specialty coffee market, where coffee quality is the center of the conversations (Smith, 2010: 29). Instead, Fair trade's concern with social justice and coffee farmers' wellbeing plays an important role in diversifying the choices provided to consumers. Fair trade, then served as an introduction to the business, quality, and flavor demands of the specialty market for many groups of small producers, while helping small coffee roasters to find a market niche (Smith, 2010: 34). The specialty coffee market demands considerably higher quality coffee than the conventional market: defects of processing must be essentially nonexistent and the coffee of high drinkability. One of the coffee retailers, Matt, criticizes the so-called long-term business relationship, he said, "For a lot of people doing direct trade, their major thing is the cupping quality. If the producer they had direct relationship with is having a bad year. Direct trade people will say, this coffee is not good. I will not buy it. What kind of relationship is that? You base your reputation exclusively on quality. You have to sacrifice a relationship to maintain your reputation."

After our conversation, Matt reminded me,

Keep in mind, everything I know is biased. I am part of the specialty coffee industry. I got to travel a lot. As far as I know, specialty coffee is only a small part, either you do fair trade or direct trade. You do a direct trade with a mill you get high quality coffee. They may also work with Starbucks. A lot of coffee went that way. Farmers bring 100 pounds cherry, the mill sort out through the machine. Too big, too small that coffee is sold as not specialty coffee. The average farmers are connected to an organization, cooperative, a mill. A mill is the really important organization. The farmer gets the check from the mill. A really mill will take interest

in the community. If I am the mill, you are the farmer. I may say to you that hey Yang, your coffee is pretty good, maybe next time try some other techniques. I can get you one dollar a pound. Once there is more effort on quality, things changed.

Both fair trade and direct trade utilize or emphasize friendship, long-term relationship, happiness, and partnership to describe their trading relationship. Fair trade says they are direct, the direct trade also concerns whether or not it is fair. All of the major concerns come back to coffee quality. Nevertheless, the strength of the relationship in this interaction is closely linked to the meeting of clear conditions and expectations in terms of identifying quality of coffee.

Producing high quality and certified coffee requires excessive daily attention and labor. Meanwhile the quality of coffee is quite sensitive to nature disasters that can easily out farmers' control, which ends up with shrunk production and poor quality of coffee beans. It is easy to envision a win-win situation where retailers gain market expansion and farmers earn more by selling high quality beans. It is still unknown who are going to take responsibility when the risk comes since the cooperation is rather voluntary than obligatory.

Coffee farmers either in fair trade or direct trade, as long as they want to sell their coffee in higher price in specialty coffee market, they have to maintain and improve their coffee quality to enable the developments and rewards of a long-term relationship. Putting quality at the center of trading relationship may make people on the advantaged side indifferent to loss and failure. It does not mean the long-term partnership is fake, but the discourse of treating of coffee growers as partners or friends conceal the unequal foundation that makes this relationship possible. As

Carolyn Fisher (2007) pointed out, any good analysis must not be complicit in the ways that the language of equality, partnership, and mutual advantage so common in descriptions made by fair traders are obscuring these power gaps in the current fair-trade (2007:78).

Despite the power disparity, another striking fact is the discourse congruence between coffee farmers and coffee marketers when they talk about trading relationships. They both talk about their relationships with each other in the terms of interests, desires, and aspirations rather than through rights and obligations. The language of interests, desires and aspirations used by both marketers and producers in the “meet the producer” event is highly individualized and it helps to coproduce a harmonious atmosphere. Nevertheless, it conceals the disjuncture of inequality and legitimizes a trading mechanism that circumvents any serious ethical concerns.

Meanwhile, this rationality renders the coffee farmers who suffer economic difficulties due to nature disasters and plant diseases invisible. Their failures would be understood in purely market terms such as they fail to provide qualified product to stay competitive. Thus, fair trade and direct trade are simply considered as two different ways of trading to be chosen from by participants. Marketers can choose whatever trading relationship is more suitable or convenient for them without acknowledging the fundamental difference in ethical concerns.

Simply opposing neoliberalism as ideology or pointing out its various failures as policies does not actually transform the problematic social relationships.

Neoliberalism here is not only hegemony, but also a common sense located in

quodidian experience. The overwhelmingly discourse of interest, passion, and exploration I encountered in my research sounds so powerful and indisputable, because it seems there is nothing wrong to talk about their personal work in coffee business in such terms. Looking back at the many conversations I've had with specialty coffee marketers in Milwaukee, I realized the struggle is not on whether or not the discourse of aspirations are superficial or fake, but on what are the conditions that enable this discourse and what is left out or concealed by this way of thinking and talking.

Scott told me, "Storytelling is enjoyable. People want to know it when coffee is connected to some back stories which are similarly nice." It is true. Even as a researcher, an outsider, I am not willing to disrupt the pleasant storytelling process. However, the main takeaway for me is that good feeling can be mystified as good deeds. As put by Doane, the sum of one's action does not equal the structure of feeling in which each lived reality makes moral sense to each person (Doane, 2010: 253). For customers who were not aware of the living conditions of people who work and live in coffee origins, talking about direct relationship of trading may invoke their empathy and initiate the reconsideration their relationship with coffee, the mundane daily necessity. However, the limitation is that there are not failed coffee farmers in the pleasant stories of coffee trading. The main theme is that coffee farmers work hard, produce excellent coffee beans, and they get paid and they are happy. Who are going to tell other stories about failures and sufferings, and who are going to listen? Perhaps, the first step is to take seriously the effectiveness and pervasiveness of neoliberal rationality on the ground and in the grounds.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

Before I dived into my fieldwork and conducted this research, one of my friends said to me, “Coffee is the world's second most valuable traded commodity, and the first is petroleum.” During my research, I kept returning to the sentence and tried to figure out what it means to study a commodity that involves so much money, travels extremely long journeys, and finally ends up in a cup that we put our hands around it.

Igor Kopytoff (1984) talked about commodification as a process that manifested in the cultural biography of things. He argued that the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process, which means commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing (ibid: 64). He proposed that studying the biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure (ibid: 65).

My ethnography tries to figure out what kind of thing coffee is by looking at a section of coffee's biography produced by a specific group of people. This biography is largely told and shaped by specialty coffee roasters and retailers in the marketing front in Milwaukee. Specialty marketers' account of coffee, due to its goal of expanding publicity is not concealed or obscured, instead, they try to reveal as much as they can to their customers about their versions of coffee biography. However, the information get highlighted and revealed in this biography may get left out in other accounts, and information that is left unsaid or unimportant can constitute important parts in other coffee biographies. Thus, it is important to listen to and

compare multiple coffee biographies made by different groups of people and produced in different social context.

The three body chapters of this thesis cover three perspectives of making coffee's biography: knowledgeable coffee, material coffee, and relational coffee. These three perspectives converge in the specialty coffee industry's constant emphasis and the most outstanding theme, which is to provide costumers with high quality coffee. I use the phrase "high quality coffee" and "good coffee" interchangeably. Although the Specialty Coffee Association of America has protocols for scoring coffee quality technically based on calculating the percentage of coffee defects and discriminating refined coffee flavors, when it comes to the world of selling coffee and drinking coffee, good coffee requires and indicates more than technical standards and professional jargon.

I did not situate my study in the broader social movement such as alternative food movement and fair trade movement, first because my interlocutors do not often talk their business and work in these terms. When they talk about fair trade and "Farm to Cup" initiatives, they are not trying to cope with consumers' demanding on ethical consumption and the authenticity of food (drink). Instead, these specialty coffee roasters and retailers, as businessmen and entrepreneurs act like brokers and pioneers who advertise higher quality coffee. Their qualification of good coffee is influenced by the broader context of fair trade and Third Wave Coffee movement. After they manipulated the information to their advantage, they claim to educate

and introduce it to consumers, which actively shapes the local coffee consumption scenarios in Milwaukee.

As put by Daniel Miller, *The social life of things* plotted a trajectory for things in their ability to move in and out of different conditions of identification and alienation (Miller, 2005:7). In my case study, coffee and its material core flavor does not move in and out of different conditions exclusively based on its material affordance. Rather, specialty coffee roasters and retailers play an important role in intervening and manipulating the whole process, if not wholly controlling it.

Both the factory tour I presented in Chapter 1 and the “Meeting the Producer” event in Chapter 3 suggest that the specialty coffee roasting companies in Milwaukee are aware and influenced by the discourses and critiques of the alternative food movement and fair trade movement. Nevertheless, as I presented in previous chapters, the concerns of social justice in coffee trading and the representations of their long-term relationship with coffee farmers ultimately are used to make the point, *we are able to provide consumers with high quality coffee*. Quality brings together the marketing efforts, including demonstrating coffee knowledge through coffee factory tours, supporting flavor categories by referring to sensory science, making flavors by highlighting the roasting and brewing process, and using direct relationship to guarantee high quality raw material of coffee.

Thinking as an ordinary customer, all these activities make sense and secure a clear and pleasant account of coffee. Nevertheless, a good story is neither true nor complete. I realize the coffee biography which I have access to and documented is

partial and biased, so it is very important to refer to other anthropologists' work located among coffee farmers communities. Their observations and conversations with farmers provide a different picture and a different biography of coffee and enable me to figure out what is missing in my setting and what reasons are behind the absence without visiting coffee farms and talking with farmers in person.

One of the central concerns of critical ethnographies based on the communities of coffee farmers is that whether or not fair trade can fulfill its ethical promise of bringing social justice, equality, and sustainability in the global market. Sarah Lyon (2014) has pointed out that political empowerment, social justice, and environmental resilience are increasingly upheld alongside flavor and quality as criteria for good foods. Those ethical concerns are often brought up with the expectation to fortify direct social and economic connections with people across their geographic region (Lyon, 2014: 60).

In theory, in both the alternative food movement and fair trade movement, consumers are educated about the producers of their coffee, and this new information supposedly leads to a relationship between consumers and producers that includes moral obligations (Lyon, 2014: 81). Nevertheless, anthropologists point out that in this ideal picture, consumers do not have to have any commitment or obligation. For Paige West (2012), the specialty coffee industry instead of working as a corrective to neoliberal changes, is the product of deregulation and the neoliberalization of the global coffee market. Even worse, the creation of stories and virtual images of coffee producers build a rather superficial and insidious

connection between consumers and producers without actually promoting and achieving mutual understanding.

My research focuses on the middleman, specialty coffee roasters and retailers. What is their role in building relationship between producers and consumers? Does their location in the middle of coffee production chain contribute to the superficial connections between consumers and producers? As I presented in previous chapters, for these coffee roasters and retailers in Milwaukee, knowing the producers is just a small part of their project of making potential consumers. In other words, instead of representing farmers, they prefer to represent themselves and make sure costumers understand and appreciate their effort and value of roasting and brewing coffee.

During my research, I experienced the incommutability between a Marxist understanding of the specialty coffee market and a marketer's perception of market is real and vivid. The difficulties I encountered during my fieldwork in terms of trying to bring ethical concerns to marketers' narrative of coffee trading tell me that there are indeed multiple biographies of coffee coexisting but they are in conflict with each other and caught up in the intersection of power. More importantly, the more popular ones win the market.

From a background that lacks a strong coffee culture, I started my research with a simply question: What is meant when people say "This is good coffee"? This question sets a material tone for my research. While my ethnographies are based on conversations that I've had with specialty coffee roasters and retailers, these

representational accounts are made possible and get specified by the very materiality of coffee flavors. The tastefulness of coffee flavors is not merely marked as descriptions or representational categories. They always invoke people's tasting memories and expectations. Coffee flavors are powerful because it seems so natural and mundane that we do not see them as socially consequential (Miller, 2005:6).

After going through anthropological literature on coffee trade and semiotics of food and drink, I was prompted to reformulate my question to "How do the specialty coffee companies in Milwaukee actively manage the qualification of good coffee?" I focus on the making of coffee biography by specialty coffee roasters and retailers. After I explored the processes and means of this production of qualification, I talked about what are the social consequences of this particular version of cultural biography for coffee.

I used Michel Callon and his colleagues' framework of "the economy of qualities" to dismantle corporations' marketing strategy. The concept of "detachment" which refers to that in order to win the market competition, companies need to constantly detach consumers from the product "by getting consumers to re-qualify the different products offered to them is particular useful (2011: 205). I showed how the specialty coffee companies detach coffee consumers from their previous experience of consuming coffee by inviting the consumers to participate in coffee factory tours and public events such as "meet the producer" and "public cupping". These events are designed to show the companies' effort and professionalism in making good coffee. These occasions also provide opportunities where customers can be

informed and acquire new languages to categorize the products they may encounter. Through this process, consumers' understanding of and attachment to coffee as a mundane daily necessity can be upgraded. In other words, consumers are exposed to multiple distinctions: "blends" vs. "single origin," "direct trade" vs. "fair trade," "drip coffee" vs. "pour over," and "dark roasted" vs. "lightly roasted." These distinctions become new standards to help them discern and select their preferable coffee. These knowledge, categories, and distinctions are by no means neutral. They are one of the central pieces that constitute social reproduction through building the distinction of taste. In my case study, social reproduction does not only happen or get revealed in the sphere of consumption. In the marketing section, social reproduction is promoted and intensified by the ideology of consuming coffee knowledgeably and imbibing coffee knowledge by participating in public events and coffee classes. These events are both inclusive and exclusive. It is inclusive because the factory tour and the "meeting the producer" event are aimed to get people educated rather than "tested". It is also exclusive because drinking specialty coffee and having a pure interest to it rather than drinking without involving any cognitive process is already a luxury for many people.

In order to backup and legitimize the promotion of refined distinction of coffee, marketers rely on scientific knowledge and the trend of artisanal production. In this thesis I also present how the coffee professionals in the specialty coffee industry learn to discriminate, evaluate, and make coffee. The baristas and roasters I talked with took classes at the Specialty Coffee Association of America and use protocols published by the organization to conduct their evaluation and description of coffee

flavors. As the Coffee Tasters' Flavor Wheel shows, to taste a sip of coffee is to be able to distinguish and name the approximately 100 subtle flavors and their combinations. Mathematically, it is a huge amount of variations. Although the technical terms and extremely refined coffee flavor categories do not directly inform and create the same amount of coffee varieties, they provide a scientific and professional foundation to legitimize the proliferation of coffee products.

Moreover, the distinctions are also influenced by the broader dichotomies and tensions between industrial, quantity-oriented, and homogenous production with artisanal, quality-oriented, and valuing social relationship production. The latter shares one of most important of commitments or expectations of the alternative food movement and fair trade movement. The validation from scientific and institutional knowledge works tougher with the trendy orientation of seeking artisanally produced authentic food/drink. They appeal to and create a specific kind of consumers who can afford and may potentially consume and be able to talk about their activities of drinking specialty coffee in a way that are influenced by specialty coffee marketers.

When it comes to the social relationship between coffee farmers and coffee roasters and retailers. I demonstrate how the language of "passion" and "friendship" registers trading high quality coffee as a happy and mutually beneficial process. I did not start out by critiquing how misleading or problematic this representation of coffee trading is, rather I let my interlocutors speak for themselves and try to reveal the powerfulness of their account. The conclusion is that no matter how intensively

and vividly they emphasize their friendship and happy experience of working with farmers, the relationship is ultimately based on whether or not coffee farmers can provide satisfying quality of coffee. My research questions started from the question of quality and come back to quality in the answers. While we can think qualify from much broader perspectives that incorporates ethical values, for most specialty coffee marketers and most consumers, their central concern is the exchange value of coffee.

As I demonstrated, coffee quality can be introduced by the dissemination of coffee knowledge, though elaborating the materiality of coffee flavor, and guaranteed by trading relationships. The emphasis on coffee quality not only renders the ethical concerns of social justice somehow less important but also subject producers, marketers, and consumers under the same rationality of competition in an economic sense.

Daniel Miller (2005) argues that we learn to expect by engaging with the relationships found between everyday things. My ethnography demonstrates the specific version of the relationships found between coffee produced by the specialty coffee roasters and retailers. The relationship they describe involves consuming coffee knowledgeably, roasting and brewing coffee carefully, and trading coffee happily. Consumers who cannot afford specialty coffee, who do not have an interest in knowing more about coffee, as well as its roasting and brewing processes, and producers who haven't forge a successful trading relationship with the specialty coffee industry in the global north are ignored and excluded from the picture. This

version of social relationship associated with coffee not only shapes specialty coffee marketers' expectation and their social world, it is consequential in terms of co-create consumers' understanding of their life and coffee producers' lives far way. Without bringing the ethical concern into the marketing front, a customer-oriented description of coffee biography with an exclusive emphasis on coffee quality would only intensify the inequality in coffee trading and the neoliberal rationality in the global market and people's everyday life.

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Appendix1: Designed Interview Questions

1. Why do you only provide pour over and espresso?
2. The advertisement posters for coffee from different counties are well designed? Who decide the style? Is there any meaning behind the poster? How do you name the different kind of coffee?
3. Can I get a tour in the roasting room? Is there a chance for customers to see the cupping events, to learn some professional knowledge about it?
4. On your website, It says it takes months to roast green beans under many different conditions while carefully experiencing with these variables. Can you explain to me how does that work?
5. One of your barista introduced to me that the espresso machine is rather expensive and it is fully manual. Why is that important? What's the different between machine control and manual control. Does it need longer term staff training for them to be familiar with the operation?
6. What do you mean by saying "take the concept of fair trade to another level"?
7. Sensory experience is rather subjective. How do you standardize it and recommend to customer? Variety?
8. Blending vs. Single origin. Blending is technically more difficult? Why single origin is so expensive?
9. What is a green coffee buyer? How can you become one?
10. Where does the farm to cup phrase come from? It reminds me the food movement farm to table. Slow food movement. [What is slow food movement?
11. Is there any connection between Coffee quality and trade relationship?

12. Why sustainability is important?

13. What do you think about the difference between direct trade and fair trade?

Appendix2: Coffee Tasters' Flavor Wheel



COFFEE TASTER'S FLAVOR WHEEL CREATED USING THE SENSORY LEXICON DEVELOPED BY WORLD COFFEE RESEARCH. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED SCAA AND WCR

Appendix 3: The Coffee Value Chain

From <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/rb/rb151.html>

The Coffee Value Chain

